

On the issues relevant to the Majiayuan Cemetery in Zhangjiachuan County

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Abstract

Majiayuan Cemetery showed diversified features from the nomadic tribes in the Northern Frontier Zone, the Central Plains and the aboriginal cultures of Gansu-Qinghai region, and so on. The earthen cave tomb with the cave on the side of the shaft was the burial type of the Qiang and Rong ethnic groups, the chariots luxuriously decorated with gold, silver, tin plaques and glass beads was the feature of the nomadic people in the Eurasian Steppes and the bronze ritual vessels and the iron weapons were from the Central Plains. The types and assemblages of the bronze ritual vessels and the potteries reflected the features of the late Warring-States Period; the coexistence of the various cultural elements showed the interchange and communication of these cultures in this region, and the owners of this cemetery might be the elite people of a West Rong tribe.

Keywords: chronology; cultural elements; ethnic attributions; Majiayuan Site (Zhangjiachuan County, Gansu); typology; Warring-States Period-burials.

On the date of Majiayuan Cemetery

The main artifacts can be used for dating are the bronzes and potteries.

The bronze *ding*-tripod unearthed from Majiayuan M15 has similar shape and style to those from M1 in Yehugou, Gaozhuang, Fengxiang County and M3 at Huangjiagou, Xianyang City, Shaanxi and M3 in Guanzhuang Township, Miyang County, Henan: all of them have lid with three ring-shaped knobs, double attached ears, three short hoof-shaped legs and globular belly and round bottom, the latter three of which are all dated in the late Warring-States Period; the *ding*-tripod from Majiayuan M1 has similar shape to those from M2011 at Shangcunling Cemetery, Sanmenxia City, Henan and M16 at Gaozhuang, Fengxiang County, Shaanxi, all of which have oblate globular body and attached ears and are dated in the end of the Warring-States Period to the Qin Dynasty. The bronze vase from Majiayuan M16 has similar shape and style to that from M1 at Yehugou, Fengxiang County, both of which have flared mouth, thick neck, deep belly, hourglass-shaped

ring foot, animal mask-shaped pushou ring handles on the shoulder and three bowstring patterns around the belly. However, the bronze vases from Majiayuan M1 and M14 look more slender with long neck, round belly, cylindrical high ring foot, and animal mask-shaped *pushou* ring handles on the shoulder and three bowstring patterns around the belly similar to those of the bronze vases from M43 at Huangjiagou in Xianyang and M6 at Miaozhuang in Pingliang, the latter two of which fall into the Subtype IIIB5 as Professor Gao's analysis (1989), who dates them as the beginning of late Warring-States and the end of the Warring-States Period to the early Qin Dynasty, respectively.

The *yan*-steamer from Majiayuan M1 has the same shape with the one unearthed from M3401 at Shangcunling Cemetery in Sanmenxia City, Henan, both of which consist of the *zeng*-steamer on the top and the *fu*-boiler at the bottom fitting snugly by the ring foot of the former and the rim of the latter, and the grating between them. The *fu*-boiler has a globular belly and round bottom, which are the styles of late Warring-States Period. The *ge*-dagger ax found in Majiayuan M1 with long blade, medium-length hu-vertical blade and three holes for fastening the shaft is the popular style of the Qin State during the reigns of Kings Zhaoxiang and Zhuangxiang, which were in the late Warring-States Period. The cocoon-shaped jar unearthed from M1 also has the style of the late Warring-States Period.

Therefore, we can date the Majiayuan Cemetery in the late Warring-States Period to the early Qin Dynasty as a whole; the M15 and M16 might be as early as the beginning of the late phase of the Warring-States Period and M1 and M14 might be as late as the end of the Warring-States Period to the Qin Dynasty.

Analyses of the cultural elements

The Majiayuan Cemetery reflected diversified cultural elements, including that of the Northern Frontier Zone of China in the east of Eurasian Steppes, that of the Eurasian Steppes and that of the Qin Culture and the traditional cultures in Gansu-Qinghai areas, and so on.

