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From Ethnic Group to Ethnicity: Rethinking Ethnicity Studies in Chinese Archaeology

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ABSTRACT Traditional culture-historical archaeology has long directly correlated specific combinations of material culture traits with ancient ethnic groups, forming the so-called "culture-ethnic group" correspondence model. This static research paradigm greatly simplifies the inherent fluidity, contextuality, and strategic nature of ethnic identity. From processual to post-processual archaeology, the traditional concept of archaeological culture has been critically reexamined. Among these, the concept of "ethnicity" proposed by Siân Jones is particularly representative. Re-examining Chinese archaeological materials through her framework yields interesting new insights. This paper takes four case studies—the Wuyishan Chengcun Han City site in Southeast China, the Nanyue Kingdom site in Lingnan, the Dunhuang Foyemiaowan cemetery in the Northwest, and the Zhangjiachang city site in the northern frontier—to re-evaluate the complex relationship between material cultural patterns and group identity from the perspective of ethnicity analysis. The results show that directly correlating archaeological cultures with ethnic identity is very difficult, and alternative research approaches should be sought. The exploration of ethnic affiliation in ancient populations must be situated in specific historical contexts, considering inter-group interaction, strategic choices, and the dynamic flow of boundaries, while also accepting the inherent uncertainty in this field.

KEYWORDS
ethnic archaeology, ethnicity, culture-historical archaeology, Chinese archaeology, material culture

1 Introduction

"What we have dug up—those pottery vessels, houses, and burials—who left them behind?" This is the most natural and fundamental question archaeologists ask when facing excavated remains. When a batch of archaeological materials is unearthed, archaeologists often seek to match them with some ethnic group recorded in historical texts—a practice that has long dominated archaeological research under the influence of culture-historical archaeology. From the time of V. Gordon Childe up to today (Childe 1929), despite much critical reflection, the tendency to correlate specific material cultures with specific people remains a powerfully attractive mode of thinking.

Critical reflection on this model began mainly with processual archaeology. Its representative scholar Colin Renfrew pointed out that ethnic groups are difficult to identify from archaeological materials (Renfrew & Bahn 2016). Also, Ian Hodder, a key figure in post-processual archaeology, also argued that ancient realities were far more complex than the simple equation of one pottery style equals one ethnic group (Hodder 1982).

It is against this academic background that Siân Jones, in her 1997 book *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present*, proposed the concept of "ethnicity" (Jones 1997). The concept of ethnicity aims to move beyond the static perspective that directly links material culture to ethnic groups, emphasizing the dynamic, contextual, and strategic nature of ethnic identity. The purpose of this paper is to explore how to use this theoretical perspective in specific Chinese archaeological cases to re-examine the complex relationship between archaeological culture and group identity.

This paper first briefly reviews the formation and theoretical foundations of the "culture-ethnic group" correspondence model in culture-historical archaeology, as well as the main criticisms from processual and post-processual approaches. Next, it introduces Jones's conceptual framework of ethnicity and discusses the translation of this term into Chinese and its usage in the Chinese context. On this basis, the paper selects four Chinese archaeological cases—the Wuyishan Chengcun Han City site, the Nanyue Kingdom site, the Dunhuang Foyemiaowan cemetery, and the Zhangjiachang city site in Ningxia—to examine expressions of ethnicity under different historical circumstances, including frontier ethnic polities, frontier administrative establishments, and multi-ethnic contact zones. Finally, the paper summa-

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rizes the discussion and reflects on the contributions and limitations of ethnic archaeology.

