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BEFORE THE DAWN OF HISTORY

To admirers of Chinese art, the three decades that followed the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 were a time of bewilderment and frustration as they watched the Chinese apparently repudiating, and even at times destroying, their cultural heritage. For years, as China carried out its gigantic social and political revolution, its doors were shut to almost all but the most uncritical admirers. While the lot of the masses improved beyond belief, art and the artist suffered, particularly during the ten terrible years from the Cultural Revolution to the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.

Yet even at the worst of times, while artists and scholars were imprisoned or sent down to farm and factory, the archaeological work never ceased. Indeed, in the years of Mao's rule, China did more to excavate, protect, study, and display its cultural heritage than ever before. If this was politically justified by Mao's insistence that the past must serve the present—and to do so it must be visible—it more truly reflects the sense of history that the Chinese have always felt and that not even the Cultural Revolution could destroy. For now, as always, the Chinese look upon their history as a deep reservoir from which they draw strength, not as a luxury but as something essential to the vitality of their culture.

Nor have the old legends been forgotten. One of these legends concerns the origins of the world.[1] In far-off times, it runs, the universe was an enormous egg. One day the egg split open; its upper half became the sky, its lower half the earth, and from it emerged Pan Gu, primordial man. Every day he grew ten feet taller, the sky ten feet higher, the earth ten feet thicker. After eighteen thousand years Pan Gu died. His head split and became the sun and moon, while his blood filled the rivers and seas. His hair became the forests and meadows, his perspiration the rain, his breath the wind, his voice the thunder—and his fleas our ancestors.

A people's legends of their origins generally give a clue to what they think most important. This one is no exception, for its expresses an age-old Chinese viewpoint, namely that man is not the culminating achievement of creation, but a relatively insignificant part in the scheme of things—hardly more than an afterthought, in fact. By comparison with the beauty and splendour of the world itself, the mountains and valleys, the clouds and waterfalls, the tres and flowers, which are the visible manifestations

of the workings of the *dao* (the "Way" of the Daoist philosophers), he counts for very little. In no other civilization did the forms and patterns of nature, and man's humble response to it, play so big a part.

We can trace the germs of this attitude into the remote past, when in north China nature was a kinder master than she is now. Half a million years ago, in the time of *Homo erectus pekinensis* (Peking Man), that region was comparatively warm and wet; elephants and rhinoceroses roamed a more luxuriant countryside than the barren hills and windswept plains of recent times. Within this area, forming the modern provinces of Henan, Hebei, Shanxi, and Shaanxi, was born a uniquely Chinese feeling of oneness with nature that, in the course of time, was to find its highest expression in philosophy, poetry, and painting. This sense of communion was not merely philosophical and artistic it had a practical value as well, since the farmer's prosperity, and hence that of society as a whole, depended upon his knowing the seasons and attuning himself to the "will of Heaven," as he called it. Agriculture ultimately became a ritual over which the emperor himself presided, and when at the spring sowing he ceremonially plowed the first furrow, not only did he hope to ensure a good harvest thereby, but his office itself was further ennobled by this act of homage to the forces of nature.

This sense of "attunement" is fundamental in Chinese thinking. Man must attune himself not only to nature but also to his fellow men, in ever-widening circles starting from his family and friends. Thus, in the past the highest ideal was always to discover the order of things and to act in accordance with it. As the history of Chinese art unfolds in the following pages, we will find that its characteristic and unique beauty lies in its expression of this very sense of attunement. Is that one reason why Westerners, often with no other interest in Chinese civilization, collect and admire Chinese art? Do they sense, perhaps, that the forms that the Chinese artist and craftsman have created are *natural* forms—forms that seem to have evolved inevitably by the movement of the maker's hand, as an intuitive response to a natural rhythm? Chinese art does not demand of us, as does Indian art, the effort to bridge what often seems an unbridgeable gulf between extremes of physical form and metaphysical content, nor will we find in it that preoccupation with formal and intellectual considerations that so often makes Western art difficult for the Asian mind to accept. The forms of Chinese art are beautiful because they are in the widest and deepest sense harmonious, and we can appreciate them because we too feel their rhythms all around us in nature and instinctively respond to them. These rhythms, moreover—this sense of inner life expressed in line and contour—are present in Chinese art from its earliest beginnings.

