INTRODUCING CHINESE ART AND CULTURE

SCOPE AND APPROACH

Chinese art has a history of more than seven thousand years, from the pottery-making and jade-carving cultures of the Neolithic (or New Stone Age) down to contemporary Chinese video, installation, and performance artists working in international arenas. China has arguably been the most abundantly productive, continuous artistic culture in the history of the world. For that reason alone, writing a usefully comprehensive history of Chinese art means that one must condense that sheer wealth of material and also deal with the rapid expansion of information about it. While old chapters are revised at least monthly by archaeological discoveries and by new interpretations opened up by research, new chapters are written daily by the explorations of contemporary artists. Our approach in this book is to embrace that dynamism of Chinese art studies, seeing it as an opportunity to convey the richness and interest of this field. Our text offers a guide to Chinese art not only through major monuments and their historical and cultural contexts but also through the insights and approaches of recent discovery and scholarship. We recognize—as should the reader—the contingent nature of our account, and the openness of our conclusions to argument, debate, and revision. Where appropriate, we discuss unresolved questions and controversies, and the suggested readings at the end of this book offer many expanded and alternative views of our topics. The story that is told in the following pages is open-ended and still evolving.

0-1 Great Pagoda of the Fogong (Buddha's Palace) Temple
Yingxian, Shanxi. Liao, datable to 1056. Height 221′ (67.3 m)

This pagoda, a memorial tower to the Buddha, is the tallest surviving wooden building in the world. Innovative concentric rings of columns made the interior space more accessible for worship than in earlier designs, evidence of the high technical achievements of architectural designers and craftsmen. Built under the patronage of the Liao regime, ruled by the Qidan people from the northern border lands, the pagoda exemplifies multicultural contributions to the arts of China.

We have kept a few other guiding principles in mind throughout. We wanted this not to be a presentation of isolated museum masterpieces but, as much as possible, a history of art in active engagement with societies, economies, and wider fields of culture (FIG. 0-1). In our choice of examples we have favored art in original archaeological or monumental settings as much as possible and, for the many cases where original contexts are lost to view, we have tried to resituate art through its diverse interconnections to social, political,

economic, and religious events or institutions. At the same time, we recognize that works of visual art operate through specific properties of material, form, and motif, and we offer many examples of detailed analysis as a guide to unfolding the complexity of particular monuments. For clarity's sake we follow a historical chronology but have tried to make chapter divisions meaningful in terms of socioeconomic changes and cultural shifts rather than accepting fixed dynastic divisions. Our chapters introduce relevant contexts and themes for each era, so that art is always discussed within larger narratives.

One important effect of recent research is that scholars now question ideas of essential, permanent characteristics of Chinese art and culture. Many long-held conceptions of Chinese art turn out to be based on the tastes and values of ruling and literate (mostly male) elite patrons and audiences of certain periods. Often left out of such accounts are features of popular, religious, or craft arts, or the cultural activities and values of women. Even the idea of an enduring Chinese cultural identity has been destabilized by an increasing awareness of the interactions and cross-borrowings between multiple regional cultures in the pre-imperial age (before the late third century BCE), between China and so-called barbarian cultures and states of the periphery and borderlands during the two millennia of the imperial age, and ultimately between China and its international trading partners. In view of this outlook, we have tried to include art from diverse social and cultural settings and to represent the cultural activities of women as patrons, practitioners, and consumers of art. This is not due to any simplistic notion of fairness, but because the more inclusive account is the fuller and more interesting one. Even the traditionally elite arts patronized by rulers and educated gentlemen, which remain the majority of those discussed, stand out in greater clarity and complexity by contrast with the kinds of art, tastes, and values they rejected.

Even while we question ideas of essentialism, it is worth asking what remains of cultural distinctiveness. In what ways were Chinese arts special and noteworthy within the broad history of world art? A few long-term characteristics stand out although, as important as these culturally distinctive elements were in the history of Chinese art, they still leave out much of significance and interest.

