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Early Civilization in China:
Reflections on How
It Became Chinese

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If we are to understand how the culture of China differs from that of other great civilizations, two fundamental and related questions need to be addressed: How did China become Chinese and how do we define "Chineseness"? Answers to these questions not only aid our understanding of the origins of Chinese culture but also, by implication and contrast, throw light on how Western values and social organization developed differently.

Before pursuing these questions, three prefatory comments are in order. First, only in broad, comparative treatments such as this one are generalizations about "Chinese culture" permitted. Even for the early period, we need to remember that there were many versions of Chinese culture that varied with time, place, and social level; I hardly do justice to all of them in this chapter. In particular, I focus less on the explicit philosophical tradition represented by such early thinkers as Confucius and more on the religious, social, aesthetic, and political practices of the Neolithic to the early Bronze Age from which these philosophers drew their assumptions and values.

Second, it must be stressed that my concerns as a historian are explanatory, not judgmental. I emphasize this point because on occasion I describe early China as having "lacked" certain features present in my Mesopotamian and Greek "touchstone cultures." But this negative ter-

minology is contrastive, not pejorative; as we see by the end, it is in no sense meant to imply that such features ought to have been present.

Third, I should like to call attention to the word "reflections" in my subtitle, for it serves a double function. Our visions of early Chinese (or Greek, or Mesopotamian) culture are partly and inevitably a product of the later culture's own conceptions of what its past was or ought to have been. The values of the present, generated by the past, reflect back on that past; fact is seen as value, and value in turn affects what facts are seen. Accordingly, the present chapter does not simply express my reflections on how the Chinese became Chinese. It also in part reflects how the later elite Chinese, on their reflection—represented by the editing and promoting of certain texts and quasi-historical scenarios—thought that they became Chinese. The discrepancies that arise between these later idealizing reflections and earlier unedited reality are the continuing concern of the professional historian. It is one of the functions of this chapter to place those concerns in a wider context.

THE HERO AND SOCIETY
Heroic Action: Its Representation and Consequences

Because cultures are man-made and serve to define man's conception of himself, it is helpful in considering the question of what it means to be "Chinese" to start by comparing the conception of man as hero in ancient China with analogous conceptions in Classical Greece (fifth to fourth century B.C.), a culture that has contributed so much to our Western understanding of the human condition. The legend of Achilles and the Amazon queen, for example, which was popular in both Greek and Roman cultures, expresses strategic views about the individual and society that would have been entirely foreign to Chinese contemporaries.[1]

If we consider the legend of Achilles and the Amazon queen as treated by the Penthesileia Painter on a kylix vase from ca. 460 B.C. (figure 2.1), we note a variety of characteristic features. The two protagonists are heroic in size, seeming to burst the confines of the bowl. Achilles is virtually naked. And the representation is characterized by the particularity of both its subject and its artist: we can identify the two figures, Achilles and Penthesileia, and we can identify, at least as an artist if not by name, the individual who made the vase. Most important, there is the ironic tale itself. At the moment when Achilles plunges his sword into the breast of his swooning victim, their eyes cross—and he falls in love! That moment of dramatic and fatal pathos is the one the artist has captured.[2] The

1. For an introduction to the legend, see Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 158–59.

2. For an introduction to the artistic representations of this story see J. J. Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 20–22.

Figure 2.1. Kylix by the Penthesileia Painter. Munich, Antikensammlung. Photograph: Hirmer Fotoarchiv München.

painting and the legend express in powerful, individual, and supposedly historical terms one of the major assumptions of the classical tradition in the West, namely, that the human condition is tragic and poignant, that the best and most heroic deeds may lead to unwished-for consequences, and that even heroic virtue must be its own reward. People live in a quirky, unpredictable, and ironic world that is by no means responsive to human values and desires.

The decoration found on an Eastern Chou Chinese bronze *hu* vase from about the same period (figure 2.2) is strikingly different. Instead of individuals we are presented with stereotypical silhouettes, all of whom wear the uniform of their fellows. We do not know the names of any of the people represented. We do not know the names of any of the people involved in casting the vessel. We do not even know with any assurance the meaning of the actions depicted (see figure 2.2 caption). Whatever their precise iconographic coherence—which may have involved some generalized depiction of rituals and martial skills—the overwhelming impression conveyed by these tableaux is one of contemporaneous, regimented, mass activity, whether in peace or war; even the birds appear to be flying in formation. The individuals portrayed, small and

Figure 2.2. Drawing of the decor on an Eastern Chou (late sixth to fifth century B.C.) *hu* wine vase from Chengtu, Szechwan. From *Wen-wu* 1977.11:86. Moving up the vessel, we see: *bottom register,* a battle by land and sea; *middle register, clockwise from bottom left,* archers shooting at birds, a banquet scene, a bell-and-chime orchestra; *top register,* more archery (*in the bottom half*), the plucking of mulberry branches (perhaps for the making of bows), an archery contest. At least three examples of bronze *hu* decorated with these kinds of scenes have been found. See Jenny F. So, "The Inlaid Bronzes of the Warring States Period," in *The Great Bronze Age of China,* ed. Wen Fong (New York: Metropolitan Museum and Knopf, 1980), 316, and Esther Jacobson, "The Structure of Narrative in Early Chinese Pictorial Vessels," *Representations* 8 (Fall 1984): 77–80.

anonymous, have been subordinated by an equally anonymous master designer to a larger order.

This Chinese vase expresses the ideals of organization that were being applied with increasing effectiveness during the period of the Warring States (453–221 B.C.), a period when men fought less for individual honor, as Achilles had done, and more for the survival of the state. Aesthetic concerns were focused on the general, the social, and the non-heroic rather than on the particular, the individual, and the heroic. This stereotyping, this bureaucratization of experience, is implicit not only in the decor of the Chinese bronze—for somebody was presumably over-seeing these soldiers and orchestra players—but also in its manufac-ture—for somebody had surely directed the numerous artisans involved in the industrial-scale casting of the vessel. Once again, this contrasts sharply with the practices of the Greeks, who both admired the individ-ual and who organized their workshops around a series of acts per-formed by single craftsmen.

The Hands of the Hero: Dirty or Clean?

The role of hero and protagonist was radically different in the two cul-tures. Achilles acts for himself. He feels the thrust of the blade as it pierces his opponent's breast; he is directly responsible; he has "dirty hands." The analogous Chinese vision of the hero, at least by the time of the Eastern Chou, was radically different. Ssu-ma Ch'ien, for example, the "Herodotus of China," who wrote at the start of the first century B.C., presents five Chou and Ch'in case histories in a chapter entitled "Biogra-phies of the Assassin-Retainers."[3] The leitmotif is that of a statesman who has an enemy he wishes to dispatch. Rather than undertaking the task himself, as Achilles would have done, the Chinese protagonist relies on the charisma of his elevated social and political position to engage an assassin. The assassin, in turn, attempts to perform the deed (with re-sults fatal to himself in four of the five cases), not for monetary gain but to requite the overwhelming social honor the lord had conferred by deigning to entrust him with the task.

The genesis of such characteristic social obligations is a theme to which I return later. Here I simply note that the lord delegates what, in the Greek case, would have been the heroic, the personal, and thus the tragic, task. His hands are clean; they are not on the sword; he is not even near when the deed is undertaken. A bureaucratic chain of com-mand protects the initiator from the shock and consequences of his deeds. The lord is not the hero; he has become an administrator. The hero, in these cases, does not act for himself; he is a delegate. There is a

3. Burton Watson, trans., *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the "Shih Chi" of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 45–67.

division between the lord's original motivation for the deed and the pro-
tagonist's heroic execution of it.

Ambiguity and Optimism

The pedagogical role of the hero (or the heroine—the role of gender in
such matters would be worth exploring) in the two cultures also differed.
The heroes of the Greeks often served only as tragic, negative examples;
few Greeks would wish to imitate Achilles by killing the woman he loved
(or imitate Oedipus by killing his father, Orestes by killing his mother, or
Antigone by killing herself—the examples are numerous). And when
Greeks in their hubris acted in the arbitrary and passionate ways of the
gods, they met disaster. Achilles would have loved Penthesileia, but he
killed her; he did love Patroclus, but his arrogance as he sulked in his
tent led to Patroclus's death.

In early China, by contrast, heroes were heroes precisely because they
were models worthy of emulation; the universe of moral action, at least
as it was represented in the accounts of myth and history, was untram-
meled by ambiguities. The basic, optimistic assumption of the *Tso chuan*,
the massive semihistorical chronicle compiled in the fourth century B.C.,
was that the virtuous man would be rewarded here and now—by promo-
tions, honors, and status. Cause and effect in the universe were rigor-
ously fair; the moral prospered, the wicked did not. The subversive
thought that the best intentions might lead to chaos and regret—not, as
in the cases of Confucius or Ch'ü Yuan, because those in power were too
unenlightened to employ them, but because there was something flawed
in the human condition itself—was rarely dramatized (see the discussion
of theodicy below).[4]

One could multiply many instances of this early, uncomplicated Chi-
nese view of man as a social being, embedded in and defined by the obli-
gations and rewards of a hierarchical, ethical, bureaucratic system. The
large-scale recruitment of labor by a centralized bureaucratic elite (as
suggested by figure 2.2), the members of which, as Mencius (ca. 372–
289 B.C.) pointed out, labor with their minds rather than their hands,
may be discerned in the Chinese record from at least the early Bronze
Age, if not earlier (see the discussion of Neolithic burials below). Eastern
Chou states were builders of major public works, particularly city walls
and the long, defensive walls that eventually culminated in the building
of the Great Wall at the end of the third century B.C. The massive re-
cruitment of labor was idealized in semihistorical accounts in which the

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4. The only direct expression of this subversive thought in early China appears in
Ssu-ma Ch'ien's "Biography of Po Yi and Shu Ch'i" (in Watson, *Records*, 11–15), in which
the historian is sorely troubled by virtuous actions that are unrewarded and unrecognized.
On Confucius's philosophical equanimity in a world where perfection is not possible, see
Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard Univer-
sity Press, 1985), 80–81.

people, both elites and masses, had cheerfully flocked to serve virtuous rulers, often dynasty founders, who had won their allegiance not by coercion but by exemplary government. Virtue was again rewarded, in this instance by the loyal service of others.