CHINA IN THE STONE AGE

Every lover of Chinese art today is familiar with the magnificent painted pottery of the Neolithic period, although not until 1921 was positive evidence found that China had actually passed through a Stone Age at all. In that year the Swedish geologist J. Gunnar Andersson and his Chinese assistants made two discoveries of immense importance. The first was at Zhoukoudian, southwest of Beijing, where deep in a cleft in the hillside Andersson picked up a number of flint tools, indicating that the area had been occupied by very early man. He himself did not excavate, but his find led to further excavations and to the eventual discovery by Dr. Pei Wenzhong of fossil bones that, with the exception of late Java man, *Pithecanthropus erectus,* were the oldest human remains yet discovered. The bones were those of a hominid, *Sinanthropus pekinensis,* who lived in the middle Pleistocene period. The remains in the cave, fifty meters thick, represent occupation between about 700,000 and 200,000 B.C. Peking man made stone tools, chiefly of veined quartz, from flakes struck off a larger pebble. He had fire and ate grains and his fellow men, breaking open their bones to suck out the marrow.

In recent years, far older remains have been discovered. The fossil teeth of an ape-man found in 1965 in the Yuanmou district of Yunnan are dated to 1.7 million years ago.[2] In 1964, in deposits on an open hillside in Lantian county, Shaanxi, paleontologists discovered the cranium of a hominid believed to be at least 100,000 years older than Peking man, and so roughly the same age as Java man, *Pithecanthropus robustus*. More recently, in 1984, the skeleton of a primitive man of the Middle Pleistocene, c. 260,000 years old, was found in Jinniushan, southern Liaoning. Jinniushan man, with a brain larger than that of contemporary primates, is related to early *Homo sapiens*.

Gradually, in the late Pleistocene, the evolution of early humans in China gathered pace. In recent years, remains

of *Homo sapiens* have been found in many areas. "Upper Cave Man" at Zhoukoudian (c. 25,000 B.C.) had a wider range of stone tools than his ancestors; he probably wore hides sewn together, and his wife adorned herself with stone beads drilled and painted with hematite, the earliest known intentional decoration in the history of Chinese civilization. Crude fired pottery vessels, dateable by C14 to 18,000–17,000 BC have been found in a cave at Xianrendong in Jiangxi province; this may be the earliest pottery yet found anywhere in the world. Finely fashioned microliths (very small stone implements) have been found in many desert sites in Ningxia and the Ordos region, different types of blades and flakes being fashioned for different purposes. Further south, in the region of northern Henan that was to become the last seat of the Shang dynasty, thousands of microliths were discovered in a habitation site in 1960; other rich remains have been found far to the southwest, in Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. Although the dating of these scattered sites and their relationship to each other are by no means clear, their distribution suggests that the Upper Paleolithic culture, shaping imperceptibly into the Mesolithic, was spread widely across ancient China.[3]

MAP 1.1 CHINA IN THE NEOLITHIC PERIOD

THE NEOLITHIC CULTURES OF CHINA

The people of Mesolithic China had been hunters and fishermen. The "Neolithic revolution" came when the ancestors of the Chinese race settled down and began to build villages and to learn the arts of farming, horticulture, and pottery making.

For a long time it was thought that Chinese Neolithic culture originated in the "nuclear area" of Southern Hebei and northern Henan, and that it radiated out from there. But as more and more Neolithic sites are discovered, the picture becomes more complicated, and it is now clear that Neolithic communities flourished more or less simultaneously in various parts of China (map 1.1), and that each area had its own way of life and distinctive crafts.

