Two Modes of the Development of Chinese Ancient Civilization: on Observing of the Funeral Jades Unearthed from Large Graves of Hongshan Culture, Liangzhu Culture, and Yangshao Culture

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In the late Neolithic Age, ca. 5500–4500 BP, the aspects of archaeological cultures in Chinese continent underwent great changes. Various traces show that social structure in those times was also in an intensive transformation from the old to the new, and the process of civilization entered a critical period. But the types, contents and major fields of change were diverse among regions and cultures, which may have reflected still deeper issues involving different modes of the civilization process. In this paper I will put forward my ideas based on a comparison of the funeral jades from large-sized tombs of the Hongshan, Liangzhu and Yangshao Cultures.

I. A General Survey and Examples of the Funeral Jades from Hongshan, Liangzhu and Yangshao Tombs

The Hongshan Culture is distributed mainly in present-day southeastern Inner Mongolia and western Liaoning and chronologically ranges from 6000 to 5000 BP. In the 1970s and early 1980s, significant breakthroughs were made through surveys of Hongshan Culture sites across western Liaoning and excavations on the Dongshanzui and Niuheliang Sites, which resulted in the discovery of the altar-temple-barrow complex and other important remains. According to the preliminary report of the excavation on the Niuheliang site (Institute of Archaeology in Liaoning 1986) and Guo Dashun’s account in his article (1997), dozens of burials in cists have been revealed in stone barrows at the Localities II, III and V. Every barrow contains at least one major burial in a large-sized elaborate pit and with rich grave goods, generally comprising exclusively jades, even pottery seldom seen, which is clearly different from the tombs at other Hongshan Culture settlements. For example, in Barrow-1 of Locality II at Niuheliang, a sleeve-shaped jade was revealed beneath the tomb occupant’s skull of Burial M4, two pig-dragon-shaped jade ornaments side by side on the chest; a hooked-cloud-shaped jade on the tomb occupant’s chest of Burial M14, and a jade ring on either wrist; 20 artifacts from Burial M21, which belonged to the jade tortoise-shell, animal-mask plaque, cong-tube, bi-disc and double bi. At Locality III, a sleeve-shaped jade was found beneath the tomb occupant’s skull of major Burial M7, a cong-shaped jade on the chest, and a jade bracelet on the right wrist. At Locality V, seven jades were uncovered at the large-sized major burial on the eastern side, i.e. a large bi on either side of the tomb occupant’s skull, a hooked-cloud-shaped pendant and a drum-and-sleeve-shaped object on the chest, a bracelet on the right wrist, and a jade tortoise in either hand.

The funeral jades of the Hongshan Culture show distinct features in assemblage. In addition to personal or-
The Liangzhu Culture was distributed largely around Taihu Lake in the lower Yangtze River Valley. It spanned the time ca. 5300 - 4300 BP, with the starting point a little later than that of the Hongshan Culture. Its tombs feature strict hierarchy; and, like the Hongshan Culture burials built close to the temple, there exist graves structured on the top of altars. The grave goods comprise generally only jade and stone artifacts and seldom pottery. But whether in the above-mentioned rather distinctive graves or in burials of other ranks, if only consisting of jade and stone artifacts, these grave goods are bound to include the tube, bead, pendant, bracelet, ring and awl-shaped ornament, and often comprise the bi-disc, cong-tube, crown-shaped ornament, trident, plaque and yue battle-axe. For example, Tomb M20 in the northern row of the Fanshan Cemetery in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, in addition to personal ornaments of the tube and bead types, yielded jades related to religious and sacrificial rites, such as four cong, 41 bi, one crown-shaped ornament, four semi-circular headgear ornaments, a trident headgear ornament and 12 post-shaped objects, as well as one jade yue with its jade pommel and 24 stone yue symbolic of military and royal power. In large-sized Tomb M9 in the southern row at the Yaoshan Altar, in addition to one stone yue, one jade-inlaid lacquer ware and one pendant string composed of jade tubes, beads and awl-shaped artifacts, crown-shaped, trident crown-shaped and post-shaped objects with lids and various-sized cong-tubes were found as major grave goods, which are generally decorated with simple or complex “Human mask designs.”

