A study of Xiongnu tombs

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**Abstract**

This paper makes an in-depth analysis to the Xiongnu tombs in the light of recently discovered data and new achievements in the study of relevant issues. It comprises four parts: distribution and date, unearthed typical artifacts, structural features and burial ritual, and periodization and zoning. By analyzing the unearthed artifacts, this paper sums up the general characteristics (identity) and traditional regional elements of the Xiongnu culture. By studying the tomb types, coffin structures and burial customs, this paper makes conclusions on the general characteristics, burial ritual systems and regional differences of Xiongnu tombs and their hierarchies reflected from the tomb structure and grave goods. Finally, based on the grave goods and tomb features, as well as the evolution and the identity and variety of burial ritual systems, this paper divides the available Xiongnu tombs into the early (late 3rd century BCE to mid 1st century CE), transitional (mid 1st century to early 2nd century CE) and late (early 2nd century to mid 3rd century CE) phases and, geographically, into the area from Transbaikalia to the middle Yellow River valley, that in the middle and upper Yellow River valley and that in Semirechye, with the first area further divided into four sub-areas. This paper believes that the first area was the dominion of the Xiongnu Empire; the second one, the region of the South Xiongnu submitting to the Han Dynasty; and the third one, the territory where the North Xiongnu launched their activities after their westward migration.

**Key words:** Periodization; regionalization; Xiongnu (ethnic group)–tombs–archaeology

**General introduction of the issue**

Since Tal’ko-Gryntsevich discovered burials of Xiongnu tribesmen in Transbaikalia in 1896, thousands of Xiongnu tombs have been revealed. Of them approximately 900 tombs lie in Transbaikalia and Tuva of Russia, including nearly 400 excavated; about 30 cemeteries in Mongolia, comprising nearly 2,000 tombs, including about 500 excavated; nine cemeteries in north China, including above 60 tombs. In Semirechye of Kazakhstan, five related cemeteries were discovered, where about 200 tombs have been excavated, including a considerable number of Xiongnu burials. Based on the unearthed data from these burials, the present paper first makes an attempt of comprehensive systematization and integrates study of Xiongnu tombs and their grave goods, and then carries out researches on their periodization and regionalization.

In the above-mentioned regions, Xiongnu cemeteries are usually distributed in forest-clad mountain valleys, on the banks of large rivers and their tributaries or at river and lake outlets linking with gorges, each comprising several to thousands of burials. In general, large-sized tombs co-exist with medium and small ones, the former lying at the center while the latter surrounding them seldom with intrusion and superimposition. Judged by the unearthed Han “wuzhu” coins, bronze mirrors, lacquered ear-cups with exact dates and other chronologically indicative objects, these cemeteries can be assigned to the late 3rd century BCE to 2nd century CE by and large, a temporal span, as known from historical documents, roughly conformable to the time of the Xiongnu ethnic group’s activities in these territories (Figure 1). Related historic literatures and the distribution of Xiongnu burials suggest that the Xiongnu tombs of the late 3rd century BCE to mid 1st century BCE...
Figure 2 Pottery Jars.

Figure 3 Fu-cauldrons.

CE discovered in Transbaikalia and Tuva of Russia and in Mongolia belong to the period of the Xiongnu Empire; those recorded in a small number in Transbaikalia and Mongolia and dated to the mid 1st century CE and later should be assigned to the North Xiongnu community; those in Cemetery Beriktas I within Semirechye of Kazakhstan must be remains of the westward migrating North Xiongnu people; those of the mid 2nd century BCE to the early 1st century CE revealed in North China, graves of Xiongnu tribesmen having surrendered to the Han Dynasty; and those of the mid 1st century CE and after should be assigned to the South Xiongnu.

