HUAIYIN LI

From Unitary Plurality to Plural Unity

The Politics of Writing about the Beginnings of Chinese Civilization

ABSTRACT The writings by Chinese historians and archeologists about the origins of Chinese civilization in the past century have transitioned from the old construct of "unitary plurality," or a shared assumption of the mythical Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor) as the progenitor of the only civilization in the land of Huaxia (proto China) while admitting its coexistence with other heterogeneous but inferior cultures, to the new paradigm of "plural unity" or a consensus on Huaxia's interaction with all other cultures to form a unitary Chinese civilization that has lasted into the twenty-first century. Substantiated by the archeological findings of the twentieth century, this transition was ultimately propelled by three interweaving forces, namely, Chinese researchers' ideological undertakings, their factional struggle for academic supremacy, and commitment to local interest and identity.

KEYWORDS Huangdi, Huaxia, unitary plurality, plural unity, regionalism

The question of where the earliest ancestors of the Han people came from, who they were, and what they did that gave rise to what was later known as the "Chinese" civilization has long fascinated many historians and the like in China. The most famous among those curious about their ethnic and cultural origins in early China was no doubt Sima Qian (司马迁 145–86 BCE), the grand historian of the Han dynasty and author of *Shiji* (史记 *Records of the Grand Historian*). To explain the beginnings of the history of the Han people in the first chapter of *Shiji*, Sima Qian exercised prudence in putting together clues that he had gleaned from personal journeys, folk tales, written records, and ancient texts. But his narration of the genealogy and achievements of the ancestors of the Han people was also full of imagination and moral judgments. Under his pen, the history of the Han people began with the activities of Xuanyuan (轩辕), a legendary hero who "cultivated morality, strengthened the military, coped with the four seasons, promoted a variety of crops, pacified the people, and placated the world"; Xuanyuan further defeated Shennong, the preceding overlord who had failed to maintain peace and bullied other tribes, and Chiyou, his biggest challenger who "rebelled and disobeyed" (Sima 1999: 3). Xuanyuan therefore won recognition by all tribal leaders as the Son of Heaven and established himself as Huangdi (黄帝), or the Yellow Emperor. After his death, the state established by Huangdi continued under his successors, including his grandson

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Zuanxu, great grandson Diku, Diku's son Yao, and Shun, who was a regent before enthronement. Together, these five earliest rulers were known as the Five Lords (五帝). They were followed by the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou dynasties, known together as the Three Dynasties (三代), whose founders again were all believed to be the descendants of the Yellow Emperor.

This unilinear account of the Five Lords and the Three Dynasties as the beginning of Chinese civilization, termed Huangdi-monism (黄帝一元论) here, went largely unchallenged until the early twentieth century, when Liang Qichao (2018, 9: 621), a leading intellectual and a political activist promoting government reforms, explicitly questioned in his 1918 essay the creditability of the "successions in the same line" by the Five Lords. Four years later, he further asked about the ethnic origins of Chinese civilization: "Are the Chinese people native to the land or are they of foreign origins?" and "Are the Chinese people descendants from the same single ancestor, or are they the mixture of plural origins from the very beginning?" (11: 375, 376).

Liang's questions and inquiries heralded a century-long journey by Chinese scholars to look for clues from ancient texts and archeological remains to trace the origins and early evolution of Chinese civilization. As shown in this study, since the 1920s, they have advanced a series of interpretive schemes, ranging from theses of dualism and tripartism in the republican years to theories of Zhongyuan-centrism in the Maoist era, polycentrism in the 1980s, and neo-Zhongyuan-centrism in recent decades. Behind the proposition of each construct were breakthroughs in archeological excavation of neolithic cultures in different parts of contemporary China that stimulated the researchers to rethink the way original Chinese cultures emerged and interacted with one another, as many studies have documented (e.g., Keightley 1983; Chang 1986; Chang et al. 2005; Liu and Chen 2012; Li F. 2013; Shelach-Lavi 2015). Instead of discussing how academic factors, in particular archeological finds over the past century, drove the evolution of the aforementioned successive constructs in explaining early Chinese cultures, this study focuses on nonacademic factors that have received much less attention in the past. Among these are the Chinese researchers' political identity and ideological commitment that influenced their choice of research topics and interpretive approaches more than any other factors; the researchers' personal abilities to form an academic faction and establish discursive hegemony in the field of early China studies; and their localist bias that led them to accentuate and overstate the role of a particular region in the rise of early Chinese civilization. While past studies have discussed at varying lengths some of the nonacademic factors in different forms as shown below, this article offers a systematic analysis of the key aspects of all those factors; more importantly, it reveals how those nonacademic factors interacted with academic endeavors to shape the trajectory of the evolving frameworks for understanding early China throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The discussion below begins with an overview of the various constructs that prevailed in succession over different periods, to be followed by a discussion of each of the nonacademic factors in the following sections. My emphasis is on the transition from Zhongyuan-centrism (via polycentrism) to neo-Zhongyuan-centrism, especially how the latter resembled and deviated from the former, an issue that is far from being clear in the existing literature. Equal attention is paid to regionalist tendencies in reinterpreting early China during the post-Mao era, to show how Chinese

researchers working outside the mainstream institutions resisted or adapted to the dominant construct on the origins of Chinese civilization.

REINTERPRETING CHINA'S BEGINNINGS: AN OVERVIEW

From the 1920s to the 2010s, a variety of interpretive schemes prevailed during different periods, trying either to break with or revive the narrative of Huangdi-monism started by Sima Qian. The republican era saw the preponderance of the theory of East-West dualism (东西二元论). In archeological studies, it is manifested in the assumption of the coexistence of two separate neolithic cultures as the origins of Chinese civilization, namely, the Yangshao culture in the middle Yellow River region, which is often associated with the activities of the tribal people under the Yellow Emperor, and the Longshan culture in the lower Yellow River region, which was linked with the activities of the Yi people. In his 1933 study of the origins of the earliest Chinese dynasties, historian Fu Sinian (2003) accordingly challenged the traditional narrative about the beginning of Chinese civilization that had centered on the activities of the Xia people, that is, descendants of the Yellow Emperor. Fu instead proposed that the Yi people and the Xia people contributed equally to the rise of early Chinese states, with the Yi active in the east, where the Shang dynasty emerged and expanded westward, and the Xia people arising from the west, from where their influences expanded eastward, hence his theory of "eastern Yi versus western Xia" (夷夏东西论) (181–234). Other researchers added to the Yi and the Xia a third group of people as contributors to early Chinese civilization, namely, the Miao (known also as Sanmiao, Miaoman, or Jiuni), who were active in the middle and lower Yangzi region, hence the theory of "three ethnicities" (三族) (Meng 2015: 44–63) or the theory of "three groups" (三大集团) (Xu X. [1958] 1985: 37–128); together, we may group them as the construct of tripartism (三元论).

The Maoist era (1950s–1970s) saw the preponderance of Zhongyuan-centrism (中原中心论). Zhongyuan (中原 Central Plains) refers to the middle Yellow River region (i.e., western, northern, and central Henan; southern and central Shaanxi; and southern Hebei), where the Yangshao culture and later Henan Longshan culture predominated; historically, Zhongyuan is also believed to have been inhabited by the proto-Han Chinese, who assumed themselves to be Huangdi's descendants. In other words, Zhongyuan-centrism resembled Huangdi-monism before the twentieth century, in that both emphasized the centrality of the Zhongyuan region in the genesis of Chinese civilization, posited the superiority of the proto-Han people inhabiting this region over all other populations around them, and traced the early history of proto-Han people to the Five Lords. Behind the establishment of Zhongyuan-centrism are the many archeological findings of the Maoist era, most notably, the discovery of the site of the Miaodigou phase 2 culture in Shaan County of Henan Province in 1956–57, which arguably established the uninterrupted evolution from Yangshao culture through Henan Longshan culture to Erlitou culture, from which the Xia dynasty presumably originated (An 1959, 1979).

