Tombs of the Yelang Period at Kele in Hezhang, Guizhou

Guizhou Provincial Institute of Antiquity and Archaeology

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In September–October 2000, the Guizhou Provincial Institute of Antiquity and Archaeology and Hezhang County Commission for Preservation of Ancient Monuments jointly excavated tombs of the Warring States period to Western Han times at Kele Village in Kele Town, Hezhang County, Guizhou and reaped great fruits. Due to the tombs are of the ancient Yelang period and the burial custom and funerary objects have distinctive local ethnic features, the excavation aroused more interest in the academic circle.

I. Brief Introduction

Kele Village, situated in the east edge of the middle Wumeng Mountain, 50 km northwest of Hezhang County, is a east-west oriented bar between hills, 1800 m above the sea level. The Kele River flows from west to east. On the both sides of the river, an earth hill 50–100 m high lies there. A dozen of tomb cemeteries and sites of the Warring States period to Han times were spotted.

The present excavated section lies at two neighboring mountain foots on the south side of the bar including Guoluobao and Luodechengdi. The Guoluobao cemetery had four burials, including three Han style earth pit burials and one local ethnic earth pit burial. The Luodechengdi cemetery had 107 burials that were all burials of the local aboriginal.

The Luodechengdi cemetery consists of two sections, 20 m between them. The geographical location of Section II (81 tombs) is higher than that of Section I (26 tombs). Among them, 3 Han tombs were omitted in this report.

II. Tomb Structure and Burial Custom

The aboriginal burial is of earthen pit, shaped like a rectangle. The pit is small, 1.42–3.20 m long and 0.4–1.45 m wide. In addition, two special earthen pits were found. One is that the both ends of the burial extended arched and the whole burial is shaped like a dumbbell, 9 ones were discovered. The other is that the head’s end extended outward and it is shaped like a bell, 8 ones were discovered.

This batch of burials had various burial customs. In
the 1970s, a couple of head-covered burials with bronze cauldron or drum of the Warring States period to Western Han times were found at Kele, which were called “head-covered burial.” Except one tomb occupant’s head and feet was covered by iron cauldrons, all the others were in the same style. The present discovery, including five head-covered burials in different customs, clarifies a couple of specific problems.

There are three burials covered by bronze cauldron, which was drum-shaped one with strong local feature. The bottom of M264 was laid with pebbles along the edge, 10–20 cm high. Its function is unknown. The other two burials are very special. A big cauldron covers the tomb occupant’s head of M273 and one bronze ewer for washing laid under two arms and feet each (Fig. 1). The head and feet of the tomb occupant of M274 were covered by a big bronze cauldron respectively. A bronze ewer for washing covered his face; two ewers under his right arm and one ewer under his left arm. The unearthed objects of M274 are of over 100 and the bronze cauldron is particularly valuable. M274 was the highest status in this excavation (Fig. 2).

The five head-covered burials interred with wooden coffins. Some survived wooden boards were found on the cauldron and even side coffin boards were remained in the center of the burial pit. In the process of excavation, we carefully examined the position of head covered by cauldron. In M264, a pair of U-shaped bronze hairpins were placed at the bent between rim and body of the bronze cauldron. In M272 remain of skull was found inside the bronze cauldron, while eye-frame and teeth were outside. Other burials have the same condition, which show that bronze cauldron was only covered on the top of head and his face was mostly exposed outside and the dead must be in supine position with extended limbs.

Except head-covered burial, other burials were found. The first is the dead’s face was covered by bronze ewer (including 2 burials: M296 and M342). Under this condition, the skull was survived while the limbs were completely decayed. The second is the dead’s head bedded by ewer, only 1 burial was found (M298). A pair of U-shaped bronze hairpins were recovered from the ewer, vestiges of a pair of bone earrings remained at the rim of ewer, several teeth placed between them. The third type is that a bronze ge-dagger axe standing beside the dead’s head. 4 burials were cleared (M331, M342, M351, and M365). The bronze ge-dagger axes were frequently found in Kele burials, they were often placed on chest. The four ge-dagger axe burials seem to be purposely interred and related to some burial ideology.

This special burial pattern at Kele cemetery has never occurred in other regions, it is worthy of careful research on the funeral custom and religious ideology it showed.

