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Introduction

Considering the vast geographical space and the differences in sociocultural developments over time in a multitude of different ecotones and cultural zones, it is only to be expected that the megalithic structures found across Central and East Asia would be highly diverse. This considerable diversity is complicated by a lack of unified terminology or clear definitions in the field of research for large stone-built monuments.

Central and High Asia have seen a long-lasting use of megaliths in the context of the expanding nomadic societies of the steppes, widespread in Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia and China, and the building and reuse of megalithic structures occurred during a long period stretching from the 3rd to the 1st millennium BC. These behaviours and phenomena are found associated with a broad range of cultures and societies: herders and cattle breeders, and agricultural societies that eventually adopted a nomadic way of life (Liu & Chen 2012; Koryakova 2014; Perriot 2016). The relatively abrupt emergence of the Chermuchek culture of the Mongolian Altai region during the 3rd millennium BC still raises many questions (Chapter 36 - Kovalev, this volume, p. 767). Further north, in South Siberia, and almost as early, are the stelae of the Okunev culture (Leontiev *et al.* 2006), dated to between *ca.* 2400 and 1800 BC (Poliakov & Lazaretov 2020). In Mongolia, the Deer Stone Stelae Culture dates from the 2nd millennium BC, and the funeral practices of the Iron Age Tagar Culture to the 1st millennium BC (Chapter 35 - Magail *et al.*, this volume, p. 747). Neighbouring relationships with the southern part of the steppes have also been the subject of a significant interest recently and we might hope for increasing insights into evolutionary perspectives and the dynamic role of these societies in the Central and Eastern Asian context (Linduff *et al.* 2017). In the Kazakh steppes, a group of anthropomorphic stelae and rows of menhirs are related to burial mounds of the 1st millennium BC (Tasmola culture – Beisenov 2017). Finally, in southern Siberia, megalithic constructions and menhirs are integral parts of huge pyramidal burial mounds (Marsadolov 2010) [(1)]. Both are believed to be related to the Iranian-speaking nomads of the 1st millennium BC. Central Asia, the north of the Tien Shan, the vast area of the Kazakh steppe, southern Siberia, Xinjiang in China and eastern Mongolia are certainly under-represented in our synthesis.

Very little information is available on large stone structures across the area of modern China. Indeed, such structures have received scant attention even among Chinese archaeologists. The use of stone in the construction of graves, both in small stone-cist graves (*shiguanzang*, 'stone-coffin graves') and in larger structures such as megalithic graves

(1) Our thanks go to Viktor Trifonov for these complementary elements.

(*dashimu*, 'large-stone graves') or dolmen (*shipeng*, 'stone tents') in the Chinese border regions was first prominently discussed by Tong Enzheng in 1987, together with other phenomena that he observed throughout that area. He argued for the existence of a 'crescent-shaped cultural-communication belt' (*banyuexing wenhua chuanbodai*), more recently dubbed 'the arc' (Rawson 2017), stretching from Yunnan in the southwest via Sichuan, Gansu, and the northern steppe all the way to Manchuria in the northeast (**Fig. 1**). In this vast area Tong saw similarities in material culture from different periods and attributed these not to diffusion, let alone the presence of one unifying culture, but rather to the contacts between ecologically similar regions with different economies that prompted people to exchange goods along the mountain corridors (Hein 2014c: 6). While different types of stone-cist graves are very common throughout this entire region and appear from the Neolithic through the Bronze and Iron Ages into historical periods, larger stone structures are much less common, appearing exclusively in the northeast and the southwest, which Tong explained as related to the presence of stone-built dwellings for the living in those areas, while in other parts of China these were largely wooden or mud-built structures for most of prehistory and into historic periods. It is therefore not

