

# XIANTOULING DUNE SITE: ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN UNDERSTANDING THE COASTAL AREA OF SOUTH CHINA IN PREHISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

*The discovery of the Neolithic cultures of coastal South China has been one of the most important developments in recent Chinese archaeology. The Xiantouling dune site, 80 km north of Hong Kong, is typical for such cultures. Having been excavated on a large scale, Xiantouling has a rich material culture which has relationships with that of the Neolithic cultures in the middle Yangtze and Yellow River Valleys.*

Chinese archaeology had its beginnings in 1921 with the discovery of the prehistoric site at Yangshao in the middle Yellow River Valley (Chen 1991). Since then most archaeological work has been carried out in the *Zhongyuan* - the Chinese heartland region of the Yellow River Valley. Until the 1970s we had little knowledge of other areas of China, especially the coastal area of South China (Chen 1994). While the discovery of prehistoric cultures along the south coast can be traced back to as early as the 1930s (Chang 1986), the most important large-scale investigations and excavations have been done since the 'Open Door Policy' and the profound reconstructions of the 1980s. One major discovery was the so-called 'prehistoric dune culture' along the coast of the South China Sea. According to incomplete statistics (Shang and Chen 1990), more than 50 sites of this kind have been found in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Hong Kong and Macao. Of those, Xiantouling is the largest excavated site (Shenzhen Museum and Zhongshan University 1990a). Its role in understanding the prehistory of coastal South China is significant.

The Xiantouling site is located on a flat elevated sand bank behind the present sand beach of the South China

Sea, almost 80 km northeast of Hong Kong. It lies 350 meters inland from the coast, in an environment of small hills. There is a small river flowing from the hills to the sea through the site, which covers 13,000 square meters. The centre of the site is little higher than the surrounding area.

The Xiantouling site was found in 1981 by staff of the Shenzhen Museum. More than 450 square meters were excavated in 1985 and a second excavation was carried out in 1989 during which a further 200 square meters were excavated. The site has two cultural strata. The upper one included some historical antiquities and had been disturbed; the lower was a brown sandy soil, 0.2 to 0.75 meters thick, which contained all the prehistoric materials from the site.

During the two excavations we found some post-holes, the diameter of the largest being 44 centimetres. In the second excavation 14 post-holes were found, but the distribution was not sufficiently regular to suggest a house foundation. Some debris of reddish or brown burned clay with bamboo or wood impressions was also found, perhaps traces of a burned house. However, neither the structure of the house nor its foundation plan could be reconstructed from the surviving evidence.

The major type of pottery in the site was coarse-tempered with sand and grit, brittle and loose in texture. Thicknesses and colours were varied. This coarse pottery was used for cooking but there was other fine pottery as well, including yellowish and white serving dishes. We can roughly divide the pottery into three groups; cooking vessels, almost all of which were round-bottomed pots or urns; serving vessels including flat-bottomed bowls, pedestal plates and round-bottomed bowls; and pot supports (some hollow: Figure 1, nos 15 and 16). The cooking vessels were decorated primarily by cord impression. The decoration on the serving vessels varied widely;

