Beyond the Yellow River: How China Became China

The cradle of Chinese civilization was long considered to be the region around the middle Yellow River. But ancient and complex cultures from far-flung corners of the modern nation now tell a different story about the origin of Chinese culture

LIANGZHU, CHINA—Three years ago, a farmer who works the lush fields along the meandering Tiaoxi river, 200 kilometers southwest of Shanghai, decided to build a new house. This area around the town of Liangzhu has long been known as a center of Neolithic settlements, so Liu Bin of Zhejiang Province's archaeological institute assembled a team to conduct routine salvage work. But rather than the postholes or earthen floors typically found at such settlements, the team instead encountered a carefully prepared foundation of stone blocks.

The blocks were part of a wall, now dated to 4300 years ago—and it was no simple enclosure. Further excavation revealed a massive perimeter of earth built on stone, with an average width of 50 meters, running in a rough circle for 7 kilometers and surrounded by a wide moat. The farmer lost his house site, but archaeologists gained a new appreciation for the complexity of this ancient culture. The enormous wall enclosed previously discovered earthen platforms, which extend over 30 hectares and are raised 10 meters above the low-lying plain. Although modest in comparison with the pyramids and ziggurats of this era in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the structures required an enormous amount of labor and skill. "To construct these large platforms and walls with simple tools, you would need 10,000 people over 2 years," Liu estimates.

Even more astonishing than the engineering are the site's location and age. Archaeologists long thought that Chinese civilization was born half a millennium later and 800 kilometers to the northwest along the central plains of the Yellow River. Wikipedia summarizes the classic view: "Chinese civilization originated in various city-states along the Yellow River in the Neolithic era." Yet centuries earlier, Liangzhu was at the center of a sophisticated culture that included hundreds of settlements discovered in recent decades, stretching across the flat and fertile expanses as far as Shanghai. With finely worked jade ornaments, elaborate tombs, high platforms, and objects carved in an artistic and distinctive style, the Liangzhu culture appears separate from that of the Yellow River. In fact, goods and styles from this region, such as the fine jades, have been found as far west as the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, 3000 kilometers upstream, and were imitated across China for thousands of years.

Dramatic discoveries like those at Liangzhu have been repeated across China in the past 2 decades, challenging long-held views. From Manchuria in the north, to the Chengdu plain to the west, and to the coastal cities of the south (see map, p. 933), excavations are revealing a host of complex and distinct ancient cultures, each with its own artifacts and traditions. Liangzhu's striking carved faces are one example; other cultures developed enormous bronze statues, large stone ceremonial complexes, and a golden, whirling sun motif.

Yellow River sites like Erlitou remain key to understanding the first true urban centers in China. But other, far-flung cultures also contain the seeds of Chinese traditions. "Before these astonishing