But long before that, it has been established by finds in a cave at Xianrendong in Jiangxi that men still in the hunter-gatherer stage were making crude pottery, which has been dated by Carbon 14 to 18,000–17,000 B.C. This,if confirmed, must be the oldest pottery yet found any where in the world.[4]

As we move around China, we find the earliest settlements yet discovered, at Yuchanyao in Hunan, and Aohan Banner in Inner Mongolia, which may date as early as 8,000 B.C., whose inhabitants lived in little houses and huts, in a community surrounded by a ditch or moat. Then came Peiligang, a village site near Luoyang. Here were found house floors, evidence of the domestication of animals, many burials, and pottery, some of which is ornamented with scratched designs (Fig. 1.1). By Carbon-14 dating, archaeologists have put the Peiligang settlement around 6000–5000B.C. Thereafter in various sites there appear larger houses, rows of attached houses, finely polished stone tools and the use of jade for ornaments and for ritual purposes, the first defensive walls, leading to the creation of walled towns, the earliest of which yet discovered, at Lixian in Hunan, is dated around 4,000 B.C.[5]

An early stage of the Chinese Neolithic civilisation was in fact the first to be discovered, when in 1921 the Swedish geologist, J.Gunnar Andersson (1874–1960), searching for oil and minerals for the Chinese government, discovered at the village of Yangshao in northern Henan simple burials

FIGURE 1.1 Jar with small "ears" for lifting. Red pottery. Ht. 17.8 cm. Excavated in Changgexian, Henan. Peiligang culture. Neolithic.

FIGURE 1.2 Banpo, Shaanxi. Part of the Neolithic village after excavation.

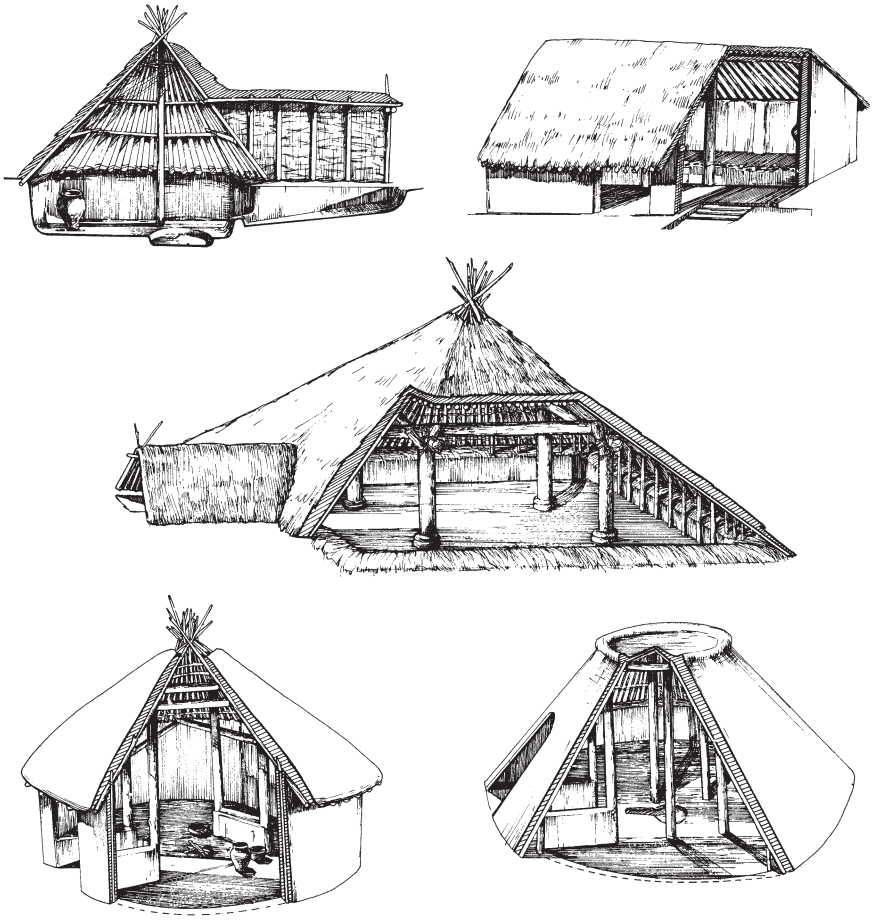

FIGURE 1.3 Banpo, Shaanxi. Neolithic houses, reconstructed. After *Xi'an Banpo* (1963).

