

Liangzhu Culture and Taosi Culture: formation of the south-north pattern of Chinese history

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Abstract

Traditionally, the historians in China have been suggesting that in the history of China, the territory have repeatedly been separated into a south-north pattern ruled by opposing political powers. In the 1930s, Mr. Fu Sinian, a famous historian in modern China, put forward a new theory that before the unification of the Qin Dynasty, even in the prehistoric ages, China was in an east-west pattern. In the condition of the 1930s, when the archaeology was in its incipient stage in China, this theory sounded plausible; however, since the discoveries of Liangzhu Culture and Taosi Culture after that and the in-depth understanding to their natures, including their ruling territories, levels of social complexity and civilization, Mr. Fu's theory became less convincing. Based on the archaeological discoveries, this paper suggests again that at the time of Liangzhu and Taosi Cultures, the earliest south-north pattern in China has been formed and these two cultures were communicating in various ways, laying the foundation of the Chinese Civilization in the later time.

Keywords: confrontation-history; Liangzhu Culture; political geography; Taosi Culture.

The development of the south-north pattern theory and the emergence of the east-west pattern theory

It is an accepted fact among historians that China was often dichotomized into two opposing camps of the north and the south, such as Eastern Jin and Former Qin, Southern Dynasties and Northern Dynasties, Southern Song and Jin (Jurchen). Yet, eight decades ago, Fu Sinian 傅斯年 proposed a model of east-west pattern based on the same historical documents, which was circulated in his celebrated article *Yi Xia Dong Xi Shuo* 夷夏东西说 (Theory of the Yi in the East and the Xia in the West). The theme of this article is to argue that there existed a framework of east-west division of opposition and confrontation prior to and during the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang and Zhou), in contrast to the later north-south patterns. This was deemed a revolutionary concept in the study of Chinese history at the time.

The continuous growth of the repertoire of archaeological material in the past eight decades,

particularly the discoveries and studies of Liangzhu Culture centered around the Lake Tai basin and Taosi Culture distributed in southern Shanxi, indicates the formation of a prehistoric framework of north-south pattern prior to the Three Dynasties. This opposing division shared many characteristics with the several historic north-south patterns. From the larger scope of Chinese history, I tentatively argue that the competition of Liangzhu and Taosi signaled the beginning of a north-south pattern in China. This argument first contradicts Fu Sinian's tenet of east-west pattern prior to the Three Dynasties. Second, it extends the formation of the often seen historic north-south patterns back to the prehistoric age.

In the introduction of the famous work *"Theory of the Yi in the East and the Xia in the West"*, Fu Sinian wrote, "started from the terminal years of Eastern Han, Chinese history was often dichotomized into opposing northern and southern camps. The opposition was expressed in the form of political fission or northern China was occupied by non-Han groups. This phenomenon cannot be extended back into early China. It was until Eastern Han that the Yangtze Valley experienced its first significant development. Wu Kingdom of the Sun house (孙吴, one of the Three-Kingdoms) was the first large-scale independent political entity emerged in southern China. The political evolution from tribe to empire prior to and during the Three Dynasties was staged on the vast territory of Yellow River Valley, Huai River Basin and Shandong. The geography within this expanse of land has only barriers separating east and west, but no barriers separating north and south. History developed in this geographic setting was a two-thousand-year saga of an east-west—not north-south—pattern. To study early China in its geographic setting, it is evident that China was partitioned into an eastern camp and a western camp prior to and during the Three Dynasties. The two camps contested, competed and fused, which led to cultural evolution. The eastern camp comprised of the Yi and Shang groups; wherein the western camp comprised of the Xia and Zhou groups."

Fu Sinian wrote *Theory of the Yi in the East and the Xia in the West* before 1930. During that time, archaeological works at Yinxu had just begun. Chinese archaeology was in her infancy. Within this setting and based on textual documents alone, Fu Sinian's proposition that political evolution was driven by an east-west opposition prior to and during the Three Dynasties was deemed appropriate at the time. Yet, it was beyond his wildest imagination that the following decades witnessed the non-stop revolutionary discoveries in Chinese archaeology. In particular, he could not possibly predict that the



discoveries of Liangzhu and Taosi would have challenged his argument. The challenge is that early China prior to the Three Dynasties did not partition according to an east-west opposing pattern. Instead, it was exactly the opposite that a pattern of north-south opposition like that of the historic era had emerged.

The growth of archaeological materials of Liangzhu and Taosi, especially the discoveries of the circumferential walls enclosing the two sites, has prompted increasing number of scholars to argue that the two cultures were in the formative phase of early state and civilization. If this contention is correct, Taosi and Liangzhu were two simultaneous independent political entities located in northern and southern China. As a result, we can date the beginning of north-south pattern of China to 4ka BP.