Such optimistic faith in the comprehensibility and benevolence of the universe, which runs through the classical texts and which was explicitly articulated in the view of Mencius that man's nature is basically good, can be related to what Thomas A. Metzger has termed the fundamental "epistemological optimism" of early Chinese philosophy. This optimism may be defined as the willingness to accept large, roughly defined moral ideas—like "benevolence" or "righteousness"—as reliable, universal, and objective; Metzger contrasts this with the kind of pessimistic epistemology represented by Descartes's "clear and distinct ideas."[5] Optimism about man's lot helps to explain the lack of interest in dramatic detail found in early Chinese texts (discussed below). It also helps explain the Chinese distrust of laws and constitutions, the traditional preference for *jen-chih*, "government by men," rather than for *fa-chih*, "government by laws."

Later I consider the sources of this confidence, but it was surely such "radical world optimism,"[6] such trust in one's leader as a moral *chün-tzu*, or "noble man," and the optimistic assumption—by the recruiters, if not always by the recruits—that such voluntary and nonproblematic state service was natural and proper that helps to explain the Chinese readiness to trust great leaders, whether Emperor Wu of the Han or Mao Tse-tung of the People's Republic. This optimism also helps to explain the lack of safeguards against the power of the state that has characterized Chinese government for at least two thousand years. If leaders are good—and if the good is unambiguous—who needs to be protected against them? Achilles, his hand on the sword, his act regretted as it is committed, represents a more somber vision. To the Greeks, the hero might not be bad, but he might be fundamentally and tragically mistaken. To the Chinese, a hero, by definition, was good; his mistakes, if he made any, were likely to be tactical in nature. His intent was free from error and regret.

THE NEOLITHIC TO BRONZE AGE TRANSITION

I now turn to the evolution of Chinese culture in the Neolithic and early Bronze Ages, with particular attention to such subjects as individualism (or

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5. Thomas A. Metzger, "Some Ancient Roots of Ancient Chinese Thought: This-worldliness, Epistemological Optimism, Doctrinality, and the Emergence of Reflexivity in the Eastern Chou," *Early China* 11–12 (1985–1987): 66–72.

6. The phrase is Max Weber's. See Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, trans. Hans H. Gerth, with an introduction by C. K. Yang (New York: Free Press, 1951), xxx, 212, 227–28, 235.

its absence), ritual and decorum, bureaucratic control, dependency and obligation, and metaphysical optimism. The Neolithic is of fundamental importance because of the remarkable continuity of post-Neolithic cultural development in China. It is probably truer for China than for most parts of the world that as the Neolithic twig was bent the modern tree has inclined.

Neolithic cultures in China flourished during the Postglacial Climatic Optimum, when it is probable that temperatures were some two to four degrees Celsius warmer than they are today and rainfall, in at least the Middle Yangtze and north China, was more abundant. The development of early Chinese culture must be understood in the context of these relatively beneficent natural conditions.

Socially, the transition from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age in China, as elsewhere in the world, witnessed the evolution of urban forms, the genesis of the state, the institutionalization of exploitation and servitude, the validation of characteristic forms of sacrifice, and the systematic articulation of religious beliefs. Spiritually and psychologically, this transition witnessed the development of a temperament and mentality that found certain worldviews and cosmological assumptions natural and comfortable, involving, in particular, the willing acceptance of hierarchy, filiality, and obedience.

In the realm of religion, the Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures of the Near East, Greece, and East Asia—to say nothing of those of Egypt and India—developed belief systems and institutions that dealt in different ways with the one certainty that faces us all: eventual death. Death can, paradoxically, be a lively topic, for from Neolithic times onward the way people have treated death and the dead has been deeply expressive of, and has had a significant impact on, the way they have treated the living.

Neolithic China

Archaeological evidence provides considerable reason for thinking that distinctions between rich and poor, male and female, and the powerful and the weak were emerging in China by the fourth and third millennia B.C. Not only did grave goods become more abundant, but the general egalitarianism of the early Neolithic burials was replaced by marked discrepancies in energy input, wealth, and ritual care in later burials (figure 2.3). Similarly, certain houses and certain village areas begin to reveal differentiation in the goods available to the living. The presence of grave goods—which, although finely made, were generally items of daily life—presumably indicates a belief in some kind of postmortem existence.

The burial, particularly in Eastern sites, of superbly made polished stone and jade tools, such as axes and spades, whose edges reveal no traces of use, also indicates that status differentiation was prolonged beyond the grave. These objects suggest that certain members of the so-

Figure 2.3. A Late Neolithic supine-extended burial with abundant grave goods at Liu-wan, eastern Tsinghai. From *K'ao-ku* 1976.6, plate 2.

ciety had been the possessors of symbolic, rather than working, tools—emblems of the owner's power to control the labor of others, both in this life and in the next. There were already by about the mid fourth millennium B.C. some people in China whose hands were not as "dirty" as those of others.

The Late Neolithic saw the emergence of scapulimancy and plastromancy, methods of divination in which the scapulas of animals (usually cattle) or the plastrons of turtles were scorched or burnt, the diviner interpreting the resulting cracks to foretell good or ill fortune. The presence of some of these "oracle bones" in cemetery areas suggests that the living, by cracking oracle bones, were attempting to communicate with the dead. One may assume that a consistently successful diviner would have acquired increased political authority, an authority supported by his powerful kin, both living and dead.

Figure 2.4. Secondary burials in grave M441 at Yuan-chün-miao, Shensi. From *Yuan-chün-miao Yang-shao mu-ti* (Peking: Wen-wu Ch'u-pan-she, 1983), plate 33.

The Neolithic Chinese treated their dead with remarkable and characteristic assiduity. Corpses were buried in orderly rows, oriented to certain compass directions depending on the area of China in which they had lived. This orderly layout presumably reflected expectations of social order among the living. The corpses were also generally buried in the supine-extended position (see figure 2.3), a practice that required more labor for the digging of the burial pit than, for instance, a flex burial. The log construction of coffin chambers in certain Eastern burials, particularly at the Ta-wen-k'ou site in Shantung, or of tomb ramps in the northwest is a further indication of the labor expended on mortuary concerns.

The practice of collective secondary burial, which, although never dominant, flourished in the Central Plains and the Northwest during the fifth millennium, is particularly revealing. The cleaning away of the flesh and the careful reburial of the bones—frequently arranged in the standard supine-extended posture of the primary burials, and with skulls oriented to the prevailing local direction (figure 2.4)—implies the ability to mobilize labor resources for the collective reinterment of up to seventy or eighty skeletons in one pit. It also implies that the dead must have been kept alive in the minds of their survivors during the period of months, if not years, between primary and secondary burial.

Figure 2.5. Grave M25 at Ta-wen-k'ou, Shantung. The eight tall *pei* goblets at the bottom of the picture had been placed in the earth fill and had presumably been used in a farewell ritual. From *Ta-wen-k'ou: Hsin-shih-ch'i shih-tai mu-tsang fa-chueh pao-kao* (Peking: Wen-wu Ch'u-pan-she, 1974), plate 13.3.

Other mortuary rituals were employed. The placement of some of the jars and goblets in Neolithic burials, for example, suggests the existence of farewell libations by mourners as the grave was being filled in (figure 2.5); the precarious, tall-stemmed black goblets of the East (figure 2.6)—whose fine, eggshell-thin construction itself suggests some special ritual function—may have been used for the consumption of millet wine at the time of interment.

