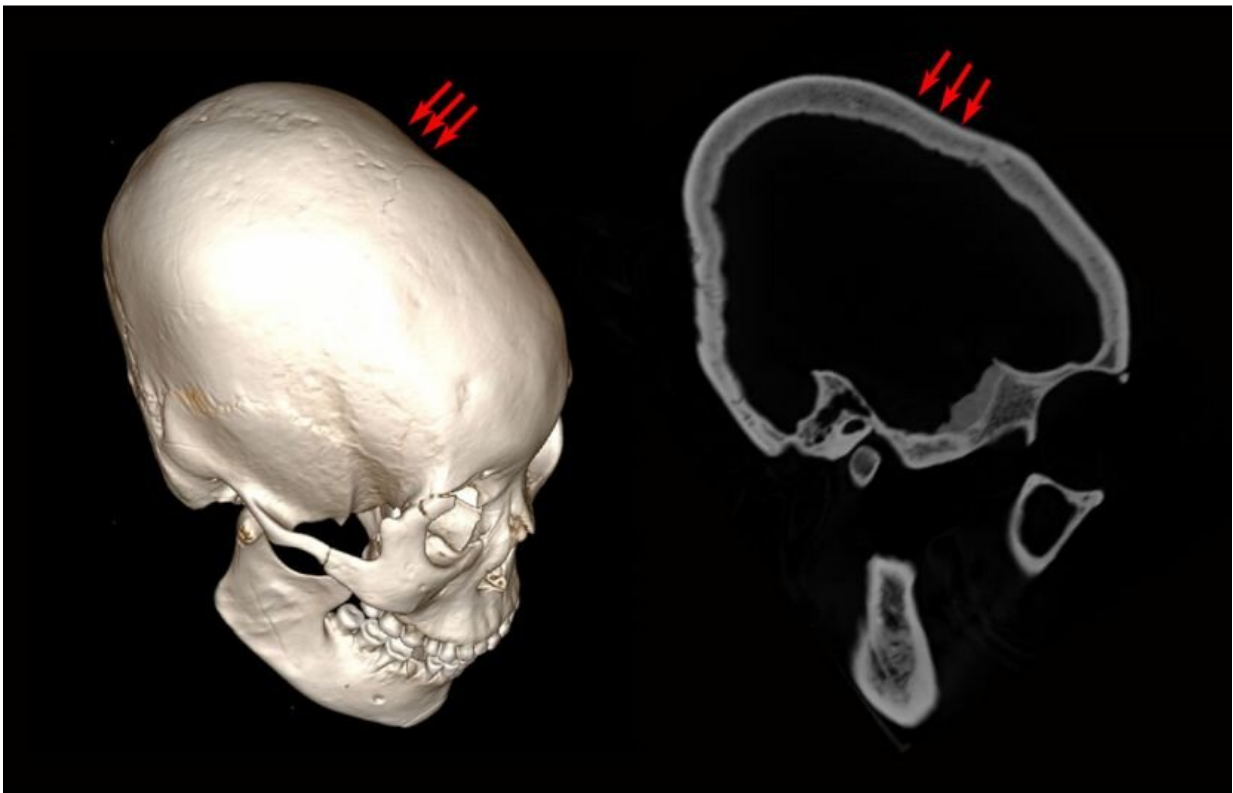


Researchers in China find some of the oldest examples of cranial modification

July 8 2019, by Bob Yirka



“Postcoronal depression” displayed by M45. A depression locates slightly posterior to the coronal suture on both parietal bones. The increase of the thickness of the diploë in the frontal and parietal bone is visible. Credit: *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (2019). DOI: 10.1002/ajpa.23888

A team with members from China, Singapore and the U.S. has found

some of the oldest examples of cranial modification in a northeastern part of China. In their paper published in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, the group describes the skeletons they studied and what they found.

Cranial [modification](#) is the process of altering the physical characteristics of the skull—throughout history, it has been done by binding the heads of babies when their skulls are still soft. In most instances, the goal was to elongate the skull—it is actually still practiced today in some parts of the world. Bindings have typically been in the form of cloth or wood boards. It is not known why many early cultures engaged in the practice, but some in the field have suggested it is likely a way to mark someone as belonging to an elite or special part of society.

In this new effort, the researchers were studying [skeletal remains](#) removed from a site called Houtaomuga. The site is believed to have been an ancient Chinese tomb—archaeologists worked at the site from 2011 to 2015. The skeletons were all in a vertically shaped tomb, and there were no obvious gender biases for cranial modification. Twenty-five skeletons were found in all, 11 of which had evidence of intentional cranial modification. Four of the skulls were from [adult males](#), one was from an adult female, and the rest were from children. The bones were not placed in the tomb at the same time, however, they were interred over the course of 7,000 years, from 12,000 to 5,000 years ago.

The researchers report that there was very [little evidence](#) that might provide an explanation for the binding of babies' heads, but suggest it likely was an indicator of wealth or high status. Some of the skeletons were buried with artifacts that suggested as much, such as pottery. They report also that they plan to continue digging in the general vicinity of Houtaomuga to find out if there are other tombs in the area, and if so, whether they have more examples of ancient cranial modification.

More information: Qun Zhang et al. Intentional cranial modification from the Houtaomuga Site in Jilin, China: Earliest evidence and longest in situ practice during the Neolithic Age, *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/ajpa.23888](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23888)

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