2 The Legacy of Culture-Historical Archaeology: From "Archaeological Culture" to "Ethnic Group" Correspondence

2.1 Childe and the Formation of the Concept of "Archaeological Culture"

Culture-historical archaeology reached its peak in the first half of the 20th century. Childe's classic definition of "archaeological culture" has had a profound and lasting influence, including on Chinese archaeologists today. Under this research paradigm, archaeologists often correlate a set of archaeological materials with a specific ethnic group, directly equating a particular material culture with a certain "ethnic group". For example, they might regard painted pottery culture as representing ethnic group A and black pottery culture as representing ethnic group B, or naturally assume in a study that one group of artifacts is Han in style while another is Xiongnu in style. This model, which directly links archaeological cultures to ethnic groups, deeply shapes the way archaeologists think. This is especially clear in studies of prehistoric periods (where there is no written evidence) and in archaeology done in border areas.

2.2 Risks of Correlating Archaeological Cultures with Ethnic Affiliation

Directly linking archaeological cultures with ethnic groups has inherent methodological difficulties and risks. Since the 1960s, the rise of processual archaeology (New Archaeology) has prompted deep reflection and critique of the culture-historical paradigm. As they pointed out, differences in material culture mainly reflect variations in ecological adaptation, technological function, economic strategy, or social organization, not necessarily ethnic identity. For instance, a change in pottery style might simply result from changes in locally available natural resources or improvements in manufacturing techniques, not from the replacement of the people who made or used it. Therefore, directly using "archaeological cultures" to correspond to ancient ethnic groups is a rather risky approach.

Compared with prehistoric studies, for periods with written records, linking archaeological finds to specific historical ethnic groups appears more common, yet the dangers of this practice have gradually been recognized by archaeologists. For example, research on the 8th-century Avars in the Carpathian Basin well illustrates this dilemma (Daim 1998). The belt sets considered the most typical markers of "Avar culture" are not uniformly distributed; they are more likely indicators of social status rather than ethnic labels. Meanwhile, on the empire's periphery, some communities selectively adopted Avar-style belt fittings while retaining other distinctive material culture elements. This shows that the borrowing of material culture was often driven by political strategies and social differentiation, not by subjective ethnic identity. Therefore, equating an archaeological culture defined by artifact assemblages with an ancient people likely obscures the fluid and contextual nature of early medieval identity.

Thus, the form and distribution of material culture do not directly correspond to the subjective identities of users; rather, reality is full of possibilities. Archaeologists can classify and describe artifacts, but it is difficult to determine what kind of identity motivated people's choices and actions.

3 Ethnicity: A Dynamic Conceptual Framework

3.1 Jones's Theoretical Contribution

Against the background of critical reflection on culture-historical archaeology, Jones proposed a different core concept —ethnicity. Jones provided clear definitions of related concepts, which can be compared to a dance performance: an ethnic group is like a theater troupe with members and a name; ethnic identity is like the strong belief and emotional attachment each performer feels about belonging to the troupe; and ethnicity is like the entire process of rehearsing, performing, competing, and cooperating —including the script, role distribution, competition or alliances between troupes, and audience reactions.

As is well known, Jones was deeply influenced by the anthropologist Fredrik Barth. Barth emphasized that ethnic groups are not simply products of cultural differences but are formed through boundary maintenance in social interaction (Barth eds. 1969). The formation and maintenance of ethnic boundaries depend on the group's differentiation between "us" and "them" in specific social contexts, rather than on some fixed, inherent cultural traits. Therefore, in contrast to the culture-historical school's assumption that specific material cultures necessarily correspond to specific ethnic groups and its practice of mapping archaeological cultures to reconstruct ethnic migrations and distributions, Jones emphasizes how we can observe the construction and maintenance of ethnic boundaries through everyday practices such as diet, ritual, and dress.

3.2 Conceptual Distinctions in the Chinese Context: Ethnic Affiliation vs. Ethnicity

Jones's work has also been influential in Chinese archae-

ology, and its Chinese translation rendered "ethnicity" as *zushu* 族属.[1] However, in actual usage within Chinese archaeology, the meaning of *zushu* deviates notably from Jones's original intention.

