The Capital Sites of Bohai Kingdom

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Key words: Bohai (Kingdom)–Antiquities Five-capital System

The Bohai Kingdom (698–926 CE) played a significant role in the historical arena of Northeast China from the seventh century to the tenth century. The locations of its capitals are perennial questions in the circles of archaeology and history. Since the late Qing Dynasty, scholars have continuously engaged in the pursuit of locating Bohai’s capitals. This paper, on the one hand, builds on previous studies; on the other hand, it takes advantage of the recently available information pertaining to the archaeological expedition directed by the Jilin Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology at the walled sites of Xigucheng and Baliancheng since 2000. It is expected to open new lines of investigation on the study of Bohai’s state capitals.

I

According to historical literature, an administrative institution called the Five-capital System 五京制度 was established by the Bohai Kingdom. The literature also documents the exact names of the five capitals and the rotation of state capitals. These records reveal a confusing fact that capitals of the Five-capital System do not equate state capitals. Clarifying these notions is a prerequisite for the search of capitals of Bohai.

The Five-capital System of Bohai Kingdom was first seen in the chapter Account of Bohai of New Tang History 新唐书·渤海传. They include Upper Capital Longquan Fu 上京龙泉府, Middle Capital Xiande Fu 中京显德府, East Capital Longyuan Fu 东京龙原府, South Capital Nanhai Fu 南京南海府, and finally West Capital Yalu Fu 西京鸭渌府.

Concerning the question of capitals of Bohai, five clues can be extrapolated from the historical literature. To summarize, Bohai moved its capital at least four times. They are, from early to late, the first capital (to be determined) → Xianzhou 显州 (at latest in late Tianbao 天宝 Period of Tang) → Upper Capital (from terminal Tianbao Period to Zhenyuan 贞元 Period of Tang) → East Capital (from Zhenyuan Period to the death of Dae Heummu 大钦茂) → Upper Capital (from the enthronement of Dae Hwa-yeo 大华均 to the extinguishing of Bohai Kingdom). In correspondent to the capitals of the Five-capital System, only the Upper Capital and East Capital were formal capitals as well.

The academic circle has reached agreement that the Five-capital System of Bohai Kingdom was a political institution. This author maintains that “the general interpretation of the five capitals is that they were parts of a political organization of administration. Their significance rested on the specific positions on a jurisdiction hierarchy. The literature has no record that the Middle, West and South Capitals had ever been used as state capital. This is indicative that the capitals in the Five-capital System were not the equivalent of state capitals. Therefore, the scale and facilities of these administrative centers do not need to meet the criteria of a state capital.” We should, therefore, explicitly distinguish the notion of state capitals from that of capitals of the Five-capital System in the archaeological investigation of Bohai Kingdom capitals.

The academic community in general agrees that the Dongjingcheng walled site located in Bohai Township 渤海镇, Ning’an City 宁安市, Heilongjiang Province is the ruins of Upper Capital Longquan Fu (Institute of Archaeology, CASS 1997). However, the academic community was once divided on the question of East Capital Longyuan Fu 龙原府. Most Chinese scholars support the proposition that the Baliancheng 八连城 walled site in Hunchun 珲春, Jilin is the ruins of East Capital. North Korean scholars disagree and argue that the walled site at Pugo-ri 富居里, Ch’ŏngjin City 清津市 in North Hamgyeong-do is the ancient locality of East Capital.

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The Capital Sites of Bohai Kingdom

(Kim 1997). Yet, the Pugo-ri proposition has never gained momentum and become muted in recent years.

On the question of Bohai’s early state capitals, several localities have been proposed. To date, the following propositions have been floating around for some time: Chengshanzi Mountain Fortress 城山子山城 and Aodongcheng 敞东城 walled site; Yongsheng 永胜 site (Li 1991); and Chengshanzi Mountain Fortress and Yongsheng site (Song 1994; Li 2002). As our knowledge on these sites grows, these propositions have been seriously questioned or outright rejected. Because of the insufficient archaeological evidence, the chronology and functions of Chengshanzi Mount Fortress have been a matter of debate. The newly recovered materials from archaeological excavations suggest that the occupations at Aodongcheng walled site and Yongsheng site are most likely single-component depositions dated to the Jin Dynasty (Research Center for Chinese Frontier Archaeology of Jilin University 2006 and 2007). This author argues the record that Dae Jo Yeong 大祚荣 “occupied Dongmou Mountain 东牟山 and built a fortified settlement” has no direct relationship to the founding of a regime. It over-stretches the fact when using this entry to argue the location of the early state capital of Bohai.