One of the most remarkable of all Neolithic burials is M3 at the Liang-chu culture site of Ssu-tun in Kiangsu (ca. 2500 B.C.; figure 2.7), which gives ample evidence of ritual activity: the corpse had been placed atop ten jade *pi* disks that had been burned; the body had then been surrounded by a variety of jade and stone tools and ornaments, including a perimeter of twenty-seven jade *ts'ung* tubes; and five of the twenty-four jade *pi* in the burial had been deliberately broken in two and placed in different parts of the grave. Given the difficulty of working with jade, a material that has been described as "sublimely impractical," the presence
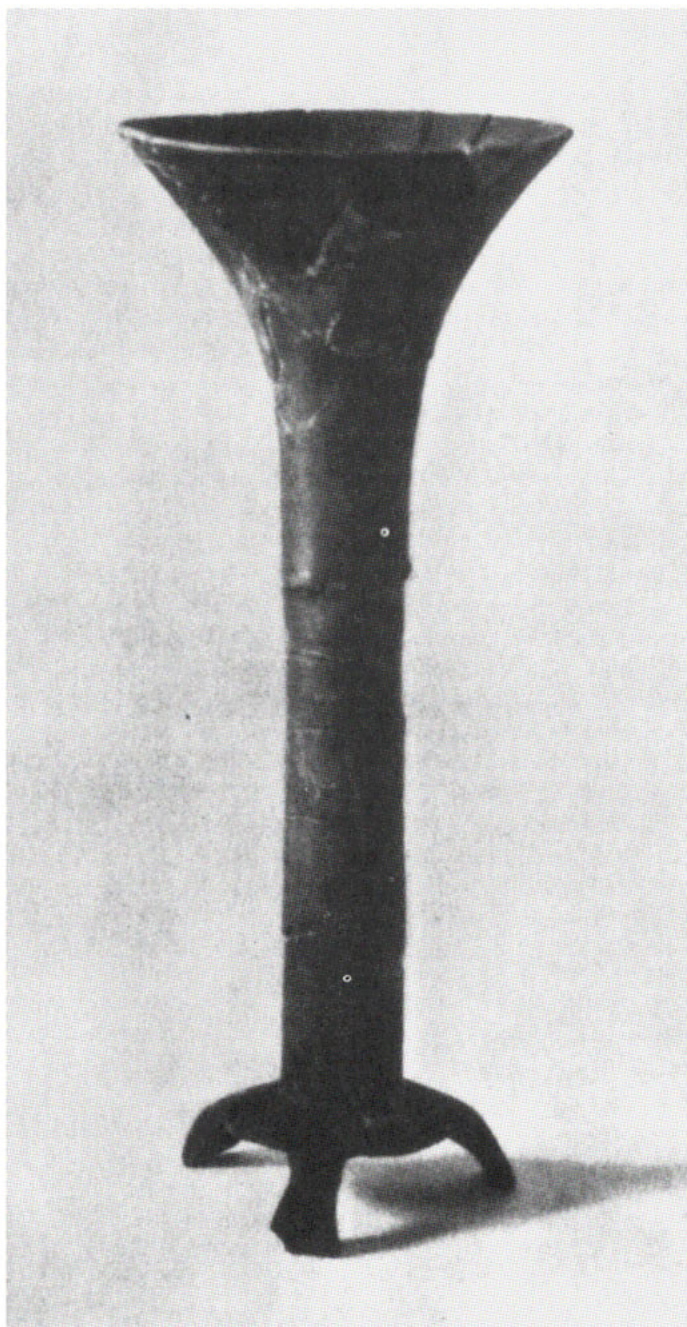
Figure 2.6. *Pei* goblet from P'i hsien, Kiangsu. From *Chiang-su sheng ch'u-t'u wen-wu hsuan-chi* (Peking: Wen-wu Ch'u-pan-she, 1963), no. 43.
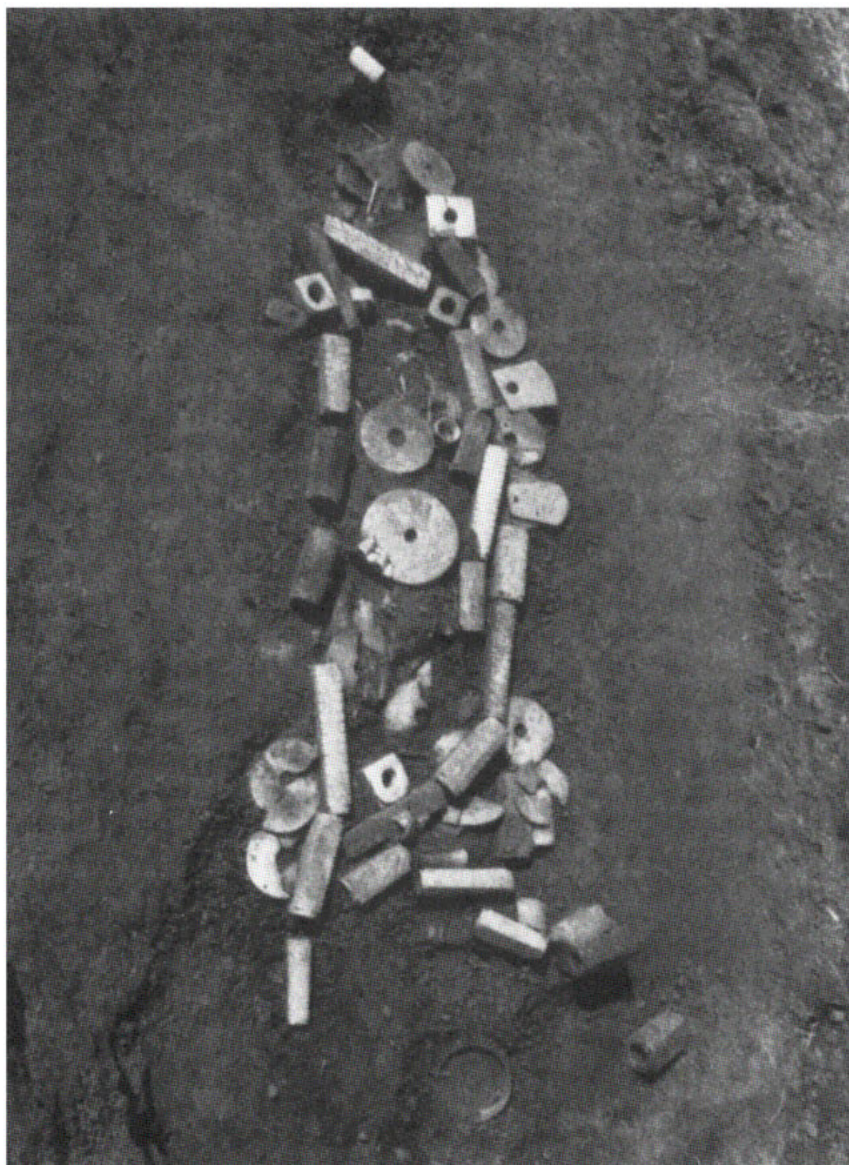
Figure 2.7. Grave M3 at Ssu-tun, Kiangsu. The corpse is "shrouded in jade."
From *K'ao-ku* 1984.2, plate 2.

Figure 2.8. Grave M327 at Liu-wan, eastern Tsinghai. The central corpse, buried in a flex position, is thought to have accompanied the other two corpses in death. From *Wen-wu* 1976.1 : 75, figure 11.

of large numbers of finely carved jade *pi* and *ts'ung* in other Lower Yangtze burials of the third millennium—they have never been found in the housing remains—is further indication of the way in which the labors of the living were exploited for the service of the dead.

Some burials also contained victims: animal and, occasionally, human. Human sacrifice was not widespread in the Neolithic, but there is evidence—both in a Yang-shao burial at P'u-yang in northern Honan (end of the fifth millennium?) and in Ma-ch'ang and Ch'i-chia burials in eastern Tsinghai and western Kansu (toward the end of the third millennium)—that a small number of people were accompanying others in death, further evidence of the kinds of payments the living were constrained to offer the dead (figure 2.8). The presence of an occasional tool by the side of the victim indicates, at least in the later sites, that a servant in this life was to continue as a servant in the next life. Ties of obligation and servitude were so strong that they persisted after death.

Bronze Age China

By the Late Shang period (ca. 1200–1045 B.C.), represented by the archaeological finds at Hsiao-t'un, near Anyang in the northern Honan

Figure 2.9. A Late Shang royal tomb at Hsi-pei-kang. From Liang Ssu-yung and Kao Ch'ü-hsun, *Hou-chia-chuang 1002-hao ta mu* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, Institute of History and Philology, 1965), plate 3.

panhandle, increasing stratification and the institutionalization of power were both represented and reinforced by a highly developed cult of the dead. The oracle-bone inscriptions reveal that the dead were worshiped as ancestors according to an increasingly precise ritual schedule. Neolithic mortuary traditions were amplified but not radically altered.

With regard to grave goods, for example, the unrifled burial known as M5—which has been linked to Fu Hao, a consort or royal woman associated with the powerful king Wu Ting (ca. 1200–1181 B.C.)—contained over sixteen hundred grave goods, including 468 bronzes whose total weight was over one and one-half tons. Extrapolation from this relatively small burial suggests that the contents of the looted tombs in the royal cemetery at Hsi-pei-kang, across the river to the northwest of Hsiao-t'un, would have been even more impressive. The tombs were veritable underground storehouses of the finest products that Shang civilization could create; these great cruciform, ramped pits, up to forty-two feet deep (figure 2.9) and equipped with beamed, room-sized grave chambers up to nine feet high, were monuments to the affection and obligation that linked living descendants to dead parents.

Such tombs are eloquent proof of the intensity with which the mortu-

ary cult both exploited and stimulated the labors of the community. The digging and refilling (with rammed earth) of such a pit alone, quite apart from the labor involved in furnishing it with the wooden chamber, coffin, and costly grave goods like bronzes and jades, would have taken one hundred men well over two hundred days to complete. The continual draining of wealth to provide goods for the dead was the early Chinese equivalent of conspicuous consumption and planned obsolescence; it stimulated the productive powers of craftsmen and laborers by expropriating the fruit of their efforts in a culturally rational manner. A system of exchange was evidently involved. Motivated by spiritualized kinship ties, mortuary taxes on the immediate wealth of the living served to guarantee the future prosperity of their descendants.

The number of human victims associated with the Shang royal burials is impressive, as it was undoubtedly intended to be. It may be estimated that some of the royal four-ramp tombs would have claimed the lives of over three hundred sacrificial victims and accompaniers-in-death and that, over the course of the approximately one hundred and fifty years in which it was in use, some five thousand victims may have been buried in the Hsi-pei-kang burial complex; these figures, which do not include some ten thousand human sacrifices recorded in divinations about the regular ancestral cult, represent a rate of about thirty-three victims a year, or 550 per king. The mortuary victims were drawn from a cross section of Shang society: elite accompaniers-in-death, placed near the king and buried whole, sometimes with their own coffins, grave goods, and even accompaniers-in-death; guards, buried whole with their weapons; and prisoners of war, the most numerous group, generally young males, decapitated or dismembered and buried in the earth fill, in the ramps, or in adjacent sacrificial pits. This last group, the sacrificial victims, outnumbered the accompaniers-in-death by a ratio of about twenty to one.

Similar large-scale immolations were not unknown in Mesopotamia—for example, in the royal cemetery of Ur, where from three to seventy-four attendants accompanied the ruler—but there the custom was short-lived and virtually unrecorded in texts. Human sacrifice was rarely practiced in the Greek Bronze Age.[7] More significantly, there is virtually no evidence of accompanying-in-death. Elite Greeks were not linked to each other by ties of obligation and dependency that bound them in death as they had presumably been bound in life. In China, by contrast,

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7. That Achilles, in book 23 of the *Iliad*, put "twelve radiant sons of Troy" to the sword at the funeral of Patroclus was more a sign of his fury than common custom. (The quotes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in this chapter are taken from the translations of Robert Fitzgerald, which are published by Doubleday.)

the custom was practiced for a far longer period, continuing to a significant degree in the burials of local rulers and even emperors down to the Ch'in–Han period and beyond, with the number of victims varying from a few to over a hundred.

The oracle-bone inscriptions—with their records of systematic offerings to dead kings, whose own powers and abilities to intercede with Ti, the Lord on High, extended to such fundamental areas as weather, climate, and victory in battle—reveal the central, institutionalized role that ancestor worship played in the workings of the Shang state. This power accorded to dead fathers and grandfathers suggests, accordingly, that Shang lineages were strong and that kinship affiliation, reinforced by religious sanctification, was a powerful force for allegiance and motivation. It may be supposed that Shang ancestor worship, which promoted the dead to higher levels of authority and impersonality with the passage of generations, encouraged the genesis of hierarchical, protobureaucratic conceptions and that it enhanced the value of these conceptions as more secular forms of government replaced the Bronze Age theocracy.

Ancestor Worship and Its Consequences

The Late Shang state emerged by building upon and institutionalizing, rather than opposing, the ties of affection, obligation, and dependency indicated by the mortuary practices of the Neolithic. The close fit between dynastic and religious power that resulted had at least three significant consequences.

First, it meant that there was no independent priesthood that might serve as an alternative locus of power or criticism; the king, as lineage head, was his own priest. The heads of all powerful lineages had access to the independent and friendly religious power of their own ancestors without the mediation of other religious specialists. Second, it meant that the way in which the values of kinship obligation, ancestor worship, and dynastic service reinforced one another led to an enduring unitary conception of the state as a religio-familial-political institution that could embrace, ideally, all aspects of one's allegiance, leaving little ideological ground vacant as a base for dissent. Given the totality of the Chinese state, it is no wonder that the only Eastern Chou "oppositionists" who left much of an intellectual mark, the Taoists of the Chuang Tzu school, had to reject conceptions of service and hierarchy. Confucius and his followers could certainly lament contemporary realities, but they were essentially meliorists working within the value system rather than radical critics of the system itself. It is also no wonder that rebels against the state were frequently to appeal to the vast world of popular nature powers, gods, and Buddhist saviors, who stood outside the normative politico-religious structure of the lineage. Third, it meant that the Chi-

nese humanism of the Eastern Chou, represented by such great social thinkers as Confucius, Mencius, and Hsun Tzu, did not see any opposition between secular and religious values and was able, in Fingarette's striking phrase, to treat "the secular as sacred."[8] The humanism that resulted, therefore, was based on social and kin relations sanctified by religious assumptions. Ritual and hierarchical expectations were applied to all aspects of a monistic cosmos; just as there had been no opposition between king (or lineage head) and priest, so there was no tension between the counterclaims of god and man, between a Zeus and a Prometheus. The optimism of the Chinese tradition, which has already been noted, can be understood as both producing and being reinforced by this fundamental sense of harmonious collaboration. There was, once again, no sense of immanent moral paradox or conflict.

