

Liangzhu Civilization

Xuefei Zhu

The Realm of King and God

Liangzhu City



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Liangzhu Civilization

Series Editor

Bin Liu, Zhejiang Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology,
Hangzhou, China

The Liangzhu Civilization series consists of 11 volumes, namely: Realm of King and God; Liangzhu City; Fanshan Royal Cemetery: Pyramid of the East; Liangzhu Jade Artifacts: Legal Instrument and Royalty; Liangzhu Pottery: Introversion and Resplendence; Engineering and Tools: The Stone Story of Liangzhu; Painting and Symbol: Primitive Characters of Liangzhu; The Paleoenvironment, Plants and Animals of Liangzhu; China and the World in the Liangzhu Era; Eighty Years of Archaeology at Liangzhu; What Liangzhu Was Like; and One Dig for Five Millennia: Liangzhu in the Eyes of an Archaeological Journalist. Representing the combined efforts of archaeologists from the Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Zhejiang Province who have been exploring Liangzhu for over 30 years, the series boasts a wealth of significant findings made at Liangzhu, shares the archaeologists' valuable experience, and includes abundant pictures of the excavation site. Accordingly, it will help readers develop a deeper understanding of Liangzhu Civilization and reveal the evolutionary course of Chinese civilization, characterized by 'unity in diversity.' Both the publication of the Liangzhu Civilization Series and the 'Liangzhu Civilization Towards the World' exhibition are expected to serve as a bridge to the public, thereby further disseminating Liangzhu Civilization and promoting an interest in traditional Chinese culture.

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Xuefei Zhu
Zhejiang Provincial Institute of Cultural
Relics and Archaeology
Hangzhou, China

Translated by
Haiyan Xu
Nanchang University
Nanchang, China

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Foreword: Liangzhu and Five Thousand Years of Chinese Civilization

The combination of time and space is marvelous. When we look up at the starry sky and see the immense universe, the twinkling stars seem to be permanently embedded in the canopy of the heavens. However, we know from modern science that the light-year is a unit of distance, and the light of stars from the depths of the universe was emitted in the distant past—the travel across time and space happens in the mere blink of an eye.

Archaeology is also a discipline about the travel across time and space. Through the door of time opened by our own hands, we can go back to different moments in human history, and 5000 years ago was a special one.

Globally speaking, the period 5000 years ago was a great era in which civilization was born. Coincidentally, early civilizations all grew up in the world's major river basins, such as the ancient Egyptian civilization in the Nile River Basin, the Sumerian civilization in the Tigris–Euphrates River Basin and the Harappan civilization in the Indus River Basin. How about the Chinese civilization 5000 years ago? This issue has baffled scholars for quite a long time. They have examined ancient China's cities, characters, bronzeware, etc., according to the international standards of civilization and found that the ancient Chinese civilization could date back to no earlier than the Shang dynasty when oracle bone script appeared.

The history before the emergence of characters was called “prehistory” in archaeology. During China's prehistoric times, different geographical units in the vast territory have given birth to cultural sequences with various characteristics since 10,000 years ago, which is figuratively called “the sky dotted with stars” in archaeology. China's prehistory, however, has long been underestimated. We always take the Xia and Shang dynasties as the origin of the Chinese civilization and take the Yellow River civilization as its core, which unconsciously downplays the historic significance of high-level ruins and high-grade relics in surrounding areas, such as those from the Hongshan culture in western Liaoning, the Shijiahe culture around the Yangtze River and the Han River, the Liangzhu culture in the Taihu Basin, the Taosi culture in southern Shanxi and the Shimao site in northern Shaanxi. As we explore the origin of the Chinese culture, we come to realize that some cultures like “stars

dotting the sky” sparked the first sign of civilization, and the Liangzhu culture is a particular one among them.

The Liangzhu culture, an archaeological culture of jade worship, suddenly came into existence in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River approximately 5300 years ago. Despite the fact that jade had already been widely admired, it was not until that period that jade worship reached an unprecedented climax. Different from ornamental jade ware many people love, Liangzhu people’s jade ware was made not only for aesthetic purposes. Represented by *cong*,¹ which belonged to the ritual jade ware system besides *yue*,² *huang*,³ *bi*,⁴ crown-shaped ornaments, three-pronged jade artifacts, awl-shaped jade artifacts, tablets and tubes, Liangzhu people’s jade ware symbolized their status, power or wealth. Various jade ware buried in earth mounds alongside the people with supreme power showed the dignity of the deceased, and the divine emblem often engraved on the jade ware demonstrated Liangzhu people’s unified belief. The owners of the jade ware were Liangzhu’s ruling class who believed they could exercise the god’s will as the embodiment of the god. The types and quantities of the jade ware buried with them imply their social status and responsibility. It seems that the Liangzhu culture was once divided into multiple centers and covered a great number of small states, because extremely high-level tomb groups were found at the sites of Fanshan and Yaoshan in Yuhang District, Hangzhou, the site of Sidun in Wujin District, Changzhou, the site of Gaochengdun in Jiangyin, and the site of Fuquanshan in Shanghai. Fortunately, history gave Yuhang an opportunity: more and more sites of the Liangzhu culture were found around the site of Fanshan, and the good protection of these centrally distributed sites allowed archaeological work to be carried out smoothly in the area. In retrospect, it provided a foundation for the rediscovery of the Liangzhu culture. Otherwise, no one would have realized that the scattered sites are different parts of the ancient capital city Liangzhu.

