

CHINA

Images
of
a Civilization



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Writing Team of
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Introduction

China: Images of a Civilization is the story of China, as told for the Western world.

China has remained an enigma for the West. It was, for so long, the “mysterious east,” the end of the Silk Road. It was the land of magnificent emperors and enormous wealth. Then it became the last battleground in the struggle of empires. Later it was the land of total chaos, wars, revolution.... In whatever period, China has remained perplexing, yet fascinating for the West.

China: Images of a Civilization was a major research project coordinated by a group of historians in Beijing to relate the story of China, as seen through Chinese eyes, to a Western audience. It gives us an insight as to how the Chinese read their own history and how we may begin to understand how that history can become comprehensible to us.

A number of themes dominate this history. The story of China is 1.7 million years of continuous historical evolution and change.

The first great theme which dominates this story is its cyclical nature. While the Western mind believes that history is the story of “onward and upward” – the ongoing development towards abundance and greater intellectual, material, technological and spiritual progress, the Chinese, as revealed in *China: Images of a*

Civilization, do not see their own story in these terms.

Chinese history is revealed as a process of great achievement and, at the same time, as a process of dramatic decay. The story is not one-dimensional, but rather one of immense creation followed by immense destruction, followed by supreme efforts at further recreation, etc.

This cycle of creation and destruction is told through the fate of dynasties, their formation and their eradication, followed by their replacement by new dynasties.

The second great theme in *China: Images of a Civilization* is the ongoing struggle in Chinese history for territorial integrity. Periods of decay led to territorial fragmentation, which, in turn, led to civil wars, and the total collapse of order and coherence. This, in turn, led to the penury and pain of everyone living in China.

The struggle for territorial integrity has many implications, but foremost is the view that this struggle was long, arduous, painful, and usually involved wars. However, prosperity could only be enjoyed when there was total territorial integrity and this coincided with periods of peace and tranquility.

The forces leading to territorial disintegration had both internal and external sources. Internally, they were the fragmentation of military

power and externally, they were the “barbarians” knocking at the gates of the kingdom.

Hence, the third great theme of *China: Images of a Civilization* relates to the inner constitution of Chinese life. If order was to be sustained, how should the administration of the land take place? This is usually thought to be a question of the nature of imperial power. It is, but it is more than that. It is about the problem of sustaining a public administration in a land where there were constant threats to internal coherence and to public order.

The fourth great theme of *China: Images of a Civilization* involves the manner in which China has historically understood and related to the outside world. Throughout its history, China has had intense relations with the outside world. Trade, commerce, foreign relations were all well known to the Chinese for many more centuries before they were known to the West. The constant problem for China had been how to maintain these relations while, at the same time, sustaining its internal coherence. “Closed doors...open doors...” Which way should it be? This problem had also led China to interpret the nature of the “outside” world in many peculiar ways. Being the “middle kingdom” had grave psychological consequences as to how one viewed the world.

There is a profound intensity to Chinese history – whether be its longevity, its period of enormous achievements, its periods of exaggerated turmoil, its open period, its closed periods, its traumas, or its glories. Everything appears to be portrayed on a grand scale.

That same history can be seen to exhibit excesses beyond the comprehension of most Westerners, such as the scale of construction, the immensity of wealth, or the excesses of pain, destruction and suffering. But beyond that, there is also an astonishing forgiving quality inherent in Chinese history.

Regimes come and go. Reconstruction follows destruction. Everything is contained in this history.

The drama of Chinese history and civilization continues into the 21st century. China never fails to astonish the world and its enormous development in all fields over the past few decades, from economy to education, from technology to culture and far beyond, has mesmerized the world. The story and the saga of Chinese civilization, its people, its images, its character and quality, continue to fascinate and inform.

Howard Aster, Ph.D.
Professor of McMaster University
May 2009



China: Images of a Civilization

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Ancient China

(c. 1.7m. years ago-475 B.C.)

Primitive Society (c. 1.7m. years ago-4000 B.C.)

The Earliest Chinese

The Matriarchal Age

The Patriarchal Age

Slave Society (c. 2100-475 B.C.)

The Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 B.C)

The Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 B.C)

The Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 B.C)

The Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C)

Primitive Society

(c. 1.7m. years ago-4000 B.C.)

The Earliest Chinese

Who Were the Earliest Chinese?

Who were the earliest Chinese? This question has been in debate for several thousand years. Mythological stories, ancient history books and anthropologists give different answers.

According to mythology, China, in remote antiquity, was a vast expanse of empty, marshy land. It was Nü Wa, the earliest ancestor of mankind, who created human beings, both men and women, with clay. The Chinese are the offspring of these human beings. According to legends told in ancient history books, Nü Wa and Fu Xi were sister and brother, who conjugated and gave birth to the earliest Chinese. Nü Wa and Fu Xi are portrayed in stone relief of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) as creatures having human bodies and dragon tails, their tails entwined. These two, remote ancestors of the Chinese are, therefore, seen to be related to dragons. The Chinese are, hence, called “the descendants of dragons.”



A Tang Dynasty illustration of Nü Wa and Fu Xi.

Timeline of Other Histories

The story of Adam and Eve in the Western culture. The first man and woman were created by God according to the “Book of Genesis” of the *Bible* and the *Qur’an*.

Sima Qian (145-? B.C.), the first great historian in Chinese history, however, held different views. In the “Annals of the Five Emperors”, the first chapter of his masterpiece, *Records of the Historian*, he wrote that the Yellow Emperor, the first of the five emperors, joined force with the Fiery Emperor and defeated their powerful enemies. They moved from the north to the south and settled in the fertile Yellow River valley. They thrived and became the Chinese nation. This is why the Chinese also call themselves “the descendants of the Fiery and Yellow emperors.”

Anthropological studies reveal that mankind was not created by god, nor by Nü Wa, but has evolved from a species of anthropoid apes. As early as 2.5-1.7 million years ago, or in the early Pleistocene Epoch, the valley of the Golden Sand River in the upper reaches of the Yangtze River and the Yuanmou Basin in today’s Yunnan Province were inhabited respectively by the Eastern Man and Yuanmou Man. Studies reveal that Eastern Man moved about erect and had freed his hands from any relations with his legs. Yuanmou Man had flat incisors like those of the later Mongoloids and knew how to make simple stone tools.

As early as two million years ago, the Yellow River Valley, too, was inhabited by man. Cultural remains of early man, dating 1.7 million years back, have been discovered at Ruicheng, Shanxi Province. About sixty miles to the west of Ruicheng, fossil remains of Lantian Man have been unearthed at the Princess Ridge in Lantian, Shaanxi Province. Lantian Man roamed the area about a million years ago and made large stone balls which were probably used in hunting.

Peking Man – The First User of Fire

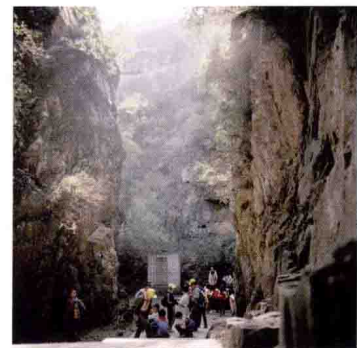
The discovery of a skullcap of Peking Man in 1929 on the Dragon Bone Hill at Zhoukoudian in Beijing created a great stir in the world. Peking Man, or *Sinanthropus pekinensis*,



Two unearthened fossil teeth of Yuanmou Man.



An unearthened skullcap of Lantian Man.



The cave in which a complete skullcap of Peking Man was discovered.

C. 2.3-2.4 million years ago: The genus *Homo* had diverged during this period in Africa. Humans came from their common ancestor with chimpanzees about 5-7 million years ago according to archaeologists and anthropologists. *Homo erectus* inhabited Asia and *Homo neanderthalensis* inhabited Europe.



A restored Peking Man.

lived 400,000-500,000 years ago and existed in the world for a total of 300,000 years.

