

II. Papers

Archaeological Discoveries in the People's Republic of China and Their Contribution to the Understanding of Chinese History

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More than eight decades ago, the distinguished Chinese scholar Hu Shi (1891–1962) wrote an essay titled ‘My Views on Ancient History’, in which he said:

My outlook regarding ancient history is, for the present, we should shorten the study of ancient history by two or three thousand years, and start our researches from the *Book of Odes*. When archaeology has become well developed, then we can slowly extend [our understanding of] ancient history before the Eastern Zhou dynasty, using excavated historical evidence.¹

Today, over eighty years later, Chinese history before the Eastern Zhou dynasty has been steadily reconstructed, step by step, from archaeological discoveries, without which, even the well-recognized deserved brilliance of ancient history, since the Eastern Zhou dynasty, would be dimmed.

One simple example demonstrates the importance of archaeology for any understanding of Chinese history. Over two thousand years ago the great Han dynasty court historian, Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BCE), began his masterwork, *Records of the Historian*, by narrating the earliest phase of Chinese prehistory as the ‘Basic Annals of the Five Patriarchs’, and using some 4660 characters. He followed this with other historical narratives about three pre-imperial dynasties, comprising the ‘Basic Annals of Xia’, the ‘Basic Annals of Yin’ and the ‘Basic Annals of Zhou’, and using 4171, 3661 and 10400 characters, respectively.²

However, approximately only one half of this time span is described within the designated 1100 pages of *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*. Written mainly by western scholars and published in 1999, this book on China’s ancient history confines itself to an archaeologically verifiable history before imperial unification (approximately 1300 years) that is, from the Shang (or Yin) to the Qin state (ca. 1570–221 BCE).³ And this purely quantitative comparison may be inadequate, because the character of ancient historical narrative is completely different from modern types of historical narrative.

Nevertheless, it is not an overstatement to say that the current understanding of China’s high antiquity (i.e. before the Qin and Han dynasties) is a grand edifice supported almost entirely by archaeological discoveries. Apart from the large number of such finds, today’s historians do not possess any more documents than those examined by Sima Qian. Oracle-bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions and texts written either on bamboo, silk or strips of wood, upon which historians rely, have all been

¹ Zishu Gushiguan Shu in Gu Jiegang (comp) 1982 (reprint of 1926 edn) *Gushi Bian (Evaluations of Ancient History)*, volume I, p. 22. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, Ancient Books Press.

² Different versions differ slightly. These statistics are taken from *Records of the Historian* (2006) in the Piaobodeshu electronic edition of the punctuated *Twenty-Four Histories*.

³ Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (eds) 1999 *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

excavated only during the last one hundred years. These texts, like ordinary archaeological materials, constitute specialized fields of scholarship, and they are now the objects of research, and the sources of information, which historians cannot ignore.

Moreover, since the discovery of the oracle bone inscriptions and the Dunhuang manuscripts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese scholars have deliberately undertaken research to link their archaeological discoveries to ancient documents. The greatest historian of the twentieth century, Wang Guowei, referred to this linked approach as a 'double-layered evidentiary method'.⁴ Unlike other historical work of the early twentieth century, current written work on Chinese ancient history is inseparable from the support of archaeological evidence. Indeed, some historical work is undertaken by professional archaeologists.⁵ Of course, special topics and integrated archaeological research, especially that related to the Shang and Zhou dynasties and later, are inseparable from the study of historical documents; otherwise, certain archaeological interpretations would be completely inadequate. It is no surprise that some scholars say:

The historian who disregards archaeological evidence soon finds out that the field has passed him or her by; the archaeologist who is unfamiliar with traditional documents will miss much of the spirit that gives life to his or her artifacts.⁶

However, it is worth noting that there is a growing trend towards biased or distorted interpretations, applied in both directions, between traditional documents and archaeological discoveries.⁷

The importance of archaeological discoveries to the study of Chinese history is generally acknowledged. Today, the study of ancient China's economy, culture, society, science and technology, or even politics and thought, cannot exist independently of archaeology.⁸ The earlier the period, the more reliant we are on archaeology.

In this brief paper, I cannot detail all of the important archaeological discoveries, and their contributions to the understanding of Chinese history, made during the sixty years since the founding of the People's Republic. In fact, I do not have the ability to write such a comprehensive work. I can only describe some of the important discoveries that I am familiar with, and indicate how they have changed the traditional understanding of the origins of Chinese culture, civilization, and the formation of the Chinese nation. I hope that readers of this paper will communicate their views about it back to me.

