Different Traditions of Flexed Burials in Ancient China

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Flexed burial refers to the type of burial, in which the legs of the deceased are flexed at angles. Flexed burials were first discovered in the Yellow River Valley in the early twentieth century. From then on, they have been found in the middle Yangtze River Valley, southern China, Gansu, Qinghai, areas to the south and north of the Yanshan Mountains, Xinjiang, and Tibet. Although there have been numerous discussions on the meaning of flexed burials, few efforts have been made regarding the origin, distribution, evolution, and mutual influence among different cultural areas while using this practice. Based on a detailed analysis, this paper aims to identify different traditions of flexed burials from the Neolithic to the Han and Tang periods, spanning a time period of more than 10,000 years (Figure 1).

I

The earliest examples of flexed burials in China were found at the early Neolithic sites in the Liu and Li River Valleys in northern Guangxi. More than 20 burials were discovered at the Miaoyan and Zengpiyan sites in Guilin and at the Dalongtan site in Liuzhou. Most of the occupants were buried with a squat posture with their thighbones attached to their abdomens – obviously the result of binding. These burials might be datable to 13,000 to 7000 BC, to judge from sherds of the cord-patterned fu vessels discovered from these tombs. Physical anthropological research indicates that inhabitants of Zengpiyan might have been closely affiliated with the Liujiang Man of Late Paleolithic, indicating that squat-posture flexed burial might first emerge in the Late Paleolithic time.

The custom of flexed burials was also found in the southwestern Yong River Valley in the middle Neolithic period (7000 to 5000 BC). More than 100 skeletons, most with squat posture, have been found in shell mounds. One of the type sites is the Baozitou site near Nanning. The cord-patterned fu vessel was still popular – clearly in continuity with early local tradition. Notably, the contemporaneous Chengbeixi culture centered in the Dongtinghu area in the middle Yangtze River Valley and the Three Gorges area has the similar cord-patterned fu vessels. The two regions obviously once belonged to the same cultural system. Although no skeleton survived in burials of the Chengbeixi Culture, the small dimension of its burial pits indicate that the deceased might have also been buried with a flexed posture.

Flexed burials have further been discovered in northeastern China. Tomb occupants at the Baiyinchanghan site of Xinglongwa culture (Linxi, Inner Mongolia) were buried with supinely positioned bodies and flexed legs. The shankbone and thighbone were tightly tied together. Different from the south China examples, the thighbone was not so close to the abdomen. By contrast, the deceased in Xinglongwa Culture burials that are south of the Chifeng City were in the supine extended position. It seems that in the middle Neolithic period, flexed burials were only popular in the upper Xilamulun River Valley in northeastern China.

Tomb occupants in flexed burials in southern China were usually buried with squat posture and they belonged to the cultural system typified by the round-bottomed fu vessels. On the contrary, those in flexed burials in northern China were mainly buried with genuflected posture once belonged to the cultural system typified by bucket-
shaped pots. This difference is significant. Flexed burials in the south and north belonged to two different traditions—namely, a “southern tradition” and a “northern tradition.” The southern tradition can be further divided into the “Huanan sub-tradition” and the “Middle Yangtze River Valley sub-tradition.” Flexed burials represented by the Baiyingchanghan examples can be named as the “eastern sub-tradition” of the northern tradition.

The distribution areas of flexed burials were slightly expanded in the Late Neolithic and Early Chalcolithic periods (5000–2600 BC). Flexed burials of the Daxi Culture belonged to the Middle Yangtze River Valley sub-tradition of the southern tradition. Most of the more than 900 burials found at the Chengtoushan site in Lixian were flexed. In the late Daxi period, flexed burials went out of fashion. Although flexed burials still persisted, supine extended burials dominated cemeteries of the late Qujialing Culture. In the north, the eastern sub-tradition of the northern tradition witnessed a vigorous development in this period. Flexed burials have been found at Tongbohaolai site in Hulunbeier (the Hake Culture), the Hongshan assemblage at Baiyingchanghan site in the Xiliao River Valley, Danangou cemetery in Wengniute Banner (the Xiaoheyan Culture), and other sites to the south and north of the Yanshan Mountains in northern Hebei as well as in central and southern Inner Mongolia.

