

A study of Xianbei tombs

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Abstract

The present paper divides the generally recognized Xianbei tombs into five groups. The first group is in the Hailar River valley; the second group, in the West Liaohe River valley; the third group, in the Chaoyang area; the fourth group, along the boundary between Inner Mongolia and Shanxi; and the fifth group, in northern Shanxi, middle Inner Mongolia and the zone a little west of them. In cultural aspect, the tombs of the second group present Xianbei features in pottery but distinct difference from the already affirmed Xianbei graves in burial manner. Referring to literature records, it may be reasonable to attribute them to the Wuhuan rather than to the Eastern Xianbei. The tombs of the third group centering on Chaoyang belong to the Murong Xianbei and present distinct features related to the second group tombs, which suggests that the Murong Xianbei culture may have partly inherited the Wuhuan culture. The fifth group tombs are the closest to the Northern Wei burials so far excavated, so they may represent the source of the Tuoba Xianbei culture. The first group of remains can hardly be taken as the direct forerunner of the fifth group graves and Northern Wei tombs, so they may have belonged to the Eastern Xianbei rather than to the Tuoba Xianbei. As the fifth group tombs show certain similarity in grave goods to the fourth group that may have belonged to Tan Shihuai's reign, to speak in temporal terms, it was hardly possible that the Tuoba Xianbei entered the Datong area through the route on the western side of the Greater Khingan Mountains. Moreover, as the fifth group tombs are related to a certain extent to the Xiongnu tombs near Lake Baikal, it can be inferred that the Tuoba Xianbei originated in the northern Greater Khingan Mountains, then went into the zone near Hulun Buir, from there migrated southwestwards, and later, turning eastwards, entered the middle area of present-day Inner Mongolia.

Keywords: Burials—Eastern Han to Northern Dynasties; ethnic attribution; Xianbei (ancient ethnic group)

A summary of the past studies on this issue

The most significant achievement in the study of Xianbei burials is to be found in the essay by Professor

Su Bai – *Xianbei Remains in the Northeast and Inner Mongolia Regions – A Record of Xianbei Remains: Part One* (1977). For the first time this essay synthesizes archaeological remains and historical documentation in a systematic manner. It proposes that the burials discovered in the region along the Greater Khingan Mountains – at Wangong in Chen Barag Banner and at Jalainur in Xin Barag Banner of Hulun Buir League, and at Nan Yangjiayingzi in Bairin Left Banner, Chifeng City – are the remains of the Tuoba Xianbei. This essay also maps out the migration routes of Tuoba Xianbei from the Greater Khingan Mountains → the flood plain of Hailar River → Lake Hulun → Bairin Left Banner → south central region of Inner Mongolia → Datong. Furthermore, the essay emphasizes the critical role of archaeological materials in demonstrating the evolution of Tuoba Xianbei civilization. Subsequently, Chen Yong, Qiao Liang and other scholars also published significant opinions, but they never departed from the migration routes mapped out by Professor Su.

However, the accomplishment of past studies of Xianbei offers no solution to such fundamental and important problems as the historical origin of the Tuoba Xianbei, the relationship between the Eastern Xianbei and the Tuoba Xianbei, and the relationship between the Xianbei and the Wuhuan. Archaeological remains could not seamlessly correspond to the historical literatures with the variation in recorded data and their diverse interpretations.

The field of Xianbei archaeology itself is not flawless as the methodology is derived from that applied to the study of prehistoric archaeology. Most of these archaeological studies base their arguments on the assumption: a particular archaeological remain belongs to a specific, concrete ethnic group; such an ethnic group has its own characteristic burial custom and characteristic grave good assemblages; such a grave good assemblage has its own inherent continuity; and potteries, over other grave goods, provide the most direct and immediate reflection of the ethnic characteristics of that group. Archaeological materials published in recent years have challenged such assumptions. For example, the burials at Lamadong in Beipiao reveal that under specific historical conditions, the burial customs of certain ethnic groups may not accord with the grave goods. In order to preserve the integrity of its own burial custom, an ethnic group may have made certain adjustments by adopting the pottery vessels of other ethnic groups. Perhaps burial customs, rather than pottery vessels, have more potential to serve as indicators of ethnic identity. The burials of Qilangshan Cemetery in Qahar Right Middle Banner are

like those of Lamadong in that they clearly expose the disjuncture between burial custom and pottery vessels. Those interred in the group of burials at Qilangshan probably came from the western region, and after migrating into the area under Xianbei control they adopted Xianbei pottery vessels. Meanwhile the burial custom retained more of own original ethnic tradition or that of its subordinate tribe. The present study uses this new methodology in order to examine the extant remains of the Xianbei (Figure 1).

