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China

Arthur Cotterell

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About the Author

Arthur Cotterell combines a career in education and training after school with an extensive interest in other civilizations. His previous books include *The Minoan World*, *A Dictionary of World Mythology*, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Ancient Civilizations*, *The First Emperor*, *East Asia: From Chinese Predominance to the Rise of the Pacific Rim*, *Origins of European Civilization* and *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Classical Civilizations*. He is currently at work on *The Pimlico Dictionary of Classical Civilizations*.

CHRONOLOGY

(showing key periods and dynasties)

PRE-IMPERIAL CHINA

Neolithic period c. 5000–c. 1650 BC (Xia dynasty?)

Shang dynasty c. 1650–1027 BC

Zhou dynasty 1027–256 BC: Early Zhou 1027–771 BC

Spring and Autumn period

770–481 BC

Warring States period 481–221 BC

IMPERIAL CHINA

The Early Empire

Qin dynasty 221–207 BC

Former Han dynasty 206 BC–AD 9

Xin dynasty (Wang Mang) 9–23

Later Han dynasty 25–220

The Three Kingdoms 221–65

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To Alan

CHINA

A History

ARTHUR COTTERELL



PIMLICO

PREFACE

The Oldest Surviving Civilisation

When in 960 the first Song emperor Tai Zu was reuniting China after a brief period of disunity, possibly connected with the invention of gunpowder, one of the regional rulers begged for independence. Without a moment for hesitation the emperor asked, "What wrong have your people done to be excluded from the Empire?" It was inconceivable that any province should seek to isolate itself: the imperial boundaries enclosed the Greece and Rome of East Asia, China was the civilised world.

A not dissimilar conviction was held by the scholar and would-be reformer Kang Youwei, who still hoped as late as 1908 that national recovery could be achieved under the tottering Qing dynasty. What changed his mind was the murder that year of Guang Xu, the emperor whom he had advised during the abortive Hundred Days of Reform in 1898. Although the despair of Kang Youwei marked a watershed in Chinese attitudes towards an imperial system of government, it did not represent any abandonment of belief in the central importance of the civilisation itself. Traumatic as the collapse of China was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when foreign nations brought the full impact of modern technology to bear, few Chinese ever doubted the survival of their

country as a great power. This belief may account in part for the imperviousness of China to modernisation before the foundation in 1912 of the Republic.



Fig. 1 China, showing present-day boundaries

Japan, by contrast, had always been more open to foreign influences, borrowing heavily from imperial China for over a millennium: its method of self-defence after 1868 was the sweeping away of inefficient feudalism through a programme of selective westernisation.

Outside Japan, the colonial port cities—Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Karachi, Colombo, Singapore, Batavia and Manila—created westernised Asian élites, for whom national independence was a goal that could be pursued without apology or a sense of contradiction. Not so in Shanghai or Tianjin, despite the interest of Kang Youwei in the institutions of the Treaty Ports, the international trading centres which were forced upon China from 1842. In

contrast to colonial India, where foreign rule fostered a national consciousness as well as tolerance of western approaches to government and administration, the presence of assertive European enclaves in the Treaty Ports only sharpened the traditional Chinese tendency towards self-sufficient and self-absorbed identity. The intervention of foreign soldiers was impressive only because of the superiority of their arms.

Chinese attitudes have a very ancient origin. The archaeological discoveries of the last two decades are not only enough to remind us that China is the oldest continuous civilisation in existence, but they also indicate that during the formative stages of development it was a world apart, cut off geographically from the other early centres of civilisation. Ancient China comprised the fertile Yellow river valley: to the north was the barren steppe whose nomadic inhabitants compelled the building of the defensive barriers eventually incorporated in the Great Wall; to the east was the largest ocean in which lay the primitive islands of Japan; to the west the highest mountain system blocked trade routes to India and West Asia; southwards were semi-tropical forests where groups of rudimentary cultivators lagged behind in cultural achievement. Well over a millennium of civilised living had passed before the Chinese realised in the Former Han period (206 BC–AD 9) that there were any other civilisations. We can still catch something of the amazement of the envoy Zhang Qian when he returned to Chang'an, the capital, in 126 BC and reported that in what is now Afghanistan there were "cities, mansions and houses as in China."

