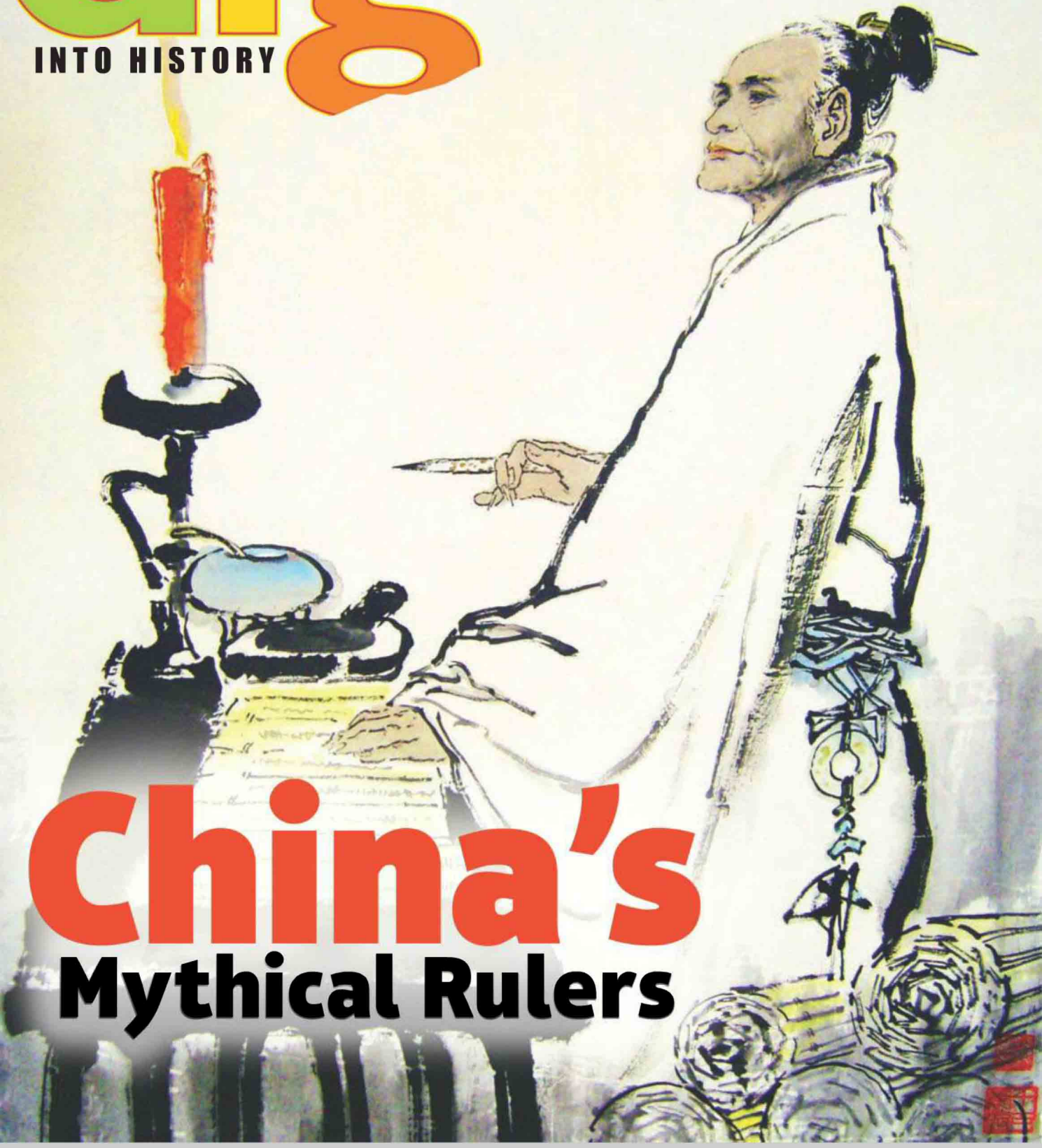


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INTO HISTORY

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China's Mythical Rulers

LET'S GO
dig-GING



The Cave of

by Patrick Wertmann

Since ancient times, tales have been told about legendary emperors who founded Chinese civilization along the banks of the Yellow River 5,000 years ago. But, it was only at the beginning of the 20th century, when the scientific field of archaeology came into being, that people began to question the

credibility of these stories. As researchers analyzed the discoveries being made throughout China, their finds would change how the Chinese viewed their history. The artifacts that were uncovered suggested that long before the reigns of the mythical rulers, highly developed societies based on agriculture

existed along the banks of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers. Such settlements also existed in other regions of the country—southern Sichuan province, for example.

(SEE ALSO PAGES 46–49.)

A Belief Challenge

Archaeologists have always considered the manufacture of

Visit Xianren Cave today, and you will travel back in time some 5,000 years. Within are areas, such as the one below, that have colored lights shining on various recreations of life at the time. The inset at right shows a man gathering grain stalks.



