Archaeological Excavation in

1949-1966

Much too little is known in this country about archaeological work and excavations carried out in China since the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. In fact, the scale of work and the methods used in this period is unprecedented and perhaps surpasses excavations done in any other region of the world or by any other nation during this period. The flood of new material now available to students of Chinese archaeology and art is immense and has vastly increased and, to a certain extent, changed our knowledge of the development of Chinese civilization.

The policy of the People's Republic of China in regard to the remains of the past was made clear from the beginning. Soon after the founding of a Bureau of Cultural Relics (Wên-wu kuân-lî-chih) was set up and the government promulgated a series of directives on the preservation of the national heritage and the advancement of research. The result was that quite considerable funds were allocated by the State for the restoration and maintenance of such places as the famous caves of Tun-huang, Yün-kang and Lung-men as well as historic buildings and places, and, last but not least, for archaeological excavations.

Two lines were followed. The first, planned excavations on sites known or expected to contain important remains of the past. These were planned by the Institute of Archaeology of the Academia Sinica in Peking or its provincial branches, or by provincial or local museums, departments of history, and universities; or by local archaeological societies. To prevent damage to sites known to be rich in archaeological remains, plans for the excavation of any site other than those specifically protected by special planning and protection were not accepted. Among these are the region around Anyang, the site of the ancient capital of the Shang dynasty; the tombs in the neighborhood of San (ancient Ch'ang-an') in Shensi; old Loyang in Honan; parts of Ch'âng-sha in Hunan; and other sites.

The second line of activity resulted from chance discoveries in the course of such construction work as large projects for the construction of railways, highways, factories and new cities, or during agricultural activities. That so much was discovered in such a way is due to the fact that in China, as in Rome, the massive presence of past civilizations themselves wherever the ground is disturbed to any depth. China is fortunate in that work demanding earth-moving jobs is done by hand. Shovels, spades, baskets and simple tools and not, as in the West, with large machines which destroy all evidence of the past.

Fortunately, up the spring of 1966 several journals reported regularly on excavations and archaeological work, in many cases soon after the excavations, so that by and large, information about the work was available. Certainly not all excavations were reported in papers available to us and I am sure that there are a great many surprises will await us when we visit China. As far as we can judge from publications, the fifties and early sixties were periods of most intense archaeological work. During that time, in addition to excavation reports in archaeological journals, a series of monographs of field work carried out by the Field Workers of the Archaeological Institute of the Academia Sinica was published, as well as a number of handsomely produced large monographs and small illustrated booklets. There appears a growing tendency to consider excavations foremost as teamwork undertaken by an organization and to aim at the greatest possible understanding of the individual of the operation. This is the reason in reports of excavations the name of the project is given first of all, e.g., "Workteam of the Archaeological Department of the provincial museum in such and such a place" though the names of the participants are mentioned in the introduction and those who wrote the report are allowed to sign it with their names.
4 Ritual bronze vessels (square ring) of the later part of the Shang dynasty. It was found by peasants in the King-heung district in the province of Hunan in 1965. Its four sides are decorated with masks, a unique feature never seen before. However, it links the Shang civilization with its Neolithic forerunners because in 1965 a pottery plaque with a human face in relief had been discovered in Shanshi. (Kaozu 1959, 11, Pt. 8, p. 568-569, found in Chiang-hai ts'un. Size of ring: Height, 46.2 cm. Who-wu 1980, 10, on cover.

5 Horse-and-chariot pit excavated at Chung-ch'iao-p'o, Chiang-chi district, of Shensi. Wawen Chou period (15th century B.C.), tomb No. 2. Bridge and mazizi, with coroza shells, frontlet coves, nose of one horse and between its ears in fixed bronze animal mask. It has round cheek-pieces, harness and yokes are covered with bronze; horseheads in different shapes and with a ratling.


