

On the round burial pit of the Yin Period at Hougang, Anyang

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Abstract

In the light of the unearthed objects and stratigraphic relations, it can be inferred that the round burial pit (HGH10) of the Yin period at Hougang, Anyang, was formed in the late Yin or at the turn from the Yin to the Zhou period. The dead buried in the pit were seriously maimed or even beheaded and their skeletons were in an extraordinary position and in disorder. However, they were offered large-sized bronze ritual vessels and a great number of other precious grave goods. This suggests that the Hougang burial pit was not a normal tomb or a sacrificial pit; it must have been a peculiar burial of persons in higher status. It is likely that the pit occupants belonged to the “sizi 嗣子” mentioned in the inscription of the Shu Sizi *ding*-tripod, who were the officials stationed at the “Lan 阌” or the State Guesthouse in the capital of the Yin Dynasty, in charge of guest reception and massage transmission. Perhaps they were killed in the Muze campaign and buried in this round pit.

Keywords: burials-Shang Dynasty; sacrificial pits-chronology; Yinxu.

The discovery of the burial pit

The round burial pit of the Yin Period (the period of the Shang Dynasty with Yinxu as its capital) at Hougang, Anyang, Henan (hereafter referred to as “the burial pit”) is located on the southern slope of Hougang, in the southeast of the Yinxu Site; its excavation number is 59AHGH10 (hereafter abbreviated as “HGH10”).

The stratigraphy of the area around the tomb pit contains the following cultural layers: the first layer is modern tilled earth; the second layer dates to the Warring-States Period; the third is of Yin Period; and the fourth belongs to the Longshan Culture. The tomb pit opened below the third cultural layer and intruded into the fourth. Three other tombs of the Yin Period occupied the same layer as the round burial pit.

The burial pit was in the shape of a round shaft, 2.8m deep, with a diameter of 2.2m at the opening and 2.3m at the bottom. The walls of the pit were smooth and even, seemingly having been pounded; the bottom of the pit was level and had also undergone ramming. It was obviously

a specially produced pit.

The deposits in the pit can be divided into five layers. The first, about 0.9m thick, was that of red burnt clay clods piled up randomly. Sherds of pottery *li*-cauldrons and jars of the Yin Period accompanied this layer; they could not be restored. The second layer ranging from 0.35 to 0.6m thick was composed of dark gray earth; it contained numerous lumps and grains of charcoal, as well as burnt bones, clamshells, etc. A few human bones were discovered underneath this layer; these were the uppermost layer of human remains. The third layer, 0.3–0.5m thick, was of grayish-yellow earth mixed with sparse grains of charcoal and burnt earth. It contained large numbers of potsherds, forming a layer of ceramic fragments ranging from 0.15 to 0.25m thick. *In situ* analysis suggested that this layer was probably formed from intact pottery vessels, 31 of which have been restored to date, that were smashed after being placed in the tomb or crushed by the tomb fill. A few of these potteries contained residual grains stuck to the inner surfaces; some of them bore cinnabar on their outer surfaces. Below the layer of potsherds laid one layer of small pebbles, and below that, a layer of human bones constituting the middle layer of human remains. The fourth cultural layer was composed of reddish-brown soil, 0.5–0.6m thick, enclosing a layer of human bones that constituted the lowest layer of human remains. The fifth layer, 0.2 to 0.3m thick, was of grayish-yellow earth and contained the shards of a few pottery *li*-cauldrons, jars and *gui*-tureens.

The pit contained upper, middle, and lower layers of human remains and accompanying grave goods. The upper layer contained the remains of 25 individuals, including 16 complete skeletons, 7 skulls, and 2 headless skeletons. Their burial positions varied. 6 skeletons were in extended prone position; 2 were in extended supine position; 1 was in flexed prone position; and two were in flexed on side position. Many of the bones bore cinnabar traces. According to specialists, these remains included 6 juvenile males, 3 adult males, 4 children and the rest indeterminate age and sex. Clear traces of blade cuts were discovered on the mandible of skeleton No. 15. One *ding*-tripod, one *you*-wine jar, one *jue*-cup, one knife, and one arrowhead, and two *ge*-dagger axes, all of bronze, accompanied the upper layer of human remains, as well as a heap of cowries, traces of cereals, silk and linen textiles, etc.

The middle layer of human remains included 29 individuals, among which were 19 complete skeletons, 9 skulls, and 1 headless skeleton. 2 were deposited in kneeling positions; 5 were in extended prone; 2 were in flexed prone; 5 were in extended on side position; and 4



Figure 1 The plans of the layers of the Hougang round burial pit.

