

Kuleqian Cemetery of the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age in Nehe City, Heilongjiang

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Kuleqian 库勒浅 Hamlet lies in the northwest of Nehe 讷河 City, and is under the jurisdiction of Duofu 多福 Village, Xuetian 学田 Town. The cemetery is located in the west of Kuleqian Hamlet, at the western edge of the first-tier terrace facing roughly to the southwest on the left bank of the middle Nenjiang 嫩江 River, with the western and northern slopes bordering on a stretch of low flood land.

In 1996, the Qiqihar 齐齐哈尔 Municipal Station for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments discovered the cemetery, and carried out a salvaging excavation at the tomb (M01) that was faced with thorough destruction. The unearthed funeral objects belong mainly to the pottery pot, jar and cup and bronze arrowhead, earring and button-shaped ornament, which suggest that the cemetery can be preliminarily assigned to the early Iron Age.

In May to June 1999, in coordination with an irrigation project on the middle Nenjiang River, the Institute re-surveyed the cemetery when carrying out archaeological investigation across the area to be flooded. In July to October 2002, a large-scale archaeological excavation was made in the cemetery. It covered an area of 3,700 sq m by opening

42 10m by 10m excavation squares, where 52 tombs were revealed and more than 150 pottery, stone, bone, antler, bronze, iron and agate funeral objects were brought to light (Figure 1).

