

The emergence of civilization in China: Neolithic societies

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- Regional and temporal setting
 - geographically isolated from the cases we have looked at so far
 - very different tradition in many ways
 - cities and complex society appeared distinctly later in time, although still very old
 - very large area
 - very variable geography and ecology
 - can be divided into 3 broad geographic and cultural areas
 - Yellow river area (also called Huang Ho, Hwang Ho, or Huanghe river)
 - for cultural purposes reaches to parts of the Yangtze river area
 - this is where civilization really got started in China, and what we will focus on
 - south China
 - mostly important in the neolithic, when it was one of the early regions in which agriculture was adopted
 - we won't deal with this region much
 - northern forests and steppes
 - mostly important later on, after the periods we will look at
 - we won't deal with this region much, either
 - Yellow river environment
 - winding river cutting through plains of deep, rich loess soil (pronounced "luss")
 - loess is a kind of soil that is particularly good for farming
 - as in Mesopotamia and the Indus, the river shifts course, floods, and carries a lot of sediment (hence its "yellow" color)
 - produces a very fertile agricultural region dotted with lakes and marshes
 - in many areas, the river flows in a broad valley floodplain
 - bounded by river terraces that were wooded
 - roughly similar to the Mississippi and Ohio rivers in the US midwest
 - environment varied in different areas, and fluctuated over time
 - to northwest, more steppe (plains with open grassland)
 - to southeast, more forest
 - and overall, wetter and warmer than today's semiarid climate
 - a more pleasant, greener environment than any we have looked at so far
- such a large region had many different cultural traditions
 - so there is no single, clear chronology or pattern that really describes the whole area well
 - your various sources (including my lectures) all organize this material slightly differently
 - The version I present in class is based on the work of K.C. Chang, the same one that gave us the "wasteful" definition of civilization
- Paleolithic 11,000 - 8000 BC
 - clear evidence of foraging people by 11,000 BC

- that is, the Yellow river area was populated by foragers pretty quickly after the Pleistocene
- not like the Mesopotamian or Indus drainages, where no significant number of people moved in until they adopted agriculture
- Early Farmers 8000-6500 BC (Neolithic)
 - climate and rich, varied vegetation were ideal for early domestication
 - Sites with very early evidence of plant domestication include
 - Spirit Cave in northwestern Thailand
 - Several south China sites
 - these suggest pig domestication, possibly incipient agriculture of various basically wild plants (beans, peas, bottle gourds, olive, cucumber, etc.), and pottery by 7000 BC or earlier
- Peiligang cultures, 6500-5000 BC (still Neolithic) (P'ei-li-kang in old orthography)
 - Chinese has been transliterated into our alphabet in several ways.
 - KC Chang, whose work I use extensively here, uses the older Wade-Giles system, recognizable by its many apostrophes, hyphens, and other diacritical marks
 - The more current system is “pinyin”. I have tried to convert most terms here to pinyin forms, but have not been able to find equivalents for them all, so some remain
 - in the Yellow river area
 - four distinct regional cultures
 - basically small village farmers
 - apparently swidden agriculture (shifting, slash-and-burn)
 - these were not the first agriculturalists, but rather just early examples of an established farming way of life
 - subsistence
 - a completely different agricultural tradition from what we have seen so far
 - based on millet, a grain (not rice, as you might suppose)
 - evidence of agriculture
 - the grain itself (two types of millet) has been found in some sites
 - sickles for harvesting grain or grasses
 - axes for clearing trees off land
 - grinding stones for grinding grain
 - also other plants
 - oil cabbage
 - nuts: walnut, hazelnut, acorn
 - “Chinese jujube date”
 - and many more; see Wenke and Olszewski
 - domesticated animals
 - pigs, dogs, chickens
 - wild animals
 - deer of various types
- settlements
 - mostly settled along rivers
 - mostly small sites, 1-2 ha

