

The Xiaohe Graveyard in Luobupo, Xinjiang

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The Xiaohe graveyard is located in the desert about 4km east of a tributary in the lower reaches of the Kongque River in the Luobupo region. It is 102km east of the old city of Loulan. In 2002–2005, 167 burials were excavated by the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology after spending nearly ten months of field work in the Xiaohe graveyard.

The graveyard is shaped like an elliptical sand-dune over 7m high, 74m long, 35m wide. Inside the graveyard are two timber post fences, one in the middle and another at the southwest corner. The area between the two rows of timber posts will be referred to as the southern district. The area north and east of the central fence of timber posts will be referred to as the northern district. There are 139 burials in the southern district and 28 burials in the northern district. The burials can be subdivided into five levels from top to bottom. The 33 burials excavated in 2003 all belong to the first and second levels in the southern district (Figures 1 & 2).

General Description of the Burials

The surface of the sand-dune graveyard is densely covered with over one hundred columns fashioned out of timber of the willow. The area is also littered with numerous coffins, skeletons and various artifacts damaged by natural or human intervention. We used digital devices to completely map out 35 excavation grids, each grid measuring 10m by 10m. The 33 burials are located in six of the excavation grids T22–T24, T28, T29 (Figure 3).

Each burial was first dug out as a sandy hole in the sand-dune. This is followed by the placing of a coffin inside the dugout hole and the erection of different kinds of timber posts in front of the coffin. Some of the burials even have towering timber columns in front. The timber coffin, fashioned out of willow, comprises the side panels, the two ends and the cover all fitted together without a bottom. The coffin size was generally customized to contain precisely one deceased person. The



