

Part 1

Chapter 1

A Magic Portal

Imagine a magic portal that takes us a long way back in time, to some 3,000 years ago. Not to the cold stones from crumbled temples of ages past, nor to the mute skulls and bones unearthed by an archeologist's spade, though these are certainly helpful aids. Through this portal we can explore an ancient China, hear the voices of its diverse peoples, common folk as well as kings and lords — their worlds, their daily lives, many centuries before Buddha, a full millennium before Christ.

These voices are preserved for us in the form of poems, odes, and songs, in a collection called the *Shijing*¹. This slender volume tells the stories behind some of these voices. Story telling is a popular art in all cultures. It is always a source of delight, for the teller as well as for the audience. Figure 1 shows an archeological find from Ancient China: the teller was dancing during his story, and accompanying himself with a drum. The expression of pure joy on his face is timeless.

Strictly speaking, China had not yet come into being that long ago. The word itself, “China,” derives from the name of the first empire, the *Qin*², founded in 221 BCE by *Ying Zheng*³, who is also called *Shi Huangdi*⁴, or the First Emperor. The root *Sin-* as in *Sinitic* or *Sino-Tibetan* comes from the same source. Previous to the *Qin* unification, there were dozens of kingdoms, tribes, and clans, many of them clustered in the sprawling plains nourished by the

1. 诗经 2. 秦 3. 嬴政 4. 始皇帝

Figure 1
Story Teller Beating Drum (击鼓艺人)



Story-telling is a popular art in all cultures. In this archeological find from Ancient China, the performer was accompanying his story with a drum. The expression of joy on his face is timeless.

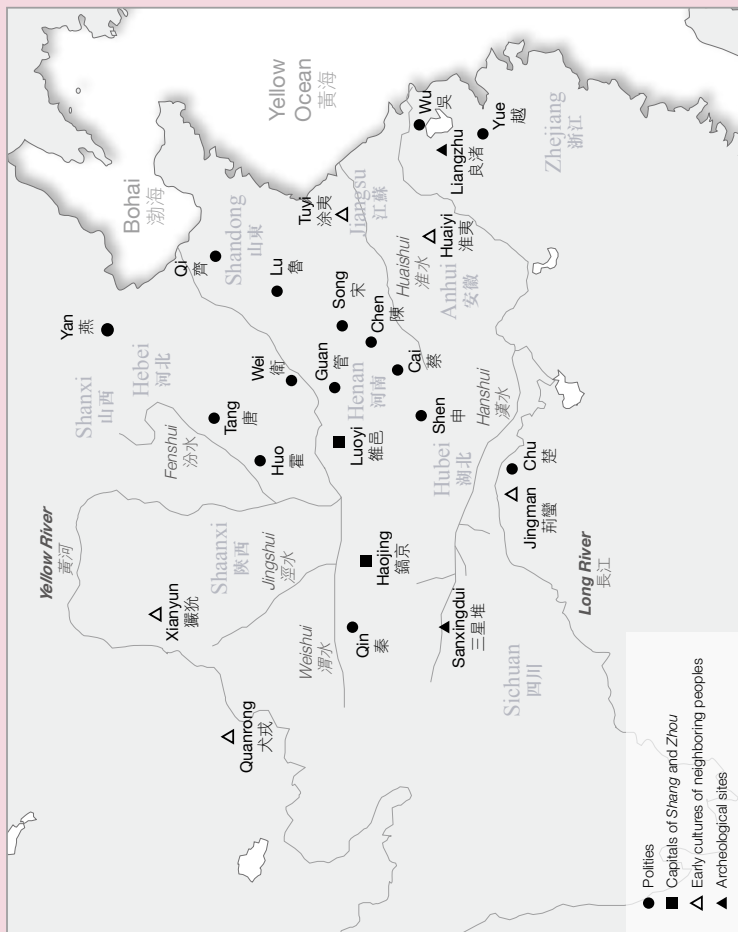
mighty Yellow River, *Huanghe*¹. Temperature was several degrees higher 3,000 years ago; it was a very different and much greener landscape, rich in diverse fauna and flora, with roaming elephants, tigers and rhinoceroses. In the poems we will soon explore, both tigers and rhinoceroses are mentionedⁱⁱ, including drinking vessels made from rhinoceros horns. Elvin (2004) gives a detailed environmental history of China from early times. Li and Jin (2008) discusses the origin of the peoples from a genetic perspective.