In the 1980s an entirely new way of interpreting early China thrived among Chinese historians and archeologists—namely, polycentrism (多中心论). Challenging Zhongyuan-centrism, archeologist Su Bingqi argued in 1981 that, among the neolithic cultures in different parts of China, including Yangshao culture in Zhongyuan,

Dawenkou and Longshan cultures in Shandong and neighboring areas, Hemudu-Majiabang-Liangzhu cultures in the lower Yangzi region, and other cultures in south-central China and along the Great Wall in northern China, each had its own origins and characteristics. Rather than a one-way influence from Zhongyuan to all other cultures as Zhongyuan-centrism had assumed, Su emphasized that all these cultures mutually interacted with one another; "while Zhongyuan influenced other areas, the latter also influenced the former," hence a variety of "zones, strains, and types" (区系类型) (Su and Yin 1981), in the form of "clusters of stars" (满天星斗) as he later described (Su B. 2019: 90–114). Contrary to the conventional wisdom of equating Zhongyuan with the "cradle of Chinese civilization," Su stated that the neolithic cultures in Zhongyuan belonged to a "derivative civilization" (次生型文明) whose remote origins should be found outside the Zhongyuan area (Su B. 2016: 16).

Su's theory inspired many archeologists in the 1980s and 1990s in their collective endeavor to depart from Zhongyuan-centrism. They all believed that the origins of early Chinese civilization were multiple and lacked a center (e.g., Tong Z. 1986; Zhang Z. 1997).[1] Echoing the theories of "eastern Yi versus western Xia" and tripartism before 1949, some archeologists and historians again emphasized the mutual interactions of a series of neolithic cultures between Zhongyuan and Shandong (Zhang G. 1993; Luan 1996), or the coexistence of three origins of Chinese civilization in regions of the middle Yellow River, the lower Yellow River, and the middle Yangzi River (Han 1996). Especially noteworthy is archeologist Yan Wenming's (1996) interpretation. Like Su, Yan denied the superiority of Zhongyuan over surrounding areas in their respective development of neolithic cultures, nor did he assume the cultures of the surrounding areas as originating from, or under the influence of, Zhongyuan. In his words, "Chinese civilization did not originate from Zhongyuan only; there were multiple centers" (14). But Yan did emphasize Zhongyuan's "role as the hub to connect all other cultural zones," including the first ring of five zones immediately outside Zhongyuan and the second ring of more distant zones beyond the first, hence his theory of "rings of flower petals" (重瓣花朵) (Yan 1987: 49).

Yan's theory heralded the rise of neo-Zhongyuan-centrism (新中原中心论), which would come to dominate the mainstream Chinese interpretation of early China in the 2000s and 2010s. Dissatisfied with the intellectual movement of "doubting the antique" (疑古) since the 1920s, which resulted in denying the historical existence of the Five Lords as well as the even more remote Three Progenitors (三皇) before them, historian and philologist Li Xueqin (1994) called for "reinterpreting the antique" (释古) in the early 1990s (19). For him, the legends about the Yellow Emperor and his descendants were not just "illusionary and imaginative," and the ancient records about the origins of the Three Dynasties "should not be denied" (38–45). Li's call for rebuilding the history of early China resulted in the launch of two state-sponsored efforts, the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project (henceforth the Chronology Project) in 1996 and its successor, the Exploration of the Origins of Chinese Civilization Project (henceforth the Origins Project), in 2001, with the establishment of the authenticity of the Three Progenitors and Five Lords (三皇五帝) and hence the credibility of five-thousand years of Chinese civilization as their ultimate goals. Reflecting on the results of these projects, Li Boqian, the "chief scientist" of the Chronology Project, published in 2008 an article titled "The Epoch of

the Three Progenitors and Five Lords in Archeological Perspective," in which he uses the latest archeological finds, made possible by the second project mentioned above, to evince the authenticity of the Three Progenitors and Five Lords by linking each of them with a particular archeological culture and specific time range.

It should be noted that neo-Zhongyuan-centrism is not the same as the Zhongyuan-centrism of the Maoist era. First, it makes serious and systematic attempts to authenticate the existence of the Three Progenitors and Five Lords by combining archeological finds with mythological texts for the sole purpose of evincing China's long history, whereas scholars of Zhongyuan-centrism used accounts of such mythological figures only to evince the universality of the Marxist theory of social evolution in explaining the primitive stage of Chinese history. Second, neo-Zhongyuan-centrism does not insist on the cultural superiority of Zhongyuan over surrounding areas as Zhongyuan-centrism does; instead, it concedes to the thesis of pluralism that had prevailed in the 1980s and admits the two-way interactions between Zhongyuan and surrounding regions and even the inferiority of Zhongyuan in relation to the cultures outside it. Nevertheless, neo-Zhongyuan-centrism essentially resembles Zhongyuan-centrism in that both emphasize the uninterrupted succession of neolithic cultures leading directly to the founding of the Xia and all of the Three Dynasties in this area, and both underscore the importance of the Zhongyuan region to the genesis of Chinese civilization by virtue of its geographic centrality, which allowed it to benefit from all other cultures around it (Li B. 1995, 2009; Zhao 2000, 2006).

The prevalence of neo-Zhongyuan-centrism and its attempt to turn the mythology of the Three Progenitors and Five Lords into authentic history (信史) did not go unchallenged since its emergence in the 1990s. It incurred serious questioning by Chinese historians and archeologists (Wu 2005; Chen C. 2006; Chen and Gong 2004), not to mention criticisms from researchers outside China over the unreserved use of the ancient but questionable texts, a problem that actually exists in both Chinese and Western writings on the history of early China (see Bagley 1999; Schaberg 2001a, b). Nevertheless, by the 2010s, neo-Zhongyuan-centrism had firmly established its mainstream status in Chinese historiography and archeology. This interpretive scheme is consistent with the overall characterization of today's China by mainstream Chinese media and scholars as a nation of plural unity (多元一体). In present-day Chinese discourse, plural unity, while admitting the coexistence of multiple ethnicities and their distinctive historical origins and cultural traditions, underscores the unity of the fifty-six officially identified ethnicities and their integration into a single Chinese nation (中华民族). For historians and archeologists of neo-Zhongyuan-centrism, the plural unity of today's China has its origins at the very beginning of Chinese civilization; for them, plural unity means, first of all, the centrality of the Zhongyuan area in the uninterrupted development from the Three Progenitors and Five Lords to the Three Dynasties, while allowing for its coexistence and mutual interaction with other cultures around this area. Neo-Zhongyuan-centrism thus revives in large measure the Huangdi-monism that prevailed before the twentieth century. Adherents of Huangdi-monism and neo-Zhongyuan-centrism both believe in the authenticity of the stories about the Yellow Emperor and his immediate descendants (the Five Lords), and both accept them and the culture they started as the very origins of Chinese civilization.

But there is a subtle yet substantial difference between them: while neo-Zhongyuan-centrism prioritizes political unity over ethnic and cultural plurality, hence plural unity, Huangdi-monism before the twentieth century is best termed unitary plurality (一元多体), for it assumes the descendants of the Yellow Emperor as the single civilized people and Huaxia as the only civilized land, but at the same time it also allows for its coexistence with different cultures within the Chinese universe (or all under heaven 天下) and does not seek to unify them.

