

3.7 NEOLITHIC CHINA: BEFORE THE SHANG DYNASTY

The problem of the origins of the Shang polity

The Shang state was not a geographically stable entity, centrally ruled from a permanent royal center. It was a shifting pattern of alliances between the frequently-relocated Shang royal house and a variety of tribal or Shang aristocratic chieftains scattered over a large area of north-central China. Shang civilization is one stage in the gradual development of a unified Chinese cultural sphere under central control, a process which culminates in the establishment of the Qin state in 221 B.C.

Shang society was built upon an agricultural base. The member regions of the Shang polity were generally themselves agricultural, and the enemies of the Shang tended to be nomadic societies. Unlike the nomadic peoples surrounding them, the Shang seem to have amassed surplus wealth that was very unevenly distributed within Shang society. Shang agriculture was productive, and its surplus tended over time to accumulate increasingly within the Shang elite class and at the Shang capital.

Power in the Shang was associated with walled cities where the elite dwelt, surrounded by artisans, who provided them with luxuries, and nearby farming lands for the peasants whose labor provided them with steady incomes. Shang civilization was clearly one in which wealth and power was distributed in a highly “stratified” fashion: the small elite class virtually monopolized both, and the king stood at the pinnacle of that class.

How did such a complex, stratified society develop? The answer is complex and not fully known. At one time, there was a consensus on this point. Sinologists generally adopted the explanation that had been offered by a social historian named Karl Wittfogel, who developed an idea known as the theory of “Oriental Despotism.” Wittfogel argued that in the “Orient” (which for him denoted an arid zone that stretched from Egypt to China) the demands of supporting large populations on parched lands necessitated the construction of massive waterworks projects to create irrigated fields. Such projects were needed for basic survival, but could not be launched without powerful control from a coordinating center. Hence, the tradition of the despot in the Orient – the absolutely powerful king.

Wittfogel’s attractive theory suffered in the Chinese case from the fact that archaeology uncovered no evidence of significant irrigation work, and discovered instead that on the basis of fossil remains of plants, it appears that the climate of north China was actually quite favorable to agriculture. Moreover, the power of the Shang king does not appear to have been excessively great (regardless of the later tales concerning Zhòu’s wicked rule).

If the origins of the Shang polity cannot be explained through a simple model like Wittfogel's, how can we account for it? Before we turn to a discussion of the features of Shang society, it will be useful to survey what we know about its Neolithic antecedents.

Overview

The Shang period is the time when China first becomes literate; many of the physical objects that the Shang people have left behind speak directly to us, when we can find and decipher them. It is harder to learn about the cultures that preceded the Shang. They are silent. Yet we have found a great wealth of objects from earlier times, and by analyzing these, we can draw a rough picture.

It was the Shang people who located deposits of copper and tin and learned the art of forging bronze. The Shang is the beginning of the Bronze Age in China. Prior to that time, tools were fashioned from wood and stone. It is customary in speaking about pre-Bronze Age China to distinguish between the Paleolithic (Old Stone Age) and Neolithic (New Stone Age) periods, a division employed in prehistoric studies worldwide. In China, the Neolithic period, which is the period in which the age of stone tools overlaps the age of agriculture, begins about 7000 B.C.

Since the first forays of Chinese archaeology in the 1920s, with time out for foreign invasions, civil wars, and the insanity of the late 1960s Cultural Revolution, Chinese archaeologists have engaged in a frenzied search for the past. Their digs have uncovered scores of primitive cultures that occupied various sites in China between the early Neolithic and the birth of the Bronze Age, about 1500 B.C.

The study of the great variety of these cultures is useful in highlighting the basic fact that the people of ancient China represented a complex ethnic mix, quite different from the picture that later texts portray of the gradual evolution and embellishment of a monolithic cultural entity, emerging from the time of the Yellow Emperor and maturing under the sage kings and Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou).

Of course, the questions that scholars of ancient China would like to see answered by the silent artifacts of the past are, "Where did 'Chinese' culture come from, and what are the connections between the late legendary accounts and the 'truth?'" But contemporary scholars also recognize that to ask the questions in such a way would be misleading: there is no consensus as to what counts as "Chinese culture," and we are far from sharing a simple account of what constitutes historical truth.

However, in this course we can spend only a brief time on prehistoric China, and nothing could make that brief time seem more endless and dull than to try to catalogue the detailed inventory of primitive cultures and the complex ambiguities of their relationships in such an introductory account. Instead, we will select only those aspects of prehistory that seem to relate most directly to our simplest questions, and speculate on what directions they may point us.

