THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF EAST ASIA

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Contents

Summary

This survey addresses some of the major issues in the archaeology of the mainland China, Taiwan, North and South Koreas, and Japan, with occasional references to parts of Mongolia and eastern Siberia (See Figure 1). It begins with the debate over the first appearance of early humans in East Asia and ends with the establishment of literate societies with administrative bureaucracies in much of the area about AD 700 (See Figure 2). The nature of the evidence regarding the evolution and dispersal of Anatomically Modern Humans is reviewed, and the implications of the recent radiocarbon dates for the early use of microblades, the origins of pottery-making, domestications of millet and rice, and the spread of rice agriculture to the Japanese archipelago are considered. The theoretical framework that traced almost all the cultural innovations to the North China Plain is compared with the current trend to interpret them in terms of local evolution and inter-regional interaction. The rise of social complexity without agriculture among the Jeulmum of Korea and the Jomon of Japan is described. Finally, the role of Archaeology as national history in the East Asian

societies today, as the means to define national identities, and its effects on heritage protection is discussed.

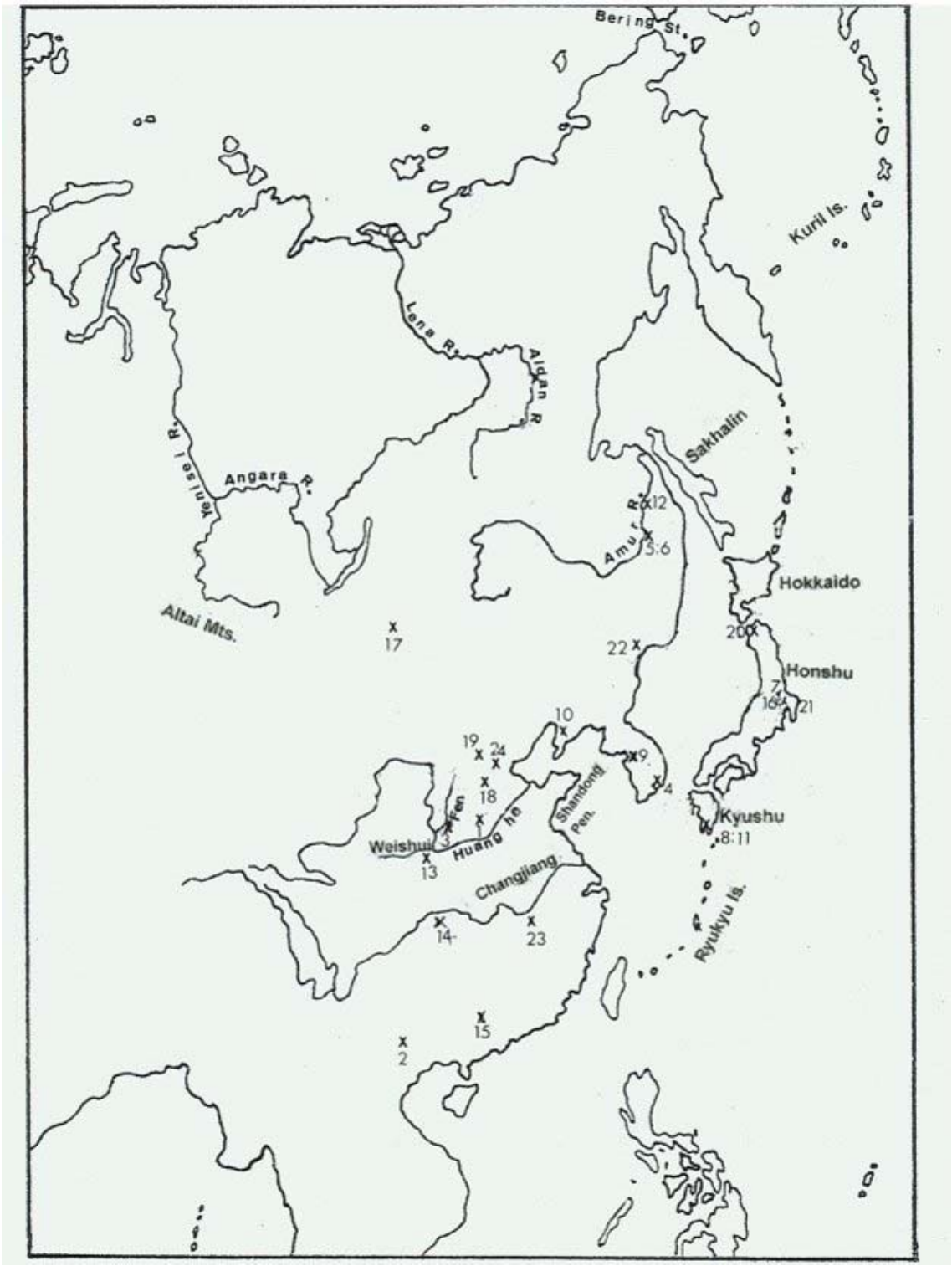

Figure 1. Archaeological Sites Mentioned in the Text.

1. Anyang 2. Bose Basin sites 3. Dingcun 4. Dongsam-dong 5. Gasya 6. Goncharka I

7. Gongenyama 8. Higashi Kurotsuchida 9. Jeonkok-ri 10. Jinniushan 11. Kakoinohara 12. Khummi 13. Lantian (Gongwangling, Chenjiawo) 14. Longgupo 15. Maba 16. Maeda-koch 17. Mount Yakh 18. Nanzhuangtou 19. Nihewan Basin sites 20. Odai Yamamoto I 21. Omori 22. Seopohang 23. Xianrendong 24. Zhoukoudian