The distribution areas of flexed burials radically changed in the Late Chalcolithic period (2600–1900 BC). The Middle Yangtze River Valley sub-tradition of the southern tradition almost disappeared. The eastern sub-tradition of the northern tradition also declined. Interestingly, at the same time, flexed burials became popular in the Banshan Phase cemeteries in Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia. The Banshan genuflect posture flexed burials are similar to those of the Xueshan I Culture and the Haishengbulang Culture to the east. These three cultures also share many features, including the nearly square burial pit, cave burial, and painted sawtooth pattern, curved line pattern, squama pattern, chessboard...
pattern, diamond pattern, H-shaped design and octagonal star design on pottery, and the duck-shaped kettle and double-mouthed pot. In fact, the Banshan Phase might be the result of the combination of a local Majiayao tradition and some influence from the east. So it is reasonable to classify Banshan flexed burials into the northern tradition and name it as “Gan-Qing-Ning sub-tradition”.

II

The distribution areas of flexed burials experienced another major change in the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age (1900–100 BC). The domination of supine extended burials in southern China marked the collapse of the southern tradition. In Gansu, Qinghai and Ningxia the supine extended burials became fashionable, indicating the end of the Gan-Qing-Ning sub-tradition of the northern tradition. In the meantime, the eastern sub-tradition of the northern tradition was revived. Flexed burials were found at the Wokenhada site in Yilan County, Heilongjiang Province, the Gaotaishan site in Xinmin County, Liaoning Province, the Saodagou site in Jilin Province, and the Wanbozi site in Tonghua County, Liaoning Province. Although their relationship with the Xiahoeyan Culture is still unclear, the genuflect posture was obviously derived from a local tradition. The most dramatic change in this period is the appearance of flexed burials in the Qin culture in the Guanzhong region and the local cultures in Xinjiang and Tibet. Burials of the early Qin culture had only been discovered in the Tianshui region. The earliest Qin flexed burials, which can be dated to the late Shang and early Zhou period, were found at the Maojiaping site in Gangu County, Gansu Province. During the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods, flexed burials entered the Guanzhong area with the expansion of the Qin State. This custom was subsequently introduced to the Han, Zhao, Wei States, Bashu, and Jiangling regions in tandem with the Qin unification of China. It disappeared in the middle Western Han period. The genuflect posture of Qin flexed burials is similar to that of the Gan-Qing-Ning sub-tradition, which might have been the origin of this custom. However, the extremely flexed legs in Qin flexed burials make it reasonable to distinguish a new sub-tradition of the northern tradition – the “Qin sub-tradition.”

Flexed burials were very popular in the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Xinjiang. Bronze Age cemeteries containing flexed burials include the Tianshanbeilu cemetery in Hami Basin, the Nanwan cemetery in Balikut Grassland, and the Xiabandi II cemetery in Tashkurgan on the Pamir Plateau. Early Iron Age flexed burials have been found at the Yanbulake, Aisikexiaer, Wubu and Hanqigou cemeteries in Hami Basin, the Subeixi and Yanghai cemeteries in Turpan Basin and Shanshan, the Chawuhugou cemetery in Heijing, the Qunbake cemetery in Luntai, and the Keziertuer cemetery in Baicheng. These flexed burials shared some traits – the thighbone is not so close either to the abdomen or to the shankbone; many burials have stone or adobe chamber and earth or stone mound (circle) on the ground; some yield evidence of cremation, such as burnt tomb pits and remains of bone ashes. Hence these flexed burials should be named as the Xinjiang sub-tradition of a new tradition – the “western tradition”.