Figure 1. The Xiaohe graveyard before excavation

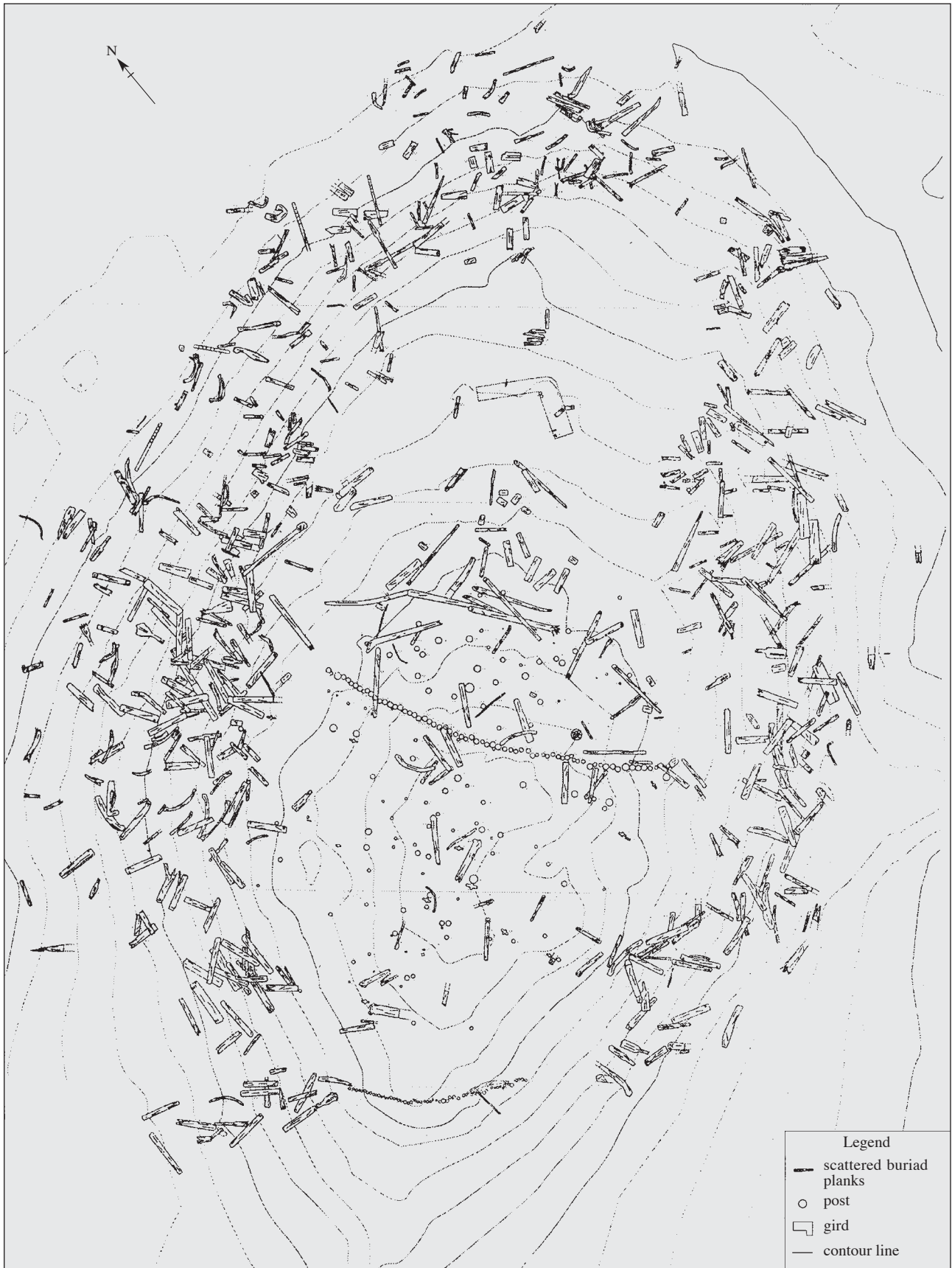


Figure 2. Illustration of the Xiaohu graveyard

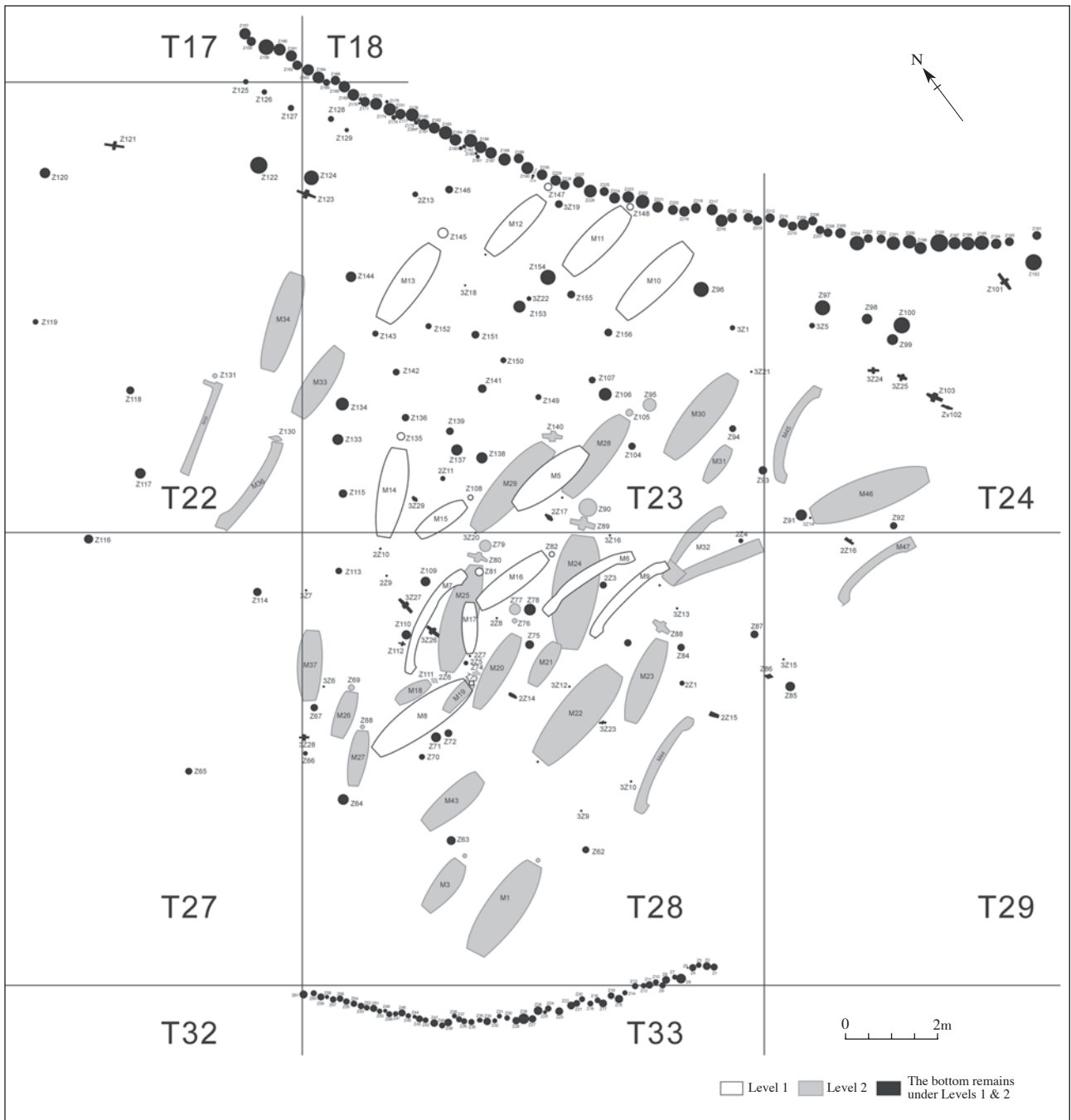


Figure 3. Illustration of Levels 1 and 2 of the Xiaohe graveyard

coffins are basically of the same design. The side panels are elliptical, and the interior surfaces of the side panels retain the natural curve of the wood at both ends. The two side panels are very close together at the head end. On the interior surfaces of the side panels near the head end, vertical grooves are cut into them. A stake in the shape of a long post would be inserted into the grooves of the two side panels to form a bottomless timber coffin frame. The cover is made up of small planks of wood sized to match the width of the coffin. Tomb

M35 on the second level is an exception as the side panels of the coffins from this tomb are almost straight and the end pieces are large. The top of each timber coffin is covered with an ox hide at the center of which a twig of red willow is placed. There are as many as 12 willow twigs placed together with a single reed stalk at the center. Heaps of broken stones can be found over the head end of some coffins (Figure 4).

Erected in front of the timber coffins are vertical timber posts of varying shapes. Thin sticks were also erected

behind some coffins. The shape of the vertical post in front of the coffin varies according to the gender of the deceased. The vertical posts in front of the coffins for the males are shaped like oars while the vertical posts in front of coffins for the females are like round columns. It has been interpreted that the “oar” is a symbolic form of the yoni while the column is a symbolic form of the lingam (Figure 5).

