

Early Chinese Pottery, Part I

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The Neolithic Period (6000 – 1500 BCE)

The discovery of Chinese Neolithic pottery dates back less than a hundred years, when the great polymath, the Swedish geologist and archaeologist J.G. Andersson unearthed them almost by accident during his trip to the northwest of China in 1924 [1]. Many of his findings are still well kept at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm (**Figure 1**).

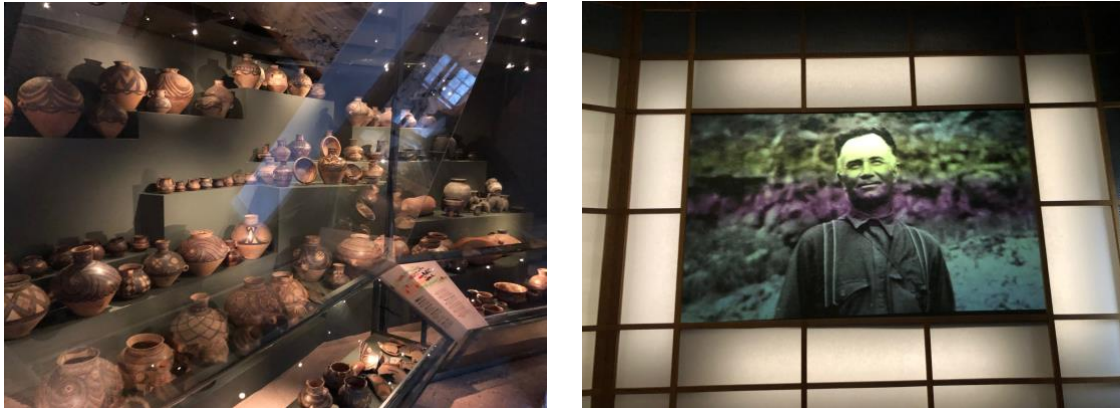


Figure 1 Left: Exhibition room at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm (photo taken in February 2000 with permission); Right: The Swedish archaeologist, palaeontologist and geologist Johan Gunnar Andersson (1874-1960)

Later investigations and excavations have since increased the knowledge base of Chinese Neolithic cultures and sites (**Figure 2**). They are primarily centred around three locations: Yangshao in the centre and northwest, Dawenkou in Shangdong and Hemudu in Zhejiang [2]. The Neolithic period of China lasted from 6000 BCE to 1500 BCE and preceded the Shang dynasty. This exhibition displays wares from two typical cultures – the Yangshao and Majiayao in the north-western part of China, along the tributaries of the Yellow River.

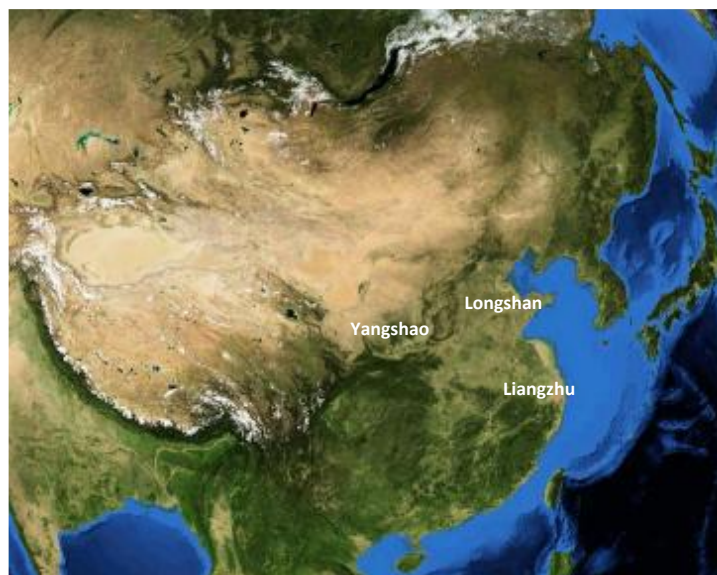


Figure 2 Map of Chinese Neolithic cultures, remade based on MAP 2 [2] and website http://www.yourchildlearns.com/china_history_geography.htm

The Yangshao culture (5000-3000 BCE) was discovered 100 years ago and named after the village of Yangshao, Henan in the central plains [2]. This culture is dispersed also in Shanxi, Shaanxi and Gansu. Yangshao pottery was mainly made of fine-grained red clay which was then impressed with cord, incised with circular lines [2] or painted with geometric patterns, flowers and animals on the surface. The red colour is a result of the oxidizing of the clay's iron content during firing at temperatures as high as 1000°C [3]. The method of construction was typically coiling, with the small vessels shaped entirely by hand [4], though it is believed that slow or even fast wheel techniques already existed [2].