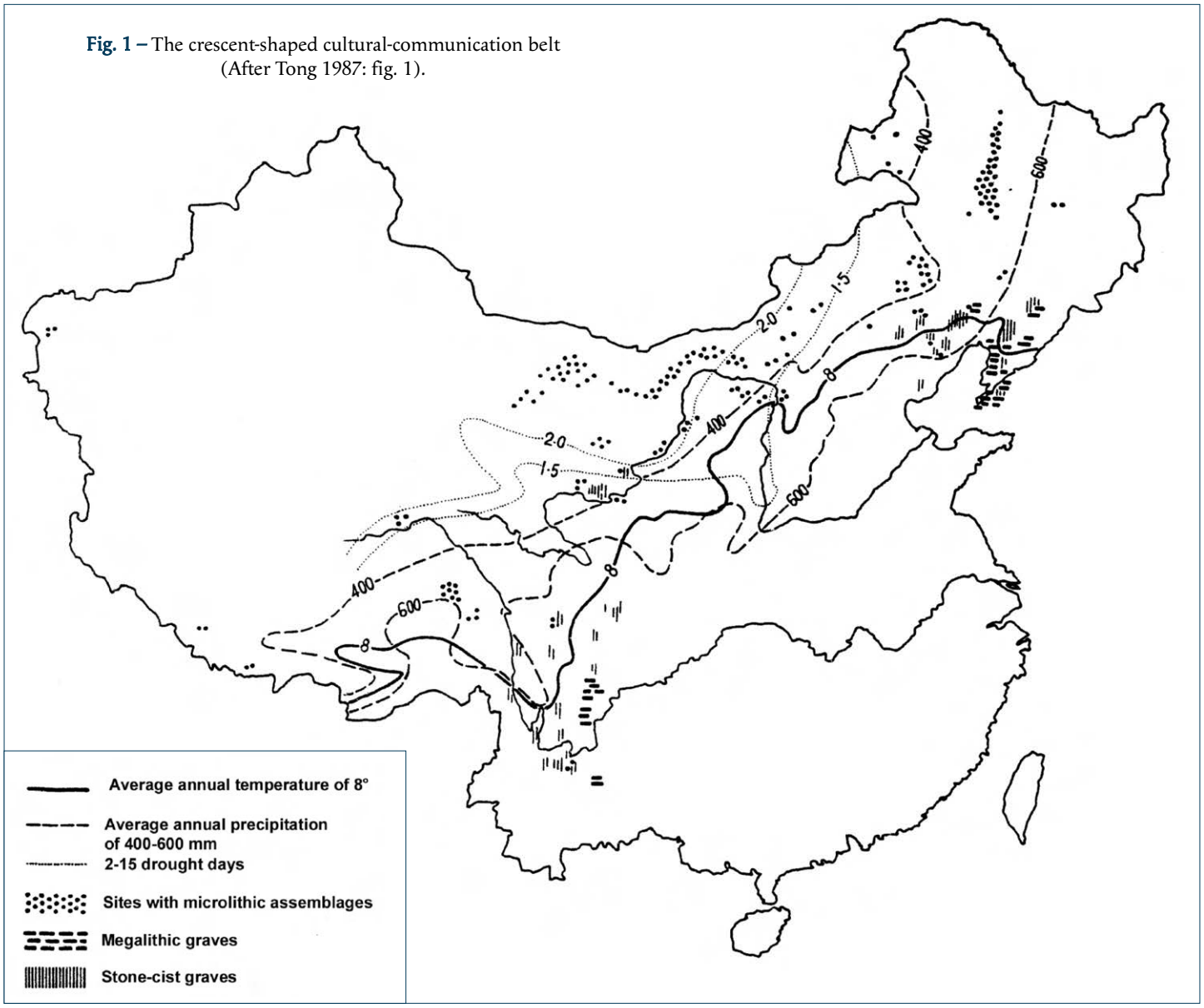

Fig. 1 – The crescent-shaped cultural-communication belt (After Tong 1987: fig. 1).

surprising that there are only two contributions on China in this volume. In the southwest, large above-ground stone structures suitably addressed as megaliths are concentrated in only one region, the Anning River Valley (Chapter 28 - Hein, this volume, p. 619). They appear to be a local development, starting from small structures for single use during the Neolithic period, developing into centres of increasingly complex rituals that continue all the way into the Han period (206 BC-220 AD) when they eventually end, except for a single incident of reuse in the Tang period (617/18-907 AD). They seem to be connected with sedentary agricultural populations displaying limited social hierarchy, though some groups focusing on hunting and/or fishing also seem to have built smaller graves with slightly different material assemblages (Hein 2017b). The situation in the northeast is quite different (Chapter 29 - Miyamoto, this volume, p. 641), with two types of large stone structures called megalithic graves (*dashimu*) or dolmen (*shipeng*) and stone-construction graves (*jishimu*) by Tong Enzheng, or designated dolmen and cairns by K. Miyamoto. Cairns in the Liaoxi district associated with the Hongshan culture of the middle Neolithic period (*ca.* 3500 BC) are distinct from those of the Liaodong Peninsula (Xiaozhushan Upper Layer culture, Late Neolithic, *ca.* 2500 BC), both found in the context of agricultural societies but with different social structures leading to different burial systems. Additionally but independently, table-type dolmens appear in the Liaodong area of China and the northwestern Korean Peninsula, unrelated to similar monuments on the eastern Mongolian plateau according to the author.

