

2. HISTORY

A. TO THE 20TH CENTURY

The Beginnings

The earliest records of Chinese history, supported by the evidence of archaeology, place the origins of Chinese civilization in the Yellow River valley, the modern provinces of Shansi, Shensi and Honan. Remains of a civilized society have been found in this area dating as far back as the fourth millenium B.C. Complete towns from the half-legendary Shang dynasty (traditional dates 1766 - 1112 B.C.) and from the Chou or Zhou dynasty (11th century - 2nd century B.C.) have been uncovered by excavations, notably that at An yang in Honan province. From this heartland, where the early Chinese developed the techniques of agriculture, the art of writing and the elements of their religious beliefs, their culture spread rapidly over the North China Plain and southward to the Yangtze. This spread and increase of China's population has been a central theme of Chinese history through the centuries.

A second major theme of Chinese history has been the alternation between periods of strength and unity, and periods of disunity and chaos. Traditional Chinese historians have seen in this alternation a cyclical pattern, in which successive dynasties flourish and grow powerful, then fall into administrative decay, leading to peasant revolts, the overthrow of the dynasty and a period of political turbulence, and sometimes foreign invasion.