

# THE RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION OF THE YIHE-NUR CEMETERY IN ZHENGXIANGBAI BANNER (2012-2014)

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The Yihe-Nur Cemetery, excavated in 2012-2014, is important as the northernmost Northern Wei Dynasty (北魏) cemetery so far discovered in China, with artefacts indicating connections with peoples of the steppe and more broadly along the Eurasian “silk

roads.” Significant analogies to the newly excavated material are to be found in tombs excavated in the suburbs of Datong (Pingcheng), the Northern Wei capital before it was moved to Luoyang in 493 CE.

The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is located on the northern frontier of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It is adjacent to Mongolia and the Russian Federation in the North, and comprises an area of 118,300 km<sup>2</sup>. The Yihe-Nur Cemetery (伊和淖尔墓地) is located in the Yihenoer Sumu [Fig. 1a,b] (伊和淖尔苏木, Zhengxiangbai Banner (正镶白旗), Xilin Gol League (锡林郭勒盟), of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and some 5 km northeast of Baori-Taolegin Gacha (陶勒盖嘎查), 1 km northwest of the Hadaqigen Lake (哈达其根淖尔湖), and 4.5 km northeast of Yihenoer Lake (伊和淖尔湖). This region is situated at the southern edge of the Hunshandake Desert [Fig. 2] (浑善达克沙地), which has a typical steppe geomorphological environment. The cemetery is surrounded by low hills that form a little mountain valley from the east to the west. The northeast part of the valley is covered by yellow sand dunes, at an elevation of ca. 1265 m. The middle of the valley lies on a slope, which is high in the west and low in the east. The Yihe-Nur Cemetery was found in the western part at an altitude between 1251-1253 m.

Due to the cemetery’s remote location it has been looted repeatedly. In the middle of June 2010, the Public Security Bureau of Zhengxiangbai Banner tracked down a case concerning the Yihe-Nur Cemetery, and recovered a set of valuable relics of the Northern Wei Dynasty that had been taken



Fig. 1a,b. Maps indicating location of Yihe-Nur Cemetery.

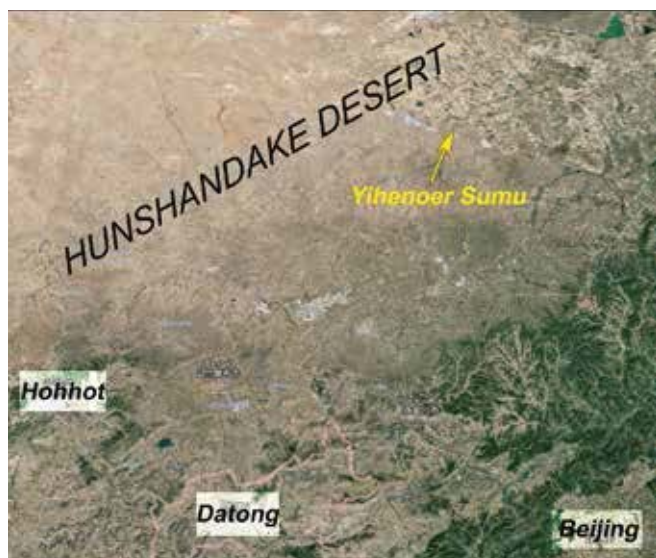


Fig. 2. Satellite photograph showing natural environment of the region. Base image: Google maps.

from Tomb M1. In May 2012, the cemetery was looted again, after which the local staffs of the heritage conservation institute salvaged the destroyed Tomb M2. In October 2013, a group of diggers had opened another tomb (M3), but fortunately were prevented from looting it when reported by local herders. Preserved intact, this the tomb was cleaned by the staffs of the Heritage Management Station, Xilin Gol League (锡林郭勒盟文物管理站). Among the burials in the cemetery, these three tombs (Nos. M1, M2, and M3) are the best preserved and have the highest classification, since they contained a rich array of goods. In light of the distinctiveness and importance of the tombs, the Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology decided to investigate and excavate the cemetery. From August to December 2014, an archaeological team assembled by the Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, the Heritage Management Station of Xilin Gol League, and the Heritage Management Station of Zhengxiangbai Banner, explored parts of the cemetery and excavated three new tombs: Nos. M4, M5, and M6. Tombs M1, M2, M3, M5 and M6 date to the Northern Wei period; Tomb M4 tomb belongs to the Liao Dynasty era [Figs. 3, 4].

### The construction of the Northern Wei tombs

The five Northern Wei tombs were concentrated in one location. M1, M2, and M3 (oriented respectively 34°, 35°, and 8°) were situated along the northeast-southwest side of the cemetery, the tomb passages positioned on the north of the chambers. M5 and M6 were also situated on the northeast-southwest side, oriented 213° and 235°, with the tomb passages to the south of the chambers. All these five tombs include a catacomb and a tomb passage (dromos), the latter

having a rectangular plan and sloping downward towards the tomb chamber.