A critical examination of the remains of Xianbei burials

The present essay follows the analysis in Mr. Qiao Liang's study *The Identification and Study of Xianbei Remains* by dividing the Xianbei remains into five groups (Table 1).

Group 1, which corresponds to Group A in Qiao's study, is deduced as the remains of the Tuoba Xianbei. This includes burials such as those at Jalainur in Hulun Buir League, and others. This group of burials is mainly distributed throughout the drainage plain of the Hailar River on the west side of the north section of the Greater Khingan Mountains. Qiao's study summarizes the characteristics as follows: "As for burials, they are mostly individual burials. The most common burial type is the earthen vertical pit tomb with a trapezoid plan, and the wooden coffin is wide at the head and narrow at the foot, lidded but bottomless; the practice of animal sacrifice of horse, ox and sheep is a common burial ritual, ... the potteries in grave goods are those of vessels for daily use. The typical assemblage of pottery vessels is urns, pots and bowls. Among these, the most common type of vessels is the one with sandy body and a flared mouth. Other common stylistic features include the addition of a thick rim around the mouth, and pricked and stamped designs below the rim. Also found is a type of vessel that has the addition of a ring foot and double upright handles." The burials in this group are mostly from the Eastern Han dynasty, while a few of the remains could have been dated

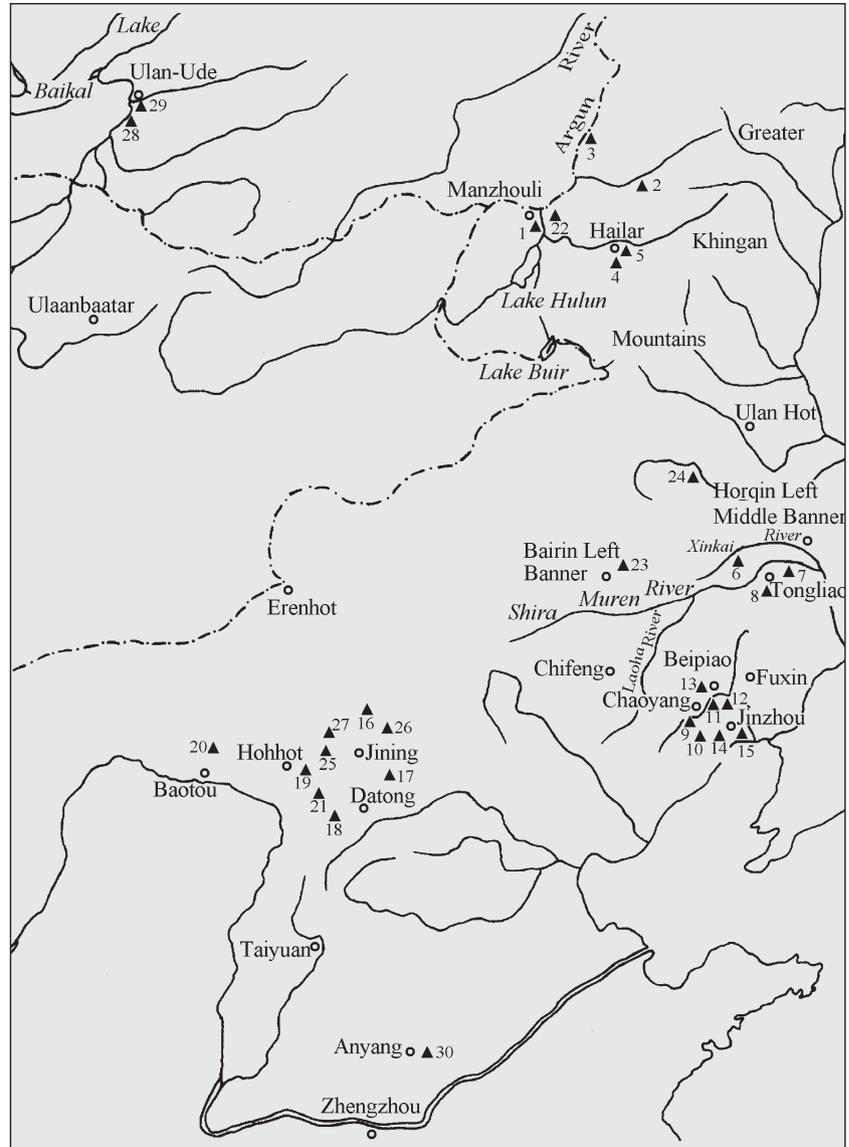


Figure 1 The distribution of the Xianbei burials.

