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Archaeology in Central and Southwest China: Travels in Guizhou

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Central and Southwest China have recently become increasingly important in archaeological research in China. Central China, which includes the provinces of Hubei and Hunan in the Middle Yangzi river valley, Sichuan in the Upper Yangzi river valley, and Chongqing municipality in between, and Southwest China, including the provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou (see Figure 1), were the focus of a session, organized at the Society of East Asian Archaeology (SEAA) quadrennial conference in Beijing in June 2008. Participants focused on new discoveries and recent research projects in Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Chongqing. The session provided a broader regional context for the archaeological survey project that I currently help direct in the Chengdu Plain of Sichuan Province (Flad 2008).

The Chengdu Plain Archaeological Survey (CPAS) has been underway since 2005. It involves a collaborative effort of archaeologists from Harvard University, Peking University, the Chengdu City Institute of Archaeology, Washington University in St. Louis, National Taiwan University, and UCLA. Several Harvard graduate students have been involved over the past couple of seasons (Figure 2). This survey seeks to understand the emergence of complex societies in a region of China long overlooked in grand syntheses of Chinese prehistory. We are systematically collecting data on settlement patterns, environmental change, subsistence practices, and other aspects of

past behavior that will illuminate the conditions under which societies developed during the period from the third millennium to first millennium BC, and the social practices that constituted this development.

If we are to understand this process, however, we need to keep the regional context in mind. The relationships between sites in the Chengdu Plain, and those in the surrounding areas must be understood. With this in mind, I have spent parts of the last two years visiting archaeological sites in this region including trips to Chongqing, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Hubei. The Guizhou portion of this effort took place after the 2008 SEAA conference. Archaeology in Guizhou is, in many ways, still in its infancy, but it is an area with great potential. Here I outline several highlights of this trip and emphasize the incredible potential of this region.

I arrived in Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou, on June 26th and stayed until July 3rd, during which time, I was given a whirlwind tour of archaeological sites and rural villages where local residents who identify with various minority ethnic groups provide glimpses of non-Han cultural practices as an attraction for tourists. My tour was arranged and organized by the Guizhou Provincial Institute of Archaeology, and directed by Mr. Li Fei, an archaeologist in the institute who gave a talk last year in the Harvard East Asian Archaeology Seminar during a visit to the Cambridge area. Although I had extremely memorable ethnographic experiences during this trip, including the fortuitous opportunity to watch traditional dragon-boat races at Shidong on the Qingshui River of Eastern Guizhou by members of the Miao ethnic group who inhabit the region and who celebrate Duanwujie (the “Dragon boat festival”) on a different day from the Han majority (Figure

3), my primary interest was in archaeological sites. Four types of archaeological remains provided a snapshot of the diversity of material in this region (Figure 4).

Our first stop was a region south of Guiyang that is under investigation by the Guizhou Provincial Institute of Archaeology as part of the nationwide survey of cultural relics that is currently underway in China. Under the auspices of this survey, the Provincial Institute is recording and documenting the condition of known sites (i.e., sites identified in previous nationwide surveys or found during subsequent archaeological studies) and systematically investigating, as much as possible, the entire province to identify previously unknown sites. This is, by any measure, a monumental task, and the Guizhou Institute is relatively small. Nevertheless, they have forged ahead admirably. Their area of research during my trip was the Huaxi region south of Guiyang in the highland area called Gaopo (“High-slope”) Township.

The focus in this area are cave coffins that are commonly associated with the Miao ethnic group in this region. We first visited a known site called Jiading that has been under the protection of the cultural relics authority since 1997. This cave is relatively large, with two entrances and over 200 wooden coffins of a variety of sizes. Some very small examples are thought to have been cenotaphs, with the most recent example constructed for a local soldier who was killed during the Korean war. Although this cemetery is no longer actively used, local Miao with the surname Wang still attend to the burials in this site. The cave is a fascinating example of an ethnographic site that is rapidly becoming a purely archaeological relic of a rapidly disappearing burial practice.

Cave coffins like these are known from at least eleven locations. Some, such as those near Gaopo, still have a connection to living descendent communities. Others have

been forgotten. Shortly after our first visit, we went to another cave, called Gupodong, that was more difficult to reach and within which the coffins were preserved much more poorly. This cave had been discovered during the current survey campaign.

A second category of sites visited during my trip were cave sites with Paleolithic or Neolithic remains. These are everywhere in the karstic landscape of Guizhou. Over 200 are known, and a fair number of these have been at least partially excavated. Among the excavated examples, however, few are well published. These include such sites as Pan Xian Dadong (Huang et al. 1995), but ironically the “best” sites have received the least amount of work. Apparently local archaeologists, who would like to investigate these sites, do not have the manpower to conduct excavations because of the non-stop demands on their time for salvage work and projects like the current cultural relics survey. Sites that do receive attention tend to be those that local archaeologists “give up” to national research institutes like the Institute for Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology (IVPP) – the unit that led the international effort to investigate Pan Xian Dadong. There is incredible potential in this region for extensive work on late Pleistocene and early to middle (and perhaps even late) Holocene remains in these many caves.