The development of the south-north opposing pattern since the unification of the Qin Dynasty

To determine whether prehistoric China of the Liangzhu and Taosi phase was partitioned into a north-south pattern like historic China, we need to outline the opposing framework of the historical times.

After a long development through the Three Dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou, Qin forged China into a unified entity. Unification became the keynote of the Chinese thereafter. More than once China fell back to a divisive north-south pattern. Nevertheless, each fission and competition led to larger and stronger fusion that contributed to the continuous development in the spiral progression of Chinese history. To a certain extent, this can be viewed as a unique mode of development of Chinese history.

In 221 BCE, Shihuangdi, the first emperor of Qin, put centuries of epidemic warfare to an end, unified China and found the first multi-ethnic state in Chinese history. However, overreaching its power and heavy taxation set off a popular uprising that overthrown the regime in just 15 years. After a short period of turmoil, Liu Bang, the Emperor Gaozu of the Han Dynasty, assumed the mandate of unification and found the Han Empire for the next four centuries. By the end of the Han reign, the uprising of Yellow Turbans brought China into the first post-unification fission. The fission began with the Three Kingdoms in 220 CE, followed by a short span of unification of the Western Jin ruled by the Sima house in 280 CE, which ended in 316 CE due to weak institution and internal conflicts.

The year after Western Jin extinguished, Sima Rui 司马睿, a member of the Jin royal lineage, found Eastern Jin in Jiankang (presently Nanjiang) with the support of the migrant elite from the Central Plains and the indigenous elite of the lower Yangtze basin. Eastern Jin lasted for 103 years, but its administration was limited to the area south of Qinling Mountains and Huai River. It lacked the ability to recover the Central Plains and northern China once under the rule of Western Jin. The northern land was thrown into a state of turmoil and constant warfare known

as the era of Sixteen Kingdoms of the Five Barbarian Peoples. However, northern China was dominated by the Later Zhao of the Jie people (a branch of Tokhara; 319-351 CE) and the Former Qin (351-394 CE) of the Di people. These two northern polities became the opposing counterparts of Eastern Jin. We coin this historic phase the first north-south opposition.

Civil war broke out at the end of Eastern Jin. After a period of turmoil, Liu Yu 刘裕 took over the crown in a coup overthrowing the Jin emperor and found the state of Song in 420 CE. It started the history of the Southern Dynasties of four successive regimes of Song, Qi, Liang and Chen. At the same time, Tuoba Gui 拓跋珪 found Northern Wei in 386 CE and busy in unifying northern China. In 439 CE, Northern Wei finally unified the Yellow River Valley and became the opposing power of the Liu Song Dynasty of the lower Yangtze basin. This was the beginning of the era of Southern and Northern Dynasties in Chinese history. Northern Wei ruled for 150 years and divided into Eastern Wei and Western Wei in 534 and 535 CE. They were soon replaced by Northern Qi and Northern Zhou. In 589 CE, Sui, the successor of Northern Zhou, conquered Chen of the Southern Dynasties. Once again, China was unified under one ruler. The Southern and Northern Dynasties was a phase when several successive polities of the north and the south contested and competed. We coin it as the second north-south opposition.

From Sui to Tang, China returned to a phase of bustling and prosperity. The short-lived regime of Sui lasted for only 38 years. It was followed by the Tang Dynasty in 618 CE, which lasted for almost three centuries. Together, China stayed unified for 327 years. It may not be appropriate to say that history repeated herself, but it was surprisingly similar. The An-Shi Rebellion during High Tang was a catastrophic setback that marked a reverse of fortune for the Tang. Starting from 907, China entered into a divided state of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. From the day of Zhu Wen took over Tang and found the Later Liang Dynasty, to the unification of Northern Song in 960, five dynasties of Later Liang, Later Tang, Later Jin, Later Han and Later Zhou were found and extinguished in successive order. At the same time, there were ten different independent powers existed in southern China and Shanxi. Nevertheless, this was a short phase of turmoil and frequent warfare, but a north-south pattern did not take form. In 979 CE, Northern Han, the last polity of the Ten Kingdoms, was conquered by Northern Song. China was unified for a new round.

Although Northern Song had ended a divided China, it was a weak dynastic regime. It spent most of its energy raising war with Liao in the north in failed attempts to recover lost territories. Therefore, China was in somewhat north-south opposition during the times of Northern Song. Northern Song later was challenged by Jin (Jurchen), which ended in the capturing and imprisonment of the Emperors Huizong and Qinzong by the Jin army. Northern Song finally extinguished after 167 years.