- sites were not occupied too long, only 50 cm to 1 m thick
- apparently there were many of these sites, relatively densely packed
 - but not all contemporaneous, so site density is a bit misleading
- mostly round pit houses 2-3 m diameter
 - plastered floors
 - sunk into the ground
- many storage pits among the houses
 - some still contained grain! (millet)
- burials show a little bit of wealth variation, even in early Neolithic times
 - most (?) had ceramics
 - some also had stone axes or “mortars and pestles” (4-legged grinding stones with flat handstones or manos)
 - a few had small turquoise ornaments
- ceramics
 - crude, utilitarian, some decorated with textural methods using stamps, cordmarks, rocker stamping, combing, etc.
- Regional Neolithic 5000-3000 BC
 - By 5000 BC, there were several distinct cultures around China
 - northern Chinese cultures all based on millet (includes the Yellow River region)
 - southern Chinese cultures all based on rice, plus some root crops (which we won't look at much here)
 - the Regional Neolithic was a very long period (2000 years)
 - this was the period in which Neolithic society began to get complex
 - spanning ‘Ubaid, Uruk, and Jemdet Nasr in Mesopotamia
 - so there was a lot of change between the beginning and the end of the Regional Neolithic
 - Yangshao culture (5000-3000 BC)
 - the most widespread and best known of the Regional Neolithic cultures
 - middle Yellow River valley
 - clearly developed from Peiligang, even maintaining its internal regional variations
 - subsistence
 - agriculture was the main source of food
 - evidence of farming
 - hoes, spades, axes, possible digging sticks: the usual Neolithic tools
 - grain impressions in ceramics
 - grinding stones: preparation of flour for bread, mush, soup
 - crops
 - millet (two types, foxtail and broom-corn)
 - hemp, probably for fibers (cloth)
 - probably slash and burn, since sites seem to show repeated but relatively short occupations
 - hunted a wide range of wild animals
 - rabbit, foxes, rats, badgers, macaques...

- deer, boar, bears,
- horse, antelope, rhinoceros (!), leopard (!)
- fish: lots of hooks, weights, fish gorges, harpoon heads
- turtles, snails
- gathered wild plants in forested areas
 - nuts: hazelnut, pine, chestnut, etc.
- domesticated animals
 - dogs and pigs common, chickens
 - chickens were domesticated in Asia
 - cattle, sheep, and goats rare
 - silkworms! (a half-cut cocoon found!)
- Yangshao settlements
 - densely distributed on lower river terraces
 - for access to rivers as well as higher terraces and mountains
 - relatively short occupations (several years to several decades), shifting, repeated settlements returning to the same locations (appropriate for slash and burn agriculture)
 - three Yangshao villages are well known from broad areal excavations
 - all three were 5-6 ha (2-3 times the SSU main quad)
 - that is pretty good-sized; remember PPNA Jericho at 2 to 4 ha
 - fully or partially surrounded by a ditch 1.5 m (5-6 feet) wide and deep
 - given as 5-6 meters, but clearly in error, based on site map
 - fairly permanent houses
 - various different shapes
 - plastered floors, benches, walls
 - often wood and branch structures thickly plastered with clay, which was then often hardened in place with fire, making a durable wall
 - this is a technology you have not heard about anywhere else...
 - houses surrounded by storage pits
 - storage by households, not centralized
 - one site (Chiang-chai) had over 100 houses, over 200 hearths, over 300 storage pits
 - so the population would probably have been several hundred people
 - houses arranged in groups around a central, open plaza
 - Chiang-chai, the 100-house site, had five such groups of houses
 - each group had one larger house
 - groups of houses may represent kin groups? clans and lineages?
 - a bit later, Chiang-chai had a 20 m long (65 feet) longhouse in the center of the town (12.5 m wide)
 - ceremonial?
 - communal activities (“meeting hall”)?
 - home of an important person?
 - all three Yangshao villages have a pottery-making area on one side of the village
 - suggesting some craft specialization already
 - one contained six kilns