DEATH AND THE BIRTH OF CIVILIZATION

Next I attempt to integrate early Chinese mortuary practices with other aspects of the culture, considering how the meaning of one set of customs may be more richly understood when seen in the context of others, how one set of assumptions about the human condition was reinforced by, and would have reinforced, others.

Death and Continuity

Shang burial customs helped to define what it was to be a ruler (or a retainer). The wealth, the dependents, and the victims accompanying the king into the next world demonstrated that his superior status (and the inferior status of his retainers) would be unchanged after death. This view of death as a continuity rather than a new beginning had already been implied by the grave goods and mortuary customs of the Chinese Neolithic. Death offered none of the escape, none of the psychic mobility offered by the mystery religions of the Near East or by Christianity itself with its vision of a redemptive death and rebirth as "in Abraham's bosom." In early China death provided an effective opportunity for survivors to validate the central values of the culture. No dead Chinese king would have been permitted the lament made by Achilles in book 11 of the *Iliad*—"Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand/for some country man, on iron rations,/than lord it over all the exhausted dead"—for such an admission would have undermined the respect and obedience owed to the dead elites and thus to their living descendants. Once a king, always a king; death could not change that.

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8. Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper, 1972). Anyone reading this provocative book should also read the detailed critique provided in Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*.

Death as Unproblematic

One striking feature of the early Chinese written record is its view of death as unproblematic. Death was simply not the issue it was for the ancient Mesopotamians or the ancient Greeks. Nowhere, for example, in the ancient Chinese record does one find the mythical claim, found in Mesopotamian texts, that death existed prior to the creation of both the universe and man. Nowhere does one find the angry and anguished voice of a Gilgamesh, horrified by the death of Enkidu and by Enkidu's depressing account of the life to come:

> the house where one who goes in never comes out again,
> the road that, if one takes it, one never comes back,
> the house that, if one lives there, one never sees light,
> the place where they live on dust, their food is mud.
> . . . .
> My body, that gave your heart joy to touch,
> vermin eat it up like old clothes.
> My body, that gave your heart joy to touch,
> Is filled with dirt.[9]

There is no ancient Chinese myth, like that of the Garden of Eden, that accounts for the "invention" of death or that treats death as some flaw in the divine plan. There are no visits to, or descriptions of, the realm of the dead that would compare with the descriptions we have of the Netherworld for the Mesopotamians or of Hades for the Greeks. Nowhere do we find the epic concerns of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which focus on the manner of death, the ritual treatment of the dead, and the unhappy fate of the shades after death and which express so powerfully the tragic (once again the word recurs) poignancy that death confers on the human condition. Nowhere do we find a philosophical discourse, like Plato's *Phaedo*, that is devoted to the nature of death and the soul.[10] The very silence of the Chinese texts about such matters suggests a remarkable Chinese ability to emphasize life over death. Ancestor worship and the endurance of the lineage served to render the loss of the individual more palatable. Indeed, these practices would have served to promote, as they were promoted by, a conception of the individual and his role quite different from that held by the Mesopotamians and Greeks.

9. John Gardner and John Maier, trans., *Gilgamesh: Translated from the Sin-leqi-unninni Version* (New York: Knopf, 1984), tablet vii, column iv, tablet xii, column iv, 178, 265.

10. The ripostes and anecdotes about death found in the *Chuang Tzu* merely confirm this point. Chuang Tzu is arguing for a nonhuman view of death precisely because he is arguing for a nonhuman view of life. He is, in these passages, less concerned about death itself than with the institutions and values that the civilized Chinese had developed to deal with it. Unlike Plato, he deals with death as a social problem, not a philosophical one, because, in his view, society itself is the problem. His cheerful acceptance of death might well have filled Plato with envy.

Morality and the Absence of Theodicy

The great mythic themes in China were not dying and death but social order and social morality; there is no Chinese equivalent to the heroic and adversarial universe of Gilgamesh or Inanna, Achilles or Hector. One is impressed and attracted by the general harmony that pervades the relations of the Chinese to their gods. For example, although there had been a flood, dimly described, its main function was to provide the sage emperor Yü with a sphere for his labors in political geography, delineating the borders for the various regions of China. The famous saying, recorded in the *Tso chuan*, "But for Yü we should have been fishes," pays tribute to his having made the world habitable; the myth does not address the issue of why the flood occurred. There is, in fact, a characteristic lack of theodicy in early Chinese culture, its fundamental optimism seeming to render unnecessary any explanations for the presence of evil.

There was no sense in early Chinese mythology that the gods were malevolent, that they resented human success, that they might conspire to destroy man, or that man was becoming too numerous and too tiresome, themes that are all present in Mesopotamian and Greek myth and in the Old Testament. Just as there was no Prometheus, neither was there any Zeus. Given this lack of divine animus, of immanent man-god hostility, it was natural that death in China should not have been regarded as an affront to mortals to the degree that it was in Mesopotamia and Greece; rather, it was part of the inevitable and harmonious order. In a kin-based society where the royal ancestors were in Heaven, there was little discord between god and men. There was little need, in short, for a Chinese Gilgamesh or a Chinese Job, asking why a man who has done no wrong should die or suffer. The issue, when it did arise, as in the cases of Po Yi and Shu Ch'i (note 4, this chapter) or of Confucius himself, who was shunned by the rulers of his age, was usually conceived in terms of employment, reward, and recognition rather than suffering or destruction. Even in his moving letter to Jen An in which the great historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien, who had been punished by Emperor Wu of the Han, laments his castration, his regrets are characteristically couched not in terms of his own loss but in terms of his having failed to serve the emperor and his colleagues effectively.[11]

Death, the Individual, and the Supernatural

Attitudes toward death depend on cultural conceptions of what has been lost. Just as the bitter reactions to death in the cases of the *Gilgamesh* and

11. The letter is translated in Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien: Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 57–67.

the Greek epics, for example, may be related to strong conceptions of personal roles in the two cultures, so may the quieter, more accepting responses of the early Chinese, who were less anguished metaphysically by death, be related to their deemphasis on individual heroic action.

The lack of emphasis on the individual may also be seen in the realm of the supernatural. By contrast with the Mesopotamians and Greeks, for whom misfortune and defeat stemmed from the harassment and disorderly interference of individual gods like Enki and Ishtar or Zeus and Aphrodite, the Shang Chinese presumably would have explained such events in terms of improper sacrifices and dissatisfied ancestors. Those ancestors would have been mollified not by the particularistic pleas of humans or by erratic interventions and divine favoritism but by ordered sacrifices whose efficacy was tested in advance through divination and offered in accordance with the status of the ancestors responsible. Given this protobureaucratic attitude toward the supernatural, it was entirely natural that death itself would also be treated in a more matter-of-fact, more impersonal manner.

The Chinese of the Western Chou, whose Mandate of Heaven doctrine moralized the political culture, explained misfortunes and defeats in terms of immoral behavior; some thinkers of the Eastern Chou, by contrast, adopted the impersonal cycles of *yin-yang* and "five-phase" theory. No matter which of these explanations one turns to, the Shang and Chou elites lived in a more ordered, more "rational" world of large, general forces that implemented the will of hierarchically ordered ancestors or "Heaven," on the one hand, or that were incarnated in natural cycles, on the other. By contrast to the Mesopotamian or Greek deities, Chinese ancestral spirits were remarkably depersonalized, a point to which I return later.

Origins and Eschatology

The absence of origins myths until relatively late in the Chinese record was also surely related to conceptions of life and death. I would suggest that conceptions of creation ex nihilo are related to and stimulated by a radical, nihilistic view of death itself. Cultures that are less anxious about eschatology, such as that of ancient China, are less likely to be concerned about their origins; cultures that are more worried about final destinations, such as those of Mesopotamia and Greece, are more likely to devote attention to the question of whence they came. The Greek concern with questions of origins, "first causes," and "first principles" is well known. In China, where identity was conceived as biological and social, the question of origins was often one of genealogy and history. A hierarchy of ancestors leading back to a dimly perceived founding ancestor or ancestress was answer enough because it satisfied the kinds of questions that were being asked.

Critical Distance

The "openness" of Greek society, which was coming into existence during the Archaic period (ca. 760–479 B.C.), has been called "its most precious single legacy," serving to encourage both "the intellectual speculations of the few and individual freedom among the many."[12] The characteristic Greek readiness to question and complain about the human condition—whether that questioning was religious, metaphysical, or political—may be related to the marked difference that distinguished mortals from immortals in Greek legend. This distance allowed the Greeks to take a stance more critical than that permitted a Chinese worshiping his ancestors, who were merely ex-humans, not radically different beings.[13] A strong, hierarchical, lineage system does not encourage children to criticize parents or descendants to criticize spiritualized ancestors; it also does not encourage the pursuit of radical innovations. I would not deny that, as Nathan Sivin notes in Chapter 7 of this volume and as Joseph Needham's extensive work has revealed,[14] Chinese craftsmen and technologists have been among the most inventive in the world. The point is, however, that such innovators were generally not rewarded with or stimulated by commensurate social prestige.

For the early Chinese, as for their imperial descendants, it was the past that was normative. The Greeks, like most traditional cultures, certainly revered the past; yet they succeeded in a situation that M. I. Finley has referred to as one of "compulsory originality" in producing a series of unprecedented cultural innovations.[15] The past was accorded greater respect by the Chinese because the past was, through the lineage, the integrated source of biological, religious, and political identity. This great respect helps explain the lesser emphasis placed on individual creativity and innovation; emulation of dead ancestors was all the originality required. Such an environment encouraged what might almost be called a spirit of "compulsory unoriginality." Once again we encounter the strength of the lineage in early Chinese culture—already seen in the mortuary evidence and the cult of ancestor worship—as one of its most

12. Anthony Snodgrass, *Archaic Greece: The Age of Experiment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 161.

13. See Vermeule, *Aspects of Death*, 125, on the way in which the epic permitted the Greeks to laugh at and even despise their gods. Jasper Griffin has made a related point. For the Greeks the "world makes less sense through moral self-examination"—which would have been the Chinese approach—"than through recognition of the gulf that separates mortal men from the serene superiority and shining gaze of the immortal gods" ("From Killer to Thinker," *New York Review of Books* 32, no. 11 [27 June 1985]: 32).

14. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 7 vols. projected (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954–).

15. M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Greeks: An Introduction to Their Life and Thought* (New York: Viking, 1964), 23.

distinctive features. It is no accident that the greatest innovations in early statecraft and social theory appeared in the Warring States period (453– 221 B.C.) of the "hundred schools," the age when the great aristocratic lineages of the Spring and Autumn period (721–479 B.C.) were disappearing from the scene.

AESTHETICS AND STYLE
Ingrainedness

Characteristically, there is no visual image or even textual description of any early Chinese ruler or deity to compare with the images and descriptions of particular rulers, heroes, and gods we have from Mesopotamia and Greece. There is no Chinese equivalent to the bronze head, which may depict King Sargon the Great, no Chinese version of a heroic, life-size, naked bronze Poseidon. In the Neolithic, the Shang, and the Western Chou the iconographic tradition was, with few exceptions, profoundly nonnaturalistic. Gombrich's formula, "making comes before matching,"[16] was not only true of the designs painted on Chinese Neolithic pots but continued to be true until relatively late in the Bronze Age. Whatever the so-called monster masks on the Shang and Chou bronzes (see, for example, figure 11.3 in Chapter 11) represented—and it is by no means clear that they were intended to "match" any natural animal—they were primarily magico-aesthetic expressions of design, symmetry, and an almost dictatorial order.

This concern with general order rather than particular description— manifested in the early aesthetics, social rituals, and philosophy of early China—may also be seen, to return to one of our earlier themes, in representations of death. No early Chinese text provides vivid, unflinching details like the worm crawling out of the dead Enkidu's nose in the *Gilgamesh* or the brains bursting from a mortal thrust and running along the spearhead in book 17 of the *Iliad*. The relative unconcern with material details can be seen as a further expression of the "epistemological optimism" referred to earlier, the willingness to embrace ideas that were more dependent on social custom and general category than on rigorous analysis and precise description.

Both aesthetically and socially, the Chinese did not manifest what has been called "the Greeks' personifying instinct," that instinct that rendered Greek myths so rich in personalities and thus so un-Chinese.[17] Indeed, if one word had to be used to describe early Chinese aesthetic, and

16. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1977), 99.

17. L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921), 359.

even philosophical, expression, I would suggest "ingrainedness." By ingrainedness I mean the willingness to concentrate on the symbolic meaning of an event, usually moral or emotional and frequently expressive of some normative order, rather than to express, or derive comfort or insight from, its existential qualities for their own sake. Such ingrainedness has nothing to do with abstractions or with the ideal forms of Plato's dialogues. It is in the Chinese case entirely immanent. The patterns, symbols, messages, rules, and so on are entirely within reality; they do not transcend reality metaphysically but merely render its existential details of minor importance. As Girardot has written of Chinese myths,

> Mythic materials and themes have entered into Chinese literature as a series of extremely abstract, and essentially static, models for organizing and evaluating human life.
>
> Mythic themes in early Chinese literature, in other words, often seem to be reduced to their inner "logical" code or implicit cosmological structure of binary *yin-yang* classification.[18]

Chinese ingrainedness, then, stands in sharp contrast to the passionate Archaic Greek attention to individual detail for its own existential sake, the recognition of the quirky, ironic, indifferent, nonsymbolic, existential, nonessential nature of reality, the "outgazing bent of mind that sees things exactly, each for itself, and seems innocent of the idea that thought discerps and colors reality." These traits are absent in the early Chinese texts that have come down to us. John Finley has referred to this Archaic Greek attitude as that of "the Heroic Mind"; his account is worth quoting in full for the contrasting light it throws on the Chinese evidence.

> When in the sixth book of the *Iliad* Hector briefly returns to Troy . . . and meets his wife and infant son at the gate and reaches out to take the boy in his arms, the child draws back frightened at his father's bronze armor and helmet with horsehair crest; whereupon Hector laughs, takes off the helmet, and lays it all-shining on the ground. In so deeply felt a scene surely no one but Homer would have paused to note that helmet still shining beside the human figures. It is as if in whatever circumstances it too keeps its particular being, which does not change because people are sad or happy but remains what it is, one of the innumerable fixed entities that comprise the world. Similarly in the heroic poems ships remain swift,

18. Norman J. Girardot, "Behaving Cosmogonically in Early Taoism," in *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics,* ed. Robin W. Lovin and Frank E. Reynolds (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 71. Girardot also refers to Sarah Allan's judgment (*The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China* [San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981], 18) that "in using myth in political and philosophical argumentation, the Chinese writer operated at a higher level of abstraction and with greater self-consciousness than is normally associated with mythical thought. He did not narrate legend but abstracted from it."

bronze sharp, the sky starry, rivers eddying. Though heroes fight and die, everything in the outflung world keeps its fit and native character.[19]

There are no comparable scenes, no "shining helmets," in early Chinese literature. Even in the *Book of Songs* (*Shih ching*), where early Chinese lyricism is most prominent, the general supersedes the particular, and nature is pregnant with allegorical or symbolic meaning, usually moral. There are love poems but no great lovers. Nature is not independent but participates in man's moral and emotional cosmology; its role is to express human concerns. To put the matter another way, early Chinese texts, like early Chinese bronze designs, reveal marks of what, to a Greek artist, would have seemed like severe editing, in which particular detail had been sacrificed to abstract order. Either there never was a Chinese equivalent of the Heroic Mind or it has left no reflection; in either case the contrast with the Classical Greeks, who were so deeply inspired by the epics of the Archaic period, is significant.

The Heroic Mind is superficially reminiscent of the epistemological optimism of the early Chinese thinkers. Both forms of thinking reveal unquestioning acceptance. The differences, however, are fundamental. First, the Heroic Mind accepts existence without question; the epistemologically optimistic mind, by contrast, accepts ideas and formulations. Second, the Heroic Mind in Finley's analysis yields by the Classical Age, to what he calls the "theoretical mind" and then the "rational mind"; what we may call the "metaphysical optimism" of Homer is replaced by the "epistemological pessimism" of Plato. No such radical evolution was to take place in China, whose thinkers were to remain consistently satisfied with their epistemological optimism, an optimism they would characteristically reassert in the eventual Confucian response to Buddhism's nihilistic metaphysics. This lack of change, this satisfaction with early, and hence ancestral, cultural forms, is a theme to which I return.

Metaphysical and Technological Correlates

Although Plato's concern with ideal forms, which is so radically un-Chinese in its metaphysical assumptions about a separate, nonimmanent realm of perfection, is alien to the Homeric view of reality, one can nevertheless note the way in which it derives from the Homeric emphasis on individual particulars, objects, and persons. When, for example, Plato employs metaphors of the workshop in discussing such matters, it

19. John H. Finley, Jr., *Four Stages of Greek Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 3, 4, 28. Similar observations about Homer's style in the *Odyssey* may be found in "Odysseus' Scar," the opening chapter of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).
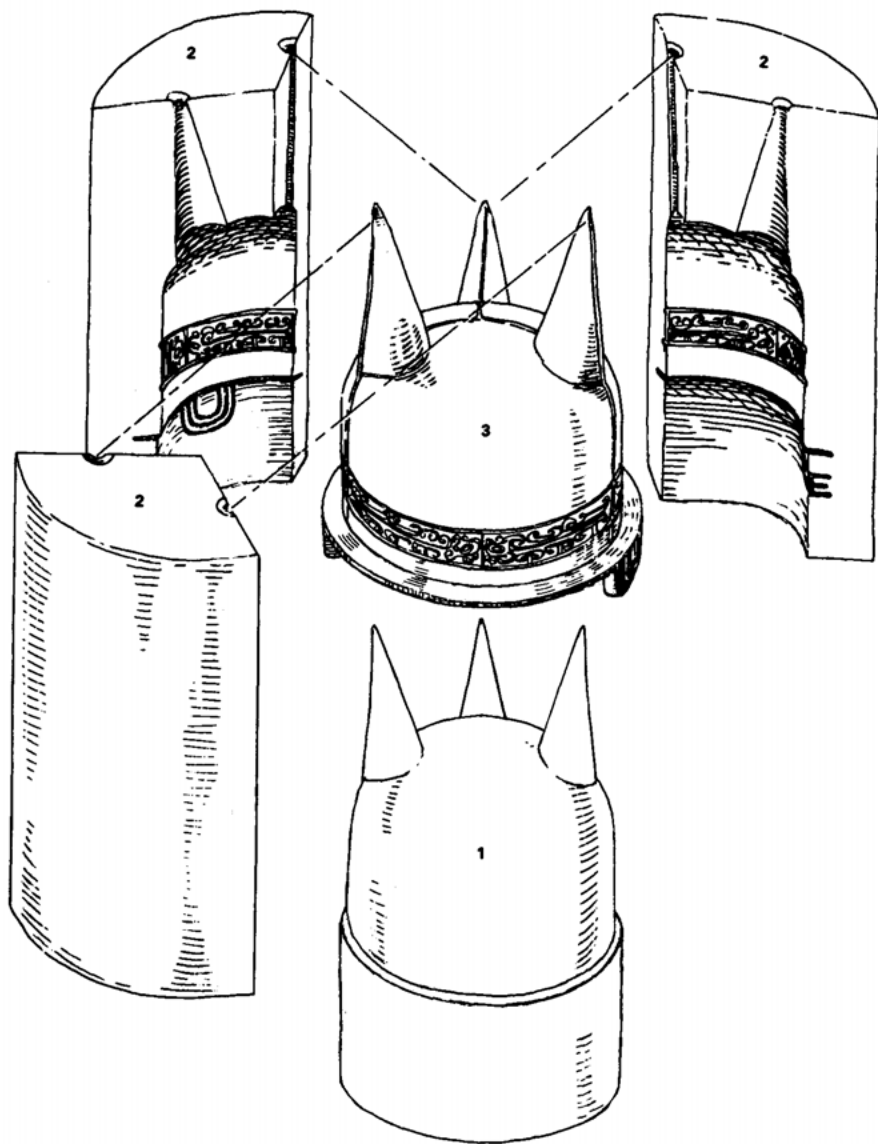
Figure 2.10. Schematic drawing of the piece-mold casting assembly used to cast a Middle Shang tripod: (1) core, (2) mold sections, (3) completed bronze vessel. From Wen Fong, ed., *The Great Bronze Age of China: An Exhibition from the People's Republic of China* (New York: Metropolitan Museum and Knopf, 1980), 72. Drawing by Phyllis Ward.

is the shoemaker's inability to make individual and identical shoes each time, his inability to match the ideal conception of a shoe, that concerns him. Bronze-working in classical Greece would have manifested the same troubling variance; each wrought object—such as Achilles' sword—would have been made singly and thus differently by a smith, hammering and beating it into an approximation of the ideal form. Chinese piece-mold bronze casting, by contrast, permitted no such individual variation. The technological process, involving ceramic molds placed around a central core, guaranteed that when molten bronze was poured into the space between the mold and the slightly pared down or shrunken core, the initial clay model would be duplicated virtually exactly (figure 2.10).[20] This duplication of models is analogous, in the technical realm, to the emulation of heroes and ancestors referred to earlier, just as the Greek techniques of smithy bronze production are analogous to the Greek emphasis on the individual hero.