**Tomb M1.** The tomb passage (10.5 m long, 1.9 m wide and 8.6 m deep) was filled with yellow soil and red clay. The chamber (measuring 3.5 x 2.5 m, and 3.1m high) is vaulted, which means that the ceiling is arched and circular while the ground plan is rectangular. The wooden coffin that was placed in the center of the chamber contained a disturbed skeleton, and was decorated on the outside with a gilt bronze ornament with a ring (in the form of a door handle, *pu shou* 铺首), gilt bronze bosses, and iron rings. Outside the coffin were a pot, a silver bowl with a floral design and human figures, a three-footed bronze basin and an iron lamp. In addition, the Public Security Bureau recovered 111 artifacts, including pots, lacquerwares, glass bowls, a gold headband, a gold chin-strap (下颌托), gold ear-rings, gold chains, gold bells, a silver double-eared cup, and turquoise and carnelian beads, etc.

**Tomb M2** is situated in the western side of the cemetery, 16 m east of Tomb M1. The dromos is rectangular, measuring 15 x 2 m, its entrance 0.9 m

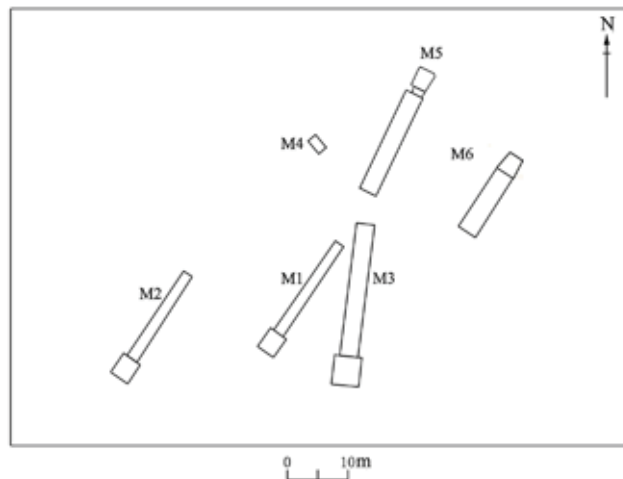


Fig. 3. Plan of the Yihe-Nur Cemetery.

Fig. 4. Tombs M4, M5 and M6.





Figs. 5, 6, 7. The tomb chamber of M3, the occupant of the coffin, and a detail of his head.

deep, and slopes steeply down to 9 m. The dromos was filled completely with a mixture of yellow soil and red clay. The rectangular chamber is 3.1 m along its north-south axis, 2.5 m along the east-west axis, and has a levelled floor. The roof of the chamber had collapsed, destroyed by looters, but four vertical walls 2.8 m high with a smooth surface remain. There was one coffin placed in the chamber's center, oriented 35° NE. The skeleton had been scattered, and the end of the coffin destroyed. Due to the looting, few grave goods were found. These include a pottery lamp found at the western side of the coffin's front, one pot found at the front on the eastern side, and 2 jugs found next to the coffin's end.

*Tomb M3* [Figs. 5-7] is composed of a dromos, a corridor (甬道) and a chamber. The dromos is 23 m long, 4

m wide, and 9.6 m deep. The side walls are stepped, with a 0.45 m wide shelf running along their length. The vaulted corridor, 1.1 m long and 1.5 m high, has vertical walls. The rectangular chamber measures 3.5 x 2.9 m, and is 2.26 m high. In the center of the chamber was a wooden coffin, outside of whose four corners were uncovered a pottery pot, sacrificed animal bones, an iron lamp and bronze curtain hooks (帐钩). The tomb occupant is wrapped in yellow silk, and wears a gold headband, a gold necklace, a gold *Dixie* belt (金蹠鞞带, a waist belt with attachment fixtures), gold finger rings, and leather boots. Inside the coffin was well preserved pottery, lacquerwares, a bow, a knife, a leather caftan, and some other remains.





Fig. 8. Tomb M5.

*Tomb M5* [Fig. 8] is composed of a dromos, corridor and a chamber. The dromos is 16.7 x 2.45-3.0 m and descends to a depth of 8.7 m. The vaulted corridor has vertical walls and measures 1.5 (L) x 2 (W) x 1.5 m (H). Some human bones and remains were found inside the looter's hole at the entrance of the corridor. Pottery pots and jars, gold finger rings, beads, bronze bosses, iron nails, leather products, planks of the wooden coffin, horse bones, cattle bones and sheep bones, etc. were also found. The rectangular chamber, which had collapsed, measures 3.7 x 3.3 x 2 m. Traces of coffin panels were found in the soil piled in the center of the chamber. The coffin, oriented northeast, had been emptied by looters. In the southwest corner of the chamber were a pottery pot and sheep bones; in the northwest corner were a damaged lacquer piece, sheep bones and horse bones; and in the northeast corner, iron hooks and one sheep skeleton. Moreover, a well-preserved human skeleton was uncovered

Figs. 9, 10. Tomb M6 with detail inside coffin.



2.15 m deep in the filling soil of the dromos, near the entrance. The body lay in a stretched supine position, oriented northeast, with a slightly inclined head. The entire body was wrapped in felt, and buried with bronze earrings and an open-work bronze appliqué mount with three small bells.

*Tomb M6* is composed of a dromos and a chamber. The dromos is 2.6 m wide at the opening, narrowing to 1.3 m, is 12 m long, and 6.2 m deep. Its side walls each have a 0.6 m wide shelf. The vaulted tomb chamber had already collapsed, and was blocked by planks placed vertically in the entrance. The chamber is rectangular with vertical walls and measures 3.3 (L) x 2 (W) x 1.6 (H) m. The wooden coffin in the chamber's center was oriented NE. It contained a single occupant, buried in a stretched position with a northeastern orientation. This person was wearing gold earrings, a gold necklace, a Diexie belt, and gold finger rings. Northeast of the skull were a lacquer bowl and container. From the waist down were objects made of pottery, a bone vessel, a wooden vessel, leather products, beads etc. [Figs. 9-10].

