The Cinnabar Inscriptions Discovered at the Xiaoshuangqiao Site, Zhengzhou

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I

During the past few years we have discovered at the Xiaoshuangqiao 小双桥 site in Zhengzhou 郑州, a site of the Middle Shang period, a number of inscriptions written in cinnabar on ceramic ritual vessels that bear great scholarly value. The Xiaoshuangqiao site is located in the southwest of the Xiaoshuangqiao Village and situated on the terrace of the southern bank of the Suoxu River 索须河, a tributary of the Huai River 淮河. To the northeast of the site is the ancient Xingze Lake 荥泽, and about 20 km to its northwest the Early Shang urban center Zhengzhou. The site extends in north-south direction, and has a dimension of 1,400,000 square meters. In the center there have been found foundations of walls of a palace complex, a high platform formed of rammed earth, foundations of palaces, dwellings, sacrificial pit clusters, ditches, refuse pits, and some metalworking remains. The majority of finds are ceramic wares, a large portion of which is ritual vessels. The cultural content of the Xiaoshuangqiao site, which appears to be rather pure, and short in chronology, roughly parallels the early phase of the Middle Shang; its flourishing time right succeeded to the end of the urban center Zhengzhou. On the ground of the cultural content and the architectural features, one may consider the site as another urban center of the Shang Dynasty; I personally believe that this site is very likely the capital Ao 阿, because it is located within the area that historical records point the capital Ao of Shang King Zhongding 仲丁 to.

II

The ceramic ritual vessel vats that bear cinnabar inscriptions are mostly unearthed in the sacrificial pits that hold cow skulls and cow horns, in other architectural features, and in deposit layers, all within the palace complex. The sacrificial pits are sizable in number, and they appear in clusters of considerable dimension. The different contents of these pits allow us to divide them into six types including the human sacrifice and the cow-skull sacrifice pits. The human sacrifice pits are concentrated to the north of the main palace. Varying in surface shape and structure, they display circular, ellipse, oblong, and irregular forms. There are various types of disposal of human bodies, including disorderly group burial, multi-body burial, two-body burial, single-body burial, single-body burial without limbs, and refuse pit burial. The cow-head pits are mostly placed to the northern and southern sides of the main palace, and irregular in shape. One pit exposes three layers of cow skulls with horns untidily deposited. Some cow skulls have already been destroyed, but the remaining ones count more than seventy. The forms of these cow skulls tell that the original cows vary widely in size and therefore in age. Other cow-head pits are comparatively smaller; they usually contain ten to thirty heads. Three pits have only one head each. The mix-type pits are located to the south of the main palace, also different in form. They have rich deposits, including not only cow skulls and cow horns, but also ceramic vessel fragments, stone wares, bronze artifacts, bone artifacts, jade ornaments, turquoise pieces, stone knives, stone sickles, stone tools with rectangular perforation, smelting furnace fragments, slag and burned clay blocks. Scattered everywhere inside the pits are tusks and bones of elephant skulls, pig, deer, dog, chicken, and cranes. Pits of the cow-horn-plus-ceramic-ware type are great in number with varying forms. They yield cow skulls, cow horns, ceramic wares–primarily vats, and stone artifacts. The cow horn pits have a small share of the sacrificial pits. They are small in size and irregular in shape; most often they contain only one to three cow horns. The ceramic-ware-plus-animal-bones pits are rela-
tively few. Most of them contain a crushed vessel and a few disturbed animal bones. This type of pits might have been the sacrificial pits for the foundations of architectures of palaces and the like.

III

The vessel types such as jar, tureen, and turtle-like wares take a considerable proportion out of the Xiaoshuangqiao ceramic shards. Among them the most intriguing wares are the vats that bear cinnabar inscriptions. Vessels of this type are primarily found in sacrificial pits, other architectural features, and deposit layers related to sacrifice. Regardless of size, they all bear characters written in cinnabar on the exterior or interior surface. For this reason we regard these vats not as ordinary utilitarian vessels, but as ritual vessels used in certain ritual activities.

