Discovery and Studies of the Jinsha Site

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The Jinsha 金沙 Site was discovered in February 8, 2001. Between then and March 2003, a savage archaeological endeavor that involved the field strategies of subsurface probing and extensive excavation had been carried out in coordination with the city’s infrastructure development. The project revealed some of the basic features of the site. We had investigated the following localities: Mei Yuan 梅苑, Lan Yuan 兰苑, Tiyu Gongyuan 体育公园, Yansha Tingyuan 燕沙庭苑, Renfang 人防, Jinsha Yuan 金沙园, Jinyu Fangchan 金煜房产, Gangzheng Fangchan 罡正房产, Jinniu Jiaotongju Zhuzhai Lou 金牛交通局住宅楼, Furong Yuan 芙蓉园, Boya Tingyun 博雅庭韵, Lingyuan Fangchan 凌远房产, Jia Zai Huilang 家在回廊, and Yangxixian Zonghe Lou 羊西线综合楼. In the past two years, we had uncovered a large number of ash pits, burials, occupation floors, kilns, and some special features, and brought light to numerous rare artifacts made of gold, bronze, jade, stone, and ivory, as well as tens of thousands of pottery vessels and sherds.

The site is located about 5 km to the northwest of the municipal center of Chengdu 成都, Sichuan 四川, in between the city’s Second and Third Ring Expressways. The area is under the administration of the Jinsha Village, Suo 苏坡 County, Qingyang 青羊 District, and the Huangzhong 黄忠 Village, Jinniu 金牛 District. The investigation indicates that the site occupies an area of about 4 sq km (400 hectares). Geographically, the site is located on the eastern part of the Chengdu Plain. The Modi 摸底 River runs through the site from west to east. The Qingshui 清水 River is about 1.5 km to the south, and the ancient course of Pijiang 郫江 River locates near the northern corner of the site.

I. Important Remains Recovered

1. Features. The uncovered archaeological features include houses, kilns, burials, ash pits, caches, and special artifact concentrations.

The more than 50 house features distributed in the following three localities: Lan Yuan at Jinsha Village, and Sanhe Huayuan 三和花园 and Furong Yuan in Huangzhong Village (Fig. 1). All the houses were made of wattle-and-daub style structures that the walls stand on shallow excavated wall foundations (like a trough) with wood (or bamboo) frames in the center. Small post holes were densely lined along the wall foundations of smaller houses; while the larger houses were not only built with small posts, larger post holes were found evenly spaced (about 1 m) along the wall foundations. The common orientation of house features was northwest–southeast.

The more than 30 kiln features concentrated in the Sanhe Huayuan locality of Huangzhong Village. Nevertheless, a small number of kilns were scattered in other localities. All the kilns were small oval in shape, with an average area of about 4 sq m. A typical kiln comprised work surface, door, fire channels, and a 1.2 m diameter circular chamber gently sloping down from the back to the front.

The 300 burials were primarily distributed in Lan Yuan, Tiyu Gongyuan (Fig. 2), and Yansha Tingyuan at Jinsha Village, and Boya Tingyun and Gangzheng Fangchan at Huangzhong Village. Primary and secondary burials were found. Skeletons of all the primary burials were lying on extended supine position. The burial pits were oriented northwest–southeast, with no exception. The head orientated, however, either toward the northwest or the southeast, with the majority heading toward the southeast. Some burials had secondary ledges. About half of the burials did not have burial goods. For those that had burial goods, few items, mostly pottery wares, were found in their graves. Yet, a few graves were richly furnished that they were not only offered with pottery, but also with bronze and jade artifacts.

The project uncovered more than 1000 ash pits. Most of them were oval in shape. Some ash pits seemed to have been carefully dug. They were oval in shape,
Fig. 1 Architectural complex at the Sanhe Huayuan in Huangzhong Village

Fig. 2 Panorama of the excavated area at the Tiyu Gongyuan
straight walled, level bottom, and yielded significant number of ceramic wares; many were complete and reconstructable. The functions of these pits need to be studied in future works.

An ivory cache was located in the eastern part of the excavation area of Mei Yuan. The feature had been severely disturbed. The remaining feature was triangular in plan with a remaining length of 160 cm, and a width of 60 cm. The fillings of the pits can be divided into two strata. The upper stratum was brownish sediment, while the lower stratum was filled with sandy silt. A large number of ivory tusks were systematically lined in eight different layers of the sandy deposit. The longest tusk measured up to 150 cm. The tusks had been preliminary identified to that of Asian elephants. In addition, the cache also yielded a large number of jade and bronze artifacts.

In a small area of about 300 sq m in the southern part of the excavated area of Mei Yuan, a concentration of stone discs and stone blades deposit was found. Within the concentration, layers of stone discs and blades were densely distributed on an occupation floor that gently down sloped from the northwest to the southeast. Yellowish sediment was sandwiched in between artifact layers.