Productivity and Technical Accomplishment in Craft Arts

China is unique among the great cultures of the world in the degree to which its civilization was identified with its craft products. For the ancient Greeks and Romans, China was Seres, "the land of silk." In early modern Europe, "China" was as likely to refer to Chinaware porcelains as to their country of origin (FIG. 0-2). There is good reason for this, because Chinese productivity and technical excellence in many crafts were unrivaled for centuries or even millennia. Ceramic production and the carving of the hardstones known collectively as jade are part of the earliest horizons of Chinese cultures in the Neolithic period, and the products of these activities have been made continuously in large numbers, sometimes approaching an industrial scale, down to the present. Chinese silks were prized luxury items for both domestic and international consumption for nearly two millennia. Chinese lacquerware factories employed an early version of mass production more than two thousand years ago. Bronze vessel

0-2 "Ceramic processes" 19th century. Four watercolor prints on paper from a series of twenty-four scenes; 15½ × 20″ (39.5 × 51 cm). The British Museum, London

The volume and high quality of craft production in pre-modern China remain impressive even by today's standards. Whether in bronze casting or ceramics, timber-frame building or block printing, artisan workshops capitalized on several basic principles. Tasks were broken into a sequence of independent steps; individual units derived from master models were easily replicated, while managers coordinated the input of resources and output at each step. These watercolors show such a workshop system in operation in Canton.

0-3 Warriors
Qin, c. 210 BCE.
Earthenware. Trench 1, Lishan, Lintong, Shaanxi

This view shows only a portion of the terracotta army buried to the east of the Qin First Emperor's tomb. Depressions on the top of the earthern baulks mark the positions of roof beams that once covered each column.

casting, gold and silver metalworking, woodblock printing of books and pictures, and hardwood furniture making are among many other media with long histories of large-scale, technically distinguished production. Far from being mere cultural embellishments, such craft industries were major economic and social forces.

Thus the use of terms such as "craft arts," "craft skills," and "craft production" throughout this book points to major traditions of highly accomplished technique and organization, and should not convey the negative evaluations often implied by distinctions between fine arts and crafts in the modern West. Critical traditions in China do indicate distinctions between literate arts—especially those such as calligraphy, painting, and architecture that acquired an accompanying theoretical, historical, and critical literature—and art forms that depended more on specialized skills and sometimes on laborious or cooperative production. Such distinctions were fluid over time, however, as antique ceramics were prized and inscribed by imperial collectors, ancient ritual bronze vessels attracted the interest of antiquarian scholars, and individual potters, carvers, and metalworkers achieved independent renown.

Ancestral Veneration and Associated Arts

Ritual performances of respect for ancestors are a Chinese cultural feature with roots that extend at least as far back as the Shang dynasty, around 1200 BCE, and continue down to the present. Among the artistic products directly associated with ancestor veneration are monuments of tomb architecture and memorial sculpture, and a wide array of ritual and grave goods: bronze offering vessels, along with tomb furnishings of stone and ceramic sculpture, metalwork, lacquer, and jade (FIG. 0-3). More generally, the importance of ancestral cult practices contributed to a strong historical consciousness in Chinese culture and to such artistic by-products as antiquarian tastes, retrospective calligraphy and painting styles, and an art-historical literature.

The Authority of the Written Text

The Chinese written language has been a unifying cultural force since the Shang period, enabling communication across temporal and geographical divides (FIG. 0-4). At the same time, writing was in some ways exclusionary, since it was limited to literate elites who were always a distinct minority of the population until the recent past. Nevertheless, writing has been a powerful vehicle for forging cultural identity, and the high status accorded the written text, at times verging on the divine or magical, lent prestige to the arts of calligraphy, monumental inscribed

stone steles, printed and illustrated books, and paintings inscribed with written texts.