In excavating the central area (the palace complex) of the Xiaoshuangqiao site we find these vats mainly in the following positions: in sacrificial pits, in trash pits and in deposit layers in the sacrificial quarter. Typologically speaking, these vats occur in two types: large size with thick body and small size with thin body. The large type is relatively greater in number; it is made of clay tempered with sands, sometimes even with shell powder. They are formed by coiling clay slips. Fired in high temperature, the vats are fairly hard, showing orange and brown colors mostly, but sometimes pale brown, gray and black skin on brown body. On the surface they are decorated with basket design, cord design, square, and attached clay slips. The small type is much less in number, smaller in size, and thinner in body. This type of vats is made of clay with fine-grained sand, sometimes without sand, and baked in moderate temperature. Hand-made mostly, they display brown, gray, gray-brown and black-skin-and-brown-body colors. Ornaments of these vats include cord design and cord-like attached slips (Fig. 1).

IV

The cinnabar inscriptions are written on the exterior and interior of the rim, and the exterior of the belly of the large type of vats, the exterior of the belly, the interior, the exterior of the rim of the small type of vats, and the exterior of vessel lid. The inscriptions discovered to date fall within three categories. Those of category one are numerals, altogether four cases. They represent three numerals, “二 (two),” “三 (three),” and “七 (seven).” They are marked on the rim in a horizontal fashion. Those of category two are insignia and pictographs, which occur in a larger number. These pictographs mostly resemble human body (Figs. 2–4), but others resemble bird, objects (Fig. 5), and activities (Fig. 6). These pictographs represent the major body of the Middle Shang written inscriptions. Some of them apparently bear the function of insignia, and might have been clan insignia. Those of category three are difficult to decipher, although they must have assumed certain meaning.

The cinnabar inscriptions written on ceramic vats found at the Xiaoshuangqiao site are limited in quantity,
but most of them have been well preserved. To date they still constitute the only body of written characters antecedent to the oracle bone inscriptions of Shang and bronze inscriptions of Shang and Zhou. Their discovery surely shed light to the study of the origin of ancient Chinese characters. In aspects of character form, stroke, structure, and written style, the Xiaoshuangqiao cinnabar characters belong to the same writing system as the oracle bone and bronze inscriptions, but they evidently predate the oracle bone and bronze inscriptions. They thus represent a critical stage of early writing. The cinnabar inscriptions have innate relationship with the oracle bone inscriptions; some of them even exhibit conspicuous derivative link (Table 1). Despite that these inscriptions are not completely deciphered, a comparative study of these early writing will be instrumental to understand the meaning of the Xiaoshuangqiao cinnabar inscriptions, and the contemporaneous ritual activities.

The discovery of the Xiaoshuangqiao cinnabar inscriptions brought the history of Chinese writing forward for at least one hundred years, or, from the Late Shang (Anyang 安阳) to the early phase of the Middle Shang. The recent carbon dates obtained by the “Xia–Shang–Zhou Chronology Project” circumscribe the absolute chronology of the Xiaoshuangqiao site to ca. 1435–1412 BC. The fact that the cinnabar inscriptions have only been discovered in the deposit layers and architectural remains within the sacrificial quarter, and mostly on ceramic vats, reveals to us that these characters were part of ritual documents. These characters, except for a few ones, occur only once and singly; therefore it is very important to investigate the meaning of each character. The fluent lines, skillful strokes, and elegant structures indicate that the characters have been employed maturely. Like the oracle bone inscriptions, the cinnabar inscriptions are found in the sacrificial quarter. The message they embody should have been related to sacrificial activities. The character forms and structures of both cinnabar and oracle bone inscriptions indicate one writing system. They both are mostly pictographs, and were developed at successive stages. In the meantime, the Xiaoshuangqiao cinnabar inscriptions
Table 1 Comparison of writing structure of Xiaoshuangqiao cinnabar inscriptions with oracle bone and bronze inscriptions

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<td>Oracle bone inscription</td>
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<td>Cinnabar inscription</td>
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句 东 天 走 天 尹 父
show some primitive features. They are mostly used singly; character compounds or sentences are rarely seen. Those with two to three character compounds are definitely different from the sentences in the oracle bone inscriptions, which can communicate a complete meaning. In addition, the cinnabar inscriptions are written on ceramic vats, unlike the oracle bone inscriptions inscribed on turtle shells and animal bones. The cinnabar inscriptions nevertheless are typical written characters; the oracle bone inscriptions, according to existing research, were written before being inscribed. We may speculate that ceramic wares were the major medium of writing. Based on currently available data, oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions were related to ritual activities; in a similar vein, the Xiaoshuangqiao cinnabar inscriptions should have been products of sacrificial activities. Despite that we cannot derive evidence from the inscriptions themselves, their locations and medium hint the relationship with sacrificial activities. The writing tool should have been brush, and the writing material made of cinnabar mixed with other substance.

References


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