CHAPTER 1

The Origins of Chinese Civilization:

Neolithic Period to the Western Zhou Dynasty (to 771 BC)

Most peoples have myths about their origins, and the Chinese are no exception. Through most of the imperial period, literate Chinese had a 'great man' theory of how their civilization developed. Unlike other peoples who pointed to gods as their creators or progenitors, the Chinese attributed to a series of extraordinarily brilliant human beings the inventions that step by step transformed the Chinese from a primitive people to a highly civilized one. Fu Xi, the Ox-tamer, domesticated animals and invented the family. Shen Nong, the Divine Farmer, invented the plough and hoe. Huang Di, the Yellow Lord, invented the bow and arrow, boats, carts, ceramics, writing, and silk. He also fought a great battle against alien tribes, thus securing the Yellow River plain for his people. In China's earliest history, he was labelled the first of the five great pre-dynastic rulers, the last two of whom were Yao and Shun. Yao was credited with devising the calendar and rituals. Rather than hand over power to his own less worthy son, he selected Shun as his successor, a poor peasant whose filial piety had been demonstrated by his devoted service to his blind father and evil stepmother. Shun not only became the next ruler but also married two of Yao's daughters. Despite their virtue, even Yao and Shun were unable to prevent floods, so Shun appointed an official, Yu, to tackle this problem. For over a decade Yu travelled through the land, dredging the channels that became the rivers of north China. So zealous was he that he passed his own home several times without pausing to greet his wife and children. Shun named Yu to succeed him. Yu divided the realm into nine regions, and had bronze vessels cast to represent each one. When Yu died, the people ignored the successor he had chosen and turned to Yu's son to lead them, establishing the precedent of hereditary, dynastic rule. Yu and his son thus were the first two kings of the Xia dynasty, a dynasty which lasted through fourteen rulers. It was overthrown when King Jie, a tyrant, was deposed by a subordinate who founded his own dynasty, the Shang. This dynasty in turn lasted through thirty rulers until a self-indulgent and obstinate king lost the support of his nobles and people, making it easy for the armies of Zhou to come from the west to overthrow the Shang. The Zhou became the last of the three ancient dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou).

These legends reveal how educated Chinese from the time of Confucius (c.500 BC) onwards constructed 'China'. To them China was defined by technology and statecraft – agriculture, writing, flood control, monarchy combining virtue and

Chinese civilization has throughout history had a strong association with agriculture. The earliest stages of Chinese culture developed in river valleys in which crops could be cultivated even with primitive techniques. Over time these early settlements spread broadly within the more temperate regions of eastern Eurasia.

hereditary succession, and so on. They recorded the story of China as a single-stranded narrative or genealogy, centred on a succession of rulers; China's past was thus much like the past of a family that could be traced back through a single line of ancestors one before the other.

Modern scholars, drawing on knowledge of geology, paleoanthropology, and archaeology, not surprisingly construct very different stories of the origins of Chinese civilization. Their accounts do not slight agriculture, writing, bronze technology, and state formation, but usually differ from the traditional story in giving more weight to the role of ritual and religion in shaping the significant characteristics of Chinese culture. Equally important, they do not see Chinese history as a single-stranded story, centred on a royal line, but a many-stranded one in which a great many distinguishable cultures interacted, some of which would undoubtedly have been labelled alien by the Shang or Zhou rulers. By influencing each others' development, these cultures all participated in the evolution of Chinese civilization.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE CHINESE SUBCONTINENT

Chinese civilization developed in a particular geographical setting, the more temperate zones of eastern Eurasia, an area large and diverse enough to open many possibilities to early occupants but not without imposing some constraints as well. China proper extends over 1,000 miles north to south and east to west; the distance from Beijing in the north to Guangzhou in the south is about that from Bangor to Miami, or Oslo to Barcelona; the distance from Chengdu in the west to Shanghai in the east is almost as great as that from Paris to Warsaw or Des Moines to New York. This huge expanse of land is interlaced with mountain ranges, which separate the more habitable river valleys from each other. It was in these river valleys that the first human settlements were established.

