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The Integration of Ordos Regional Culture and the Evolution of Livelihood Patterns during the Pre-Qin Period

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Abstract

Ordos, located in the southwestern part of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, is one of the core areas of Northern Frontier culture. During the pre-Qin period, the Ordos region witnessed the integration of agrarian and nomadic cultures, fostering ethnic amalgamation and cultural exchange. The subsistence models evolved from a combination of gathering and hunting in the Paleolithic era, to complementary farming and hunting with integrated cultivation and animal husbandry during the Yangshao culture, and further to mixed agriculture and pastoralism in the Longshan and early Shang cultures. By the Shang-Zhou period, nomadic practices emerged as dominant, centered on herding and hunting. This process demonstrated a mutually reinforcing relationship between cultural fusion and the evolution of subsistence models, collectively shaping the distinctive cultural landscape of the Ordos region.

Key Words

Northern Frontier culture, pre-Qin period, Ordos, cultural integration, subsistence models

1. Northern Frontier Culture and the Pre-Qin Period Cultural Landscape of the Ordos Region

Northern Frontier culture, as a distinctive form of regional culture, has long been a crystallization of wisdom co-created by diverse ethnic groups in the Northern Frontier region. It is not only an indispensable component of Chinese civilization but also exemplifies the unique charm of regional culture. The Northern Frontier, with its vast territory, boasts a diverse and profound cultural landscape characterized by intricate complexity and distinctive features. These elements intertwine and merge, collectively shaping the profound and enduring cultural identity of the Northern Frontier.

Inner Mongolia is renowned for its profound historical and cultural heritage and abundant humanistic resources. The diverse cultures flourishing across this vast land form a vital part of Chinese civilization. However, there has long been a lack of a unifying concept that encapsulates all these cultural elements while reflecting Inner Mongolia's unique characteristics. To address this, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region proposed the creation of "Northern Frontier Culture"—

a regional cultural brand embodying Inner Mongolia's distinct identity.¹ Guided by the cultural mission of the new era and rooted in the region's rich historical resources, the regional government has innovatively advanced the development of this brand. Efforts focus on perpetuating the legacy of Chinese civilization, promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of Inner Mongolia's traditional culture, and contributing to the flourishing of Chinese culture.

The Ordos region, situated at the convergence of the Northern Frontier and the Central Plains, holds exceptional historical significance and has served as a hub for extensive cultural and economic exchanges. This area not only witnessed the collision and integration of nomadic and agrarian civilizations but also acted as a vital bridge connecting diverse regions and ethnic groups. It exemplifies the historical process of "unity in diversity" within the Chinese nation and vividly embodies the pluralism and inclusiveness of Chinese culture. The Hetao region, a critical zone of agrarian-nomadic interaction, underwent multiple cultural transitions—from nomadic to agrarian, then back to nomadic—ultimately forming a mixed agro-pastoral



Figure 1. The Yellow River in Central-Southern Inner Mongolia.

Figure 2. Panoramic view of the Salawusu Site.

system.² Throughout this process, nomadic, agrarian, Yellow River, and Great Wall cultures deeply integrated

and evolved, jointly constituting the foundational origins of Northern Frontier culture (figure 1).



Figure 3. Current landscape of the Zhukaigou Site.

The Hetao culture traces back to the Hetao Humans (140,000–70,000 years ago), who thrived along the Salawusu River (also known as the Wuding or Hongliu River) in Uxin Banner, Ordos, creating the renowned Hetao Human culture³ (figure 2).

Discovered in May 2010, the Wulanmulun Site (dating to approximately 60,000–45,000 years ago, Late Pleistocene epoch) yielded over 15,000 handcrafted stone tools, 15,000 ancient animal fossils, and extensive evidence of fire use, including ash, charcoal, and burnt bones.⁴

The Zhukaigou Site, located in Nalin Township, Ejin Horo Banner, represents a cultural site spanning the Neolithic to Bronze Age. Excavations revealed rich cultural deposits, covering various periods from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age, with artifacts and cultural connotations forming a relatively complete system marked by distinct local characteristics. This led to its designation as “Zhukaigou Culture”.⁵ The discovery demonstrates human activity in Ordos since the Paleolithic era. Over time, the region became a stage for ancient nomadic tribes such as the Xianyun, Guifang, Yiqu, Loufan, and Linhu. These groups significantly enriched the cultural diversity of Ordos and laid a solid foundation for subsequent historical development (figure 3).

After unifying China, the Qin Dynasty further consolidated and advanced the cultural status of Ordos. Emperor Qin Shi Huang established multiple commanderies, including Beidi, Shang, Jiuyuan, and Yunzhong, with subordinate counties, forming a robust administrative framework. Measures such as migrant resettlement, land reclamation, Great Wall construction, and imperial road networks strengthened control and development. These initiatives not only facilitated economic and cultural exchanges between Ordos and the Central Plains but also spurred rapid agricultural growth

and cultural prosperity.

