PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATIONS OF THE XIANTOU LING PREHISTORIC CULTURAL REMAINS OF SHENZHEN, CHINA

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the characteristics of cultural remains from the Xiantou Ling (Xiantouling) dune site (c.4500 BC), Zhujiang delta region of Guangdong Province, and offers a discussion of certain relevant issues.

Geologists believe that the sand dunes of the ancient Zhujiang River Delta formed during the beginning of the Holocene Epoch. Alluvial deposits in the deltaic lagoons were formed into dunes under the heavy impact of the sea, because at that time, with the ending of the glacial epoch and the beginning of the epoch of high humidity, temperatures increased rapidly and sea levels also rose correspondingly. Prehistoric humans, in order to locate new sources of food, turned their attention from collecting or hunting in the hills to areas near the water. The sand dunes of the bay were ideal dwelling places for these people. The several hundred prehistoric sites that archaeologists have discovered along the coast of South China reveal the ability of the ancestors of the ancient Yue Nation to take up the development of the sea resources, and the processes by which this occurred.

The Xiantou Ling dune site at Shenzhen, located at 22°36' N and 114°27' E, is on the northwest coast of South China’s Dapeng Bay. To the southeast it faces Ji’ao Zhou and Emei Zhou of Hong Kong across the sea. The site is on a 13,000 square meter ancient sand dune, eight meters above sea level and 350 meters inland. On both sides of the dune are rolling hills, with an alluvial basin at the rear. Streams in the basin empty into the sea to the east.

The three excavations conducted in 1985, 1989 and 1997 by archaeologists from Shenzhen Museum unearthed a total area of 1,200 square meters. The findings of the excavations in 1985 and 1989 have been published (Shenzhen 1990a), while the findings of the excavation in 1997 have not been published yet. I had the good fortune to take part in the excavations in 1985 and in 1997.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE XIANTOU LING SITE
The cultural layer of the Xiantou Ling site is comparatively simple. The discovered remains include one building foundation, two ash pits and a large amount of red-sintered earth. The hearth found in 1985 at T4–2 (it was unclear at the time whether it was a hearth) was built with earth and was burned into red-sintered earth. The hearth was of an irregular round shape with a diameter of 1.2 meters and the height of the remains still intact was 30-40 centimeters. However, in the absence of any house foundations or building ruins nearby, and because of the many pottery sherds found scattered around, it is surmised that this was actually the foundation of a kiln. Apart from the above items, a large number of stone implements and ceramic remains have also been found in the cultural layer.

Stone Implements
There are three kinds of stone implement: ground, chipped and natural; in proportions 4:1:5. The stone material is mainly fine sandstone, with slate occupying second place. Among the ground stone implements, axes and adzes come first in number (Figs 1-3), followed by round anvils (Fig. 4), knives (Fig. 5), chisels and rings. A small number of adzes have slightly slanted shoulders (Fig. 3). There are no 90-degree shoulders or stepped adzes. Typically, in the Zhujiang River Delta area, stone knives are found at sites of this kind. In Xiantou Ling three were found, including an exquisite arc-edged knife excavated in 1997, with a “beating panel” (da ji taimian) on the handle (Fig. 5). Stone knives have otherwise not been found often in prehistoric archeological work in South China. Archaeologists at the Guangdong Provincial Archeology Institute have unearthed two porous stone knives in burial M28 at the site of Xiankezhou, Gaoyao, Guangdong Province.
Unfortunately, they were seriously weathered. In 1960, five stone knives of Late Neolithic date were discovered at the shell mound site of Hulushan Mountain, Boluo (Mo Zhi, n.d.) These stone knives are believed, based on textual research by certain scholars, to be related to primitive rice growing (Deng and Huang 1994).

The fourteen stone barkcloth beaters found represent the largest number unearthed so far at any prehistoric site in South China. These stone beaters (Fig. 6) are generally round-angled rectangles with one polished side and intense vertical flutes on the other side. They are 1 to 2 cm thick, varying in length. As most of them have been damaged or broken, their original lengths cannot be ascertained. One excavated complete piece, however, is 21.9 cm long, 6.6 cm wide and 1.2 cm thick (not illustrated).