Similar to the succession of Western Jin and Eastern

Jin, the sole survivor of the Song royal house Prince Kang Zhao Gou 康王赵构 ascent to the throne of Southern Song at Nanjiang (presently Shangqiu) with the support of the old guards of Northern Song court. Southern Song later relocated to Lin'an (presently Hangzhou). The regime that fled south was not free from the harassment of Jin. However, it was, to a certain extent, beyond the reach of the Jin Dynasty. Southern Song was safe in the southeastern corner of China and held its ground against Jin along the Huai River for extended period of time. This was the third round of north-south pattern in Chinese history that lasted for 152 years.

In 1234, Jin ended its history of 120 years under the joint attack of Song and the Mongols. In 1279, the superior Mongol military trampled Southern Song in lightning speed and brought an end to this weak regime. The Mongol empire found by Genghis Khan conquered China and laid the foundation for a unified China for the next six centuries.

The above three episodes of north-south opposition shared several characteristics. First, the north-south division was drawn along Qinling Mountains and Huai River. Second, power centers of the southern polities were located around the lower Yangtze reaches. Eastern Jin and the Southern Dynasties were seated at Jiangkang (presently Nanjiang). Southern Song was seated at Lin'an (presently Hangzhou). The centers of power of the northern polities had more variations. Former Zhao was seated at Xingtai and Ye (presently Linzhang in Hebei). Former Qin was seated at Chang'an (presently Xi'an). Northern Wei was seated at Pingcheng (presently Datong) and Luoyang. Eastern Wei and Northern Qi were seated at Ye. Western Wei and Northern Zhou were seated at Chang'an. Jin was seated at Shangjing, presently Harbin), Yanjing (presently Beijing) and Bianliang (presently Kaifeng). Third, the southern polities were offshoots of the Han Chinese states originated in northern China. Northern China was ruled by ethnic groups indigenous to the northern frontiers. Later Zhao was ruled by the Jie people. Former Qin was ruled by the Di people. The Northern Dynasties were various powers headed by the Xianbei tribe. Finally, Jin was a polity of the Jurchen people.

The formation of the south-north pattern in the prehistoric age represented by the Liangzhu and Taosi Cultures

In the following, we are going to discuss the structure of the Liangzhu Culture and Taosi Culture of the prehistoric phase.

The Liangzhu Site was discovered in 1936. In 1959, this type of material culture remains was classified as "Liangzhu Culture." After a series of discoveries of high elite cemeteries and open-air altars at Fanshan, Yaoshan, Huiguanshan, and Mojiaoshan in the 1980s and 90s, our understanding of Liangzhu Culture had been raised to an unprecedented level. In 2006, circumferential walls enclosing an occupation of 290ha was found at Liangzhu. The potsherds recovered from the deposits outside of the

walls indicated that the upper limit of the enclosure should be no later than late Liangzhu phase.

To summarize, Liangzhu Culture was the latest prehistoric culture distributed in the lower reaches of Yangtze. Its absolute dates were bracketed between 5300 and 4000 BP. Its distribution centered at Lake Tai basin, and bounded by Shanghai to the east, Qiantang River to the south, Mao Mountains and Tianmu Mountains to the west, and Yangtze River to the north. Yet, typical Liangzhu cultural elements were yielded from Huating Site in Xinyi, Jiangsu, a location to the north of the Huai River. Professor Yan Wenming viewed the findings as results of a Liangzhu north expedition. It is likely that Liangzhu's realm of power had reached the Huai River basin.

Liangzhu Culture had artifact assemblages of pottery with unique style, jade and lacquer ritual paraphernalia with rich religious and divine meanings. It also had cemeteries to bury the high elite, open-air altars and walled population centers. It is indisputable that Liangzhu was the most developed prehistoric culture engaged in the processes of early state formation in southern China. Liu Bin 刘斌, an authority in the excavation and study of Liangzhu, summarizes, "the discovery of the walled site at Liangzhu has integrated the large-scale earthen platform at Mojiaoshan, the cemetery of nobilities at Fanshan, and the many Liangzhu sites into a unified entity. It confirmed that the area around Mojiaoshan was the core distribution of Liangzhu Culture. It provided new material to improve our understanding on the processes of social evolution of Liangzhu Culture and its status and significance in the origin of Chinese Civilization. It is the actual proof for the contention that Chinese civilization has a continuous history of five thousand years."

