

Foreword

The Chinese civilization is one of the four most ancient in the world. Relative to the Egyptian, Indian and Tigris-Euphrates civilizations, it is characterized by consistency and continuity throughout the millennia. Rooted deep in this unique civilization, originating from the Yangtze and Yellow River valleys, the Chinese people have, for countless generations, adhered to their own cultural traditions. These traditions have remained basically unchanged even though political power has changed hands many times. Foreign groups invaded the country's heartland repeatedly, but in the end all became members of a united family called "China."

Cultural relics, immeasurably large in quantity and diverse in variety and artistic style, bespeak the richness and depth of the Chinese civilization. These cover all areas of humanity's tangible culture. This book classifies China's cultural relics into two major categories: immovable relics and removable relics. "Immovable relics" refer to those found on the ground and beneath, including ancient ruins, buildings, tombs and grotto temples. "Removable relics" include stone, pottery, jade and bronze artifacts, stone carvings, pottery figurines, Buddhist statues, gold and silver articles, porcelain ware, lacquer works, bamboo and wooden articles, furniture, paintings and calligraphic works, as well as works of classic literature. This book is devoted to removable cultural relics, though from time to time it touches on those of the first category.

Far back in the eleventh century, when China was under the reign of the Northern Song Dynasty, scholars, many of whom



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also had official positions, were already studying scripts and texts inscribed on ancient bronze vessels and stone tablets. As time passed, an independent academic discipline came into being, taking all cultural relics as subjects for study. New China boasts numerous archeological wonders thanks to field studies and excavations that have continued ever since it was born in 1949. This is true especially of the most recent two decades which have witnessed an unprecedented construction boom in China under the state policy of reform and opening to the outside world, in the course of which numerous cultural treasures have been brought to light from beneath the ground.

Readers will find in this book a brief account of eight kinds of China's cultural relics – pottery, jade, bronze ware, porcelain, sculpture, painting, furniture and arts and handicraft articles. We will concentrate on the most representative, most brilliant works of each kind while introducing you to their origins and development.

This book is too small to include many other kinds of cultural relics unique to China, for example those related to ancient Chinese coinage, printing and publication of Chinese classics, traditional painting and calligraphy. To cite an old Chinese saying, what we have done is just “a single drop of water in an ocean.” Despite that, we hope you will enjoy this book, from which we believe you will gain some knowledge of traditional Chinese culture.



Painted Pottery



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Among all cultural relics found in China, what we categorize as pottery was the first to come into being. Archeological investigation shows that the earliest pottery ware discovered in China to date was produced about 10,000 years ago. This includes a pottery jar found in the Immortal's Cave in Wannian County, Jiangxi Province, south China. The jar is the oldest found in such condition as to allow it to be restored in its entirety.

Origin of Pottery Art

For people in the earliest stage of human development, it was the land on which they lived that provided artistic inspiration. This may explain how the earliest pottery was made. The process seems pretty simple: mixing clay with water, kneading the paste and pressing and forming it with the hands until a rough but useful article was produced, drying it in the open-air, and then baking it in a fire until it hardened. Before they began producing clay ware, prehistoric people had, for many millennia, limited themselves to changing the shapes of natural materials to produce useful tools or personal ornaments. For example, they shaped stones into sharp-edged objects for use as tools or weapons, and produced necklaces by drilling holes in animal teeth or oyster shells and stringing them together. Pottery making, however, was revolutionary in that it was the



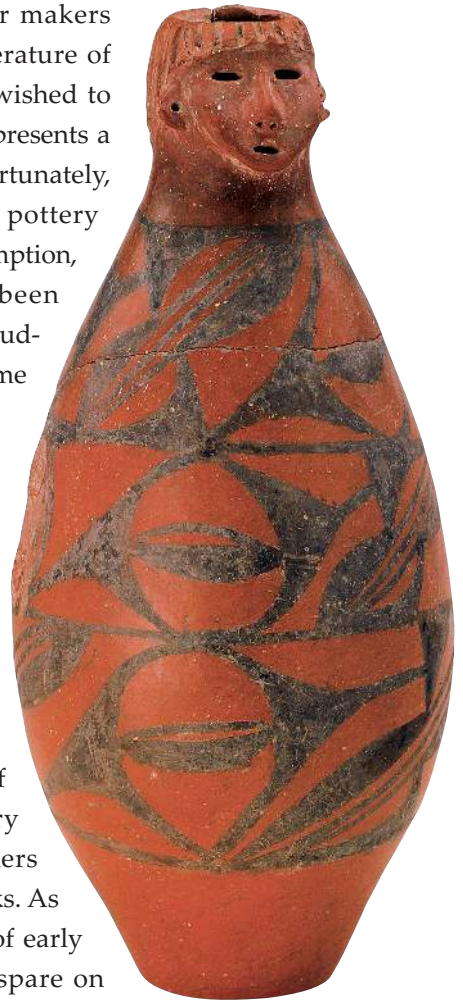
White pottery vessel of the Longshan Culture, unearthed at Weifang, Shandong Province.



very first activity whereby human beings transformed one thing into another, representing the beginning of human efforts to change nature according to their own design. Prehistoric pottery vessels are crude in shape, and the color is inconsistent because their makers were yet to learn how to control the temperature of the fire to ensure the quality of what they wished to produce. Despite that, prehistoric pottery represents a breakthrough in human development. Unfortunately, scholars differ on exactly how and when pottery making began. According to a popular assumption, however, prehistoric people may have been inspired after they found, by accident, that mud-coated baskets placed beside a fire often became impervious to water.

