

Understanding Chinese heritage and culture

Part 1

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A thousand years ago China's civilization towered over those of the peoples of Europe. China's history began either about 4,000 B.C. or about 2,700 B.C. with a succession of wise emperors who introduced the elements of a civilization. They instructed their people, and prudently positioned China, as early as in the third millennium B.C., to an astonishingly high cultural level.

The Peking Man makes his appearance in the Far East at a time when remains in other parts of the world are very rare and are disputed. The Peking Man lived in caves; no doubt he was a hunter, in possession of very simple stone implements and also of the art of making fire. At the time of the Peking Man there must have been a warmer and especially a damper climate in North China and Inner Mongolia than today. Historical accounts have recorded, for instance, that stone implements were still in use in Manchuria and eastern Mongolia at a time when metal was known and used in western Mongolia and northern China.

AGRICULTURE SECTOR

About 4,000 B.C., we can trace in North China a purely Mongoloid people with a Neolithic culture. In place of hunters we find cattle breeders, who are to some extent agriculturists as well. In the west, in the present provinces of Szechwan and in all the mountain regions of the provinces of Kansu and Shensi, lived the ancestors of the Tibetan peoples as another separate culture. They were shepherds, generally wandering with their flocks of sheep and goats on the mountain heights. Farther east is the Yao culture, an early Austronesian culture, the people of which also lived in the mountains, as collectors and hunters, some engaging in simple agriculture. They mingled later with the last great culture of the south, the Tai culture that is distinguished by agriculture. The people lived in the valleys and mainly cultivated rice.

A group which occupied the higher altitudes and practiced hunting or slash-and-



burn agriculture came into closer contact with another group in the valleys which practiced some form of higher agriculture. The result, as a rule, was a stratified society being made up of at least one privileged and one ruled stratum. Thus there came into existence around 2,000 B.C. some new cultures, which are well known archeologically. The most important of these are the Yang-Shao culture in the west and the Lung-Shan culture in the east.

CHINESE HISTORICAL TRADITION

Chinese historical tradition has it that the semi-historical rulers, Yao and Shun, and the first official dynasty, the Hsia dynasty ruled

over parts of China with a centre in southern Shansi. The central territory of the Shang realm lay in north-western Honan, alongside the Shansi Mountains and extending into the plains. It was a peasant civilization with towns. The Shang state had its centre in northern Honan, north of the Yellow river. Silk was already in use at this time. The invention of sericulture must therefore have dated from very ancient times in China. It undoubtedly originated in the south of China.

The intellectual level attained in the Shang period was very high. With these 3,000 characters the Chinese of the Shang period were able to express themselves well. In the field of material culture, horse-breeding becomes more and more evident. With horse-breeding the two-wheeled light war chariot makes its appearance. A Shang-time chariot was manned by three men: the warrior who was a nobleman, his driver, and his servant who handed him arrows or other weapons when needed. Families of artisans and craftsmen also were hereditary servants of noble families—a type of social organisation which has its parallels in ancient Japan and in later India and other parts of the world. We find in the early Chou time the typical signs of true feudalism: fiefs were given in a ceremony in which symbolically a piece of earth was handed over to the new fief holder, and his installment. The Chou had no priests. As with all the races of the steppes, the head of the family himself performed the religious rites. The feudal lords and nobles were occupied with their own problems in securing the submission of the surrounding villages to their garrisons; they soon paid little attention to the distant central authority. Much of the bronze, and later all the iron, for use in northern China came from the south by road and in ships that went up the rivers to Ch'i, where it was distributed among the various regions.

We must consider the intellectual history of this period, for between 550 and 280 B.C. the enduring fundamental influences in the Chinese social order and in the whole intellectual life of China had their origin. China's best-known philosopher, Confucius was one of these scholars. He was born in 551 B.C. in the feudal state Lu in the present province of Shantung. Confucius gave up his wanderings, settled in his home town of Lu, and there taught his disciples until his death in 479 B.C. Confucius's importance lies in the fact that he systematized a body of ideas, not of his own creation, and communicated it to a circle of disciples. His teachings were later set down in writing and formed the moral code of the upper classes of China.

SIGNIFICANT CHANGES

The introduction of cavalry brought a change in clothing all over China, for the former long skirt-like garb could not be worn

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on horseback. Trousers and the riding-cap were introduced from the north. The new technique of war made it important for every state to possess as many soldiers as possible. The technique of cultivation underwent some significant changes. The animal-drawn plough seems to have been invented during

this period, and from now on, some metal agricultural implements like iron sickles and iron plough-shares became more common. Manuring of fields was used in Shang era. The increased use of metal and the invention of coins greatly stimulated trade. Iron which now became common, was produced mainly in Shansi, other metals in South China. The rulers of the various states entrusted the merchants with the collection of taxes, and this had great advantages for the ruler: he could obtain part of the taxes as the merchant usually had grain in stock.

Recent findings in Central Asia indicate that direct connections between India, Persia, and China may have started at a time much earlier than we had formerly thought. Sogdian merchants who later played a great role in commercial contacts might have been active already from 350 or 400 B.C. on and might have been the transmitters of new ideas. The most important philosopher of this school was Tsou Yen. Its opined that Tsou Yen's basic ideas had their root in earlier Chinese speculations: the doctrine that all that exists is to be explained by the positive, creative, or the negative, passive action (Yang and Yin) of the five elements, wood, fire, earth, metal, and water.

Some people place the beginning of the Ch'in dynasty in that year, 256 B.C.; others prefer the date 221 B.C. It is believed that strong relations with eastern Turkestan began in this period, and the state of Ch'in must have drawn big profits from its "foreign trade". The merchant class quickly gained more and more importance. In 221 B.C. Shih Huang-ti had become emperor of all China. The trading colonies that gradually extended to Canton and still farther south served as Chinese administrative centres for provinces and prefectures, with small but adequate armies of their own, so that in case of need they could defend themselves. This first realm of the Hsiung-nu was not yet extensive, but its ambitious and warlike attitude made it a danger to Ch'in. It was therefore decided to maintain a large permanent army in the north. In addition to this, the frontier walls already existing in the mountains were rebuilt and made into a single great system. Thus came into existence in 214 B.C., out of the blood and sweat of countless labourers, the famous Great Wall.

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The famous Shih Chi, is the first historical work of the modern type and it was also the model for all later official historiography. Most of the painting was done on silk, of which plenty came into the market through the control of silk-producing southern China. Paper had meanwhile been invented in the Second Century B.C. by perfecting the techniques of making bark-cloth and felt. Sculpture and temple architecture received a great stimulus with the spread of Buddhism in China. All the dynasties of China can't be captured in one article, as their regal splendour requires volumes. China has grown over the centuries and its heritage will last for many more centuries.