The burials on the first and second levels are individual burials. The two levels yield a total of 40 bodies, 30 of which are adults, and 10 are juveniles. Among the 23 bodies that are clearly identifiable as adults, 14 are male and 9 are female. Among the males, three bodies have unusual characteristics. One body is made of wood



Figure 4. The burials in Level 2 in the southern area

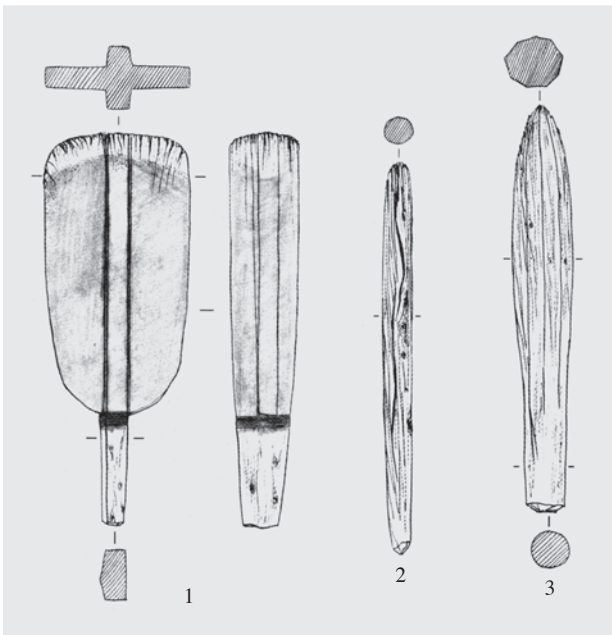


Figure 5. Different kinds of timber posts in front of the coffins
1. oar shaped vertical post (M24:1) 2. column shaped vertical post (M11:1) 3. column shaped vertical post (M13:1) (scale: 1/36)

(Figure 6), one body has the skull of a mummy as the head while the fragmented torso and limbs are fashioned out of wood. Another body has only the remains of a wood arm. The head of the deceased is mostly facing east or northeast, the body lies on the back, and the limbs are stretched out straight. Some faces are found with stripes painted on them. The bodies are generally covered with a milky white paste-like substance (composition to be further determined). The deceased wears a felt hat on the head, the feet are shod in leather boots, a cummerbund is worn around the waist, and the entire body is wrapped inside a voluminous cape made from woven woolen material. As for burial objects, besides the clothing, necklaces, bracelets worn on the body of the deceased, each burial has a straw basket installed on the right side of the cape. Large amounts of small twigs of *mahuang* (*ephedra sinica*), tips of animal ears and short ropes made of bundled animal tendons are placed over the body of the deceased. In some cases, grains of wheat and millet, etc. are scattered both on top and underneath the body. Also commonly found are thin, long sticks of red willow and feather ornaments made from the feathers of creatures of the bird family. The costume and certain burial goods vary according to the gender of the deceased. The cape has a raw edge with unraveled threads; for the male it is usually located along the lower hem of the cape while that for the fe-

