Preliminary discussion on the white pottery produced during the Prehistoric Age in the Haidai Region

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Abstract

Haidai Region is one of the two main distribution areas of white pottery in the Neolithic Age of China. In this region, white pottery was mainly popular in 5000-4000 BP; the white pottery wares in this region had distinctive features: they were made of Kaolin clay and baked in high temperature, their types were reducing gradually during this time, and their most significant type is gui-pitcher in unique shapes. The white pottery wares were recovered mostly in large- and middle-sized sites, and moreover, from large- and middle-sized burials, showing that they had natures of ritual vessels, the existence and absence and the amounts of which in a tomb or site were indicators of social differentiation. Meanwhile, white pottery was diffused and spread into the Central Plains, the middle and lower reaches of Yangtze River and the region in present-day northern Henan and middle and southern Hebei Provinces and other areas along with the external communication of Dawenkou and Longshan Cultures, and finally inherited by the Xia and Shang Cultures in later times.

Keywords: diffusion and spreading; Haidai Region; Neolithic Age; ritual vessels; white pottery.

The outline of the issue

The Haidai Region geographically extends to the lower valleys of the Yellow and Huai Rivers and at its height of power reached south as far as the north bank of the Yangtze River, and northeast as far as the Bohai straits and southern part of the Liaodong Peninsula. During the Neolithic Age this area was dominated by the Dawenkou and Longshan Cultures. The earliest white pottery examples of the Haidai Region were discovered in the Dalian region of the southern Liaodong Peninsula, and later were discovered at the sites of Chengziyai in Changqiu and Liangchengzhen in Rizhao. Based on recent excavations and fieldwork, this rich body of whitewares derives from the sites of both Dawenkou and Longshan Culture and can be understood as a phenomenon belonging to the prehistoric Haidai Region.

The evolution of white pottery production and typological characteristics

The color variations of potteries are numerous, ranging from red, grey, black, brown, yellow, purple and white, with three colors including grey, red, and black the most common. Color is primarily based on different conditions of the baking process. White pottery of the Haidai Region is an exception due to the fact the color is determined by the presence of kaolin.

Based on available data, the earliest white pottery from the Haidai Region dates to 5000 to 4600 BP, as represented at late Dawenkou Culture sites, including Dawenkou, Yedian, Xi Xiahou, Lingyanghe, Dazhucun, and Yuchisi. Painted (red painted) pottery was the most popular pottery type from early and middle phases of the Dawenkou Culture, yet this tradition also included the color white alongside black and dark red colors against a red pottery. Unlike other Neolithic cultures, Dawenkou peoples favored ornamental designs that incorporated the color white. By the time of Longshan Culture, ca. 4600-4000 BP, all areas within the Haidai Region produced white potteries. Nonetheless major differences in terms of numbers of wares produced varied according to site and area. White pottery types gradually were limited in production to a single type, known as the gui- shape. Numbers of whitewares created also gradually declined. The Yueshi Culture that succeeded the Longshan produced no whitewares. Whitewares of the Haidai Region lasted only for about 1000 years.

Whitewares of the Dawenkou and Longshan Cultures are of two types, one whose clay quality is rough and the other refined. Colors vary between a pure white and one that tends toward a reddish or orange tint. During the earliest phase refined clay whitewares were the norm. Later, as types of whitewares dwindled in number and the gui was singled out, a coarse whiteware became more common.

The most common, ten types of whitewares initially produced include gui-pitcher, ding-tripod, he -pitcher, jar, vase, flat-backed canteen, dou-stemmed bowl, zun -jar, cup, stemmed cup, bowl, case and lid (Figure 1). Over the course of the Dawenkou and Longshan periods production varied considerably.

The distribution of Dawenkou period whitewares was primarily located at major sites in the Wen and Si River Valleys of south central Shandong Province, the Yi and Shu River Valleys of southeastern Shandong, and the coastal areas. Types were many and both coarse and refined examples existed. As mentioned, by the Longshan period numbers of whitewares diminished and reduced to one type, the gui-pitcher (Figure 2). Yet unlike
Figure 1 The white potteries of Dawenkou Period found in Haidai Region.