In these pages, by means of illustrations, maps, and some very basic models and over-simplified claims, we will portray prehistoric developments in China as a prelude to the

culture of the Bronze Age, that is, to Shang and early Zhou civilizations. We will briefly observe four stages or cultural spheres, all of which are named after the modern village sites where their remains were first discovered. These are:

1. Peiligang Culture, c. 7000-5000
2. Yangshao Culture, c. 5000-3000
3. Longshan Culture, c. 2700-2000
4. Liangzhu Culture, c. 3500-2000

In discussing these cultures, we will describe what we have found of them briefly, but we will also be looking for clues related to several key features of Chinese culture and the legendary past.

- Can we see in the distant past the complex kinship and class structures typical of later Chinese elite culture?
- Can we find the origins of the walled-city warrior culture that distinguished the Chinese from the nomad and other tribes?
- Can we find evidence of the sage emperors or of the Xia Dynasty?

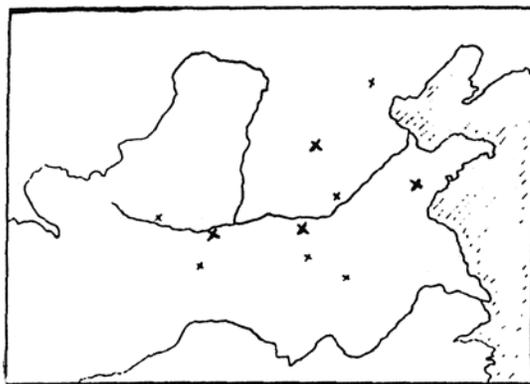
1. Peiligang Culture

In the seventh millennium B.C., a widespread culture flourished in pockets throughout the Yellow River Valley. The people in these scattered villages practiced agriculture and animal husbandry, and may have been ancestral to two important later cultures, known as the Yangshao and Longshan cultures.



Pei-li-gang houses

The villages of the Peiligang people included both round and square dwellings, approximately six to ten feet across (a modest room), with plastered floors, sunken beneath ground level. The walls were probably composed of mud and straw, and the roofs were thatched straw.



Major and minor sites of Pei-li-gang Culture

We know quite a bit about what these people ate: when the ancient layer of soil that had formed the ground of their villages was excavated, within and around each foundation site were found pits for storage or areas where animals had been kept. The Peiligang people ate several varieties of millet, cabbages, nuts, and fruits. They raised pigs, dogs, and chicken for food, and hunted deer. In other words, their basic

patterns of agriculture and husbandry were not radically different from those of much later generations of ancient Chinese.

Archaeologists pay great attention to certain aspects of culture that do not necessarily capture our attention in ordinary life: tools, pottery, and burial patterns. These facts can be read from preserved remains; costume, ritual, war, and personality generally cannot.

Peiligang culture made its implements from three types of materials: stone, bone, and shell. Spears, arrows, and harpoons might all be tools of war, but equally point towards hunting, as do needles that were most likely used to knit nets.

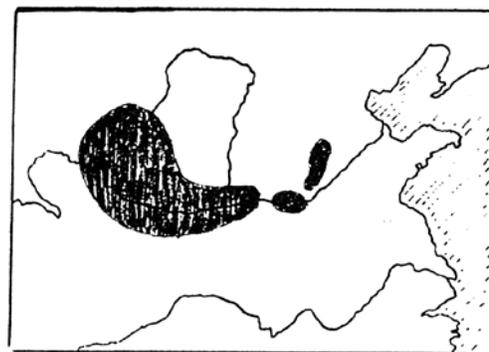
Pottery was simple. It was made without a potter's wheel, decorated with patterns made by pressing cords and combs into the clay, and fired at about 900 degrees Centigrade.

The dead were buried individually and stretched out. In many cases a few pots or tools were included in the graves; apparently the dead were in need of such objects. But there are not marked distinctions among the graves. This does not appear to have been a culture producing significant surplus for accumulation by individual families or investment in lavish grave rites. Unlike Shang culture, it does *not* bear signs of social stratification.

The Peiligang culture of the Yellow River Valley seems to be an ancestor of the next culture we will discuss, the Yangshao culture.

2. Yangshao Culture

The Yangshao culture is one of the two great Neolithic cultures that proliferated in northern China. Its earliest sites in the Wei River valley date from about 5000 B.C., and the westernmost regions of the Yangshao culture seem to persist until approximately 2000 B.C. In other words, Yangshao culture possessed a history of three thousand years – as long as the time from the Zhou conquest of the Shang to the election of George W. Bush. Yet because Yangshao society was pre-literate, we are unable to know it in any narrative form that would convey the enduring stream of social and political drama and surely make it seem one of the great civilizations of world history.



Regions of Yang-shao Culture sites

There are many Yangshao sites. The following description draws elements from various sites to draw a composite portrait.