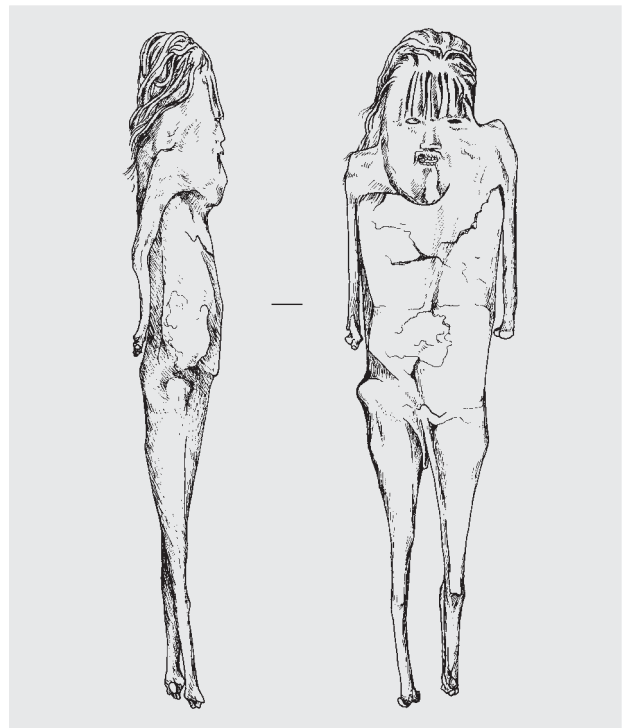


Figure 6. Mummy of burial M33 (Scale: 1/13)

male is located around the neck and shoulders. The cummerbund of the male is styled like a belt while the cummerbund of the female is styled like a short skirt. The timber post or “*yoni*” placed in front of the male coffin is flanked by a mortuary bow and a wood arrow; a feather arrow is placed on the body. On the female body is placed a wood lingam, leather bag and wooden comb. There are also more peculiar burial goods such as ox heads, wooden staffs inlaid with human faces, etc., probably objects related to the social status of the deceased.

Examples of Burials

The female burial M13 from the first level and the male burial M24 from the second level will serve as representative examples. The general conditions of these burials are introduced below.

1. M13 is located on top of the sandy slope in the north end of the southern district. The burial hole is 295cm long, 140cm wide from left to right, and it is 50cm deep. In front of the coffin is a thick and large wood post with a diamond shape to symbolize the lingam; it is 187cm tall. The wood coffin is quite large; it measures 225cm in length, the middle section is 84cm wide, 45cm high. The cover is composed of 11 wood planks, and draped over it are three pieces of ox hide of varying sizes. In the middle section of the coffin, 12 sticks of red willow and one small reed stalk are placed (Figure 7).

The occupant of the burial is an adult female. Her head is facing east. Except for the head, legs and feet, the body is wrapped in a woven wool cape with a pattern of red vertical stripes on a white ground. Near the chest and abdominal area, the cape is held in place by three carved wood pins painted in red together with three short sticks of red willow that are all burnt at one end. Placed on top of the abdomen of the female corpse is a large ox head, the forehead of which has a checkerboard pattern painted in various colors. Next to the right hip of the corpse is a straw basket with a felt cover. When the cape was unwrapped, three small packages made from bundles of wool yarn were found along the hem on the right side, and inside these packages were grains of millet and crumbled twigs of *mahuang*. Underneath the cape that wrapped around the corpse

is another cape made of grayish white woolen material that served as a cushion (Figures 8–10).

The head is cushioned by a piece of white sheepskin underneath. Worn over the head is a white, round felt hat. Wrapped around the waist is a cummerbund made of woven wool with a pattern of vertical stripes, and this cummerbund is unusually wide. 7 round copper disks are attached to the waistline around the middle section of the cummerbund (Figures 11 & 12). The feet are shod in short leather boots. Worn around the neck is a necklace made of red wool yarn strung with pearls. Worn around the wrist is a bracelet made of red and yellow wool yarn strung with an oval jade bead (Figure 13). Placed on the left bosom of the female corpse is a small wood carving of a human face, on the right side of the abdomen is a large leather satchel decorated on the surface with red tassels and three feather ornaments (Figure 14). To the left of the left wrist is a wood lingam (Figure 15). To the right of the torso is a red willow twig wrapped at one end with the skin of a rodent. The right upper arm is resting on a red willow twig shaved to a point at one end. A wood comb is placed to the right of the right hip. Below the right hand two small rocks are placed. The sunken abdomen of the female corpse is scattered with grains of millet while the lower torso is covered with numerous twigs of *mahuang*. Underneath both arms and the left hip are strips of animal tendons. Milky white flaky substances can be found around the neck and shoulders. There are also several pieces of tips of animal ears.