Why, then, did Chinese scholarship on the origins of Chinese civilization undergo a transition from unitary plurality to plural unity in the interpretive constructs over the past century? Archeological excavations were no doubt the primary driver behind the succession of different interpretations, including, among others, the discovery of the Yangshao culture in the 1920s and the Longshan culture in the 1930s that bolstered the theory of East-West dualism before 1949; the discovery of the Miaodigou phase 2 culture that substantiated Zhongyuan-centrism in the Mao era; the new or renewed excavations of Majiabang, Songze, and Liangzhu cultures in the lower Yangzi delta, Daxi and Qujialing cultures in the middle Yangzi region, Hongshan culture in western Liaoning, Qijia culture in Gansu and Qinghai, and so forth, which inspired the various polycentric theories in the 1980s and 1990s; and, finally, the re-excavation of late neolithic and early bronze-age cultural sites at Erlitou, Shimao, Xinzhai, and the like that have been used to substantiate neo-Zhongyuan-centrism (see, e.g., Jaffe, Campbell, and Shelach-Lavi 2022). But the new findings in archeological study are not the only factor propelling advancements in scholarship on early China. Various nonacademic factors also intervened in the process to shape the different generations of scholarship on the origins of Chinese civilization. Let us first consider the factor of political and ideological influences on Chinese archeologists and historians.

IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL IDENTITY

It is a truism that archeology is inextricably linked with politics. Despite their alleged commitments to academic rigor in conducting research and to objectivity in interpreting their finds, archaeologists throughout the world have been subject to the influences of the historical and political contexts in which they develop their research agenda. These influences have not always been counterproductive. Stimulated by the needs for ethnic or national identity and resistance to racist or imperialist biases, the rise of nationalist archaeology in many non-Western countries has been conducive to the cultivation of pride in a specific cultural heritage and to an awareness of the dignity of all humanity. Government funding and sponsorship have been instrumental in the implementation of excavation projects that archaeologists alone cannot perform as private individuals. Nevertheless, when the state's policies or political agenda determined archaeological research and when archaeologists acted solely "in the service of the state," they also ran the risk of having their excavations ill-defined and their interpretation of archaeological finds distorted (Kohl and Fawcett 1995). Twentieth-century China was no exception. It witnessed the rise of nationalist archeology in the republican era and resultant breakthroughs in studying early China, which nevertheless yielded to the command of Maoist politics and the supremacy of Zhongyuan-centrism for three decades after 1949.

The predominance of East-West dualism in the republican era can be traced at least in part to their response to the hypothesis of the Western origins (西来说) of Chinese civilization proposed by Swedish geologist Johan G. Andersson (1874–1960). Andersson discovered the very first neolithic cultural site in China, namely, Yangshao culture in Mianchi County of Henan Province, in late 1921. In a 1923 report, he believed that the remains of Yangshao marked "strong Chinese features" and that this culture was "decidedly Chinese" (Andersson 1923: 32, 34). He thus entitled his report "An Early Chinese Culture." Nevertheless, based on the striking similarities between the ornamental elements of painted pottery of Yangshao and neolithic cultures in the Middle East, Andersson inferred that "the technique of polychrome pottery was introduced from the West" and that "other cultural and possibly also racial traits were carried by the same waves of migration" (41). He further linked his speculation with earlier European writings on "western influences in the early Chinese civilization," most notably the work by Terrien de Lacouperie (40–41; see also Chang et al. 2005: 2–3; Li F. 2013: 15–17; Shelach-Lavi 2015: 49–50).

Andersson's theory was initially well received by Chinese scholars in the 1920s. However, unlike de Lacouperie's theory that had enthusiastic followers among the anti-Manchu Chinese nationalists in the last years of the Qing dynasty, from which they found support for their claims of the distinctiveness and superiority of the Han people over the Manchus, Andersson's work soon incurred resentment and resistance from the politically motivated intellectuals in the wake of the nationalist movement that ended in the establishment of the republican government in Nanjing in 1927. To repudiate Andersson's theory—and to counterbalance the growing influence of the "doubting the antique" school among Chinese intellectuals, Fu Sinian, director of the newly established Institute of History and Philology in Nanjing, called for the reconstruction of ancient history (重建古史). His top priority in leading the institute, therefore, was for his colleagues to start archeological excavations and find different origins of early Chinese civilization on their own, hence the excavation of the tombs of the Shang dynasty in Anyang of Henan Province and a neolithic site in the suburb of Jinan of Shandong Province, which led to the discovery of the Longshan culture. The entirely different look of black pottery from the Longshan culture led the Chinese archeologists to believe that there were two very different origins of prehistorical cultures in China, one in the east represented by the Longshan culture and the other in the west represented by the Yangshao culture (Liang S. 1959: 91–98). It was precisely the findings from Anyang and Longshan culture that prompted Fu Sinian to propose his famous theory of the dual origins of Chinese civilization.

In sharp contrast with Fu and other nationalist scholars of the republican era, whose discontent with the theory of Western origins was mild and generally couched in academic language, the mainstream historians and archeologists in post-1949 China condemned the same theory in a blatant and highly politicized fashion. Yin Da (1954a), head of the Institute of Archeology in Beijing, attacked the theory of Western origins as reflecting the "racist bias" of "the so-called scholars of Western imperialist countries" (8). In his essay dedicated to the memory of archaeologist Liang Siyong, who played a key role in the discovery of the Longshan culture, Yin Da praised Liang's contribution in this regard as "a head-on, forceful repudiation of the opinion of the

so-called scholars from imperialist countries" (8), despite the fact that Liang had adhered most enthusiastically to the theory of Western origins back in the late 1920s and the 1930s. Likewise, Xia Nai (1955), the vice head of the same institute, blamed acceptance of this theory among Chinese scholars in the 1930s, himself included, as "reflecting their semi-colonial mindset of worshipping the West" (4).[2]

Despite the importance of the Longshan culture in exploring the beginnings of early Chinese civilization, however, the theory of East-West dualism enabled by the discovery of this culture did not continue into the post-1949 period. What prevailed throughout the Maoist era was instead Zhongyuan-centrism, a new construct that was sustained by two key assumptions. The first is that the Zhongyuan area is where the Xia dynasty, the very first of the Three Dynasties, is located; for many Chinese archeologists, the Xia resulted directly from an uninterrupted evolution of neolithic cultures beginning with the Yangshao culture, continuing through Miaodigou phase 2 culture and Henan Longshan culture, and culminating in Erlitou culture, which was believed to be the remains of the Xia (An 1959, 1981). The second is that Yangshao and the subsequent cultures in Zhongyuan were more advanced and sophisticated than all other cultures in the surrounding areas economically, technically, and politically (An 1979; see also Ho 1975). Neither of these two points, however, has been widely accepted by researchers in the field. Whether Erlitou can be equated with the capital city of the Xia remains highly controversial among Chinese archeologists, not to mention the denial of the history of the Xia by many outside China. Few historians or archeologists today accept that either Yangshao or Henan Longshan was overall significantly more advanced than their counterparts in the lower Yellow River or lower Yangzi River regions.

