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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# KUNLUN IN QINGHAI'S PREHISTORIC ART

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

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## ABSTRACT

According to statistics, there are now more than 100,000 painted pottery of the Majiayao Culture circulating in the world. Behind such a large number of cultural products, there must be profound cultural thoughts and cultural designs, which is the Kunlun myth system. Only the Kunlun myth system can accommodate this river of painted pottery, and similarly, only this river of the painted pottery can fill every space of the Kunlun myth system. The Kunlun myth is the voice of Majiayao painted pottery, and Majiayao painted pottery is the image of the Kunlun myth. Only by combining the two can the sound and visual images of the ancient Qinghai spiritual civilization be presented, restoring the unique and complete narrative of ancient Qinghai culture.

## KEYWORDS

Qinghai Prehistory, Painted Pottery, Kunlun, Middle-Range Theory

Round heaven and square earth is a traditional concept of the universe in ancient China. *Rites of the Zhou-Chunguan-Zongbo* says: "Six jade objects are made to worship heaven, earth and the four directions. Cangbi (sky-blue jade disc) is used to worship the heaven and the yellow jade cong is used to worship the earth." Zheng Xuan noted: "When worshipping gods, one must resemble their kind, and the round jade disk is used to represent the heaven." *Shuowen Jiezi* also says: "The round jade disk is like the heaven." The round jade disk is used to represent and worship heaven, which has become a symbolic ritual object and etiquette in Chinese classical culture. *Huainanzi-Tianwen Xun* says: "The heaven is round and the earth is square, and the Tao is in the center." Therefore, the purpose of classifying the heaven and the earth with the concept of the round heaven and square earth is to "worship the heaven", that is, to "communicate with the heaven." *Rites of the Zhou-Chunguan-Dianrui* says: "A ribbon is used to penetrate the grooves of gui, zhang, bi, cong, hu and huang, so that the grooves on bi and cong are connected from top to bottom, and then are used to bury the corpses." Zheng Xuan noted: "The grooves on the bi and cong should be connected from top to bottom, symbolizing the connection between heaven and earth." Therefore, for the spiritual life of ancient Chinese people, "connecting with heaven" is the most important thing. If one can connect with heaven, he will be a "king" or "son of heaven." *Chunqiu Fanlu* Wang *Daotong* states: "In ancient times, the creator of characters used three strokes and connected the middle, which means the king. The three strokes represent heaven, earth and man, and the one connected in the middle is the way. Who

can connect heaven with the earth if not the king? " Later, the emperor became the "Son of Heaven", so there is a saying that 'Son of Heaven sits in the Mingtang'. The legendary Yellow Emperor, literally speaking, is a king who can communicate with heaven. The character "Huang" is written as "𠩺" in oracle bone script and "𠩺" in bronze script, which means an arrow shooting the sun. The shooting the sun here is actually a figurative expression of "communicating with the heaven", just like the bird shooting picture on the Han Dynasty stone relief.

## 1. KUNLUN IS THE IMAGE OF HEAVEN

"The heaven is vast, and how can it be the shape of heaven?" (Cheng and Cheng, 2000) What is heaven? " *Shuowen jiezi* says: "Heaven is the summit or the highest point which nothing can surpass. The character tian is composed of 'one' and 'great'." The heaven is a spiritual rather than a physical concept. Xunzi said: "The heaven has no real shape, and everything above the earth is heaven". *Simple Tao Te Ching* says: "The unknown things represent heaven, and the empty space is also heaven" (Xu, et al., 1992). Or as *Huainanzi-Tianwen Xun* says: "The air has boundaries, and the clear thin air is heaven", and everything is in the state of chaos and formlessness. Because of this, Qu Yuan asked in *Tian Wen* that "The air is a hazy mass, and how can we recognize it?" So, if humans want to offer sacrifices to heaven or communicate with heaven, an imaginary entity is needed to replace this empty heaven, which is Kunlun. Although the word "Kunlun" is only seen in documents after the

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Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the concept of "Kunlun" should have appeared in prehistoric times.

Shamanism believes that the entire universe has a three-fold structure: heaven, earth, and hell. The Qing Dynasty scholar Xu Ke compiled the *Qing Bai Lei Chao* which says: "Shamanism established three realms. The upper realm is called Ballan Yuercha, which is heaven; the middle realm is called Ertu Tu Yidu, which is earth; and the lower realm is called Yarqiang Zhuji Yaji, which is hell. The upper realm is where the gods live, the lower realm is where the demons live, and the middle realm used to be a pure land, but now humans reproduce here." (Xu, p. 2010). The centers of these three structures are connected by an axis, which is the world mountain (or cosmic mountain) or world tree (or cosmic tree) called the axis mundi. The cosmic tree in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* has many names, such as Jianmu, Fusang, Damu, Xunmu, Zhushu, Fumu, Qingmu, Ruomu, etc. For example, "Jianmu is in Duguang, where the emperors can go up and down. There is no shadow in the sun, and no sound when calling. It is the center of heaven and earth." (Liu, 2016, p. 173).