The side cave tomb with vertical shaft and stepped passageway is a feature of Majiayuan Cemetery. As early as in the Neolithic Age, the tombs with cave grave opened on the wall of one of the longer sides of the vertical shaft have been found in Gansu-Qinghai areas, which are believed to be the origins of the cave tombs of the Jiang Rong ethnic group (around the end of the Shang and the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasties) at Liujia Village in Fufeng County and the cave tombs

of the Western Zhou Dynasty at Zhangjiapo Cemetery in Chang'an County, both in Shaanxi Province. The large-sized wooden coffin chamber tombs in 甲-shaped plan and with ramp passageway flanked by steps are not seen in other areas; however, the idea of showing social statuses and hierarchies by the step numbers of three, five and nine would be incurred by the Qin Culture or that from the Central Plains.

The lacquering of the chariots unearthed from Majiayuan Cemetery showed the traditional style of the Central Plains, the single pole and double wheel are also the traditional structures of the chariots of the Central Plains; however, decorating chariots with large amounts of gold, silver ornaments and iron ornaments inlaid with gold designs and beads made of various materials is only seen in Majiayuan Cemetery. High wheels with numerous spokes and long hub are believed to be the characteristics of the vehicles in the steppe areas. Therefore, we can believe that the chariots of Majiayuan Cemetery belonged to a unique chariot type integrating the styles of the Central Plains and the Northern Steppes. Moreover, the gold and silver chariot ornaments with openwork tiger and bighorn sheep figures showed the influences from the bronze cultures of the Northern Frontier Zone, but their shaping is seldom seen in these bronze cultures.

The main common elements of the bronze cultures in the Northern Frontier Zone and the Eurasian Steppes, such as the weapons, animal motifs (or beast motifs) and horse fittings, are all found in Majiayuan Cemetery. The animal victims and the coexistence of the bronzes with the Northern Steppes styles and gold ornaments are also the features of the bronze cultures in the Northern Frontier Zone of China.

Among the bronzes, the ones can be confirmed as the typical ones of the bronzes of the Northern Steppes are the three-winged arrowheads with shaft sockets, swords, knives, bells, mirrors with knob-shaped handles, serpentine ridges, staff heads, bighorn sheep-shaped chariot fittings and chariot ornaments with openwork designs, etc.

Around the 2nd millennium BCE, the potteries decorated with serpentine ridges (змеичатые валики) emerged in the Northwest China and Ordos regions and diffused to other areas gradually. The pottery *li*-cauldrons with serpentine ridges are found numerous and densely in the south of central Inner Mongolia, and they emerged early, lasted long and had complete evolution sequence. In the Spring-and-Autumn Period, this kind of *li*-cauldron appeared in Maojiaping Site, and during the Spring-and-Autumn and Warring-States Periods, it is found in the east and southeast of Gansu and its influences could reach the Guanzhong Plain and the southern Ningxia. The bronze *li*-cauldrons with serpentine ridges and shovel-shaped feet are the imitations of their pottery counterparts, and the products of the integration of the bronze cultures in the Northern Frontier Zone and the traditional cultures in Gansu-Qinghai areas.

In the view of the cultural traditions, using large amounts of gold implements, especially gold decorations

and ornaments, is one of the features of the bronze cultures in the central Eurasian Steppe and the Northern Frontier Zone of China, which is different from the feature of the traditional cultures in the Central Plains, which is using jade as the main material of decorations and ornaments. In Scythian and other cultures in the Eurasian Steppe, the metal inlaying and granulation techniques are also widely applied. They are treasured by the living people and also seen as the talismans preventing the dead from decaying. In early China, the using of gold is seen in Qijia Culture, Siba Culture and Lower Xiajiadian Culture, but in China, jade played important role even in the Han Dynasty, when gold has become the symbol of wealth, jade still had key functions in ritual system and the costume and personal adornments. However, in the Northern Frontier Zone and Northwest China, once gold was known by the people, it was firstly used as the material of personal adornments and gold ornaments also became one of the marks of the culture groups in these two regions.

