[1] *Early History, to 1027 BCE*

Land and Settlement
Early Mankind
Agricultural Revolution in the Neolithic Era
Xia: The First Dynasty?
The Shang and the Origins of Chinese Civilization
Oracle Bones
Ritual Objects as Historical Sources
Shang Society

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Land and Settlement

Along with Russia and the USA, China is one of the world's largest countries, stretching about three thousand miles from the east coast to its boundaries to the west in central Asia, the Himalayan states, and Vietnam. This vast domain embraces the tropical island of Hainan and the subarctic areas of Manchuria. Its landscape of plains, deserts, and lofty mountains has created various kinds of economies, based upon the environment. There are multiple Chinas, depending on the topography and the inhabitants' differing responses to the lands in which they reside. Two-thirds of the land consists of mountains or other demanding terrain, with limited or almost no opportunities for transport, precluding the development of agriculture. However, the melting snows from the mountains provide water and, in modern times, hydroelectric power. The Tibetan plateau (Tibet and Qinghai province) has the most daunting mountains. The lands east of the mountains are China's agricultural heartland.

A History of China, First Edition. Morris Rossabi.
© 2014 Morris Rossabi. Published 2014 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Within the traditional boundaries of China, the north and south regions differ. The Qinling Mountains and the Yangzi River divide the country. Flowing from Tibet to north China and then to the original core of Chinese civilization in Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces, the Yellow River (or Huang He) is vital to the northern economy. Loess soil blowing from Inner Mongolia into these provinces and Gansu province permits sedentary agriculture. The yellowish soil builds up with silt and mud in the Yellow River and necessitates the construction of embankments to protect against floods. The river is, in many sections, fifty meters or more above the plains, and proper maintenance of embankments is essential to prevent flooding and changes in the course of the river, which could ravage the land. When a government, in traditional times, did not undertake such flood-control projects, the dynasty declined and peasants suffered, leading to frequent disorder and rebellions. At the same time, the north suffered from a lack of precipitation and endured severe droughts. Deficiencies in water and a short growing season due to an early onset of low temperatures limited staple crops to wheat, oats, and millet. Rice required considerable water and could be grown only in the south.

At this time, the Yangzi River dominated south China. The largest waterway in the country, it was navigable and readily linked the southeast coast to its hinterland to the southwest. Abundant precipitation and good soil offered optimal conditions for a rice-based intensive agriculture in the southeast. The Sichuan Basin, in the southwest, with its mild and humid climate, was also a rich agricultural region. Even farther to the south, below the Nanling mountain range, a tropical climate permitted the planting of two crops a year. West of the Nanling, Guizhou and Yunnan provinces also had a bountiful agricultural base. The southeast coast has excellent ports, and ships from southeast, south, and west Asia reached these harbors, but traditional China generally, with some exceptions, oriented itself inland throughout its history. Like the north, the south has not always been blessed by nature. The southeast coast has been prone to typhoons and monsoons and the attendant flooding and loss of life.

Both natural and man-made disasters have afflicted China. Floods have threatened the Yellow River basin as well as the southeast coast; earthquakes have proved to be devastating throughout the country (in recent years, they have caused damage and much loss of life in an area not far from Beijing and in Sichuan); and dust storms emanating from Inner Mongolia have created hazardous conditions in the north. Such a listing of catastrophes does not include locusts and predatory birds and animals and their effects on crops. Human error or lack of concern for the environment has had similarly devastating consequences. Felling of trees and erosion, especially in the north, has resulted in growing desertification, leading, for example, to the increased size of the Gobi desert. In modern times, the use of coal for heating and unregulated emissions from automobiles have contributed to poor air quality in many cities, including Beijing, while chemical effluents from factories and untreated wastes have fouled numerous lakes, rivers, and streams, further jeopardizing the relatively paltry supplies of potable water in the north.

China's territorial parameters have changed throughout its history. Modern China controls much more land than the Han or Tang, the great traditional dynasties, did. The Han did not totally dominate south China, and the Tang did not

control parts of the contemporary southwest. Yunnan province did not become part of China until the thirteenth century, and the region of Xinjiang (comprising one-sixth of modern China's land) was not ruled by a dynasty from China until the eighteenth century. Like the histories of Russia and the USA, China's lengthy past is a narrative of colonization. China in the second century CE did not encompass many areas that are now considered to be part of its lands. It was a much lesser domain – at least in territorial extent – than contemporary China.

As a result, there have been many Chinas. Starting with a base around the Yellow River, China expanded to the south and the west. As the Chinese added territory and peoples, they also incorporated new cultural patterns and values that they adopted from the native inhabitants. When they advanced along the current northern borderlands, they gained control over non-Chinese peoples, which contributed to the cultural mix. Localism prevailed, as many areas retained their own identities. Although these regions fell under central control, they often persisted in their own lifestyles. Yet historians cannot readily identify these deviations and regional variations because the written records, most of which derived from the central authorities, ignored both local patterns and opposition to the dynasties' institutions and policies. Nonetheless, readers should be aware that the trends and policies described in this book may not apply to all regions at all times in Chinese history. There was considerable variation in this large land mass.

Before China expanded into the regions of the non-Chinese peoples, geography determined the divisions between it and its neighbors. Chinese peasants spread to lands suited for farming. They planted in terraces on mountains, constructed canals, built banks to tame rivers, and created ditches to preserve water for irrigation and to avert floods. The available land imposed limits on such sedentary agriculture. Mountainous and desert terrain, especially in the north and west, prevented farming in those regions. The areas north of China proper had short growing seasons, low temperatures, and soil unsuited for intensive agriculture, precluding Chinese settlements. This territory was principally the nomads' land. Hunting and fishing prevailed in the northeast area in northern Manchuria, which resembled the Siberian territories. Directly north was the Gobi desert, which prevented Chinese colonization, and, farther north in modern Inner Mongolia and Mongolia, nomadic herders dominated. Only late in history (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) did Qing China, governed by the Manchus, attempt to encroach on the northern lands of Mongolia and Xinjiang. Because the Tarim Basin and the Tian Shan in Xinjiang have proved to possess oil, coal, and precious ores, Chinese expansion in that region has been important. However, it has resulted in considerable turbulence because the Turkic (principally Muslim) population in the area has repeatedly chafed under Chinese domination.

