

The Neolithic site at Dongshancun, Zhangjiagang City, Jiangsu

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Abstract

The two terms of excavation to Dongshancun Site recovered a dozen or so burials of Majiabang Culture and a settlement of Songze Culture consisting of house foundations and burials, the nine high-ranking large tombs among which were the first discovery of tombs of Songze Culture in this rank. The discovery of these nine high-ranking tombs provided new data for re-understanding the comprehensive feature and the level of the social productivity of Songze Culture in circum Lake Tai zone. The separated arrangement of large- and small-sized tombs and the appearance of large-sized house foundations in the early and middle phases of Songze Culture proved that at latest around 5800 BP, social classes have emerged in Songze Culture and provided important materials for the researches on the process of social civilization in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River and the origins of Chinese Civilization.

Keywords: Dongshancun Site (Zhangjiagang City, Jiangsu); large-sized tombs; Majiabang Culture; social stratification; Songze Culture; origins of civilizations.

Introduction

The Dongshancun Site is located in the north of Dongshan Village, to the northwest of the Nansha Office of Jingang Township, Zhangjiagang City. It lies 18km apart from Zhangjiagang City seat and about 2km south of the Yangtze River, on a slope of the eastwards extending ridge of Mt. Xiangshan.

In August to November 2008 and March 2009 to February 2010, the Joint Archaeological Team from Nanjing Museum and Zhangjiagang Museum carried out there prospecting and two seasons of excavation. The site is sub-quadrate in plan and measures about 500 x 500m in area. The excavation was launched by opening 10 x 10m grids and covered over 2300sq m in the two seasons (Figure 1).

Tombs of the Majiabang Culture

Tombs of the Majiabang Culture were discovered eleven, of which six in Excavation Square T1506 of Zone I

and five in T0611 and eastern T0511 of Zone III. The former group is opened beneath the Layer 4 (Songze Culture layer) and the latter lies beneath the Layer 2 and intruded the Layer 6 (the Layer 2 is the Ming-Qing remains superimposed on the Layer 6 that belongs to the Majiabang Culture, for T0611 is higher in terrain). Their major axis points roughly to the northwest and southeast and their pits are roughly the same in size, measuring about 1.9m in length and about 0.7m in width. The grave goods are small in number, generally two or three artifacts for each grave. These are largely pottery vessels, some being in association with small jades (Figures 2-4). The pottery is mainly of red clay ware and occasionally of red sandy and black clay wares, and falls into the types of *fu-*



Figure 1 The excavation areas of Dongshancun Site.



Figure 2 09ZDM78 (W-E, Majiabang Culture).



Figure 3 09ZDM68 (W-E, Majiabang Culture).



Figure 4 09ZDM97 (E-W, Majiabang Culture).



Figure 5 Red pottery *dou*-stemmed bowl (M68:2).



Figure 6 Pottery pointed-bottomed vessel (M97:1).

cauldron, flared-ring-foot *dou*-stemmed bowl, basin, cup and pointed-bottomed vessel. The four tombs in T0611 contain principally flat-bottomed or round-bottomed *fu* while the six in T1506, flared-ring-foot *dou* (Figures 5 and 6).

Settlement of the Songze Culture

In the Songze Culture Age, Zone I was a cemetery of small-sized tombs, Zone II chiefly a residential area with a lot of house foundation discovered, and Zone III mainly a burial ground of large-sized tombs.

1. Small-sized tombs

27 of them are excavated. They are largely distributed in Excavation Squares T1606, T1706, T1806, T1906, T1805, T1905 and T2005. The grave openings are underneath the Layers 3 or 4, which shows certain temporal disparity. The graves are roughly the same in size and orientation, about 2.2m long and 0.8m wide, and around 330° or so. Most of the human skeletons have

rotten away; only a few individuals left over traces. The grave goods are relatively rich, consisting of pottery, stone and jade artifacts, above ten pieces in most cases or even 26 in very a few burials, though only two or three occasionally. They are largely disposed in certain places, arranged in order on the two sides and at the foot of the tomb occupant (Figures 7–9).

The small-sized tombs in Zone I can be roughly divided into three phases, which are represented by M9 and M15 for Phase I, M74 and M77 for Phase II and M1, M4 (Figures 10 and 11) and M5 for Phase III. Comparison with the Songze and Nanhebang Sites of the Songze Culture shows chronologically the three phases of Dongshancun small-sized tombs to correspond to the early, middle and late phases of Songze Culture respectively.

2. The residential area

It is in Zone II and consists of five house foundations (F1 through F5), all covered by the Layer 4 and intruding the Layer 5. F1 and F2 are in good condition with extensive



Figure 7 Potteries unearthed from 08ZDM15 of Songze Culture.

1 and 2. pots (M15:8 and M15:6) 3. *dou*-stemmed bowl (M15:7) 4. *ding*-tripod (M15:13)



Figure 8 Potteries unearthed from 08ZDM15 of Songze Culture.

