

CHAPTER ONE

Ape-men to the Shang
(700,000 – 1750 BC)

China is the size of a continent – marginally smaller than Europe and larger than the United States. The north is brown, being semi-arid with hot summers and cold winters that bring snow. The south is green, rainy, subtropical and though cold in winter seldom sees snow. Three great west-to-east river systems mark this division together with a central area: in the north, the Yellow River (which has dozens of times changed its course to the sea); in the centre, the Yangtze; and in the south, the Pearl (west).^{*} Its scenery encompasses hill and mountain ranges, deserts and fertile sandy plains, forests and jungles and gorges and countless streams and lakes. In this land ancestral apes, ancestral humans, and modern man, with much evidence of continuity between them, have laid their bones for two million years. Indeed, finds in south China in 1983 have been claimed by some scientists to place our first ancestors there, not in Africa, about ten million years ago.

When it comes to recounting a history of China, two contradictory tendencies catch attention. On the one hand, no people have been more assiduous in recording their history than the Chinese, whose first accounts were set down in the final millennium BC and punctiliously updated in dynasty after

^{*} In this narrative, the area northwards of just south of the Yellow River will generally be referred to as 'the north' and the area south of it as 'the south'.

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dynasty. On the other hand, efforts to resurrect the remotest times have not been helped by a peasant tradition of using ground-up fossil-bones – called Dragon Bones – for curing any malady you can think of, dragons being considered beneficent. The practice did no harm, which, as a Scots scientist remarked, is more than can be said for many drugs in the British Pharmacopoeia; but it has meant the consignment of priceless information to the stomachs of the credulous.

Current theories have it that the earth emerged out of chaos 4,600 million years ago, that the diminutive shrew-like creatures from whom we descend were hunting insects in the trees sixty million years ago, and that ape and man diverged over ten million years ago. By such reckoning modern man who appeared perhaps over a hundred thousand years or so ago is mint-new.

Before the 1983 finds, ancestral apes were thought to have spread from Africa to Java and thence to China. They evolved into early but true humans, *Homo erectus*, who have left indications of their existence in south and north-central China from about 700,000 BC. There followed a steady evolutionary development into beings of whom the most famous representative is named Peking Man after his occupation of a cave near what became Peking (Beijing) – in fact about twenty-five miles westward of it in hills at a place called Chou-k'ou-tien. By his time – starting about 400,000 BC – mankind was becoming divided into its five basic racial groupings, of which one, the Mongoloids, are believed to have given Peking Man his genes.

His brain size of over 1,000 cubic centimetres approached modern man's 1,350, but he was not very prepossessing. Standing about five feet high, with a low, beetling brow and receding chin, no doubt bloodied and stinking, he had but a three in a hundred chance of reaching the age of fifty. He ate mostly deer, but also leopard, bear, sabre-toothed tiger, hyena, elephant, rhino, camel, water-buffalo, boar and horse; his diet included wild fruit and nuts; and he consumed the flesh, brains and marrow of his fellow humans whom he killed by blows to the

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skull. He cooked his food, for he was one of the world's first makers and users of fire; and he collected brightly coloured pebbles, perhaps for the pleasure of their sparkle in the light of his fire, suggesting a dawning aesthetic sensibility. He left a multitude of Old Stone Age tools.

In the course of his 200,000-year occupation of his cave – has any habitation ever provided a continuous home for so long? – he and his fellow cavemen elsewhere in China made significant evolutionary advances. These culminated, as his immediate successor, in modern man, *Homo sapiens* ('wise man' – perhaps done into Latin to fend off mockery). It is interesting that Neanderthal Man, the precursor of *Homo sapiens* in Europe, seemingly never appeared in China, suggesting that those scientists are right who believe he was in an evolutionary cul-de-sac and not on the road to modern man. Interesting also is the fact that Peking Man and his descendants carried the seeds not only of the Mongoloid sub-races to be called Chinese but of most Far Eastern races, of the Eskimos, and of the American Indians.

While the ascent of man in China first reached the *Homo sapiens* stage in a sprinkling of places in the north and south of the country, from about 50,000 BC people with diversified cultures were living all over it. Their most famous brethren left their remains, dated about 18,000 BC, in the same hills at Chou-k'ou-tien once occupied by Peking Man, but in a higher cave, hence called the Upper Cave.

