Archaeological Observation on the Exploration of Chu Capitals

Wang Hongxing

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According to accurate historical documents, the capitals of Chu State include Danyang 丹阳 of the early stage, Ying 郢 of the middle stage and Chenying 陈郢 and Shouying 寿郢 of the late stage. Archaeologically speaking, Chenying and Shouying are traceable while the locations of Danyang and Yingdu 郢都 are still oblivious and scholars differ on this issue. Since Chu capitals are the political, economical and cultural centers of Chu State, the research on Chu capitals directly affects further study of Chu culture.

Based on previous research, I intend to summarize the exploration of Danyang, Yingdu and Shouying in recent years, review the insufficiency of the former research and current methods and advance some personal opinion on the locations of Chu capitals and later exploration so as to call further attention to this issue from fellow scholars.

Danyang

Danyang as the early capital of Chu state came into being in early period of Western Zhou when Xiong Yi 熊绎 first founded Chu state. However, scholars, either ancient or present, have not reached an agreement on the location of Danyang. There are mainly three versions: one is the Zigui 秭归 version which holds that Danyang was located in the southeast of Zigui, Hubei 湖北 Province; the Zhijiang 枝江 version which holds that Danyang was located in present Zhijiang County of Hubei Province; and the Danjiang 丹江 version, which holds that Danyang was located on the north bank of Danjiang River where Danjiang River (in present Xichuan 浏川 County of Henan 河南 Province) and Xishui 渭水 River or firstly in Shangzhou 商州 of Shaanxi 陕西 Province and then to Xichuan of Henan 河南 Province.

In view of the recent research on the civilization process of the middle reach of Yangtze River, we may infer that Danyang ought to be a central settlement among a group of settlements not far away from Jingshan 荆山 with rice as the main crop. No matter whether there are any remains of fosses around the central settlement, its area must be larger than ordinary sites and be of higher scale and have public amenities such as large buildings or altars. The site ought to have definite functional sections and the cemetery ought to be divided into that of the aristocracy and the plebeians. The relevant documents and the unearthed inscriptions on tortoise shells from Zhouyuan 周原 saying “the viscount of Chu (actually the ruler of Chu) came to inform” indicate that Zhou had frequent contact and exchange with Chu. This should be reflected by the similarities revealed by their material and cultural artifacts. The early Chu culture might be a sub-culture of Zhou culture (with li 鬲 tripod and yan 燊 steamer as main cooking utensils).

According to what mentioned above, the archaeological finds in Zigui of Hubei Province do not provide sufficient support to Zigui version. The excavation of Guanzhuangping 官庄坪 indicates that this place was a junction area of ding tripod-fu cauldron culture (or Chu culture) and li-yan culture (or Zhou culture). It did not merge into Chu culture until the middle of Eastern Zhou period. The Chu capital in Zigui was a site built in Ming Dynasty and contains no ruins of Zhou Dynasty. In recent years archaeologists have conducted scientific excavation to the sites found in the inundated area of the Three Gorges Reservoir in recent years. They did not find any settlements of Western Zhou Dynasty, let alone any large high-level central settlements of that period. So the version that Danyang was in Zigui is not supported by archaeological discovery.

The trial excavation of the site Jijiahu 季家湖,
Danyang 当阳 indicates that the cultural remains here may be a little earlier than Ji’nancheng 纪南城, Jiangling 江陵, but the construction of this city was not in late Eastern Zhou period (approximately late Spring and Autumn period); in the subsequent archaeological investigation on the banks of the middle reach of Juzhang 沮漳 River nine sites of Eastern Zhou period were discovered. Trial excavation was made of the comparatively larger Yangmugang 杨木岗 site, Danyang; Yet no settlement and central settlement of Western Zhou period or Spring and Autumn period was discovered. Later on some remains claimed to be of Zhou Dynasty were discovered. But my field research indicates that they do not accord with the constituent conditions of settlements: they are later than Zhou period and the area of the sites are small. Therefore, the attempt to locate Danyang in Zhijiang or the present Juzhang River is also precarious.