Even then the difficult overland journey via the oasis towns of Central Asia kept outside contact down to the bare minimum, though foreign merchants carried along the Silk Road, as this caravan route became known, the greatest Chinese import before modern times—Buddhism. The fact that this Indian belief arrived so late in China, penetrating

all parts of the country only towards the end of the fourth century, helps to explain why it failed to dislodge Confucianism as the state religion. While the struggle for spiritual eminence was fiercely contested and accompanied by scenes of mass fervour, the strength of the rational, sceptical mould of Confucian philosophy prevailed. The Buddhist church was brought by the Tang emperors (618-906) within the compass of the state, a Bureau of National Sacrifice being established in 694 to scrutinise the ordination of monks and nuns. The Chinese political tradition that took for granted strong central authority, embodied in the emperor as the Son of Heaven, was too firmly rooted for Buddhist evangelists to alter permanently either the social or the spiritual landscape.

Notions about divine approval of the throne, the so-called Mandate of Heaven (*tian ming*), predate the unification of China in 221 BC and ultimately derive from the ritual observances practised by the Shang kings, who ruled the Yellow river valley and surrounding areas from about 1650 till 1027 BC. A closely knit kinship group, the Shang nobles traced their descent through their chief member, the king, from the supreme deity, Shang Di, the founder-ancestor of their people and the ruler of the natural world. Our knowledge of the sacrifices offered by the reigning king in order to gain divine goodwill comes from the ideographic script which almost certainly evolved out of the practice of reading oracles from the shape of the cracks made by scorching animal bones and tortoise shells. Shang religion was, in effect, an elevation of ancestor worship, a practice distinguishing Chinese culture from prehistoric times. So powerful, however, has been sentiment over such rituals that in 1916 general Yuan Shikai chose to signal the conversion of his presidency into a dynasty by donning imperial costume at the celebration of the New Year. To thwart this warlord's pretensions the exiled Kang Youwei wrote to provincial governors urging them to remain

neutral in the ensuing civil war, even though this meant that free scope was given to the republicans led by Dr Sun Yatsen.



Fig. 2 Four ancient ideograms from Shang inscriptions relating to settlement: (l-r) the first means city, and shows a man kneeling in submission beneath an earthen enclosure; the second refers to worship in the ancestral temple—the hand beneath is offering the smell of cooked meat to the sacred niche from whence spiritual influence was thought to emanate; in the third an aristocratic residence is depicted on its earthen platform; and the last represents the city wall, the earthen defences of a Shang settlement

That it should have been a scholar who attempted to rally support for the throne during the final decline of the empire is hardly surprising. The proposed reforms of Kang Youwei can be seen as the tail-end of a tradition of state service stretching back to the lifetime of Confucius himself. When in the sixth century BC this great teacher tried to deal with the abuses prevalent amongst the numerous feudal states, Confucius placed emphasis on loyalty to principles not factions, and argued that only through benevolence and propriety could a ruler lead his subjects to perfect lives. The character for propriety (*li*) tells us exactly what Confucius had in mind, since the strokes represent a vessel containing precious objects as a sacrifice to the ancestral spirits. The rite of ancestor worship thus became the focus of a moral code in which proper social relations were clearly defined: the loyalty a minister owed to a prince was the same as that owed to a father by a son.

Under the empire (which lasted, with interruptions, from 221 BC till 1912) administrative requirements allowed the

service rendered by the scholar-bureaucrat to be a reality as well as an ideal. Confucian scholars connected with the landowning class were one of the twin pillars of imperial society: the other was the great multitude of peasant-farmers, no longer tied to a feudal lord but liable to taxation, labour on public works, and military service. The low social position of merchants—a prevailing feature in Chinese history—was the natural outcome of economic development down to 221 BC because princes had always assumed most of the responsibility for industry and water-control works. Metallurgy tended to be under state supervision, as in Shang times when foundries and workshops were first set up close by cities, but the blocking of all avenues of social advancement to merchants was the really effective curb since it prevented the sons of successful traders from becoming officials. A poor scholar without an official position would prefer farming to trade as a means of livelihood, lest he spoil any future opportunity of a civil service career. Fully aware of the role of education in sustaining the traditional order, Mao Zedong said he had hated Confucius from his boyhood. Because of his interest in the Chinese countryside, however, Mao Zedong was the first Communist leader to appreciate the revolutionary dynamic inherent in the agrarian revolts which had punctuated imperial history. Before anyone else he understood that in China, unlike the West, political control was strongest in the urban areas.

