

The picture of an early Chinese polity which was geographically and culturally united, with a strong and prosperous centre extending its influence outwards to an ever-larger area, emerged from excavations sponsored by the Republican government at the Anyang site from 1928, and carried out by the first-generation of professional Chinese archaeologists. It was an ancient China which suited the needs of the new and often fragile Republic for a usable past. Above all, it supported the account of early history given in the earliest written Chinese texts, and allowed a certain resolution of the tension between the desire for 'modernity', expressed as the scientific discourse of which archaeology formed part, and the unwillingness to jettison the written heritage of many centuries. Nowadays a picture of a much more disparate,

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Bronze standing figure from Sanxingdui, over life-size, c.1200 BCE. Excavated in 1986, the figure had been deliberately broken and

heterogeneous, and less ethnically pure ancient China is forming around the extraordinary finds from excavations which reveal cultures of undoubted antiquity and sophistication far from any of the traditionally understood heartlands of Chinese culture. For many, this multi-centred ancient China speaks to current needs more eloquently than the cohesive monolith of older accounts.

None of these excavations is more potentially disruptive of the standard accounts than those at Guanghan Sanxingdui, in Sichuan province, near the modern city of Chengdu. Discovered in 1986, this upset all previous models of early Chinese culture, archaeology, and art. Here, outside a city wall made of rammed earth, and contemporary with the Shang city of Anyang, two pits were located. The first dates from c.1300–1200 BCE, the second from a few decades later. Among a mass of burnt animal bones archaeologists found gold, bronze, jade stone, and pottery objects of a totally unknown type, of which the most spectacular to modern eyes are a group of life-sized bronze heads from the earlier pit and a huge single bronze statue 262 cm. high from the later [2]. Technically these bronzes are on a par with, or even surpass, anything done at Anyang, long thought to be the 'cradle of Chinese civilization'. However, the aesthetic is strikingly different; the reaction of many scholars, seeing these for the first time, was that they looked 'un-Chinese'. In other words, they did not look like the things that had been used to construct an idea of 'Chineseness'. Any representation of the human figure on this scale at this date was previously unknown, let alone the distinctive huge, staring eyes and sharply ridged noses of the Guanghan heads, or the tensed posture of the standing figure, with its arms made to hold some now lost object in wood or ivory.

No written text refers to this culture at the time of its flourishing. We do not know who they conceived themselves to be, or what their relations were with other contemporary state formations in other parts of what is now China. They were clearly in touch with bronze-using