



CHINA STUDIES

CULTURAL
FLOW BETWEEN CHINA AND
OUTSIDE WORLD
THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Shen Fuwei



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by Shen Fuwei



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PART ONE
**CULTURAL INTERCOURSE
BETWEEN
CHINA AND THE WESTERN
REGIONS**

Chapter One

The Earliest Contact Between China and the Western Regions Before the Qin Dynasty

I The Western Regions as Described in Ancient Chinese History

The two great rivers of Huanghe (Yellow River) and Changjiang (Yangtze River) flowed across the valleys and plains of East Asia towards the sea, and between them opened an extensive, fertile ground for the inception of Chinese Civilization. It was on this land that emerged the early human society and widespread culture of the Stone Age, which was followed by even more splendid cultures of the Bronze Age and Iron Age. Thereby, China has distinguished itself as the origin of one of the four ancient civilizations in the world, along with the Nile River, Mesopotamia, Indus Valley and the Maya Indians of Central America.

1. The Origins of Chinese Culture

The Xia Dynasty, which was founded during the 21st century B.C., in an area across the middle reaches of the Yellow River between its two tributaries of Yishui and Luoshui, was known as the first slavery state in Chinese history. The dynasty of Xia was succeeded by that of Shang, and later by the Zhou Dynasty. Zhou, which was originally a principedom under Shang in the area of the current northern Shaanxi Province, distinguished itself from the neighbouring ethnics by calling its

nation both "Xia" and "Zhong Guo" (Middle Kingdom). The people of Zhou, claiming themselves to be the descendants of the Xia Dynasty, also called their own territory "Qu Xia" or "You Xia" or "Shi Xia" (meaning Xia territory). The name of "Zhong Guo" was used to indicate their identity as a farming community, as opposed to the nomadic tribes in the surrounding areas.

During the reign of the Xia Dynasty, whose domain was sometimes also called "Hua," its many princedoms—located in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River—referred to their territories as parts of "Hua Xia."

During the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.) and the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.), political and economic exchanges increased among the prince states in both the Yellow River and Yangtze River valleys, the territory of "Zhong Guo" also expanded as a result. It was then that people believed that this Middle Kingdom was 3,000 *li* (1,500 kilometres) in both directions, a square-shaped area surrounded by seas. This area, as described in the verses of the ancient literature *Li Ji* (*The Book of Rites*), was "extending to running sand in the west, reaching Hengshan Mountain in the south, bordering East Sea in the east and looking upon Mount Hengshan in the north." Such an area, which was already nine times bigger than the Middle Kingdom as earlier claimed in legends, became the territory of "Zhong Xia" or "Zhong Hua" in ancient history. This marked a major expansion of the original concept of Middle Kingdom, which covered just an area of approximately 500,000 square kilometres, embracing parts of the present Henan, Shanxi, Hebei, Shaanxi and Shandong provinces in North China. By the 5th century B.C., the heartland of Chinese Civilization had expanded to more than one million square kilometres in area, whose geographic size was far larger than the other ancient civilizations existing in the contemporary era.

However, despite the spectacular expansion of Chinese Civilization in area, it remained far apart, geographically, from the civilizations of Mesopotamia in the west and the Indus Valley in the southwest, by a distance of some 6,500 and 4,000 kilometres,

respectively. The immense mountains and deserts that separated the East and the West, across which only some nomadic tribes drifted, had, for centuries, blocked the communication between these ancient civilizations.

2. The Ancient Chinese Legend About Xiwangmu (Western Queen Mother) and Its Relation with the Western Regions

The Warring States Period saw a rapid growth in exchange between China and other nations inhabiting the neighbouring steppe, which further broadened the world outlook of the Chinese people. As a result, Zou Yan, a scholar of the Qi State, introduced the idea, during the 4th century B.C., that the world was composed of "Great Nine Continents." The world, in Zou's idea, was much larger than the Middle Kingdom surrounded by "Four Seas." According to Zou, China, which was then known as "Chi Xian Shen Zhou" (the Red Sacred Land) to many Chinese, was a continent in itself, surrounded by the nine other continents. Each of these continents, including the central continent of China, was assumed to comprise also "nine smaller regions distinguished by their geographic features," according to Zou. The ancient book, *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*, compiled during the 3rd century B.C., held that the Great Nine Continents occupied an area of 28,000 *li* (14,000 kilometres) from east to west and 26,000 *li* (13,000 kilometres) from north to south, while the Middle Kingdom measured 3,000 *li* (1,500 kilometres) in both directions.

In geographic concept, the border of this Nine Continent world extended westward to the Kunlun Mountains or the Congling range (the Pamirs) in western Xinjiang. According to the ancient literature *Shanhaijing (Classic of Mountains and Rivers)* written during the Warring States Period, this region was illustrated, in a legendary style, as an area situated somewhere between the "Black Water" (Syr-Darya) and the "Red Water" (Yarkant River) under the Kunlun Mountains. This area, which was surrounded by "deep valleys and blazing hills," was the location of the cave-dwellings of Xiwangmu (Western Queen Mother), who was described as "adorned with hairdress, tiger's