1. Jalainur in Xin Barag Banner; 2. Labudalin in Ergun Right Banner; 3. Qika in Ergun Right Banner; 4. Monggon Qulu in Ewenki Autonomous Banner; 5. Tuanjie Cemetery in Hailar District; 6. Liujiazi in Horqin Left Middle Banner; 7. Shegen in Horqin Left Rear Banner; 8. Xinshengtun in Horqin Left Rear Banner; 9. Wangzishanfen (and Burials in Shi'ertai Brick Factory) in Chaoyang City; 10. Tiancaogou in Chaoyang City; 11. Fangshen Village in Beipiao City; 12. Cangliangjiao in Beipiao City; 13. Lamadong in Beipiao City; 14. Qianshan in Jinzhou City; 15. Li Wei's Tomb in Jinzhou City; 16. Sandaowan Cemetery in Qahar Right Rear Banner; 17. Bagou Cemetery in Xinghe County; 18. Shanjiapu in Youyu County; 19. Meiden Village in Hohhot City; 20. Mongolian Ethnic School of Guyang County; 21. Xigouzi in Horiger County; 22. Ih Ul in Xin Barag Banner; 23. Nan Yangjiayingzi in Bairin Left Banner; 24. North Manit in Horqin Right Middle Banner; 25. Xiaheigou in Qahar Right Front Banner; 26. Dongdajing in Shangdu County; 27. Qilangshan Cemetery in Qahar Right Middle Banner; 28. Derestui Cemetery; 29. Ivolga Cemetery; 30. Xiaomintun in Anyang City

Table 1 Tabulation of the Five Groups of Xianbei Burials.*

		Group 1 (Group A by Qiao Liang)	Group 2 (Group G by Qiao Liang)	Group 3 (Group D by Qiao Liang)	Group 4 (Group E by Qiao Liang)	Group 5
Dates	Past Study	Eastern Han, a few somewhat earlier	Late Eastern Han to Western Jin	End of Han to Wei-Jin	Late Eastern Han	Before and after the establishment of capital at Shengle
	Present Study	Same as above	Mid to late Eastern Han	Same as above	Mid to late Eastern Han	Mid to late Eastern Han to the time around the establishment of capital at Shengle
Ethnic Identification	Past study	Tuoba Xianbei	Eastern Xianbei	Murong Xianbei	Tanshihuai Xianbei	Tuoba Xianbei
	Present Study	Eastern Xianbei	Wuhuan	Same as above	Same as above	Same as above