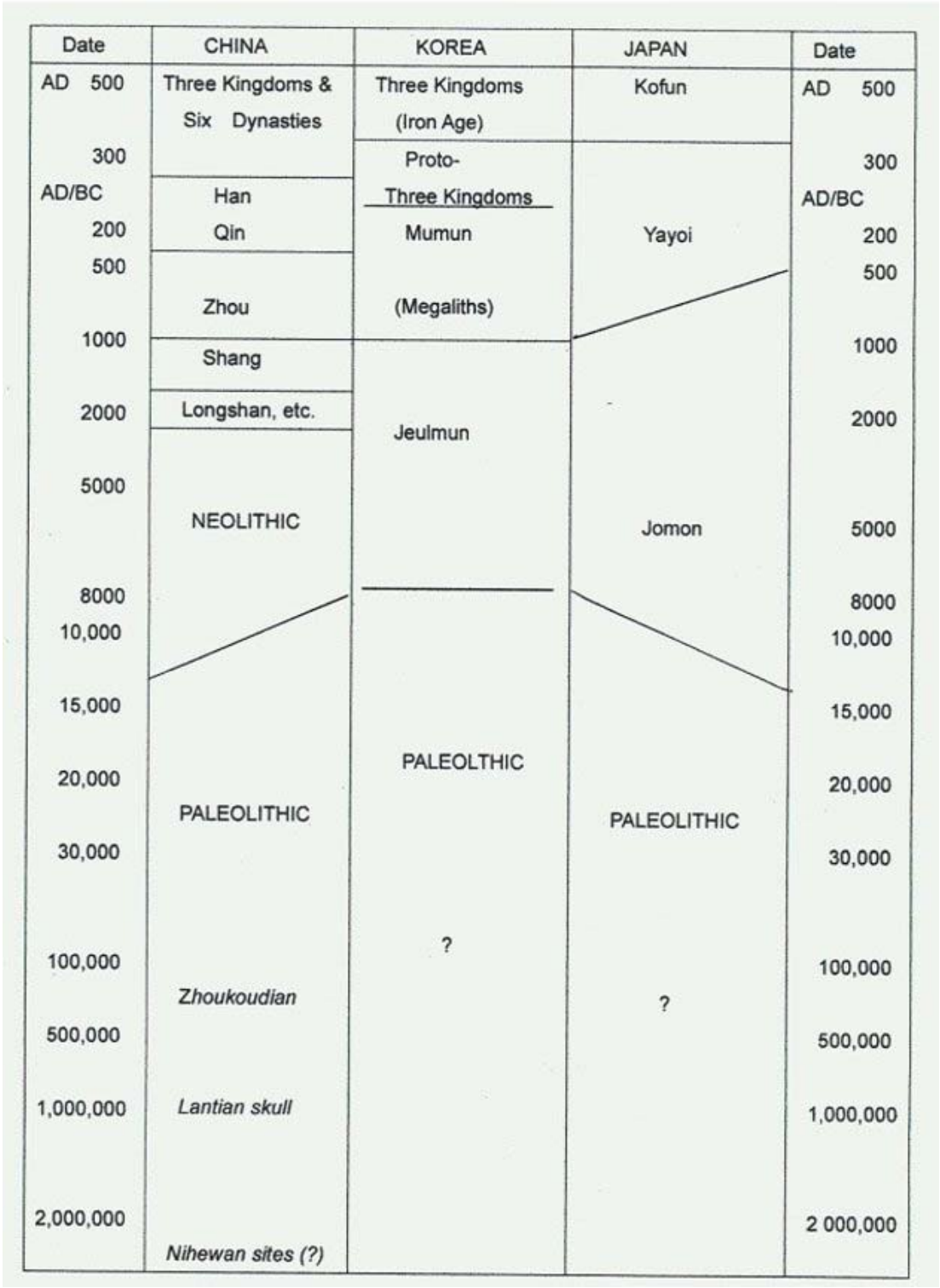

Figure 2. Periodization in East Asian Archaeology

1. Earliest Humans in Eastern Asia

The site of Zhoukoudian, about 50 km. southwest of Beijing, is famous for the large number of early human fossils and numerous stone tools. Once named *Sinanthropus pekinensis*, these are now grouped with other early humans, known as *Homo erectus.* Do these fossils represent the earliest appearance of humans in East Asia? If not, what is the earliest acceptable evidence of human presence in this area, and where did they come from? Did they evolve locally out of earlier antecedents, or are they migrants from another area?

'The cradle of mankind' was once thought to be in Asia, and the discovery in 1891 of 'ape-man,' or *Pithecanthropus* (also classified as *Homo erectus* today), in Java appeared to confirm this view. With the recovery since the 1920s of a variety of pre- and proto-human fossils, including *Australopithecus,* from Africa, the prevailing interpretation today places this 'cradle' in Africa. Nevertheless, some anthropologists continued to argue until recently that eastern Asia must have been a part of the area where the early phase of human evolution took place, on the ground that a number of fossil apes that were thought to be ancestral to humans once lived in southern China and northern part of the Indian subcontinent. Of the evidence cited, the presence of *Gigantopithecus*, *Ramapithecus* and *Sivapithecus* is no longer considered relevant, because these species do not seem to be in the line leading to the genus *Homo*. As to the isolated teeth of what were thought to be *Australopithecus* from cave deposits in South China, they could have been relevant, if they indeed belonged to *Australopithecus*. It is most likely, however, that the teeth were those of early *Homo,* and that it was not until after a branch of Australopithecines evolved into *Homo* that Asia was first inhabited by hominids.

A new discovery or an early radiometric date on a fossil often re-opens the debate. A recent example is the recovery in 2001 of some 800 chipped stone pieces from one of the numerous fossil bearing localities in Nihewan Basin in North China, which was reported as a new challenge to the theory of African origin of humankind. The layer from which these were recovered was reportedly dated by the paleomagnetic method to be more than two million years old. Another example of very early date comes from Longgupo in Sichuan in South China, presented, in this case, as the evidence for very early arrival of humans from Africa, rather than for local evolution. The specimens collected included a mandible with a few teeth, and another isolated incisor of an early form of *Homo*, as well as several chipped stones. The layer where they were found was dated as being between 1.98 and 1.78 million years old. Doubts have been raised, however, about the human nature of both the mandible and the 'artifacts.'