When Chinese archaeologists discuss *zushu*, they often refer to the populations or ethnic groups corresponding to different archaeological cultures, such as the Qin, Chu, Han, Xiongnu, or Xianbei peoples recorded in historical texts. These concepts have both ethnic connotations and may refer to shared political identities; their usage is quite broad and ambiguous. For example, when a Chinese archaeologist says a certain burial is a "Qin tomb", the word "Qin" could mean the Qin state, the Qin ethnic group, or the Qin culture in archaeological terms; the tomb occupant might be from the Qin heartland or from newly conquered populations.

It is also interesting to observe how the Chinese word *zushu* 族属 is translated into English in Chinese scholarship. For the analysis in this part, we have mainly referred to the English titles or abstracts of the relevant Chinese scholarship. Roughly, there are four approaches: first, as ethnic identity (Pan and Li 2025) or family (Guo 2025), carrying a sense of blood relations; second, as nationality (Sun 2006), reflecting the research focus on Shang-Zhou period archaeology; third, as ethnic attribution (Zhang and Pan 2025), emphasizing belonging; and fourth, as ethnicity (Liang and An 2023; Tong and Zhuang 2024), perhaps influenced by the popularity of *The Archaeology of Ethnicity*. The first three essentially still refer to specific groups of people, whether defined by blood, polity, or both. The fourth, although appearing to absorb the concept of ethnicity, in fact still treats it as an objective classification label based on material remains (such as grave goods, burial customs), more corresponding to "ethnic group" (族别) or "ethnic affiliation" (族群归属) in Chinese—an analytical tool imposed by researchers to match a certain ethnicity in history. For example, in Liang's article, although the English title uses the word "ethnicity", the content actually discusses how to correlate archaeological cultures with specific ethnic groups such as Zhou, Qin, and Yiqu Rong. The author argues that "among various elements of archaeological culture, burial customs have the strongest correlation with ethnic affiliation, followed by pottery, bronze ritual vessels, and weakest weapons and tools." Here, the issue of *zushu* actually corresponds to ethnic group and ethnic identity as used in the article's English abstract. So we can see that the definition of *zushu* in Chinese archaeological research differs markedly from Jones's definition of ethnicity; the former should more accurately be translated as ethnic group or similar static, bounded concepts. Moreover, in ancient Chinese literature, *zushu* even carries the meaning of "relatives sharing the same bloodline." From this perspective, translating dynamic ethnicity as *zushu* can easily cause widespread misunderstanding; a more appropriate Chinese translation might be *zuqunxing* 族群性.

3.3 Insights from Jones's Romanization Case Study

Jones used a case study on Romanization in ancient Britain to demonstrate how to apply the concept of ethnicity in concrete analysis. Traditional Romanization studies described it as a unidirectional, linear process of replacement or fusion of indigenous culture after Roman conquest, ultimately forming a homogeneous "Romano-British" culture. This concept is grounded in colonial and imperial ideologies from the 19th to the early 20th century, tending to describe the outward spread of cultural traits rather than analyzing internal social dynamics. In terms of periodization, traditional research frameworks often draw a clear line between the "Iron Age" and the "Roman period". This is certainly a convenient way to divide history based on historical events, but it also creates rigid boundaries and overlooks the social and cultural continuities and complexities that existed across the conquest period. When identifying ethnic groups, archaeological finds are sometimes directly linked to the names of tribes mentioned in classical texts. These "tribes" or "ethnic groups" are treated as fixed entities with clear boundaries and internal uniformity. Researchers often lack a dynamic analysis of their social and political nature.

Jones reinterprets Romanization as a locally driven process. Local elites, in particular, actively adopted and displayed Roman material culture and lifestyles to compete for and strengthen their power. They integrated these new elements into their existing social hierarchies and patron-client relationships. Because different regions and groups had different histories and structures of interaction with the Roman Empire, the forms, degrees, and outcomes of Romanization varied considerably from place to place.