A great number of ritual bronze vessels of the Shang and Chou periods have been excavated, and some cases in as Fig. 4 revealing decors never seen before on Shang ritual vessels. Many horse-and-chariot pits in the neighborhood of tombs of nobles of the Shang and Chou periods were excavated in various parts of the country. The Institute of Archaeology conducted a great number of excavations in the neighborhood of Sian (province of Shensi) between 1955 and 1960. Among them were horse-and-chariot pits like the one shown in Fig. 5. It was found close to the tomb of a noble of the Western Chou period (11th-early 8th century B.C.). Although not seen in this picture others show that small bronze bells were often suspended from the necks of horses (and dogs).
Among the chance discoveries we may mention those made during the construction of the water reservoir in the San-min gong. For example, a burial ground containing 234 tombs was found in Shang-t‘ung-lung in the Shan-fang province of Honan. It proved to be that of the short-lived State of Kuo which was destroyed in 665 B.C. The tombs thus dating from the late Western Chou period to the middle of the seventh century B.C. Most of the tombs had not been robbed. Of the three horse-and-chariot pits found in this place, one contained as many as ten chariots and twenty horses. Again, the excavation was carried out by the Institute of Archaeology. Fig. 6 shows the quality of their work. The actual chariots had long disintegrated but their shapes were retained in the clay. Nothing had been damaged—not the spokes of the wheels, the pole between the horses, nor the box of the chariot with its low screen and opening at the back. The importance of chariots and horses was well documented in the Shih-ching, the Book of Songs, compiled in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. The buggying of chariots and horses in tombs or in special pits on the occasion of the death of members of the aristocracy continues all through the Chou period and in a few cases even during the Han period, providing us with information on the changes in the construction of chariots and in the harness used.

For instance, Fig. 7 shows the reconstruction of a chariot found in a burial pit in Liu-li-k‘ang (Hu-t‘ien, Honan). Typical of all chariots in the later part of the Chou period are the relatively thin spokes which give the wheels an elegant look. It is important that at this time, that is in the Warring States period (481-255 B.C.), the shaving of wheels was already known. According to Professor Joseph Needham this was introduced into Europe not before A.D. 1500. It is important because it gives the wheels an added strength against side-thrusts.

In one of the last copies of Wên-ku published just before the Cultural Revolution, the Workteam of the Office of Culture of the province of Hupeh reported the excavation of three tombs not far from the city of Chiang-ling. All resemble in construction those in Hunan and quite unmistakably were those of members of the high aristocracy of the State of Ch‘u, dating from the Warring States period. They had not been robbed and provide a good example of the wealth and taste of this society and the importance attached to burial. In tomb No. 1 alone more than 400 objects were found, among them 160 made of bronze, including a great number of ritual vessels, chariot fittings, a bronze lamp held in the hand by a rider on a camel and a sword with an inscription "Kou Chien, King of the state Ch‘u (had this) precious sword made for his own use" (Fig. 8). The king is renowned for his swords which are described as being "as lovely as a hibiscus, as bright as stars, as smooth as calm waters, as hard as granite and as glossy as ice." When found, the sword was in perfect condition without a speck of rust, proving the skill of the metalworkers of that day. It is thought that to protect their finished articles they overlaid them with tin, silver or mercury. That this sword was found in the tomb of a noble of the State of Ch‘u is important for its date, because the State of Ch‘u was conquered by the King of Ch‘u in 332 B.C., and we may suspect that on this occasion Kou Chien’s famous sword was captured and given to a noble of the victorious State of Ch‘u, finally to be placed in his tomb. This would rule out a date before 332 B.C. for the tomb but according to circumstances we may expect it to be no later than the turn of the century. Among other items found in the tomb may be mentioned part of a book written on bamboo slips and more than a hundred objects covered with often beautifully painted lacquer. They include cups, tables, writing brushes, boxes, a musical instrument (a sé resembling a zither) with pegs and bridges still in place, and an openwork lacquered wooden screen with an extraordinary type of decoration of great beauty (Fig. 9). In addition, there were remains of food—plum pits, melon seeds, chicken and fish bones and so forth. The noble buried in this tomb—judging by its content—must have been a highly educated man with a sophisticated taste, a true contemporary of...
The philosopher Hsin-tzu who was educated in the State of Ch’u and in his chapter on “Cultiva-
tion of oneself” includes as one of the qualities
demanded of the chün-tzu, the gentleman, the
“beauty of retirement.”

The wealth of beautifully lacquered and painted
doors found in tombs of the Warring States period, especially in the State of Ch’u, is
overwhelming; it reveals that in elegance and
subtlety of design the art of lacquering reached
its highest point during this period and perhaps
in this region and not—as formerly believed—in
the Han period.
Among the surprising discoveries found in
Ch’ü tombs were lacquered and brightly painted
demon or monster figures (Fig. 10). They were
most likely placed in tombs as guardians against
evil spirits, catching them with their tongues.

