

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Professor Jue Guo

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Barnard College Professor Jue Guo, where I ask her: Can you set the scene for Early China? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm going to get right into our introduction. Welcome Professor Jue Guo! You are a professor of social and cultural history of early China.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:00:33] That's correct.

JVN [00:00:34] You're also an assistant professor of premodern Chinese civilization and humanities at Barnard College and co-chair of Columbia University's Early China seminar. Your resume is amazing!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:00:50] Thank you. Thank you. Yeah.

JVN [00:00:52] You're doing so good on, like, the studies.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:00:54] I, I'm definitely loving what I do. That's, I'm, I'm, I do not know, you know, what people outside my little circle think about what I do, but that's why I was so, I'm so, I'm also very excited and, and quite frankly very flattered to be invited to this show because, you know, I study such a kind of obscure subject and quite in the distant past, so I don't always get to talk to people outside my academic circle or outside my academic life. But thank you for your interest and thank you for being curious about Early China.

JVN [00:01:42] Oh, my gosh, it's my pleasure. And thanks so much for taking your time to talk to me and just a little teeny, tiny bit about me, just so you know how it happened. I, you know, it only occurred to me in my kind of, like, twenties that I didn't know enough about, an accurate description of American history and, you know, I went to elementary school and then I went to high school and then I went, you know, to just a little bit of college, and then I went to hair school and I just, you know, which I love, but I just realized, like, I didn't learn that much about China or, like, any part of Asia really, you know outside of, like, geography, maybe? And I just, then I was, like, Chinese history has probably been around way longer than American history-

PROF. JUE GUO [00:02:31] That is objectively true.

JVN [00:02:34] So tell me about, How much older is China than America?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:02:41] That's a very good question. I think we really have to define both China and America, right? I think probably for ordinary listeners that America means the United States of America instead of the continent. So, so I think in that sense, if we talk about the United States of America, then much, much longer. If we talk about that there is a state form that has, there's a state level of organization, then China has had at least four, about, let me think, I have to count, about, over 3,000 years and the Ame-, United States is still in the 100s, right. So, but I think if we talk about peoples that have lived in the Americas and lived in Asia, in East Asia, and that's where China is, then, the, the history becomes much more comparable because I'm a historian of the past so I always think about in longer time spans.

So, so, America had people, lived here, had, you know, really amazing early cultures, just as everywhere else. And in fact, in our common ancient history, we say in America is, is one of the four so-called pristine civilizations, meaning that they developed on its own rather than as derived from somewhere else. And we have Mesopotamia in the Middle East, and then we have Egypt and then we have China. I have to, I think, I have to add that for Asia, we also have Indus Valley, that's currently where India is, and that's also a very, very well-established, long-lasting civilization, and then we have the Americas. So, so I think that's, that's kind of how I would see it. I'm going to define what China and, and America is, so, and then we will have different time spans to compare. Does that make sense?

JVN [00:04:57] Ah, yes! My little brain just cannot figure it out, like, it so badly wants to be able to understand, like, when everything was and where it was all going down, but it's too much to get together. So, tell me about the time period that you study.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:05:13] So the time period I study specifically, I would say there are several, several ways to say it. I would say that the common way I would say the, is when the first millennium BCE, so Before Common Era, this is kind of a more academic term. It's also before, I think in general, a publication that would say BC, before, Before Christ. And BCE, Before Common Era is more of the term that academics adapt these days to, to avoid that Eurocentric-

JVN [00:05:53] Yes!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:05:53] -Undertaste of that. But the, the, so 1,000 kind of from year zero and back to a 1,000 years. And that's, that's the first millennium BCE. That's my, my research focus is on that period, but also slightly earlier and a little bit into the Common Era as well, because I also have some research interest into the early, in Chinese history we call the Early Imperial Period, meaning we have two empires: the Qin empire, the Han

empire. So my research ends relative-, about at the end of the Han empire, when the Han empire falls in the third century, CE, the Common Era.

JVN [00:06:45] So Common Era is, like, zero forward, right? So now we're like in 2021 in the Common Era. And then BCE is Before Common Era and now we're CE, yes, yes, yes get it together. So that's BCE ahuh great. This is so exciting!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:07:01] I know that I think that a lot of these, these terms, they are *really* confusing. That is, if you don't make it a part of your daily life, I don't really see why people need to kind of make these distinctions.

JVN [00:07:15] Oh yeah, because now we're in the Common Era; I get it. Yeah, because, yeah, because we, you know what it should really be: we're, like, basic now, like now we're basic, but before, honey, they were very interesting. So then just to back up a bit, what are, like, the overall, like, time periods, of, like, China as a whole? So you have like, what would, like, ancient China be?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:07:38] So, yeah, this is, so let me give the example of when I teach my course, called Introduction to East Asia: China. So I teach the China part and I start, because I work on, my specialization is early China, so I generally start actually from 10,000 BC, BCE when people, we have significant settled people. So we begin to hav, you know, observable patterns. So archeologically visible, and that means, you know, the area has been occupied much earlier on. We talk about in the really, really before time. But when we began to see activities, all sort of traces of human activities was largely when people to, to settle down, to live in a place and began to live their life, and then they were producing things that will be preserved and then archeologists come find them, right. So, so, that's kind of when I start. But from 10,000 BC to about 2000 BC, things grow, things develop, things change, but on a very, very slow pace, comparatively speaking, right.

