Introduction: The Value of Chinese Culture to the World

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I

In 2006, I wrote a book whose title in English is *China: A New Cultural History*,[1] and which narrated the overall context of the development of Chinese culture, beginning with a certain number of regional cultures that gradually merged over time, finally achieving a huge scale nearly equal to that of a world power. When I chose the original Chinese title for this work—*Wangu jianghe* 萬古江河 (*Rivers of Ten Thousand Ages*)—my goal was to describe the length of time that this culture had endured, and by "rivers" I naturally was referring to China's two "lifebloods," the Yangzi and the Yellow River, both of which nourished regions that became one part of China's culture. Of course, Chinese culture as a whole also includes areas beyond the Yangzi and Yellow River basins. By including the word "rivers" in the title, I also hoped to express my aim of tracing things from their origins down to the present day and describing how the different local cultures of each region had merged into one, finally forming the

1 Cho-yun Hsu, *China: A New Cultural History*, trans. Timothy D. Baker, Jr. and Michael S. Duke (NY: Columbia University Press, 2012).

largest cultural space in the ancient world. This culture belongs not to a tribe, not to a people, not to a country, but to all humanity.

We might call this cultural China a "universal state." Of course, I use the term "universal state" with no connotation of "imperialism." The idea is rather that the meaning of Chinese culture is defined in the Confucian *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*) in terms of "bringing peace and security to other people," and these "other people"—the "one hundred surnames" as we say in Chinese—simply refer to different groups of people, not one particular "people." By way of contrast, several of the world's major cultural systems grew out of Judaism: Judaism, Catholicism, the Eastern Orthodox church, and Islam all have an "authoritarian" God who favors and protects a particular ethnic group or the god's believers. Belief in these gods' teachings is basically exclusive. In the process of the evolution of Chinese culture, however, by the time of the Zhou dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the abstract notion of "heaven" had come to represent the universe as a whole. Heaven and man constitute and affirm one another. Consequently, Chinese culture defines the human world in terms of the universe, after which the human world nurtures its various "spaces:" countries, peoples, kinship groups, neighbors, friends. These levels, extending from the individual to the universe, cannot be broken, much less be set against one another. A continuous order holds all the levels together.

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After I finished writing *China: A New Cultural History*, I came to feel that the book's narrative was actually about the *internal* evolution of the Chinese cultural sphere. But since this cultural sphere exists between a great universe above and a complete world below, how should we locate the space that China can comfortably occupy? This is my mission in writing this book. In line with this, I toyed with possible titles to go along with *Rivers of Ten Thousand Ages*, such as "Ten Thousand Streams Returning to the Source," or "Rivers Flowing into the Sea"—the oceans being the largest bodies of water on earth, where all rivers eventually return.

As I wrote this book, which is based on many scattered archaeological sites and the extension and transformation of a number of ancient cultures, I came to a realization: that in the course of its long-term

evolution, Chinese culture materialized through many individual sites that were arranged in sequences. As the archeologist Su Bingqi 蘇秉琦 put it: "regional systems and cultural types" serve as clues through which we can organize the archeological sites, many of which appear to have individual characteristics, as elements of ancient history, and once we grasp the proper sequence, we can see the evolution of a particular cultural expression over time. In this book, I present Chinese history in terms of temporal sequences and spatial diffusions, and on that basis follow the trajectories of human movement and the shape of interactions between communities and countries. In other words, I try to tell the story of scattered archeological sites in a comprehensive narrative, having to do with vast geographical and temporal distributions, and large cultural groups represented by their particular characteristics.

Before I wrote this book, in terms of the developmental model of China during its archeological era, I had basically accepted Chinese historian Fu Ssu-nien's 傅斯年 (1896–1950) "Yi and Xia, East and West" theory,[2] which sought to explain the extension and expansion of Chinese culture from the traditional idea of the Central Plains. More recently, Professor Yan Sun's new book, *Many Worlds Under One Heaven: Material Culture, Identity, and Power in the Northern Frontiers of the Western Zhou, 1045–771 BCE*, starts in the west and examines the western Han River where the Qin state originated, and then turns to Zhouyuan (the Zhou central plains), the Jing River basin, the development of the Zhou regional state Jin in the Fen River basin of Shanxi, and finally the northwestern regional state Yan, located at the junction of Yanshan and the grasslands. Fairly well-developed steppe cultures are found to the

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2 Translator's note: Fu's theory 夷夏東西說, now generally considered obsolete, argued that Shang-dynasty China was developed by two ethnic groups, the Yi in the east and the Xia in the West. Even if details of the theory have been proven wrong in subsequent research, Fu nonetheless introduced the idea of ethnic homogeneity into Chinese ancient history.

north and west of the four areas where the states of Qin, Zhou, Jin and Yan were situated. Yan Sun investigated the cultural particularities of the artifacts unearthed from the sites of the four areas, and found they were all intimately intertwined with the steppe culture, the traces of which can be seen in the artifacts. Sun's theory can also help us to understand that when traditional archaeology talked about the evolution of the Central Plains from east to west, this is also inextricably linked to grassland cultures.

