

# HONGSHAN — AN EARLY COMPLEX SOCIETY IN NORTHEAST CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

*The Hongshan culture has been known to archaeologists since the 1930s. However, newly discovered sites have disclosed an unexpected level of complexity, including evidence for an elaborate social superstructure. The discovery of many jades in their archaeological context has allowed for the identification of many formerly unprovenanced museum specimens as Hongshan jades.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Hongshan culture has been the centre of a great deal of discussion in China in recent years. Although it has been known to archaeologists since the 1930s, newly discovered sites have revealed previously unknown facets of this culture, disclosing an unexpected level of complexity. At the same time, the time frame of this culture has been shown to be considerably earlier than previously thought, with calibrated C14 dates in the fourth millennium BC. Thus, a society of unsuspected complexity has been found to have an unexpectedly early date.

Perhaps another reason that the Hongshan culture was not appreciated earlier is that it is in a location where complexity was unanticipated. Neither Chinese documents nor theories which presuppose the earliest Chinese complexity in the Zhongyuan prepared archaeologists for these discoveries on the ecotone between the Mongolian grasslands and the Manchurian plain. The finding of female statues and statuettes, while common in other parts of the world, is completely unprecedented in China, adding to the unexpectedness of this site. Finally, the number of jades which were robbed from Hongshan sites and spirited to collectors' markets

around the world is astounding. As the style became recognised, more and more museum objects are identified as Hongshan jades, unfortunately missing their provenance. In spite of all the new excavations, there are still many unknown facets of this group of sites. It is particularly unfortunate, therefore, that so many sites have been damaged by recent jade hunters.

Before describing this group of sites, and some of the Chinese interpretations of them, I will set forth the set of questions I have posed so that the data can be considered with the questions in mind.

Although it is clear that Hongshan sites have complex features, I want to focus on the amount and type of complexity in the society. I do not wish to frame this question as a typological one — i.e., is this a chiefdom or an early state — for I find that approach growing stale. Rather, I will attempt an analysis of the Hongshan political, economic, and social structures based upon the discoveries to date. An essential question is whether the finds are indeed indicative of an elaborate superstructure, by which I mean a class of decision-makers wholly separate from the basic producers. If this question can be answered in the affirmative, what subsistence base and other economic activities supported this superstructure, and what insights can be gained from interpreting these activities? And finally, if we grant a superstructure composed of élites, what can be said about the shape of the superstructure? That is to say, was it simply two-tiered, or a pyramid with several tiers? To what extent did the élite have control over production? Did they perform specific roles in the society? These are the questions posed for this paper; others have been tackled elsewhere (e.g. Nelson 1991).

## HONGSHAN DISCOVERIES

A sketch of Hongshan sites must include both villages and ceremonial centres. The more spectacular aspects

will be considered first — the elaborate graves and the ritual areas, and then the more mundane sites which, although they are simple villages, also have important facets which contribute to a discussion of Hongshan complexity.

The Hongshan burials are arresting both in terms of their contents and their construction. A series of burial mounds at the site of Niuheliang, about 80 km west of Chaoyang and roughly the same distance south of Chifeng, is the best published example (Liaoning 1986). The tomb groups are designated as Localities 2 to 7, each locality having several square stone-mounded tombs, including about 30 tombs altogether, most of them with evidence of looting. Locality 2 has five stone constructions, in a line from west to east. One round construction has no evidence that it was intended to be a burial mound. The tombs are labelled with Z-numbers, from west to east. Although these tombs had been plundered and parts were badly damaged, it was possible to understand their construction, for they were far too large to destroy totally. The major burials were in the centre of each mound, oriented with head to the east. Often lesser burials were ranged around the central burial.

Z1 has a space between an inner wall and an outer wall, within which there are many potsherds from black-on-red painted jars which had been placed in rows surrounding the inner stone grave chamber. A number of lesser graves were tightly packed around the central burial, some so close together that the stone-slab sides of the burial cists shared side walls. These small graves, less than 2 m long and about 0.5 m wide, contained jade objects. Some skeletons are well preserved, including one (M4) that has crossed ankles. Another, in an unusually small cist, is a secondary burial (M6), and three secondary burials were found together in yet another stone cist (M7) with each group of bones in its own separate pile. The central burial had been completely destroyed by looters.

The burial designated Z2 is next in line. It is approximately square, about 18 m on each side. An inner stone square, measuring 3.6 m on each side, provided the burial chamber, oriented east-west. It had been robbed, and only a few potsherds, along with bones of pigs and cattle, were left in the grave.