The real reasons behind the dominance of Zhongyuan-centrism in the Maoist era are political. First, all the preexisting interpretative schemes about early Chinese civilization became politically problematic after 1949 and therefore had to be avoided or completely jettisoned. The theory of Western origins was already denounced as quasi-scientific and serving only the interest of foreign imperialism. The "doubting the antique" inclination among some Chinese intellectuals was also condemned as "driven by a semi-colonial mindset" or "being poisoned by the scholars hired by imperialists" (Xu X. [1958] 1985: 26, 27). Nor could people talk about the theory of East-West dualism because Fu Sinian, the scholar who was most active in promoting it, had gone to Taiwan together with the defeated nationalist regime in 1949. As a result, the only theoretical scheme that remained and did guarantee political correctness was Marxist historical materialism. Back in the 1930s and 1940s, several left-wing historians had tried to reinterpret the primitive society in early China by borrowing from Marxism.[3] After 1949, a typical way to narrate the primitive society as the very beginning of Chinese history in standard history textbooks was to combine the Marxist theory about the "universal laws" of the evolution of human society in the primitive stage from matrilineality to patrilineality with mythological evidence from ancient Chinese classics as well as archeological finds of the twentieth century (E. Tong 1995; Nelson 1997: 121–23; Shelach 2004). As a result, the various versions of the Three Progenitors and Five Lords, which had been discredited as false by the "doubting the antique" scholars of the 1930s, were reintegrated into the narratives about the

beginning of Chinese civilization. And the activities of the Five Lords, according to ancient texts, took place mostly in the Zhongyuan region, which worked to evince Zhongyuan-centrism.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the spring of scientific research (科学的春天) or the thriving of research activities and free debate of academic issues in China under economic reform and opening-up policies. Gone was the highly politicized condemnation based on ideological claims; the constraints imposed on researchers by the recurrent political campaigns largely disappeared.[4] It was against this background that Su Bingqi proposed his new theory of polycentrism. According to Su's own recollection, he had actually brewed "innovative ideas" about early China for many years prior to the reform era, but he had to "tuck his tail" (夹着尾巴) and refrained from openly expressing his views; instead he "focused on what he was expected to do" at that time (Su K. 2015: 9). It was the loosening of political constraints after 1979 that allowed him to enter "the world of freedom" in academic research and "follow what my heart desired without transgressing what was right" in the same manner as what Confucius said of himself at age seventy (9). Hence his proposition of the famous theory of zones, strains, and types and his use of the metaphor of clusters of stars (or polycentrism) to describe the diverse and multiple origins of early Chinese civilization. Most of the archeological finds that constituted the empirical foundation on which Su proposed his theory of regional patterns and categories had been made during the Maoist era and earlier. But it was the relaxed atmosphere of the post-Mao era that enabled him to openly deconstruct Zhongyuan-centrism.

Su's theory of polycentrism, as mentioned earlier, is only one of the many new theories that surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s; for a while, it was also the most influential in the field of prehistorical China, as discussed shortly. Nevertheless, what eventually prevailed in the 2000s and 2010s was not polycentrism but neo-Zhongyuan-centrism. Key to the success of neo-Zhongyuan-centrism is the tremendous administrative and financial support that its proponents received through two famous projects, namely, the Chronology Project of 1996–2000 and the Origins Project of 2001–16. As Li Xueqin (1999: 49), who initiated the Chronology Project, explained it, the purpose of this project was to enhance "the exploration of the roots of Chinese civilization" and "promote the self-esteem and self-confidence of the Chinese nation and strengthen the cohesiveness of our nation." The initial purpose of the project, as Song Jian, director of the State Commission for Scientific Research, envisioned it, was to demonstrate the historical existence of the Yellow Emperor or, by extension, establish the authenticity of the history of the Three Progenitors and Five Lords and thereby affirm the belief that Chinese civilization has a five-thousand-year history (Song 1996; Li and Lin 2017). The same purpose motivated the initiation of the Origins Project. As Wang Wei (2008: 254), head of the Institute of Archeology, explained it, the project of exploring the beginnings of Chinese civilization was "ultimately a response to the pressure that Chinese archeologists and historians have borne for a long time," namely, the persistent skepticism about whether China has a history of five thousand years or, in other words, whether the ancient records about the Five Lords are real. For a long time, he said, "no solid evidence could be provided for a solution," and the Origins Project was to solve the problem (254).

These motives are understandable in the contexts of Chinese historiographic tradition and contemporary Chinese politics. The initiation of the two projects and the subsequent preponderance of neo-Zhongyuan-centrism chimed well with the state's call for the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" in the 1990s and 2000s when China emerged as a global superpower after decades of rapid economic growth. To define the goals of these two projects as enhancing the cohesiveness and self-confidence of the nation well served the political needs of the state. In return, the central government provided these projects with generous funding, which made possible many archeological excavations and other research activities under these projects.

Despite the many new findings and achievements under the two projects, some of which are truly exciting and groundbreaking (see Lee 2002), the projects encountered unexpected criticism from among Chinese archeologists and historians. In the absence of reliable evidence from ancient texts or archeological remains to determine the dates of each of the reigns of the Shang dynasty after King Wuding and the reigns of the Zhou dynasty prior to 841 BC, leaders of the Chronology Project encouraged participants to have a "free debate" and conduct a "true, realistic research in scientific spirit and methods" (Wu 2005: 73). Nevertheless, they also required the two-hundred-odd participants to finish their respective tasks within a time limit and reach a consensus in the concluding report of the project, disallowing the inclusion of different opinions (Wu 2005). Despite its questionable creditability, the reestablished chronology of the Three Dynasties was nevertheless officially published in 2000 (Xia-Shang-Zhou Duandai Gongcheng Zhuanjiazu 2000). Nor did the Origins Project produce the expected results. When the achievements of the project were announced in 2018, two years after the official conclusion of the project, they were summarized in three sentences: "Signs of incipient civilization emerged in the Yellow River, middle and lower Yangzi River, and western Liao River regions circa 5800 years BP; different parts of China entered the stage of civilization 5300 years BP; and a more matured civilization formed in the Zhongyuan region circa 3800 years BP, which exerted cultural influences to surrounding areas and thus constituted the core and leader in the general unfolding of Chinese civilization" (*Renminribao*, May 29, 2018). These conclusions surprised no one who was familiar with the studies of early China. Questions such as whether the Five Lords ever existed, where they came from, or what they did, which were central to the original purposes of the project, were not mentioned or answered at all. Dissatisfied, Li Boqian, who contributed to the initiation of the project and did not personally participate in it after his retirement, thus complained after the conclusion of the project that "no official and integrated result has been made available, and no one knows what exactly the new interpretations are about the questions that the public is most concerned with, such as when China started a civilization and how the state was formed" (Li and Chang 2017: 27). Archeologist Yan Wenming questioned the feasibility of the Origins Project from its beginning. For him, a complex academic issue such as the origins of Chinese civilization could not be solved in the method of "a large-scale campaign" and "timed results"; "Being a scholar, one has to be realistic and frank, letting people know that this kind of project is unfeasible and should be avoided at all" (Yan and Zhuang 2006: 12).

ACADEMIC FACTIONS AND HEGEMONY

In any given period in modern China, factionalism has been another factor contributing to the prevalence of a particular construct in explaining the beginning of Chinese civilization. While researchers' political identities played a key role in shaping their interpretations of early China as shown above, their abilities to mobilize administrative resources and social networks to advocate and perpetuate their interpretations were equally important in making their own scholarship dominant in the field, thus likely giving rise to a scholarly faction. A scholarly faction is defined here as a group of researchers who shared the same academic tradition and formed a distinctive circle of their own based on personal or institutional ties. To be a leader of such a faction, the scholar had to be a first-rate researcher contributing to their field more than anyone else within the circle. Equally important, he had to be an active social network builder and an administrative genius able to access various social, political, and financial resources; win over government support and sponsorship; and attract and patronize followers who continued and expanded his scholarship.

Fu Sinian was one such factional leader. A famous student leader during the May Fourth Movement of 1919, Fu spent more than six years studying in Europe afterward and later became the director of the Institute of History and Philology under the nationalist government in 1928. Discontent with the dominance of Western scholars, most notably Andersson, in the field of prehistorical China in the 1920s, Fu (2003: 12) proclaimed in his guideline for the newly founded institute: "We will establish the authenticity of a scientific Oriental Studies in China!" This was, to be sure, an ambitious goal for him to achieve in the late 1920s and 1930s when the country was ridden with incessant warfare. He worked hard to recruit dozens of the best-trained scholars into his institute, whose works later indeed exerted a far-reaching impact on the field of ancient Chinese history and culture. Nevertheless, in the eyes of people outside the institute, Su was nothing more than an academic lord (*xuefa*). Reviewing the situation of his field before 1949, Xia Nai wrote in 1955 (6):

> Academic lords such as Hu Shi and Fu Sinian turned research institutions and universities into their turfs and thus formed an exclusive faction. Just like warlords, they never allowed outsiders to encroach on their turf while they always attempted to expand their turf into others' sphere of influence. This attitude was also seen in archeological work. Different research institutions divided the areas of field work into different turfs, and they each occupied a turf. Competition took place between national and local institutions for control of materials, as best seen in the example of a dispute between the Institute of History and Philology and the former Henan Museum over the excavations of Xiaotun, Anyang, in the autumn of 1929.

