

# Sociology of China



# Sociology of China:

## *An Introduction*

By

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and Fang Fang

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Cover image: A large statue of Mao Zedong on Juzizhou Island appears to show him overlooking the rapid development which has been recently occurring in the central business district of the city of Changsha where he was an educator early in his life. The contrast between his orthodox communist and the newer market-oriented paths to societal development come into stark contrast in this photo from southcentral China.

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## PREFACE

This textbook project had its origins in the late 1980s when the lead author was a graduate student at Penn State University. Sociology students were expected to take a foreign language. Since most students developed competency using the mainframe computer and necessary statistical software languages, they did not study a spoken second language. Being curious about people in societies dissimilar to America, the lead author decided to study either the Russian or Chinese language. He picked Chinese after involvement in the international student union within which he met students from Taiwan. He took several Chinese courses at Penn State. His teachers were all from Beijing. After only two semesters of the language, he took his first trip, and many to follow, to Taiwan. Upon graduation, he worked in the Census Bureau and Department of Education in Washington, D.C. as a demographer and statistician. Down the hall, coworkers who studied population and education of countries around the world wrote their reports. He traveled back to Taiwan with his wife. After landing a teaching position as professor at Mansfield University, a Chinese student in his Sociology 101 class asked her parents to connect him with the sociology department at Central China Normal University. Over the years, he has frequently worked there and at other universities as a visiting scholar. While traveling around in China in 2015, he reunited with his old grad school buddy, the second author, who was also teaching and conducting research in China. They have been collaborating ever since their post-graduation reunion in China. Along their professional ways, he met a fellow sociologist presenting research on women and family at a roundtable at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting in Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. She was born and raised in Mainland China and came to the U.S. for graduate studies. Ever since, they have been collaborating on their common interest in Chinese society.

The present book is in a way a fusion of the lead author's two academic loves: sociology and Chinese society. As he prepared to teach a new course that he called The Sociology of China, no textbook existed. Thus, he was forced to teach the course by cobbling together information and articles on the topics. He produced extensive teaching notes. The present book is in a way an extension of those early notes. The chapters are based on the major topics that sociology students typically learn about in Sociology 101. Each

chapter contains a list of key concepts and terms. Comparative insights and perspectives based upon American society have been woven into the material throughout the book. Although the textbook is partially designed with an American undergraduate college student in mind, students from other parts of the world who are interested in China would undoubtedly benefit from studying it.

Chapter one examines the origins of Chinese culture. Of all the major cultures in the world, China has the longest continuous history in terms of language and cultural norms. This makes it a highly attractive subject for sociologists who have an interest in comparative studies. Plenty of archeological and historical material is available to the sociologist for exploiting. There are plenty of people to interview! The chapter examines how China's cultural values emerged and shaped the people there over time. Given its prominence at points of time in history, it is useful to explore why China fell behind other societies in recent centuries. Some western ways of thinking were adopted, yet many traditional Chinese norms and behaviors continued. Through much trial and error and struggle, Chinese society rose back out of the turmoil of the century of humiliation.

Chapter two covers sociological theory's rise in the world and influence on China. Graduate level theory classes at Penn State University were grinding in breadth of coverage. Students tried to keep their heads above water since the professor seemed to know something about everything in the world and he could dive into great depth. His demanding teaching approach and passion for the topic encouraged our intellectual curiosity. We hope that our summary of the story of how sociology came about, how the founders produced various theoretical perspectives, and how those ideas traveled to China and took root or not there to affect the modernization of China does justice to this subfield. Given the recent changes in China's economy that vaulted it to the second largest in the world, we explore how its makeup meshes with the various founders' ideas.

Chapter three is about religion and its development in China. The sociology of religion is indeed a fascinating field. The simple task of objectively defining what a religion is represents a difficult challenge. Then trying to envision how it potentially can impact all spheres of social life only makes the task more challenging. True, in China there is no large established church as westerners are familiar with. However, there is so much action in many other ways that need explanation for understanding to be had. By extending the definition of religion and using all theoretical angles to explore Chinese society, lots of activities and beliefs come into focus. Ancestor worship, a quasi-religious thinking and behavior system, seems to have played a crucial role in binding Chinese people together in ancient

times right up until today. The Chinese apparently worshiped nature in various capacities. Add to these ways of thinking Confucius's work, collectively known as the Confucian classics, and you have a stew of religions mixed together. Confucius and his ideas have been equated to impacting the Chinese spirit and soul at a magnitude comparable to Jesus, the Bible and the Christian church in Europe. How did Chinese ways of thinking about the supernatural survive the impact of Buddhism, an imported religion from India, and the Communist Party's policies?