We are speaking about several 100 years as a unit, not a year, not a month, not a day. But once we get into about, in China, about 2000 BC, so, so, another 1,000 years before the year that I specialize, things began to accelerate, and that's largely due to several technological advancements. One is metallurgy, so this, this 2000 BC began the Chinese Bronze Age, so Chinese began to learn how to work with metals. And that's, by the way, is actually coming from Central Asia and West Asia. And also begin to, we see in terms of social political structure, that things, the population began to grow, so there is a need to, to find a more efficient and complicated ways to to organize people and also maybe maintain the coexistence of people of very different cultural traditions. And then once we get into the millennium that I talked about you know extensively today, is, is then things just begin to accelerate, begin to, to, to change. Changes happen at a much faster pace.

So, so that's kind of the history that I would begin as the Early China, and I really think that part is still very important for reasons and particularly for, for these from 2000 BCE or from the 1000 BCE where we began to have a lot more written sources, we have a better idea about what kind of social, political institutions they had.

And, remarkably, many of them have very, very long life that, let me give example, for instance, we know in the middle of this first millennium BCE, many of these regional states begin to develop ways to count people: census. Because the state has a great interest to know how many people do they have, because they want to level taxes. And, and early taxes are poll taxes, right. So, so they need to know, and how many people were working on farms, how much they can produce. So, so in terms of census, we have records at least as early as 400 BC around or 300 BC. From that time period we began to have records and the first census of the entire empire happened in the Han dynasty and that happened in year two. So we have year zero, year one year, year two in the Common Era. And we know, we calculated based on the census records, Han empire, through that census has about 57 million people.

JVN [00:12:32] Holy sh-, wow. 57 seven million!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:12:36] Then, Early China, in general, we will talk about kind of from the beginning when people settled down, begin, you know, begin to have a better idea about, yeah, where people lived and what kind of basic life, you know, their agricultural practices, that we began to have information. And Early China really ends at the end of the Han dynasty. So into, slightly into the third century of the Common Era that marked by the fall of this empire and after, that is so-called the Three Kingdom period. So, so Han empire divided into three kingdoms that I think some of the, your listeners might, I don't know, maybe there is a, there is a very popular game based on the Three Kingdoms, the history of the Three Kingdoms right after the fall of the Han. I don't play games, so I heard about it. And this probably is also not the current gamer world, maybe 10 years before, but because that period was the beginning of the so-called disunity in China.

So, so as you see, the traditional historical account was always there is one, whether the Shang dynasty, Zhou dynasty, Qin dynasty, or Han dynasty, it gave you at least this ostensible unity. But then, the, the after the fall of the Han empire, this, China had the first time a prolonged so-called disunity or division, which lasted almost 500 years [*GUEST NOTE: This period lasted almost 400 years*], so that, there's just a lot of various kingdoms coming, coming and going. And also many of the different, we begin to have the northern people coming down that nomadic people begin to, to come into the core of this tribe, what we call China today, and build their own empires as well. So that kind of being used

as a watershed moment of marking early China and then, historically, we say the medieval China.

JVN [00:15:14] I'm just so fascinated by the *past* and trying to imagine, like, what it looked, like, and, like, what the colors were like, what were the clothes, like, like, how did people look, how do people act. And I'm like, was it the same as now, but just back then, like, you know?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:15:32] Those are great questions. I think this is exactly how it got me interested in the past. Exactly these very kind of close to us, everyday questions that I just wanted to know that, you know, what was it like, if we were living in the past. It was, it really, really that different? So that's, that's basically how, what is driving me to, to do the specific very specialized research, but the questions I wanted to answer are very, I think, are very common to people.

JVN [00:16:10] Well, what do we know about China? Like, what's the deal, honey? Like from way back *when*. Can you just tell me everything?!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:16:16] I will try; I don't think I can tell you everything, but I think I will try maybe just very broadly what was, what it was like in the period that I study that I, you know, I, I also got curious and I tried to find out what was it like, just as you want to know about maybe the Americas, this is where, the place you grew up, and I grew up in China, and I was just like you, I didn't know that much. And I also, you know, schools, schools have curriculums and, and I would say everywhere we are, we need to constantly revisit the school curriculum, particularly about history and particularly about teaching your so-called "your own history," right. So, I don't think we're ever going to know what *really* happened, but we can make a more sincere effort to get closer to that.

And that's how, how I became a historian. So, so the era that I study that I just said, that first millennium BCE, in traditional Chinese history--so here I might get a little bit academic, so let me know if I need to explain more--that we have, in Chinese history there is this distinction between pre-imperial--this is the area, the time period that that I study primarily--and then imperial.