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING

China today is an area far larger than Europe and the nearby lands bordering the Mediterranean, those regions most commonly construed as "Western civilization." It is more diverse in climate, terrain, and human populations than that same European and Mediterranean cultural realm, with a history as long and complex as that of the "West" or any large portion of Earth's crust, be it the Indian subcontinent or sub-Saharan Africa. A simple-minded equation of China, a twenty-first century nation state, with other nations—France or Greece, Egypt or Mexico—misses these crucial points. China is among the few modern-day nations—others being Australia, Russia, and the United States—that occupy territory of truly continental proportions. Its total area of 3.7 million square miles (c. 9.6 million sq. km) is slightly more than that of the United States. The People's Republic of China (hereafter abbreviated as PRC) today stretches from subarctic northern latitudes (Heilongjiang is on the same parallel as Hudson Bay, Canada) to tropical ones (Hainan is on the same parallel as Havana, Cuba). This physical domain is exceptionally diverse, changing from jungles and hardwood forests to vast grasslands and barren plateaus, from mountain ranges high and low to great river basins, lake systems, and deserts of shifting sands.

However, it is misleading to take this map of the present-day PRC (see map, pages 12–13) as our mental image of an enduring "China." Its boundaries are actually an artifact of late imperial history. The Manchu expansion of the 18th century under the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1795) had been achieved through the forcible submission of diverse peoples, many of whom had rather little to do with Chinese states for most of their own earlier history. By adding on the regions of Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet, the Manchu–Qing armies created a more multiethnic and multicultural empire than any earlier, Chinese dynasty had ever done. Throughout its

0-4 Wu Changshi (1844–1927), Stone Drum Script
1915. One of a set of four hanging scrolls, ink on paper; 59 × 15¾″ (150 × 40 cm). Shanghai Institute of Chinese Painting

This modern work of calligraphy was based on an archaic script style, more than 2,000 years old, the most famous examples of which are the inscriptions on ten cylindrical granite boulders known as the "Stone Drums" (see FIG. 3-2 below). Wu Changshi's scrolls testify to the centrality of the writing system as a unifying force in Chinese culture, often accompanied by a veneration of the past and a strong historical consciousness. Modern-era calligraphers added an archaeological interest in the origins and early history of writing.

Macroregions of China

earlier recorded history, by contrast, China was much smaller in physical extent, a core geographers usually call "China proper," "Inner China," or "agrarian China." Shorn of the dependencies tacked on by the Manchus, China proper was nonetheless large and diverse, but something less than half the area of the modern-day PRC. Until fairly recently, 95 per cent of the population lived in China proper, with only 5 per cent residing in the outer regions.

In this book we deal primarily with China proper, but even then only selectively with many of its southern and border regions. We have adopted the concept of "macroregions" as our basic frame of reference for breaking down this vast entity on a continental scale. G. William Skinner defined macroregions as physiographic units tied together internally by river systems and delimited from each other at their margins by natural barriers, principally mountain ranges (see map above). Each macroregion on our map has approximate boundaries established by natural terrain rather than by administrative (human) fiat, unlike today's provinces or their predecessors. Indeed most macroregions include more than one present-day province, and their boundaries sometimes transect traditional provincial-level units. Nonetheless, some macroregional boundaries remain conventional, as where the huge Yangzi River drainage area is divided into Upper, Middle, and Lower macroregions. Each macroregion has a core, a zone defined by a major river and its tributaries, with adjacent high-quality land available for human exploitation. Each macroregion also has a periphery, a zone surrounding the core characterized by its less desirable land, lower rates of cultivation, and smaller population. Urban development has always been concentrated in regional cores.

Dividing China proper into macroregions creates units of analysis more comparable to European

nation-states in size, internal range of climate and physical terrain, and population. Leaving aside **Manchuria**—the three northeastern provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang—there are nine macroregions. **North China** extends from the approximate line of the Great Wall south to the Huai River and from the eastern foothills of the Taihang range to the Bohai Gulf (Pacific Ocean). It is dominated by the Yellow River (Huang he). The North China plain of river alluvium has filled in the continental shelf between the Taihang Mountains and the Shandong massif (modern Hebei, Henan, and Shandong). This macroregion corresponds in large measure to the "central plains" (*zhongyuan*) of traditional Chinese historiography, the heartland of ancient "central states" (*zhong guo*). That term, in fact, became the appellation for China in Chinese only from the late seventeenth century.