Another construction is hemispherical, an earthen mound above three stone rings. The outside ring, with a diameter of 22 m, was the lowest, each ring higher toward the inner part of the mound. The innermost ring has a diameter of 11 m. No evidence suggests that this was built as a tomb, although there were three human

skeletons of uncertain age near the mound surface. The structure is interpreted as a ceremonial structure, where rituals relating to the tombs were performed (Guo, forthcoming).

The excavation of these burials unexpectedly solved the problem of the origin of some spectacular jade objects which had been thought to date to the Shang dynasty or later. These jades had been well known in collections outside and inside China for decades, and much prized for their unusual shapes and high degree of workmanship. Some of the jades are flat, carved in animal shapes, especially turtles and birds with spread wings, or in curvilinear patterns known as cloud-shape. Others are three-dimensional rings in a shape which the excavators call the "pig-dragon" (Sun and Guo 1984). Finally, there are cuff-shaped objects which were usually found under or beside the skull. Because of this association they are thought to be hair ornaments, possibly pony-tail holders. The lower edges often show wear fractures, perhaps from hair being wound tightly around the jade object or from the attachment of other material such as feathers.

In addition to the jades, there is evidence that rows of large painted cylinders were placed in a square around each central burial. These average about 50 cm high and 30 cm in diameter, but may be up to twice that size. The vessels are well made with thin, hard walls. Each was carefully painted with horizontal rows of hook-shaped designs. Guo (forthcoming) estimates that some 300–400 of these vessels were made for each tomb and with 30 tombs at Niuheliang, some 10,000 such pots would have had to be produced for that site alone.

Ritual areas include the Goddess Temple, also from Niuheliang (Liaoning 1986, Nelson 1991), and the site of Dongshanzui in Kazuo, which contains an area with constructions interpreted as altars, as well as small and medium-sized nude female figurines and a possible human sacrifice (Guo and Zhang 1984). In addition a mountain, somewhat resembling the head of a pig with erect ears, can be sighted on a clear day from the position of the Goddess Temple. This is called "Pig Mountain", and is believed to be part of the ritual region by the excavators of Niuheliang.

The Goddess Temple is a multilobed structure, 25 m long north to south and from 2 to 9 m wide east to west. Some wall footings show traces of red, yellow and white painting in geometric patterns. A separate circular building lies at one end of the temple and a large stone platform is at the other end. Jades of the same style as those found in the burials were also unearthed in the temple structure, as well as painted potsherds, which

probably came from bottomless black-on-red painted cylinders.

This site is referred to as the Goddess Temple because of fragments of statues found within the walls. One face, slightly larger than life size, is the most spectacular find, with high cheekbones and blue-green jade eyes. The statues were made of fine but unbaked clay, finished on the outside with a very fine clay layer and paint. Other statue fragments include human female breasts, arms, legs and ears in various sizes, including an ear that is three times life size. Some pieces appear to be pigs' hooves and bird claws, both larger than life.

Another ritual area at Dongshanzui contains stone constructions, both round and square (Guo and Zhang 1984), as at Niuheiliang. In the centre a huge rectangular stone foundation is 11.8 by 9.5 m. Within the stone walls are piles of other stones, often long, thin and awl-shaped, almost erect and making oval piles. Walls stretch out on each side of this construction, as well as front and back. To the south and north are sandstone blocks in a single line with a single layer. There are also large stones and burned red clay chunks, not in any discernible order. Two jade pieces (a flat turquoise owl and a pendant with dragons), and sherds of painted cylindrical pots were found in this area.

In front of the square construction, a low circular platform 2.5 m in diameter and about 40 cm high was built. Dressed white stones formed the outside layer. Four meters farther south were three connected stone ovals, up to 4.1 m in the largest dimension. A rectangular floor, 7.4 by 2.5 m, was identified beneath the stone ovals. A neatly finished square pit, 110 by 80 cm, which the excavators specifically say is not a hearth, occupied the middle of the east wall. Basin-shaped at the bottom, it contained small stones and a layer of dark-gray burned clay. A finely polished stone axe suggested to the excavators the possibility of a sacrificial location.

An extended human burial was also found, in the northeastern part of the stone circle platform. The only burial offering was one dark gray pottery bowl, placed on the ribs. The sex and age have not been reported.

Many reconstructible pottery vessels were found at Dongshanzui, including all the shapes, decorations and colours usually found on Hongshan sites, but the majority are large, cylindrical, bottomless painted pots. Some unusual shapes include basin lids painted on the inside, incised bottles, black *dou* and small tripod cups. Several polished axes were found at the site, as well as a few other stone tools, including grinding slabs, choppers and microliths. Pig and deer bones were also found.

The pottery female figurines were the most remarkable find, discovered in the lowest layer of the stone platform. They are much smaller than those at Niuheiliang, and differ also in being made of baked clay. Most are nude and some may represent pregnancy. All heads were broken off. Medium-sized sitting figures were also found, one wearing a belt.