furnished with the marvellous painted pottery that has given the name "Yangshao culture" to a major phase in Chinese prehistory lasting from about 5000 to 3000 B.C. In 1923 Andersson, noting the resemblance between the Yangshao pottery and that of the ancient Near East, went westward to Gansu in search of linking sites and there found, at Banshan, graves with rather similar pottery. Since then, however, Chinese archaeologists have found so many "painted pottery" sites in different parts of north China that possible connections with western Asia are hardly discussed.

The most important discoveries of the Yangshao culture occurred in the 1950s and 1970s, when archaeologists unearthed a group of Neolithic villages and a cemetery at Banpo (fig. 1.2), just east of Xi'an, and another at Jiangzhai, further to the east. The Banpo villages cover two and a half acres; four separate layers of houses have been found in a cultural deposit three meters thick, representing many centuries of occupation spanning the fifth millennium B.C. The earliest inhabitants lived in round wattle-and-daub huts with reed roofs and plaster floors and an oven in the center, the design perhaps copied from an earlier tent or yurt. Their descendants built rectangular, round, or square houses with a framework of wooden planking, sunk a meter below ground level and approached by a flight of steps (fig. 1.3). A further advance in the domestic architecture of late Stone Age China is marked by the three-room houses excavated at Dahecun near Zhengzhou, the plaster walls of which were actually baked to give them a hard and durable surface.

The Banpo potters made both a coarse gray or red pot-

FIGURE 1.4 Bowl. Pottery decorated with masks and nets in black slip. Diam. 44.5 cm. Excavated at Banpo, Shaanxi. Early Yangshao culture. Neolithic. National Museum of China, Beijing.

tery and a fine red ware burnished and then painted in black with geometric designs and occasionally with fishes and human faces (fig. 1.4). They seem not to have known the potter's wheel, but made their vessels by coiling long strips of clay. From clay they also made spindle whorls and even hairpins, but the finer objects such as needles, fishhooks, spoons, and arrowheads were made of bone. Part of the villages of Banpo and Dahecun have been roofed over and preserved as museums of Chinese Neolithic culture.

The painted pottery found first by Andersson and later unearthed at many other sites in Henan and Gansu has not been matched in quality or beauty by any Neolithic wares discovered since. It consists chiefly of funerary urns (fig. 1.5), wide and deep bowls, and tall vases, often with loop handles set low on the body. Though the walls are thin, the forms are robust, their generous contours beautifully enhanced by the decoration in black pigment that was clearly executed with a crude form of brush. Some of the designs are geometric, consisting of parallel bands or lozenges containing concentric squares, crosses, or diamonds. The lower half of the body is always left undecorated; it may have been set in the sandy ground to prevent it from overturning. Many vessels are adorned with sweeping wavelike bands that gather into a kind of whirlpool; others make

FIGURE 1.5 Funerary urn. Pottery decorated with red and black slip. Ht. 40 cm. Excavated at Banshan, Gansu. Yangshao culture. Neolithic. Ostasiatiska Museet, Stockholm.

use of the stylized figures of men, frogs, fishes, and birds. Shards found at Majiayao in Gansu (c. 2500 B.C.) reveal a sophisticated brush technique, in one case depicting plants each of whose leaves ends in a sharp point with a flick of the brush—the same technique that was to be used by the Song artist, three thousand years later, in painting bamboo. Naturalistic motifs, however, are rare, and the majority are decorated with geometric or stylized patterns whose significance is still a mystery.