*Past Study mainly refers to the viewpoints of Prof. Qiao Liang

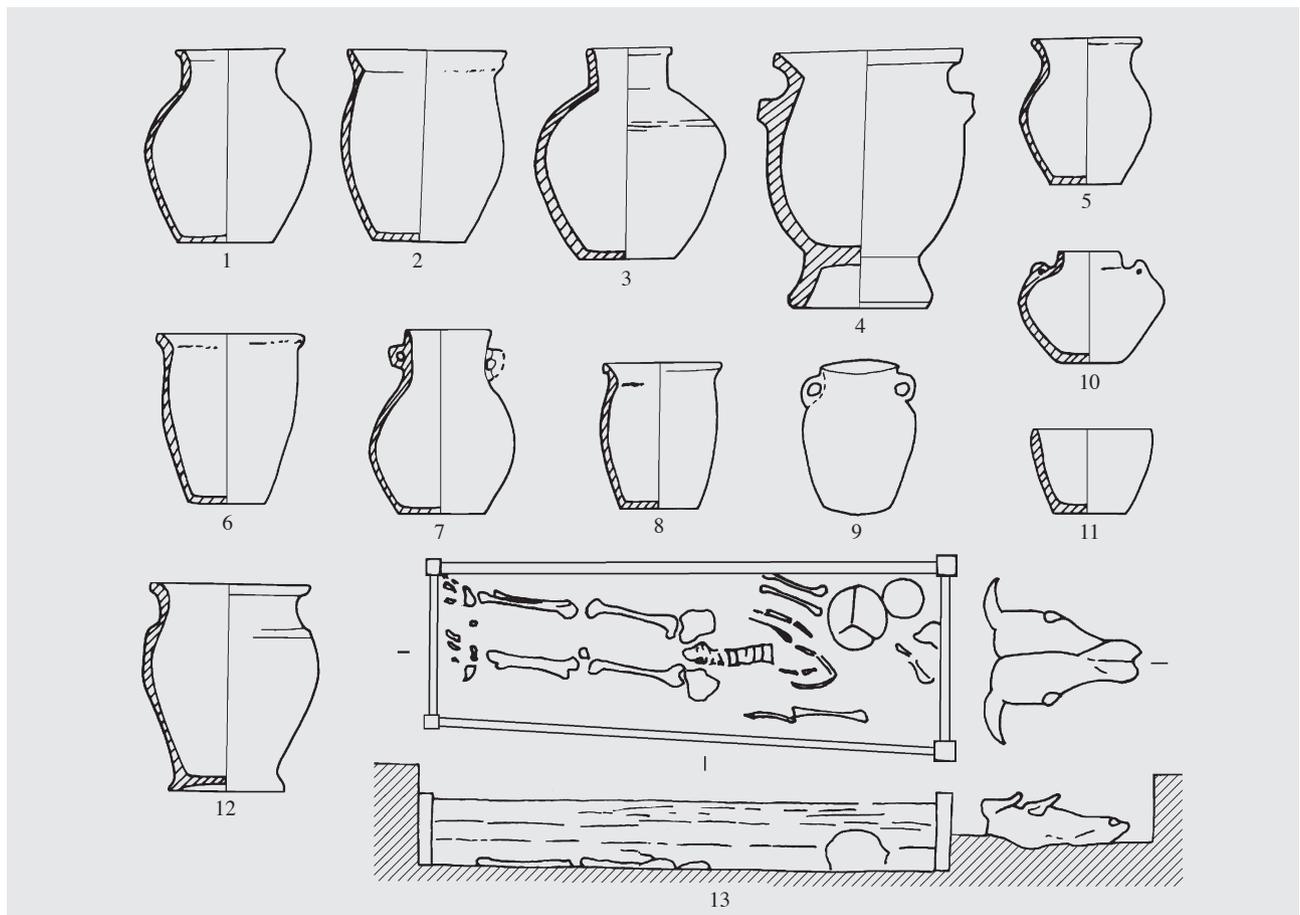


Figure 2 The representative burials and potteries of Group 1.

1. Urn with flared rim and straight neck (Jalainur 1986M3003:4); 2. urn with large mouth (Jalainur 1959M1); 3. pot with high neck (Jalainur 1984M4); 4. urn with ring foot (Jalainur 1984M4); 5. urn with flared rim (Jalainur 1986M3008Top:3); 6. urn with large mouth (Jalainur 1986M3012:5); 7. amphora (Jalainur 1986M3014:4); 8. urn with large mouth (Jalainur 1986M3010:5); 9. amphora (Jalainur 1960); 10. amphora with low body and small mouth (Jalainur 1959M1); 11. cup (Jalainur 1960); 12. urn with ring foot (Monggon Qulu M7:2) 13. the plan and side section of Jalainur 1960M19, a tomb with wooden coffin

earlier (Figure 2).

Group 2 corresponds to Group G according to Qiao's study. It is deduced to be the remains of the Eastern Xianbei. This includes Liujiazi and others in Horqin Left Middle Banner, Jirim League. The remains in this group are mainly distributed in the West Liaohu River Valley, especially in the area of Xinkai River. Qiao's study has the following conclusion: "The burial remains can be divided into two types: one is the earthen vertical pit grave and the other is the grave with stone cist. Some of the earthen pit burials contain traces of mortuary furniture fashioned out of some kind of wood material, and they are mainly single burials. Most burials are aligned along an east-west axis and heading east. The most characteristic grave good is an ornamental gold pendant with the design of a horse or other animal motifs... As for pottery vessels, the most commonly found types are the sandy body urn, flared mouth and vessel body decorated with intaglio patterns, and the earthenware pot with wide mouth and thick neck. Besides the intaglio patterns, all kinds of designs impressed with roulettes are also well-developed (Figure 3)."

Group 3 generally corresponds to Group D according to Qiao's study. They are proposed to be the remains of the Former Yan. Included are burials such as those at the Wangzi Shan Cemetery in Chaoyang and others. These burials are located in major areas of activity of the Murong Xianbei during the Sixteen-Kingdoms Period. Qiao's study has the following conclusion: "There are many burials with cists constructed out of stone blocks or stone slabs; the layout of the burial chamber and coffin or outer cist (*guo*) are commonly in trapezoid plan. Niches are often found inside the burial chamber, and inside these niches are traces of animal sacrifice of ox, sheep and dog ... Gold ornaments seem to be popular; ... among pottery

vessels the most striking types are pots with small mouths and short necks and urns with flared mouths. Pots with small mouths seem to be most popular, and the surfaces of these pottery vessels are often decorated with intaglio patterns of horizontal, vertical, or crisscrossed lines." If one were to conclude that Group 3 is the remains of the Former Yan, it may be more appropriate to regard them as the remains of the Murong Xianbei. The highpoint of development of this group of remains probably occurred