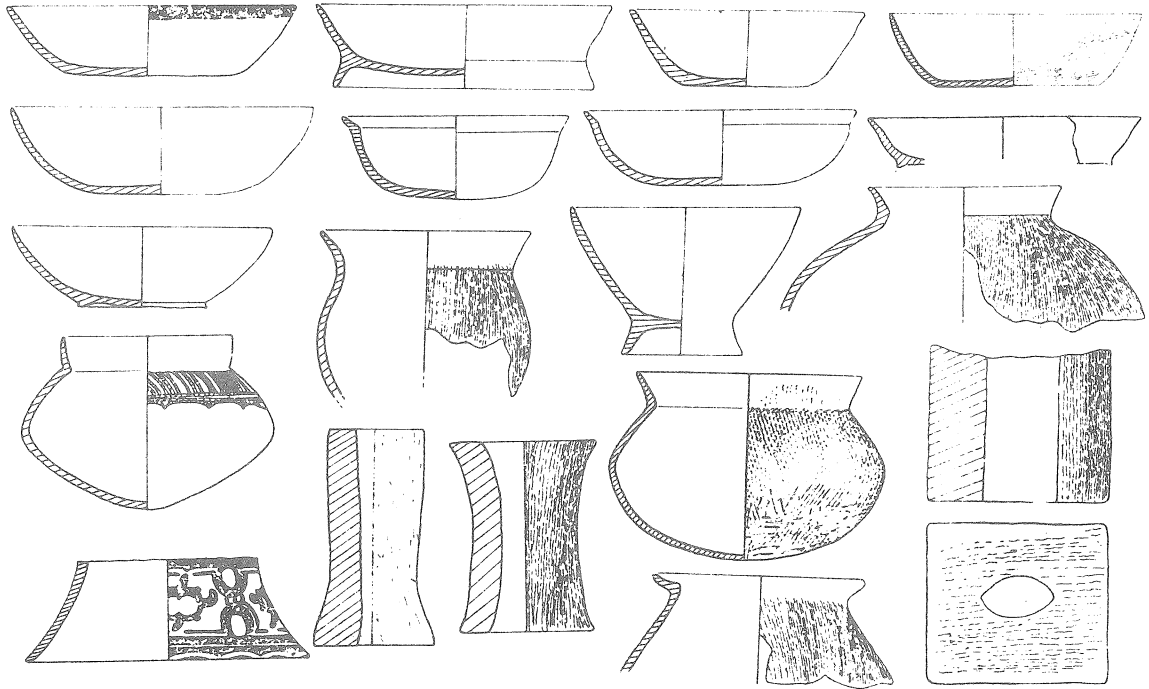


Figure 1: Pottery from Xiantouling. Reprinted with permission from *Cultural Relics 11*, 1990 (Shenzhen 1990a, 1990b).

some were decorated with shell-edge stamping; some had incised wavy lines, some straight; some were painted with red pigment, either on the surface or interior; some had impressed and punctate designs; some had appliqué (Figure 2). On several pedestals and pot supports there were also hollowed-out designs, of types popular at the Dahuangsha site several kilometres west of Xiantouling (Shenzhen Museum and Zhongshan University 1990b). We found some painted pottery at Xiantouling but most of it was very difficult to reconstruct. The round-bottomed cooking vessels and the pot supports belonged to composite sets which probably gave southeast Chinese cooking some distinctive characteristics. While pot supports occur also outside southeast China they differ markedly in form.

A lot of stone tools were discovered in Xiantouling, mainly polished rather than just flaked. We deduced from some unpolished stone tools that manufacture quite possibly took place on site. Pebbles were often used with little or no retouch, and axes, adzes, barkcloth beaters, whetstones, stone balls, hammers and even grinding stones were found in great quantity during the excavation

(Figure 3). We also found a stone with decoration on its surface but its function is as yet not known. One stone ring and some inner cores from the manufacture of stone rings and bracelets were also found.

There are no radiocarbon dates for Xiantouling. However, according to a calibrated date from Dahuangsha it could be as early as  $6255 \pm 260$  BP (ZK 2513, dated at the Laboratory of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences). Since the Sham Wan site in Hong Kong, dated to approximately 3500-2200 BC (Meacham 1978), had a similar material culture, Xiantouling may be of a similar age.

Although there are a lot of problems to resolve within this culture and in the whole southeastern coastal area, the excavation of Xiantouling does provide many clues for understanding the prehistoric cultures of South China: 1) From the viewpoint of broad comparison within Chinese archaeology, Xiantouling and the other dune culture sites provide a relatively clear picture of prehistoric life along the coast of South China. This picture has been helpful in fostering understanding of the cultural sequences of this area and their relationships