Toriyama Kiichi (1944) proposed that the walled site of Xigucheng 西古城 is the ruins of Bohai’s Middle Capital Xiande Fu, but it was the seat of Luzhou 卢州 and not related to Xianzhou 显州. Chinese scholar Li Jiancai (1982) agrees that Xigucheng is the ruins of Middle Capital Xiande Fu; but he argues that the site was also the seat of Xianzhou. Thus, the pursuit for Middle Capital is split into the Luzhou camp and Xianzhou camp. This author maintains that Toriyama Kiichi has correctly used the criteria of a state capital to justify the nature of Xigucheng. Yet, proposing Xigucheng is the archaeological corollary of Middle Capital Xiande Fu lacks the necessary evidence in historical literature. There is no record in all the Bohai Kingdom-related document conveys the faintest signal that Middle Capital Xiande Fu was ever used as state capital.

In the 1980s, Korean scholars proposed that the Chonghae Earthen Castle in Pukchong County, South Hamgyeong-do is the ruined South Capital Nanhai Fu. This proposition has since become the consensus of the academic circle. However, it is clear that the site had never been the seat of Bohai’s state capital. According to the findings at the walled sites of Dongjingcheng, Xigucheng and Baliancheng, state capitals of Bohai are defined by three critical criteria: major urban facilities aligned along a central-axis, large-scale palace complexes, and glazed pottery architectural elements. The excavation report of Chonghae indicates that it does not meet any of these criteria. It is noteworthy to point out that there is no indication from the historical literature that South Capital Nanhai Fu had ever been used as state capital.

Finally, Linjiang 临江 and Ji’ an 集安 have been proposed to be the localities of West Capital Yalu Fu. However, both propositions lack information about their exact locations. According to historical literature, West Capital Yalu Fu had never served as the state capital of Bohai. This simple fact suggests that it is not necessary to use the state capital criteria in the pursuit of West Capital.

Deduction from the above discussions suggests that the timings when the walled sites of Xigucheng, Dongjingcheng and Baliancheng became the so-called capitals do not necessarily correspond to the timing of the Five-capital System. As a political institution, the Five-capital System was not related to the founding of a state capital. To expand on this understanding, the state capital facilities seen at Dongjingcheng, Xigucheng and Baliancheng might have been built at a time earlier than the beginning of Five-capital System. At the very least, the founding of the Five-capital System should not be as earlier as the time when Xianzhou was the state capital.

II

Xigucheng (Jilin Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 2007) systematically reports the materials obtained from the five-year archaeological excavation at the walled site of Xigucheng. The report takes a cautious position and associates the site with Middle Capital Xiandefu. After publication of the report, the author (Song and Wang 2008) argues in a separate paper that Xigucheng Site should be first identified with “Xianzhou.” After that, it might have the necessary conditions to be identified with Middle Capital Xiande Fu.

The plan of the inner city and the architectural features of Xigucheng Site indicate that it carried relatively complete urban functions. During the early state-building efforts of Dae Jo Yeong, he should have concentrated his resources on the stabilization of the regime, rather than the building of a capital city. Therefore, Xigucheng Site is unlikely conducive to the early state capital of Bohai. Yet, the various features of Xigucheng
clearly suggest that it was a state capital. Moreover, the historical literature unambiguously states that Xianzhou was one of the state capitals of Bohai. The questions, therefore, are whether Xigucheng Site is the archaeological corollary of “Xianzhou” and whether it is the location of Middle Capital Xiande Fu. To answer these questions, we have to compare Xigucheng with Baliancheng and Dongjingcheng, two walled sites that have been securely identified with the state capitals of Bohai.

The author has systematically compared the features and material remains of Xigucheng with that of Baliancheng and Dongjingcheng. The following arguments summarize and refine the past studies.

1. Comparison between the Sites of Xigucheng and Baliancheng

The two walled sites share certain characteristics in city plan. Both of them feature two concentric circumferential walls, making an inner city nested into an outer city; the main structures of the city distribute along the central axis; and plans and the relationship between the constituent parts of palace complexes I and II are similar. At the same time, they also show considerable difference (Table 1; Figures 1 and 2). Material remains recovered from the walled sites of Xigucheng and Baliancheng are almost identical. Table 2 lists their common characteristics.