And Chinese history, as I told you, that has about a three, a little bit more than 3,000 years of written history, meaning we have writings about this history and that divide is pre-imperial, about, a little bit more than a 1,000 years and then imperial, Chinese imperial Period. And it ended really, really late, it ended in 1911 in the Common Era. So basically the beginning of last century. And that's when China became a republic instead of an imperial state, a series of imperial states. So from that imperial period, usually we used the

time, the beginning as 221 BCE, that's the so-called unification of China into the first empire, and that's Qin. So, I think most people heard about the first Emperor of Qin. You know, he had that gigantic mausoleum with the terra cotta soldiers.

JVN [00:19:13] Oh yes!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:19:15] So, so you're, so that, that was his tomb, that was his, you know, afterlife, kind of his afterlife imagination, but that was, that was just materially impressive. And then, so, from the time when he unified China and until 1911, that is a really long time; that's the imperial history. And for that period, that depends on how do you count it. We have about 24 or 25 dynastic histories to, to kind of document, official documenting the various dynasties, various empires. So that is a very, very long history. And then the history I study is the pre-imperial, so before the empire. And this empire also, it's very important, not only because this is the first empire in China, China we call today, but in East Asia. So East Asia includes modern day China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. I can show you the maps just, just kind of to anchor us in the space-.

JVN [00:20:42] Yes!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:20:44] Yeah, I think that might help. So I'm going to share my screen.

JVN [00:20:48] Oh this is so fun!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:20:49] I'm so sorry that this is, my kind of my teaching mode kicks in, so you have to bear with me.

JVN [00:20:57] No, this is so much fun; don't ever apologize!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:21:00] So, so I prepared a few slides to, to show kind of the geography of the place where, where we are speaking about. And I also have to just, just to make a confession: I love Google Earth! I really love the, you know this is the kind of technology that we certainly have the privilege that before they have cut, they had cutting-edge technology as well, but not like this. So I really love Google Earth to really see kind of the physical geography of the place. So this is, would be, you're looking at Google Earth on top of, kind of a top view of where China is.

And so, let me, and if we kind of go in the more two-dimensional, this is where China is, currently, this is all present names. So this is China. This is Tibet and the, the area I work with specifically is this area. So in sort of, like, in today's China, there would be called a central China. In geographical terms, in cultural geographical terms, particularly if we

consider the history of this area, then it's probably, it's largely belongs to southern China or central southern China. And, so I'm just you know, if we talk about a specific areas, I will go back to these maps. And this is kind of a traditional, based on the traditional history. So all of these are the dynasties I was talking about.

JVN [00:22:55] Oooh.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:22:56] So, so, the Shang dynasty and all of these dates are also traditional.

JVN [00:23:01] I just wanna describe for the listeners, if you had to--now look, this might be really annoying for you because you're like a literal, like professor, like, doctor of history--but if you had to like--and this is like a nightmare because I know that this probably makes me, like, a nightmare American person, um 'cause, like, we have to, like, make it about us so that we understand--but, so everyone, if you think about, like, you know, go into your minds, with like your idea of a Chinese, like, gorgeous map. It's like, kind of, like, it's giving me kind of, like, where, like, the Great Lakes would be in like America, or like the like, like Ohio-ish or like Indiana-ish. But if, if you had to like make, they're different shapes, but it's kind of like it's giving me that area. Would you agree?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:23:49] It is! It's kind of in the middle, right. Yeah, yes.

JVN [00:23:51] Yeah. Just so you can imagine it because they're probably in the car and they probably can't look at a gorgeous map right now and they're, like, but if you, but if you're not and you can just pull over and look at a map, you really should because this is fascinating. We're going to have this on our social for people that are listening to this, 'cause I'm, I've never been so gripped by a map in my life. So keep telling me; I'm obsessed.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:24:16] Yeah. I, you know, I'm, in real life, I'm a person with terrible sense of direction, but I love maps for historical study. I just think it is so direct to see, and, and another way to say that sometimes I say to people, probably also historians, but do not specialize in China, is this is sometimes also called the Mesopotamia in China because it's between two large rivers, the two largest river, the Yangtze River in the south and the Yellow River in the north, and the area I study is in between. So this is also kind of another way to look at the, the change, historical change in terms of the geographical span of China. So we are looking really, you know, this is a traditional view, so I want to emphasize that. But generally speaking, this is the beginning when we, the Shang dynasty, this is when we began to have writing.

So one thing about Chinese history or Chinese civilization--I teach a course called Chinese Civilization, I'm in the middle of that for the semester--one of the hallmarks of civilization in general, but Chinese civilization, is the invention of writing. So Chinese writing, the writings we use today have derived from about 1300 BCE; that has been continuously used until this day. This is, this is relatively unique. So elsewhere Chinese writing was not the earliest in the world to be invented, but other places where it has early writings that they eventually got discontinued, for instance, in Egypt, for instance, in Mesopotamia and many other places never get to, they, they just never did invent writing.

So, so that's, that's a relatively interesting aspect about China is one that writing was invented, I also have examples I can show you and two, and then to continuously to be used. And this millennium that I study, we just have a lot more utilization or use of writing for states. And then the second half of that millennium, many private writing that people begin to use writing to express themselves, and that's where we got all those philosophers, for instance, Confucius.