“The police know all that is going on,” noted Father Amiot of eighteenth-century Beijing, “even inside the palaces of princes. They keep exact registers of the inhabitants in every house.” Above all, the French Jesuit was impressed by the way in which the city’s numerous inhabitants were steered along “the path of order and duty without arrests, without harsh actions, the police seeming hardly to interfere at all”. Perhaps ignorant of the unusual extent of censorship under the foreign Qing dynasty, Father

Amiot was still correct in contrasting the orderliness of the Chinese capital with life in its European contemporaries. Whereas in Europe major cities have tended to expand from a nucleus such as a market-place or a cathedral, in China there has always been a more deliberate pattern of foundation. The Chinese use the same word, *cheng*, for a city and a city wall, revealing a very deep-rooted veneration of encircling walls. In the records of the Ministry of Works it is stated that when at the beginning of the fifteenth century the Ming emperor Yong Le decided to establish his residence at Beijing, he first built "a wall around the capital which was forty *li* long and pierced by nine gates". Although the rigidity of town planning was often relaxed, as a result of population growth or enforced movement during barbarian invasion or a weak dynasty, the Chinese city never succeeded through trade and industry in becoming sufficiently independent to challenge established political, legal and religious ideals. It was never a centre of social change.

The very Chinese sense of unity, of belonging to a civilisation rather than to a state or a nation, was fostered by the early development of the city. Long before unification by the Qin dynasty in 221 BC there were concentrations of ancient cities on the loess plains of northern China. This fine soil, windblown from the Mongolian desert in the last Ice Age, literally shaped the origins of China, since its fertility when watered led to state interest in the benefits to be derived from water-control works. Philosophically the king preserved the prosperity of the people by maintaining good relations with the heavenly powers, but along the riverbank his officers oversaw the extensive conservancy schemes upon which agricultural prosperity depended. Increased output sustained a large population in high densities and accentuated the division between the steppe and the sown lands. That the ancient Chinese came to equate civilisation

with walled settlements surrounded by fields given over to intensive agriculture was only natural and must explain how they absorbed the less advanced cultivators who lived to the south. Yet the hilly terrain of much of southern China has permitted the survival of a great number of subcultures and different dialects, in contrast with the northern provinces where almost everyone now speaks Mandarin, as it is named after the former lingua franca of the imperial officials.

The standardisation of the written script, some time before 210 BC, at the behest of Qin Shi Huangdi, the First Sovereign Emperor, was a contributory factor towards national integration. Even more, the centralised bureaucracy he established in place of the feudal administrations his armies overthrew in 221 BC proved to be the basis of the most durable framework for social order ever invented, as the latterday efforts of Kang Youwei to salvage its remains early this century dramatically bear witness. Into the imperial bureaucracy were recruited scholars, especially after examinations in the seventh century became the principal means of qualification: their scale of values differed profoundly from that of merchants, thereby confirming the influence of the state over economic activity. Equally the power of the brush proved stronger than the sword, despite the Chinese invention of both the crossbow (before 450 BC) and the gun (in the thirteenth century). While China has suffered its fair share of war, more indeed than most other countries this century, it never accepted the necessity of a powerful military class. On the contrary the low esteem accorded to the armed forces is evident in the saying: "A good man is not made from a soldier, nor fine furniture from rotten wood". At any rate it helps to explain the somewhat ambivalent feelings of the colonial inhabitants of Hong Kong towards the British royal family, whose male members on official occasions invariably dress in military uniform.

