

On the archaeological culture and related issues

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Abstract

Archaeological culture is a fundamental concept of archaeology, and an essential subject of theoretical thinking. In China, the study of cultures has been a central subject of archaeological research, especially that of the Neolithic Age and the Xia-Shang-Zhou Period. Since the 1980s, however, cultural sequence has been established in most regions of China, and all sorts of scientific techniques and archaeological theories have been extensively employed in archaeology; should we continue to take archaeological cultures as a central subject of research? If yes, how can we carry on the research in line with the new developments? Such questions must be addressed from both the theoretical and practical perspectives. Based on personal observation of Chinese archaeology, the author would present new thoughts on the concept of culture and related issues.

The origin of the concept of archaeological culture and its significance

The concept of archaeological culture was first proposed in Gordon Childe's world-renowned work *The dawn of European civilization* (1925). Overhauling the lineal evolutionism that describes the general evolution of human society, it drew scholars' attention to regional diversity and cultural interaction, to cultural development of human societies and interaction, to the point that it brought archaeology to a new height.

In China, archaeological culture has been the focal subject of prehistoric and Shang-Zhou archaeology. Among the scholarly works on Neolithic archaeology published by Chinese archaeologists from the founding of New China through the 1980s, the majority is bound up with archaeological cultures. Facing the rapidly increasing discoveries, Chinese prehistoric archaeologists have taken it as the top priority to identify the culture in a given region and define their cultural manifestation, further to investigate the origin and descent of the culture and its connection with surrounding cultures, which constitutes the so-dubbed "genealogical research" of an archaeological culture. After decades of joint efforts

of Chinese archaeologists, the genealogical research has made remarkable achievements. Up till now, in most regions of China, cultural sequence has been established to the various degrees of completion (with some remaining gaps in some regions), and the material manifestation of the cultures of various periods has been more or less understood.

Some trends in the present researches of archaeological cultures

Some trends observable in the existing research on archaeological cultures are as follows:

Study one type of artifacts while ignore the entire assemblage and the culture as a whole;

Qualitative study of one type of artifacts or features without quantitative analysis;

Conduct typological analysis of artifacts without understanding the mechanisms behind the typological characteristics. In fact, the different characteristics are derived from different technical traditions, which are possibly manifestations of different human groups;

Study artifacts but without paying attention to their functions. One may well see the artifact assemblage of a culture, but one may not understand why such assemblage rather than another is used. Neither may one understand what type of lifestyle or worldview or tradition it embodies. These questions are studied insufficiently, but they are the very ones that one must address so as to study the ancient life of human being.

Like to name new cultures and crave after the "first discovery". Some archaeologists take it as a major contribution naming a new culture after the site they have excavated, and often do it hastily without fully understanding the materials, which is not appropriate.

Connotation and boundary of an archaeological culture

We believe that an archaeological culture consists of not only the artifacts that the people responsible for the culture created, used, and left behind, but also features that they created and left behind. The materials that the ancient populations bequest to us are manifest not only of their material life, but also of their spiritual life. If one takes pottery wares as the sole content of an archaeological culture, without considering occupational remains, burials, and ritual structures, one may not fully understand the life of the community and the culture it creates.

Human is a social creature. All sorts of social relations are observable in the life of a community and archaeological materials. The spatial distribution of

settlements, the spatial organization of a city or a village, the layout of burials in a cemetery, and the differences in the sizes of the burials and grave goods they yield reflect a kind of social relation of the society in question. It follows that an archaeological culture embodies not only the material and spiritual life of a society, but also the social life – social organization and social relations – of that society.

An archaeological culture is comprised of not just a type or a group of pottery wares, but also other artifacts, such as stone and jade ones, and structural features, such as dwellings and burials. It is comprised of the whole of the life of ancient human societies and all the aspects thereof.

Human life is multi-faceted, and can be classified in various ways by various criteria. In the view of the author, it can be divided into the three categories of material life, spiritual life, and social life; the material life is comprised of the chain of production, exchange or redistribution, consumption, and discarding. Human behavior is likewise diverse, which is observable in archaeological culture. One must bear in mind that an archaeological culture is the embodiment and manifestation of all aspects of the life and all types of behavior, and one must include the spiritual world and social organization into the study of a culture. This is often taken to be an expansion of the concept of archaeological culture. Given the long-held idea that an archaeological culture is little more than a type or a few types of pottery wares, one is entitled to say so. But fundamentally speaking, this is not an expansion of the concept, but a return to the right understanding of it.