Figure 2 gives us a sketch of that ancient landscape, centered around the Central Plain, or *Zhongyuan*² in Chineseⁱⁱⁱ. Broadly speaking, the Central Plain was relatively self-contained, with ocean to the east, mountains to the west, deserts to the north, and jungles to the south^{iv}. Millennia before our story here, which begins around 3,000 years ago, the primary way of life in the *Zhongyuan* area was agriculture, especially with wheat in the north and rice in the south. This was in stark contrast to neighbors, especially to the north and northwest, who were pastoral nomads. This tension between two ways of life was a recurrent theme in much of Chinese prehistory and history. The *Cultural Atlas of China* by Blunden and Elvin (1998) is an accessible and comprehensive study of such issues.

Let us first look at some of the rivers on this landscape since they provide the water which is the source of life. The Yellow River, or *Huanghe*, originates in the highlands of *Qinghai*³. It traces a path that is like the outline of a top hat, with its top segment hovering above 42 degrees North, until it bends sharply southward. In this southward course, it serves as the boundary between two modern provinces, *Shaanxi*⁴ to its west, and *Shanxi*⁵ to its east. Along this southward course it is joined by the *Fenshui*⁶. Further south, it is joined by the *Weishui*⁷, and at that junction makes another sharp angle eastward, this time separating *Shanxi* to its north and *Henan*⁸ to its south. From there, the River, or simply referred to as *He*⁹ in ancient times, courses to the northeast, to empty eventually in the *Bohai*¹⁰.

1. 黄河 2. 中原 3. 青海 4. 陕西 5. 山西 6. 汾水 7. 渭水 8. 河南 9. 河 10. 渤海

Figure 2
Ancient China around the Central Plain



Two great rivers, the Yellow River and the Long River, provide the water which is the major source of life for the cultures of early China.

The other great river, the Long River, or *Changjiang*¹, was also simply referred to as *Jiang*². In modern times, segments of it also have other names, such as *Jinshajiang*³, and *Yangzijiang*⁴, the latter name sometimes appearing in English spelled as “Yangtze.” This great river originates in the far west flowing south. But in *Yunnan*⁵ its path was blocked by huge granite formations, and took a sharp turn eastward. From there it maintains a steady course eastward, hovering around 30 degrees North, crossing the breadth of China until it empties into the East China Sea, or *Donghai*⁶. Near the modern city of *Wuhan*⁷, it is joined by a famous tributary, the *Hanshui*⁸ or *Hanjiang*⁹.

Although there are many other water systems, these two great rivers, *Changjiang* and *Huanghe*, or simply referred to as *Jiang* and *He*, have a special meaning for Chinese civilization. In addition to the water they provide, without which life is impossible, they are also the major arteries for communication and transport.

Figure 2 also shows us some of the lesser known tribes on this landscape, lesser known because they appear mostly as outsiders, enemies, or “barbarians.” In the northwest shown in Figure 2, the *Huanghe* flows northward across the territories of the *Xianyun*¹⁰ and the *Quanrong*^{11v}. In the south, the *Changjiang* flows by the territory of the *Jingman*¹². In the east we see the two tribes of *Tuyi*¹³ and *Huaiyi*¹⁴. The *-rong*¹⁵, *-man*¹⁶, and *-yi*¹⁷ in these names were generic labels given by ancient historians to refer to neighboring tribes to the west, south, and east respectively; the generic label not illustrated in Figure 2 is *-di*¹⁸, to refer to tribes in the north. The people of the *Shang* and *Zhou* saw their location as being in the middle; hence the term *Zhongguo*¹⁹, or “Middle Kingdom.”

1. 长江 2. 江 3. 金沙江 4. 扬子江 5. 云南 6. 东海 7. 武汉 8. 汉水 9. 汉江
10. 獫狁 11. 犬戎 12. 荆蛮 13. 涂夷 14. 淮夷 15. 戎 16. 蛮 17. 夷 18. 狄
19. 中国

The attitude the Ancient Chinese held toward some of their neighbors can be seen in the characters they used to refer to them. For example, 狄 *di* is written with a left component 犬 *quan* that means “dog,”^{vi} and 蛮 *man* is written with a bottom component 虫 *chong* that means “insect.” 戎 *rong* and 夷 *yi* fare a little better, their characters being constructed from components that mean weapons of war, namely 戈 *ge* “spear” and 弓 *gong* “bow”^{vii} respectively. Another neighboring tribe often referred to in Ancient China was the *qiang* 羌, written with a character whose top component 羊 *yang* means “sheep.” These ethnic labels had to wait till the 20th century for some of them to be written with less discriminatory characters. See the last section of this book for more discussion on this development.