Flexed burials found in Tibet can be divided into three phases. Burials of phase I dating to 2000–1000 BC were found at the Xiao’enda site in chab-mdo and the Chos-gong site in Lhasa. Artifacts from the two sites show similarity with archaeological cultures in Gansu, Qinghai, western Sichuan, and Xinjiang. Phase II can be dated from 1000 BC (Western Zhou) to the Western Han period. Flexed burials of this phase have been discovered at the Chos-gong, Gongjuexiangbei and Zanda-Piyang-Dungkar sites in Western Tibet. The round-bottomed spout pots in the stone chamber of Chos-gong tombs resemble pots of the Zhagunlake Type of the Chawuhugoukou Culture at the southern edge of the Tarim Basin. Flexed burials in the upper valleys of the Nu River, Lancang River and Jinsha River are similar to the Lhasa ones. The Piyang-Dunkhar cemetery in western Tibet has some special customs such as cremation and animal sacrifice, customs also common at the Xiangbaobao and Xiabandi II cemeteries in Tashkurgan. Generally speaking, flexed burials in Tibet (including western Yunnan and western Sichuan) maintained their own characteristics for a long time and often coexisted with secondary burials. We can see influence from both the northern and western traditions, but we prefer to name them as the “Tibetan sub-tradition” of the western tradition.

Some Phase III (around 0–900 AD) flexed burials had been found at the Dongjiesang and Punugou sites. This custom disappeared after the 9th century.

III

We have identified three traditions of flexed burials in ancient China – the southern, northern, and western traditions. The southern tradition appeared (about 10,000
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It has two sub-traditions – the Huanan sub-tradition (13,000–1900 BC) and the Middle Yangtze River sub-tradition (6000–3000 BC). The northern tradition emerged around 6000 BC and died away in the first century BC. It can be divided into three sub-traditions: the eastern sub-tradition from 6000–100 BC, the Gan-Qing-Ning sub-tradition from 2600–1900 BC, and the Qin sub-tradition from 1100–100 BC. The western tradition appeared (around 1900 BC) and disappeared (9th century AD) much later. It had two sub-traditions: the Xinjiang sub-tradition (1900–100 BC) and the Tibetan sub-tradition (1800 BC–AD 900).

If we turn our eyes to the north, we can find that the three traditions are comparable with three traditions of flexed burials in the Eurasian landmass. The distribution area of the southern tradition at least includes northern Vietnam. Flexed burials found in northwestern Guangxi are the earliest examples of this tradition. Territory of the northern tradition covers the Eastern Baikal area and eastern Mongolia. Sideway flexed burials probably earlier than 4000 BC were found at Lake Nozhiï, Aryn Zhalga, Molodovsk, and Dalasun cemeteries in the Eastern Baikal area. Jomon period flexed burials in Japan may have had some relationship with this tradition. The flexed burials found at the Baiyinchanghan site are the earliest examples of this tradition. The distribution area of the western tradition is even much larger. Flexed burials dating to 5000–1000 BC have been found at cemeteries of the Tripol’e-Cucuteni culture, the Namazga I – III culture, the Yamnaya culture, the Afanas’evo culture, the Sintashta-Petrovka culture, and the Andronovo culture. Among them, the Afanas’evo, Sintashta-Petrovka, and Andronovo cultures strongly influenced the formation and development of Bronze Age and Early Iron Age cultures in Xinjiang.

However, these three traditions were by no means independent with each other without any interaction among them. The northern and western traditions occupying the middle and high latitude areas of Eurasia share some similarities, including bucket-shaped ceramic pots with curved or pressed geometric patterns, stone mound (circle) above burials, stone chambers (coffins), and cremation. They may have belonged to a larger cultural tradition. Interestingly, the majority of the relatively well-preserved Late Paleolithic burials found in France, Italy, Russia and Kenya were also flexed burials. If we accept the “Out of African” assumption on the origin of Homo Sapiens, it seems that flexed burials might have been the earliest burial style.

References


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