The advanced understanding to the gold started in the Shang Dynasty. The gold products could be attributed to three large cultural systems, which are the Northern Frontier Zone and Northwest, the Central Plains and the Southwest. In the territory of the first cultural system, all of the gold products are found in burials as the personal adornments of the tomb occupants showing his/her power and wealth; in the Central Plains, the gold products are mainly decorations of other utensils and horse fittings found in chariot and horse pits, while the symbols of the state, power, kinship are the bronze ritual vessels; in the Shu State of the Southwest cultural system, the gold products are all found in sacrifice pits; as the main roles in the sacrificial ceremonies, jades and bronzes jointly created a surrealistic holy world. In the mid and late phases of the Warring-States Period, the gold implement manufacturing and gold and silver inlaying techniques were greatly developed. Seen in the view of central Eurasian Steppe, a Gold Age existed in the north of present-day Kazakhstan; in Herodotus' historical works, the legend of griffins guarding gold is recorded. At the same time, large amounts of gold products appeared in the whole central Eurasian Steppe. Kiselev attributed this situation to the interruption of the trades of the Central Asia with the northern steppe zone because of the invasion of Alexander the Great which caused the overstocking of gold in the original regions. Seen from the fact of Majiayuan Cemetery, no jades have been found in all of the excavated tombs and the gold products found from them are mainly the personal adornments and chariot and horse fittings. In the view of cultural traditions, the cultural elements from the Northern Frontier Zone and Northwest China and central Eurasian Steppe are integrated in the Majiayuan Cemetery.

The polychrome inlaying, granulation, filigree and other gold processing techniques have close relationship with those in the Eurasian Steppe. Inlaying with carnelian and glass and gold granulation and filigree techniques are the traditional ornament styles and skills in the

early periods of Egypt, circum-Mediterranean, Sumer-Babylonia and Persia; in the Bactrian bronze cultures around 2000–1800 BCE, gold tiger inlaid with agate and turquoise has emerged. Among the gold wares unearthed in Majiayuan Cemetery, the inlaying technique is mainly applied on the belt plaques and personal adornments, and the inlaid materials are mainly carnelian, turquoise or faience. In the bronze cultures on the Eurasian Steppe around the end of the 5th to the 4th centuries BCE, such as Scythian Culture, these techniques were also widely applied. Moreover, the shapes of the inlaid gems on the gold wares of these cultures are also similar to that found in Majiayuan Cemetery, mostly in crescent shape or “comma” shape; the opposing gold granulation triangles are also seen in the Scythian and Altai Culture. The eardrops unearthed in Majiayuan Cemetery have similar styles in general with those found in the nomadic cultures on the central Eurasian Steppe. Drip-shaped gold and turquoise pendants are very popular in Scythian Culture; the double-conical gold beads are also popular adornments in the ancient cultures on the Eurasian Steppe.

The gold plaque with tiger-biting-goat design and the gold belt hooks unearthed from M16 have flavors of the bronze cultures in the Northern Frontier Zone, while the motif of griffin fighting a serpent on the rectangular plaque is very popular in Scythian and Pazyryk Cultures, as well as the motif of bird heads on the back of the tiger on the belt ornaments unearthed from M14, which would also originated from the Scythian and Pazyryk Cultures.

The using of silver ware is first seen from the silver nose ring of Siba Culture. In remains of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, silver wares are seldom seen; as late as in the Warring-States Period, silver products appeared more frequently. However, in the Bactrian bronze cultures around 2000–1800 BCE, silver products are very popular, and in Scythian Culture from the end of the 5th to the 4th centuries BCE, silver wares with Hellenic styles are also found. In Majiayuan Cemetery, numerous silver chariot ornaments with openwork patterns, silver personal adornments such as silver beads, neck collar and silver cup are unearthed. The tradition of using silver wares found here might also originated from the Eurasian Steppe. The method of imitating the seams of leather bags on the silver cup shows strong style of nomadic culture. Silver shoe sole is only seen in M16 of Majiayuan Cemetery; the silver soles have been also found in Ordos region but the latter had patterns decorated.