Yangshao villages were composed of groups of houses, square, oblong, and round. A single village could possess several such groups, which were generally organized around a central area. Houses typically were a single room with about 150 square feet of floor space, about the size of a contemporary American family room. Floors were on ground level or slightly below, walls were

of clay and straw, and roofs were probably thatched and supported by wooden posts, sometimes latticed with rafters.

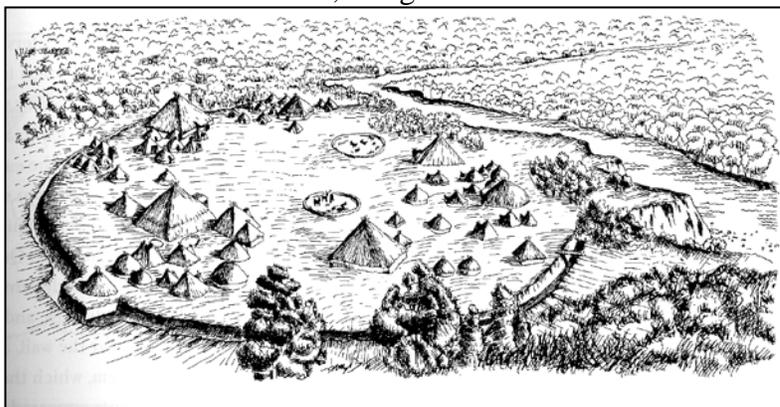
At the center of the village, there was sometimes a “longhouse,” a lodge-like dwelling or ceremonial center up to sixty feet long, with rooms and multiple hearths. The entire village was often surrounded by a ditch which separated the village from the area in which the dead were buried. The organization of the village into distinct areas of multiple dwellings of various shapes and sizes suggests that members of a single village were grouped by lineage relationships, rather than considering themselves an undifferentiated unit. We will see that this idea is suggested also in burial practices.

The burials schemes of Yangshao cemeteries are very complex. Like the segmented village structures, graves tend to be arranged in groupings with spaces between the groups. The Yangshao people paid a lot of attention to burials. Many Yangshao graves do not reveal skeletal corpses, but instead an arrangement of bones that clearly indicates that the bodies of the dead had been dug up and ceremonially reburied. This practice, known as “secondary burial,” endures in some Chinese cultural areas today. The dead are buried in temporary graves until such time as their bodies have largely decomposed. Then the graves are opened and the bones are cleaned, before being buried once again in a final resting place. In many cases, secondary burials included the remains of many people in a single grave.



Secondary burials

In addition to burying many of the dead more than once, Yangshao culture demonstrated its devotion to the dead by investing considerable amounts of resources in graves. Graves were often dug as deep chambers with ledges along the walls on which pottery and other valuable objects could be placed. Sometimes the floors of the graves were paved with wooden planking and mats. In some cases, corpses were placed in wooden caskets.



Artist's sketch of Yangshao village scene



Decorated Yangshao pots

One of the most distinctive features of Yangshao culture is its beautifully decorated pottery. These include many intricate patterns of spirals, grids, and animal drawings, and in some cases mysterious representational figures that suggest associations with

shamanism and magic. The Yangshao people who produced these beautiful pots buried many of them in the graves of the dead. *The distribution of such “grave goods” indicates great distinctions in the wealth and status of grave occupants.* While poorer primary burials might include only a pot or two, some of the larger graves surrounded the corpse with scores of beautifully decorated pots, fine tools, ornaments, and so forth, surely indicating the commanding role that the departed had played among the living. In the case of one large grave, almost 100 pots, joined by other objects, celebrated the grandeur of the grave occupant, whose forlorn skeleton was literally buried under opulent grave goods that had shifted on top of him over the millennia.

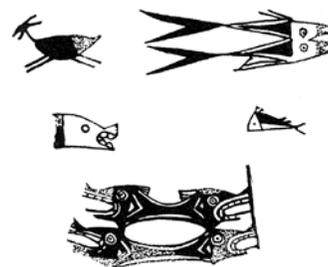
The distinctions of wealth among the graves does not correspond to the groupings of the graves. Graves within a single group may possess very different levels of opulence, suggesting that the groupings were not determined by wealth or status, but rather by lineage relationships. The fact



A much honored Yangshao individual

that among the opulent graves there are instances where the corpse was that of a child further suggests that wealth and status could be transmitted from parent to child. If we pursued these lines of speculation, they would lead towards a portrait of a society where *extended lineage groups maintained ritual but not material solidarity*: where within each large group, wealth was unevenly distributed, with certain lineage branches accumulating wealth and prestige that was not shared with less distinguished branches.