They belonged to the worldwide culture of the Late Stone and Mesolithic Ages. It was a culture tirelessly inventive in consolidating the triumph of *Homo sapiens* in evolution's survival stakes. While the last Ice Age neared an end, men and women reached their full prowess as hunters and gatherers. Those in the Upper Cave preyed on tigers, leopards, boars and wolves in the nearby woods, deer and gazelle in the nearby steppes, and huge fish in nearby lakes. For these purposes they used not only stone but also bone, shell and wood to make shafted spears, harpoons with detachable heads, bows and arrows, and specialized tools with finely polished blades. They

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built temporary summer shelters away from their winter cave. They plied eye needles to hemstitch leather for clothes and containers. They perfected the felling axe; devised pick and adze, and, as big game diminished, made traps for smaller animals together with nets and hooks for fishing, which led them to chip out canoes and start adding the waters to their domain.

Theirs was probably a communal clan society with membership through the mother, since the status of father doubtless did not exist until the unobvious connection between copulation and pregnancy was realized. It has been deducted that they had totems, taboos, initiation and other rituals, respect for the dead, fear of spirits, belief in a Fertility or Mother Goddess and similar features still surviving among primitive people. Only late in the day did warfare seem to start: after all, the hunting grounds were large and the entire world population would not have crowded a modern city. People moved about in small groups, such as the one that left their relics in the Western Hills near Peking.

In the aftermath of the last Ice Age which ended in about 10,000 BC, the earth's climatic and geophysical conditions made possible man's first steps from survival towards civilization. By about 8000 BC people in the Tigris–Euphrates area of the Middle East had begun to farm. They sowed the soil and domesticated animals. And they began to make pottery, from which later generations would derive immeasurable technological progress. Above all, these developments, producing surpluses and leisure, led to the building of towns and cities, for all that this would mean to science, commerce, the arts and politics.

In post-glacial China, which was warmer and more moist than today, the agricultural revolution occurred later. If an area to the north is considered, from about a hundred and fifty miles west of where the river Wei flows into the Yellow, to some hundreds of miles downstream of the latter, and a couple of hundred miles on either side, we are looking at the anteroom of Chinese civilization. Here, in the fertile plains and valleys, people who had achieved the

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final refinements of Stone Age tool-making developed a number of farming communities in the millennium before 5000 BC.

Unlike their fellows in the south who also made pottery but continued to live in caves, they built small houses, usually round but sometimes rectangular, six – nine feet in diameter with plastered floors usually sunk below ground level, and they had storage pits for their grain which they processed with pestles and mortars. They made spears, harpoons, arrows, hoes, chisels and sickles; their remains include bone net-knitting needles, hairpins, and turquoise ornaments. In kilns heated up to nine hundred degrees Celsius they wrought coarse pottery, mostly red or brown without much decoration, in the form of jars and bowls. They chiefly domesticated pigs and dogs, and also for their food – as well as for material and medicine – they could experiment with the cultivation of a variety of indigenous plants, which included two kinds of millet, artichokes, soybean, garlic, mallow, onion and cabbage, and also peaches, plums, apricots, persimmons and mulberries, not to mention cannabis. (In the south, the earth offered a different but as wide a range that included rice, taro, yam, red beans and spinach and also oranges, kumquats, loquats, lychees, olives – and tea.)

The first clear delineation of this farming culture by about 5000 BC comes to us through the discovery of what is called, after its village of origin hard by the Yellow River, the Yang-shao Culture. It was not exclusive to the middle Yellow River basin where the Wei and Fen rivers converge with the Yellow – for example, it arose also, with regional variations, quite extensively further west, to the north-east, along the coast, and up the Yangtze. In various phases it lasted for nearly two thousand years and basically shaped Chinese civilization.

Much hunting and fishing still went on, and the gathering of seeds from chestnut, hazelnut and pine trees in the then abundant woods. But essentially these were farming communities cultivating, like their forebears, millet (some of it processed into flour) in the north, rice in the south, and vegetables; and they kept mainly domesticated dogs and pigs

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but also cattle, sheep and goats. They raised silkworms, adumbrating the product which above all others would distinguish the Chinese. Their technique of crop cultivation was slash-and-burn, and they shifted their settlements from time to time to let harvested areas lie fallow.