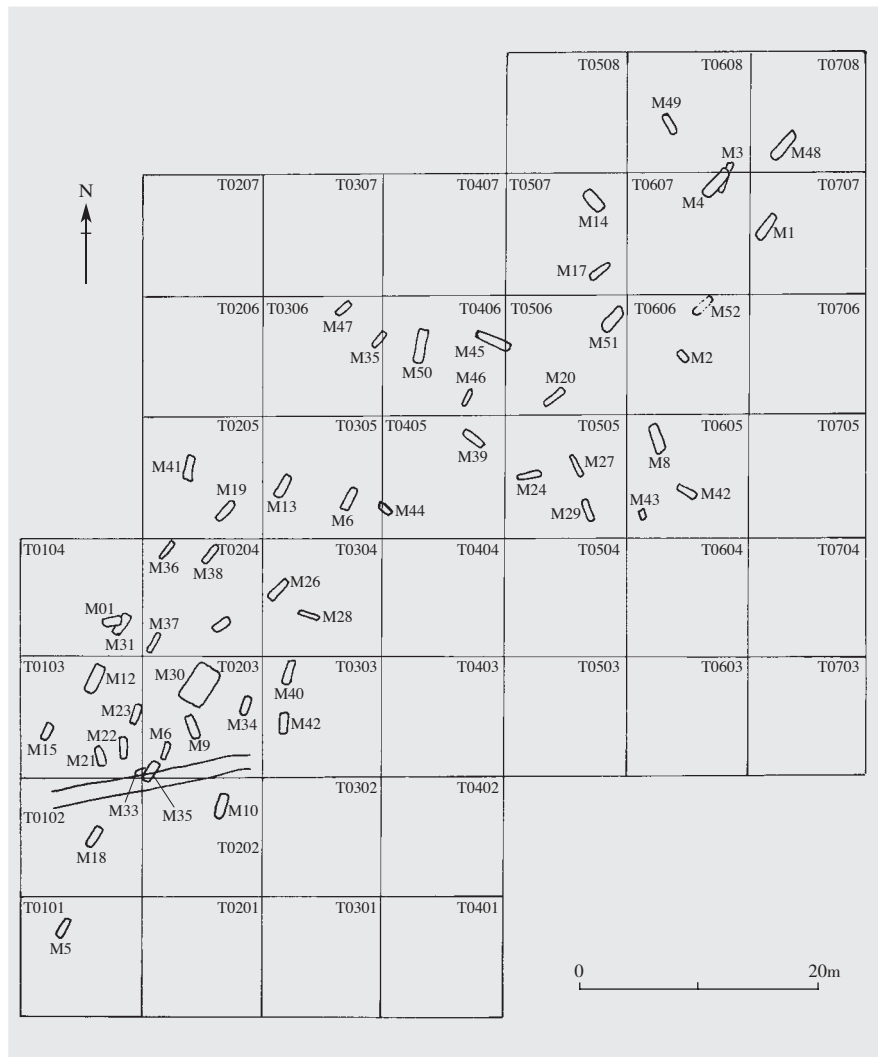


Figure 1. Plan of the excavation squares and tombs in the Kuleqian cemetery

The surface of the cemetery has been turned into a flat field. It simply consists of two layers. The top layer is porous black sandy soil, 20–30cm thick. The second layer is black and yellow sandy soil, also loose in texture, measuring 20–30cm in thickness and yielding a small quantity of reddish-brown sandy pottery pot and jar shards. Beneath this layer are the openings of tombs, which has intruded primary earth.

A Brief Account of Tombs

The tombs are all sub-rectangular earthen pits and contain no coffins and other structures except for second-tier platforms in some cases. Traces of fire using were discovered in one pit and a pig's mandible in another. The cemetery is spread in order and occupies the zone stretching along the terrace edge from the northeast to the southwest, and the central axis of the tombs also points principally to this direction. The tomb pits are largely small in size, long but narrow, each with a capacity of only one corpse, 150–280cm long, 30–70cm wide and 40–120cm deep.

Lying on the terrace formed of yellow sandy soil that is loose and easy for water to permeate through, the pits walls are in a poor condition and the human skeletons have badly rotted. Most of the tombs retain only broken skulls and limbs, so the burial manner and custom can hardly be exactly determined and the tomb-owner's sex and age are difficult to identify.

Of the excavated 52 tombs, 22 are ordinary corpse burials as discerned in burial custom or represented by the human skull (plus remaining limb bones in some cases) discovered at one end. Eight are secondary burials, which yielded two or more individuals with the skulls (plus lime bones in some cases) in disorder. The rest of tombs contain only incomplete limb bones or absolutely no human remains, which may have been removed for secondary burial or might have thoroughly rotten away.

Based chiefly on the difference of their funeral objects in type, assemblage, decoration and shape, most of the tombs are divided into two phases. The other 17 grave-goods-less burials are preliminarily assigned to one or the other period in the light of their direction.

Early Tombs

1. Tomb form and burial custom

The early phase comprises 37 tombs, of which the

definitely datable number 27, namely 24 pointing to the northeast and southwest and three to the north and south. The other ten are indefinite in date but can be tentatively assigned to this phase as their central axis points northeast and southwest. In burial manner, the discernible burials are all in an extended supine position. Below are several examples.

Tomb M30 It is located in the north of Square T0203. The tomb opening is about 45cm beneath the ground surface; the tomb pit is 350cm long and 210–230cm wide for the opening and is 126cm in depth. It is 210 degrees in orientation and has a second-tier platform of primary earth, 40–60cm wide and 82cm high. This is a secondary burial with three incomplete skulls and two sections of lower limb bones in the south of the pit, and a pelvis, some limb bones and a few ribs piled randomly in the middle and north. The grave goods include a pottery pot in the southeastern corner of the tomb bottom; a rhomboid necklace and a four-sided one, both made of white stone beads, in the middle and rear parts; above 500 white stone beads in the earth filling, on the second-tier platform and at the tomb-bottom; and a jade pendant and a broken pottery pot also in the earth filling. The white stone beads must have been scattered layer by layer by throwing from the rear end to the front one as those dropping down from above are largely revealed in the earth filling of the front end (Figure 2).