Regarding the uses of these fluted stone beaters, some think they were tools for making pottery during the shaping process. The polished side can be used to beat the surface of the clay pot, thus bonding the clay of the hand-built pot into denser paste; and the fluted side can be used to beat on the surface of vessels to produce parallel raised ribs. Feng Yongqiu and Wen Benheng made successful experiments replicating this (Feng and Wen 1994). However, several famous ethnoarcheologists both at home and abroad have pointed out, with the support of ethnographic materials, that this kind of “dark cloth stone swatter” (shupi bushi pai) is common in archaeological contexts in island Southeast Asia and in coastal areas of continental Southeast Asia, especially in the geographical area where the Austronesian language family is represented. It should be noted that these fluted stone beaters are very rare in the Daxi Culture of the Yangzi River area and other famous prehistoric cultures of the Central Plains of China.

Round stone anvils (shibing) were frequently found. They are finely chipped and ground; some are slightly bulging on both sides, and some have concave beating markings (Fig. 4). These concave stones are called stone anvils in the Daxi Culture. There is disagreement as to their function. Some have said they were stone paddles used for making pottery; and some have suggested that they were “stone hammers.”

The chipped stone implements were mostly made from river cobbles or other natural stone material, which did not need much chipping or processing to make chopping tools, blade tools or grining tools. Natural stone tools are stones of different shapes directly used without processing, having readily apparent traces which show they have been used frequently. They include pestles, beaters, stone anvils and stone balls.

Pottery Vessels (Figs 7-16)

Pottery is classified into three categories: round-bottomed vessels, vessels on stands or with ring feet, and flat-bottomed vessels. There are no tripods. All pots were hand-made, having no traces of wheel processing. The thickness of the pottery vessel walls varies: the average is 0.4 cm, the thicker ones 0.6 cm, and the thinner just 0.2 cm. The firing temperature was not very high. It is assumed that the temperature was around 800°C, and that the firing was done in vertical enclosed kilns. Because of uneven heating and the effects of oxidization, one pottery vessel may have several colors. By inspecting the variegated pottery segments, we may conclude that the manufacturing method was the plastic covering method (tie su fa - non-wheel thrown, sculpted or slab-built vessels [editorial note by M.F.]).

As to the composition of the pottery, more than 96% is sand-tempered. Some contains a small amount of carbon. Gray and black cores are common; the surfaces are polished; the colors are usually gray brown and orange, probably due to the nature of the pottery clay and the firing temperature. More than 10% of the sand-tempered pottery vessels have a reddish brown coating both on the interior and the exterior. Both the excavations in 1985 and 1997 uncovered cinnabar (red ochre? ed.) pigment. Up to 3% is white pottery; the surfaces of some pottery wares with fine sand temper are gray or light gray, which may be the result of contamination.

Pottery Decoration

Impression, incision, carving and stamping various patterns were the main methods for decorating pottery vessels. A variety of motifs stamped, impressed or incised in vessel surfaces is shown in Figure 17. Especially on the white pottery unearthed in 1997, there are also fine and exquisite complex impressed designs with infilled zones of fine-toothed stamping (Figure 18).

[Editorial comment by PSB: from here on the original text is very hard to follow. It is best to let the illustrations, albeit without scales, speak for themselves. Those wishing to examine more Xiantou Ling pottery should consult Shenzhen Museum 1991, Plates 85-162.]

There are 50 restored vessels from the site, in all more than 300 damaged pieces. Many vessels ears were unearthed in isolation; they are shaped as half-circles, with small holes through them. They come in three kinds: those with sharp edge, with flat edge, and those that are round-shaped (Figure 15).

CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF XIANTOU LING REMAINS

The prehistoric inhabitants of the area around the Zhujiang River delta settled along the rivers and coastlines (Fig. 19). In the past, many archeologists thought that the dune sites were the remains of seasonal occupation. Since the 1980s, through the efforts of archeologists from Guangdong Province and Hong Kong, more and more evidence for settlement has been found in the dune sites, which, besides Xiantou Ling, include Tung Wan of Hong Kong,
later Yunglong (Hong Kong 1997), Fu Tei Wan and Ha Pak Lai (Yunlong 1998). At many sites, such as in the lower layers at Shamwan and Hsin Ho Chau, graves have been found. Chinese archaeologists believe that the shell mounds and sand dunes of the Zhuijiang River Delta represent “comparatively independent tribes; and people also organized various functional areas, residing areas and grave areas according to the geological environment and topography.” (Zhu 1994). Archeological materials from South China indicate that Huanyangdong (Song et al. 1983) (transition from Palaeolithic to Neolithic), Blue Pool (Qingtang Early Neolithic: Guangdong 1961a), Chenqiao Village (Guangdong 1961b) and Xiantou Ling (Mid-Neolithic) represent a process of settlement shift from caves and terraces to plains and coastal areas, showing the process of our ancient Yue ancestors expanding to the sea, step by step.

On the one hand, human beings entering into the South China coastal environment developed a series of skills to adapt to the coastal life and continuously expanded their range; and on the other hand, they continuously engaged in exchanges with inland areas for agricultural techniques and other cultural elements, gradually establishing themselves as stable settled tribes. At the same time, needs for different goods prompted the maintenance of trade networks, expanding and deepening cultural exchanges (Qiao 1993).

Needless to say, the economic life of the prehistoric residents who left behind these dune sites centered on sea food resources; agricultural tillage was but supplementary. The axes, adzes and stone knives unearthed on Xiantou Ling constitute evidence of primitive agricultural production. Inside the sand dunes were wide lagoon basins with rich soil and water resources, very agreeable for crops, including rice. The pottery vessels were delicately made, with tasteful shapes and colorful decorative patterns, which indicate they were made not only for practical purposes but also had aesthetic values. “This certainly is one thing only realizable when primitive agriculture had built an appropriate foundation, and people had come to live a stable settled life (He 1989).

The dune sites have hills to the rear, so hunting and gathering still existed as a supplementary subsistence activity. Bones of domestic animals and poultry are common in shell mounds, but rare at the dune sites, which may be due to difficulty in preservation. The possibility that the inhabitants of the dune sites knew how to domesticate animals and poultry cannot be ruled out.

Archeologists from Hunan Province, Guangdong Province and Hong Kong, as well as all archeologists who have investigated the Early Daxi Culture in the Dongting Lake area (especially the lower layers at Zaoshi City and at Tangjiagang; Hunan 1986; He 1994) and the Xiantou Ling Culture in Shenzhen, generally are of the opinion that these two cultures share points of close resemblance in terms of pottery production, the composition of vessels, the decorative techniques, the painted pottery and also the white pottery.

The similarities and differences between the Yangzi and Guangdong cultures are as follows:

1. Pottery production. The characteristics of hand manufactured, non-wheel thrown vessels are the same as those of the Early Daxi culture. At Xiantou Ling over 96% of the total was sand-tempered, mainly dark brown, followed by gray and black, orange, red-slipped and white pottery. Sand-tempered pottery made up around 50-60% in the lower layer of Zaoshi, and nearly all of it was of red color.

2. Vessel forms. Vessels in Xiantou Ling mainly consisted of jars, cauldrons, plates, basins, bowls, cups and dou vases. The Early Daxi Culture of Dongting Lake area included all the above elements seen in the Zhuijiang River Delta, but there are some differences between these two areas in terms of details of vessel shapes.

3. Painted Pottery. In the Dongting Lake area, painted pottery first appeared in the Zaoshi City Lower Layer Culture period. This was in black, with wide stripe patterns on a red background. It was in the Mid-Daxi Culture that reddish-brown patterns on a red background appeared. No black-painted pottery has been found around the Zhuijiang River delta. In the Da Huangsha, Taiwan (Tai Bay) and Hongxue periods, the painted pottery of Xiantou Ling prospered. There were more than 50 kinds of decorative patterns.

4. White pottery. As to prehistoric white pottery around the Zhuijiang River delta, Xiantou Ling has the lead in quantity. Particularly large amounts of white pottery were unearthed in 1997. Apart from plates on ring feet, there were also jars, bowls, basins and cups. The most common similarity between white pottery wares of Xiantou Ling and Tangjiagang was that patterns made with fine-tooth combs form the backgrounds for their relief designs (Fig. 18).