This unique attitude towards the military is probably due to Chinese inventiveness. Early production of cast iron and steel provided efficient hoes, ploughshares, picks and axes: it allowed effective tillage by a small number of peasant-farmers, so reducing feudal bonds. Slavery was never a significant feature of Chinese civilisation after 1000 BC, in striking contrast to Greece and Rome. Imperial unification was intertwined with technical advance, but the ability of a dynasty to endure was also related to the acquiescence of the governed and the means by which they could effect political changes. It happened in China that offensive weapons were always superior, the crossbow before the lifetime of Christ having already ruled out an armoured domination like that of the medieval knight in the West. For this reason Mencius (372-288 BC), the greatest disciple of Confucius, could reasonably argue the right of the people to take up arms against tyrannical government.

Although the People's Republic currently lays claim to a large area of the China Sea, the historical fact remains that the Chinese never used their nautical skills to gain possessions overseas. Nor did they seek to expand their landward borders by unnecessary conquest: the Great Wall epitomised a state of mind which regarded defensive measures as a necessary evil. "An army is kept for a thousand days to be used on one," went an old saying. How advanced were Chinese vessels, for instance, can be seen by a comparison with those of the Portuguese explorers. Had Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope seventy years earlier, he would have found his own craft of 300 tonnes sailing alongside a Chinese fleet with ships of 1500 tonnes under the command of grand eunuch Zheng He. What the Portuguese adventurer actually encountered was an empty Indian Ocean, since after 1433 the Ming emperors discouraged maritime activities and ran down the imperial fleet, a policy of indifference to sea power which eventually exposed China to the unchecked depredations of

European navies. The emptiness of the eastern seas gave the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch and finally the English the false impression that they were the first explorers to reach the area. Nowadays we know that the eastern Pacific, the China Sea and the Indian Ocean were Chinese lakes until the mid-fifteenth century.

Another difference between the ocean reconnaissance of the Chinese and the Portuguese concerns treatment of the peoples they met. Instead of pillaging the coastline, slaving, seeking to establish colonies and monopolise international trade, the Chinese fleets engaged in an elaborate series of diplomatic missions, exchanging gifts with distant kings from whom they were content to accept merely formal recognition of the overlordship of the Son of Heaven. There was neither the intolerance of other religious beliefs nor the search for material wealth, in the form of a fabulous city such as El Dorado, which were characteristic of the Portuguese expeditions. Sobering indeed is the statistic of 1 million slaves transported from Angola to the New World during the sixteenth century.

The Chinese distaste for organised war has a parallel in the traditional emphasis placed on clan and family. The ideal of four generations living beneath one roof reflected a belief in the value of custom, in a society largely unaffected by matters of state. The point is made in the famous interview between Confucius and the Duke of She, elder statesman of semibarbarian Chu. The duke argued that an individual's first loyalty was owed to the state, but the philosopher maintained it was to the family. "Among us there are those who are so upright", said the duke, "that if his father steals a sheep, the son will testify against him." To which Confucius replied, "Among us the upright act quite differently. The son shields the father, and the father shields the son: this we consider to be uprightness." An offshoot of large families and clans were secret societies, associations for mutual protection in disturbed times. Often

republican in temper during the nineteenth century, the secret societies of today have largely forfeited their role and, in some cases, they have turned to crime.

The strength and resilience of the family has undoubtedly sustained Chinese culture during the periods of crisis; it has also ensured in nearly every case of conquest that foreign rulers have been absorbed and sinicised. Very different to the Germanic invasion of the western provinces of Rome was the Tartar partition of China (317-589), when most of the lands to the north of the Yangzi river passed into the hands of barbarian tribesmen from the steppes. Sinicisation of the invaders of north China eventually led a Tuoba Wei emperor to issue a decree prohibiting the use of the Tartar language, costume, and customs. Everyone had become Chinese. There was nothing like the collapse of the Latin West, where barbarian inroads destroyed the ancient civilisation with the exception of tiny pockets hidden away behind monastery walls, and a definite lowering of social conditions occurred, in which the Germanic peoples lost both their own culture and that of the world they had won. Unlike China, the western provinces of the Roman empire were not populated by large numbers of people who partook of the cultural tradition, and, besides, there was an enormous slave class.

