A Preliminary Study of Tombs of the Southern Xiongnu

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Xiongnu is an ancient ethnic group living in the Northern Frontier Zone of China and Eurasian Steppe area. In the end of the third century BCE, it established a vast steppe empire covering the area from Yalu River in the east to the Pamirs in the west and from Lake Baikal in the north and Ordos Plateau in the south. Since the middle period of the first century CE, because of the internal conflicting and the external pressure from Han Central Government and other nomadic groups such as Xianbei, Xiongnu declined and was forced to move westward, and retreated from historic stage gradually. The “Southern Xiongnu” mentioned in this paper refers to the eight tribes living to the south of Gobi Desert which submitted to the Eastern Han Government in 47 CE under the command of Bi, the King of Rizhu of Xiongnu, who rebelled against the Punu Chanyu who lived to the north of Gobi Desert, the other Xiongnu people surrendered to Eastern Han in later times, who were settled down by the Government in eight frontier commands and prefectures, and descendants of these Xiongnu tribes and people. “Burials of Southern Xiongnu” refers to the burials of Xiongnu ethnic group dated as in the middle and later periods of the Eastern Han Dynasty within present-day China.

Discoveries and Researches

Although many Xiongnu burials of the Western and Eastern Han Dynasties have been found in present-day China, very few of them could be confirmed to be that of the Southern Xiongnu in the Eastern Han Dynasty. The important ones are: five tombs at Lijiataozhi, Tongxin County, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region; nine tombs in Budonggou, Dongsheng City, Inner Mongolia; the Shang Sunjiazhai Cemetery in Datong County, Qinghai Province; Tomb No. 1 in Zhanglonggedan, Machi Township, Baotou City, Inner Mongolia and Han Cemetery in Dabaodang, Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province.

The scholars of relevant disciplines have done plenty of identification and researches on the Southern Xiongnu burials in the Eastern Han Dynasty and given very good explications and conclusions including the differentiation between Xiongnu (both Southern and Northern) burials and Xianbei burials, which laid firm foundations for further researches. However, the past identifications and researches did not establish a set of criteria of ethnic attribution identification by analyzing the cultural connotations of Southern Xiongnu and Han-styled burials themselves. Therefore, it is necessary to study the Southern Xiongnu burials in a comprehensive way with references to historic literature and draw universal rules to identify and confirm Han-styled Southern Xiongnu burials from burials of Han people.

The Characteristics of Southern Xiongnu Burials

The five localities of Southern Xiongnu burials found so far in China are distributed in the northern and northwestern frontier zones of the Eastern Han Dynasty, which well matched the records in historic literature about the settlement of the new-submitted Xiongnu tribes and people by Eastern Han Government, as well as the dates of these burials, which were mostly the middle and later periods of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Moreover, the funeral custom, burial article assemblages and the existence of objects exclusively made and used by Xiongnu people all helped us to confirm that the burials in these

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five localities belonged to Southern Xiongnu people. The comparative analyses to these tombs lead us to these points:

1. The tomb structures were almost completely in Han style: most of them were brick-chambered tombs with mounds and slope passages, which were usually double-chambered, with few single-chambered cases and some decorated with stone relief. Joint burials were very popular with supine extended position and very random heading directions. These tombs would have been of the noble people of Southern Xiongnu. Besides of the brick-chambered tombs, some straight pit tombs, wooden-chambered tombs and stone slab tombs were also found. The straight pit tombs without mounds on the ground which were found in Dabaodang and Budonggou would have been the tombs of Southern Xiongnu people with lower statuses; the stone slab tombs found in Lijiataozhi had shapes and structures similar to that of the Xiongnu tombs found in Transbaikal (Figure 1).

2. The tombs had burial article assemblages and typical burial articles different from those of the Han-styled tombs of the same time. Generally, the assemblages were gradually changing into the Han-style, which means that the Han-styled burial articles and the Han cultural elements associated with burial articles took increasing portions while the Xiongnu-styled artifacts and cultural elements were reducing accordingly. However, the concrete assemblages were still not completely the same with the pure Han-styled burials of the same time:

First, jars of various styles took the bulk in pottery assemblages, both in types and amounts. The fine clay grey pottery jar of the type with small mouth, thin neck,
Figure 2. The typical burial articles in Southern Xiongnu burials (pottery jars)