Megaliths of Korea and Japan have been 'well known' to the scholarly western public since the end of the 19th century (Gowland 1895, 1897; Chavannes 1907; Munro 1908; Torii 1917b). Early Japanese archaeologists working in Japan and Korea (and South Manchuria) actively used the terms borrowed from western archaeological research translating 'cairn', 'stone circle', 'stone chamber' and 'dolmen' into sinographs that are still used today in China, Korea and Japan. The oldest forms and contexts of megalithic structures here do not belong to agrarian societies but to the highly collectively organized, pottery making, sedentary hunter-gatherers of the Honshū and Hokkaidō Japanese islands (Chapter 34 - Kikuchi, this volume, p. 733), and take the shape of stone circles erected during the Late Jōmon Period (2nd millennium BC). A second context is connected with the converging emergence of rice growing societies and megaliths (mainly dolmens, *goindol* in Korean) and their development on the Korean Peninsula after the turn of the 9th century BC, at the beginning of the local Bronze Age (Chapter 30 - Nakamura, this volume, p. 663). Although being in contact with highly stratified societies in neighbouring Northeast China, peninsular societies responded with a good measure of local agency and diversity, and the same applies for northwestern Kyūshū in western Japan and the beginning of the Yayoi period (Chapter 33 - Nespoulous, this volume, p. 709). A third and final context is two-fold, starting with the enduring implantation of the colonies of Han China (the more noticeable of these being Lelang in 108 BC) in the vicinity of present-day Pyeongyang (Chon 1998; Tamura 2001) triggering the rise of a broader spectrum prestige goods economy, as can be seen in the proto-Three Kingdoms of Korea and the mounds of the Late Yayoi period (from the mid 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD) in western Japan. Then followed a period of weaker and less direct Chinese governance (as the Chinese colonies fell to local powers) from the 3rd century AD until the 7th century, and the rise of the strong local political entities of the period of Three Kingdoms of Korea (Chapter 32 - Yamamoto, this volume, p. 689) and the Kofun period of Japan (Chapter 34 - Kikuchi, this volume, p. 733). On the peninsula, rather than building dolmens or cairns, the use of raw stones continued in the evolution of ancient funerary practices, entangled in later distinctive funerary customs of the necropolis of the various Korean ancient capitals (Yoshii

2010). In Japan, the emergence of the *kofun* (literally 'ancient mounds period') and its abundant use of raw stone, was part of the elaboration of a trans-insular elite culture, reflecting the rise of the political regime of an early state. From Kyūshū to the south of the northeastern region of Honshū, with its centre around present-day Nara, Ōsaka and Kyōto, the Kofun period is characterized by a strong cohesive dynamic whereas on the peninsula, differentiation between existing powers was the norm (Chapter 33 - Nespoulous, this volume, p. 709). Both in Japan and Korea, because of strong pressure of urban development and the risk of natural hazards (specifically in Japan which is prone to earthquakes), the relocation of built heritage is not a rare occurrence: wooden buildings can be dismantled, stored and rebuilt elsewhere (Marquet *et al.* 2015). The same is occasionally done with *goindol* or smaller *kofun* stone chambers (Chapter 31 - Son, this volume, p. 681). South of the Shangdong peninsula, where other *goindol* stand just in front of Korea, megaliths are also expected to be found along the Chinese coastline as far south as the island of Taiwan which, indeed, has numerous examples. First documented at the end of the first half of the 20th century by Japanese archaeologists (Torii 1925; Kano 1929, 1930a-c; Kanaseki & Kokubu 1957; Song & Lian 1983; Lian 2008) some standing stones here (**Fig. 2**) could have been raised as early as the Chilin and Peinan cultures of the Late Neolithic period (*ca.* 1500-800 BCE) in the eastern and southeastern parts of the island. These could be linked with the northernmost distribution of people with Austronesian languages. Burial cists or rock coffins were in use during the Iron Age, as well as some rather small 'stone-wheels' – or anchors (cf. also Chapter 12 - Sand, volume 1, p. 277, for similar stone discs, some much bigger, and exchange networks still in use among the Yap islands in Micronesia).