Peking Man's greatest contribution to civilization is his use of natural fire. Deposits of charred bones and cinders, 16-20 feet in height, found in the Peking Man cave on the Dragon Bone Hill show that Peking Man knew not only how to use fire, but also how to keep live cinders for a long time. Fire played an important role in mankind's progress. With fire, man improved his diet and this, in turn, sped up his evolution. With fire, man was able to ward off the cold and extended his sphere of activities into the vast, colder regions. It was also fire that allowed man to bake the first pottery objects and smelt bronze and iron, thus creating the basis for a world of diverse materials and implements.

Although Peking Man was the first user of fire, he probably did not know how to kindle a fire. Legend has it that it was Sui Ren who invented the method of drilling into wood to start a fire. Sui Ren's epoch corresponded roughly to the middle or late Paleolithic Period and later than Peking Man's age. This period also coincides with the time when people already knew how to bore holes into flat stones.



An unearthened skullcap of Peking Man.

About 100,000 years ago, at the edge of the northern grassland along today's Great Wall, there lived many groups of hunters. They chased wild horses with stone flings. They became known as Xujiayao Man because the remains of one group of them have been discovered at Xujiayao in today's Yanggao County, Shanxi Province. Several tons of horse bones left behind by them are evidence that they were the earliest hunters of horses in China.

The earliest stone arrowheads were made in China about 28,000 years ago by Shiyu Man, who inhabited Shiyu Village in Shuoxian County, Shanxi Province. Among these remains are large

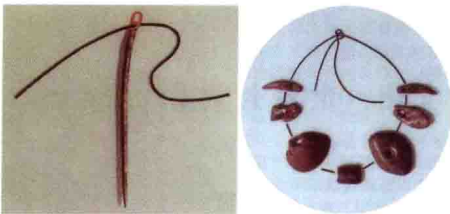
Timeline of Other Histories

- C. 1.75 million years ago: Pre-Zinjanthropus, or 'Handy Man,' lived in the present-day East African Olduvai Gorge, where Drs. Louis and Mary Leakey discovered skull bits of the 'Handy Man' in 1959.

quantities of the bones of wild goats. Shiyu Man was hunters of wild goats with bow and arrow. They also made many fine stone tools which were, possibly, used for processing fur and leather.

The Upper Cave Man

About 18,000 years ago, that is, 200,000 years after Peking Man disappeared from the earth, the caves on the Dragon Bone Hill that once provided shelter for Peking Man was inhabited by the Upper Cave Man. Among the remains of the Upper Cave Man is a bone needle, which the Upper Cave Man probably used for sewing leather clothes. The needle measures 3.2 inches long and is as slender as a match stick. Pointed at one end and perforated with a sharp tool at the other, the bone needle has been smoothly polished. The same kind of bone needle had been in use for more than 16,000 years afterwards before it was replaced by iron needles in the early Han Dynasty (220 B.C.-A.D. 24). The Upper Cave Man also wore personal ornaments made of sea shells, animal teeth, fish bones and stone beads. The fact that the ornaments have been dyed red by hematite shows that the Upper Cave Man was the earliest user of mineral dyes in China. Some Chinese aestheticians maintain that the Upper Cave Man was a lover of beauty and they conclude that ancient man was concerned with aesthetic ideas. However, these ornaments might be worn for quite different purposes. The Upper Cave Man buried their dead and spread hematite around the



A needle and a personal ornament used by Upper Cave Man

corpses. This was probably a primitive religious ceremony associated with the transformation of life and death and the belief in the existence of soul.



The Dragon Bone Hill at Zhoukoudian, Beijing.



A restored Upper Cave Man.

The Matriarchal Age

The Rise and Decline of Matriarchal Clans

In ancient history books, the birth of many nations is associated with mythology. It is said that Jian Di, the great grandmother of the Shang clan swallowed three swallow eggs and gave birth to Qi, the ancestor of the Shang. Jiang Yuan, the great grandmother of the Zhou clan, followed the footprints of a giant, became pregnant and gave birth to Ti, the ancestor of the Zhou. Similar stories can be found in the literature of many different nations. The plots may be different, but they all have one point in common. Only the great grandmother is known, but not the great grandfather. This period of mankind's history in which only the mother was known was the Matriarchal Age.