Mechanisms in the formation and development of characteristics of an archaeological culture

The human being lives in various systems, which affect or shape in various ways the life of a society. When the systems change, the human life will also change, and the archaeological culture the society leaves behind will change accordingly. The systems that affect and shape the development of an archaeological culture consist of:

1. The physical and ecological system. All the living creatures live in a certain physical environment, and inevitably depend on the ecosystem thereof. The human being is no exception. A proper range of temperature, moisture and precipitation is indispensable for the human life. The different physical environments and ecological systems determine the different lifestyles of the human being. The populations, who live in different ecological contexts, will surely have different lifestyles, and produce different archaeological cultures. For various reasons, the physical environment changes from time to time, and the human life likewise alters, and so does the archaeological culture that it produces.

2. Subsistence (economic activities) system. Material production activities are fundamental ones of the human being, and the major contributor to the archaeological culture. Diverse topography, climate and ecosystem give

rise to diverse economic life in different regions of China since the antiquity. Even in the agriculture-dominant regions, the rice-growing and millet-growing populations use different sets of production tools and utensils, which are evident in their archaeological cultures.

3. Production technology. An archaeological culture is what the ancient people have left behind. The alteration of human life inevitably brings about the alteration of an archaeological culture. Technology is the capability of the human being to transform the nature and make it serve her needs. It has been improving and thus changing the human life. Technological system, or production mode of material culture, is one of the key factors that shape an archaeological culture; its development and change have been drive behind its change.

4. Belief and outlook. Different peoples have different beliefs and different subjects and forms of ritual. The ritual activities, which bear root in the different beliefs, are preserved in various forms, which are observable in various types of remains related to beliefs and outlook. The remains are the windows through which we may observe the traditions, beliefs, outlook, ethos, and aesthetics of ancient people, and constitute the indispensable materials for the study of ancient spiritual world. They are no less important than the remains derived from the material life. Unlike the production activities, the beliefs and outlook are relatively stable; once established, they are inert to change. The forms of ritual and mortuary rites are usually the most conservative and stubborn components of a culture. The stagnancy of outlook and tradition is pervasive. The mortuary rites and ritual forms are the most salient and stable components of a society, and should be taken as the most fundamental elements of an archaeological culture.

The formation and development of an archaeological culture must take place within the confine of the belief and outlook. In general, when two consecutive archaeological cultures have different artifact assemblages and typological characteristics, and they have starkly different mortuary rites and ritual forms, we may consider that the creators of the two cultures are of different ethnic groups. One, however, should not exclude the possibility that the mortuary rites and ritual forms of an ethnic group change dramatically because its belief and outlook alter that way.

5. Social pattern and its changes. As said before, an archaeological culture is what a group of people have left behind. Human is a social being, and archaeological cultures inevitably bear the imprints of the society, which may have come from outside or inside. Every human group has its own tradition, its own lifestyle, its own disciplines and codes. Every member must comply with the tradition and codes of the group; if not, he/she will be subject to punishment. For this reason, the group can sustain, consolidate, and develop itself; and for the same reason, an archaeological culture can develop its own characteristics, and keep its own tradition alive. On the other hand, an archaeological culture reflects social

system and social condition to some extent, for which the settlement pattern, the spatial organization of a prehistoric settlement and a historic city, and the layout of a cemetery supply ample examples.

A society is not static; it adapts itself to the changing economy, politics and culture of the human group. The differentiation of social status and wealth among the social members, the formation of hierarchy, and the emergence of rulership and state all resonate in the life of the human group, and in the archaeological culture. The rise of warfare gives rise to the boom of prehistoric walled settlements; the differentiation of social status and wealth within a human group and the formation of the elite class bring about the emergence of “ritual paraphernalia” – artifacts that embody the social status. These developments change the human life, which in turn manifest in the archaeological culture.

6. Different archaeological cultures interact, impact, and converge with each other. An archaeological culture is the material manifestation of a human group; a human group, however, interacts with other groups in various ways, including marriage, trade, war, alliance, gift presentation, and tribute submission, which reflects themselves in archaeological cultures.

Plural components of an archaeological culture

Because an archaeological culture interacts with its neighbors, when one looks carefully into the components of it, one can identify a number of types of elements: the first are those inherited from the mother culture; the second are those adopted from other culture(s) that it coexists with and interacts with; the third are those innovated by the culture itself. We may consider them to be the “multiple components” of an archaeological culture. In the study of an archaeological culture, one must treat the different components in different ways; and one must look at a specific group of elements when one deals with a specific question.