Figure 3. The typical burial articles in Southern Xiongnu burials (bronze and iron artifacts)
1. iron knife (M8:1 at Budonggou, Dongsheng City, Inner Mongolia)  2. iron knife (98M2:34 at Dabaodang, Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province)  3. iron nail (98M2:36 at Dabaodang, Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province)  4. bronze canopy spoke finial (98M2:17 at Dabaodang, Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province)  5. bronze ring (98M2:16 at Dabaodang, Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province)  6. bronze button (98M2:23 at Dabaodang, Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province)  7. iron shovel (98M2:21 at Dabaodang, Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province)  8. bronze horse curb (Dabaodang, Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province)  9. bronze chariot fitting (M1:4 at Lijiataozzi Cemetery, Tongxin County, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region)  10. bronze clasp (98M2:32 at Dabaodang, Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province)  11. iron cauldron (M5:2 at Budonggou, Dongsheng City, Inner Mongolia)
polished surface decorated with wave patterns on shoulder and/or belly and a hole on the bottom could be seen in almost every tomb, and pottery jar of this type has been believed as one of the representative vessels of Xiongnu culture. Moreover, the sizes of the pottery jars were larger than that in tombs of other cultures, and this is also a special feature telling the Southern Xiongnu burials from burials of other people (Figure 2).

Second, large amounts of bronze and iron implements were found in these tombs. The bronze artifacts are knives, arrowheads, bells, rings, belt buckles, guard borders and corner brackets and tube-shaped ornaments. The iron artifacts are horse curb bits, belt buckles, knives, arrowheads, swords, axes, shovels and nails. Burying weapons as burial articles was the traditional burial custom of Xiongnu and other nomadic people, but burying agricultural tools as burial articles showed the changing of the subsistence of Southern Xiongnu people from animal husbandry to agriculture, although the types and numbers of weapons and tools varied in different areas along the frontier zones (Figure 3).

Third, large amounts of personal ornaments in clear ethnic features were found. In the tombs confirmed to be that of Southern Xiongnu people, ornaments made of metal, glass, agate, jade, stone and bone, including headgears, earrings, belt plaques and beads. The most significant ornaments are the beads made of various materials and in different shapes, which are much rarer in Han-styled tombs of the same periods. The situation of burying large amounts of ornaments is also very popular in Xianbei burials but the differences between Xiongnu and Xianbei remains have been pointed out by scholars (Figure 4).

The fourth, implements made of bone were very popular in Southern Xiongnu burials. The main categories are knives, shovels, spoons, brushes, chopsticks, seals, tubes, hairpins, flake-shaped tools and tools with denticles and grooves. Burying bone implements was the burial custom of the minorities such as Rong and Di who lived along the northern and northwestern frontier zones of ancient China, and one of the main characteristics to distinguish the burials of these nomadic or frontier tribes from that of the people from the Central Plains. Therefore, the remnants of this custom found in these Southern Xiongnu tombs are symbols of the succession of this nomadic tradition and the distinction to the Han-styled tombs of the same time. In fact, from the Xiongnu burials of the Western and Eastern Han Dynasties excavated at Chandman Uul in Mongolia and Transbaikal and Semirechye areas in Russia, the customs of burying arrowheads and horse curb bits or other weapons and tools made of bone were also found. Some researchers have pointed out that the highly developed bone processing and bone tool manufacturing was also one of the special features of Xiongnu Culture (Figure 5).

The fifth, stone burial articles and tomb structural materials are very popular. The stone burial articles are mainly lamps, pestles, boards, ink-stones, steles, tiger-shaped post base or tiger-head and stone huts. Stone burial articles, tombs built with stone blocks or slabs and/or marked with stone pebbles, slabs or pillars are also features of Xiongnu burial culture, which were also frequently found in the Xiongnu burials in Russia and Mongolia but absent in Han-styled burials of the same time.

The above analyses confirmed that the structures of Southern Xiongnu burials, especially those of the rulers or noble people, are very similar to the Han-styled tombs...
of the same statuses and periods: most of them had mounds on the ground, long slope passages, random orientations and complicated burial furniture, and tombs were usually arranged as clan cemeteries. The animal sacrifices in forms of burying skulls of horses, bulls and sheep are widely seen in tombs of all statuses. Apart from the Han-styled pottery burial articles, the implements and ornaments made of metals, jade, stone and bone in Xiongnu style were also very popular, especially the pottery jars in large sizes, which are different from those of the Han-styled burials. These features represented by these tombs are essential for us to re-understand and re-identify the ethnic attributions of the large amounts of “Han tombs” found in the northern and northwestern frontier zones of the Eastern Han Dynasty.

The Identification of the Ethnic Attributions to Some Han Burials

The historic literature and archaeological researches have proven that in the Eastern Han Dynasty, because of the cold climate and frequent natural disasters in the steppe area to the north of Gobi Desert and the conflicting of the ruling classes, the Xiongnu tribes and people were continuing to immigrate into the Han-controlled regions and submitting to the Han Government, and the latter defined the eight prefectures near the northern and northwestern frontier zones (roughly present-day southern middle Inner Mongolia, northern Shaanxi, northwest Shanxi and eastern Gansu Provinces) as the settlements and pastures of the submitted Xiongnu tribes. As recorded in the historic literature, in the middle period of the Eastern Han Dynasty (around 90 CE), the population of submitted was as many as 237,300. This hinted that the burials of this period in these areas should include many of Southern Xiongnu people. Based upon the characteristics of Southern Xiongnu burials mentioned above, historic literature records and research results of related disciplines, we can make a trial identification to the ethnic attributions of some burials in these areas.