Given this context, it is fitting that the problem of variance, of the failure to match an abstract ideal, did not occur to the early Chinese as a major theoretical problem, as opposed to a practical one. They assumed that individuals were identified and valued in terms of the human roles they played within the kinship group. "There is good government," said Confucius, "when the father is a father and the son a son" (*Analects* 12.11). They also assumed, with characteristic optimism, that people were educable to the good and were capable of performing those roles adequately; their epistemological optimism did not require them to define or analyze those roles, such as that of father and son, with the rigor and precision that a Plato, more pessimistic about the human capacity to know and understand, would have demanded.

The Absence of Drama

The central importance of dramatic performances in the Athens of the fifth century B.C., acted in theatrical competitions before audiences of some fourteen thousand citizens and challenging and lampooning some of the most cherished values of the state while being supported in part by public funds, needs no comment here; the absence of such an artistic and political form in China is another feature that separates the two cultures.

The absence of dramatic confrontation may also be discerned in other areas of Chinese expression. I have already noted, for example, the lack of narrative tension in the pictorial representations on the Eastern Chou

20. For a brief introduction to piece-mold casting and its aesthetic consequences see Robert W. Bagley, "The Beginnings of the Bronze Age: The Erlitou Culture Period," in *The Great Bronze Age of China: An Exhibition from the People's Republic of China,* ed. Wen Fong (New York: Metropolitan Museum and Knopf, 1980), 70–73.

hu vases (see figure 2.2). In the realm of expository prose one of the striking differences between the writings of the early Chinese philosophers and Plato is the particularism with which Plato incarnates his arguments, describing the time, the place, and the persons to give dramatic force to Socrates' conversations. Confucius's sayings, by contrast, are usually divorced from the emotional hurly-burly of debate with keenly delineated individuals on particular historical occasions. There is little dramatic tension in early Chinese philosophical texts comparable to the "tense liveliness," the "dialectical friction," of Plato's dialogues.[21] This successful incarnation of the general in the particular characterizes Greek art, philosophy, and conceptions of the immortals. In China, by contrast, in art, philosophy, and religion the individual is submerged in more general concerns.

This absence of dramatic tension in both philosophy and art relates to the Chinese concern with ritualized social hierarchy that we see emerging as early as the oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang and that becomes fully developed in the classical ritual texts of the Eastern Chou and Han. The Chinese *li* were canons of status-based, role-related social decorum, reciprocity, and ethical consideration that operated in the religious, social, and political spheres; they implied by their very nature that basic social questions had already been resolved in favor of a patriarchal status quo. The ideals of social behavior were known: "Let the father be a father, the son a son"; the only point at issue—so well exemplified by the early Han in the esoteric moral catechisms of the *Kung-yang* (late Chou) and *Ku-liang* (early Han?) commentaries to the *Spring and Autumn Annals,* supposedly composed by Confucius—was how to fit particular cases to general rules.

Such a socio-moral taxonomy, eventually articulated in the doctrine of the "rectification of terms" (*cheng-ming*), is both impersonal and undramatic. Assuming that a familial-style commitment to shared values is preferable to a society of adversarial relationships, the promoters of the *li* manifested a cast of mind that was uninterested in logical argument designed to change opinions; they preferred instead to appeal in set-position speeches to the authority of hallowed books and traditions.

Art and Ancestor Worship

Chinese aesthetic and even philosophical uninterest in particular detail may also be related to ancestor worship. As Fortes notes, "The ancient

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21. The phrases are those of Alvin W. Gouldner, *Enter Plato: Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 361, 385. Even in the *Chuang Tzu,* A. C. Graham notes the rarity of "genuine debates" in which "spokesmen of moralism . . . and of worldliness . . . are allowed their say before being defeated" (*Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book "Chuang-tzu"* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1981], 234).

Greeks appear to have had elaborate cults concerned with beliefs about ghosts and shades, but no true ancestor cult." He emphasizes that "ancestor worship is a representation or extension of the authority component in the jural relations of successive generations; it is not a duplication, in a supernatural idiom, of the total complex" of kin or other relationships. Ancestor worship, in short, does not simply involve belief in the dead; it involves belief about the dead, who are conceived in a certain way.[22]

Following this line of thought, I propose that an inverse relationship exists between an emphasis on hierarchical roles of authority, whether for the living or the dead, and the vagueness with which the afterlife is conceived. The cultures that depict the afterworld, or even this one, with some attention to specific detail may not need, or may do so precisely because they do not have, a well-defined social hierarchy or ancestral cult. When the authority of the elders and ancestors functions well in this world, there is less need to depict the environs of the next. This suggestion—which may be related to the earlier discussion of the impersonality of the dead—would also help explain the well-known fact that, although there are many mythic personages alluded to in ancient China, there is little evidence of a sustained, anecdotal mythology.[23] In this view there would have been no need in China for the precision of event and personality that we associate with the art and mythology of Mesopotamia and Greece; the "mythological issues," as it were, would have already been resolved by the invention of the ancestors, who were ancestors precisely because they were not comprehensive or detailed representations of personality and social role. The Mesopotamian and Greek concern in both religion and art with personality, social role, and the chaos of unstructured, adversarial existence was replaced in China, if it had ever been present, by a generalized concern with harmonious order and design and with ingrained and symbolic meanings.

Harmony and Moral Chauvinism

The emphasis on harmony in early Chinese art, literary expression, and philosophy—a corollary to the absence of critical and dramatic tension—may also be related to the deep-seated moral and epistemological optimism and confidence already noted. This optimism and confidence

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22. Meyer Fortes, "Some Reflections on Ancestor Worship in Africa," in *African Systems of Thought*, ed. M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 125, 133.

23. Derk Bodde, "Myths of Ancient China," in *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, ed. Samuel Noah Kramer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), 369–70; Bodde notes that "the gods of ancient China . . . appear very rarely or not at all in art, and are commonly described so vaguely or briefly in the texts that their personality, and sometimes even their sex, remains uncertain."

could only—and here I speak as a child of the Western tradition—have been achieved by glossing over, frequently by generalizing and classifying, those sharp, awkward, and frequently nonharmonious details that caught the attention of the Greek artist or philosopher.

One of the characteristic and non-Chinese features of the *Iliad*, for instance, is that the audience hears, and has its sympathies engaged by, both sides of the story, within the walls of Troy as well as without. Similarly, neither Creon in *Antigone* nor Oedipus in Sophocles' trilogy is presented as an unsympathetic or unremittingly evil figure. This ambiguity about what and who is right lies at the essence of the tragic vision; our sympathies are not, should not, and cannot all be on one side.

Greek epics derive much of their complexity and dramatic tension from the frank recognition that unresolvable conflicts exist in the world, that choices are frequently made not between good and evil but between two goods. By contrast, no early Chinese writings—with, as is so frequently the case, the possible exception of the *Chuang-tzu*—take a similarly detached and complex view of the human condition. There is no passage in early Chinese literature analogous to Antigones' wrenching cry, "Ah Creon, Creon, / Which of us can say what the gods hold wicked?"; the epistemological optimists of China thought that they could say. The vanquished were simply categorized as "ingrainedly" immoral and their point of view was never presented as worthy of consideration, dramatically or historically. From the *Book of Documents* (*Shu ching*) through *Mencius* and beyond, last rulers of dynasties were by definition bad and those who overthrew them, whom we should unquestioningly trust, were by definition good; there was no sense of a "loyal opposition" as even conceivable, let alone desirable or human. There are few Trojans in early Chinese literature; generally, there are only Achaeans, only victors.[24]

RELIGION, LINEAGE, CITY, AND TRADE
Ancestor Worship: The Strategic Custom

To the extent that it is possible to speak of one strategic custom or institution in the mix of early China's cultural variables—strategic because

24. Even in Ssu-ma Ch'ien's detailed portrayal of Hsiang Yü—the great antagonist of Liu Pang, who eventually founded the Han dynasty—there was little tragic about his defeat, which, if we take the Grand Historian at his word, was entirely justified: "It was hardly surprising that the feudal lords revolted against him. He boasted and made a show of his own achievements. He was obstinate in his own opinions and did not abide by established ways. . . . 'It is Heaven,' he declared, 'which has destroyed me. . . .' Was he not indeed deluded!" (Watson, *Records*, 104). Even if Ssu-ma Ch'ien is being ironic here, he in no way portrays Hsiang Yü with the kind of sympathetic and dramatic detail that Homer accords Hector. Although Hsiang Yü's flawed character brings destruction, the destruction is not tragic because his character is not presented as admirable.

of its pervasive ability to sanctify all other aspects of life and to legitimate and reinforce the lineage—it would seem to be ancestor worship and its social and political corollaries involving hierarchy, ritual deference, obedience, and reciprocity. At some point, probably still in the Neolithic, the commemoration of the dead—a feature common to many early cultures, including the Greek and Mesopotamian—probably became more orderly and articulated in China, taking on an ideological and juridical power of its own. The values of this new ancestor worship would have been intimately related to, and could not have been generated without, the existence of strong lineages. The traditional Chinese ideal of the extended family in which several generations were to live under one roof is only practicable when family members are trained to value group harmony above personal independence. Indoctrination in the value of *hsiao* (filiality or obedience), whose roots can be discerned in the sacrifices made by the Shang kings, if not in the offerings placed in Neolithic burials (see figures 2.3 and 2.5), provided just such a training and socialization. Forming part of a rich vocabulary of familial and religious dependence and obligation in which even rulers would refer to themselves as a "small child," presumably still under the eye of their dead parents, *hsiao* was precisely not the kind of lineage virtue that would have been validated by the independence and unpredictability of the Mesopotamian and Greek gods and heroes.

