New Research Exploring the Origins of Sanxingdui

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In 1986, our understanding of Bronze Age China was dramatically transformed by the discovery of two large pits containing hundreds of bronze, jade, and gold objects and elephant tusks at a site called Sanxingdui on the south bank of the Yazi River, just northwest of the city of Guanhan, in the Chengdu Plain of Sichuan (SSWKY 1999; Figure 1). These finds not only provided evidence of a previously unknown bronze tradition, they also indicated that Sanxingdui (ca. 1500-1100 BC), a site known and periodically investigated since the 1930s, was an important center of a previously unknown complex society. This society practiced elaborate rituals involving complex and relatively unique symbolic systems, specialized production of labor intensive prestige goods, control of networks of resource acquisition, and its leadership had the ability to mobilize a reasonably large community of individuals to produce and maintain walls around the site and to sustain its ritual economy.

I was pulled into the exciting world of prehistoric archaeology in the Chengdu Plain through a fortuitous confluence of events. During my PhD research at UCLA, I participated in research in the eastern part of the Sichuan Basin at the early salt production site of Zhongba, and I frequently traveled to Chengdu to visit our collaborators there. In 2001, during one of these trips, I was lucky to be among the first to see accidental discoveries just made at a site now called Jinsha. We now know that Jinsha contains a vast array of interesting material, but among the first discoveries were artifacts very reminiscent of the Sanxingdui find, both in their form and their apparent ritual function, although somewhat later than Sanxingdui in date. Jinsha is now a world-class site museum and it is a beacon of the exciting potential of archaeology in the Chengdu region (Figure 2).

Additional research during the past decade has identified at least 9 walled sites in the Chengdu Plain that predate the walled settlement at Sanxingdui (Wang 2006), and these are now collectively referred to as sites of the Baodun Culture (ca. 2700-1500 BC). The walled sites comprise the majority of published Baodun sites, and it is assumed, based on the presence of Baodun remains in the lowest occupation levels at Sanxingdui, that Baodun culture was directly ancestral to the culture of Sanxingdui during the period contemporaneous with the ritual pits.

Although preliminary excavations at many of these walled Baodun culture sites has illuminated some aspects of life in these settlements, very little is known about their patterns of settlement or the extent to which the walled sites were representative of the Baodun period. Similarly, regional settlement patterns for the periods contemporary with Sanxingdui and Jinsha have not been investigated previously. In 2005, together with archaeologists from the Chengdu City Institute of Archaeology, Peking University, Harvard University, UCLA, Washington University in St. Louis, and National Taiwan University, I helped start a research project to address these fundamental problems.

The research project has focused its preliminary efforts on developing a suitable strategy for survey in the Chengdu Plain. Like much of southern China, the Chengdu Plain is dominated by wet-field rice-paddy agriculture (Figure 3). Ground visibility

during the summer months is nearly zero and the rice paddies are not accessible for sub-surface testing. In the autumn and into the winter, however, after rice has been harvested, visibility is slightly better although uneven due to the use of these same fields for growing various vegetables, and during these seasons sub-surface testing is also possible.

In our first season, the research team tested several sub-surface investigation strategies near the Baodun Culture site of Gucheng in Pi Xian County (see Figure 1). A controlled test of shovel-test-pits (STPs), Luoyang spades, and three types of augers determined that open-bucket augers were the most appropriate tool for rapid, systematic coring over a large area in this region (Figure 3). The team has subsequently adopted a survey strategy that involves coring transects across a 300 km area around the site of Gucheng and simultaneously conducting surface survey across the same area.

The team is also working with a geophysicist and a geomorphologist to put the survey data into a more comprehensive context. The geophysics work complements the survey teams by exploring whether locations that contain early surface or subsurface remains also show evidence of subsurface magnetic anomalies that may represent features. We intend to use these data to identify the extent and nature of sites in the survey region. The geomorphology research is focused on reconstructing past environmental conditions and identifying evidence for landscape transformations that may have occurred over the past 4000 years.

Our first two seasons of preliminary work have shown that Baodun period sites do exist outside of the known walled sites. In addition, material remains from the Sanxingdui period, and later periods are also relatively common. Most of these data come from the coring program. These data present difficulty problems of interpretation and require that we think carefully about the relationships between material culture, settlements, landforms, and social organization. Over time we hope to shed more light on the origins of Baodun, Sanxingdui, and Jinsha, and the relations among these important sites.

References:

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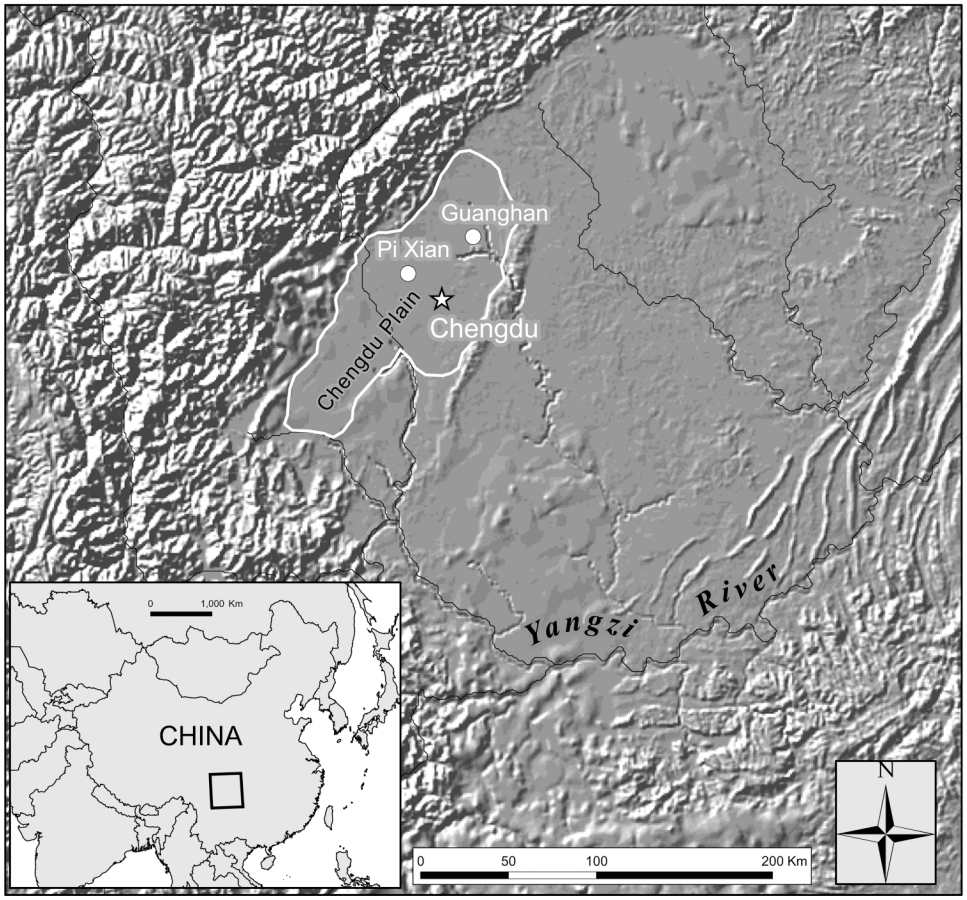

Figure 1: Locations of Guanghan, Pi Xian, and Chengdu in the Chengdu Plain, Sichuan.

Figure 2: The site museum of Jinsha in Chengdu, Sichuan.

Figure 3: Zhou Zhiqing of the Chengdu City Institute of Archaeology recording data from an auger test hole.