I. The Origin of Chinese People and Chinese Culture

Although hundreds of Paleolithic archaeological sites have been discovered in China, and large

⁴ Wang Guowei 1994 *Gushi Xinzheng* (Reprint: *New Evidence for Ancient History*). Beijing: Tsinghua University Press.

⁵ For example, the section "Yuangu Shidai" (Remote Antiquity) in Bai Shouyi (comp) 1994 *Zhongguo Tongshi* (*General History of China*). Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin [People's] Press, is written by three professional archeologists: Su Bingqi, Zhang Zhongpei and Yan Wenming.

⁶ "Introduction", p. 13, in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (eds) *op cit.*

⁷ For example, an important site at Taosi in southern Shanxi province has been considered as the capital of King Yao with little supporting evidence. See Xu Shunzhan 1996 "Zailun Xiawangchao Qianxi de Shehui Xingtai" (Rethinking the Pre-Xia Dynasty Society) in *Zhongguo Xianqinshi Xuehui* (China Pre-Qin History Society) comp: *Xia Wenhua Yanjiu Lunji* (*Papers on the Xia Culture*). Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press, pp. 128-135.

⁸ Such representative works are: Bai Shouyi *op cit.*; Lu Weiyi and Xia Hanyi (trans and eds) (forthcoming) *Jianqiao Zhongguo Shanggushi* (*Cambridge History of Ancient China*); and M. Loewe and E. L. Shaughnessy (eds) *op cit.* These works use a large amount of archeological material, as does the well-known Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilization in China*. In the recently compiled *Shang History* of some ten volumes (now in press), by the Institute of History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, archeological materials play an important role.

amounts of human fossil material from remote antiquity have been excavated, the earliest of which date to more than one million years ago, except for a few archaeologists and historians, not many people would consider tracing the origin of Chinese people and Chinese culture as far back as to this era. But a substantial quantity of archaeological material, beginning from the Neolithic period and Bronze Age, and from later more modern archaeological stages, indicates a conspicuous homogeneity among China's ancient residents. This feature is particularly evident at archaeological sites in the Yellow River Basin.

Because of this, Neolithic human remains found in North China proper have been called 'proto-Chinese', or 'the first Chinese'; and differences between human physical characteristics in north and south China can be traced in the anthropological data back to Neolithic and even to late Paleolithic Ages.⁹ If one were to say that Chinese culture showed signs of emerging during the Neolithic Age, then one can also say that the Chinese people originated during this era, and that these people have continued since then to participate in Chinese history.¹⁰

Before 1949, archaeological evidence for the Chinese Neolithic period was limited to and defined by sites from Yangshao culture, Longshan culture, and from the so-called Microlithic culture in northern parts of China.¹¹ Swedish geologist and archaeologist J. G. Andersson (1874–1960) who discovered and excavated Yangshao culture and its sites, also theorised that 'Yangshao culture originated from the west'.¹²

After Chinese archaeologists discovered and excavated the late Neolithic period Longshan culture and sites in eastern China (ca. 3rd millennium BCE), they proposed a 'dualist antithetical theory' that managed to incorporate both the eastern origins and development of Longshan culture, and the western origins and development of Yangshao culture into one 'hypothesis of the Yi in the east and the Xia in the west'. They also argued that the study of the Bronze Age Shang culture (from the ca. 16th until ca. 11th centuries BCE), more popularly and obviously recognizable as Chinese, should be extended to the Bohai Bay, in north-eastern China, as 'a possible cradle of Chinese culture'.¹³

In the mid 1950s, archaeological evidence from Miaodigou, in the Shan county of Henan province,

⁹ Han Kangxin (in press) "Zhongguo Xinshiqi Shidai Jumin Zhongxi Yanjiu" (Research on the Racial Affiliations of China's Neolithic Inhabitants). In Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (comp) *Zhongguo Kaoguxue: Xinshiqi Juan (Chinese Archaeology: Neolithic Age Volume)*. Beijing: China Shehui Kexue [Social Sciences] Press.

¹⁰ David N. Keightley 1990 *Early Civilization in China: Reflections on How It Became China*. In Paul S. Ropp (ed) *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 15–54. Fei Xiaotong 1989 *Zhonghua Minzu de Duoyuan Yiti Geju (The Chinese Nation as a Unified Entity with Multiple Components)*. In Fei Xiaotong et. al, *Zhonghua Minzu de Duoyuan Yiti Geju (The Chinese Nation as a Unified Entity with Multiple Components)*. Zhongyang Minzu Daxue [Central Academy of Nationalities] Press, pp. 1–36.