III. Funerary Objects

The unearthed funerary objects number 500 pieces. The number varied greatly in different tombs from none, 1 or 2 pieces to 100 pieces. The artifacts include bronze, iron, pottery, jade, lacquer, and bone in texture. The types consist of weapon, ornament, household wares,
Fig. 3 The tiger figurine on the bronze fu-cauldron (M274:87)

Fig. 4 Drum-shaped bronze fu-cauldron (M272:1)

and seal.

1. Bronze cauldrons for head-cover consist of two types: one has loop handles decorated with braid pattern and the other is drum shape. The former one, 3 pieces, its exterior wall remained with thick ash, should be practical vessel. The cauldron has a big size, its belly diameter up to 50 cm, with wide flared rim, bulge belly, and round bottom. Its belly appliquéd with a pair of loop handles decorated with braid pattern. The cauldron was well cast, one of them appliquéd a set of knockers with ring on its belly. Another one is appliquéd with a pair of standing tigers between rim and shoulder (Fig. 3).

The drum shaped one has 3 pieces. It has small size and is roughly made. To present, 10 more cauldrons of this type have been found at Kele. They were all discovered in head-cover burials (Fig. 4).

2. Weapon comprises of bronze and iron ge-dagger axes, swords, and knives. Among them, the bronze ge-dagger axe, iron sword with bronze shaft, and bronze sword are distinctive.

Bronze ge-dagger axe, straight blade, consists of 2 types. One is of rectangular blade with rectangular holes, decorated with low relief. The other is M-shape; its blade has elliptical holes, decorated with low relief (Fig. 5).

The iron sword with bronze shaft is decorated with 3 groups of spiral pattern on the pommel, its shaft with fine thunder pattern and braid pattern. 10 more this type of sword have been recovered at Kele to present, which are the most typical Yelang sword (Fig. 6). 3 more bronze swords with bronze shaft were also found here and its type is identical with iron ones (Fig. 7). The Ba-Shu styled sword was found. One is shaped like willow leaf with 1 or 2 holes in the shaft and the other has clear turn between the shaft and blade. In addition, one dagger with snake’s head pommel was found, which belonged to the Yunnan Dian Culture.

3. Ornaments consist of many types and bronze, jade, and bone in texture.

Hairpin, bronze texture, consists of 4 types: single slip, U-shape, single slip attached with several rings, and U-shape with spring head. Hairpins were frequently worn, often on the head horizontally. Some burials clearly show that hairpins were 4–5 cm higher than the skull, which demonstrated that the dead’s hair bun was very high.
Earring includes bone and jade jue-earrings. The former is more. They are flat round shape with very small opening. The wearing method varied. Only one jade earring was found. It is shaped like disc and decorated with four hat-shaped patterns on its edge (Fig. 8).

Bracelets are all made of bronze. They were frequently occurred in burials and often worn in pair. The bracelet comprises 2 types: narrow and wide ring shaped. The latter one occasionally inlaid with several rows of turquoise crumbs (Fig. 9).

Necklace is made of agate tubes, jade beads, and bone beads. They were occasionally used.

Bronze bells are about 2 cm high, some with decoration. When discovered, they were placed with necklace in group, maybe were part of a necklace.

Bronze belt buckle includes mainly goose head shaped and pipa-musical instrument shape. Some have large size up to 30 cm long.

4. Pottery is very few. The vessel types mainly include small guan-jug with single handle as well dish-mouthed cup, small guan-jug with ring foot. Pottery is fine sand tempered in grayish brown color, hand made in low firing temperature.

In addition, one bronze seal was found. It is square with bridge-shaped knob. The inscription is two red written Chinese characters “jing-shi 敬事” in seal script.
IV. Concluding Remark

The discovery of the cemetery much enriched our knowledge of the Yelang Culture and marks a great advance in Yelang archaeology in recent years.

The Yelang Culture is an important component of the southwest China civilization in the Warring States period to Qin and Han times. However, its nature is still a puzzle to present; as a result, Yelang archaeology becomes a priority in Guizhou. Kele in Hezhang lies in the scope of ancient Yelang; the varied cultural features demonstrated by this batch of burials at Kele provide valuable material data for expounding social structure, life custom, religious belief, and cultural exchange of the aboriginals at Yelang region.

This excavation reaped a couple of new fruits. For example, the different status showed in the burials of sections I and II at Luodechengdi, several styles of head-covered burials, new knowledge of other special burials and specific problems, cultural exchange between different regions showed by weapon, and new finds in funerary objects furnish crucial clues for exploring and studying the Yelang Culture. There are many sites and burials worthy of excavation at Kele where would be an important area to understand the Yelang Culture.

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