Chapter four is about social stratification. Inequality existed in China ever since the start of civilization there. Thousands of years before Europe, a social mobility system was created in China allowing people at the bottom to rise to the top. The leaders at the top were members of the royal family primarily for the most part, mandated by heaven to their posts. When conditions became bad at the bottom, revolutions did occur, and a few poor peasants rose all the way to the top. The communists who came to power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were quick to point this out. They elevated many poor peasants to top posts and treated harshly landowners, capitalists and intellectuals as being anti-revolutionary. Private property was eliminated and differences in income were greatly reduced. In the reform era, the economy boomed but so did inequality. Now capitalists can be found in the top ranks of the CCP. China is stratified. The question becomes, does it have social classes? Depending on which conflict approach one takes, arguments can be made for both sides, yes and no. It is socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Chapter five is about education, its history and condition in China. The key to social mobility in the United States is education. This pattern appears to be true in China as well. In America, Asian Americans have been labeled the model minority group because of their success in the education system. In the search for explanations for their success, the lead author has conducted research in America and China. The history of education in China reveals how closely tied being a learner is with the character of the people. Chinese had to abandon their traditional approach to education in favor of the western approach in order to modernize. After downplaying the importance of intellectuals, China turned to them to help the country compete better with the global community. Parts of China produce some of the smartest students in the world. Support from parents, high expectations, and belief in hard work all contribute to this distinctive outcome. It might, however, come at the disadvantage of nurturing creativity.

Chapter six is a straightforward coverage of the social demography of China. Being able to understand the size of a country's population is important for governing and planning. In China's past, the emperor conducted censuses so that he would know how much tax revenue to expect. When the communists took power, they tried to utilize increased numbers of people to achieve their goals of building a better, stronger country. The sheer size of China's population demands attention from thinkers and leaders. This chapter examines the decisions that were made to control the population after people concluded it was growing too fast and the impact of those early pro-growth decisions. Demographers say that you can see population problems happening right under your nose. They can be difficult to deal with indeed. Now instead of a growth problem, the largest challenge facing China is the lack of growth. It has changed into a low fertility country. Will there be enough young people to fill positions in the growing economy? Who will take care of the growing elderly population, family members and the state? Can the government increase the fertility rate? In these past few years, the answer appears to be no.

Chapter seven covers the Chinese family. At the center of every society is the institution of the family. With its long cultural history, it is to be expected that the family in China embodies many of those long-lived cultural traits. Built around the concept of filial piety (*xiao*), there is typically a hierarchical authority system within Chinese families, wherein older generations are given deference and respect by those who are younger. The patriarchy within Chinese culture is also evident within its families, as women, whether it be as wives or daughters, are viewed as having less value and stature within the family. And families in China are expected to maintain the family lineage, with this responsibility resting squarely upon sons, who must find a bride and have children. Despite its long-maintained norms, though, China's families are not immune to the numerous changes within the economic, political, and cultural realms. Increasingly, marriage rates are declining, cohabitation and singlehood rates are increasing, and the pursuit of parenthood is viewed with skepticism by young adults. Simply, the family in China is changing, and in ways which are quite distinct from its historical origins.

Chapter eight examines the women question in China. The social construction of gender in China is deeply influenced by historical traditions, political ideologies, economic changes, and globalization. Over time, China's gender norms have been shaped by Confucianism, socialist ideologies, political narratives and policies, market reforms, and globalization. This chapter delves into how each of these forces has left an indelible mark on how gender has been understood, experienced, and enforced in ancient

and contemporary China. It provides a brief overview of LGBTQ+ issues in China and how they have been integral to Confucian norms on family and state policing of gender non-conformity.

Chapter nine covers China's environment using the sociological perspective. China's great thinkers of the past urged moderation in behavior and respect for the environment. Within their thoughts are seeds of present-day environmentalists. However, the best advice is not always headed by people in the world. China's environment before the modern era had already been victim to one of the greatest transformations of the natural world by humans. China's early communist state created its share of environmental problems as well. The reform era leaders took a new approach to running the economy and as a result, China became the second largest economy in the world. The environment, as in many other developing countries, was left on its own. The list of environmental problems is long. Many of the issues are serious. However, leadership has shifted thinking and thus there are signs of progress. It will be a long and challenging road to a sustainable future for China and the world.

Finally, chapter ten is about people in China who do not obey the norms of society. Within an authoritarian government, China prefers to avoid the open disclosure of deviance and crime within its borders. However, all other societies, China has criminal and deviant activities of many, many varieties. Among youth, juvenile delinquency abounds, with many engaging in petty crimes, such as vandalism, shoplifting, and substance abuse. Chinese youth, though, are sometimes found to engage in more serious crimes, including rape and murder. The juvenile justice system in China deals with such instances in a rather unique manner and draws heavily upon the philosophy of Confucius to provide guidelines for addressing juvenile crimes. Adults, on the other hand, engage in an even wider array of deviance and crime. Patterns of administrative and criminal offenses abound, with relatively strict punishments being seen as the key to discouraging others from doing the same. Beyond this, white collar crime is fairly common, with embezzlement and fraud frequently discovered by authorities. Gangs and organized crime abound, engaging in such inhumane acts as human trafficking, kidnapping, and murder. China, despite the government's attempt to disclaim or deny deviance and crime, finds itself having to deal with a very wide range of such activities.

