

# Re-discussion of the Problem of When People in the Region South of the Five Ridges Began to Cast Bronzes

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Key words: *Bronze Founding-Guangdong Sheng (China)-History*      *Metallurgy-History-Guangdong Sheng (China)*      *Fubin Culture*

## I

Lingnan 岭南 (mostly present-day Guangdong Province) is a geographic region located in the southern periphery of China's expansive landmass. When did bronze metallurgy begin in Lingnan? Had it experienced a developmental stage of Bronze Age? These questions have fascinated the academic circle for decades. Two competing propositions have been circulated among the scholars. The first proposition maintains that metallurgy began in Lingnan at early dates parallel to that of the Shang Dynasty of the Central Plains. The alternative proposition argues that metallurgy began in Lingnan at late dates parallel to that of the Spring-and-Autumn Period of the Central Plains. In 1974 a Shang style bronze *ge*-dagger axe with a straight tang and no straight blade was recovered from Dingdapushan 顶大埔山 of Fubin 浮滨, Raoping County, Guangdong Province. This unprecedented discovery is the first of a series of breaking archaeological findings lending support to the early date's proposition. The year of 2005 was particularly important because it witnessed the printing of multitude evidences of early bronze metallurgy in Lingnan upon the publications of two major archaeological monographs: *Boluo Henglingshan: Shang Zhou Shiqi Mudi 2000 nian Fajue Baogao* 博罗横岭山: 商周时期墓地2000年发掘报告 (Henglingshan in Boluo County) and *Jueyang Kaogu* 揭阳考古 (Archaeology in Jieyang, 2003–2005). Today, the academic community overwhelmingly accepts the scenario that bronze metallurgy

began in the eastern Guangdong area in times parallel to the Shang Dynasty of the Central Plains. When we assume that we have concluded the discussion on the beginning of bronze metallurgy in Lingnan, Mr. Li Longzhang of Shenzhen Museum reversed the course and reiterated his support to the late dates proposition. In a recently published monograph *Lingnan Diqu Chutu Qingtongqi Yanjiu* 岭南地区出土青铜器研究 (Bronzes from Lingnan), Li comprehensively and systematically refutes the many tenets of early dates and maintains that bronze technology did not occur in Lingnan until the Spring-and-Autumn Period. I have great respect of Li's work; however we agree to disagree on the questions of the beginning of bronze metallurgy and the relative chronology of Bronze culture in Lingnan. Based on our common commitment in academic pursuit and the good faith of deepening the discussion on the question of bronze metallurgy in Lingnan, I am going to initiate a new round of discussions by rebutting Li's arguments.

## II

Mr. Li's work *Bronzes from Lingnan* (BFL thereafter) raises three questions regarding when bronze metallurgy began in Lingnan. First, was there bronze artifact in Fubin Culture? In particular, it questions the provenience of the Shang style bronze *ge*-dagger axe collected during the 1974 excavation at Dingdapushan. Second, even if the *ge*-dagger axe in question was an artifact of the Fubin Culture, could it be an antique replica of the Yue people in eastern Guangdong during the Eastern Zhou

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era? Third, was the Fubin type remains earlier than the *Kui*-dragon pattern pottery 夔纹陶 (a dragon-like motif remains and “ was there a time when Fubin Culture co-existed and interacted with *Kui*-dragon pattern Pottery Culture? ”

1. The first question is about the provenience of the Shang style bronze *ge*-dagger axe in Dingdapushan. BFL argues that the provenience of the bronze artifact in question is ambiguous that it was recovered by local farmers when digging in the cemetery. There is no indication that the bronze object was contemporary with the Fubin type material remains recovered from the burials.

It is true that the bronze *ge*-dagger axe of Dingdapushan was not recovered *in situ*. Yet, the distribution of material culture remains and stratigraphy around the Fubin type burials in the site revealed that the Fubin type burials were the only cultural remains in the vicinity. Although it is not possible to identify the exact burial in which the bronze artifact was deposited, we cannot rule out the possibility that it was offered to one of the destroyed burials. If we are allowed to expand our scope of investigation, bronze artifacts had been recovered from other burials of Fubin Culture. For instance, the Fubin type burials at Hulinshan 虎林山 in Zhangzhou, Fujian Province yielded a bronze *ge*-dagger axe similar to Dingdapushan's specimen. In addition, the Hulinshan site also yielded other bronze artifacts of spearhead and bell. In another instance, an assemblage of bronze artifacts presumably used as grave goods were recovered from Dayingzhaishan 大盈寨山 Site at Nan'an, Fujian in 1974. Although the pottery assemblage is not available for examination, the bronze *ge*-dagger axes and spearheads resembled the respective bronze artifacts found in Hulinshan burials. It also yielded *ge*-dagger axes and *Huang*-pendant made of jade, and they shared many characteristics with the respective stone artifacts of Fubin Culture. After examining the assemblage, Professor Wu Chunming concluded that they were remains of the Fubin Culture. It has become increasingly clear that the Fubin people had the knowledge of metallurgy and had cast bronze artifacts. Fubin Culture was unmistakably a Bronze culture.