In this book, I have nonetheless followed the rethinking of our knowledge of archaeological sites, which discovered that the two parallel regions, the Yangzi and Yellow River basins, actually developed separately and subsequently became entangled with each other. It is absolutely not the case that ancient China developed solely from the Central Plains. I would particularly like to point out the regions to the west of Guanlong, including Qinghai and the Helan and Qilian mountain ranges, possess an importance that goes far beyond their being a Western "periphery."

The questions raised by evidence from the Sanxingdui site eventually led me to understand that the area stretching from the eastern foothills of the Yin Mountains and extending to the north of Sichuan and the upper waters of the Yangzi was a transition point between farming and nomadism; also that it was in this very region that certain human activities carried out in continental East Asia were necessarily linked to the central part of East Asia, the territory that would become China. This is what led me to use the term *Rong* 戎[3] as a common name for the non-Han peoples of the area, when characterizing the interaction between these eastern-most nomadic groups and groups on the eastern side of the divide. The same thing led me to understand that the expanse of mountains, rivers, and lakes from the north of Sichuan to the mouth of the Yangzi River is

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3 Translator's note: Rong is one of many words used to name or describe various non-Han groups found in the Chinese northwest during this period. Others include Man, Yi, and Di.

also an area where ancient Chinese civilization evolved. And some of the evolutionary processes at work here were brought about by the diffusion of ethnic groups from the Bohai Bay on the east coast in Neolithic Shandong 4,000 years ago, which made the development of the Yangzi River and the Yellow River immensely complex.

The so-called "spread of ethnic groups" will be described later in this book in terms of the spread of the Longshan culture (the Black Pottery culture, ca. 3000–ca. 1900 BCE). In order to simplify the text, I will use "Haidai area" to cover this whole cultural area. The place where the "Eight surnames of Zhu Rong" 祝融八姓 spread is also covered.

Later on, when people from the Yellow Sea area expanded to the east coast, bringing about changes to the Fujian-Guangdong region, we see the beginnings of our ancestors in ancient China as these various groups interacted and collaborated, finally creating the Chinese world. On this big stage, one of the most important dramas of Eastern humanity took place. In the historical era, the factors that intervened in China's history seem to have been mainly nomadic peoples from the continental north and west, who entered China one after the other, some of them having been integrated into China ever since. In the modern era, however, the significance of the Silk Road and movement from Central Asia into China gave way to Europeans and other East Asians who came via the sea. These maritime stimuli truly constituted a great shock to China, to the extent that China could no longer be a great continental country, but instead had to set sail on the Pacific Ocean and join the rest of the world. The second half of my book will necessarily address the question of how China responded to this challenge.

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II

In the following chapters, I attempt to organize China's ancient evolution into three "core areas," each of which has its own process of development and presents its own intrinsic characteristics. The interactions between the three "cores," either in terms of extension, evolution, or diffusion, are the "biographies" that narrate the growth of Chinese culture itself as it takes shape.

The first of these three core regions (Region 1) is the Yellow River basin, which stretches from Guanlong to the Bohai Sea. To the north are the steppes, the homeland of the nomads. The second (Region 2) is to the south, below the "Qinling-Han River-Huai River line" that divides north and south China, where we find the Yangzi River and the lakes of central China. The third (Region 3) is even further to the south, where the Nanling Mountains divide the Yangzi River valley from the Pearl River delta, which is customarily known as the south and is also an extension of the first zone.

In fact, historically, when the first core region was invaded by northern nomads, it would retreat to Region 2, a leitmotif in China's national history. This second zone has another feature: its easternmost point is the mouth of the Yangzi River and Taihu Lake, where the kingdoms of Chu and Wu met in the Warring States period (476–221 BCE), and where it also overlaps with the coastal areas of China's third zone. Region 2 traces its source to the northwest, in the Min River basin in northern Sichuan. This entire second core area has a warm climate, sufficient rainfall, and a topography and living conditions that are indeed superior to those of the first area.

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In writing this book, I gradually came to understand that the diffusion of the culture of the Haidai region brought with it excellent cultural traditions and stimulated the development of civilization in various areas where the migrants newly arrived. In short, the most important thing about the spread of Longshan-Dawenkou culture from the Haidai region is that they brought the essence of their cultural traditions to the Yangzi River basin and the southeast coast, ending the Neolithic Age in various places and marking a turning point toward the Bronze Culture. The southeast coast south of the Yangzi River estuary, bounded by the Nanling Mountains and Wuyi Mountains, including Yunnan and Guizhou in the southwest hinterland, can be called the third core area, or Region 3.

Region 3 begins where the coastal area of the first region meets the "watery tail" of the second region, which then hooks up with the coasts and mountains from Liangzhu to Guangdong. This coastal zone meanders in and out, overlapping with parts of the first and second zones, and is also continuous with the entire coastal zone south of the Yangzi River delta.