Together the study of these chapters will provide the reader with a basic introduction to both sociology and Chinese society. The first two authors have been teaching sociology for a combined fifty plus years. They also have spent considerable time and energy learning about China and thought they should combine their strengths and interests, along with the expertise

of the third author. The resulting collaboration is a unique approach to presenting Chinese culture, norms and history to college students and we hope that our efforts will be beneficial.

Many people told the lead author not to go to communist China. He would not be safe there. He should not trust its people. They will spy on him. Most news stories about China in the American media were negative. After arriving in China, his sociology graduate students took him out for tea after class. It was then that he realized they were ordinary people like him, wanting to learn, make friends, be happy, contribute positively to their society, learn about the wider world, etc. There is a discernable difference between the Chinese government and the Chinese people. The authors, through their many trips to China, quickly recognized this distinction, and came to better understand, enjoy, and truly appreciate China for its unique culture, natural beauty, cuisine and, most of all, it's warm and welcoming people. Truly, it was those very people who inspired this book.

We would like to thank the many people who have helped us along the way get to where we are now, being able to write a college level sociology textbook on a topic that is unusual. We appreciate our fine sociology professors from the past at Bloomsburg University, Penn State University, and Virginia Tech for nurturing our interest in sociology and providing a pathway to improve society and peoples' lives. We would like to thank our fellow sociology students who surrounded us during our studies and helped us get through our tough programs. We cannot say enough thanks to all our international friends for their hospitality and openness without which this project would not have occurred. From the top officials who held banquets for us to the many students who acted as our tour guides to the simple stranger on the street who provided us with needed help. We thank our colleagues who have reviewed our work at many points along the way. Finally, we appreciate all the patience from our family and friends as we explored societies on the other side of the globe and returned to pour all of what we learned into this project.

Through reading and studying our book, students will develop an introduction to the field of sociology and a working knowledge of Chinese society and culture. They should be able to appreciate China's distinct culture among other cultures in the world both in the present and the past. Although the book covers ten topic areas, there are many others in sociology. They are beyond the scope of this first edition, and we hope to expand it in the future.

谢谢 Xie Xie (Thank you),

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# CHAPTER ONE

## CULTURAL TRENDS IN CHINA FROM ANCIENT TO PRE-MODERN TIMES

### **Introduction**

Culture, the beliefs, values, and views on how one ought to live life in a society, is a product of geographical, historical, and psychological forces according to Franz Boas. Different areas of the world will exhibit unique cultures. It is less the product of a unilinear evolution of societies around the world over time. Thus, to best understand the culture of a particular society—and others throughout the world, one should literally delve into it to become cognizant of its powerful drivers. This early scientific perspective on culture is known as historical particularism (Harris, 1968) and it shapes part of the approach taken below to examine Chinese culture.

More recent theorizing about globalization over the past several decades is concerned with whether a convergence in cultures is occurring around the world (Pieterse, 2020). Convergence towards a Westernized, English language dominated world culture is foreseen. An alternative to this convergence view posits that new hybridized cultures could form by people selectively adopting and merging elements from multiple cultures in their social milieu. Opposite from converging, another possibility is that some world cultures remain distinct, not lending themselves to integrating with others. In other words, cultural differentialism can occur, with cultures being similar to hard billiard balls bouncing sharply off each other (Huntington, 1996). Throughout Chinese history and prehistory, various cultures at the local, regional, and transcontinental levels pushed and pulled on each other amidst processes of assimilation, acculturation, and cultural conflict. Over the course of Chinese history, a dominant culture emerged and held fast for centuries (Hsu, 2012; Yuan, 2010).

To better understand and appreciate China's present-day culture, one should examine the emergence of first human life in China, which occurred some 200,000 years ago. Pockets of archeological evidence suggest that the earliest human inhabitants lived using simple stone tools. A hunting and

gathering society took hold during paleolithic times. An abundant amount of archaeological evidence advancing far beyond stone tools suggests that a more settled and civilized way of life then emerged. It is known as the neolithic times. From the latter, the first glimpses of culture in the area known as China today can be gleaned.

## **Paleolithic or Very Early Stone Age**

Around 700,000 years ago or earlier *Homo erectus*, named for being able to walk upright, emerged from early human ancestors in Africa. It was the first human ancestor to be found outside of Africa. An evolved form of *Homo erectus*, *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* (the Neanderthal), emerged in parts of Europe and Western Asia more than 200,000 years ago (Price and Feinman, 2001).