Until recently it was thought that the Yangshao culture, with its painted pottery, was more or less directly superseded by a totally different culture centered on Shandong

and represented by the burnished black pottery of Longshan. But under the impact of a succession of new discoveries, this simple picture has given way to a more complex and interesting one. First, the beautiful painted pottery from Neolithic sites at Majiayao and Banshan (c. 2400 B.C.) is now known from carbon-14 analysis to be as much as two thousand years *later* in date than the painted pottery of the Yangshao village of Banpo, which has yielded a carbon date as early as 4865 B.C. plus or minus 110 years. This evidence suggests a movement of the nuclear Yangshao influence westward from the Central Plain.

Many years ago Japanese archaeologist working in what was then called Manchuria (Liaoning) discovered remains of the Hongshan culture, related to the Yangshao but having some marked characteristics of its own. Recent excavations at the Hongshan sites have revealed stone tombs—one with an outer "wall" of clay cylinders more like those that surrounded much later Japanese tombs of the Tumulus period than anything yet found in China—as well as ritual stone platforms, a round stone object that appears to be an altar and, most remarkable of all, robustly modelled "Venus" figures of clay (fig. 1.6), a painted clay head with eyes of jade (fig. 1.7), which may have been used in a fertility rite, and jade creatures that the Chinese archaeologist for want of a better name call "pig-dragons" (fig. 1.8). The Hongshan culture is now dated to around 3500 B.C.

Moving south, we come to the Neolithic civilization of Shandong and northern Jiangsu (about 4300 to 2400 B.C.), which, as K.C. Chang put it, "is variously christened the Qinglian'gang Culture or the Dawenkou Culture, depending on whether the initiative had come from the archaeologists in Jiangsu or from those in Shandong."[6] In ancient times this area was warmer than it is today, its lakes and marshes full of alligators. The early Dawenkou people produced elegant pottery decorated with swirling patterns in red and white, distantly related to the Yangshao, of which the bowl in fig. 1.9 is a typical example.

Continuing our southward journey, we come to the Majiabang culture of southern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang, related to the Dawenkou and dated to about 5000–3000 B.C. Its people were rice farmers who lived in timber houses near the water; they had domesticated the pig and the water buffalo and hunted alligators, elephants, and deer. Their tools and weapons were made of wood, bone, and

FIGURE 1.6 Naked women, clay. Ht. 7.8 and 5 cm. Excavated at Dongshanzui, Kezuo county, Liaoning. Hongshan culture. Neolithic. National Museum of China, Beijing.

FIGURE 1.7 Pottery mask with eyes of jade. Excavated at Dongshanzui, Kezuo county, Liaoning. Hongshan culture. Neolithic. National Museum of China, Beijing.

FIGURE 1.8 "Pig-dragon." jade. Ht. 11 cm. Excavated at Dongshanzui, Kezuo county, Liaoning. Hongshan culture. Neolithic. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Liaoyang.

FIGURE 1.9 Painted *dou*. Ht. 26 cm. Dawenkou culture. Excavated in Shandong. Neolithic.

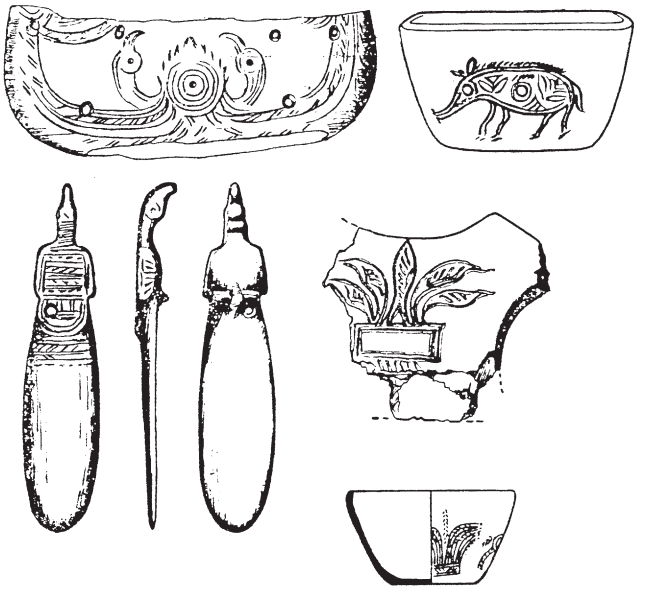

FIGURE 1.10 Decoration on ivory and black pottery. Zhejiang. Hemudu culture. Neolithic.