Ordinary villages of this culture have long been known. The excavated houses are subrectangular and slightly subterranean, and they tend to be large, up to seven meters along a side. One of the most interesting common finds is a large stone tool called a *si*, which is interpreted as a plough. A great many other stone tools are found, including grindstones, axes and hoes. The tools were made to a pattern, so that several types of each tool category can be discerned.

#### THE HONGSHAN SUPERSTRUCTURE

*Do these discoveries indicate an elaborate superstructure?*

With this brief description of some Hongshan sites, it is time to examine the question of whether or not an elaborate superstructure existed. Arguing for the presence of "civilisation", Guo Dashun (forthcoming) emphasises the following points:

1. There was a very large ceremonial centre. Guo includes Niuheiliang, Dongshanzui and Pig Mountain as part of one large complex 50 kilometres across.
2. Large and elaborate tombs, carefully constructed, require the mobilisation of non-élite labor in order to accomplish the varied work involved.
3. Pottery, jade and bronze production all must have been organised with full-time specialists.

Guo's arguments have a good deal of merit. However, the extent of the ceremonial complex can be questioned since we cannot be sure that Dongshanzui and Niuheiliang are contemporaneous, nor do we know the time span of either site. Pig Mountain as part of the ceremonial complex also needs to be treated with some reserve, although the pig-foot statues and the pig-snouted jades, as well as pig bones in the burials, do suggest ritual association with domesticated pigs.

The tombs at Niuheiliang are impressive in size and there is much to suggest contemporaneity of the tombs and the Goddess Temple. The large numbers of specially constructed ritual vessels and the elaborate jades made of imported raw materials also lead to an interpretation that these are the graves of élites. Probably the most telling point, however, is the subordination of some graves to others. These graves, although of lesser importance, nevertheless contain emblematic jades and therefore do

not seem to represent lower class human sacrifice, but rather a second tier nobility.

The question of bronze is an important one but it has no satisfactory answer at present. The discovery of a multi-piece mould for casting a decorative object has been reported in the Chinese press as related to Hongshan, but it has no certified context and no bronzes have been found. A copper earring with jade bead was found *in situ* in a burial at Niuheiliang. On the other hand, some of the tomb plundering is ancient but the jades were not taken until this century. Perhaps bronze, so easily recycled, constituted some of the loot.

Jades and painted cylinders, the first category apparently produced to be status markers for the living and the second for ritual use, are important arguments for craft production. Guo's point goes further, however. He suggests that the number of steps required to create these objects, and the fineness and quality of the finished products, can be seen as evidence of full time specialists and of managed workshops. Jade chips at Niuheiliang, as well as tools made of inferior jade in some village burials, suggest the importation of jadestone as raw material and local jade working. Furthermore, the large platform behind the Goddess Temple may on further investigation be shown to be a site for constructing or even firing the large painted pottery cylinders used so extensively in graves. Although two-chamber kilns were found at another Hongshan site, they do not seem to be large enough to fire these jars.

Long distance procurement of raw materials may have been an élite function. The leaders either obtained the jade themselves, or more likely organised non-élites to travel to the (presently unknown) sources of the jade and bear it back. Since bronze use in the Hongshan culture has been indicated with both copper wire and a casting mould, the procurement of copper and other metals such as tin or zinc could be added to the list of exotic materials. Some knowledge of distant places is implied by the fact of painted pottery, for it appears without precedent in Hongshan in the midst of pottery shapes and decorations following long traditions in Liaoning province. The painted pottery has been traditionally interpreted as linking Hongshan to Yangshao in the Zhongyuan.

*What subsistence base and other economic activities support the superstructure?*

With a presumption of élites based on the various indications described above, it is appropriate to consider whether the subsistence base could have supported an élite class of non-primary producers. The importance of

pigs in this culture has already been noted, as well as the presence of sheep and cattle, and it is probably safe to assume a consistent source of high quality protein, at least for the élites. Intensive grain production also seems likely. Not only are grinding slabs and grinding stones found extensively but large stone ploughs suggest the harnessing of animal labor power. The presence of cattle bones is another such indication. Although there have been no specific cereals identified in Hongshan sites, pre-Hongshan sites do have grains which are probably local plants such as foxtail and broomcorn millets, buckwheat, or *Echinochloa*. Cultivation of grains had been taking place in this region for at least two millennia and must have been well developed.

Other economic activities would have included trade, or at least travel for the procurement of jade as a raw material. Trade routes must have covered a wide territory, for although the exact sources of the jade are not known, the finished products are of quite diverse colours and materials. The term "jade", as used in China, may be applied to any stone of attractive colour which can be carved and polished. The diversity of the finished objects suggests that several sources may have been used. Connections with other bronze users, should bronze be confirmed, would provide another indication of trade and long distance connections.