In addition to its impact on mortuary practices and its validation of filiality, ancestor worship had important demographic consequences. To the extent that a cult of the ancestors requires the procreation of cultists to continue the sacrifices, the eschatology of death in early China encouraged population growth in a significant way. This sanctification of posterity, and especially of male progeny, is a constant theme in the bronze inscriptions of the Western Chou, many of which end with a prayer such as, "For a myriad years, may sons of sons, grandsons of grandsons, long treasure and use (this vessel)." The multiplication of progeny recurs as a theme in the *Book of Songs* (*Shih ching*) and is given its most articulate emphasis in Mencius's famous dictum that nothing is more unfilial than to fail to produce descendants. The supreme obligation to one's ancestors was to become an ancestor oneself.

The considerable demands of the ancestral cult, visible in the grave goods of both the Neolithic and the Bronze Ages, also served to stimulate the production of material wealth. In social rather than economic terms, however, the order being "revitalized" by Chinese mortuary cults was the lineage, the power of senior kin over junior kin, and the conservative and ascriptive ties of affection, obligation, and exploitation that were stronger than life itself.

Belief in ancestors had additional consequences. Although there is no doubt that the Shang and Chou Chinese worshiped nature powers or

spirits—rivers, mountains, and fertility figures like Hou Chi (Prince Millet), the legendary ancestor of the Chou—the argument that these spirits had originally been local deities, the ancestors of particular tribes, has much to recommend it.[25] Similarly, there is some evidence that Shang Ti, the Lord on High, may have once been a progenitor of the Shang royal lineage. And it is clear that the Chou ruler came to regard himself as the T'ien Tzu, "Son of Heaven." Even though the biological relationships are murky in many of these cases, the general conception of man's relationship to the spirits of the universe was implicitly genealogical. Rulers were thought to have a special, quasi-familial relationship to the supreme deity; man was the offspring of the spirits, ancestral and otherwise. Accordingly, there was no sense of a radical difference between spirits and humans. The spiritual universe was unitary and man's relationship to that universe relied less on personal observation and exploration and more on participation in the social groups that were the primary focus of religious feeling.

The Ancient Chinese City

Despite its ability to focus and accentuate cultural values, religion is not an independent variable. Because religion operates within society and is a product of society, we cannot ignore the environment and the economic context that produced the Chinese form of lineage dominance. The ancient Chinese city is instructive in this regard because it differed significantly from the city found in Mesopotamia or Classical Greece. Not only was it visually and aesthetically different, being built largely of rammed earth, timber, thatch, and tile rather than of stone, but its political composition was different too. Early Chinese cities may be regarded as politico-religious embodiments of lineage and dynastic power, centered on a palace-temple complex and existing primarily to serve the needs of the ruling elites whose ancestors were worshiped there. These settlements were characterized by a regulated layout and unitary power structure in which merchants and artisans, subordinate to the elite lineages, played a relatively minor political role.

In Mesopotamia, by contrast, the sprawling cities grew by accretion and housed large and diverse populations. Secular power and religious power were clearly distinguished and often in opposition; the palace was confronted by countervailing sources of authority as represented by the temple, the military, private wealth, and merchants. Lineages, in particular, do not seem to have played the significant political role they did in China; the character of Mesopotamian urbanism appears to have "dissolved" the social and religious strength of the kinship units.

Ancient Chinese cities stand in even sharper contrast to those of Clas-

25. See David N. Keightley, "Akatsuka Kiyoshi and the Culture of Early China: A Study in Historical Method," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42 (1982): 294–99.

sical Greece. Greek cities were characterized by their variety of changing political forms, such as tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy, their emphasis on overseas colonization and commerce and the consequent exposure to the challenge of other cultural traditions, their reliance on "citizens," who had both rights and duties in the state, their emerging conception of equality before the law, their dependence on legal and economic slave-labor and the corollary discovery of personal freedom. In Athens the lack of any permanent officialdom, the preference for direct citizen participation in government—once more the reliance on "dirty hands"—rather than on representation and bureaucracy, is particularly notable. The Eastern Chou analogues of the Greek citizens, the *kuo-jen,* "people of the state" (the state being conceived primarily as the walled capital itself), may have had certain privileges, but they appear to have had no separate corporate or legal existence.

Notable also is the absence in China—so puzzling to Marxists inspired by the Greek case—of the *stasis,* or social conflict, between "the few" and "the many" that was a characteristic feature of the Greek city states. The rare urban upheavals recorded in the *Tso chuan* involved factional struggles among the noble lineages and their supporters; they did not involve class interests and were not fought over economic issues.[26]

This nonpluralistic Chinese urbanism helps to explain why the shift from kin-based to class-structured society that is associated with the rise of states in general seems to have taken place less completely in traditional China, where the government at both the dynastic and bureaucratic level continued to be marked by its familial nature in terms of both ideology and personnel. Despite the remarkable commercial activity that characterized many cities of post-Sung China—Marco Polo, for example, was astonished by their size and wealth—merchants in China did not achieve the kind of political, legal, and economic independence that they did in the West. This is a distinction of fundamental importance whose deep and ancient roots are partly to be found in a political system that gave kinship ties and their political extensions priority over commercial and legal ones.

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION

The ultimate question is, Why did early China develop in these particular ways? Why did its values and cultural style differ from those of the ancient Near East or ancient Greece? Speculation is tempting.

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26. See, for example, the struggles in the state of Wei in 470 B.C. (James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics,* vol. 5, *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1872], 856–57); the palace workers, of relatively high status themselves, provided the manpower, not the motivation, for the revolt of the great officers. Their role is in some ways analogous to that of the assassin-retainers discussed earlier.

First, the great abundance of Neolithic sites in China suggests greater population density than in Mesopotamia and Greece, even at this early date. If this impression is confirmed by subsequent excavations and by statistical analysis, we may conclude that Chinese experience would have been more "peopled" and that such "peopling" is congruent with a less individualistic, more group-oriented social ethic.

Second, one can speculate that the Chinese environment, which encouraged such population growth, together with the population growth itself, helped to set the basic mood of the culture. If one can relate the trusting and self-confident mood of the ancient Egyptians to the benevolence of the Nile valley, and the pessimism and anxiety of the ancient Mesopotamians or ancient Greeks to the comparative harshness and uncertainty of their environment, then one may argue that the comparatively favorable Neolithic climate in China would have encouraged a characteristic optimism about the human condition. The agrarian nature of the civilization also suggests that the characteristic dependence on superiors was related to the inability to move away from coercive leaders once one's labor had been invested in clearing the land and rendering it fertile.

Third, the nonpluralistic nature of early Chinese culture is a trait of great significance for which we should try to account. I have noted the relatively undifferentiated character of the early cities. We may further note the lack of significant foreign invasions and the absence of any pluralistic national traditions; the challenging linguistic and cultural contrast that the markedly different Sumerian and Akkadian traditions presented to the inhabitants of early Mesopotamia, for example, was simply not present for the early Chinese literati. Also, to the degree that the trading activities of merchants and the value placed on them in Mesopotamia and Greece can be explained by their relatively resource-poor hinterlands, then private merchants would have been less powerful in China because they would have been less needed. In this case geography may have played a role. Because the major rivers in north and central China—the Yellow, the Huai, and the Yangtze—flow from west to east rather than along a north-south axis, trade, to the extent that it followed the river valleys, would have generally been between regions in the same latitude whose crops and other natural products would have been similar; the distinctive ecogeographical zones in China are those of north and south, not east and west.

In this view the market economy would not have had the strategic value in China that it had in other parts of the world. A significant proportion of Chinese trade in early historical times, in fact, seems to have been tribute trade—reciprocal or redistributive in character, political in function, and dealing in high-cost, luxury items reserved for the elites, who controlled the merchants by sumptuary regulations and by co-

opting them as necessary into the administrative bureaucracy.[27] The lack of an inland sea like the Mediterranean, the absence of rocky shores and good harbors along much of the north and central China coast, the absence of major trading partners across the China Sea to provide cultural as well as economic stimuli, and the presence of deserts and mountains separating north China from Central Asia, would have further encouraged the noncommercial, agrarian bias of the early Chinese city and state and the self-confidence of its isolated, indigenous culture.

These considerations, which are basically geographic, suggest that characteristically Chinese formulations of property and legal status would have developed in a culture where economic power was primarily agrarian power. Although there is no early evidence to support Karl Wittfogel's view of an agromanagerial despotism running the state's essential water-control works, one can nevertheless see that wealth in the early state would have depended less on control of land—there was probably a surplus—and more on control of a labor force that could clear that land and make it productive. Social control—originally motivated and legitimated by religious and kinship ties—rather than technological or military control, would have been the key to political success. Access to lineage support, ancestral power, and divinatory reassurance would have been more important and more inheritable than mere claims on unpeopled, and thus unworkable, property. The problem, as revealed by King Hui of Liang near the start of the *Mencius* (1.A.3) in a conversation that is purported to have occurred ca. 320 B.C., was how to attract people to serve a ruler and his state: "I do not find that there is any prince who exerts his mind as I do. And yet the people of the neighboring kingdoms do not decrease, nor do my people increase. How is this?" This problem was one of the major concerns of the Eastern Chou philosophers. It is worth recalling that the kind of bronze-casting industry that the Shang elites patronized and that expressed both their military and their religious power had depended on the ability to mobilize labor on a large industrial scale.[28] These early patterns of behavior and legitimation subsequently made possible the larger water-control projects of imperial times; it was not the projects that created the patterns.

27. These speculations need to be treated with caution for at least two reasons. First, the traditional Confucian bias against trade has meant that commercial activity has not been well recorded in the early texts. Second, the kinds of archaeological techniques that would enable us to "finger-print" the sources of pots and jades, for example, have not yet been applied to the Chinese evidence. For both reasons the commercial role of early cities in China and the kinds of exchange networks that linked them to one another and to other regions of China still remain to be explored.

28. Ursula Martius Franklin, "The Beginnings of Metallurgy in China: A Comparative Approach," in *The Great Bronze Age of China: A Symposium*, ed. George Kuwayama (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1983), 94–99.