1. jar (M15:10) 2. *dou* (M15:12) 3. *gui*-pitcher (M15:11)



Figure 9 Pottery three-section-stemmed *dou* (M77:1, Songze Culture).

accumulations of burnt clay left over (Figure 12). F3 and F4 lie to the south of F1 and F2, with postholes remaining *in situ*. F3 has an oval plan and measures about 13sq m in area, while F4 is round in plan and about 17sq m in area. Judged from the general plan, there may have been two groups of houses with F4 and F3 auxiliary to F1 and F2 respectively.

F1 is discovered in Excavation Squares T1209 and T1210 and has 33 postholes in the periphery. It is rectangular in plan and comes first in size among the so far recorded Songze Culture house foundations, measuring 14.7m long from north to south and 5.75m wide from west to



Figure 10 08ZDM4 (E-W, Songze Culture).



Figure 11 Potteries unearthed from 08ZDM4 of Songze Culture.
 Top row from left. *yi*-pouurer (M4:23) *gui*-pitcher (M4:25) *dou*-stemmed bowl (M4:22)
 Bottom row from left. jars (M4:9 and M4:7) jar with ring foot (M4:21)

east, covering about 85sq m in area and major axis pointing roughly due north. A selective excavation in its western half revealed that the floor is uneven and bears no traces of special treatment. In the middle of the west is a gentle rectangular slope, maybe the remains of the doorway. At the center of the south and north, rectangular and square earthen plinths were found to be slightly raised above the floor and to have postholes. The house may have been a large-sized single-roomed building with the roof supported by the internal posts. A number of objects were yielded from the accumulations of burnt clay, including pottery jars and *fu*-cauldrons, stone adzes, spindle-whorls, small jade tubes and animal bones.

3. High-ranking large tombs of Songze Culture

Nine of them were revealed. This is so far the most important remains



Figure 12 The house foundations of Songze Culture (NE-SW).

on the Dongshancun Site and the largest-sized, highest-ranking graves revealed since the discovery of the Songze Culture. They are mainly distributed in Excavation Squares T0510, T0610 and T0713 and cover an area of approximately 300sq m (Figure 13).

These large tombs are all rectangular earthen pits orienting to the northwest; no traces of intrusion were seen among them. They are similar in size, largely about 3m long and 1.7m wide, some pits reaching about 3.3m in length and 1.8m in width, and seven tombs exceeding all of the Songze Culture burials discovered in the past. A part of tombs left over traces of coffins, such as M95 and M98. The grave goods from each grave number over

30 in most cases and fall into pottery, stone implements and jades. The stone and jade artifacts are mostly placed on the tomb occupant's body, head and feet, whereas the pottery vessels around his body (Figures 14–16). Below is a brief description of M90 for example.

M90 lies in the south of Excavation Square T0610 with the opening beneath the fifth layer, at a depth of about 0.8m from the present-day surface. The tomb pit is one of the seven largest tombs discovered in the present excavation, measuring 3.05m long and 1.7–1.8m wide for the opening and 0.4m deep for the whole pit, with an orientation of 340°. It is made rather neat, walls slanted and bottom leveled. The human skeleton is in a poor condition, only



Figure 13 Full-view of the high-ranking large tombs of Songze Culture in Zone III (S–N).



Figure 14 09ZDM91 (E–W).



Figure 15 09ZDM92 (E–W).

the rotten skull remains in the center of the northern bottom (Figure 17).

The grave goods are very rich, totaling 67 pieces and coming first in quantity among the Songze Culture tombs discovered so far. They consist of 38 pottery vessels, 19 jades, five large-sized stone *yue*-battle axes (Figure 18), two large stone adzes and three other stone implements. The pottery vessels are disposed mainly in the periphery of the bottom and in type fall into the *ding*-tripod, *dou*-stemmed bowl, *gui*-pitcher, pot, plate, basin and vat (Figure 19); two of them are wide-mouthed red sandy vats



Figure 16 09ZDM93 (E-W).



Figure 17 09ZDM90 (E-W).

found in the southeastern corner of the tomb bottom. The jade artifacts are placed chiefly at the tomb occupant's wrist and head as well as on his upper left and belong to the types of *huang*-semicircular-pendant, bracelet, *jue*-ring, earplug, tube, bead and pendant (Figures 20 and 21). The stone *yue* are laid, for four, on both sides of the tomb occupant, each group consisting of two pieces opposite to each other; the other one is in the northeast of the tomb bottom, covering the slanting-stripe-shaped traces of cinnabar that must be remains of the painted curves skirting the round handle-hole. The two stone adzes are put in the southwestern corner of the tomb bottom, one of them measuring about 34.2cm in length, 6-6.5cm in width and 2.7cm in thickness.

Regarding the unearthed jade and stone artifacts, a *jue*-ring is placed on the tomb occupant's head, a *huang*-semicircular pendant on his southern side, a stone awl on his upper right, and a grinding stone and a heap of quartz sand below his head (Figure 22). The grinding stone has been broken into two sections, the awl is all dark red and is polished smooth, body bearing a scar, point flattened



Figure 18 Stone *yue*-battle ax (M90:31).



Figure 19 Some potteries unearthed from 09ZDM90.

