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Kungang (昆岗):

The Making of an Imaginary Archaeological Culture

by

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Kungang (昆岗): The Making of an Imaginary Archaeological Culture

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Summary

This article analyzes the cultural imaging and fictitious construction employed in designating and describing the “Kungang Ancient Tombs,” including their naming to echo an ancient historical site, the collecting and relocation of cultural relics, and the fabricated explanations for these relics. As we explore further, we find that local interests, motivated by the expectation of benefitting materially from attention and tourism, were responsible for instigating the exploration and exploitation of a desert archaeological site.

Besides the Kungang Ancient Tombs, we also discuss the Northern Cemetery, which proves to be of the same cultural type as Xiaohe (小河) Cemetery, far to the east.

1. A brief introduction to the Kungang Ancient Tombs

The Kungang Ancient Tombs are located outside Ala’er City in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Ala’er is between 80° 30’ E and 81° 58’ E, and 40° 22’ N and 40° 57’ N. Lying to the south of the Tianshan Mountains (天山) at the northern edge of the Taklimakan Desert, Ala’er is located at the upper reaches of the Tarim River, which arises from the confluence of the Yarkand River, the Hotan River, and the Aksu River. Ala’er, a young city, was formerly a division of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), and it was established by the central government in 2002. Ala’er therefore is also known as the First Agricultural Division of XPCC. Instead of following the usual pattern of local administrative names in China, that is, *xiang* or *zhen* (乡, 镇), the secondary administrative units of Ala’er continue to be referred to as *tuan* or *lian* (“regiment” 团 [“village”], 连 [“town”]), a remnant of the old army system.

In May 2012, the authors visited the Kungang Ancient Tombs in the 11th Regiment of Ala'er. Here is the introduction to Kungang Ancient Tombs that appears on a signboard at the site:

The Kungang Ancient Tombs are located in the southern desert of the 13th and 15th *lian* ["company" 连] of the 11th Regiment in Ala'er. They date to 3,800 to 4,000 years ago, and they have contributed quite a few cultural relics to the study of the history of ancient Kungang [i.e., the tombs near Ala'er]. The tombs were accidentally discovered in the early 1980s when a local worker was looking for firewood. The ancient tombs cover a large area of several square kilometers, indicating a huge population and a long history over time. The unearthed skeletons of corpses have golden hair, high cheekbones, sharp-featured faces, and large frames, all of which are features of the Europoid.

None of these coffins have bases. Males and females were buried together, and males were placed above females. Ancient river courses and a large area of sere *Populus euphratica* forest were found near the tombs. Features characteristic of living quarters were also discovered.

In recent years, related cultural relics entities have several times done archaeological research at these ancient sites; the latest was in 2009, led by the Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute of Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Experts preliminarily agreed that the cultural type of the Kungang Ancient Tombs was consistent with Xiaohe Cemetery near the Lop Nor region.

According to the above official introduction, the Kungang Ancient Tombs are of great significance for the study of Xinjiang, regardless of their age or cultural type. The official introduction also divides the Kungang Ancient Tombs into three burial sections, which are named Kungang I, Kungang II, and Kungang III. The locations of Kungang I and Kungang II are clear, and we have investigated these two sites. However, we were told that the location of Kungang III, which has the most cultural relics and importance, is not clear.

Because there are neither archaeological excavations nor reports for Kungang I and Kungang II, we could make only a simple description for these two tombs.

Kungang I is a large cemetery that extends for several square kilometers. The main part is located in a high and long dune that stretches south and north for several hundred meters, and is about 10 meters high and 30 meters wide. By the time we arrived, several scattered wood planks and bones strewn about were all that remained, indicating that the site used to be a burial area. The dune seems to have been built on a base of tamarisk cones, and this is the reason it is much higher than other dunes in the vicinity. We were told that the dune used to be surrounded by a quantity of wooden poles of *Populus euphratica*. Both sides of the dune are fixed in place by long wooden poles, and other poles are laid transversely along the edge of the dune from bottom to top. On top of the dune, two rows of wooden pillars have been inserted.

The side panels of the coffins were long wood planks, and the 𠂔-shaped boards secured the side panels at the two ends. The bottomless coffins had lids made from *Populus euphratica* sticks placed in an orderly fashion on the coffin; grass-mud paste was then smeared on the lid to make it air-tight.¹

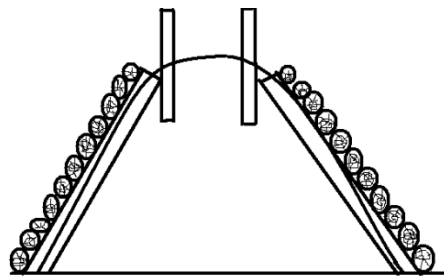


Fig. 1 Cross-section of the dune

¹We have seen every part of the coffins except the covers. The description of the covers came from the guide.