EARLY MANKIND

The study of China in its preliterate stage has undergone dramatic changes since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. New construction, the opening up of more arable land, and systematic surveys of ancient sites all

have contributed to discoveries of a treasure trove of fossils and artifacts. Major finds were also made before the founding of the People's Republic, but the pace of discovery has accelerated since then. For example, a leading text on the archeology of ancient China, first published in 1963, was revised and enlarged on four separate occasions before 2000 because of the rapid increase in knowledge during that time. Thus, generalizations about preliterate China are quickly dated and often require emendation. The specific portrait drawn in this text will no doubt be superseded, although the general outline may remain valid for some time to come.

The most spectacular and significant site of the Middle Pleistocene (about 400,000 years ago) is Zhoukoudian, a complex of caves about forty kilometers west of Beijing. Found by the Swedish paleontologist J. G. Andersson around 1921, these limestone hills proved to have a wealth of materials for the reconstruction of early hominid life in China. Scholars have identified about fifteen geological strata in the caves and various different levels of culture. The most renowned fossil in the cave was the so-called Beijing Man or, to paleontologists, *Sinanthropus pekinensis* or *Pithecanthropus pekinensis*. Isolated skulls, bones, and teeth of forty individuals were found in this site; forty percent of those individuals had died before the age of fourteen. Their diet consisted of the meat of other animals, including the ancestors of deer, leopards, elephants, water buffaloes, and horses. They also gathered and ate nuts and berries. They had discovered how to make fire and how to produce stone tools and implements. However, having been found after half a million years, the fossils were lost only twenty years after their discovery. In 1941, the Chinese and the Americans responsible for the remains feared the growing turbulence in China and decided to send the fossils to the USA for safekeeping. However, the USA's entry into the Second World War in December of 1941 upset these plans, and the fossils were either lost in a ship bound for the USA when it was sunk by the Japanese navy or were simply stolen while awaiting shipment to the USA or later.

These fossils found in the Zhoukoudian caves are among the most significant evidence of Paleolithic culture in China, but sites throughout the country have yielded other Paleolithic remains. In recent years, excavations (which have uncovered Paleolithic sites in southwest China, Manchuria, and Inner Mongolia, among other locales) have proven that the earliest evidence of hominid life is not limited, as previously believed, to the areas around the Yellow River. Many scholarly controversies have developed about the interpretation of these hominids, including so-called Beijing Man. Additional discoveries may help to resolve some of these issues.

Agricultural Revolution in the Neolithic Era

Those finds that can be definitively linked with modern Chinese people date from the Neolithic era. Evidence about the Neolithic age is plentiful and historians have sifted through it to provide a clear image of cultural and technological

innovations. The most significant changes from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic were the development of agriculture and a growing dependence on farming for survival. A fragile hunting and fishing economy became a more stable, agrarian-based society. Archeological excavations since 1949 have challenged the earlier view that China had two, and only two, demarcated Neolithic cultures. At least four such cultures have been identified, and the sites are scattered throughout the country. The new discoveries have considerably altered the previously accepted dates for the Neolithic. J. G. Andersson, who excavated one of the Neolithic sites in the early 1920s, had given 2500 BCE as the approximate onset of the Neolithic, but more-accurate dating techniques have shown that his village was founded as early as the fifth millennium BCE and that other Neolithic sites existed around 6500 BCE, if not earlier.

The earliest known sites can be found as far apart as southern Hebei province and eastern Gansu province, and several have been found in south China. The residences and cemeteries excavated in the northern areas share specific characteristics – round or square houses, underground storage pits, use of specialized stone tools including knives, axes, hammers, and mortars and pestles, and simple handmade red or brown pots. Pigs and dogs had been domesticated, and this may serve to explain why (in an indication of the vital role of the pig in early China) the Chinese character for "pig" placed under the character for "roof" came to form a new character meaning "family" or "household." The dead were buried singly in individual graves and provided with pottery or stone tools. Many of the sites in south China are located in caves, again scattered across a wide variety of regions in the provinces of Jiangxi, Guangxi, and Guangdong. Judging from the tools found in these sites, the cave dwellers worked the land but also hunted and fished. Bones of deer, sheep, rabbits, and birds indicate the range of animals they hunted. Like their contemporaries in the north, they had domesticated the pig, and the large number of pig bones indicates the animal's value to the inhabitants.

The Yangshao sites are doubtless the most renowned of the early Neolithic cultures. Discovered in 1921 by J. G. Andersson, they provide a wealth of data on the peoples and economies located in the area. Banpo village in the modern city of Xian is a typical example of these sites. Excavated by archeologists starting in 1953, the site has been turned into a well-arranged museum with helpful descriptions of the original layout of the village. Because it has been left in pristine condition, it provides a glimpse of Neolithic life. The discovery of the bones of various animals, including deer, raccoons, and foxes, confirms that that the Banpo villagers, like their counterparts in Paleolithic cultures, hunted for part of their sustenance. The uncovering of seeds from trees verifies that the inhabitants also gathered food. Yet their generally sedentary existence and their larger populations necessitated a steadier source of supply than hunting and gathering. Since agriculture offered greater control of their environment, the villagers turned to farming for most of their needs. Millet was their principal food crop, and rudimentary farm implements, such as hoes and spades, exemplify some of

their technological sophistication. Fishing provided variety to their diet and appears to have been a significant economic activity, as evidenced by the numerous representations of fish on their pottery.

Banpo was a well-laid-out village. Its inhabitants placed their sturdy houses, which were either at or below ground level, at the center of the village complex. Plastered floors and walls, as well as roofs supported by wooden posts, gave an appearance of permanence to the dwellings. Adjacent to the houses were storage pits, with pottery containers often used as granaries, and enclosed areas for domesticated animals. A cemetery (in which more than a hundred skeletons of adults were discovered) and a kiln were located on the fringes of the village. A communal dwelling was found at the center of the village, and the doors of the individual dwellings opened out onto the center. The large number of infants and children buried in the cemetery and in burial urns near the houses attests to the fragility of life in this era.