As to the relations between the painted pottery and the white pottery in the Zhuijiang River delta area and that of the Dongting Lake area, He Jiejun has written that:

the Dongting Lake area is not only the origin of white pottery, but the center from which white pottery was spread. ... With Dongting Lake as the center, white pottery radiated as far as thousands of miles beyond, worthy of the name of “messenger for Daxi Culture”. (He 1994).

He also pointed out that the route by which elements of Daxi Culture (referring to painted pottery) spread to the Zhuijiang River delta was through the Yuan River to the Xijiang (West) River and into the Zhuijiang River delta.

My understanding of functions such as “messenger” and “spread” are as cultural exchanges, as understood in archeology, and does not simply indicate “trans planta-
ton.” The modern concept of archeological cultural exchanges has liberated itself from the simple traditional concepts of diffusion or core/periphery and changed into relations between comparatively equal peer polities. Behind the concept of cultural exchanges there may be various extremely complicated layers such as competition, mutual imitation, war, the spread of inventions, religious and material exchanges.

Since the 1950s, Chinese archeologists have been conducting extensive archeological investigations and excavations in the South China Area, covering Qujiang, Yangchun, Fengkai, Huaiji and Wenguan of Guangdong Province as well as Guilin, Liuzhou and Baise and other places in Guangxi Province. It has been suggested by some that: “Among the materials that we have got in China at the present on the transition from Paleolithic Culture to Neolithic Culture, no other areas contain more information and materials than the mountainous areas of South China.” (Qiao and Zhang 1991). The Blue Pool (Qingtang) site in North Guangdong, which dates to eight to nine thousand years ago, filled the gap in archeology of the Early Neolithic of Guangdong Province. Sites post-dating the Mid-Neolithic have been found in large numbers, especially in the area around the Zhuijiang delta. Through a long period of gestation, formation and development, the prehistoric culture circle around the Zhuijiang delta had formed, the source of which was the Earlier Neolithic Culture in South China itself. Cultures engaged in exchanges among themselves in their long-distance exchanges with the outside world, especially through mutual connections with the former Daxi Culture in the Dongting Lake area in the middle reaches of the Yangzi River. They absorbed the advanced cultural elements and developed a very unique Xiantou Ling Culture. On the other hand, some elements spread outside of this area by way of the sea, such as the stone barkcloth beaters which have been widely found in Taiwan and Southeast Asia.

THE AGE OF THE XIANTOU LING SITE

The date of the Xiantou Ling site has not yet been determined via the C14 method. But more than 20 sites with remains from the Mid-Neolithic have been explored and excavated around the Zhuijiang delta, including:

1. the Dahuangsha site at Shenzhen (Shenzhen 1990b), only 8 kilometers from Xiantou Ling;
2. the Damei Sha (Shenzhen 1993) and Xiaomei Sha (Yang and Gu 1994) sites a little over 10 kilometers away;
3. the sand dune sites of Longxue at Zhongshan City (Zhongshan 1991); Houshawan Bay (Zhuhai 1991) and Caoliangwan Bay (Zhuhai 1991) on Sanbao Island, both near Zhuhai City;
4. Tai Wan (Finn 1958; Ou 1994) and Sham Wan (Mecham 1978) on Lamma Island, Hong Kong;
5. Tung Kwu Chau, Chung Hom Wan, Hau-tei war (Xiediwan) at Dayushan;
6. Sai wan (Xiwan) on Changzhou;
7. Shenwancun village at Chilijiao, and Futeiwan (Hudiwan), as well as other shell mounds sites;
8. In addition, there are also the shell mound sites of Wanfuyuan Nunery at Dongguan City, Kinglan Temple First Phase Culture at Zengcheng City, and the Xianke Islet site at Gaoyao City.

