

China: Regional Neolithic

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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
 - We will focus on the Yellow river area
 - the Yellow river is also called the Huang Ho, Hwang Ho, or Huanghe river
 - for cultural purposes reaches to parts of the Yangtze river area to the south
 - this is where civilization really got started in China
 - Yellow river environment
 - in many areas, it is a winding river in a wide valley in plains of deep, rich soil
 - bounded by river terraces that were wooded
 - roughly similar to the Mississippi and Ohio rivers in the US Midwest
 - within the valley floor, the river shifts course, floods, and carries a lot of sediment (hence its “yellow” color)
 - result is a very fertile agricultural region dotted with lakes and marshes
 - in the times we look at, environment was 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
 - your various sources all organize this material slightly differently...sorry.
 - I am using a simplified version of KC Chang’s framework
- There are several ways to write Chinese in our alphabet
 - KC Chang uses the older Wade-Giles system, recognizable by its many apostrophes, hyphens, and other diacritical marks
 - The more current system is “pinyin”. I have converted as many terms as possible to pinyin forms, but have not been able to find equivalents for them all
- the Yellow river area was populated by Paleolithic foragers by 11,000 BC, pretty quickly after the Pleistocene – and probably even earlier
 - unlike Mesopotamia or the Indus, where population was low until people adopted agriculture
- Early Neolithic 8000-5000 BC
 - numerous cultures and periods that we won’t cover here
 - climate and rich, varied vegetation were ideal for early domestication
 - a completely different agricultural tradition from what we have seen so far
 - swidden agriculture (also called shifting agriculture, or slash-and-burn)
 - based on millet, a grain (not rice, as you might suppose)

- also other plants
 - beans, peas, bottle gourds, olive, cucumber, oil cabbage, walnut, hazelnut, acorn, etc.
- evidence of agriculture
 - the grain itself (two types of millet) has been found in some sites
 - in some cases, in storage pits among the houses
 - sickles for harvesting grain or grasses
 - axes for clearing trees off land
 - grinding stones for grinding grain
 - shifting agriculture is suggested in part because sites were occupied for a period of years or a generation, then abandoned, then reoccupied again numerous times
- domesticated animals
 - pigs, dogs, chickens (chickens were domesticated in Asia)
- wild animals
 - deer of various types
- basically small village farmers

- Regional Neolithic 5000-3000 BC
 - By 5000 BC, there were several distinct Neolithic cultures around China
 - northern Chinese cultures based on millet (includes the Yellow River region)
 - southern Chinese cultures based on rice, plus some root crops (which we won't look at)
 - 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
 - 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)
 - still probably slash and burn agriculture methods
 - hunted, fished, and gathered a wide range of wild plant and animal foods
 - domesticated animals
 - dogs and pigs common, chickens
 - 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
 - populations of several hundred people
- fully or partially surrounded by a ditch 1.5 m (5-6 feet) wide and deep
 - Wenke and Olszewski call this a “defensive moat”, but was it?
- 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
- houses arranged in groups around a central, open plaza
 - One village, Chiang-chai, had five such groups of houses, averaging 20 houses each
 - 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”)?
- all three Yangshao villages had a pottery-making area on one side of the village
 - suggesting some craft specialization already
 - one contained six kilns
- all had a cemetery area located roughly south of the village
 - minor variation in goods, but with occasional notably rich burials
 - one 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 at least some 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?
- another 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 possible maker's marks suggest specialized producers?
 - small amount of 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
- Three late cultures of the Regional Neolithic period show even clearer emergence of social hierarchy and ritual activity
 - Dawenkou culture, Hongshan culture, Liangzhu culture in different areas
 - discussed in the readings by Barnes and by Fagan and Scarr

- You needn't be able to separate these
- the chronological bar chart shows how they overlap in time
 - all three began during the later centuries of the Yangshao culture, and continued after it
 - so they represent the culmination of Regional Neolithic trends, rather than the Regional Neolithic as a whole
- Dawenkou culture = Ta-wen-k'ou (4300-2400 BC)
 - downriver from the Yangshao culture
 - illustrates trend towards more elaboration and variation in burial treatments
 - ledge burials for higher-status people, the ledge surrounding a wooden casket
 - the latest, richest burials feature a log chamber
 - one cemetery (Chengzi) was divided into sectors with burials of differing richness
 - 62% had no grave goods; mostly in the eastern sector
 - ~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 sector
 - some goods (jade, turtle shell) were probably imported
 - indicates the emergence of a wealthier elite class
 - 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)
 - northeast of Yangshao
 - 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)
 - built of rock slabs
 - a possible plaza bounded by a wall of rock slabs, partially paved with stone slabs
 - 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
 - under the wall, painted potsherds were buried
 - outside the wall, a row of 11 painted ceramic cylinders were buried
 - the burials contained many jade animal pendants
- A third example: Niheliang (Another Hongshan site)
 - 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
- 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
 - 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
 - what does it mean?
 - more travel, trade, exchange of ideas?
 - maybe more people interacting encourages the emergence of civilization?
 - or does increasing social complexity lead to more interaction?
- By the end of the Regional Neolithic, and into the first half of the following period (the Longshan 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?
 - 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

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