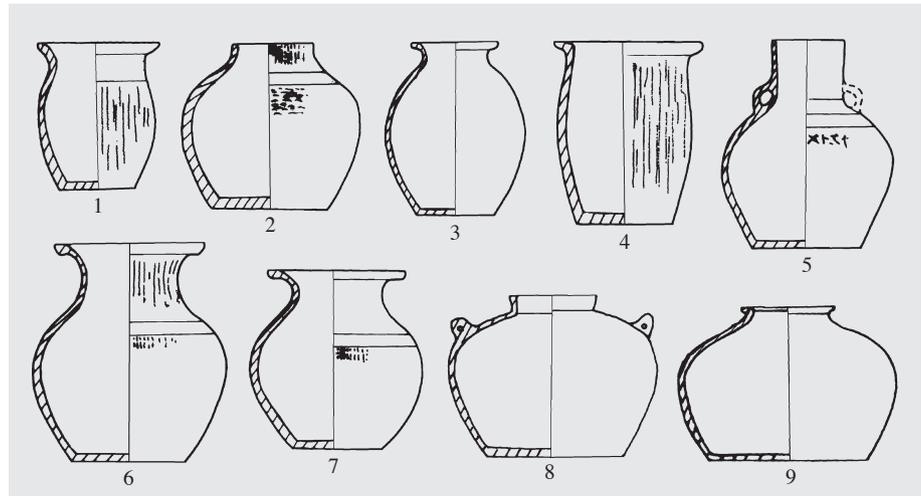


Figure 3 The representative burials and potteries of Group 2.

1. Urn with large mouth (Shegen in Horqin Left Rear Banner:3299);
2. pot with small mouth (Shegen:2040);
3. urn with swelling belly (Liujiazi in Horqin Left Middle Banner:89);
4. urn with large mouth (Daqin Tal in in Horqin Right Middle Banner);
5. amphora (Liujiazi:87);
6. pot with thick neck (Liujiazi:96);
7. pot with thick neck (Liujiazi:98);
8. amphora with low body and small mouth (Liujiazi:83);
9. pot with low body and small mouth (Liujiazi:85)

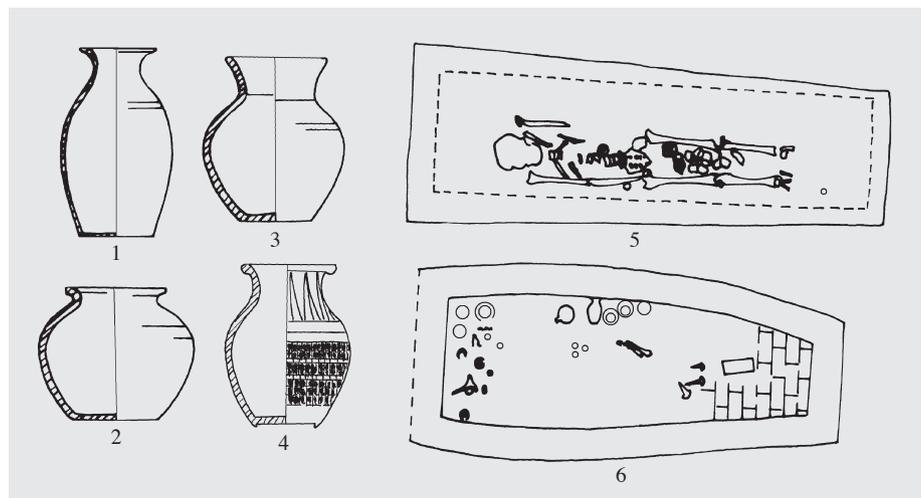


Figure 4 The representative burials and potteries of Group 3.