Among the different versions concerning the location of Danyang, the version raised by Professor Shi Quan 石泉 is more credible. He holds the viewpoint that Danyang was first in Shangzhou 商州 and later in Xichuan. The documents he cited are earlier and his version is in accordance with the historical context that Jingshan is very near to Danyang and close exchange existed between Zhou and Chu in the early Zhou period. Shangzhou and Xichuan County have been good habitats for human beings since Neolithic Age: here the mountains and rivers weave into beautiful scenery, the soil being fertile, and water abounds in this area. All in all, this is a good place for rice-dominated agriculture. In Shangzhou of Shaanxi Province 12 sites of Zhou Dynasty are discovered and they concentrate by Danjiang River and form a group of settlements. Archaeologists of Shaanxi Province found ruins of Western Zhou period in Donglongshan 东龙山 site, Shangzhou (with an area of approximately 300,000 sq m) and Gongjiawan 巩家湾 site of Danfeng 丹凤 County. They maintain, that though the remains of Western Zhou period were strongly influenced by Zhou culture, the major features of them differ greatly from Zhou culture and bear some resemblance with the relics unearthed from Zhenwushan 真武山 site in Xiangfan 襄樊, Hubei Province. So the sites very probably fall within Chu culture category. As for the 14 sites of Zhou Dynasty discovered in Xichuan County, Henan Province, the cultural features of them bear both similarity and difference with typical Zhou culture and reveal a closer relationship with similar relics of Zhenwushan site. Though the archaeological work done in Shangzhou and Xichuan are limited, especially the important sites like Longcheng 龙城 of Xichuan County were all inundated by first-stage project of Danjiang Reservoir, and up to now no sound evidence has been discovered to prove that Danyang was located here. However, I hold that the version of Danyang being located in Xichuan or firstly in Shangzhou and late in Xichuan is more believable due to several factors: the geographical location of this area is very close to Jingshan and Danyang, this area is fit for the rice-dominated farming and abounds groups of settlements featuring Chu culture of Western Zhou period. This is the place most archaeological clues accumulate.

**Capital Ying**

Previously the archaeological circles generally held the view that the first capital of Chu in early Spring and Autumn period was in Ji’nan site of Jiangling. Ji’nan site of Jiangling is located in Hubei Province. It is the largest city site of Eastern Zhou period that has ever been discovered in Chu State. Outside the city site have been discovered large quantities of settlements and cemeteries of Eastern Zhou period, among which quite a number are cemeteries of high-rank aristocracy, such as the unearthed Wangshan 堆山 cemetery, Tianxingguan 天星观 cemetery, Baoshan 包山 cemetery and the Balingshan 八岭山 cemetery, Jishan 纪山 cemetery and Jinniu 金牛 cemetery not unearthed yet. Judging from the distribution of the settlements, the size of the central city and the rank of the aristocracy’s tombs, Ji’nan site of Jiangling is qualified enough to be the capital of Chu State.

However, none of the unearthed tombs of the aristocrats around Ji’nan were earlier than the middle Warring States period. So most archaeologists hold the view that the city of Ji’nan must have been built and used in Warring States period and so it cannot be the Capital Ying first constructed by King Wen or Wu of Chu State. I personally hold the viewpoint that the city of Ji’nan, Jiangling possesses the conditions for being made Capital Ying. It may be Capital Ying built in the middle Warring States period and taken by Bai Qi 白起, a general of Qin in 278 BC, yet it cannot be the first capital of Chu called Ying. In view of this, scholars begin to regard the present Juzhang River reaches or Xiangyi 襄宜 Plain further north as the possible place holding Capital Ying.

From the discussion about the location of Danyang, we know that no settlements and central settlement of Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn period are dis-
covered in Juzhang River reaches. The general and special investigations of cultural relics in this area are conducted thoroughly; I myself have also gone to this area several times to make geographical and archaeological study and failed to get any clues indicating the existence of Chu’s first capital here. Therefore, there is little likelihood that the first capital of Chu should be located in Juzhang River reaches.

Meanwhile, Xiangyi Plain has drawn wide attention among archaeological circles. The archaeological research indicates that Chu Wangcheng 楚王城 in Yicheng 宜城 was once a very important city. Yet the construction period of this city differ apparently from the construction date of the first capital of Chu. At present we do not have sufficient evidence to assert that Chu Wangcheng in Yicheng is Capital Ying.