This Romanization example will not be unfamiliar to Chinese archaeologists. When we study so-called "frontier archaeology"—that is, archaeological research on the borderlands of great unified dynasties —we often encounter similar situations. We frequently use concepts like "Sinification" (汉化) or "Huaxia-ization" (华夏化) to summarize the acculturation processes between "Han culture" and other archaeological cultures. Jones's conclusions about Romanization profoundly remind us that ethnicity analysis must be placed in specific temporal and spatial contexts; generalizations are not possible without reference to concrete historical circumstances.

[1] On the usage of the term *zushu* in Chinese archaeology and its correspondence to English ethnicity, see Chen Chun 陈淳, "Theory and Methods in Ethnic Archaeology 族属考古的理论与方法", *China Cultural Relics News* 中国文物报, July 11, 2017, and related discussions.

4 Chinese Case Studies

4.1 Wuyishan Chengcun Han City Site: Strategic Imitation by a Frontier Ethnic Group

The Wuyishan Chengcun Han City 武夷山城村汉城 site is located in Chengcun, Xingtian Town, Wuyishan City, Fujian Province, in a mountain basin surrounded by the Wuyi Mountains and the Chongyang River. The city wall, built of rammed earth following the terrain, is roughly rectangular in plan and covers about 480,000 square meters (Yang eds. 2004). Although the site is located on the southeastern coast of China, its core buildings clearly imitated the architectural styles of the Central Plains region. For example, two palace-style building foundations have been found at the center of the site, which are typical of the Qin-Han period Central Plains style. In addition to the layout and construction techniques, the building materials also show the same features. A large number of tile-ends with auspicious inscriptions such as "Wansui 万岁", "Changle 常乐", and "Le Weiyang 乐未央" have been unearthed at the site. The excavators judged that their manufacturing techniques were the same as those used in the Central Plains core area at that time. Among the pottery vessels found, there were both locally styled ones and those imitating Han-style vessels from the Central Plains.

There have been debates about the date and nature of this site. Regarding the date, apart from early rough estimates, most scholars now place it in the early Western Han (no earlier than 202 BCE), with the lower limit at the first year of Yuanfeng 元封 of Emperor Wu (110 BCE). As for the site's nature, some scholars believe it was the capital of the Minyue 闽越 kingdom—hence the name "Minyue King City"—while others think it may have been a military stronghold in the early Western Han and only later became the capital (Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences eds. 2010: 295). The Minyue were an ethnic group mainly distributed in Fujian from pre-Qin to Han times, and the origins of the Austronesian language family are often linked to the Min people. At the Chengcun Han City site, the coexistence of different styles of archaeological culture itself indicates a very complex historical background.

Examining the Chengcun Han City from the perspective of ethnicity shifts the focus from mere artifact dating and archaeological culture studies to exploring how material remains witnessed the self-identification, cultural adaptation, and interaction with Central Plains Han culture of the ancient Minyue people. At least the following observations can be made:

First, the large palace foundations and the unearthed building components with strong Central Plains styles reflect the emulation and borrowing of Central Plains political authority and ritual systems by the Minyue elite, which was an important means for them to construct their own legitimacy and authority.

Second, alongside imitation, there was selective adoption of Central Plains culture, not passive acceptance. For example, technical analysis of tiles from the site suggests influences from both the imperial center and the Chu region (represented by the Shouchun City site) (Cai and Teng 2017).

Third, the city had functional zones including palace areas, craft workshops, and residential areas within the walls, and large burial areas outside, indicating a complex social structure at that time.

Fourth, archaeological layers and finds indicate that the site was destroyed around the mid-Western Han, roughly matching the historical record that Emperor Wu of Han ordered the destruction of Minyue palaces after pacifying the region. Even if some opponents argue that this site was not the actual Minyue capital, such large-scale destruction is clearly non-natural and likely corresponds to the end of a relatively independent local ethnic polity, reflecting dramatic changes in ethnic boundaries under political and military forces.