JVN [00:27:13] Oooh!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:27:13] Yeah, so, so this is a really fascinating millennium

JVN [00:27:20] So Confucius comes from the millennium that you study?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:27:23] Yes, Confucius lived, traditionally, we think, he probably was born around 551 BCE and he died in 479 BCE. So it is right in the middle of this millennium.

JVN [00:27:38] Ok wait, so I got to get something straight. So, so it's been 2,021 years since the Common Era started?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:27:48] That's right.

JVN [00:27:49] Right. And you study from 0 Common Era to 1000 BCE.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:27:59] Right.

JVN [00:28:00] Right. And so when you said that there was, like, the 26 dynasties and all of, like, this shifting up until 1911. So 1911 is, like, this Republic of China, that's when, like, this one-. But that was 1900 years of the dynasty, and then before *that*, there was like another-.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:28:21] We are talking about 3,000 years of history with writing as sources, but I think that the imperial period when, where we began to have each dynasty has a history, written history associated with it, that's 221 years before zero and 1911 after zero.

JVN [00:28:46] Oh, got it! Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Ok, that makes sense to me.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:28:51] That's right.

JVN [00:28:51] Wow, that's so much time!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:28:54] It is a lot of time.

JVN [00:29:00] Tell me about when writing started.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:29:01] So the earliest writing we have today is, is from a very peculiar kind of material. So, so this was way before paper was used, even though now we are almost post-paper. So I realized that how, how distant that, that must sound. But the earliest writing, the Chinese, that we say kind of the earliest form of Chinese was found on these, we called it oracle bones. They are bones of turtle shells and they are bones of ox scapula, the shoulder bones. And I, shall I show you a couple of these?

JVN [00:29:46] Yeah, please! Yes.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:29:48] So what I wanted to show you is these are the earliest writings they find. This is shoulder bone of the, of cattle, of, of ox.

JVN [00:30:04] Wow.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:30:05] And they are engraved. So, and this one you can also see, so it's because the shoulder bone, you know, I always use my own shoulder bone to illustrate it because that has a flat surface, so that's a good writing surface.

JVN [00:30:23] Yes!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:30:24] I think that, that we, we generally think this was not a common material for writing. There were probably organic materials such as wood or bamboo, because later we do have archeological finds of those, but not to this early period because of the preservation. But these bones were much better preserved compared to the other, more organic plant-based writing materials. But the writing itself, that, as you can see in

this, this is around 1300; this is a mature form of writing. We still don't know very much about the origin of, of the writing because when we have it, this is already a fully functional, mature form of writing. So there are various theories about, "How did writing get invented in China?" There were kind of marks, and quite complicated marks on potteries in previous millennium, but since we, we cannot really decipher them, they seem to marking things, but not in a way we could decipher as we were able to do with these, I, I just said they are oracle bones.

And the reason they are called oracle bones is because most of these writings that engraved on, carved onto the bone, the cattle bones and turtle shells, there were records of divination. So what I mean by divination is most, the vast majority of them are these Shang kings that they, they have, they have a lot of concerns, they need to worry about whether, you know, they are going to have a good harvest. And they are concerned about the weather, right, the next 10 days. Is it ever going to rain? Or they are concerned about if they went out for a hunting, hunting game, is it going to be smooth? Is something, an accident, going to happen? And what I'm showing you here, this is actually, I just saw this morning and think about it, because today is actually, let's see, in China now, it's already the Lunar New Year, the Year of Ox.

And, and so I was thinking about showing you this is why I show this is one of my most favorite artifacts about the ox. This is a bronze ox jar for wine. So I will tell you about that later. But coming back to the writing, so what was recorded on this, particular bone is a record of the Shang king went for a hunting trip and then had an accident that his, his car, or, chariot, broke off and, so as you can see, Chinese writing is usually understood as I think early on, to call it a logogram but now we think it is more of a ideogram. *[GUEST NOTE: Chinese writings "are logogram but also contain what are called ideogram too."]* Meaning it is a combination of expressing ideas in addition to their sound component. In any case, I think this is actually quite, quite self-explanatory, is talking about the yoke of, of a chariot, it got broken.

JVN [00:34:14] And this character, in this character, you can see everyone is like, it looks like there's a chariot and like one of the sides of it has become disconnected.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:34:22] That's correct.

JVN [00:34:23] And why, is there, are there symbols on this gorgeous ox bone that, like, are still in use, like, now? Because you said that, like, once we see writing that it's like we, it's still used now, which is just, *that* is amazing.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:34:39] There is a trend. There is development. But let me see, um, yeah for instance, oh, for instance, this one. You see this one?

JVN [00:34:52] Yes! It looks kind of like a 'y.'

PROF. JUE GUO [00:34:55] It does look like a 'y,' or this very much looks, like, sorry, I have to go into a little bit into what the divination is about.

JVN [00:35:04] Please do!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:35:05] Divination is, this kind of divination is using these, whether it's turtle bones or, or these cattle bones, they, they have, they drill holes on the back side-- sorry, I don't have that to show you--but the reason they do that is to prepare these bones so they can, when they are put over heat, then they can crack. So those cracks, I don't know if you can see this one.