1. Pot with flared rim (Lamadong in Beipiao City M328:3);
2. urn (Lamadong M266:01);
3. urn with large mouth (Lamadong M363:4);
4. pot with thick neck (Li Wei's Tomb:9);
5. the plan of Wangzishanfen Yao M9001 in Chaoyang City;
6. Li Wei's tomb in Jinzhou City

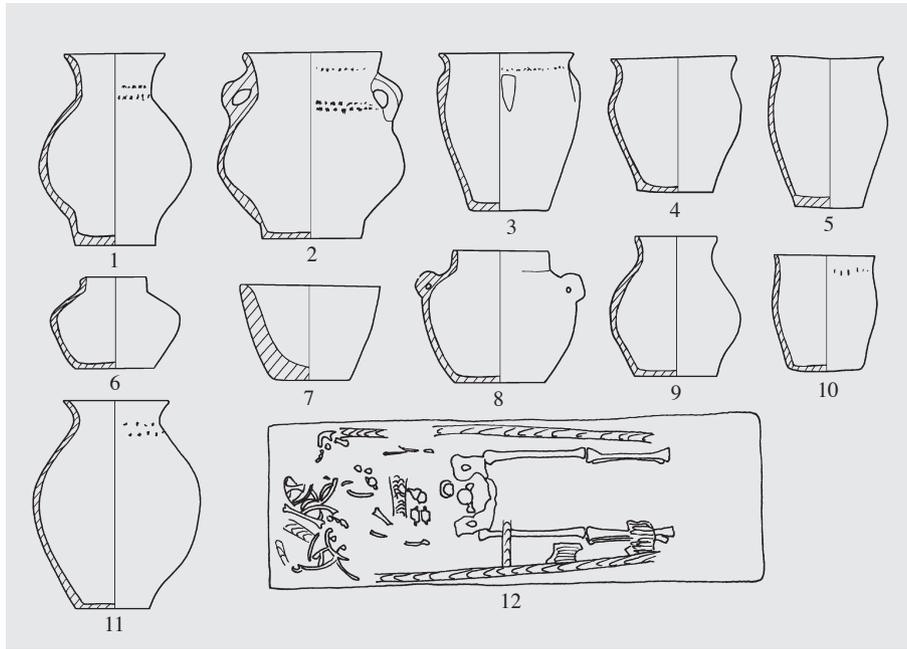


Figure 5 The representative burials and potteries of Group 4.

1. Urn with flared rim (Shanjiapu in Youyu County M11:1); 2. amphora (Shanjiapu M4:3); 3. urn with large mouth (Shanjiapu M17:1); 4. urn with large mouth (Shanjiapu M3:3); 5. urn with large mouth (Sandaowan Cemetery in Qahar Right Rear Banner M105:1); 6. urn with low body (Sandaowan M113:3); 7. cup (Sandaowan M13:2); 8. amphora (Sandaowan M113:1); 9. urn with flared rim (Sandaowan M6:1); 10. urn with large mouth (Sandaowan M17:1); 11. urn with flared rim (Sandaowan M103:1); 12. the plan of Sandaowan M124

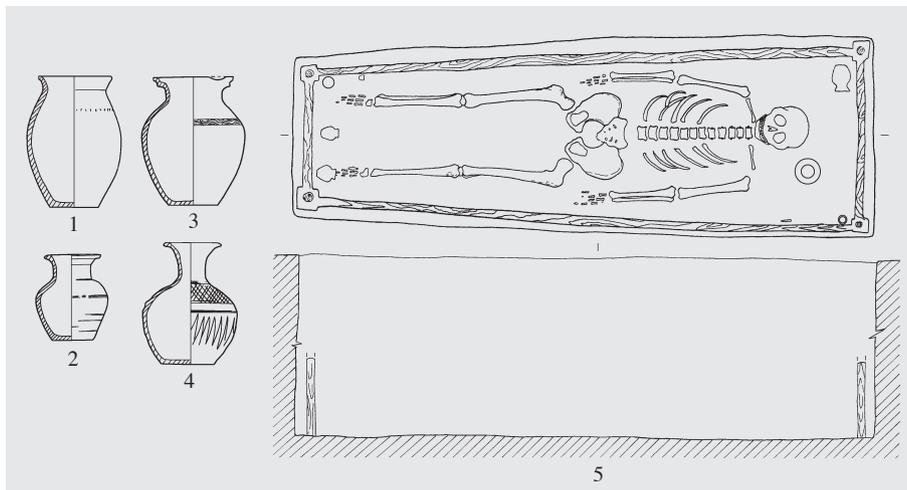


Figure 6 The representative burials and potteries of Group 5.

1. Urn with flared rim [XB (Bagou Cemetery in Xinghe County) M1:4]; 2. urn with flared rim and straight neck (XBM1:3); 3. urn with dish-shaped rim (XBM3:1); 4. pot with long neck (XBM1:1); 5. the plan and side section of XBM1

before the mid 4th century CE (Figure 4).