Arc-shaped gold necklace parts were distributed from the east to the west along the Great Wall route since the early Spring-and-Autumn to the Warring-States Period; in the Xia Banzhuwa Cemetery of Kayue Culture located in Hualong County, Qinghai Province, an arc-shaped gold necklace part has been found. Similar gold objects have been excavated in Trans-Baikal, the upper reaches of Ob River, Irkutsk and so on, which have been suggested to be the relics of Scythian Age not earlier than the 7th century BCE. This kind of arc-shaped neck ornaments might have been originated in Qijia Culture: from Mogou Cemetery

in Chenqi Township, Lintan County, which was located in the upper reaches of Tao River, bronze neck ornaments similar to that found in the Eurasian Steppes have been unearthed and dated as the late phase of Qijia Culture which was around 1800 BCE. However, the gold and silver necklace parts found in Majiayuan Cemetery look different from them but in wide semi-circular shape, and might be a developed form of the former.

Very few pure tin products have been found in Majiayuan Cemetery, the main types of which are chariot ornaments and belt plaques with openwork patterns and animal and human figurines. The chariot ornaments and belt plaques are also the elements absorbed from the bronze cultures in the Steppe region. The hat with pointed top worn by the tin human figurine might imply the influence of the costume of Saka Culture.

Majiayuan Cemetery yielded the most glass wares and quasi-glass products both in the artifacts of all of the materials unearthed from this cemetery and in all of the cemeteries of the same period within China; the categories of glass artifacts found in this cemetery are also rather rich. The earliest glass products found so far in China are of the Western Zhou Dynasty; in the Warring-States Period, glass became much popular. The “eye beads” found in Majiayuan Cemetery have styles of the Achaemenid Dynasty in ancient Persia, and also show the influence of the compound “eye beads” with crescent-shaped “eyes” which were made in China. Han blue has been found both in China and Japan, but Han purple has only been found in China and believed to be produced in and is peculiar to China. Faience is firstly found in the tombs of the late Spring-and-Autumn Period in Yimen Village, Baoji City, but has declined in the late phase of the Warring-States Period and are only discovered in the Northwest and Southwest, but it is found in large amount in Majiayuan Cemetery. The glazed pottery cup has shapes and styles rarely seen in China; the earlier decorating styles seem to have foreign cultural elements, but the purple part of the seven rows of nipple patterns has been identified as Han purple, so it is very likely produced in China. The glass and quasi-glass wares found in Majiayuan Cemetery have very diversified features including glass, faience, artificial pigments and glazed potteries, and rich origins including domestic and imported products.

Among the grave goods, the bronze vases, *ding*-tripods, *ge*-dagger-axes, cocoon-shaped jars, pottery *fu*-cauldron and gray pottery jugs are the cultural elements from the Central Plains and the Qin State. The single-lugged red pottery jugs and *li*-cauldrons with shovel-shaped feet are the traditional pottery types in the archaeological cultures of the Gansu-Qinghai areas and also frequently seen in the cultures in the Northern Frontier Zone of China during the Spring-and-Autumn and Warring-States Period; meanwhile, this kind of pottery wares found in the tombs of the Qin State in Guanzhong Plain are also believed to be the reflection of the influences from the cultures in Gansu-Qinghai areas.