#### Artifacts from the Northern Wei tombs

*Wooden Coffin.* Every tomb contained a wooden trapezoidal coffin, high and wide at the head and low and narrow at the foot. The top and ends of the coffin are slightly inclined outward. The surface is painted with black lacquer, and covered with thin light-colored silk (絹). The lid, side, head, foot and bottom

are all made of linked panels, with Y (~Ya [亚])-shaped notches along the edges where hourglass-shaped plugs were inserted to join the boards.

The coffin of Tomb M2 is 2.65 m long, at the head it is 1.4 (W) x 1.27 (H) m, and at the foot, 0.7 x 0.7 m. The lid has a thickness between 0.09-0.13 m. Inside the coffin is a shelf: human remains were placed on top of it, and funerary objects underneath. The surface of the coffin is decorated with 14 gilt-bronze ornaments with round “handles” (铺首), 52 gilt-bronze bosses and 6 iron rings distributed as follows: one side panel has 5 of the ornaments, under which are 2 iron rings surrounded by 15 bosses; the front panel has 3 ornaments surrounded by 7 bosses; the back panel has one ornament and one ring, but all the bosses have fallen out.



Tomb M3 contained a well-preserved coffin, 2.7 m long with a head panel 1.2 x 1.4 m and foot panel 0.55 x 0.55 m. The lid is between 0.08-0.12 m thick. The coffin has gilt-bronze bosses and gilt-bronze ornaments on its surface, and the head and foot panels are painted [Fig. 11]. On the head panel is a painting of a house with a red pillar and blue roof. In the center of the house is seated the occupant surrounded by his many white-faced attendants, who are standing or sitting and wearing round hoods. The exaggerated face and body proportions of the main occupant distinguish him sharply from the attendants [Fig. 12; Color Pl. IV].

The ornaments with ring “handles” are all gilt bronze, in the shape of a beast’s face holding a loop in its mouth that is cast as a separate piece. The beast’s face is ferocious, with erect ears pointing upwards, bulging eyes, a high pointed triangular nose and wicked-looking fangs or tusks protruding on each side of the mouth. The face is framed with curls, and the outline of the face is made more natural by some lines that give it a more artistic sense. The loop hangs under the nose of the beast from a semi-circular hook. Both the ears and tusks have small round holes through which iron nails attached the ornament to the coffin. In addition to these features, on the ornament found in Tomb M1, located between the ears, is the figure of a giant who squats on the tails of two addorsed *loongs* (Chinese abstract dragons, 龙), holding them tightly by the heads, which are turned toward him [Fig. 13; Color Pl. IV]. This is an image well attested in other cultures of the “tamer of animals,” although in China it probably represents Huan Long Shi, the dragon tamer.<sup>1</sup> This ornamental bronze measures 16.5 x 16 cm, with a loop 12 cm in

Fig. 11. Wooden coffin of M3

Fig. 12. Painting on the head panel of the wooden coffin of M3



Fig. 13 (left). The gilt bronze ring handles from Tomb M1.

Fig. 14 (below). A gilt bronze ring handle from Tomb M2.



diameter and 1.6 cm wide. The bronze ornament from Tomb M2 is different: between the ears are two horns that curl inward, and between the horns is what might be interpreted as a tree trunk with curving branches at the top, on which stand two confronted birds (their heads turned away from each other) with long tails [Fig. 14]. The distance between the tips of the beast's fangs is 13.1 cm, its face is 10.7 cm wide, and its nose 3.1 cm high. The loop has a 10 cm diameter and is 1.4 cm wide. The bosses on the coffin have round, umbrella-shaped heads 5.3 cm in diameter that are 0.5 cm high and 0.1-0.2 cm thick, with a cylindrical nail down through the middle to attach them to the wood [Figs. 11].

*Ceramic.* The number of ceramics discovered is different in every tomb: M3 has the largest amount,

Fig. 15. Jar from Tomb M3, outside the coffin.

Fig. 16. Pot from Tomb M3, inside the coffin.

Fig. 17. Lamp from Tomb M2

a total of 12 pieces; M6 has only one piece. There are three types: pots, jars, and lamps. The jar found in M3 has an everted mouth, a long neck, and a small flat base. Its rim diameter is 19 cm, base diameter 13.1 cm and height 42.3 cm [Fig. 15]. The pot from M3 has a plate-shaped rim, a flared neck, rounded shoulders, a bulging body, and flat bottom. Its rim diameter is 8.1 cm, base diameter 5.1 cm and height 13.1 cm [Fig. 16]. The lamp from M2 [Fig. 17] has a round bowl-shaped dish set on a horn-shaped base decorated with 4 openwork holes equidistant from each other. The lamp has a 12 cm rim diameter, a 11.2 cm base diameter, and is 15.1 cm high. On the lamp are still some traces of soot.