We now can see that the Liangzhu City, composed of the imperial city, the inner city and the outer city, covers 6.3 km², around eight times the size of the Forbidden City. It boasts palaces, royal tombs, city walls, moats, a water transportation system inside the city, and a water conservancy system outside the city. It was a proper capital city in terms of its scale and layout, and the Liangzhu culture could reach the standards of civilization except for characters and bronzeware. Nevertheless, with our minds open, we may find that the general standards of civilization should not be applied rigidly when determining whether a culture has entered a civilized society or not. The significance of etiquette manifested by bronzeware in other civilized societies is reflected in jade ware in the Liangzhu culture. Despite the lack of the character system through which languages can be recorded and thoughts and cultures can be passed down, the symbols incised on ritual jade ware could unify people’s thoughts to a great extent, and the impressive organizational and managerial capabilities of Liangzhu society reflected in large construction projects also suggest that there must have been

¹ *Cong* (琮): a straight tube with a circular bore and square outer section with convex sides.

² *Yue* (钺): axe.

³ *Huang* (璜): semi-circular jade artifact.

⁴ *Bi* (璧): flat jade disc with a circular hole in the centre.

a certain method for information transmission similar to the character system. For these reasons, the discovery of the Liangzhu City established the existence of the Liangzhu civilization.

The archaeological studies of Liangzhu have lasted for more than eight decades. In 1936, Shi Xingeng first discovered black-surfaced pottery and stone tools, and today we have defined the Liangzhu culture as the first regional culture in ancient China that formed an early kingdom; in 1959, Xia Nai put forward the designation of “the Liangzhu culture” and scholars came to know the characteristics of this culture, and today we carry out multi-field and all-dimensional archaeological research on the Liangzhu civilization and the state form of Liangzhu becomes clearer and clearer to us. This book series, written by young and middle-aged scholars who are devoted to the archaeological work of Liangzhu, focuses on recent archaeological findings and studies of the ruins of the Liangzhu City in Pingyao Town, Yuhang District, Hangzhou, and contains a huge amount of information, including different aspects of the site that people hope to know, the history of the archaeological studies of Liangzhu, the palaeoenvironment, plants and animals of Liangzhu, Fanshan royal cemetery which is the highest level of cemetery in the Liangzhu culture, high-grade jade ware of Liangzhu often discussed by people, and a wide range of pottery used in Liangzhu people’s daily life. On top of that, Liangzhu is also compared with other ancient civilizations in the world, and an intriguing series of news reports on Liangzhu is commented on by media professionals. We hope this book series can arouse readers’ interest in the Liangzhu civilization, so more people can be inspired to explore our history.

Perhaps many people would ask about the relationship between the Liangzhu civilization and the Chinese civilization because Chinese people are called the descendants of Huaxia⁵ in modern history but few people have heard of Liangzhu. This is understandable: we believe the Chinese civilization is a unified civilization of a state with its political power in the Yellow River Basin; it has survived from the Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han and Tang dynasties and is still thriving today. However, the archaeologists have launched the “In Search of the Origins of Chinese Civilization” project to gain some insights into the earliest cultural form of Chinese civilization, so we should not have too many presuppositions for the earliest civilized society. Since we have found a 5,000-year-old regional civilization, the Liangzhu civilization, we may also find the Hongshan civilization in northern Liaoning and the Shijiahe civilization in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, though we are not able to confirm the existence of these civilizations at this stage due to limited archaeological findings. While the Liangzhu civilization started declining gradually 4,300 years ago, the elements of the civilization have been well inherited because of Liangzhu’s jade, and its influence has spread all over the country—regional civilizations actually have a nationwide and even universal influence.

⁵ Huaxia refers to a confederation of tribes—living along the Yellow River—who were the ancestors of what later became the Han ethnic group in China (Source <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huaxia>).