The economy of the Yangshao culture was largely agricultural, and, like the Peiligang culture, millet was the dominant crop. But we also see evidence of other forms of distinctly Chinese types of agriculture, such as the cultivation of hemp for cloth fiber and the earliest evidence of sericulture: the nurturing of silkworms. Yangshao sites indicate a broader range of animal husbandry, including dogs and pigs, sheep, goats, and cattle. Hunting yielded a wide variety of meats: badger, raccoon, fox, bear, deer, turtles, and the occasional leopard or rhinoceros.



Shaman-like Yangshao motifs

The decor of Yangshao pottery clearly possesses some aspects of symbolic representation, as well as a well developed aesthetic. As mentioned earlier, we encounter interesting animal forms, both realistic and fantastic, and a justly famous pair of masklike faces with fish seemingly whispering in their ears. In addition, pottery designs include a

wide variety of marks that apparently identified the potter – an early form of meaningful symbol that seems ancestral to the Chinese written script.

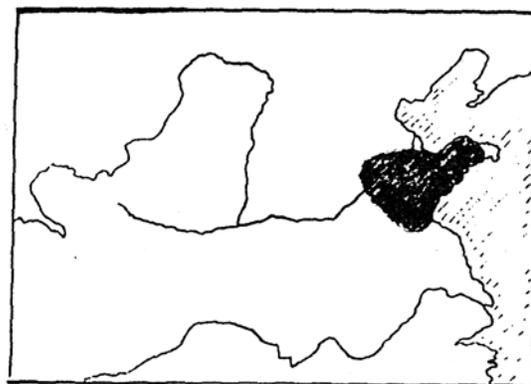
In addition to pottery, amidst the array of wooden, stone, and bone implements found at Yangshao sites is the earliest bronze implement yet found in China. It is a knife, dating to about 3000 B.C. Unless and until an earlier example appears elsewhere, Yangshao culture must be seen as the source of China's transition into the Bronze Age.

What is very much *absent* from the widely dispersed Yangshao sites is one of the most distinctive features of later Chinese culture: walled settlements. The Yangshao were clearly not a wall-building culture. In later China, wall-building was an activity of agriculturalists. Walls allowed the sedentary farming population a secure retreat in the event of attack from nomads or other more mobile tribes, and provided defensible bases for agricultural communities to war against one another as well. The Yangshao people were apparently unwarlike: very few of the many tools excavated at the village sites would have been suitable as weapons of war.

To sum up some basic themes of the Yangshao stage: we see in Yangshao culture a likely ancestor of the elaborate kinship structures of later Chinese society and their associated ritual aesthetic. We cannot, however, identify the Yangshao people as the forbears of the warrior society of walled China.

3. Longshan Culture

During the Neolithic Period, the Shandong Peninsula was almost isolated from the rest of China. A strip of low land on the western side of the peninsula was, during this period, largely covered with water and marshes, making communication with the Yellow River Valley difficult. During the centuries after the end of the Peiligang cultural phase, an outpost of that culture on the peninsula, perhaps through interaction with other cultures previously settled in Shandong or located to the south, developed into a series of evolving cultural stages.



Region of Long-shan Culture

The last of these, known as Longshan culture, seems in many ways directly ancestral to the culture of literate China. The fully developed phase of Longshan culture dates from the early part of the third millennium B.C. and endures until about 2000 B.C., the same time as the last Yangshao settlements are fading in the extreme west. Its development seems to coincide with climate changes that led to the gradual disappearance of the marshy barrier that isolated Shandong, and Longshan sites spill from the hills of Shandong into the Yellow River plain.

The most distinctive trait of Longshan culture is precisely what is missing from Yangshao: *settlement walls*. At one Longshan site, the foundations of a city wall forty feet thick have been

excavated. Its foundation was laid five feet deep, and it is calculated to have risen to a height of almost twenty feet and been almost thirty feet wide at its top. It was constructed with layer upon layer of stamped earth, each thin layer being pressed down upon a previous dried layer with wooden boards so that these layers clearly survive today. The total circumference of this wall was 1680 meters, or slightly over a mile.

Although it is now known that settlement wall building in China predates the Longshan era by many centuries, and first began, as far as archaeology has yet shown, distant from Shandong, in the middle Yangzi region, no early culture expanded the practice of wall building to the scale we see at major Longshan sites.

Longshan culture was agricultural, and its mix of crops was similar to that found in Yangshao culture. But in addition to the tools of agriculture, Longshan sites yield a rich harvest of spearheads and arrowheads, suggesting the prevalence of warfare.

Although the earliest Shandong ancestors of Longshan culture do not appear to have had elaborate burial practices and lavish graves, the later Shandong Neolithic cultures did, and they match the Yangshao culture in this respect. The most lavish of the Longshan graves, in fact, show a degree of wealth that suggests concentrations of power well in excess of those that may have lain behind the inequities of Yangshao society.