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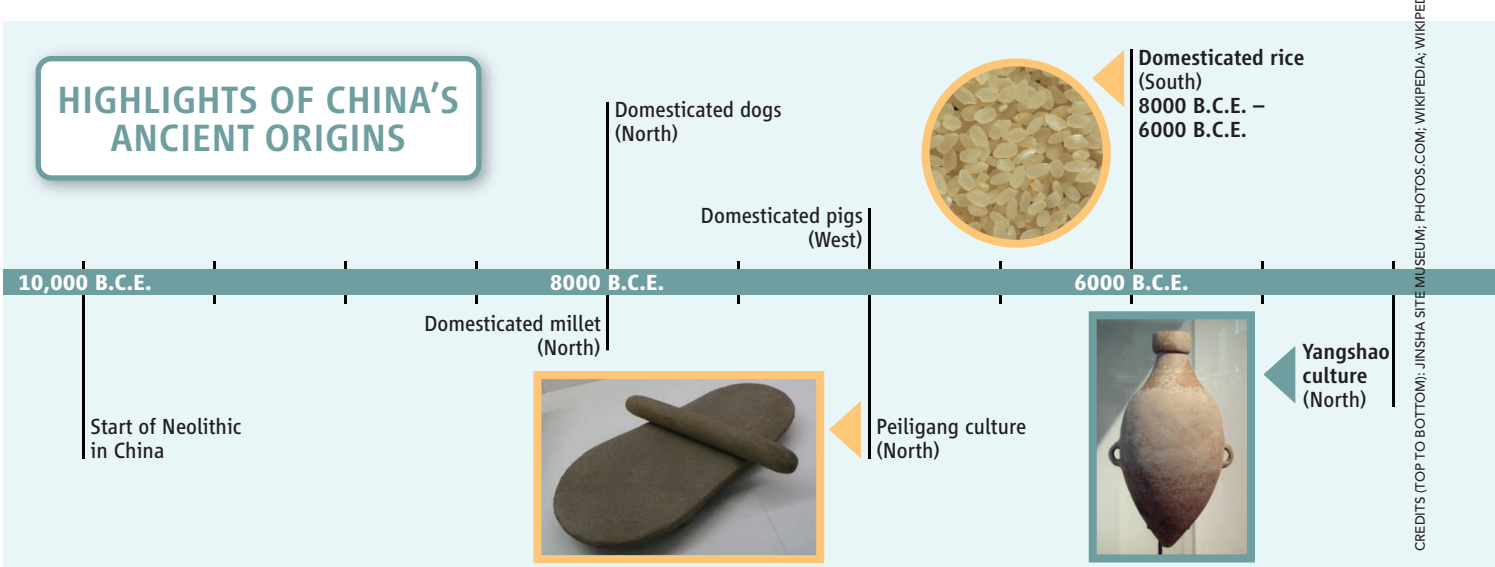

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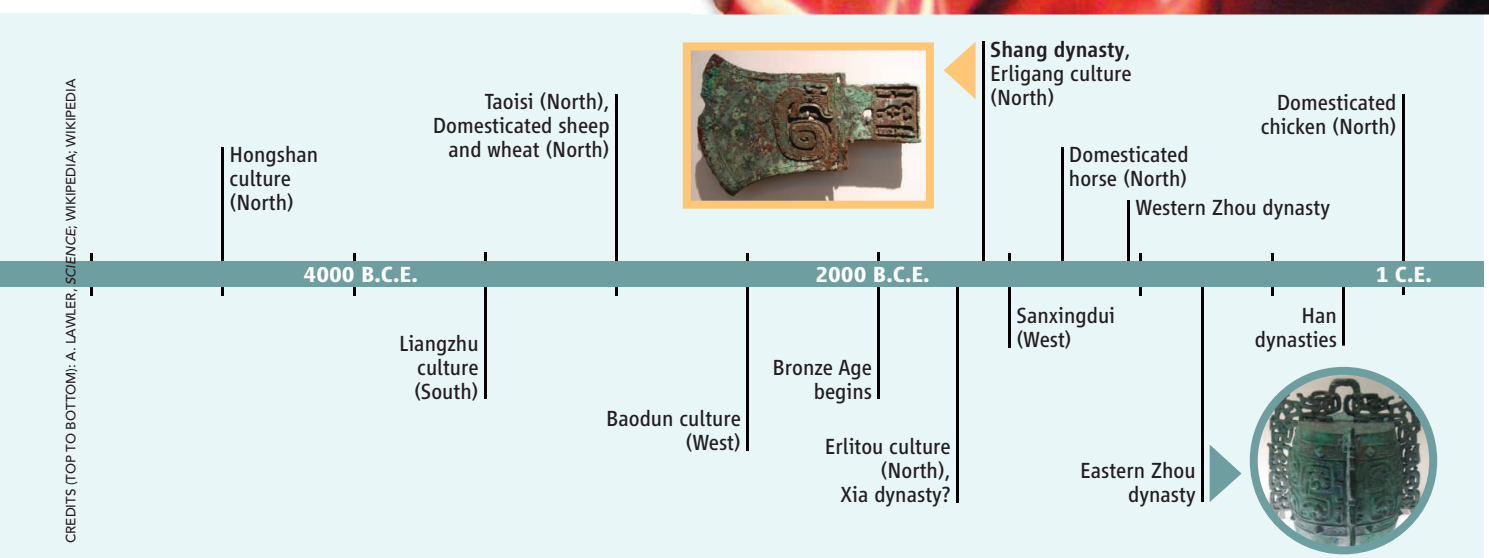
finds, we were focused on the central plains," says Wang Wei, director of the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. "Most of us accepted that the Yellow River was the origin of Chinese civilization. But as we've done more research, we have found other cultural areas as numerous as the stars in the sky. … Now it is clear that the development and expansion of regional centers contributed to the formation of Chinese civilization." And, he adds, communication and competition among those centers may hold the key to understanding how a common culture emerged.

