

Origins of Chinese Civilization

Origins of Chinese Civilization – Study Notes

1. Geographic Foundations

Region	Key Features	Why It Matters
Yellow River (Huang He) Basin	- Loess-rich soils - Seasonal flooding	Provided fertile farmland but required flood control, spurring early state organization.
Yangtze River Basin	- Warm, humid climate - Rich wetlands	Supported rice cultivation, later complementing millet-based economies of the north.
Northwest Plateaus & Highlands (Qinling, Loess Plateau)	- Natural barriers - Access to mineral resources (copper, tin)	Encouraged regional diversity and later facilitated the rise of the Qin state.
Coastal & Maritime Zones	Access to the East China Sea & South China Sea	Enabled early trade, cultural exchange, and later seafaring expansion.

2. Pre-historic Cultures (c. 8000–2100 BCE)

Culture	Approx. Dates	Location	Major Achievements
Nanzhuang (Peiligang)	8000–7000 BCE	Henan, Shaanxi	Early domestication of millet; simple pit houses.
Dadiwan	6600–5900 BCE	Gansu, Qinghai	Pottery, grain storage pits, evidence of social differentiation.
Yangshao	5000–3000 BCE	Central Yellow River valley	Painted pottery, millet agriculture, village layouts with central plazas.
Dawenkou	4300–2600 BCE	Shandong	Early bronze work, jade ornaments, hierarchical burials.

Origins of Chinese Civilization

Culture	Approx. Dates	Location	Major Achievements
Longshan	3000–1900? BCE	Eastern Yellow River & Shandong	Black pottery, walled settlements, early use of rammed earth walls, proto-writing symbols.
Majiabang & Hemudu (Southern rice cultures)	7000–3000? BCE	Zhejiang, Jiangsu	Rice paddies, dugout canoes, domesticated water buffalo.

Key Takeaways

- Parallel development of **millet** (north) and **rice** (south) created distinct agricultural bases.
 - Increasing social complexity is evident in fortified towns, differentiated burials, and craft specialization.
-

3. The Bronze Age & Early States (c. 2100–771 BCE)

3.1 The Xia Dynasty (Traditional, semi-mythical)

- **Traditional dates:** 2070–1600 BCE.
- **Significance:** First dynastic narrative; credited with early flood control projects (e.g., Yu the Great).
- **Archaeological correlate:** Erlitou culture (1900–1500 BCE) – urban centers, bronze workshops, palace complexes.

3.2 The Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE)

- **Capital:** Yin (Anyang) – major archaeological site.
- **Achievements:**
 - **Bronze casting** (large ritual vessels, weapons).
 - **Oracle bone script** – earliest confirmed Chinese writing.
 - **Ancestor worship** & elaborate funerary rites.
- **Political structure:** King + hereditary aristocracy; tribute system linking peripheral chiefdoms.

3.3 The Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE)

Origins of Chinese Civilization

| Phase | Dates | Characteristics | |-----