Unusually delicate Long-shan black pottery ware

The cultural distinction between the Longshan and Yangshao cultures finds expression in the sharply distinct pottery styles of the two. Whereas the Yangshao artistic imagination created intricate patterns on brightly colored pottery, Longshan potters, equally skilled, created finely shaped, thinner pieces, generally black in color without significant painted decoration. Longshan potters employed a potter's wheel, and added decorations by such devices as incisions, appliques, and cut-outs.

But the cultural feature that is perhaps the most striking in the Longshan site excavations is the discovery of many burned animal scapulas: unscribed oracle bones. These seem to offer very positive evidence that the Longshan people were the ancestors of the Shang, particularly in light of the shared feature of city walls.

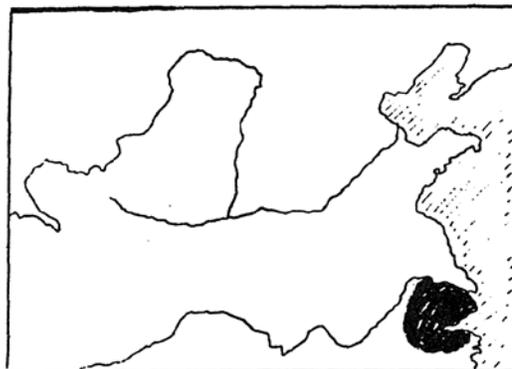
The pattern of settlements and dating of Longshan culture indicate that this Shandong culture, which may thousands of years before have shared roots with the centrally located Yangshao culture, gradually supplanted Yangshao through a process that most likely included both conquest and simple cultural cooptation. At some sites, a layer of Yangshao settlement was immediately superseded by a Longshan layer, indicating the sort of sudden cultural displacement that would be characteristic of territorial conquest. At other sites, there is a gradual transmission, with a period of mixed Yangshao and Longshan pottery suggesting

that trade and cultural diffusion was the manner in which the Longshan culture eventually supplanted the Yangshao.

Naturally, it is tempting to wonder whether we see in this process the supplanting of the historically problematic Xia Dynasty by the Shang, or perhaps even the wars between the Yellow Emperor and Chi You (though the technologically less advanced, peaceful Yangshao culture does not match well with the legends of Chi You as the inventor of weaponry). But these speculations are difficult to support from the mute evidence. Naturally, as the archaeological record becomes clearer, there will be many elements that seem to match legendary accounts (and others which do not, and which will thus draw less attention). However, it is difficult to determine what criteria we could use to assert a direct identity between the cultures whose objects were found and the superhuman personalities of China's legendary founders.

Liangzhu culture

One other major prehistoric culture deserves mention in this brief survey. This is a culture that flourished in the regions surrounding the mouth of the Yangzi River, where later the states of Wu and Yue would thrive. This culture progressed through a number of stages, the earliest appearing about 5000 B.C. In its later phases, it is called the Liangzhu culture, and is dated 3500-2000.



Region of Liang-zhu Culture sites

Liangzhu culture, although on the fringes of what we generally think of as the cradle of Chinese civilization, was very advanced, and seems to have influenced the more central regions of China in many ways. It was an agricultural society, cultivating rice – a very challenging crop to domesticate. The Liangzhu people also depended on fishing, and hunted for boar, deer, foxes, and the occasional elephant. They domesticated pigs, dogs, sheep, and water buffalo (which became the principal draught animal of South China).

Liangzhu architecture was distinctive, consisting of timbered construction with well developed joinery. Houses were long, up to 60 feet, with platform entrances on the broad side of the house, and plank floors. Dwellings were built on piles over wetlands.

In many respects, Liangzhu culture seems far removed from later metropolitan Chinese culture. But three features of Liangzhu grave practices resonate closely with the Shang. First, many graves show evidence of bone piles that may suggest the practice of dismembering the living to accompany the dead, a practice which reaches its peak in the massive tombs of the Shang kings. Second, among the grave goods in Liangzhu burials we find a very great quantity of finely carved jades. Jade, which is found in Shang tombs, is a very hard stone to work, and it appears that the Liangzhu culture was the first to master the art and to devote to it the large investment of artisan time that it required. One species of jade ornament found in great numbers in Liangzhu graves is

a smoothly hollowed tube of jade, square on the outside and round within. These objects are found nowhere but in graves, and appear to have had no utility other than a symbolic one (which we do not yet fully understand).



