

## Story of Early Humans in China

Without time travel, what can we actually know about early humans? The most interesting information seems out of reach—what they were like, how they spoke and moved and held their bodies, their languages, how they thought, what they believed, their feel for life, their skills, how they organized their affairs, how wisdom traveled.

Considerable scientific ingenuity has been brought to bear to build up a story of early human life, but the solid part of that story mostly concerns the material life and technological level of the ancient peoples. Even this very-reduced story as it is proposed at any given time is dependent on the happenstance of archeological finds. There has been no general worldwide archaeological survey, in the sense of systematically investigating all regions in the same depth with the same degree of interest. The more-investigated regions take illusory prominence in the story. New finds regularly emerge to throw previous interpretations into a cocked hat. The story is constantly being rewritten under the impact of current finds and recast to accord with current fashions in social thought in the scholars' home societies.

Often cited: Barnes, Gina L. *The Rise Of Civilization in East Asia: The Archaeology of China, Korea and Japan*. Thames and Hudson, London, 1999 (1992).

To tell the story of early humans in China intelligibly it is easier to focus on pictures we can draw from specific sites that have been investigated. These give a glimpse into the material life of the early communities. The larger framework (constantly under debate by specialists) figures only as a backdrop, a rough time line to synch up the story and provide section headings keyed to the standard terminology.

### ***Homo Erectus***

The longer timeline leading to modern humans in China is the first bone of contention among scholars.

*Homo erectus* (some prefer: *homo ergaster*) appears fully developed in fossils found in East Africa's Rift Valley dating from about 1.9 million years ago. Until recent years, the earliest traces of *Homo erectus* found in East Asia dated from perhaps a million years later.

A new wave of archaeological finds has shown a much earlier dispersion of *homo erectus*. There are finds of stone tools dating from 1.9 million years ago at Riwat in Pakistan, three *homo erectus* skulls from Sangiran and Mojokerto in Java dated from 1.8 - 1.6 million years ago, and *homo erectus* teeth and stone artifacts from Longupo in China dating from 1.9 million years ago. Some scholars think that this implies that early populations of *homo erectus* traveled into East Asia within a couple of hundred thousand years of the species arising in Africa.

Roy Larick and Russell L. Ciochon. "The African Emergence and Early Asian Dispersals of the Genus *Homo*", **American Scientist**. November-December 1996.

*Homo erectus* is found in China and the Far East, and thought to have arrived there crossing through South Asia. Many Chinese scholars prefer to think that *Homo sapiens* evolved independently from *Homo erectus* in China as well as in Africa. The non-Chinese scholars' consensus is that *homo sapiens* arose in Africa and spread from there to other regions of the world, including China, following strings of ecological niches they could scavenge from, as the earlier hominids had done in their earlier diffusions.

Even the analysis of early hominids into species seems to be subject to constant blurring by new finds that lie midway between previously defined types. Two famous archaeological finds in China (a hominid skeleton at Jinniushan in the northeast in 1984 and a skull at Dali in the southwest in 1978) show archaic humans from about 200,000 years ago who combine anatomical traits of both *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens*.

List of hominid finds in China: <http://www.chineseprehistory.org/table.htm>.

### **Archaic *Homo sapiens***

The story comes as a series of disconnected pictures based on archaeological finds whose significance is the subject of debate among specialists.

By 200,000 years ago, members of our species *homo* were in the area we know as China. During a period of expanding glaciers that peaked around 100,000 years ago, sea levels fell and land corridors opened up from the East Asian mainland to the areas that are now Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the Indonesian islands, making it possible for early humans to spread into new territories.

Archaic *Homo sapiens* appear in the fossil record at numerous sites all over China dating from what archaeologists term the Middle Paleolithic period (125,000 to 40,000 years ago). The relative scarcity of fossil remains and stone tools found in China from that period puzzles scholars.

The stone tools from this period were made using a technique that involved carefully preparing the stone core from which blades were struck off.

