

Yangshao Culture

Yǎngsháo wénhuà 仰韶文化

Well known for its painted red pottery and the high status it afforded its women, the Yangshao culture is one of the best known in Chinese history. Scholars have drawn many conclusions about this Neolithic culture based on remains found at archaeological excavations and Yangshao sites, although unanswered questions and theories remain.

The Yangshao culture, dated from about 5000 to 3000 BCE, is one of the best known Chinese Neolithic (8000–5500 BCE) cultures. It is named after the Yangshao village on the southern bank of the Huang (Yellow) River in Mianchi County, Henan Province. Discovered in 1920 by local farmers, the Yangshao site was excavated a year later by Swedish geologist Johan G. Andersson (1874–1960). The relative date of the Yangshao culture was established in 1931 when Chinese archaeologist Liang Siyong (1904–1954) identified material remains of Yangshao, Longshan, and Shang cultures in three successive layers of strata at the Hougang site in Anyang, Henan. This discovery proved that the Yangshao culture is a Neolithic culture and that it predated the Longshan and Shang cultures.

Yangshao Excavation Sites

Chinese archaeologists have found more than two thousand sites of the Yangshao culture, many of which have been excavated, presenting a comprehensive picture of

this society. Experts think that the Yangshao culture developed from several of the Neolithic cultures in north China, including Peiligang, Cishan, Laoguantai, and

Scale model village from the Yangshao culture, based on excavations at the Banpo Neolithic Village, Xi'an. PHOTO BY PAUL AND BERNICE NOLL.



Lijiacun. Centered at three major tributaries of the Huang River (the Wei, Fen, and Luo rivers in the middle Huang River basin), the Yangshao culture expanded to the areas far beyond the reaches of its ancestral cultures. It reached Gansu and Qinghai provinces in the west, the area along the Great Wall in the northwest, and the northwestern part of Hubei Province in the south.

Material remains from Yangshao sites across several regions demonstrate great variations, challenging scholars to develop better approaches to characterize the temporal and spatial differences of the Yangshao culture. Scholars have proposed several theories to establish different regional types and phases of the Yangshao culture. The most widely accepted theory defines the Yangshao culture in Shaanxi, Henan, and Hebei provinces as seven distinctive regional types: Banpo, Miaodigou, Xiwangcun, Wangwan, Dahecun, Hougang, and Dasikongcun.

The Yangshao people lived in sedentary communities consisting of semisubterranean and above-ground houses built of wood and earth. The Yangshao society engaged in a millet-based agricultural economy, supplemented by hunting, gathering, and fishing. Pigs, dogs, and sheep were domesticated. Tools for economic activities were mostly polished stone axes, adzes, and knives, accompanied by a small number of bone arrowheads, fish forks, needles, and chisels.

BURIAL GROUNDS

Our understanding of the Yangshao culture also comes from its burials. In general, adults were buried in a community cemetery of the village near the residential area. The burial sites are mostly rectangular earthen pits containing no coffin. Single adult burials were common; composite burials of individuals of both males and females at different ages were also widely seen. Popular burial goods include painted pottery such as *bo* bowls, *guan* pots, *pan* basins, and other personal ornaments. Children were treated differently in burial. They were buried in ceramic urns, often near the house or in some cases in the community cemetery.

PAINTED RED POTTERY

The Yangshao culture was best known for its painted red pottery featuring black geometric motifs. The pottery was handmade. The most popular objects were red and brown

guan pots, *pen* basins, *bo* bowls, and small-mouthed, pointed-based vases with painted motifs. The vessel was shaped first and then painted before it was sent to the kiln for firing. Black designs on red pots were the most characteristic of the Yangshao painted pottery. Nevertheless, red motifs against white coating on red pottery are seen as well. The most intriguing designs on the painted vessels are those featuring fish, frogs, and human faces symmetrically displayed on the interior of the painted basin. Some basins were used as covers for children's urn burials, implying that the motif might have some religious or social meanings. Some scholars hypothesize that distinctive marks found on the rim of some vessels are the precursors of Chinese writing.

Society and Community

The Yangshao society has long been regarded as an equalitarian matrilineal society in which females generally enjoyed a high social status and played significant roles in economic and political arenas. But an increasing number of scholars recently suggest that during the late period of the Yangshao culture the society was much more complex and can be defined as a patriarchal society in which males had dominant economic and political power.

Settlements at Banpo in the city of Xi'an and at Jiangzhai in the city of Lintong provide us the best insight into early Yangshao society. The Banpo site, mainly occupied between 4800 BCE and 4300 BCE, covered an area of about 30,000 square meters, which was further surrounded by trenches of 6 to 8 meters wide and 5 to 6 meters deep. Forty-six houses, mostly circular with a diameter of 4 to 6 meters, were found in two residential areas where storage pits, animal pens, and children's burial sites were also scattered. In each residential area was a large house likely to be occupied by clan leaders and used for community activities. The largest house at Banpo covered an area of about 160 square meters. Remains of six pottery kilns were located east of the residential area. A cemetery of 174 burials, mostly individual adults, was located north of the residential area.

The Jiangzhai site was 15 kilometers east of the Banpo site. It provides another good example of detailed layout of a Yangshao village. The village consisted of three components: residential area, cemetery, and kilns. The residential area, dated from 4600 to 4400 BCE by calibrated

radiocarbon-14 analysis, covered an area of 50,000 square meters. It was surrounded by trenches on the east, north, and south and protected by a natural river on the southwest. A plaza situated at the center of the residential area was encircled by one hundred houses organized in five groups. Headed by a large house, each group was comprised of ten to twenty houses with their doors oriented to the central plaza. The layout of the houses at Jiangzhai indicated that several clans or families might inhabit the site. Like those at Banpo, the houses at Jiangzhai featured wattle-and-daub walls and thatched roof.

WALLED SETTLEMENT

A settlement enclosed by walls appeared in a late phase of the Yangshao culture (3300–2800 BCE) at the Xishan site in Zhengzhou, Henan Province. The Xishan site covers 100,000 square meters, with a walled settlement in the northwestern section of the site. The layout of the walled settlement is roughly circular in shape, measuring 180 meters in diameter and 345,000 square meters in area. The walls, surrounded by a moat with a maximum width of 11 meters, were built with advanced *banzhu* technique, in which earth was pounded between wooden boards. Archaeological excavations have revealed lower sections of the western and northern gates of the settlement. The northern gate was furnished with two triangular platforms, possibly watchtowers, and a protecting wall outside the entrance. The appearance of a sophisticated defensive facility in the city, together with the increasing

stratification of the burial treatment and the transition of the settlement patterns, indicates the increasing complexity of the late Yangshao society, which forecasts the emergence of regional political power in north China.

Yan SUN

Further Reading

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