These jade tubes resemble Shang bronzes in that each represents a remarkable concentration of cultural resources in ritual pursuits associated with the dead. The jade tubes recall the Shang in another, even more direct way. Their outer patterns bear significant resemblance to the *taotie* and related animal motifs that are the essential characteristics of Shang bronze art. In the version at left, the bulging eyes that may have evolved into the masklike *taotie* are worked into a motif that is distinctively Liangzhu, apparently showing a combination of human and bird forms surrounding the central facial image. If, indeed, that face is the root of the *taotie*, we may well ask how Liangzhu could have influenced the Shang? The two

cultures were far separated geographically, and clearly, the rice and fishing culture of the Yangzi delta left no mark on metropolitan Chinese culture.*

One possibility has been suggested by a different form of archaeological data. The record of settlement and of soil sediments for the Liangzhu culture indicates that towards the close of its existence, the region of the lower Yangzi Valley encountered a prolonged period of floods. This flooding seems to have driven the people of Liangzhu culture inland; the archeological record of their civilization in the region comes to an end. The layer of settlements found in soil directly above those of Liangzhu cultural stratum come from a less developed culture, which appears to have moved into the area after the floods receded. (It is a rare sinologist who does not wonder whether these new reports of a prehistoric flood during the time period generally associated with the Xia Dynasty might not have some connection with the legend of the Emperor Yu, who became king and founded the Xia on the basis of his superhuman feats of flood control.)

If this reconstruction is accurate, then it may be that the Liangzhu culture emigrated to the regions where the Longshan and Yangshao cultures were undergoing their lengthy fusion and contributed to the cultural enrichment of those regions. Perhaps it was the Liangzhu immigrants who inspired the Shang to so value the turtle shell as a divinatory object, or who led the Shang to make cowry shells – unavailable in the inland Shang regions – the principal form of “cash” in trade. (One scholar has even proposed that the Liangzhu people were the Xia, establishing a dynastic tradition in the Yellow River valley through emigration and conquest.)

The picture that emerges towards the close of the Neolithic, then, is of a China in which, through processes of cultural aggression and natural forces, different advanced cultures were being

*“Resemblances” are difficult to constrain in cultural analysis. Note that this Liangzhu “shaman” motif also bears some features in common with the images from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng 2000 years later (reading 2.11).

brought together. While all may have, in millennia past, belonged to a single group of early inhabitants of China, by the end of the Neolithic, each culture had introduced an independent cultural dynamic into a shared cultural substratum. This provided, perhaps, enough common ground for cultural exchange – in spite of forms of violence that may have accompanied it – and enough variety to create the enormously complex societies of the Shang and Zhou that were to follow.

The problem of the Xia

Naturally, both Chinese and Western scholars wish to relate the archaeological record to the textual account of pre-Shang China. As we have mentioned, this is difficult to do. Even were we to find the mummified remains of the Yellow Emperor in some grand tomb, how would we know it was he if no written mark could name him? Nevertheless, the controversies on this point, both within China and in the West, have been intense and interesting. The focal issue over the past two decades has concerned the historicity of the Xia.

The traditional accounts of the Xia Dynasty resemble in many respects those of the Shang. A few kings notable kings, such as Emperor Yu, the Xia founder, and Jie, its evil last king, are portrayed with some detail, and the remainder are merely listed, with a story or two emerging here or there. The famous figures appear to be principally legendary, but the very dullness of the remaining list of kings suggests that there may be some factual basis to the chronology. Still, even if there once ruled in China a list of sovereigns with the names that we see in the annals of the Xia, were they the rulers of a significant polity, the true predecessors of the Shang, or is this simply a list of some tribal ruling clan grafted on to the history of the more universal dynasties of the Shang and Zhou.

Some years ago, a scholar named Sarah Allan, at Dartmouth College, proposed an interesting hypothesis to account for resemblances between the traditional accounts of the Shang and of the Xia. She suggests that the existence of the Xia was essentially a Shang myth, one which served to legitimize the power of the Shang kings, as the conquerors of a previous legitimate dynasty that had lost its virtue. Her proposal is very similar in structure (though quite different in its particular arguments) to those which were once proposed to demonstrate how the Shang might have been a mythical construct of the Zhou people.

Archaeology has tended to reinforce the certainty of those who believe in the historicity of the Xia. A number of Bronze Age excavations in places other than Xiaotun have uncovered large cities on a scale comparable to or greater than the ruins of the last Shang capital at Yin, and including massive city walls, which the Xiaotun site puzzlingly lacks. While at least one of these cities appears certain to be one of the former Shang capitals, a particularly early site at a location called Erlitou is located near where some traditional accounts place the capital region of the Xia, and many scholars now accept that this is indeed the homeland of the Xia. If it is, then the continuity between the Xia and Shang would be evident, as Erlitou appears to represent a developmental progression between the Neolithic Longshan and Shang cultural stages. But Erlitou could simply be explained as an early site of the Shang dynastic period, or even as a pre-dynastic

Shang site – after all, *something* directly preceded the Shang; the issue is whether its nature is reflected in the later textual account of the Xia.