2. The second question concerns the identity of the maker of the bronze specimen in question. BFL maintains in pages 131 and 234 that the Shang style bronze *ge*-dagger axe of Dingdapushan was “ very likely an antique bronze replica of the Yue people in eastern Guangdong during the Eastern Zhou Period. ” I view

the modern term “ antique replica ” implies the activities of commercial production by modeling after the shapes, motifs and sizes of artifacts of antiquity (usually bronzes). The production of antique replicas, including bronze replicas, can be traced to no earlier than late Ming to early Qing. The Song-Yuan times also witnessed the replicate production of early bronze objects. Yet they were not made for collection but for use as ritual paraphernalia in temples and shrines. The archaeology of late Western Zhou and early Spring-and-Autumn has unearthed bronze vessels, such as *ding*-tripod, *gui*-vessel, *zun*-vessel, and *you* 鬯-wine jar, of early Western Zhou styles from elite burials. However, they were miniatures of the real objects decorated with unrefined patterns, and therefore lacked practical value. They were very likely products of the nostalgic thinking at that time. Regardless of the motivations behind the replicating activities, the artifacts produced were primarily used in ritual contexts. We seldom see the replication of weapons.

The style of the bronze *ge*-dagger axes of Fubin Culture suggests it was no accident that they appeared in the Fubin Culture. Bronze *ge*-dagger axes with straight tang and no vertical blade were only yielded from three Fubin cultural sites at Dingdapushan, Hulinshan and Dayingzhaishan. Yet, scores of stone *ge*-dagger axes of the same style were found in these and other Fubin sites. It is intriguing that this type of weapon has never been found in the local pre-Fubin cultural sites. Its appearance in Fubin Culture, therefore, was related to the widespread use of *ge*-dagger axe in early and mid Shang Culture in the Central Plains. However, the sudden appearance of *ge*-dagger axes in Fubin Culture was not the result of direct diffusion of Shang Culture. There existed a vast spatial gap between the geographic distribution of Shang Culture and Fubin Culture. The diffusion must have been activated through intermediate agents. The most likely candidate that could have served as an intermediate agent is the Wucheng 吴城 Culture distributed in the upper and middle reaches of Ganjiang River. In addition to bronze and stone *ge*-dagger axes similar to that of Fubin Culture, Wucheng cultural sites also yielded pottery vessels bearing stylistic similarities to that of both Fubin and Shang cultures. They included wide-mouthed *zun* 尊-jars, bent-shouldered concave-based jars, and *hu*-kettles 壶. In light of these different lines of evidences, the academic circle widely accepts that the Shang style artifacts of Fubin Culture were the results of indirect diffusion of Shang Culture through

Wucheng Culture.

If the appearance of Fubin Culture was closely related to Wucheng Culture, the dates of bronze *ge*-dagger axes found in Fubin sites should not be too remote from the dates of the respective artifacts of Wucheng Culture. The Large Xingan 新干 Tomb of Wucheng Culture yielded bronze *ge*-dagger axes of different styles. They included styles of straight tang and no vertical blade, straight tang with vertical blade, and curved tang. According to the typology of the ceramic grave goods, the relative chronology of the tomb was older than the terminate phase of Wucheng Culture. Taking the "time lapse" factor of cultural diffusion into consideration, the cast dates of the Fubin bronze *ge*-dagger axes could be younger than the terminate dates of Wucheng Culture. However, it was unthinkable that the dates were as late as Eastern Zhou. Therefore, the argument that these bronze artifacts were the products of antique replication of Yue people lacks credible merit.

3. The third and final question concerns the relative chronology of *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture and Fubin Culture. BFL maintains that although the findings of Henglingshan at Boluo shows Fubin Culture might be "slightly older" than *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture, "to date there is no direct stratigraphic evidence showing Fubin type remains were superimposed by *Kui*-dragon pattern pottery remains." On the contrary, "there are indications that there existed a period of coexistence and interaction between Fubin Culture and *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture." To support its argument BFL extrapolates evidences from three archaeological sites, Hai Dei Wan 蟹地湾 and Tung Wan Tsai 东湾仔 of Hong Kong and Wugongshan 蜈蚣山 at Didu 地都 of Jieyang. Let us examine these three sites in detail.

The Hai Dei Wan site of Hong Kong had been subjected to five seasons of excavation from 1968 to 1979, yielding a rich assemblage of material culture remains. Li argues that Fubin Culture and *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture were contemporary in the site by maintaining that "the excavations of Hai Dei Wan site in Hong Kong yielded remains of *Kui*-dragon pattern pottery and remains typical of Fubin Culture, such as wide-mouthed *zun*-jars, bent-bellied *dou*-stemmed bowls, and tall-stemmed brown-glazed *dou*-stemmed bowls, in strata of the same depth." Li's summary of the site's deposition may be factual, but his interpretation risks muddling two different concepts of depth and cultural level.