JVN [00:35:37] Yes.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:35:38] These cracks, these were interpreted as messages coming from the ancestors. So these, these divination is, is considered as a way of communicating, ways that he sees the ancestors who became the spiritual force that kind of gave blessing or, or, you know, sending down calamity. So, so the descendants were very much, in this case, the Shang king, would very much care about, of the ancestors' forecast about, in this case, about his hunting game, about his own safety. So apparently what he did was he, he had diviners to prepare these bones and then there were these cracks and then these cracks being interpreted as either, you know, "Yeah, you are going to have a fun game, go for it." Or, "There *might* be some, you know, concerns and you'll want to be careful." And you, very, very rare cases, apparently if something, for instance, in this case, if something unpleasant happened, somebody falls off because the wheel got off, and somebody falls off the chariot and got hurt, and so, so then they came back and, and say, "Ok so, so the forecast about that there would be concerns, there'll be worries, was correct."

And for reasons we still don't know very well, they choose to, to engrave this *entire* process from, you know, they had these concerns, they did the divination, *and* the aftermath, and they choose to to put a very brief record on these bones. And this is how we got the earliest writing in China. So even though it is a very, very narrow window, but this is the earliest written records we have and this is where we got the earliest writing. And come back to your question about whether some of the forms are still used: yes. And so, for instance, this one you said like a 'y,' right. So it can go this way or this way. It

doesn't matter. This, this, this graph later will be read as “bǔ 卜” and this is a modern graph. Can you see how similar they are?

JVN [00:38:19] Yes!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:38:20] And this means to do the divination by cracking the bones.

JVN [00:38:27] Ah! I love that, that's so cool that it has endured for this long. Your expertise spans over a 1,000 years. And so what was going on, like, at 1000 BCE, what was happening, like, at the beginning?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:38:48] So 1000 BCE, around that, the more specific date that scholars of Chinese history now come to a consensus was about, around the year 1046 or 45, between that year. So about 50 years before 1000 was this so-called Shang-Zhou transition. And, simply put, Zhou was a smaller polity from the West and the Shang was sort of in this area, its core is in this area. And Zhou conquered the Shang, so put it in the simplest of term, and that's why Shang became Zhou. And this is also a traditional historiographical narrative, that there's these dynasty exchange, changes.

And so around that year when the Zhou was founded, and then for the next millennium, Zhou was trying to govern this, this, you know, enlarged territory. So they need to basically just as any government, if you all of a sudden have a *much* larger territory, have a lot more people than you used to have, the first thing you wanted to do is how to govern, how to hold everything together, if that's what you wanted to do. And I think usually from a political point of view, that's what the ruling class want to be, right. They want to control a larger area because that means a lot more people, a lot more resources, a lot more wealth. So politically speaking, it is a high order of task that how do you, how do you govern such a, a much bigger territory.

And socially speaking, it's also about the people living in these areas. You know, some probably before identified themselves as allies or subjects of the Shang. And now Shang was conquered, Shang became a subject, the Shang descendants become subjects of the Zhou, so what do you do about it? And also many in this area, there were many, many independent to semi-independent polities, regions. This is another thing that why this, this era, this millennium fascinates me, is also because there were just a *lot* of regions and has very long history of their own and have their very long traditions, local traditions. And so I'm really fascinated by kind of the tension between the forces.

For instance, for the Zhou dynasty, for the Zhou kings, that they wanted to integrate, they want to have control, centralized control. By the way, this is also, I think, China being

historically understood, as always, a higher, having a higher level of centralization, versus these, you know, just on the ground, in reality, that China also has a very diverse regional culture which survives into today as well, particularly through language. So how, how do these two kind of forces work together?

There's one force try to pull everything together, but there's also forces of the regional cultures wanted to keep their own tradition, keep their own independence, if not political independence, at least a cultural, preserve their cultural heritage and cultural traditions. So this is what I find that, that this millennium was really pivotal to understand how, how the next two millenniums, that those 2,000 years of imperial history, meaning from the emperor, empire point-of-view, they always wanted to integrate, they always wanted to have more people, to have more centralized control.

And then there was this underlying persisting resistance and resilience of the local culture that, that, you know, is trying to negotiate with this seemingly overwhelming state power, so, so, that's what fascinates me in this millennium. Because, many of the strategies are both side, many of the state level institutions were developed bureaucracy for instance, were developed in this, or fully developed in this millennium. And then there's also a lot of low cost strategies that how do they resist or coexist with such kind of state power. And also just how to coexist with a very large contact with people that probably previously due to technological advance, that you've never had a direct contact.

So the ancient world peoples, for a lifetime most people living in where they were born. They are, you know, they do not travel beyond their own village or their own town. Or even just you know maybe the, the farthest will be to the next largest market town for most very, very common people. But that's kind of where the strength of the region of, of the regional culture comes from and the resilience comes from. So I'm very fascinated by this tension between, you know, the forces of the integration, unification, versus the forces that, that are trying to maintain the region's social, cultural traditions.