Perhaps the most intriguing evidence yet offered comes from a historian named David Nivison, from Stanford University. Nivison, who is noted for his tortuously detailed efforts to rationalize the chronological accounts of early historical texts and bronze inscriptions has, with the aid of an astronomer co-researcher, proposed an elaborate system of adjustments to our understanding of the existing annals of the Xia that would align perfectly all the astronomical records of eclipses and planetary conjunctions preserved in those texts with the dates for those phenomena as generated by contemporary computerized calculations. He argues that this spectacular coincidence between texts like the *Bamboo Annals* and modern astronomy demonstrates without doubt the historicity of the Xia.

Nivison is a wonderful scholar, and his claims may be correct. However, the remarkable coincidence of dates that he produces from his research does rely on a series of speculative adjustments. For example, Nivison's proposal only holds if we assume that the last of the Xia rulers, the evil Jie, was fictional, and all the other kings listed were real. While the strange resemblance between Jie and other "last rulers" makes it reasonable to believe that he might have been invented as a literary device to legitimize the Shang conquest, the need to make this type of adjustment reduces to some degree the power of Nivison's claim. Similarly, Nivison builds into his version of the chronology several other types of systematic adjustments to trim years from the traditional account or to add them as necessary. The result is that his evidence, while impressive, must be called highly "leveraged," relying on an unusually large number of assumptions in order to achieve the result of perfect coincidence between textual and astronomical records.

We will close this section on what came before the Shang with a translation of the *Shiji* account of the annals of the Xia kings, omitting the lengthy accounts of Yu's achievements in flood control.

From: The Ancestral Annals of the Xia Dynasty

The Death of Yu and the Initiation of Hereditary Succession

In the tenth year of his reign, the Emperor Yu went touring and hunting in the east. When he reached Kuaiji he died.

Perhaps it is worth noting that the site of Kuaiji is located in the region that was the home of the Liangzhu culture, which archeological records suggest was driven from its homeland by floods.

He had bestowed the realm upon Yi. After the period of three years mourning was complete, Yi yielded the throne to Qi, the son of Yu, and retired to live on the south face of Mt. Chi. Because the son of Yu was worthy, the empire attached its loyalty to him. When Yu had died, although he had entrusted the realm to Yi, Yi had not long served as aide to Yu and the empire was to yet attached to him. The patrician lords all left Yi and presented themselves at the court of Qi, saying, "This is the son of our former ruler, Yu." And so Qi ascended the throne as the Son of Heaven, Emperor Qi of the Xia.

Note that in this account, Yu is made to follow the example of Yao and Shun in ceding the throne to an unrelated worthy. No one, it seems, really bears any responsibility for initiating the system of hereditary succession.

Emperor Qi

Emperor Qi of the Xia was the son of Yu. His mother was a woman of the Tushan clan.

The clan of the Yushi would not submit to the Xia and Qi attacked them, fighting a great battle at Gan. On the eve of battle, Qi swore the "Oath at Gan." He summoned his six high ministers and laid the oath forth before them.

Oh, you men of the six offices. I swear to you now, the clan of Youhu has transgressed. It has disgraced the five regularities and cast away the example of the three upright emperors. Heaven has therefore cut off its mandate. Today I merely exact with reverence the punishment of Heaven.

Should those on the left not attack on the left or those on the right not attack on the right, then you shall not have carried out my orders. If any should drive their chariot horses other than in the proper manner, then you shall not have carried out my orders. If you follow my orders, then I shall reward you before the ancestral tablets. If you do not follow my orders, you shall be cut down before the altars of state and I shall destroy your families.

Thereupon, the clan of Youhu was annihilated and all in the empire attended at the court of the Emperor Qi.

The successors of Emperor Qi

When Emperor Qi of the Xia died, he was succeeded by Emperor Taikang.

The Emperor Taikang lost control of his state. His five brothers awaited him at the bend of the River Luo and composed the “Song of the Five Brothers.”

When Emperor Taikang died, he was succeeded by his younger brother, who ruled as Emperor Zhongkang. In the time of Emperor Zhongkang, the clans of the Xi and the He sank into lustful license. They discarded their office of calendrical observations and through time out of joint. Yin led a righteous campaign against them and composed “The Campaign of Yin.”

When Emperor Zhongkang died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Xiang. When Emperor Xiang died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Shaokang. When Emperor Shaokang died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Yu. When Emperor Yu died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Huai. When Emperor Huai died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Mang. When Emperor Mang died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Xie. When Emperor Xie died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Bujiang. When Emperor Bujiang died, he was succeeded by his younger brother, Emperor Qiong. When Emperor Qiong died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Jin. When Emperor Jin died, he was succeeded by the son of Emperor Bujiang, Emperor Kong-*jia*.