The typological scheme of the eave tiles of Baliancheng follows that of Xigucheng. The types and scripting styles of Baliancheng’s scripted eave tiles are consistent with that of Xigucheng (Table 2; Figures 3–5).

The above comparison reveals that the architectural elements unearthed from the Sites of Xigucheng and Baliancheng share common typological features. They are likely originated from the same workshops. This high degree of similarity suggests that the time lapse between their productions was short; thus indicating that the two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geometric shape</th>
<th>Urban plan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Center of settlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baliancheng</td>
<td>Near square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xigucheng</td>
<td>Rectangular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Comparison between the Plans of Baliancheng and Xigucheng
### Table 2. Common characteristics of artifacts recovered from Baliancheng and Xigucheng


*Figure 3. Eave tiles from Xigucheng Site*

*Figure 4. Eave tiles from Baliancheng Site*
sites were built within a relatively short period. This argument corroborates with historical literature that the time lapse between the founding of Xianzhou as state capital and the relocation of state capital to the East Capital was about three decades.

2. Comparison between the Sites of Xigucheng and Dongjingcheng

The two walled sites share many characteristics in city plan. See details in Table 3. The only difference is that the center of the inner city of Dongjingcheng is palace complex II; wherein, that of Xigucheng is the south gate of the inner city.

It is apparent that the plan of the northern half of Dongjingcheng was built with the same scheme of the main facilities of Xigucheng (Figure 6).

The material remains of Xigucheng (including that of Baliancheng), however, are strikingly different from that of Dongjingcheng.

We start with eave tiles. In spite of the fact that the eave tiles of Dongjingcheng Site have morphological styles similar to the Aa, Ad and Bb types eave tiles of Xigucheng Site, they also display dissimilarities in the decorative patterns. See Table 4 for details.

To sum, the decorative patterns of Xigucheng’s eave tiles are relatively simple; wherein the patterns of Dongjingcheng’s eave tiles are elaborated (Figure 7).

Both Xigucheng and Dongjingcheng yielded considerable number of “scripted tiles.” However, each of

![Figure 5. Tiles with Impressed Inscriptions from Bohai Capitals](image)

| Table 3. Common characteristics of the city plans of Xigucheng and Dongjingcheng |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Similarities in the City Plans of Xigucheng and Dongjingcheng | The size of Xigucheng’s outer city is similar to that of Dongjingcheng’s inner city | Scheme of Xigucheng’s Hall Sites I, II and V is identical to that of Dongjingcheng’s Hall Sites III, IV and IV. | Hall Sites III and IV, partitioning walls and gate structure of Xigucheng are also seen in the inner city of Dongjingcheng. | Sizes of the architectures of inner cities are similar |
| | Size Planning Scheme Urban Plan Individual Structures | |
| Similarities in the City Plans of Xigucheng and Dongjingcheng | The size of Xigucheng’s outer city is similar to that of Dongjingcheng’s inner city | Scheme of Xigucheng’s Hall Sites I, II and V is identical to that of Dongjingcheng’s Hall Sites III, IV and IV. | Hall Sites III and IV, partitioning walls and gate structure of Xigucheng are also seen in the inner city of Dongjingcheng. | Sizes of the architectures of inner cities are similar |
the assemblages have unique characteristics and show significant difference.

Finally, glazed pottery *chiwei* (owl tail-shaped roof ridge finial) are objects of intrigue. The style of *chiwei* yielded from Hall Site I of Xigucheng is primordial. The styles of *chiwei* yielded from other localities are similar to that of Type I *chiwei* of Dongjingcheng. They are elaborately decorated with string of beads pattern. The Type II *chiwei* of Dongjingcheng has become sumptuous.

It is noteworthy to point out that the patterns seen on the eave tiles of Xigucheng and Baliancheng are hybrids of the indigenous Bohai culture (Types A, B and C of Xigucheng) and the Central Plains culture (Type E of Xigucheng). However, elements of Bohai culture dominate the patterns of the eave tile assemblage of Dongjingcheng. The eave tile assemblage of Xigucheng shows stylistic signature of the Central Plains, suggest-

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**Table 4. Comparison of the patterns of eave tiles from Dongjingcheng and Xigucheng**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Central Nipple Zone</th>
<th>Lotus Petal Motif</th>
<th>Between-petals Patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dongjingcheng</td>
<td>Nipple, string of beads, concentric ridged lines, string of beads + cross, string of beads + crescent moon, various combinations of nipple &amp; concentric ridged lines</td>
<td>Four to seven lotus petal patterns</td>
<td>Sepal, cross, crescent moon, T-shaped, curved line, crescent moon + sepal, fork-shaped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xigucheng</td>
<td>Nipple, string of beads, concentric ridged lines</td>
<td>Six lotus petals, six-petal flower and grass, side-viewed eight lotus petals</td>
<td>Sepal, cross, crescent moon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 6. Plan of the Place Complex of Upper Capital Site**