In a cave located south of present-day Beijing called Zhou Kou Dian, the remains of very early hominoids were discovered. Several skull caps, bones and teeth were uncovered, suggesting human ancestors lived there some 500-200,000 years ago. The name given to the creature was famously known as “Peking man.” It is part of the *Homo erectus* line. Reconstructions of the head of Peking man produced a creature strongly resembling the Neanderthal. More *erectus* fossils were discovered in Bose Basin in southern China. Also discovered in the basin--but not with any human fossils--were hand axes, a more sophisticated tool compared to simple flake tools (Boyd and Silk, 2003; Watson, 1966).

Fossils of another early hominid with long legs and a large brain were discovered in Africa, Europe, and Asia. It is called *Homo Heidelbergensis*. It lived some 900,000 to 130,000 years ago. Locations of *Homo Heidelbergensis* fossils in China include the north Yinkou central area of Dali and in the south by Maba (Boyd and Silk, 2003). It spanned a relatively short period on the human ancestor tree.

Around 70,000 to 50,000 years ago, after arising in Southern Central Africa some 170,000 years ago, modern type humans, *Homo Sapiens*, arrived in Asia. *Sapien* represents “thinking”. They left Africa some 130,000 years ago and entered Europe around 50,000 years ago. They moved to Australia some 40,000 to 60,000 years ago. The land bridge near Alaska was crossed some 30,000 to 15,000 years ago (Price and Feinman, 2001) and they moved into North, Central and South America.

Archeological evidence of early man in North America dating back 16,000 to maybe 19,000 years ago has been uncovered in Meadowcroft, a cave along the Cross Creek outside of Avella PA, which feeds into the Allegheny River in the rolling hills west of Pittsburgh. The area contains

many large earthen tombs made by native Indian tribes of the Adena culture in the Upper Ohio river valley. One burial mound, known as the Mammoth Mound, is over sixty feet tall and represents the largest prehistoric Indian burial mound in the world. Along with the bodies entombed inside were stone and bone tools along with ornaments, suggesting a belief in the afterlife (Thomas, 1999). Using modern DNA evidence, researchers have found evidence of a gene flow from Chinese to native Americans (Novick et. Al, 1998).

The physical characteristics, tools and behaviors of modern humans differed remarkably from those of earlier humans. Their brain sizes were larger than previous hominids. They used language and symbols. They crafted fine precision tools from many types of materials besides stone (needles, hooks) and used trade items (shells, beads). These advantages helped them to travel across all kinds of environments and flourish. They left prolific amounts of artifacts revealing their culture.

## **6000-1700 BC Stone Age (Neolithic) Period**

Archeological evidence indicates that some 8,000 years ago humans began settling in the major river valleys of China. These valleys were the Yellow River in the north, the Wei river in the northwest and the Changjiang river in the south central. The people engaged in simple farming of millet, which is a small, seeded grass. They engaged in agriculture by growing chestnuts and domesticating animals such as pigs and dogs. They lived in villages which may have been centered around “clans” based on the type of structures unearthed (Price and Feinman, 2001; Watson, 1966).

Simple painted pottery existed throughout the Yellow River valley in this time. It had a hallmark characteristic of vertical lines. This type of artifact, first discovered in the Yangshao village of Henan Province, has been found at the lowest levels of earth in various archeological digs in north central China (Chi, 1957; Watson, 1966). Hence, the Yangshao period is generally depicted as representing the first more settled and civilized culture in China.

The Cishan culture in Hebei province, which slightly predates the Yangshao, left evidence of agriculturally based town life and an apparent clan-based society given the clustering of shelters in small groups (Hsu, 2012, p. 29). This is evidence of a slightly earlier transition among humans living in the same area from a hunting and gathering to an agricultural society (Xie, 2009).

Another early culture emerges from the archaeological record, overlapping with the later Yangshao period. Near the village of Longshan in Shandong

province a different type of ancient pottery was found. It was much thinner, thus invoking an eggshell description and was usually made in black (Chi, 1957). The remains of the Longshan culture include bones from domesticated animals, polished axes, farming tools and processed jade (Xie, 2009; Watson, 1966).

**Figure 1.1 Longshan Culture Pottery**



Parts of China contained artifacts from other early cultures. At the top of the Yellow River, the Qijia culture was found to have bronzeware. In Zhejiang province, the Liangzhu culture contained evidence of altars and elaborately decorated jade ceremonial utensils. In northeast China above the Yangshao cultural area, the Hongshan culture left evidence of goddesses in the form of clay statues. It also produced beautiful jade dragons (Han, 2008; Nelson, 1995). On the eastern coast of China, Dawenkou culture constructed tombs for apparently powerful and wealthy individuals. They contained jade axes, ivory combs, and drums along with white pottery (Hsu, 2012). These early cultures and others represented in the artifacts unearthed by archeologists across central China formed the core of China's emerging civilization (Hsu, 2012; Xie, 2009; Yuan, 2010).