"Kunlun" is the transliteration of the ancient Hunnic language "heaven", while "Qi Lian", "He Lian", "He Lan", "Kala", "Ku Long" and so on are also different transliterations of "heaven" in Hunnic language. They all refer to the cosmic mountain that can reach heaven in shamanism. For example, the word "He Lian" of Helian Bobo, the founding emperor of the Xiongnu-led Hu Xia dynasty, was originally "Kulun", which also means heaven. In addition, *Han Shu·Huo Qubing Biography* says: "Qi Lian Mountain is Tianshan Mountain. The Huns call heaven Qi Lian" (Ban, 1975, p. 686). The ancient pronunciation of "Qi Lian" can be read as "Šilen" or "Kilen". The ancient pronunciations of "Kun" and "Qi" both belong to the ni initial; "Lun" and "Lian" are the same tone, so "Kunlun" is "Qi Lian". The word "He Lan" of Helan Mountain in Ningxia is also an example. "He Lan" and "He Lian" can be interpreted as synonyms not only because of their geographical consistency, but also their homophonic pronunciation, that is, "heaven". Japanese scholar Shiratori Kurakichi said that Manchus still call heaven "Kulun" (which can be transliterated as Kunlun) (Shiratori, 1976). Cen Zhongmiao said: "Kunlun is the transliteration of the Hu language 'Kala', which means black." *Book of Jin* said: "The slaves are long and black in color, and the palace ladies all call them Kunlun." (Fang, et al., 1975). *The New History of the Five Dynasties · Volume 53 · Miscellaneous Biography 41* said that Murong Yanchao "was a Tuyuhun tribe member and half-brother of the Later Han Emperor Gaozu. He once used the surname Yan, and Yanchao had a black beard and was called Yan Kuncang." *The Old Book of Tang · Biography of Southern Barbarians* also said: "In the south of Linyi, they all have curly hair and black bodies, and are generally called 'Kunlun'." (Liu, et al., 1975). So in this sense, "Kunlun" is also the same as "hole" and "black".

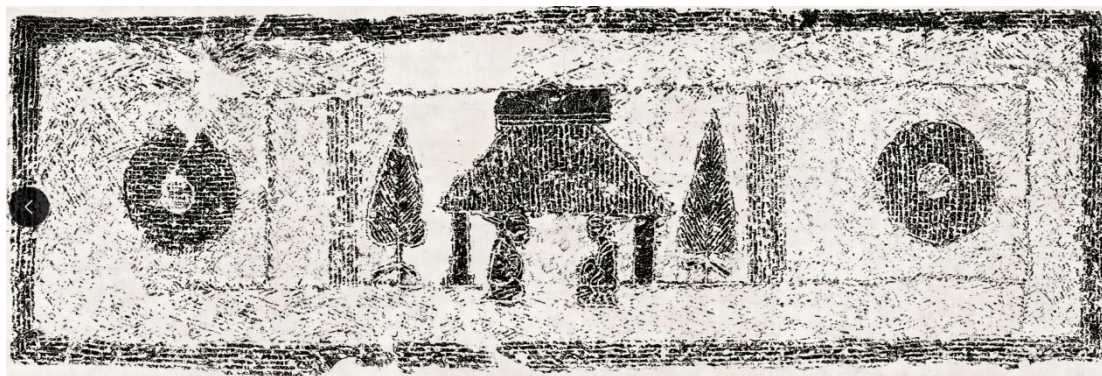
"Kunlun" is a mountain, but it also means a "cavity", which seems to be a contradiction. In fact, since the three realms are connected by a central axis, the images of "black", "hole", "muddle", "chaos", and "disorder" in Kunlun are equivalent to the concept of mountain, and the mythological structure synonymous with "heaven" is also easy to understand, because

it can be regarded as an upward mountain and heaven, and also as a hole and cavity of the earth's axis. As the master of Kunlun, Queen Mother of the West, her "cave" is like "Kunlun" or "cavity", which is the connection (tomb or shaft hole) between the human world and heaven (or hell), and also the expression of her function (immortality) and status. Therefore, *The Great Wilderness West Classic* says: "To the south of the Western Sea, along the banks of the Flowing Sands, beyond the Red Water and before the Black Water, there lies a great mountain called the Kunlun Hill. Within it resides a deity with a human face and a tiger's body, adorned with patterns and a tail, all white in hue. Below it lies the abyss of the Weak Waters, surrounded by a ring, and beyond that, there is the Mountain of Blazing Fire where objects thrown are consumed instantly. There exists a person with a tiara, tiger teeth, and a leopard's tail, dwelling in a cave, known as the Queen Mother of the West. This mountain encompasses all things."

The six traditional Chinese jade objects can vividly explain the unity of "heaven" and "hole". *Shuowen Jiezi* also said that "the roundness of the jade bi is like the sky", and the round hole in the center of the jade bi is a symbol of "heaven". In another jade object "Jue", there is a more vivid embodiment. *Baihutong* said: "Jue is the incomplete ring". (Xiao, 2024). *Guangya* said: "Jue is like a ring, but broken and not connected." The gap must be meaningful and the most important symbol of the Jue. The small gap on the Jue does not symbolize "breaking off" with someone, but symbolizes "connecting" with heaven. The hole and cavity in the center symbolize the heaven and Kunlun, and the gap symbolizes the channel to communicate with heaven (Figure 1).

