MARITIME ADAPTATIONS IN PREHISTORIC SOUTHEAST CHINA: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROBLEM OF AUSTRONESIAN EXPANSION

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Abstract

The movement of the Austronesian peoples from their homelands in the coastal areas of the East Asian mainland is an extremely complicated problem, and it is still in need of further discussion. In order to address this issue, we must endeavor to understand more clearly the prehistoric cultures of the southeastern coast of the Chinese mainland, and especially changes in settlement and subsistence patterns. In recent years, the great increase of available archaeological materials concerning the prehistoric cultures in the southeastern coastal regions of China, including Taiwan, has begun to present a favorable opportunity to re-examine the problem here raised. This article therefore aims to present a new synthesis of the archaeological materials in that area, in the hope to better comprehend the motivation and reason for the spread of the Austronesian ancestors.

Introduction

In the archipelagos of the Pacific and Indian Oceans south of the Asian mainland, extending over about one-third of the surface of the globe, about two hundred and seventy million speakers of Austronesian languages are living today. They inhabit the areas of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia in the Pacific; in Southeast Asia, they are found in Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula and archipelago, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the southeastern part of Indochina; and in Africa, on the island of Madagascar. Racially, these populations pertain to the Oceanic Mongoloid stock; and culturally, they exhibit many characteristics in common, indicating that their dispersal over their present living areas cannot have occurred very long ago (Chang 1959; Bellwood 1979).
Many hypotheses pertaining to Austronesian origins have been proposed by ethnologists, archaeologists, and linguists. Most believe that the Austronesian people take their origin from the southeastern coastal regions of China. For instance, as early as 1899, the Dutch linguist A. H. Kern inferred that the ancient Austronesians were coastal dwellers and, furthermore, that they were seafaring peoples who had dwelled in the border areas adjacent to Champa, China, and Vietnam—that is to say, in Cambodia and the adjacent maritime areas (cited from Li Rengui 1979).

Robert von Heine-Geldern (1932) was the first to propose that Austronesians are represented archaeologically by the four-sided ax (Vierkantbeil), and he traced the spread of this diagnostic element from its origin in the Asian mainland by way of Indochina all the way to the islands of Southeast Asia. Thereafter, Ling Shunsheng (1950) used ancient Chinese textual sources and ethnographic data to establish his hypothesis that the Austronesian culture had its origin in the ancient Yúe-Liáo 越獠 Culture in South China. Kano Tadao (1955) inferred from archaeological and ethnological evidence that the ancient inhabitants of Taiwan had mostly come from South China. Ralph Linton (1955), espousing the standpoint of comparative ethnology, proposed a “South Asiatic Complex,” which corresponded in extent to the distribution area of the Vierkantbeil as established by Heine-Geldern. Chang Kwang-chih (1959), basing himself on Chinese archaeological materials, wrote that the ancient Yúe 越 people in the southeastern part of China had moved southward and eastward, becoming the ancestors of the latter-day Austronesians.

Since then, Grace (1961), Chang (1987, 1988, 1989), Shuter and Marck (1975), Bellwood (1979, 1983, 1988, 1995), Blust (1976, 1988), Thiel (1988), Ngo The Phong (1988), Pham Huy Thong (1988), Tsang (1992), and others have established, based on an ever-increasing body of archaeological evidence, that the Southeast China-Taiwan region was probably the area in which the Austronesian people originated and from where they spread.

While it now seems very likely that the Austronesian people indeed originated from the coastal regions of Southeast China, the reasons for why the Austronesian people expanded so quickly from their homelands into the vast area of the Pacific within a relatively short time span still pose a problem that needs to be answered.

When first raising the issue of the origin of the Austronesians, Kern suggested that the Austronesians moved southeastwards in reaction to pressure from inland populations to the north (cited from Li Rengui 1979). In 1988, K. C. Chang formulated a similar hypothesis. He proposed that the ancestral culture of the Austronesians had originally been