FIGURE 1.11 Stem cup. Black pottery. Ht. 19.2 cm. Excavated at Weifang, Shandong. Longshan culture. Neolithic.

stone. Although they had plenty to eat and their pottery was varied in shape and decoration—some of it incised with primitive signs or "characters"—their ceramic techniques were rudimentary, for they seem not to have had kilns, but baked their pots over an open fire.

South across Hangzhou Bay lies Hemudu in Yuyaoxian, which in more recent times has been an important center of the ceramics industry. Here were found the remains of a large village, at least as old as Banpo, built of timber on piles at the waterside, the posts and beams skilfully joined with mortise and tenon. These villagers too cultivated rice. They made a thick pottery burnished black, some of which they decorated with pretty flowers and plants incised in the clay before firing (fig. 1.10). Particularly remarkable was the find in 1977–78 of a red lacquered wooden bowl, the earliest example of the lacquer craft so far discovered in China.

The latest phase of the Neolithic in Eastern China has long been associated with Longshan, the site in Shandong discovered in 1928 by Dr Wu Jinding, and dated between about 2,600 B.C. and 1900 B.C. Most famous among the ceramic wares of the Longshan people is a delicate pottery made of dark clay burnished black and of incredible fragility, being often laminated in layers as fine as half a millimetre thick. The shapes are elegant, while the decoration, consisting chiefly of raised bands, grooves, and milled rings, gives it a somewhat metallic, machine-made look (fig. 1.11). It must have been very difficult to make, let alone use, for in the succeeding Bronze Age the tradition died out completely. Discoveries at Weifang in Shandong show that this "black pottery culture," as it was long called, also produced a white pottery of vigor and originality, illustrated here by the extraordinary *kui* pitcher in fig. 1.12, which seems to imitate a vessel made of hide bound with thongs. The Longshan people practiced scapulamancy, that is, divination by interpreting cracks formed by heat applied to animal shoulder blades—a custom long thought to have originated in the Shang dynasty.

A more southerly relative of the Longshan culture was first discovered at Liangzhu and later in other sites in the lower Yangzi Valley. Like the much earlier Hemudu, these people made their houses and tools of wood; they produced highly burnished black pottery and tools and ritual objects of jade, a stone that was to play an important part in Chinese life. Liangzhu burial customs were completely different from the modest Yangshao graves.

FIGURE 1.12 *Gui* pitcher. Grayish-white pottery. Ht. 29.7 cm. Excavated at Weifang, Shandong. Longshan culture. Neolithic.

At Huiguanshan, for example, was found a graveyard on a high terrace approached by flights of stairs and furnished with a drainage ditch, while the huge funerary platform at Mojiaoshan, ten meters high, had at its center a timber building possibly used in funerary rites.

JADE

By the Neolithic period, rough stone tools made by striking flakes off a larger pebble had given way to finely-polished stones of which the most precious was jade. Although early Chinese texts speak of jade from several places in China, for many centuries the chief source has been the riverbeds of the Khotan region in central Asia, and Western scholars came to the conclusion that jade did not exist in its true state in China proper. Recent discoveries, however, lend support to the ancient texts, for a jadeitic stone used today by Beijing jadesmiths has been traced to Nanyang in Henan and Lantian in Shaanxi. However, the true jade (*zhen yu*) prized throughout history by the Chinese is nephrite, a fibrous mineral rich in magnesium, as hard as steel and of peculiar toughness. In theory it is pure white, but even small amounts of impurities will produce a wide range of colors from green and blue to brown, red, gray, yellow, and even black. In the eighteenth century, Chinese jade carvers discovered in Burma a source of another min-