On the ethnic attribution of Majiayuan Cemetery

As the historic literature, the people living in the eastern and southeastern Gansu during the Western and Eastern Zhou Periods were Qin People and West Rong 戎 tribes; although the composition of “Rong” is rather complicated, the people referred to this term were all tightly related to the ethnic group mentioned as “Qiang 羌” during the Shang Dynasty. The tribes called as Rong by the Zhou people were mainly distributed in the vicinity of present-day Baoji or the areas to its west and north, which were the original places of Qin people and the traditional activity areas of the West Rong tribes. Therefore, the occupants of Majiayuan Cemetery might have belonged to Qin people or West Rong tribe.

In the Guanzhong region, the Qin tombs in the Warring-States Period mainly have two types, namely vertical shaft pit tombs and cave tombs; the former took the bulk and the latter emerged as late as the mid and late phases of the Warring-States Period. The tomb occupants are mostly in flexed position, while the much fewer extended positions are mainly found in the cave tombs. The cave tombs also have two types, which are side cave tombs and coaxial cave tombs, and in the late phase of the Warring-States Period, the coaxial cave tombs was the major type. The bronze assemblage in the grave goods is *ding*-tripods, *yan*-steamers, vase and *mou* 鬲-cauldrons, and the pottery assemblage is *li*-cauldrons, *fu*-cauldrons, *yu*-basins and jars, and cocoon-shaped jars are also popular. Obviously, the Qin tombs of the Warring-States Period have sharp differences from those in Majiayuan Cemetery in terms of tomb types, burial positions and grave good assemblages, and so on. These aspects all play important roles in cultural and ethnic identities, common psychology and tradition of an ethnic group, therefore we can draw the conclusion that the occupants of Majiayuan Cemetery are not Qin people.

Side cave tomb is a tomb type created by the Qiang-Rong ethnic groups in the Gansu-Qinghai areas during the late Neolithic Age, since which tombs of this type are found in large amounts in the cultures of the Bronze Age. The cave tombs of Liujiia Cemetery around the end of the Shang and the beginning of the Zhou Dynasties in Fufeng County, Shaanxi are also suggested to belong to Jiang Rong tribe. The side cave tomb with stepped passageway is also a feature of West Rong culture.

Professor Yu Weichao has pointed out that the *li*-cauldron with shovel-shaped feet is from the Rong tribes in the Northwest. In Maojiaping Site in Gangu County, Gansu, the Group B remains containing *li*-cauldrons with shovel-shaped feet coexisted with the Group A which belonged to the Qin Culture of the Western Zhou Dynasty to the Warring-States Period, and the Group B remains are attributed to the Ji Rong 冀戎 tribe of the West Rong tribes. In recent years, the archaeological surveys conducted in the upper reaches of Xihan River also showed that the remains containing *li*-cauldrons with

shovel-shaped feet belonged to a culture other than the Qin Culture, which have different distribution centers but whose distribution areas are overlapping; this situation matches the records in the historic literature on the spatial relations of the Qin people and Rong tribes. Moreover, seen from the fact that this kind of *li*-cauldrons appeared as late as in the tombs of the mid and late phases of the Warring-States Period in present-day Baoji area which has been the traditional core region of Qin people, this kind of *li*-cauldron could not be the aboriginal element of Qin Culture. Its appearance in Guanzhong region during the mid and late phases of the Warring-States Period showed the eastward migration of the West Rong tribes using it in this period.

The tombs of Yimen Village Cemetery in Baoji City, which yielded large amounts of gold artifacts as the tombs of Majiayuan Cemetery did, are also believed to belong to the chiefs of certain West Rong state annexed by Duke Mu of the Qin State during his conquering over the West Rong tribes. The common custom of using large quantity of gold wares reflected the common ethnic psychology and tradition.

During the Eastern Zhou Period, many ethnic groups were existing in the Northern Frontier Zone; their archaeological cultures have both common and different features. Some scholars unequivocally pointed out that the cultural remains of this type in the south of Ningxia belonged to the Wu tribe of the West Rong. It would be the remains of another tribe of West Rong than the occupants of Majiayuan Cemetery, which matches the fact in the historic literature about the activity areas of West Rong tribes.

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Postscript

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