1 and 7. pots (M90:28 and M90:29) 2 and 5. jars (M90:8 and M90:3) 3. *dou*-stemmed bowl (M90:2) 4. *ding*-tripod (M90:6) 6. *gui*-pitcher (M90:9)



Figure 20 Jades and stone implements unearthed from 09ZDM90.

1 and 4. jade bracelets (M90:56 and M90:55) 2 and 3. jade *jue*-rings (M90:44 and M90:36) 5, 6 and 9. jade tubes (M90:47, M90:48 and M90:40) 7. stone awl (M90:41) 8. jade earplug (M90:37) 10 and 11. jade beads (M90:39 and M90:38)

and showing clear use-wear. It has very high iron content, whose proportion is as great as able to attract a magnet. Unearthed in association with the grinding stone and quartz sand, it may have been part of a set of jade working tools.

4. Some new achievements

Compared with the Songze Culture burials discovered in the past, the presently excavated large-sized tombs show a few new features:

(1) The high-ranking large-sized tombs of Songze Culture on the Dongshancun Site and the small-sized ones are separated from each other in different burial areas, which is a phenomenon known for the first time among the then cemeteries discovered so far in the Yangtze River Valley and even throughout China.

(2) These high-ranking tombs are as large in size as exceeding all previously discovered tombs of Songze Culture. No one of the tombs recorded in the past exceeded 2.8m in length, but on the Dongshancun Site, seven of them measure over 3m in length.

(3) The high-ranking tombs contain a great number of grave goods, which exceed 30 pieces in most cases and reach 67 in the richest tomb. The grave goods from the nine large tombs total 385 pieces, while the previously discovered tombs yielded at most only 34 each, a number exceeded by seven Dongshancun large tombs.

(4) Most of the large tombs are furnished with massive stone *yue*-battle axes, long narrow stone adzes and wide-mouthed vats. These new discoveries pushed up the time of the origination of the royal or military power represented by the stone *yue* to the early phase of the Songze Culture.

(5) The funeral jades in the large tombs are rich in both number and variety. The nine tombs yielded 100 pieces



Figure 21 Jades unearthed from 09ZDM90.

1–4. *jue*-rings (M90:51, M90:50, M90:49 and M90:52) 5 and 6. ornaments (M90:53 and M90:54) 7 and 9. pendants (M90:46 and M90:45) 8. *huang*-semicircular pendant (M90:42)



Figure 22 The grave goods nearby the head of tomb occupant of 09ZDM90 *in situ* (E–W).

in total, coming first among the presently available sites of Songze Culture. Moreover, there emerged some new types, such as the key- or G-shaped ornament from M96 and the handled *yue*-shaped object from M98.

5. Periodization and chronology

Stratigraphical and typological analyses indicate that the Dongshancun large-sized tombs can be roughly divided into two phases. The Phase I of large-sized tombs includes M90, M92, M95, M98 and M89, while Phase II of tombs, M91, M93, M94 and M96. The former yielded commonly the slender-stemmed *dou*, contracted-mouthed drooping-bellied *ding*, high-necked pot, wide-mouthed pointed-bottomed vat; the latter the three-section-stemmed *dou*, contracted-mouthed round-bellied *ding*, round-bottomed vat and *gu*-shaped cup. The typical vessels of the two phases show rather clear evolutionary sequences, which are roughly identical with those known from the pottery

of the Songze Site in Shanghai and Nanhebang Site in Zhejiang. The Phase I of large-sized Dongshancun tombs corresponds to the early phase of the Songze Culture and the Phase II to the Culture's middle phase, altogether covering 5800–5500 BP in absolute date.

Conclusions

In the two seasons of excavation, the Dongshancun Site provided more and more abundant information, and its importance and value are increasingly manifested.

1. The discovery of the flat- or round-bottomed *fu* cauldron in tombs of the Majiabang Culture Period reflects the exchange between the archaeological culture represented by the round-bottomed *fu* in the eastern Lake Tai Basin and that represented by the flat-bottomed *fu* in the western Lake Tai Basin. It provided new data to the in-depth study of the pedigree of prehistoric archaeological cultures in the circum-Lake Tai Region.

2. The frequent occurrence of the large-sized stone *yue*, long narrow stone adze and wide-mouthed vat of ceremonial use in the large-sized tombs of Songze Culture suggest that incipient ritual system had existed by the Songze Culture Period. It provided material data for researching into the then burial institution as an important part of the ritual system.

3. The first time of revelation of high-ranking large-sized tombs of the early and middle Songze Culture in the Yangtze River Valley made up the related gap, found out the source of the well developed civilization in the Liangzhu Culture and gained new materials for re-understanding the whole aspect and the level of social productive force of the Songze Culture in circum-Lake Tai Region.

4. The separation of the early and middle Songze Culture large-sized tombs from the small ones and the then emergence of large-sized architectures evidence that at least by 5800 BP or so there had existed definite social differentiation between the rich and the poor and clear social stratification. This contributed new archaeological data for researching the civilizing process of the societies in the lower Yangtze River Valley and has important value to the studies of the origin of Chinese Civilization.

Postscript

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