Northwest China comprises the loess (windblown, fine particle soil) highlands of the upper Yellow River and its major tributaries, especially the Wei River (Shaanxi) and the Fen River (Shanxi). This macroregion is well delimited on the south by the Qinling range and on the east by the Taihang but is more arbitrarily defined on the north and west, where it meets the steppe and desert zones of Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Gansu. The Wei River valley of modern-day Shaanxi supported a succession of ancient capitals, starting with the (Western) Zhou (c. 1050–771 BCE) near the Feng River, southeast of modern Xi'an, and continuing through the Qin (221–206 BCE), Han (206 BCE–220 CE), various small states during the period of division, and the Tang (618–907 CE). No other region (see maps, pages 56, 124) played such a decisive role in ancient and medieval times.

The drainage of the Yangzi ("winding river"), also called the Changjiang ("long river"), can be defined as four macroregions. The **Upper Yangzi** macroregion corresponds in large part to modern Sichuan ("four rivers") province, a high basin rimmed with mountainous terrain on all sides. At least since the establishment of the first empire in 221 BCE, this macroregion has been one of the most populous and prosperous in all of China proper, as remains true today. The **Middle Yangzi**, on the other hand, is defined as the tributaries and lakes that occupy the central reaches of the river's drainage, approximately the traditional provinces of Hubei and Hunan ("north of the lake" and "south of the lake," respectively). Lake Dongting still acts as a huge catchment basin for this part of central China; in ancient times it was even more vast. The high dam (now under construction) near the Three Gorges is an effort, among other things, to control the water issuing from the Upper Yangzi and hence protect the Middle Yangzi from devastating floods. The **Lower Yangzi** macroregion corresponds approximately to the traditional area called "south of the river" (Jiangnan), the low-lying provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang along with Shanghai, where the great river meets the ocean. In the history of later imperial China this region became the most prosperous in all the realm, the home of elites that dominated government service and the arts. A fourth macroregion—the **Gan-Yangzi**—can be defined as the drainage of the Gan River, a major tributary that runs north through modern Jiangxi province.

Along the coast and further south are three other macroregions: the **Southeast Coast**, comprising parts of Zhejiang and all of Fujian, cut off from the interior by mountainous zones and facing the ocean; **Lingnan**, the coastal lowlands drained by the West River and tributaries, the traditional Guangdong and Guangxi ("broad east" and "broad west"); and **Yungui**, the plateaus of the southwest, modern Yunnan and Guizhou. Peoples from the north began to move into these southern macroregions only in the Qin–Han periods, and this immigration continued throughout much of later history. These regions not only support distinctive "dialects" (actually individual languages such as Cantonese), they are also the homelands of many of the fifty or so officially recognized "national minorities," including such large groups as the Zhuang and Miao.

Macroregions held political, economic, and cultural importance throughout China's history, but other kinds of geographical dynamics involving urban centers operated at various times as well. In early China until the late first millennium CE, the most important geopolitical axis was from west to east, as political capitals alternated between the strategic Xi'an region in the northwest and

the area around Luoyang in north-central China, which was closer to population and economic centers. Beginning with the period of division in the mid-first millennium CE, a north–south axis became increasingly important as refugee populations moved south, political capitals were established in the Nanjing region, and a long-term shift to the southeast as the engine of economic development gained momentum. Starting from the end of the first millennium CE, the region of Beijing in the far northeast became a political center for the northern Liao and Jin regimes of partially sedentarized, formerly nomadic peoples. Beijing continued as a primary political capital under the Mongol Yuan regime (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) and thereafter, attesting to the ongoing importance of the northern borderlands and inner Asian strategic relations in later Chinese history (FIG. 0-5). Hangzhou in the southeast became a capital city for the refugee Southern Song regime (1127–1279) in the twelfth century, and Nanjing, briefly a capital in the early Ming (fourteenth–fifteenth centuries), continued as a secondary capital throughout that dynasty. Other major cities in the southeast, such as Suzhou, Yangzhou, and Shanghai, were primarily commercial and cultural centers, as were both Hangzhou and Nanjing. These cities were advantageously located near water transport or other trade routes, especially on the network of rivers, lakes, and canals (including the famous Grand Canal system that linked southeastern and north-central China) that was so beneficial to the commercial prosperity of southern China.

