Report for Sichuan Archaeological Internship

Deng Xiaoyi   July 2018

I have visited two sites in the past month: first Jiang Kou Chen Yin (江口沈銀遺址工作站), also newly known as War Site of Late Ming (明末戰場遺址) and then Sanxingdui (三星堆遗址工作站). Since it is summer now, there is currently no excavation happening in each site with increased rains and hot weather. However, during our stay in each site, we had the opportunity to visit some of the excavation-on-going sites like Ren Shou (仁壽工地) and Guang Yuan Song Grave (广元宋墓). All of them have contributed a lot to my understanding of the standard of archaeological excavation.

At the beginning as well as the end of this internship in Chengdu, we have also visited Sanxingdui Museum (三星堆遗址博物館), Jinsha Museum (金沙遗址博物館), Sichuan Provincial Museum (四川省博物館) and Chengdu City Museum (成都市博物館).

My report mainly consists of two parts: a clear procedure of archaeological excavation in mainland China and my reflection of public archaeology in Sichuan.

Procedure of Archaeological Excavation in Mainland China

In China today, archaeological institutions or archaeological teams are set to work with infrastructure construction projects, like highway, underground or new buildings. Usually, during the planning phase, construction units would co-operate with archaeological teams to launch on-site excavation before any construction begins. Take Ren Shou site for example, the construction of Round-Tian-Fu Highway (環天府大道), preliminary on-site investigation has been launched and several graves have been found. Because of the urgency of the construction project, excavation had to start even it is the worst time of a year to launch any excavation. Another example is Guang Yuan

Song tomb, located in a new building construction site. Constant rains have added to the difficulty of excavation but no postponement can be made. This kind of excavation is also called "urgent excavation" because of its close relation with infrastructure construction.

Urgent excavation can also be launched to protect the site from contemporary looting and by this definition, Jiang Kou Chen Yin is also categorized as urgent excavation because the whole project was initiated by the increasing number of underwater looting activities in villages nearby. In this case, the integrity of the whole site is believed to be under threat so local heritage management unit applied to National Heritage Management Department for permission of excavation.

Another kind of excavation, contrary to urgent excavation, is active excavation, which means archaeological excavation takes part without any construction projects, or even the whole area has been protected for archaeological investigation and excavation because of the finding in previous excavation. A great example is Sanxingdui site because construction in nearby area has all been banned to ensure the integrity of the site.

After preliminary investigation, archaeologists are supposed to know there is something underground and sometimes, even what to expect underground. To make sure what it is underground, we need investigatory dig which usually involves the usage of Luoyang Shovels. Archaeologists use Luoyang Shovels to investigate the distribution of different layers in a specific point. After strategically plotting points, we will be able to understand the rough area of the site. With these information, we will be able to answer the question better whether an excavation is needed in this site, where to excavate if so, and how to plan excavation units to maximize the outcome of our excavation.

With excavation plan approved by relevant governmental departments, excavation officially starts. Usually excavation is launched by both archaeologists and site workers. Workers are responsible for moving out mud from excavation unit and archaeologists are responsible for

monitoring excavation, identifying significant findings in different layers and recording on-site information for future report writing.

Our imagination of archaeological investigation usually stops at excavation but in fact, archaeological excavation extend way longer than merely excavation as shown by our experience in both sites. Firstly, on-site records need to be re-accessed to generate relation among different layers in our excavation. This is done by sorting the sequence of different layers from an on-site recording document. We have tried it in Sanxingdui and I have to admit it is not necessarily a difficult task but it requires a lot of patience and carefulness.

Secondly, we need to sort and calculate different artifacts found in the same layer to generate reliable sequential conclusions of historical eras, represented by different layers. The key of this step is highly related with the nature of each site because for different artifacts found we have different sorting methods. In Sanxingdui, what we dealt with the most is pottery fragments. What we did most was first to sort the fragments into two categories: sand-based or mud-based pottery and then into different color categories. The sorting is for both repairing and calculating. Repairing involves collecting pieces originally from the same pot and then trying to stick them back together. For me, this is an extremely difficult task because I got so confused in front of hundreds of pieces and I don't remember the information of each pot so well as my teammates. But I did enjoy using chemical glue to stick pieces back together. Calculating involves transforming all the information to sheets for future analysis.

For pieces with patterns, we also need to transform the pattern information onto paper with ink and Xuan paper. This involves wetting the paper and pat it to make it stick tightly with our pieces. With the paper dried, we need to use ink to leave the pattern on the paper.

參觀三星堆祭祀坑	參觀蜀道
參觀廣元市博物館	參觀發掘工地

Another important part of after-excavation data collection is electronizing all the information, including hand-drawn maps and artifacts information. The software AutoCAD is usually used to electronize maps, which we have tried in Sanxingdui. To input artifacts information into computer, we need artifact photography and spread sheets to build an information system. We have taken this task in Jiang Kou Chen Yin, dealing with mostly gold or silver artifacts. Collected information includes length, thickness, mass and brief description of each artifacts. In terms of artifact photography, I am personally very touched by our instructor at the site for his word - "Artifact won't move so you have the chance to set everything, the lighting, the physical setting and the camera to the best. Then why not?". Some photos require further photoshoping because we need to use gadgets to make artifacts stand and the gadgets sometimes are inevitably shown in the photos.

Apart from separate information input into electronic system, integrated information systemizing is also utilized in archaeological excavation. GIS in this case is utilized to put all the collected information together, including electronized maps of each excavation units, artifact distribution in the whole sites and natural landscapes. The software ArcGIS is usually used and instructor in Sanxingdui has shown us its power. I think it vividly shows that archaeology is essentially an inter-disciplinary research field where the integration of various information can create powerful conclusions.