There is a plethora of excavated material
dating from the Han period (206 B.C. to A.D. 220), divided
into an Early or Western and a Late or Eastern
Han period). In general, one of the significant
results of the many excavations is that now we
know what kinds of tombs are typical of certain
periods or regions and thus are able to date a
tomb solely by its construction or building
material. A great surprise was to find quite a
number of Western Han tombs with wall and
celling paintings. These proved that at this time
realistic representations of men and animals in
action had already reached a stage of perfection
(Fig. 11) and sophistication which inspired all
our previous speculations with regard to the be-
ginning of this type of painting in China. A crude
picture of a garden impressed on hollow tiles and
shown in a kind of perspective found in a Western
Han tomb predates the beginning of landscape
painting by several centuries. In general, the
pictures in the newly excavated tombs of the Han
period, whether painted, engraved on stone walls
or impressed on bricks or hollow tiles, have
widened considerably our knowledge of daily life,
festivals, music, dances, acrobatics, theatrical
plays and rites of this time.

The layout, construction and decoration of
tombs reveal a certain degree changes in the
economic and social conditions of the Han period.
Starting in the middle of the Western Han period
we notice a steady increase in the size of tombs,
reflecting the growing prosperity of large sections
of the population. The ground plan and elevation
shown in Fig. 12 is that of one of two tombs dis-
covered in the neighborhood of Wang-tu in
Hopei. Both were similar in construction and
decoration, but this is the larger of the two. It is
built on a north/south axis with side-chambers
on both sides. Such an arrangement corresponds
to a certain extent the layout of a family com-
pound with courtyards one behind the other, each
serving a special function, with the private rooms
of the master of the house (or the ancestor hall)
in the rear courtyard. This tomb reflects, in more
than one way, the changes in the social structure
of society. Feudal aristocracy had lost its power
and had been replaced by new classes which had
established their own status symbols. It was what
we may call a more bourgeoisie society in which
the display of wealth rather than refinement was
important. The walls of the front chamber in both
tombs had been covered with paintings, not
with scenes of cavalcades and riders as cus-
tomary in Eastern Han tombs but with pictures of
officials, their titles listed in the inscriptions
beside them (Fig. 13). Some were the same as
those in other tombs, all typical of petty officials
whose function in life had been to serve and
accompany high officials, such as provincial
governors and others. Now in death their effigies
—no more their bodies—had to continue to serve.
Both tombs contain a number of short inscrip-
tions; in one was a eulogy written in red ink and
in the other a little deed to the burial ground.
Unfortunately both are partly illegible and trans-
volution very difficult, so there is some room for
speculation about the identity of the buried per-
sons and their dates. However, it is important that
these tombs were built in the middle or later part
of the second century A.D.

Perhaps one of the most startling discoveries
was made in the province of Yunnan, in Sh İl-chai-
shan near Chin-ning, about thirty miles southeast
of Kunming. Excavation was started in 1955 by
the Yunnan Provincial Museum and continued
through 1956 and ’57 under the auspices of the
Institute of Archaeology. A burial place was dis-
covered which, according to a golden seal in-
scribed “Seal of the King of Tien,” could be
identified as that of the Tien people, a non-
Chinese tribe, who buried their dead here in the
second and first centuries B.C. The tombs yielded
a rich harvest of containers, weapons, ornaments,
bells and other objects made of bronze. Although
some tombs contained some mirrors, belt-hooks,
coins and vessels imported from China, a great
number of objects were made locally and revealed
a fully mature bronze culture of which hitherto
little had been known (except the Dongson bronze
drums). The covers of some of the containers

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were filled with well-modelled figures of men and animals in action, ranging from battles and human sacrifices to processions of oxen and harvest festivals. A most complex scene involving about 120 people, each engaged in different activities, is shown in Fig. 14. Together with pictures engraved on walls and lids of some containers, they provide us with a well-documented record of the life of the Tienn people. Another outstanding feature of these tombs is the unusual abundance and strange types of highly decorated bronze weapons and tools and of ornamental plaques.

One of the most interesting tombs of the Six Dynasties period (A.D. 222-589) was discovered in the T'ing-ch'ien District in the southwestern part of Honan in 1957 and excavated by the Workteam of the Office of Culture of Honan in 1958. It was a fairly large brick tomb with vaulted ceiling. Its outstanding feature was a moulded and painted brick panels inserted into the walls at intervals. (There were also wall paintings near the entrance.) They show a procession consisting of soldiers, musicians, riders on horseback, grooms leading profusely caparisoned horses, men carrying incense burners, an ox-cart and others. From the Han period onwards processions have been one of the most common subjects depicted in tombs. What is outstanding is the manner and style of these pictures (Fig. 15). They are of an elegance and decorative beauty never seen before. An inscription in the tomb tells us that the buried person had been born in the south in the region around Soochow in Kiangsu and had been an officer in the army. Actually this part of Honan had been fought over and changed hands several times during the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. It is a border region and belongs to the south as much as to the north. We are thus justified in taking these pictures as examples of the pictorial style of the south. This explains their superior quality because it is the southern part of China which in later periods became the center of painting and produced some of the greatest painters of China; on the other hand, the south was always poor in sculpture.