In 2004, Wang's institute began coordinating an ambitious multidisciplinary effort to chart this in detail, by providing a more accurate chronology for sites and bringing to bear the latest methods for analyzing the past 25 years of finds. By drawing on researchers across China and collaborating with foreign scientists, Wang hopes to paint a more nuanced and data-driven view of the country's ancient past while pushing China's archaeological community toward the forefront of the field. But it is a formidable challenge, says archaeologist Lothar von Falkenhausen of the University of California, Los Angeles, who has long experience in China. "We don't really know how the interactions took place, and they changed over millennia."

Saving face. These 3000-year-old bronzes of a previously unknown style were recovered from Sanxingdui near Chengdu.

Want a revolution

How China became China is no mere academic topic; it goes to the very heart of how the world's most populous and economically vibrant nation sees itself and its role in the world. During much of the 20th century, archaeology was often used as a political tool, first as a boost to national pride in a country that felt dominated by Western powers and Japan. After the 1949 Communist revolution, suggestions that China's evolution was strongly influenced by Western trade and technology became politically taboo. "Archaeology played a critical role in defining Chinese nationalism," says Gary Crawford, an anthropologist at the University of



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Toronto, Mississauga, in Canada. "But there's been a real revolution in the profession in the past 20 years."

That revolution has opened up previously off-limits topics, from the impact of the West (see p. 940) to regional diversity. After decades of isolation, Chinese archaeologists are increasingly setting aside formerly obligatory Marxist theory and drawing on modern techniques in gathering and interpreting data. Regional discoveries and institutes find a warm welcome—and funding—within provincial governments flush with tax revenues and eager to emphasize their unique contributions (see p. 936).

No one doubts that the plains around the middle Yellow River are where Chinese civilization coalesced around the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C.E., during what historians call the Shang dynasty (see timeline, p. 930). Legend speaks of an earlier dynasty called the Xia, but its existence remains controversial (see p. 934). The vast archaeological and textual remains from the Shang reveal an elite with a rich court culture ruling over masses of millet and wheat farmers—the grains of choice in the cooler and drier north. Embroiled in frequent conquests, the Shang people used advanced weaponry such as horse-drawn chariots and took many prisoners from conquered regions. They also practiced human and animal sacrifice, worshipped a supreme god who dominated the forces of nature, and paid homage to their ancestors, who were seen as active participants in family life.

Heaven and Earth. The round bi and square cong used in Liangzhu became enduring Chinese symbols.

Many of these traditions and technologies echo through the next 3 millennia. The Shang set the stage for the expansion and collapse of central authority that repeatedly characterizes Chinese history. But there have been hints that this single region did not hold the whole story. More than 30 years ago, Su Bingqi of Peking University and K. C. Chang of Harvard University independently suggested that China's civilization grew out of a complex interweaving of many regional cultures. Recent excavations back up these ideas. Indeed, prehistoric Chinese societies stretched across time and space, from the millet-farming-and-pig-raising Peiligang people in the north starting in 7000 B.C.E., to the 5000 B.C.E. Yangshao people near the Yellow River, who may have first experimented with silk. Many of the symbols of classic Chinese civilization, such as dragon motifs and the use of jade as a magical stone, appear to originate far from the central plains. Two cultures in particular—the Hongshan in the northeast, which flourished from 4500 B.C.E. to 2250 B.C.E., and the Liangzhu, which lasted from 3500 B.C.E. until 2250 B.C.E.—were setting the pace many centuries before the Shang. Indeed, the peoples of the mid–Yellow River area began to construct their first major settlement, called Taosi, at about the time the older cultures collapsed.

Finely carved jade, for example, first appears about 3500 B.C.E. during the Hongshan culture in today's Liaoning and Inner Mongolia. There, researchers have found elaborate stone tombs containing numerous jade objects shaped like a phoenix and dragon—animals that later become central symbols in Chinese mythology.