For administrative purposes, the contemporary map of China (map, pages 12–13) is divided into first-, second-, and third-order units.

First-order divisions:

(1) Provinces. Large-scale administrative units akin to provinces have been in existence since at least the time of the First Emperor of Qin (c. 221–210 BCE) when thirty-six "commanderies" were established. The modern-day provinces of the PRC differ somewhat from their immediate predecessors of the Qing (1644–1911) and Republican (1912–1949) periods, although some of their names extend back to early periods. Today there are twenty-three provinces.

(2) In addition, much territory is administered as five Autonomous Regions, areas where sizable so-called minority populations (for example, Hui–Muslims, Uighurs, Zhuang, Mongols, and Tibetans) once predominated.

(3) Finally, four large, centrally administered cities share first-order status, being represented in national affairs in much the same way as the provinces and autonomous regions. These cities are: Beijing (Peking), Tianjin (Tientsin), Chongqing (Chungking), and Shanghai.

Second-order divisions: Although various intermediate administrative districts exist, the usual second-order unit is the county (*xian*). The county administration system predates even the commanderies of the First Emperor. Throughout most of Chinese history, county magistrates ran China.

Third-order divisions: Most archaeological sites are named after a local place, be it a city, village, or natural feature within a county.

CHINESE LANGUAGES

Chinese is a language family. The spoken languages (speech) of various regions, in English by custom called "dialects," are actually more accurately considered separate languages. Thus "common speech" (*putong hua*) and "national language" (*guo yu*) are adaptations of a language called Mandarin (*guan hua*), so named because it was once the speech of imperial officials. The spoken languages of Guangdong (Canton), Shanghai, Fujian–Taiwan, and many other regions are in reality distinct languages. Speakers of Cantonese and Mandarin cannot communicate; the gap between them is as great as that between speakers of German and Italian. *In this book all terms are rendered in their standard, modern Romanized Mandarin spelling.*

The regional and historical diversity of spoken language in China made standardization of written language all the more important. The earliest politically imposed efforts at script standardization were mandated by the founding emperor of the Qin, China's first imperial dynasty, and were a crucial instrument of political unification. Perhaps no factor was more important to long-term political and cultural unity than the common

written language, accessible to the educated whatever their spoken language or ethnicity. Various forms of official scripts linked writing with political authority, along with its basic communicative functions. Writing was associated with elite status and cultural authority as well, since only a small minority of the population was educated in the classical literary and philosophical texts that were the prerequisite curriculum for civil-service examinations and prestigious official careers. That base of classical literacy expanded over time, with increased educational opportunities and more widespread competition for official positions. The development of printing technologies in the late first millennium CE also aided the standardization and dissemination of writing. A lower level of functional literacy, that allowed comprehension of shop signs, primers, and almanacs, was more widespread.