The T'ang period is the time of China's greatest splendor (A.D. 618-906). Perhaps the greatest surprise which the excavations have revealed is the large numbers of tombs in T'ang. Many of them are dated by inscriptions and will finally supply us with a more secure line of development than the arbitrary descriptions of paintings in contemporary literature written by collectors or connoisseurs. One of the most spectacular tombs excavated in 1959 was that of Princess Yung-yi, a granddaughter of Empress Wu, who, after her husband's death, ruled the country and tried to establish her own dynasty. Because she suspected her granddaughter of having criticized some of her favorites, she ordered the 17-year-old princess and her husband to be killed. When after the death of the Empress the father of this princess became Emperor he had his unlucky daughter reburied in a splendid tomb (A.D. 708).86 meters long. The passageway into the tomb chamber was paved with pictures of horses, male servants and soldiers, that is, all those most commonly not admitted into the inner courtyards of the house of a noble. The walls of the inner chamber, on the other hand, showed groups of ladies (adies-in-waiting), some carrying utensils as if bringing them to their mistress (Fig. 16). Strangely enough, one of the girls seems to be wearing a man's dress.

No less astonishing was the discovery of tombs of the Sung period (A.D. 960-1270) with painted walls. Three tombs discovered in 1951 during the building of a water reservoir in Pal-sha in the Yu District of Honan were excavated in 1952. Most commonly, a staircase leads down to the tomb door and the tomb consists of two chambers connected by a passage. The chambers are of different shape, one being square, the other round or polygonal. All three tombs were built of bricks and resemble each other though they are not identical. Mostly a cupola is built over each chamber. What is remarkable is that the insides of the tombs are made to resemble in every detail the houses of the living. Wooden beams were fashioned out of bricks with brackets, all painted in bright colors with geometrical and floral patterns. The wooden construction resembles closely that illustrated in a contemporary book, the Ying-foo (fe-shih). The halls had windows showing draperies painted all around. A favorite subject is a girl made out of bricks appearing in a half-open door. On the walls were pictures showing scenes from the daily life of the family. In one we see a lady arranging her hair in front of a mirror held by a servant girl; in another, a small orchestra composed of male and female players—probably members of the family. In some cases, as in the picture of a husband and a sitting in front of a screen with servants behind them, the setting was carved in brick and painted over. In Fig. 17 we see the family with food and an elegant pitcher on the table in front of them, the girl apparently engaged in a game of skill with threads. Other pictures show money and men
View into the central chamber of Emperor Wan Li's tomb with the three thrones and altar sets in the background. Ming Dynasty; built 1584-90.

Archaeology of New China, op. cit. Pl. CXXXIX.

The most famous of the tombs of the Ming period (A.D. 1368-1644) is that of Emperor Wan Li near Peking. Excavation began in 1956 and was finished in 1957. It is a very large tomb with a number of rooms and contained the coffin of the Emperor and of two of his wives. Three marble thrones and three sets of altar pieces made of porcelain were found in the largest room (Fig. 18). The most precious objects were discovered inside the three coffins: splendid crown-like head coverings and jade and gold cups, bowls and pitchers of most delicate workmanship. It is known that the Emperor began to build his tomb in 1584 when he was 22 years old. It took six years to complete and cost eight million ounces of silver; when it was finished the Emperor gave a festival in his own tomb chamber. He died A.D. 1630. The tomb has been preserved at the site and has become a tourist attraction.

These are just a few examples, selected more or less at random. They will, I hope, suffice to show that archaeological work and excavation on this enormous scale could not have been carried through without the active support of the government and the cooperation of the people. It seems, therefore, appropriate to quote a sentence from Mao Tse-tung’s Little Red Book: “Make the Past serve the Present” which has been interpreted as positive encouragement of archaeological work. In a way, there can be no more precise statement about the “relevancy” of history.

This is the first of two articles by Dr. Bulling. In the second, which will appear in the Fall number of Expedition, she will discuss the archaeological work done since 1966.

Notes


4 In this neighborhood the ancient capital of the State of Ch’u (Ying) is believed to have been situated.

5 Kou Chien, King of Yueh, is a well known person. Ssu-ma Ch’ien in his Shih-chi reports at length about him. See translation by Edouard Chavannes, Les Mémoires Historiques de Se-ma Tsien, Vol. IV, pp. 418ff.