Human migration and communication have never ceased since the Paleolithic era. Population movement of different scales, degrees and forms have facilitated collisions, exchanges and integration between cultures, and the development of regional civilization is also a dynamic process. The one thousand years following the Liangzhu civilization—the earliest Chinese civilization we can confirm as of today—witnessed the successive prosperity of Taosi, Shimao and Erlitou, and the center of regional civilization changed from time to time. In this process, the elements of civilization, such as etiquette, hierarchical society and city structures, were inherited and integrated till the beginning of the Xia and Shang dynasties. In fact, the Xia and Shang cultures evolved in their respective regions, and the change of the dynasties reflects the dominance of Xia was replaced by the dominance of the other regional civilization—the regions were much larger this time and the civilizations fought against each other during that period for the control over the territory. It was not until the Qin dynasty that a state unified by centralized political power appeared in China. In this regard, the period from Liangzhu to the Shang and Zhou dynasties saw the Chinese civilization's continued evolution from a regional civilization to a unified one, so this period can by no means be separated apart.

Liangzhu, China
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Bin Liu

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Chapter 1

A Few Concepts About “Liangzhu”

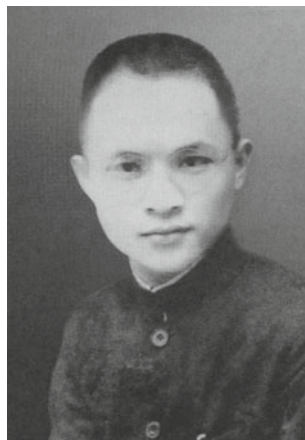


We relate “Liangzhu” in the hope that people will bear in mind the visual and palpable impression of the 5,000-year-old Chinese civilization. But what exactly is “Liangzhu”? Is the ancient city of Liangzhu exactly the Kingdom of Liangzhu? Is the Liangzhu Culture exactly the Liangzhu Civilization? “Liangzhu” is so famous, but why are important discoveries clustered in the town of Pingyao?

Once we have clarified these concepts, we will get closer to Liangzhu and feel more cordial and comfortable with Liangzhu.

The first concept is the “Liangzhu Site.” The concept of “Site” has very little connotation, but there are many types of sites, such as, a cemetery, an ancient village, an ancient battlefield, and the list goes on and on. The site is usually at a specific location, named after a local village, a town, a hilltop, a river, or an iconic building nearby so that people can easily know where the site is probably located. The Liangzhu Site, which was the collective name for a group of prehistoric ruins in the town of Liangzhu, was named after the town. At the time, there was a very dedicated staff named Shi Xingeng (Fig. 1.1) worked in the West Lake Museum of Zhejiang province (now the Zhejiang Provincial Museum). From December 1936 to March 1937, he found more than ten Neolithic sites featured by black pottery (Fig. 1.2) around his hometown Liangzhu, which are collectively called Liangzhu Site later. Specific to each site, there are also smaller places, such as Qipanfen, Hengweili, Zhongjiacun, etc.

Shi Xingeng (1911–1939) was a native of Liangzhu town in Hang County of Zhejiang province. In 1931, he worked as an assistant officer in the Geology and Mineral Division of the Department of Natural Sciences at the West Lake Museum of Zhejiang province (the predecessor of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum). In 1936, he participated in the excavation of the Gudang Site in Hangzhou, and through the arrangement of artifacts unearthed at the Gudang Site, he was reminded of similar cultural relics in his hometown, which led to the archaeological investigations and excavations in Liangzhu town in 1936 and 1937. He fell sick from overwork and died young in 1939.

Fig. 1.1 Shi Xingeng

Then comes the concept of “Liangzhu Culture.” The word “Culture” here is not the same as what we usually mean when we say that a person is educated and knowledgeable. The term “Culture” is an archaeological concept that refers to the aggregate of distinctive material culture created by human activities within a given geographical area and a given time frame. When archaeologists discover some remains in an area that have the appearance of a similar material culture intensively and frequently, they usually name that archaeological culture after the first place of discovery. The scope of this region is, at times, very vast. For example, the area of Liangzhu Culture, covers almost the entire lower Yangtze River, and the sites around the Taihu Lake basin are the most densely distributed. In our knowledge, its age is about 5,300–4,300 years old, predating the Xia dynasty, which was established around 2070 BC. The living standard of Liangzhu people in this period were not as primitive as we think, and both agriculture (such as rice cultivation) and handicrafts were already fairly well developed. Stoneware (Fig. 1.3) and earthenware (Fig. 1.4) are the main tools for daily life, but the jade-making, carving, lacquer arts, and carpentry techniques have all reached a level that is breathtaking to people today. Judging by the grades of burial goods that exist in the various cemeteries, large or small, we can infer that the society of Liangzhu society had already been a hierarchical one at that time.