China's geography contributed to the growth of its early cultures. In a way, the central part of China served as a cradle for early civilizations in

this part of the world. There were fertile river valleys along the Changjiang River where rice was cultivated some 6,000 to 8,000 years ago. The land along the Yellow River was more suited for growing millet which was widely harvested there. The land it drained was dry and contained loess, a yellow-colored soil and hence its name. To the northwest nomadic peoples lived a pastoral life in the more arid, elevated environment where food for fodder and water were both scarce. In the northeast, the mountains, forests, and rivers allowed for hunting to provide sustenance. The extremely tall mountains to the west formed a natural barrier and were not hospitable to animals or plants. The south-central area along the Changjiang River drainage was made up of many rivers and lakes, giving rise to the harvest and cultivation of water borne plants such as wild rice. Along the southeast coast, the sea served as another natural barrier where fishing developed. Thus, each area favored a specific approach to social activities to maximize resources and chances of survival. Yet at the same time, the terrain contained enough key passes which allowed for interactions and exchanges to occur, and chances for cultures to blend over time (Hsu, 2012; Yuan, 2010).

## **First Chinese Mythology**

Tales from the early cultures abounded. Several tales were variants off the same general theme suggesting that they were created and shared among the different early societies (Hsu, 2012; Watson, 1966). Over time, the widely known tales explained the origins of the planet and human life. Many societies around the world have unique creation stories (e.g., Genesis in the Bible) and the Chinese are no exception.

Pangu was an ancient Chinese being who slept in the world which was a big black ball of chaos. Not being able to sleep well, he awoke to split the ball in half. The top rose to become the blue heaven. The bottom fell to become the dark earth. Clean air separated the two. Pangu used his body to keep the two spheres separated. He was the master of the world: breathing would cause wind, tears would produce rain, snoring caused thunder and so on. When he finally passed away, his body parts caused the earthly terrain to appear: body parts turned into mountains, blood formed roaring waters, muscles morphed into fertile land, teeth became minerals, sweat turned into rain and dew, and stars were from his hair (Xie, 2009; Yuan, 2010).

The earth was devoid of humans. However, a creature by the name of Nuwa wondered about and felt lonely. She gathered some mud, looked at her reflection in the water and began to fashion a being resembling herself. It came alive and danced about. “Ren” as they were called (people in

Chinese), had wisdom and ability superior to the creatures in existence. She created both men and women and then helped them to produce their own children, so she did not need to keep making them to populate the earth. They flourished widely and she was happy until the gods of water and fire had a fight. This led to calamities that threatened the humans Nuwa had created. So, she raced about fixing the sky and propping it back up, she slew the black dragon and scattered the other dangerous creatures. She stopped the floods by burning reeds and using the ashes (Xie, 2009; Yuan, 2010).

Legend also has it that several prominent individuals guided humans from barbarism to civilization. Three kings and five legendary emperors are mentioned in Chinese history, sort of like Greek mythology. Nuwa married Fuxi, her brother. Afterwards they decreed that marriage should be exogamous. Suiren invented fire and tools to help people eat cooked food. Fuxi invented hunting and the fish net as well as raising animals and pottery for storing food. Youchaoshi invented the house to prevent people from being attacked by wild animals. Shennong invented agriculture and medicine. He tasted all kinds of herbs himself to find out which ones were beneficial (Xie, 2009).

## **Evidence of Family and Gender Norms in the Ancient Artifacts**

Experts have examined the pattern of the oldest artifacts spread across the many early human dwelling sites described above. The remains found were much more likely to be of men than women. The items found within the graves were also differentiated by gender: agricultural tools alongside men and items for processing and storing the harvest, ornaments, and needles, awls and spindle whorls for making clothing alongside women. Quantitatively, the graves of men typically contained more items compared to the graves of women. Qualitatively, precious items, including those related to ceremonies—especially ritual vessels that held alcohol, were found almost exclusively in the graves of men (Hinch, 2018).

Two other trends in burial practices are noteworthy as well. Sometimes several young women were buried along with a man. Such a practice suggests that polygyny existed in the early civilized society. Second, sacrifices of living animals and humans were more often found in the graves of men. Overall, different gender expectations existed at the time. A patriarchal system existed for the most part with men being connected to the more valuable objects and socially important activities. They also seem to have been accorded more status and power, given the pattern of burials and

burial items (Hinch, 2018). This pattern of male dominance repeats itself, with a few exceptions, throughout ancient Chinese history.

