Letters to the Editor

On “Chinese” Migrations into Neolithic Southeast Asia

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In a recent paper published in this journal, Hanihara (1993) suggests that a number of scholars, including myself, imply that Chinese populations of Shang Dynasty origin migrated southwards to replace Hoabinhian and other hunter-gatherer populations in Southeast Asia, hence to found the modern populations of the Southeast Asian region (Hanihara, 1993, especially pp. 25, 38–9).

This suggestion represents a misrepresentation of my views, which I have always attempted to state clearly in my publications (especially Bellwood, 1985, 1992). My view is that populations who once lived in the southern part of the nation which we today call “China” expanded southwards, commencing at the beginning of the Neolithic, to form the founders of the present Austroasiatic, Austronesian and eventually other major populations of Southeast Asia (such as Thais and Burmese).

These people were not “Chinese” in the ethnic or biological sense (i.e., the ancestors of present-day Han Chinese) and had no direct connection with Anyang or the Shang Dynasty whatsoever. They were Southeast Asians.

If Hanihara’s views of an indigenous development of the Southeast Asian phenotype actually incorporate southern China in a geographical sense (he does not make this clear in his article), then it seems to me that the apparent confrontation between those purported to prefer a “Chinese” origin and those who prefer an indigenous origin will be partly removed. However, regardless of confusion over the meaning of the terms “China” and “Chinese,” the sample of populations used by Hanihara to support his case for an indigenous ancestry of Southeast Asian populations is hardly adequate to refute any hypothesis of Neolithic demographic expansion. His sample comprises several modern and near-modern groups, plus some prehistoric groups from Jomon Japan and northeastern Thailand (site of Ban Chiang). In my view this sample can have little fundamental relevance to questions of population origin and movement across Southeast Asia and southern China more than 4000 years ago. The only way to refute the hypothesis of an expansion of Neolithic populations into Southeast Asia from southern China is to compare large skeletal samples from *early* Neolithic burial grounds spread across the whole of East and Southeast Asia, from northern China into Indonesia, and *especially* in southern China. Such examples do not exist on the scale required — Ban Chiang is mainly a Bronze and Iron Age site and the Jomon is clearly geographically peripheral.

In cases such as this, where suitably-dated ancient samples are rare or absent, it seems to me that it is necessary for biological anthropologists to be very cautious in their attempts to refute hypotheses from other disciplines about continental-scale population history, to recognise the limitations inherent in their data, and also to pay more attention to what scholars in other disciplines actually state.

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