Speculations of this sort encourage us to seek for still earlier, more "ecological," more geopolitical, more material explanations for the origins of Chinese culture. They do not, however, satisfactorily explain why early Chinese culture took the precise forms that it did. That question, in fact, unless we narrow its scope, is unanswerable because cultures are to a large extent self-producing, the products of a virtually infinite combination of interacting factors. Many of these factors are mental and many of them are unidentifiable in the archaeological or early historical record. To put the matter another way, with the exception of the most basic precultural factors, such as climate and geography, which can only provide the most general of answers, there is nothing but dependent variables. It is truer to what we understand of cultural development— and truer, perhaps, to Chinese than to traditional Western approaches to explanation—to think in terms of the gradual coevolution of many factors rather than of a few prime movers.[29]

Because we cannot explain "everything," universal laws of development with a specificity sufficient to explain the genesis of Chinese, or any other, culture must elude us. Nevertheless, we can, as I have attempted to do, suggest some significant and characteristic features of early Chinese culture whose interrelationships were strong and whose subsequent influence on the civilization of imperial China was large.

CONCLUSION

What then do we mean by "Chinese" from the Neolithic to the early imperial age in the Han? Impressionistic though any attempt to define a worldview or cultural style must be, it may be suggested that "Chinese" referred in part to a cultural tradition permeated by the following features (listed, on the basis of the above discussion, in no order of causal priority):

1. Hierarchical social distinctions—as revealed by opulent Late Neolithic burials (see figures 2.3 and 2.7), by the high status of the Bronze Age elites both in this life and in the next, and by the human sacrifices demanded, both in blood and in obligation, by those elites.

2. Massive mobilization of labor—as revealed by the early Bronze Age city walls, the royal Shang tombs (see figure 2.9), the industrial

29. On the correlative or "organismic" Chinese view of the world in which "conceptions are not subsumed under one another, but placed side by side in a *pattern*, and things influence one another not by acts of mechanical causation, but by a kind of 'inductance,'" see Joseph Needham, with the research assistance of Wang Ling, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 280–81.

scale of Shang bronze-casting (see figure 2.10), and the large-scale public works, such as the long walls and tombs of imperial times.

3. An emphasis on the group rather than the individual—expressed in the impersonality and generality of artistic and literary representation (see figure 2.2) and generated and validated by a religion of ancestor worship that stressed the continuity of the lineage and defined the individual in terms of his role and status in the system of sacrifice and descent.

4. An emphasis on ritual in all dimensions of life—seen in Neolithic mortuary cults (see figures 2.5 and 2.7), in the emphasis on ritual practice revealed by the oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang, and in the classical cult treatises of the Eastern Chou and Han.

5. An emphasis on formal boundaries and models—as revealed by the constraints involved in rammed-earth construction, by the use of molds in Neolithic ceramic technology and in the bronze technology that evolved from it (see figure 2.10), by the dictatorial design system of the bronze decor (see figure 11.3), by the use of models in both bronze technology and social philosophy, and by the great stress on social discipline and order in ethics and cosmology.

6. An ethic of service, obligation, and emulation—consider the burials of accompaniers-in-death and human victims in Neolithic (see figure 2.8) and Shang times, the elevation of sage emperors and culture heroes who were generally administrators rather than actors, the motivations of Ssu-ma Ch'ien's assassin-retainers, and the obligations and unquestioning confidence that the princely man might engender. The endurance of this ethic is dramatically expressed by the army of some seven thousand life-sized terracotta soldiers, buried ca. 210 B.C., proud and confident as they accompanied the First Emperor of China in death (figure 2.11).

7. Little sense of tragedy or irony—witness the evident belief, well developed even in the Neolithic, in the continuity of some form of life after death. Witness, too, the general success and uncomplicated goodness of legendary heroes and the understanding of human action as straightforward in its consequences. Confucian optimism about the human condition was maintained even in the face of Confucius's own failure to obtain the political successes that he needed to justify his mission. The optimism, both moral and epistemological, was a matter of deep faith rather than of shallow experience.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but I am proposing that particular features such as these, combined in the ways I have described, help to define what we mean by Chinese for the early period. It must be stressed that other scholars could well emphasize different features of
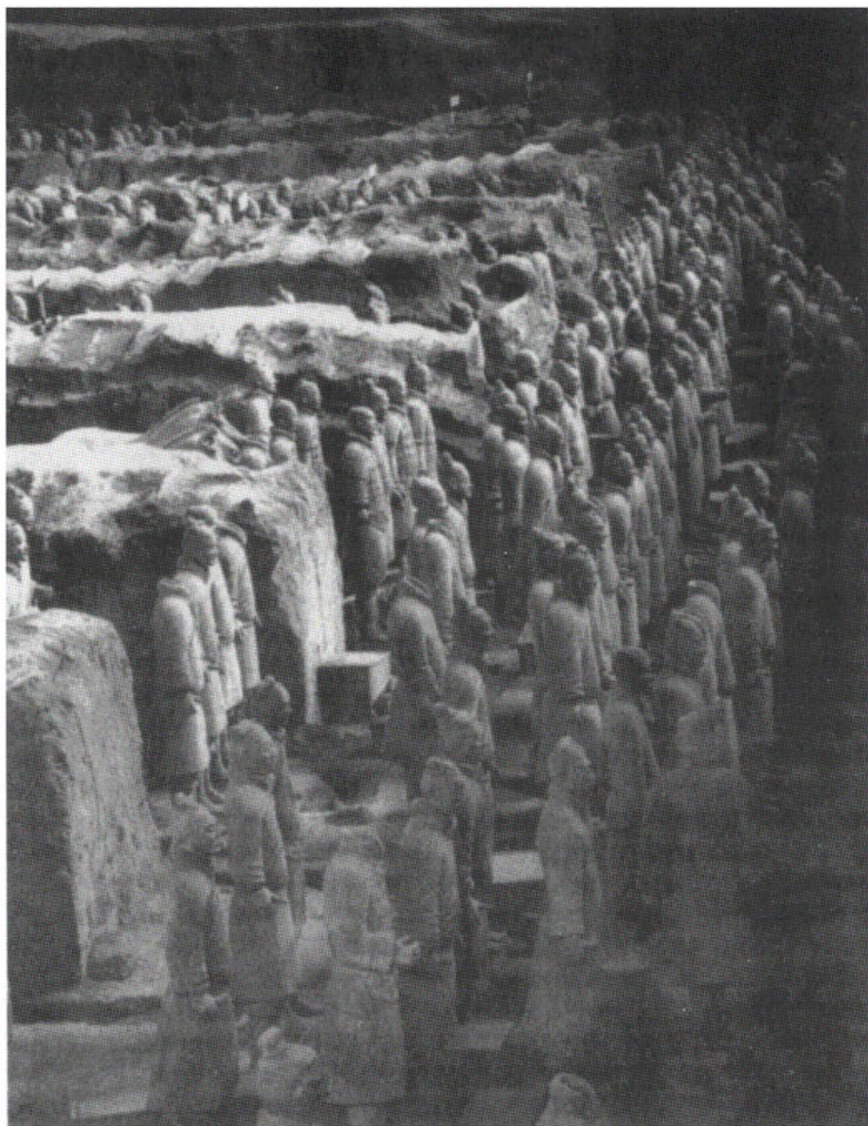
Figure 2.11. Part of the seven-thousand-man army of terra-cotta figures buried with the First Emperor of China, ca. 210 B.C. From *Ch'in Shih Huang ling ping-ma yung* (Peking: Wen-wu Ch'u-pan-she, 1983), no. 7.

the culture—such as the influence of millet and rice agriculture, the acceptance of a monistic cosmology, the influence of a logographic writing system, the nature of early historiography, the role of shamanism, and Confucian conceptions of benevolence and good government. As I indicated at the start, I do not focus on the Eastern Chou philosophers not only because they have already been studied extensively by Western scholars[30] but also because my main concerns are "prephilosophical"; I attempt to relate legend, history, aesthetics, and political practice to the culture of the Neolithic-to-Bronze-Age transition. My analysis, accordingly, is neither definitive nor comprehensive; it does not propose to explain "everything."

Furthermore, in making cultural comparisons, we should generally think in terms of emphasis or nuance, not absolute distinctions. I do not claim that the ancient Chinese had no sense of individual heroism, that no leader ever did things for himself, that death was not a source of terror, that the early Chinese ignored details, or that merchants played no role. But if one imagines a series of axes on which individualism, personal involvement, attention to detail, anguish at the death of loved ones, service to the group, and so on could be plotted, one would find that the Chinese responses differed to a significant degree from those of other seminal civilizations.

Finally—to return to a caution raised at the start of this chapter—I would remark that the very nature of cultural comparison, which involves moving from the familiar culture to the unfamiliar one, results in a rhetoric that seems critical of the "target" culture, which is described as deficient in certain features. But should such features have been present? Is what has been called the Greek "lust to annihilate" attractive?[31] Are gods who masquerade as swans to rape their victims? Are sons who overthrow their fathers? What we may regard as the good and the bad features of any culture are inextricably linked. All great civilizations have their costs as well as their benefits, and it would be instructive—indeed, it is essential if full cultural understanding is to be achieved—to rewrite this chapter from the Chinese point of view, stressing and seeking to explain all the features that early Greek culture, for example, lacked. The most notable of these would surely include the emphasis that many early Chinese thinkers placed on altruism, benevolence, social harmony, and a concern with human relations rather than abstract principles.

The cultural traditions established in the Neolithic and the Bronze

30. The most recent comprehensive study is that of Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China.*

31. Eli Sagan, *The Lust to Annihilate: A Psychoanalytic Study of Violence in Ancient Greek Culture* (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1979).

Ages of China were ancestral to all that followed, continuing to exert their influence down to recent, if not contemporary, times. It could be argued—as the discussion about the extensive ramifications of ancestor worship has suggested—that the Chinese were relatively slow to de-sacrilize their world. Ancient social practices tied to the lineage con-tinued to be attended with powerful religious qualities throughout impe-rial times. A major question—in our own case as well as that of the Chinese—is to what degree will the older, deeply seated traditions help or hinder the search for new solutions? Recent claims that "traditional Chinese cultural values may be conducive to the economic life typical of the modern epoch" suggest that the answer is by no means a foregone conclusion.[32] The combative individualism of the West may yet prove more costly than the harmonious social humanism of China. To address a question such as this, surely, is one of the reasons we study history and why it is important to understand the past as clearly as we can. As Ssu-ma Ch'ien wrote some two thousand years ago, "He who does not forget the past is master of the present." When we consider George Santayana's more negative formulation that "those who forget the past are con-demned to repeat it," Ssu-ma Ch'ien was the more optimistic. But that would have been characteristic. And how appropriate that his should have been a confidence in the virtues of the past.

32. John C. H. Fei, "The Success of Chinese Culture as Economic Nutrient . . . ," *Free China Review* 36, no. 7 (July 1986):43.