Immortals

pottery wares as a typical indicator that early societies were already advanced and, therefore, linked it with the emergence of agriculture. The discovery of pottery fragments at the site known as Xianrendong, which literally means the “Cave of the Immortals,” now challenges this idea.

The site of Xianren Cave was first discovered by archaeologists in the early 1960s. It is located in a narrow basin surrounded by high mountains and close to a river in Wannian County, Jiangxi province. Some 62 miles to the south flows the Yangtze River. The large, inner hall of the cave can be reached through a

small entrance. When archaeologists first entered, they found the remains of 22 fireplaces and three trash pits. In the latter were animal bones, pieces of broken pottery, and numerous tools made of stone, bone, and shell. But work at the site stopped after these initial excavations.

New Digs

Then, in 1993 and 1995, Chinese and American archaeologists decided to resume working there. This time, the scientists uncovered two layers of earth, each dating to a different time period. Approximately 300 pottery shards and dozens of tools were found in the upper layer. In the lower level, they found stone tools and the remains of various animals, including snails, but not pottery shards. Analysis of the shards showed that they had been made by hand and fired in an open bonfire. While some of the vessels had a plain surface, others were decorated with marks made by pressing cords into the clay.

The shards uncovered in the first layer had much to tell. But, first, a note about pottery: Its production involves one of the oldest techniques invented by humans. Experts believe that this technique developed simultaneously in different parts of the world. Until recently, the oldest pottery, dated to 13,000 B.C., was believed to have originated with the Jomon culture in Japan. From there, it was thought that hunters and gatherers carried their knowledge of the practice east toward Korea and into the Amur region, located between the Russian Far East and northeastern China. By way of comparison, pottery in ancient Egypt appeared for the first time



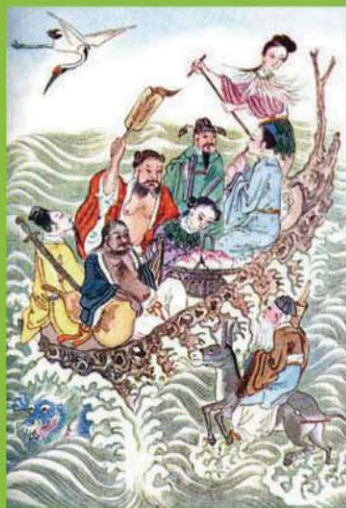
Here's another scene at Xianren Cave. This one shows a hunter going out with his dog.

between the eighth and ninth centuries B.C. These new finds may prove that the pottery from Xianren Cave in southern China predates all other early finds.

Immortals

In Chinese mythology, the words *xian* and *xian ren* describe Immortals who are endowed with supernatural and magical powers that can give life and destroy evil. The most famous among them are the *ba xian* or Eight Immortals. They include seven men and one woman (seven in boat and one riding an animal at right), who are worshiped in particular by **Daoists**. According to legend, the Immortals live on the islands located in the eastern end of the Bohai Sea.

One of the most popular among the eight is Li Tieguai. Legend has it that he is quick-tempered and moody, but also benevolent to the poor and the sick. He is often portrayed as an old man with messy hair, walking with a crutch and carrying a gourd over his shoulder. It is said that he uses his power to fight for the oppressed and the needy.



Let's Hear It for C14!

To determine the age of the pottery found in Xianren Cave, researchers used the C14 dating method. All organic material—dead plants, animals, and pieces of wood and bone, for example—contains C14, a **radioactive isotope** of the chemical element carbon. By measuring the exact amount of it remaining in a sample, experts can calculate the time when the particular animal or plant died. In the case of Xianren Cave, archaeologists collected human and animal bones and all traces of charcoal—from pottery fragments, for instance—that had entered the

Daoists followed the principles of the Chinese philosophy known as Daoism, which promotes humility and religious piety.

52 **A radioactive isotope** is a chemical element (an isotope) with an unstable nuclear composition.

cave approximately around the same time. To their surprise, the pottery was made nearly 20,000 years ago. This was the time of the last Ice Age and clearly makes this pottery older than the Jomon or any other pottery discovered so far.

The specialists could distinguish two different types of pottery. The first was rather coarse and simple. Traces of burning on the outside that had been caused by placing the wares into an open fire suggest that these pieces were intended for

everyday use such as cooking, storing food, or even brewing alcoholic beverages. Finds of clams and snails in Xianren Cave offer evidence of what the people ate. The second type required much more effort to produce. Presumably, these vessels were intended for special occasions, such as rituals.

Travel? Yes, But Lightly!

Since hunters and gatherers moved from one place to another, it was thought that they would

have been unlikely to have taken along their heavy and fragile pottery wares. For this reason, scholars had linked the invention of pottery to the process of settling down and to the emergence of agriculture. But, the discovery in Xianren Cave suggests that nomads, at their seasonal camps, produced pottery for cooking at least 10,000 years before farming began in that part of the world. When they left, they would simply leave their cooking pots behind.

THE ADVENTURES OF **dr. dig** BY CHUCK WHELON

