

# Re-evaluating Huai River Culture as an Axial Civilizational Core in Ancient China

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**Abstract:** This paper repositions the Huai River as a central axis in the development of Chinese civilization, challenging traditional narratives that emphasize the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers. By examining the Huai River basin's strategic role in bridging the cultural and political divide between northern and southern China, the study highlights its significance in early sociopolitical integration, ritual systems, and interethnic interactions. Using a multidisciplinary approach that integrates archaeology, historiography, and cultural studies, the paper explores the Huai River's function as a dynamic cultural corridor. Drawing on comparative flood myths, it contrasts the Western narrative of Noah's Ark with China's legend of Yu the Great, whose flood control was marked by governance and coordination rather than escape. This analysis reflects a broader civilizational preference for adaptation over evasion. The findings call for a more inclusive axial framework, positioning the Huai River not merely as a geographic feature but as a pivotal cultural and civilizational axis that shaped the evolution of Chinese identity and governance.

**Keywords:** Huai River Culture; Chinese Civilization; Yu the Great; Flood Myths; Cultural Integration; North-South Axis; Archaeological History

## 1. Introduction

The dominant narrative of early Chinese civilization has long emphasized the Yellow River in the north and the Yangtze River in the south. However, recent archaeological and historiographical advances highlight the Huai River basin—situated between these two regions—as a critical locus of early cultural, technological, and political development. This paper argues that the Huai River functioned not

merely as a geographic corridor, but as a civilizational axis that fostered integration, innovation, and ideological synthesis, playing a foundational role in the evolution of Chinese civilization.

Positioning the Huai River within the context of the “Axial Age” (8th–3rd century BCE), as conceptualized by Karl Jaspers, further underscores its significance[1]. While China saw the emergence of Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, and Legalism, Western civilizations witnessed parallel intellectual breakthroughs. Despite linguistic and cultural differences, these traditions addressed similar metaphysical and sociopolitical concerns. The Huai River region, linking the northern and southern cultural spheres, provided fertile ground for the convergence and dissemination of these philosophical paradigms.

Archaeological evidence reinforces the region's civilizational depth. Sites such as Shuangdun, Guxia, and Yuchisi reveal advanced Neolithic cultures featuring proto-writing, anthropomorphic pottery, and symbolic systems, indicating early forms of abstract thought and cultural complexity. These findings position the Huai River among China's “Four Sacred Rivers,” as noted in classical texts like the *Shangshu*. Historically, the Huai River played a central role in state formation and mythic narratives. From Yu the Great's flood control to the Tushan alliance and the institutional legacies of the Xia and Zhou dynasties, the region consistently shaped political and cultural structures. The area also influenced key thinkers—Laozi, Zhuangzi, Confucius, and Mozi—whose philosophies emerged from or were shaped by this dynamic milieu[2]. Culturally, the Huai River embodies a median ethos—bridging the militaristic culture of the north and the aesthetic refinement of the south. This hybrid identity fostered a resilient and inclusive cultural model, aligning with the broader Chinese paradigm of “unity in diversity.” The mythic union of the Huaxia dragon and

Tushan phoenix further symbolizes the synthesis of ethnic, mythological, and political elements foundational to Han identity. Modern scholars, including Liang Qichao, have recognized the Huai River's enduring significance in shaping China's moral and national consciousness[3]. Far from being a peripheral zone, it emerges as a core engine of civilizational development, mediating regional differences while generating coherent cultural values.

The Huai River basin constitutes a critical, yet underappreciated, axis in Chinese history. Its integrative role across geography, philosophy, ethnicity, and polity underscores its importance in the *longue durée* of Chinese civilization.

## **2. Archaeological Findings and Spatial-Temporal Framework**

Archaeological evidence from the Huai River basin reveals a rich history of cultural exchange and transformation, underscoring the region's central role in early Chinese civilization. This framework repositions the Huai River as a vital connector in the broader narrative of Chinese history, offering a nuanced perspective that transcends traditional regional divides.

### **2.1 Reframing the Huai River: A Central Axis in Chinese Civilization**

The Huai River basin, long overshadowed by the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers in mainstream historiography, deserves recognition as a pivotal axis in the formation of Chinese civilization. Positioned between northern and southern China, it functioned as a vital corridor facilitating the exchange and transformation of ecological patterns, political institutions, and cultural paradigms. From the Neolithic cultures of Shuangdun and Lingjiatan to the ritual landscapes of Gaixia and Yuchisi, archaeological evidence underscores the region's historical centrality. This study reframes the Huai River not as a marginal zone but as a civilizational engine—capable of generating symbolic systems, institutional models, and spiritual frameworks[4]. Rather than adhering to the binary determinism of the two-river model, we propose an axial approach that highlights the Huai River's integrative and transformative capacities across historical periods.