One important type of Yangshao pottery is Banpo (5000-4000 BCE), discovered in the village of Banpo. The amphora in the current exhibition, a typical example (**Figure 3**) [4], is a water-fetching vessel with two ear-shaped handles on either side of the body. The bottom is pointed, and the body is pressed evenly with spiral lines.



Figure 3 Yangshao red amphora (catalogue No. 1)

The Majiayao culture (3800-2000 BCE), also referred to earlier as 'Gansu Yangshao' [3], is later than Yangshao and itself can be divided chronologically into four types: Shilingxia, Majiayao, Banshan and Machang [5]. It was discovered first in Majiayao, Gansu province, and is associated with Yangshao but developed into its own separate lineage. Early Majiayao pottery (3100-2700 BCE) is similar to Yangshao, being made of red clay with black slip decoration [4]. Majiayao vessels are made using the coiling method, possibly with a gentle touch on a slow wheel [6]. Burial evidence suggests that the makers of these pots with such lively patterns were likely to be females [3].

In the exhibition, we see a typical, small Banshan type (2600-2300 BCE) jar (**Figure 4**). This type is often burnished and painted in a broad variety of designs and colours. The reddish colour derives from the iron content, whilst the different shades of black and purple are the result of varying content of iron and manganese [3] [7]. Majiayao pottery evolved later into the Machang type (2300-2000 BC), which is not as finely made as the earlier Majiayao type, having a coarse surface. Machang pottery was decorated in a free painting style using only the colour black.



Figure 4 Majiayao culture Banshan type small burnished jar (catalogue No. 2)

Shang Dynasty (1600 – 1046 BCE)

Xindian pottery (1200-500 BCE), mainly located in Gansu province, existed well into the early Shang dynasty in parallel with bronze making and its culture is [4] [5]. Xindian pots were often decorated with S-shaped patterns that resembled a ‘yoke’ [5]. They are made of rough red clay with gentle white pottery surface coating, red and black paintings. The piece in the current exhibition (**Figure 5**) is a typical form with two ear-shaped handles, one on each side of the neck, and the distinctive S-shaped yoke patterns on the shoulder.



Figure 5 Left: Xindian jars at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm (photo taken in February 2000 with permission); Right: Double- ear Xindian jar with S-shaped decoration (catalogue No. 3)

The ‘Li’ with three feet appeared from the Shang dynasty to the Zhou dynasty [6]. A *Li* is a cooking vessel made of greyish clay, found in Henan and other northern areas [4]. The piece currently exhibited (**Figure 6**) has surface decorations of rough pressed lines. In this period, it seems that less effort was put into pottery making, due to the emergence of the metal vessels as China entered the Bronze Age [5]. Surface impression combined with incision seems to become the dominant fashion to replace the colour decoration [6].



Figure 6 Left: Li (鬲) at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm (photo taken in February 2000 with permission); Right: Shang Dynasty surface impressed grey Li (catalogue No. 4)

A later vessel in the exhibition shows further influence of metalware on pottery forms and surface decoration. In the eastern coastal area of China (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, etc.), a new fashion emerged for impressed surface decorations on high-fired, unglazed pottery. Typical patterns resemble textile designs, such as squares, rectangles, and spirals [7]. This small jar from the exhibition (**Figure 7**) is a typical example, showing the taste of the southerners, which is fine and elegant.



Figure 7 Warring States mini jar with textile- impressed surface (catalogue No. 5)

The discovery of early Chinese pottery occurred barely one century ago and therefore many unknowns remain: what the pots were used for, how they were made, what the different patterns signify, etc. One thing is clear that the beauty of their simplicity and elegance provides us with plenty of space for our imagination to wander.

Bibliography

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