These settlements were large, sixteen miles in extent. They could have as many as a hundred houses grouped round a centre, with a surrounding ditch beyond which were placed the cemetery on one side (for adults, laid out on their backs; children were buried in rows between the houses) and kilns for pottery-making on the other. Animal pens and storage pits were clustered in the middle. The houses had fire-hardened floors set below ground level, with wattle-and-daub walls and thatched roofs on wooden posts; all had a hearth. They were arranged in groups, with sometimes in front of each a larger house with internal partitions, and sometimes there was a central longhouse over sixty-five feet long and twenty-five feet wide. The organization of these settlements has suggested to experts the existence of a clan system that would persist into the fabric of the future state. Another foretaste was their pottery: made on a turntable, some of it was quite beautiful, with cord, mat and basketwork impressions or polished red and black designs, but most significant were incised symbols in which some authorities see the source of Chinese writing.

In the millennium following 4000 BC the Yang-shao Culture and its affiliates in various regions interacted with each other – a nation-building process had begun – and by the millennium-end a higher culture had been progressed to. Its most famous manifestation is called the Lungshan Culture, situated in a wide area of the middle Yellow River valley but also along the Yangtze River and down the coast. Houses now tended to be rectangular, sometimes raised on a platform, but the most distinguishing feature of the villages was the surrounding wall. The Chinese had begun making themselves the greatest wall-builders on earth. At one site, for example, the twenty-foot high thirty-foot wide wall enclosed a rectangle with sides about four hundred

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yards long: starting with a ditch over forty feet wide and five feet deep, the builders spread a layer of loess – the area's dry yellow earth borne by winds from the far northern deserts – and tamped it down; added another layer, tamped it down; and so on upwards, with each layer marginally narrower so that the wall gradually sloped inward for stability.

Such walls suggest a defensive purpose, just as the finds of quantities of arrows, spears and suchlike suggest periodic warfare: indeed at one site the remains have been found of people scalped or decapitated. More elaborate burials, often furnished with articles of use or adornment, suggest increasing religiosity, as does the manufacture of ritual vessels among the more advanced pottery, which was wheel-turned and hard-fired. (This hard-firing also accounts for the first objects of metal – copper alloys, even bronze.) Of interest also in the Lungshan Culture was the first use of scapulomancy, the birth of the oracle-bone practice whereby animals' shoulder blades were burned to produce cracks which could be divined as communications of the gods – gods malign and benign who, wherever else they may exist, have been lodged in the Chinese mind, or at least in the simpler minds, right up to the present day: not a clutch of gods as in ancient religions like the Greeks', nor a single god as in Christendom and Islam, but hordes.

The period, then, of China's history called the Yang-shao and Lungshan Cultures, that is, from about 5000 BC to 2000 BC, saw an important transformation: an increasing difference among the populace in wealth and political power, increasing ritual (and remember that ritual in conduct has been one of the most enduring characteristics of Chinese society), increasing violence in both internal and external relations, increasing movement of goods and ideas between the various centres, the beginning of metallurgy and, at the end of the period, the beginning of the art and glory of writing. We have reached Chinese civilization.

Writing took thousands of years to develop, from the first signs imprinted on 5000 BC pottery to true writing on bamboo

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and boards before about 2200 BC. That is the century when, tradition has it, the first dynasty was established. Experts now generally accept that this, called the Hsia, is a fact. Scores of little 'states' were in being and it is probable that the Hsia were the strongest and most advanced, with perhaps one of their capitals on the River Lo not far from its confluence with the Yellow River and in the same broad area of the Yang-shao and Lungshan Cultures. Here have been found the vestiges of two grand palaces, one almost square with sides of three hundred and fifty feet. Stone, shell and bone still provided the implements for agriculture, but also in use were bronze vessels and weapons, as well as a wide range of pottery and lacquer.

China was not of course alone in its accelerated progress between the third and second millennium BC. The period was also marked by the development of fully stable urban societies in pioneering Mesopotamia and the Levant, Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia, by the blooming of the Indus Valley, by the first pyramid-building as dynasties arose in Egypt, and by the arrival of the early Greeks in the Peloponnese. And here we may pause to look back on the outline these pages have presented: across untold millions of years ape-man in China evolved into man and then modern man, who from being a cave-dwelling hunter went on to participate in the three great developments that have shaped our world – first the practice of farming, begun in the Middle East before about 8000 BC and leading to the founding of villages and towns; next, the deployment of metallurgy, again first discovered in the Middle East where doubtless a potter, perhaps before the third millennium, observed the effect of the heat in his kiln on copper and other minerals; and third, recording and communicating by writing – perhaps started in the third millennium BC, by priests keeping tally of tributes in the temples of Sumer. The Chinese, particularly in their core area around where the Yellow River having flowed south down the eastern side of its great loop proceeded to the sea, echoed these developments with some distinctive features of their own, such as silk production. But

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were the developments indeed an echo of what happened in the West or were they spontaneous? The answer to this question, long the subject of fervent debate, lies in the further question of how could communication have occurred over so vast and forbidding a terrain – thousands of miles of huge mountain ranges and immense deserts?

