

II. Papers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I. The Origin of Chinese People and Chinese Culture

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Su Bingqi states that:

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

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

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

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

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

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