Fig. 2 The dune at Kungang I

Although Kungang I has not been excavated thoroughly, it was once explored. An archaeologist from the Archaeology Institute of Xinjiang, together with local scholars and guides, in May 2005 unearthed two tombs of adults and two tombs of children in Kungang I. The adults' tombs contained vertical joint burials, each with a flexed male and female. Two skeletons wrapped in white cloth were found in the children's tombs. A wooden bowl was placed on the left of the upper part of one child's skeleton.² Local news sources reported that "the unearthed corpses have golden hair, high cheekbones, sharp-featured faces, and large frames, all of which are features of Europoids. Experts from the Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute of Xinjiang conclude that these skeletons are Europoid. They believe that skeletons of Europoids unearthed

² In March 2005, teachers at Tarim University (without a professional archaeologist) formed a team to investigate Kungang I. The investigation report also mentioned "vertical joint burials with a male and a female" and a delicate "wooden bowl" found in a child's tomb (Jia Dong 贾东, "Qiannian gumu tanwei: Ala'er gumu diaocha baogao 千年古墓探微: 阿拉尔古墓调查报告 (Exploring the Ancient Tombs of Thousands of Years Ago: Report on the Ala'er Ancient Tombs)," *Talimu wenyuan* 塔里木文苑 (Tarim Florilegium), 2006, No. 1. Website: <http://xn--cjr34ixtok68a.com/article/blist.asp?unid=312>.

in Southern Xinjiang have a history of at least 2,200 years.”³ However, when we finally had a chance to talk face-to-face with the archaeologist from the Archaeology Institute of Xinjiang, he told us that, based on the presence of machine-made textiles in the tombs, he speculated that Kungang I was of modern times. Because tombs of modern times are not in the range of archaeology as studied in China, the archaeologist did not mention Kungang I again when he went back to Urumqi.

Kungang II is “only a few steps away from the main road of Ala’er City,” our guide told us. Victor Mair, who had visited Kungang II with J. P. Mallory in 2011, noted that the scene we saw this time (in 2012) was very different from what he saw the previous time. In 2011, Kungang II was merely a vast expanse of small sand hills, covered by countless sere branches and roots. But this time, the area was enclosed by iron fences. Coffins, which were of the same size and consistent with the coffins in Kungang I, were laid here and there upon sand hills. Our guide, a regimental commander, told us that these coffins had been transported from Kungang I by trucks to make up for the many coffins in Kungang II that had gradually been destroyed by local people.

A small introductory signboard had been put next to every coffin. For example, “the adults’ tombs are vertical joint burials with flexed male and female” or “the two skeletons in the children’s tombs were wrapped with white cloth, while a wooden bowl was placed on the left of the upper part of one of the skeletons.”

³ Li Min 李民, Wang Panfeng 王攀峰 and Zhang Yumei 张玉梅, “Damo shenchu jingxian qiannian gumuqun 大漠深处惊现千年古墓群 (Ancient Tombs of Thousands of Years Ago Suddenly Appear Deep in the Desert),” *Akesu Bao* 阿克苏报 (Aksu News), Nov. 11, 2005. Website: <http://8sohu.blog.sohu.com/29814233.html>.



Fig. 3 A tomb and its introductory signboard at Kungang II

In order to highlight that “there used to be many tombs in Kungang II,” our guide showed us a “recently unearthed” female skeleton, which was kept still partly in the earth with no coffin nor even a vestige of a coffin, and which was protected by a heavy wooden case constructed by the keepers of the site. Our guide explained that, because there were no archaeologists in Ala’er, when they found the tomb, they invited a doctor to examine the skeleton. A sign placed next to the skeleton reads: “prone and extended burial: golden hair, petite face, hands laid on the chest, peaceful and calm.” However, we are obliged to point out that this female skeleton is different from the other skeletons at Kungang II, because, first, there is no mark of a coffin or a tomb around the skeleton, and, second, the soil clinging to this skeleton is clay, which is different from the sand around the other skeletons.



Fig. 4 Female skeleton at Kungang II

The exact location of Kungang III is unclear, but it was this site that most interested us. In the cultural relics exhibition room located at Kungang II, there are three signs that introduce the relics of Kungang III, while only two were used for Kungang I and Kungang II, indicating the relative interest of the sites. Many cultural relics described on the signs, including boots, baskets made of grass and reeds, the wooden phalluses, and the statues carved of wood, are consistent with the cultural type of Xiaohe Cemetery. This, plus the puzzle of Kungang III's location, made it even more mysterious and intriguing.

Fortunately, on another day, in the exhibition room of the Institute of the Culture of the Western Regions (*Xiyu wenhua yanjiusuo*), Tarim University, we found that all of the cultural relics of Kungang III described on the signs at Kungang II have been collected and displayed in the burial culture section of the exhibition room at Tarim University. On the wall of this section, there was a sign about Kungang with the titles "*Kungang wusheng yue qiannian* 昆岗无声越千

年 (Kungang has silently lasted for thousands of years)" and "*Wenming chulu duanni* 文明初露端倪 (The ancient tombs lift the mask of an unknown civilization)." However, the sign includes only pictures of the Kungang I and Kungang II cemeteries, while there are no pictures of Kungang III Cemetery, only abundant artifacts. Besides the relics of Kungang III, the skeletons and relics from the tomb of the two adults and that of two children of Kungang I mentioned above were shown in the exhibition area.