The Yangshao Culture was principally distributed in Shaanxi, Henan, Shanxi, Hebei and Gansu in the Yellow River Valley, and dates from ca. 6000-4500 BP. Its early phase left over no clear traces of differentiation in settlement pattern and social structure, and the grave goods comprise pottery vessels, jade-like turquoise ornaments of the tube and bead, stone implements such as axes, adzes, spades and chisels, and a few jade tools. In the mid and late phases, the settlement pattern and social structure were greatly changed, central settlements and large-sized architectures appeared successively, and high-ranked tombs brought about as a result of the social developments. In 2005–2006, the Institute of Archaeology, CASS and the Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology excavated on the Xipo Site in Lingbao County, Henan, the 34 tombs recovered in which belonged to the mid phase of the site going back to 5300 BP. Of them the largest tomb M27 is a rectangular earthen pit with primary soil second-tier platforms and measures about 5m in length and about 3.4m in width at the opening. The tomb occupant is a male adult, but it is strange indeed that there are no grave goods in the tomb chamber, only nine pottery vessels in total of the large-mouthed vat, gui food vessel-shaped object, cauldron-on-stove, pot, bo-bowl and a cup are found in the foot pit. About 6m away from M27 is M29, also an earthen pit with primary soil second-tier platforms. It is about 4m long and about 3.3m wide for the opening, and about 1.85m deep. The pottery assemblage consists of six vessels, of which five are in the foot pit. The tomb occupant is a male and, like that of M27, has no stone implements and jade artifacts buried as his grave goods. The burials with jades are medium- or a litter larger in size. Among the 22 graves excavated in 2005 six yielded pottery as well as jades, the latter numbering three from M6, M8 and M9 respectively and two from M17, a yue and a ring from M22 and three yue from M11, which is unexpectedly a minor child’s burial. These tombs are also furnished with primary soil second-tier platforms and foot pits for the most and are similar in form to large tombs.

II. Different Features and Different Types

The Hongshan, Liangzhu and Yangshao cultures are all archaeological cultures of Neolithic China. Although almost all existed in the chronological frame of 5500-4500 BP, each of them has its own features in funeral jades.

1. Assemblage of Funeral Jades. In the tombs of the Hongshan Culture, the jades commonly seen in the assemblages belong to the horse-hoof- and sleeve-shaped objects, hooked-cloud-shaped pendants, bi, rings, and animal figures, such as pig-dragon, tortoise, bird, cicada and silkworm, but seldom include the yue, axe and other weapons of practical or ritual use and consist of no cong.
incised with “deity emblems,” tridents and semi-disc-shaped objects.

In the Liangzhu Culture, the popular jade grave goods comprise the cong, bi, crown-, trident-, semi-disc and awl-shaped objects, bracelet, ring and yue (made of jade or stone). They include seldom sleeve-shaped objects, hooked-cloud-shaped pendants and jade tortoises, pigs or stone. They belong exclusively to the jade hooked-cloud-shaped pendants and jade tortoises, pigs or stone). They include seldom sleeve-shaped objects, hooked-cloud-shaped pendants and jade tortoises, pig-dragons and other animal figures.

The funeral jades of the Yangshao Culture are strongly unitary in type. They belong exclusively to the jade yue and are not accompanied by any other types.

2. Quantity of Funeral Jades. The funeral jades of large-sized tombs in the Hongshan Culture, as recorded in the above-mentioned burials at Niuheliang and the like, are diverse in number, occurring in twos or threes, sixes or sevens and even as many as 20.

The funeral jades of the Liangzhu Culture, in comparison with their contemporary and similar-scale counterparts in the Hongshan and Yangshao Cultures, doubtlessly come first in the amount of funeral jades. Each of them generally yielded dozens or even over a hundred artifacts, including ornaments. As seen in the above described large Fanshan and Yaoshan tombs, each grave contains more than one hundred jades if numbered by piece rather by set.

The funeral jades of large Yangshao Culture tombs are not only incomparable in quantity with those in similar-sized Liangzhu graves, but also a bit lesser than those in large Hongshan Culture tombs. The Lingbao Xipo tombs similar in scale contain generally only one jade yue, even the richest M11 yielded merely three pieces.

3. Manufacturing Techniques of Funeral Jades. The Hongshan Culture funeral jades are round sculptures or plaque-shaped ones. The hooked-cloud- and animal-shaped objects usually bear engraved patterns. In the Liangzhu Culture, the funeral cong and crown-, semi-disc- and trident-shaped jades are almost all incised with a fine design of human or animal masks, even some bi and yue bear such motifs. The Yangshao Culture funeral jades are mainly round sculptures, such as commonly seen yue, which have almost no difference from practical axes and bear no designs.

