Evidence of ancient DNA reveals the first European lineage in Iron Age Central China

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Various studies on ancient DNA have attempted to reconstruct population movement in Asia, with much interest focused on determining the arrival of European lineages in ancient East Asia. Here, we discuss our analysis of the mitochondrial DNA of human remains excavated from the Yu Hong tomb in Taiyuan, China, dated 1400 years ago. The burial style of this tomb is characteristic of Central Asia at that time. Our analysis shows that Yu Hong belonged to the haplogroup U5, one of the oldest western Eurasian-specific haplogroups, while his wife can be classified as haplogroup G, the type prevalent in East Asia. Our findings show that this man with European lineage arrived in Taiyuan approximately 1400 years ago, and most probably married a local woman. Haplogroup U5 was the first west Eurasian-specific lineage to be found in the central part of ancient China, and Taiyuan may be the easternmost location of the discovered remains of European lineage in ancient China.

Keywords: Yu Hong tomb; ancient DNA; mitochondrial DNA

1. INTRODUCTION

The Yu Hong tomb archaeological site (37°40′36″ N, 112°25′36″ E) is located in the northwestern Taiyuan basin in Shanxi Province (figure 1), China, and has been excavated since 1999. The burial style and multicolour relief have a Central Asian appearance, while the people pictured in the reliefs have obviously European morphological traits, such as straight noses and deep-set eyes. A well-preserved epitaph carved on the tombstone was found with the remains, with scenes depicting the life of Yu Hong (Zhang 2005) who died in AD 592, when he was 59 years old, and was buried in the same grave as his wife, who died later in AD 598. The ancestors of Yu Hong lived in ancient Yu country, which was located in the ‘West Region,’ which included Central Asia and Xinjiang at that time. His grandfather and father lived in ancient Xinjiang and were nobles of the Yu country. Yu Hong was a chieftain of the Central Asian people who had settled in China during the Sui Dynasty. However, anthropologists could not determine the race of these remains owing to the partial missing skulls. In order to discover their origin, it was decided to employ the technology of mitochondrial DNA analysis.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

(a) Sample preparation

One tooth and one femur sample were selected from Yu Hong’s skeleton and from that of his wife. All samples were provided by the Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute of Shanxi Province. The tooth and bone samples were processed independently. The tooth samples were immersed in 1 N hydrochloric acid for 3–5 min and washed with double distilled water (ddH₂O), then with 100% alcohol. Then, all sides of the samples were exposed to ultraviolet (UV) light for 15 min. The samples were then pulverized by Freezer Mill 6750 (Mercken, USA) after immersion in liquid nitrogen. On the other hand, 3–4 mm of the outer surface of the ancient bone fragment was removed, in order to eliminate possible surface contamination. After treatment with liquid nitrogen, the bone fragments were ground with a Planetary Mill Pulversette 6 (Fritsch, Germany). All fine powders were stored at 4°C.

(b) Ancient DNA extraction

DNA was carefully extracted from the powdered bones and teeth samples using the GENECLEAN Kit for ancient DNA (BIO101, USA), according to its manual protocol.

(c) Uracil-N-glycosylase treatment

Ten microlitres of DNA extract from each of the samples were treated with 1 U of uracil-N-glycosylase (UNG) for 30 min at 37°C to excise uracil bases caused by the hydrolytic deamination of cytosines. UNG reduces sequence artefacts caused by this common form of post-mortem damage, which results in apparent G/C→A/T mutations and subsequent errors in sequence results (Gilbert et al. 2003). After this treatment, extracts were used to perform PCR amplification. The UNG treatment was useful for confirming doubtful sequences.

(d) PCR

The amplification of 364 bp (nucleotide positions; np 16035–16398) of the mtDNA HVRI region was performed using four overlapping primer pairs (table 1; Xie et al. 2005). As a result of its relatively high evolutionary rate, it was both difficult and inadvisable to assign unique mtDNA haplogroups to specimens using control region DNA alone (Yao et al. 2002;...
white clones of each sample were selected for sequencing,
USA), according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Five
his wife using the pGEM-T Easy Vector System I (Promega,
mtDNA sequences from the bone samples of Yu Hong and
To minimize the risk of contamination, we cloned the
(Procenza & Poinar 2000), the DNA extractions were
were incorporated throughout the analysis. To help avoid
laboratory contamination, sterile aliquoted reagents, sterile
gloves, face masks, filter pipette tips and other standard
precautions of ancient DNA studies were adopted.
Contamination during the excavation of skeletal remains is
always a possibility and difficult to avoid. The best way to deal
with this problem is by the simultaneous analysis of two
independent samples from the same individual. For this
reason, both bones and teeth of Yu Hong and his wife were
analysed. In addition, the DNA of all laboratory personnel
and archaeologists involved in the project was genetically
typed and kept on record for a final comparison with
the results.
Each sample was extracted three times, including one
from the teeth samples and two from the bone samples, and
then amplified at least three times to increase the reproduc-
ibility of results. After treatment with UNG, the post-
mortem damaged portion was discarded. If more than one
sequence had double peaks at the same position after
treatment with UNG, it was treated as contamination,
although the extraction and amplification blanks were always
negative. Since the Taq misincorporation would not appear in
the same position in independent amplifications of the same
extract, the artefacts introduced by the Taq Polymerase could
be identified.