The sky is round, and one can enter only through a "que". We can also prove the symbol of the jue as reaching heaven through another kind of cultural relic, namely, que. *Zhengyun* says that "阙" is pronounced as que. "阙"(que) is the same as "缺"(que). *Han Shu·Wang Mang Biography* says: "Do not interfere with an army that is returning home, and when you surround a city, leave an outlet free. The note says: "Que is not compelte." (Ban, 1975, p. 1269). The reason why these two words have the same meaning and pronunciation is mainly to describe the characteristics of "not close" or "missing and not connected" in their shapes. Another meaning of the word "que" refers to a tall gate. *Shuowen Jiezi* says: "It is a gate and pronounced as que." *Guangyun* says that the gate is called que because "the center of the gate is a road." In the Han Dynasty brick reliefs, we can confirm the symbol of this que through the text. The double que in the brick reliefs unearthed in Sichuan and other places has the words "Heavenly Gate" written on it (Figure 2).

The text or written description of the "jue" and "que" as cultural relics is the myth of Buzhou Mountain, which is part of the Kunlun myth system: "Once upon a time, Gonggong and Zhuanxu competed for the position of Emperor of Heaven. In a rage, Gonggong damages the pillar supporting the heavens, causing the sky to tilt towards the northwest, and the sun, moon, and stars slid in that direction; meanwhile, the earth inclined towards the southeast, causing all rivers to flow in that direction." (Liu, 2016, p. 92). Buzhou Mountain is the name of a mountain, which is said to be located in the northwest of Kunlun. *The Classic of Mountains and*



**Figure 1:** Jade Bi Symbolizing Heaven (Right), the Jue Symbolizing the Communication with Heaven(Left), and Heaven (Middle) on the Han Dynasty Brick Reliefs



**Figure 2:** The Gate of Heaven (Que) on a Stone Coffin Unearthed in Jianyang, Sichuan

*Seas-The Great Wilderness Western Classic* records: "In the corner of the great wilderness, there is a mountain that does not fit together, named Buzhou." Buzhou Mountain is also jue and que, "que is not close like Buzhou". Shamanism believes that the emperor and gods live on the top of the mountain (in the sky or on the treetops), and the demons live at the bottom of the mountain (underground or at the roots of the trees). The demons were unwilling to accept and wanted to live on the mountain, so they often fought with the gods living on the mountain and wanted to occupy the top of the mountain. For example, the Tibetan myth "The Incense of the God of the Noble King (or Victory)" describes the struggle between the god Indra on the top of the mountain and the Asura at the foot of the mountain. The cause was that the Asura coveted the fruits on the trees on the mountain and wanted to take them for himself (Stein, 1972). The myth of Mount Buzhou is also a typical shamanic myth. Gonggong is a demon and Zhuanxu is an emperor or God. Gonggong could not defeat Zhuanxu and could not live on the top of the mountain, so he finally "angered and hit Mount Buzhou". It is precisely because Mount Buzhou is the world mountain, the pillar of heaven and the axis of the earth, so after being knocked down by Gonggong, "heaven and earth were broken and the sky is tilted to the northwest." This myth not only provides a textual description for the cultural relics "jue" and "que", but also shows the antiquity of Kunlun mythology, that is, the era of the Five Emperors.

*Records of the Grand Historian-Dayuan Biography* records: "The Han envoys explored the source of the river, and found that it came from Khotan. There were many jade stones in the mountains. The emperor looked at the ancient books and named the mountain Kunlun where the river came from." (Sima, 1975, p. 1143). In other words, Kunlun Mountain existed before the Han Dynasty, and all mountains that people used to communicate with heaven could be called Kunlun Mountain. In the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu of Han simply named the Nanshan Mountain in Yutian (now Hotan) Kunlun Mountain based on the Western Regions investigation report of Zhang Qian and others. From then on, Kunlun Mountain or Tianshan Mountain changed from a mythological or cultural concept to a geographical concept of mountain name.

"Kunlun" as a cultural symbol or geographical concept is also very popular in Qinghai. *Han Shu-Geography* clearly records that the stone chamber of the Queen Mother of the West (the owner of Kunlun Mountain) is in Linqiang, which is today's Erlang Cave in Tianjun County (Note 1). In fact, the cultural products under the cultural concept of Kunlun include patterns, artifacts, and relics, etc., which should not be limited to Erlang Cave in Tianjun County. For example, there is also

Qinghai Lake (i.e. Xianhai, which is said to be the Yaochi of the Queen Mother of the West). So, what else is there?

Our academic research task is to find the specific pattern or relics and remains that symbolize "Kunlun". Since "Kunlun" existed before the Han Dynasty, the first question we need to solve is how far back "before the Han Dynasty" can be? In the discussion of the Buzhou Mountain myth, we know that it can be as early as the legendary Yellow Emperor era 5,000 years ago. *Records of the Grand Historian* has shown in many parts that the Kunlun myth has been popular since the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors: "Gong su from Jinan brought a drawing of the Yellow Emperor's Ming-tang to the king. In the picture, there is a hall with no walls on all four sides, covered with thatch, with water flowing through it, and a circular palace wall with a double corridor. There is a building on top, and it is entered from the southwest. It is called Kunlun. The emperor enters through it to worship the God." (Sima, 1975, p. 459) Although this passage describes Kunlun as a building, in fact, not only the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, but also Guanzhong, Central Plains and other central areas of the Han Dynasty did not have buildings at least before Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. In the Qinghai region, what should the cultural products under the cultural concept of "Kunlun" look like? Since the time and place are confirmed, the answer is obvious: the most eye-catching cultural product was the Majiayao painted pottery in Qinghai 5,000 years ago. So is the relationship between the cultural concept prevalent at that time and the cultural product mutual corroboration? Is the Majiayao painted pottery a cultural product under the Kunlun cultural concept? Since the time and place are consistent, it seems impossible not to link these two important events together. Before we discuss this, however, we have to solve a theoretical and methodological problem.