**Figure 7. Eave tiles from Upper Capital Site of Bohai**
ing an earlier chronology. On the contrary, the eave tiles of Dongjingcheng had basically abandoned the Central Plains’ elements; wherein indigenous style became fully developed and dominated the assemblage. In addition, the chiwei of Xigucheng is more primordial than that of Dongjingcheng. Taken together, we can conclude that the absolute dates of Xigucheng was older than that of Dongjingcheng. The material remains of Dongjingcheng are likely attributable to times after the founding of Dongjingcheng as capital of Bohai Kingdom.

In all, the above comparative analyses among Xigucheng, Baliancheng and Dongjingcheng suggest that the occupation of the walled site of Xigucheng was earlier than the occupations of Baliancheng and Dongjingcheng. It is beyond doubt that Xigucheng was once the capital of Bohai Kingdom, and Xianzhou was once the capital seat of Bohai. The corroboration of archaeological and historical literature suggests that Xigucheng Site is the ruins of “Xianzhou” as seen on written text. Nevertheless, whether Xigucheng Site is simultaneously the archaeological corollary of Central Capital Xiande Fu is a question cannot be determined until the beginning date of the Five-capital System of Bohai has been determined.

III

This paper is a rejoinder of the research appeared in two earlier publications, namely “An Archaeological Perspective of Xigucheng Site (Song and Wang 2008)” and “The Five-capital System and Capital Cities of Bohai Kingdom (Song and Qu 2008).” Their findings can be summarized into the following observations:

1. In spite of the fact that Dae Jo Yeong built a walled settlement in Dongmou Shan, it lacks additional written document to support the argument that Dongmou Shan was the founding place of a regime. The present archaeological research cannot determine the exact location of Dongmou Shan and we are still in pursuit of the earliest capital of Bohai Kingdom. Nevertheless, the architectural elements yielded from Tomb 1 of Liudingshan have never been seen in other Bohai sites. They are very likely the architectural elements of early Bohai Kingdom. Their characteristics can be used as touchstones in the search for early Bohai capital.

2. The extant evidences suggest that there lacks convincing reason to consider Middle Capital Xiande Fu as one of the state capitals. According to written records, Middle Capital, West Capital and South Capital of the Five-capital System had never been used as state capital of Bohai.

3. In the discussion of the jurisdiction of Middle Capital Xiande Fu, the chapter Account of Bohai of New Tang History puts Xianzhou after Luzhou. This order of delineation prompts a proposition that the seat of Middle Capital was located in Luzhou. Based on the understanding that the Five-capital System was a political system of administration and was independent to state capital, and the fact that within the jurisdiction of Middle Capital, the Xigucheng Site is the only archaeological site bearing the features of a state capital, Xigucheng can only relate to Xianzhou, a state capital. Meanwhile, during the period when the capital of Bohai Kingdom was located at Xianzhou, the Five-capital System had yet to be established. Why Luzhou became the first prefecture under the governing of Middle Capital after the founding of the Five-capital System is a question for future discussion.

4. By the termination of Tianbao Era, Bohai relocated its capital to “Upper Capital.” By that time, the plan of Dongjingcheng followed the scheme of and modeled after the city plan of Xianzhou (i.e., Xigucheng Site). The scheme of three nesting layers of circumferential walls of Dongjingcheng was formed during and after the reign of Dae Hwa-yeo. By Zhenyuan times, Bohai relocated its capital to East Capital, which exhibited some changes in the scheme of city planning. Yet its architectural elements were supplied by the same workshops that supplied Xianzhou.

5. Xigucheng Site was the archaeological corollary of “Xianzhou” seen in literature. Under the circumstance that the exact time of the founding of the Bohai’s Five-capital System is not known, we are unable to determine whether Xianzhou was the seat of Middle Capital Xiande Fu. This is the point where the arguments of this paper diverge from the “Luzhou camp” and “Xianzhou camp.”

References


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Postscript: The original article was published in Kaogu 考古 (Archaeology) 2009.6: 40–9 with seven illustrations. The abridged version is prepared by the author and translated into English by Lee Yun Kuen 李润权.