*Glazed ceramic.* Tomb M1 contained five brown-glazed ceramic pots and four jars. All of the jars have an everted rim, a flared neck, rounded shoulders, a bulging body and a flat base. One jar has a 6.1 cm rim diameter, a 4.4 cm diameter at the bottom, and





Fig. 18. Glazed ceramic jar from Tomb M1.

Fig. 19. Glazed ceramic pot from Tomb M1.

is 10.1 cm high [Fig. 18]. The pots have a flared neck, rounded shoulders and a flat bottom. One pot has a 6.4 cm rim diameter, a 3.2 cm diameter at the bottom, and a height of 10.2 cm [Fig. 19].

*Gold chin strap.* In Tomb M1 archaeologists have unearthed a remarkable gold chin strap [Fig. 20; Color Pl. V], whose parts include a round headband (23 cm in diameter), two V-shaped cheek-girdles and a spoon-shaped jaw-guard. The function of this chin-strap, which is 14.3 cm long and 7 cm wide, was to keep the face stable. The headband is decorated with square “plaques” framed with a linked-pearl pattern (联珠纹). In the center of each plaque the raised pearl dots form a flower pattern. The cheek-

girdles have analogous decorations that are diamond-shaped. The rim of the jaw-guard is inscribed with a honeysuckle pattern, and the central part has two coiled flying *loongs* surrounded by beasts with wings. There are several small holes on the ends of the cheek-girdles and jaw-guard, which might have been used to link the two parts together.

*Gold earrings.* In Tombs M1 and M6 archaeologists uncovered two pairs of gold earrings [Fig. 21], made in a very similar style. The ones from M1 are 5.6 cm long. The upper part consists of a large ring (which would have passed through the piercing in the ear), below which are two smaller rings for attaching the pendants. Connecting the large ring and one of the smaller ones is a beaded attachment with a half-



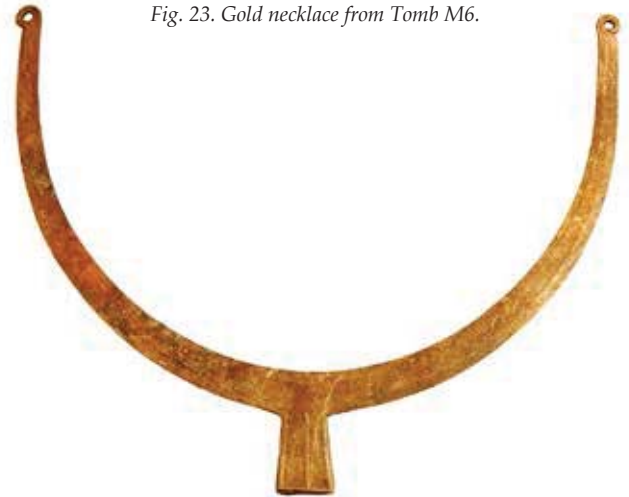
Fig. 20 (left). Gold chin strap from Tomb M1.

Fig. 21 (above). Gold earrings from Tomb M1.

Fig. 22. Gold necklace from Tomb M3.



Fig. 23. Gold necklace from Tomb M6.



moon shaped inlay of colored glass. The lower part of each earring has two pendants, attached to the small rings and ending in umbrella-shaped honeysuckles. These pieces originally might have been inlaid with gems, but are all missing now.

Gold pectoral necklaces were found in Tombs M3 and M6. The one from M3 [Fig. 22] is U-shaped, ca. 28.5 cm long and 23 cm wide. It has some holes in its rim, which might have been used to attach it to clothes. The necklace is inscribed with a honeysuckle (忍冬) pattern and inlaid with 3 gems: a blue one in the center and two green ones on the sides. The middle part of the necklace comes to a triangular point; at which is attached a crescent-shaped piece in the center of which is a tear-drop-shaped green gem. Suspended from this is a flower. Presumably the one flower now extant was flanked by two more, where only the attachment rings have been preserved. The necklace from Tomb M6 [Fig. 23] is 22 cm long and 17.5 cm wide. Each end has a single hole, and the trapezoid-shaped middle part that extends downward has raised vertical lines on the edge and in the center.

Gold-decorated Diexie belt (金蹀躞带). Tombs M3 and M6 each contained a gold-decorated Diexie belt [Fig. 24a,b; Color Pl. VI]. The preserved parts (buckles, plaques and "rivets")