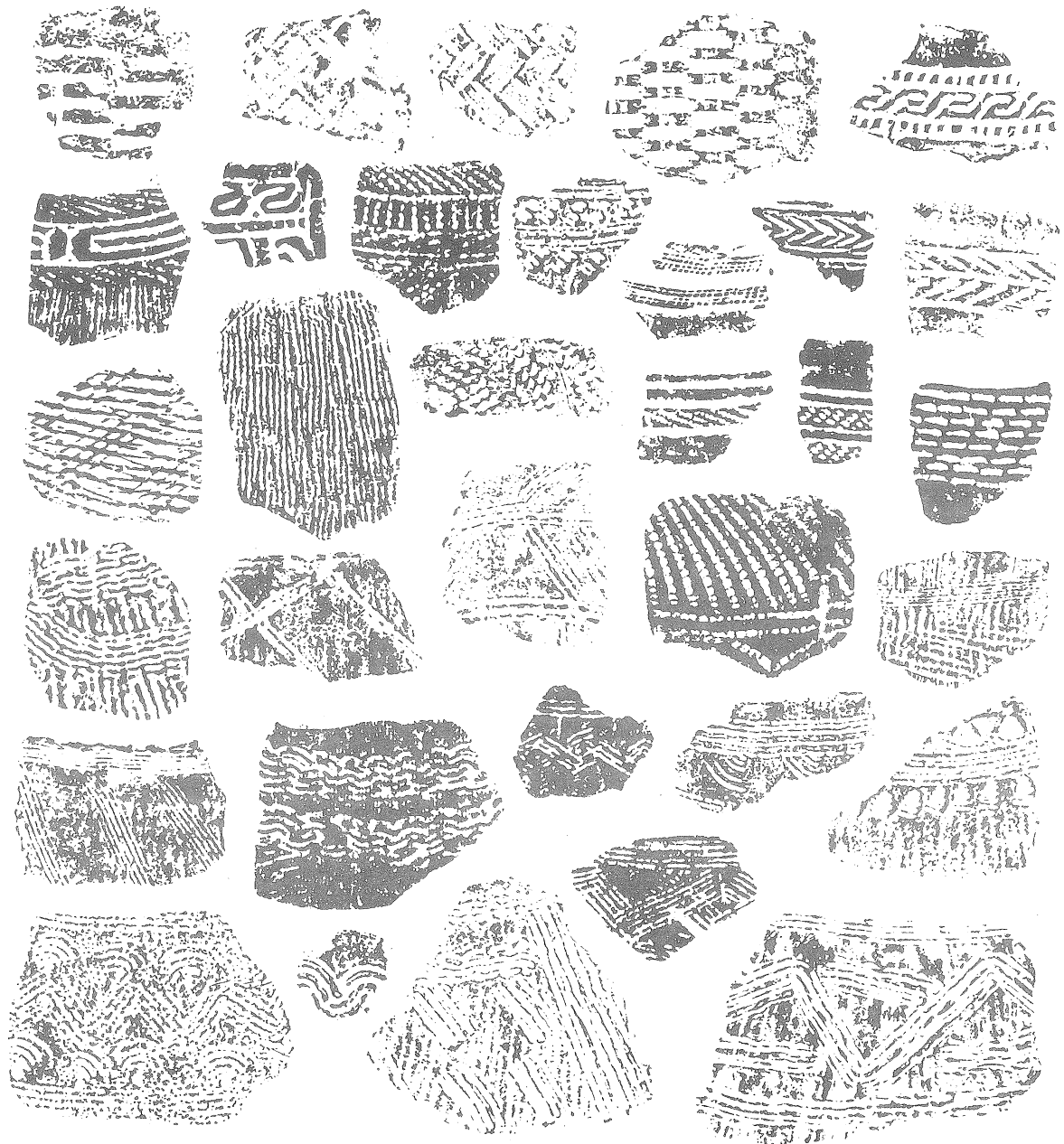


Figure 2.: Pottery decoration from Xiantouling. Reprinted with permission from Cultural Relics 11, 1990 (Shenzhen 1990a, 1990b).

with the Yangtze Valley, the Yellow River Valley and Southeast Asia.

2) Even though no floral or faunal remains were recovered from Xiantouling it should be noted that Neo-

lithic dune sites of this type are generally located at the bases of small hills facing the sea or a river, thus with access to a great variety of economic resources. We are not certain whether the people at Xiantouling

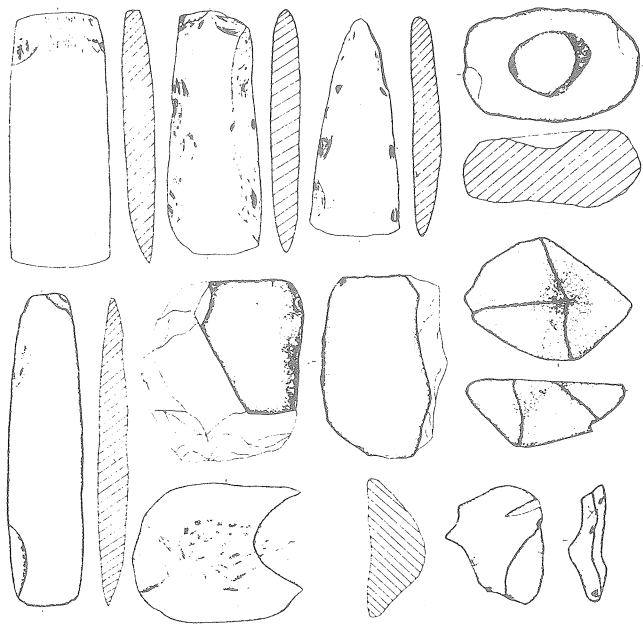


Figure 3: Stone tools from Xiantouling. Reprinted with permission from *Cultural Relics* 11, 1990 (Shenzhen 1990a, 1990b).

practised agriculture and their main subsistence might have come from hunting, fishing and gathering.

- 3) The cord-marked surfaces and mollusc-shell impressions on pottery are characteristic of the southeast coastal area of China (Chang 1986) and mainland Southeast Asia (Higham 1989; Bellwood 1992). The round-bottomed cooking pot became typical in southeast China after the Hemudu Culture of Zhejiang. We also found some pieces of the type of white pottery common to the Zaoshi Lower, Yangshao, Daxi and Dawenkou Cultures in both the Yangtze and the Yellow River Valleys. Without chemical analysis we cannot be sure of the exact relationships, but similar decoration on the white pottery from Xiantouling and Daxi probably means that there were cultural influences reaching the former site from the middle Yangtze Valley.

The painted pottery of Xiantouling was different from that of the Yellow River Valley, but the pot supports are quite similar to those from Daxi. However, the pot supports of Xiantouling were cord-marked or incised instead of being painted. The plate form on a pedestal with hollowed-out decoration is typical of Chang's Longshanoid cultures (Chang 1986). Its appearance at Xiantouling means that contacts with the Yangtze Valley or even the Yellow River Valley surely occurred during this period.

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