1 Introduction: Early China and its natural and cultural demarcations

"Early China" refers to a long period from the beginning of human history in East Asia to the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty in AD 220, a date that is often, though imprecisely, used to mark China's entry into the Buddhist Era. As the initial period that gave the Chinese civilization much of its foundation, Early China has always served as the gateway to China, by offering a series of essential lessons in government, social practice, art, religion, and philosophical thought, necessary for students of all periods of Chinese history. But in a more general sense, if history is the best way to teach about a culture in which people live, it is perfectly natural that knowledge of Early China can provide what is often the most fundamental explanation of aspects of the social life in modern China and of its underlying values. As a field of research, Early China Studies is one of the areas that have most dramatically benefited from the advancement in modern academia, particularly in the discipline of archaeology which has been renewing daily our understanding of China's distant past. It is also a field that has seen occasional interplay between politics and scholarship, and that has been much shaped by different national or international traditions.

To begin our journey into this distant past, below I will first introduce the natural and temporal settings of Early China as necessary for understanding the social and cultural developments soon to be discussed in this book. For the same purpose, the chapter will then turn to a brief discussion of the process by which Early China Studies has emerged as a modern academic field, and the state of the field will alert the reader to the need not only to see the past, but also to understand the different ways in which it was seen and interpreted.

A Geographical China: Natural Environment

Geographers of China often tend to analyze China's topography in four massive steps: the Qinghai–Tibetan Plateau with an average elevation of 4,000 m above sea level is known as the "Roof of the World." The high

plateau combines the territories of the modern Qinghai Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region, taking up about a quarter of the total area of the People's Republic of China (see map of China, p. xxii). The second step extends north and east from the edges of the Qinghai–Tibetan Plateau and it consists of multiple ranges of mountains and high plateaus such as the Loess Plateau and Inner Mongolia, rising to an average height of 1,000–2,000 m above sea level. The third step is formed by floodplains such as the North China Plain, the Manchurian Plain in northeastern China, and the Yangzi Delta in the south, interspersed by hilly grounds generally ranging between 500 and 1,000 m in elevation. The fourth step is the continent itself, extending into the seas beyond the east and south coasts of China.

Even when we are talking only about the areas that can be considered as part of Early China, back in a time when "China" as a nation was still in her infancy, we find that more cultural developments had taken place in the valleys and strips of plains that are surrounded by the mountains and plateaus on the second step mentioned above, or on the transitional belts along the major mountain ranges, but not at the centers of the floodplains located in the east.[1] The reason for this development was simply ecological, given the fact that in the second millennium BC most of the eastern China plains were still covered by marshes and lakes,[2] and the coastline in some sections was at least 150 km inland from today's seashores. The pre-Qin texts record the names of more than forty marshes or lakes on the North China Plain, most of which had dried out after the third century AD. In fact, for millennia the North China Plain was continuously caught in the process of sedimentation by the Yellow River which carried on its way east huge quantities of earth from the topographical second step. The natural environment, particularly landforms and climatic change doubtless had a very major impact on the early development of human society and culture. On the other hand, human subsistence activities could also transform the surface of the earth and cause modifications to the environment in very significant ways, as most dramatically shown by the expansion of the industrial societies in the modern era.

Over the past thirty years, Chinese paleoclimatologists have made significant progress through fieldwork in understanding long-term climate

[1] We find analogies of this development in other world regions. For instance, in Mesopotamia early sedentary cultures began in north Iraq and then moved southeastwards to occupy the lower reaches of Tigris and Euphrates close to the Persian Gulf only during the Samara Culture period, dating to *c.* 5500–4800 BC.