The main characteristics and hierarchies of Xiongnu tombs

A number of city sites and dwelling sites of the Xiongnu period have been discovered in archaeology, but the importance of the then tombs in the Xiongnu Culture was determined by the strong mobility of Xiongnu as a steppe nomadic Empire. Thus the whole aspect of the Xiongnu Culture can be exhibited from the typical grave goods and distinctive features of the discovered Xiongnu tombs and the burial rituals they reflect. These tombs are great in number, rich in variety and complex in structure. Their representatives have circular or square barrows on the ground, which are largely built of stones with loess sandwiched in sometimes. The circular barrows occur mostly on ordinary tombs, while the square ones mainly on large- and medium-sized graves. The interior is generally a rectangular earthen pit with the major axis pointing to the north and south and the lower walls made of stones. The ordinary tombs have no tomb-passages, while the large-sized elite ones are usually furnished with an open-air ramp extending from the southern side. The dead are principally buried in wooden outer and inner coffins, singly in general, in an extended supine position heading north. The common grave goods include vessels, weapons, harness and
Figure 4 Swords (Knives).

Figure 5 Iron Arrowheads.
1. Type Au; 2. Type Ab; 3. Type Ac; 4. Type Ad; 5. Type Ae; 6. Type Af; 7 and 8. Type Ag; 9. Type Ah; 10. Type Ai; 11. Type Aj; 12. Type Ba; 13. Type Bb; 14. Type Bc; 15. Type C; 16. Type Da; 17. Type Db; 18. Type Dc; 19. Type E (1, 2 and 12. Ivolga Cemetery; 3, 15 and 19. Budonggou Cemetery; 4–6 and 16. Tseremukhov Cemetery; 7, 9 and 17. Il’mova Cemetery; 8, 13 and 14. Egiin Gol I Cemetery; 10, 11 and 18. Derestui Cemetery)
metal ornaments, which are mainly jars, hu-cauldrons, knives, swords, arrowheads, bits, cheek-pieces, openwork-decorated bronze rings, spoon-shaped bronze ornaments, belt buckles and waist plaques (Figures 2–5). Horses’, cattle’s and sheep’s skulls and limb bones occur as prevalent animal victims.

In the light of their difference in coffin furnishing, the Xiongnu tombs, on the whole, can be classified into nine types, namely double outer single inner coffin, single outer single inner coffin, single outer multiple inner coffin, multiple inner coffin, single coffin, cist or sarcophagus, wooden stretcher, urn-coffin and coffin-less tombs (Figures 6 and 7). Judged by the tomb shapes, coffin structures and grave good assemblages, they fall into four ranks. The double outer single inner coffin tombs belong to the highest rank and must be assigned to the Xiongnu royal kin and senior aristocracy; the single outer single inner coffin ones, to the second rank, i.e. to the Xiongnu aristocracy; the single coffin and cist or sarcophagi ones with more grave goods, to the third rank, i.e. to the lower aristocracy or common people; and the single coffin and coffin-less ones with scanty grave goods, to the fourth rank, i.e. to the lowest poor people.

The funeral customs and burial rituals of the Xiongnu tombs

Through an analysis of the available data from their tombs, the Xiongnu people’s burial rituals can be summed up as follows:

1. The earlier Xiongnu tombs are mainly of single burial, collective burials occurring as exceptions, the dead being laid in an extended supine position heading north a little by west or east. The later ones are of multiple burials for an overwhelming majority, the dead lying usually in an extended supine position heading in varying direction.

2. The earlier Xiongnu tombs are generally furnished with half-log outer and plank inner coffins, whose decorations varied in richness according to ranks of the tomb occupants. The later tombs contain wooden stretchers or simple coffins; outer coffins emerged only in a few cases. No decoration was applied to any kind of coffin.

3. The grave goods in the earlier Xiongnu tombs include pottery, bronzes, ironware, gold wares, silverwares, jade and other precious stone ornaments, bone artifacts, lacquered wooden articles and silk fabrics. Animal
victims are quite popular, mostly represented by horses’, oxen’s and sheep’s skulls and limb bones. Their quantity is generally in accordance with the tomb ranks. In the later tombs, animal victims are sharply decreased, and pottery, bronze, iron, gold and silver wares are the principal grave goods. These objects often present local cultural features, distinctly differing from their counterparts in earlier Xiongnu tombs in both style and type.