This characteristic "Levallois Technique" is pictured and described in <http://www.hf.uio.no/iakk/roger/lithic/LEV/Lev.htm>.

Notable sites that represent this stage of the human story in China include Xujiayao in Shanxi province in North China, which contains human fossils and stone and bone tools. This site is described in detail at <http://www-personal.une.edu.au/~pbrown3/xujiayao.html>.

Another famous site for archaic *Homo sapiens* is Zhoukoudian Locality 15 near Beijing. This is detailed at <http://www.unesco.org/ext/field/beijing/whc/pkm-site.htm>.

The early traces of anatomically modern human beings in China date from the so-called Late or Upper Paleolithic period (40,000 to 12,000 years ago). Archaeological finds show evidence of increased sophistication in stone-working and tool-making.

A site at Shuidonggou (dated 30,000 to 15,000 years ago) in Ningxia province in Northwest China shows that the people working stone there carefully prepared the stone cores from which they struck off blades, and seemingly had developed a repertoire of standard types of tools.

A site at Xiachuan (dated 20,000 to 12,000 years ago) in Shanxi province in North China seems to show the development of intensive food collecting and preparation. It contains such tools as pestles, scrapers, millstones, saws, grindstones, and reaping hooks.

This site is described at <http://www.carleton.ca/~bgordon/Rice/papers/SHI98.rtf>.

A site at the Zhoujoudian Upper Cave near Beijing dated about 11,000 years ago shows evidence of intentional burials. There are tools made of bone, such as needles and awls. A necklace suggests these early people were interested in personal adornments. The presence of seashells and fish bones at a site over a hundred miles inland suggests the people carried on a relatively long-distance trade.

### ***"Mesolithic Period"***

In the past, archaeologists defined a Mesolithic Period in China lasting from around 12,000 to 9,000 years ago. Given that the last glacial maximum in China occurred around 20,000 to 18,000 years ago, the term scholars prefer nowadays for the people in this era is "postglacial foragers."

These people began to experiment with cultivating plants and domesticating animals. They created more complex tools combining stone with other materials, like wood and bone. Groups of these people began to stay in one place for more extended periods of time.

Various archaeological sites are taken to exemplify this period.

Guxiangtun is a postglacial forager site near Harbin in Heilongjiang province in Northeast China. The stone industry features projectile points and many scrapers, suggesting a hunting economy. There are bone tools such as chisels and awls. There are remains of deer, moose, water buffalo, rhinoceros, and mammoths associated with the site.

Another notable site is at Djalai Nor in Inner Mongolia. Here anatomically modern humans inhabited the dunes around small seasonal lakes around 12,000 to 11,000 years ago. There are traces of woven baskets or fish traps made out of wooden strips. These people apparently lived by hunting and fishing, but the existence of semi-permanent settlements hints at the beginnings of plant cultivation.

A site in South China at Wuming in Guangxi province contains traces of a wide variety of tools made of bone and antlers. Judging from their garbage middens, the people here consumed a lot of freshwater shellfish and hunted deer, water buffalo, and monkeys. Some large worked slabs of stone might have been used to grind grain.

### ***"Neolithic Period"***

The Neolithic Period in China dates from about 9,000 years ago. Archaeologists define the Neolithic period worldwide characterized by ceramics, polished stone tools, permanent settlements, signs of craft specialization, and of course the rise of agriculture.

One revealing site for China in this period was discovered at Cishan in the southern part of Hebei province. The Neolithic layer dates to around 7,300 years ago. The site contains dozens of structures, including pit-houses and storage pits. There are hand-made pottery vessels in the tripod shape that is so characteristic of later Chinese civilization. There are querns and rollers for grinding grain, and a wide variety of bone tools. Most of the animal remains are from domesticated pigs and dogs. There are caches of wild nuts the people gathered for food, and storage pits containing millet, which may or may not have been domesticated.

Another site from this era is at Peiligang near Zhengzhou, today a major city in northern Henan province. This too dates from 8,000 - 7,000 years ago. The graves investigated here show artifacts parallel to those found at Cishan: undecorated pottery tripods, saddle querns and rollers, axes, shovels, sickles, hand grinders. Dogs are the only domesticated animals in evidence.