After 1949, under the influence of the Soviet model of scientific research, individual archeologists were no longer allowed to work "only according to one's own interest" or to "do closed-door research" (Xia 1953: 38). Instead of limiting their research activities to "the narrow circle of scientific research under individualism," archeologists had to show commitment to "the collectivist style of work," and their research had to be subject to the state's centralized planning, as Yin Da (1954b: 68), the head of the Institute of Archeology required. Given the predominance of the Soviet model

in research and the supremacy of Marxism as the only legitimate ideology to guide archeological and historical studies, it was difficult for any scholar to work outside the collective research projects sponsored by their home institutions, let alone form a distinctive research tradition or scholarly school of one's own. The only "school," if any, that was allowed in post-1949 China was the Marxist school, characterized by the unquestioned application of historical materialism to all research works. This does not mean, to be sure, that it was totally impossible for the most productive and resourceful scholars to achieve their status as the top authorities and even carve out their personal spheres of influence in their respective fields. Throughout the three decades of the Maoist era, Xia Nai was undoubtedly one such authority in Chinese archeology, owing to his solid training, with a PhD degree, in archeology from the University of London and, more importantly, because of his sincere embrace of Marxism as a methodology to guide his research work. It was, in other words, the combination of authenticity in his academic training and correctness in his ideological orientation that allowed Xia to be the undisputed top authority among the Chinese archeologists and the leader of the Institute of Archeology for more than three decades (1950–82) (E. Tong 1995).

After the death of Xia Nai in 1985, Su Bingqi emerged as a new authority in Chinese archeology to dominate the interpretation of early Chinese cultures. Beginning as a junior researcher in the Institute of Archeology in 1950, Su also served as an adjunct faculty member in archeology at Peking University after 1952. While he remained inferior to Xia from the 1950s through the early 1980s in terms of his influence and positions in professional organizations in the same field, Su had the advantage of teaching archeology for decades at the top university in China and thus building a network through his students, who later came to dominate the field in the 1980s and 1990s. By contrast, without many students, Xia Nai could only maintain loose personal ties by patronizing the junior researchers of his own institute, and his influence inevitably dwindled after his death in 1985. Furthermore, unlike Xia who persistently emphasized academic rigor in empirical research and never ventured into conceptualizing empirical findings, Su established his influence by primarily proposing new interpretive schemes. While he had to keep a low profile and never openly expressed his own ideas about early China when Xia was alive, Su became increasingly outspoken in the 1980s and 1990s, advocating the establishment of a "Chinese school" (or a "disciplinary system with Chinese characteristics") of archeological research on the basis of his own theory of zones, strains, and types (Su B. 1995: 561). By the late 2000s, his influence had expanded to such a degree that, at the opening ceremony of the twelfth annual conference of the Chinese Archeological Association in 2009, his student Zhang Zhongpei, now president of the association, announced that the organization's mission was to be "deepening and perfecting the theory of zones, strains, and types in archeological cultures, that is, the theory of cultural genealogy in the study of archeological cultures, and advancing Chinese archeological studies by holding high the banner of Su Bingqi" (Zhang Z. 2009).

While Xia and Su belonged to the first generation of leading archeologists in post-1949 China, Li Xueqin and Li Boqian can be considered representative of the second generation of scholars in the field of early China studies. Li Xueqin's success had to do with both his academic intelligence and socializing abilities. After quitting

his undergraduate study as a sophomore in philosophy from Tsinghua University in 1952, Li Xueqin joined the Institute of Archeology as a research assistant, where he participated in the compilation of a dictionary of oracle-bone inscriptions. Two years later, thanks to his networking efforts, Li Xueqin joined the Institute of History to be an assistant to the institute's director, where his research resulted in the publication in 1959 of a monograph, *An Outline of the Geography of the Yin-Shang Dynasty*, when he was twenty-one years old, in addition to a series of articles on ancient Chinese scripts. His career in the same institute in the following decades culminated in his position as its director in 1991–98. It was during his tenure as director when Li Xueqin initiated the Chronology Project by using his networks in academic and administrative circles. But this project, as noted earlier, incurred strong disagreement and criticism from his colleagues both in and outside China, because of Li's excessive use of administrative measures to ensure the timed completion of the project and build consensus among the participants. Li Xueqin's own lack of systematic training in ancient classics and scripts also caused his opponents to question his academic credentials (Wu 2005). His call for "getting out of the era of doubting the antique," for instance, incurred counterattack from Liu Qiyu (1995), Gu Jigang's student, who accused Li of lacking the necessary training and qualifications in the study of ancient Chinese classics. Thus, while Li Xueqin was successful in mobilizing political and academic resources to organize large national-level research projects, his influence in the field remained limited, owing to the problematic results of the projects he stewarded; his preoccupation with networking activities that prevented him from focusing on teaching and research, therefore limiting the number of students under his supervision to continue or promote his scholarship; and, most important, the quality of his own publications, which were ridiculed as "getting shorter and shorter, and thinner and thinner" (Li L. 2020: 72).

While Li Xueqin was instrumental in making the Chronology Project happen, Li Boqian played a more important role in carrying out this project and steering its successor, the Origins Project, and contributed more than anyone else in building the neo-Zhongyuan-centrism theory. After graduating as a major in archeology from Peking University in 1961, Li Boqian stayed at the same school as a faculty member for the next forty-five years, where he trained many students. While he lagged Li Xueqin in enhancing academic work with social networking and Su Bingqi in promoting his own scholarship, he chose to collaborate closely with Li Xueqin on the Chronology Project, serving as its chief scientist and vice chair of the project's Experts Group. Later he worked with Wang Wei and Zhao Hui to start the preliminary research that eventually led to the Origins Project, though his retirement in 2006 prevented him from direct involvement in it. As a key and ardent proponent of neo-Zhongyuan-centrism, Li Boqian was particularly interested in authenticating the legends about the Three Progenitors and Five Lords with the latest archeological finds, which had been Li Xueqin's original reason for initiating the Chronology Project. Li Boqian published an article titled "The Three Progenitors and Five Lords in Archeological Perspective" in 2008, when he believed that the existing archeological work had provided enough evidence for him to determine the time range of each of the legendary figures and thereby authenticate the history of the Xia dynasty. To periodize the Three Progenitors and Five Lords, he matched each figure to a specific archeological culture, concluding that "the epoch of the Three Progenitors in

traditional historiography is largely corresponding to the times of paleolithic cultures and early to mid-neolithic cultures in archeology, and the epoch of the Five Lords corresponds largely to the mid- to late neolithic period in archeology" (Li B. 2008). More important than these legendary figures is the authenticity of ancient records about the history of the Xia dynasty. For Li Boqian, the remains of a large-size city at the re-excavated site of Wangchenggang of the late Longshan culture period, circa 2000 BCE, coincide with the inception of the Xia dynasty; therefore, he contended, this city could be determined as Yangcheng, the capital city of the Xia dynasty under King Yu. Furthermore, he suggested, the re-excavation at Taosi of Shanxi Province revealed this site to be the capital city of the Xia under King Yao, and the re-digging of the site of Xinzhai and the finding of a large number of remains originating from the eastern region confirmed the massive immigration of Yi people from that region to this area under the rule of Hou Yi, who acted as the regent of the Xia dynasty according to ancient texts. All these discoveries, Li Boqian argued, together with the excavation at the famous Erlitou site, established the authenticity of the history of the Xia via evidence of the early, mid, and late periods of this dynasty. "The culture of the Xia," he concluded, "has eventually emerged from obscure and insubstantial legends to historical realities in clear visibility" (Li B. 2016: 6), which, he suggested, rendered support to the chronology of "the Three Progenitors, the Five Lords, and the Xia-Shang-Zhou dynasties" established by Sima Qian (5).