Similarly, a 400 sq m concentration of warthog tusks, deer antlers, jade, bronze, and ivory artifacts were located in the northern part of the Mei Yuan locality. The tusks had been identified to be the lower incisor teeth of warthogs, indicating that they were purposely selected.

2. Artifacts. The savage project recovered more than 3000 counts of artifacts including gold, jade, bronze, stone, and ivory objects. The excavation also yielded large quantities of ivory tusks and tens of thousands of ceramic wares and sherds.

The gold assemblage comprises about 80 specimens of masks, belts, gold leaves in the shapes of frog, Sun Bird, and bird-headed fish, trumpet-shaped objects, box-shaped objects, and numerous fragments of gold. A gold belt decorated with a pattern of bird, fish, arrow, and human head is almost identical to that of the gold staff found in Pit 1 of Sanxingdui三星堆. The gold leaf image of Sun Bird is remarkably lively that it is the cream of similar handicrafts of the Shang–Zhou era (Figs. 3 and 4).

The bronze assemblage is as large as 1000 counts. The more frequently seen artifacts include standing human figurines, ox heads, halberds, disc-shaped objects, perforated squared-shaped objects, eye-shaped objects, bells, shells, etc. It is noteworthy to point out that there is a human figurine of about 20 cm tall, standing on a podium, with hands holding on the chest. Its style is very similar to the style of the standing figurine recovered from Pit 1 of Sanxingdui. Also found are the accessories of large bronze vessels and a few ring-footed bronze zun-vessels, and fragments of large bronze objects of unknown shapes. They point to the fact that there exist large bronze artifacts in the Jinsha Site yet to be found (Figs. 5 and 6).
Fig. 5 Bronze standing figurine (2001CQJC:17)

Fig. 6 Bronze bird figurine at the sacrificial area (2001CQJC:553)

Fig. 7 Jade cong-tube (2001CQJC:1)

Fig. 8 Jade ge-halberd (2001CQJC:683)

Fig. 9 Jade zhang-tablet (2001CQJC:955)
The jade assemblage comprises about 1000 counts of cong-tubes, disc-shaped objects, blades, halberds, battle-axes, chisels, spearheads, bracelets, rings, shell, etc. Most of the sunken lines on hilts of the blades were painted with cinnabar (Figs. 7–9).

The overall styles of the gold, bronze, jade, and stone artifacts of Jinsha are consistent with that of Pits 1 and 2 of Sanxingdui, indicating that these two sites were closely related. However, the Jinsha Site also exhibits strong unique characteristics. Its gold assemblage is exceptionally large and diverse in shape. Its jade assemblage is not only large, it also yields all the shape classes seen in other contemporary cultures. The round stone carving of figurines (e.g., kneeling humans, tigers, serpents, etc.) are rarely seen in similar sites. The ivory tusks recovered weigh up to several tons; its sheer size makes it a unique discovery in the archaeology of China.

II. Preliminary Understanding

1. Relative and absolute chronology

Recent studies have tentatively established a culture history of the pre-imperial Cultures of the Chengdu Plain: the Baodun Culture (2700–1700 BC)–the Sanxingdui Culture (1700–1200 BC)–the Shierqiao Culture (1200–600 BC)–the Shangwangjiaguai remains (500–200 BC). From the seriation of ceramics recovered from the 12 localities, we tentatively divide the Shang–Zhou remains of Jinsha into four phases of the Shierqiao Culture.

Phase I: Diagnostic remains of this phase were recovered from the Lan Yuan locality strata 6 and 7 and most of its ash pits and burials, and the Sanhe Huayuan locality strata 6 to 9. The diagnostic ceramics include small flat-bottomed guan-jars, tall dou-pedestal stands, ping-jars, he-kettles, petal-handled lids, goblet-shaped
wares, ring-footed guan-jars, deep restrict-necked point-bottomed zhan-cups, deep point-bottomed bei-cups, flare-lipped urn-jars. Phase 1 pottery is similar in style and composition to that of strata 13 and 12 of Shierqiao, and Sanxingdui phase IV. We conclude that phase I was contemporaneous to the Yinxu 殷墟 phases III and IV to the early Zhou.

Phase II: Typical examples of this phase were found in strata 4 and 5, and the ivory, jade, and bronze concentration in Area I T8104 strata 6 and 7 of the Lan Yuan locality. Most of the Shang–Zhou remains of the various localities are diagnostic to this phase, suggesting that this was the most prosperous time of the Jinsha Site. The major ceramic styles include restricted point-bottomed zhan-cups, point-bottomed guan-jars, deep, ridged point-bottomed bei-cups, ring-footed bo-bowls, long-necked guan-jars, weng-urns, twist-handled lids, etc. This ceramic composition is also the typical composition of the Shierqiao Culture. The style of phase II pottery is similar to that of strata 11 and 10 of the Shierqiao Site, and the late phase burials of Shuiguanyin 水观音 Site in Xinfan 新繁. Its absolute chronology is dated to the early to middle Western Zhou.