These two sites are somewhat enigmatic, since they reveal domesticated animals, but no clear proof of agriculture. The querns and rollers used to grind grain could have been used with grain that was gathered, not cultivated.

### ***"Yangshao Culture"***

The period of Chinese prehistory from about 8,000 to 5,000 years ago is conventionally known as the Yangshao Culture, after a famous Neolithic site discovered in Yangshao in Henan province in 1921. Further research has suggested that more probably there were many regional cultures in those days, variants on the Middle Neolithic pattern. Every site tells a different story, and archaeologists are always tempted to declare each site the representative of a culture.

The people in those days practiced slash-and-burn agriculture (millet in the North, rice in the South) and kept domestic pigs and dogs. They made pottery by hand, and sometimes painted it or marked the wet clay to decorate it. They wove baskets and knew how to sew. They made many tools out of bone and ground stone. They lived in permanent villages (as opposed to temporary seasonal camps). These villages had graveyards, and there are differences in wealth apparent in different styles of burial. Archaeologists sometimes think they can

discern regional cultures revealed in the stylistic differences among the artifacts of the period.

An important site representing one regional variant of the Yangshao culture is at Banpo, near the city of Xi'an in Shaanxi Province. This is the relatively dry, deeply eroded land of fine fertile wind-blown soil and sheltered river valleys, now almost treeless, then well forested. This version of Yangshao culture looks like a prototype of the millet culture of historical North China.

Here archaeologists in 1953 uncovered traces of a 6,000-year-old Neolithic village containing some forty-five houses of various styles and shapes, two hundred storage pits, six kilns, and a graveyard. Tools that survived included needles, arrowheads, and fish hooks. It seems that the people pursued a wide range of economic activities: they hunted and fished, grew millet, raised pigs and dogs as domestic animals, and fired their hand-made pottery in kilns. The pottery is painted with designs that appear to depict fish, animals, and plants.

Archaeologists try to deduce social practices from site layout and architectural remains. One can speculate about the role and meaning of the large long-house (20 X 12.5 meters) in the village and the large ditch (5 meters wide and 5 meters deep) surrounding the core of the village. Symbolic demarcations of space? Felt need for defense? Sprouts of private property? What is the meaning of the houses facing in toward the center and the long-house?

The people buried in the village cemetery are physically like the Han people of North China today. The burials seem to show that some people were wealthier or had more status than others.

Another flavor of the Yangshao culture left traces along China's Pacific coast, in the flat, fertile, well-watered region where the Huai and Yangzi River systems empty into the sea, from modern Shandong to Zhejiang.

If the archaeological finds so far indicate the true timeline, then it seems that around 6,000 years ago people on the dry plains of North China's Yellow River Valley were coming to depend on millet as a staple at the same time people in the swampy lowlands of the Yangzi delta and coastal South China were coming to subsist on rice.

Archaeology of rice agriculture: [www.carleton.ca/~bgordon/Rice/](http://www.carleton.ca/~bgordon/Rice/).

The famous site at Hemudu on Hangzhou Bay on the central coast gives clear evidence of intensive rice cultivation around 6,300 years ago. People continued to gather useful wild plants and hunt wild animals like elephants and rhinos, but they also worked the land with hoes, grew rice, and kept domestic dogs and pigs and possibly water buffalos.

The Neolithic artifacts from these coastal regions have their own styles, as seen in painted pottery, tripods, pottery vessels in distinctive shapes, decorated turtle shells, and stone knives for harvesting rice. Judging from fossil remains found at village sites, wild animals still filled the lands and waters: deer, water buffalo, tortoise, freshwater mussels, fish.