"Jade is like gold in the West," says archaeologist Elizabeth Childs-Johnson of Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, who frequently works in China. "It is a major symbol of power" in China from the Neolithic to the modern era. The stone is also hard to work and therefore labor intensive. Whereas copper, bronze, and gold take center stage in the early civilizations of the West, these metals come relatively late to the East. Childs-Johnson argues that like precious metals in the West, jade production in China acted as a major stimulus for social evolution by defining an elite.

Recent excavations at Hongshan sites such as Niuheliang in the Liao River valley northeast of Beijing have focused mainly on remarkable burial structures and goods, including the jades. Eighteen elite graves dating to the centuries before 3000 B.C.E. have so far been unearthed, one with 20 pieces of carefully carved jade beads, disks, bracelets, hair tubes, and a plaque with fangs. The sacred and burial areas demonstrate "a level of cultural sophistication that is not duplicated elsewhere at this time in early China," says Childs-Johnson. One partially excavated site near Niuheliang called Chengzishan includes a massive temple on a platform 165 meters wide and 900 meters long—nearly half the size of the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Researchers have so far found subterranean rooms, a life-size ceramic head of a female with inlaid nephrite-jade eyes, and sculptures of ox heads and birds.

Archaeologists have also increasingly found the material of daily life among the Hongshan people, including stone tools such as plow tips in standardized shapes; sophisticated kilns that fired black, gray, and red vessels; and unusual red-painted ceramic cylinders that served as building supports. And they say there are undoubtedly large numbers of undiscovered sites in this little-explored region, which Childs-Johnson thinks was "a prominent cultural center and player in the evolution of Chinese civilization."

Researchers say they are just beginning to piece together the interactions among the Hongshan and other highly complex cultures that developed before the Yellow River culture or were largely independent of it. Was there trade, migration, diffusion, or warfare? Did the later cultures build on the earlier ones, or were they completely

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independent? New excavations may yield answers soon. "Northeast China is currently a hotbed of active field research that will illuminate both the nature of local cultural developments and long-distance relationships," says Harvard archaeologist Rowan Flad.

Long-distance contacts among cultures seem likely, but their complexity and extent remain elusive. For example, the Liangzhu culture, which emerged 1000 years later and 2000 kilometers southeast of the Hongshan heartland, may have drawn on the older society's expertise in jade, but direct evidence is lacking. As early as the 1930s, Liangzhu archaeologists began to uncover numerous and varied jade objects of an even higher quality than those in the northeast.

The Liangzhu people seem to have had military and political concerns with their neighbors, as hinted at by the walls, moats, and stone weapons found more recently. And some 30 excavated large-scale mounds, often with elaborate burials that include jade, ivory, and lacquer, show that there was widespread regional trade, primarily up the Yangtze River. To date, archaeologists have identified nearly 300 settlements in an area of 18,000 square kilometers, says Liu.

The age of many of these early sites, particularly Liangzhu itself, is controversial. New radiocarbon evidence shows that the massive stone and earth wall uncovered by Liu was constructed in the later period, just before Liangzhu's collapse around 2250 B.C.E., says Wu Xiaohong of Peking University. Whether that huge effort was for defensive purposes or to hold back floods—there is some evidence of climate change—remains uncertain.

Whatever the wall's purpose and age, Liangzhu itself had a broad influence that touched much of the territory of present-day China. Its products—from jade to pottery—are scattered throughout the north and the east and are found in the western province of Gansu as well as the southwestern province of Sichuan. And the society appears to have imparted religious ideas that remain quintessentially Chinese. The Liangzhu people created circular disks called *bi*—symbolizing heaven—as well as squarish cylindrical *congs*—symbolizing earth—at a time when the Yellow River was still relatively sparsely settled. The *bi* and *cong* are widely found in the Yellow River region later and came to be seen as shapes that express the Chinese culture's mythological understanding of the cosmos.

Origin seekers. Beijing's Wang Wei (*above*) and Liangzhu's Liu Bin (*below*) see a more complex story of China's emergence.