Two great river systems flow east through China proper, the Yellow River in the north and the Yangzi River in the centre. The Yellow River rises in the far western highlands, makes sharp turns through the northern deserts, then flows swiftly from north to south through a hilly area of loess – fine, wind-driven yellow earth that is fertile and easy to work even with primitive tools. At the southern end of the loess highlands, the Yellow River turns abruptly eastward and spreads out, yellow with silt, between banks a mile or more apart. Finally it traverses the whole of the alluvial plain and empties into the sea. The other great river, the Yangzi, takes in the water of many tributaries and carries a much greater volume of water. It rises in Tibetan highlands, crosses the mountains encircling the Sichuan basin, moves through magnificent gorges with sheer cliffs a thousand or more feet in height, then flows eastward a thousand miles to the sea, each day delivering an average of half a cubic mile of water into the Pacific Ocean.

The regions drained by these two rivers differ in soil, topography, temperature, and rainfall. The north is colder, flatter, and more arid; its growing season is

shorter and its soil more alkaline, making it best suited to crops like wheat and millet. North of the Yellow River, rainfall is frequently too light for unirrigated agriculture; in many areas it averages less than 20 inches a year. Flood and drought recur with much greater frequency than in the south. The Yellow River is prone to flooding because as it flows through the loess regions of the northwest, it collects silt which is gradually dropped as the river makes its way east and the current slows. Because the silt builds up the height of the river bed, over the centuries, farmers and government forces constructed dykes to keep the river in its course, a practice that made floods, when they occurred, that much more destructive, inundating huge regions.

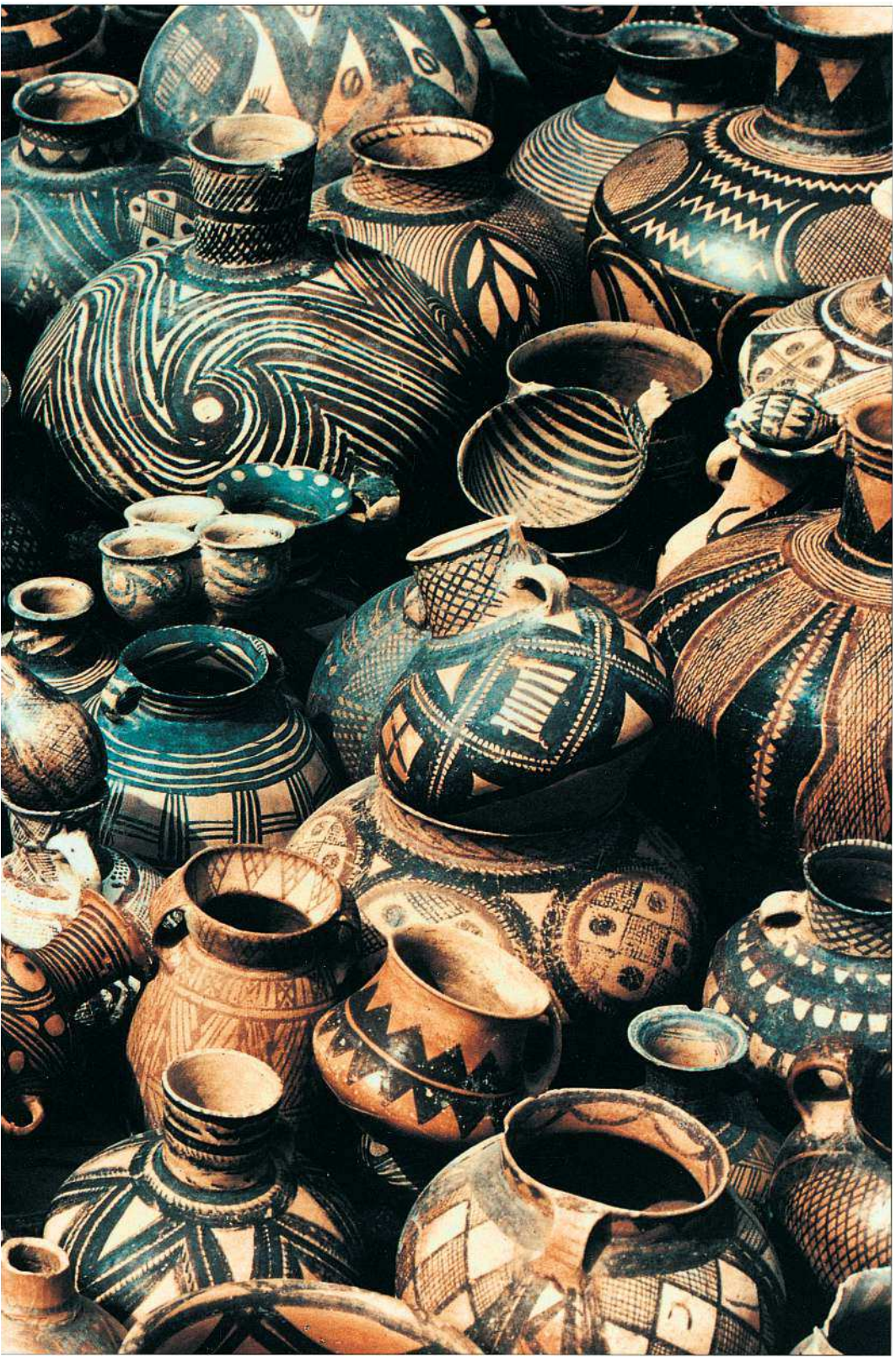
The region drained by the Yangzi River is warmer and wetter than the north. Most of it stays green all year and receives more than 60 inches of rainfall annually, making it well suited to rice cultivation and to double-cropping. The Yangzi and many of the numerous small rivers crisscrossing the south are navigable, making the south a land suited to boat travel. In the north, by contrast, until modern times people travelled by land, on foot, on the backs of horses or donkeys, or in carts drawn by animals.