## 2. MIDDLE-RANGE THEORY IN ARCHAEOLOGY

In archaeology, middle-range theory refers to a conceptual framework, method or theory that expects to connect the archaeological evidence excavated by current archaeologists from the site with the behavior and activities of past humans. Simply put, it is a middle-range theory that bridges the two ends, that is, to build a bridge between static material remains and dynamic human activities, so as to find the relationship between material culture and human behavior. The proposal of the middle-range theory emphasizes to understand the process of past human artifact manufacturing and what kind of traces will be left after various activities by observing the behavior and life of the living people, via ethnographic analogy or experimental archaeology, so as to establish an understanding of the relationship between material remains and past human behavior. Archaeologists can reasonably interpret archaeological relics and phenomena based on the results (Raab and Goodyear, 1984). Middle-range theory generally includes taphonomy, experimental archaeology and ethnoarchaeology, but the middle-range theory of Chinese archaeology should also include philology (including mythology). For example, if we find a stone knife with a hole from the Neolithic Age, how can we know what the primitive people used this stone knife for? No matter how rigorous the formal research, that is, analysis and discussion cannot prove the specific function of this stone knife, because stone knives can be used to cut meat, peel skin, cut grass, and even as weapons in combat. Only by analyzing the micro-marks on the stone knife can we know what this stone knife has done; only ethnological materials (for example, the modern Li people in Hainan Island still use this stone knife with a hole tied to their hands to harvest ears of rice) can tell us how to use this stone knife; and only the burial method when the stone knife was unearthed can tell us more about the stone knife. Here, micro-mark analysis, ethnological cases, and burial methods are all mid-range theories, because these methods bridge the mid-range between unearthed stone products (excavated objects) and stone knives (cognitive results).

The middle-range theory is applied through the comparison method. Comparison is one of the most basic and effective methods in scientific research and is also the basic method of archaeological research. The idea and logical basis of comparative research is that similarity is related (Bogucki, 2020), which is also the ideological basis of Linnaean taxonomy, archaeological typology and other disciplines (Felsenstein, 1983).

However, we need to distinguish between two similarities: one is homology and the other is convergence. The former comes from a common genetic ancestor, that is, it is caused by transmission. The latter is the result of convergent evolution, that is, when two genetically unrelated biological populations reach similar adaptive solutions due to similar choices during the evolutionary process. The second edition of "Genetic Terminology" defines "convergent evolution": different species show phenotypic similarities in the process of evolution due to adaptation to similar environments. It also refers to the similar structures and functions of proteins or nucleic acid molecules of different origins. For example, although pterosaurs, bats, birds and other animals are distantly related, they all have flying wings because they are adapted to flying life (Figure 3) (Alexander, 2015). Mole crickets and moles both live underground, so they have appendages suitable for digging. Biology tells us that convergent similarity is not a common natural phenomenon. It requires strict environmental conditions and selection options, so most similarities are homologous. Whether they are homologous or convergent, they are all similar, related, and comparable.

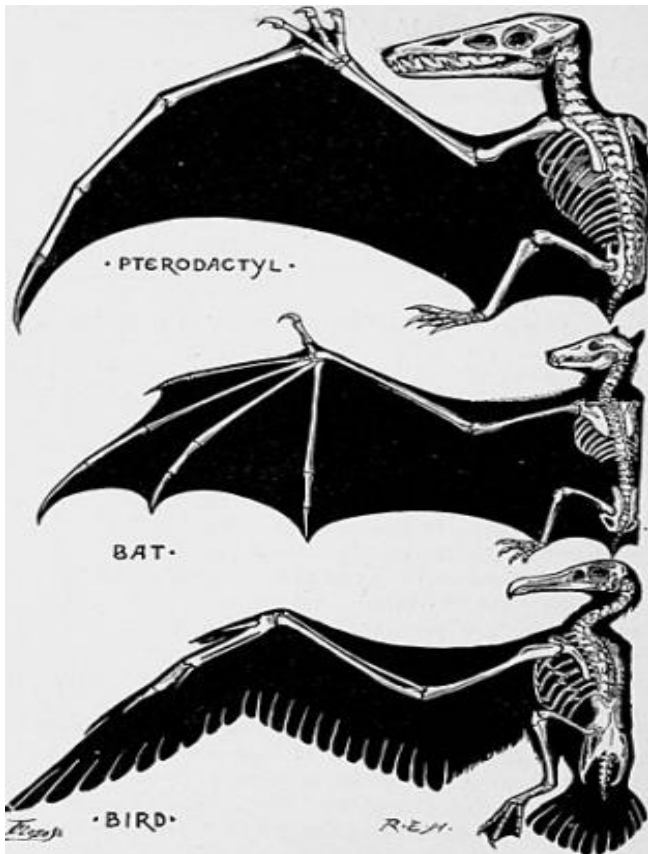


Figure 3: Comparison of the Wings of Pterosaurs (Top), Bats (Middle), and Birds (Bottom)

Therefore, we use the middle-range theory to regard Kunlun mythology as mythological material for studying the patterns of Majiayao painted pottery, and place Majiayao painted pottery in the context of Kunlun mythology. The patterns become Bell's "significant form" (Bell, 1914). However, Bell's "significant form" mostly refers to emotions, while we need to turn it into rationality.