4.2 Nanyue Kingdom Sites: Strategic Construction of Elite Identity

Similar to the Minyue King City, comparable situations are found at sites related to the Nanyue Kingdom. These sites are mainly distributed in the Lingnan region, centered on Guangzhou, including the tomb of the highest ruler—the Nanyue King—as well as middle-stratum and commoner burials, and the Nanyue royal palace site—the capital of the Nanyue Kingdom (Guangzhou Municipal Institute of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology and Nanyue King's Palace Museum Preparatory Office ed. 2008). The architecture, burials, and artifacts of Nanyue show not only so-called "Yue 越" cultural styles but also strong Central Plains characteristics. For instance, the famous gold seal excavated from the Nanyue King's tomb was made following the style of Qin-Han imperial seals. Compared with the Minyue King City, the Nanyue sites have yielded richer inscribed materials. Because of the greater number of written materials, especially texts related to palace names and bamboo slips, we know much more about Nanyue than about Minyue.

Applying an ethnicity perspective to the Nanyue Kingdom means no longer simply labeling archaeological finds as "Han" or "Yue," but focusing on how ethnic identity was constructed, expressed, and changed through material culture over time.

From the perspective of elite strategies, the Nanyue King Zhao Tuo 赵佗 initially established his independent rule in Lingnan, facing a complex situation of multiethnic coexistence. To maintain stable rule, Zhao Tuo and his successors adopted a policy of "harmonizing the

hundred Yue 和辑百越", skillfully combining Central Plains political organization and ritual systems with local social structures and material culture of Lingnan, creating a hybrid regime that could both engage with the Central Plains dynasty and effectively govern Lingnan. From the perspective of local society's selective adoption, for local elites and commoners, ethnic identity construction was more pragmatic and contextual. They might selectively adopt Han cultural elements (such as iron tools, Chinese characters) to raise social status or adapt to new political-economic environments, while retaining many Yue cultural traditions in daily life and burial customs to maintain internal cohesion and identity.

The archaeological remains of the Nanyue Kingdom clearly show how, under certain historical conditions, ethnic identity was strategically used, creatively blended, and finally expressed in physical objects. This helps us move beyond the simple idea that people were either "Han" or "Yue". For example, studies of Nanyue cemeteries suggest that during the process of mixing with Han culture, it was the upper-class local nobles who first changed. They adopted Han Chinese customs for utensils, tomb shapes, and burial practices (Yuan 2026). In other words, social ranks within the ethnic group affected how fast cultural mixing happened.

4.3 Dunhuang Foyemiaowan Cemetery: Mismatch between Archaeological Culture and Genetic Background

In addition to traditional archaeological and historical methods, recent scientific techniques have offered new perspectives for ethnic archaeology. Although a person's bloodline does not represent their cultural identity nor directly reflect their ethnic affiliation, combined with other archaeological indications it can still play a useful role. A recent study focused on the Dunhuang Foyemiaowan 敦煌佛爷庙湾 cemetery in northwestern China (ca. 220–907 CE). Researchers conducted Y-chromosome and mitochondrial DNA genetic analyses on ancient human remains to explore the population's ethnic background and compared the results with archaeological cultural traits (Xiong et al. 2022).

The study found that paternal lineages (Y-chromosome) showed close links to Tibeto-Burman-speaking populations, as well as typical Han-related lineages, Altaic lineages, and a small amount of East Asian southern lineages; maternal lineages (mitochondrial DNA) showed close ties to Mongolic populations, with gene pools also containing East Asian northern, East Asian southern, and even a trace of West Eurasian lineages. This indicates that the Foyemiaowan population experienced a complex history of multi-source admixture.

What is more noteworthy is the discrepancy between the archaeological culture and the genetic background. In terms of material remains, the tomb structures (e.g., chamber tombs) and grave goods (e.g., daily-use pottery and Han-style bronze mirrors) at this cemetery all show a typical Han Chinese cultural style, consistent with the traditions of the Central Plains (Gansu Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology eds. 1998). However, the genetic analysis reveals that this population had mixed multi-ethnic features in both paternal and maternal lineages. Therefore, the archaeological culture that appears as Han Chinese tradition at the Foyemiaowan cemetery does not match the actual genetic ethnic background of that population. This example vividly illustrates that we cannot simply use material culture to define the cultural identity or ethnic identity of ancient populations.