Tomb M38 It is located in the north of Square T0204. The opening is 50cm deep from the ground surface, and the pit is 200cm long and 60cm wide for the opening, 70cm in depth, and 223 degrees in orientation. Two incomplete skulls are revealed in the middle of the tomb-bottom and at the western wall of the pit respectively, and a fibula and a tibia, both broken, on the left of the rear part. This is also a secondary burial. Among the grave goods is a pottery pot in the southeastern corner of the tomb-bottom, a pottery jar in the middle, and a pottery and a stone arrowhead at the eastern wall. It comes first in the quantity of grave goods among the excavated tombs of Kuleqian cemetery, and its funeral objects are rather complete in assemblage. A stone scraper and an incomplete pottery vessel are unearthed from the earth filling (Figure 3).

2. Description of funeral objects

The early tombs contain 69 pottery, stone, bronze, jade and agate objects.

The pottery objects number 38, of which five are seriously broken. They are largely sandy ware with the sand grains fine and even in size, and close to the

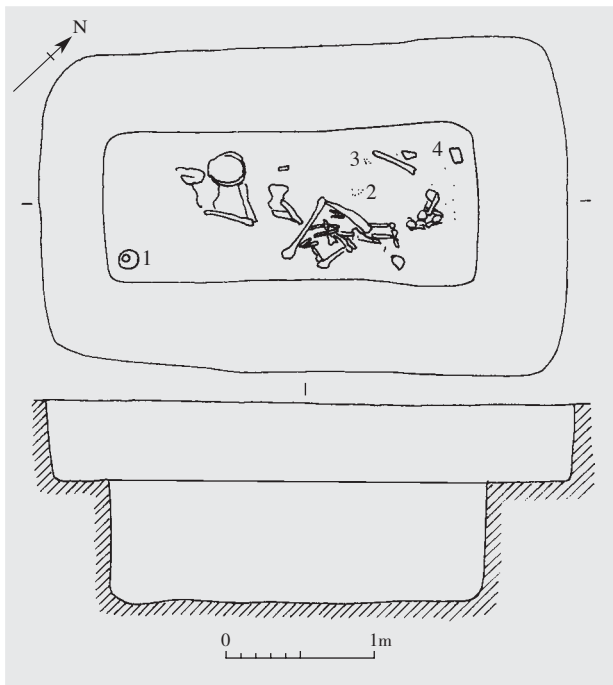


Figure 2. Plan and section of Tomb M30

1. pottery pot 2. necklace made of white stone beads 3. necklace made of white stone beads 4. white stone beads

local soil in composition, suggesting that the material may have been natural clay without special treatment. A part of vessels are coarse sandy ware, usually brown due to uneven firing, and sometimes yellowish-, grayish-, reddish- or blackish-brown. In decorative manner, a small amount of pottery has a plain smooth surface. The decorations are made by means of stamping, incising, pressing, piercing and attaching, but comb impressing is the most common technique. The impressions are often distributed on the neck and upper belly, with the upright triangle, inverted one and bowstring pattern as the main motifs, the bent, straight and slanting lines and checker added as subordinate elements and forming rather gorgeous geometrical combinations; and stylized animal designs occur in very a few cases. The incised pattern is made on the neck and upper belly; the pressed one, below the rim and on the neck of some vessels. The pierced motif falls into two types. One of them is a series of small round pits occurring below the rim of a few objects, and is shaped by straightly piercing the wall from the inside or outside, sometimes forming deep pits and producing outward or inward bulges called “pearl motif.” The other type is a series of dots slantingly or straightly pierced from the outside to the inside for filling in the blanks within the contours of geometrical patterns. The



Figure 3. Tomb M38 (early phase; photo from northeast to southwest)

attached motifs form the nipple pattern and the attached line below the rim. The objects are all hand-made by coiling clay rings with the mouth joined onto the upper belly, and the lower belly onto the base. The base is generally flat (often with a false ring-foot) and occasionally pointed, and round-bottomed vessels are absent at all. A part of pottery has ears, largely bridge-shaped and occasionally small-ring-like. Some utensils bear traces of restoration by drilling holes and making up cracks. Typologically the objects are vessels except for a broken casting mold; jars and pots account for the most, and bowls and cups occur in a small number. In size they are small and medium, large-sized artifacts are absolutely absent, and objects specially made for funeral use form an overwhelming majority (Figures 4–10).