To sum up, the ultimate goal of neo-Zhongyuan-centrism, as the works of Li Xueqin and Li Boqian demonstrate, is to authenticate the narrative of "the Three Progenitors, the Five Lords, and the Xia-Shang-Zhou dynasties" as the beginning of Chinese civilization, and to turn this narrative into authentic history (信史). Unlike the Zhongyuan-centrism of the Maoist era, which only selectively uses evidence from ancient mythology to demonstrate the universality of the Marxist theory about the early evolution of human societies and its applicability to prehistorical and ancient China, neo-Zhongyuan-centrism was not interested in Marxist theory at all. The neo-Zhongyuan-centrists' goal was to repudiate the tradition of "doubting the antique" and establish the new paradigm of "explicating the antique" (释古), that is, using the latest excavations, made possible by the generous funding from the government for the Chronology Project and the Origins Project, to confirm the legends recorded in ancient texts about the beginning of Chinese civilization.

It should be noted that Li Xueqin and Li Boqian were not alone in advocating neo-Zhongyuan-centrism for the purpose of reestablishing the authenticity of the narrative about the beginning of Chinese civilization. Their efforts were continued by the next generation of leading Chinese archeologists, including, most prominently, Wang Wei, director of the Institute of Archeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2006–17), and Zhao Hui, dean of the School of Archaeology and Museology (2006–13) at Peking University. Both Wang and Zhao worked closely with Li Xueqin and Li Boqian in carrying out the Origins Project. Together, they turned neo-Zhongyuan-centrism into the new orthodoxy prevailing since the 2000s in explaining the origins of Chinese civilization.

The triumph of neo-Zhongyuan-centrism, therefore, is a result of the interplay among multiple academic and nonacademic factors. Breakthroughs in archeological studies had a clear impact on neo-Zhongyuan-centrism, distinguishing it

from the Zhongyuan-centrism of the Maoist era in their interpretations of one key issue: whereas the traditional Zhongyuan-centrists insisted on the superiority of the Zhongyuan region in cultural development and the one-way cultural diffusion from Zhongyuan to the surrounding areas, the neo-Zhongyuan-centrists admitted a two-way exchange between the core and peripheral areas and even the inferiority of the core in relation to some peripheries in cultural development. But these two schools converged in their shared conviction that the Zhongyuan area was the hub linking all other cultures, thereby forming an integrated and unified civilization to be represented by the Xia dynasty. The neo-centrists went ever further than their predecessors in establishing connections between the latest diggings and the tales from ancient texts in order to prove the truth of the stories about the beginning of Chinese civilization written by Sima Qian more than two thousand years ago. Instead of seeking truth from facts (实事求是) or establishing evidence about the beginning of early China on the basis of scientific research only, the neo-centrists were motivated to look for evidence from archeological research to strengthen the authenticity of ancient tales. By fully mobilizing political resources, utilizing the latest archeological findings, and building a network of their own that firmly dominated the field of early China, the neo-Zhongyuan-centrists succeeded in establishing the hegemony of their theory in the Chinese studies of early Chinese culture and civilization in the twenty-first century.

REGIONALIST CONTENTIONS AGAINST ZHONGYUAN-CENTRISM

Despite its promotion by some of the most prominent scholars from the leading institutions in Beijing, neo-Zhongyuan-centrism was far from been widely accepted in the field; this was especially true among the archeologists and historians of provincial institutions, whose research agendas were usually developed to meet regional needs. Just as China's economic and government systems underwent decentralization in the reform era since the 1980s, research institutions at the provincial level also witnessed growing autonomy during the same period, as seen in the thriving academic journals, associations, conferences, and museums dedicated to the studies of regional history and archeology. Hence the emergence of the so-called regionalist paradigm in which the provincial researchers and institutions tended to focus on historical phenomena originating from their own areas and underscore or even exaggerate their impacts on transregional or national levels (Falkenhausen 1995). Behind the rise of the regionalist inclinations was a complex set of factors that served to build local identity and promote local economic interests. Despite their emphasis on the richness and distinctiveness of local culture and history, however, regional institutions tended to conceptualize local heritages in terms of their contributions to a coherent and continuous Chinese civilization (Bennett 2012; McNeal 2015; Shelach-Lavi 2019). In the literature on early China, a similar trend is observable, in which the researchers of different regions emphasized the importance of the prehistorical cultures of their own regions in the emergence of an integrated, larger-scale culture in early Chinese dynasties. Nevertheless, while these regionalist reinterpretations were generally formulated within the grand narrative of early China as an integrated entity, there was no lack of instances in which they diametrically contradicted the Zhongyuan-centric assumptions.

Consider first the thesis of Southeast China as the origin of Xia culture proposed by Chen Shengyong in 1991, the director of the Institute of History of Zhejiang Province Academy of Social Sciences. Zhejiang Province is where the key sites of the Liangzhu culture were found. Chen, therefore, justified his thesis by primarily emphasizing the importance of this local culture in the formation of Chinese civilization under the Xia. For him, the jade pendant (玉璜) and jade axe (玉斧), as the sacrificial instruments of the Xia, originated from the Liangzhu culture, and the bronze vessel (*ding*), as the most important sacrificial container of both the Xia and Shang dynasties, also had its origins in the southeastern region. So did the *taotie* 饕餮 and *yunlei* 云雷 motifs commonly seen on the bronze vessels of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, which, in Chen's view, were also derived from the motifs inscribed on the jade *cong* (玉琮) that were characteristic of the Liangzhu culture. In addition, Chen argues, the terraced earth altar, the calendar, the burial customs, the cultivation of rice, and the production of silk under the Xia also had their roots in the lower Yangzi region where the Liangzhu culture predominated. Chen Shengyong (1991: 18) concluded, "The culture of the Xia originated from the southeast, and the Xia dynasty arose in the southeast."

Chen's proposition contradicts the conventional wisdom about the origins of the Xia in the western part of today's China and the consensus of Erlitou as the Xia's capital city. To repudiate the western origins of the Xia, Chen questioned Sima Qian's narrative that depicted Yu as one of the Yellow Emperor's descendants, arguing that Sima Qian's writing reflected his Zhongyuan-centric bias. Instead, Chen contended that Yu was neither descended from the Yellow Emperor nor a native from the Zhongyuan region, but a native of the southeastern region, evidenced in Yu's activities that were closely related to Kuaiji of northern Zhejiang. Chen's interpretation was refreshing in the 1990s, and his emphasis on the geographic diffusion of key cultural elements as clues in the search for the origins of early Chinese cultures inspired other archeologists working on the same subject. A growing number of researchers have acknowledged the dissemination of the culturally more sophisticated ornaments and technologically more advanced tools and vessels, together with their decorations and cultural meanings, from the eastern and southeastern regions to the Zhongyuan region, and they gave up their traditional assumption about the superiority of Zhongyuan in cultural and economic developments. But the geographic origins of such cultural elements found in early Chinese dynasties cannot be equated with the origins of those dynasties or the origins of the people who started those dynasties. These cultural elements alone were far from sufficient evidence to substantiate Chen's hypothesis about the southeastern origins of early Chinese civilization.