## **Oral Traditions and Legends**

China's history is commonly demarked by dynasties. Scholars recognize the earliest dynasty as the Shang. However, according to legend, the Xia dynasty existed before the Shang. No hard archeological evidence of it exists. Some experts believe it occurred at the end of a combined Longshan and Yangshao period (Murphey, 2010). Historians such as Mo-tse and thinkers such as Confucius (Xie, 2009; Waley, 2009, p. 31) who came centuries later preserved the oral traditions by writing about the Xia. The thought of the existence of the Xia was sufficient for the supposed Xia dynasty to have a lasting impact on China's culture. Some modern historians believe that the Xia dynasty could be the "birthplace of Chinese culture" (Clements, 2019, p. 41). Thus, it is imperative to examine some of the beliefs and stories associated with it.

According to tradition, the Xia dynasty had multiple kings who ruled a territory containing subgroups. They struggled at times to maintain their orbit of power (Clements, 2019). The ancient sage kings emphasized virtuous behavior and talent. They picked their most dutiful sons to pass power to and thus set an example for people to serve their parents. A system of rewards and punishments was used to encourage people to reflect on their actions and to perform good deeds (Xie, 2009).

At Erlitou, near the city of Luoyang on the banks of the Yellow River east of Xian, archeologists found burnt bones, bronze objects, jade, ivory, gold, and cauldrons from what they believe to be the base of Xia society. The objects suggest that the people built a society based on differentiated social ranks, given the higher level of sophistication of relics compared to earlier ones. The elite appear to have been trying to communicate with ancestors or gods (Clements, 2019; Yuan, 2010).

Stories of the Xia need to be interpreted in the light of being written by people after the Xia who might have held a biased view of the previous rulers whom they conquered. Nonetheless, some themes can be gleaned from the stories of life during the Xia dynasty. Rulers built a hierarchical society. They held power by striking a balance between maintaining their elite position, demanding resources provided by common folk, and always working on their acceptance by the masses. However, some steered off course and engaged in too much drinking of alcohol and seemingly immoral behavior (Clements, 2019).

Ancient historians looking back on the type of society that existed in pre-history reveal some foundational social norms indeed, as per the *Book of Rites* edited or written by Confucius. Men were to love their parents. They were to love the sons of others in society as well. Concern was to be given to the aged and others in need such as widows, orphans, the sick. Moreover, gender expectations were apparent: proper work for men, females in the home. Choosing men of talent, virtue and ability set the course for patriarchal gender relations. Indeed, the early sage kings were all men; one best known was named Huangdi, or the “yellow emperor” and he has been connected to the Hongshan culture (Yuan, 2010). Conscientious leaders could develop a great harmony in society resulting in social prosperity (Xie, 2009).

Interestingly, Clements notes one difficulty with researching the history of China: keeping track of specific women because of an apparent norm that avoided directly addressing women by name or required the use of the father’s name (2019, p. 16). Waley records in *The Analects of Confucius* that a state ruler’s wife called herself the Little Boy. People called her the prince’s person or the person of the prince. Apparently, the whole passage’s aim was to convey proper etiquette from an old ritual handbook (2009, p. 225). Indeed, Hinch (2018) examines the names of significant women in China through artifacts and describes the ways in which they often had numerous names in the historical record, depending on their position at the time (single or married), who they married (their husband, the king’s surname would thus be followed by the character for female), and who was addressing them (family members, in-laws, commoners, foreign dignitaries and so on).

The archaeological evidence of early human activities in China, combined with writings connected to leaders of the time reveal early Chinese social norms and culture. Family and blood ties were obviously crucial, given the repeated reference to clan like social organizations and language used to describe women. But above and beyond the clan like structures, movement to some higher form of social organization, using Durkheim’s common collective consciousness concept, entailed encouraging individuals to expand their thinking about the social sphere to include others who were not related by blood. This sets the stage for rudimentary non-clan type social institutions to rise. However, the important role of the family in establishing a foundation from which to build upon cannot be belittled. The stone age man in China left evidence of having a concern for fellows in their party and thoughts of an afterlife. For example, artifacts from 130,000 years ago in a cave in southern China reveal that a man’s head, the Maba Man, was severely fractured, yet he was rendered appropriate aid which enabled



him to survive (Clements, 2019, p. 31). Items found in burials of human remains included ornamental beads, shells, and carved bones with some remains being placed in a specific location suggesting that it was considered a “burial” chamber (Hsu, 2012, p. 25).

Neolithic times in China reveal recurring struggles among people to think about, test, evaluate, solidify, consolidate, and grow the best forms of higher social interaction. In other words, how to increase social integration. Humans advanced not only by exerting ways to hold power over the natural world, producing a new form of “energy” according to historians (Hsu, 2012), but in line with symbolic interactionists, they learned how to exert power over other humans through symbolic means in the form of higher-level beliefs to guide behaviors. Social interaction, organization and division were based on socially constructed quasi-religious beliefs (Hinch, 2018). This point will be revisited below when religion among the ancient humans is discussed.