Development of Painted Pottery

At first, pottery vessels were produced simply for practical use, as their makers had no time and energy to spare to decorate their products according to any sort of aesthetic taste. Among the earliest pottery were unearthed so far, only a few containers have crude red lines painted round their necks. As life improved along with the development of early agriculture, people came to have time to spare on undertakings other than those for mere subsistence – crop farming, hunting, animal husbandry and such like. While still serving practical needs, pottery also became something denoting people's pursuit of beauty. Painted pottery came into being as a result,



Pottery jar of the Yangshao Culture dating from 5,600 years ago, unearthed at Dadiwan, Qin'an County, Gansu Province. The upper part of the jar is in the shape of a human head.



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representing a great leap forward in the development of pottery making. Among prehistoric relics, painted pottery wares are the earliest artifacts featuring a combination of practical use and artistic beauty. Painted pottery peaked 7,000–5,000 years ago, during the mid- and late periods of the Neolithic age. The most representative painted pottery wares, mostly containers and eating utensils, were produced in areas on the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River, including what is now Gansu and Shaanxi provinces. These vessels were decorated with lines and animal figures painted in color.

In prehistoric times, people sat on the ground when they ate or met. It has been suggested that this is why decorative patterns and figures were painted on parts of a pottery vessel fully exposed to view – for example, the part below the inner or outer side of the mouth of a bowl and, in some cases, decorations on the inner

side extending to the bottom. On a basin with

a protruding belly, we find decorative

patterns below and on the fringe of

the mouth and above the curve. In

comparison, no decoration is seen below

the curve because people sitting on the ground would have hardly seen that part.

To take another example, in the case of a large

basin decorative patterns are found inside,

on the upper side of the inner wall. These

are not on the outer wall, because

people sitting round the basin

would not have been able to see

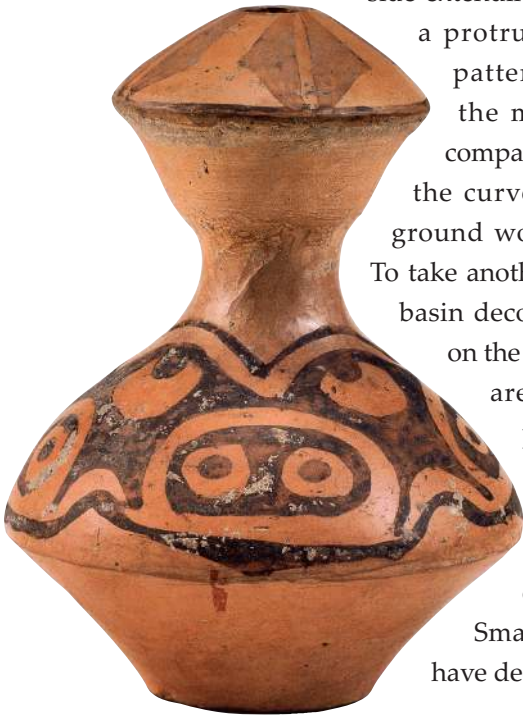
it. Decorative patterns are found

on the outer wall of a jar, mostly

on the shoulder or above the belly.

Small bottles in the shape of a gourd

have decorative patterns all over them.



Pottery vessel produced 4500–3000 BC, unearthed at Qin'an, Gansu Province. It features a slender neck and a painted pattern resembling the face of a pig.



Painted Pottery of the Yangshao Culture

Painted pottery of the Yangshao Culture is recognized as the most representative prehistory painted pottery found in China. In 1921 the ruins of a prehistoric village were found at Yangshao Village, Mianchi County, Henan Province, and were identified as belonging to a highly developed matriarchal society that existed in central China. Many cultural relics have been unearthed from the site since then, including pottery utensils for daily use, which are valued not only for their cultural importance but also for the workmanship with which they were produced. Clay to be used for making the utensils was washed and, for that reason, most products are of the same color as their raw materials. To be more precise, products made from fine clay are red, and those made from fine clay mixed with fine grains of sand are brownish-red. Most decorative patterns were painted in black, with some in red. Sometimes a thin layer of red or white coating was applied to the unfired products, on which decorative patterns were then painted, in order to ensure a greater contrast of colors. The



Painted pottery bowl of the Dawenkou Culture (4500–2500 BC). It was unearthed at Peixian County, Jiangsu Province.