1. the first human skeletons 2. the first layer of human skeletons 1–24. human skeletons A. bronze ding-tripod B. bronze you-wine vessel C and E. bronze ge-dagger axes D. bronze knife F. cowries I. millet grains J. bundle of textiles K. bone hairpin L. bronze bubble-shaped ornament M. bronze semicircular object N. ivory bar 3. the second layer of human skeletons 1–29. human skeletons G. jade huang-semicircular pendant H. jade fish O. jade bead K. bone hairpin F. cowries 4. the third layer of human skeletons 1–18. human skeletons A. cowries B. bone hairpin C. engraved bone plaque

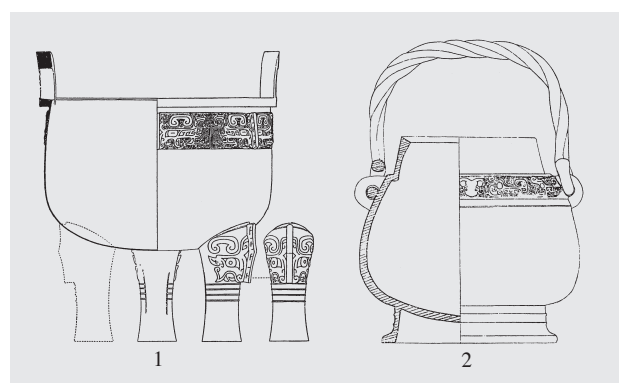


Figure 2 The bronze vessels unearthed from the Hougang round burial pit.

1. *ding*-tripod (HGH10:5) 2. *you*-wine vessel (HGH10:6)

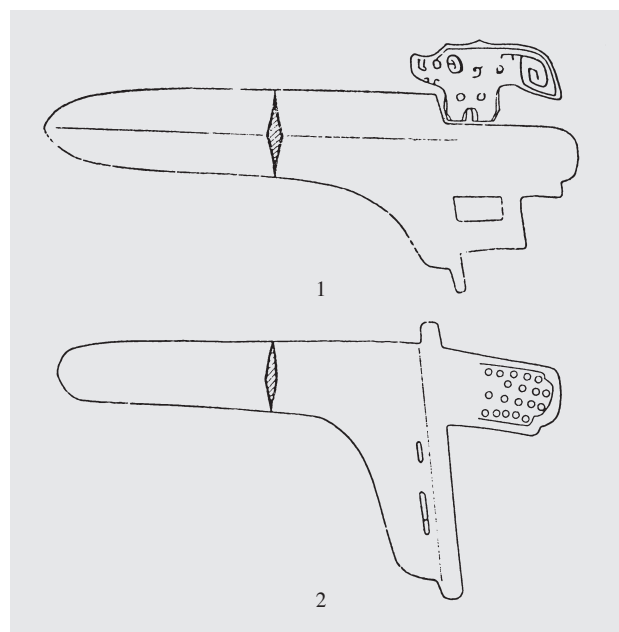


Figure 3 The *ge*-dagger axes unearthed from the Hougang round burial pit.

1. *ge*-dagger ax with shaft head (HGH10:3) 2. *ge*-dagger ax with medium-lengthed *hu* and two holes (HGH10:2)

were in flexed on side position. The skulls were mostly concentrated in the southeast corner of the pit, with their crowns mainly facing east or south. A number of the bones bore cinnabar on their surfaces. According to the observations of the excavators, the remains included 8 young males and 5 children. Grave goods were limited to small numbers of ornaments and a few cowries.

The lower layer of human remains comprised 19 individuals, including 2 intact skeletons, 5 skeletons lacking legs or feet, 10 skulls, one upper jawbone, and one partial leg. The burial positions included extended

prone, flexed on side, etc. Age and sex analyses allowed the identification of 2 adult males, 3 young females, 4 children, and 2 infants. Small numbers of ornaments and cowries accompanied this set of remains (Figure 1).

All told, the pit contained remains belonging to a total of 73 individuals, as well as grave goods including 10 bronze vessels (ritual vessels, weapons, and tools); 32 pottery vessels (everyday items); 5 jade items (beads and huang-semicircles); 13 items of bone or ivory (hairpins and other ornaments); 718 cowries (not including fragmentary specimens; these included some belonging to items of adornment, as well as more than 300 gathered together in a cloth sack); grains (apart from those contained in the bronze and pottery vessels, some grains, apparently millet, were piled in a heap); textiles, etc. (Figures 2–4).

