

Miaodigounization and Erlitounization: the formation and evolution of the Hua-Xia ethnic group and Hua-Xia tradition from the perspective of archaeology



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Abstract

What is Hua-Xia? How and when did the Hua-Xia ethnic group and Hua-Xia tradition come into being? As the spatial and temporal framework, the connotative features and the genealogy of the archaeological culture become increasingly clear, we can identify two important periods of prehistoric archaeological cultures that may have played key roles in the formation of the Hua-Xia ethnic group and its cultural identity. First is the Yangshao Culture (especially its Miaodigou Era), which was formed at the middle Neolithic age. During this period, agriculture was established as the main economic base, resulting in massive population growth, as well as rapid expansion of painted pottery, unique artifact collections and other highly consistent material culture, from the Central Plains of China to the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River and beyond. Based on recent genetic, linguistic and other multidisciplinary research, it can be roughly confirmed that this culture is the archaeological manifestation of the emergence and formation of the Sino-Tibetan language family with a large population and a vast territory, so it is of fundamental significance for the formation of the Hua-Xia tradition in terms of ethnicity, language and culture. Second is the Erlitou Culture, which rose in the heart of the Central Plains of China after the Longshan Era, and stood out again in the Yangshao homeland in the competition among the regional cultural traditions of the early Chinese interaction circle after the collapse of the Yangshao Culture. Absorbing all the advanced cultural factors known at that time, it became the mainstream cultural tradition and great civilization tradition, including the political tradition, the ideological tradition, the lineage system and the unity and coherence in writing. The Erlitou Culture provided world views, values, even the instrumental systems and political institutions

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for the continuation of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties to identify and follow, which roughly corresponded to the rise of the Xia dynasty as depicted in the literature. Thus, if Miaodigounization, with its great integration and expansion feature, was acclaimed as the foundation of the Hua-Xia tradition, Erlitounization enabled the establishment of Hua-Xia mainstream tradition.

Keywords Hua-Xia ethnic group · Hua-Xia tradition · Miaodigounization · Erlitounization · Longshan era · Repeated integration

Introduction

The concept of modern nation originated in Europe and was introduced into China in the late Qing dynasty and the early Republic of China. The “Chinese people” and the “Chinese nation” are concepts of ethnic identity gradually formed in the long course of history. In particular, the appellation of the Chinese nation was first proposed and defined by Mr. Liang Qichao in the late Qing dynasty after he summarized the interaction of ethnic groups in China in the face of domestic and foreign political and diplomatic situations. It then was widely recognized as the academic and ideological basis for the unity and harmony of Five Ethnic Groups after the Xinhai Revolution (Ma 2021). The recognition of the concept of “Chinese people” may have existed in the prehistoric era of the Five Emperors. *Shiji-Records of the Five Emperors* says: “Emperor Yao died. After three years of mourning, Shun abdicated to Danzhu (a son of Emperor Yao) and moved to the south bank of the South River...then he arrived in China (Zhongguo) and ascended to the throne, called Emperor Shun.” If Shun’s “arriving in China” is still a retelling of the legend by Sima Qian, then the current conclusive documentary evidence can be traced back to the Western Zhou dynasty. Unearthed in Jiacun Town, Baoji, Shaanxi Province in 1963, the inscription of He Zun (during the reign of King Cheng of the Zhou dynasty) contains the words “Here in China I Dwell”, which refers to the Cheng Zhou region of the Western Zhou dynasty. According to *Shiji-Annals of the Zhou dynasty*, the Duke of Zhou built the capital city of Luoyi there at the beginning of the Zhou dynasty because “this was the middle of the world and the tributes were paid in all directions”. It can be seen that the people living in the area of Luoyang in the Central Plains, traditionally known as the middle of heaven and earth, were already culturally Chinese in the early years of the Western Zhou dynasty and even earlier in the period of Emperor Shun (Wu 2011).

In early China, there was a long-standing understanding of different ethnic groups and cultures. There are numerous legends about the differentiation and interactions (including communications, exchanges, integration and conflicts) among the Chinese, the Central Plains, the Hans, and their surrounding ethnic groups in the ancient era. The situation became clear and conclusive in the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang and Zhou), especially after the pre-Qin and Qin-Han periods. Chinese people had different names with the changing of dynasties, such as the Zhou people, the Qin people, the Han people, the Tang people and so on. Basically, they all referred to

people in the ever-expanding area of China starting from the Central Plains. The Chinese cultural identity shared by Chinese at home and abroad implies the return, reaffirmation and gradual expansion of Chinese identity in the construction of nation-state after the Manchu dynasty among the nations of the world.

A more important appellation of the early Chinese people is Hua-Xia, which is a more ancient and in-depth ethnic and cultural cognition, containing many codes of the blood relationship and cultural inheritance of the Chinese nation. In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods before the Qin and Han dynasties, the main ethnic groups of the vassal states in Central Plains called themselves Zhu-Xia or Hua-Xia, while the surrounding states, including some famous vassal states, were not Zhu-Xia. The powerful kingdom of Chu, for example, was regarded as one of the “Nan-Man kingdoms” (meaning uncivilized peoples in the south) by Hua-Xia (Yang 2006). The so-called Hua-Xia in this period was not only the result of the thinking and expression of various philosophers in the pre-Qin Axis period, which is commonly referred to today as the traditional Chinese culture, but also the result of the ethnic integration, political and cultural identification and inheritance for more than 1000 years in the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties. It was also a kind of ethnic consciousness that had already existed in the pre-Qin period in relation to the four surrounding tribes. However, Hua-Xia must also have undergone a long stage of unconscious existence, and there are historical facts and clues to be traced back to the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties or even earlier. The legendary era before the three periods included cultural memories of the long-term interaction among different tribal groups such as Hua-Xia, Miao-Man and Dong-Yi, and archaeological findings also revealed the cultural development in early China from pluralism to unity, with the Central Plains ethnic group and its culture gradually dominating as the primary tradition. Therefore, the domination of Hua-Xia, and the process and mechanism by which the four surrounding tribes integrated into the central Hua-Xia, are the keys to the formation and evolution of the early Chinese nation, as well as Chinese civilization and its traits. This is a grand and complex process, involving not only the inheritance and integration of ethnic groups by blood, but also the assimilation and identification of cultural, social and political evolutions. The discoveries and researches of modern archaeology over a hundred years have been able to provide a great many valuable clues for the exploration of this issue.

The formation and evolution of diverse regional cultural traditions as the background

The archaeological culture is defined and depicted by the discovered ancient human remains (Xia 1959), which reflect the means of human life and production, technical skills, social organization and spiritual culture within a given space and time, with specific individuals and groups behind them. Chinese archaeology in the past one hundred years has largely established the spatial-temporal framework and cultural genealogy of the human cultural evolution in early China. Therefore, with a systematic review of relevant discoveries, we can roughly trace how the Hua-Xia tradition emerged and evolved.