Bronzes They number 11 pieces, all mold-made ornaments. Most of them are buttons or button-shaped decorations; a part of finds belong to the plaque and awl.

Stone artifacts Altogether 24 pieces. They fall into decorations and small-sized tools. The former are all necklaces made of talcum beads, but most of them have been damaged with the beads scattered out, only a part remain strung. The latter are largely scrapers and partly arrowheads. In addition, there are five jades (four pendants and one tubular ornament) and two agate beads

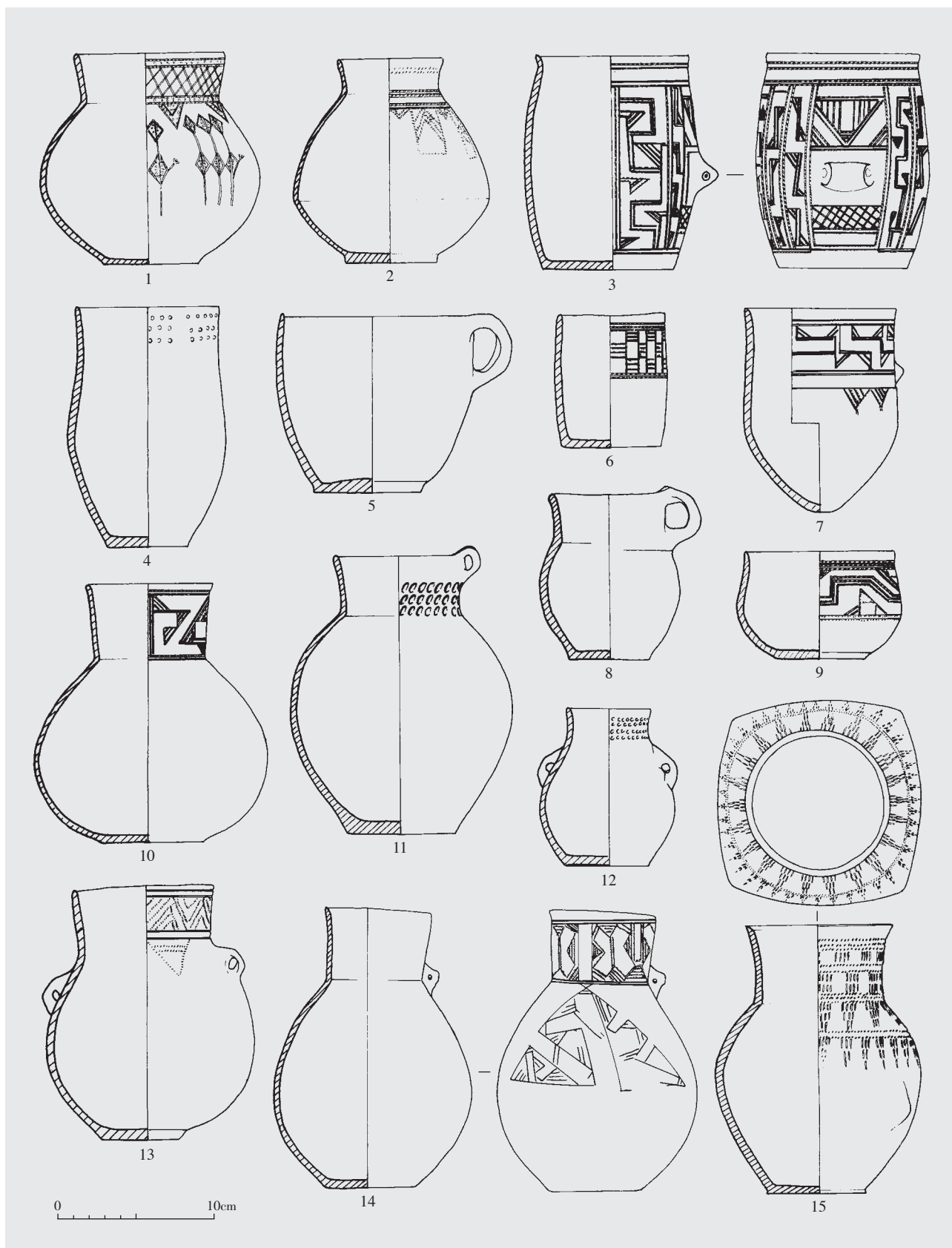


Figure 4. Pottery of the early phase

1-4. jars (M12:1, M50:1, M4:1, M36:2) 5. cup (M22:1) 6-8. jars (M34:1, M41:3, M38:1) 9. bowl (M20 earth filling:1) 10-15. pots (M30:1, M48:1, T0205 ②:1, M41:9, M33:1, M32:1)



Figure 5. Flat-bottomed pottery jar (early phase; M12:1)



Figure 6. Pottery pot (early phase; M30:1)



Figure 7. Flat-bottomed pottery jar (early phase; M4:1)



Figure 8. Pointed-bottomed pottery jar (early phase; M41:3)



Figure 9. Pottery bowl (early phase; M31:1)



Figure 10. Necklace made of white stone beads (early phase; M30:4)

with the middle hole made by drilling from opposite direction.

Late Tombs

1. Tomb form and burial custom

The late tombs excavated in the cemetery number 15, of which seven are definitely datable. In direction, seven tombs point to the northwest and southeast and one to the west. Of the eight tombs indefinite in date, seven are tentatively assigned to this phase as their central axis points northwest and southeast. In burial manner, the

affirmable human remains are largely in an extended supine position. Let us see the following examples.

