THE LONGSHAN PERIOD AND INCIPIENT CHINESE CIVILIZATION

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Abstract

In the ongoing reconceptualization of Chinese cultural origins, the Longshan period (third millennium BC) has emerged as the incipient stage of complex civilization in China. It is now realized that many important characteristics of traditional Chinese society came to fruition during prehistoric times. Following a brief outline of the early processes leading to the formation of state-level civilization in China, this essay discusses some of the major archaeological indicators of socio-political complexity.

The extremely plentiful materials accumulated by Chinese archaeologists over the past seventy years have furnished a novel framework for understanding ancient Chinese history. We have come to realize that Chinese civilization grew from multiple origins that merged into one system, and we have abandoned earlier theories that regarded Chinese civilization as either derived from the West or from a single core area in the Central Plains. Building on work done by historians and archaeologists during the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese archaeologists since 1949 have defined six macro-regions within which development toward complex civilization occurred separately during prehistoric times: (1) the upper reaches of the Yellow River basin; (2) the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River basin; (3) the Yangzi River basin; (4) far southern China; (5) the northern steppes; and (6) China’s Northeast. Distinctive regional cultures continued to flourish in these six regions during the time when the Shang and Zhou had established their royal dynasties in the Central Plains.

The guiding paradigm under which many archaeologists today reconstruct ancient history from archaeological data is Su Bingqi’s 蘇秉琦 (1909-1997) theory of coevolving regional systems (quxi leixing 区系類型). First proposed in 1975 and elaborated in subsequent studies (Su Bingqi 1984, 1994), this model views ancient China’s regionally diverse archaeological cultures as representing ethnic groups separately devel-
oping towards state-level civilization. According to Su, these heterogeneous culture-groups interacted over a long timespan and gradually merged into a greater whole. Similar ideas were also espoused, since 1977, by the influential Xia Nai (1910-1985) (Xia Nai 1977, 1985).

Parallel to this paradigm shift among Chinese archaeologists, K. C. Chang reached similar conclusions in the course of the periodic reworking of his broad-based and highly original syntheses of archaeological work in China (e.g., Chang 1986a, 1986b, and 1986c). In particular, Chang’s notion of the “Chinese Interaction Sphere” has provided the theoretical basis for a coherent panorama on the multiple origins of Chinese civilization. Chang’s work has contributed in important ways to reestablishing the importance of the Chinese experience in a worldwide comparative context. I fully agree with his contention that the rich archaeological data from China furnishes us with ample material with which to gain new understandings of social science generalizations. Furthermore, as Chang (1986a) also notes, the Chinese model itself might be an example of the principal path taken by societies throughout the world towards complex society, and the better known Western model might actually have been the exception.

The formation of Chinese civilization

Around 3000 BC, the various Neolithic cultures then existing in the Yellow River basin and along the middle and lower Yangzi all more or less simultaneously underwent dramatic social and cultural changes. By then the inhabitants of northern China had long ago left behind the stage at which securing mere subsistence was the principal motivating factor for social activity. China entered a new historical age, the Longshan Period, which lasted more than a millennium; it comprises two phases, with the chronological dividing line being around 2600 BC.

Archaeologically, the most obvious manifestation of cultural change around 3000 BC is in ceramics. Grey and black pottery, tripod vessels, pouched-leg vessels, and ring-footed vessels appeared throughout the Longshan Culture Sphere, and while regional distinctions persisted, their shapes, quantities, and decoration styles became notably more homogeneous by comparison to earlier periods. But greater uniformity in material culture is only now the most visible result of what must have been much more encompassing processes of culture change, involving accelerated and strengthened interaction among regional cultures and of thorough-going social and economic transformations. These changes must have been stimulated by the development of the productive forces and surplus accumulation (Engels 1972 [1884]).