Emperor Kong-*jia*

Emperor Kong-*jia* was fond of magic and affairs of the ghosts and spirits. He was licentious and chaotic. The virtue of the House of Xia declined and the patrician lords revolted. Heaven sent down two dragons, one male and one female. Emperor Kong-*jia* was unable to feed them, and could locate no one from the Dragon Master clan.

After the decline of the House of Yao-Tang (the clan of the Emperor Yao) among the clan descendants was one Liu Lei who had studied dragon training from a member of the Dragon Master clan. He came into the service of Emperor Kong-*jia* who bestowed upon him the surname of Dragon Driver and endowed him with all the properties descending from the clan of Pigskin.

The female dragon died, and was prepared as a dish for House of Xia’s tables. The House of Xia thereupon ordered Liu Lei to procure more dragons for them, and in fear he ran off.

The successors of Emperor Kong-*jia*

When Emperor Kong-*jia* died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Gao. When Emperor Gao died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Fa. When Emperor Fa died, he was succeeded by his son, Emperor Lü-*gui*. This was Jie.

The Emperor Jie

Between the time of the Emperor Kong-*jia* and the time when the Emperor Jie came to the throne, many of the patrician lords had rebelled against the Xia. Jie did not apply his efforts to building virtue, and his military activities harmed the common people till they could not bear it.

One of the colorful stories illustrating Jie's character which unfortunately does not appear in the *Shiji* account concerns a concubine whom he acquired in the course of a war campaign (some texts speak of two sisters). So infatuated did he become with this woman, who unfortunately bore him no sons, that he had his queen thrown in the River Luo to drown in order that this favorite, Meixi, should have no competitor at court. The following account captures the flavor of this tale, which may be compared of other evil "last rulers," Zhòu of the Shang and You of the Western Zhou (whose story appears later in these readings). It appears that all these men fell victim to a single variety of evil influence.

"Jie was of extraordinary strength. He could twist iron bars and tear apart tigers and rhinoceroses with his bare hands. . . . In the thirty-third year of his reign, he attacked Mount Meng, the country of the Youshi, who offered him the princess Meixi to propitiate him. The king made her his concubine and followed everything she told him to do. . . . The king had a palace built for Meixi, fashioned entirely of carnelian stone with halls of ivory, a jadeite tower, and a bed of jade. They engaged in lewd behavior and ordered that lascivious music and dances be performed for them. . . . The king ordered that a lake of wine be constructed in which boats could be sailed. At the roll of a drum, 3,000 people would come drink from it like cattle."

Then Jie summoned Tang of the Shang and imprisoned him in the Tower of Xia, releasing him when his term was over. Tang cultivated his virtue and the patrician lords all cleaved to Tang.

Then Tang led his troops forth and attacked Jie of the Xia. Jie fled to Mingtiao and was later banished to die in exile. Jie said, "How I regret that I did not kill Tang when he was in the Tower of Xia! Now it has come to this."

And now Tang sat astride the throne and held court to the empire in place of the Xia. He bestowed an estate upon the descendants of the Xia. During the Zhou Dynasty, their estate lands were located in Qi.

(*Shiji* 2.83-88)

Note how closely Tang's story parallels that of King Wen a dynasty later. King Wen was also imprisoned and released by a lascivious ruler.

LIST OF KEY NAMES AND TERMS

Neolithic	Yangshao	Longshan
Liangzhu	Emperor Yu	Jie

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *What is the relationship between the Neolithic and Bronze Age eras?*
2. *What are the main features of each of the major Neolithic cultures covered in this reading – how are they distinct from one another?*
3. *What was the function of grave goods, and what can we learn from them about Neolithic societies?*
4. *What was the Xia Dynasty and where does our information about it come from?*

Sources and Further Readings

The underlying source for much of this information is the now quite dated *The Archaeology of Ancient China* (4th edition), by K.C. Chang (Yale, 1987). Like many people in the field, my understanding of Chinese pre-history was shaped by iterations of Chang's excellent textbook, and no single successor has replaced it. Part of the reason for this is that from the 1980s on, archaeological exploration has exploded in China, and it would be extremely difficult to write a similar text now. Many important "new" Neolithic cultures have been identified, and for some regions we are beginning to get a picture of the way in which early culturally distinctive settlements gradually developed in complexity towards state-like organization. An excellent survey of the state of Chinese archaeology for the Neolithic is provided by appropriate sections of the lavishly illustrated *New Perspectives on China's Past: Chinese Archaeology in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Xiaoneng Yang (Yale, 2004, 2 vols.).

Sarah Allan's theories about the historicity of the Xia Dynasty are found in *The Shape of the Turtle* (Albany: 1991). David Nivison's arguments concerning the Xia are found in, "Astonomical Evidence for the *Bamboo Annals'* Chronicle of Early Xia" (*Early China* 15), co-authored with K.D. Pong.