When one studies the genealogy of an archaeological culture, one must look at the first group of elements, and ask from which cultures they are derived. When one studies the relationship between one culture and its neighbors, one must look at the second group of elements, which answer the question that which cultures it interacts with. When one studies the nature and ethnicity of an archaeological culture, one must look at the third group of elements, which are the innovations of the culture and the core and essential part of it.

Cultural sphere, culture, and cultural phases

When one examines archaeological cultures of one period across regions, one can find that cultures within one large area are similar to each other to some extent, and they constitute a cultural sphere.

How to understand the various “layers” of archaeological cultures? An archaeological culture

represents the material manifestation of a human group of a common region, economic formation, tradition, and religious belief; different “layers” of archaeological cultures may correspond to human groups of different sizes but of similar regional, economic formation, tradition, and religious belief. The largest cultural sphere may correspond to a “tribe”, and the cultures to individual components of a tribe. On the one hand, they share traditions, and have intimate interactions, so that they share cultural traits; on the other hand, they interact with human groups of other cultural spheres in various ways, yet differ from them.

From the perspective of the “layered” archaeological cultures, one can tell that the cultural spheres experience the vicissitudes of power, and their interrelationships are in a fluid state. For instance, in around 4000 BCE, the Miaodigou Culture of the Yangshao Cultural Sphere exerted strong influence upon the surrounding regions, which extend to the Hetao area in the north, the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River in the south, the lower reach of the Yellow River in the east, Gansu and Qinghai in the west. This is the “wave of expansion”. Later, prehistoric cultures of the middle Yellow River were in a state of turbulence. In around 3000 BCE, the large cultures such as Dawenkou in the lower Yellow River, Qujialing in middle Yangtze River, Liangzhu in the lower Yangtze River developed quickly, and expanded their power towards the middle Yellow River. This is the second wave of interaction. The exchange, impact, confluence and reference among the various cultural spheres turn out to be the engine for the formation of Huaxia-centered Chinese culture. Therefore, the study of the interaction between cultural spheres is an important subject of archaeological research in China, which is fundamental to the formation of the multi-component unity of the Chinese culture.

Ethnicity of an archaeological culture

If the different layers of archaeological cultures correspond to different human groups, how shall we attribute the cultures and cultural spheres to the ethnic groups recorded in the historic literature and legends? This is a question that one often encounters when one studies late Neolithic and historic archaeology.

When Chinese archaeologists deal with the ethnicity of an archaeological culture, or link it with an ethnic group recorded in the historic literature and legends, they often take a suspicious attitude. But some take a positive attitude so as to connect up prehistoric cultures with historic cultures. In his model of “double-petal flower”, Wenming Yan remarks that the Central Plains, “according to received legends, was once the activity area of the tribes of the Yellow Emperor and Yan Emperor, which give form to the ethnic groups of the Hua and Xia (1987).” The Neolithic cultures of Gansu and Qinghai “should have been the prehistoric cultures of the later Rong and Qiang ethnic groups.” In Shandong, “the Dawenkou

and Longshan Cultures should have been the prehistoric cultures of the Eastern Yi ethnic groups.” The prehistoric cultures of Yanshan Mountains and Liao River valley give birth to the Yan Culture. In the middle Yangtze River was born the Chu Culture; prehistoric cultures of the lower Yangtze River should have belonged to the ancient Yue ethnic groups.

In the view of the author, although the ethnic groups recorded in the received legends or historical texts, such as “Eastern Yi,” “Western Rong,” “Southern Man,” and “Northern Di” are all derisive designations that the Huaxia ethnic groups employed to refer to surrounding peoples, it is true that various ethnic groups were living in the four directions of the Huaxia ethnic groups. When one deals with cultures of the Neolithic Age and the Xia-Shang-Zhou Period, the received texts of legends and history deserve serious treatment. It is not desirable to reject the discussion of ethnic attribution of an archaeological culture altogether in the name of “being scrupulous”; nor is it desirable to jump to link an archaeological culture with an ethnic group without a careful study of the genealogy of the culture. The appropriate approach is to conduct independent study of an archaeological culture and its genealogy so as to establish its chronology and spatial distribution, and its origin and development. Based on this, one may match it with the ethnic group recorded in the received texts of legends and history. When the chronology and space

of these two match, and when the characteristics of the culture is fully examined, one may consider the affiliation seriously. Even so, it remains to be a hypothesis that requires further test against more archaeological data.

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Postscript

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