[2] Even in the historical period, it was recorded that the Yellow River had changed its course some twenty-six times.

changes in China across multiple ecological zones (Fig. 1.1).[3] By correlating data from different locations, the researchers were able to isolate a number of periods of important change in the temperature fluctuations over some 11,000 years. As the world was moving out from the last Glacial Age at the end of the Pleistocene Epoch in about 11,700 BP,[4] the temperature in North China climbed up to a level of 3–4 °C higher than the average temperature of the present years, and the precipitation was 40% (150 mm per annum) more than today's. This meant very abundant rainfall and a large number of lakes and marshes in most areas of North China up to perhaps the edges of the Qinghai–Tibetan Plateau, and China as a whole enjoyed very warm and humid weather and thick vegetation prior to the beginning of the agricultural way of life. This high temperature (the long lower curves in Fig. 1.1) continued from 8000 BP to 5000 BP with wide fluctuations in the later millennia until the arrival of the third millennium BP when the temperature suddenly dropped down to below the present-day level.[5] In historical chronology this drop corresponded with the end of the Shang Dynasty (1554–1046 BC) and the early Western Zhou (1045–771 BC) period. But even during most of the Shang Dynasty, the temperature in North China was still about 2 °C higher than today's. After the sudden drop around the beginning of the third millennium BP, temperature rose again for a period of time, but in the most recent 1,500 years, as we move out from Early China, the temperature in North China was mostly considerably colder than it is today.

South China was relatively less affected by the climate changes discussed above. But the south is more mountainous than the north, being divided by the major mountain ranges into largely three independent zones along the Yangzi River: the Sichuan Basin, the middle Yangzi lakes and marshes, and the lower Yangzi Delta. The recent drop in temperature close to the middle of the first millennium AD had also caused some major lakes in South China to shrink and dry up. For instance, in pre-Qin times, a large stretch of the middle Yangzi plain of some 120 km from present-day Wuhan westwards was under the water of

[3] The basic method is to drill hundreds of soil samples from riverbeds and lake floors. By analyzing the pollen samples and the various types of ancient plants represented by them, it is possible to reconstruct the outline of long-term temperature fluctuations of a region.

[4] BP (before present) is used in geology for long spans of time, whereas BC (before Christ) is used by historians and archaeologists to represent time in more recent millennia. The Pleistocene Epoch is the geological age in the Earth's history that began in 2,588,000 BP and ended in 11,700 BP, to be followed by the Holocene Epoch (the recent epoch).

[5] See Shi Yafeng and Kong Zhaozheng, *et al.*, "Mid-Holocene Climates and Environments in China," *Global and Planetary Change* 7 (1993), 222.

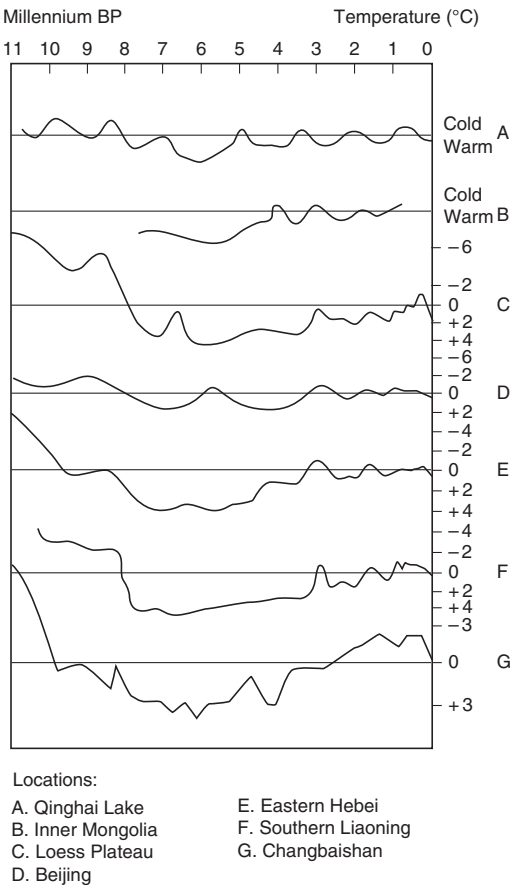

Fig. 1.1 Temperature fluctuation in China, 11,000 BP to present.

the famous Yunmeng Marsh, known also by its nickname of the "Great Marsh" in historical records. But after the third century AD, most of this marsh had gradually dried up and had long been transformed into agrarian fields surrounding urban centers.