3. RESULTS
(a) mtDNA sequence variation
We analysed mitochondrial DNA from Yu Hong and
his wife’s skeletons which were excavated from Yu Hong
tomb in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, dated AD 592. DNA
was isolated from both the bones and teeth samples.
Owing to the risk of contamination with modern DNA, we
followed stringent and laborious protocols (Cooper &
Poinar 2000).
The mtDNA HVR-I region analysis of each set of
specimens resulted in the recovery of a 364-base pair (bp)
fragment, 16035–16398 of the Cambridge Reference
Sequence (CRS; Anderson et al. 1981), which was
confirmed on each sequence of three independent
extracts. The sequences recovered from the bone and
tooth of each individual were identical. These sequences
were compared to the CRS: there were a total of
five variable np, all corresponding to transitions. Yu
Hong had mutations at np 16243 T-to-C and 16270
C-to-T, versus his wife’s at np 16223 C-to-T, 16260
C-to-T and 16362 T-to-C.
(b) Haplogroup distribution
Haplogroup classification of the ancient individuals was
investigated according to the variations in both HVR-I
sequence and coding region of mtDNA (Yao et al. 2002;
Quintana-Murci et al. 2004). Nucleotide position 16270
was the characteristic transition of the U5 sub-haplogroup
which belonged to macro-haplogroup R under macro-
haplogroup N, while np 16223–16362 was the charac-
teristic motif of haplogroup D or G, which were all in the
macro-haplogroup M. Accordingly, the following sites
were chosen for RFLP analysis: ±10397 Alu I indicated
Table 1. PCR primers used for DNA amplification in this study. (Number in primer name indicates position of 3’ nucleotide.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HVR-I/haplogroup</th>
<th>primer</th>
<th>sequence</th>
<th>length (bp)</th>
<th>annealing temperature (°C)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HVR-I</td>
<td>L16055</td>
<td>5'-GGAAGCAGATTTGGGTAC</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H16142</td>
<td>5'-ATGACTACAGGTGTCAGG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HVR-I</td>
<td>L16131</td>
<td>5'-CACCATGAATTTGTACGGT</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H16218</td>
<td>5'-TGTCATAGTGTGGAGGTGGTG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HVR-I</td>
<td>L16185</td>
<td>5'-ACCCAAATCCAATCAAAAAC</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H16286</td>
<td>5'-TGTACTGTTTAGGGGTGGTAGG</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HVR-I</td>
<td>L16281</td>
<td>5'-CCCTACCCACTAGATACCAA</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H16379</td>
<td>5'-CAAGGGGACCCCTATCTGAGG</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/N</td>
<td>L10304</td>
<td>5'-ATGGGACCTCAAAACAACCT</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H10423</td>
<td>5'-GAGTCGAATTCATTCGT</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>L4701</td>
<td>5'-CTATCATCTTCACAATATAFCTCT</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H4848</td>
<td>5'-ATGTGAGAAGAAGCAGG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>L5159</td>
<td>5'-GGCCACAGGACCCTACTACTA</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H5287</td>
<td>5'-GGGGATGAAGGGCTTATG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>L12608</td>
<td>5'-ATCCCTGATAGTCTTGTCG</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H12719</td>
<td>5'-GTTGGAATAGGTTGTTAGG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>L12269</td>
<td>5'-TACACAATGGCTTCTCAACCT</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H12357</td>
<td>5'-GAAGTCAGGCTAGGTTAGG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Polymorphic restriction and haplogroup distribution of the ancient samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sample</th>
<th>10397</th>
<th>5176</th>
<th>4830</th>
<th>12703</th>
<th>12308</th>
<th>haplogroup</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yu Hong</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>U5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu Hong’s wife</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

macro-haplogroup M/N; +12703 Mbo II indicated macro-haplogroup R; +12308 Hinf I indicated haplogroup U; −5176 Alu I indicated haplogroup D; and +4830 Hae II indicated haplogroup G. The restriction enzyme results show that Yu Hong belonged to haplogroup U5, while his wife was categorized as a member of haplogroup G (table 2).

(c) Authentication of results

(i) Experimental results showed an inverse correlation between the size of the amplified fragment and the efficiency of the amplification (table 3). This is consistent with one of the criteria used to determine authenticity in ancient DNA studies (Cooper & Poinar 2000; Alonso et al. 2004). In addition, the quantification results from the tooth samples show that starting copy numbers for amplification were more than 1000, confirming the sequencing results (Cooper & Poinar 2000).