The female corpse is 150cm long. The face and parts of the legs exposed outside the cape are covered with a milky white paste-like substance. The face is narrow



Figure 7. Three pieces of ox hide of varying sizes covered the coffin

and thin, with deeply sunken cheeks, high cheek-bones and cavernous eye sockets. The tightly drawn mouth is relatively long and thin. The hair is the color of flax; it is short and does not reach below the neck. The hair seems to have been painted with a paste-like substance as well. After removing the painted substance from the face, the area from the forehead to the nose is found to have been painted with red horizontal stripes. The three stripes over the forehead are most prominent, while those from the bridge of the nose to the upper lips are broken and faint (Figure 16).

2. M24, located at the center of the southern district, has been destroyed by M6, M9, M16 of the first level and M21 of the second level. The burial hole is approximately 440cm long, 235cm wide, 170cm deep. In front of the coffin is erected a round wood column 330cm tall and a wood yoni that is 180cm tall (Figures 17 & 18).

The wood coffin is 181cm long, the mid-section is 49cm wide. The cover is composed of 10 planks with black vertical lines painted on them. Draped over the coffin cover are four pieces of ox hide. Placed on top of the middle piece of ox hide are 12 twigs of *mahuang* and one reed stalk.

In front of the top end of the coffin is a yoni flanked by 3 arrows and one mortuary bow on either side. Near the base of the wood column, a bundle of reed stalks, red willow and other vegetation are tied to the wood column. Inserted into the bundle is a thick reed stalk blunted at both ends together with four bunches of long, thin *mahuang* twigs wrapped in twine. There are also four pieces of sheep leg-bones. Placed on top of the

bundle is a piece of cow dung and next to the bundle is a large straw basket with a handle made from twine.

The occupant of the burial is an adult male. The body has already mummified. He lies on his back, head facing northeast. Except for the head, legs and feet, the rest of the body is wrapped in a woven wool cape with a pattern of red stripes on a dark brown background. The cape is held in place by three carved wood pins and three short twigs of red willow. Placed along the right hem of the cape are 4 small packages made from bundles of red wool yarn. Inside the packages are broken twigs of *mahuang* and grains of millet. Placed on top of the cape over the abdominal area is a large ox head with its forehead painted in red with black stripes. A wood staff decorated at one end with an inlaid design of a human face is anchored into the sand above the head and another one is anchored into the sand below the feet of the male corpse (Figure 19). Next to the right hip of the male corpse is a woven straw basket with a felt