¹¹ Yin Da 1979 *Xin Shiqi Shidai (The Neolithic Times)*. Beijing: Sanlian [SDX Joint] Publishing Company, pp. 1–81.

¹² Andersson, Johan Gunnar 1923 *An Early Chinese Culture*. Bulletin of the Geological Survey of China (Peking) 5: 1–68. Chen Xingcan 2004 *The Chinese Fate of Johan Gunnar Andersson: From Scholar to Scholar*. In Magnus Fiskesjö and Chen Xingcan (eds) *China Before China: Johan Gunnar Andersson, Ding Wenjian, and the Discovery of China's Prehistory*. Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, pp. 104–125.

¹³ Fu Sinian 1935 "Yixia Dongxi Shuo" (Eastern Yi and Western Xia). In *Qingzhu Cai Yuanpei Xiansheng Lishiwusui Lunwenji (Collected Essays in Honor of Mr. Cai Yuanpei's 65th Birthday)*. Institute of History & Philology of Academia Sinica, Nanjing, vol 2: 1093–1134. Xu Zhongshu 1931 *Zailun Xiaotun yu Yangshao (Further Discussion of Xiaotun and Yangshao)*. In *Anyang Fajue Baogao (Anyang Excavation Report)*, Vol III: 556–557. Liang Ssu-yüing 1939 *The Lungshan Culture. Proceedings of the 6th Pacific Science Congress* 4: 69–79. Chen Xingcan 1997 *Zhongguo Shiqian Kaoguxueshi Yanjiu [1895–1949] (Research in the History of Chinese Prehistoric Archeology [1895–1949])*. Beijing: Sanlian [SDX Joint] Publishing Company, pp. 210–227.

demonstrated that Yangshao culture, having passed through the so-called Miaodigou culture's second phase, eventually developed into the Longshan culture.¹⁴ So Yangshao culture came to be considered as the source of Chinese culture, a source located in the border region of Shanxi, Shaanxi and Henan provinces, precisely in the place that was traditionally designated 'the Central Plain'. Thus this culture of the Central Plain was thought to have expanded into the four quarters of China, forming the so-called 'Longshanoid' or 'Longshanized' phase, which ultimately established the foundations of the Chinese civilization of the historical period.¹⁵ This archaeological evidence based interpretation closely matched and supported the traditional historiographic theory which assigned a core and fundamental role to the Central Plain, and considered that all higher cultural advances had spread outwards from there. This viewpoint dominated Chinese archaeological and historical studies until the late 1970s, when new archaeological discoveries and an open academic environment broke down this 'nucleus area' hypothesis, and put forward the theoretical model of 'regional systems and cultural types' or 'regional cultures and multiple origins' hypothesis.¹⁶

In 1981, the distinguished Chinese archeologist Su Bingqi (1909–1997) argued for support of the 'regional systems and cultural types' hypothesis. He explicitly challenged the 'nucleus area theory' by dividing Chinese prehistoric cultures into six regions:

- 1) the contiguous border area of Shaanxi, Shanxi and Henan provinces,
- 2) Shandong province and some neighbouring areas,
- 3) Hubei province and neighbouring areas,
- 4) the lower reaches of the Yangzi River,
- 5) a southern region with a central axis from Poyang Lake to the Pearl River Delta, and
- 6) a northern region focused chiefly on the land area in which the historical Great Wall was later built.

Su Bingqi states that:

In the past, there was a view that the Yellow River valley was the cradle of the Chinese nation, and that our national culture first began to develop from here, then expanded to the four quarters, while other regional cultures were more backward and developed only by influence from it. This is an incomplete explanation. Historically, the Yellow River Basin did, indeed, play an important role, particularly in the period of civilization, when it often occupied a dominant position. However, other ancient cultures in other regions concurrently developed their own distinct characteristics, through their own paths. This has been proved by ever increasing quantities of archaeological evidence from various places. At the same time, the Central Plain and other regions always mutually influenced each other.¹⁷

The multiple-origins hypothesis, as represented in the theory of regional systems and cultural types, emphasizes that all regional cultures have made their own contributions to the formation of Chinese culture. However, different cultures do not develop uniformly and some always precede others. Thus, while emphasizing cultural diversity, a growing number of researchers have also noted the unified

¹⁴ Zhongguo Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo (Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Sciences) 1959 *Miaodigou yu Sanliqiao (Miaodigou and Sanliqiao)*. Beijing, Kexue [Science] Press.