## **The First Dynasty of China: The Shang**

A prolific number of archeological relics were uncovered in China dating back to what is known as the Shang dynasty. Hence, it is generally viewed as the first dynasty of China. Farmers around a town called Anyang found “dragon bones” in their fields. They were regularly ground up as medicine until an expert came across them. Astonishingly, they contained writings that turned out to be early Chinese language (Clements, 2019). The bones were shoulder blades from cows and the bottom plates of turtles. They are commonly known as “oracle bones” because of their use in divination. Also found from the Shang dynasty were many decorated bronze vessels with three or four legs. They had elaborate carvings, many lines, and several types of creatures such as tigers and birds (Chi, 1957; Watson, 1966). Compared to bronze age Egypt, the bronze vessels of the Shang period contained more numerous shapes and decorations requiring higher level craftsmanship skills. Furthermore, they contained an unusual number of intricate writings revealing social life (Han, 2008).

The evidence from the archeological digs portrays an agricultural society in the Yellow River valley. Peasants grew food and craftspeople made things such as tools, clothing, ornaments, weapons etc. The world’s first compound recurve bow was noted to come into existence at this time (Murphey, 2010; Watson, 1966). A royal family ruled from within walled palaces. They used advisors and diviners to help them predict the future. Animal and *human* sacrifices occurred when the king died. Apparently, they believed in an afterlife in which the king’s servants would be needed.

Wooded forests contained abundant animals. People enjoyed eating them given the variety of bones found in dig sites and the types of animals sketched on ritual vessels. The bronze vessels, of which there was more than anywhere else in the world, were used in rituals often apparently honoring ancestors (Clements, 2019; Watson, 1966).

The oracle bones played a role in the quasi-religious beliefs of the Shang. They had become a tool through which the living communicated with the spirits of the ancestors. Answers to the unknown such as war and floods could be found by scratching questions onto the bones. When the bones were heated, cracks developed revealing, with proper interpretation, the answers (Chang and Chang, 1978). A specialized class of people, “priests”, performed these exercises (Clements, 2019).

**Figure 1.2 Oracle Bone at the Guangzhou Museum**



The oracle bones and sacrificial vessels appear to have been part of a quasi-religion according to the common sociological definition of religion (Roberts, 2004). First, the people possessed a communal set of beliefs. Second, they sought explanations for good and bad occurring in their lives and the environment. Communication with ancestors and spirits was vital. The world was divided into sacred and profane realms. Special places existed for worship. Certain objects were imbued with high ceremonial value and apparent powers. Beliefs of a supranatural world occupied by various types of beings possessing different levels of power existed. Some individuals, namely top rulers, were seen as having the ability to communicate with entities in the sacred sphere and thus, possessed some sacredness themselves. Together, these beliefs surely had functional outcomes for all those involved (e.g., providing meaning and organization to social life), a crucial characteristic of religion according to Durkheim (Jones, 1986). Third, actions toward the sacred realm involved rituals that sought to bring about a sense of awe in the people who were involved. Fourth, the objects and actions took on deeper symbolic meaning to help convey the belief system to people, another crucial aspect of religion (Munson, 1986).

With regard to sacredness, various historical books describe the legendary individuals that existed in ancient China as having god like superpowers. They invented language, agriculture, medicine, fire tools, pottery, dwellings, fishnets and so on. And supposedly their direct descendants kicked off the mysterious Xia dynasty described above (Po, 2009; Xie, 2009). Although they at times fought with each other, they are known for their dedication towards making life better for all humans by taming nature and displaying filial piety. It should be noted that Confucian scholars were the first to write these legends down (Clements, 2019), leaving open the possibility that their worldview might have been partly cast backwards into time. Finally, it should be noted that the god like creators of the known world and life in it were mainly male. This pattern solidified the idea that power should be wielded by men.

The Bronze Age came about in China aided by knowledge of making pottery. Molds were carefully made and molten bronze poured in. Then the molds were broken. The resulting metal objects were then polished and ready for use. Provincial level museums in China contain many three or four-legged bronze sacrificial wine vessels.

Some anthropologists and sociologists, for example Lewis Henry Morgan and Auguste Comte (McGee and Warms, 2003; Ashley and Orenstein, 2005) argue that each stage of human development sows the seeds for later more developed forms to emerge. From this perspective, the

**Figure 1.3 Mid-Shang Dynasty Bronze Wine Vessel with Animal Mask**



hunters and gathers discovered how to use fire. Knowledge and control of fire led eventually to the development of pottery. Knowledge of pottery allowed for containers to be made to store food. Henceforth, a more sedentary lifestyle became possible. The pottery knowledge and industry promoted metal storage containers, knives, pans, symbolic figures etc., to be developed for more intricate and elaborate practical and symbolic purposes. Villages and towns arose. Writing was developed to keep track of valuable grains. Hierarchy and social stratification followed, and so on (Moore, 2009). Indeed, the pattern of social and cultural development seen in China's ancient history seems to follow this type of evolutionary layout.