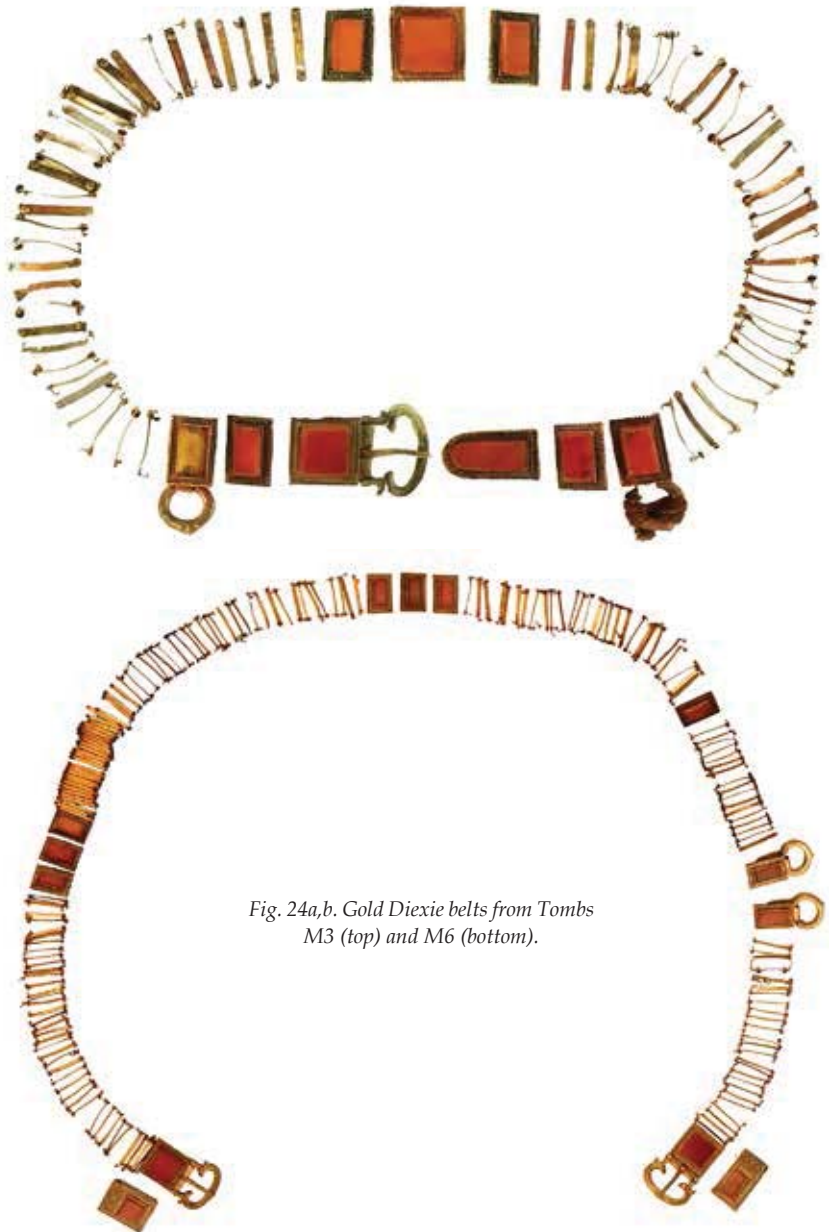


Fig. 24a,b. Gold Diexie belts from Tombs M3 (top) and M6 (bottom).



would have been fastened to a leather strap. The belt from M3 has a single buckle; that from M6 two buckles, each inlaid with red agate. Presumably for the latter there would have been two pierced straps (either part of the belt or attached separately to the garment), which then could be fastened through the buckles. The belt from M3 has inlaid plaques at the back and flanking the buckle and tongue in the front. The belt from M6 has 11 plaques, also inlaid with red agate and separated into four groups by an array of golden "rivets". On each belt, two of the plaques have peach-shaped rings hanging from them which were used for hooking personal belongings. On the plaques and buckles, the inlays are framed by gold granulation (beading). The plaques and buckles were attached to the belt strap by rivets. In the sections between the plaques and buckles, the "rivets," each a bar (3.4 cm long) with attachment pins on the ends, would create a kind of "net" of gold over the surface of the strap. The total length of the belts is uncertain. The introduction of such belts into China is probably a result of interaction with steppe peoples of the north; belts with movable tongues are not known in China before the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.<sup>2</sup>

*Gold bells.* Tomb M1 contained 6 gold bells [Fig. 25], each 1.8 cm long and 0.9 cm wide. The bells flare



Fig. 25. Gold bells from Tomb M1.

Fig. 26. Gold ornaments from Tomb M1.

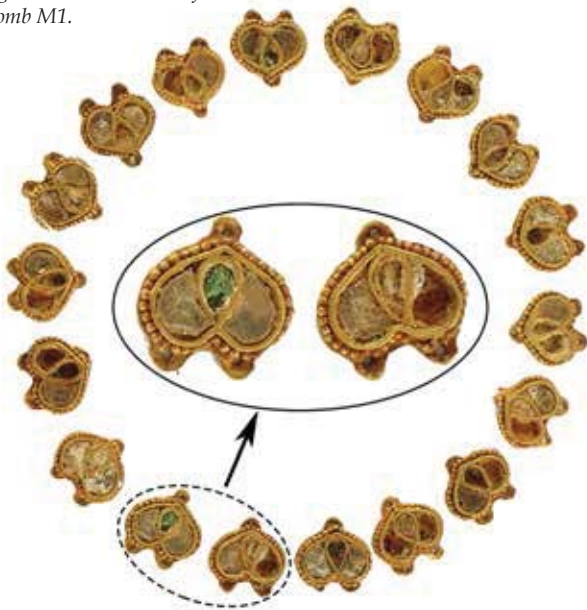


Fig. 27. Gold finger rings from Tomb M6.

toward the bottom and have arched lower rims. At the top of each is a small ring. The decoration forming four groups of patterns has been created by raised gold lines all framed with granulation of fine gold beads.

*Gold ornaments.* Tomb M1 contained a large set of small gold bracteates which might have belonged to a necklace. The ones depicted here in Fig. 26 are heart-shaped, 2.5 cm long and 0.3 cm. thick, and framed with granulation that forms a linked-pears pattern (联珠纹). The face of each bracteate is inlaid with white and green stones, the compartments separated by raised gold lines. Three holes in each bracteate would have made it possible to link them or attach them by sewing to a garment.