- all have a cemetery area located roughly south of the village
 - minor variation in goods, but with occasional notably rich burials
 - one had 8,577 bone beads, 12 stone beads, several red ceramic vessels
 - another had a 3-4 year old child, buried in a plank-lined pit with 79 vessels and stone artifacts, plus quantities of millet
 - suggesting that status was based on birth or family, not just on accomplishments
 - numerous other ways in which the burials varied:
 - some contained one body, others contained many
 - some were primary (the body was buried intact, shortly after death), while others were secondary (the body was either allowed to decay to bones before burial, or was dug up and reburied as bones after it decayed)
 - some burial pits were surrounded by a zone of rocks, flanked by shell “mosaics” in the shapes of animals, etc.
 - this may reflect complex differences in roles in life (shamans? others?) as well as simply social standing
 - i.e. burial evidence of some real status differentiation already, including apparently heritable status
 - before cities, large populations, even permanent agriculture
 - relatively early in the cultural development of China, compared to our other cases
 - strong status variation and ascribed (inherited) status both became enduring themes in Chinese society
 - like the houses, the graves were grouped into clusters, each with the full range of types of burials
 - Chiang-chai’s cemetery had 3 sectors
 - maybe these groups of graves also represent kin groups, like the house clusters?
 - one site (Yuan-chün-maio) had 57 burials in 6 rows
 - buried in two parallel sequences at the same time
 - rows 1 and 4, then 2 and 5, then 3 and 6
 - suggests two descent groups?
 - both using the cemetery at the same time
 - but each with its own area in the cemetery
- Social organization
 - Maybe by hierarchical kin groups, as later in China?
 - the traditional arrangement known from later historical times may already have been present in the Regional Neolithic:
 - settlements divided into two or more clans
 - each of the clans has a status hierarchy within it, determined by descent, with one top-ranking family, with a top-ranking head of the family
 - the clans themselves are ranked, so that the head of one clan has a more respected position than the head of a lower-ranked one
 - this might be suggested by the groupings of houses and the groupings of burials
- Specialization
 - Probably some, maybe part time
 - pottery specialists

- indicated by kiln areas and high quality of ceramics
- ceramics were hand formed, some by coiling, but some rims were apparently finished on a "turntable" (tournette or slow wheel); a few small vessels may have been made on a fast wheel
- ceramics with incised marks suggest specialized producers?
 - maker's marks? owner's marks?
 - in one area, 139 signs
 - possible forerunners of writing symbols?
- metalworking must have been done by specialists
 - a bronze knife, cast in a two-part mold, dates 3000-2500 BC (i.e. terminal Yangshao); this is the earliest known Chinese bronze, but not yet a major industry
 - silk production and hemp textile production may have been done by specialists
- The Barnes reading and the Fagan and Scarr reading mention three *late* regional variants of the "Regional Neolithic Period" and gives some interesting details:
 - Dawenkou culture, Hongshan culture, Liangzhu culture
 - You needn't be able to separate these
 - they are examples of impressive developments in different areas during the later part of the Regional Neolithic period and the earlier part of the subsequent Lungshan Horizon
 - the chronological bar chart shows how they overlap in time
 - they began during the later centuries of the Yangshao culture, and continued after it
- Dawenkou culture = Ta-wen-k'ou (4300-2400 BC)
 - downriver from the Yangshao culture
 - contemporary with Yangshao, continuing on after it
 - at the time, people of the Dawenkou culture were geographically separated from the Yangshao area by wetlands that later filled in to form the Yellow River alluvium
 - like Yangshao, Dawenkou also probably derived from Peiligang
 - Dawenkou exemplified a trend towards more elaboration and variation in burial treatments
 - ledge burials for higher-status people
 - log chamber burials appeared in later part of the period, with more grave goods than earlier burials
 - one cemetery site (Chengzi) was divided into sectors with different amounts of grave wealth
 - 62% had no grave goods, and were mostly buried in the eastern part
 - ~32% had a moderate quantity of goods
 - 5-7% had large pits, caskets, many grave goods
 - jade, ceramics
 - turtle shell, pig mandibles
 - these rich burials were concentrated in the northern part of the cemetery
 - some goods (jade, turtle shell) were probably imported
 - indicates the emergence of an elite class
 - with generally greater wealth and status
 - special access to exotic goods

