

Abstract

Hepu is located at the southern end of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China, bordering the Beibu Gulf. In the year 111 BCE, Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty pacified the Lingnan (south of the Nanling Mountains) region and divided it into nine commanderies. The Hepu commandery was one of these newly established commanderies and subdivided into the Xuwen, Gaoliang, Hepu, Linyu, and Zhulu counties. Hepu quickly developed a center for politics economics, culture and military of the Lingnan region, an bridgehead to the outside world of the Han Dynasty and the port of origin on the ancient Maritime Silk Road. There are a large number of ancient tombs around the county town, covering an area of about 68 km². It is estimated that there are more than 10 000 tombs still buried underground. It is the historical testimony of Hepu's prosperous history.

From 1957 to 2013, over 1200 tombs have been excavated. Most of these date to the Han Dynasty (206 BC - AD 220) and some tombs belong to the following Three Kingdoms, Jin dynasty and Southern dynasties periods. As many as 20,000 cultural relics unearthed. Different tomb shapes and various unearthed objects provide important historical evidence for the resurrection of the society of Hepu during the Han Dynasty.

According to building materials and types of construction, the tombs can be divided into four categories: mound tombs, shaft tombs, wooden-chambered tombs and brick-chambered tombs. Some of them were joint tombs.

The custom of elaborate funeral was popular during the Han Dynasty, so there was a wide variety and large number of buried artifacts here. According to the usage of the objects, they consisted of drinking and eating wares, production tools, weapons, coins, stationery, decorations, funerary objects, etc. They were mainly pottery wares, followed by bronze wares and some gold, silver, iron and jade wares. There were also glass, crystal, agate, amethyst, garnet, etched stone turquoise and beryl beads, as well as a small number of bones, bamboo ware, woodware, and lacquerware.

Based on the tomb shapes and typical artifacts in different phases, we divided the evaluation of Hepu Han tombs into five periods: the early Western Han Dynasty, the middle Western Han Dynasty, and the late Western Han Dynasty and the Xin Dynasty, the early Eastern Han Dynasty, and the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Apart from some special early mound tombs, shapes of Hepu Han tombs were developed from shaft tombs and

wooden-chambered tombs of the Western Han Dynasty to the brick tombs of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Tombs of the Eastern Han Dynasty were dominated by brick tombs, but the shaft tombs and wooden-chambered tombs were still in use until the late Eastern Han Dynasty. The division of the five periods generally reflects the evolution and development process of the tomb structure and burial artifacts during the Han Dynasty.

The unearthed cultural relics of Hepu Han tombs have close relationship with the ancient Maritime Silk Road. After the pacification of the Lingnan region and its incorporation in the Han commandery-county system, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty officially opened the Maritime Silk Road. Aimed at improving foreign contacts, this oversea route started from the Hepu and Xuwen harbors and arrived in South Asia via Southeast Asia. There are a large number of cultural relics related to the Maritime Silk Road unearthed from Hepu Han Tombs. In addition to the exported goods, such as gold and varieties of silk, they were mainly luxury imported goods like spices, glasswares and bead ornaments. Unearthed bead ornaments are made of glass, garnet, amber, crystal, beryl, rosaceous stone, agate, etched stone or gold, etc. These artifacts come from the trade between the Han Empire and the region of Southeast Asia and South Asia or the indirect trade between the Han Empire and the region of Central Asia, West Asia and the Mediterranean. In addition, some non-trade goods, such as Persian pot and bronze cymbal, were also imported into Hepu. Along with the trade, there are also cultural exchanges. Some artifacts implanted foreign cultural factors, such as "Hu People" tomb figurines, feathered man illuminated statues. Some artifacts reflected that the Buddhism entered into China through the South China sea, such as buddha items "Bosheng Lianhua" (a stand with a begging bowl in which a lotus grows on the top), Makara ornaments, Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha) ornaments. Shapes and construction techniques of the roofs which were supported by corbel vaults used in brick-chambered tombs of the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty in the Lingnan region were may also influenced by that of the Bactrians and Parthians in Central Asia.

The analysis of cultural factors in Hepu Han Tombs reveals that multicultural integration was an internal driving force for the development and prosperity of Hepu Port. After Emperor Wu pacified the Lingnan region and established commandery and counties in Hepu, a large number of Central Plains Han people flooded into Hepu from the Lingbei (north of the Nanling Mountains) region, the powerful Han culture quickly

developed into a mainstream in Hepu and the local Yue people diluted the importance of their aboriginal culture. At the same time, Hepu has developed a close relationship with its surrounding areas. Its cultural factors affecting burial, were influenced by the Nanyue culture taking the Pearl River Delta as its center, the Wuyue culture in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces and the Chu culture covering the provinces of Hubei and Hunan. Some cultural elements also spread from overseas by the trade.

As an integrated human settlement, the grave and the urban site are the most important and basic components. The sites associated with the Hepu Han Tombs are Dalang urban site and Caoxiacun urban site. These two sites are connected to each other chronologically and respectively located beside the upper and Lower reaches of the Ximen River. The Dalang urban site, where pier relic was found at its rivefacing side, dating to around the middle period of the Western Han Dynasty should be administrative center of the Hepu County, whilst the Caoxiacun urban site dating to the period from the late Western Han Dynasty to the Eastern Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms should be the administrative center of Hepu Commandery. Judging from the archaeological discoveries and the analysis of Han settlements, most people lived in cities or the areas surrounding them. It is further unlikely that ports were separated from urban sites, thus we can assume that they were situated in connected space. It is speculated that Hepu Port of the western and Eastern Han Dynasty had developed in a dynamic process migration with the city along the river.

With its grand scale, relatively complete remains, rich cultural connotation and distinctive regional characteristics. the complex of Hepu Han Tombs has become one of Chinese culture focuses, especially the research on Chinese-Western cultural exchange during the Han Dynasty. At present, the local government is cooperating with other China's coastal cities that also found important ports on the Maritime Silk Road of different periods in history and working to promote the complex of Hepu Han Tombs and other sites to application for World Cultural Heritage. Therefore, the study of Hepu Han Tombs can provide academic support for the next stage of associated cultural relics protection and application for World Cultural Heritage.