The date of the burial pit

Scholars generally date the Hougang burial pit to either the late Shang or the early Western Zhou. In reality, it is difficult to distinguish between late Shang and early Zhou remains at Anyang. The “Phase IV Yinxu Culture” identified by prior scholars belonged mainly to the reigns of the Shang kings Di Yi and Di Xin, but it can definitely be extended to the first years of the Western Zhou period.

The author is in accord with the opinion that the date of the Hougang burial pit can be fixed in the late stage of the Phase IV of Yinxu. *Yinxu Fajue Baogao* divides the Phase III of the remains in the Miaopu Locus North, Anyang, into early and late stages, the latter of which takes PNVT3B ④ as its model unit. Comparing this case with the potteries excavated from the Hougang burial pit suggests a slightly later date for the latter. For example: the *li*-cauldron T3B ④ :27 from Miaopu Locus North has a somewhat fuller belly, an obvious divided crotch, and dimly visible points on its feet. In contrast, a similar type of *li* (HGH10:28) from the Hougang burial pit has a thinner, narrower belly with a shrinking upper belly; its crotch is nearly flat with no visible dividing line, and it completely lacks any trace of foot points. Further, a *li*-cauldron with dish-shaped rim (HGH10:29) from the Hougang pit is close in form to the *li*-cauldron M40:2 from the Phase IV, fifth-stage remains at the western section of Yinxu, with slight differences between the two. A pottery *gui*-tureen from the Hougang pit is also very similar to the *gui* PNVT3B ④ :287 from Miaopu Locus North.

For these reasons, the author dates the Hougang burial pit to the final years of the Shang Dynasty or the Shang-Zhou transition period.

The nature of the burial pit

Scholars typically consider the Hougang burial pit to be either a burial of accompaniment or a sacrificial pit.

The author holds that the Hougang burial pit is not a sacrificial pit. Though it may be classified as a tomb, it is not a normal tomb, but is probably the remains of a

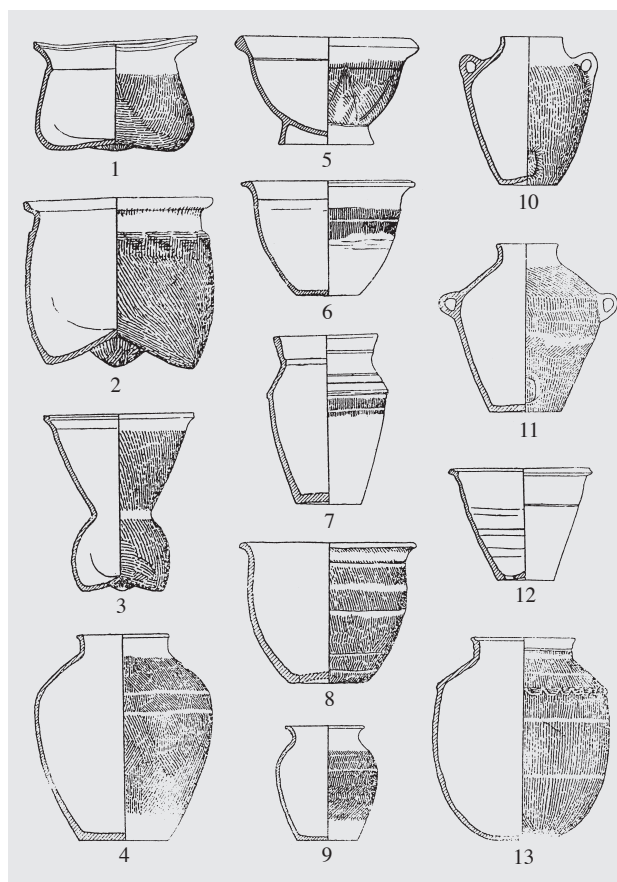


Figure 4 The potteries unearthed from the Hougang round burial pit.

1. *li*-cauldron of Type I (HGH10:28) 2. *li*-cauldron of Type II (HGH10:29) 3. *yan*-steamer (HGH10:30) 4. jar of Type I (HGH10:16) 5. *gui*-tureen (HGH10:26) 6. basin of Type I (HGH10:24) 7. jar of Type III (HGH10:18) 8. basin of Type II (HGH10:25) 9. jar of Type II (HGH10:17) 10 and 11. *lei*-vessels (HGH10:20 and 19) 12. *zeng*-steamer (HGH10:31) 13. jar with round bottom (HGH10:21)

specialized burial.