Although ancient humans lived in China for nearly two million years, identified on the basis of archaeological remains, the regional cultural traditions with such technical and occupational characteristics as the use of tools can only date back ten thousand years. This is because the increasing variety and complexity of tool combinations such as stone tools, the invention and spread of pottery and agriculture, the increase in population and settlement, as well as the deep exploitation and adaptation of the environment are all cultural phenomena that followed the transition phase of the Paleolithic and Neolithic Ages. Thus, the Chinese archaeologists proposed a series of regional names for the Neolithic and later archaeological cultures. These different identifiable regional cultures and their extended traditions are, in general, the material remains of the ethnic groups' production and lives in ancient history and legends that followed. From the middle Neolithic Age, especially with the development of the agricultural economy, settled villages flourished, and the archaeological culture in different regions, as a living tradition with strong local adaptation and a long history, took roots and developed. Not only did several large regional cultural traditions with distinctive characteristics form, but they also gradually interacted with each other in the form of tribal or ethnic groups, forming a circle of interaction in early China. During this interaction began the integration of multi-cultures into a unified Chinese civilization encompassing all the tribal groups (Zhang 1989a, b).

In terms of the formation and evolution of regional cultural traditions, the process can be roughly divided into the following stages.

Sowing

China has had a history of human existence and development for nearly two million years since the early Paleolithic Age. In particular, after leaving Africa, the ancient modern humans reached China in different batches along the southern coastline and the northern grassland. Not only did genetic and cultural exchanges take place between them, but they also demonstrated clues of the genes and cultures of pre-modern humans such as the Neanderthals and the Denisovans (Reich 2019). Because of different environments and corresponding adaptation strategies, the Paleolithic technique and the cultural tradition of the coexisting southern gravel and northern flake stone were manifested. Ancient humans throughout East Asia during the Paleolithic Age may have contributed more or less genetically to the later Chinese, and the culture they created was, of course, the earliest basis of the early Hua-Xia tradition.

Sprouting

The Last Glacial Period in the late Paleolithic Age, especially 18,000 years ago, turned into a period of rapid warming and violent fluctuations. In order to cope with the extreme environment in the Last Glacial Maximum, the ancient humans were forced to adopt a broad-spectrum adaptive strategy, strengthening the exploitation of the environment and hunting activities, deepening the knowledge and utilization of some animal and plant resources, and further miniaturizing and complicating their

techniques and tool systems. Especially in southern and eastern China, due to the relatively favorable environment and stable life, ancient humans were the first to invent pottery and fully utilize various plant and animal resources. After the refinement of the Younger Dryas Little Ice Age¹ about 12,800 years ago, encouraged by the favorable climate all the way after that, humans experimented with agriculture and livestock breeding. The population was growing, and in some places, houses were built in the wilderness, forming villages for permanent or semi-permanent settlement. About 10,000 years ago, several economic zones began to take shape, centering on pottery, grinding stone, jade, two types of cereal agriculture (southern rice and northern grain), tropical and subtropical tuber crops, and intensive fishing and hunting in abundant environments such as rivers, lakes, swamps and coastal areas. It laid the foundation for the development of the regional cultural tradition that became increasingly intricate and well coupled with the specific geographical contexts in many regions.

Rooting

About 9000 years ago, especially after the severe cooling event 8200 to 8400 years ago (Liu 1998), the Holocene ushered in the Great Warming with good coupling of precipitation and temperature. The climate was very suitable for the development and spread of agriculture. The farming and sedentary societies in eastern China became a great landscape in the livable areas such as the mountain front, river valley, lake basin, and so on, forming a cluster of village cultural landscape, while ware usage, settlement structure and spiritual and cultural products became increasingly diverse. Early Neolithic archaeological culture with certain regional characteristics sprang up, such as the Xinglongwa culture in Northeast China, Xinglong culture in the north area of Northern China, Peiligang, Laoguantai, Dadiwan and the Cishan culture in the loess region and its southeastern edge, the post-Li (Houli) culture in Haidai region, the Pengtoushan culture at the bank of Dongting Lake, the Shunshanji Culture in Northern Jiangsu, the Hemudu, the cross-Huqiao (Kuahuqiao) and even the earlier Shangshan culture in Hangzhou Bay, showing their distinctive regional characteristics and a clear connection with the subsequent cultural traditions.

Development and growth

Five thousand five hundred to 7000 years ago, boosted by factors like economy, technique, ideology, especially the rapid growth of the population, such relatively independent or isolated cultural blocks as Yangshao Culture, Dawenkou Culture, Hongshan Culture, Qujialing Culture, Liangzhu Culture etc., gradually achieved the integration of different archaeological cultures within the same geographical

¹ During the Last Glacial Maximum, human beings adopted a broad-spectrum adaptation strategy and recognized new characteristics of some animals and plants. The cooling in the Younger Dryas Little Ice Age forced human beings to deepen this cultural achievement and form domestication. Therefore, it is a return to cultural adaptation.

environment and region. It developed into a mature regional cultural tradition with distinctive characteristics in economy, settlement, artifact collections and spiritual belief, and resulted in inter-cluster and intra-social stratification, thus initiating the process of social complexity. Different cultural regions not only distinguished from but also communicated closely with each other, and even had contacts and collisions, thus forming an early East Asian cultural interaction circle with similar scope in China for later generations (Zhang 1989a, b). Some luxuries and ideological goods, including knowledge and ideas, might be exchanged between the upper classes in different regions (Li 2015). Su and Yin (1981) classified them as the six major zones of Chinese prehistoric culture based on the theory of zone types, pointing out that they not only had their own origins, characteristics and development paths, but also evolved and interacted with each other within and between regions. Moreover, they are the prehistoric basis of the culture of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties and the Jin, Chu, Qin, Qi, Yan, Wuyue and Bashu in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods.

Collision and reorganization

About 5500 years ago, regional integration reached its peak successively with the population saturated and the regional buffer zones reduced. The Holocene Warm Period had passed the optimum stage of climate, and the pressure on resources began to increase. Yangshao Culture, which was located in the environment-sensitive area, took the lead in disintegration. At the same time, new economic factors such as wheat, cattle and sheep from West Asia began to pour into Yangshao Culture area, causing another agricultural revolution on the basis of millet farming. On the one hand, the tension between man and land resulted in increased competition among settlements and different cultural types, increased divisions and conflicts within and outside settlements, construction of city walls and numerous trenches, as well as some extremely large and luxurious tombs of some prominent people. On the other hand, the spread of new technologies accelerated, and the phenomena of cultural exchange and convergence became more and more obvious (Cao 2000). After carefully combing the unified and diversified features of the regions, Yan proposed a general naming of the Longshan Era (Yan 1981). The author also discussed the cultural phenomenon of general Longshanization and its profound significance, which was triggered by the transformation of economic and social development (Cao 2022). A truly early Chinese interaction circle had brought the cultures and ethnic groups of various regions closer, which foreshadowed an upcoming battle for the Central Plains.

Centralization

After the intense division, reorganization and competition, some regional traditions quickly fell apart, while Erlitou Culture emerged as the result of fierce contending in the Central Plains during the Longshan Era, combining various advanced cultural factors in East Asia at that time, with strong radiating power over other regions (Cao

2021). Based on the traditional Chinese historical narration that many states had to pay tribute to and attach to the Chinese dynasty-states it can be concluded that a primary cultural tradition and supra-regional great tradition were established. Through the change, succession and development of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, a historical trend centering on the Central Plains took shape (Zhao 2006a, b). After the description and elaboration in the classical literature in the Axis period of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States, and through the unification of the Qin and Han dynasties, the Hua-Xia tradition, an integration of agriculture and husbandry in East Asia, was established as the peak of civilization and the core of gravity, followed by a snowballing growth.