Phase III: This phase is represented by the material remains recovered from I T6414 stratum 7, the oracle bone concentration in the western part of the ritual precinct. Deposit of this phase is relatively scarce in the site. The major vessels include dish-mouthed guan-vessels, straight-mouthed point-bottomed zhan-cups, point-bottomed guan-jars, tall-necked guan-jars, ring-footed guan-jars, restricted guan-jars, etc. The ceramic assemblage of this phase is similar to that of the Xinyicun 新一村 stratum 8 in style and composition. Its absolute chronology should be bracketed between the late Western Zhou and the early Springs and Autumns period.

Phase IV: Typical examples are found in the ritual precinct stratum 5. Deposit of this phase is relatively thin. The major vessel classes are dish-mouthed guan-jars and unrestricted point-bottomed zhan-cups. The ceramic assemblage of phase IV resembles that of Xinyicun strata 7 and 6 in style and composition. Its absolute date, therefore, is contemporary with the mid and late Springs and Autumns period.

2. Functional division of Jinsha Site

The Jinsha Site is a large center of the ancient Shu 蜀 Culture during the Shang–Zhou era. It is very likely that Jinsha, after the decline of Sanxingdui civilization, emerged into a political, economic, and cultural center, as well as an urban center of the archaic Shu State, spanning from the late Shang to Western Zhou times. Our investigation indicates that there existed considerable functional division within the site.

A complex of five structures were revealed in the Sanhe Huayuan locality. The length of each of the structures exceeds 20 m. The largest structure, F6, is 8 m wide and 54.8 m long, making an enormous occupation floor of 430 sq m. The structure was internally partitioned into at least five different room chambers. It was delicately built. The wattle-and-daub walls were supported by timber frames. The Sanhe Huayuan locality and its surrounding area should be where the palatial complex of the Jinsha Site located.

The northeastern part of Mei Yuan is a unique area. This area alone yielded a total of 3000 counts of gold, bronze, jade, and stone artifacts. It also yielded a large number of ivory tusks and oracle bones. In addition, three unique features were found: “ivory tusk cache,” “concentration of stone blades and discs,” and “concentration of warthog tusks, deer antlers, and semi-precious stones.” These features distributed in spatially discrete areas, each had its plan, thus indicating that they might serve different functions. We tentatively suggest that this area was most likely the locality for religious ceremonies. The palatial complex at Sanhe Huayuan is just a stone throw away, about 800 m on the opposite side of the Modi River.

The excavation of Lan Yuan revealed a large number of house features, ash pits, burials, and tens of thousands domestic ceramics. Distribution of these features seems to have been systematically laid out. We tentatively argue that this area was used for dwelling and burials.

Burial pits were densely distributed in the Tyiu Gongyuan locality. The pits cut into house features, red baked clay surfaces, and ash pits of previous occupations. Taken together, this area is most likely first used as a residential precinct, and then used as a graveyard upon the abandonment of dwellings.

3. Significance of the excavation

Jinsha is only second in scale to Sanxingdui of the archaic Shu State in southwestern China. The savage project brought light to the great wealth of the high bronze civilization of Shu. The present findings are invaluable in the study of the pre-imperial history of southwestern China, and in the study of the formation and development of early Chinese civilization.

The rich jade assemblage of Jinsha comprises blades, halberds, battle-axes, sectioned cong-tubes, rod-
shaped chisels, band-shaped objects, concave chisels, and collared discs. They are stylistically similar to the jade artifacts of the Xia and Shang cultures of the Central Plains, the ancient cultures of the lower Yangtze, and the contemporary bronze cultures in the Southeast Asia. The discovery and excavation of Jinsha provide material information for the study of the interaction between the archaic Shu State and other bronze cultures.

The Jinsha Site of the archaic Shu State was a political, economic, and cultural center emerged in the Chengdu Plain during the late Shang and Western Zhou eras. The discoveries of the palatial complex, the ritual precinct, the residential area, and the cemetery are particularly significant to the study of the plan and functional division of urban centers of its times.

Last but not least, the large amount of jade artifacts yielded from Jinsha is extremely valuable for the study of the technology, production processes, and tool kits of the early jade industry. It adds a large assemblage for the study of the jade culture during the Bronze Age China.

References


Note: The original paper is published in *Kaogu 考古* 2002.7: 9–11, with 2 pages of plate, written by Zhang Qing 张擎, Zhou Zhiqing 周志清, and Zhu Zhangyi 朱章义. The present version, an abridgment from the original, is prepared by the original authors and English-translated by Lee Yun-kuen 李润权.