4. The male tomb occupants are largely accompanied with horse fittings and weapons, whereas the females’ tombs generally contain tools, though arrowheads and horse fittings occur in some cases. It reflects the division of labor between the two genders in the Xiongnu society.

The periodization of Xiongnu tombs

The Xiongnu tombs show strong consistency in feature, burial rituals and typical grave goods, but as time went on, they underwent changes in the shapes of their structures, the characters of their grave goods and the burial customs. Based on a comprehensive analysis of tomb data with references of historic literatures, the present paper divides them into three developmental stages, namely the early, transitional and late phases (Figures 8–10).

1. The Early Phase (late 3rd century BCE to mid 1st century CE) belonged to the Xiongnu Empire period, when the Xiongnu ethnic group controlled the vast territory from Lake Baikal in the north to the Yinshan Mountains in the south and from the Pamir Heights in the west to the Liaohe River valley in the east. As is known in archaeology, Xiongnu tombs are widely distributed in Transbaikalia, Mongolia, Tuva and the middle Yellow River Valley. In general they feature a rectangular or square earthen pit in a north-south orientation, in a slight slanting to either side in some cases, a relatively low circular or square cairn or earthen mound, stone walls and single burial with the occupant lying in an extended supine position heading north, northwest or northeast. In the pit are a half-log outer coffin and a plank inner one, which are occasionally substituted by a cist or sarcophagus. The outer and inner coffins are largely decorated with silks or felt blankets, the inner coffin is lacquered on the surface, and the gaps above the two coffins are usually filled with large stones. The grave goods include pottery jars, bits, cheek-pieces, iron arrowheads, swords, knives, and bows discernable by the remaining decorative pieces. The most characteristic ornaments are various waist plaques and bronze rings, both with openwork designs. Animal

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Tomb Forms</th>
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<tr>
<td>Early Phase (Late 3rd Century BCE - Mid 1st Century CE)</td>
<td>![Early Phase Diagram]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transitional Phase (Mid 1st Early 2nd Century CE)</td>
<td>![Transitional Phase Diagram]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Phase (Early 2nd Mid 3rd Century CE)</td>
<td>![Late Phase Diagram]</td>
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Figure 8  Periodization of Xiongnu Tombs.

Figure 9 Periodization of the grave goods unearthed from Xiongnu tombs (I).


Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Potteries</th>
<th><em>Fu</em>-Cauldrons</th>
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<tr>
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<td>1–13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid 1st Century CE)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transitional Phase</td>
<td>4–8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>33–35</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Mid 1st - Early 2nd</td>
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<td>Century CE)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Late Phase</td>
<td>11–13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Early 2nd - Mid 3rd</td>
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<td>Century CE)</td>
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victim offering is commonly represented by entombing horses’, cattle’s and sheep’s skulls and limb bones, which are mostly placed close to the northern tomb-wall, at the dead’ heads, in pottery vessels or without containers. A lot of tombs contain Han period bronze mirrors, vessels and “wuzhu” coins, silks and lacquer ware. Obviously the early Xiongnu Culture presents strong expansionism, exerting vigorous influence upon and even assimilating the cultures in the conquered territories.

2. In the Transitional Phase (mid 1st century to mid 2nd century CE), the Xiongnu ethnic group was declining, and their empire was split into North and
<table>
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<th>Ornaments</th>
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<tr>
<td>(Early 2nd - Mid 3rd Century CE)</td>
<td>45 46 47</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>70 71 72</td>
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</table>

