



Beyond the Yellow River: How China Became China

The cradle of Chinese civilization was long considered to be the region around the middle Yellow River. But ancient and complex cultures from far-flung corners of the modern nation now tell a different story about the origin of Chinese culture

LIANGZHU, CHINA—Three years ago, a farmer who works the lush fields along the meandering Tiaoxi river, 200 kilometers southwest of Shanghai, decided to build a new house. This area around the town of Liangzhu has long been known as a center of Neolithic settlements, so Liu Bin of Zhejiang Province's archaeological institute assembled a team to conduct routine salvage work. But rather than the postholes or earthen floors typically found at such settlements, the team instead encountered a carefully prepared foundation of stone blocks.

The blocks were part of a wall, now dated to 4300 years ago—and it was no simple enclosure. Further excavation revealed a massive perimeter of earth built on stone, with an average width of 50 meters, running in a rough circle for 7 kilometers and surrounded by a wide moat. The farmer lost his house site, but archaeologists gained a new appreciation for the complexity of this ancient culture. The enormous wall enclosed previously discovered earthen platforms, which extend over 30 hectares and are raised 10 meters above the low-lying plain. Although modest in comparison with the pyramids and ziggurats of this era in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the structures required an enormous amount of labor and skill. “To construct these large platforms and walls with simple tools, you would need 10,000 people over 2 years,” Liu estimates.

Even more astonishing than the engineering are the site's location and age. Archaeologists long thought that Chinese civilization was born half a millennium later and 800 kilometers to the north-

west along the central plains of the Yellow River. Wikipedia summarizes the classic view: “Chinese civilization originated in various city-states along the Yellow River in the Neolithic era.” Yet centuries earlier, Liangzhu was at the center of a sophisticated culture that included hundreds of settlements discovered in recent decades, stretching across the flat and fertile expanses as far as Shanghai. With finely worked jade ornaments, elaborate tombs, high platforms, and objects carved in an artistic and distinctive style, the Liangzhu culture appears separate from that of the Yellow River. In fact, goods and styles from this region, such as the fine jades, have been found as far west as the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, 3000 kilometers upstream, and were imitated across China for thousands of years.

Dramatic discoveries like those at Liangzhu have been repeated across China in the past 2 decades, challenging long-held views. From Manchuria in the north, to the Chengdu plain to the west, and to the coastal cities of the south (see map, p. 933), excavations are revealing a host of complex and distinct ancient cultures, each with its own artifacts and traditions. Liangzhu's striking carved faces are one example; other cultures developed enormous bronze statues, large stone ceremonial complexes, and a golden, whirling sun motif.

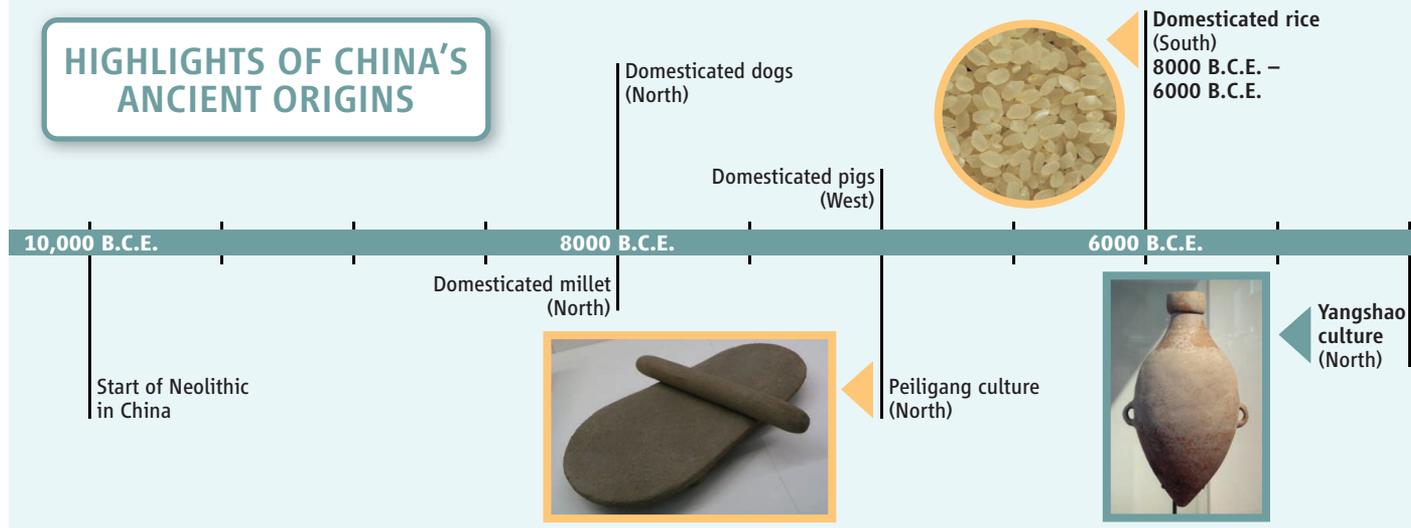
Yellow River sites like Erlitou remain key to understanding the first true urban centers in China. But other, far-flung cultures also contain the seeds of Chinese traditions. “Before these astonishing

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Podcast interview
with author
Andrew Lawler.

HIGHLIGHTS OF CHINA'S ANCIENT ORIGINS



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