*Gold rings.* Several gold rings were found in Tombs M5 and M6. The occupant of M6 was wearing 10 rings on his or her fingers, five rings on each hand [Fig. 27]. The rings have diameters of 1.7-2.3 cm, are between 0.2-0.3 cm wide and 0.1 cm thick. They are made from thin strips of gold rolled into a cylinder and then flattened. The ends have round holes, which could have been used to thread wires and adjust the size.

*Gilt-silver eared cup.* The silver eared cup found in Tomb M1 [Fig. 28] is 13 cm long, 9.8 cm wide, and 2.5 cm deep. Oval in shape, it has arc-shaped ears or handles on each side, and a flat bottom. The surface of the ears has gilded honeysuckle patterns.

Fig. 28. Gilt-silver eared cup from Tomb M1.



*Gilt-silver bowl* [Figs. 29, 30; Color Pl. VI]. One of the most striking artefacts of all those excavated in the cemetery, this bowl, found in Tomb M1, is 14 cm in diameter and stands 4 cm high. The inside is smooth and has no decoration. The outside is framed by a pearl-like band, and most of the surface covered by acanthus leaves in low relief set off against a gilded background. Four projecting “bosses” depict characters from Greek mythology: Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite and Athena.



*Three-footed bronze basin.* Found in Tomb M1, this circular basin [Fig. 31, next page] was decorated with 8 animals, stalking or perhaps feeding with lowered heads, two of which are now lost. The rim of the basin is decorated with a thin pearl- or rope-like band along the edge, below which is an “arcade” formed from a band of square niches. The tripod feet on which the basin rests are shaped like horses’ hooves.



*Dragon-headed bronze “curtain hooks”* (帐钩) [Fig. 32]. Probably finials, these were found in Tomb M3. They are 14.4 cm long, made from bronze, hook-shaped, and have a *loong* (dragon)-shaped head. The mouth of the *loong* is open with a protruding tongue, and its body curves around to a circular bulge before ending in a hollow cylinder into which a handle or pole would have been inserted.<sup>3</sup>

*Iron lamp* [Fig. 33]. Found in Tomb M1, it has a 17.2 cm rim diameter and is 17 cm high. The lamp has a square base, on the four corners of which squat men who support the bowl of the lamp on their heads and steady it with their raised hands.

*Glass bowl.* This blue glass bowl [Fig. 34] found in

Figs. 29, 30. Gilt silver bowl from Tomb M1.

Tomb M1 has a 9.5 cm rim diameter, is 4 cm high and has a round foot. Some small bubbles are visible in the transparent glass.

*Lacquered elephant-shaped Zun vessel* (尊) [Fig. 35]. Found in Tomb M3, it has a wooden body carved as an elephant which is painted with lacquer of a deep



(top to bottom, left) Fig. 31. Three-footed bronze basin from Tomb M1.

Fig. 32. Bronze "curtain hooks" with Loong heads from Tomb M3.

Fig. 33. Iron lamp from Tomb M1.

(above) Fig. 34. Glass bowl from Tomb M1.

Fig. 35. Lacquered elephant-shaped Zun (尊) vessel from Tomb M3.

brown color. It is 21.5 cm long, 10 cm wide, and 18 cm high. The elephant has a stocky body and drooping ears; its trunk has broken off. The body is hollow inside, which means that liquids poured in the round vessel mouth at the top could flow out from the trunk of the elephant.

*Lacquer tableware.* Found in Tomb M3, this set of tableware [Fig. 36] included: a plate (with a 40.5 cm rim diameter) painted with black lacquer; 2 ear cups, painted red inside with black lacquer ears; a round bowl, painted with red lacquer both inside and outside, but with black lacquer on the base; 2 small, black lacquer cups (盞); and a red lacquer spoon.

*Leather caftan* [Fig. 37]. Found in Tomb M3, this caftan is 1.2 m long and 1.36 m wide. It is sewn from leather; and has a lapel folded to the right, short and narrow sleeves, and slightly widens toward the bottom. This



(left) Fig. 36. Lacquer tableware from Tomb M3.

Fig. 37. Leather caftan from Tomb M3.

(above) Fig. 38. Felt boots from Tomb M3.

type of clothing was used by nomads as for protection during the winter.

*Felt boots.* These felt boots [Fig. 38], found in Tomb M3, are high with a pointed tip. They are 26.5 cm long and 19.5 cm high. On their surface are dense and exquisitely embroidered patterns.

#### The tomb and objects from the Liao period

Tomb M4 [Fig. 39] was the only one of the six dating to the Liao era. A pit tomb, it is located on the north slope of the cemetery. Its orientation is 335° to the north. It has a square entrance, 3 m long, about 1.5-1.6 m wide and larger at the top than at the bottom of the pit. The pit is about 2.7 m long, 1.18 m wide, and 2.26 m deep. The occupant was laid out in a stretched position towards the northwest in the middle of the pit, the body found in a badly decayed coffin, 2 m long, 0.7

Fig. 39. Tomb M4.



m wide, and 0.3-0.4 m high. The skeleton is in poor condition, having almost completely disintegrated. Surrounding the body and inside the coffin was a large number of felt wool remnants. Left of the skull were two pots, and a shell was found on the right side. An iron knife was found outside the right arm.