During the Qin period, General Meng Tian was dispatched to expel the Xiongnu and reclaim the Henan Territory (including the Ordos Plateau). The construction of the Great Wall and imperial roads reinforced central governance over frontier regions while promoting economic and cultural integration between Ordos and the Central Plains. Artifacts from the Qin era unearthed in Ordos, such as cocoon-shaped pottery jars, attest to stable economic and cultural ties between the Ordos Plateau and the Guanzhong Plain.⁶ These relics not only reflect societal production and daily life but also provide critical evidence for understanding the role of Ordos regional culture within Northern Frontier Culture during the pre-Qin period.

2. Evolution of Subsistence Models in the Ordos Region during the Pre-Qin Period

2.1 Paleolithic Culture with Combined Gathering and Hunting

The most representative Paleolithic sites in the Ordos region include the Salawusu Site, Wulanmulun Site, and Shuidonggou Site, spanning approximately 140,000 to 15,000 years ago, forming a complete sequence of the Middle to Late Paleolithic period. These sites have yielded abundant animal fossils, including remains of woolly rhinoceros (*Coelodonta antiquitatis*), hyenas, *Camelus knoblochi*, *Megaloceros ordosianus*, *Bubalus wansijocki*, *Bos primigenius*, *Equus przewalskii*, *Cervus elaphus*, and *Procapra przewalskii*, reflecting the hunting practices of early humans targeting large herbivores. Distinctive tool-cut marks on fragmented bones indicate the use of stone tools for hunting.⁷ Additionally, various stone tools, such as scrapers, points, and denticulate blades, played critical roles in these activities.

Beyond hunting, gathering was equally vital for survival. Fossils of plant fruits and roots discovered at these sites suggest their use as dietary supplements. Tools like cores and flakes, likely employed in gathering and processing plant foods, further highlight this dual subsistence strategy (figure 4). Traces of fire use at the sites demonstrate that early humans had mastered fire, thereby enhancing survival capabilities and promoting the adoption of cooked food—a key factor in human physiological evolution.⁸

During the Paleolithic era, hunting served as a primary economic activity in Ordos, providing meat, hides, and bones essential for clothing and tool-making, all particularly crucial in cold climates. Gathering, mean-



Figure 4. Stone tools unearthed from the Salawusu Site.

while, supplied carbohydrates and vitamins through plant resources, complementing the nutritional gaps in a meat-centric diet. This combined subsistence model exemplified early humans' adaptability and flexibility to their environment. In resource-rich areas, the dual reliance on hunting and gathering ensured survival, stabilized communities, and fostered social development.

Studies of the Salawusu, Wulanmulun, and Shuidonggou sites reveal inherited yet innovative advancements in stone tool production. Analysis of flora and fauna remains also indicates shifts in ecological conditions—alternating cold, warm, dry, and humid phases—highlighting environmental factors as key drivers of subsistence strategies.

The Ordos Paleolithic period (Middle to Late Paleolithic) represents a critical phase for exploring human origins, particularly the emergence of modern *Homo sapiens*. Inhabitants of the Ordos Plateau during this era relied on combined gathering and hunting, utilizing knapped stone tools crafted from natural cobbles. These tools, designed for hunting, plant processing, self-defense, and crafting other implements, reflect sophisticated technological skills. For instance, fragmented bones with tool marks at the Wulanmulun

Site corroborate large herbivore hunting, while fire traces confirm cooked food practices.⁹

The abundance of stone tools and animal fossils from these three Ordos Paleolithic sites provides critical insights into early human lifestyles. Exquisitely crafted tools, such as points and scrapers, underscore advanced lithic technology and hunting proficiency. In summary, the pre-Qin subsistence model in Ordos during the Paleolithic era centered on combined gathering and hunting, with knapped stone tools enabling reliance on large herbivores as primary food sources—features vividly preserved in the region's archaeological record (figure 5).

2.2 Yangshao Cultural Remains: Agro-Hunting Complementarity and Integrated Cultivation-Husbandry

Due to climatic influences, the Neolithic era emerged later in the Ordos region compared with other areas. However, its characteristic cultural features—crop cultivation, pottery production, polished stone tools, settled housing, and domesticated livestock—flourished significantly. As noted by archaeologist Su Bingqi, from the Neolithic to the Xia-Shang periods, civilizations across China were distributed like “a sky full of stars,”



Figure 5. Woolly rhinoceros fossil.



Figure 6. Yangwan site dwelling remains.

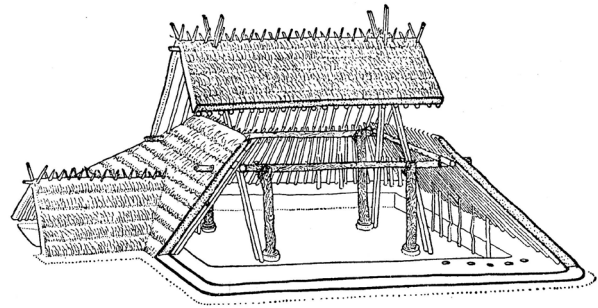


Figure 7. Reconstruction diagram of the Yangwan site dwelling.

forming a diverse and interconnected cultural landscape.