One noted site is Beiyinyangying, near the historical metropolis Nanjing in the heart of the Yangzi River Valley. The ancient village was on a small mound near a river. The rectangular houses had hard dirt floors, wooden posts to support them, and walls made of woven branches covered with mud plaster. Mats woven of reeds or of bamboo were used for the roofs, on the floors, and to cover walls. There was a village cemetery: people were buried in different ways, but we don't know why. Fossil pollen studies that show what mix of plants were growing in a given area in the past suggest the Neolithic people at Beiyinyangying were clearing the land, maybe to build rice fields.

### ***"Longshan Culture"***

The period of Chinese prehistory starting about 5,000 years ago is traditionally known as the Longshan Culture, after a site discovered in Longshan in Shandong province in 1928.

Again, the idea of one single Longshan Culture has proven to be a mirage on closer inspection, but the label is still floating around. Some scholars now propose that the Yangshao and Longshan Cultures were not separate and distinct, but that the Longshan Culture gradually grew out of the Yangshao Culture.

The people of this period had made progress in raising animals, and had domesticated sheep and cattle, to go with pigs and dogs. Whereas the earlier farmers may have shifted their villages as they shifted their fields using slash and burn methods of agriculture, the Longshan people clearly kept their settlements permanently in one place. Their population was growing, and they began to grow food crops outside their original ranges. Their farming became more intensive, judging from the multiplication of agricultural tools.

The Longshan Culture is famous for its strikingly beautiful black pottery turned on a wheel. Some take this as a sign of craft specialization, based on the idea that using a potter's wheel is a demanding skill that would have been the domain of specialists. The pottery of the earlier Yangshao type cultures seems crude and utilitarian by comparison with what people were producing now. The Longshan era people developed a profusion of ceremonial vessels in various shapes and sizes.

People now started to surround their villages with serious, strong walls made of rammed earth. This suggests fortifications, and hence warfare on a different scale than the raids and vendettas of hunters and gardeners.

In this period we find the first signs of a practice well-known from the first phase of Chinese literate culture: the use of "oracle bones," generally ox scapulae and tortoise shells, in divination ceremonies. The bones were put in a fire, and specialists interpreted the resulting pattern of cracks. In the historical period the diviners supplied answers to questions posed by the prominent lords and war-leaders who employed them. The first samples of Chinese writing are preserved on such bones, but these are from a later period. Here 5,000 - 4,000 years ago, in the Longshan period, the oracle bones are not yet inscribed.

An example of an early agricultural community of this period comes from a place called Qūjialing in Hubei. The site is dated around 4,200 years ago. The villagers grew rice in an area where it is not native. This was a farming village cultivating rice and raising dogs, pigs, chickens, ducks, and geese. They must have had sheep, since they had clay models of them, and spindles for making yarn out of wool. The people had a large assortment of farming tools, and used finely ground stone arrow points. They produced a large variety of painted ceramic ware.

A glimpse of things to come is provided by a famous site in Shandong province called Dawenkou that contains the tomb of a rich lady who lived and died around 4,300 years ago. The site has in all some 104 tombs in the form of rectangular pits. The dead have their heads toward the East and hold deer teeth in their hands. Archaeologists interpret it as the graveyard of a wealthy clan.

The lady in question was about 5'3" tall, and 50 - 55 years old at the time of her death. She was buried in a wooden chamber built in a pit. She wore polished stone and jade ornaments and there were various enigmatic ivory, jade, and bone objects positioned around her. There are other grave goods buried with her outside the wooden chamber—large pottery containers, animal bones, a jade finger ring.

No one today knows what any of this meant. This ancient lady's ornaments call to mind the ceremonial jade rings, disks, axes, and daggers that were used by powerful people as emblems of rank and authority in later periods of Chinese history.

### ***The Age of Kingship***

At 4,000 years ago, we have a picture of China covered with Neolithic villages with populations in the hundreds, depending on agriculture, but still heavily engaged in food-gathering, hunting, and fishing, more or less well adapted to the environmental possibilities of their localities. We know something about their technology and settlement patterns, but nothing about their mental life, beliefs, and social structures, or about their conflicts and political struggles.