The above is the general diachronical development of early man and culture with East Asia as the background, from hunting to farming and husbandry, giving birth to the early civilization and main ethnic groups centered on Hua-Xia. Synchronically, in comparison with Africa and Europe, the land of early China was a good place to live in the East. Different groups of the descendants of *Homo erectus* have come from far away and multiplied here. China is said to be one of the regions with greatest diversity of early archaic humans in Eurasia, with greater genetic span and integration between them than any other regions, including Africa. Because of the complex diversity of the early ethnic groups, their livelihood types and their integration and interaction ways in a highly complicated environment of East Asia from the Tibetan Plateau to the coastal plains, Neolithic China fully exhibited the prosperity of multi-regional cultural traditions and their interactions. Therefore, in the course of formation, the Hua-Xia tradition was able to absorb and synthesize the achievements of people and cultures from an extremely wide range of time and geography. Before the Central Plains became the center, the development of regional cultural traditions in the Middle Neolithic Age reached its peak and the tribes in ancient Chinese legends such as Yan, Huang and Chi You were very active. Archaeological evidence showed that Hua-Xia in the Loess Belt, Dongyi in Haidai and Jianghuai,² as well as Miaoman in the middle and south of the Yangtze River, were all populous and powerful ethnic groups (Xu 1985). However, with different cultural bases and geographical environments in the transitional period of the Paleolithic and Neolithic ages, they not only took different development paths, but also occupied different positions in the regional interactions. According to Yan, the regional cultural traditions in the Middle Neolithic Age formed a multi-petal flower-like structure (Yan 1987), showing a tentative trend from diversity to unity. After the integration and expansion of Miaodigounization in Yangshao Culture period and Erlitounization after the reorganization in the Longshan era, the Hua-Xia ethnic group gradually emerged as the center of regional cultural interaction in early China. Therefore, Miaodigounization and Erlitounization, which can be said to be the key stages of the development of the Hua-Xia civilization in early China, had laid a dazzling and solid background for the development of history afterwards (Cao 2011).

² Haidai and Jianghuai areas are one of the important archaeological and cultural regions in China. The former refers to Shandong today, the latter refers to the area between the Yangtze River and the Huaihe River.

Miaodigounization in the development of Yangshao culture: the formation of the core ethnic group and the foundation of the cultural character

Miaodigou Culture is synonymous with the middle stage of Yangshao Culture. The discovery and naming of the Yangshao Culture in 1921 were considered to symbolize the birth of modern Chinese scientific archaeology. After 100 years of archaeological discovery and research, it has been basically confirmed that the Yangshao Culture is a regional culture mainly distributed in the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River and the Loess Plateau. But whether for the enduring existence from 7000 to 4700 years ago, the approximately 1.3 million square kilometers of distribution space, the intricate relationship between local types and their origins, or the large number of relics, the Yangshao Culture deserves to be regarded as a giant. Thousands of sites with painted pottery as the core feature are distributed in the loess belt around the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River, far more than those of sister cultures of the same period in other regions, including those at a slightly later stage of development (Wei 2021a, b).

The Yangshao Culture was born with many outstanding features. In addition to the uniquely painted pottery and pottery collections such as jars, pots, bottles, and bowls, the sites of the Yangshao Culture were generally large in scale. Relics indicative of group solidarity, such as grouped houses around large public buildings, central squares, standard cemetery planning, mass co-burial graves, and a large number of children's urn burials, demonstrated strong settlement centripetal force and social organization ability. For example, in the Jiangzhai Relic which has been well excavated and studied, there were five groups of buildings arranged around their own large houses in the early Yangshao Culture, encircling the large square in the center and with a corresponding public cemetery outside the settlement ring trench (Banpo Museum. Archaeological Institute of Shanxi Province. Lintong Museum 1988). In the Xipo Relic in Lingbao, Henan province, which belonged to the middle and late Yangshao Culture, four super-large houses surrounded the central square with opposite doorways, playing a prominent role in public activities (Henan First Team from the Institute of Archaeology CASS, Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Henan Province, Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Sanmenxia, etc 2005; Li et al. 2007; Henan First Team from the Institute of Archaeology CASS, Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Henan Province, Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Sanmenxia 2015). This type of elaborately built, oversized house, with the delicate wall facing the doorway as the upper position and the front protruding into a nearly pentagonal shape, was found in the center of many Yangshao relics. Undoubtedly, it was a further development of the large house tradition that already prevailed in the early Yangshao settlement. Its internal unique functions and structures, such as the large fire pit that greeted the door, the specially treated floors and walls (in some well-preserved sites, hardening treatments similar to lime surfaces and wall painting were found to cover an area of several hundred square meters), the dense columns and the frequent remains of drinking, had

quite a lot in common with the early public buildings such as the men's clubs in prehistoric societies that were commonly found in the modern ethnography and archaeology around the world, as systematically combed by Flannery and Marcus (2016). It was also an important source of the special public buildings such as ancestral temples and palaces in the later Chinese society. It is conceivable that it is in such public buildings that village members, or young and middle-aged men, often met and were taught about the history, religion, rituals, military and other aspects of the community, and made important decisions and expansion plans for the development of the village.

The Yangshao Culture is important because it is the first regional archaeological culture in early China that takes agriculture as its main economic base. The great Holocene Warm Period and the northward shift of the precipitation belt, as well as the easy cultivation of the loess belt under the farming conditions at that time led to the development of agricultural economy. The Yangshao Culture took the lead in time and space, and undertook two major waves of westward and northward expansions at the Banpo and Miaodigou stages in quick succession.

The Yangshao Culture was formed about seven thousand years ago. The formation mechanism, internal complexity and external expansion and connection of such a vast culture, are incomparable to those of other cultures in the same period. In the pre-Yangshao period, there were such cultures as the Jiahu Culture, the Peiligang Culture, the Cishan Culture, the Beifudi Culture, the Baijia Culture, Laoguantai culture and the Dadiwan Culture coexisting. The Yangshao Culture was able to replace these different cultures only after cultural integration in the expansion process, which was actually initiated from the Peiligang Culture. With the ending of the Last Glacial Period, the rise of sea level, the arrival of the Holocene Warm Period, as well as the rearrangement of people and living resources, the two agricultural cultures of southern rice and northern cereals, which originated in southeast China and north China respectively, rushed along the Yellow River out of the middle reaches and into the trumpet mouths of the eastern lowlands. They intersected in the second and third terraces of China's geographical landscape and along the north-south climatic demarcation line between Qin Mountains and Huai River, leading to the rise and expansion of the Peiligang Culture around Mount Song region, Henan Province, which turned out to be the main source of the Yangshao Culture. The early Yangshao Culture took full advantage of the water-heat coupling conditions of the Holocene Warm Period and the easy cultivation of the loess, inherited the northward westward expansion of Jiahu and the Peiligang cultures, and integrated many local cultures of the Loess Plateau and its southeastern edge. Along the foothills of the Taihang Mountains and the tributaries of the middle reaches of the Yellow River, the complex farming culture and painted pottery were extended to areas as far north as Hebei, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Shaanxi and Gansu-Qinghai provinces, reaching the Half Moon Zone outlined by Tong (1987), or the far northwest end of what Rosen called the Chinese Arc (Liu 2017), another deep, giant cultural-geographical trumpet. After the establishment of the principal status of agriculture, the substitution of millet (glutinous)-millet-rice by millet (glutinous)-millet-rice-bean crops, the further increase in the proportion of agriculture (Zhang 2021), and the transmutation of other internal cultural elements and patterns such as the pattern of painted

pottery, at the Miaodigou stage about 6000 years ago, the cultural integration of various local types within the range of the Yangshao Culture, as well as the complete coverage of the Loess Plateau and its southeastern edge, was basically finished, finally. Its painted pottery and other cultural concepts and factors also had a strong impact on the surrounding archaeological cultures, forming a magnificent unification movement in prehistoric China.