The writing system in use at the time was highly developed with some 2,000 words. By the end of the Shang dynasty the writing system had 5,000

words (Murphey, 2010). The Chinese writing system is distinctly unique. Thus, it did not seem to be transferred from another part of the world such as the Middle East. Perhaps the idea of writing things down came across from such a distance. However, there are no resemblances between the two systems (Chi, 1957). The Shang people also apparently used wheeled chariots in warfare. Pictographs of chariots appear in the early inscriptions. Did the idea get transferred from the Middle East? Some anthropologists argue that many of the similarities in culture found around the world are the result of cultural diffusion while others argue that it can result from independent local/regional evolution (Moore, 2009).

According to the archeological record, in 1300 BC or so the earliest known writings in China clearly were in existence. They were preserved on bones and shells. Perhaps the writing existed somewhat before this time on more perishable items. Some pottery finds in northern China contain what look like early Chinese characters. But no one has been able to decipher them. One guess is that some of these very early symbols represented different clans or tribes. The word for dawn might have come from a picture of the sun over mountains from people who lived next to the Taishan mountains. Another guess is that the geometric lines represented events which were being counted because they were repeatedly found on artifacts. At its oldest, the characters could be 5,000 to 6,000 years old, emerging from Yangshao and Dawenkou cultures of the time (Fazzioli, 1987; Han, 2008). The bones and shells were largely used for divination purposes or talking with the ancestors (Tsien, 2011).

Communication with other groups of people in nearby areas could have been facilitated with the writing system, and hence, unification of a broader region in China made possible. Other cultures in the world, specifically in the Middle East, developed a writing system before the Chinese. But the Chinese system is the oldest one in continual existence in the entire world (Han, 2008). Some experts also say that the Chinese culture is the oldest culture in the world; the other cultures from ancient times, such as Egyptian and Mayan, having passed away a long time ago (Chi, 1957). Some argue that the unique writing system, being based on pictographs and hence, understandable to people who spoke varying dialects, helped to fuse, and unify the various cultures that existed in China and contributed to their continuous evolution as opposed to fragmentation and extinction that occurred in other ancient writing systems and cultures around the world (Han, 2008; Hsu, 2012).

The Shang appeared to have been a violent and barbaric group of people at times. They made animal sacrifices to the gods and ancestor spirits, often destructing their bodies and burning them. Foundations of the Shang capital

contained many dog bones. A ceremony to a river god involved the sacrifice—drowning--of a virgin to be “married” to the river. The tombs of top Shang aristocracy contained human sacrifices, namely decapitated slaves or prisoners. In some cases, concubines were sacrificed wholly intact. Communication with the highest deities was only for the Shang rulers to perform. Priests could communicate with nature spirits. Ancestral spirits were more accessible to those who performed the rituals (Clements, 2019, p. 46-7).

The history of concubines in China goes back to the Shang dynasty and before and attests to the somewhat polygamous nature of ancient Chinese society. Indeed, the legend of the great Sage King Yao includes the tale of him marrying both of his daughters to his meritocratically chosen successor to the throne, thus bypassing his son (Clements, 2019). Polygamy, or here polygyny--more than one wife, tends to be found in societies that have a sex ratio imbalance, households seeking productivity and social prestige advantages, and a need to forge political ties (Kottak, 2015). The last two factors seem to apply to society in ancient China: it had a growing agricultural foundation based on increasingly larger scale production of grains (millet in the north, rice in the south) combined with competition among various clans and tribes spread across a wide but accessible geographical terrain in the heart of China. It was bordered by a more nomadic type of society in the drier plains to the north and traders to the west, both of which were prone to invading the heartland.

The Shang literally termed their place “the middle country” given its central location in East Asia. By the end of the Shang dynasty, extreme social hierarchies were in existence among the people. A royal aristocratic group lived at the top in great luxury. They lived in grand palaces and buried their dead in elaborate tombs. Slaves were used to take care of menial work. Resources were being drained for the royal family and also to fight border wars with adjacent tribes (Murphey, 2010). The last Shang king supposedly loved drink, food and women so much so that he neglected his duties to respect the gods (Clements, 2019).

Before continuing with China’s dynastic story, some impressions of Shang society can be gleaned from the information and meanings contained within the early written language carved into thousands of oracle bones. Language is one dimension of culture according to anthropologists. Thus, in order to understand a culture, one should learn its language (Ulin, 1990). Indeed, Emile Durkheim said that language is like clothing in which thought is wrapped up (Traugott, 1978). Although Chinese language has been altered along the centuries, the current day language has some continuity