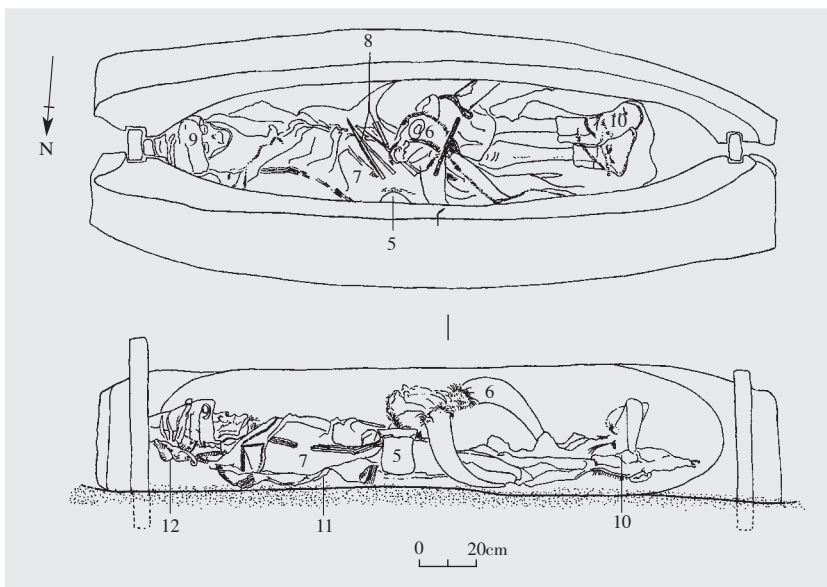


Figure 8. Plan and cross section of burial M13



Figure 9. Coffin of burial M13 after the lid was moved away



Figure 10. Side view of the mummy in burial M13

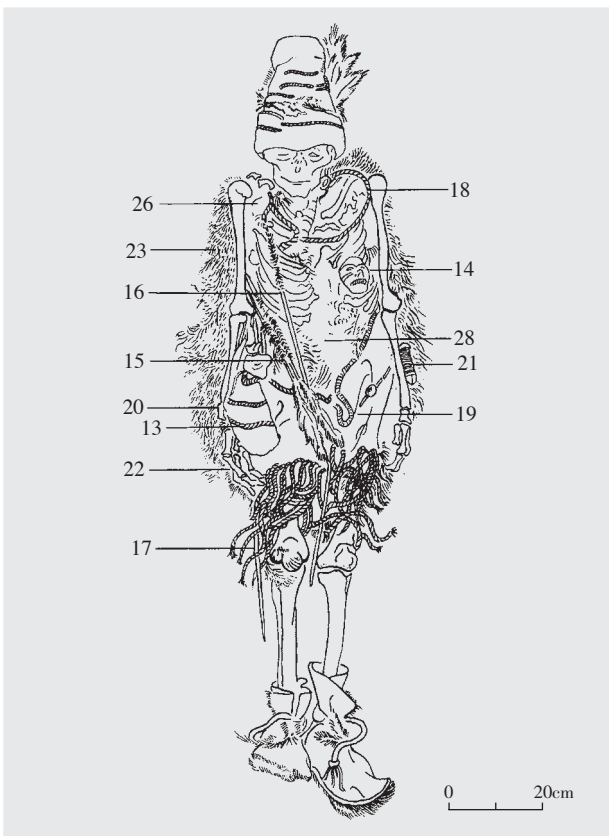


Figure 11. Burial objects of burial M13

13. leather satchel 14. wood carving of a human face
 15. feather ornaments 16. stick 17. tamarisk stick 18.
 necklace 19. cummerbund made of woven wool 20.
 wrist chain 21. wood lingam 22. small pebbles (under
 right hand) 23. twigs of mahuang (scattered under
 body) 26. milky white blocks 28. grains of millet (24,
 25, 27. unmarked in this figure)



Figure 12. Cummerbund made of woven wool (M13:19)

cover. Underneath the cape that wrapped around the corpse is another grayish-white woven wool cape.

The head is cushioned by a sheep skin underneath. Worn over the head is a dark brown felt hat. Stuck on the left side of the hat is a single feather ornament and a fan-shaped feather ornament with five separate feathers. Attached to either side of the hat is a rodent with the rodents' heads brought together so that they are facing each other as they dangle down the middle of the hat. Wrapped around the waist is a cummerbund in the form of a narrow band that is brown and ochre in color. The feet are shod in short leather boots, and the boots are tied above the ankles with straps made from a woven woolen material. Earrings adorn both ears. Around the right wrist is a bracelet composed of seven strands of

small white beads strung together. Worn next to this bracelet is another wool yarn bracelet strung with an oval jade bead. Each calve is tied with a rope of brown wool yarn with red tassels. A large quantity of burial goods is heaped around the lower torso and in the area next to the right side of the body. Most of them are in the form of long wooden stick-like objects, with a total of over 40 pieces (Figures 20 & 21). They include 3 snake-like wood carvings, 2 leather coats, a flat wooden stick wrapped at one end with a bunch of brown feathers, one wood arrow with a bone tip, 25 feather arrows with carved designs, 8 red willow sticks that are shaved to a point at both ends, 3 red willow sticks with one end wrapped in rodent skin, 2 red willow sticks with the bark still attached, and one long and thin red willow stick

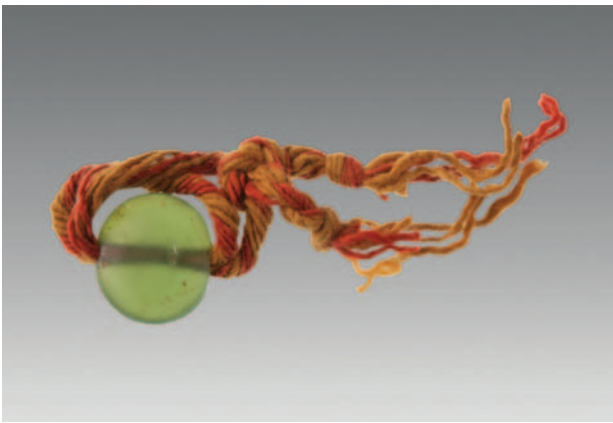


Figure 13. Wrist chain (M13:20)