Here is a passage from the *Book of Rites* or *Liji*¹, one of the Five Classics in the Confucian tradition, which also reflects the same inhospitable attitude:^{viii}

“The tribes on the east were called Yi. They had their hair unbound, and tattooed their bodies. Some of them ate their food without its being cooked with fire. Those on the south were called Man. They tattooed their foreheads, and had their feet turned in toward each other. Some of them ate their food without its being cooked with fire. Those on the west were called Rong. They had their hair unbound, and wore skins. Some of them did not eat grain-food. Those on the north were called Di. They wore skins of animals and birds, and dwelt in caves. Some of them did not eat grain-food.”

Two famous archeological sites are also shown in Figure 2. The remains from both sites reveal high levels of culture, as can be viewed in their respective museums. The *Liangzhu* culture, for instance, left behind finely worked jade, silk, ivory and lacquer

1. 礼记

artifacts, many of these used at ritual burials. It has been dated to 5,500 to 4,000 BP, and ranged over much of the east coast, from Lake Tai or Taihu¹ in the south extending northward all the way to Shandong².

The other archeological site in Figure 2 is *Sanxingdui*³, situated not far from the historical city of *Chengdu*⁴ in China's southwest. Dating back some 3,000 years, it was contemporaneous with the first dynasties in the Central Plain, and there may have been limited interactions between the two regions. International exhibits from the *Sanxingdui* culture have thrilled viewers all over the world, with its impressive bronze statues, some standing over 2.6 meters tall. Also memorable are its many masks, some with grossly exaggerated facial features, including beak-like noses, ears extending laterally, and eyes protruding outward like antennas.

Indeed, toward the end of the second millennium BCE, there were several archeological sites with bronze technology. In addition to *Sanxingdui*, they were found also in *Zhouyuan*⁵ in the Wei river valley, in *Shilou*⁶ in west-central *Shanxi*, at *Sufutun*⁷ in *Shandong*, at *Ningxiang*⁸ in *Hunan*⁹, at *Xin'gan*¹⁰ in *Jiangxi*¹¹, etc. However, our attention will be focused on the *Anyang* site in *Henan* for the simple distinction that these people left behind an immense historical legacy in the form of oracle bone inscriptions.

With these inscriptions from the *Shang* dynasty of over 3,000 years ago, China transitioned from the mist of legends and myths into a tradition of documented history. Combining the information in these inscriptions with the poems and songs composed around the same period, we can begin to piece together an ancient landscape of how people expressed their loves and waged their wars when the world was still relatively young. That is the landscape we will explore here.

1. 太湖 2. 山东 3. 三星堆 4. 成都 5. 周原 6. 石楼 7. 苏阜屯 8. 宁乡 9. 湖南
10. 新干 11. 江西

Endnotes

- i. Following the usage on Mainland China, the system of spelling used here is the *Hanyu Pinyin* 汉语拼音, and the Chinese words are written in their simplified forms, called *Jianti Zi* 简体字. For simpler appearance, the high level tone, or tone 1, is sometimes not marked with diacritics. Also to avoid diacritics, the letter “ü” is often replaced by “v”; e.g., “nü” by “nv”. Square brackets are used to indicate phonetic values, such as the use of [ŋ] to represent the single sound usually spelled with the two letters “ng.”
- ii. For instance in poem *m234*.
- iii. The names in Figures 2 and 3 of Chapter 3 are given in Traditional sinograms while Simplified sinograms are used in this book; see the earlier section Sinograms, Traditional and Simplified for discussion of the difference. As an example, note the Traditional sinogram 漢 *han* at approximately the 6 o'clock position in the figures, which labels the river flowing southeastward into the *Changjiang*. The corresponding Simplified sinogram is 汉.
- iv. The Central Plain is of course a large area, containing diverse topography from region to region.
- v. Authorities differ on whether the *Xianyun* and *Quanrong* were one tribe or two distinct tribes.
- vi. Some characters when used as components for other more complex characters change their shapes to more compressed forms; this is the case of 犬 as it is used as the left component in 狄.
- vii. Identifying part of 夷 as 弓 may be due to later developments of the sinograms in question; I thank Takashima Kenichi for this information.
- viii. Based on Poo 2005:65.