Tomb M29 It is located in the southeast of Square T0505. The opening is 45cm deep from the ground, and the pit is 210cm long and 57cm wide for the opening, 93cm deep and 330 degrees in orientation. This is a burial of five corpses placed in two layers. In the upper layer, a single skeleton was found at a depth of 50cm from the tomb opening, face directed upward, head pointing to the northwest and body lying in an extended supine position. The funeral objects consist of two tubular ornaments in bone and jasper respectively and a single-eared pottery cup, all on the left side below the skull. The lower layer contains four skeletons placed one upon another in an extended supine position, head pointing to the northwest for three and to the southeast for the other one, forming a “direction-reversing” multi-corpse burial. Skeletons 1–3 lie at a depth of 70cm from the tomb opening. Of them No. 1 is in rather a good condition, skull slightly damaged, face directed upward, head pointing to the northwest, and scapula, rib and pelvis partly missing. The funeral objects are two button-shaped ornaments placed above the skull. No. 2 is an about 45 years old female skeleton, of which only the skull, a part of pelvis and a section of tibia remain, face directed upward and head pointing to the northwest. The eyes are covered with a pair of button-shaped bronze ornaments; the face is furnished with a stone bead; and the pelvis is associated with four iron arrowheads and seven bone ones. On the skull are the left tibia and fibula of No. 1. Of No. 3 only the skull remains. It underlay the tibia and fibula of No. 2, face directed to the west and head pointing to the southeast, and a button-shaped bronze ornament is placed aside. No. 4 is the skeleton of a male some 50 years old. It is found on the tomb-bottom, face directed to the east and head pointing to the northwest; the remains include the skull, vertebra, tibia and fibula, and a part of ribs and pelvis (Figure 11).

