Genealogy of the Bronze Horse Frontlet in Ancient China and Korea

HARUNARI Hideji

The so-called sword handle-shaped bronze implement excavated at the Korean Bronze Age site of the Goejeongdon Tomb has been the focus of much attention following its discovery in 1967 due to its unusual form and exquisite casting. Since then several other examples have been discovered. The origins and genealogy, however, have remained unclear. In this thesis I will aim to demonstrate that the horse frontlet excavated at the Xiaoheishi Site of the upper Xiajiadian culture of Inner Mongolia is its direct archetype, and further, that this archetype is also found in the horse frontlet excavated from the tomb No.1193 of the early Western Zhou at the Liulihé site, Beijing. The horse frontlet is a bronze ornamental piece which was attached to a horse’s bridle and which first appeared during the Shang period.

There are, however, significant differences in the form and method of manufacture between the Inner Mongolian horse frontlet and the bronze Korean sword handle-shaped implement, or rather, the bronze frontlet-shaped implement. Since the appearance of the bronze sword handle-shaped implement coincided with the appearance of the slender type sword, which also first appeared during the Korean Bronze Age, there is a high probability that examples of earlier forms are still buried in Inner Mongolia and Liaoning Province.

The Western China horse frontlet spread to the Upper Xiajiadian culture in the 11-10th century B.C. During the long intervening period leading up to the Korean Bronze Age of the 6-5th century B.C., chariots fell out of common use and a decline in horse riding culture meant that this type of piece and its use underwent a change, transforming dramatically to become a ritual implement. The bronze frontlet-shaped implement did not, however, spread to Yayoi culture of the Japanese archipelago.

The design of the western upper Xiajiadian culture horse frontlet employed a tiger. It suggests the high status tiger held among the animals that fend off evil spirits. As the king ruled the tiger, it followed that the tiger symbolized the kingship in all regions.

Key words: Upper Xiajiadian culture, bronze sword handle-shaped implement, Xiaoheishi Site, Korean bronze culture, horse frontlet, tiger, Liulihé No.1193 tomb