Another example of localism is the hypothesis of today's Shandong Province as "the very center of Chinese civilization during the times of Five Lords" proposed in 2007 by Jiang Linchang, a historian of Shandong University (16). Like Chen, Jiang too dismissed Sima Qian's Zhongyuan-centric narrative as reflecting only the ethnocentric bias of the political elites of the Zhongyuan region against the states and cultures of surrounding regions. For Jiang, the people of the eastern Yi, rather than the people of the Zhongyuan region, were the economically and culturally most sophisticated population, as seen in the remains of the Dawenkou culture and the

subsequent Longshan culture in Shandong Province. "It was the people of eastern Yi," he wrote, "that first entered the threshold of civilization and first established a civilized state in the age of the Five Lords" (2007: 15); furthermore, he stated, "in the dawn of civilization in our country four thousand to five thousand years ago, the Longshan culture of the east and the Liangzhu culture of the southeast radiated the brightest light, and the various Longshan cultures found in the middle Yellow River region and the middle Yangzi River region were yet to reach that level" (16). The Yi people, he argued, built a state of their own, namely, the Yu dynasty, which expanded momentously under their leaders Shaohao, Taihao, and, most prominently, Chiyou, who once defeated Yandi but eventually succumbed to Huangdi or the Yellow Emperor. Nevertheless, Jiang contended, the Yi people never gave up. They continued to compete with the people of the Xia dynasty from the Zhongyuan region and even invaded the Xia, culminating in their leader Hou Yi's acting as the regent of the Xia for a period. It was because of the Zhongyuan-centric writings of Sima Qian and other ancient classics, Jiang concludes, that the people of the eastern Yi were marginalized in the history of early China.

A third example in scholarly efforts to challenge Zhongyuan-centrism is the hypothesis of "Hongshan culture as the direct root of ancient Chinese culture" proposed by Guo Dashun, director of the Institute of Cultural Relics and Archeological Studies of Liaoning Province. Guo's theory was in turn inspired by Su Qingqi's proposition of a "Y-shaped cultural belt" running from the Wei River valley of central Shaanxi Province and extending upward through Shaanxi and then reaching westward to the Hequ region and eastward to western Liaoning, which, Su Bingqi (2016: 121–24) argued, was where the prehistorical culture of the Zhongyuan region interacted with the cultures from the north to spawn early Chinese culture. The importance of the Hongshan culture in the archeological study of prehistorical cultures in China is widely acknowledged. Nevertheless, in the eyes of researchers influenced by the tradition of Zhongyuan-centrism, the roles of Hongshan culture in the formation of Chinese civilization as seen in the Xia-Shang-Zhou dynasties were marginal and limited because of the abrupt ending of this culture, which showed little sign of continuation and dissemination (Li B. 2009). Rejecting Li's thesis, Guo emphasized the connections between the Hongshan culture and Chinese civilization. Among the cultural remains that he interpreted as signs of such connections, he singled out a female head statue found at the Niuheliang site of Hongshan culture, interpreting it as the earliest evidence of ancestral worship in ancient China—thus naming it *nüzu* (女祖) or a female ancestor—and even equating it with "the shared ancestor of the Chinese nation" (Guo D. 2016: 124). He also highlighted two jade ornaments from Hongshan cultural remains, dubbed jade dragon (玉龙) and jade phoenix (玉凤), as evidence of this culture as the origin of Chinese civilization, assuming that the two mythical creatures, dragon and phoenix, are "the most representative cultural elements in ancient Chinese cultural tradition" (2006: 20). The fact that these ornaments were used as sacrificial decorations, he suggested, further reveals the beginning of the traditional Chinese system of ritual and ceremonies (2006).

Zhongyuan-centrism, therefore, faced challenges from scholars who found the origins of Chinese civilization outside the Zhongyuan region. Common to these theories against Zhongyuan-centrism is that their proponents each defended the

regions where they worked and lived as the place from which the earliest form of Chinese culture originated. We may thus term this tendency among such scholars as local loyalism or localism. Several factors explain why the localist theories came into being one after another in the 1990s and thereafter. A basic reason, of course, had to do with the latest archeological findings from the neolithic cultural sites in those regions. In all the examples of localism mentioned above, however, the archeological evidence as well as anecdotes from ancient classics provided by each of their proponents are subject to different interpretations and far from sufficient to support their propositions. The so-called *nüzu*, for instance, was interpreted by other scholars as merely a symbol of a deity supposed to protect the local environment or women in maternity (Yu 1984; Wang Z. 1988). The so-called sacred temple where the *nüzu* was found, according to Yan Wenming (1992: 44), "is just a place where the statue was placed and not a temple at all." Likewise, the "jade dragon" was seen by other researchers as resembling the shape of a pig or a bear and very difficult to be associated with the familiar image of the dragon (Lin 2006). The scant and dubious evidence used by Guo thus undermined rather than supported his conclusion about "the Hongshan culture as the origins of China as a country with a five-thousand-year history and of the cultural tradition of the Chinese nation" (Guo D. 2018: 97). Archeological findings from the Dawenkou and Longshan cultures and the Liangzhu culture in eastern China, of course, are much greater in quantity and rich in varieties. The polished and thin-walled black potteries from the cultural sites in Shandong Province and the refined jade sacrificial ornaments from the Yangzi delta are much more sophisticated than those found in the contemporaneous Yangshao and Henan Longshan cultures of the Zhongyuan region. But the elegant vessels and instruments alone are not sufficient indicators of these regions as the origins of Chinese civilization. After all, the rise of the earliest Chinese civilization, as many researchers have pointed out, is a rather all-around process, involving advancements in not just technological but also, even more important, military and political dimensions. Technical sophistication in manufacturing alone is not a sufficient factor in explaining a hugely complex issue such as the origins of a civilization. In fact, it is precisely the vanishing of the technologically more advanced cultures in eastern China that supports the proposition of Zhongyuan-centrism. For neo-Zhongyuan-centrist scholars, the cultures of the Zhongyuan region might not be technologically the most advanced, but they eventually outcompeted the neighboring cultures by militarily conquering, culturally borrowing from, and eventually assimilating, the latter.

Given the lack of sufficient evidence supporting the various theories of non-Zhongyuan origins, it is not unlikely that nonacademic factors also played a role in motivating the scholars from non-Zhongyuan provinces to challenge Zhongyuan-centrism. Historians and archeologists working in a local institution naturally tend to develop an interest in the history of their own regions, and the characteristics of the subject they investigate can also likely lead them to emphasize the distinctiveness of their findings and even overstate the importance of the local culture being studied for understanding related issues at the national level or in a general sense. This inclination in turn reflects a degree of local loyalty that the researchers are likely to develop in their academic interest because of their personal identity with the locality where they are from or where they lived for long. It is not surprising, therefore, that

Chen Shengyong, a native of Zhejiang Province and an authoritative historian in the same province, advocated the thesis of the southeastern origins of Chinese civilization by highlighting the unique roles of his province in this regard. So did Jiang Linchang of Shandong in defending his province as the place where Chinse culture originated and Guo Dashun of Liaoning Province in proposing the Hongshan culture in western Liaoning as the origin of Chinese civilization.