The amazing absorptive power of Chinese culture has encouraged some observers to label it as unchanging. In reality there were large-scale internal transformations and constant movements of the imperial boundaries: these alterations are not always perceived clearly for the reason that they were slow in comparison with the rush of events in the twentieth century. Yet even the policies of the Tuoba Wei dynasty can be seen as the foundation of the brilliant Tang renaissance which made China the largest, most populous, and most tolerant country in the world. To the Tuoba Wei emperor Xiao Wen Di the Chinese owed the reform of the tax system, the re-introduction of salaries to

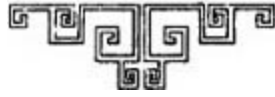
officials, the re-creation of the militia, and not least the revision of land tenure. The tendency to overt concentration of ownership was arrested as the throne reasserted its authority to be the true custodian of the soil.

Present-day Chinese are aware of past greatness, though there remains something of a love-hate relationship with the splendours of imperial and pre-imperial history. Mao Zedong was quite typical when he told the people not to dismiss the past but make it serve the present. Only then would China be able to “separate all the rotten things of the ancient feudal ruling class from the fine ancient popular culture that is more or less democratic and revolutionary in character”. Where the past is at its most fascinating is in the amazing discoveries of archaeology, which since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949 has been given a degree of official support unmatched in the modern world. The 1973 Chinese Exhibition in London was the showcase of the People’s Republic, since not a few of the pieces on display, including the jade funeral suit of the Han princess Dou Wan, had been excavated during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. However, the most impressive archaeological find was made only in 1974, when peasant-farmers sinking a series of wells at Mount Li in Shaanxi province unearthed a section of a life-sized terracotta army buried close to the mound marking the tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi, the unifier of China. Over 7000 figures are estimated to be in the four chambers that have only been in part explored.

During the summer of 1980, at the time that bronze chariots were also discovered, the author was fortunate enough to be invited to visit the excavations at Mount Li. It was in conversation with the archaeologists there that a difference in attitude towards history became so apparent. No sense of urgency prevailed on the site, where magnificent pieces of sculptured terracotta were being patiently restored and exhibited in the positions they were

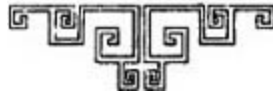
found. There were no immediate plans to open the tomb mound itself, and Yang Chen Ching, the site curator, joked that its excavator might well be his own grandson. This deliberate slowness rests on a profound awareness of cultural continuity, on an intimate connection with the past. The individual portraiture of the soldiers in the terracotta army, Yang Chen Ching suggested, was a celebration of China's unification in that all the varying physical features of its various peoples were represented. What he did not need to add was that they still inhabit the country and fully expect to do so forever. Belonging to the oldest surviving civilisation justifies such confidence, especially in the context of the spectacular Chinese recovery following the end of the Second World War, and makes any study of China impossible without reference to its ancient origins.

PART I



PRE-IMPERIAL CHINA

1



THE EMERGENCE OF CIVILISATION

Prehistory, Shang and Early Zhou (earliest times till 771 BC)

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHINESE CULTURE

TODAY ARCHAEOLOGY IS confirming the view expressed in Chinese myth about the remote origins of settlement in the country. Since the discovery of Peking Man at Zhoukuodian in the 1920s, there have been innumerable finds relating to the prehistoric period, which ended during the seventeenth century BC with the foundation of the Shang dynasty.

Excavation at Zhoukuodian had yielded evidence of forty individuals by 1938, when the operations of the Imperial Japanese Army made the site dangerous. Though these fossil fragments were lost in the hostilities, detailed study had already identified Peking Man as an advanced hominid whose limbs and trunk were of ordinary proportions. In 1959 the cave at Zhoukuodian was reopened and newly excavated materials shed light on a band of hunters and food gatherers which thrived there some 500,000 years