Therefore, the Yangshao Culture can be said to be the first prehistoric culture in early China, formed through cultural integration and innovation, with agriculture as its main base. It relied on agriculture as the economic foundation for its population growth and expansion. It took the lead in realizing the transition from diversity to unity in the Loess plateau, including the traditional Central Plains, during the Miaodigou stage. The integration and expansion of the Yangshao Culture has roughly gone through three stages. The first stage was the continuous expansion to the loess belt through the north-south integration of the Peiligang Culture and the composite agricultural economic base. Secondly, millet (glutinous) and beans were used to replace millet by a large margin, so as to further optimize the crop structure, deepen the important role of agricultural economy and sustain population growth. In the valley of the Jin-Yu-Shaan delta and the loess belt, the early local types such as the Banpo and Hougang were further merged, forming a new Miaodigou type, initiating the second round of deeper expansion and integration, and bringing the cultural unity of the loess zone and a strong outward influence. The third stage was another localization and even disintegration after its great expansion, which triggered another wave of shocking cultural diffusion.

Recent genealogical studies in linguistics and human paleogenomics have revealed that the Yangshao Culture and its descendants have played a fundamental role in the formation of Sino-Tibetan language family (Zhang et al. 2019). Ethnolinguistics such as Sun Hongkai also argued that the people of the Majiayao and subsequent cultures in the Ganqing and Hehuang regions moved south along the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau and even onto the Tibetan Plateau, contributing to the formation of Tibeto-burman language family used in China's Qinghai Tibet Plateau, South Asia and Southeast Asia (Sun 2015). The Chinese language derived from the Sino-Tibetan language family, as the main linguistic and cultural basis of the Chinese ethnic group and civilization, can be traced back to the prehistoric Yangshao Culture.

During the late Yangshao period and the post-Yangshao cultural downturn, the settlement and population size of the Yangshao Culture homeland in the Central Plains were not inferior to those of other neighboring cultures. However, the fall and disintegration from the peak stage of Miaodigou provided new opportunity and space for it to absorb the surrounding cultural factors. The Dawenkou Culture in the east and the Qujialing Culture in the south squeezed and penetrated the Yangshao homeland at the peak of regional integration. With the change of the environment, after the disintegration of the Yangshao system, the Yangshao descendants from the north returned to the homeland with mutations and new cultural factors from the more distant northwest. As a result, the original core distribution area, the so-called Central Plains, stepped into an early state of evolution in which ethnic groups with different blood overlapped and squeezed into

a composite cultural integration and reorganization. With new economic factors such as wheat, cattle and sheep, as well as metallurgy joining, there appeared many new central towns like Shimao, Taosi, Taiping, Wadian, Xinzhai and Erlitou, which widely integrated the cultural creations of various places. Mass graves, martyrdom, the foundation of the living and the remains of sacrificial rites appeared in large numbers in the Central Plains, indicating that the process of integration and reorganization was full of bloody conflicts and confrontations. However, this hierarchical state of social existence in the same region is precisely the prerequisite for the emergence of a social organization that transcends kinship, tribes and clans, and it is also an important civilizational substrate lacking in the cultural traditions of Hongshan, Liangzhu and the neighboring regions of Haidai and Jiangnan in the same period. As a result, the Central Plains eventually became the birthplace and stronghold of the early dynasties. The so-called dynasties can be understood as the unique national civilizational centers of early China where kings came to court, also as the Chinese civilizational formation model of the Central Plains where the competition for the primary cultural tradition took place.

Therefore, the formation of the Yangshao Culture and its large-scale outward colonization and expansion had foundational significance for the population and culture of the early Hua-Xia tradition. Its disintegration was equally important, because after the integration and disintegration of the Miaodigou stage, it entered the Longshanization Era. Under the development pattern in which the proportion of agriculture was increasing and the population and wealth accumulation had reached a certain limit, this era was a period of cultural adaptation after the regional tradition of the Yangshao Culture reached internal and external saturation or approximate saturation, which was first initiated by the Yangshao Culture region and echoed by the whole interaction circle of early China. Its internal manifestation was that the population continued to grow and the space became more crowded or even compressed. The external manifestation was the reduction or even disappearance of the blank buffer zones, and the increasingly intense intercultural or interregional competitions with widespread collisions and even conflicts. The essence was the resetting of population, economy and culture after the development of agriculture, providing new socio-cultural background for the birth of the mainstream Hua-Xia tradition surpassing the regional traditions after the Longshan Era. In the process of Longshanization, the Dawenkou and Qujialing Cultures, which completed their integration later, expanded westward and northward. The people who disintegrated from the Yangshao Culture carried new cultural factors such as cattle and sheep, wheat, and metallurgy from the north to compete with each other, overlap and merge in the core area of the Central Plains in southern Shanxi, western Henan and eastern Shaanxi. Finally, around Mount Song region, the great Hua-Xia tradition emerged and stood out of regional cultural traditions, which is called the rise of the Erlitou Culture. After the three dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou successively established in the Central Plains, the Hua-Xia cultural tradition of the Central Plains became the civilized highland of the whole East Asia.

The gathering of heroes at Erlitou: the highland of integrating east Asian civilization cultures Iterwined at Erlitou: the highland of integrating east Asian civilization

The Erlitou Culture is a kind of archaeological cultural relics represented by Erlitou ruins excavated from the first to the fourth phases in the Luoyang basins in Henan province. More than 500 sites of various types of Erlitou Culture have been found so far, mainly distributed in the central and western Henan around Mount Song region. In its heyday, it spread as far as to the central Shanxi in the north, Shangzhou in eastern Shaanxi and the upper reaches of the Dan River in the west, northern Hubei in the south, and eastern Henan in the east, while its influence radiating to even greater areas. In the Xia–Shang–Zhou Chronology Project, the Erlitou Relic was roughly dated to be between 1800 and 1500s BC by a series of high precision carbon fourteen dating and corrections (Compilation of Experts Group of Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project 2001). The Erlitou Culture is important for several reasons. Firstly, it rose and flourished in the heart of the traditional Central Plains. Secondly, it was later in time than the Longshan Culture in Henan Province and earlier than the Erligang Culture of the Shang dynasty represented by the Shangcheng in Zhengzhou. Thirdly, the Erlitou Relic itself was the only super-large central settlement in the core area of the Central Plains before Shangcheng in Zhengzhou, spanning the Bronze Age with rich and splendid connotations and nature of a capital city. In addition to the key points in space and time, the Erlitou Culture and the Erlitou Relic are indeed unusual from the archaeological culture perspective alone, and have many different characteristics from the previous and contemporaneous archaeological cultures, including the representative cultures and sites of the highlands of civilizations around the Longshan period.