Like most of the other Neolithic sites in the north, Banpo was situated near a tributary of the Yellow River. The nearby waters provided the foundations for agriculture. The river conveyed the fine grains of sand that had, probably for millennia, been transported from the Mongolian deserts. After the sand was deposited and weathered, it eventually formed the loess soil that made the land productive. Layers of loess soil deposited over thousands of years facilitated farming, partly due to the ability of the loess to absorb water, and the river provided the water to nourish the soil. However, the river could cause havoc to neighboring villages. Accumulation of substantial amounts of loess in the river could, on occasion, result in water

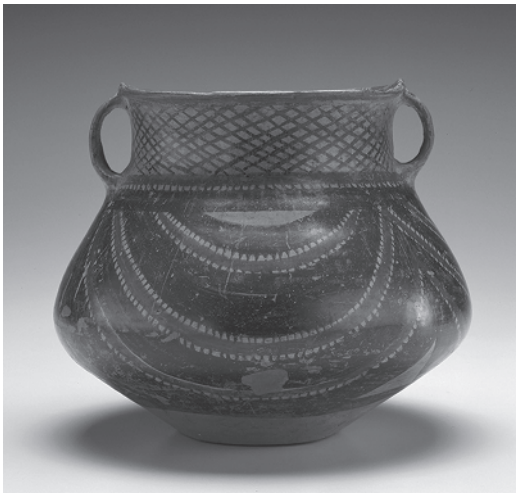

Figure 1.1 Ceramic urn, Gansu province, Neolithic period. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, USA / The Bridgeman Art Library

spilling over the banks and flooding. Villages downstream felt the full energy of the river. The reaction to such flooding was simply to move to higher grounds to avoid the onrushing water. Later, substantial irrigation projects would be devised to control the river.

Banpo's inhabitants had made great strides in the production of pottery, which varied considerably in color, decoration, and shape. They used a red pigment to paint a large number of the pottery vessels, but not all were painted; some were gray or black. The shapes of the vessels, which were remarkably diverse, were often dictated by their use, from tripods for cooking to thin-topped but large-bodied jars for storage to both small and large bowls for food and for ritual observances. The decorative motifs were also varied, with geometric designs, realistic depictions of fish and deer, and abstract representations of fish and animals. These depictions of fish and animals reflected the continued significance of hunting and, particularly, fishing in the economy of the village. Symbols on some of the pottery may have indicated ownership or the sign of the potter and may have signaled the beginnings of a written language.

The village's tools and ornaments were more numerous and diversified than similar artifacts of the Paleolithic era. Stone chisels, polishing tools, hoes, and spades supplemented the stone axes, knives, and arrowheads of earlier times. Antler needles, fishhooks, spearheads, and polishers showed significant improvements in technology. The fashioning of decorative items such as rings and beads made of jade and other semiprecious and precious stones indicated the development of an economy producing more than subsistence products.

The Banpo village and the original Yangshao villages were not the only north China sites of Neolithic culture. Since the 1920s, other such sites have been excavated in the provinces of Gansu (the so-called Painted Pottery Culture), southern Hebei, central Henan, and Shaanxi. They shared some of the same cultural and economic traits of Banpo, but there were nonetheless variations in the sizes of the villages, the types of pottery and stone implements, and the methods of burial. Such differences presaged a characteristic of much of Chinese history and a persistent theme in this book – the local deviations from central patterns or, later, from central government's demands and laws.

South China also witnessed the development of early Neolithic cultures, but the early and late Neolithic sites found in the province of Shandong (in the northeast) were most closely related to the earliest true Chinese civilization. Like the Yangshao, the Dawenkou culture of Shandong, which originated later than the Yangshao culture, was based upon millet production, but its tools, pottery, weaponry, and crafts were more complex in design and in performance. In addition, excavation of the graves revealed growing complexity in social organization. A few were extremely elaborate, with exquisite pottery and stone implements, while most were bare or had relatively few furnishings. Such evidence points to a more hierarchical social structure. In addition, it is apparent that Dawenkou had been

Figure 1.2 Ting tripod bowl, Longshan culture (third or early second millennium BCE) from Shandong province. The Art Archive/Genius of China Exhibition

influenced by other Neolithic cultures. The borrowing of practices confirmed that the various Neolithic communities were in touch with and affected each other.

The Longshan culture of Shandong, which succeeded the Dawenkou, was the culmination of the interrelationship of the earlier Neolithic sites. Relatively few Longshan villages have been totally excavated, but the ones that have reveal significant changes from Yangshao villages. The pottery, for example, was principally black and gray, differing from the painted pottery of the Yangshao. Most vessels were relatively unadorned, although some were decorated with incisions and appliqués. The tripods, jars, and other shapes characteristic of Yangshao were also found in the Longshan assemblages, but new forms, such as steamers and cups with handles, were introduced in the Shandong cultural complex. Stone and bone implements and weapons in both cultures were similar, but the preponderance of arrowheads and spearheads in Longshan indicated a greater concern for defense from troublesome outsiders.

The very concept of "outsiders" was a new formulation; it shaped some unique features of the Longshan and provided even sharper distinctions from the Yangshao. Defense against perceived or actual enemies heightened the Longshan villagers' sense of identity and unity. They began to recognize that they shared certain beliefs, customs, practices, and institutions that clearly distinguished them from others. The most tangible manifestation of distinctiveness was the construction of walls around their villages, a practice that most Chinese cities would later follow. The Longshan village of Chengziya built the earliest known such wall, to an average height of about six meters. Defense was the paramount consideration for the villagers; yet

the walls reflect an affinity of interests – familial, clan, and political – that required protection. The inhabitants of these walled villages sensed that they belonged together and were distinct from other groups.

In addition to stamped-earth walls, Longshan culture exhibited other features that would be found in the earliest Chinese dynasty. Longshan appears thus to be a direct link between the Neolithic era and the origins of Chinese civilization. Not only did Longshan and the earliest Chinese civilization build walls around their villages but they also both used the practice of scapulimancy. Diviners or community leaders burned animal scapulae to generate cracks that they would then interpret to foretell the future. These so-called oracle bones, pervasive throughout the Longshan sites, constituted a step in the development of the Chinese written language and yield invaluable information about the Shang, the first attested dynasty. They also reveal an increasing concern for rituals, which is also shown in the unusual animal-mask decorations on the distinctive black pottery, tools, and other objects and in the markedly different burials from those found in Yangshao sites. The Longshan devoted considerable resources to burials, which is an indication of increasing attention to ceremonies concerning an afterlife and of a more stratified social structure. A few burials in the cemeteries consisted of sizable graves with wooden caskets and numerous furnishings; a slightly larger number had a few caskets and some scattered goods; and the largest number had no caskets and no furnishings. It appears that the more elaborate the burial, the higher the socials status of the deceased.

Attention to rituals and ceremonies, together with walled villages and oracle bones, link Longshan to the earliest Chinese civilization; in addition, new materials for tools and weapons and clearer political and social distinctions relate this Neolithic culture to the first recognizable entity that can legitimately be called China. Objects made of copper and several bronze vessels, which were discovered in a number of Longshan sites, mark the transition from a stone-age to a metal-age culture. The Bronze Age dynasties were still at some remove, but the appearance of metal tools indicates technological advances on the path to the full-blown metallurgical centers of early Chinese civilization. Warfare and burial practices and other ceremonies point to demarcated territories and political groups and to a stratified society, still another step toward the first Chinese dynasty. Political power within the Longshan groups became more concentrated, and wealth varied considerably. Such differentiations presaged the social distinctions found at the early stages of Chinese culture.