Group 4 as a whole corresponds to Group E according to Qiao's study. They are deduced to be the remains of the reign of Tanshihuai. Included are the burials such as those

of Sandaowan Cemetery in Qahar Right Rear Banner and others. They are distributed throughout the area along the boundary between Inner Mongolia and Shanxi Province. Qiao's study has the following conclusion: "Graves are mostly earthen dugout pits with rectangular layouts and vertical shafts... Mortuary furniture is not commonly used, and coffins are mostly made of wood...included among the pottery vessels is a type of grey pottery vessel that was probably manufactured with the techniques of the Central Plains. Indigenous pottery vessels are mostly represented by urns with flared mouths and pots with pricked or pressed designs around the neck and double vertical handles." The remains at Sandaowan in Qahar Right Rear Banner can be dated within a specific time span, while some of the burials can be dated earlier than the late Eastern Han. Accordingly this group of burials can be dated probably in the late Eastern Han Dynasty (Figure 5).

Group 5 includes burials at Bagou in Xinghe County and others. The distribution area is spread throughout central Inner Mongolia as well as the region slightly to the west, and the northern part of Shanxi Province. The remains of this group indicate a cultural phenomenon in which the most common type of grave is the earthen dugout pit with trapezoid plan and a passage tunnel. There are also brick-chamber tombs with trapezoid plan and a passage tunnel. Graves in which the manner of burial can be confirmed indicate that the body was interred in extended supine

position. Representative grave goods are pottery vessels such as long-neck pots and high-collar urns and jugs with short collars, often bearing a variety of intaglio designs on the surface. They are probably from the mid to late

Eastern Han extending to the period immediately before or after the establishment of the capital at Shengle (Figure 6).

According to the ethnic attribution done in the past on the basis of the five groups of archaeological remains, the five groups of archaeological remains outlined in the present study roughly fall into three categories: the first category is the so-called Tuoba Xianbei remains of Group 1 and Group 5, another category is the remains of Group 2 and Group 3, and the last category is Group 4, the so-called remains of the Tanshihuai Time just before and after their unification of the Xianbei. Group 2 and Group 3 are combined into one category not only because they share many similarities but also because the Murong Xianbei is a branch of the Eastern Xianbei. If we make use of this understanding to re-examine the actual evidence of the remains of the five groups, we would come to the realization that archaeological materials cannot be solely in the service of ethnic attribution as done in the past. The discrepancy between the remains of the Tuoba Xianbei in Group 1 and those in Group 5 is the most obvious, next is the discrepancy between the remains of so-called Eastern Xianbei in Group 2 and the so-called remains of the Murong Xianbei in Group 3. As Group 4 is a singular example, it will not be discussed at this time. A new perspective on ethnic attribution is proposed by the present study as follows.

A new proposal concerning the ethnic identification of Xianbei remains

1. The hypothesis that Group 2 (Liujiazi Cemetery in Horqin Left Middle Banner and other burials) are the remains of the Wuhuan. The difference between the remains of Group 2 and Group 3 is most obvious in the plan of the grave. The layouts of burials among the remains of Group 2 are different from those among the remains of Group 3 or other remains that have been inferred as Xianbei remains. Those inferred to be Xianbei remains have either pit burials or have wooden coffins, all with trapezoid plans. On the other hand, all the burials with known layouts in Group 2 have rectangular layouts. Learning a lesson from the research of Lamadong in Beipiao and Sandaowan Cemetery in Qahar Right Rear Banner, one would exercise caution in deducing that the remains of Group 2 are that of the Eastern Xianbei, the predecessor of the Murong Xianbei.

From the geographical point of view, one can see many obstacles in the attempt to identify the Liujiazi Cemetery as the remains of the Eastern Xianbei. According to the *Account of Wuhuan, Xianbei, and Eastern Yi* of the *Book of Wei* in the *History of the Three Kingdoms*, the main ethnic groups living in the area to the north of the Great Wall during the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty were the Wuhuan and the Xianbei.

The ancient environment of the region around West Liaohe River where Group 2 remains are located corresponds more closely to the textual records

concerning the Wuhuan. Among such records, a more detailed account can be found in the *Account of Wuhuan, Xianbei, and Eastern Yi* of the *Book of Wei* in the *History of the Three Kingdoms*. In an annotation referencing Wang Shen's *Book of Wei* is the following: "The common folks (of the Wuhuan) know the times of birds and beasts giving birth and nursing their young, and use these as the signs of the four seasons, and they plow the fields and sow seeds when the cuckoos begin to sing (in each year). The land is suitable for cultivating green millet and *dongqiang* (*Agriophyllum squarrosum*). The *dongqiang* looks like seepweed and they yield fruits like mallow seeds that ripen in the tenth month; these can be used to make white liquor, but (the Wuhuan) did not know about the use of yeast in fermenting liquor. (The Wuhuan) depend on China for their grains." The remains of Liujiazi, Shegen and Xinshengtun in Horqin Left Middle Banner are widely distributed throughout the drainage plain of the West Liaohe River. This area has a relatively flat terrain. While the environment has experienced desertification and degradation in recent times, that is not the case in ancient times. This area as a whole, including the drainage plain of the West Liaohe River, probably had a very moist climate during the mid to late Eastern Han Dynasty.