2.2.1 Agro-Hunting Complementarity in Early Yangshao Cultural Remains

With the advent of the Neolithic era, communities represented by the Yangshao culture of the middle-lower Yellow River basin settled along riverbanks, adopting slash-and-burn agriculture. They developed farming, animal husbandry, permanent dwellings, and pottery-making, while transitioning from Paleolithic knapped stone tools to more advanced polished stone tools. This period exemplified a socioeconomic model combining primitive agriculture with hunting and gathering.

In the Ordos region, early Neolithic sites such as Lujiapo, Guandi, and Yangwan (dating to approximately 6,500 years ago) mark the earliest human activities (figures 6, 7). The Yangwan site in Jungar Banner is a typical representative of the Banpo phase of Yangshao culture. Its semi-subterranean wooden-framed earthen structures and adjacent storage pits (circular, square, rectangular, or oval) for grains and goods reflect architectural traditions inherited from the Banpo culture.¹⁰

Yangwan's inhabitants lived in large kinship-based communities, selecting sheltered, sun-facing slopes near water sources as settlements. A central communal house



Figure 8. Polished stone axes.



Figure 9. Polished stone knives.

served as a gathering space, indicating the emergence of primary social organizations based on blood ties—the dawn of structured civilization.¹¹ Using production tools, stone and pottery tools dominated the Yangwan site. The process of stone tools crafted through knapping and polishing included axes, knives, grinding rods, grinding plates, chisels, and spades. Pottery, primarily sand-tempered or clay-based, featured vessels like jars, pointed-bottom bottles, round-bellied pots, and basins, often decorated with cord or string patterns. These artifacts reveal specialized craftsmanship tailored to functional needs, showcasing advanced Neolithic technology.

Analysis of tools suggests a subsistence economy centered on primitive agriculture supplemented by hunting. Residents cultivated grains using polished tools (axes, spades, perforated knives) for land preparation and harvesting. Hunting remained vital, with microliths (arrowheads, blades, flakes) enabling efficient processing of animal hides and meat.

In terms of pottery objects manufacturing, early Yangshao pottery exhibited mature techniques, including cord-marked surfaces and vibrant painted designs. Vessel specialization emerged: wide-mouthed jars stored grains, while narrow-necked bottles held liquids. As archaeologist Zhang Zhongpei observed in *On the Archaeological Cultures of Inner Mongolia*, Ordos' early Yangshao remains show strong ties to the Central Plains Yangshao culture while absorbing influences from northeastern Hongshan culture.¹² Notably, the widespread use of microliths in Ordos not only shaped local traditions but also profoundly impacted later Longshan culture, fostering agricultural advancement through cultural fusion.

Thus, the early Yangshao period in Ordos exemplified a symbiotic agro-hunting subsistence model, where farming and hunting mutually reinforced socioeconomic

resilience—a dynamic interplay that laid the foundation for regional cultural evolution (figures 8, 9).

2.2.2 Late Yangshao Cultural Remains with Integrated Cultivation and Animal Husbandry

In the distant past along the Yellow River in northern China a unique cultural form emerged, as evidenced in the late Yangshao cultural remains. Among these, the Ordos region stands out as a key distribution area due to its integrated cultivation-livestock economy and distinctive cultural features.

The Haishengbulang cultural type, distributed along the Yellow River in central-southern Inner Mongolia and dating back approximately 5,500 years, represents a late Yangshao cultural remnant. Influenced by the northward expansion of the Miaodigou phase of Yangshao culture, it gave rise to the Miaozigou culture in central-southern Inner Mongolia, while the Majiayao culture emerged contemporaneously in Gansu. The Haishengbulang culture was directly shaped by Miaozigou culture and experienced interaction with the Hongshan culture from northeastern China.¹³ Production tools of the Haishengbulang culture include large stone tools, microliths, and tools repurposed from bone, antler, or pottery fragments (figure 10). Large stone tools feature hoes, spades, knives, grinding plates, and grinding rods, with some sites also yielding axes, discoid tools, spindle whorls, and grooved stone implements. Tools modified from pottery fragments primarily include large spades and knives, as well as spindle whorls. Notably, ceramic spades and knives far outnumber their stone counterparts. Microliths encompass burins, scrapers, composite tools (e.g., stone blades inset into bone daggers), flakes, and blades. Bone artifacts include awls, needles, and daggers embedded with stone blades. Unique tools such as oval-sectioned broad axes, notched knives, semicircular implements, and refined microlithic



Figure 10. Pottery of the Haishengbulang culture.

craftsmanship highlight the culture's distinctiveness. Domesticated animals included pigs, dogs, sheep, and cattle, while hunted wild species ranged from deer, badgers, mammoths, tigers, and aurochs to fish, turtles, and birds. This assemblage reflects an economy centered on primitive hoe-based agriculture, supplemented by livestock rearing, fishing, and gathering.¹⁴