Large stretches of land ill-suited to crop agriculture separated the Chinese subcontinent from Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, the nearest sites of other early civilizations. Beyond China proper to the north is the steppe or grasslands of Inner Asia, a region even colder and more arid than north China, where animal husbandry is a more productive use of land than planting crops. Inner Asia was never populated primarily by Chinese; instead it was the home of nomadic pastoralists, such as the Xiongnu and Mongols, China's traditional enemies. These steppes extend across Eurasia to the Ukraine, but China proper is cut off from these steppe lands on the northwest by vast deserts where nothing grows except in rare oases. South of these deserts and directly west of south and central China is Tibet, the 'roof of the world', whose high mountains were as unsuited to Chinese farming life as the deserts and grasslands to the north. The mountainous regions southeast of Tibet (modern Yunnan and Guizhou provinces) were not quite so impassable, but by the time there was much reason to cross through them into south and southeast Asia, travelling by sea had become the more practical option.

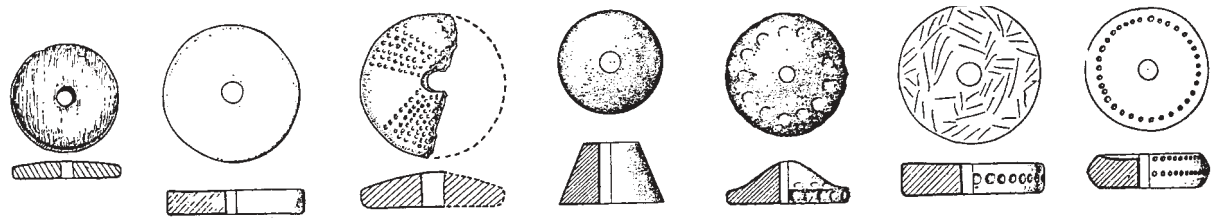
To see the Chinese subcontinent as early Chinese saw it, we must erase from our minds all the maps we have seen showing it to occupy only a small fraction of the landmass of Eurasia, and far to one side at that. The Chinese subcontinent is so vast that by the first millennium BC the Chinese thought of it as All-Under-Heaven (*tianxia*), the entire earthly stage on which human beings acted out the drama of civilization. Surrounding it were vast oceans, wild deserts, steep mountains – regions much less central to the project of civilization. How far they extended, no one knew for sure. But the location of the centre of civilization was not in doubt.