Seafaring along the eastern China coast was certainly possible in Early China as indicated by early cultural contacts widely stretching across the coastal regions from the north to the south. This is also evidenced by the cultural connection in archaeology between the southeast Mainland and the island of Taiwan inhabited by the various groups of the Austronesian-language-speaking people who had further connections

to the Pacific Islanders.[6] In the southwest, through the rainforests of present-day Yunnan, cultural contacts with the South Asian subcontinent were established in the late Bronze Age and were expanded under the Qin and Han Empires. In the northwest, there were many oases leading the way west out of China. Although the exchange of material goods and ideas over these oases or broadly across the northern steppe might have begun by the early Bronze Age if not earlier, China's geographic isolation from the inner Asian continent was not completely broken until the first century BC. Even after the discovery of the road into Central Asia in the second century BC by the early Chinese explorers, the trip along the emerging "Silk Road" was known to have been very difficult.

Early China and the Grand Historical Trend

Why "Early China"? Are there compelling reasons for treating Early China as a large and separate phase in Chinese history? As mentioned above the Early China period ends at the fall of the Eastern Han Dynasty in AD 220.[7] There are three general reasons to treat this long period as an integrated field of research and teaching in Chinese history. First, in this early phase civilization, though modified inevitably by interregional influences, evolved on essentially indigenous East Asian ideas, and the development of social and political institutions can be seen as largely an internal process of this subcontinent. However, the expansion of the Han Empire into Central Asia in the first century BC brought China into sustained contact with other major world civilizations, most importantly Middle Eastern and Indian, and the subsequent introduction of Buddhism to China gave Chinese civilization a totally different dimension, a drastic beginning of a new era. In world history, this shift paralleled the transition from the Classical to the Christian West. Second, there is a common source base offered by archaeology. Even for the later part of the period

[6] "Austronesian" is a language family widely distributed throughout the Pacific and the Southeast Asian islands and peninsulas as far west as Madagascar. On the linguistic divisions of Early China, see E. G. Pulleyblank, "The Chinese and Their Neighbors in Prehistorical and Early Historical Times," in David N. Keightley (ed.), *The Origins of Chinese Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 411–466.

[7] A clear temporal demarcation of "Early China" is found in the editorial remarks of the inaugural issue of the journal of *Early China*, by David N. Keightley, who explained the goal of the journal as: "*Early China* is a newsletter devoted to the dissemination of information and the testing of new ideas in the fields of pre-historic, Shang, Chou [Zhou], and Han China."

when substantial information has become available from the received texts, documents (particularly legal statutes unearthed from underground) still constitute the most critical basis for our inquiry. Third, particularly because of the nature of sources, many being created before the unification of the Chinese writing system around 221 BC, the study of Early China is deeply indebted to the methodological support of paleography which deals with various forms of archaic scripts and inscriptions.

Although everything that dates before the end of the Eastern Han falls reasonably within the confines of Early China, by convention we choose to begin with the emergence of early farming communities in China in about the seventh millennium BC,[8] particularly in the lands reached by the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers. Over the next two millennia in the greater part of eastern China these original farming societies had developed into large-scale cultural complexes with regional characteristics. During the late fourth millennium BC, early complex societies began to emerge in a number of regions which were each organized into a settlement hierarchy, headed by a large political center that was often surrounded by rammed earth walls.[9] This stage was followed, first in limited areas in North and South China, by intense social development into early states, or state-level societies. In North China, these early states are best known from archaeology and history to have been ruled by the dynastic houses such as that of Shang (1554–1046 BC) and of Western Zhou (1045–771 BC). Therefore, they can be called the early "royal states." The collapse of the Western Zhou state in 771 BC and the lack of a true central authority thereafter opened ways to fierce inter-state warfare that continued over the next five hundred years until the Qin unification of China in 221 BC, thus giving China her first empire. Finally, after the consolidation of the imperial bureaucratic system under the Western Han Empire (206 BC – AD 8), the period ended with the collapse of the Eastern Han Empire (AD 25–220).