Although Longshan was associated principally with the province of Shandong, other sites sharing the same characteristics were widely dispersed in the third millennium BCE. Farther to the south, around the modern cities of Hangzhou and Shanghai and other centers along the Yangzi River, archeologists have excavated villages exhibiting the same cultural features as the prototypical sites in Shandong. To the west, some villages inthe provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, and Henan, associated with the Yangshao culture, gradually manifested traits of the Longshan, and their material culture and social differentiation resembled those of the Longshan. Even farther away, archeologists have uncovered Longshan-like sites as distant as Fujian and Guangdong in the south and the Liaodong peninsula in the north.

These discoveries challenge the earlier view that Chinese civilization originated only along the bend of the Yellow River in north China. Archeological evidence now points to the existence of many regional cultures, which shared basic traits but differed sufficiently to be distinctive. This pattern of regional traits, which on occasion translated into regional autonomy, characterized China even after the creation of a so-called common culture and the establishment of a centralized government that, in theory, ruled the entire country. Historians have begun to question the concept of a monolithic China and to acknowledge the significance of regional variations, both culturally and politically. Evidence of there being many Chinas can be found for any given time in Chinese history, even this early stage of culture. Paucity of information, however, often limits knowledge and consideration to the central authorities and the reputed dominant culture.

Xia: The First Dynasty?

Throughout the third millennium BCE, regional cultures were in touch with each other. Groups living along the bend of the Yellow River, in Shandong, and in the middle Yangzi River valley were the most significant. Some relations within and between these three groups were peaceful and resulted in rudimentary commerce, while others involved violent struggles for power. Absence of written records impedes precise knowledge of the causes of these conflicts, but control of land and water and clashes between ambitious leaders no doubt provoked some of this warfare. More powerful villages swallowed up weaker ones, although in the process they were influenced by the traits and practices of the vanquished. Indeed, interaction, whether peaceful or adversarial, among these regions inevitably affected the customs and beliefs of the various regions and brought them closer together into a peaceful Sinitic culture. By around 2000 BCE, the stage had been set for cohesion and the establishment of a state.

Early Chinese legends traditionally attributed the founding of a state to a much earlier period and to a heroic man or god named Yu who, according to long-held beliefs, reputedly founded the Xia, the first dynasty. Yu was one of the last semidivine, semihuman figures who, mythical accounts claim, were responsible for vital technological and cultural advances, the origins of the state, and even the beginnings of the Earth. A divinity named Pangu is credited with the creation of the Earth. He divided Heaven and Earth and, after his demise, his body was transformed into the various features of the Earth's environment. His blood flowed to create the lakes, rivers, and oceans; his eyes turned into the sun and moon, the brightest phenomena seen by mankind; his hair grew into the trees and plants; and even his body lice were changed – they formed human beings and animals.

Pangu, who appeared only in later texts, established the foundations of the reputed innovations and discoveries of the mythical Three Sovereigns (*Sanhuang*) and Five Emperors (*Wudi*). Paradoxically, some of the figures who supposedly trod the Earth after Pangu are noted in earlier sources. In fact, the later they are said to have lived, the earlier their appearance in Chinese historical texts.

In addition, in these texts, the figures who reputedly inhabited the Earth in later times resemble humans and have been stripped of their characteristics as divinities. Naturally, the earlier figures retain their godlike attributes.

The Three Sovereigns, for example, assumed strange, nonhuman shapes and made extraordinary contributions to Chinese civilization. Fuxi and his consort Nuwa, who is variously described as his wife or his sister, are portrayed with human heads but serpents' bodies. The sources laud Fuxi for introducing animal husbandry and marriage and creating musical instruments and the calendar. Shennong, the second of the Three Sovereigns, was China's great economic benefactor because he reputedly initiated agriculture and commerce, and Zhurong, the last of the Three Sovereigns, allegedly instructed the Chinese in the use of fire.

The Five Emperors generally contributed to human relations rather than to techniques and inventions and were depicted in human form. Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor) reputedly devised the governmental structure and expelled the non-Chinese "barbarians" from China's core territories, permitting the development of Chinese civilization. His wife served as a model for women, originating sericulture and undertaking domestic chores, and his principal minister created the first written symbols. Yao and Shun, the last two emperors, exemplified the Chinese values of wisdom and competence for rulers and embodied the highest virtues, as was later articulated by Confucius and his followers. Early accounts credit them with devising the characteristic Chinese governmental institutions and with setting political precedents. For example, Yao emphasized the principle of merit in the selection of officials and leaders, although his own family lost out as a result. He chose the commoner Shun rather than his own son as his successor. He judged Shun to be the most competent person to rule the territory of China under his control and forsook heredity as the main criterion for succession. Yao was particularly impressed with Shun's unswerving devotion to filial piety, despite the cruel and inhumane treatment he received at the hands of his stepmother and father. Yao eventually gave the throne and two of his daughters in marriage to Shun, who supposedly came to be an exceptional ruler, proving that Yao's confidence in him was not misplaced.

When Shun, in turn, needed to choose his own successor, he followed Yao's example, overriding the hereditary or flesh-and-blood imperative in order to select the most competent person. In this case, he tapped Yu, who became a great cultural hero and is repeatedly mentioned and praised for his accomplishments in the Chinese histories. Yu tamed the Great Flood, which had caused havoc and devastation and threatened the survival of the sedentary agricultural civilization created near the Yellow River and its tributaries in north China. In effect, the sources depict him as the originator of the irrigation projects that permitted the continuance of Chinese civilization. Without flood control and simultaneous conservation of the occasionally scarce water resources of north China, agriculture could not have been sustained.

Having saved civilization through strenuous, life-long efforts, Yu was poised to follow his predecessors in selecting a successor. However, his people rejected his choice and selected his son as the heir, thereby legitimizing the principle of hereditary succession and originating the concept of a dynasty or

a family-ruled state. His son's succession to the throne resulted in the founding of the first reputed dynasty in the Chinese tradition, the Xia. The dynasty, which in theory flourished around 2000 BCE, survived until the reign of the cruel and tyrannical Jie, who so alienated his own people that they rebelled, enabling a virtuous leader named Tang to overthrow the Xia and found the Shang (ca. 1600–1027 BCE) dynasty. This portrait of a virtuous and wise founder and a depraved and evil last ruler of a dynasty became still another precedent in Chinese historical writings. The sources depict nearly every succeeding dynasty with just such a pattern – clearly attempts by usurpers to justify the overthrow of the previous rulers.