Next, let’s talk about “Liangzhu Ancient City.” Liangzhu Ancient City located in the east of Pingyao town, north of the 104 national highway is one of the many sites of Liangzhu Culture. This site is unique in that it is a “Site Group” (Fig. 1.5), a collection of many ruin sites that have been gradually discovered and recognized. It consists of walls, gates, moats, palace areas, burial areas, handicraft workshop areas, and an outer wall ... It is not a single cemetery or settlement, but an aggregation of many sites with different functions, presenting the shape of an ancient city. It is called “Liangzhu Ancient City,” not because of its location in Liangzhu, but the cultural attributes of the ancient city—Liangzhu Culture.



Fig. 1.2 Liangzhu cultural artifacts excavated by Shi Xingeng. Black-skinned pottery Dou (top left). Double-nosed pot (top right). Stone adze (bottom left). Stone knife with slanted blade (bottom right)



Fig. 1.3 Typical stone tools of Liangzhu Culture



Fig. 1.4 Typical potteries of Liangzhu Culture

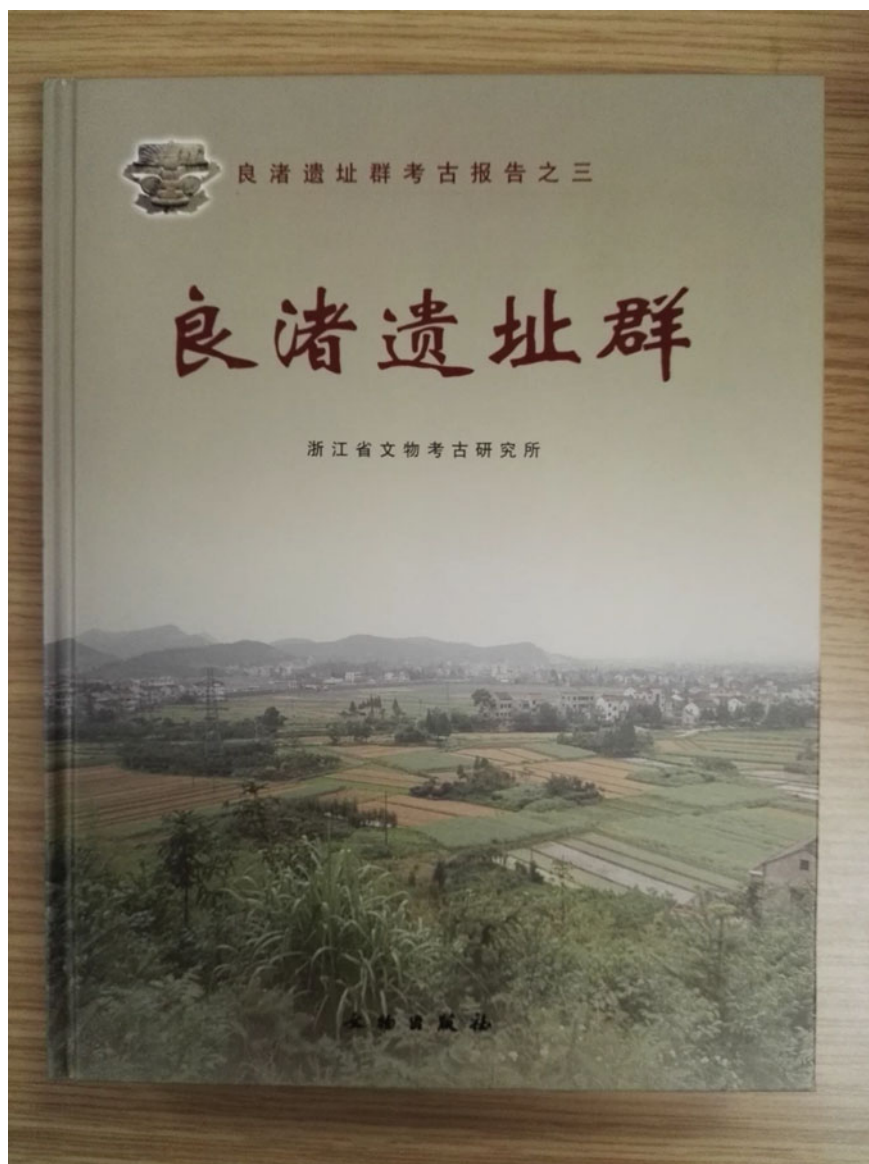


Fig. 1.5 The cover of *The Liangzhu Site Complex*, an archaeological report

In 2005, the Zhejiang Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology published an archaeological report *Liangzhu Site Complex*, which brings together information of more than a hundred Liangzhu cultural sites in Pingyao and Liangzhu.

Based on the concept of Liangzhu Ancient City, we have developed another concept—“Liangzhu Kingdom.” It’s a concept with the nature of a regime. This