Because Tarim University lacks a department of archaeology, there evidently are not sufficient scholars available to study the great number of relics. Most relics in the exhibition room are marked "collected from Ala'er City." The director of the institute made no secret of the fact that, besides those collected by the archaeologist from the Archaeology Institute of Xinjiang mentioned above, most relics were bought from antique dealers and grave robbers, which could explain why the location of Kungang III remains unknown. We will further discuss Kungang III and its relics in section 3.

2. Where did the Kungang Ancient Tombs come from?

Before we discuss the origin of the Kungang Ancient Tombs, we need first to identify the origin of the name of Kungang. Why are the ancient tombs to the south of Ala'er City named "Kungang"? Archaeologists usually name a cemetery after the place where the tombs are discovered, such as the Alagou (阿拉沟) Cemetery in the Tianshan Mountains and the Subeixi (苏贝西) Cemetery in Turfan. On the other hand, if an archaeological discovery can be verified by historical records, the discovery might be given the historical name, as is the case with the Niya (尼雅) Site and the Loulan (楼兰) Ruins.

To begin with, we can say that "Kungang" is definitely not a modern place name in Xinjiang. Our guide told us that the name of Kungang was given by the director of the Institute of the Culture of the Western Regions, Liao Zhaoyu (廖肇羽). He wrote an article entitled "Kungang Has Silently Lasted for Thousands of Years" in his blog.⁴ This article makes a

⁴ Liao Zhaoyu 廖肇羽, "Kungang wusheng yue qiannian 昆岗无声越千年 (Kungang Has Silently Lasted for Thousands of Years)," in his blog, Nov. 25, 2007. Website: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4a505cae01000cd1.html.

historical connection between Kungang and Ala’er and concentrates on the ancient “Qiuci (龟兹) – Khotan (于阗) Road” and the name of “Kungang.”

But Kungang has appeared only twice as a place name in historical records. One mention is in “Geographical Records” of *New Tang History*:

If we start from the south of Barkhuan (Bohuan 拨换) and go all the way to the east, we will pass by Kungang. If we go across the Red River (Chihe 赤河), then turn southwest, we will pass through Shenshan (神山), Suiyang (睢阳), and the Salt Lake (Xianpo 咸泊). Then we go south again and pass by Shushu (疏树), and finally we will arrive at Khotan (于阗) city. It is a total of 930 *li* from Barkhuan to Khotan city.

自拨换南而东，经昆岗，渡赤河，又西南经神山、睢阳、咸泊，又南经疏树，九百三十里至于阗镇城。

The other record comes from *Taiping huanyu ji* (太平寰宇记, Records of the World from the Great Tranquility Reign Period [Song dynasty, 960–1279]), with different wording:

If we start from due south of Barkhuan, go across the Sihun (思浑) River, then turn southeast, pass by Kungang (崑冈), San’ai (三义), and some other forts, we will finally arrive at Khotan (于阗) city. It will take fifteen days to get to Khotan city, crossing almost a thousand *li*.⁵

又从拨换正南渡思浑河，又东南经崑冈、三义等守戍，一十五日程至于于阗大城，约千余里。

Both records claim their origins from Jia Dan (贾耽), a geographer in the Tang dynasty (618–907). However, Liao Zhaoyu did not undertake further textual research based on these two records. He merely mentions that when scholars study these two records, they usually identify

⁵ Le Shi 乐史, *Taiping Huanyu Ji* 太平寰宇记 (Records of the World from the Great Tranquility Reign Period) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2007), p. 3000.

Kungang as Ala'er. Therefore, if Kungang in the Tang dynasty is where Ala'er is now, to name the ancient tombs in Ala'er after its ancient place name, Kungang, would seem reasonable.

The naming of Kungang is of great significance for Ala'er, a newly built city that has a history of only decades. Local newspapers have proudly proclaimed on many occasions that the discovery of the Kungang Ancient Tombs pushed Ala'er's history back more than two thousand years earlier and overturned the old cliché that, before the agricultural regiments moved in, Ala'er had been a "wasteland" where no human beings had set foot for thousands of years.⁶ "Kungang" immediately become a new symbol for the young city of Ala'er, making it just like those other well-known cultural capitals, Qiuci of Aksu and Niya of Minfeng. The local government announced that history parks would be built at the sites of Kungang I and Kungang II, and one could foresee their value in promoting local tourism in the near future.⁷

As discussed above, since the ancient tombs underwent no official archaeological excavations, no professional archaeologists participated in the naming of "Kungang Ancient Tombs." It seems clear that this naming, therefore, has no scientific sanction.

Moreover, Kungang has been studied by only a few scholars, due to the lack of historical records; in contrast with what Liao Zhaoyu believes, academia has never reached any consensus about the exact locations of the ancient place names mentioned in the two records from *New Tang History* and *Taiping huanyu ji* quoted above, including Kungang.