**Figure 10** Periodization of the Grave Goods Unearthed from Xiongnu Tombs (II).

37 and 44. iron swords; 38 and 39. iron daggers; 40, 41, 43 and 45. iron knives; 42, 46 and 47. bronze knives; 48 and 56. iron cheek-piece and bit; 49 and 52. iron cheek-pieces; 51, 54 and 55. bone cheek-pieces; 50. horn cheek-piece; 53 and 57. iron bits; 58. bronze bit and cheek-piece; 59–61 and 73. bronze waist plaques; 62. gold-plated waist plaque; 63–65. bronze belt buckles; 66. gold-plated iron waist plaque; 67 and 73. bronze buckles; 68. iron belt buckle; 69. bronze ornament; 70 and 71. bone ornaments; 72. bronze belt hook; (37 and 55. Egiin Gol I Cemetery; 38, 39, 59 and 64. Ivolga Cemetery; 40. Tseremukhov Cemetery; 41, 43, 49, 50, 51, 56, 62 and 65. Derestui Cemetery; 42 and 63. Daodunzi Cemetery; 44, 57, 68 and 69. Budonggou Cemetery; 45, 70 and 71. Beriktas I Cemetery; 46 and 47. Datong Shang Sunjiuazi Cemetery of Han-Jin Period; 48 and 52. Noin-Ula Cemetery; 53 and 54. Il’mova Cemetery; 58, 72 and 73. Shenmu Dabaodang Cemetery; 60. Tomb 140 at Chang’an Kexingzhuang; 61. Tomb 25 in Tongchuan Zaomiao Cemetery; 66. Xigoupan Cemetery; 67. Dafanpu Cemetery)
South Xiongnu. The former surrendered the Eastern Han Dynasty, while the latter continued to control the northern steppes. The traditional features of Xiongnu tombs were gradually weakened. With the Xiongnu people’s emigration, their culture began to be deeply influenced and even assimilated by the local traditional cultures in the territories they settled in.

3. The Late Phase (early 2nd to mid 3rd century CE) witnessed the westward migration of the North Xiongnu under the flanking attacks of the Eastern Han Dynasty, Xianbei and South Xiongnu, as well as the long-term relations and amalgamation of the South Xiongnu with the Han ethnic group. The North Xiongnu burials can be represented by Tomb 1 in Cemetery Beriktas I, while the South Xiongnu burials, by the Shennu Dabaodang and Datong Shang Sunjiazhai Section B Cemeteries. As time went on, the burial customs of the North Xiongnu having finished westward migration and the South Xiongnu subjected to the Han Dynasty were gradually evolved from a relatively typical Xiongnu mourning institution into entombment manners with local elements adopted more and more and was finally assimilated by local cultures.

The regionalization of Xiongnu tombs

The Xiongnu tombs can be divided into three regions in the light of their shapes, grave goods and burial rituals (Figure 11).

1. Region I covers Transbaikalia to the middle Yellow River Valley, embracing Transbaikalia, Tuva, Mongolia and the middle Yellow River valley. It features greatness in tomb number and dates from the Xiongnu Empire period. Judged by the tomb types, the features of grave goods and the burial rituals, it can be pointed out that there was no clear chronological variety but rather distinct disparity territorially existed. According to the available data, this region can be further divided into four areas, which are numbered Sub-regions IA, IB, IC and ID respectively.

Sub-region IA covers northern Transbaikalia. It was in the Xiongnu Empire’s northeastern territory and archaeologically is represented by the Ivolga Cemetery. In this area, the Xiongnu Culture definitely held the dominant position and clearly coexisted with other cultural elements, which resulted from the complex composition of the population. The tombs are largely rectangular earthen pits with neither stone-built chambers inside nor buildings on the ground. As shown by the usually seen humble coffins and grave goods, they are lower in rank with a few exceptions. The dead are buried in an extended supine position generally heading north, northwest or northeast. The burial furnishings are varied in shape, including outer and inner wooden coffins, log ones and cists or sarcophagi, and some tombs have no coffins. The grave goods present certain Xiongnu Culture features with elements of other cultures clearly mixed in.

Sub-region IB, which mainly refers to Tuva, lying in the northwest of the Xiongnu Empire, chronologically belongs to the Xiongnu-Sarmatian period and is represented by Bai-Dag II and Chaskal II Cemeteries. The tombs are still rectangular earthen pits for the most, some of which having a tomb-passage untraditional for Xiongnu. The tombs are largely buried singly in an extended supine position; flexed skeletons occur in some cases and their heads point to various directions, mostly to the north or west. The burial furnishings are varied in shape, including outer and inner wooden coffins, log ones and cists or sarcophagi, and some tombs have no coffins. The grave goods present certain Xiongnu Culture features with elements of other cultures clearly mixed in.