Figure 14. Leather satchel (M13:13)



Figure 15. Wood lingam (M13:21)



Figure 16. Color paint on the face of the female occupant of burial M13



Figure 17. Round wood post and a wood yoni in front of the coffin M24

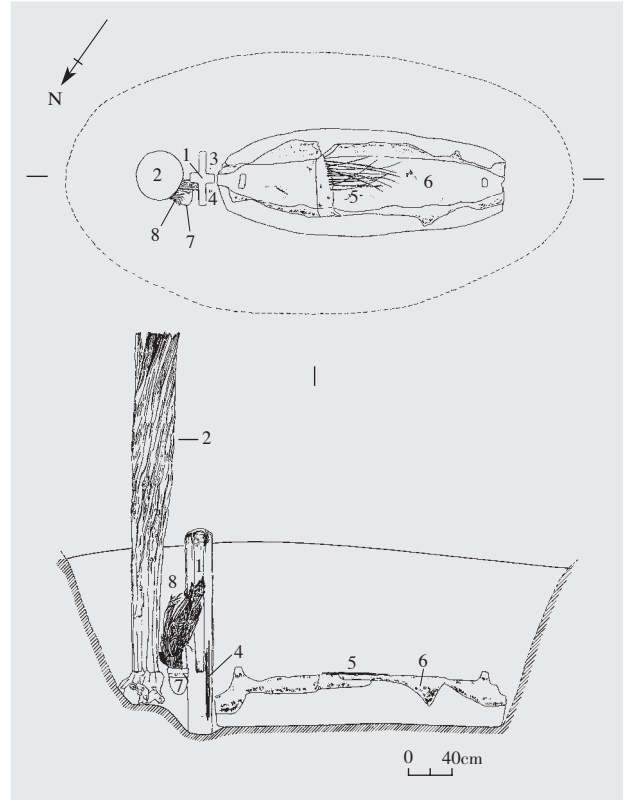


Figure 18. Plan and cross section of burial M24



Figure 19. Wood staffs decorated at one end with an inlaid design of a human face (Left burial M24:10; Right burial M24:9)

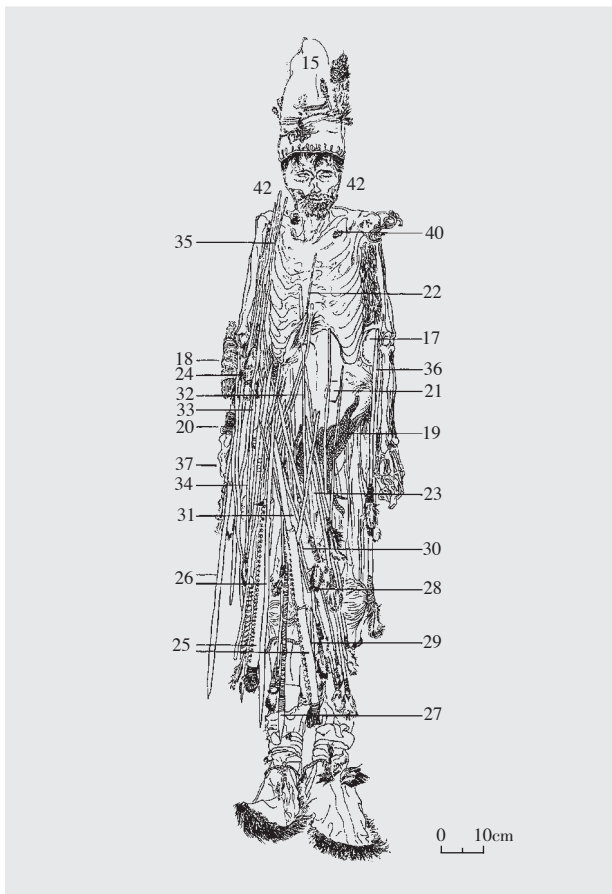


Figure 20. Burial objects of burial M24

15. wool cape 17. wood carving of a human face 18. sheaf of muhuang 19. cummerbund made of woven wool 20. wrist chain 21. small pebbles 22-24. feather ornaments 25. two flat sticks with leather cover 26. two snake-shaped wood carvings 27. two wood arrows with bone heads 28. feathered arrows (12, between two legs) 29. three sticks 30. two sticks with two points 31. snake-shaped carving 32. two tamarisk sticks 33. four feathered arrows 34. six wood sticks with two points 35. seven feathered arrows 36. two feathered arrows 37. wooden horseshoe-shaped object 40. animal ear tips 42. pair of earrings (38, 41. unmarked in this figure)