Moreover, even still greater diversity exists in the condition and manner of burial. As mentioned above, the large-sized tombs of the Hongshan Culture are often multiple burials under the same barrows, not far away from burnt clay floors and stone sacrificial sites, and with stone-built altars erected among barrows. Various traces suggest that these tombs are not an organic component of usual settlement sites, but a sort of particular remains of religious and sacrificial ceremonies. The large-sized Liangzhu Culture tombs, such as those at the Yaoshan Altar, are completely the same as those of the Hongshan Culture. The Liangzhu Fanshan cemetery, despite its own distinctive features, consists of tombs also built on an artificial high platform with sacrificial traces remaining nearby.

The large tombs of the Yangshao Culture are built neither on artificial platforms or altars, nor close to sacrificial places, but in the same cemeteries with other tombs as done in general practice. The only distinction of such cemeteries is the relative concentration of large-sized and smaller tombs in separate zones.

The above comparison suggests that the large-sized tombs discovered in the Hongshan, Liangzhu and Yangshao Cultures are roughly the same in date and scale but in the use of funeral jades show their respective features, which obviously represent three different types: the Hongshan Culture type displaying great diversity from them.

III. Different Types and Different Modes

The researchers believe unanimously that the Hongshan Culture type of jade comprises, in addition to usual ornaments of the tube, bead, pendant, bracelet and ring types, consist of the sleeve-shaped object, hooked-cloud-shaped pendant and jade pig-dragon, tortoise, bird, cicada, silkworm and the like that were taken to be tools communicating with gods. Zhou Xiaojing (2006) holds that these objects “must have been ornaments for Shamas’ costumes or their instruments, namely magic aids and tools they used when they practiced magic in their lifetime and enjoyed as grave goods when they were entombed after death.” It is thus clear that although the then society had been differentiated and the so-called “public power” overriding it had come into being, the controller and exerciser of the power was not the secular “king” but the wizard, or the so-called “god-king” who controlled the power of communicating with gods, the possessors of absolute power and absolute prestige. Gods solved the operation and regulation of society, and their wishes and orders were all transmitted and implemented by the wizard communicating with them.

The funeral jades of the Liangzhu Culture were also concerned with religion and sacrifice in function, i.e.
also tools of communicating with gods. On the function of the commonly seen jade bi and cong, the Chapter Da Zong Bo 大宗伯 (Minister of Rites) in Zhou Li (The Rites of Zhou) completed in the Warring-States Period says that “the verdant bi-disc is offered as a sacrifice to Heaven and the yellow cong to Earth.” Kwang-chih Chang (1986) studied various opinions on the use of the jade cong and pointed out that “the concrete shape of the cong is both round and square... Already the shape shows that the cong was a symbol of the linkage of heaven with earth, i.e. as a mean or magic instrument linking heaven with earth.” The cong and other jades are almost all carved with “human and animal mask design,” or “animal mask design” and “deity emblem” as some researchers call. If we consider the meanings of this design along with the shape of the cong and the association of cong and bi often seen in archaeological excavations, then the reasonability of interpreting the two types of jades as tools or magic instruments for communicating with gods will be still more understandable. The discovery of the jade cong called “grand cong” in the large Liangzhu Fanshan tomb in 1986 provided direct evidence for the revelation of the meaning of that image (Zhejiang Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 2005). It “is carved with ‘human with animal mask design’ in the upper and lower parts of the vertical grooves on the four sides, altogether eight images.” The human wears a feather crown on the head, arms raised, elbows bent and fingers stretched, while the mythical animal features round eyes, swollen nose, wide mouth, long protruding teeth and bird’s feet. It is obvious at the first look that the images depict an infinitely resourceful half-deity that in his practice of magic rides a mythical animal able to go up to heaven and down to the earth. This is the most complete and most complicated image of a half-deity riding an animal and ascending to heaven so far we have seen on Liangzhu jades. The other similar images must have been versions of its simplification or decomposition, but all can be taken as its representatives transmitting the same information. The “half-deity” in a feather crown is just a wizard, while the mythical animal with round eyes, protruding teeth and bird’s feet, an imaginary creature with man-like spiritual nature. Kwang-chih Chang concludes through his research in the above-quoted article that “the wizard’s operation of communicating with Heaven and Earth was under animals’ help, so it is certainly not accidental that the magic instruments as tools of communicating with gods bear incised animal figures.” The most distinct difference of the assemblage of funeral jades in large-sized Liangzhu Culture tombs from that in Hongshan Culture graves is the usual inclusion of jade or stone yue symbolic of military and kingly power in addition to numerous jades concerned with religious and sacrificial activities. The yue was a weapon evolved from the stone axe as a tool of production and symbolized kingly power. The substantial and universal existence of jade and stone yue suggests that military and kingly power had already held certain position and was combined into one with religious authority in the then power center overriding Liangzhu society. But in comparison with each other, religious authority was mightier than military and kingly power, which has a piece of evidence in the human with animal mask carved on the jade yue unearthed from Tomb Fanshan M12 in Yuhang. It indicates that the yue not only appeared in the grand sacrificial cemeteries, but also existed as a symbol of theocracy in the execution of death sentences and military expeditions. It is even more important that here we have a proof verifying that just the wizard was qualified to execute military and kingly power and at the same time able to associate himself with other people and gods, to communicate with Heaven and Earth and to control sacrifice-conducting power. In other words, the wizard held both religious authority and military and kingly power.