### **2.2 Pluralism and Cultural Synthesis in Huai River Culture**

A defining feature of Huai River culture is its deep-rooted pluralism. The region consistently demonstrated an ability to mediate between diverse

geographic, ethnic, and ideological forces—serving as a bridge between Confucian orthodoxy and Daoist plurality, and fostering inclusive institutional forms over hegemonic domination[5]. This capacity for cultural synthesis contributed to the enduring Chinese ideal of "unity in diversity" and informed the Tianxia worldview, wherein centrality is fluid, relational, and inclusive.

### **2.3 The Huai River's Legacy in Global Context**

In the context of today's global fragmentation and cultural homogenization, the Huai River's legacy offers a compelling alternative civilizational model—one grounded in balance, resilience, and intercultural dialogue. Reexamining the Huai River enriches our understanding of China's historical development and offers a nuanced lens through which to envision a more connected and adaptive global future.

## **3. Geographical and Strategic Position of the Huai River Basin**

Geographically situated between the Yellow River in the north and the Yangtze River in the south, the Huai River basin occupies a liminal yet strategic position within the spatial logic of Chinese civilization[6]. Far from serving as a mere buffer zone, it operated as a dynamic axis of integration, enabling the circulation of ideas, populations, and institutions between two major civilizational centers. Archaeological findings from the Neolithic period—such as ceramic styles blending Longshan and Liangzhu traits, as well as lithic and bronze technologies—attest to the Huai region's hybridizing role. During the Shang and Western Zhou periods, this integrative function became institutionalized, with the Huai basin acting as a node where ritual codes, administrative techniques, and political forms were transmitted, adapted, and synthesized. Local polities like Xu and Huaiyi exemplified the region's intermediary role in diplomacy, warfare, and cultural exchange.

### **3.1 Institutional and Infrastructure Developments: From the Zhou to the Tang**

The Eastern Zhou and Han periods further solidified this centrality through the relocation of power centers, emergence of reformist thought, and large-scale infrastructure projects such as the canal systems that integrated the Huai into the imperial transportation and governance networks[7]. These developments culminated in the Sui-Tang Grand Canal system, which transformed the Huai into a core artery of national cohesion.

### **3.2 Cultural and Philosophical Hybridization: The Huai as an Axial Convergence**

Culturally and linguistically, the Huai basin exemplifies the synthesis of northern and southern traditions. Phonological and lexical features in the region reveal a long-standing process of linguistic fusion, while ritual practices—especially funerary customs—demonstrate a blend of northern ceremonial forms and southern symbolic motifs. This hybrid ritual ecology allowed for the standardization of forms without erasing local cosmologies. The Huai River thus served as a crucible of civilizational innovation, not simply mediating between established traditions but generating new cultural models.

Reframed through the lens of Karl Jaspers' "Axial Age," the region reflects a site of axial convergence, where cognitive frameworks, political ideologies, and metaphysical systems entered sustained dialogue[8]. The philosophical ferment of the Warring States period—including Confucian, Daoist, Legalist, and Mohist thought—was deeply rooted in the socio-cultural dynamics of the Huai corridor. Figures like Confucius, Mozi, and Zhuangzi either originated from or were profoundly shaped by this hybrid environment, which informed their attempts to reconcile fundamental oppositions—ritual and law, nature and governance, hierarchy and equality. In this light, the Huai River emerges not only as a geographic threshold but as a conceptual and civilizational axis around which China's pluralistic identity took form.

### **4. The Huai River and the Mythic Foundations of Political Authority**

The Huai River basin played a pivotal role in the political imagination and institutional development of early Chinese civilization. As a liminal zone between northern agrarian states and southern tribal societies, it served not merely as a recipient of external ideologies but as a generative landscape for new political and ritual forms. The myth of Yu the Great, who is said to have controlled the floods and divided the realm into nine provinces, locates his pivotal activities along the Huai. The legendary Tushan assembly, convened near the Huai River, marks the mytho-political transition from consensual leadership (shanrang) to hereditary rule (jia tianxia), and thus from tribal confederation to dynastic governance[9]. Here, the act of water control becomes more than a hydraulic achievement—it functions as a metaphor for the

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harmonization of nature and polity, establishing a model of centralized planning and ritual legitimation deeply embedded in the Huai landscape. This legacy of governance through environmental mastery would resonate through later political thought and imperial engineering.

### **4.1 Ritual Innovation and Institutional Synthesis in the Huai River Region**

Throughout the Zhou, Warring States, and early imperial periods, the Huai River region remained a key site for ritual innovation and institutional synthesis. Excavations in Yucheng, Huainan, and Bengbu reveal material evidence—bronze ware, jade implements, burial complexes—that reflect not only adoption of Zhou ritual forms but also their regional adaptation and transformation. The Huai served as a crucible for customizing the "li" system into a pluralistic ritual order, which laid the groundwork for the later ideology of "Great Unity" (da yi tong). Politically, states along the Huai—Song, Chen, and Cai—engaged in bold reforms that merged patriarchal lineage with emerging meritocratic principles, giving rise to political philosophies rooted in complex social ecologies[10]. The Confucian emphasis on ritual propriety, Legalist calls for uniform governance, and Mohist ideals of pragmatic egalitarianism all drew from the socio-political dynamics of this region.