This phenomenon has a historical background: after the Han dynasty, the central government's control over the Hexi Corridor weakened, and regional regimes established by non-Han groups such as Xianbei, Di, and Lushui Hu 卢水胡 alternately ruled the area, with frequent warfare and migration. Dunhuang was located on the Silk Road thoroughfare, influenced by population movements and cultural exchanges from multiple directions —Central Plains, Mongolian Plateau, Qinghai-Xizang Plateau, and the Western Regions—and historical records also document the coexistence of Han, Di, Qiang, Xianbei, and various Western Region peoples in the Hexi Corridor at that time. The complex genetic structure of the Foyemiaowan population was precisely a product of this period's specific geopolitics and the demographic flows along the Silk Road. Although their archaeological cultural appearance was similar to Central Plains sites, their genetic structure and dietary habits differed significantly from typical Han populations. Interestingly, although during this period the imperial court gradually abandoned direct control over the Hexi Corridor and various non-Han regional political forces became dominant, Han cultural elements still strongly influenced the people of Foyemiaowan. How did this influence persist in people's minds? This becomes a new question worthy of deeper exploration in ethnicity studies.

4.4 Ningxia Zhangjiachang City Site: Multi-Ethnic Integration in a Frontier Town

The last case comes from the Zhangjiachang 张家场 City Site project in Yanchi County, Ningxia Province.[2] This city site, located on the Gobi desert, belongs to the northwestern frontier region during the Qin-Han period. We have been conducting continuous archaeological excavations at this site since 2021. Through this work, it can be

[2] The Zhangjiachang City Site was excavated by Ningxia Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and School of Archaeology and Museology, Peking University during 2021 to 2026. The official excavation report has not yet been published; the information cited here has been authorized by the project leader.

observed that whether in terms of city layout, construction techniques, building materials, coinage, or extramural burials, this ancient site is highly consistent with the stylistic features of the Central Plains region. Based on the unearthed seals and clay seal impressions, as well as the scale and layout of the city, it can be inferred that this site was an administrative institution established by the Han government in the northwestern frontier region.

If we were to use the conventional research approach of the past —that is, directly matching archaeological cultural features to the ethnic identity of the people who used them—then there would be no doubt that we would consider the Zhangjiachang City Site to be a typical Han culture. Moreover, what makes this case special is that the Han cultural elements reflected in the artifacts unearthed here are even more "pure" and typical than those at the Chengcun Han City Site. This is because, with the exception of a very few pottery vessels, the architecture and utensils here are all highly similar to those found in the Central Plains region.

However, from an ethnicity perspective, the ethnic affiliation of the city's inhabitants is not so clear. Apart from typical Central Plains-style artifacts (especially the seals and clay sealings that symbolize administrators), we excavated large quantities of animal bones, mainly cattle, horses, and sheep, which are generally considered indicative of a nomadic lifestyle. Before the city was built, this area had long been used by nomadic populations. It is easy to imagine that this site was a stage where people of different backgrounds (possibly including garrison soldiers, Central Plains migrants, local residents, affiliated nomads, merchants, etc.) lived together, and their ethnic affiliations must have been dynamic, contextual, and multi-layered. Thus, although we can identify the city's administrators and administrative affiliation, it is still difficult to determine the ethnic affiliations of individual residents simply based on artifacts.

In addition, it is worth noting that on a pottery jar excavated within the city, there are two Chinese characters inscribed "Huren" (胡人， means Hu people). Was this an object made by Han people to refer to the Hu people? Or was it an object used or even made by the submitted Hu people themselves? Obviously, we cannot determine this based solely on this pottery jar, but it makes the issue of ethnic identity at this site more interesting and more complicated.