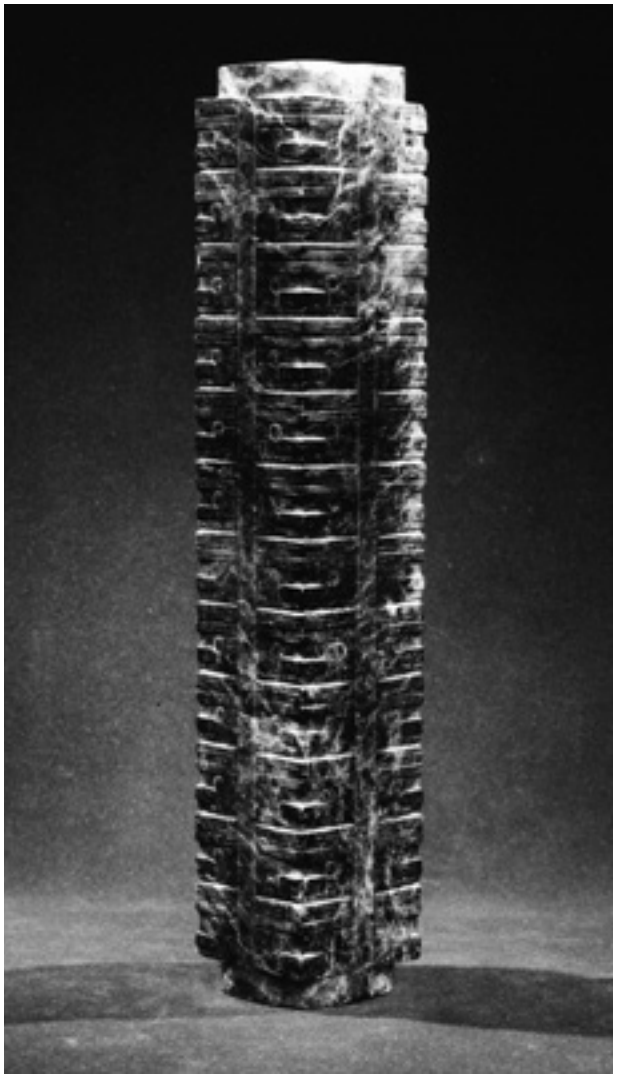

FIGURE 1.13 *Cong.* Squared ritual tube. Jade. Ht. 31.2 cm. Liangzhu culture. Neolithic. Courtesy of Michael Weisbrod, New York.

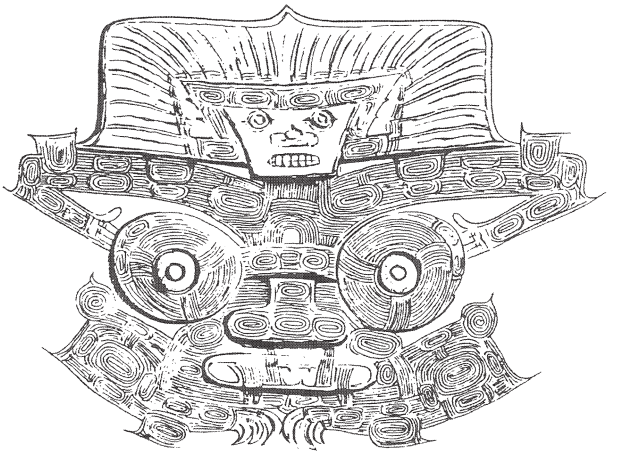

FIGURE 1.14 Drawing of mask decoration on a jade *cong.* Liangzhu culture. Neolithic. After *Wenwu*, no. 1 (1988): 1–31, fig. 20.

eral, jadeite, composed of interlocked granular crystals, whose brilliant apple and emerald greens have made it deservedly popular for jewelry both in China and abroad.