¹⁵ Zhang Guangzhi (Chang Kwang-Chih) 1999 Zhongguo Xinshiqi Shidai Wenhua Duandai (Periodization of China's Neolithic Age Culture). In Zhang Guangzhi (ed) *Zhongguo Kaoguxue Lunwenji (Collected Essays on Chinese Archeology)*. Beijing: Sanlian [SDX Joint] Publishing Company, pp. 45–114.

¹⁶ Chen Xingcan 2002 Cong Yiyuan dao Duoyuan: Zhongguo Wenming Qiyuan Yanjiu de Xinlu Licheng (From Unity to Diversity: the Intellectual Journey of Research on China's Cultural Origins). In *Zhongyuan Wenwu (Cultural Relics of the Central Plain)* 1: 6–9. Chang Kwang-Chih 1999 China on the Eve of the Historical Period. In M. Loewe and E. L. Shaughnessy (eds) *op cit.*, pp. 37–73. Su Bingqi and Yin Weizhang 1981 Guanyu Kaoguxue de Quxi Leixing Wenti (On the Issue of Regional Systems and Cultural Types in Archeology). In *Wenwu (Cultural Relics)* 5: 10–17.

¹⁷ Su Bingqi and Yin Weizhang: *op cit.*, p. 10.

character of Chinese prehistoric culture and the core role of the Central Plain's culture.

Professor Yan Wenming of Peking University aptly summarized this point. He too divided the Chinese prehistoric culture into six, mostly similar, large regions:

If we consider the various cultural types of the Central Plain region to be the first level, the five cultural regions around it make up the second level, and in the outermost layer are many other cultural zones which may be considered a third level... (the latter) being comparable to flower petals (i.e. organic outgrowth) of the second level. Moreover, the Neolithic cultures of all China resemble an enormous flower with multi-layered petals... (Furthermore) Early Chinese civilization did not happen in one region, but successively in many regions, as the result of mutual effects and stimulation among various cultural centers in this vast area. The originating regions of the early civilization should be reckoned to include all of North China proper and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangzi River. Moreover, in regard to the originating and formative processes of civilization, the Central Plain in all cases played a leading and prominent role.

Professor Yan also wrote that:

The Chinese prehistoric culture is a hierarchical and centripetal structure. The civilization first started in the Central Plain, followed by surrounding cultural zones; the third layer, which is the outermost layer of cultural zones, entered the civilization much later. Therefore, during the originating and formative processes of the early Chinese civilization, it was impossible for external cultures to play important roles. Grand scale interactions between Chinese culture and that of foreign countries only began in the Han dynasty, after complete formation of the ancient civilization. No matter how great the scope of these interactions, they had only a limited impact on the development of Chinese culture, and could not change fundamentally its distinctive national features.¹⁸

In short, the past sixty years of archaeological evidence has proven that Chinese prehistoric culture did not originate from outside of China, nor was it dispersed from a nucleus or cultural center to China's geographic peripheries. Prehistoric cultures developed in each area by adapting locally to natural and environmental conditions, and through direct or indirect relations between these various cultures, they influenced each other, each one making its own contribution, to a greater or a lesser degree, to the formation and development of ancient Chinese civilization. This conceptual framework, which is derived almost completely from archaeological evidence, is now commonly accepted. It is a major challenge to the traditional Chinese view of history, which has endured for more than two thousand years. Archaeology has contributed substantially to our re-examination of the early period of Chinese history.

II. The Formation of Ancient Chinese Civilization

The Xia period (ca. 2200 until ca. 1750 BCE) is traditionally described as China's first historical dynasty. However archaeological evidence has proven that the Erlitou culture, as represented by the Erlitou site in the Yanshi district of Henan province, is China's first state-level, complex society.¹⁹

However, ancient Chinese civilization was not the consequence of a single event. The formation of a complex society was a slow and tortuous process. For example, archaeological evidence demonstrates that a complex society was developing on China's Central Plain during the mid to late 4th millennium

¹⁸ Yan Wenming 1998 *Zhongguo Shiqian Wenhua de Tongyixing he Duoyangxing* (The Unity and Diversity of Chinese Prehistoric Culture). In Yan Wenming *Shiqian Wenhua Lunji* (Collected Essays on Prehistoric Culture). Beijing: Kexue [Science] Press, pp. 1–17.

