

CHINA KNOWLEDGE SERIES

AN OUTLINE HISTORY  
OF CHINA

TUNG CHI-MING

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS  
PEKING 1959

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## CHAPTER 1

# PREHISTORIC TIMES

### Peking Man

About 500,000 years ago a species of primitive man lived in Choukoutien, in the southwest of Peking, whom the scientists call Peking Man. What distinguished him from his modern counterpart was that he had large brow-ridges and receding chin, a low forehead, and his brain-case was only three quarters the size of modern man's.

Most of the northern part of China then was warm and humid. The land was covered with thick forests, the home of the sabre-toothed tiger, Peking Man's most deadly foe. The vast grasslands teemed with wild horses, spotted deer, antelopes, great rhinoceroses and woolly mammoths. Buf-



**The Peking Man, from a reconstructed model in the Peking Historical Museum**

faloes and the giant deer called *Euryceros pachyosteus* made the riversides and lakesides their home; bears and tigers, the hills and mountain caverns.

Peking Man had only the primitive club and rough flint tools with which to conquer the world of nature around him. His greatest friend was fire which he obtained from burning logs picked up from accidental forest fires and preserved in the cave he inhabited. It enabled him to roast his food, and frightened away the wild beasts.

A food-gatherer and hunter, Peking Man collected the roots and stems of plants, seeds and fruit. The spotted deer was his prey in the warmer seasons; in winter, he had the more difficult job of hunting the giant deer, a migrant from the colder north. Occasionally, he added the meat of wild cattle and horses to his diet. However, as he was armed with only the crudest of tools, Peking Man's great problem was food — always he must have been haunted by hunger.

As he did not know how to build shelters, the earliest man lived in groups in natural hill caves, preferring those near rivers which provided him with drinking water and gave a plentiful supply of stones with which he could fashion his tools. Besides, he could kill the animals that came to the stream for water.

## Upper Cave Man

We call the species of man who lived about 50,000 years ago, also in the Choukoutien area, the Upper Cave Man. He was like the modern man in appearance and was far more advanced in the scale of human progress than his ancestor of 450,000 years earlier. He was able to make

articles of bone, like the bodkin, which he used to thread pieces of hide together to make clothing.

Like the Peking Man, the Upper Cave Man was a hunter and gatherer of food. But he had extended his larder to include fish and mussels and learned to make fire artificially.

We call the period extending from the Peking Man to the Upper Cave Man the Palaeolithic Age.

## Painted-Pottery and Black-Pottery Cultures

The ancient Chinese of five or six thousand years ago had already vastly improved their tools. Stones were polished smooth and shaped into axes, swords, hammers and chisels. Bones, antlers and shells were turned into needles, awls, sickles and saws. That technical advances had been made is shown in the fact that many of these implements were pierced with holes to facilitate tying or to be set in handles.

We call this age of polished stone tools the Neolithic Period.

A pre-Neolithic discovery, the bow and arrow, was the most important weapon of the Neolithic Age. It made hunting much easier, for man could now kill animals and birds at a distance.

A very important discovery of this period was the art of making pottery. The inhabitants of the loess plateau in the northwest of China made pots of red clay beautifully painted with black and purple lines. We call their culture the Painted-Pottery Culture.

The people of the North China Plain made black-coloured pottery which was distinguished by its fineness

of execution, thinness and its smooth surface. We call their culture the Black-Pottery Culture.

With the invention of the pot, Neolithic man was enabled to store water and food and to cook his meals.

When a Chinese of prehistoric times caught animals alive he would slaughter some to meet his immediate wants, leaving the remainder for subsequent days. Gradually, he learned to keep the surplus beasts and the domestication of the pig, dog, ox and sheep followed. Thus began animal husbandry.

The ancient Chinese also noticed that seeds had the property of developing shoots which grew into plants identical with those from which they had fallen. Thus he learned to sow grain and till the soil with stone implements. Thus came the beginning of agriculture.

With the development of animal husbandry and agriculture man began to settle in permanent dwelling places. The people of the loess plateau and the North China Plain lived in villages located near rivers. Their houses, made of mud and roofed with reeds, were all, large and small, built to a single pattern. They knew how to weave, and wore clothes, the material of which was probably made from jute.

## Clan Commune

The social unit during Neolithic times was the clan commune.

All in the commune were related. The land, animals and tools were commonly owned, the individual having only the use and care of weapons. Hunting, fishing, tending the animals, tilling the soil, and house-building, were

done by the members of the commune all working together. They shared the fruits of their labours because they did not produce much, and had one individual taken more than his fair share another would have starved. Though an elected head directed the work of the commune all important questions were discussed and decided at clan meetings. In those days there were no classes, no private property, and no one could exploit another.

Neighbouring clans formed the tribe which was led by a tribal chief. Tribes in turn formed the tribal alliance in order the better to seize grazing lands and hunting grounds and to meet the threat of hostile tribes. Both chiefs of tribes and of tribal alliances were elected.

## Legendary Figures

Legend has it that more than 4,000 years ago there was one such tribal alliance, which had as its chief a person called Huang Ti (Yellow Emperor), one of the foremost leaders of the Yellow River area. In his day, many important discoveries had already been made. Man had created a written language and learned to rear silkworms, to weave silk and to build carts and boats.