JVN [00:45:29] So is the Zhou dynasty starting to, like, come into its own, and it was, like, you know, like, just, you know, like just you know like 50 years before the 1,000, but, so what was it like? Like, were they like, was it like an emperor-empress situation? Was there a congress? Was there elections, was it all, like, royal-born? Like, what was the deal? How does it work? How does that centralized government work?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:45:52] That's, that's such a great question. And interestingly, I think United States, despite, you know, it's such, such a different cultural and time, cultural context and time period. It's actually a good analogous, good analogy to think about because, yes, so there was the king, there was a royal family and the throne is, or the

rulership, the authority, the ruling authority is passed through sons, right. So the Zhou king, in theory, I think, well, I shouldn't say in theory, that's almost in the sense of what we would call law. It's not the modern day codified law, but kind of a ritual law. The king only has one official wife at the time, but the king can have many, many secondary wives. So the king really have, a *lot* of offsprings, but only the sons will have the opportunity to become the next king. And really only the son born, only the firstborn son, born to the official wife. So that's how the kingship got transmitted. And then the king has his ministers, all of those ministers at the beginning and for quite a long time, were usually these aristocrats, these highborns. Many of them are, they are. they are related either by, you know, by, by marriage, by alliances or just biologically related.

So it's not so different from any other pre-modern society that, that kind of the blood relationship was the foundation. But, on top of that, as does the state get more complex, then all kinds of alliances coming in, political alliances through marriage, or simply through you know political negotiations. And, and these people helped the king to run the state. And the king will hold court, for instance, the Zhou kings have two primary capitals. They are sort of about, let me think, maybe 300 kilometers away from each other. There was several other places the king also have, had residence. But those were two political capitals of the Zhou kings, and, and that's pretty much where the Zhou kings did direct control. For the far-flung, as you see, it goes all the way here, and we are talking about over a 1,000 kilometers, so far-flung places, the Zhou kings would send their relatives there to be the regional king. But what was really interesting was that they were not central places where sort of, you know, virgin lands. There were people already there, so it was really interesting how did these outsiders coming in, with the state power behind them, and how do they deal with the local population? And this is also what I'm *most* interested in.

JVN [00:49:28] So what happened? How did they work together? Were they just mad as hell at these rich, like, you know, royal people, or were they kind of like, "Ok, like we can be your friend, but, like, don't make us do, like, your way of life, if you let us keep our own thing." Or what happened?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:49:46] I'm pretty sure all of those happened. I think, so, so, first of all, so this kind of trying to control this large state clearly is a combination of both military conquests, so use of sheer force, and also economic incentives that to, to try to bring in, for instance, more resources and higher technology to help the local people to, to actually, you know, improve the life of quality, if you will, and also when you encounter a different group of people, there will be a clash of of culture, right: your way of life and our way of life. So it's a process of getting to a point where there has to be equilibrium that, that would reach that level.

But, what we know, depending on the sources, and interestingly because of the people, these Zhou people and these aristocrats, were the people who are literate; they have the ability to write this story. So we know, this is sometimes we say that the history is written by the winners, right, in the colloquial sense. So the people who have the ability to write a story according to *their* perception, *their* understanding, and this is really what we got for China, for that 3,000 years of written history.

JVN [00:51:27] There was no dissenters that were found?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:51:31] Not in the, not in the *written* sources or at least not their voice. You know that rebellions happened, of course, of you know resistance, clearly were there. But they were not, they were portrayed as rebels. They will be portrayed as perpetrators of the proper social order. But the actual story must be much more complicated than that, right. So how did the local people receive these outsiders? That, that, that process must be a combination of, you know, "I will accept certain terms, but I will also negotiate the terms and those terms will change over time." And interestingly that even the outsiders--and we were also talking about and this is what I mean by United States can be used as a good example to to think as an analogy--is you know when you largely were talking about the immigrants going to faraway places, but after several generations they became native-born, right?

JVN [00:52:53] Right.

PROF. JUE GUO [00:52:54] So we are talking about the European immigrants coming here and after gener-, several generations, several 100 years, then they became the Americans. So, so that's kind of what I'm getting at, that the actual society is this really ever-evolving process of dealing with things you are familiar with, your way of life, but once there are new things coming in, then there's a lot of different ways of reacting. You know, there isn't just one way of good or bad, or us or them. And then eventually they become, this is also, you know, America is called a "melting pot," and this happens everywhere. That when cultures come across each other, and this also happened in this millennium that I study because of these conditions.

JVN [00:53:57] So what happened after the Zhou kings, what, so did the Zhou, did the Han dynasty control all of this, like, yellow and orange, part too?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:54:07] Yes, so this, this map, just put it simply, the Han dynasty, which would be the second empire, controls, or at least have, let's say, political and a military presence in the green area.