ago. A tool-maker with the knowledge of fire, Peking Man had a varied diet of edible leaves, nuts, and roots, plus meat from the animals which roamed the locality—deer, antelope, sheep, horses, pigs, buffaloes, cats, rhinoceroses, camels and sabre-toothed tigers. In 1963 an older cousin was found at Lantian, about sixty kilometres south-east of Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi province. Living some 600,000 years ago, Lantian Man had a thicker skull and more pronounced jaws, clear indications of an earlier stage of human evolution. The cranial capacity is 780 cc compared with the 850–1300 cc of Peking Man, and the 1350 cc of ourselves. The most primitive hominid so far discovered, however, is Yuanmou Man, who existed in Yunnan province over 1.7 million years ago. Possible use of fire is suggested by the presence of ashes and charred bones near the place where the fossil teeth of Yuanmou Man were unearthed.

All these early hominids were dependent upon nature's bounty. As hunters and food gatherers, they had to be mobile in order to follow the seasonal changes of natural resources and therefore little time was available for the development of culture. They also had to cope with the alterations in natural conditions brought about by glaciation: Peking Man endured two long periods of cold dry weather as well as one short warm and moist period without biological change. Not until a relatively recent date, within the last 10,000 years, were the ancestors of the Chinese people ready for a settled way of life based on agriculture. At present the earliest village site is five kilometres east of Xi'an at Banpo and dated between 4700 and 4200 BC; it is representative of at least 400 known settlements located on the loess terraces of the Wei river valley.

The domestication of plants and animals enabled people to remain in one locality and multiply. As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the invention of food production was rightly looked upon as a cultural turning point. Chinese legend

says that Shennong introduced agriculture by fashioning wooden implements and cultivating plants, whose seeds fell from the mouth of a red bird. He made pottery too. Besides being the inventor of agriculture, Shennong was regarded as the original herbalist who investigated the medicinal properties of plants, including tea. Endowed with a transparent stomach, he was able to observe the effects upon his body of all that he ate and drank, and learned that tea thoroughly cleaned out his intestines. Thoroughly Chinese as this interest in food as a preventative medicine is, the drinking of beverages made from the native tea plant appears to have begun only in the Spring and Autumn period (770-481 BC).

At the end of the Ice Age a layer of loess was deposited over a large area of north China, in some places nearly 100 metres deep. Blown from the semi-arid steppe, the yellow soil is easy to work and self-fertilizing if well watered, thus rendering primitive slash-and-burn methods of cultivation unnecessary. On this rich land, along the middle Yellow and Wei river valleys, the first settled culture developed in the fifth millennium BC: it is called Yangshao after the village in Henan province where in 1921 the initial identification occurred. The excavations at Banpo since 1952 afford a glimpse of what life was like in a Yangshao village of between 500 and 600 inhabitants. Enclosed by a circular ditch, six metres in depth, the settlement area was extensive, almost 50,000 square metres: or three and a half times the size of Jarmo in northwestern Iraq, where about 7000 BC a population estimated at 150 offers one of the earliest proofs for the mastery of tillage and animal husbandry. Remains of implements at Banpo include hoes, spades, cutters and digging sticks, while grinding stones show that the chief crop, millet, was prepared and preserved in the form of flour. The most important domesticated animal was the pig, but bones unearthed indicate that hunting and fishing supplemented the village

diet. How crucial rivers and streams were can be seen not only from the abundance of fishing tackle on the site but also in the frequent use of stylised fish for the decoration of pottery. More than half a million pieces of pottery have been recovered, some 1000 of which are sufficiently well preserved to display the achievements of Yangshao ceramics. Whereas a fine-grained ware with geometric designs in black, red and brown was reserved for ritual purposes, impressed coarse grey vessels met daily needs. The latter were decorated with cord, mat or basket impressions.