The common characteristic of the above sites is sand-tempered pottery making up the largest proportion, around 80-98%. In all sites the assemblages resemble that of the Xiantou Ling. The pottery comprises mainly round-bottomed jars, cauldrons, flat-bottomed plates, bowls, small bowls on ring feet (some painted) and douvases. Stone implements are mainly ungrounded adzes and axes; there are also a few single or double shouldered adzes. Stone barkcloth beaters are common. Remains of house foundations and post holes were discovered in the lower layers at the sites of Kinglan Temple and Shenwan Bay (Shen Bay).

Radiocarbon Dates

NB: No lab. numbers submitted with original manuscript, all dates are presumed uncalibrated.

The carbonized food specimen found in pottery unearthed at Dahuangsha T101(4) is dated to 5600±260 (with dendrochronological correction: 6255±260 years - ZK2513). Other dates on “food remains” are as follows:
1. Damei Sha, 5250±240 bp;
2. Haiteiwan in Hong Kong, 5100±100 bp;
3. Yung Long, 5230±100 bp, 5450±150 bp, 4710±130 bp, 4790±120 bp, 5490±220 bp, and 4880±170 bp;
4. Shiqi Baishui-jing, 4820±120 bp;
5. Saiwan, 4000±300 bp;
6. Chung Hom Wan, 4570±130 bp;
7. Shamwan, 4000±300 bp;
8. Kwo Lowan, 4410±80 bp, 4600±90 bp.

The publication of the excavated materials of the Xiantou Ling site attracted a great deal of attention in archeological circles. Professor Zeng Qi of Zhongshan University believes that its date should be close to that of the Pre-Daxi Culture. Professor He Jiejun, Director of Hunan Province Archeology Research Institute, points out that the pottery complex of Xiantou Ling, especially the decorative designs, very much resembles the Lower Layer Culture of Zaoshi City in the Dongting Lake Area (Zao City Remains T43, charcoal specimen in layer 5, 6920±200 bp [BK82081]) and Tangjiagang. Deng Chong also classified Xiantou Ling as of a relatively early date. Some believe that the stamped/impressed designs on the white pottery of Xiantou Ling are very mature, and they thus doubt their date. But these scholars are not aware that the stamped designs on the white pottery from the Gao Miao (Qiao Temple) site of Hunan Province are even more exquisite. The pottery of the Gao Temple site is very
unique in design patterns, rich in fine comb dots, reaching the peak of perfection. There are not only various geometric figures formed by minute dots, but also designs rendering wind, birds, solar patterns, and deity emblems which are very vivid and full of changes made by variations in the dots, similar to those seen on jade implements of Liangzhu Culture. The exaggeration and boldness of design composition, and the neatness and adeptness of skill really aroused disbelief that these were works from a prehistoric period, seven thousand years ago.” (He 1996).

The red pigment on the Xiantou Ling pottery deserves our attention. After examination, it has been concluded that the brownish red pottery coat and the color designs were very likely made with ground cinnabar (ochre? ed.) mixed with water (Figure 16). In the beginning, people painted fresh red on the interior and the exterior of vessels. The painted ribbons encircling the lips of sand-tempered barrel shaped pottery-ear cups and basins found in Xiantou Ling are the most primitive color design discovered in the Zhujiang River delta area up till now. Archaeological materials show that in the earliest period of painted pottery, designs were mostly simple patterns and lines. In the Chenqiao Village shell mound, which dates from the earlier period of the Mid-Neolithic of Guangdong Province, we see some sand-tempered jars with wide brownish red ribbons painted on necks and bellies (Guangdong 1961). In the lower layer of the Zaoshi City Neolithic site in Stone Gate (Shimen) County, Hunan Province, we find ribbon-shaped patterns located on the lower part of the tray of tall circular-base plates, or on the circular base itself (Hunan 1986).

Judging from the finds from the sites at Dahuangsha and Xiaomeisha, the Middle-Neolithic colored pottery of the Zhujiang River delta had matured in terms of production skill by this time. The red painted vessel from Xiaomeisha shown in Figure 16 is made with very pure clay and has a polished surface, with perforations through the ring foot. The C14 dates from the Dahuangsha and Dumeisha sites suggest that this pottery dates to between 4800 and 4500 BC.