Numerous sacrificial pits have been discovered at Yinxu, mostly concentrated in the vicinity of the palace remains and the royal mausoleum precinct. The palace district includes hundreds of sacrificial pits, while 1483 such pits have already been excavated in the royal mausoleum precinct. Regardless of whether the victims in these sacrificial pits are humans, animals, or both, the pits themselves are mainly rectangular, vertical shafts (though a small number are square); round examples have not yet been found. In the sacrificial pits of Xibeigang, the human victims are usually beheaded; very few complete skeletons have been found. Moreover, almost none of the Xibeigang pits contain grave goods. Clearly, the Hougang pit is different from the common run of sacrificial pits.

If we approach the Hougang pit as a sacrificial pit, then

we must find the object of its offerings -- nothing other than high-level tombs, palace remains, or an altar. However, no such structure has been discovered in association with these remains to date. It is therefore basically impossible that the Hougang pit was associated with large-scale buildings or an altar. As for the nearby Shang tombs, small tombs were not qualified to enjoy high-level sacrificial pits, and the nearest large-scale tombs lie more than 500m away, making any association unlikely.

With respect to its roundness, the Hougang burial pit is completely different from the rectangular, vertically shafted sacrificial pits usually seen at Yinxu. Neither does it correspond with respect to the inner coffin, outer coffin and other burial implements typically seen in Yinxu tombs. The Hougang burial pit shows special characteristics with respect to grave goods as well. The assemblage relationships of pottery grave goods in Yinxu Phase IV tombs are overwhelmingly centered on *gu*-goblets and *jue*-cups. Typically, one set of a *gu*-goblet and a *jue*-cup are accompanied by other potteries such as *li*-cauldrons, *gui*-tureens, basins, jars, *lei*-vessels, etc. The Hougang pit completely lacks any pottery *gu*-goblets or *jue*-cups; its assemblage of grave goods is totally different from those of the average tomb. Yinxu Phase IV tombs also often contain a number of vessels intended specially for burial, such as crude *gu*-goblets and *jue*-cups, coarse pottery *lei*-vessels, etc. All of the grave goods in the Hougang burial pit, however, were built for actual use; for example, a bronze *ding*-tripod with soot on its bottom had obviously been used. The pottery vessels were basically all daily use utensils commonly seen in the ruins and did not include any mock vessels meant specifically for burial.

The Hougang burial pit was not a burial of accompaniment either. Although high-level aristocratic tombs are found among the Hougang ruins, the round burial pit lies over 500m to the southeast of these. The tombs found near the round pit are all small, unsuitable for pairing with a high-grade burial of accompaniment.

The determination that the Hougang pit is a sacrificial pit is largely based on indications of binding on the human remains found therein. Some bore traces of having cut, some of having beheaded. There were also burnt textiles, charcoal, ash, etc. In fact, there may be another explanation for these phenomena.

Perhaps this was an unusual burial carried out under unusual circumstances for some unusual (e.g. killed in combat or conflict) deceased persons. We must consider the unusual shape, unusual burial position, and specific date of this pit together. The pit dates to the final years of the Shang or to the Shang-Zhou transition. This was an era of war and social upheaval, when the Yin capital faced trouble both internal and external, and an episode of bloody war was brewing, or had just occurred, between the Shang and the Zhou. Certainly, a number of people were slaughtered, and Yinxu must have contained some of their graves. The corpses in the tomb had undergone severe mutilation, even to the extent that some bodies and heads were separated. Their burial positions were all different from the standard

forms employed in regular tombs; the skeletons were jumbled and out of order. However, the pit occupants enjoyed the use of large-sized bronze ritual vessels, assemblages of pottery vessels, a large number of cowries, etc. Based on this, the Hougang burial pit probably was neither a regular tomb nor a common sacrificial pit, but a special type of burial; moreover, the deceased therein were of comparatively high status.

Obviously, to link this burial pit with the battle conducted by King Wu against Zhòu 紂 would be a bold but reasonable consideration. Taking it a step further, it is not impossible to consider that the human remains in the pit might have belonged to a single large household that some calamity had befallen. However, final conclusions will require scientific evidence. We await the results of this aspect of the work, including, for example, DNA evaluation illustrating blood relations between the deceased, etc.

The occupants of the burial pit

Who were buried in the Hougang burial pit? To answer this, we must consider the inscription of the Shu Sizi *ding*-tripod found in the pit (Figure 5).

Scholars have put forth different readings of the inscription of the Shu Sizi *ding*, but all agree on its basic meaning: on the *bingwu* day of the ninth moon, at 齋 宰, the Shang king awarded Shu Sizi twenty strings of cowries, with which the latter cast a sacrificial bronze



Figure 5. The rubbing of the inscription of the Shu Sizi *ding*.



ding-tripod for Father Gui.