Because the history of the Xia appears to be intermingled with legendary accounts and mythical heroes and because no specific site has been definitively ascribed to the dynasty, some scholars have speculated that later rulers, probably in the Zhou (1027–256 BCE) dynasty, fabricated its existence to legitimize their own destruction of the previous dynasty. These rulers would have argued that, just as the Shang was justified in deposing the Xia, whose rulers had lost the people's support because of misrule, they too were right in overthrowing the corrupt and declining previous dynasty. In this view, invention of the "Xia" was merely a convenient means of sanctioning rebellion against an existing dynasty.

On the other hand, some scholars have attempted to substantiate the historicity of the Xia, and finds at Erlitou in the province of Henan in 1957 have provided support for this interpretation. The site appears to be a cultural midpoint between the Longshan Neolithic era and the Shang dynasty. Scholars who reject the existence of the Xia label Erlitou as Early Shang, while others who are impressed by the Chinese historical sources assert that it represents a distinct phase differing from the Shang. The most obvious difference between the Erlitou and the Longshan sites is two sizable residences of "palatial foundations" (in the words of the distinguished archeologist K. C. Chang).[1] Reconstruction by the on-site archeologists indicates that one of the residences had a gabled roof and a timber framework. Tombs adjacent to the residences show the sharp social distinctions that had developed. A few – the graves of the elite – had lacquered coffins and other valuables, but the depredations of grave robbers make it impossible to assess the exact nature of the ritual and practical objects placed in these tombs. Others were bare and appear to contain the remains of ordinary people of nonelite background. A few individual residences were sizable, reflecting the rise of a newly prosperous elite. In sum, the scale of the palaces and a few of the tombs reveal a much more highly developed culture than that of the Longshan.

Although stone tools and objects made of bone and shell similar to those found at Longshan predominated, artifacts composed of other materials less frequently found (if at all) at Longshan occurred at Erlitou. Stone tools comprised the vast majority of agricultural implements excavated at the site, and a few farm tools were shaped from bone and shell. Yet the inhabitants of Erlitou also used bronze knives and chisels. Gray, black, and red pottery provided most of the food and storage containers, but bronze wine vessels also appeared in larger numbers. Bronze weapons and musical instruments supplemented the

stone varieties and were found even more frequently than in the Longshan sites. Objects made of new and more valuable materials and probably used for rituals and ceremonies surfaced more often from this era. Jade ceremonial knives and axes, lacquer drums and cups, and turquoise plates constituted new objects not represented in Longshan sites. On the other hand, like the Longshan peoples, the inhabitants used oracle bones, but, unlike the Shang, they did not produce inscriptions, thus revealing the absence of a written language.

In short, Erlitou represents a mixture of Longshan and Shang, but can it be identified as a distinct phase that coincided with the Xia dynasty? This question continues to be controversial and, like much else in the prehistory of China, the archeological evidence is, as yet, insufficient to provide incontrovertible proof. Also, like much else in the study of Chinese archeology, it has become entangled with feelings of nationalism and attitudes about traditional Chinese historical sources. For a few scholars (certainly not the majority), ethnic pride has become bound up with proving the veracity of the Chinese historical accounts, which are among the most prized and revered writings in China, and with verifying traditional beliefs in and descriptions of the Xia. No doubt they, as well as scholars who have no particular national pride invested in this controversy but who nonetheless subscribe to their views, have developed a strong case to confirm the existence of a Xia dynasty. Longshan, Erlitou, and Shang lie along a continuum, but there are marked differences between the three. The bronzes, burials, and palaces of Erlitou are larger in scale and more diverse in decoration than the similar objects and buildings of the Longshan, whose inhabitants certainly did not erect palaces of any size. The congruence of the dates of Erlitou and the Xia (2100–1800 BCE) also buttresses the claims for an independent dynasty distinct from the Shang. Yet the most striking evidence is that Erlitou sites have been found in precisely the places mentioned in later texts as the locations of the Xia capitals. According to some scholars, this geographic congruence corroborates the information on the Xia in the Chinese historical texts. However, unless written evidence confirming the identification of Erlitou with the Xia is uncovered, the controversy will continue to rage.

Some of the most critical questions swirling around the study of early Chinese civilization center on the origins of its most characteristic cultural and technological elements. To put it simply, did the Chinese develop these institutions and practices independently or did many derive from neighboring cultures from which the Chinese borrowed? The evidence generally bears out the view that the unique features of Chinese civilization developed in China, although useful contributions were introduced from other lands, and careful archeological and linguistic studies may indicate closer links and diffusion between China and other cultures. Analysis of bronzes produced in central Asia may, for example, testify to their predating and influencing the so-called unique bronzes of ancient China; similarly, study of eastern Siberia may show that scapulimancy developed earlier there than in Longshan; finally, the Chinese numerals and writing may have antecedents elsewhere. In short, as more information becomes available, closer links and interchanges between China and the surrounding cultures may be revealed.

The Shang and the Origins of Chinese Civilization

The Shang is not only the first attested dynasty of China but also the first era to provide an array of rich source materials. More abundant information translates into more precise reconstruction of its history than at any previous time in China's history. Excavations in the last Shang capital of Anyang have uncovered artifacts, such as bronzes, pottery, jades, and oracle bones, offering vivid glimpses of society. The names of about thirty kings have been identified in the oracle-bone inscriptions, and archeologists have located the sites of eight different capitals of the dynasty. Later written accounts yield stereotypical portraits of the kings, providing insights into the later dynasties but primarily offering anecdotes with a specific moral message about the Shang. For example, these sources depict Cheng Tang, the first ruler, as a great unifier who represented, in Chinese eyes, the highest moral standards. According to these accounts, many regions voluntarily accepted his rule because they recognized that he embodied the virtues prized in Chinese culture. The same sources depict his adversaries, in particular King Jie, the last ruler of the so-called Xia dynasty, as despicable exploiters and oppressors of their subjects. Victory for Cheng Tang was almost predictable, for, in these later accounts, the moral superiority of the new ruler would naturally attract others to join him in defeating the evil and dissolute tyrant.

