

2024 BUTLIN LECTURE

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War and the Origins of Chinese Civilization*

Why did complex societies, characterized by densely-populated walled cities, first arise in northern China, jump-starting early Chinese civilization? We explore this question in three steps. First, the North, especially the alluvial plains along the Yellow and the Yangtze Rivers, had generally flatter terrains than the South. Second, by dividing China's landmass into 100 km × 100 km grid-cells and using our archaeological database, we demonstrate that cells with flatter terrains faced higher war threats in prehistoric and early historic times, where war threats are respectively proxied by each cell's number of excavated military grave goods for the Neolithic period (8000–1700 BCE) and by its number of recorded conflicts for the Eastern Zhou (770–221 BCE, the earliest period for which war data are available). Third, we establish that during both the Neolithic and the Eastern Zhou, higher war threats led to the construction of more settlements with defensive walls and moats, resulting in more complex societies, i.e., early cradles of civilization. Thus, warfare was a key trigger of the civilizational process. This finding is robust after controlling for irrigation potential, agricultural productivity and threats from the steppe, as well as under alternative specifications.

*Coauthored with Peter Turchin and Wanda Wang

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The 2024 Butlin Lecture is free and open to the general public.