First of all, the Erlitou Culture is a new culture integrating elements from several different cultures. Many predecessor scholars have analyzed its origins in terms of typological and cultural factors. With the development of archaeological discoveries and knowledge, most scholars agreed that in terms of the pottery collections for daily use, the most accurate marker of archaeological culture, the Erlitou Culture was mainly based on the fusion of the Meishan type, south of the Longshan Culture in Henan province and the Wangwan type north of Mount Song region. It absorbed a lot of factors such as the Zaolvtao Culture in eastern Henan and the Hougang Culture II in northern Henan, and developed rapidly during the short Xinzhai period. Apparently before and after it, the pottery cultural factors from Shandong, Anhui and even the northwest also poured into the region (Wang 2020; Wei 2021a, b). In fact, all aspects of the Erlitou Culture clearly showed this extensive absorption integration and innovation of cultural factors around the neighborhood. Unlike previous archaeological cultures, which were often transformed by the natural evolution of an early culture or by external influences, the Erlitou Culture selectively and even actively integrated brilliant elements of the surrounding neighborhoods, including distant archaeological cultures, such as the processing and application of cast bronze, jade artifacts

and turquoise in the Erlitou Culture, as well as white pottery, hard pottery, sea-shells and other fresh factors, most of which were borrowed extensively, adapted, upgraded and given new connotations before being used. Among the economic basis of the whole society and the material forms of the archaeological culture, the five grains and six animals in traditional China, except for the horse, were then in place (it should be added that rutting traces were found in Erlitou) (Yuan 2016). The compound agricultural economy was taking shape. Meanwhile, there were highly developed and specialized handicraft industries and workshops for stone making, copper casting, jade making and bone making. The most impressive was the mastery of the superb technology of manufacturing bronze containers with composite fan and using them as monopoly ritual vessels. It is clear that the Erlitou Culture is the true beginning of China's Bronze Age, as opposed to the various small pieces of bronze that were found sporadically in many places before but did not play an important role in production and life.

Second, the Erlitou Culture has distinctive and transcendent characters among many regional cultural interactions of the time. In the forming process, it absorbed a wide range of cultural factors from all over the world, then integrated and upgraded them, which not only exceeded the original cultures or cultural types, but also exerted its cultural influence on the surrounding areas to a great extent. In the case of the vertical timeline and the Central Plains, the emergence of the Erlitou Culture was another large-scale unification and re-emergence after the peak, differentiation of regional integration and the relative silence of the region in the Yangshao period. Like the peak period of Yangshao, it also had a wide influence on the neighboring cultures. If its radiation area was measured by the distribution of Erlitou-style Yazhang (Deng and Wang 2015), Jiyi (Zhang 2018), and other characteristic symbolic objects and factors, the scope was much larger than that of the Miaodigou type at the peak of the Yangshao Culture. The difference is that the appearance of the Erlitou Culture led to a downturn of the surrounding archaeological cultures of the same period, such as the Yueshi Culture in the east, the Xiaqiyuan Culture in the north, the Maqiao Culture in the southeast, as well as the middle reaches of the Yangtze River. Not only was there a lack of high-quality products like the Erlitou Culture, but the previously developed handicraft industries such as pottery also showed a trend of vulgarization. It is clearly the result of the deliberate abandonment of ideological goods by the upper echelons of these cultures after they were subjected to repressive political and ideological influences.

Those two points set the Erlitou Culture apart from any other earlier and contemporaneous archaeological cultures in the circle of early cultural interactions in the neighborhood and even in East Asia at the time, or among the scattered high points of civilizations around the region, such as Hongshan, Haidai, Liangzhu, Shijiahe, and even Shimao and Taosi. Its emergence has a distinctive transcendence, which can be seen, in a way, as a symbol of the formation of the Hua-Xia tradition or the core of civilization in Central Plains. In *The Earliest China*, Xu graphically summarized this phenomenon as the development of the civilization pattern from a sky full of stars to a moon with few stars (Xu 2009).

During this process, the area around Mount Song region, namely the intersection of the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River and the southeast edge of the

Loess Plateau, formed a special cultural geographical zone because of geographical and climatic factors. In the pre-Yangshao period, the two agricultural cultures, southern rice and northern grain, had already met here, providing a composite agricultural economic base and a starting point for the formation and expansion of the Yangshao Culture, which was coupled with the great warm period and the loess belt. In the regional traditional competition in the post-Yangshao era, this area became the focus of cultural factors and forces in all directions. After the overlapping and integration of different ethnic groups and cultures, it eventually became the ideal place for the emergence of the most comprehensive Erlitou Culture. Thus, it was considered as a key geographical hub for the entire East Asian history and culture, and regarded by the Hua-Xia cosmology as the center of the human world.

At the peak of regional integration which took the agricultural tribes as its carrier, the archaeological cultures in various regions generally developed into cluster-like defensive hierarchical societies characterized by internal differentiation and large-scale central settlements. They built central settlements, even ring-trench settlements and settlements with city walls. Such settlements were several times more defensible than ordinary ones, thus they could better protect the security of ethnic groups in the face of ethnic conflict or external marauders. The Erlitou Culture created a new model of coordinated regional defense, with a number of high-defensive sub-center settlements such as Shaochai in Gongyi, Dashigu and Dongzhao in Zhengzhou, Wangjing Tower in Xinzheng, Puchengdian in Pingdingshan, and Yusi in Mengzhou (Wen and Chen 2014), forming an arch guard form against the Dayi, while Erlitou itself only built palaces and walls in the administrative center for limited differentiation and defense (Yuan and Zhu 2014). Erlitou and the location of these sub-centers constituted the center of the culture, and the important locations beyond the cultural center, such as major transportation routes or origins of key resources, were placed under the jurisdiction of the most defensive central forts, including Dongxiafeng in Xia County, Gucheng in Yuanqu County, and the Mount Donglong in Shangluo, which may have been such peripheral strongholds. This new model of space defense and management was inherited entirely and expanded by the Erligang Culture. Archaeological discoveries have showed that relics such as Dashigu in Zhengzhou, Xishi Village in Xingyang, Wangjing Tower in Xinzheng, Gucheng in Yuanqu County, and Mount Donglong in Shangluo were all rebuilt or reconstructed at the Erligang stage after the Erlitou Culture died out, working as a regional central settlement and forming a co-prosperity relationship with Shangcheng in Zhengzhou. Erlitou continued to develop itself, but was gradually crushed and replaced by another nearby Erligang Culture, Shangcheng in Yanshi. Obviously, these phenomena can be regarded as archaeological manifestations of the formation and alternation of the state form or state tradition.