(ii) Since the quantity of DNA recovered from the bone samples was less than that from the tooth samples, cloning of PCR products of bone samples was performed. Five clones were selected for sequencing from each individual, and in these sequences, only a few positions were different from those in the direct sequencing. The consensus sequence of different clones, however, was consistent with the sequence obtained using the direct method. We determined the differences to have been caused by random Taq misincorporation. Post-mortem damage was ruled out because the extracts had been treated with UNG.

Table 3. Quantification results of three different fragment sizes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>fragment size (bp)</th>
<th>Yu Hong’s bone</th>
<th>wife’s bone</th>
<th>Yu Hong’s tooth</th>
<th>wife’s tooth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>138</td>
<td>50–150*</td>
<td>50–150</td>
<td>100–500</td>
<td>250–500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>&lt;30</td>
<td>&lt;30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>363</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Quantification result showed the number of copies of DNA per microlitre extract, which was confirmed in three independent quantification PCRs.

(iii) The sequences from the bone and tooth samples from each individual were identical, which strongly confirms the authenticity of the result.

(iv) The DNA of all laboratory personnel and archaeologists involved in the project was genetically typed and found to be absent in all samples.

4. DISCUSSION

Yu Hong and his wife belong to different haplogroups. Yu Hong is included in haplogroup U5, the west Eurasian-specific haplogroup, while his wife belongs to haplogroup G, representative of East Asian populations.

Haplogroup U5 is the oldest European-specific haplogroup and its origin dates back to approximately 50 000 years. It most probably arose in the Near East and had spread into Europe in a very early expansion (Richards et al. 1996, 2000). Yu Hong’s epitaph indicates that his ancestors lived in the ancient Yu country, which was located somewhere in the West Region, which...
included Central Asia and Xinjiang in China at that time. However, Lin (2002) believed that it was located in Central Asia. The epitaph also tells us that Yu Hong’s grandfather and father were nobles of Yu country and lived in ancient Xinjiang. Archaeologists believe that earlier ancestors may have arrived in ancient Xinjiang with the eastward expansion of Yu country (Zhang 2005).

In Central Asia, haplogroup U5 was especially concentrated in Tajikistan at approximately 4.5% frequency, and only three individuals from other Central Asian countries were of this type (Quintana-Murci et al. 2004). In Chinese Xinjiang, this haplogroup has been found in only 2 out of 53 samples from Kazaks in Kashen (Yao et al. 2004). From the analysis of the haplogroup U5 distribution, this haplogroup was concentrated mainly in Tajikistan and Kashen, both of which are located on the Pamirs. We theorize that Yu Hong came from this region and that the ancient Yu country may also have been located there.

The epitaph tells us that Yu Hong’s grandfather and father still lived in Yu, and therefore he might have been the first person from his family who came to ancient China. The mtDNA lineage could not be passed on from the father, and we had no evidence that the women from his family, such as mother or sisters, had followed him. Thus, we could only confirm that this European matrilineal lineage had arrived here, but we did not know whether it had directly impacted the mtDNA lineages of human populations in this region. The migration of western peoples into East Asian populations has always interested biologists. As Comas wrote in his article ‘The genetic influence of western peoples across Asia is obvious in Central Asia, but there is no evidence of its presence in the easternmost area since no traces are found in extant or ancient East Asian populations’ (Comas et al. 2004). The analysis performed on the ancient sites of 2500-year-old Liangchun (Wang et al. 2000) and 2000-year-old Yixi (Oota et al. 1999), eastern China, concluded that there was a drastic shift from a European-like population (2500 years ago), through an intermediate population (2000 years ago), to the present day East Asian populations. However, re-examination of these data using a phylogeographic approach (Yao et al. 2003) clearly demonstrates no genetic link between these ancient populations and western Eurasians. On the other hand, our research shows that haplogroup U5 was the first west Eurasian-specific haplogroup to have been found in the central part of ancient China, and Taiyuan may be the easternmost region where European lineage has been found until now in ancient China.

Our findings indicate that a member of the oldest European-specific haplogroup, U5, arrived in Taiyuan approximately 1400 years ago. It is the first west Eurasian-specific haplogroup to have been found in the central part of ancient China, and Taiyuan may be the easternmost region where European lineage has been found until now in ancient China.

This research was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC J0530184). The authors are grateful to Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute of Shanxi Province, China, for providing the ancient samples, and to Valerie Clack, and Victor H. Mair, John Pinches and Songhe Wang for their revision on the manuscript.

REFERENCES


NOTICE OF CORRECTION

The penultimate sentence of the Introduction is now correct.

9 May 2007