By the late Yangshao period, rising social productivity in Ordos intensified wealth disparity and social instability, evidenced by defensive structures. For example, the Ashan culture (c. 4,500 years ago) in the Hetao region shows heightened pastoral influences, with abundant bone tools and microliths. Increased productivity exacerbated social stratification, culminating in defensive stone-walled enclosures¹⁵ (figure 11). In 1988, the Zhaizhigedan Stone Wall site was discovered in Jungar Banner. The oval-shaped stone enclosure, built along a hilltop's natural contours, covers 15,000 m². At its center lies a pyramidal platform, suggesting a settlement combining ritual and defensive functions. This discovery underscores intensifying resource competition and social unrest, signaling the brink of transformative societal change.¹⁶ Excavations at Zhaizhigedan yielded Neolithic agricultural tools (axes, grinding plates, rods) and large pottery vessels, emphasizing the site's agrarian foundations. These findings illuminate the late Yangshao period's socioe-

conomic shifts, bridging primitive agrarian stability and the dawn of complex civilization.

Amid a trend of climatic cooling and aridification, coupled with the decline of primitive agriculture, late Yangshao communities in the Ordos region increasingly relied on animal husbandry, marking the embryonic formation of the first major social division of labor in human history.¹⁷ During this period, livestock rearing expanded significantly, becoming a socioeconomic pillar. Primitive agriculture did not vanish but instead integrated with animal husbandry, creating a mixed farming-herding economy. This model enhanced productivity and diversified economic activities. Concurrently, advanced tools such as bone implements and microliths emerged, reflecting technological progress and pastoral development.

2.3 Agro-Pastoral Economy in Longshan to Early Shang Cultural Remains

The Longshan cultural remains in Ordos, exemplified by the Yongxingdian Site and Zhukaigou Site, reveal a multifaceted economy combining agriculture, animal husbandry, handicrafts, fishing, hunting, and gathering. These practices formed the socioeconomic bedrock of the era.

Yongxingdian culture, a key component of Inner Mongolia's prehistoric heritage, showcases agro-pastoral



Figure 11. Stone-Walled settlement at Zhaizhigedan Site.



Figure 12. Ceramic li tripod and yan steamer from Yongxingdian Site.



Figure 13. Ceramic yan steamer from Yongxingdian Site.



Figure 14. Dwelling remains at Zhukaigou Site.

characteristics.¹⁸ Excavations reveal semi-subterranean dwellings with rounded corners. Floors were either clay-paved or coated with lime plaster. Circular hearths, slightly raised and lined with stone slabs, facilitated cooking. Roofs were supported by wall posts, and ground mortars met daily needs. Artifacts include pottery, stone tools, and bone implements (figures 12, 13). Pottery types—such as large-bellied li tripods, round-shouldered jars, single-handled jia vessels, narrow-mouthed urns, and high-stemmed dou plates—reflect diverse domestic activities. Stone tools, including axes, knives, spades, pestles, and rings, were thick-bodied and finely polished. Bone tools (awls, chisels, hairpins, needles) demonstrate both utilitarian and aesthetic craftsmanship. These finds underscore a settled agrarian society reliant on crop cultivation, tool-based processing, and storage.¹⁹ Thus, Yongxingdian communities prioritized agriculture while integrating pastoralism.

Yongxingdian's agro-pastoral model had lasting impacts: it stabilized resource access, fostered social prosperity, and facilitated cultural exchanges, contributing to China's pluralistic civilization. Studies of Yongxingdian artifacts reveal strong regional traits, bridging the earlier Ashan culture and subsequent Zhukaigou culture. By this period, agriculture showed signs of decline, while pastoralism began to emerge—a trend amplified in the Zhukaigou era²⁰ (figure 14).

Zhukaigou Site, located in Zhukaigou Village, Yijinhuluo Banner, dates to approximately 4,200–3,500 years ago (late Longshan to Early Shang). Discovered in 1974 and excavated four times between 1977–1984, the site includes eighty-three dwellings, 207 pits, 329 tombs, nineteen urn burials, and over 1,200 artifacts (510 ceramics, 270 stone tools, 420 bone tools, fifty-one bronzes), covering 4,000 m².²¹

Zhukaigou culture, a pivotal archaeological culture in

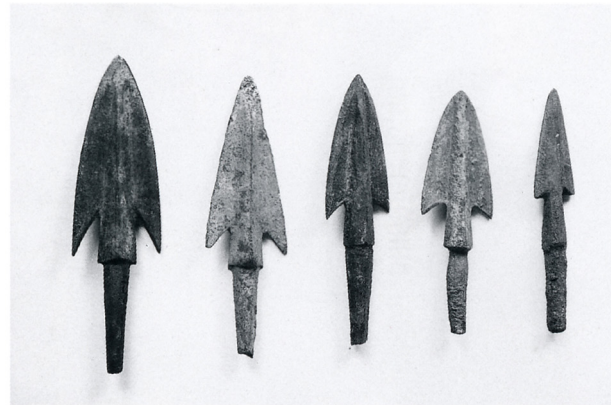


Figure 15. Small bronze artifacts unearthed from Zhukaigou.