2. The hypothesis that the remains of Group 5 (including the Bagou cemetery in Xinghe and others) are those of the Tuoba Xianbei. The main characteristics of the Bagou remains and others are unique; at the same time, they also have some connections with the remains at Jalainur in Xin Barag Banner and Sandaowan Cemetery in Qahar Right Rear Banner. It is possible that the remains of Bagou have their own origins. Comparing to the Jalainur and Nan Yangjiayingzi remains, the remains at the Bagou Cemetery and others seem to have closer and more direct ties to the typical Tuoba Xianbei burials. That is to say, the most important resource of Tuoba Xianbei culture is located in the Bagou remains. In other words, the Jalainur remains and others that were deduced to be Tuoba Xianbei remains may not be genuine Tuoba Xianbei remains but the remains of the Eastern Xianbei.

Lending support to the views above is the interpretation of Mr. Ma Changshou's early study of the origins and migration routes of the Tuoba Xianbei. According to this study, the Tuoba Xianbei and the Donghu Xianbei may have had the same origin, but they increasingly diverged with the passage of time. The main argument is based on the understanding that the Tuoba Xianbei came from the integration of the Xianbei and the Xiongnu. The earliest birthplace of the Tuoba Xianbei is located in the northeastern corner of present Inner Mongolia, corresponding to the southeast part of the present Argun River. *Juru* (the swampy zone), the place where first Tuiyin led the mass migration of the Xianbei people to settle down, may have been in the area of the present Lake Hulun. Six generations later, the so-called second Tuiyin (also called Tuiyan) became one of the Great Chiefs of the western tribes joined under Tanshihuai's alliance. If Tanshihuai's alliance successively incorporated the five

Great Chiefs of the western Xianbei tribes from east to west according to textual records, then the herding base of the Tuiyan would be located in the Hovd region in the west part of Mongolia (east of present-day Altai Mountains). Later, they migrated to the central region of Inner Mongolia.

3. The hypothesis that Group 1 (Jalainur cemetery and others) remains are those of the Eastern Xianbei. This theory had been proposed by historians a long time ago. Representative of this view is the study of Mr. Zhang Boquan who says: “The Xianbei cultural remains in the areas of former activity of the Dong Hu, Wuhuan and Eastern Xianbei should belong to the Eastern Xianbei and the Wuhuan, and there should not have been any remains of the Tuoba Xianbei. The so-called Xianbei culture that existed in the Hulun Buir steppe did not leave much evidence for comparison with that of the Tuoba Xianbei. On the other hand, it could be compared to the historical record in *Houhan Shu* (the *Book of Later Han*) concerning the society and customs of the Wuhuan and the Eastern Xianbei.... In particular, the admixture of Han cultural artifacts clearly points to the special cultural character of the Eastern Xianbei that stemmed from the Dong Hu. It is different from the Tuoba Xianbei culture that manifests the dictum: ‘Xianbei as father, Hu as mother.’”

III. Conclusion

Based on the excavated materials at the two cemeteries – Lamadong in Beipiao and Qilangshan in Qahar Right Middle Banner, the present study finds that the core subject of archaeological study – burial customs and pottery vessels of ancient ethnic groups – may indicate certain incongruities. What was once inferred to be Eastern Xianbei remains in the west of present-day Liaoning Province, which was “earlier than” the Murong Xianbei, are now deduced to be probably that of Wuhuan; what were once assumed to be Tuoba Xianbei

remains before are now construed to be probably that of the Eastern Xianbei. Meanwhile, the historical origin of the Tuoba Xianbei is still unclear. However, the second massive migration of the Tuoba Xianbei may not have taken the route along the western side of the Greater Khingan Mountains as proposed in the past. Extant archaeological materials seem to suggest the merging of the Tuoba Xianbei and the Xiongnu; perhaps the dictum from textual records “Xianbei as father and Hu as mother” could be interpreted with the study of archaeology.

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Postscript

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