¹⁹ Liu, Li and Xingcan Chen 2003 *State Formation in Early China*. London: Duckworth. Xia Nai 1985 *Zhongguo Wenming de Qiyuan* (The Origins of Chinese Civilization). Beijing: Wenwu [Cultural Relics] Publishing House. Zhang Guangzhi (Chang Kwang-Chih) 1983 *Zhongguo Qingtong Shidai* (China's Bronze Age). Beijing: Sanlian [SDX Joint] Publishing Company, pp. 7.

BCE, that is, during the mid to late phase of Yangshao culture, and became what is now described as the Miaodigou culture (named for the representative archaeological site). At first Miaodigou culture powerfully influenced surrounding areas, but by the early 3rd millennium BCE, the people and cultures of these adjacent areas (such as the upper and lower reaches of the Yellow River, the middle and lower reaches of the Yangzi River, and the northern region in which the historical Great Wall was later built) had themselves developed and expanded, and were, in turn, influencing the people and culture of the Central Plain region. Through constant exchanges and interactions between neighbouring cultures, that is, under pressure from the periphery, the Longshan culture of the Central Plain was continually challenged and strengthened, and then gradually became predominant. Finally (ca. early 2nd millennium BCE) this burgeoning complex society manifested its full potential in what is now described as the Erlitou culture.²⁰

In addition, the later civilizations of three historical and dynastic periods: Xia, Shang and Zhou, were the consequences and beneficiaries of cultures that were founded and had evolved during the Neolithic period. Beginning with the Longshan period (ca. 3rd millennium BCE) many Chinese regions developed larger or smaller kingdoms, which competed with, and culturally influenced, each other. The Xia, Shang and Zhou were merely three sequential political powers that developed in the Yellow River Valley, and they were the successors of many prehistoric cultures.

According to Professor Kwang-chih Chang (1931–2001) the relationships between the three historical eras – Xia, Shang and Zhou – were not only characterized by successive dynastic supremacies, but also, by extended and concurrent dynastic duration. Indeed, this latter relationship between these three states was the most important principal, when viewed within the overall configuration of trends in North China proper. Accordingly, the replacement of one court by another as the eponymous dynasty of an historical period, merely reflected the three states' stages of ascendancy and decline in relative terms of power and weakness.²¹

Nevertheless, no large-scale pre-Shang and pre-Zhou sites, which should be archaeologically contemporaneous with those of Erlitou culture, have yet been discovered or excavated. Consequently the majority of Chinese archaeologists consider the Erlitou site to be the late capital city of the Xia dynasty. The Erlitou culture itself was distributed over a limited area, mainly in central and western Henan, to the west of Zhengzhou, and in southern Shanxi. However, the Shang culture, based on sites found in Henan province, experienced an unprecedented expansion, and its political domain and cultural influence reached as far as the Liao River in the north, into Guangdong and Guangxi in the south, to the Gansu and Qinghai region in the west, and into the Chengdu Plain in the southwest, including its eastern part, the Shandong Peninsula. The implementation of the *fenfeng* system of local enfeoffment (or land tenure) during the Zhou dynastic period, enabled the further expansion of its political domain into surrounding areas. Such expansion laid the basis for the substantial greater political unification achieved under the later Qin and Han dynasties.²²

Although it has been long slighted in traditional histories, in prehistory many powerful regional states developed in the Yangzi River Valley. For example, in the mid-1980s archaeologists discovered the Sanxingdui civilization (ca. 13–12th centuries BCE), in Guanghan district of Sichuan province, and the Dayangzhou civilization, in Xingan district of Jiangxi province.²³ Both of these late Bronze

²⁰ Zhao Hui 2000 *Yi Zhongyuan wei Zhongxin de Lishi Qushi de Xingcheng* (Formation of the Historical Trend Defining the North China Plain's Centrality). *Wenwu* (Cultural Relics) 1: 41–47.

²¹ Zhang Guangzhi (Chang Kwang-Chih) 1983 *op cit.*, p. 31.

²² Song Xinchao 1991 *YinShang Wenhua Qiyu Yanjiu*. Xi'an: Shaanxi Renmin [People's] Press.

²³ Jiangxi Sheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo (Jiangxi Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Relics) 1997 *Xingan Shangdai Damu* (A Big Tomb of the Shang Dynasty in Xingan). Beijing: Wenwu [Cultural Relics] Press. Sichuan Sheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo (Sichuan Provincial Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Relics) 1999 *Sanxingdui Jisi Keng* (Excavation of the Sacrificial Pits at Sanxingdui). Beijing: Wenwu [Cultural Relics] Press.