### 3. KUNLUN DECORATION IN MAJIAYAO PAINTED POTTERY

According to ethnological materials, many pipette-shaped rock carvings made by ancient Indians on cliffs were found in the Andes desert region of South America (Figure 4). According to ethnological materials, these patterns are considered to be a kind of sky-reaching pattern. The ladder or door-shaped design symbolizes the hierarchical world of heaven, earth and underground in shamanism, and the vertical line in the middle symbolizes axis mundi, that is, the connection of the three realms (Van Hoek, 2017). This way of expressing the connection of the three realms should be a general rule, like Esperanto, which is applicable to the whole

world. For example, the idea of creating the Chinese character "wang" is the same. Dong Zhongshu said: "When the ancients invented writing, they drew three horizontal lines which they connected through the center by a vertical stroke, and then called this 'wang' (ruler / king). These three lines represent heaven, earth, and man, while the connecting of them through the center represents the way of the ruler."

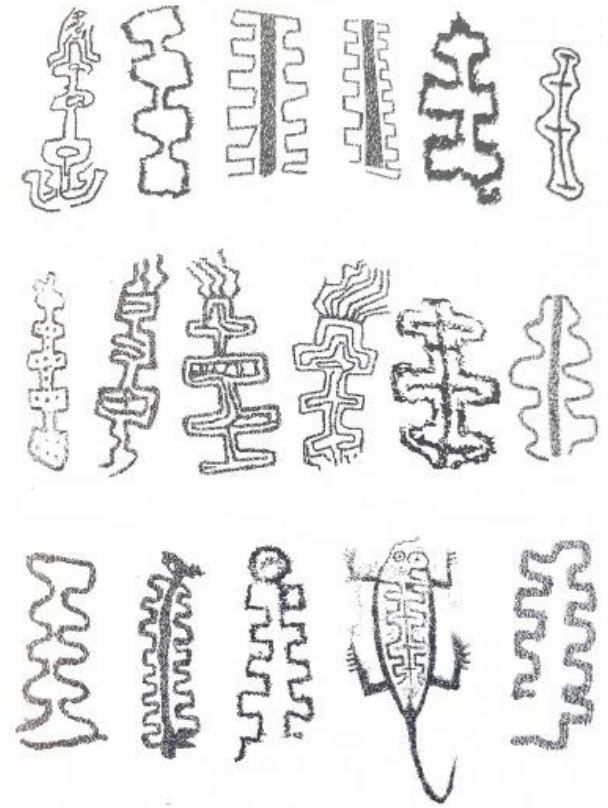


Figure 4: Pipette-Shaped Rock Carvings made by Ancient Indians on Cliffs in the Andes Desert of South America

This ladder-like or door-shaped pattern can also be found in the Machang-type painted pottery patterns of the Majiayao culture (Figure 5). According to the comparison principle of "similar is related", not only are the patterns similar, but their design concepts or creative ideas are also similar, that is, they symbolize the connection of the three worlds or ascension to heaven (Kunlun).



Figure 5: Pipette-Shaped Patterns on the Machang-Type Painted Pottery of the Majiayao Culture

The most vivid expression of the cultural concept of reaching heaven or reaching the top of Kunlun through the jagged hierarchical world is the seashell. Seashells are born with a crack in the middle, and the two sides of the crack are jagged shell teeth, which is the most natural expression of the cultural concept of reaching heaven. It is worth thinking about that although Qinghai is an inland province, it is the first place where seashells were discovered in China's Neolithic culture, such as the Zongri tombs in Tongde County and the Majiayao culture tombs in Datong County (Figure 6). Not only that, there are many seashell patterns in the painted pottery decorations of the Majiayao culture (Figure 7) and deformed and modified seashell patterns (Figure 8). Since Qinghai does not produce seashells, where do these seashells come from? How were these seashell decorations created? The reason that seashells were valued by the ancients was not because they were noble as equivalents, but that they were regarded as equivalents because of their noble status (natural symbols of reaching heaven).

Among the Banshan and Machang painted pottery decorations, there is a composition with string patterns all over the body, but several string patterns are often interrupted by a vertical line, forming a vertical road to heaven that runs perpendicular to the string patterns, looking like a tower or a gate to heaven (Figure 9). While in the early Majiayao type, the vertical lines are under the string patterns and do not show a continuous form (Figure 10), using graphics to express the explanation of the word "tian" in *Shuowen Jiezi*: "Heaven is the summit or the highest point which nothing can surpass".