The author will now discuss four words contained in the inscription: *shu* 戌, *sizi* 嗣子, *lan* 𨵿, and 宰.

Shu 戌: Scholars consider this term to be either an “ethnonym” or a type of official position under the Shang Dynasty. The mode of address “*shu* X” 戌某 appears often in the oracle bone inscriptions; I feel that understanding the term as the name of an official position is the most appropriate.

Sizi 嗣子: Scholars have read this as a *hewen* (compound character) used as a personal name; this explanation has met with approval in the field. Upon close examination, the character appears to depict a square frame (with simplified strokes, not closed) containing the elements *ce* 册, *kou* 口, and *zi* 子. This is probably a combined ideogram indicating the handling of clerical affairs and the management of orally transmitted information at a fortified location. Its use in combination with the character *shu* 戌 then placed additional emphasis on its military flavor.

Lan 𨵿: *Lan* is the name of a location in which the Shang kings carried out bequests; this is generally agreed. The character is also seen in the inscriptions of the Fu Yi *gui* 父乙簋, the Li *gui* 利簋, and other vessels. Some scholars have pointed out that this character may have been the name of a place or of a palace building, while others have suggested that it was a *zuhui* (clan emblem) or a personal name.

In the author’s opinion, the character 𨵿 (simplified as 𨵿) indicated a type of building. It contains the “roof” 宀 and “door” 门 radicals and gives the impression of materials stacked up inside a building, with moonlight shining in front of the doorway, as though it pertained to night-time lodging. Since the later form *lan* carried the meaning of “great hall,” *lan* was obviously a building of some sort, and, judging from the sense of “great hall,” an extraordinary building at that. Scholars have pointed out that the bronze script forms of *lan* 𨵿 and *guan* 管 are related (Yu 1977) and that the Yinxu oracle bone inscriptions contain the character *guan* “官” (馆), therein referring to an official guesthouse. The author thus holds the viewpoint that *lan* 𨵿, *guan* 管, and *guan* 官 could be loaned each other to be worth considering. *Lan* 𨵿 pertained to buildings that provided food and shelter for the night; given that from the Zhou period onwards, buildings specializing in the reception of guests were collectively referred to as *guan* 馆, the logic behind the formation of the character *lan* 𨵿 was probably identical.

From the *Zhouli* and other sources, we know that pre-Qin kings built *guan* 馆 in the capitals of states for the purpose of receiving regional rulers and their emissaries. Scholars agree that the *lan* 𨵿 must have been located somewhere near the Shang capital Yin. As far as its specific location, current suggestions include Zhengzhou, Yanshi, Luoyang and Anyang. We hold that the ruins at Yinxu, Anyang, are those of the Yin capital in the post-Wu Ding period, thus, *lan*, as a guesthouse of the Yin state, should be sought somewhere in the vicinity of Yinxu at Anyang.

宰: this character is in the form of an item suspended in

a building. The suspended item is similar in structure to the character *peng* 朋; I suspect this character referred to a chamber of the *lan* wherein supplies were stored.

Lastly, we will discuss the question of the status of the owner of the Shu Sizi *ding* 戌嗣子鼎 found in the Hougang burial pit. The *shu* 戌 mentioned in the inscription of the *ding*-tripod may have been either a clan name or the name of an office. *Sizi* 嗣子 was probably the person who received the bequest; this may be a borrowing of the name of his office to refer to him.

The use of *lan* 𨵿, i.e., *guan* 馆, accords well with that of *shu* *sizi* 戌嗣子. That is, the owner of the Shu Sizi *ding* was posted at the location *lan* 𨵿 and was an official responsible for receiving guests and relaying information. Thus we can perhaps boldly surmise: A special tomb formed in the latter years of the Shang Dynasty and completed in a rush, the Hougang burial pit may be the resting place of personnel associated with a Shang national guesthouse who were killed during the Battle of Muye between the Shang and the Zhou. The chief official of the guesthouse and his household may be among them; garrison guards, servants, and others may also be included. They died in the context of a national crisis rather than as criminals; because they were high-level officials, they enjoyed the privilege of comparatively abundant grave goods. Exigent circumstances did not permit the observance of complete funeral rites; thus, they were buried in a rush, such that their tomb was crude and lacked inner and outer coffins, and the remains themselves were jumbled.

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Postscript

The original paper written by Du Jinpeng 杜金鹏 was published in *Kaogu* 2007. 6: 76–89 with six illustrations and one table. This abridged version is prepared by the author and translated into English by Nicolas Vogt 侯昱文.