northern China, is renowned for its unique subsistence model, cultural complexity, and systemic traits. It marks a critical phase in southern Inner Mongolia's ancient history and profoundly influences studies of northern Chinese ethnic groups. Zhukaigou's economy centered on agriculture, supplemented by livestock breeding, pottery-making, brewing, and trade. Advanced farming tools—polished stone sickles, knives, and crop remains (millet, broomcorn) attest to sophisticated agrarian practices. These crops not only sustained daily needs but also fueled a brewing industry, evidenced by ceramic wine vessels and drinking cups. Livestock husbandry, another cornerstone, involved domesticated pigs, sheep, and cattle. Their bones, abundant at the site, indicate large-scale breeding providing meat, dairy, and wealth. Notably, Zhukaigou witnessed the nascent separation of pastoralism from agrarian traditions, forming the prototype of northern Chinese pastoral culture.²² This shift marked the completion of humanity's first major social division of labor—a milestone in China's ancient societal evolution (figure 15).

The Zhukaigou Site comprises both settlement and burial areas, spanning a broad chronological range. Archaeologically, its cultural phases are divided into five stages: the first two belong to the Longshan period (c. 2500–1900 BCE), the third and fourth to the Xia Dynasty (c. 2070–1600 BCE), and the fifth to the Erligang phase of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1450 BCE). Studies of pollen ratios (e.g., Chenopodiaceae and *Artemisia*) reveal a climatic shift from semi-arid to increasingly arid and colder conditions during this period. Environmental degradation constrained agricultural development, preventing Zhukaigou from evolving into a full-fledged agrarian civilization like its Central Plains counterparts. The gradual decline in farming tools and the emergence of bone arrowheads and short swords in later stages signal a socioeconomic transition.

Notably, rising proportions of sheep and cattle bones indicate that despite environmental stress, Zhukaigou's inhabitants adapted by shifting land-use practices toward pastoralism or mixed agro-pastoralism.²³

The subsistence model of Zhukaigou culture underwent a profound transformation, reflecting societal adaptability to ecological change. In its early stages, agriculture dominated, but climatic cooling and reduced rainfall increasingly limited crop yields. Livestock husbandry gradually supplanted farming, with expanding herds and diversified species driving the rise of a pastoral economy. This shift not only boosted productivity and living standards but also catalyzed the formation of distinct pastoral cultural traditions. During this transition, the number and variety of livestock continued to increase, and the pastoral economy gradually became the dominant economic form of that society. This transformation not only enhanced the productivity and living standards of the society at the time but also contributed to the formation and development of pastoral culture. Concurrently, changes in the natural environment were one of the key factors driving the shift in subsistence strategies of the Zhukaigou culture. As the climate grew drier and colder, coupled with reduced precipitation, agricultural production in the Zhukaigou region became severely constrained. To adapt to these challenges, people gradually shifted toward livestock husbandry and a pastoral economy.

2.4 Pastoral-Hunting Dominance in Shang-Zhou Cultures

By the Shang-Zhou period, the Ordos region had become a cradle of proto-nomadic pastoralism. The separation of pastoralism from agrarian traditions marked the completion of humanity's first major social division of labor. Zhukaigou's economy, initially agrarian, integrated livestock breeding, handicrafts, and brewing.

From the Shang Dynasty onward, northern China's narrow eastern-western corridor became home to nomadic groups known as Rongdi and Hu. Environmental pressures gradually transformed mixed agro-pastoral lifestyles into full-fledged nomadic pastoralism. This region, later termed the Northern Steppe Cultural Belt or Great Wall Cultural Belt, witnessed the interplay and fusion of nomadic and agrarian cultures.

During the Shang-Zhou period, Ordos experienced significant human ecological shifts. Cooling and aridification prompted a transition from farming to semi-nomadic pastoralism, with economic centers shifting



Figure 16. Landscape of the Xigoupan Tomb Complex.



Figure 17. Typical bronze ornamental plaque from the Ordos Region (silver plaque with tiger preying on deer motif).

southward to northern Shanxi and Shaanxi. Nomadic groups eventually dominated Ordos, establishing a pastoral-hunting subsistence model.

The Xiongnu, a renowned nomadic confederation, emerged from the Yin Mountains of Inner Mongolia. According to *Records of the Grand Historian: Xiongnu Chronicles*, they descended from Chunwei, a descendant of the Xia royal lineage. Preceding the Tang-Yu era (a legendary pre-dynastic period), northern tribes like Shanrong, Xianyun, and Hunyu roamed the steppes, living migratory lives without permanent settlements or agriculture. There are no written records, only verbal covenants. As children, they could ride sheep and draw bows to shoot birds and rats; when grown, they would hunt foxes and hares for food.²⁴ Therefore, in ancient Chinese texts, the Xiongnu were described as a nomadic people who dominated the regions north of the Central Plains from the Warring States period to the Qin and Han dynasties.

From the Spring and Autumn to Warring States periods, numerous nomadic tombs and hoards were discovered in Ordos, including the Baohaishe Tombs,

Taohongbala Cemetery, Xigoupan Xiongnu Tombs, Gongsunhao M1, Yulongtai Xiongnu Tomb (figure 16), Sujigou Hoard, Shihuigou Tombs, Aluchaideng Tombs, and Nianfangqu Ancient Hoard. Their burial customs, tomb structures, and grave goods—such as weapons, horse gear, and animal-style artifacts—confirm their association with Xiongnu culture.

