

Pluralistic Development and Cultural Interaction: A study of the Assimilation into the Han Chinese Civilization of the Ancient Yue Culture in the Pearl River Delta and the Ancient Shu Culture in Sichuan Province (Abstract)

This paper sets out to compare and contrast the development of prehistoric cultures in the Chengdu Plain in Sichuan province and the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province with an emphasis on how these peripheral ancient cultures were gradually assimilated into the mainstream Han Chinese civilization. Archaeological evidence traces human activities in the Pearl River Delta back some 7,000 years. Historical records always refer to the early settlers in the Lingnan (嶺南) region as the Yue (越) people, and the archaeological cultures of the Pearl River Delta are therefore described as the ancient Yue culture. Similarly, the prehistoric culture in the Chengdu Plain is called the ancient Shu (蜀) culture, as historical documents record that the area was settled by the Shu people.

The prehistoric archaeological cultures in the Pearl River Delta are divided into five phases. A characteristic feature of the culture of Phase I, dated between 7,000 and 5,700 years ago, is fine clay pottery painted with red designs and white pottery pressed with meticulous low relief designs. The origins of this pottery can be traced back to the Tangjiagang (湯家崗) culture (7,000 – 6,500 BP) in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River in Hunan province, suggesting that the more advanced culture there exerted a significant influence over the culture of the Pearl River Delta. Recent archaeological discoveries at sites in Gaomiao (高廟) in southern Hunan, Xiaojin (曉錦) in northern Guangxi and Shixia (石峽) in northern Guangdong suggest that the Shang (湘), Ji (資) and Yuan (沅) rivers in Hunan were the major routes of communication between the middle Yangtze River and the Pearl River Delta. This trend that saw the spread of cultural influences from the north continued during the Phase II culture of the Pearl River Delta, which dates back 5,700 to 4,900 years ago.

During the Phase III culture of the Pearl River Delta dated between 4,900 and 4,200 years ago, there was a shift in cultural influence from the middle to the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. The stone tools, pottery, jade and ceremonial implements of precious stones as well as the burial practices of the Shixia culture bear witness to this, as they all reflect strong influences from the advanced Liangzhu culture (良渚文化) in the lower reaches of the Yangtze and from the Fanchengdui culture (樊城堆文化) in Jiangxi province. The sudden advances in stone-working techniques and the discovery of highly polished jade ceremonial implements such as yue axes and rings in the Pearl River Delta imply that the early settlers learned the advanced stone-working

techniques of the Liangzhu culture via the Shixia people.

The cultures of Phase IV (4,200 – 3,500 BP) and Phase V (3,500 BP – 214 BC) in the Pearl River Delta were prosperous periods, as is testified to by the sharp increase in the number and size of archaeological sites that have been discovered there, which indicates a rapid growth of the population in the region. The hallmark of these two cultural phases is pottery stamped with a wide variety of geometric patterns. A large-scale geometric pottery ware manufacturing site with four long dragon kilns and a huge quantity of kiln debris discovered at Yingang (銀崗) and an extensive burial ground with three hundred tombs containing hard geometric pottery as grave goods in a variety of shapes and forms unearthed at Henglingshan (橫嶺山) in Boluo county suggest that the early settlers were organised in a sophisticated form of society. A very strong culture appears to have developed here, the influence of which extended beyond the Nanling Range (南嶺) northwards into southern Hunan and Jiangxi. This healthy indigenous culture has always been referred to as the Yue culture in the literature. Although the Yue people were subsequently conquered by the army of the First Emperor of Qin in 214 BC, elements of their culture were gradually assimilated into mainstream Han Chinese culture.

The prehistoric cultures in the Chengdu Plain in Sichuan began around 4,500 years ago, thus quite late when compared with those of the Pearl River Delta. The earliest archaeological culture is the Baodun culture (寶墩文化) dating from 4,500 to 3,700 years ago. The characteristic feature of this culture is provided by the seven walled settlement sites that have been excavated – the largest is the Baodun site, which covers 600,000 square metres – and that suggest the presence of a complicated society in Chengdu Plain in very early times. The shape, size and construction techniques of these walled settlements are, however, very similar to the walled settlements found in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, the earliest one of which is the Chengtoushan (城頭山) site that dates back to 6,000 years ago. This suggests that the origins of the Baodun culture may be traced to the Chujialing culture (屈家嶺文化) in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River.

The Baodun culture was later succeeded by the Sanxingdui culture (三星堆文化), dated between 3,700 and 3,200 years ago, which was dominated by a single huge walled settlement at the Sanxingdui site of some 2,600,000 square metres. Some scholars believe that the Sanxingdui walled settlement was the capital of the early Shu state, as the site over the past few decades has yielded large quantities of bronze statues, figurines and ritual objects, as well as ivory, jade and gold ceremonial implements. The

similarities between some of these early bronze and jade ceremonial objects and others found at the Erlitou and Erligang sites in the middle reaches of the Yellow River strongly suggest a link between the Sanxingdui culture and the Xia and Shang dynasties. It is generally believed that the Sanxingdui people learned the technology of bronze-casting from the Xia people.

The Sanxingdui culture was succeeded by the Shierqiao culture (十二橋文化) of 3,200 to 2,700 years ago. After the decline of the Sanxingdui walled settlement in around 1200 BC, the capital of the Shu state seems to have shifted to the Jinsha site on the western outskirts of Chengdu city. Jinsha is a huge site covering an area of some five square kilometres. Archaeological excavations in the past decade have yielded a large quantity of ceremonial and ritual bronze, gold, jade and ivory objects similar to those unearthed at the Sanxingdui site. However, no wall has yet been found at Jinsha. The Shierqiao culture was followed by the culture of the Shu State of the Warring States period, which is characterised by beautifully cast bronze weapons and huge wooden coffins carved in the shape of a canoe. Historical documents record that the Shu State was eventually conquered by the Qin State in 316 BC, with the Shu culture subsequently assimilated into the mainstream Han Chinese civilization.

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