According to the record in *Taiping huanyu ji*, both Kungang and San'ai are place names

⁶ Zhang Lei 张雷 and Wang Ping 王平, "Xinjiang Ala'er shi fujin de huyang lin zhong faxian qiannian gumu qun 新疆阿拉尔市附近的胡杨林中发现千年古墓群 (Ancient Tombs from Thousands of Years Ago Discovered in the *Populus euphratica* Forest near Ala'er City in Xinjiang)," *Zhongguo Guangbo Wang* 中国广播网 (China National Radio web), Nov. 11, 2005. Website: http://www.cnr.cn/2004news/society/200511/t20051130_504135783.html; Wang Jianguo 王建国, "Ala'er de qianshi jinsheng 阿拉尔的前世今生 (The History of Ala'er)," *Xinjiang Jingji Bao* 新疆经济报 (Xinjiang Economic News), Nov. 28, 2010. Website: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4c82259d0100nqcr.html.

⁷ Jiang Shan 江珊 and Wan Ling 万凌, "Ala'er shi yituo junken wenhua dazao meili wenhua lvyou pinpai 阿拉尔市依托军垦文化打造魅力文化旅游品牌 (Ala'er City Relies on Military Agricultural Colony Culture to Build an Appealing Brand of Cultural Tourism)," *Bingtuan Wang* 兵团网 (Corps Web), June 6, 2012. Website: http://bt.xinhuanet.com/2012-06/06/content_25353953.htm.

of *shoushu* (forts 守戍). In the Tang dynasty, forts set up by the central government were called *bao* (堡), *shu* (戍), or *zhen* (镇). Therefore, Shenshan, the place name in the quoted paragraph of *New Tang History*, appeared as Shenshan Bao at Mazar Tagh. It is now 180 miles northeast of Khotan and lies on the western bank of the Hotan River (N 38° 28', E 80° 40'), at modern Mazar Tagh.⁸

These defense forts emerged as the Tang government came to feel the need to reinforce its control over the Western Regions. In the third year of Xianqing (显庆, 658), the Tang government dispatched forces from Anxi Duhu Fu (Anxi Frontier Command Headquarters) to Kuca, the capital of Qiuci, and set up the Four Zhen (forts 镇) under the leadership of Anxi Duhu Fu, which were Qiuci, Khotan, Yanqi (Qara Shahr 焉耆) and Shule (Kashkar 疏勒). When the Tang government sent an army of 30,000 to guard the Four Zhen in the first year of Changshou (长寿, 692), defense capabilities were further strengthened.

"Kungang" appeared as a place name not only in *New Tang History* and *Taiping huanyu ji*, but also in the Hotan Documents recently collected by the Museum of Renmin University of China. Kungang was mentioned in Document No. 166, which was a *Jiliang Li* (给粮历 a type of inventory of grain provision).

Zhu Shuangli (朱双丽) points out that the locations of Kungang given in the *New Tang History* and in *Taiping huanyu ji* contradict each other. According to the *New Tang History*, Kungang was to the north of Red River (Chihe, now Tarim River). However, in *Taiping huanyu ji*, Kungang was to the north of Sihun River, a branch of the Tarim River. Zhu Shuangli believes that *New Tang History* records the location in error, because Kungang was surely under the jurisdiction of Khotan in the Tang dynasty, and a site north of the Tarim River would be too far to be within the administration of Khotan. Zhu Shuangli speculates that one would first have needed to cross the Red River (Chihe) before reaching Kungang.

⁸ Arakawa Masaharu 荒川正晴, "Tangdai Yutian de wuluo 唐代于阗的乌骆 (Wuluo in Khotan During the Tang Dynasty)," *Xiyu yanjiu* 西域研究 (Studies of the Western Regions) (1995), No. 01, pp. 66–76.

Zhu’s speculation accords with the literal meaning of Kungang. *Shang shu* (尚书), one of the earliest works of history, mentions Kungang as a vague place name, instead of a place name in the strict sense, a usage that must have developed afterwards, as discussed above.

When Kungang was on fire, the jade and stone all burned
(火炎昆岗，玉石俱焚).

Here, in this famous proverb from *Shang shu*, Kungang signifies a site possessing jade, in the Kunlun Mountains. Khotan produces jade, so the existence of a fortress named Kungang under Khotan’s administration is quite reasonable.

Based on the textual study of Kungang, we can see that naming the “ancient” tombs in Ala’er after “Kungang” is inappropriate in two senses.

First, the cultural meaning of Kungang is not compatible with the existence of ancient tombs. Kungang is the name of a defensive fort beginning only from the Tang dynasty, while the ancient tombs are claimed to have a history of at least 2,000 years or even 3,800–4,000 years, the oldest of which has the same cultural type as the Xiaohe Cemetery.

Second, their geographic positions are not identical. Ala’er City is a northwestern oasis in the Tarim Basin. The distance between Ala’er and Aksu (Bohuan) is 120 km, while the distance between Ala’er and Khotan is 424 km. As recorded in the historical records, Kungang was in the jurisdiction of Khotan. However, even with a relatively highly developed modern transportation network — let alone transportation during the Tang dynasty — it is not reasonable to suppose Ala’er was under Khotan’s jurisdiction. The location of Kungang in the Tang dynasty must have been south of Ala’er.