### **4.2 From Regional Innovation to Imperial Synthesis**

These traditions were synthesized at the imperial level by the Qin and Han dynasties, notably in the ritual reforms under Emperor Wu, which institutionalized cosmological rites and calendrical systems that required territorial coordination across river basins. Ritual in the Huai basin was thus not only a tool of statecraft but a cosmological system—fusing northern celestial models with southern animistic traditions, and embodying the Chinese civilizational ideal of harmonizing Heaven, Earth, and humanity through spatial and symbolic order.

### **4.3 The Huai River's Role in Shaping Centrality**

The ideological construct of the "Central Plains" (Zhongyuan) has long underpinned Chinese conceptions of self, state, and civilization, traditionally rooted in the agrarian heartlands of the Yellow River. However, emerging archaeological and textual evidence positions the Huai River basin not as a peripheral space but as an active agent in

constructing, sustaining, and reinterpreting this centrality. Geographically situated between the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, the Huai River served as a lived articulation of the “Middle Kingdom” ideal—a symbolic and spatial threshold where ecological, cultural, and political convergence occurred. Its liminal position endowed it with geographic legitimacy as a mediator between climatic zones and civilizational traditions[11]. Huai River societies combined northern administrative rigor with southern cosmological fluidity, creating a synthesis that extended and transformed the Central Plains ethos. This hybrid role is reinforced by classical texts such as the *Shujing* and *Zhou Li*, which frequently reference Huai locales as sites of ritual, governance, and interregional consultation—signaling the basin’s legitimacy as part of the symbolic core of early Chinese order.

#### 4.4 Pluralism and Adaptability in Centrality

Rather than enforcing orthodoxy, the Huai River region demonstrated that centrality could be pluralistic and adaptive. The experience of negotiating identity and authority across cultural boundaries made the Huai basin a crucible for reimagining the “Tianxia” worldview—not as a rigid hierarchy, but as a dynamic, integrative model grounded in inclusion and transformation. This was reflected not only in its institutional history—home to dynasties, reformist states, and intellectual movements—but also in its cultural legacy. Thinkers like Guanzi and Mozi, and later literary figures rooted in the Huai tradition, helped articulate core concepts of balance, ethical governance, and moral adaptation that would underpin both Confucian and Daoist traditions.

#### 4.5 The Huai River’s Symbolic Legacy

The region’s recurring metaphorical presence in classical poetry—as a place of both exile and return, fragmentation and renewal—attests to its enduring symbolic depth. In this light, the ideological foundations of the Central Plains appear not as a static orthodoxy but as a flexible mosaic, with the Huai River at its conceptual and cultural center.

### 5. Reevaluating the Huai River as a Civilizational Axis

The Huai River basin, long marginalized in the historiography dominated by the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, emerges as a vital axis of Chinese civilization. Strategically situated between North

and South China, it served as a dynamic mediator of ecological systems, political institutions, cultural forms, and philosophical currents. From Neolithic settlements to early imperial consolidation, the Huai region functioned as a conduit of continuity, synthesis, and adaptive innovation.

#### 5.1 Challenging the “Two-River Determinism”

This study challenges the prevailing “two-river determinism” by proposing an axial paradigm that recognizes the Huai River’s integrative role. Archaeological evidence—from Shuangdun and Lingjiatan to Gaixia and Yuchisi—demonstrates the region’s enduring cultural innovation. More than a passive recipient, the Huai River actively shaped institutional models, ritual systems, and symbolic frameworks central to Chinese civilization[12].

#### 5.2 A Pluralistic Cultural and Ideological Bridge

A hallmark of Huai River culture is its capacity to reconcile geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and ideological diversity. Acting as a bridge between Confucian traditions of the Central Plains and Daoist thought from the southern uplands, the region fostered integrative dynamics over hegemonic ones. This pluralistic ethos contributed to the formation of the “unity in diversity” principle foundational to Chinese identity.

### 6. Conclusion

The Huai region’s inclusive cultural logic shaped the evolving *Tianxia* worldview, where centrality is relational and adaptive. As such, the Huai River became not only a geographic midpoint but a cultural core, shaping China’s civilizational ethos through tolerance, renewal, and hybridity. In the context of global homogenization and fragmentation, the Huai River model offers a compelling civilizational alternative—emphasizing integration over exclusion, balance over polarity, and continuity over rupture. Its pluralistic legacy aligns with contemporary calls for intercultural dialogue and sustainable coexistence.

Reevaluating the Huai River as a civilizational axis not only enriches historical understanding but also informs a more inclusive vision of cultural centrality—defined not by dominance, but by connectivity, adaptability, and transformation across time and space.

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#### Data Availability

The experimental data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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