The two pots have similar shapes: an everted rim, long neck, and flat base. On the neck are some vertical lines, created by polishing of the surface. The lower body has vertical comb-dot decoration made with shallow cuts into the fabric. The taller of the two pots [Fig. 40] measures 8.1 cm rim diameter, 7 cm base diameter, and is 18.7 cm high.



Fig. 40. The pot from Tomb M4.

and artifacts found in the Datong Northern Wei Cemetery (大同南郊北魏墓地). For a comparison of the pottery found in each, see Table 1.























Based on the periodization of the Datong Northern Wei Cemetery as described in its excavation report (Shanxisheng 1992), the date of Tomb M1 in the Yihe-Nur Cemetery should be later than 493 CE, which is the date that the capital was moved to Luoyang. Tomb M2 antedates the beginning of the Taihe period (太和, 477-499 CE) and the move of the capital to Luoyang. Tombs M3 and M6 belong, respectively, to the period in which the Taiwu Emperor (太武帝, 424-452 CE) unified the reaches

of the Yellow River and to the Taihe period. Tomb M5 belongs to the beginning of the Pingcheng period (398-493 CE). The more recent redating of the chronology of the Datong Northern Wei Cemetery by Wei Zheng

**The dates of the tombs**

Tombs M1, M2, M3, M5, M6 in the Yihe-Nur Cemetery show a lot of similarities with the tomb structure

**Table 1: Pottery comparison between the Yihe-Nur and Datong Northern Wei Cemeteries**

Tomb No.	Yihe-Nur	Datong	Yihe-Nur	Datong	Yihe-Nur	Datong
M1	 M1:3	 M134:4	 M1:5	 M10:3	 M1:8	 M10:1
M2	 M2:1	 M99:2	 M2:2	 M99:9		
M3	 M3:4	 M3:4	 M3:8	 M3:5	 M3:10	 M3:2
M5	 M5K1:32	 M228:1	 M5:1	 M228:2		
M6	 M6:1	 M214:17				

韦正 (2011) suggests that Tombs M1, M2, and M6 of the Yihe-Nur Cemetery belong to the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE; M3 should be no later than the 430s, and M5 dated ca. the 430s.

This research and the results of <sup>14</sup>C dating (presented in Table 2) confirm that Tombs M1, M2, M3, M5, and M6 of the Yihe-Nur Cemetery date to the Northern Wei period and M4 to the Liao Dynasty. The results of the <sup>14</sup>C dating suggest that the skeleton found in the dromos of M5 might be a sacrificial death. The pots found in M4 and decorated with comb-dot pattern are typical relics of the Liao period and belong to its beginning years.

### The gender and age of the tomb owners

The seriously damaged skeleton from Tomb M1 has female characteristics, but we were unable to determine the age of this person. The skeleton found in M2 was male, aged between 25-30. In M4 was a female, aged around 25. Remains of two people were found in M5: a male, aged around 40, had been placed in the chamber; a female, aged around 30, was in the dromos. The remains in M6 were a male, aged between 25-30. Based on observations of the morphologies of the human skulls, we have determined that they all belong to the North Asiatic Mongoloid type, and that they were all rather young when they died. There were no traces of injuries caused by blunt weapons. Further analysis is needed to determine the cause of death. Since the body found in M3 was covered in silk which we have not yet removed, we still lack data about this skeleton.

### Ethnic groups and cultures

The Yihe-Nur cemetery is located in the region of

the Six Frontier Towns (六镇) and the Great Wall of the Northern Wei Dynasty. At present it is the only cemetery dating to the Northern Wei that has been found in the steppes this far north in China. The tombs are concentrated in one area in an orderly array and evidence a high standard of construction and furnishing. It seems obvious that this was an aristocratic family cemetery from the Northern Wei period. The tomb structures, coffins, pottery and lacquerware patterns all show distinctive characteristics of the Xianbei (鲜卑) culture. However, the manufacturing techniques and design of the metalwork show some elements belonging to the peoples living in the Eurasian steppes. As Shing Müller has argued (2003), chin-straps of the design found here probably first appear in China as part of the mortuary traditions of non-Chinese under the Northern Wei (other examples are known from the Datong Northern Wei Cemetery). There are even some rare relics, such as the gilt silver bowl with Hellenistic motifs, which seem to be imports from Central and Western Asia. Stylistically similar bowls have been excavated from Northern Wei tombs near Datong; it has been suggested that they show either Parthian or Hephthalite influences (see Shanxisheng 1992, pp. 8-9; Pl. 2; Dien 2007, pp. 279-80; Watt et al. 2004, pp. 154-55). There are a good many analogous metal vessels found in Northern Wei tombs which probably came from the eastern Iranian world of Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> Clothing such as the leather and fur caftan, felt boots and belts would have been worn by steppe peoples. Such abundant evidence suggests that the peoples of the Yihe-Nur Cemetery had cultural traditions connected with those of Northern Steppe peoples and presumably had trade connections via the Silk Road through the northern steppes.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2. Results of <sup>14</sup>C dating at Beijing University (AMS) for samples from the Yihe-Nur cemetery.**