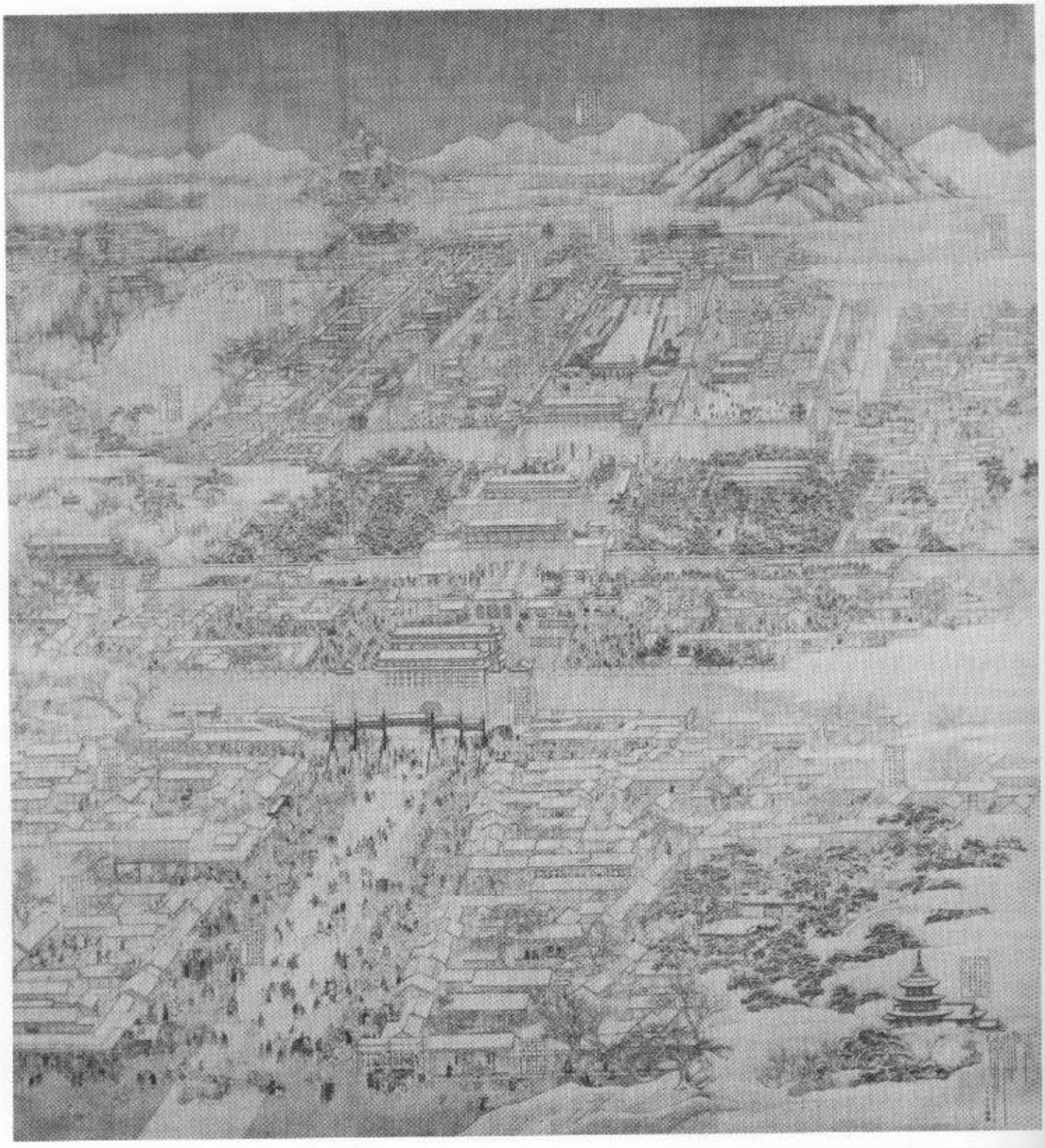
Chinese written characters were normally written or printed from right to left and from top to bottom in unpunctuated columns. Various categories of script forms developed over time and for different cultural functions, including official forms such as the seal or clerical scripts, a standard script most often used for printed texts, and various cursive scripts. Handwritten texts could be produced at different speeds and with varying degrees of formality, using pliable animal-hair brushes. The distinctions between regular, running, and "draft" scripts could be roughly analogous to those between printed writing, cursive script styles, and barely legible personal scrawls in handwritten English (see "Script Types," page 175). A small minority of individual characters were pictographic or represented abstract concepts, but most were compound characters including a significant classifying element, or "radical" (water, metal, hand, bird, and grass are examples), along with a phonetic component that conveyed pronunciation.

Functions of writing thus included representing spoken language, providing a unifying vehicle of communication, and conveying political, religious, or social authority. From early times writing was also appreciated for its aesthetic values. A critical and theoretical literature about calligraphy developed from the third century CE, paralleling texts on the aesthetics of literature, music, and painting. Almost any kind of writing can be appreciated in aesthetic terms, but some modes of writing consciously emphasized visual interest over content. In most texts that go beyond mere notation or practical function, evaluation and response involve an interplay between aesthetics of form, content of the message, status of the occasion of writing, and the medium or format of the text. An official text written in a formal style and engraved on a stone monument (for example, see FIG. 6-32 below) had a very different purpose and impact than an autobiographical essay brush-written on a scroll in an idiosyncratic, extreme cursive style (for example, see FIG. 6-33 below).