The Yellow River, shown here, acquired its name because the silt it carries gives it a muddy look. The earth of the north China plain is predominantly wind-borne and river-borne loess soil, which led early Chinese also to think of the earth as yellow.

The well-watered hills and valleys of south China offer a much lusher landscape than the colder, drier north.



The geometric designs on the pots of the Yangshao culture (c. 3200–2500 BC) often evolved from images of birds, fish, frogs, and other animals that may originally have had totemic significance. The assemblage of painted pottery depicted here captures the variety of the geometric designs that resulted, but does not show how the pots were used, since no grave had so many pots placed together.



The first sign of textile production is the appearance of spindle whorls like these ones found at Hemudu, near Shanghai, which date from about 5000 BC. These wooden and ceramic whorls were used to put a twist in hemp yarn, making it strong enough to use in weaving.

PREHISTORY

Early human beings, called *Homo erectus,* appeared on the Chinese subcontinent over a million years ago, having gradually spread from Africa and west Asia during the Pleistocene geological era (the Ice Age). Even though no major glaciers extended into China, the average temperature was colder than in subsequent ages, and mammoth, elk, and moose roamed north China. Peking Man, discovered in the 1920s, is one of the best-documented examples of *Homo erectus*. He could stand erect, hunt, make fire, and use chipped stones as tools.

Modern human beings (*Homo sapiens*) appeared in East Asia around 100,000 years ago, probably also spreading from somewhere in Africa. During the long paleolithic period (Old Stone Age, c.100,000 to 10,000 BC) of predatory hunters and gatherers that followed, humans began to speak. Language expanded symbolic capabilities, allowing the development of notions of gods and kinship, for instance. Over the course of these thousands of years, we can reasonably assume that many bands of people migrated across the Chinese subcontinent, fighting with each other when threatened, splitting up or merging when survival dictated. Some early bands moved on to the Pacific islands or the Americas. In what sense

This finely made stone grinder, about 20 by 8 inches, was unearthed at the site of a neolithic village in Cishan, Hebei province, and dates from no later than 5000 BC. Stone tools were used in food processing even before crops were cultivated; this one was probably used to crush the stalks of uncultivated vegetables to make them more digestible.

any of those that spent time in the Chinese subcontinent should be considered ancestral to the historic Chinese is largely a matter of speculation.

Distinctly Chinese history, therefore, begins much later, after the end of the last ice age in about 10,000 BC. By 5000 BC neolithic cultures with agriculture, pottery, villages, and textiles had emerged in many of the river valleys of today's China. Agriculture was undoubtedly the key change, facilitated by climatic change towards warmer and wetter weather (warmer and wetter even than today). Cultivating crops allows denser and more permanent settlements. Pottery and textiles make life much more comfortable: pottery jars are excellent for transporting water and storing grain; cloth made into clothing and bedding provides protection against cold. Tending crops, weaving textiles, and fashioning pots require different sorts of technical and social skills than hunting, so warriors probably had to share leadership with skilled and experienced elders. At the same time permanent settlements brought new forms of social organization; a territorial unit, the village, supplemented kinship-based forms of organization.