We are on a firmer ground when we come to the evidence for the presence of *Homo erectus*. The oldest specimen is a skull cap unearthed at the Gongwanling locality of the Lantian site on one of the tributaries of the Huanghe (the Yellow River) in North China. An age ranging from 0.7 million to 1.15 million years has been obtained by the paleomagnetic dating method. From another locality in the same Lantian Basin, called Chenjiawo, comes a mandible, dated to be 0.65 million years old. About 30 stone artifacts of quartz and quartzite have also been excavated from the Lantain area. By far the largest collection of *Homo erectus* remains, anywhere in the world, comes from the 'Peking Man' site at Zhoukoudian, mentioned earlier. The excavations, which began in

the 1920s and resumed after World War II, unearthed skeletal materials of some 50 individuals from the 50-meter deposits of the cave, that date from about 0.6 million to 0.2 million years ago. Also recovered from this locality of Zhoukoudian are more than 100,000 stone tools, mostly made of locally available vein quartz. The majority of the tools are small and irregularly shaped, and would have served as cutting, scraping, and piercing tools. Also present in small numbers are tools for heavy-duty work, classified as 'choppers' and 'chopping tools,' that were made from pebbles or chunks of rock with a few flakes taken off to form the cutting edge.

2. Two-culture Theory of the Paleolithic World

Tool assemblages of similar composition are found from many other sites in East and Southeast Asia. Conspicuous by its absence is the hand-axe, which, in spite of its customary name, probably was a general purpose cutting and butchering tool, and was the essential element in the tool kit of the early humans in Africa and Europe. Also called 'bifaces,' these tools were rather carefully prepared on both surfaces. Their absence from eastern Asia led to the idea that the world at that time was made of two cultures: the 'Hand-axe Culture' of Africa and Europe and the 'Chopper/ Chopping-Tool Culture' of East and Southeast Asia. These two overlapped around the Indian subcontinent. It was even suggested that the early humans of the eastern Asia were incapable of producing the bifacially flaked hand-axe. The implication of technical and intellectual inferiority of early humans of the area offended Asian anthropologists who took it as an indication of racism on the part of western archaeologists. An alternative interpretation has been to suggest that the Paleolithic cultures of East and South Asia were simply different, not inferior, and that the hard cutting edge of the hand-axes was not needed in this area of abundant bamboo forest, which provided excellent material to make effective tools. The irregularly shaped cutting and scraping tools of stone were expedient tools to make actual tools from bamboo and other organic materials.

Many scholars continued to argue that early humans of East and Southeast Asia were just as capable as their contemporaries in Africa and Europe, pointing out the presence of hand-axes at such sites as Pacitan in Java, Mount Yakh in Mongolia, Jeongok-ri in South Korea, and Gongenyama in Japan. The problem with these have been that none had been reliably dated, and could be of much younger age to be relevant to the issue at hand. The situation has now changed, however, with the investigation in the Bose Basin in southern China. The excavations in 1988-89 and 1993 unearthed about 600 artifacts, including more than 100 hand-axes. Paleomagnetism dating of the sediments, as well as fission track dates of the tektites associated with the artifacts, gave an age in the neighborhood of 0.7-0.8 million years. It now appears that hand-axes were made and used by some of the early humans in eastern Asia as well.

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Biographical Sketch

Fumiko Ikawa-Smith was educated at Tsuda College, Japan (BA 1953), Radclife College, USA (AM 1958) and Harvard University (PhD 1974). She has lived in Canada since 1960 and taught at the University of Toronto (1964-66) and McGill University (1967-2003). Retired from McGill in 2003, she is currently serving as President of the Society for East Asian Archaeology (2004-2008) and as President of the Japan Studies Association of Canada (2004-2007). Her recent publications include: "Humans along the Pacific margin of Northeast Asia before the Last Glacial Maximum: Evidence for the presence and adaptations," in *Entering America: Northeast Asia and Beringia before the Last Glacial Maximum*, edited by David B. Madsen (University of Utah Press, 2004), and "Gender in Japanese Prehistory," in *In Pursuit of Gender*, edited by Sarah M. Nelson and Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (Altamira Press, 2002).