After Huang Ti, the chiefs well known to tradition were Yao, Shun and Yu. They were succeeded upon their death by their deputies. When Yao was on the throne the Yellow River overflowed its banks, whereupon he summoned a meeting of the tribal confederacy to discuss how to control the floodwaters. In the course of the discussions, some tribal chiefs proposed that Kun, the father of Yu, should be given charge of the work. To this the assembly agreed, though the chief of the tribal

alliance was against the idea. Kun failed to vanquish the flood and was put to death by Yao and his deputy Shun. Yu, appointed to complete his father's work, toiled with an army of people and finally, after 13 years, succeeded in guiding the floodwaters back into the river course and so out to the sea.

After Yao's death Shun became the ruler. Yu was elected his deputy and in the course of time succeeded to the throne.

In Yu's day, the people produced more than their predecessors. Within the clan organization, the large family had sprung up. Its superiority of numbers enabled it to grab communal lands and animals and turn them into private property for the exclusive use and enjoyment of the family. Thus it came about that signs of inequality and the distinction between rich and poor emerged within the commune. Yu himself was the representative of one of the rich and powerful families.

## CHAPTER 2

# HSIA AND SHANG DYNASTIES

After the death of Yu, his son Chi seized the throne and prevented the lawful heir Yi from exercising his customary right. From that time, about the twenty-first century B.C., the office of the chief of the tribal alliance became a hereditary one. History names the period inaugurated by Chi the Hsia dynasty.

The Hsia dynasty marked the beginning of slave society in China, in which slaves and peasants were the producers of all the means of subsistence, while the exploiting class was composed of aristocrats. As the supreme leader of the aristocrats, the king wielded the highest authority in the state. At the zenith of its rule, the Hsia dynasty had vast areas along the middle reaches of the Yellow River, under its sovereignty.

Sometime in the sixteenth century B.C. a tribe headed by its chief Tang defeated Chieh, last ruler of Hsia, in battle and gained control of the greater part of the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River. It was the end of the Hsia dynasty and the beginning of the Shang dynasty.

The Shang occupied the lower reaches of the Yellow River, where they grew crops on the fertile soil and raised cattle and sheep on the rich grasslands. But the river

which with its tributaries provided a plentiful supply of water for irrigating the fields proved also to be a foe against whom a stern battle had to be constantly waged. There were times when it flooded the fields, crumbling houses and sweeping both men and animals to their death.

Like the Hsia, the Shang were ruled by hereditary chiefs called kings who were succeeded on death either by their brothers or sons.

During the next 300 years following the founding of the kingdom, the Shang were forced by the capricious river to move their capital five times. It was not until the fourteenth century B.C. when King Pan Keng moved the capital to Yin (in present-day Honan Province) that a permanent site was founded. Yin remained the royal town for about 270 years, a fact which shows that the Shang had made a considerable advance towards solving the flood problem.

## Life and Production

The Shang knew how to smelt metals. They developed bronze, which is an alloy of copper and tin. Axes, knives, awls, needles, maceheads, spearheads, arrowheads, pots, goblets, tripods and other articles were made of bronze.

But bronze was an expensive metal and its manufacture was controlled by the aristocracy. The peasants had to be content with tools of stone and wood. They used a two-pronged hoe to turn the soil, which they planted to rice, wheat, proso and millet. Ditches were dug around the fields to irrigate the land with water from the river. Crude sickles of stone or shell were used to harvest the crops.

The Shang also practised sericulture and made clothes of silk. They kept pigs, dogs, horses, cattle and sheep, and raised chickens. By this time horses had been harnessed. War chariots and royal carts were very often pulled by four horses.

The men of this period were also hunters. They used the skins and furs of animals for clothing and fashioned the bones into weapons and tools.

Handicrafts developed. Spirit was made from grain, cloth from silk and ramie, and leather from the hides of animals. In the capital large workshops produced with fine workmanship utensils of bronze, stone, bone and jade.

## Social System and Culture

Shang society was a slave society divided into slaves, peasants and nobles.

The nobles made slaves of their prisoners of war and forced them to work for them. These slaves, fastened with a cord around the neck, toiled in the fields or in the manufactories of the capital, supervised by whip-carrying overseers. They were fed on the coarsest grains and could be killed at will by their masters.

Working with the crudest tools the peasants had very poor harvests, a part of which they had to hand over to the lords.

The nobles lived on the labour of the slaves and peasants and enjoyed a life of luxury.

The Shang kings built enormous palaces consisting of several dozens of halls, the largest of which were 180

*chih*<sup>1</sup> long and 30 *chih* wide. Beneath the palaces were spacious cellars where great quantities of grain and goods were stored.

When a king died he was buried in a huge grave together with hundreds of carved stone pieces and articles of gold, jade and bronze. Hundreds of slaves were buried in the royal tomb, some alive, some after decapitation.

The ordinary people, however, lived in the most primitive conditions. Their houses were tiny mud huts. Their simple graves contained only such crude pottery and weapons as they possessed.

The Shang kings conducted solemn ceremonies to worship their ancestors. For one such performance they would slaughter hundreds of cattle and sheep. They prayed to their ancestors for protection and invoked their aid to foresee the future. They regarded their own activities as being merely done in execution of the will of their forbears; it was a belief shared by ruler and ruled alike and strengthened the sway of the royal house over the people.

The Shang kings caused the messages to be recorded in writing on ox bone or tortoise shell. These sentences are the earliest examples of Chinese writing. We call those early ideographs oracle-bone characters, to which modern Chinese writing traces its origin.

Thanks to everyday needs and the development of agriculture, the Shang had already acquired some rudimentary knowledge of science. From the oracle-bone inscriptions we find characters representing figures of up

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<sup>1</sup> One *chih* is equal to 1.0936 feet. The standards of the weights and measures used in this book vary according to the different dynasties. It remains to be settled how they will be converted into modern standards.