As to farming, the cultivation of crops in the fertile loess terraces along the Yellow River could have been learnt from Nature herself who spreads seed and grows it; while penning-in amenable animals must have seemed an obvious surer provider than the chase. Writing had a long period of local gestation, not suggestive of any external influence. This leaves the issue of metallurgy. The smelting of copper ore has been dated beginning in China by the third millennium BC. The areas where it was first practised had ample ores of their own, and while the Egyptians took a thousand years to learn how to make bronze by using the copper they worked, the Chinese, because their ores were frequently mixed – tin often appeared even in copper – very early (about 2200 BC) stumbled on the copper – tin process to produce bronze as the fortuitous consequence of smelting.

At all events, by 2200 BC, shrouded in the mists of time, the first dynasty of paramount rulers emerged, the Hsia Dynasty, of which only myth and legend offered a glimpse long before archaeology afforded hesitant confirmation.

These myths and legends describe a rather different cosmic genesis from the one in the Bible or for that matter the one in these pages. Some remarkably adumbrate modern theory: from a Great Beginning of total emptiness came primal matter and vital forces, 'that which was clear and light' drifting upwards to become heaven while the earth solidified; 'then, without being created, things came into existence ... but all became different, being divided into diverse species of fish, birds, beasts ... and man was born out of non-being to assume form in being'. Another account, also eschewing the Western notion of a Creator, is more picturesque. In the beginning, it says, the universe was an egg. It split open and the upper half became the

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sky, the lower the earth, while from it emerged ancestral man. Upon his death 18,000 years later he split into parts: his head formed the sun and moon, his blood the rivers and seas, his hair the forests, his sweat the rain, his breath the wind, and finally his fleas became the ancestors of mankind. For 216,000 years twelve Emperors of Heaven ruled the universe. They were followed by three sovereigns with human heads and snake-like bodies. They gave way to a series of earthly emperors, of whom the last five were recognized by China's first historian writing in the century before Christ. The foremost was called Huang-ti, the Yellow Emperor, said to have ascended the throne in 2698 BC and to have had a notoriously ugly wife named Mo-mu: he is regarded as the founder-hero of China; and besides defeating encroaching barbarians and securing supremacy of 'the land within the passes' – the middle Yellow River below the surrounding hills and mountains – he introduced the institution of government, while his chief minister devised written signs.

The benevolent reign of the Yellow Emperor was a Golden Age when all men were pure of heart and they prospered amid increasing civilization. His successors, whose reigns were likewise marked by universal accord, initiated astronomical observation, the calendar, and flood control. Each of these rulers were chosen not by birth but merit. Thus it is told of one that seeking a successor he was advised of a humble bachelor named Shun: 'He is the son of a blind man. His father is stupid, his mother is deceitful, his half-brother is arrogant. Yet he has been able to live in harmony with them and be splendidly filial. He has controlled himself and not come to wickedness.' On the strength of this encomium the Emperor decided to give Shun two of his daughters in marriage and then observe his behaviour. The test was a success. 'Come you, Shun,' the Emperor said, 'in the affairs on which you have been consulted, I have examined your words. They have been accomplished and capable of yielding fine results for three years. Do you ascend the imperial throne.' Shun demurred because he thought his virtue inferior to the task but he finally accepted the Emperor's abdication.

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Shun, known as Emperor Yü, it is who is credited with founding the Hsia Dynasty of seventeen kings, hence his regal title, Virtuous Founder of Dynasty. The last of his line, five hundred years later, was a very different man, being a cruel and wicked tyrant, labelled Degenerate Terminator of Destiny upon being justly overthrown to give way to the first dynasty that stands clear and certain in the full light of history – the Shang Dynasty, dating from about 1750 BC.