

CHAPTER ONE – CHINA IN THE PREHISTORIC AGE

THE PALEOTHIC ERA

Arriving from Africa and the Near East, early humanoid forms (Homo Erectus) first appeared in China over one million years ago. From 1923-1927, the fossilized remains of over forty humanoids were unearthed at the Zhoukoudian cave system, near Beijing. Based on the location of their discovery, these breakthroughs finds were first dubbed as Peking Man, and later classified by the scientific community as Homo Erectus or “upright man”. Besides having the ability to stand fully vertical, the Peking Man was distinct from his predecessors through his knowledge of fire-making. These first famous specimens have been dated to be over 500,000 years old, but in more recent times even earlier specimens of Homo Erectus have been found, primarily in southern China.



Zhoukoudian Caves

Modern human beings (Homo Sapiens) first appeared in China roughly 100,000 years ago. In the West, it has been theorized that Homo Sapiens like Homo Erectus before them also originated out of Africa. Gradually migrating eastwards along the Eurasian continent, they eventually came to displace and cause the extinction of Homo Erectus in China. However, many Chinese archaeologists disagree. Their arguments lies in the evidence of structural similarities, such as the shape of certain teeth, between Homo Erectus and modern-day Chinese. Through this, they believe that the Chinese people are direct descendents of the Peking Man.

From roughly 100,000 to 10,000 BCE, these early Chinese peoples lived a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle, organized into groups of extended kinship, or clans. They were constantly on the move, following the vast herds of wildlife which they hunted or searching for new environments to gather from. During this time period, China was an area of amazing ecological abundance and diversity, with remains of elephants, rhinoceroses and other large animals having been found. It was through this nomadic lifestyle that the first humans arrived in North America, coming from East Asia via the Bering Strait.



Zhoukoudian Tourist Office

THE NEOLITHIC ERA

The Neolithic Age in China began around 10,000 BCE. At this junction in history, a crucial development took place that would change China forever. This was the beginning of a settled lifestyle, as Chinese

people began living in permanent villages with crop agriculture, domesticated animals and pottery-making. This could support a much denser population in a single area than hunting-gathering could. In the northern areas along the Yellow River, where temperatures were colder and more arid than the south, the primary agricultural crop was millet. In the south, which was dominated by the Yangzi River, the climate was warmer, and more precipitous. These conditions were well suited to rice agriculture. Here, Chinese people adopted the Southeast Asian technique of growing rice in wet fields, along with other crops such as lotus and water chestnuts. By 6000 BCE, pottery was used throughout all of China, which was instrumental in the storing of food and water. Domesticated dogs and pigs were commonplace in both north and south by 5000 BCE, soon followed by the domestication of sheep, cattle and water buffalo. With agriculture replacing hunting as the primary means of obtaining food, the tradition of Chinese craftsmanship developed. Besides pottery making, Chinese people began to develop their techniques in basket weaving and jade working. This overall change to a settled lifestyle caused shifts in social structure, as agricultural management and skilled craftsmanship required different leaders than hunting. Skilled and experienced elders began to vie with martial men for social leadership.



Hongshan Pig Dragon

Today we can recognize two dozen or so distinct Neolithic cultures that existed in China, identifiable both by their agricultural techniques and handcrafted works. Whereas the different agricultural zones were divided by latitude, with rice in the south and millet in the north, the primary divide in terms of material crafts was east-west. In the western zone, such as with the Yangshao culture along the Yellow River Valley in today's Shanxi and Gansu provinces, painted pottery was prevalent. The Yangshao people decorated their storage jars with red and black spiral patterns, diamonds and other geometric shapes. Designs of birds, fish and trees are also commonly found on Neolithic pottery from western China. In the east, along the coastline from Liaodong (near Korea) in the north to present day Shanghai, pottery was very rarely painted. Instead however, these cultures concentrated on more elaborate pottery shapes, with additional parts such as legs, spouts and handles attached to the body. These goblets and vessels were likely used for ritual feasting and sacrifice. A further artistic trait of the eastern cultures was the working of jade. The two cultures which have produced astonishing examples of Neolithic jade work are the Hongshan culture, based in Liaodong, and the Liangzhu culture, located just south of Shanghai. In the Hongshan culture, jade was carved into shapes of animals, such as turtles, birds and "pig-dragons", whereas the Liangzhu people typically carved jade into disks and small notched columns. During the Neolithic period, jade was likely carved with the intent of ritual or burial purposes. Today, however, designs of both the Hongshan and Liangzhu sort are typically worn as jewellery throughout all of China.



Late Neolithic Pottery

The late Neolithic period (ca. 3000-2000 BCE) saw increased contact between the various independent cultures. This resulted in the spread of technology from one area to the next. Thus, the art of painting pottery spread eastwards, while the more elaborate pottery shapes, such as the tripod cooking pot, spread westwards. This was also a period of increased military conflict. Evidence of walled settlements, with defensive barriers made of pounded earth as large as 20 feet high and 30 feet thick can be dated to this era. These hardened earth walls could be nearly as hard as concrete. Such a feat of engineering would have required a great amount of manpower resources and coordination. Thus, historians believe that the gap between the religious and political elite and the common people drastically widened during this period. A further sign of both heightened conflict between different cultures and the increased power of the elite classes can be found in the evidence of human sacrifice, beginning around 2000 BCE. These sacrificial victims were likely captives, taken from military victories against other cultures.

The end of Chinese prehistory is conventionally dated to circa 2000 BCE. Vital to the growth of civilization, and the establishment of China's Bronze Age dynasties of the Xia, Shang and Zhou, were the developments of writing and bronze working. While bronze technology provided the means for military expansion, the development of writing allowed for a unified political control of areas in which it was previously impossible, due to linguistic differences. These two developments were the foundations for the transformation of a land inhabited by several different cultures into a dominant central kingdom, that which would come to be known as Zhong Guo, or the Middle Kingdom.

Editor:
Walter Koh
(McGill University)