Sub-region IC embraces southern Transbaikalia and all Mongolia and is represented by the Il'mova, Derestui and Noin-Ula Cemeteries. It shows great unity in tomb structure, grave goods and burial custom presenting a rather pure aspect of the Xiongnu Culture. The highest-ranked, largest-sized tombs of the Xiongnu Empire period and the elaborately-made huge pottery jars are discovered mainly in this area. The arrowheads are principally made of iron and possess high combat effectiveness, and the whistling arrows characteristic of the Xiongnu Culture are concentrated here. This sub-region must have been the central area of the Xiongnu Empire.

Sub-region ID occupies mainly the middle Yellow...
River valley with the Han period Xigoupan, Daodunzi and Lijiataozii Cemeteries as its representatives. The prevailing entombment manner is single burial, the tomb occupants are laid in an extended supine position heading north, and offered with horses’, cattle’s and sheep’s skulls and limb bones as animal victims and with pottery jars, waist plaques and openwork bronze rings characteristic of the Xiongnu people as grave goods, all of which constitute traditional features of Xiongnu tombs. Local cultural elements, however, are also clearly demonstrated. For example, some graves in the Daodunzi cemetery are furnished with a head niche and some consist of a side cave and a pit-shaped passage, the tomb walls bear no traces of retouch, and the grave goods include a considerable number of short-necked, swollen-large-bellied and flat- or round-bottomed pottery jars, which are obviously different from their counterparts among the traditional Xiongnu vessels. The tombs in the Xigoupan Cemetery contain no coffins. The brick-chamber graves in the Lijiataozii Cemetery are evidently built after a typical Han tomb style, which suggests that the local people had been deeply assimilated by the Han ethnic group.

The sub-division of Region I indicates that in the expansion process of the Xiongnu Empire, the native ethnic groups in the conquered areas, simultaneously with adopting Xiongnu culture, still kept and developed their original cultural components, which led to the formation of Xiongnu burials containing common Xiongnu Culture features as well as different local cultural elements. Nevertheless, Sub-region ID is a distinctive area for there were the clearest alternate rise and fall of Han and Xiongnu power and influence. This situation resulted in the co-existence of the tombs of the Xiongnu tribesmen controlled by their empire with still more numerous graves of the Xiongnu people having surrendered to the Han Dynasty.

2. Region II comprises the middle and upper reaches of Yellow River. Spatially it slightly overlaps Sub-region ID but temporally later than the latter. The tombs are distributed mainly in Ningxia, Shaanxi and Qinghai and represented by the Budonggou and Dafanpu Cemeteries, a part of the Shenmu Dabaodang Cemetery, and Section B of the Datong Shang Sunjiazhai Cemetery. They should be assigned to the South Xiongnu having surrendered to the Han Dynasty. The Xiongnu Culture features almost entirely vanished, and the Han Culture elements held the leading position.

3. Region III occupies the Semirechye area. The tombs are distributed chiefly in Semirechye (Seven-river Area), belong to the westward migrating North Xiongnu and are represented by Tomb I in the Beriktas I Cemetery. The grave goods present traditional Xiongnu cultural elements for a part of objects and at the same time demonstrate clear local cultural tradition. The burial features show obvious tendency of North Xiongnu tombs being amalgamated with local cultures.

To sum up the comprehensive analysis of the available data of Xiongnu tombs, it can be concluded that the Xiongnu burial institution and rituals were inherent in the Xiongnu ethnic group, and their culture in the Xiongnu Empire period featured distinct unity and rather strong expansionism. As the empire fell down, the Xiongnu Culture’s own character was becoming increasingly dim, gradually losing its traditional style and finally assimilated thoroughly.

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Postscript

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