Usually concurrent with all the post-excavation information analysis, report writing begins as in some case, report writing is highly relevant with whether the excavation will continue. So the final stage of an complete excavation is report publication. During our stay in both Sanxingdui and Jiang Kou Chen Yin, both leaders are working hard on report writing as it is the least possible time period for excavation.

It is clear that a complete archaeological excavation consist of more than real digging from the initial investigation, planning and post-excavation information analysis. However, what we usually think of when we talk about archaeology is only the outdoor excavation. Therefore, I think the internship has completed the concept of archaeological excavation for me by involving me into the real post-excavation information analysis.

陶器修復	陶器修復所需工具

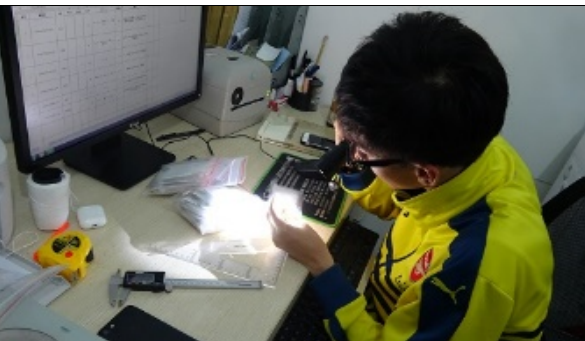|	
陶器修復	陶器修復
整理陶片	嘗試使用 rtk 儀器
講解陶片標本	陶片分類
辨識文物上的文字	文物攝影

Reflection of Public Archaeology in Sichuan

I am most concerned with the practice of public archaeology in Sichuan during the whole trip. My reflection involves three different kinds of practices: communication with local residents, public education (exhibition and public lectures) and public participation.

During our stay in Jiang Kou Chen Yin, we have participated in several local preliminary investigation which means we visited a lot of local villages and looked for possible Han graves in Wu Yang Cheng, which is an ancient city established in Qin. Since there have always been people living on that land, we were mostly walking in habited area, contrary to my expectation before about deserted land. In our visits, sometimes local villagers would be very curious what this bunch of strangers are doing in their fields so they would ask us. Also, sometimes to find out whether there are unknown graves, we would ask local residents. Generally speaking, local villagers are well informed about the distribution of archaeological remains near their field, if found. But their understanding remained to the level that this is something related to Wu Yang Cheng and they are under protect. After I have expressed my concern, our team leader replied that this is none of their business anyway, as long as we don't pay them for excavation. His reply has made me uncomfortable because his reply has not only shown his contempt but also revealed that archaeology, has still remained a privilege for (urban) middle class. But where the exhibited artifacts are from, people are linked with archaeology only by economical reimbursement. Despite this, I would say the communication with local residents is positive and contributing.

In terms of public education of archaeology in Sichuan, I am very surprised to find different exhibition practice, aiming to introducing the public to archaeological practices. Sanxingdui site, as well as Jinsha site has been developed into a topical museum, concurrently with the on-going investigation. In Sanxingdui Museum, the two sacrificing pits have been re-created at the original site

for exhibition where the exact same artifacts are placed exactly like the time of excavation. Bronze statues are used to reflect the working scene of archaeologist, which has also added to the historical feeling of the excavation site (Sandxingdui site has had a long history of excavation of more than 90 years). Also, the vegetation in the museum has also been used to show what excavation units are like.

In Jinsha Museum, part of the excavation site has been conserved and built into a whole exhibition hall to show the public what an excavation site is like. Together, there are many on-site illustrations introducing different archaeological concepts including layers, excavation units and artifacts protection. This is a new approach from traditional exhibition where we only show the public the selected collection of excavated artifacts. I think this is better than the traditional approach because the traditional one, by showing only the cleaned and selected version of excavation results but emitting mostly the excavation process, easily leaves the impression of collecting beautiful and valuable artifacts from excavation sites on the public. Under the context of Chinese archaeology, where for a long time archaeology has been stigmatized as looting with licenses, it is even more important than other contexts to show that archaeological excavation is a discreet scientific investigation and research and in the excavation site, there are definitely more mud, more rust than usually exhibited in museums. Therefore, I think it is an effective approach to educate the public about archaeological excavation.

Finally, apart from exhibition as a kind of public engagement, archaeological excavation in Sichuan has also adopted a new approach by recruiting non-archaeology –major volunteers nationwide. I think it is another very effective approach to open archaeology to the general public. Also, this kind of program, including our program, creates opportunities for potential youth to enter this field.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am introduced to a more complete understanding of archaeology in this internship by participating in mostly post-excavation data analysis. Digging is definitely an important part of archaeological excavation but it is far from the only part. Post-excavation data analysis is also very significant in generating meaningful conclusion even though always neglected in our imagination. By participating in actual task, I now have gained a new perspective in reading any archaeological reports – even the slightest part involves hours of hard work. I think it also gives me insights about how I should contribute to research in the future.

Also, I have gained a more holistic picture of the dynamic between different actors in the process by interacting with different people from the field, from interns from archaeology major students in Peking University to staff in archaeological station. Archaeology, even though always romanticized as a conversation with the past, is primarily communication in the present.

In terms of public archaeology, I think my experience in the field has helped me think more about why we need archaeology as living people, why we need to communicate with whom have lived in the past and how we should publicize our findings better.

I am very grateful for this opportunity offered by Sichuan Provincial Department of Cultural Affair, Sichuan Archaeological Institute and The Chinese University of Hong Kong. I believe this experience and all the inspiration it has offered will help me in various perspectives.