Ignoring later historical legends and examining only material remains, these neolithic cultures can be divided by latitude into the southern rice zone and the northern millet zone. In the Yangzi valley rice was cultivated as early as 5000 BC, supplemented with fish and aquatic plants such as lotus, water chestnut, and caltrop. At Hemudu, a site south of Shanghai, neolithic villagers built wooden houses on stilts and made lacquered bowls and blackish pottery with incised geometric designs. Basketry and weaving were highly developed; residents left behind spindle whorls used to twist yarns and shuttles used in weaving. Other wooden tools included hoes, spears, mallets, and paddles. The technological level of the Hemudu villagers, in other words, was already higher than that of most North American Indian tribes in the seventeenth century.

North China was too cold and dry for rice; the cereal that became the foundation of agriculture there was instead millet. In Cishan, a site in Hebei dating to before 5000 BC, millet was cut with stone sickles and stored in crude pottery bowls, jars, and tripods (three-legged pots), often decorated with cord or comb impressions. The loess soil common in north China made cultivation relatively easy for primitive farmers as it was easily worked and its loose structure allowed fresh nutrients to rise to the surface. In both north and south, the domestication of animals accompanied the domestication of plants. Dogs and pigs were found in both areas as early as 5000 BC, and by 3000 BC sheep and cattle had become important in the north, water buffalo and cattle in the south.

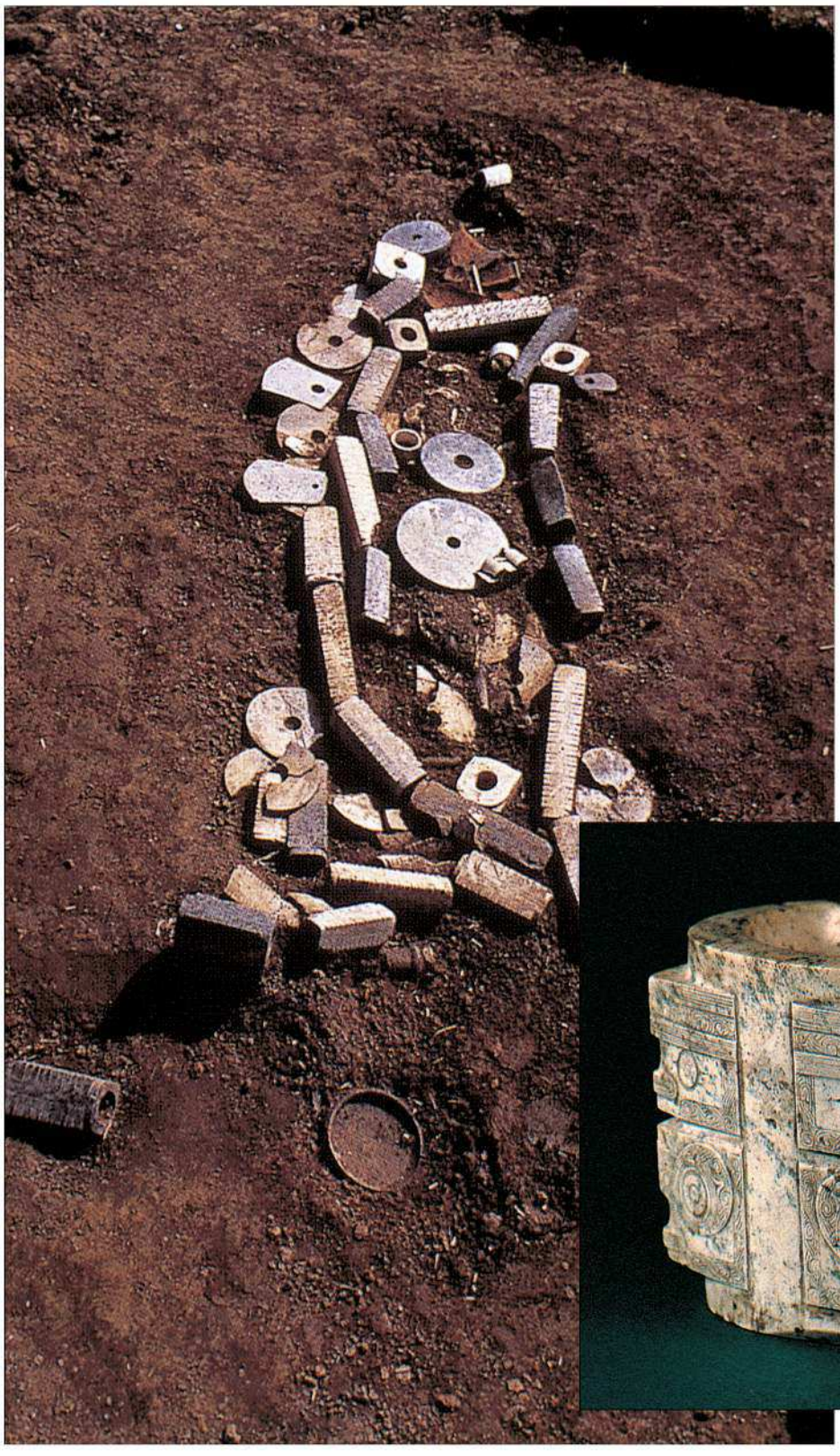
In addition to this north–south division on the basis of subsistence technology, Chinese neolithic cultures can be roughly divided east–west on the basis of artistic styles and burial practices. In the west, in the Yangshao culture area (primarily Shaanxi and Gansu provinces from about 5000 to 3000 BC) burials were generally simple and pottery was often decorated with painted geometrical designs. Grain jars decorated in the fully developed Yangshao style were exuberantly painted in

