Rethinking the Origins of Taiwan Austronesians

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Introdution

In the early 1980s, Taiwan was proposed as the homeland of the Austronesian by archaeologist Peter Bellwood and linguist Robert Blust. The purposes of this paper are to reexamine the new archaeological and linguistic data on the origins of Taiwan Austronesians and to make use of Holocene sea level changes in Taiwan to determine the timing of the entrance of Taiwan Austronesians and their maritime adaptation during the early Neolithic. This paper will also discuss the use of "the Phuket model" of Rogers and Engelhardt to explain the hypothetical dispersal processes of proto-Austronesians and the initial colonization processes of the Taiwan Austronesians.

Archaeological views of the Austronesian homeland

Bellwood suggested that the first Austronesian-speaking people originated in China around 6,000 years ago and migrated from there to the Philippines from Taiwan. This idea was supported by the Hawaiian linguist Robert Blust. Recent archaeological reports suggest an earlier spread to island and coastal Melanesia. On the other hand, Solheim (1996) proposed that Southeast Asian maritime Neolithic cultures or the early Nusantao people go back to the flooding of southeast Asia over 7,000 years ago, and that the homeland of Austronesian languages and sailing skills is in the region of eastern Indonesia and the nearby southern Philippines.

Incentives of Autronesian dispersals

Bellwood and Blust pointed out that the dates of the entire Austronesian dispersal are closely determined by the initial archaeological sequences in Taiwan and the Philippines. These are: (1) arrival in Taiwan from China 4,500 B. C., (2) arrival in the Philippines from Taiwan 3,000 B. C., (3) arrival in southern Philippines 2,000 B. C.. If Austronesians did originate on the Asian mainland, they could have migrated several times, which, again, would allow a deeper timescale than a single spread through Taiwan. The incentives for the initial stages of Austronesian dispersion--population expansion and land hunger--suggested by Bellwood have been questioned by Oppenheimer (1998) who believed that early Austronesian explorers were literally

driven off their land by the flood. Most archaeologists and other specialists have moved away from the old question of post-glacial sea rise as a cause of Neolithic dispersal simply because it was too long ago and too slow. But, the timing of last flood undoubtedly coincide with the appearance of Tapengkeng culture on the west coast of Taiwan. There are two current subgroups of hypotheses that suggest that the proto-Austronesian has been spoken on the island of Taiwan somewhere on the order of 5000 years and has diverged into four major subgroups (Blust 1977). It is highly possible that such coincidence may have cultural historic significance on the origins of Taiwan Austronesians and their subsequent islandwise linguistic diversifications.

Neolithic flood

Geologists have shown there were three recurrent cycles of dry and cold followed by warm and humid that characterezed the three post-glacial floods of the last 15,000 years. The last of the freeze-ups was extremely short, lasting only 400 years. Then the world warmed up to its most sunny and humid time of the past 10,000 years--the so-called interglacial optimum--and the final flood 8,000-7,500 years ago. During the third flood the coast of southern China and the islands of Southeast asia were rich in mangroves and dense tropical forests (Oppenheimer 1998).

One of the first archaeologists to recognize the effect of this flooding on the appearance and chronology of far eastern coastal Neolithic sites was Meacham. He also has stressed the importance of the downed coastal strip "Nanhailand" that once spread up to 160 kilometers out into the South China Sea in interpretations of the region's prehistory. It may be argued that the rise in sea-level had a major impact on the obliteration evidence of older coastal Neolithic cultures, giving archaeologists a false horizon. It is only after the decline from 6,000 years onwards that pot-making maritime settlements appeared all the way down from the coast of southeastern China and Taiwan. These settlements, argued Charles Higham, "were simply relocations of maritime people who had always lived in this area, but who had been flooded out."

Tapenkeng culture and Taiwan Austronesians

Based on the characteristic pottery and other durable artifacts in the earliest Neolithic culture of the west coast of Taiwan, including the Tapengkeng((TPK) site, Bellwood proposed that the route of the hypothetical early proto-Autronesian culture was from Hemudu in China. Among the ceramic assemblages are cord-marked pots, pots with incised, stamped circular and punctuate decorations, and pots with perforated ring-feet. Other items include stone adzes with a quadrangular cross-section, stone net weights, flaked hoes and barth-cloth beaters. The same ceramic and lithic assemblages are also widely distributed in the early Neolithic sites of the Pearl River delta near Hong Kong. Such a technocomplex of TPK implicates that the Taiwan

Austronesians could have originated either near the lower Yangtze River or the Pearl River along the coast of southeastern China, in other words, multiple possible tracks.

All newly published C-14 dates and TL dates obtained from the earliest Neolithic sites along the coast southeastern China indicate that they are older than the sites discovered on the west coast of Taiwan. Those early TPK sites are all located on shell mounds, sand dunes, coastal plains and river terraces. Fishing, gathering and hunting were the most important subsistence activities. There is also evidence that root and tuber horticulture was practiced. It is also interesting to note that there are major regional stylistic and vessel form variations among the TPK ceramic assemblages in northern and southern Taiwan. Such ceramic variation could be related to the lingustic subgroup diversification of proto-Austronesian after their arrival to Taiwan.

In the future, we would like to use "the Phuket model" proposed by Rogers and Engelhardt (1998) to test whether the TPK sites can be categorized as temporary fishing camps, multiple camp sites, larger camps, base camps, abadoned occupation area or specialized and limited-use activities areas. Once the exact nature of those sites and the spatio-temporal framework within their palaeoenvironmental contexts are understood, it is possible to go one step further to determine the maritime adaptation of early Taiwan Austronesians. We will also pay particular attention to the "Triple-I (intrusion, innovation, and integration) model which is now favored by many Pacific archaeologists, because that model can help us to delineate the dispersal stages of the above-mentioned TPK sites in Taiwan after proto-Austronesian intrusion.