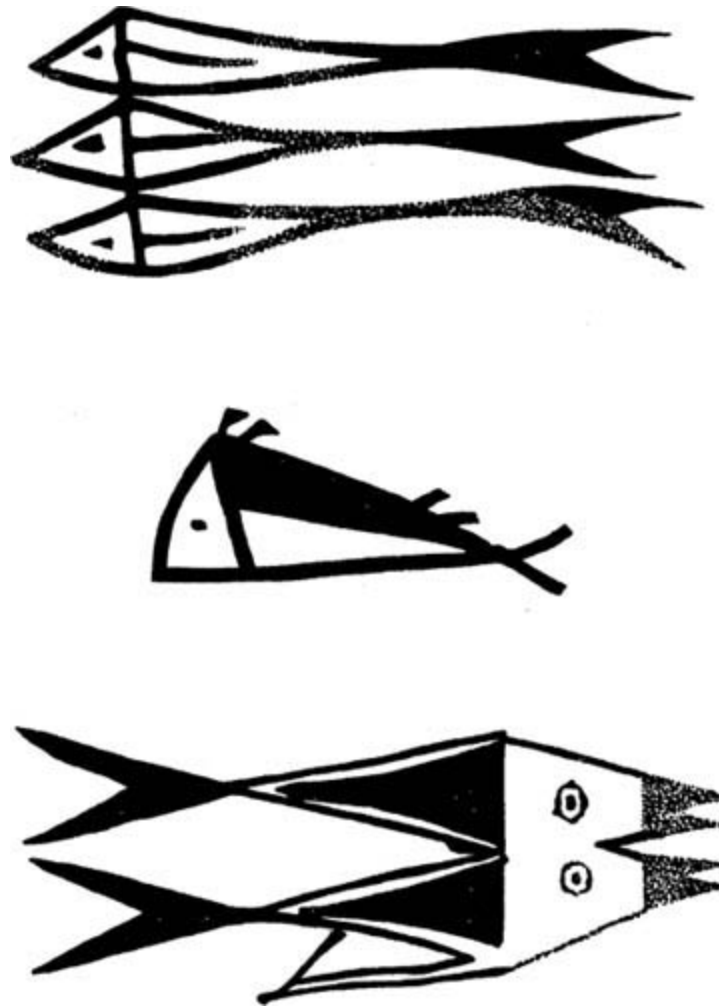


Fig. 3 Fish designs are particularly abundant on Yangshao pottery recovered from the Wei river valley, Shaanxi province. Here the earliest farmers in China used the rivers and streams to irrigate their fields as well as add to their diet

There is nothing in the archaeological record to suggest that the Chinese, or the proto-Chinese Yangshao people, ever passed through a pastoral phase. Milk and milk products have hardly featured in the Chinese diet, while the language is rich in agricultural metaphor. The fundamental division historically always has been between the nomadic life of the northern steppe and the settled communities of farmers to the south of the line of the Great Wall. A gradual differentiation was at work during the Yangshao cultural phase, as millet became the crop of the north and rice held sway in the central and southern provinces. Though rice was known at Yangshao itself, its domestication seems to have been achieved in the Yangzi delta, an area inhabited in prehistoric times by non-Chinese peoples. At Hemudu, south of Hangzhou bay in Zhejiang province, rice remains found in 1978 have been dated to approximately 4000 BC, which negates the theory that rice was imported into China from India. The inhabitants of the prehistoric settlement at Hemudu took advantage of natural swamps, or created artificial paddy fields, in order to raise an early-ripening subspecies with long grains. Thus the one food crop destined to overshadow all others in the future Chinese agricultural system derived from the fringes of the Yangshao cultural area. In a similar way the invaluable soya bean was contributed in the seventh century BC by the Turkic Jong, who were asked to send large quantities to north China. Quite possibly cultivated first on the Manchurian plains, the soya bean was recognised by the ancient Chinese to be exceptionally nutritious as a food and an enrichment for the soil. The character for the soya bean, *shu*, draws attention to the nitrogenbearing nodules of its root, since the three strokes at the bottom signify plenty. Besides ensuring more balanced harvests, soya beans supplied all classes of the population with cheap protein as well as vitamins and, once

the method of extraction was perfected, a useful source of oil.