Therefore, in Early China we observe the rise and fall of social organizations at different levels and scales, and it is the focus of this book to trace and explain the development of society from the early farming villages to states and then to empires. If we take a proportional view of the whole of Chinese history, Early China would have been the longest period and the

[8] The development of human society and particularly the human body in the preceding Paleolithic period was shaped more by natural than cultural processes, to be dealt most effectively in the domain of science based on global contexts. Therefore, it is not tied to the cultural–geographical mass that we call "Early China."

[9] In its anthropological definition, the term "complex society" denotes a society that had at least two and often more strata, and a centrally directed decision-making process, centering on the power of the chief.

one that saw the most dramatic social changes and political developments. This was also a long process during which cultural traits originally developed in regional contexts were gradually modified and merged to characterize what can be called the distinctive Chinese civilization.

Rediscovering China's Antiquity

Although the concept of "Early China" was formed relatively recently, the study of the period has had a much longer history in both China and the West. It is commonly held that three major discoveries at the turn of the twentieth century opened new windows to China's past and contributed directly to the rise of modern historiography in China: first, the discovery in 1899 of inscriptions carved on oracle bones and shells of the Shang Dynasty in Anyang in northern Henan, second, the discovery in 1900 of a secret inventory of medieval manuscripts totaling some 50,000 items in a Buddhist cave in Dunhuang on the edge of the desert in western Gansu Province, and third, the disposal in 1909 and the subsequent reclamation of the Ming and Qing Dynasty archival documents from the imperial palace in Beijing. These are very important cultural events that had multiple implications for modern Chinese history and for the world beyond it.

Although the last two discoveries fall outside of the confines of Early China, the British explorer Aurel Stein, on his way to Dunhuang, excavated some 700 bamboo strips with writing on them from a desert fortress (which has recently been re-excavated), a discovery that was to lead to a long series of findings of administrative documents from the Western Han Empire in and out of the region. The strips from Dunhuang were subsequently studied and published, since Stein was unable to study them himself, by Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918) (Fig. 1.2a), a French scholar in Beijing and the reputed founding father of Western sinology. Chavannes by this time had just published his translation of the most important historical text from ancient China, the *Grand Scribe's Records* (Shiji), written by Sima Qian in the first century BC. When Chavannes's book on the Dunhuang strips was brought to China, it was reproduced and further annotated by prominent Chinese scholars in new editions.

The Dunhuang manuscripts, combined with the historical texts that Chavannes knew well, provided an important context in which a generation of early French sinologists was trained with a clear focus on philology and historical linguistics, an interest that was certainly not restricted to the Han Chinese language, given the fact that nearly ten languages are represented in the Dunhuang materials. But gradually the French interest

(a) (b)

Fig. 1.2 Pioneers of early sinology: (a) Édouard Chavannes, (b) Wang Guowei.

was expanded to various fields of history and religious studies, and in the hands of the Swedish sinologist Bernhard Karlgren the research scope of early sinology was further expanded to include the study of material objects, particularly the bronze vessels and their inscriptions.[10]

In China itself, the discovery of oracle bones, which were by and large handled by the Chinese dealers, had led to their collection and subsequent study and publication by scholars who also worked on Shang and Western Zhou Dynasty bronze inscriptions recorded in the native antiquarian tradition since the Song Dynasty (AD 960–1279). In particular the scholar Wang Guowei (1877–1927) (Fig. 1.2b), Professor at Tsinghua University after years of exile in Japan after the fall of the Qing Dynasty to which he owed his loyalty, produced a long series of essays that address religious and cultural institutions of the early royal states Shang and Western Zhou. Wang's works set the fundamental tone of research for

[10] For the early history of Western sinology, consult: D. Honey, *Incense at the Altar: Pioneering Sinologists and the Development of Classical Chinese Philology* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2001), pp. 1–40; H. Franke, "In Search of China: Some General Remarks on the History of European Sinology," in *Europe Studies China: Papers from an International Conference on the History of European Sinology* (London: Han-Shan Tang Books, 1992), pp. 11–23.