*What can be said about the shape of the superstructure?*

Élites and commoners are thus distinguishable through the archaeology. But do the discoveries allow distinction between simple ranking, incipient stratification, or several levels among the élite? Answers may be found in the burials, the ceremonial precincts and the jades.

To begin with, the large central burials surrounded by smaller burials indicate a more powerful person who controls not only resources but also the lives of others. Each large complex tomb must have been built all at once, representing a single ritual event. The central burial occupied a large square stone chamber, surrounded by hundreds of painted cylinders on all sides. Beyond the cylinders were a number of smaller graves, some of them joined together. The whole was covered by a pile of stones and earth. Thus the burial construction might have had a duration of many months or even more than a year. The people buried with the central person must have been interred within a year of the death of the main tomb occupant. More than half of the burials in Z2 were secondary burials, indicating that the persons to go to the afterworld with the central burial had predeceased him or her. Some, however, were more recently deceased, perhaps even buried alive. If the person with crossed

ankles took this jaunty position as death approached, it suggests a belief system in which it was important for lesser nobles to accompany a central person to the beyond. The additional burials were not low-ranked persons, for they too had their jade emblems of power or nobility.

The burial evidence thus suggests at least a three tier system, with a central burial, secondary élites and commoners, the last probably divided between agriculturalists and craft specialists. In addition, burials with jades on hills above ordinary villages suggest local élites subsidiary to those who were buried in the major ceremonial areas.

The location of the large tombs at Niuheliang is also of interest. Placement of these largest and most elaborate burials on high hills associated with ritual precincts, far from the centres of subsistence, could indicate an élite which does not need to use the visibility of the tombs to impress the general population. But perhaps the populace was awed by occasional pilgrimages to these sites, the awe increased by the distance travelled to get there.

Village sites of the Hongshan culture are found from the Sharamurun River at the north end, south to the region of the Great Wall. To attend ceremonies at the centres, long distances would have to be traversed. It is possible that the central figure of each tomb was further elevated above the ordinary people by a remote burial, but it is also possible that the remoteness of the ritual sites lent an additional aura of dignity and strangeness to the proceedings.

Other considerations are what other activities might have occurred in these places, who performed them, and why. If there were craft specialists at the ceremonial centres, where did they live? Where did the élite live, for that matter? These are among the many unanswered questions. Two possible additional uses of the ceremonial precincts can be considered.

The first possibility is that the production of élite goods took place at these sites. Niuheliang has an area with jade chips, and at one location near the Goddess Temple there is a platform which could have been used for pottery production. Since the cylinders were used nearby, it would have been efficient to produce them in this place. The unfired temple statues, which were large and fragile and difficult to transport, must have been locally produced. However, archaeological evidence to support this theory is thin, although it has internal consistency.

Another possibility is that these ritual precincts were also market places, with intermittent fairs held in these large spaces, attracting people from the distant

communities. Such markets could have been validated and made sacred by the ceremonial structures and the activities that were performed in or on them. There is some confirmation of this hypothesis at Dongshanzui, where a few artifacts of daily use were found. However, chronological control is worrisome for this interpretation.

The crafts themselves, however, require an élite no matter where they were produced. The jade objects are not random art, pieces of ornamental intention only, but are made in standard shapes and repeating patterns. The distribution of the jades in burials suggests emblems of rank. It seems clear that they mark several statuses and were not available to everyone.

The painted cylindrical jars which are so fine, large and fragile, but produced in large quantities especially for burials, smack of conspicuous consumption, as well as both a need and an ability to mobilise surplus labor. Production of daily pottery and assorted stone tools, on the other hand, probably took place in families or villages, along with that of baskets, ropes, clothing and other ordinary needs.

The organisation of production thus may have been on two levels; production for the ritual organised by the élite and household production of tools and containers, clothes and dwellings. The jade specialists, in particular, had a very time-consuming and onerous task. They could have been kept busy as full time specialists.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, it appears that at least a three-tier structure was in place in the Hongshan culture. The élites were involved in both organising the production of jades and the procurement of raw materials. The jades so manufactured were used as status symbols, to further separate the élite from the producers. Other production specifically for the élites included painted pottery and perhaps bronze. Plough agriculture and domesticated animals could have produced enough food for the non-food-producing élites and specialists. The shape of the superstructure involved both central and peripheral élites. Thus the Hongshan culture appears to be a genuinely stratified society, although there is a good deal more one might wish to know about it.

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NELSON, HONGSHAN—AN EARLY COMPLEX SOCIETY IN NORTHEAST CHINA

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