Having established the inappropriateness of naming the site after Kungang, we now turn to explaining the sites of Kungang I and Kungang II, near Ala’er. The radiocarbon dates of the samples from Kungang I and Kungang II are 800–1,000 years BP. (The detailed dates for the samples are appended to this paper). The tombs in these two cemeteries are not as old as Xiaohe Cemetery, but they still have a long history. In fact, there was no tradition of Ala’er having been considered “a wasteland for thousands of years” of history, as the local media claimed. Ala’er is located at the upper reaches of the Tarim River, which arises from the confluence of the

Yarkand, Hotan, and Aksu rivers. It had sufficient water and arable land and plenty of sunshine, all of which made it suitable for people to sustain their lives there. As the population in the Tarim region expanded, people naturally exploited the area. This exploitation, however, could not have led to the building of such a large city as Ala'er is today, dependent as it is on advanced modern techniques of irrigation and soil renewal.

Kungang I is near the South Tarim River, a river which is recorded in history but which was completely cut off in 1962.⁹ Before that time, the South Tarim River changed its course many times. In 1929, Huang Wenbi (黄文弼) found some cultural relics of the Tang dynasty near the old courses of the South Tarim River.¹⁰ Water in the South Tarim River was mainly supplied by the Hotan River, which is fed by the melt waters of the mountains south of the Tarim Basin. Even now, when it is flooded, water in the Hotan River still supplies the old course of the South Tarim River. In May 2012, on our way to Kungang I, we saw deposit lines around dunes left by the 2010 flood, and green plants growing upon the silt deposited then. Local people told us that floodwater also formed a lake in the old course of the South Tarim River, and that animals living in and around the lake attract many hunters.

Because of the lack of official archaeological reports, we cannot make a precise interpretation of Kungang I and Kungang II. "Golden hair, high cheekbones, sharp-featured, and large frames" are features of "Europoid skeletons." However, although these features have appeared again and again in media reports since 2005, we have not seen reports of physical anthropological or molecular anthropological analysis of the skeletons. The history of Kungang I

⁹ Fan Zili 樊自立, Chen Yaning 陈亚宁, and Wang Yajun 王亚俊, "Xinjiang Talimu he ji qi hedao bianqian yanjiu 新疆塔里木河及其河道变迁研究 (Study on the Tarim River and Its Watercourse Evolution in Xinjiang: Recorded in the *Records of Rivers*)," *Ganhan qu yanjiu 干旱区研究 (Arid Zone Research)* (2006), Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 8–15; Han Chunxian 韩春鲜, Shiba shiji yilai Talimu he ganjiu hedao bianhua ji qi yu renlei huodong de guanxi 十八世纪以来塔里木河干流河道变化及其与人类活动的关系 (Channel Changes of the Tarim River and Their Relationship to Human Activities from the Eighteenth Century), *Zhongguo shamo 中国沙漠 (Journal of Desert Research)* (2011), Vol. 31, No. 4, pp. 1072–1078.

¹⁰ Huang Wenbi 黄文弼, *Talimu pendi kaogu ji 塔里木盆地考古记 (Archaeological Notes on the Tarim Basin)*, (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1958), 42–51.

recorded in the reports is purposely moved back from "2,000 years ago" to "3,800 to 4,000 years ago," to which we cannot agree because none of these dates match the radiocarbon date of the samples from Kungang I.

Kungang I is the only site in which we can be certain that ancient tombs have been excavated in the area. Kungang II is located near the Tarim River and a small lake. It is obviously a copy of Kungang I, which is farther away and much less accessible. So far there are no assured tombs unearthed at Kungang II, including the doubtful "lately unearthed" female skeleton.

As for Kungang III, the site that interests us most, we do not know its exact location, nor can we be certain about reports of unearthed tombs at Kungang III. However, based on the cultural relics collected at Tarim University, Kungang III is remarkably different from Kungang I and Kungang II, especially with regard to the dates of the relics from the three sites, which makes it impossible for them to be of the same cultural type. The radiocarbon dates of the samples from the relics of Kungang III are 3,200 to 3,500 years BP, in contrast to the dates of Kungang I and II, which are 800–1,000 BP. (The radiocarbon dates are attached in the appendix.) We will further discuss Kungang III in the next section.

Because of the lack of similarity among the unearthed tombs and relics, Kungang I, Kungang II, and Kungang III are by no means of a single cultural type. Therefore, to code and align the three sites in the same series of Kungang Ancient Tombs is quite unreasonable. Considering the falsity in naming and dates and the unprofessional analysis of the cultural relics obtained from these sites, it is evident that the Kungang Ancient Tombs are an imaginary archaeological culture, in which the cultural relics and tombs born out of different cultural types in different areas and eras are combined unprofessionally and haphazardly together.

3. Kungang III and Beifang Cemetery (the Northern Cemetery)

In this section, we will discuss the mysterious "Kungang III." As mentioned before, most items in the rich collection of cultural relics from "Kungang III" were bought from dealers and other middlemen. In legitimate trade, buyers usually demand detailed location and photos of the tombs where the antiques were excavated so as to ensure their authenticity, but antique dealers and

grave robbers usually withhold information for the sake of their business. These unspoken rules hinder the revelation of further knowledge about the cultural relics from Kungang III.

Although these cultural relics have an obscure origin, local media intentionally classify them under the label "Kungang Ancient Tombs" and construct a confused and inauthentic cultural type starting from "3,800–4,000 years ago."