Behind the obvious factor of local loyalty on a personal level, however, the factor of regional interest might also come into play in shaping the scholarship on regional cultures. The 1990s and 2000s saw growing autonomy of local governments in pursuing economic growth in their own cities or counties, as a result of the gradual devolution of power from the central to local levels since the 1980s. Promoting so-called historical and cultural tourism projects became one of the means for local elites to stimulate economic growth and build their community's identity (see, e.g., McNeal 2015). Elevating the importance and uniqueness of local historic sites became the duty of historians and archeologists of a given province to justify these local cultural and historical projects, the most famous example being the several sites associated with the activities of the legendary Yellow Emperor, for which a competition has long taken place between Shaanxi and Henan Provinces, resulting in each annually sponsoring a grand ceremony dedicated to the legendary ancestor of the Han people. While Chen's, Jiang's, or Guo's propositions of their own provinces as the origins of ancient Chinese civilization were not necessarily or directly linked with such local tourist projects, local socioeconomic autonomy certainly encouraged researchers to emphasize and even exaggerate the role of their own region in the making of Chinese cultural and historical traditions.

CONCLUSION

History writing is rarely value free. Narrating a past event necessarily involved the historian's own judgment, reflection, and political bias; the pursuit of writing about the past "as it is" is a "noble dream" always much desired by professional historians but seldom achieved in actuality (Novick 1998). Chinese historians are no exceptions. Throughout the twentieth century, Chinese historians of different ideological persuasions primarily wrote about the history of modern China to legitimize the actions taken by the political forces with which they sided (H. Li 2013). The origins of Chinese civilization, a subject that seems to be remote from the present, are nevertheless closely related to present-day politics on different fronts in modern and contemporary China. As demonstrated above, a number of nonacademic—or political—factors interwove with academic breakthroughs in archeological and historical studies to shape Chinese researchers' interpretations of China's early cultures. The rise of the nationalist revolution in the late 1920s as well as Fu Sinian's personal ambition for the reconstruction of ancient history no doubt contributed to the conception and popularity of the thesis of East-West dualism in explaining the beginnings of early China during the republican years. Nevertheless, this thesis is solidly based on archeological finds, primarily from the excavations of Longshan culture sites in Shandong Province and the tombs of the Shang dynasty in Henan Province. Likewise, the ending of Maoism and the beginning of the reform era definitely inspired Chinese researchers to think freely about the nature and mutual relations

of different prehistorical cultures, hence the rise of various polycentric theories. But the new interpretations offered by Su Bingqi and his colleagues reflected primarily the archeological discoveries of the 1970s and 1980s. In other words, archeological finds, rather than the political agenda of the government, motivated Chinese researchers during the republican and early post-Mao periods to reinterpret the origins of Chinese civilization.

On the other hand, much of the reverse can be said about the Zhongyuan-centrism of the Maoist era and neo-Zhongyuan-centrism in the past two decades. These two theories, while similar in their assumption about the central role of the early cultures of the Zhongyuan region in the rise of early Chinese civilization, served different political purposes. Zhongyuan-centrism, or assumptions about the uninterrupted involution of prehistoric cultures in the Zhongyuan region, the superiority of this region over all other regions in neolithic cultures, and subsequently its key role in creating an integrated Chinese civilization, served well the needs of the newly established socialist state for justifying itself as a historically legitimate power that continued the long tradition of China as a unified, multiethnic country. By comparison, neo-Zhongyuan-centrism thrived after 2000 when China was emerging as an economic superpower exercising global influence. The primary goal of neo-Zhongyuan-centrism was to prove the uninterrupted five-thousand-year history of Chinese civilization. Archeological excavations and textual research funded by the Chronology Project and the Origins Project, therefore, were designated only for evincing the authenticity of ancient legends about the origins of Chinese civilization and demonstrating the presumed thesis of "plural unity" as a general characterization of prehistorical cultures in early China. The primacy of political considerations overtook academic commitments to define the research agenda and purposes of government-sponsored institutions. Not surprisingly, the publication of the results of the Chronology and Origins projects has triggered one of the most controversial debates in the field of early China, involving participation and wide attention by archaeologists and historians from both China and abroad, thus becoming an academic event that was truly international in scope; arguments were polemical and at times emotional between those who defended the projects and those who questioned them.

It is in this light of politicization that the rise of academic factions can be properly understood. The success of the nationalist revolution in the 1920s, the victory of the communist revolution in 1949 and the subsequent consolidation of the socialist state throughout the Maoist era, the inception of economic reforms and opening-up in the 1980s, and, finally, the phenomenal rise of China as a global power since the 2000s—all these developments motivated Chinese historians and archeologists in each of these periods to come up with a research agenda aimed to meet the need of the government above them, hence the rise of a new paradigm that came to dominate the field in a given period. But the influence of the state is not the only non-academic factor shaping the different schools in interpreting the origins of Chinese civilization in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The establishment of a paradigmatic hegemony in the field also had to do with the researchers' personal efforts and characters. Those who established themselves as authorities in the field were invariably the people who excelled in not only research but also student train-

ing and social networking. They made huge efforts to train students for the continuation and promotion of their academic tradition, as exemplified by Su Bingqi in the 1980s and Li Boqian in the 1990s. Equally important for them was to build academic and political networks so that they could fully mobilize administrative and financial resources for their research agendas. This is how Fu Sinian established his leadership in the field of early China in the republican era and how Li Xueqin and his followers succeeded in promoting the Chronology Project and Origins Project in the late 1990s and 2000s. For all of them, academic success was more than about doing the academic work itself.

Finally, it is worth noting that not all researchers in the study of early China were willing to compromise their scholarship to meet the changing needs of the modern Chinese state. After all, those who enthusiastically organized large-scale research projects by seeking government funds through networking belonged to the minority among them. Many refused to politicize their research agenda and instead emphasized disciplinary autonomy and academic rigor in designing their research and interpreting early Chinese cultures. Some of them were openly critical of the excessive politicization of archeological and historical research in the field as mentioned above. It is also worth emphasizing that, other than the scholars of the leading research institutions and universities located in Beijing, there were even more researchers working in provincial research or educational institutions. Many of these regional scholars also countered the dominance of Zhongyuan-centrism and neo-Zhongyuan-centrism with their own interpretive schemes. Unfortunately, these regional studies, while innovative in interpreting regional archeological findings, turned out to be no less biased than the Zhongyuan-centric constructs that they challenged. While Zhongyuan-centrism is explicitly linked with the state's agenda of legitimacy building, the regionalist inclinations reflected more or less the researchers' local identities as well as the regional interests behind their research projects. Therefore, after a century-long quest for reconstructing the beginnings of Chinese civilization, how to reconcile between what is established from research and what is desired beyond their findings remains a challenge that confronts the researchers in the field.

HUAIYIN LI is professor of history and Asian studies at the University of Texas at Austin. His recent publications include *Reinventing Modern China: Imagination and Authenticity in Chinese Historical Writing* (2013), *The Making of the Modern Chinese State, 1600–1950* (2020), and *The Master in Bondage: Factory Workers in China, 1949–2019* (2023).

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NOTES

1. In the fourth edition of *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, Kwang-chih Chang (1986: 234–94) proposed the concept of "the Chinese interaction sphere," which also challenged the narrative of Zhongyuan-centrism.

2. Xia Nai wrote this on March 6, 1955, in response to the political campaign against "the bourgeois thoughts of Hu Shi and his followers" (Xia 2011: 145).

3. Influenced by the Marxist theory of social evolution, many historians and archeologists believed that the legends of the Five Lords, including the so-called voluntary abdication (*chanrang*) among some of them, as well as the fatherless births of the very original ancestors of the Three Dynasties, were not totally groundless; these stories were in fact consistent with the "universal law" of matriarchy as the dominant form of society in the primitive age prior to its transition to patriarchy (e.g., Lu 2011; Guo M. 2011: 323; Xu Z. 1958).

4. It is in this context that Chinese archaeologists reevaluated in the 1980s and 1990s Andersson's role in Chinese archaeology. Despite the inaccuracies in his interpretations of the Yangshao culture he discovered, Andersson was now described as an "honest and fair-minded scholar" and a "pathbreaker in Chinese prehistoric archaeology and modern field archaeology" (Chen X. 1992: 93–94).

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