Because of its unique qualities, jade has since ancient times been regarded by the Chinese with special reverence. In his dictionary the *Shuowen jiezi,* the Han scholar Xu Shen (c. 100 A.D.) described it in words now well known to every student of Chinese art: "Jade is the fairest of stones. It is endowed with five virtues. Charity is typified by its luster, bright yet warm; rectitude by its translucency, revealing the color and markings within; wisdom by the purity and penetrating quality of its note when the stone is struck; courage, in that it may be broken, but cannot be bent; equity, in that it has sharp angles, which yet injure none."[7] Although this definition applies essentially to true jade, the word *yu* may include not only nephrite and jadeite but other fine stones such as serpentine, tremolite, hornblende, and even marble.

The hardness and toughness of jade make it difficult to carve. To work it one must use an abrasive. Possibly the Neolithic craftsmen used a substance harder than modern carborundum. It has even been suggested that the abrasive was diamond dust, although no diamonds are found in China proper today. Hansford demonstrated that it is possible, given time, to drill a hole in a slab of jade using only a bamboo bow drill and builder's sand mixed with water.

Jade weapons such as axes, ornaments (bracelets and rings) and ritual objects have been found in graves chiefly in east and northeast China, among the earliest being the so-called "pig-dragon" rings of the Hongshan Culture that I mentioned earlier. Rich finds from graves of the later Liangzhu Culture in the Lake Tai region include many jade *bi*, a disc with a hole in the centre, and *cong* tubes (see fig. 1.13), circular inside and squared on the outside, one of which is 40 centimetres long—a marvel of the jade-worker's craft, dated between 2700 and 2200 B.C. Some of these *cong* are decorated with zoomorphic masks that seem to anticipate the *taotie* motifs cast on the ritual vessels of the succeeding early Bronze Age (see fig. 1.14). Very similar jade *bi* and *cong* have also been found in sites in northern Guangdong such as Shixia, suggesting that the "Liangzhu culture" was more widely spread than was formerly thought. By the late first millennium B.C. these *bi* and *cong* had become associated with Heaven and Earth, and they have continued to bear this symbolic meaning up till modern times. But what they, and the masks, meant to the Liangzhu people, and what role they played in their burial rites, is not known.

FIGURE FIGURE 1.15 Incised motif on the side of a pottery vessel. Dawenkou culture. Neolithic. Ju County Museum, Shandong.

WRITING

A much-debated question is when the Chinese first developed the system of writing that was to become, in the art of calligraphy, the highest expression of Chinese culture. The answer depends on what we mean by "writing". Recognisable forms of Chinese characters have not, as yet, been found in Chinese Neolithic sites, but marks painted with a brush on pottery from Yangshao and other sites in central China are thought to be numerals, or potters' or owners' marks; while drawings such as that incised on the gray Dawenkou pottery (fig. 1.15) seem to show a sun-disc, a crescent moon, and a mountain. Such devices are the precursors of the pictographs and ideographs of the early Bronze Age. But of the writing of symbols that are connected in some sort of grammatical structure, however primitive, there is as yet no sign.

Even the simplified picture I have given may suggest something of the richness and variety of late Stone Age culture in China, which, in its later phases, merges imperceptibly into the Bronze Age. It is now known that the Chinese Neolithic people experimented with simple metal technology—witness the cast copper knife 10 cm long found at Majiayao (c. 3000 B.C.), copper awls from Sanlihe and part of a copper vessel from Wangchenggang, southern Henan (both of the Longshan culture of about 2500 B.C.), and copper tools and knives from Qijiaping, Gansu (datable to about 2000 B.C.). Scattered and few though these finds are, they show that the transition to a fully developed bronze culture was more gradual than was formerly thought, and that is was probably influenced, in a way not yet fully understood, by the ealier metal technology of western Asia.