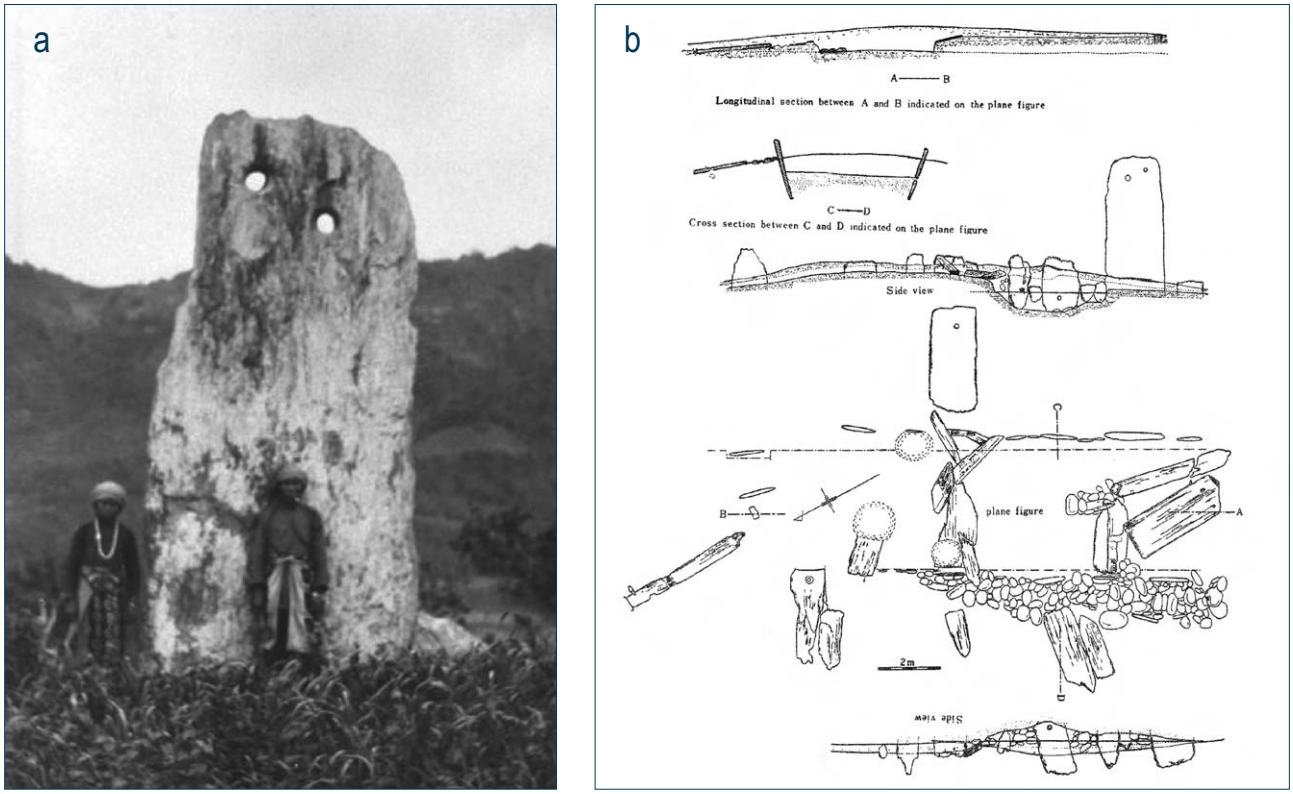

Fig. 2 – Megaliths of the Peinan culture, Taiwan: a. Menhir of Peinan (Photo: R. Torii, 1896); b. Excavations at the menhir, its surroundings and its excavated house structure (After Kanaseki & Kokubu 1957).

The megaliths of Central and East Asia do not fit into a clear temporal or cultural framework, being built from late prehistory, through protohistory and antiquity, and it is even possible to consider phenomena rooted in later societies, such as the arrangements of huge natural stones in the context of the gardens of elite medieval residences in Japan (**Fig. 3**). There is much room for future research.

Fig. 3 – Natural stone blocks arranged in the garden of the Suwa residence's archaeological site in the medieval town of Ichijodani, destroyed by siege and fire in 1573 (Photo: L. Nespoulous).