Perhaps it was a historical coincident, when important discoveries were made in the archaeology of Liangzhu Culture in the 1980s, ground-breaking discoveries were also made at Taosi Site in Xiangfen, Shanxi at the same time. The site was discovered in 1950s. Excavation of the site started in the 1980s. Major findings included a large-scale, well-organized and clearly stratified cemetery comprised of 1,300 plus earthen pit burials. The burials were organized into a pyramid structure that the richest burials located on the apex consisted of less than 1% of the population. Grave goods recovered from these richest burials included ritual paraphernalia of crocodile skin drums, chime stones and a color-painted pottery basin with coiling dragon design. Evidently, individuals buried in these graves were tribal leaders who controlled the ritual and military affairs when they were alive. The majority of the burials (90%) were small earthen pits no larger than the bodies they encased. They were void of grave goods. These were the burials of commoners of the society. Contrasts in burial treatment were attributed to the formation of social stratification and suggested a high level of social complexity and civilization had occurred. For this reason, Taosi was highly valued by the scholarly circle once it was excavated.

The year of 2000 marked the beginning of the state-run



Exploration on the Origin of Ancient Chinese Civilization Project. Taosi Site was included as one of the sub-projects. Excavations in the past few years revealed features of large burials, palace zones, granaries, a large-scale circular rammed-earth structure, and circumferential walls. The circumferential walls of the middle phase enclosed an occupation of 280ha, a scale comparable to that of Liangzhu, the largest walled town in prehistoric China. The large-scale circular rammed-earth structure occupying 1400sq m was deemed to be an observatory facility with sacrificial functions. It is the most important excavated structure at Taosi to date.

Our current knowledge suggests that the sites of Taosi Culture were densely distributed in the Linfen Basin centered by Taosi Site. However, its influence reached as far south as the Yellow River. Its absolute dates bracketed between 4500 and 3900 BP. In other words, into the Xia Dynasty. However, all the important sites of Taosi Culture were dated to its early and middle phases. For instances, the high elite burials of the early and middle phases, the small walled town of the early phase, and the large walled town and circular structure of the middle phase. They suggest that Taosi Culture had its most glorious days during the early and middle phases.

The contents of Taosi Culture included an assemblage of pottery vessels with unique characteristics, pottery and jade ritual paraphernalia rich in religious and divine meanings, high elite burials, open-air altar, and walled towns. Together they gave Taosi Culture a majestic status in Chinese prehistory. They unambiguously suggested that Taosi was the strongest entity in prehistoric northern China and had reached and surpassed the threshold of early state.

It is not difficult to see that Liangzhu Culture and Taosi Culture shared many characteristics. Both cultures were originated from their corresponding indigenous cultures during the terminal prehistoric phase. They coexisted in 4500-4000 BP, albeit Liangzhu Culture began in a date earlier than that of Taosi. Corresponding to the pre-Taosi dates of early Liangzhu phase, southern Shanxi was occupied by Miaodigou II Culture, the precursor of Taosi Culture. Both cultures yielded burials of high elite or royalty, ritual paraphernalia made of pottery, lacquer and jade, the largest walled towns in prehistoric China, palatial structures and open-air altars, which were deemed related to cosmological observation and time keeping by the excavators. In addition, scholars generally agree that both cultures were engaged in the processes of early state formation. Liangzhu was distributed in the realm of Southern Dynasties of the historic era; wherein Taosi was distributed in the realm of the Northern Dynasties of the historic era. These features are sufficient to argue that Liangzhu and Taosi were two coexisting independent polities distributed in southern and northern China. They were two of the most developed cultures occupying China during prehistoric times.

We could not say anything of certainty on whether these two prehistoric polities had confrontation and warfare like the later north-south patterns. Yet, we have found Liangzhu

style jade *cong*-prismatic tubes and V-shaped stone knives in Taosi Culture. They were indicative of the influence of Liangzhu Culture to Taosi Culture. Even though we might never find evidences about confrontation, conflict and interaction between the two cultures, we could not negate that they had formed a north-south pattern in the political, economic and cultural affairs of the time. It is fair to say that Liangzhu and Taosi were the forerunners of the north-south pattern of Chinese history.

Conclusions

The above analyses could not support an argument that the prehistoric north-south opposition of Liangzhu and Taosi equated the historic north-south patterns. Yet, we can see the prehistoric and historic opposing structures shared many similarities. For instances, they were regional independent political entities, and their core areas of control were consistent to their corresponding counterparts. The main dissimilarities were that in the historic era, all the southern opposing polities were Han regimes relocated to the south; whilst the northern opposing polities were regimes found by other ethnic groups. In addition, confrontation and warfare were frequent among the opposing northern and southern camps. The limitation of archaeology constrains in many ways in our pursuit to understand the prehistoric north-south pattern. We could not see the details of regime change from the archaeology of Liangzhu and Taosi. Archaeological cultures are not the equivalent of states and ethnic groups. Characteristics seen in material culture remains are not direct reflections of the realm of control of a polity. By all accounts, however, we have put forth a new perspective to view the past from archaeological cultures and to explore deep structural questions pertaining to the evolution of human societies.

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Postscript

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