Tomb M43 It is located in the center of Square T0605. The opening is 45cm deep from the ground surface, and the pit is 120cm long and 63cm wide for the opening, 40cm in depth, and 155 degrees in orientation. This is an ordinary single burial with a roughly complete skull, a neck bone, a part of vertebra, a pelvis, a left upper limb bone and roughly complete lower limb bones remaining of the skeleton. The tomb occupant is an old female buried in a peculiar manner: the skull is erect, forming a right angle with the neck bone, head pointing to the southwest, face directed to the northeast,



Figure 11. Lower layer in Tomb M29 (late phase; photo from northwest to southeast)



Figure 12. Tomb M43 (late phase; photo from northwest to southeast)



Figure 13. Pottery cup (late phase; M29 upper:3)



Figure 14. Pottery pot (late phase; M44:1)

and lower limb bones bent and warped, which is due to the fact that the tomb-pit is too short to hold the corpse. No grave goods were found in the tomb (Figure 12).

2. Description of funeral objects

Altogether there are 78 pottery, bronze, iron, stone and jade artifacts, with the bronzes coming first in number. The iron and bone implements are discernible only in type as they have been corroded by rust and badly damaged.

The pottery belongs mainly to sandy ware; only a part is made of fine sandy clay. In color yellowish-brown ware comes most frequently, grayish- and reddish-brown ones occurring in some cases. The surface bears no decorations for an overwhelming majority, and polishing and pit-like pattern decorating are seen on very a few objects. Ring-built vessels and finger-kneaded ones are close in number. The former are made of clay rings piled up one upon another, with the mouth ring overlapping the upper belly and the lower belly covering the bottom edge. The base is often made into a false ring-foot, flat-bottomed vessels account for a small part, and no tripods were encountered. The most frequently yielded are pots, jars and cups, all medium or small in size and largely made exclusively for funeral use (Figures 13 and 14).

Bronzes All of them are ornaments, mostly button-shaped or ring-like, and a few belonging to the small bell.

Ironware It has been seriously corroded by rust, belonging to small-sized tools except for a few ornaments and falling into the types of knife, arrowhead, spearhead and button-shaped ornament. The bone artifacts are also largely small-sized, with ornaments occurring in a small number, and the discernible in type fall into arrowheads and tubular ornaments. The jades are all jasper objects, largely belonging to the tubular ornament and partly to the bead.

Conclusions

1. Date

The early tombs are great in number. They are distributed mainly in the northeast and southwest of the cemetery, with the central axis pointing to the northeast and southwest except for some burials pointing north and south. The pottery is generally decorated by impressing, polishing, incising, pressing, piercing and applying, with densely concentrated tiny comb marks as the principal motif. The main vessel set is combined of the high-neck pot, low-necked jar, wide-mouthed

curved-bellied deep jar, cylindrical jar, single-eared cup and swollen-bellied bowl. The cup has a rather straight mouth, a curved belly, and a bridge-shaped handle on the mouth to the upper belly. Among the ornaments, the necklaces made of white stone beads come first in quantity, jade pendant next, and button-shaped bronze ornaments occur in a small number, scattered in different parts of the tomb.

The late tombs are smaller in number and are distributed mainly in the middle of the cemetery. Their central axis points to the northwest and southeast except for a few tombs pointing west and east. All the pottery objects have a polished plain surface. The major types are the flared-rim, curved-neck, curved-belly pot with a tall and slender body, carinated-belly pot, single-ear cup and single-handle cup. The single-ear cup has a wide mouth, a slanting belly, a small bottom and a bridge-shaped handle on the upper belly. Among the ornaments are jasper tubes but no white stone beads and jade pendants. Button-shaped bronze ornaments are greater in number, of which the larger-sized are chiefly used as eye, ear and mouth coverings. Ironware came into being in this period.

The above comparison suggests that the two phases of tombs widely differ in cultural aspect and belong to different archaeological cultures, which have no distinct inheritance relationship between each other. The early phase belonged to the Bronze Age, and the late phase was already in the early Iron Age.

