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## Life without the Movius Line: The structure of the East and Southeast Asian Early Palaeolithic



Robin Dennell

Dept. of Archaeology, University of Exeter, UK

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### ABSTRACT

The starting point of this paper is that the Movius Line is no longer an appropriate way of studying the Early Palaeolithic of East and Southeast Asia, and should be disregarded. Instead, it is argued that the Early Palaeolithic of East and Southeast Asia needs to be seen as comparable to that in the rest of Eurasia, rather than the product of an isolated backwater. Contra Movius, East Asia was not isolated throughout the entire Early and Middle Pleistocene, but open to immigration during interglacials, as is indicated by its fossil hominin record. As in Europe and Southwest Asia, both bifacial and non-biface assemblages are present in China and Korea, thus indicating the presence of an Acheulean component, although the lack of agreement over how the Acheulean should be defined creates difficulties in establishing its extent in Southeast Asia. Regarding non-biface assemblages, Zhoukoudian was an unfortunate choice of an East Asian site that lacked bifaces, as bifaces are also rare or absent in a number of caves in Southwest Asia and Europe. Additionally, the absence of bifaces in some sites is not convincingly demonstrated because of the small size of the lithic assemblage. Finally, the simple flake industries in Southeast Asia are likely contemporary with Upper Pleistocene, Middle Palaeolithic and microlithic assemblages in India rather than with Middle Pleistocene, Acheulean assemblages, as proposed by Movius.

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## 1. Introduction

In a previous paper (Dennell, 2014a), I reviewed the fieldwork conducted by Helmut de Terra, Teilhard de Chardin and Hallam Movius in Central Burma (now Myanmar) in 1937–1938 along the Irrawaddy River (Terra and Movius, 1943), and concluded that Terra, the expedition's geologist, was unsuccessful in identifying a sequence of four Middle and Upper Pleistocene terraces along the Irrawaddy. Consequently, none of the material found by Movius on or in these alleged terraces is demonstrably Middle Pleistocene in age, and none of it has a secure stratigraphic context (see also Hutterer, 1977). Movius further failed to demonstrate that any of the material he considered from Burma and Southeast Asia (Movius, 1948) was the same age as Middle Pleistocene Acheulean assemblages from India and Southwest Asia. In a related paper (Dennell, 2014b), I reviewed Movius's perception of the "Far East" as ancient, exotic but fundamentally conservative and backward, and argued that such views were Eurocentric and should not bias interpretations of its palaeolithic record. I further suggested that

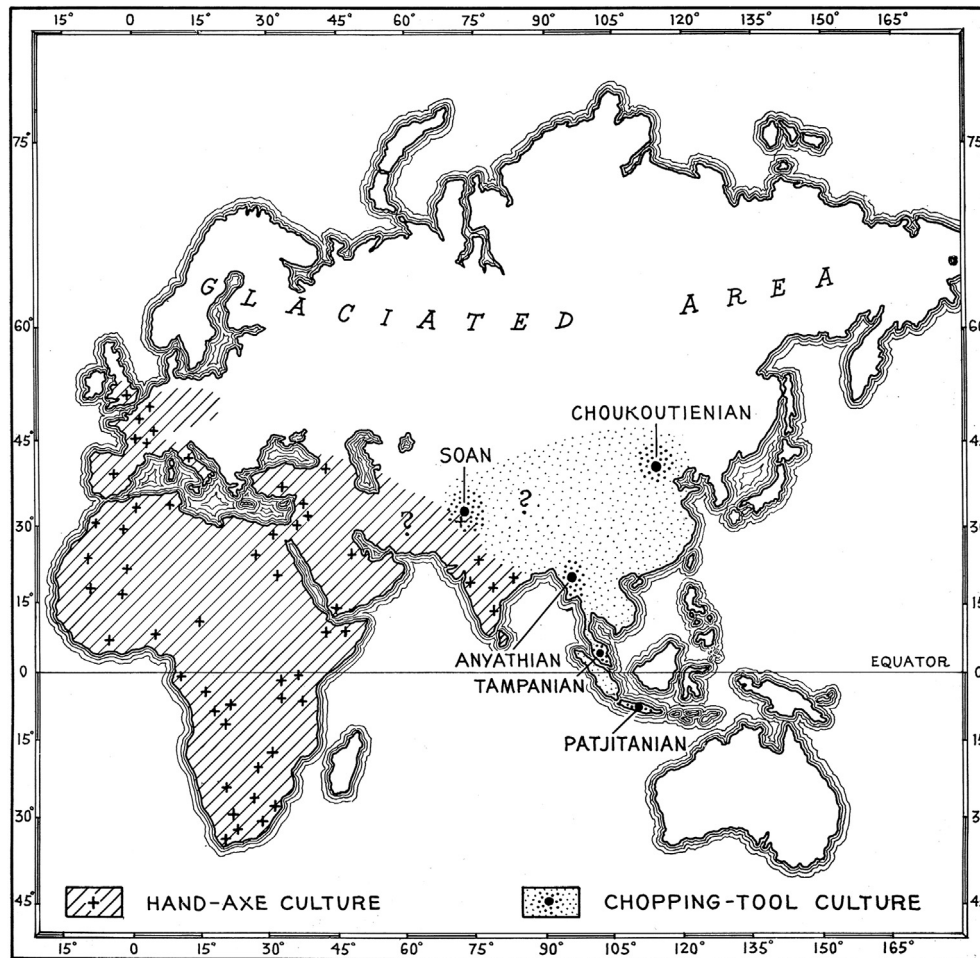
the Movius Line is a house built on sand that should be forgotten: it offers no useful insights into the Early Palaeolithic of East and South Asia, and obscures the complexity and variety of lithic assemblages on either side of it. If we are to make a fresh start, we should begin by recognising the spatial and temporal complexity of this Eurasian record. This paper sets out to explore this complexity. The emphasis is on East and SE Asia, as it was here that Movius's views had the greatest influence. These were largely negative in relegating East Asia to a marginal position in human evolution.