The Yangshao Culture, however, shows wide divergence. Among the grave goods of its large-sized tombs, in addition to pottery, there are only a few or even no jade yue, as well as no traces of religious and sacrificial activities and other symbols of the existence of theocracy. It had also entered the stage of hierarchical society by the mid and late phases, but as a distinctive feature, in the power center overriding the society, the military and kingly power symbolized by the jade yue held the supreme absolute position. We cannot say that there were no religious believes and sacrificial activities in Yangshao societies, but the above-stated conditions at least proved that religious authority must have held only a tiny position in the social and political life. It may have been concerned with the then people’s belief. The Yangshao people’s belief was ancestral worship completely different from the divine worship reflected from the ritual centers of the Hongshan and Liangzhu cultures, because jades were largely ritual objects in divine worship while pottery was their counterparts in ancestral worship.
Based on the above analyses it can be concluded that in the evolutionary process of early Chinese civilization, by 5500 to 4500 BP, either the Hongshan Culture in the north, the Liangzhu Culture in the southeast or the Yangshao Culture in the Central Plains had developed to the stage called by Prof. Su Bingqi as “archaic state,” but their routes and types of advance were divergent from each other. The “archaic state” of the Hongshan Culture was a theocracy with the religious authority as the main power, and that of the Liangzhu Culture, also a theocratic state, but the religious authority was associated with military and kingly power, and that of the Yangshao Culture, a state of kingly power that was associated with military power.

**IV. Different Modes and Different Prospects**

Different modes of development determined entirely different prospects.

Archaeological researches have revealed that the Hongshan Culture was developed into the Xiaoheyan Culture, which was later transformed into the Lower Xiajadian Culture already in the Bronze Age. However, either of the latter two, as known so far, left over neither so astonishing religious and sacrificial vestiges and objects as the altar-temple-barrow complex revealed in the Hongshan Culture, nor proofs of their development into states of independent civilizations. In fact, as time went on, the successors of the Hongshan Culture were again and again differentiated, some vanished and some were amalgamated into other cultures or assimilated by more speedily and more highly developed cultures.

The Liangzhu “archaic state” with altars, elite burials, large city-sites and fine jades as its symbols was evidently higher-developed in comparison with the Hongshan “archaic state,” but its prospects, like those of the latter, also left over no important vestiges and objects verifying its development into a still higher-level independent civilization. On the contrary, more data showed that it also withered away or was superseded or amalgamated or assimilated by other cultures.

The most distinctive is the Yangshao “archaic state” in the Central Plains. Plenty of archaeological data show that the Central Plains Longshan Culture following the Yangshao Culture did not stop its steps toward civilization but continued to make progress and reached again a new stage. Bringing together the excavations on the Taosi city-site in Xiangfen of Shanxi (Shanxi Archaeological Team, IA, CASS 2004, 2005), on the Wangchengan city-site in Dengfeng of Henan (School of Archaeology and Museology, Peking University 2007) and on the Xinzhai city-site in Xinmi (Aurora Center for the Study of Ancient Civilizations, Peking University 2008) and the discovery of the palace-city site on the Erlitou site in Yanshi (Institute of Archaeology, CASS 1999), and studying the substantial material data, we get a picture demonstrating that the history of Xia period previously considered as legendary times actually is a reliable history. If we link up the accomplishments in the past excavations and studies on the Yinxu at Anyang, the Shang city-site at Zhengzhou and that at Yanshi, all in Henan, the Zhouyuan and Chang’an Feng-Hao sites in Shaanxi, and the Luoyang Chengzhou site in Henan, then the development courses and patterns of the history of Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties will be clearly exhibited to the people; if we trace back to the origin, naturally it began from the Yangshao “archaic state.” We do not deny that the Central Plains Longshan Culture and the following Xia, Shang and Zhou cultures absorbed in their evolutionary courses advanced elements of other cultures, but on the whole, all these later cultures were surely the direct successors and developments of Yangshao Culture.