Lab Number	Tomb Number	Sample	<sup>14</sup> C (BP)	Calibration of <sup>14</sup> C dates (BC)	
				1σ(68.2%)	2σ(95.4%)
BA142037	M4	Human Ribs	1160±25	780CE (3.4%) 790CE 810CE (49.9%) 900CE 920CE (14.9%) 950CE	770CE (95.4%) 970CE
BA142038	M5 Chamber	Sheep Ribs	1700±30	260CE (12.9%) 280CE 320CE (55.3%) 400CE	250CE (95.4%) 420CE
BA142039	M5 Dromos	Human bone	1695±30	260CE (9.5%) 280CE 330CE (58.7%) 400CE	250CE (95.4%) 420CE
BA142040	M6	Human bone	1595±25	420CE (21.5%) 460CE 480CE (46.7%) 540CE	410CE (95.4%) 540CE
BA150028	M1	Human bone	1530±20	460CE (11.7%) 490CE 530CE (46.7%) 580CE	430CE (28.7%) 490CE 500CE (66.7%) 600CE
BA150029	M2	Human bone	1515±20	530CE (68.2%) 585CE	440CE (8.7%) 490CE 530CE (86.7%) 610CE

The peoples living in the region of the Six Frontier Towns were very diverse. The Gaoche (高车) people were the largest population controlled by the Xianbei aristocracy. Under the Northern Wei Dynasty a policy that differentiated among the nomad groups was implemented to control those who had surrendered: “Under the Taizu (太祖) Emperor [in 399 CE], the tribes were scattered. Only the Gaoche were relegated to the status of a subtribe, as their character was rough, and they did not like to be sent away.” In the second year (429 CE) of the Shenjia Period (神䴥), Emperor Taiwu (太武皇帝) sent An Yuan (whose position was Left Pushe [左仆射]) to subdue the Gaoche people at Sinipo (巴尼陂). It is recorded that “when the tribes of Gaoche saw the army of the Northern Wei, hundreds of thousands of them surrendered, millions of cattle were seized, and they immigrated and settled South of the Gobi desert, in the ‘thousand miles’ zone” (Description of Gaoche 魏书·高车传, in *Wei Shu* 1974). Against this historical background, it can be argued that the Yihe-Nur Cemetery was likely owned by the tribal chief of the Gaoche and his family members. Alternatively, because a portion of the grave goods reveal some cultural elements of Central and Western Asia, it cannot be excluded that the people who owned the Yihe-Nur Cemetery might have immigrated from these areas. Therefore, these steppe relics not only demonstrate the cultural complexity along the northern frontiers of China, but also provide us with some very important archaeological data about the travel routes and cultural features of the Steppe Silk Road.

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#### NOTES

1. See the commentary by Annette Juliano in Juliano and Lerner 2001, pp. 82-84, where the figure of the “dragon-tamer” on the example illustrated there, excavated from a different Northern Wei period tomb, may in fact be an image of the Infant Buddha with wings resembling those of a Daoist immortal. As Juliano puts it (p. 84), this imagery “would give the *pushou* extraordinary power to protect the deceased in the tomb on the journey to immortality” and

“reflect the adaptation of Buddhist and foreign elements into a traditional Chinese context.”

2. For a discussion of the belts of the northern steppe peoples and illustration of the ways in which they were fastened, see Sun 1994, although he does not illustrate an example such as what we have here with two buckles that have movable tongues. See also Juliano and Lerner 2001, pp. 112, 267.

3. For an analogous pair and reference to several other such finds, see Juliano and Lerner 2001, p. 96.

4. Marshak 2004 provides an excellent overview, in which, for comparison with the bowl here, note especially Figs. 34

and 35. He also wrote the descriptive entries later in Watt et al. 2004, pp. 148=55.

5. After reviewing the abundant artifactual evidence of an interest in foreign wares, Dien (2007) puts the matter this way (p. 284): “[I]t is a mistake to think of the Silk Road as connecting two very different societies. North China was ruled by the Xianbei and related nomadic groups who may well have shared elements of their culture with the peoples of Transoxiana. Certainly there were ample opportunities to know those people from the west firsthand...”

*Editor's note:* A brief report on the excavation of Tomb M2 in the cemetery has already been published as: 内蒙古自治区文物考古研究所, 锡林勒盟文物保护管理站, 正镶白旗文物管理所 [Inner Mongolia Cultural Relics and Archaeology Research Institute, Xilin Gol League Heritage Conservation Station, Zhengxiangbaiqi Heritage Management]. “Zhengxiangbaiqi Yihe-Nur Cemetery M2 fajue jianbao 正镶白旗伊和淖尔墓群M2发掘简报” [Brief report on the excavation of Yihe-Nur Cemetery M2]. *Caoyuan wenwu* 草原文物 [Steppe Cultural Relics] 2016/1: 46-50.

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Plate IV

Chen et al., "Yihe-Nur Cemetery," pp. 46, 47.



*(above) Painting on the head panel of the wooden coffin of M3.*

*(below) The gilt bronze ring handles from Tomb M1.*



**Plate V**

Chen et al., "Yihe-Nur Cemetery," p. 48.



*Gold chin strap from Tomb M1.*

**Plate VI**

Chen et al., "Yihe-Nur Cemetery," pp. 49, 51.



*(above) Gold Diexie belt from Tomb M3.*

*(below) Gilt silver bowl from Tomb M1.*