These three core areas are why I named this book *Jingwei huaxia*.[4] Mountains and hills, along with rivers and lakes, overlap and intersect everywhere, forming the vast foundation of the mainstream of Chinese civilization. Beyond these three zones, of course, we find China's northwest, with its lofty mountains and desert oases, and the sources of many of China's rivers are found in the Himalayas, or the Tian or Yin mountains. This is China's vast western territory, which we might consider yet another zone. However, in terms of the narrative employed in this volume, the development process of Chinese civilization in the era we are concerned occurs mainly in the above three core regions. The northwest, along with southwestern China, with its high mountains, deep valleys, and ethnic complexity, were hinterlands into which Chinese civilization gradually expanded. In this book, we will not spend much time with these regions. In the future, should time and opportunity permit, I think we can still discuss the development of these two regions as well.

With a little imagination, I could fit these core areas onto a map of China. The first core area was in constant contact with northern nomads, although the "contacts" took different forms over time. In the second core area we note yet again the influence of the Rong culture in northwestern China.[5] Region 2 extended to Sichuan, where it also encountered the southern cultures that emerged in the mountains further to the southwest. In the first core area, around 4,000 years ago, there was already a well-developed jade culture from Hongshan (ca. 4700–ca. 2900 BCE) to Longshan.

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4 Editor's note: *Jingwei huaxia* 經緯華夏 is the original Chinese title, which literally means "Latitudes and Longitudes of Historical China."

5 The Rong were widespread in the northwest, and from their images on bronze objects, with their high noses and deep-set eyes, it is assumed that they were probably the Asian white people later known as "Scythians." I believe, however, that they are a pre-Turkic race from the Yin mountain range, those who were described in the *Hanshu*'s 漢書 (*Book of Han*) chapter on the western regions as the Greater Yuezhi or Dayuezhi peoples, who were later oppressed by the Xiongnu and subsequently fled en masse to what eventually became Afghanistan.

However, following a dramatic change in climate 4,000 years ago, the Neolithic culture from Longshan to Dawenkou, which had been extremely developed, had to move to the second and even the third core areas.

This turn of events greatly stimulated the development of Region 2, as well as strengthening the interactions between Region 2 and Region 3. It also highlighted the characteristics of the third core region, with its Baiyue culture, which has been extended to the southern coast.

If we take the three core areas as a whole and place them on a Chinese chess board, the chess players will find themselves facing a "huge dragon." Heading in a southeasterly direction from the foot of the Himalayas, the highest point on the continent, we encounter lofty mountain peaks, and myriad rivers and lakes. In this land where mountains and rivers meet, the morning clouds wend through the mountain peaks, and the evening mist enlivens the rivers and lakes. The endlessly changing mists and clouds are like flying dragons soaring above the land of China.

In China's vast territory, wherever we find a source of water we might also find a site left by the ancients, which might be settlements, or might be tombs. Of course, more often than not, what they left behind were artifacts and items of daily use. Thus, on river banks and plateaus, in mountain valleys and on the plains, remains of those ancient people dot the land like stars in the sky. These cultural traces can also help us decipher where the sites came from and where they went, as well as the exchanges between them and the changes they experienced. As Chinese archaeologist Su Bingqi put it: "Different sites of the same culture give us clues to that culture's geographical distribution." And if we note changes in the sites due to contact and adaptation, we can see how different groups modified their life patterns and cultural content over time. In this chapter, we are using the cloudy, misty traces of these ancient cultures to deduce how they lived together and how they moved about the vast mountains and valleys: the metaphor of the soaring dragon in the sky matches the reality of the rich flourishing on the ground.

In the *I Ching* or *Zhouyi* 易經 / 周易 (*Book of Changes*), the explanation of the meaning of the Qian hexagram talks about "flying dragon in

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the heavens," where dragon and sky cast light on one another, producing myriad changes but no central feature, the happy outcome of "a flight of dragons without heads."[6] And even if these dragons fly into the sea, from the two seaside peaks of Mount Tai and Mount Yu facing the sea, we can watch them cavorting in the billowing waves.

Clouds suffuse China's skies and water China's fields, so that everywhere there is water to irrigate the crops and nurture the people. These kind, hard-working farmers live and die on their own labor power. They do not need plunder and war to sustain their lives. However, when they encounter foreign invaders, the farmers also try to protect their homes and families. These scattered villages, with their fields and pools, block the invasion of the northern barbarians.

If the natural defenses of China's villages proved not to be up to par, China's nerve center could immediately be decamped, abandoning the first core area for the second. For example, when the Western Jin left the north and moved south in the early fourth century, the move was to the second core area; the defensive outposts were established on the lakes and rivers in Xiangyang and Jingmen, and on the northern banks of the Huai River. If the invaders penetrated further, the nerve center would retreat further south to the third core area, where the kingdoms of Chu and Wu met in the Warring States period. For example, after the humiliation of Jingkang in 1127, the Song moved its capital to Hangzhou, maintaining defense lines in what would become Sichuan and Shaanxi, with the lakes and rivers of Xiangyang and Jingmen as back-up defenses.

When Japan invaded China in the twentieth century, the Kuomintang government retreated from the coastal areas to Sichuan, with the Three Gorges of the Yangzi River as the first line of defense, even as it opened a rear outlet through the mountains of the southwest, leading to the Indian Ocean and eventually to the world.

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6 Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Cary F. Baynes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 9–10.