The other leading Shang figures are also portrayed in dubious stereotypes that served to support the orthodox political morality. The written sources laud rulers of probity but vilify licentious and corrupt kings in order to justify rebellion and usurpation. Pan Geng, for example, is portrayed as a hero because he reputedly moved the capital city to Yin at a propitious time. On the other hand, King Zhou, the last ruler of the dynasty, is presented as a grotesque monster. According to these later sources, he ignored the government, sponsored outrageous orgies, and exacted higher taxes to pay for the lavishness at court. Critics of his policies and activities took their lives in their hands. He had recalcitrant ministers sliced open so that he could examine their hearts; he used the so-called "grilled roast" technique to incinerate, in a most painful way, any dissenters; and he killed a female bedmate who was apparently not enchanted with his sexual proclivities. This horrifying portrait of a brutal tyrant naturally served to justify the Zhou dynasty's overthrow of the Shang in the eleventh century BCE. The political motives underlying this depiction arouse suspicions about its accuracy. Nor can the Shang's fall be attributed to a depraved and blood-thirsty monster. Economic, social, and political factors, some of which will never be known because of the limitations of the written sources and the material artifacts, contributed much more to its decline than the alleged brutality of a loathsome, almost inhuman king.

Despite these lacunae, archeological data and written inscriptions reveal considerable development in almost every area of endeavor. The Shang, the dates of which are still in dispute, though it certainly ended in 1028 BCE, witnessed remarkable changes from Neolithic cultures. Cities rather than towns

were built. Rituals and ceremonies were more elaborate, and a recognizable system of writing was created. The populations of the cities were larger, necessitating a more complicated social system. Nearly every site and institution was on a larger scale than in the Neolithic.

The modern city of Anyang (in modern Henan province), in which the Shang capital of Yin was located, has turned out to be a treasure house of Shang civilization. The site stretches beyond the old city walls of Anyang to include small villages and tomb complexes. The village of Xiaotun, the principal site thus far excavated, consisted of rectangular houses with stamped-earth bases, large tombs adjacent to smaller burial pits, and ritual areas also with burial pits. The excavations indicate that Xiaotun was inhabited prior to the shifting of the capital. Even in this early period, the several hundred or so residences uncovered had drainage ditches, and graves of seemingly important individuals contained bronze ritual vessels, as well as the remains of human sacrifices.

With the establishment of the capital near Xiaotun, the buildings assumed larger proportions – evidence of a more sophisticated society. The inhabitants erected several large above-ground structures, some with thirty layers of stamped earth, which have been identified as palaces and temples. The sizable quantity of below-ground pit dwellings, which contained animal bones, pottery, and tools, attest to the large number of ordinary residents who farmed the fields or acted as service personnel for the palace inhabitants. Enormous underground storage pits, which preserved the goods of the royal family and the elite, and numerous bronze, jade, and stone workshops were built near the palaces. Also adjacent were colossal tombs, with human and dog sacrifices; sixteen people (men, women, and children) were sacrificed in one such tomb. Precious objects overflowed within the pit, the coffin, and other parts of the grave. Hundreds of jades, bronzes, and pottery vessels, among other goods, were scattered throughout the tombs. Other objects placed in the tombs included weapons, musical instruments, and cowry shells (which were used as money).

ORACLE BONES

Knowledge of the Shang has emerged not only from the era's physical remains but also from oracle-bone inscriptions, of which about 100,000 pieces have survived. The Shang advanced beyond the Neolithic forms of scapulimancy in using turtle shells (generally female) along with cattle bones in divination and incising responses on the scapula, thus producing the first conscious Chinese writing. Workmen chiseled or bored holes in the bone or shell, and diviners applied heat and produced cracks, which were then interpreted. A craftsman, perhaps the same workman, recorded the circumstances surrounding the actual divination – the date and the name of the diviner (who, as the Shang progressed, was almost always the king) as well as its actual content. Divinations concerned potential military ventures and hunting expeditions, the harvests, sacrifices to the ancestors, and the weather and other natural phenomena.

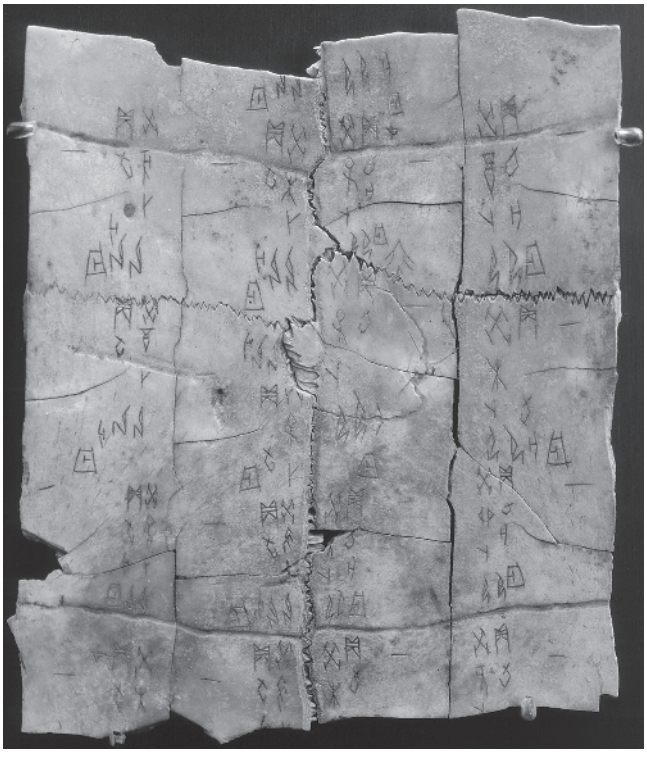

Figure 1.3 Tortoise shell with divinatory text of the reign of Geng Ding, Shang dynasty, fourteenth/thirteenth century BCE. The Art Archive / Musée Guimet Paris / Gianni Dagli Orti

The diviners sought responses from the ancestors and from Di (who was particularly identified with the Shang royal family), a deity who, along with the river, mountain, and wind gods, controlled the natural world as well as warfare, illness, and other human crises. The king's interpretation of the cracks foretold the future. On occasion, the bones recorded the actual outcome, which most often confirmed the prognostication. The whole operation – the chiseling of holes, the proper creation of systematic cracks, and the recording of the divination – required enormous effort, time, and expertise, indicating divination's value to Shang society.