## 2. Preliminary considerations

### 2.1. Movius and East Asia

Under Movius's (1948) synthesis (see Fig. 1), the Early Palaeolithic world of Africa, Europe, and Asia comprised two monolithic blocks: an Acheulean one, defined by the use of bifaces in Africa, western Europe, Southwest and South Asia, and one defined by the use of unstandardized flakes and cores in East and Southeast Asia (see Fig. 1). Movius envisaged this dichotomy in cognitive terms; in other words, there were those who made handaxes because they were "progressive" and "dynamic", and others who did not because

E-mail address: [r.w.dennell@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:r.w.dennell@exeter.ac.uk).



MAP 4. The distribution of Lower Palaeolithic hand-axe and chopping-tool cultures in the Old World during late Middle Pleistocene times.

Fig. 1. Movius's (1948) synthesis of the Early Palaeolithic. This well-known image contrasts flake and core assemblages of East and Southeast Asia with Acheulean handaxe assemblages of India, Southwest Asia, Africa and Europe. Note the inclusion of the Soanian flake and core assemblages in northern India (now Pakistan) that Terra and Paterson (1939) identified in their fieldwork in 1935. (Source: Movius, 1948; Map 4).

they were “conservative” and an example of “cultural retardation” (see Dennell, 2014b for a critique of these views). As Movius (1948, p.411) stated the tools are “relatively monotonous and unimaginative assemblages of choppers, chopping tools, and hand-axes..... as early as Lower Palaeolithic times, southern and eastern Asia was a region of cultural retardation .....it seems very unlikely that this vast area could ever have played a vital and dynamic role in early human evolution ... Very primitive forms of Early Man apparently persisted there long after types at a comparable stage of physical evolution had become extinct elsewhere”. Movius's opinions were undoubtedly heavily influenced by Teilhard de Chardin, who was the senior figure in the field expedition to Burma in 1938 in which he collaborated with Helmut de Terra (as he had already in Kashmir in 1935) and Movius, who was by far the junior-most member of that expedition. Chardin was unambiguous about China's context in the wider palaeolithic world: “Early Palaeolithic China was a quiet and conservative corner on account of its marginal geographical position ..... in contrast with the already ‘steaming’ West, Early Pleistocene Eastern Asia seems to have represented .... a quiet and conservative corner amidst the fast advancing human world” (Chardin, 1941, p.60). He went on to state that “East Asia gives the impression of having acted (*just as*

*historical China and in sharp contrast with the Mediterranean world) as an isolated and self-sufficient area, closed to any major human migratory wave” (1941, pp.86,88; italics mine). Movius and Chardin effectively stripped East Asia of any palaeolithic history, since it was seen as static and thus unchanging.*

## 2.2. Post-Movius views of “the Acheulean”

Although the Movius Line still remains in place, palaeolithic archaeologists now see the Early Palaeolithic in more subtle terms. For example, we now reject the implicit, if unintended racism, in Movius's dismissal of East and Southeast Asian hominins as primitive and backward simply because they did not make handaxes. We also recognise that foragers and hunter–gatherers are most unlikely to use the entire range of their non-perishable material culture in all situations and on all occasions: some artefacts – such as bifaces – may be situation-specific and used for specific tasks such as butchering large animals, for heavy-duty tasks, or used in a social context to attract mates (Kohn and Mithen, 1999 [but see Hayden and Villeneuve (2009)]) or to enhance status; there may also have been gender or age differences in the ways that tool-kits were used. In other words, there may have been some members of

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