JVN [00:54:30] Oooh!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:54:31] So they really reached a far, far, farther than the earlier, the pre-imperial one. This is the reason that this is called empire, right. So it really integrated a lot of regions that used to be independent. And, as you can see, that also very different regions and of very, very different cultures. So, so what happened in the millennium I study was the Zhou kings direct, or even through their relatives, of sending them to areas to, to be the regional ruler. And that would gradually, through the integration of these outsiders coming in with the local community, and they will become more identified with the region they live. They were born there, they lived there, they had intermarriages with the local people, with the local, you know, local people also having their own earlier, their own power structure, if you will. And so, so the power dynamics will shift. And in the end the Zhou kings were no longer able to maintain this control. And basically then it's, it's become a lot of independent, independent, smaller states.

And this is what, this happened in the Zhou dynasty or in this millennium for much of it, or if not the entirety. So, so this millennium has been called, or, at least the second half of it, Chinese historians tend to call it "the multi-state world," because there are a lot of little states, big states, as many as several hundreds. Some of them are very, very small, could be just one town, and some of them probably much larger, has, has several large towns and then they will eventually be, become, for instance, this is where Qin came from. Qin was a regional state and, from the West, and were able to incorporate or unify all the other smaller, big and small states and went out as, as the one who built the first empire. So, so that's kind of what was happening on the broadest sense.

JVN [00:57:12] So, but, the Qin one, how do I, Qin, is that right?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:57:17] Yeah. You really have a knack for Chinese, your pronunciation is, it's just perfect.

JVN [00:57:24] Thank you so much! They, but they didn't last for super long it seems like?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:57:29] No, no. The Qin empire lasts only 14 years, yes.

JVN [00:57:34] But it controlled all of what used to be the Zhou and the Shang once?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:57:40] Yes, so Qin here, this darker green, so it's expanded from the Shang and then the Zhou-.

JVN [00:57:49] Wow!

PROF. JUE GUO [00:57:50] -And then Han *further* expanded. But what I do want to emphasize that, you know, this is where I love maps, but maps can be misleading as well. We shouldn't think about these areas that, because we color them so that means that they are all Han, the degrees of control are very uneven. So the core, right, so the core has probably been consolidated further and further. And by the time of Han dynasty, that they were very solidly under the control of the Han empire. But for instance, that this part of this north, northwest part, which borders today the-, what we call Central Asia and then connect it to West Asia, this is where Silk Roads are. So, and this area was more, a lot more fluid.

There, there are a lot of, for instance, the Steppe empires. This is also where the Chinese empire, or the Han empire rurally is called agricultural-based empire versus these nomadic empire. People lived on horsebacks, they live mobile, much mobile life versus the Han empire that the vast majority of the people were farmers were, were living in villages, do not to move as much. So this is a contested area of a lot of warfares happens. And this is why you have see the Great Wall of China.

JVN [00:59:32] Right, which is up north. When was that built?

PROF. JUE GUO [00:59:34] This one, what is showing here, this is why this is a map that I think is good for illustration, but, this one is built, connected so, there were previous wars, many of them, but it's connected a large part during the Qin dynasty. But the Great Wall, if you go to China, I hope you go one day, The Great Wall you see today, especially if you go to Beijing then you will see it's just in a suburb, that one was built in the Ming dynasty; that's late imperial I think, I might, I have to think about, I think 14th, no, 14th to 16th century. So, so each dynasty, they will continue to repair, to build, but the earliest wall of the so-called Great Wall, it was part of the Qin wall and that they did back to around 400 BCE. So, so these, this Great Wall did not come into the shape we have today, not until much, much later. But these, the foundations, the earliest foundation was very early.

JVN [01:00:54] So when do we see like the, like, the most modern, like, jobs? Like when was the first like hairdressers, sid that happen in the, the part that you study?

PROF. JUE GUO [01:01:07] Absolutely. I think-

JVN [01:01:09] So what was their deal?

PROF. JUE GUO [01:01:10] I think because, this is actually *really* interesting because recent discoveries, archeological discoveries, have really revealed that these aristocrats were very

much into, you know, beauty products; they really cared about their appearance. You know, not only they have the best clothes, mostly silk, made of silk, but yeah, they wear makeup and they, they have very elaborate hair, hairstyles. So I would think they must have people help them instead of, you know, they can do that themselves, both aristocratic men and their, and aristocratic women. So, so in, in tombs that we find they have these, these toiletry boxes, they have their makeup and they have their hair extensions. They have, you know, very exquisitely made hairpins, combs. So I think they spent a lot of time on their hair.

JVN [01:02:22] Wow. Do we see any, like, salons, or, like, was there any, like, salons that we see or no? They just did it more at home?

PROF. JUE GUO [01:02:29] I would think as much, do it at home, that, I guess because these aristocratic families, they, they can afford their all, all their services that is for their own family. So I do not know if there are salons that, you know, common people, farmers can also go to. I suppose, the farmers probably also dealt with their hair, somebody in the village or in the family that would.

JVN [01:03:02] But so, like, in, like, village life like, so there wasn't necessarily, like, big cities, like, it was mostly, like, littler villages.

PROF. JUE GUO [01:03:11] Most of them, but there were big cities. There were, some of the cities are probably the largest of the world at the time.

JVN [01:03:19] So do they have, like, so in those really big cities, like what do we in, in that era from 1000 BCE to, like, the Common Era, like, what was, like, a life, what was it like in a big city? Like was there, what was it like there?