Strata of the same depth in archaeological excavation do not necessarily mean these strata attribute to the same cultural level. Therefore, the recovery of remains of Fubin Culture and *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture from the same depth has no implication that they coexisted and interacted in the past.

Let us now turn to Tung Wan Tsai site at Mawan 马湾 Island of Hong Kong. The preliminary report partitions the cultural deposits of the site into three phases. I agree with BFL that Phase III of Tung Wan Tsai North, represented by C13, was the remains of *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture. However, it is problematic for both the report and Li to argue that grave C1044, which yielded typical Fubin vessels of long-necked ring-footed *hu*-kettle 盬, double-sprouted *hu*-kettle, and cup with symmetrical small holes on the rim, was contemporary with C13. Graves C1044 and C1061 were dug in close proximity, and both features were superimposed by the stratum of C1004 and intruded the strata of C1007 and C1009. These two burials, C1044 and C1061, were located on the same stratigraphic stratum and shared many characteristics in the contents of material remains. The report ascribes C1061 to Phase II, which I agree, but ascribes C1044 to Phase III is problematic. The above evidences suggest it is more appropriate to join C1044 with C1061 and ascribe both to Phase II, that is, a phase of the Fubin Culture.

Finally, do the findings of Wugongshan site at Didu 地都 of Jieyang support BFL's argument? Again, it is negative according to our study. The site was excavated under the direction of Guangdong Provincial Team of Cultural Relics in 1983. The excavators partitioned the site's depositions into three strata. Stratum I was the plow zone. Strata II and III were also labeled as the upper and lower cultural levels respectively. The lower cultural level, that is stratum III, contained deposition of Neolithic remains. The upper cultural level, that is Stratum II, was subdivided into IIA and IIB according to the presence and absence of post-depositional disturbance. The disturbed second strata of T1 and T2 of the west slope were collapsed into stratum IIA. Wherein, the undisturbed second strata of T3 and T4 of the south slope were collapsed into stratum IIB. Stratum IIB yielded hard pottery shards and glazed pottery shards, and no finding of *kui*-patterned shard. The glazed shards were the remnants of brown-glazed wide-mouthed *zun*-jars diagnostic to Fubin Culture. Stratum IIA yielded pottery shards decorated with *kui* pattern along with shards diagnostic

to Fubin Culture. BFL conveniently selects the coexistence of Fubin shards and *kui*-patterned shards in the disturbed stratum IIA of T1 and T2 to argue that “it is likely that Fubin Culture and *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture might have contemporary in the site.” If we follow the logics of BFL, it is hard to explain the fact that Youganshan 油柑山, a site located 3 km northwest of Jieyang City, yielded 27 pottery vessels from eight Fubin type pit burials, and none of the vessels bear the slightest resemblance to the diagnostic pottery of *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture. Similarly, only Fubin type remains were yielded from Dingdapushan, and Hulinshan, Niaolunwei 鸟仑尾, and Goutoushan 狗头山 at Zhangzhou, Fujian Province. No coexistence of Fubin Culture and *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture was evidenced in these sites. BFL disregards the findings disagreeing with its argument; instead, it selectively uses the coexistence of shards bearing characteristics of Fubin Culture and *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture in a single disturbed context of Wugongshan to advocate the contemporary and interaction supposition is disturbing in itself.

### III

The above analyses and discussions have firmly established that despite collected in secondary context, the Shang style bronze *ge*-dagger axe of Dingdapushan at Fubin in Raoping was an artifact of the Fubin Culture. This contention is supported by the findings of Hulinshan at Zhangzhou and Dayingzhaishan at Nan'an in Fujian. It is apparent that people of Fubin Culture had started a bronze casting industry. However, the technology of bronze metallurgy was not an independent invention of Fubin Culture. Instead, it was the result of the southward diffusion of Shang Culture from the Central Plains through Wucheng Culture. Cultural diffusion is a complex process. In general, there exists “time lapse” when a cultural practice diffuses from locality A to locality B. However, under normal situation, the “time lapse” should not be lengthy. Studies from various angles agree that the *Terminus a Quo* of Wucheng Culture should not be as late as Western Zhou. Therefore, it is quite appropriate to date Fubin Culture, a culture occurred under the influence of Wucheng Culture, to the times parallel to late Shang and early Western Zhou of the Central Plains. Fubin Culture distributed in modern eastern Guangdong and southern Fujian. The distribution of *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture covered the entire

modern province of Guangdong and beyond. Fubin Culture was not contemporary with *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture and it is an iron-clad fact that Fubin Culture preceded *Kui*-dragon Pattern Pottery Culture.

The above contentions, supported by rich archaeological findings, are scientific conclusions reached by the researches of a great number of scholars. They are convincing and irrefutable.

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Postscript: The original paper, published in *Kaogu* 考古 (*Archaeology*) 2008. 8: 91–6, is written by Li Boqian 李伯谦. This summary is prepared by the author himself and translated into English by Lee Yun-Kuen 李润权.