Upon first encountering these cultural relics in the middle of the Tarim Basin, our initial guess was that they came from the Northern Cemetery. Wang Binhua and Idris Abdursul, both very well known archaeologists in Xinjiang, agree with this assessment. The Northern Cemetery is located in the lower reaches of the Keriya River, and its precise location is N 39° 34' 22"; E 81° 47' 28". Although the site was never officially approved for excavation, the team of the Archaeology Institute of Xinjiang led by Idris arrived at the cemetery for a preliminary excavation on March 20, 2008. By that time, the cemetery already had been seriously damaged by grave robbers, with the result that only two brief, introductory articles have ever been written about the Northern Cemetery.¹¹ Fortunately, however, the team was able to bring back some cultural relics. After careful comparison between artifacts from the Northern Cemetery and those from the Xiaohe Cemetery, Idris believes that they are of the same cultural type and that the Northern Cemetery is dated earlier than the Xiaohe Cemetery.¹² However, the precise coordinates of the Xiaohe Cemetery are N 40° 20' 11"; E 88° 40' 20", which means the distance from the Xiaohe Cemetery to the Northern Cemetery is 594.35 km as the crow flies, and nearly

¹¹ By now, archaeologists familiar with the site have told us that it is so badly damaged by looters that essentially nothing remains of it, and it will never be excavated. We would not have published these coordinates if the site, which is in an extremely remote and inaccessible place, had not already been repeatedly and irretrievably looted. There is nothing left that is salvageable, and the integrity of the site has been totally destroyed.

¹² Zhang Yingchun 张迎春, "Beifang Mudi: Maicang zai damo fudi de qiangu zhi mi 北方墓地: 埋藏在大漠腹地的千古之谜 (The Northern Cemetery: A Mystery Lasting for Thousands of Years Buried Deep in the Desert)," *Xinjiang Renwen Dili* 新疆人文地理 (Xinjiang Humanities Geography) (2009), No. 3, pp. 69–75; Chen Yiming 陈一鸣 and Zhang Yingchun 张迎春, "Shenmi de Beifang Mudi 神秘的北方墓地 (The Mysterious Northern Cemetery)," *Kexue yu wenhua* 科学与文化 (Science and Culture) (2008), No. 11, pp. 22–23. See also Victor H. Mair, "Epigone or Progenitor?" in Victor H. Mair and Jane Hickman, eds., *Reconfiguring the Silk Road: New Research on East–West Exchange in Antiquity* (forthcoming).

700 km following the route of the Small River (Xiaohe), then going along the Tarim and down the Keriya River to the Northern Cemetery.

We explain below why we believe that the Northern Cemetery is later than the Xiaohe Cemetery.



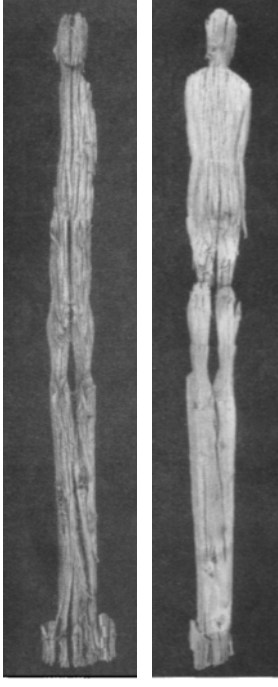
To determine whether the cultural relics of Kungang III came from the Northern Cemetery, we compared the cultural relics from Kungang III and Northern Cemetery, and also use relics from the Xiaohe Cemetery as references. The artifacts examined are discussed below.

(1) Surrogate wooden mummies

Wooden mummies from Kungang III are apparently from the same source as those from the Northern Cemetery. These surrogates look very similar. Their heads, trunks and lower limbs are barely discernible, and obviously their creators did not bother to carve their arms. Big red crosses were drawn on the faces of the two female mummies of Kungang III and the only statue of the Northern Cemetery. Indistinct red color is found on the male surrogate from Kungang III, but there is no trace of a red cross. A similar red cross also appears on one of the woven baskets from Kungang III.

In comparison, the Xiaohe Cemetery surrogates are more realistic, while those from Kungang III and the Northern Cemetery are more symbolic and abstract. The Xiaohe surrogates have two arms, made by thin and slightly curved sticks. Their faces have eyes of narrow, curved lines and clearly depicted mouths; some of them even have mustaches sewn onto the face, skin made of leather, and a full set of clothing.

Table 1 Comparison of surrogate wooden mummies from Kungang III, Northern Cemetery, and Xiaohe Cemetery

Kungang III	Northern Cemetery	Xiaohe Cemetery
		

(2) *Fur-lined leather boots*

Boots from Kungang III and the Northern Cemetery exhibit similar styles, decorated with red cord and white feathers. Boots from Kungang III have lost their shoelaces, leaving only the mark where they had been. The insoles of the Xiaohe Cemetery boots have their furry sides directed upwards while other parts of the shoes have the furry sides downwards. On the other hand, the Kungang III boots seem to have no fur inside. On the whole, boots from Kungang III and the Northern Cemetery have better tanned and more stable shaped leather pieces than the boots from Xiaohe.