Starting from Banshan, painted pottery was popular with black and red color compositions. Generally, red was used to outline the lines,



**Figure 6:** Zi'an Shell Unearthed from the Zongri Site (Upper Left), Seashell Unearthed from the Majiayao Culture Tomb in Datong, Qinghai (Lower Left), and Modern African Natives Wearing Seashell Headdresses on the Head, which Means Communication with Heaven



**Figure 8:** Deformed and Modified Seashell Patterns on the Painted Pottery of the Majiayao Culture



**Figure 9:** A String-Patterned Painted Pottery Interrupted by Vertical Lines. The Two Vertical Lines form a Road to Heaven that Runs from Top to Bottom, like a Gate or Passage



**Figure 7:** Seashell Patterns on Painted Pottery of Majiayao Culture



**Figure 10:** The Vertical Line Pattern on the Majiayao Painted Pottery Symbolizing the Pillars that Lead to Heaven (The Spout of the Pot Symbolizes Heaven)

and black was used on both sides, that is, the inner side of the black adjacent to the red was painted with serrated patterns, and the side with the tooth tip facing inward was painted with red (Li, 1998). The typical patterns of Banshan painted pottery are: "geometric patterns composed of straight lines or curves, especially the curved patterns. The most representative pattern is the serrated pattern belt composed of red and black colors, that is, a red color is added between two serrated black colors, so as to form a colorful pattern." (Figure 11) (Li, 1993). We can also regard this serrated pattern as an imitation, emphasis and enhancement of the serrations in the middle seam and on both sides of the shell pattern. Johan Gunnar Andersson has a special description of this red color drawn with ochre (Note 2) and sandwiched between two jagged black lines: "There is a pattern that we often see. It is a red stripe with black stripes above and below. There is a gap between the red stripe and the two black stripes, and there is no painting. From the inside of the black stripe, a number of sawtooth patterns extend to the central red band. However, this pattern is almost existent in all the funerary pottery jars of the same period, but there is absolutely no trace of it in the domestic pottery of the same period. Therefore, we regard it as a kind of "mourning pattern" related to funerals, which is indeed reasonable." (Andersson, 1925). Andersson called it "mourning pattern" for a reason, because in our context, this pattern is not only a symbol of communicating with heaven through the multi-level world, but also symbolizes the blood flowing in the veins. This is a pattern designed specifically for the rebirth of the dead or communicating with heaven. In fact, all prehistoric patterns were designed for the soul to communicate with heaven and rebirth, so they can all be considered "mourning patterns." Ochre was already commonly used in the late Paleolithic period. Archaeologists have discovered red ochre and shells buried with the dead in cave burials of late Homo sapiens in the Grottes des Enfants in Menton, France, the Paviland Cave in Wales, England, and Shandingdong Cave in China. J·A·Hammerton, author of *Harmsworth's Universal Encyclopaedia*, said: "We have reason to believe that red ochre was a substitute for blood, the essence of life, and together with shells it was a symbol of production, or the giving of life. Both red ochre and shells were believed to increase the 'vitality' of the deceased, or in other words, to prolong the chances of survival." (Hammerton). Archaeological proof of this assertion is that the lower limb bones found in the Majiayao culture tombs at Yuanyangchi in Yongchang, Gansu, were painted red with ochre powder (Note 3).

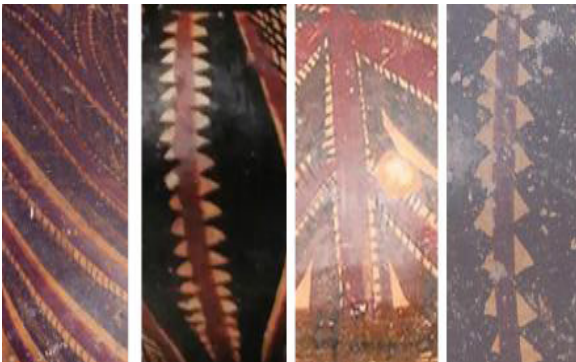


Figure 11: The Serrated Pattern on Majiayao Painted Pottery Symbolizes the Soul (Red) Reaching Heaven or Blood Vessels

Just as the "hao" (the hole in the middle) of the jade bi symbolizes heaven and Kunlun, in the decoration of Majiayao painted pottery, the concept of "Kunlun" is also often expressed by the spout of pottery (Figure 12A, E). It is like a saying in *Liezi-Tangwen*: "In the middle of the country there is a mountain called Huling, which is shaped like a clay jar. On the top of the mountain there is an opening shaped like a ring, called Zixue." This is why "Kunlun" is also called "black", "hole", "hunlun", "hundun", etc. The pattern often called "frog" or "frogman" by scholars is actually very similar to the Chinese character "tian", whether it is oracle bone script, bronze inscriptions or later large seal script (Figure 13). As emphasized in *Shuowen Jiezi*: "The head is the highest point in the human body, and the highest point in nature is the sky, so people use 'tian' to represent heaven", and the frog pattern on Majiayao painted pottery also emphasizes "top of human". However, in our context, it should be understood as: the zigzag lines are mountain shapes, and the vertical lines are pillars (trees, roads) that reach the sky. The expression

method of using the spout of a jar or a circle to symbolize "Kunlun" and "holes" makes the pattern look like the head of a frog or a frogman, just like the pipette-shaped rock carvings in the Andes Desert area of South America, in which the middle straight line symbolizes the sky, and finally evolved into a human shape (Figure 14), because the main body of communicating with heaven is, after all, a human.



