

Miaodigou possibly the earliest civilization in China

By ZHAO CHUNQING

The prevailing consensus within the academic community is that Chinese civilization can be traced back to the Liangzhu culture, which dates back approximately 5,300 years. However, there is ongoing debate regarding whether the Miaodigou culture should be classified as an early civilization. This paper therefore posits that the history of Chinese civilization can be further extended back to the Miaodigou phase of the Yangshao culture. Archaeologically, the Miaodigou culture had entered the initial stage of a civilized society and thus can be referred to as the Miaodigou civilization.

The Miaodigou culture refers to the archaeological culture of the middle Yangshao period (the Miaodigou phase of the Yangshao culture), dating back to 5,900-5,400 years ago. It is one of the most widely distributed prehistoric archaeological cultures in China, extending north to the central and southern parts of Inner Mongolia, south to southern Shaanxi and southwestern Henan, west to Gansu and Qinghai, and east to the eastern part of Henan, covering the entire middle and upper reaches of the Yellow River and the Jiangnan region [around the confluence of the Yangtze and Han rivers]. Its influence extended even further, with traces found in the lower reaches of the Yellow River and the middle reaches of the Yangtze River.

Cultural continuity

The continuity of the Miaodigou culture is notably apparent, representing the middle phase of the Yangshao culture. Research indicates that the Yangshao culture evolved from the early cultures of Peiligang, Cishan, and Laoguantai, dating back to 7,000-9,000 years ago. The Yangshao culture progressed through four stages: Banpo, Miaodigou, Xiwangcun, and the Miaodigou II phases, spanning from 5000 BCE to 3000 BCE. The Miaodigou phase, as the middle period of the Yangshao culture, inherited the early Banpo legacies [Archaeological sites with similarities to the site at Banpo are considered to be part of the Banpo phase (4th-3rd millennium BCE)], and further developed into the Xiwangcun branch of the Yangshao culture.

The Miaodigou phase not only continued the traditions of moated settlements [fortified settlements with trenches and walls built around] of the Banpo phase, but also introduced larger settlements, some reaching up to 800,000 square meters. The settlements were equipped with communal facilities, including water pools, while to the northeast of the settlements, cemeteries containing



Ceramics of the Miaodigou culture, preserved in the Chinese Archaeological Museum Photo: Ren Guanhong/CSST

hundreds of contemporary graves have been excavated to date.

The structure and layout of the public cemeteries during the Miaodigou phase were strictly arranged based on kinship, reflecting relatively egalitarian social relationships, and appear to have been a continuation of the Banpo burial practices. By the Xiwangcun phase, both the settlement layouts and public cemeteries presented features of differentiation.

Tangible characteristics

The Miaodigou phase of the Yangshao culture, also known as the Miaodigou culture, is widely recognized for its innovations. The Miaodigou people introduced a novel array of utensils, with pottery predominantly characterized by deep-bellied and curvy bowls and basins, as well as stoves, cauldrons, zeng vessels [steamers], jars, urns, bowls, and small-mouthed, pointed-bottom bottles.

The painted pottery of the Miaodigou culture was remarkably distinctive, with the most prevalent decorative motifs including petal patterns, pod patterns, eye-shaped patterns, and net patterns. Among these, a variety of petal patterns stand out as the most common. The petal-patterned painted pottery is one of the hallmarks of the Miaodigou culture. Chinese archaeologist Su Bingqi pointed out that the daisy and rose motifs are the most commonly observed decorations on Miaodigou painted pottery, which might be the origin of the name of the Huaxia people [as “hua” of huaxia and the character “flower” have similar pronunciations in Chinese].

The Miaodigou culture transitioned to hoe-farming agriculture, evidenced by a notable increase in the number of stone spades compared to axes, a significant rise in the quantity of ceramic and stone knives utilized for reaping crops, and a substantial transformation in the design of stone plows. These developments indicate a significant

advancement in the production technology of the Miaodigou culture compared to that of the Banpo culture.

Expanding outward

Based on the distinctive characteristics of the Miaodigou culture in various regions, the Miaodigou phase of the Yangshao culture can be divided into core and peripheral areas.

The core area is primarily distributed in western Henan, southern Shanxi, and eastern Gansu, with uniform cultural presence. The pottery and their motifs discovered in these areas display such striking similarities that differentiation between them is nearly impossible.