Romanization

Since all Chinese languages use a logographic writing system, often referred to as "Chinese characters," one way to represent the sounds of Chinese words is by "Romanizing," that is, using the letters of the Roman alphabet. That alphabet was not, however, created for this purpose, and many of the accommodations are less than ideal. Two systems are in common use. The first is Wade–Giles, a system created in the nineteenth century by two redoubtable English scholars, Thomas Wade and Herbert Giles. Until the 1970s, this was standard in English-language publications of all kinds. The second is Pinyin (literally, "spelling" or "put together sounds"), a system promulgated by the PRC for all official purposes and employed by many users outside China since the 1980s. *Pinyin has been followed in this text.* Since Pinyin was created recently, it employs some conventions of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA); unlike Wade–Giles, it was not created expressly for the convenience of English speakers.

The following examples illustrate some of the contrasts between Wade–Giles and Pinyin: Wade–Giles links multisyllable words with hyphens, while Pinyin simply runs the syllables together, e.g. (Wade–Giles) Ho-mu-tu, (Pinyin) Hemudu; Wade–Giles employs several diacritical marks, while Pinyin does not, e.g. (Wade–Giles)



Yin-hsü, (Pinyin) Yinxu; in Wade–Giles, initial consonants that are aspirated are marked by an apostrophe, while in Pinyin different letters are used to represent the aspirated and unaspirated sounds, e.g. (Wade–Giles) *pan*, *p'an*, *tan*, *t'an*, *kan*, *k'an*, (Pinyin) *ban*, *pan*, *dan*, *tan*, *gan*, *kan*.

CHRONOLOGY

This book begins ostensibly at 5000 BCE with "Late Neolithic" cultures of seven thousand years ago. How to label and understand such long spans of time are not simple questions long ago resolved by specialists. One of the main thrusts of modern-day archaeology in China is to extend our knowledge back into earlier periods, often redating cultural phenomena and the labels we apply to them in the process. Several conventional divisions of time are perpetuated here, but with certain qualifications.

History and Prehistory

In premodern Chinese culture there was no "prehistory." The oldest stages of the human story were accounted for by narratives (now considered myths). Sima Qian's *Historical Records* (*Shi ji*, c. 100 BCE), for example, retells a history of the world from the beginning of human time. Embedded in received literary sources were all the vital details: from the creation of humankind by Fu Xi and Nu Wa (see FIG. 4-21 below) through such notable human inventions as cultivated plants (by Shen Nong) or writing (by Cang Jie). On the other hand, critical scholars devoted enormous efforts to examining historiographical traditions with searching text criticism, determining in the process that the oldest firm date was merely 841 BCE, during the Western Zhou period. Prior to that date, all traditional and modern chronologies vary, depending on sources adduced and decisions on various issues. The most often debated of key early dates—the founding of the (Western) Zhou—continues to engage scholars, who in our time consult radiocarbon datings, eclipse records, and a variety of other sources.

Since the discovery of the oracle-bone inscriptions at the turn of the twentieth century, primary historical sources have been available for study back to the period of the Late Shang kings, beginning probably with Wu Ding (variously estimated at c. 1300 or 1200 BCE). In this volume we regard the period from Wu Ding's era onward as "historical" in the simple sense that primary records are at hand. The centuries leading up to Late Shang "documented" in some transmitted sources are regarded as "proto-history," in the sense that, while some of their data may in fact illuminate the past, it cannot be confirmed from authentic ancient records of the period. Where to establish a boundary between "prehistory" and "proto-history" is more arbitrary. Here we suggest the end of the third millennium BCE as a workable approximation, knowing full well that developments in Chinese archaeology may require revision. Thus the inception of the first of the Three Dynasties of traditional historiography—the Xia—marks the boundary of prehistory and proto-history in this volume (chapter 2).