**V. Different Prospects and Different Causes**

The Hongshan “archaic state” withered away, so did the Liangzhu “archaic state,” only the Yangshao “archaic state” was able to develop continuously, lasting long and uninterrupted, and became the ceaseless, several-thousand-year-enduring mainstay of the history of Chinese civilization. What were the principal causes?

Both the theory of environmental change and that of foreign cultures’ invasion are reasonable and possible to a certain extent. But up to the present, the proposed proofs seem hardly able to evidence them to be tenable. Considering over and over again, I maintain that the key matter must have consisted in these cultures taking different routes and modes in their evolutionary processes toward civilization.

The Hongshan “archaic state” adopted the mode of enlarging unlimitedly religious authority, and the Liangzhu “archaic state,” that of associating religious authority as the leading role with military and kingly power. The supremacy of theocracy must have been the root cause that made them fall finally. Firstly, the wizard controlling religious authority spent a great amount...
of social wealth on unproductive religious and sacrificial construction and activities, which undermined the normal functions and sustainable development of the social organism and the motive force of the further development of society. Secondly, the wizard controlling religious authority did not govern the state with his military and administrate talents but execute leadership by worshipping deities with sacrifices, communicating with them through dialogues, conducting himself subordinately in accordance with the oracles or freely to his own mind. The results of these behaviors are imaginable. But in the Yangshao “archaic state” emphasizing kingly power on the foundation of joint military and kingly power, things were absolutely different from the above stated. In the archaeological excavation on the Lingbao Xipo site (No. 1 Henan Archaeological Team, IA, CASS 2007; Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 2008) we saw neither religious and sacrificial scenes extensive in scale and rich in variety like those of Hongshan Culture at Niuheliang and those of Liangzhu Culture at Yaoshan and Huiguanshan, nor jades full of mysterious religious flavors and meanings like those seen frequently in large-sized tombs of Hongshan and Liangzhu cultures. Despite their high ranks and positions, the large-sized Yangshao Culture graves yielded in general only pottery vessels and one or two jades and were not built in special places separate from the common cemeteries of “clans” but, on the contrary, in the same area along with the smaller-sized tombs of other community members that may have shared the same blood relationship with the occupants of large tombs. Here we see the prominence of kingly power and the insignificance of religious authority, the simple and unadorned style of noblemen and the close linkage of the noble with the humble despite differentiation from each other. Evidently under the leadership of such a directing center, the Yangshao “archaic state,” firstly, did not and could hardly suffer the extreme waste of social wealth, which ensured the normal function and enduring development of society. Secondly, although the rulers of Yangshao “archaic state” controlling military and kingly power esteemed and feared national deities in mind and thus offered them sacrifices, the primary objectives of worship were their ancestors, from whom they sought for blessings and ruling strategies, thus they did not administer the state so strongly in accordance with the oracle and so freely to his own mind as the Hongshan and Liangzhu “archaic state” rulers and theocracy controllers did. Thirdly, the rulers of Yangshao “archaic state” were closer to the people and more understood folk society, and so were able to put forward measures relatively satisfying the requirements of the common people and society and conforming to the needs of the development of society.

In short, both archaeological data and literal records suggest that the state of kingly power in the history of ancient China could reach a level of development higher and better than the theocratic state for it was able to hold consciously or unconsciously the direction permitting society to sustainable development and preventing social wealth from meaningless wasting. From the very beginning of its social stratification, the Yangshao Culture adopted the policy of stressing and developing kingly power on the foundation of combined-together military power and kingly power, which was followed by its successors. This must have been the root cause why the mode of civilization the Yangshao “archaic state” created allowed sustainable development that lasted thousands of years.

The development from the state of religious authority to that of kingly power must have been a general law in the logical sense. But in the process of civilization, owing to differences between various regions and various cultures in environments, traditions and influences from other cultures, it was possible for certain cultures to take diverse routes and modes of development. A piece of evidence can be drawn just from the Yangshao Culture that did not adopt the evolutionary mode from religious authority to kingly power but went along the route of developing kingly power from the very beginning.

References


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