1. The Northern Shaanxi Area. Most of the Han tombs found so far are distributed in Yulin Municipal Area; among the published data, the tombs in Dabaodang Cemetery, Shenmu County are the most significant.
Dabaodang Cemetery was a resident cemetery in Dabaodang walled city flourishing since the middle period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the excavation to which discovered some artifacts similar to the burial articles in the tombs, such as the pottery jars of Types A, B, C and D, pottery basin, tile-ends, iron cauldrons, iron arrow (sword?) and iron axes; some cemeteries of the same period were also found nearby the city. Therefore, it is reasonable for the excavators to suppose that this walled city was the seat of the “dependant state” established by the Eastern Han Government to supervise the immigrated Southern Xiongnu people. However, they did not mention the ethnic attributions of the tombs clearly. Having studied the data of the tombs 96SDM4, M5, M9, M10, M17, M23 and 98M2, and referred to the historic records and the features of Southern Xiongnu burials explained above, we can confirm them as tombs of Southern Xiongnu people submitted to the Eastern Han Dynasty. They had not only structures in common with the Han tombs of the same period, but also popular custom of animal sacrifices, typical Xiongnu-styled pottery wares (Type B jar in the report), artifacts made of bronze, iron, jade, stone or bone, and ornaments made of various materials with obvious Xiongnu features.

2. The Southern Middle Inner Mongolia. Because of the special geographical position and climatic conditions, this area was the main zone for the agricultural and nomadic peoples to communicate and impact each other and a key area for the political powers in the Central Plains and the steppe area to fight for seizing and controlling. The tombs of the Eastern Han Dynasty are mainly found around the vicinity of Baotou municipal area and Sanduandi Cemetery in the southwest of Ordos Plateau. Historic literature showed that this area was the main place for Southern Xiongnu to live and pasture, and many Eastern Han tombs with animal sacrifices were also found nearby Baotou area. In the past researches, some scholars have pointed out that these tombs might contain Xiongnu cultural elements. However, their lack of discussions on the burial article assemblages made insufficient results on the issue of ethnic attribution identification of these tombs. The analyses to Tombs M64, M67, M70, M91 and M93 in Zhaowan Cemetery, M8, M12 and M25 in Sanduandi Cemetery and M3 in Zhaotan Locality told us that all of them belonged to the middle and later periods of the Eastern Han Dynasty; they did not have distinctions to the Han-styled tombs of the same periods; these tombs did not have unified orientations and most of them were joint burials; almost all of these tombs had animal sacrifices. In burial article assemblages, the pottery jars bearing “Xiongnu cultural elements” took the bulk of pottery wares, accompanied by some Han-styled vessels; the Xiongnu-styled artifacts made of bronze, iron, jade, stone and bone and ornaments made of various materials were found in these tombs in noticeable amount. Referring to the locations of the settlements of Southern Xiongnu tribes and people in the Eastern Han Dynasty and the characteristics of Southern Xiongnu tombs mentioned above, we can identify the occupants of these tombs as Southern Xiongnu people.

Conclusions

The Southern Xiongnu burials found in China so far are mostly distributed in the northern and northwestern frontier zones of the Han Dynasty, and chronologically belonging to the middle and later periods of the Eastern Han Dynasty. The main burial groups are: the Dabaodang Cemetery in Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province, the tombs in Locality B of Shang Sunjiazhai Cemetery in Datong County, Qinghai Province, Zhanglonggedan Cemetery and some tombs of Zhaowan Cemetery in Baotou City, Budonggou Cemetery and some tombs of Sanduandi Cemetery in Dongsheng City, Inner Mongolia (some tombs of Sanduandi Cemetery might be of the descendants of the Xiongnu people submitted in the middle and later periods of the Western Han Dynasty). During these periods, because of the deeper Sinization, the tomb structures and burial article types and assemblages of Southern Xiongnu resembled that of the Han-styled tombs, but some Xiongnu burial customs were still reserved. Slight distinctions are seen on burial customs and burial article categories and types of Southern Xiongnu tombs distributed in different areas, but the general appearances are still similar. The distinctions were caused by many factors, including not only the differences of ethnic group compositions in Xiongnu people of these areas, but also the differences in geographical environments, the depths of Sinization and the dates of these tombs.

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