For a mainstream cultural tradition to form, it needs to transcend various regional cultural traditions and be recognized and contested by different ethnic groups. A mainstream cultural tradition also features not least the transcendence and breakthrough of consanguineous organizational relationship, while earning broad recognition as an ideology. Throughout the history, many cases across the world have shown that state is the only organizational form that can achieve this (Herzo 1998). The Erlitou Culture can be seen or roughly seen as a political tradition or longevity

of the dynasty as it can integrate various traditions, including larger cultural traditions that are represented by the archaeological culture. They went beyond traditions in regions while incorporating these traditions themselves. Of course, the evolution of regional traditions was naturally accompanied by social differentiation, the division of the ruling and ruled classes, and the corresponding interpretation system of ideology. Yet, ruling and ruled classes were poles apart within and among ethnic groups, because the latter required systematic integration of different ethnic groups, classes as well as various cultural factors. Therefore, although some areas in the early interaction circle of China had developed into a complex primary civilization, they never crossed the threshold of national civilization. On the contrary, the pattern of Erlitou Culture was a case in point where a major breakthrough was secured. In the promotion, exchange, embracing, integration, transformation and radiation of the above elements among different ethnic groups, the Erlitou Culture created a new model of social governance that transcended inequality within region and even inter-regional mutual aggression and plunder. It probably reached a new common ideological understanding featuring transcendence. More importantly, this mainstream cultural tradition, or the great tradition, which transcended various traditions, was followed by the Erligang Culture. Obviously, it was the mainstream Hua-Xia tradition that transcended ethnic cultural traditions, with state political tradition as its core. It was carried forward by the people of the Qin dynasty and Zhou dynasty since then, and evolved from the dynasty in its early days into the Chinese Empire, centering on the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River over time.

The mainstream cultural tradition that underpinned the state tradition, i.e., palace buildings, sacrificial relics, funeral and musical articles and other institutional cultural relics related to the world view, ideological system, sacrificial system and ritual system, developed rapidly in Erlitou relics and was kept alive by future generations. Archaeological discoveries were mainly about the production techniques and organizational form of high-grade artifacts, the most important of which were the bronze ritual vessels and the etiquette culture represented by them. To date, more than 200 pieces of bronze ware have been found in Erlitou Relics, including vessels, weapons, musical instruments, ceremonial ornaments and tools, covering almost all kinds of bronze wares in East Asia. Bronze vessels were unique in the Erlitou Culture as they were created as a result of drawing on bronze smelting, pottery-making techniques and concepts from all over the world. The vessels, including bronze-Jue, bronze-Jia, bronze-He and bronze-Ding discovered constituted the earliest group of bronze ritual ware in China. Some of the pottery models for casting bronze ware found in the Erlitou bronze foundry were exquisitely patterned, with round vessels up to 30 cm or more in diameter. Close to the south of the palace complex and surrounded by enclosing walls, the bronze foundry site covered an area of about 10,000 square meters. It had been used from the early to the very late stages of the Erlitou Culture, and it is not only the earliest bronze foundry in China, we can also be certain that the production is operated by the imperial court (Zhao and Xu 2019).

The turquoise and other jade objects found in the Erlitou Relics are also very distinctive, as evidenced by the fundamental differences in production and use-pattern between them and a wealth of decorative jade and witchcraft jade discovered in the eastern Haidai, Hongshan, Liangzhu and other sites, as well as other jades, such

as Jade ware symbolizing wealth, precious jade found in the sites of western Qijia site, Shimao site and Qingliangsi Temple. Jade Yue, Jade Knife, Jade Zhang, Jade Gui, which were ritual or sacrificial utensils in ancient China, are cases in point. Although most of them was modeled after the shape of jade objects in Haidai and other relics, they had nothing to do with their original usage and way of mounting the handle. Rather, they were used in a variety of occasions to show the authority of the aristocracy. As a ceremonial decoration, turquoise was often inlaid on a plate. Mr. Xu Hong, one of the excavators, speculated that many jade artifacts in the Erlitou period might have been used as “Jade *Gui*” or “Jade *Hu*” to show the relationship between the monarch and officials at court. Therefore, we have good reason to believe that the Erlitou period had formed the true ritual jade culture by transcending the original jade culture in the context of funeral and witchcraft (Chang 2017); and in the process, the forms and meanings of many early jades had been arranged and reconstructed. After that, it developed into a more refined and profoundly influential Chinese traditional ritual jade system through further drawing on and integrating the rich cultural connotation of witchcraft jade in various places, especially in the eastern region. The white pottery, indented hard pottery and primitive porcelain found at the Erlitou were in all likelihoods the early relics of the same type from the southeastern region. These complex devices and the new ideology behind them had obviously formed a new system of knowledge, meaning and etiquette which were different from the past but may correspond to the mainstream state tradition.

Thus, it can be seen that the Erlitou Culture has achieved a leap-forward integration and breakthrough in the broader scope of the Central Plains. Its cultural factors, settlement structure and values have all reflected the cross-regional cultural patterns of super-ethnic groups. The reasons are as follows. First, there were interactions between the ethnic groups and cultures in the Central Plains. Second, since the late Yangshao period, it had been strongly influenced by various cultures from around the central plains that had successively entered the peak of regional integration period, especially by the continuous flow of people and fresh cultural factors from the northwest region. By the late Longshan period, due to the evolution of the culture itself and the changes of the environment, the interaction and even collision among the archaeological cultures of different places had been unprecedentedly intensified. Because of the relatively low tide and hollowing-out after the Yangshao period, as well as the relatively suitable and stable geographical environment, perhaps coupled with the new livable space created by the alluvial acceleration of the Yellow River under the background of the new climate environment, the Central Plains had become a place for all forces to compete, for people from all directions to settle and new cultural factors to gathered sharply. At the same time, due to the introduction of new cultural factors such as sheep, wheat and bronze smelting, coupled with continued high-intensity development and environmental changes, the population of the northern region increased substantially about 4300 years ago. Culture began to transform, and the competition between each other intensified unprecedentedly. At this stage, very dense stone-city settlements (Shicheng) sprang up along today’s Great Wall region, as well as giant central military settlements such as stone mounds (Shimao), which may also be brutal conquest predators in a vast territory, forcing large-scale population concentration in the basin of southern Shanxi

(Jinnan) and rapid movement towards complex societies. Against this background, Taosi once tried to integrate various forces and cultural factors, and may have initially crossed the threshold of becoming “a country”, but the attempt was immediately overturned and collapsed under the huge tension of time and space. The movements of Shimao and Taosi were bound to have a certain impact on the ethnic groups in the hinterland of the Central Plains around Mount Song region. These ethnic groups were the common subjects in the flourishing period of Yangshao, who had completed their regional integration within a short period of time and took the initiative to attack other places, focusing especially on the northwest, directly placing Jinnan under their jurisdiction as a resource and strategic buffer zone, in order to seek advanced cultural resources and comparative advantages in the increasingly complex pattern of interaction.