The peripheral area surrounding the core consists of seven major types of the Miaodigou culture: Yancun, Diaolongbei, Longgansi, Shizhaocun, Xinghuaacun, Dasikong, and Bainiyaozi. The cultural characteristics of these seven types are not entirely consistent, bearing elements resulting from north-south cultural exchanges. However, even within the peripheral area, painted ceramic basins similar to those found in the core area were frequently discovered, demonstrating the Miaodigou culture's high level of uniformity.

As a powerful culture, the Miaodigou held tolerant views towards neighboring archaeological cultures. Miaodigou designs are often observed in the pottery of contemporary cultures such as the Hongshan culture in northeast China, the Dawenkou culture in the east, the Daxi culture in the south, and the Majiayao culture in the Gansu-Qinghai area. Conversely, elements from the contemporary painted pottery of these regions can also be found in the painted pottery of the Miaodigou culture. This indicates that the Miaodigou culture maintained an egalitarian exchange relationship with neighboring cultures. Importantly, there are no indications of military conquest in the means of

maintaining these exchanges, indicating the tolerant attitude of the Miaodigou towards other cultures.

Pursuit of peace

The peaceful characteristics of the Miaodigou culture are demonstrated by the absence of differentiation in settlements and cemeteries, as well as the absence of signs of conflict or war.

The public cemeteries of the Miaodigou settlement and the Yangganzhai site serve as typical examples. Hundreds of graves from the Miaodigou culture period have been excavated at the Yangganzhai site, yet there is hardly any significant difference between the burials, neither in grave size nor the number of grave artifacts.

The peaceful nature of the Miaodigou culture is also reflected in the patterns of its painted pottery. While the earlier Banpo phase often depicted themes of fish and birds in conflict, the Miaodigou period witnessed a shift away from the theme of conflict towards illustrating harmony between these creatures.

It should be noted that in the Xipo cemetery [at Lingbao, Henan] from the later stages of the middle Yangshao culture period, around 5,300-5,800 years ago, archaeologists observed that certain large graves contained a greater number of burial artifacts, including jade axes. This indicates the emergence of differentiation among burials within communal cemeteries. While this differentiation can be viewed as a precursor to civilization, it may only represent an early stage, insufficient to discount the Miaodigou culture period as being in its initial stage of civilized society.

In summary, the paper believes that the Miaodigou culture exhibits the earliest characteristics of archaeological culture and can be designated as the Miaodigou civilization. Dating back to 5,800-5,300 years ago, the Miaodigou civilization is potentially the earliest civilization discovered in China to date. Following the Miaodigou civilization, during the late period of the Yangshao culture, China's civilizational process began gaining momentum. The Hongshan culture in the Liao River basin, the Qinwangzhai culture in the Central Plains, the Dawenkou culture in the lower reaches of the Yellow River, the Qujialing culture in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, the Liangzhu culture in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, and others sprang up across the country, marking the onset of the splendid “proto-state” era [roughly between 3,800-5,800 years ago].

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FILE PHOTOS: The Miaodigou pottery vessels adorned with grid patterns (above), bird-shaped motifs (middle), and petal patterns (below)

Miaodigou painted pottery

By REN ZHIYU

The Miaodigou culture of the middle Yangshao period predominated the border areas of present-day Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Henan provinces. Its powerful influence introduced painted pottery art forms to other surrounding cultures. The Miaodigou culture was viewed as the heyday of painted pottery, with its painted pottery more richly decorated in terms of motifs, patterns, and compositions than those of the Banpo phase. Realistic patterns were largely replaced by abstract patterns such as petal motifs.

There are some typical motifs of Miaodigou painted pottery. The first one features grid patterns in black pigment. These net-like designs likely represent the use of fishing nets in ancient times, indicating that people of that era might have used such nets for catching fish.

The Neolithic people lacked knowledge of seasonal agricultural practices, but found inspiration in the movements of the sun, the changing seasons, and the migratory patterns of birds. The migration of birds could indicate seasonal changes, and thus became an important signal for agricultural development to the ancient people. Miaodigou pottery commonly featured simplified bird-shaped designs, with pottery-makers skillfully capturing the distinctive flying postures of birds by depicting outstretched wings using dots and lines.

The most distinctive pattern of Miaodigou pottery is petal-shaped patterns, usually composed of two layers of petals, with the overall design resembling a blossoming flower.