Environmental archaeology indicates that the early Shang-era Ordos grew colder and drier. Communities adapted by abandoning agriculture for pastoralism, giving rise to nomadic economies. This shift birthed the iconic Ordos Bronzes—small ornaments, tools, and weapons adorned with vivid animal motifs (tigers, wolves, horses, cattle) that epitomize steppe cultural aesthetics.²⁵ Known globally as the Ordos Animal Style (figure 17), these bronzes reflect nomadic reverence for wildlife and the unique artistry of pastoral societies.

The Ordos region served not only as a hub for nomadic activity but also as a crossroads for the convergence and integration of Central Plains agrarian culture and steppe nomadic traditions. During the Shang-Zhou period, agricultural technologies and tools from the Central Plains gradually spread to Ordos, influencing local production practices. Concurrently, archaeological discoveries—such as horse bits, flat rings, and bronze artifacts depicting pastoral and hunting scenes—attest to the coexistence of herding, hunting, and limited farming. These finds vividly illustrate the nomadic lifestyle and its economic foundations.

Archaeological evidence indicates that during the Shang and Zhou periods, the inhabitants of the Ordos region primarily engaged in pastoralism and hunting, supplemented by gathering and limited agricultural activities. Artifacts unearthed at the sites, such as animal bones and horn products, fully reflect these economic characteristics. With the continuous development of nomadic pastoralism, the local population gradually adopted a mobile lifestyle—migrating according to water and grass availability and relocating with their herds. In addition to nomadic pastoralism, hunting also served as a vital economic activity for these communities. The abundance of hunting tools and weapons, including bows and arrows, attests to the prevalence and significance of hunting during that period.

3. Cultural Fusion and Evolution of Subsistence Models in Ordos

3.1 Mutual Promotion

During the Paleolithic Age, cultural integration in the Ordos region was manifested in the profound exchange

and collision of distinct lithic cultures. These cultures likely originated from surrounding regions or were introduced through migration, and their convergence enhanced the efficiency of hunting and gathering, laying a solid foundation for the establishment of local subsistence strategies. An analysis of Western cultural elements within the lithic industry at the Ulan Mulun site reveals characteristics of Western Paleolithic cultures, particularly in tool assemblages (e.g., serrated-edge tools and notch-based implements), specialized flaking techniques, and tanged stone arrowheads. The discovery of these tanged arrowheads may provide critical new evidence for studying cultural exchanges between East and West during the Paleolithic era, as well as migration routes of modern humans.²⁶

Firstly, the tanged stone arrowheads serve as key material evidence of East-West cultural interaction (figure 18). Certain stone tools unearthed at the site exhibit distinct features of the Western Middle Paleolithic Mousterian culture, strongly suggesting that the Ordos region acted as a vital bridge for cultural exchange. The emergence of tanged arrowheads not only reflects significant advancements in ancient humans' tool-making techniques but also highlights the close cultural interplay between East and West. Secondly, these arrowheads may also represent a cultural link between East Asia and North Africa. Scholars propose that the dissemination of tanged arrowheads aligns partially with the northern migration route of modern humans out of Africa. The tanged arrowheads found at Ulan Mulun likely signify the transmission of the North African Aterian culture to East Asia, marking the site as a critical intermediary hub connecting the two regions.²⁷ Moreover, tanged arrowheads played a pivotal role in the evolution of subsistence strategies. Their unique design enabled hunters to engage in long-range precision targeting, dramatically improving hunting efficiency and safety. This technological breakthrough marked a major leap in Paleolithic hunting methods and significantly propelled the innovation of subsistence practices. Enhanced hunting capabilities allowed ancient humans to secure more prey, diversifying food resources. This advancement not only stimulated economic development but also fostered social diversification, including specialized roles in hunting, gathering, and tool processing.

Based on previous scholarly research, the Neolithic cultures of the Ordos region can be categorized into the Yangshao culture and the Longshan culture. During 7000–6000 BCE, the Banpo phase and Miaodigou phase of the Yangshao culture were identified as spreading northward along the Yellow River from the Guanzhong