Imperial China

Strictly speaking, the imperial age begins in 221 BCE with the success of the Qin armies against their final rival (see chapter 4) and concludes with the demise of the (Manchu) Qing dynasty in 1911 CE (see chapter 10). In spite of the biases of many generations of earlier scholars, Chinese society and culture were by no means unchanging during that long span, nor were the breaks at 221 BCE and 1911 CE absolutely clear-cut. The essential components of Qin's new regime were created in the centuries prior to 221, while other vital elements of an imperial state were crafted only in the Han or still later. The abdication of the last emperor, likewise, did not change the structure and functioning of Chinese society overnight. The two rival modern Chinese states, the PRC and Republic of China (ROC), both perpetuate long-established imperial customs and usages.

Our chapters recognize many, but not all, of the major dynastic divisions. Whether or not we follow the historian's periodizations, we are convinced that social, economic, ideological, and

0-5 Xu Yang (active c. 1750–after 1776), Bird's-Eye View of the Capital
1770. Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper; 8′4¼″ × 7′8″ (2.55 × 2.34 m). The Palace Museum, Beijing

The ceremonial north–south axis of the capital city of Beijing is the major organizing feature of this maplike overview. The large gate and wall across the center of the painting mark the boundary between the commercial Outer City and the residential Inner City. Farther back are gates and walls of the Imperial City government buildings and temples, surrounding the walled Forbidden City of the imperial palace and central throne halls. The Temple of Heaven is depicted at lower right. Although organized around a series of enclosures, with power focused at the center, Beijing, like other great urban centers, had spaces for commerce and leisure and reached out to a wider world, here including the European sources of perspectival rendering techniques.

cultural phenomena cannot be usefully distinguished by following political chronology. Our seven chapters covering the imperial period are both a matter of practical convenience and statements about more meaningful periodizations from the standpoint of our topic—art and culture. The lumping together of complete dynasties in chapters 4 to 7 is more or less conventional, the sorting of topics across dynastic divisions in chapters 8 to 10 less so. Our rationalizations are explained in each chapter.

Dynasties

Until the Yuan, dynastic appellations derived from traditional names of regions, ancient states, or the fief of the founding emperor. Liu Bang, founder of (Former) Han, had been a lord of Han; Li Yuan, founder of Tang, was Duke of Tang. Each dynasty had an imperial family, but their surname is rarely used in this connection; one exception is the "Cao Wei," used to distinguish Cao Cao's Wei dynasty (220–265 CE) from the Tuoba (Tabgatch) Wei (386–535 CE). Some dynasties are designated, after the fact, as Former or Later, Western or Eastern, when distinctions are required. Western Zhou is so named because its capital was in the west (near modern Xi'an), while Eastern Zhou shifted its capital east to Luoyang. The last three dynasties followed a new naming custom, selecting terms of auspicious import (Yuan, "primal"; Ming, "brilliant"; Qing, "pure"); two of the three were founded by non-Han Chinese rulers. In premodern times, the inhabitants of China used the current dynastic name as the name of their nation. Such phrases as "people of Han" or "people of Tang" were perpetuated in later periods as names for the "Chinese."

Dates

The successive kingdoms and dynasties of the historical period generally kept track of dates by enumerating years in the reign of the present ruler, king or emperor. Late Shang oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions make reference to a certain year of a certain "sacrificial cycle," thought to be approximately the same as a year. Likewise, late imperial documents and paintings are dated, for example, to the "22nd year of the Qianlong emperor" (1757; see FIG. 9-33 below). For the period from Former Han through Yuan, era names were promulgated by the court and changed as circumstances required. Events are dated to a certain year of a certain era. In Ming and Qing times, however, a single reign name was adopted for each ruling emperor instead. (Thus, "Qianlong" is the reign name, not the emperor's own name.) Some historians prefer to call emperors by their family and personal name (the Song emperor Huizong thus becomes Zhao Ji, with Zhao the family name), but more often these rulers are referred to either by their ancestral title such as Tang Taizong ("grand ancestor"), or by their posthumous honorific name, such as Emperor Wu (Han Wu di, the "martial emperor"). The equivalent of the Western surname always comes first by custom; hence Mao Zedong was Comrade Mao.