The use and social significance of whitewares

Whitewares are novel types with special characteristics manifest in their use, as revealed by various cultural factors. From currently available data, whitewares have both practical and non-practical uses. Some show evidence of use while others of small size demonstrate their symbolic use as mingqi 明器 or “spirit vessels.” Since whitewares of the Dawenkou cultural period have still not undergone scientific testing, estimation of their use or non-use depends on their shapes. As pointed out, Longshan period whitewares are limited to the gui-pitcher type which scholars tend to associate with water or wine. Recent scientific analysis of Liangchenzhen gui-pitchers have revealed remains combining rice, honey, fruit, in addition to fragrant grass. Based on this evidence the whiteware gui was used as wine vessel. Naturally, going one step further in the analysis, usage probably involved feasting, sacrifice and other ritual purposes.

The 1000 year time period over which whitewares (ca. 5000–4000 BP) were produced was characterized by dramatic new changes, particularly evident in new social distinctions and new vessel functions. The creation of a white pottery vessel at this time was new and novel. Although the initial production of whitewares was limited in number their appearance marked a new social stage. As represented by three different site examples from the Wen and Si River valleys, such as Dawenkou, Yedian, and Jianxin, representing large, middle, and small scale sites, it is apparent that the presence or absence of these whitewares and their numbers distinguish class not only in burials but also among settlements. The higher the class, the more numerous the whitewares and vice versa, the lower the class the less whitewares or even absent at all. Whitewares were a clear marker of social stratification.

Evolution and diffusion of whitewares

The distribution of whitewares was wide in extending culturally beyond their own domain of the Haidai. Initially concentrated in the Si River Valley, they may be considered Dawenkou in origin and discovery. Expansion beyond this area appears to follow the movement of...
Figure 2 The white pottery gui-pitchers of Longshan Period found in Haidai Region.
1, 4 and 7. solid-legged gui (Yaoguanzhuang H97:10, Sanlihe T203:1 and Yaoguanzhuang T1:5) 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8. hollow-legged gui (Dafanzhuang M26:11, Yaoguanzhuang H81:5, Xiwusi H160:11, Yaoguanzhuang H97:6, and Yinjiacheng M15:19) 9. flat-bottomed gui (Yinjiacheng H73:5)

peoples. During the Dawenkou period, cultural influences within the Haidai Region gradually spread beyond to the area of the Central Plains and to the southern Liaodong Peninsula. This expansion continued during the Longshan period, and rapidly to areas of the lower Yangtze River Valley and North China plains. This spread of whitewares follows the expansion and greater distribution as well as fusion of different cultural types.

During the late Dawenkou period, peoples migrated to the Central Plains. Whitewares followed this migration. Whitewares have been discovered at Duanzhai in Dancheng County of eastern Henan as well as west as far as Huacheng in Yanshi City nearby the capital site of Erlitou. Although during the Longshan and Erlitou periods whitewares are not numerous, their existence is intimately connected with the pottery production of the eastern Haidai Region.

The second tendency of whiteware distribution appears in the central south part of Hebei Province and northeast area of Henan. Both areas’ whitewares derive in type from the Haidai Region. These new wares appear at sites including Lidazhao in Xinxiang, Baiying in Tangyin, Dahanmangang and Hougang in Anyang and Xiapanwang in Cixian. The cultural elements of the Handai Region found in these areas are mainly that of the mid and late phases of Longshan Culture.

The third tendency characterizing whiteware distribution is their appearance in the Lake Tai area of the lower Yangtze River Valley. This area has had an intimate relationship with the Haidai Region since antiquity: the Liangzhu Culture experienced profound influences from the Dawenkou Culture. By the Longshan period, the waning of the Liangzhu Culture gradually gave rise to the Guangfulin Culture, which was under the influence of northern Haidai cultures. Sites lying between the Yangtze and Huai Rivers, such as Zhouboudui and Nandang in Gaoyou, Jiangsu, Guangfulin in Songjiang, Shanghai, and Qianshanyang in Wuxing, Zhejiang, all show the southern extension of influences from the northern Haidai Longshan Culture and form a clear route of cultural diffusion.

In terms of east west relationships, evidence of the intimate relationship between the Liaodong Peninsula and Haidai Region appears in the prominence of whitewares, again demonstrating the influence of the Haidai Longshan east through to the peninsula.

Based on the above analysis, it is apparent that the whitewares of the Dawenkou and Longshan cultural periods gradually expanded outwards to include the lower Yangtze River Valley, the middle reaches of the Yellow River, North China, and the Liaodong Peninsula.

Postscript

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