Table 2 Comparison of fur-lined leather boots from Kungang III, Northern Cemetery, and Xiaohe Cemetery

Kungang III	Northern Cemetery	Xiaohe Cemetery
		

(3) Woven grass baskets

Worn away by weather and time, the grain and other parts of the baskets from the Northern Cemetery are unrecognizable. However, woven grass baskets were a characteristic feature of the Xiaohe Cemetery. The baskets from Kungang III and Xiaohe are of very similar design.

Table 3 Comparison of woven grass baskets from Kungang III, Northern Cemetery, and Xiaohe Cemetery


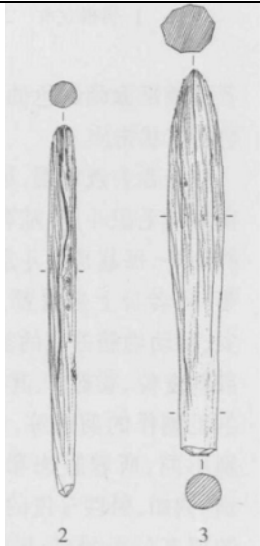
Kungang III	Northern Cemetery	Xiaohe Cemetery
		

(4) Phallus-shaped posts

The phallus-shaped posts of Kungang III are like those from the Northern Cemetery, although the red color on the Kungang phallus-shaped posts is barely visible due to their severely wind- and sand-damaged condition. Their upper parts are shaped into square columns while their lower parts are relatively thin. There are apparent differences between these two parts of the phallus posts attributed to all three sites.

The phallus-shaped posts of the Xiaohe Cemetery can be divided into two types. The first type is shaped like a polygon, the cross-sectional area of which remains unchanged throughout its length. In the second type, the upper part is a polygon, which gradually and smoothly turns into a thinner cylinder in the lower portion.

Table 4 Comparison of phallus-shaped posts from Kungang III, Northern Cemetery, and Xiaohe Cemetery





Kungang III	Northern Cemetery	Xiaohe Cemetery
		

(5) Mantles

The mantles from Kungang III and the Northern Cemetery have identical designs, with decorative fringes at the bottom margin and three red parallel marks on both the left and right

sides. The Xiaohe Cemetery has some mantles of that same design and others that are designed somewhat differently.

Table 5 Comparison of mantles from Kungang III, Northern Cemetery, and Xiaohe Cemetery

Kungang III	Northern Cemetery	Xiaohe Cemetery
		
		

Based on the comparative analysis of the cultural relics from Kungang III and the Northern Cemetery, we surmise that the relics from these two sites may have the same origin, which could explain their similar appearance.

Two other pieces of evidence support our opinion. The first is that the Northern Cemetery is within easy reach of the southern border of Ala'er. Although the Northern Cemetery is in the lower reaches of the Keriya River, the distance from Ala'er to the Northern Cemetery is actually shorter than the distance from Hotan City to the Northern Cemetery. Nowadays, with the help of the desert highway, it is much easier to reach the Northern Cemetery from Ala'er than from Hotan.

During our stay in Ala'er and while planning for a visit to the Northern Cemetery, the staff of Tarim University hired local Uyghur villagers to serve as our guides. For these Uyghur villagers, travel in the desert is routine work, and they are very familiar with tombs and ancient sites in the Taklimakan Desert. Although they had never heard of the so-called Northern Cemetery, as named by academia, they are well aware of a burial mound at the southern border of Ala'er, which we believe is the Northern Cemetery. Our guides also told us that archaeologists, whom they had mistaken for government officials, had carried out a preliminary excavation at the cemetery and left code marks on many relics. Therefore, we believe that the cultural relics from Kungang III in the Institute of the Culture of the Western Regions are in fact from the Northern Cemetery.

In the following paragraphs, when we mention "Northern Cemetery," the term includes the relics of the Kungang III. By doing so, we greatly increase the number of artifacts from the Northern Cemetery, most of which were formerly believed to have been lost or destroyed.

We maintain that the Northern Cemetery and the Xiaohe Cemetery are of the same cultural type. In this section, we shall compare antiques from the Northern Cemetery with those from the Xiaohe Cemetery, including necklaces, bracelets, felt hats, skirts, wooden pins (or parts of combs), and wooden phalluses.

However, we have a different opinion from that of Idris concerning the sequence of the two cemeteries. Idris believes that the Northern Cemetery is slightly earlier than the Xiaohe Cemetery. However, from the radiocarbon dating results, the date of the Northern Cemetery is shown to be 3,200 to 3,500 years BP (specific data appears in the appendix), while the date of



Xiaohe Cemetery is 3,453–3,653 years BP.¹³ Therefore, the Xiaohe Cemetery appears to be slightly earlier than the Northern Cemetery.

The difference in the design of the cultural relics from the two cemeteries also reflects their time sequence. Although designed similarly, the Northern Cemetery artifacts are obviously of a more mature type than the Xiaohe artifacts with respect to workmanship and appearance.