现代人走出非洲的两条路线与带铤石镞的传播路线示意图

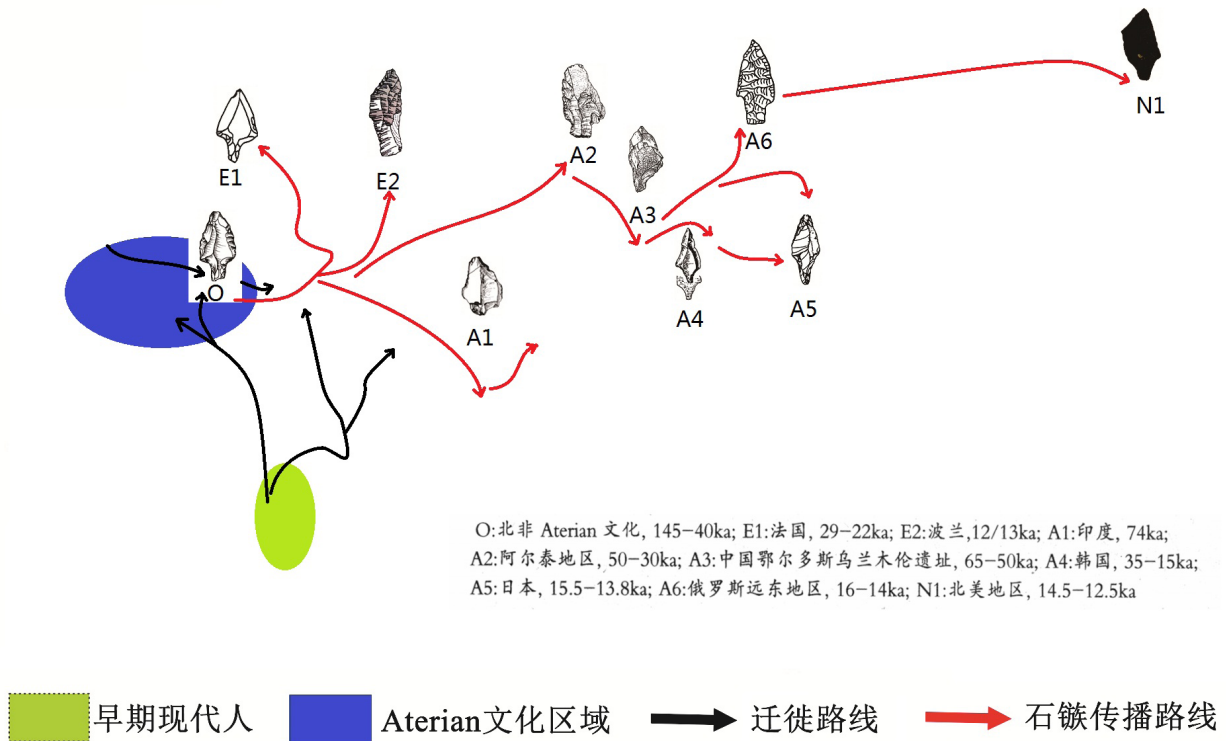


Figure 18. Distribution map of tanged stone arrowheads (adapted from *China Cultural Relics News*, Nov. 8, 2013, p. 6)

region, reflecting the northward expansion of Central Plains agricultural practices into the central-southern Inner Mongolia region. Among these, the Miaodigou phase exerted the farthest influence. Building upon the Yangshao and Hougang Phase I cultures, the indigenous Haishengbulang culture developed over a period from approximately 5800 to 5000 BCE. It later evolved into the Laohushan culture (4800-4300 BCE) during the early Longshan period and the Zhukaigou culture (4200-3500 BCE) spanning the late Longshan to early Shang periods.²⁸ During the Yangshao period, painted pottery art in the Ordos region reached its zenith, serving as both a manifestation of local aesthetic sensibilities and a direct product of cultural fusion. Painted pottery unearthed from this period features motifs typical of the Yangshao style, such as fish and birds, alongside traces of interaction with neighboring cultures like the Longshan and Hongshan cultures. These ceramics, characterized by vibrant colors, intricate patterns, and sophisticated craftsmanship, vividly illustrate the deep exchange and integration of ceramic-making techniques across cultures.

Meanwhile, agricultural technology in the Ordos region advanced significantly, driven by the introduction of advanced techniques and tools through cultural interaction. Local inhabitants widely adopted polished stone tools such as stone knives and axes, which were sharper and more durable than earlier flaked tools, greatly enhancing agricultural productivity. Additionally, farming methods and crop varieties imported from surrounding areas, such as foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*) and broomcorn millet (*Panicum miliaceum*), were extensively cultivated, further propelling agricultural development. This technological assimilation not only improved living standards but also laid a robust foundation for subsequent agrarian civilizations. Animal husbandry also flourished in the Ordos region as a positive outcome of cultural integration. By this period, common domesticated animals like pigs and dogs were raised, alongside early attempts to manage larger livestock such as cattle and sheep. The development of animal husbandry fostered complementary growth between pastoralism and agriculture, strengthening social cooperation and exchange among communities.

3.2 Co-Shaping Regional Identity

The roots of Ordos culture are deeply embedded in the ancient Hetao culture, and through millennia of evolution and historical transformations it gradually developed its unique cultural character by the pre-Qin period. Over this extended historical process, nomadic culture and agrarian culture flowed like two parallel rivers—maintaining their distinct trajectories while continuously intersecting and permeating one another. This dynamic interplay wove a profound tapestry of cultural integration, epitomizing the principle of “you within me, and I within you.”²⁹ Such profound integration not only enriched the essence of Ordos culture but also distinguished it as a singular exemplar of harmonious symbiosis between nomadic and agrarian traditions across the northern frontier and broader regions. This cultural duality solidified Ordos’ legacy as a beacon of coexistence, where contrasting lifeways coalesced to forge a vibrant regional identity.