Figure 12: The "Frog Pattern" Jar in Majiayao Painted Pottery Should Be Called a Mountain Shape and a Heaven Reaching Pillar in Chinese Context. The Concept of "Kunlun" is also Often Expressed by the Spout of a Pottery Pot or Jar (A, E)



Figure 13: The Evolution of the Chinese Character "Tian"



Figure 14: The South American Pipette-Shaped Heaven Reaching Pattern that Evolved into a Human Figure (Left) and the Heaven Reaching Pattern on the Machang Painted Pottery that Evolved into a Frogman Figure (Right)

A more vivid example of images comes from the Helan Mountain rock paintings, which can more directly link the painted pottery decorations with the Kunlun mythology. As mentioned earlier, Helan Mountain is Kunlun Mountain, both of which mean “sky” in the Hunnic language, and the only difference between the two is the transliteration. The Helan Mountain rock paintings are famous for human faces, and among these human faces there is a kind of human face with tear marks on the face, which rock painters call “tearful human faces”. In addition to the Helan Mountain site, this kind of “tearful human faces” has also been found in many other rock painting sites in Ningxia and Inner Mongolia (Figure 15). Interestingly, this kind of “tearful human faces” has also been found in the painted pottery of Majiayao and Zongri culture (Figure 16). As for the cultural symbol of this “tearful human face”, it is not the topic we are concerned about and discuss here. We only focus on their similarities in form. The uniqueness of the “tearful human faces” in rock paintings and painted pottery shows that their similarities can only be co-origin and cannot be convergent, that is, the two have a common ancestor. The similarities in origin can prove that there is a kinship or even blood relationship between Kunlun culture and Majiayao painted pottery, but it is expressed through different media.



Figure 15: A Tearful Human Face in a Rock Painting in Ningxia



Figure 16: A Tearful Human Face on a Painted Pottery Pot from Machang, Qinghai (Left) and a Zongri Painted Pottery Basin from Tongde County (Right)

The most common mountain-shaped decoration in Zongri painted pottery is called zigzag pattern, “multiple wave pattern” (Note 4), or “multiple continuous fold line pattern” by archaeologists. (Note 5) (Figure 17) However, this kind of fold line pattern is often decorated with dots, vertical paths, boots or human feet, and square brackets between the multiple fold lines or at the bottom (Figure 18A, B). These auxiliary patterns play the role of indicating things and their functions, just like six types of Chinese characters, showing that these patterns are not just fold line patterns, but “meaningful forms”. Therefore, we believe that calling it “fold line pattern” may make people ignore the importance of these auxiliary decorations, and it should be called “heaven-reaching decoration” because the mountain-shaped and vertical paths here all

symbolize reaching heaven. An extremely rare Liangzhu culture stone axe with tiger patterns, cirrus patterns and flying bird patterns on both sides was discovered at Dinggang site in Yixing, Wuxi, Jiangsu (Figure 19). Its cirrus pattern is very similar to the neck patterns of some Zongri painted pottery. It is also believed to be a pattern expressing the mountain shape (Kunlun) (Figure 18C), that is, the expression of Kunlun with “Que” or three layers of Kunlun. It is also the source of the mountain shape patterns of Xindian culture in the later Bronze Age.

The so-called “ox head” pattern in Xindian culture is the development of Majiayao Tongtian pattern. The late form of the word “tian” gradually developed from human shape to abstract, which seems to follow the evolutionary route from Majiayao’s frog pattern to Xindian’s ox head pattern. It is also the continuation of the mountain shape symbol of Zongri painted pottery (Figure 18D, E, F). This Tongtian thought and its expression patterns have been passed down from the prehistoric Neolithic through the Bronze Age to the historical period.

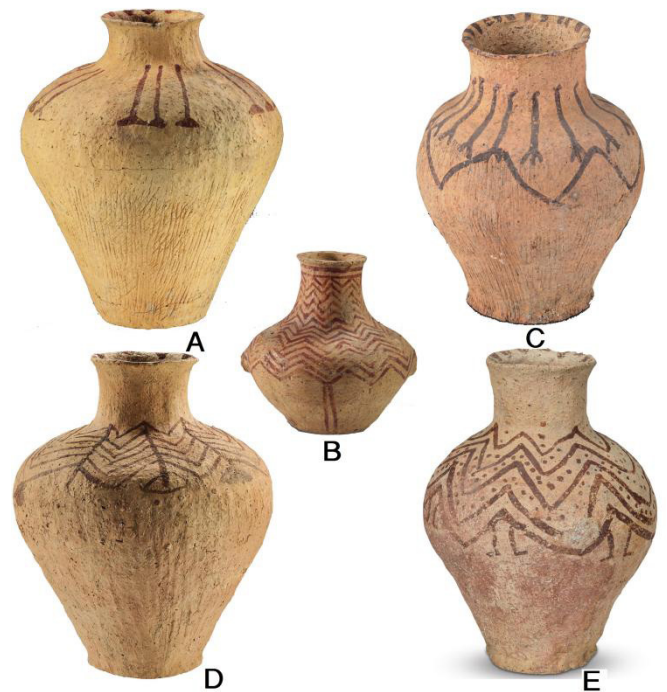


Figure 17: Zonori Culture Zigzag Patterns Showing the Pillars to Heaven (A), the World Mountain and the World Tree (C, D), and the Road to Heaven (B)



Figure 18: Zigzag Line Jars Representing the World Mountain (A-C) in Zongri Culture and Painted Pottery Jars Representing Communication with Heaven (D-F) in Xindian Culture