This stemmed cup excavated from Taian, Shandong province, has extremely thin walls, as thin as an eggshell. Such finely made black pottery is a distinctive feature of Dawenkou culture (c. 2300 BC).

red and black with spirals, diamonds, and other geometric patterns. The range of shapes, however, was relatively limited, confined mostly to utilitarian jars and urns. By contrast, in the east, over an area extending from Liaoning province to Shanghai, pottery was rarely painted, but more elaborate forms appeared very early, including tripods and pedestalled bowls and cups. The finest wares, formed on the potter's wheel, were thin-walled with a burnished surface almost metallic in appearance. Many forms were constructed by combining parts, adding legs, spouts, handles, or lids. The frequent appearance of ewers and goblets in this region suggests rituals of feasting or sacrifice. Also in the east burials gradually became more elaborate. At one site, Dawenkou in Shandong province, some of the dead were buried in coffins and occasionally a wooden chamber was built to line the burial pit, giving a further layer of protection. The richest graves at this site contained fifty, sixty, or even well over a hundred objects, including, for instance, necklaces and bracelets made of jade, stone, or pottery beads. One unusual feature of the Dawenkou culture is that many people had their upper lateral incisors extracted, a practice Chinese authors in much later times considered barbarian.

Even more distinctive of the eastern cultures is their investment in the production of finely worked jade. Jade is a very hard stone, formed when the crystals of

Jade object with a snake- or dragon-like body and pig-like snout, 6 ½ inches long, excavated at Sanguan Dianzi in Liaoning province (Hongshan culture, c. 3500 BC). Neolithic villagers, using sand or other abrasives, would have had to devote many days to fashioning this small ornament or talisman.



Left. The most spectacular neolithic jade discoveries are from the Liangzhu culture (c. 3300–2250 BC). This grave excavated at Sidun in Jiangsu province contained long rows of twenty-five *cong* (tubes with cylindrical bores and squared sides) and thirty-three *bi* (discs). Archaeologists speculate that the individual buried there was a priest interred with the treasures he used in ceremonies.

Below. Skill at precise measurement and planning was needed to achieve the highly regular motifs on the jade *cong* found at Liangzhu. The prominent eyes and symmetrical design on this 2¾-inch-tall *cong* tube, excavated at Sidun, Jiangsu province, suggest connections with the famous *taotie* design found on bronzes a thousand years later.