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Excerpt

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Painted pottery jars produced 3000–2000 BC, belonging to the Majiayao Culture.

PAINTED POTTERY

Yangshao Culture dates back to a period from 5000 BC to 3000 BC. Early sites and ruins found later in other parts of central China are culturally similar to the Yangshao ruins. For this reason, the Yangshao Culture has been recognized as synonymous with the culture prevalent in central China during the matriarchal clan society – in a region with Gansu, Shaanxi and Henan as its center, and encompassing Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Qinghai, as well as parts of Hubei. In 1957, the so-called “Miaodigou branch of the Yangshao Culture” became known with excavation of a site at Miaodigou in Sanmenxia City, Henan Province, which archeologists believe existed during the transition of the Yangshao Culture to the Longshan Culture. Painted pottery utensils found at Miaodigou were produced around 3900 BC. Flying birds, distorted bird patterns made with crude lines and frogs are the main decorative patterns.

Fish and distorted fish patterns, sometimes with fishing net patterns, characterize pottery utensils found at Banpo in Shaanxi Province. Archeologists believe these represent another branch of the Yangshao Culture, which is earlier than the Miaodigou

The Longshan Culture

Longshan Culture refers to the culture of late Neolithic times in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River in China. It was named after the place where characteristic relics were found – Chengziya in Longshan town, Zhangqiu county, Shandong province - in 1928. At this site, wheel-made, highly polished black pottery and thin-walled eggshell pottery utensils were found frequently, therefore, the description black pottery culture was used, later replaced by Longshan Culture. The cultural connotations in different regions were different, and the origins of the culture were also different, so it was not a single archaeological culture. In terms of social development, it belonged to the patrilineal clan social age.



Painted pottery cup produced 3000–2000 BC. Identified as belonging to the Tanshishan Culture, the cup was unearthed at Minhou, Fujian Province.



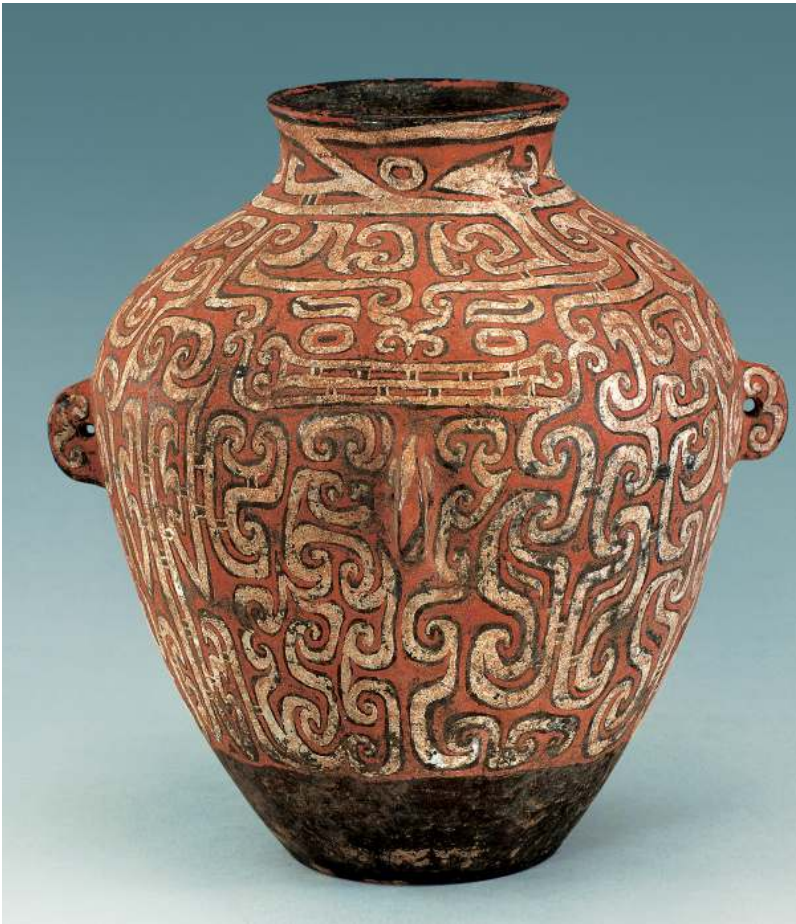
Painted pottery vessel in the shape of a boat, a relic of the Yangshao Culture (4800–4300 BC). It was unearthed at Baoji City, Shaanxi Province.



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branch. Images of frogs painted on the inner side of pottery basins and deer are the only other animal figures on Banpo pottery ware.

What merits even greater attention, however, are painted pottery utensils found at a place also called “Miaodigou” on the foot of Mount Huashan in Shaanxi. These are beautifully decorated with strings of patterns painstakingly designed and arranged. Research has shown that the workmen first used dots to mark the position of each pattern on the unfired utensil, and then linked the patterns with straight lines or curved triangles to form a decorative



Painted pottery jar produced 2000–1500 BC. It was unearthed at Aohan Banner (county), Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