Our first cave site that did not have coffins was also a stop on our first day of travel. Known as Heiliandong, it comprises two large caves and a small one. The largest of these caves is about 22 meters deep, but the others are quite shallow. On the floor surface at this cave and others we visited, a few minutes of investigation resulted in the collection of stone flakes and thin black pottery. This material is characteristic of early sites in the region, although little dating has been done to precisely identify the

chronology of this pottery. At present it is simply identified as “Neolithic.” Later material, including porcelain and coins, demonstrate, even in the superficial nature of surface collections, the long-term use of these caves.

Visits to cave sites continued throughout my travels. Some were planned visits, including stops at the site of Chuandong cave in Anshun County, a protected monument since 1988. The site has been excavated three times by scholars from Nanjing University and IVPP. Another was the impressive site of Feihushan, one of our last stops on my tour. This cave lies in a solitary karstic hill in the middle of rice-paddies—a very picturesque locale. Excavations here are among the few published studies of Neolithic cave sites in the region (Li & Wan 1993). We spent the better part of an afternoon collecting material from this site for the Provincial Institute. Other visits were impromptu stops at caves we noticed while driving past. These included a site called the Zhengjia cave in Western Guizhou. Although probably a site that housed prehistoric occupation, the floor of this cave was mostly covered by concrete, and, although it is a protected cultural site, it seems that its significance comes from a period of use as an ammunition dump during the years of resistance in the 1940s.

A third set of archaeological material included in this survey was the rock art of Guizhou. We visited the site of Wushan in Longli County where several extensive sets of rock art came to the attention of archaeologists in 2002. The Institute of Archaeology then conducted a relatively full survey of the cliff face in 2004 (Li 2006). The chronology of the art is not yet clear, although it is thought to date to the Bronze Age. Several motifs appear repeatedly in the art including designs that look like horses, sometimes with riders (Figure 5), and others that seem to depict humans leading cattle with humped backs by a

rope (Figure 6). Unfortunately, local attempts to promote tourism at the site have hindered the potential to answer more questions about the site function and date. Uneven areas of ground surface below the cliffs have been flattened and covered with concrete. It is not clear when future work will be conducted.

A fourth archaeological focus of our travel in Guizhou was a visit to sites in the Tianzhu region along the Qinshui River, further downstream and closer to Hunan Province than the location of the Dragon Boat race. Archaeologists from the Guizhou Institute surveyed this region in 2004 in preparation for the construction of a dam on the river that will flood many of the riverbank sites. The survey located a number of Neolithic sites including the Pojiao site shown in Figure 4. These sites were all close to the riverbank, and seem to be associated with the Gaomiao-culture that has come to light recently in Hunan. The Gaomiao-culture has been dated to ca. 7800–6000 BP based on the research in Hunan (Hunan 2000, 2006), and the material in Guizhou is very similar in terms of ceramic characteristics. The sites are all small with coarse sandy-reddish pottery and thin black sandy pottery as well as very large stone flakes.

Archaeology in Guizhou is very diverse, and has a lot to contribute to the understanding of prehistoric people in the upland regions of interior southern China. All four of the archaeological site types that I visited are not yet well understood and require significantly more research. This research will need to be intensive and local, but it will also need to put these finds in the context of broader patterns of activity in Central and Southwestern China. The future of my fieldwork in Sichuan and the future work in Guizhou will be intertwined.

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Figures:

- 1) Map of Central and Southwest China
- 2) Members of the Chengdu Plain Archaeological Survey in 2005–2006. From left to right: He Kunyu, Zhou Zhiqing, Gwen Bennet, Yan Jingsong, Li Shuicheng, Luisa MENGONI, Rowan FLAD, JIANG Zhanghua, Jade Guedes, Ding Jianxiang, Roderick Campell, and Xie Tao.
- 3) A “Dragon Boat” preparing for the Miao Dragon Boat Festival race in Shidong.
- 4) Archaeological sites visited during the Guizhou tour and mentioned in the text. These include the cave-burial sites of Jiading and Gupodong, the cave sites of Heiliandong, Chuandong, Zhengjia and Feihushan, the Wushan rock art site, and the Gaomiao-culture sites such as Pojiao on the Qingshui River.
- 5) Rock art from Wushan with horse figures. Note those near the bottom which apparently have human riders.
- 6) Rock art from Wushan depicting a hump-backed bovid with a rope coming out from the nose.