The loess soil at Banpo assisted the building of dwellings, most of which were semi-subterranean. It is easily shaped for fire holes and storage pits, as well as shelves, seats and bed platforms. During the final stage of occupation there may have been as many as 100 houses, judging from the excavated portion of the site. Twenty-four late houses, along with 160 storage pits, are fully dug and presently on display inside a permanent building. Also visible are the foundations of a huge longhouse (20 by 12.5 metres), which was divided by partition walls into separate rooms with hearths. House floors were usually plastered, while reed roofs supported by wooden posts surmounted low wattle-and-daub walls. Outside the defensive ditch there was a cemetery, containing 130 adult burials, and a pottery with no fewer than six kilns, in one of which were found unfired pots.



Fig. 4 Banpo village was defended by a ditch some six metres in depth. This Yangshao site is situated a few kilometres to the south of Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province

The pattern of subdivision into dwelling area, kiln centre, and cemetery recurs throughout Yangshao village sites. Shared burial grounds are also in evidence, but however many villages were involved the deceased are always laid to rest close together in neat rows. The custom of sharing cemeteries during the later phase of Yangshao culture shows that population pressure had caused the growth of a feeling of community wider than the individual village. It

shows, too, that there existed a sense of lineage strong enough to require the burial of the dead in ancestral ground. Belief in an after-life is indicated by the placing of food and utensils in graves, so we may surmise that here are the dim beginnings of ancestor worship, which is attested unequivocally during the following Longshan cultural phase. Argument continues about the nature of Yangshao society, however. Chinese archaeologists have analysed a number of unusual graves as examples of matrilineal burial practice: they find special significance in the grave of a little girl at Banpo which yields rich funerary gifts besides the vestiges of a wooden coffin. That the leader of the village was female cannot be determined with assurance from the archaeological survey of the site, but evidence from legends concerning the tribal origins of the historical Zhou people would support the prevalence of matriarchy in remote times. According to *The Book of Odes (Shijing)*, collected not later than the sixth century BC, the Zhou descended from Jiang Yuan, who “prayed she might no longer be childless. She trod on the big toe of Heaven’s footprint and thereby attained her desire.”

Equally uncertain are the antecedents of Yangshao culture, now generally recognised as the genesis of Chinese culture because of the permanent influence its self-sustaining agriculture exerted over the tribes who subsequently came to regard themselves as the Chinese people. Physically the inhabitants of Yangshao villages resemble the present-day Chinese of the southern provinces, but this is not unreasonable when it is recalled how, during the imperial era, nomadic invasion turned north China into a melting pot. Yet even from Zhou times, when literary sources become more available, it is obvious that the criterion for defining membership in the Chinese world was awareness of a common cultural heritage rather than ethnic affinity. “King Wen,” Mencius could say openly in the fourth century BC, “was a barbarian,” when he laid

the foundation of the Zhou conquest of Shang. He came to be regarded by the Chinese as a sage-king through the contribution made by his successors to the civilisation itself. The prehistoric Chinese, then, were never a homogeneous people and the growth of the original cultural area established in Yangshao times came through the gradual adoption of a standard way of life by separate groups. Of central importance was the development of a religion focused primarily on male-ancestor worship.

Before Yangshao culture had run its course, another culture emerged called Longshan after the type-site of Chengzhiyai in Shangdong province, where it was discovered in 1929 near to Longshan or "Dragon Mountain". Chengzhiyai's rectangular ramparts of rammed earth indeed anticipate the long tradition of walled cities about to be inaugurated by the Shang; furthermore, the settlement area they enclosed was over five times larger than that within the defensive ditch at Banpo. Other resemblances with later times include divination techniques, pottery shapes and, interestingly, a number of potters' signs which are similar to characters found in Shang oracle inscriptions. Either an evolution of Yangshao culture or a distinct eastern tradition with connections leading north-eastwards into eastern Siberia, Longshan is essentially characterised by its advanced pottery, a thin, highly polished ware, either grey or black, which shows signs of having been made on a wheel. This culture flourished until the start of the Bronze Age sometime after 1800 BC, and its remains are found beneath those of the Shang in Henan province, the seat of that dynasty. But its influence was very widespread during the third millennium BC, when notable material progress was being made in several different areas. While the Henan Longshan was ancestral to Shang civilisation (with its cities, metallurgy, writing and elaborate art), the same culture in Shaanxi province also underlay the future Zhou dynasty, in