placed on the lower right side of the body. Inside the right elbow joint of the male corpse is a small wood carving of a human face placed in an inverted position (Figure 22). Outside the right elbow joint is a bundle of *mahuang* tied together by a wool string of intertwined red and white yarn. Placed on the left side of the abdomen is an almost rectangular stone slab of mottled blue and white color. In the middle of the chest and between the legs are placed a feather ornament. There is also a feather ornament placed inside the right upper arm. On the side of the right hip—where the deceased could reach with the right hand—a wooden horse-shoe shaped instru-



Figure 21. Male mummy of burial M24

ment inlaid with a strip of stone is placed. Some small twigs of *mahuang* are scattered over the lower torso and along either side of the upper torso. Around the neck and shoulders are some broken animal ear tips.

The male corpse is 164cm long, the abdomen is sunken, and the tendons around the chest and the muscles of the four limbs are prominent. The entire body is covered with a thin layer of milky white paste-like substance. The forehead is narrow, the cheek bones are broad, the eyebrows are arched and thick, the eye sockets are deep, and the eyelashes are dark brown. The beard is golden yellow, and the upper mustache is neatly trimmed. The hair is a light shade of auburn speckled with a few golden yellow and white strands. The hair hangs down naturally behind the head; it is long, reaching just above the hips. The surface of the hair is also painted with a milky white paste-like substance. After removing some of the milky white paste painted on the face of the male corpse, it can be seen that the area from the forehead to the nose had been painted with red horizontal stripes, but the exact number of stripes is no longer identifiable.

Concluding Remarks

The basic structure of single burials has been clarified by the excavation of burials at two levels of the southern district. That is, each burial consists of a timber coffin inside a sandy hole, the wooden posts erected in front of the coffin symbolizing the lingam or yoni, and the thin post erected at the foot end of the coffin. Some burials have large wood columns painted in red anchored at the furthest head end of the burial hole. These wood columns were used as markers

above the ground. Before the excavations, many willow columns were already exposed above the surface of the sand-dune, and most of them were burial markers. Furthermore, based on the levels to which they belong, most of them can be dated earlier than the first and second levels of burials. In addition, before and during the excavations, many damaged coffin timbers were collected from the southern district. After conducting a survey of such findings, it can be seen that above the first and second levels in the southern district there were at least 60 or more burials.

As the burials were stacked together in different layers, the first and second level burials became mingled with the “forest” formed by the wood columns in front of burials on the level below. The first level had been seriously disturbed, and the original plan of distribution is no longer discernible. As for the second level, the basic plan was to distribute the burials from the center of the graveyard outwards to the surrounding area. The burial at the center is that of a male (M24). The wood yoni placed in front of this burial is large, and the burial goods are rich as well as peculiar in their features. The burials on the first and second levels exhibit a strong sense of uniformity in terms of burial customs, burial



Figure 22. Wood carving of a human face (M24:17)

styles, and burial goods. This leads to our conclusion that the burials in the limited space between the two wood fences in the southern district were built from the bottom up, and that such burial activities were continued without interruption.

After the excavations of the entire site of the Xiaohe graveyard, 16 soil samples from different soil levels were subjected to AMS ¹⁴C dating. The three samples from levels one and two, based on calibrations with tree ring dating, can be dated no earlier than 1690 BCE, and no later than 1420 BCE. According to the sequence of burials and ¹⁴C dating figures, it is most likely that levels one and two can be dated between 1650 and 1450 BCE.

As the excavated material indicate, during the prehistoric times in the Luobupo area there was an ancient culture with peculiar cultural characteristics, and it is the Xiaohe graveyard that preserved the most representative remains of this culture. The multiple levels of burials, the graveyard site, the material remains are mostly related to primitive religion and practices of sorcery. They provide valuable primary material for the study of social structure and primitive religious beliefs at the time.

Notes: The original report was published in *Wenwu* 文物 (Cultural Relics) 2007.10: 4–42, with 72 illustrations in which 37 are photographs. The authors are Yidilisi Abuduresule 伊弟利斯, Li Wenying 李文瑛, Hu Xingjun 胡兴军. The present abridgement is prepared by Hu Xingjun and translated into English by Judy Chungwa Ho.