We have mentioned above the difference between the boots from the two cemeteries. The leather of boots the from Kungang III and the Northern Cemetery is better tanned and more durable than that of the Xiaohe boots. Meanwhile, the surrogate mummies and phallus-shaped posts of Kungang III and Northern Cemetery are more symbolic and abstract, which suggests their development from complexity to simplicity.

¹³ Xinjiang wenwu kaogu yanjiu suo 新疆文物考古研究所 (The Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute of Xinjiang Autonomous Region), "Xinjiang Luobupo Xiaohe mudi 2003 nian fajue jianbao 新疆罗布泊小河墓地 2003 年发掘简报 (A Brief Excavation Report on Xiaohe Graveyard Located in Luobupo, Xinjiang Autonomous Region)," *Wenwu* 文物 (Cultural Relics) (2007), No. 10, pp. 4–42.

Table 6 Comparison of artifacts from Northern Cemetery and Xiaohe Cemetery

Northern Cemetery	Xiaohe Cemetery
	
Felt hats	

Northern Cemetery



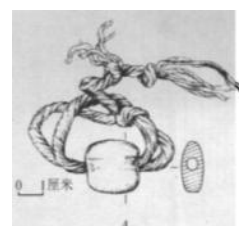
Xiaohe Cemetery



String skirts



Wooden phalluses



Necklaces, bracelets

Northern Cemetery



Xiaohe Cemetery



Wooden pins

The wooden pins also reflect the sequencing of the two cemeteries. The design of the wooden pins from the Northern Cemetery and that of the Xiaohe Cemetery are basically the same. They are composed of two parts, a pin and a cylinder engraved with a triangular decorative band. Compared with the wooden pins from the Xiaohe Cemetery, the two parts of the Northern cemetery pins appear better proportioned and more balanced. In addition, the engraved triangular decorative bands are better distributed, which endows the wooden pin with a clearer and simpler appearance. Meanwhile, the dividing line seen in the pins from the Northern Cemetery is much clearer and more delicate.

Conclusion

In sum, this paper deconstructs an imaginary archaeological culture concocted for the benefit of the local government, whose operatives unprofessionally and clumsily combined together cultural relics and tombs from different areas, from different times, and belonging to different cultural types.

After analyzing each element in this imaginary archaeological culture, we can make the preliminary speculation that the artifacts of Kungang III in the Institute of the Culture of the Western Regions came from the Northern Cemetery. We also found that the Northern Cemetery

belongs to the same cultural type as the Xiaohe Cemetery, and that the latter is slightly earlier than the former. Both radiocarbon dating results and comparative analysis of artifacts support such a conclusion. As for other questions concerning the relationship between the Northern and Xiaohe cemeteries, we leave them for discussion in another article.

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The illustrations of Kungang I, Kungang II, and Kungang III (Northern Cemetery) were made by Cheng Fanyi.

The photographs of the Northern Cemetery in the first five tables are from Zhang Yingchun 张迎春, "Beifang Mudi: Maicang zai damo fudi de qiangu zhi mi 北方墓地: 埋藏在大漠腹地的千古之谜 (The Northern Cemetery: A Mystery Lasting for Thousands of Years Buried Deep in the Desert)," *Xinjiang Renwen Dili* 新疆人文地理 (Xinjiang Humanities and Geography) (2009), No. 3, pp. 69–75;

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Codes of the cultural relics from Xiaohe Cemetery

- Surrogate wooden mummies: MC117, MC118
- Fur-lined leather boots: M13:10
- Woven grass basket: M2:11
- Phallus-shaped post: M11:1, M13:1
- Female Mummies: M4, M13
- Felt hat: M13:9, M4:7
- Belt skirt: M4:17
- Wooden phallus: M13:21, M4:16
- Necklace: M4:12
- Bracelet: M4:13
- Wooden pin: M4:11
- Wooden comb: M4:19

Appendix

Radiocarbon Dating Results of Samples from Kungang I, Kungang II and the Northern Cemetery

Name of cemetery	UBA No.	Sample ID	Material Type	14C Age (BP)	±
Kungang I	UBA-20556	Kungang I No 26	Wood	930	26
	UBA-20555	Kungang No 25	Poplar	800	27
Kungang II	UBA-20554	Kungang II No 24	Textile	1139	24
	UBA-20553	Kungang II No 23	Textile	1096	24
	UBA-20552	Kungang II No 21	Woven cloth	1010	22
	UBA-20551	Kungang II No 20	Woven cloth	915	28
	UBA-18284	KG4	Textile	984	27
	UBA-18283	KG3	Felt	790	30
	UBA-18282	KG2	Cord	841	25
	UBA-18281	KG1	Seeds of ephedra?	867	30
Northern Cemetery (Kungang III)	UBA-18273	BFM1	Wheat	3422	44
	UBA-18274	BFM2	Ephedra stalks	3505	48
	UBA-18275	BFM3	Possibly pea family	3365	38
	UBA-18276	BFM4	Cord of animal fiber	3306	29
	UBA-18277	BFM5	Textile fiber	3315	26
	UBA-18278	BFM6	Textile fiber	3239	29
	UBA-18279	BFM7	Textile fiber	3302	56
	UBA-18280	BFM8	Possible dairy product	3372	34

From Queens University (Belfast) Radiocarbon Laboratory

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