This wave of great changes was summed up by Zhao as the third wave of social complexity or the formation of Chinese civilization in the *Age of the Ancient Country* (Zhao 2020). But apart from the similarities and differences in time and space, its mode and significance were completely different from the first two waves. The first wave towards the complex stratification of the primary civilization society was spontaneous, which was the situation when the agricultural cultural tradition successively entered the climax of regional integration. The Yangshao Culture took the lead, while Dawenkou-Longshan in the East, Hongshan in the Northeast, Songze-Liangzhu in the Southeast and Qujialing-Shijiahe in the South all had their own splendid chapters, and even came from behind to quickly enter the high-level Chiefdom society. Among them, the exquisite cultural factors of Dawenkou, Qujialing and other societies that were richly endowed with abundant environment and goods even marched into the Central Plains on a large scale. It is estimated that there would be many migrants at the same time to fill the relative gap here in the late period of Yangshao (Du 1992; Sun 2000). However, with the second wave surging from the transitional period in the north, various highly variant and novel cultural factors along the north of the Great Wall had been traveling southwards one after another from the second phase of Miaodigou. Its domino effect swept across the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River and even further south in East Asia, making the cultural pattern of the Longshan Period change dramatically. The competition among regional traditions entered a white-hot stage. Even the giant central settlements, like Liangzhu and Shijiahe, collapsed (Zhao 2020). The third wave, with the Erlitou Culture as its protagonist, truly integrated the achievements of civilization in all directions, casting the mainstream tradition and cultural consciousness of Hua-Xia civilization with the state as the carrier.

Conclusion: Hua-Xia: the great tradition of oriental civilization with the characteristics of openness, compatibility and tenacity

In summary, we can see that the compatible core ethnic group and centers of culture and civilization, such as the Yangshao Culture and the Erlitou Culture, were gradually integrated from the very diverse environment, early humans, types of livelihood, and cultures in East Asia. So, what is Hua-Xia? It can be argued that, as one of the

main ethnic groups in early China, and as the main cultural root of Chinese civilization, Hua-Xia's subjectivity is obviously closely related to the two great cultural integration movements of Miaodigounization in the Yangshao period and Erlitounization after the fierce competition of regional cultural tradition in the Longshan Period. Hua-Xia was built on a composite agricultural economic base, which was formed by the fusion of two major agricultural economies, the southern rice and the northern millet. Like other important cultural expansions and cradles of civilization, Hua-Xia was the result of expansion models of agriculture-population and of its accompanying language-culture. In the early formation of Hua-Xia, the formation of the Yangshao Culture, especially its Miaodigou stage, including the strong unity and expansion of dry farming and ideology expressions of painted pottery, has played a fundamental role in the formation of population, languages and cultures, and cultural genes. The rise of the Erlitou Culture in the reshuffle of Longshan after the collapse of the Yangshao Culture not only continued the advantageous tradition in geography, population and blood relationship in the Central Plains, the birthplace of Yangshao, but also integrated the advanced cultural factors of East Asia from the aspects of ideology, military and politics, fusing and casting the historical status of the great tradition of civilization and Hua-Xia mainstream tradition beyond regional ethnic groups.

"Xia" in *Shuowen Jiezi*³ is directly interpreted by Xu Shen as Chinese people. Of course, "Xia (summer)" also refers to hot weather and natural phenomena of growth of all things on earth. Therefore, "Xia" can also be interpreted as "big". The word "big" here not only refers to the vastness of body or territory, but also implies a cultural attitude of tolerance, openness and inclusiveness. For example, "big Qi (generous)", as opposed to "small vessels". "big Qi" refers to the invisible spirit that can contain everything, while "small vessel" refers to the limited volume of tangible objects. Moreover, some people argue that "Xia" and "Ya (elegance)" are interchangeable in meaning. All the cultural achievements of Xia People, including language, are the representatives of "Ya" in aesthetic concept (Li 2013).

The early literature indicated that there was a Xia dynasty before the Shang and Zhou dynasties. According to historical conventions, people living in the Xia dynasty could be called Xia people naturally. However, due to the lack of Xia people's own written evidence such as oracle bones, it is still debatable in the academic world that whether the Xia dynasty really existed and which culture found in archaeology was the cultural remains of the Xia dynasty or Xia people. In *Records of the Historian of Xia Benji*, the Xia dynasty was recorded as a faithful historical account. Some characters in oracle bones and bronze inscriptions were interpreted by many scholars as the character "Xia" (Ji 2010). In addition to the above-mentioned common meanings of the character, some clues were also interpreted by some scholars as historical traces of the Xia dynasty. Indeed, a group of people did live in early China and their culture was once named Xia. This is not only a cultural memory, but also a cultural tradition, being recognized, identified and inherited and an example

³ *Shuowen Jiezi*: The earliest Chinese dictionary that systematically analyzes the shape and origin of Chinese characters in China. It is also one of the earliest dictionaries in the world.

of the continuation of the long-standing cultural memory. During the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods, the kingdoms in the Central Plains and their people were popularly called or self-claimed Zhu-Xia (various Chinese kingdoms).⁴ Xia, as a cultural phenomenon which was prior to the Shang dynasty, was a great tradition and mainstream tradition combined by the lineage system and the unity and coherence in writing, and the political tradition, the ideological tradition (the convergence of Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism). Hence, according to the comprehensive analysis from the aspects of era, region and connotation, it is very possible that the Erlitou Culture is the remnant of the Xia dynasty.

The character “Hua” has not been confirmed by the inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells, but there are many examples in the inscriptions on bronze, which refer to flowers and are generally extended to indicate the essence of things. In the context of ancient Chinese culture, “Hua (the rising tone)” and “hua (the high and level tone, meaning flower)” are interchangeable, which means as gorgeous and beautiful as “hua”. In the pre-Qin literature, it can usually be seen that beautiful clothing was called Hua and elegant culture was called Xia.⁵ Legend has it that silk reeling from silkworms was invented by Yellow Emperor to make clothes, which were light, thin, smooth and glossy, the ultimate embodiment of their beauty. In recent years, with the help of scientific and technological archaeology, archaeological evidence of sericulture has been found in the Yangshao cultural sites in the Central Plains (Yuan 2020). Some scholars have also linked the rich and varied floral patterns of the painted pottery of the Yangshao Culture, as well as a series of related place names and people names in the Central Plains region to the legend of China, thus the Yangshao Culture and the earliest Hua ethnic group together (Su 1994). The Yangshao Culture is understood as the Huanization of the major ethnic groups in East Asia, the first one to lay an undertone formally of the process of ethnic memory and identity. Hence, the Yangshao Culture has the tendency of ideological identity from hua (flower) to Hua (China). Indeed, it can also be said that “Hua” is a very vivid expression in the hearts of the ancestors of a civilized, elegant and profound culture (Chen 2021).

Hua refers to the highly civilized people or nations, and Xia refers to the region with rich culture. Collectively, “Hua-Xia” should refer to a state of etiquette created by civilized people, which embraced a higher state of civilization, etiquette, tolerance, and openness. Certainly, after being forged by state civilization, especially the intensified cultural interaction in the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods and refined in the Axial period, this vague sense of cultural superiority and identity was gradually clarified and fixed as the cultural self-consciousness of ethnic groups in Central Plain, contrary to that of the four surrounding tribes. Overtime,

⁴ For example, *Zuo Zhuan · The Year of Mingong* records: “Di people attacked the state of Xing. Chancellor Guan Zhong said to the Duke Huan of Qi: ‘Rong and Di are powerful and greedy, who will not be satisfied; the states of Zhu-xia are our compatriots which we should not give up easily. The pursuit of ease and pleasure is as deadly as suicide by drinking poisonous wine. *The Book of Songs* says: Don’t we miss our hometown, but there is a blood Book Alliance oath, which must be observed.’”