Age cultures should be considered as the prominent representatives of local indigenous civilizations, while also being linked in multiple ways with the Xia, Shang and Zhou civilizations of the Central Plain.²⁴ After two thousand years of mutual development and fierce competition, such large and small regional states were all absorbed into the torrent of history by the Qin and Han empires at the end of the 1st millennium BCE.

If the six regional cultures of prehistoric China comprised most of later Chinese civilization, and if prehistoric China's various regional cultures, after developing into socially complex cultures throughout the Neolithic period, exhibited increasing tendencies towards a common identity and formed a unique but different cultural community, it is then possible to regard each regional culture's core elements as having been more different from each other than alike. This is the conclusion inferred by archaeologists based on the material remains belonging to these various regional cultures' interactions and conflicts. This culturally independent situation continued until the rise of ancient China's historical civilization – with Xia, Shang and Zhou as the core early dynasties – before gradually changing under the power of these three dynasties. Like a rolling snowball, while the Xia, Shang and Zhou cultures grew ever more substantial, so their cultural identity also gained unprecedented strength, eventually establishing the solid foundation for the later unified, multi-ethnic, Qin and Han dynasties.²⁵

The historical picture of the Xia, Shang and Zhou periods, viewed from an archaeological perspective, has substantially challenged the long term and traditional perception of the first four thousand years of Chinese history. The rich archaeological discoveries made by the People's Republic of China have not only brought a new understanding of the formation of ancient Chinese civilization and its early development, but also, to a large extent, changed the whole understanding of that history.²⁶

III. The Environment of Ancient Chinese Civilization in its Development and Structure

Ancient Chinese culture can be described as having such characteristics as: autochthony, unity, and diversity. These characteristics are inseparable from the geographic environment in which they occur. China's special geographic position, comprising a relatively independent geographical unit, determined that its ancient cultures, since the Paleolithic Age, were in a state of relative isolation. Although these Paleolithic cultures are not recognizably 'Chinese', given the duration of the Paleolithic period, it seems that those primitive cultures that developed in the territories of China, developed very differently to primitive Paleolithic cultures of the western part of the Old World.

Since the late Paleolithic period, contacts with the world outside of China gradually increased. But for most of the Neolithic and the Bronze Ages, Chinese culture developed independently because the route from its heartlands (the Yellow River, the middle and lower reaches of the Yangzi River, and their neighbouring areas) to the western part of the Old World was blocked by the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, and by many deserts and mountains. The route towards the south was also blocked by a series of big rivers, high mountains and tropical rain forests. To the east was the ocean, vast and trackless during most of the prehistoric period. To the north of the Chinese heartland were not only endless stretches of frigid and desert wastelands, but also a series of rivers flowing from west to east, into the sea.

At the same time, while China can be considered a huge geographical unit, it is also composed of a vast number of lower level geographical units: plateaus, plains, basins, mountain ranges, hills, rivers,

²⁴ Institute of Archeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2003 *Zhongguo Kaoguxue: Xia Shang Juan (Chinese Archeology: Xia and Shang Volume)*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.

²⁵ Chen Xingcan 2000 *Zhongguo Yuangu Wenhua Yanjiu de Jige Guanjian Wenti de Pingshu (Remarks on Several Key Problems in Research on the Chinese Culture of Remote Antiquity)*. In *Shiqian Yanjiu (Research on Prehistory)*. Xi'an: San Qin Press, pp. 278–279.

²⁶ M. Loewe and E. L. Shaughnessy (eds) *op cit*.

deserts, swamps, lakes, etc. Topographically, east to west varies through three grades of altitude, while north to south spatial distance extends over more than 30 degrees of latitude. Together these constitute a climatic zone ranging from subtropical to warm temperate, cool temperate, and the Qinghai-Tibet paramos. Three major economic zones, characterized by northern dry farming, southern rice farming and northwestern hunting and grazing, were established during the early to middle Neolithic period, and each formed its own distinctive regional culture, based on features of the local geographical environment.²⁷

However, the details above do not imply that China's ancient culture was a closed and self-sufficient system, and despite being cut off by high mountains, great deserts and a vast ocean, China's cultural interactions with the external world remained continuous throughout her long history. At present, archaeological discoveries cannot answer all relevant questions, but some phenomena are particularly worthy of note. For example:

It was not until the late phase of the Shang dynasty that horses and horse-drawn chariots suddenly appear.