At 4,000 years ago, we are nearing the dawn of Chinese history. Chinese traditional history (which took shape 500 - 100 B.C.) speaks of the Xia Dynasty. "Xia" means 'summer.' This was the period of Sage Kings of legend who introduced all the fundamental arts of civilization (hunting, fishing, animal husbandry, agriculture, markets, herbal medicine, water control, mathematics and the calendar, writing). The Sage Kings ruled by winning the allegiance of the people through their virtue and knowledge. They passed down power not to their biological descendants, but to the most qualified by talent and moral excellence to lead the community. The period of the Sage Kings was presented as the ideal golden age, the source of correct values, by later Chinese intellectuals of the Warring States and the Empire.

The earliest state described in Chinese history is known as the Shang Dynasty. Around 1750 B.C., 3,750 years ago, so the story goes, the Yellow River Basin was unified under the rule of a warrior aristocracy, known as the Shang people.

They defeated or made alliances with rival lords, appointed their own clansmen as military overseers, and brought the whole region under central control.

The traditional story undoubtedly exaggerates the degree of centralized power that existed in this early period. The basic model of a conquering aristocracy apportioning out domains and appointing royal relatives and allies to positions of power rings true to later, better-known examples. The prime status symbol of the Shang aristocrat was a war-chariot, the embodiment of warrior power.

The Shang warriors used bronze weapons and elaborate bronze ceremonial objects to mark their legitimacy. Bronze takes a sharper edge than stone and a bronze blade is less fragile than a stone blade. The common farmers continued to use tools of stone, wood, and bone. During this period, many people were captured in war and reduced to slavery, and even among the free commoners, forced mobilizations for large building projects might have been the norm. It is said that the Shang system organized the common people by occupation and craft into supervised groups.

The scant records of the period suggest that the aristocrats believed they were mediators between Heaven and the human realm, and presided over public ceremonies that fused their political and religious claims.

An unwalled city that was the Shang capital about 3,200 years ago was found in 1928. There were remains of what was apparently a royal palace and several royal tombs containing precious bronze vessels and jades, chariots, and animal and human sacrifices. Also found was a large trove of inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells, the earliest Chinese writing, apparently already well-developed, with thousands of symbols.

On Anyang: <http://www.ancientdna.com/Anyang.htm>.

There was a superb level of skill working with bronze among the people during the Shang period. It is not known how the knowledge of this complex technology of bronze making and casting developed and appeared on the Chinese scene. Scholars conjecture that bronze-making know-how either developed in China or was brought in via traders from Central Asia, having developed centuries earlier in the Middle East.

On Shang bronzes: <http://www.wisc.edu/arth/ah370/shang.html>.

Shang politics reimagined: <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~kaplan/H370/ap06.pdf>.

The first written words we have from this part of the world are left over from the divination ceremonies of the royal court. They record queries made by powerful people through the medium of specialist diviners. They pose questions such as:

"Shall we launch an expedition against the Yi?"

"Should we marry a princess from the Rong?"

"Will the rain cause disaster or not?"

"Should the King make an alliance with Lord A against Lord B?"

"Will God approve if we build a village there?"

"Will the Queen give birth to a son? "

Significant events were also noted in some inscriptions:

"On such-and-such a day, the chariot and horses of the petty official Q collided with the king's chariot, and the driver was knocked out."

Here's one by an expert recording his success:

"Diviner Y made an oracle on day D that the upcoming ten-day period T would be unlucky, and two days later the King was injured."

Picture of oracle bones with translation: <http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Myth/translit.htm>.

■ ■ ■

The story goes on from here in the Age of Kingship.

I've never known how to tell that one to children, so I hope this is enough up to here for the story of Early Humans in China.

Barnes, Gina L. *The Rise Of Civilization in East Asia: The Archaeology of China, Korea and Japan*. Thames and Hudson, London, 1999 (1992).

Archaeology of rice agriculture and other topics are available at: [www.carleton.ca/~bgordon/Rice/](http://www.carleton.ca/~bgordon/Rice/).