With deepening study of the prehistoric archeology of the Zhujiang River delta area, it is necessarily to give archeological cultural names to these Mid-Neolithic remains. In the 1980s, Yang Shiting designated them the “Xiqiao Shan 1st-Stage Culture” or “Jinlansi 1st-Stage Culture” (Yang 1986a,b). Subsequently, some scholars have suggested the term “Xiantou Ling Culture” and He Gang (1993) has suggested “Xiantou Ling – Dahuangsha Culture.” The chairman of the Hong Kong Archeologists’ Association, Ou Jiafa, suggested the “Hou Sha Wan Bay Type Culture.” Deng Chong, director of the Archeological Arts Research Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, suggested “Taiwan Culture.”

In 1997, Professor Yang Shiting wrote an article endorsing the nomination “Taiwan Culture” (Yang 1997), but at the same time he also pointed out problems arising from using the spelling “Taiwan.” Professor An Zhimin holds that “From the viewpoint of the history of archeology, it may be proper to give the name of ‘Da Bay [Dawan Bay] Culture’ based on the typical remains first discovered by Finn in the year 1933” (An 1997).

My own preference is for the term “Xiantou Ling Culture”. Archeologists from Shenzhen Museum are planning on publishing a “Report on the Xiantou Ling Excavation” within the next few years. It will provide an overall introduction to the information gained from the excavations.

N O T E

1. The term “Xiantou Ling Culture” was first proposed by Professor Li Boqian in 1991, at the “International Academic Seminar on the Prehistoric Culture of Zhujiang River Delta and Nearby Areas.” In 1994, Li Songsheng wrote his “Preliminary discussion of the Xiantou Ling Culture,” published in Shenzhen Archeological Discoveries and Research. My article “Study on the periodization of Shenzhen Neolithic dune sites and related issues” (in Research on the Ancient Cultures of South China and Nearby Areas, 1994, Chinese University of Hong Kong) also discussed the classification of the Xiantou Ling Culture.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T

Thanks go to Mr. Zhu Feisu and Xu Hengbin for their kind advice with regard to this article. The rubbings were produced by Gao Aiping; the photographs by Liu Wenlin.

R E F E R E N C E S

NB: Because of communication difficulties, the references are not in full BIPPA format.


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ILLUSTRATIONS FOR YANG YAO’LIN’S PAPER

Editorial note: The following 16 photographs, 2 ink rubbings of pottery decoration and one map were submitted with Yang Yao’lin’s paper, but the photographs lack full captions and none have scales. Those interested can consult a much larger photographic display of artefacts from Xiantou Ling and related sites in Guangdong, published in Shenzhen 1991 (see above list of references). All items illustrated are from Xiantou Ling, except Fig. 16, which is from Xiaomei Sha. It was hoped that the latter, which has red painted decoration, together with a red-slipped ring foot and a red ochre tablet from Xiantou Ling, could be illustrated in colour on the back cover of this IPPA Bulletin. But costs precluded this option.

BIPPA 15 (1996) also carries an article on Xiantouling by Chen Xingcan. The article published here uses the spelling Xiantou Ling, as used in Yang Yao’lin’s original manuscript.
Figure 1: Stone axe/adze.

Figure 4: Flat cylindrical stone anvil or hammer

Figure 2: Stone axe/adze

Figure 5: Stone knife with polished blade

Figure 3: Shouldered stone adze

Figure 6: Grooved stone barkcloth beaters
Figure 7: Cord-marked vessel

Figure 8: Vessel with dentate-stamped shoulder

Figure 9: Bowl with ring foot

Figure 10: Vessel with incised decoration

Figure 11: Vessel with incised decoration

Figure 12: Flat-bottomed dish
Figure 13: Dish on ring foot

Figure 14: Pottery "stand"

Figure 15: Lug handles

Figure 16: Painted and incised dish with ring foot from Xiaomei Sha
拓片— 咸頭嶺出土陶器紋飾拓片 (2:1)

Figure 17: Rubbings of incised, impressed and stamped decoration on Xiantou Ling pottery
拓片二  咸头岭出土陶器上的浅浮雕图案 (2:1)

Figure 18: Rubbings of incised and stamped decoration on Xiantou Ling pottery
Figure 19: Major prehistoric sites in the Zhujiang (Pearl) Delta region.