Wheat appeared abruptly during the Longshan period ca. 2500 BCE, and by the early Shang period's Erligang phase (ca. 1600–1415 BCE) wheat had already become a commonly grown crop in North China.

Since copper and bronze implements appeared almost simultaneously in the 3rd millennium BCE, in the Gansu-Qinghai region and in the Central Plain region, China did not experience the long Copper Age that the western part of the Old World did.

On the Central Plain region goats and sheep began to appear during the Longshan period (3rd millennium BCE) and during the Erlitou (1900–1500 BCE) and Erligang periods these animals became widespread and numerous domesticates.

The jades and tortoise shells found at the late Yin-Shang capital of Anyang have been identified as originating from contemporary China's western and southern border regions, from Xinjiang and the southern maritime zone.

The seashells found in the Sanxingdui culture site at Guanghan, Sichuan province, can be sourced to the Indian Ocean.

Recent research shows that the domesticated water buffalo may also have been introduced from the Indian sub-continent in the 1st millennium BCE.²⁸

²⁷ Yan Wenming *op cit.*; Zhang Guangzhi (Chang Kwang-Chih) 1999 *Zhongguo Kaoguxue Lunwenji (Collected Essays on Chinese Archaeology)*. Beijing: Sanlian [SCS Joint] Publishing Co; Chen Xingcan 2000 *op cit.*, pp. 258–287.

²⁸ Lee, Gyoung-ah, G. W. Crawford, Li Liu, and Xingcan Chen 2007 Plants and People from Early Neolithic to Shang Periods in North China. In *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 104: 1087–1092. Crawford, G. W. 2006 East Asian Plant Domestication. In M. T. Stark (ed) *Archaeology of Asia*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 77–95. Yuan, Jing 2007 The Origins of Animal Domestication in China. Paper for International Conference on Zooarchaeology, Zhengzhou, July 13–15, 2007. Zhang Guangzhi (Chang Kwang-Chih) 1983 *op.cit.* Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (comp) 1994 *Yin Shang de Faxian yu Yanjiu (Discovery of and Research on Yin-Shang)*. Beijing: Chinese Social Sciences Press. Sichuan Province Research Institute of Antiquities and Archaeology (comp) 1997 *Sanxingdui Jisikeng Fajue Baogao (Excavation Report of the Ceremonial Pit at Sanxingdui)*. Beijing: Antiquities [Wenwu] Press. Liu Li, Yang Dongya, Chen Xingcan 2006 Zhongguo Jiayang Shuiniu de Qiyuan (Origin of the Chinese Domesticated Water Buffalo). In *Kaogu Xuebao* 2: 41–178. Ao Tianzhao 1993 Sanxingdui Haibei Laiyuan Chutan (Preliminary Discussion of the Origin of Sea Shells at Sanxingdui). *Sichuan Wenwu [Sichuan Cultural Relics]* 5: 48–50. Li Shuicheng 2008 Zhongguo Jingnei Kaogu Suojian zaoqi Mailei Zuowu (Early Cereal Crop Remains Known Archaeologically from within China). In Huang Shengzhang (ed) *Yazhou Wenming [Asian Civilization]* 4: 50–70.

Numerous archaeological discoveries that detail China's relations with the outside world during the Qin-Han period and later are even more numerous than those for earlier periods. But the scale and influence of those relations, before China was forced into open trade by European powers in the AD nineteenth century, were far less than the mutual interactions and conflicts among the various cultural regions within the vast geographical unit of China itself. For example:

The middle and lower reaches of the Yangzi River region is where irrigated rice cultivation originated.

As early as during the Yangshao period (ca. 5000–3000 BCE) rice cultivation had already entered the Yellow River valley.

On the Central Plain region, while the dry field crops of millet, wheat, and legumes were dominant, they were supplemented by the minor agricultural tradition of wet rice cultivation, which can be traced in North China, back to at least to the period ca. 1600–1300 BCE, during the Shang dynasty.²⁹

A culture of ritual objects, used in religious practices that centered on ancestral offerings, as represented by Erligang bronze vessels, spread rapidly and widely during the Shang dynasty of the mid 2nd millennium BCE throughout the Yangzi River valley and the northern region, transcending the indigenous cultures of each locality, and constituting a widespread 'cultural commonality', which formed the basis of a high level culture definitive of Chinese civilization.³⁰

To summarize:

The basis of China's culture was formed during the 10,000 years since the Neolithic period.

Its autochthonous, pluralist, and organically integral character is inseparable from the geographical environment in which it occurred.

