NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 2nd General Meeting of the Society for 1987 will be held in:

THE CONSERVATION CENTRE, 120 WAKEFIELD STREET, ADELAIDE

ON

MONDAY 27TH APRIL 1987 AT 8.00 PM.

AGENDA

1. Apologies:

2. Minutes of the previous General Meeting:
   Minutes of the previous general meeting, held in the Conservation Centre, 120 Wakefield Street, Adelaide on 23rd March 1987, having been circulated in this journal, to be confirmed.

3. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and journals received from other societies and organisations, since the last general meeting, will be tabled at this meeting.

4. Speaker:

   Mr Robin Coles, Mount Barker T.A.F.E., will address the society, and the subject of his address will be:

   "Aboriginal sites in the Mount Lofty Ranges."

5. Supper will be served at the close of the meeting.

R. Allison
Hon. Secretary
120 Wakefield Street
ADELAIDE SA 5000
Excavating a lost culture
Fang Dianchun and Wei Fan

Fang Dianchun and Wei Fan are members of the archaeological team investigating the Hongshan culture relics.

Important archeological discoveries which may lead to the rewriting of Chinese history and prehistory are being made. Traditionally, Chinese civilization was thought to have developed in the valley of the Huanghe (Yellow) River. Now a new culture has been discovered far to the north which achieved a high degree of sophistication a thousand years earlier than the Huanghe valley cultures. This is the Hongshan culture, a Neolithic farming society whose relics have been found in an area running north from the Yanshan Mountains 400 kilometers north of Beijing and into Liaoning Province and Inner Mongolia.

Relics of it found so far include a worship site with a round altar and adjacent buildings, a temple with religious statues near a burial site, and another set of tombs in a ceremonial arrangement. No such things have been found for any other of China's Neolithic cultures.

Such a scale of construction could hardly be the work of a local tribe. These must be traces of the social and political activities of an early state. This is the opinion of Su Bingqi, vice-president of the Archaeological Society of China. If this is so, this early state predates by a thousand years the Xia dynasty, which modern scholars consider the beginning of Chinese history and dynastic rule.

The once-legendary but now verified Xia dynasty (2100-1600 B.C.) was founded by the flood-controller Yu the Great along the Huanghe in Shanxi and Henan Provinces. Though no written records exist datable to that period, archaeological excavation has authenticated the Xia state's existence, and also its development out of the Longshan "black pottery" culture, one of China's two main Neolithic cultures. Legend, however, tells of a rule — it must have been at least a tribal confederation — achieved by Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor, around 3100 B.C. He was the first of what are known as the Five Sovereigns, who preceded Yu.

The Hongshan culture is named for the village near the city of Chifeng in Inner Mongolia where its first finds were discovered in the 1930s. At that time the culture was thought to be only a later development of the Yangshao painted pottery culture which flourished in the Huanghe valley 4500-2500 B.C. Early Hongshan finds consisted of red pottery with impressed or black painted designs, stone plowshares and hoes made by either flaking or grinding, and some finer stone tools for cutting and chopping — nothing to show that Hongshan was anything more than an agricultural culture with a fairly highly developed farming technology. Several finds since 1979 indicate that the Hongshan culture was much more than that.

Circular altar

In 1979 an altar and ruins of associated buildings were found at Dongshanzhai four kilometres southeast of the Kazuo (Harqin Zuoyi) county seat in western Liaoning Province. It was situated on a ridge of earth facing Mt. Majia, apparently a sacred mountain, across the Daling River. The altar was made of neatly finished flat stones set in a circle. Inside, the 2.5 meter diameter circle is covered with small round pebbles.

In the vicinity of the altar were found fragments of numerous clay figurines. The two best-preserved ones, missing only heads and feet, are figures of pregnant women, 5 and 6.8 cm high. From the broken pieces it has been possible to put together two larger figures of seated women which if fully reconstituted, would measure 50 cm high. Both are seated gross-legged, with the left hand on the abdomen. One wears a sash. These may represent or be dedicated to a fertility goddess or crop spirit. Very similar figures have been found in several places in Europe and elsewhere dating from Paleolithic (Old Stone Age) times and after. These are held to represent an "earth mother" who was believed to make crops and herds productive. This is the first time such fertility goddesses or votive figures have been found in China. Their discovery has stimulated tremendous excitement and conjecture.

North of the altar were the ruins of a group of stone buildings with main and auxiliary structures arranged symmetrically along a north-south axis, and a north-south wall of oblong chiselled stone slabs.