- the spatial separation of their graves from those of lower-status people suggests that they may have been socially segregated in life, too
- Hongshan culture (3500-2000 BC), started in the Regional Neolithic, but continued well into the following period
 - several Hongshan sites were not residential, but instead for special burials and probably ceremonial uses
 - these sites suggest more formal ceremonialism
 - probably ritual experts, maybe mobilization of surplus to build, maintain, and conduct rituals at the sites
 - elaborate, expensive burial practices suggest a marked upper class
- Example: the Hongshan culture site of Dongshanzui (Tung-shan-tsui)
 - ritual structures dating to 3500 BC (late Regional Neolithic)
 - built of rock slabs
 - a possible walled plaza with some areas paved with stones
 - surrounded by sherds of painted clay cylinders
 - about 2 dozen clay human figurines, from 6 cm (under 3") high to half life size
 - jade animal pendants
 - kept clean, no domestic garbage
- Another example: Hutougou (Hu-t'ou-kou) (another Hongshan site)
 - burial of several people (in sequence) inside and outside of a low circular stone wall
 - this is illustrated in the Barnes reading
 - rocks were piled up to make the wall
 - under the rocks, painted potsherds were buried
 - and outside the wall was buried a row of 11 painted ceramic cylinders
 - one tomb was centered inside the round wall
 - another was a rectangular structure of stone with five chambers, each used for a burial
 - both tombs contained many jade animal pendants
- A third example: Niheliang (Another Hongshan site)
 - dates to about 3,500 BC
 - a mortuary center with 13 groups of burial mounds
 - main burial mound surrounded by lesser ones
 - inside the main burial mound were “conjoined vaulted tunnels”
 - with paintings on the interior walls
 - the main burial contained the head of an unfired clay life-sized figurine with jade eyes
 - plus fragments of larger statues and animal figurines
 - also some secondary burials
- Liangzhu culture (3500-2200 BC)
 - although this culture is contemporary with the others, we will treat it as the earliest expression of the culture that characterized the following period
 - so I won't discuss it here
- So, what was going on in the Regional Neolithic period (5000-3000 BC)?

- People living in semi-permanent farming settlements (think of Yangshao villages), practicing slash-and-burn agriculture
 - clearly no cities at this point
- Possibly organized into hierarchical clan groups
 - shown in clustering of houses and burials
- Some social stratification implied by housing and burial variation
- by the middle of the Regional Neolithic period, around 4000 BC:
 - different Neolithic groups in the Yellow river region were interacting more
 - increasing mutual influences in pottery and other artifact styles
 - increasing homogenization of material culture over a large area
 - This is what the term "Regional" refers to: the trend towards increasing similarity over the whole, broad region
 - a pattern we have seen before in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus (had we covered it)
 - what does it mean?
 - more travel, trade, exchange of ideas?
 - maybe more people interacting has something to do with the emergence of civilization?
 - or vice versa?
- By the end of the Regional Neolithic, and into the first half of the following period (the Lungshan Horizon), there came to be:
 - marked wealth and status hierarchy
 - implied by rich burials in segregated areas of cemeteries
 - and apparent ritual importance of some individuals who were buried in special monuments, under big mounds, etc.
 - at least some craft specialization
 - implied by fancy burial goods
 - skilled craftspeople were presumably supported to make them
 - analogous to Naqada II? Maybe even more stratified?
 - evidence of considerable investment in ceremonial activities
 - elaborate burial structures and symbolic goods in them (masks, figurines, “painted cylinders”, etc.)
 - non-residential structures imply increasing formal ceremonialism
 - probably ritual specialists
 - probably considerable power to mobilize labor and resources to build ceremonial sites and carry out activities at them
 - highly variable from region to region
 - but still with no settlements big enough to consider cities
 - no evidence of centralized storage or redistribution
 - little evidence of warfare, not even many weapons in burials
 - Chinese archaeologists see these early stratified societies as involving
 - elaborate, relatively expensive ritual, that presumably resulted in respect and power for people associated with it
 - strong hereditary status systems probably like the clans documented at later times

- maybe the hereditary elite were ritual specialists, or supported them
- many of these trends mentioned by Barnes actually reached their peaks at the ends of each period, contemporary with the first half of our next major period, the Lung-shan horizon
 - So much of this evidence does not really represent the Regional Neolithic as a whole
 - but rather the culmination of its trends
 - technically falling in the next period, the Lung-shan horizon
 - which we will see next time...