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Mistaken identity

Although Hongshan and Liangzhu were among the first complex cultures in East Asia, others also clearly contributed elements now considered part of Chinese culture. The first lacquerware and protoporcelain, for example, appear to have emerged in the late Liangzhu period from the middle Yangtze River area, far upstream from Liangzhu itself. And rice, that staple and symbol of Chinese society, was domesticated over a long period of time in the lower reaches of the Yangtze, starting by 7000 B.C.E. or even earlier.

Other regions evolved their own unique cultures, styles, and traditions that did not obviously transfer to what later came to be called Chinese civilization. In 1987, archaeologists working on a 12-kilometer-square site called

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Stone Age. The Hongshan people of northeast China created fine jade works like these 5500 years ago.

Sanxingdui, north of the modern city of Chengdu in Sichuan Province in the country's rugged southwest, unearthed a spectacular array of finds. They found eerie bronze and gold masks, a gold scepter, jade ornaments, and massive bronze statues—including a 4-meter-high representation of a tree—from the period around 1200 B.C.E. Sanxingdui is unmentioned in any texts or myths, has no writing of its own, and lies in a remote area; a Tang dynasty poem warns that it is harder to get into Sichuan than heaven. So the evidence of a wealthy and complex culture here stunned both researchers and the Chinese public. Some of the artifacts hinted at connections to Central Asia and far southern China. "The discoveries in the province have forced Chinese archaeologists to completely rethink [Sichuan's] importance in narratives of prehistoric and early historic China," says Flad.

A decade later, archaeologists working elsewhere in Sichuan's Chengdu Plain revealed a culture that appears to have been the predecessor of the Sanxingdui culture, dating to as early as 2500 B.C.E. The largest of these sites, called Baodun, had been mistaken for years for a later Han dynasty settlement. "Nobody believed a city could be from that early period," recalls Wang Yi, who directs the Chengdu City Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Relics. After confirming the dates, "we realized it was a discovery to rewrite the history of Sichuan and even China."

The settlements are on a smaller and less complex scale than the cities that emerged 1000 years later on the central plain. But since 1996, a total of eight early walled sites in Sichuan have been pinpointed, ranging in size from 10 to 66 hectares. Wang says the largest contained a population in the thousands, although he declines to be more specific pending further excavations. Many have small houses ringed around larger structures that sit on earthen platforms paved with pebbles. Construction of the walls resembles that downstream along the middle Yangtze, where other cultures are known to have flourished, but specific trade links remain unclear. Work on Baodun sites has been delayed, because many lie beneath modern towns and villages, and the 2001 discovery of the Jinsha site in Chengdu dating to 1000 B.C.E.—likely a successor to the Sanxingdui culture—forced regional archaeologists to focus their attention and resources there instead. Wang says there are plans to resume digs at Baodun once villages on the site are relocated.

The sophisticated sites in Sichuan, in the northeast, around Liangzhu and elsewhere have made it clear that "the origin of Chinese civilization is scattered all over the present-day country," says Jiang Weidong, an archaeologist and director of the Liangzhu Museum outside the city of Hangzhou. Weidong thinks that these independent cultures began to link up only sporadically and gradually over many centuries. He notes that in later Chinese history, a half-dozen or so regions periodically reassert their sovereignty and that each of these regions had highly developed prehistoric cultures. For example, in the early centuries B.C.E., the Shu state in today's Sichuan and the Yue state in the Liangzhu area repeatedly broke away from central control. The serial pattern of Chinese centralization followed by the rise of regional powers may be an artifact of those ancient regional developments, Weidong suggests.

Although not even half-complete, the project to define the origins of Chinese civilization has already laid to rest the notion of an imperial China rising from the central plains of the Yellow River to bestow its gifts on backward hinterlands. Now archaeologists face the challenging task of understanding how the myriad peoples and cultures of the region interacted over several millennia. UCLA's Von Falkenhausen even suggests that, as a result of this complexity, "the very notion of [a single] Chinese civilization will probably have to be jettisoned." Chinese scholars say that they will follow the data. "The focus of this project is not to prove the glory of Chinese civilization but to see how it formed," says Wang. "We want the details."

–ANDREW LAWLER

Face time. Enigmatic carved visages decorate this jade box from Liangzhu.

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