The oracle bones afford glimpses of Shang society. Nearly every aspect of Shang culture, from agriculture to sickness to the interpretation of dreams, was addressed in these records of divination. Since the king himself, reflecting a theocratic system, was the principal diviner, the bones often convey the objectives and aspirations of the elite, as well as their spiritual views. However, Shang religions consisted of more than oracle bones. The bones themselves allude only to rituals, dances, music, and ceremonies, without providing additional details. Thus, they convey only a partial – though invaluable – view of Shang religion and society. Though the bones that have survived constitute less than ten

percent of the total actually produced for divination, most specialists believe that they are representative in theme and subject matter of the rest. Some historians believe that the divination inscriptions provide a general picture of the elite's worldviews; they also recognize that knowledge of Shang China will not, unless new remarkable sources are uncovered, achieve the same level of detail about rulers, the military, and the economy as exists regarding later dynasties.

Ritual Objects as Historical Sources

Other sources that provide information about the Shang include signs and actual writings on bones, pottery, and jade, but no doubt the most important are ritual bronze vessels. The bronzes reflect sophistication and advances in arts and crafts but also yield information on religion, social relations, and government. Some of these data derive from fragmentary and sometimes cryptic inscriptions on the bronzes. Unlike the bronze inscriptions of the next dynasty, the Zhou, the Shang artifacts are brief, none amounting to more than fifty Chinese characters. Nonetheless, they occasionally narrate the circumstances under which the bronzes were cast, for several were produced to commemorate military expeditions, gifts, or special rituals. Many were designed for ritual purposes and served as drinking vessels, food containers, or cooking implements on ceremonial occasions. Bronze craftsmen also fashioned musical instruments, chariots, weapons, and farm tools.

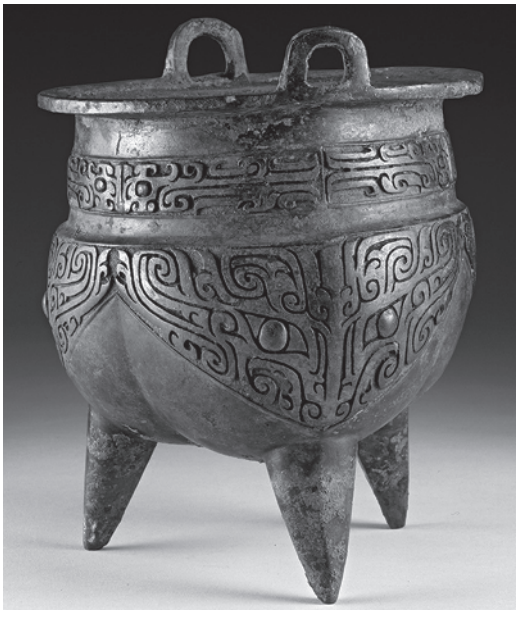

Figure 1.4 Bronze vessel bearing the *taotie* design, Shang dynasty. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, UK / The Bridgeman Art Library

In addition, the decorations on the bronzes may yield insights about the Shang ethos and religion. Descriptions of fantastic animals, which sometimes combined features of different animals, were characteristic of the motifs found on the bronzes. The so-called *taotie* mask is the most distinctive of these mythical figures. Readily recognized by its prominent and large eyes, which gaze directly at the observer, the *taotie* has puzzled scholars who have tried to understand its possible ritual or religious importance. Speculation on its meaning ranges from its use to protect humans to its identification as a grotesque, malevolent monster. What appear to be its jaws, as well as its horns and snout, give it a ferocious appearance, but its symbolic significance remains elusive. There are also variations in the depictions of the *taotie* in the Shang bronzes, and the eyes often are the only means to identify the creature. A number of other animals, including dragons, are represented, although once again their precise meaning is unclear.

The diverse shapes of the vessels, some of which derive from shapes of Neolithic pottery, and their decorations reveal the skill of the bronze craftsmen. Art historians have identified at least five stages of decoration, with each evincing a more elaborate style and more detailed decoration of the objects. The origins of the decorations and indeed of the high level of bronze casting are unknown, but the quality and the large number of bronzes indicate the presence of a sizable industry and skilled artisans. The artisans were favored in this social structure; for example, they lived in houses with floors of stamped earth rather than in the virtually underground residences of ordinary folk.

Along with a sophisticated bronze industry, the Shang also produced jade, ceramic, and lacquer objects. Jade carving developed in the Neolithic, but

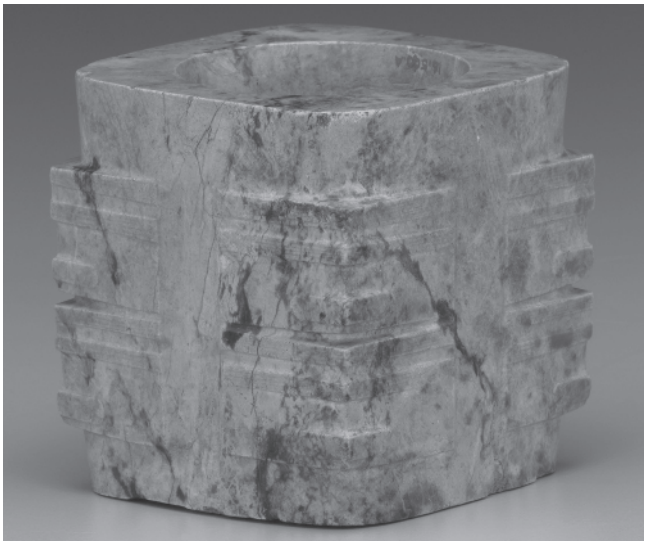

Figure 1.5 *Cong* (jade tube), Neolithic culture, 3300–2250 BCE. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, USA / Gift of Charles Lang Freer / The Bridgeman Art Library

more jade artifacts have survived from the Shang. Jade knives, weapons, and jewelry, often with incised decorations of animals or simple geometric designs, have been found in many burial sites. Their appearance at burial sites may indicate that they had a ritual or religious significance. They may, for example, have served as offerings to the spirits or the ancestors. The *bi* ring, a disc in the shape of a circle, probably had such ceremonial associations and may have been used in divining the future. Some of the jade probably came from outside the core area of Shang culture, testifying to the development of commerce during this era. Lacquerware has also been discovered in some Shang tombs. Like the motifs on jade and ceramics, the designs on lacquer reveal an interest in the depiction of animals.

SHANG SOCIETY

The Shang's more populous settlements, larger towns, elaborate and grander tombs, bronze industry, and ceramics and jade production, as well as the greater emphasis accorded to divination, presume a more organized society, an efficient mobilization of resources, and a highly developed division of labor. However, details about the structure of government and the social system are difficult to tease out of the sources. Careful study of the fragmentary writings and artifacts has offered glimpses of the Shang elite, but information about commoners is scanty, and knowledge of their lives and values will probably remain limited.