In Matriarchal society, the clan was the cell of society. People in a clan had the same great grandmother, and all the members of the clan were related by blood.

Matriarchal society came into existence in China about

100,000 years ago during the middle Paleolithic Period. Primitive economy had by then progressed from gathering wild plants to large-scale, big game hunting, which called for close coordination and a clear division of labor on the part of the hunters and the guidance of a leader of considerable prestige. As the organization for production developed and became more complex in scale, the social organizations of clans adapted to the needs of this production began to emerge.

Take Xujiayao Man, for example. It is a likely hypothesis that the hunters of this era did not belong to the same clan,



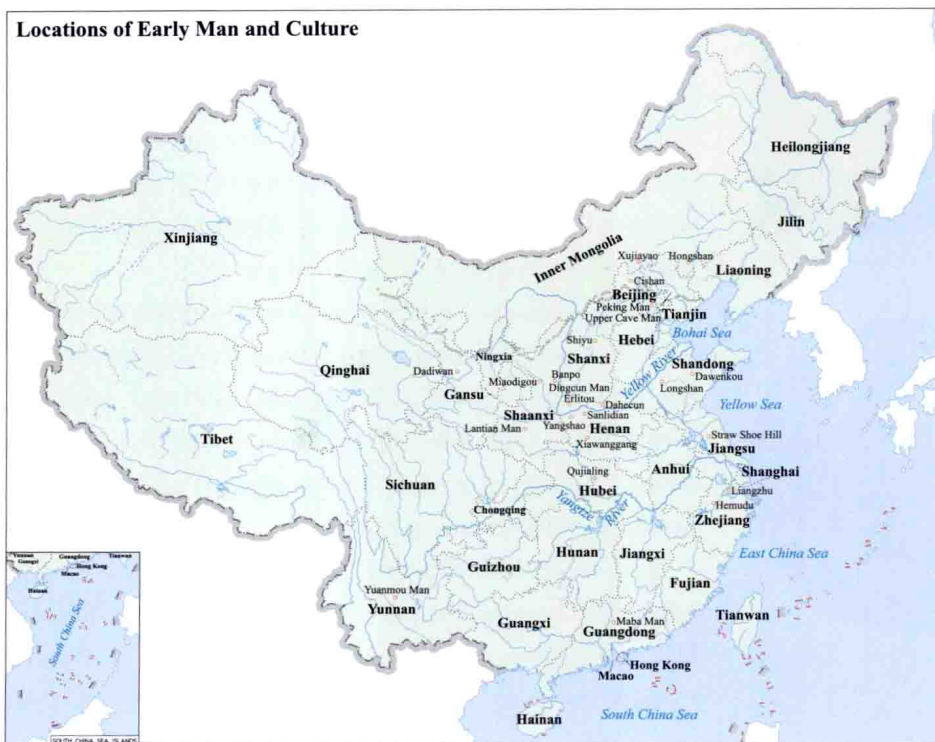
Sharp stones used by Xujiayao Man.

Timeline of Other Histories

C. 10000 BC: Dog was first domesticated in Middle East; intensive flock management was developed in Zagros Mountains.

they could not have successfully captured the thousands of wild horses and shared their life together for a long period of time. More than 1,079 finished but unused stone balls were found at the site of Xujiayao Man's dwelling. It is known that the American Indians were experts with the sling. There was a clear division of labor between their men and women. While the men hunted the women made stone balls. The large numbers of stone balls found at the sites of Xujiayao Man were probably made in the same way. They already had a well-organized clan system.

When women started farming about 10,000 years back, Matriarchal clans began to flourish. They reached their zenith of development about 6,000-7,000 years ago in the Yellow River and Yangtze River valleys. About 5,000 years ago, the Matriarchal system began to disintegrate in the Central Plains, accom-



C. 8000 BC: Potatoes and beans were first cultivated in South America; Fertile Crescent had the earliest permanent farming villages.