Fig. 1.3 Excavators at Anyang wearing bronze helmets freshly excavated from the Shang royal tomb no. 1004; photograph taken in 1935 during the twelfth excavation. In the middle, playing the role of a Shang King, is Shi Zhangru, senior archaeologist in the Academia Sinica; to his left (behind) is Xia Nai who went on to serve as the Director of the Institute of Archaeology in Beijing from 1962 to 1982. Shi holds a long bronze knife on his arm; the man on the right, Wang Xiang, has a cat sleeping on his arm.

modern historical studies of Early China which was based largely on excavated paleographical materials. The identification of the oracle-bone inscriptions as the divination records of the late Shang royal court led to the excavation of the Shang capital in Anyang in northern Henan in 1928, a notable beginning of Chinese archaeology. Until Japan's full-scale invasion of North China began in July 1937, the Academia Sinica in Nanjing planned and executed fifteen large-scale excavations in Anyang, uncovering both the royal palace zone and the cemetery of Shang kings, yielding huge quantities of materials including of course more oracle bones (Fig. 1.3). As the excavation there was resumed after the war and has continued to the present day, Anyang archaeology has played a central role in our understanding of the Shang Dynasty, and of early Chinese civilization in general.

However, modern Chinese historiography had many different roots, and it was never a homogeneous tradition. While Wang was pursuing a research method that aimed to re-establish China's antiquity on the basis of corroboration of excavated data with the transmitted historical records, a new trend of essentially textual scholarship argued for the total rejection of the traditional view of history. The deepening frustration with China's political reality since the late nineteenth century had come to a head in the May Fourth Movement in 1919. The reflection of this political–cultural current in historical studies was the so-called "Doubting Antiquity" movement led by Gu Jiegang (1893–1980), a young graduate from Beijing University who began in 1921 to formulate his own theory of Chinese history. To Gu, the received textual tradition about China's antiquity was the piling up of layered fabrications produced in the later periods, because quite obviously texts dated later, particularly from the Han Dynasty, often have more to say than early texts about their contemporary time. Although these sources can be used to study the intellectual mentality of the Warring States to Han times, they are ultimately invalid as sources for early history.[11] In the words of Gu's spiritual mentor Hu Shih, China's history has to be cut short by at least two thousand years, to start only with the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BC).

The revolutionary role of Gu and his colleagues in undermining the authority of the received tradition should not be underestimated – by doing so they had taken traditional Chinese historiography along the very first step towards modernization. However, as serious scholarship the "Doubting Antiquity" movement was weakened by a number of logical problems. Not only did Gu and his followers conduct research almost entirely neglecting the already promising solid progress that had been made by scholars like Wang Guowei, in most cases the persuasiveness of their argument for the late fabrication of a certain tradition depended entirely on the *non-existence* of relevant records in the earlier period, which was itself an argument that cannot be proven. When such proof does turn up through archaeology as in many cases where texts were judged later forgeries by Gu and his followers, they are bound to be on the losing side.[12] But in a more general sense, the "Doubting Antiquity"

[11] Gu publicized the theory in his autobiography in the first issue of *Gushibian* (Debating Ancient History) in 1927. Seven issues of the journal had been published before 1941, standing as the central literature of the "Doubting Antiquity" movement. For an English literature on Gu Jiegang, see L. A. Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang and China's New History: Nationalism and the Quest for Alternative Tradations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

[12] The principle by which Gu and his followers operated is also undermined by another logic – the earlier we move up in time, the fewer sources have survived to the modern days.