At the same time, this huge geographical unit's contacts with the external world have never ceased, and China has never been a completely self-sufficient cultural unit, although during the entire ancient period its external contacts never played a decisive role.

Finally, let us return to the issues raised at the start of this paper. The multitude of archaeological discoveries made during the last sixty years of the People's Republic of China have brought about many great, observable and obvious achievements. While the excavation of Yinxu at Anyang has proven the reliability of ancient texts (especially 'Basic Records of Yin' in *Records of the Historian*), another whole series of subsequent major archaeological discoveries has caused many scholars to rethink their cautious and critical attitude towards ancient texts, an attitude which in fact should be maintained. The 'doubting antiquity' movement of the early twentieth century has been almost entirely replaced by an optimistic credulousness. In the most extreme cases, certain archaeological sites are precisely matched to certain legendary figures recorded in ancient texts. Of course, archaeology can determine the truth or falsehood of ancient texts, but this is only a small part of the value of archaeology to history, and it should be relied upon, using its own methods and evidence, even more so, to reconstruct China's ancient history.

Xi'an: Sanqin Press. Linduff, K. M., Han Rubin and Sun Shuyun 2003 *The Beginnings of Metallurgy in China*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press. Linduff, K. M. 2003 A Walk on the Wild Side: Late Shang Appropriation of the Horse in China. In M. Levin, C. Renfrew and K. Boyle (eds) *Prehistoric Steppe Adaptation and the Horse*. Cambridge: Madonald Institute for Archaeological Research, pp. 139–162. Yuan Jing and Rowan K. Flad 2005 Research on Early Horse Domestication in China. In M. Mashkour (ed) *Equids In Time and Space*. Oxford: Oxbow, pp. 124–131.

²⁹ Lee, Gyoung-ah, G. W. Crawford, Li Liu, and Xingcan Chen 2007 *op cit*.

³⁰ Allan, S. 2007 Erlitou and the Formation of Chinese Civilization: Toward a New Paradigm. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, 2: 461–496.

I will raise another example to clarify this point. During the past fifty years or so, China's many archaeologists and historians have expended great energy to prove that the Erlitou site is the Xia dynasty capital and that Erlitou culture is Xia culture. To the present day, this goal has not been achieved, because no excavated written material can explicitly confirm this interpretation. Nevertheless, from a strictly archaeological viewpoint, the discovery of the Erlitou site and the Erlitou culture have not in the least kept us from comprehending the course of historical progress in the mid Yellow River region during the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE. Regardless as to whether or not this culture represents Xia, or whether or not this site represents one or another capital city of the Xia, we can confirm that a state-level society, characterized by a surface area exceeding 3 million square metres, possessing multitudes of architectural foundations and walls made of tamped earth, and yielding high ranking tombs and vessels of bronze and jade, appeared in the fertile land of the Yiluo plain at that time. Archaeological discoveries have proven that this culture is primarily distributed through western Henan and southern Shanxi, and that its influence already extended towards the Yangzi River valley, the goal of which was probably to control critical natural resources such as copper and turquoise.³¹

What I would like to confirm, and affirm, is that archaeology has its own methods and goals. It is fully capable of making its own contribution to the reconstruction of China's history, through the use of its own science and language.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to thank Dr Thomas Bartlett for his hard work on translating and editing this article. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers who made many critical and constructive comments.

The History of Archaeology as Seen Through the Externalism-Internalism Debate: Historical Development and Current Challenges

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Introduction

“[The history of archaeology] it is a story full of excitement and of exciting personalities, a story based on the determination of individuals such as Schliemann at Troy and Howard Carter in the Valley of the Kings, a story of the purpose in excavation and fieldwork but a story also of the strange way in which discoveries of great importance made by chance” (Daniel 1981: 212).

“The development of archaeology has corresponded temporally with the rise to power of the middle classes in Western society [...] it seems reasonable to examine archaeology as an expression of the ideology of the middle classes and to try to discover to what extent changes in archaeological reflect the altering fortunes of that group” (Trigger 1989: 14-15).

These citations provide us with meaningful examples of the two broad approaches that have characterized the writing of the history of archaeology during the last century: internalism and externalism. The first quotation, from Glyn Daniel's *A Short History of Archaeology* (1981), illustrates

³¹ Liu Li and Xingcan Chen *op cit.* Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 1999 *Yanshi Erlitou*. Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue [China Social Sciences] Press. Liu Li and Xu Hong 2007 Rethinking Erlitou: Legend and History in Chinese Archaeology. *Antiquity* 81: 886-901.