Dating back to the Paleolithic period, the Ordos region bears clear traces of early human activity. Throughout subsequent historical developments, agrarian and nomadic civilizations interwove and collided here, composing a grand narrative of cultural integration. Particularly after the Qin and Han dynasties, intensified exchanges and fusion between the agrarian civilizations of the Central Plains and the nomadic cultures of the north significantly catalyzed the diversity and innovative evolution of Ordos culture. The pre-Qin period, a pivotal era for cultural convergence and economic development in Chinese history, bequeathed a rich cultural legacy and distinctive regional identity to later generations.

Situated at the crossroads between the Central Plains and northern frontiers, the Ordos region emerged as a vivid exemplar of multicultural symbiosis. From the Yangshao culture and Gan-Qing culture of the Neolithic era to the later interplay of Hongshan culture and Miaodigou-type culture, the region cultivated a uniquely blended cultural character. This convergence of diverse traditions not only enriched the cultural depth of Ordos but also solidified the foundation for its distinctive identity.

As northern nomadic tribes migrated and Central Plains dynasties expanded, Ordos gradually became a stage for multicultural coexistence. Over centuries, diverse ethnic groups learned from and influenced one another, collectively forging a regional culture imbued with local flavor. This profound integration of ethnic traditions strengthened internal cohesion and fostered a dynamic environment of cultural diversity and inclusivity.

Endowed with fertile land and vast grasslands, the Ordos region developed a dual economic model integrating farming and pastoralism during the pre-Qin period. This complementary relationship not only enhanced productivity but also spurred regional economic prosperity. The combination of agriculture and animal husbandry demonstrated remarkable efficiency and sustainability in resource utilization.

With the diversification of economic practices, commercial trade began to flourish in Ordos. Increasing cross-cultural exchanges and trade among ethnic groups fueled economic growth and accelerated cultural hybridization. The rise of a commodity-driven economy unlocked new opportunities and vitality for the region.

From a production perspective, Ordos historically nurtured both the meticulous agrarian culture of intensive farming and the mobile pastoral traditions of nomadic life. This productive duality laid a robust foundation for deep cultural integration.³⁰ Agrarian communities adopted herding techniques suited to the steppe environment, while nomadic groups assimilated farming practices, resulting in a unique agro-pastoral hybrid system. Such productive synergy further catalyzed cultural exchange and mutual adaptation.

The interplay of cultural fusion and economic evolution shaped Ordos’ distinctive identity, blending the boldness of nomadic traditions with the refinement of agrarian sensibilities, and allowing the region to shine brightly within the broader tapestry of Chinese civilization. The complementary dynamics of farming and herding, coupled with commercial growth, endowed Ordos with a diversified economic landscape. Thus, during the pre-Qin period, the region’s cultural integration and adaptive livelihood models jointly forged its unparalleled regional character and economic paradigm.

4. Conclusion

In the vast expanse of China’s northern frontier, Ordos shines as a luminous pearl, its geographical and historical significance offering a critical lens for studying the evolution of northern frontier cultures and Chinese civilization itself. During the pre-Qin period, the interplay of nomadic and agrarian traditions in Ordos birthed a kaleidoscope of cultural forms. From Paleolithic hunter-gatherer systems to the agro-pastoral integration of the Yangshao and Longshan cultures, and ultimately to the nomadic dominance of the Shang-Zhou era, Ordos’ subsistence models evolved from rudimentary to complex, singular to pluralistic. This

trajectory reflects not only advances in productivity and human adaptability but also the 生命力 (vitality) of cross-cultural exchange and synthesis.

Cultural fusion and subsistence evolution mutually reinforced one another, co-shaping regional distinctiveness. The introduction of agrarian practices brought advanced technologies and lifestyles, catalyzing societal prosperity, while the preservation of nomadic traditions imbued the region with unparalleled cultural charisma and geopolitical significance.

In summary, the cultural and economic metamorphosis of pre-Qin Ordos constitutes a pivotal chapter in the evolution of Chinese civilization. It provides invaluable insights into the formation of northern frontier cultures and enriches our understanding of

China's pluralistic yet unified civilizational framework. This legacy underscores Ordos' enduring role as a microcosm of cultural hybridity and a testament to humanity's adaptive genius.

Ordos Museum

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2024 Ordos City Social Sciences Research Topics (Project No.: 2024S146)

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鄂爾多斯先秦時期區域文化的融合與生業模式演變

趙國興

摘 要：鄂爾多斯位於內蒙古自治區的西南部，是北疆文化的核心區域之一。先秦時期鄂爾多斯區域經歷農耕文化與遊牧文化的交融，實現了民族融合與文化交流，生業模式從舊石器時代的采獵並重，到仰紹文化的耕獵互補與種養結合，再到龍山文化與早商文化的農牧兼營，最終形成了商周時期遊牧興起、牧獵為主的模式。文化融合與生業模式的演變在這一過程中表現出了相互促進的關係，它們共同塑造了鄂爾多斯區域的特色文化。

關鍵詞：北疆文化；先秦時期；鄂爾多斯；文化融合；生業模式