Another stone circle surrounded by remains of clay figures was found at Hutougou near the mining town of Fuxin in western Liaoning. Archaeologists were led to it when a local farmer discovered a stone tomb that had been exposed by erosion on a cliff. Eighteen jade artifacts found in the tomb were judged to represent the Hongshan culture. This was an important breakthrough, for it finally threw light on the origin of a large number of jade dragons, tortoises, birds, cicadas and other animal life found previously in Liaon-
ing and Inner Mongolia. Such jades are on exhibit in the museum at Harvard University in the U.S. and in others in France and Australia, but there was no reliable data on their source or date.

Earliest dragons

Among the Hutoucouj jades were small circular-shaped amulets believed to depict dragons as well. If so, they are China’s earliest known representations of this mythical beast which later became the symbol of imperial might.

Previously, in 1971, a sensational curling dragon was found in Ongnuid banner of Inner Mongolia. Fashioned out of a single piece of dark green jade, it is 27 cm high. The dragon’s head stretches forward, its mane flowing back. The highly polished piece has a hole for threading a cord. When first found it was dated to the Shang dynasty (16th-11th centuries B.C.) but now is identified as a Hongshan work.

The Hongshan dragons are distinguished by a rather square snout, like a pig’s. They raise fascinating questions: What was the dragon in the Hongshan culture? Where does it place this culture in the time-chart of development? The female figures, the dragons and elaborate sites of worship all indicate that the Hongshan culture was a very sophisticated one. But where did it come from? How was it structured?

Big temple complex

Spurred on by these questions, archaeologists continued their search over the hills and valleys of Liaoning. In 1981 they found a burial ground at the village of Niuhe liang, 20 kilometres northwest of Dongshanzui. Trial excavation in 1983 revealed clusters of stone tombs, and soon afterward, a temple to a goddess on a nearby hilltop.

Niuhe liang is situated on a high ridge of earth extending 10 km east to west. Along its spine run the rail line and a motor road going north from the city of Chengde. The slopes are covered with thick pine woods which control the formerly serious erosion.

The temple lies at the centre of what is believed to be a whole complex of as-yet-unexcavated structures. It has been carbon-dated to about 2575 B.C. Around it on some twenty hills are clusters of stone tombs, all in view of a distant mountain, possibly a holy mountain. Such an orderly arrangement indicates that the Hongshan people had a strong sense of social life and of religious belief.

When the earth overlaying the temple was removed the excavators found a treasure-trove of statuary. The first things to come to light were the fragments of five or six large clay figures, the smallest of which had been nearly lifesize. In the temple’s main chamber were clay ears, noses and other parts of statues which had been twice as big as life. The prize was the lifesize head of what might be a goddess, painted red, with balls of bluish-green jade for eyes. The cheeks seem to be deliberately exaggerated to an extra roundness. The features are held by some to be typical of those of the peoples of north China today.

All the fragments, whether arms, breasts, or dragons’ lower jaws, show careful workmanship. Among the hand fragments, for instance, there are clenched fists, hands with thumbs up, and others with fingers outspread and fine-fingered women’s hands. Fragments of birds’ talons show the powerful toes bent with knuckles protruding in a fierce manner.

The temple buildings had been burned, but it could be seen that they were made of wattle and daub. After the walls were smoothed out, they were decorated with designs impressed in the mud, or with geometric designs painted in colour. The temple measures 200 metres across. Behind it is a square larger than a football field under which archaeologists think may lie the remains of a palace.

Higher forms of worship

Clearly the Hongshan people had already advanced from primitive totemism and animism to some other form of worship. They were also moving from the simple equality of communal life to status differentiation according to wealth. This is shown by the groups of tombs excavated. A cluster would contain tombs of small and medium size with few or no burial artifacts as well as others with beautiful articles of jade, including dragons and cloud-design pendants. One group of tombs including a very large one with the burial chamber in a 300-square metre enclosure. The whole was surrounded by four walls made of big stones, and the grave itself was covered with rocks piled high to form a very large mound. The ordinary tombs consisted of a coffin-like box for the body formed of flat pieces of stone laid on the ground and piled with earth and stones in a smaller mound.

Who were these Hongshan people in whose life religion played so large a role? Does this culture have any relations to that of early legendary rulers? The Hongshan discoveries have focused greater attention on north China. Clearly there is still a lot of digging to be done, a lot of Chinese history to be uncovered.

Note: This article is reproduced from ‘China Reconstructs’, December 1986.