2. Cultural attribution

In the Nenjiang River valley, the Xiaolaha 小拉哈 Baijinbao 白金宝 and Erkeqian 二克浅 cultures have been established as archaeological cultures of the Bronze Age. The early pottery of the Kuleqian cemetery belongs to another culture than the Xiaolaha complex, and rather a great chronological disparity exists between them. Nevertheless, they still have certain similarity to each other, which reflects that, in terms of several cultural elements, some inheritance relationship can be seen between the early Kuleqian tombs and the Xiaolaha culture.

In comparison with the pottery of Baijinbao culture, the early Kuleqian pottery shows rather distinct features in the combination of types and the decoration of object surface, and should be assigned to another culture. But the two groups are close in the shape of their common objects. Strong similarity is also seen in decorative motif and technique, although certain difference exists in design. These suggest that there is a close relationship

between the early Kuleqian tombs and the Baijinbao culture.

The Erkeqian culture is named after the representative early Erkeqian tombs. A comparative examination shows that the early Kuleqian tombs are roughly identical with the Erkeqian culture in pottery combination and conformable to the latter in the formal style of common-type objects, and that the two groups are similar in the retouch and decoration of objects surface as well as in the shape and position of the vessel ear. These assemblages and stylistic features indicate that the early Kuleqian tombs and the Erkeqian culture are basically the same in cultural content, character and nature, and belong to the same culture. In other words, the early Kuleqian tombs belong to the category of Erkeqian culture. In date they should be assigned to the mid- and late Spring and Autumn Period as the Erkeqian culture is close to the late Baijinbao culture in terms of chronology.

The appearance of pointed-bottom vessels of early Kuleqian tombs and the style of pearl patterns on Kuleqian pottery are not owing to local cultural tradition but resulted from the spread of Neolithic Age to Bronze Age round-bottomed or pointed-round-bottomed vessels and the pearl pattern from the Baikal Lake region, Russia, to the Nenjiang River Valley.

As to the late Kuleqian tombs, as their unearthed funeral objects are too small in number to reflect completely their cultural aspect, no all-round comparison can be made between them and the Pingyang 平洋 and Hanshu 汉书 cultures already established in the Nenjiang

River valley. Compared with the pottery from the late Erkeqian tombs, it can be pointed out that the objects from Kuleqian are also basically combined in the pot, jar and cup set, the vessel surface is generally plain, and the artifacts of the two groups are conformable in formal style. In the Kuleqian cemetery, we see again tall slender pots with the belly slightly curved or carinated, deep-bellied jars with a wide mouth and a bent rim, and single-eared cups with a flared mouth and a slanting belly. In addition, both groups of remains feature the custom of burying animal heads as funeral objects (dog's head for Erkeqian; pig's mandible for Kuleqian), which also evidences their identity in cultural attribution.

A part of pottery from the late Erkeqian tombs and the late Kuleqian ones show similarities to the same types of vessels from Jalainur 扎赉诺尔 and Ergun-Right-Banner 额尔古纳右旗 Labudalin 拉布达林 burials in Inner Mongolia. The latter two groups of graves go back to the Eastern Han period. The pottery cups from late Kuleqian tombs bear slightly raised handles, sharing a common style with their counterparts in the Guntuling 滚兔岭 and Fenglin 凤林 cultures in the Sanjiang Plain 三江平原. Therefore the date of the late Kuleqian tombs can be inferred to be in the Han-Wei period.

The Late Erkeqian tombs and the late Kuleqian ones are both newly discovered cultural remains in the Nenjiang River valley. The study of their cultural aspect, features and nature may be left to the future when relevant excavation material is accumulated to a certain amount.

Note: The original report, published in *Kaogu* 考古 (Archaeology) 2006.5: 15–34 with 23 figures, four plates and one table, is written by Zhang Wei 张伟 and Wang Changming 王长明. The present summary is prepared by the authors themselves and English-translated by Mo Runxian 莫润先.