⁵ *Zuo Zhuan Zhengyi · the tenth year of the reign of the Duke Ding* says: “China has the greatness of etiquette, so it is called Xia; it has the beauty of clothes, so it is called Hua.”

the culture of Hua-Xia, the Qin and Han dynasties and the Tang dynasty became the inner core of East Asian civilization, the high-points of cultures. Besides, objectively, this sense of identity was spread further by political unification and expansion, becoming the consensus and long-term effective factors in the vast territory centered on Central Plain. Therefore, “Hua-Xia” can be taken as a community of national cultures in early China, including ethnic groups, livelihood, culture, cognition, and aesthetic identity, featured with the lineage system and the unity and coherence in writing. The Miaodigou stage of the Yangshao Culture, being regarded as the first critical period of the emergence of the Hua-Xia tradition in East Asia, provided the population resource and mainstream cultural identity for neighboring states and cultures to copy or even to compete for political power. It wasn't until the period of the Erlitou Culture that the Hua-Xia tradition gained the framework of worldview and the core of value that could be inherited. Both of them were extracted in the interaction between ethnic groups and culture. Thus, the Hua-Xia tradition is the crystallization of the achievements of mankind and its civilization in East Asia.

Su once described Chinese history as “the root of culture over millions of years, the progress of civilization over tens of thousands of years, the ancient civilization of 5,000 years, and the unified entity of China for 2,000 years” (Su 2001). Also, his words are appropriate descriptions for the Hua-Xia civilization and the Chinese nation, which not only have long history, but also form some unique characteristics given the unique geographical environment and the evolution process mentioned above.

First, openness and inclusiveness. The Hua-Xia civilization and the Chinese nation have made continuous integration with neighboring ethnic groups and cultures, maintaining ethnic and cultural diversities. The first is the fusion of human genes. It is safe to say that genetic fusion between ancient modern people from south and north China occurred naturally, while the fused genes of the early Chinese people with Neandertals who were active in the west of the Eurasia, as well as fused genes with the Denisovans who lived in the same time period with or even earlier than the Neandertals was amazing. With the development of Ancient DNA Technology and relevant achievements, genetic contributions of early *Homo erectus* can be estimated to be recognized, proving the long-term roles played by East Asians in terms of human physique and stone technology. The second is the integration of cultural elements such as means of livelihood and lifestyles. As the tradition of hunter-gathering occurred millions of years ago and the abundant aquatic resources and forests were explored earlier, ancient China was one of the regions where all kinds of economic lives could be found prior to the agricultural stage. The hunting-gathering economy that brought about prosperity made more people be willing to settle down, and laid solid economic and social and cultural foundations for navigation, pottery and other inventions. Although China, unlike the Fertile Crescent in Western Asia, did not possess the ideal resources to choose from for animal and plant domestication in the way to agricultural society, the people tried different kinds of domestication in many places. Two corps domestication centers, rice domestication center in Southern China and millet domestication center in Northern China, were founded early. Apart from those, the booming fishery and hunting in Northeast Asia and tubers gardening to south Nanling were all conducive to the development of

population, settled communities, and regional traditions in the Neolithic Age, which offered multiple economic and cultural options in the transformation to the complex and civilized society. Therefore, the formation of early Hua-Xia and the national culture were not only the results of the interaction between different regional cultures since the Neolithic agricultural society, but also included cultural collision and fusion between the north and the south since the Paleolithic period. And they developed, mixed, and advanced by regional traditions in early agricultural society and cultural communication, which even involved the continuous influx and stimulation of Western and Central Asian civilization. In particular, the core of the Chinese civilization, from the embryonic form of the Yangshao Culture to the settled Erlitou Culture, was actually a long-term process in which different ethnic groups, technologies, goods and ideas were constantly blended and honed. The rise of Erlitou civilization, the embodiment of essence of all culture, had then been the result of continuous and repeated integration of cultures (Ma 2020).

Second, it has formed a relatively unique worldview that man is an integral part of nature, as well as a complex and diversified small-scale peasant economic foundation with grain and livestock flourishing, which enables strong stability and resilience of the economy and society. On the way to East Asia, Archaic humans, or we say *Homo Sapiens* had to cross mountains and rivers and kept observing the surroundings, so this diversity of living environment and lifestyle on their journey not only contributed to their unique views on astronomy, geography, and the relationship between human and natural resources, but also formed their attachment to the lands. Furthermore, the same experience inspired them to be the first ones to sail, to get to know substances like water, earth, and fire, to invent pottery, and to domesticate plants and animals. Since then, they have also developed a jade culture with a strong sense of life and image worship from the stone culture of millions of years. With extensive cultivation, meaning wide sowing but low yield, farming in loess areas particularly had a strong dependence on good weather, but unfortunately, floods and droughts were frequent in the region. As a result, this region developed the religious and political culture of observing celestial phenomena to determine time and foster communication between heaven and man, formed relatively unique views on the world and religion, and emphasized cultural cohesion of ancestors. The small-scale peasant economy here was fully developed, while the exchange of commodities was not. Therefore, self-reliance and self-sufficiency became prominent features early on, at both family and social levels. Besides, the social organization form, expanding layer-by-layer with the family being the core, had also been stable and sustained.

What's especially worth mentioning is the important role of the middle reaches of the Yellow River and the loess belt as the cradle of the early Chinese civilization. The aforementioned early human and cultural diversity in East Asia was based on the East Asian monsoon climate and geographical diversity shaped by the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, which is the third pole of the world. These factors created a fold belt from Northeast Asia to the southeast edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, where the terraces, climate and environment were very diverse (the belt is also called the Hu line, the semilunar cultural belt, the Chinese Arc and so on by scholars from different fields). This fold belt and the north-south climate transition zone of East Asia met in the Central Plain region, making it an obvious cultural melting pot of different ethnic groups and livelihood from

Upper Paleolithic. Each of the major cradles of early human civilization had its own characteristics. The Yellow River valley and the loess belt in the Central Plain during the warm Holocene provided a perfect place for both rice and millet planting and the prosperity of the Yangshao Culture. Although the middle reaches of the Yellow River valley lacked the effect of agglomeration of irrigation and shipping, like the Nile, the Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, all the plateau, river valley, waterfront and the basin of the Yellow River out of the Loess Plateau composed a geographical vortex of culture. The Loess Plateau and other major river basins became its depth, and the diverse ethnic groups, economies and cultures were constantly colliding and merging. With the interaction of various cultures, an interaction circle of culture in East Asia with the development trend centered on the Central Plains was formed. After continuous absorption and adjustment, the natural economy with developed agriculture and self-sufficiency took shape, so did the population and cultures based on it. This cradle not only played a key role in the emergence of the Chinese ethnic group and the civilization of East Asia from multi-cultures to integration, but also became a center of cultural attraction for a long time. After the Qin and Han dynasties, with the construction of the Great Wall and the excavation of Grand Canal, the Chinese civilization not only successfully digested the clash of civilizations between agriculture and animal husbandry and continued to flourish, but also integrated the agricultural civilizations of the Hai River, Yellow River, Huai River, Yangtze River, Qiantang River and even Pearl River. By absorbing and integrating the surrounding ethnic groups and various cultural factors, a Chinese mechanism had finally been formed for the continuous growth of the Chinese nation and Chinese civilization.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate Before taking the participants' interview, the author obtained their oral consent. They understood the purpose and significance of the survey. They can also leave the interview at any time. All recordings were made with their consent.

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