5 Discussion

5.1 Mismatch between Archaeological Culture and Ethnic Identity

The four cases above collectively reveal the complex, non-corresponding relationship between archaeological cultures and ethnic identity. The "Han-style" palaces and "Wansui" tiles at Minyue King City, the coexistence of the Nanyue gold seal with Yue cultural traditions, the mismatch between Han-style burials and multi-source genetic backgrounds at Foyemiaowan, and the coexistence of Central Plains-style architecture/burials with pastoral economic remains at Zhangjiachang —these cases demonstrate again that there is no simple direct correspondence between material cultural appearance and the actual identity of the people. On one hand, the same material culture style may be used by people of different ethnic backgrounds; on the other hand, the same people may practice different material cultural expressions depending on the context, perhaps displaying one identity in public and another in private. Material cultural differences in different historical contexts may reflect social status differences (as in the Minyue elite's emulation of Central Plains ritual), economic strategy differences (as in the coexistence of pastoral and agricultural economies at Zhangjiachang), or technological diffusion processes (as in the spread of Han-style pottery-making techniques at various sites). Furthermore, material cultural practices are highly contextual—the same group might selectively display or conceal certain identity markers in different social settings. Therefore, establishing simple one-to-one correspondences between archaeological cultures and ethnic identities faces fundamental methodological difficulties.

5.2 Theoretical Insights of Ethnicity Analysis

Jones's concept of ethnicity provides an effective theoretical tool for understanding the complexity of the phenomena described above. Unlike traditional approaches that treat ethnic identity as a static label, ethnicity analysis understands identity as a social process embedded in daily practice. In the cases of the Chengcun Han City Sity and the Nanyue Kingdom Sites, we can see how ethnic identity was strategically mobilized and displayed. The upper class of the Minyue state constructed their political authority and legitimacy of rule by imitating the Central Plains palace system and inscribed roof tiles. Zhao Tuo, the King of Nanyue, skillfully integrated the Central Plains political system with local social structures through a new policy, thereby better managing the complex situation of multi-ethnic coexistence. These are all manifestations of strategic ethnicity. In the cases of the Foyemiaowan cemetery and the Zhangjiachang City Site, we can see the situational nature of ethnic identity. The same group of people might selectively display or conceal specific cultural markers on different social occasions, thus leaving behind seemingly contradictory material culture assemblages in the archaeological record. Barth's boundary analysis, which focuses on how ethnic groups are formed through the maintenance of boundaries in social interaction, is also fully reflected in these cases.

5.3 Contributions and Limits of Scientific Techniques

The genetic analysis from the Foyemiaowan Cemetery offers a striking new perspective for ethnic archaeology. However, it must be clearly recognized that a person's DNA does not represent their cultural identity, nor does it directly reflect ethnic affiliation. Genetic background reveals population origins and admixture history, while archaeological culture reflects the inheritance, selection, and adaptation of material and behavioral practices in social life. When they diverge as at Foyemiaowan, it provides crucial clues for understanding the dynamic construction of ethnic identity. DNA information must be combined with other archaeological evidence to be most useful. With today's increasingly advanced scientific techniques, we still need to maintain theoretical clarity: empirical data ultimately need to be interpreted within specific historical and archaeological contexts.

6 Conclusion

In summary, in archaeological studies concerning ethnic identity, it is very difficult to find unambiguous "ethnic markers" directly within archaeological cultures. The traditional practice of directly equating specific material cultural traits with ethnic groups recorded in historical texts greatly simplifies the inherent fluidity, contextuality, and strategic nature of ethnic identity.

By introducing Jones's concept of "ethnicity", we can see that the search for ethnic identity in ancient populations must not be detached from the specific historical background of each site; we must consider inter-group interaction, strategic choices, and boundary flows. Even so, we must acknowledge that this endeavor is always accompanied by uncertainty. It is precisely this process of exploring amid uncertainty, of approaching historical complexity in specific contexts, that constitutes the enduring fascination of archaeology as it investigates ancient social life.

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