The key figures in the elite were the king and the royal family. As the oracle bones attest, the king was clearly the main diviner, a ritual and religious function that at some early stage translated into secular political power. As he expanded his authority in the capital at Anyang, he instructed specific clans to settle in new towns and provided their leaders with tangible symbols of power, helping to legitimize their rule in these sites. The kings and their consorts derived from a small group of clans, among whom the royal succession rotated. Because primogeniture was not the norm, officials who were part of the elite advised the king on the choice of a suitable successor who could assume the religious, political, and military responsibilities. The king's ritual tasks evolved throughout the dynasty but always involved offerings to the ancestors and earlier kings, as well as divinations concerning war, hunts, and other matters of importance. Depending on the era, kings also made offerings to deities associated with nature or performed rituals to produce more bountiful harvests.

Elite status conferred privileges and responsibilities on both men and women. Royal consorts played an active role in the public sphere. They could conduct sacrifices and act in the name of the king, and at least one took part in a military campaign. In short, they played active social roles rather than spending their lives in the shadowy private spheres of household and harem. Other members of the elite included princes, diviners, ministers, officials, and landlords who were granted land or walled towns by the king. Members of the elite had the right to accompany the king on hunts, often used to train the military, and to assume the responsibility of supporting him on military expeditions. By participating in the hunts, they had access to the animals

bagged – a valuable resource for their own domains. In theory, the land accorded them was still owned by the king, and they were obligated to offer tribute to him. In practice, however, distance and time influenced the king's ability to control them and to demand and receive tribute. The farther away their domains from the capital, the less leverage the king could have over them. Similarly, at times when weak monarchs were on the throne, they fulfilled their obligations with neither alacrity nor regularity. Yet their power derived from the titles that the king conferred upon them as lords over walled towns within the Shang state.

The princes and lords commanded the armies, but the social status of the military is not discernible from the sources. Naturally the king was the commander in chief of the state's army, and the princes and lords led the military within their own domains – the military forces that could be mobilized were apparently sizable. Descriptions of the battles, of the captives, and of the human sacrifices of prisoners of war in the tombs of the elite attest to the participation of substantial numbers of soldiers in particular campaigns. The military achieved a degree of specialization, with specific units of archers, foot soldiers, and charioteers who used bows and arrows, halberds, and chariots.

Knowledge of the nonelite is even sketchier. The divination inscriptions describe what appear to be collectives of peasants who worked under the strict supervision of the king and lords. They worked together to farm the fields, served as soldiers, offered tribute, and were compelled to perform corvée labor. Although most were servile, labeling them "slaves" is an overstatement. Unlike slaves, most could not be bought or sold. To be sure, slavery existed in the Shang; prisoners of war were often enslaved and forced to work in the fields or were sacrificed at tombs of kings or lords. Yet the vast majority of the nonelite were not slaves, although they undoubtedly were accorded little status, were economically exploited, and were dominated by the kings and lords. As suggested earlier, artisans had a higher position in the social hierarchy, lived more comfortably, and had access to more goods than ordinary commoners. Specific clans dominated particular trades such as woodcarving, bronze casting, and jade carving, and craft production was often a monopoly transmitted from one generation to another.

Although records on finances are absent, it appears that the king collected taxes from all his subjects. He received tribute of grain, principally millet, from the peasants, who also sent cattle (for his divinations), sheep, and horses to the capital. During his hunts (and possibly tours of inspection), he also requisitioned supplies from the peasants for his entourage. The quantity of taxes levied by the king is not recorded, but it must have been sufficient to pay for military campaigns and the elaborate tombs and other material possessions of the royal household. Simultaneously, the king received goods that the artisans had fashioned. The furnishings at the royal tombs, as well as those of the elite, attest to the considerable number of bronzes, jades, and pottery items commandeered from craftsmen. Merchants surely played a role in transmitting grain and craft articles from the various towns to the capital and vice versa, but they are scarcely mentioned on the oracle bones. Cowry shells were used as

currency, and the modern Chinese word for "merchant" (*shangren*) uses the same Chinese characters as "man of Shang." Yet the paucity of data precludes efforts to assay the role of trade and the status of merchants during this era.

The available information, however, permits us to conclude that the population was divided into defined groups and classes. The king and the royal family were at the apex, with the monarch performing ritual functions (including divination), commanding military forces, and amassing considerable quantities of grain, craft articles, and other valuables. The lords to whom the king entrusted land for the construction of new settlements held sway over these territories, as well as over the inhabitants. They too received substantial amounts of the goods produced within their domains. Less privileged were the peasants, slaves, craftsmen, and merchants. Peasants did not own the land they farmed and turned over much of the produce to the king and the lords. Known as *zhongren* (multitude), they could be conscripted into the military or for labor service. Often captives of war, slaves could count themselves fortunate if they were employed to farm the land or to act as servants and unfortunate if they were selected to be sacrificial victims. Although craftsmen had a higher status and lived better than the *zhongren* and the slaves, the articles they fashioned were most often designed for the king and the nobility.

This generally stable social structure contributed to a popularly accepted conception of the uniqueness of Shang culture. Some archeologists asserted that its culture and artifacts were primarily indigenous. Even more significant was that the inhabitants of the Shang perceived themselves as a different people. They had, after all, developed a sophisticated culture, with a worked-out political system, a highly organized bronze industry, a unique burial system, and a written language. Their pictorially based written language, found mostly on the oracle bones and perhaps in some signs and symbols on ceramics, contributed, in large measure, to the Shang people's feelings of identity. The language, with its initial associations with divination and religion, proved a powerful vehicle for the fostering of their sense of affinity.

With the growth of such feelings of identity, the Shang distinguished itself from other neighboring regions, which were sometimes adversaries. Most attacks against Shang territory originated from its north and northwest, and the final onslaught, which overwhelmed the dynasty and permitted the rival Zhou dynasty to take power, derived from the northwest. Competition for land and for control of mineral deposits and other natural resources provoked crises and conflicts between the Shang and nearby territories. Such hostilities bedeviled relations between these various states. Ironically, conflict may have resulted in interaction and borrowing among a few, which enlarged the territory in which cultural homogeneity prevailed.

NOTES

1 K. C. Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 4th ed., 1986), p. 310.

Further Reading

E. J. W. Barber, *The Mummies of Ürümchi* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).
K. C. Chang, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
K. C. Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 4th ed., 1986).
David Keightley, *Sources of Shang China: The Oracle Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
Harry Shapiro, *Peking Man* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974).