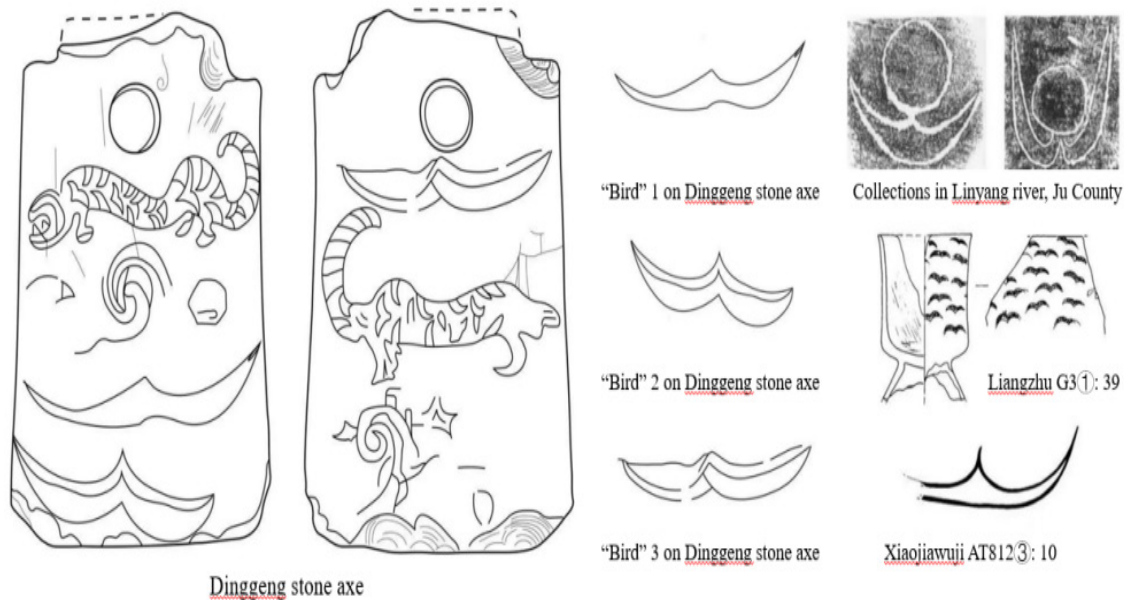


Figure 19: Stone Axes from the Liangzhu Culture Unearthed in Dinggeng Archaeological Site, Wuxi, Jiangsu

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The prehistoric painted pottery in the Hehuang area is the most brilliant prehistoric culture not only in Qinghai, in the northwest, in China, even in the world. According to statistics, there are more than 100,000 pieces circulating in the world now, which are magnificent and overwhelming. It is like Zhang Chengzhi wrote in his novel *The River in the North*: “The ancient painted pottery has become a river”. What are the cultural thoughts and cultural designs behind such a huge cultural product? If we know nothing about it, then these painted pottery are just cold prehistoric relics that idle away time. However, when we can explore the cultural thoughts and designs behind these cultural products, these cultural relics suddenly become alive. There must be a strong ideological system behind such a huge cultural product to support it, not just fragmented cultural concepts, which is the Kunlun mythology system. Only the Kunlun mythology system can accommodate this river of painted pottery, and similarly, only this river of painted pottery can overflow all the space of the Kunlun mythology system. Kunlun mythology is the voice of Majiayao painted pottery, and Majiayao painted pottery is the image of Kunlun mythology. Only the combination of the two can present the audio and video images of ancient Qinghai’s spiritual civilization and restore the unique and complete narrative of Qinghai’s ancient culture.

#### ANNOTATION

Note1: The note under the entry of “Jincheng County Linqiang (now Huangzhong County, Qinghai Province)” in “Han Shu-Geography” says: “In the northwest to the frontier, there are the West Queen Mother’s Stone Chamber, Xianhai and Salt Pond. The source of the Huangshui River in the north, east to Yunwu and into the river. In the west is Xudi Pond, Ruoshui and Kunlun Mountain Shrine, which Mang called Salt Qiang. Kan Yan said that there were Beihe Qiang in the west, which were the people who presented the land to Wang Mang as Xihai County.” (*Han Shu-Geography*, compact version. The Commercial Press, 1975, p.407.). *Shui Jing Zhu-Huangshui* also says: “Huangshui River flows out of the frontier, passes through the West Queen Mother’s Stone Chamber in the east, flows southeast, passes through Longyi City, so it is the land of Xiling.”

Note 2: A piece of ochre was unearthed from the Banshan Tomb in Huazhaizi, Lanzhou. See the Cultural Relics Team of Gansu Provincial Museum, etc.: Banshan Type Tomb in Huazhaizi, Lanzhou, *Journal of Archaeology*, No. 2, 190.

Note 3: Gansu Provincial Museum Cultural Relics Team, Wuwei District Cultural Relics Survey Team: Neolithic Tombs in Yuanyangchi, Yongchang, Gansu, *Journal of Archaeology*, 1982, No. 2.

Note 4: *Zongri Relics*, edited by Qinghai Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, et al. Science Press, 2022, p. 10.

Note 5: Qinghai Provincial Cultural Relics Administration, and Hainan Prefecture National Museum: “Brief Report on the Excavation of the Zongri Site in Tongde County, Qinghai”, *Archaeology*, No. 5, 1998: pp. 1-35; Qinghai Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, School of History and Culture, Hebei Normal University, School of History, Nanjing University: “Brief Report on the Excavation of the Tomb Area of the Zongri Site in Tongde County, Qinghai in 2020”, *Sichuan Cultural Relics*, No. 5, 2022: pp. 4-18.

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