PROF. JUE GUO [01:03:35] I think so, sort of big cities in, in this pre-imperial era, we have several of them that we both have archeological discoveries and, and also textual sources. And so, for instance, the, one city that I study that was probably built, is actually in the south, this is the capital city of this kingdom called Chu. Historically, it's not here because it is being traditionally kind of said it was a Zhou dynasty regional state. And that, I think the size of that city, by today's comparison, it's not that impressive. It's about, think, half of Manhattan.

JVN [01:04:30] That's huge!

PROF. JUE GUO [01:04:33] Yes that is for New Yorkers. That's not small. But, but that's kind of the city that I, 'cause I know better, so I'm just going to use that as an example. But

there were larger cities than that, there would be a northern city that we know possibly, probably the entire New York, the size of New York City, you know, not just Manhattan, so it's that kind of size. And then the urban life were probably also quite interesting, just as New York, you know, really attractive because of the diversity. So there's all kinds of people living there. There's still a large population around such urban centers that probably have farmers. So, so they support the city dwellers and mostly to, to supply food for them. And then living in the city from archeology what can see is the city is also functionally divided. So there's rurally you have the royal family, the court, that had the core, in the core city being warded off, the aristocratic families and then also artisans, craftsmen. So all sorts of workshops, so, workshops making, making bronzes, making tools, making potteries. And the area I study, *especially* workshops making lacquerware, at the time was actually extremely time consuming and that's extremely expensive.

So they supply these aristocratic families so they have most exquisite wares to use, to eat, to drink, to have banquets, feasts, or, and some workshops must have produced, for instance, the musical instruments. Yeah, the aristocratic life was not bad. So they were entertained all the time, they, they like music, they like dancing. They, they have the professional dancers trained for their entertainment and, and so craftsmen is, it must be a big population living in these urban centers as well. And then, you know, many of the burea-, the aristocratic people, they were, they were serving at the king's court, kind of, what we say, working for the government. So, so, so that's kind of the urban life. And I think that, but most of them do not participate directly in agricultural, produce food, but those population, the supporting population do really live outside the urban centers.

JVN [01:07:42] Ah! Professor Jue Guo, I feel like I have, I don't know how you're going to feel about this, for me, I feel like it's good news. Um, would you ever do a second episode with us so that we can do, 'cause I feel like I had so much to ask just to even understand this time period that I barely even got to ask everything that I want to ask about. But I wanna interview you twice because I was, I was just so fascinated. And I just will, I this is just such a big subject, I couldn't have ever done it, and I could honestly talk to you for like three more hours, like easily.

PROF. JUE GUO [01:08:17] I know, I think that the problem is really just because it's really long. So, there are so many things that, that I have to, you know, kind of talk about-

JVN [01:08:29] I'm obsessed with it!

PROF. JUE GUO [01:08:32] I'm happy about that.

JVN [01:08:33] 'Cause I get too excited. I mean, because I mean, I'm looking at my thing, we're already at an hour and 20 minutes, and I feel like if I start asking what I want to get into, it's like we'll never be able to edit it down. I think this is just a two-part episode, which is totally fine with me, if it's fine with you; will you come back and talk to us more? Because, I need to like, I have a whole other episode in me with you that I just, but all of this was so good. So what are we supposed to do, we have to do more!

PROF. JUE GUO [01:09:00] Sure, yeah, I'm happy to. I think that I also, I think I'm just really bad to, to, to say more in a more concise way and-

JVN [01:09:12] If you ever call yourself bad in front of me again, I swear. You are the best; I'm obsessed. I, I mean, you're, this is so good. I mean, I, seriously, it's so good. You really did do so good and I'm so excited to talk to you more.

PROF. JUE GUO [01:09:29] Yeah, I think that I would be happy to maybe next time we can get into more of the specific topics that you like to, to ask. Is there anything that you are burning to know that, that today?

JVN [01:09:43] Ah, well, yeah, but there's-. I feel so satiated with everything that I learned. It's, I mean, but I have, like, 50,000 other questions. I want to know about women stuff, I want to know about gay stuff, I want to know about jobs, I want to know about, like, all the other stuff that interests you about, like, the pull and the tug of like the newcomers coming, but then, like, you know, and then, like, and I also kind of want, I know that we say history is written by the winners, but, like, what happened to the people who maybe didn't win, like, how dark did it get, like or do we just don't know about that stuff?

And also, like, is there any, like, really just gorgeous gay love stories? Was there cat, like, was there cats, was there puppies? There was, like, gorgeous clothes, like, I mean, ahh, I mean, you're only making me want to have, are we going to roll it into the second interview now? No, because I think we literally have to have you back again. And I think people are going to be obsessed.

PROF. JUE GUO [01:10:42] Thank you.

JVN [01:10:43] Don't we think people are going to be obsessed; I just think that this is exciting, that we didn't realize that we are walking into like a two-part interview. We didn't even know that that's how it was going to be. But it's not our fault that you're fascinating. It's just not our fault.

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Barnard College Professor Jue Guo.

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