Despite that, Chu Wangcheng is still a site worthy of our attention. According to the general investigation of cultural relics, a large group of settlements of Eastern Zhou period exist in the site of Chu Wangcheng and the neighborhood and it is only next to Ji’nan of Jiangling in scale. All together there are over 80 sites and cemeteries of Eastern Zhou period in this group of settlements, among which there are over 14 each covering an area of over 100,000 sq m. What is especially important is that cultural accumulations of Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods exist in quite a number of sites and many bronze ritual vessels of Spring and Autumn period were unearthed. The geographical environment of Yicheng Plain is very fit for rice-growing agriculture with its plain terrain and sophisticated water system and so enables Yicheng plain to sustain a large population. Furthermore, the location of Yicheng plain is very important: it controls the middle reach of Hanshui 汉水 River with Nanyang 南阳 Basin to the north, Suizao 随枣 Corridor to the east and Jianhan 江汉 Plain to the south and so is an indispensable place for the Chu people to extend from north to south. The historical background and the strategic situation of that time all indicate that this area must be taken good care of no matter whether the Chu State intends to keep watch on the nations in the North China plain or to appease the states of Hanyang 汉阳, or to conquer the minorities of Ba 巴, Pu 濮 and Yue 越.

The archaeological material indicate that the settlement group of Chu Wangcheng in Yicheng is still the most important settlement group for the exploration of Chu’s first capital Ying at present. Yet we should not confine our viewpoint within the city walls of Chu Wangcheng, rather, we should make a comprehensive study of the emergence and development of the whole group of settlements (including the cemeteries) and observe the distribution rules of the settlements carefully. Only in this way can we come to a correct recognition of its nature.

**Chenying and Shouying**

In 278 BC, Bai Qi, a general of Qin, took Ying and so the capital of Chu was forced to move eastward to Chenying via Chengyang 城阳.

The academic circles unanimously hold that the location of Chenying is in the neighborhood of the present Huaiyang 淮阳 County of Henan Province. Archaeologists of Henan Province did discover the ruins of this city and had it prospected and tentatively excavated in 1980. They affirmed that this city was once expanded when King Qingxiang was in the reign. To the southeast of the city archaeologists also discovered many tombs with heaped earth over them, such as Ma’an 马鞍 Tomb and Maihuang 麦黄 Tomb in Wafangzhuang 瓦房庄 Village, Dalian 大连 Township, together with Double Tombs in Wangdian 王店 Township. They are believed to be royal tombs with earthen mounds over 10 meters high, towering like a hill. Documents also show that Chenying is located in present Huaiyang County. Yet the sites of old cities overlap each other in this region, including ancient Chen 陈 State, Chen 陈 County of Chu State, Chenying of Chu State, the old Chen County of Han and Jin Dynasties, Chenzhou 陈州 and Wanqiu 宛丘 County of Tang and Song Dynasties. They are all located here or nearby. The present archaeological work done still fail to clarify the exact locations of them respectively, neither can the layout of these cities be designated correctly. So this problem is the focus the later research on Chenying.

Since Chenying was liable to be attacked by Qin at any time, the capital of Chu was again forced to move in the 22nd year of King Kaolie 考烈 of Chu (241 BC). This time it was moved southward to Shouying.

As for the location of Shouying, there are two versions: outside the city gate of Shouxian 寿县 County, Anhui 安徽 Province or the site of abandoned Shouchun 寿春 County. And the second version refers to the site of Hongxiao 洪小 Temple, which was totally ruined in the project for rebuilding the riverbank of Huai River. The first version got more and more support from archaeological materials.
Near the city gate of Shouxian County were discovered important relics of Chu, including the bronze tax-free warrants inlaid in gold given by Chu’s king to E’s ruler Qi, bronze bull as sacrificial offering and many gold coins with inscriptions of Chinese characters such as “郢爰” or “陈爰.” There are lots of tombs around the city gate, among which the so-called Lisangudui Tomb to the east of the city gate was dug out illegally by tomb-robbers and thousands of royal objects were unearthed in 1930s. Scholars hence infer that this is probably the mausoleum of King You幽王 of Chu in the end of Warring States period. In 1985 a large architecture was excavated and prospected in Baijiatai柏家台. With a length of 54m and width of about 42m, its area reaches 3000 sq m. In recent years Shouchun city of Chu was reinvestigated. The western and southern city walls formerly established were now negated. Scholars point out that the present Shouxian County is Shouzhou city of Tang as well as Shouchun city of Chu. The city walls form a square roughly, the distance from the north wall to the south wall being about 2100m and that from the west gate to the east gate being about 2050m. The total length of the city wall is 8500m. Outside the city there are also the residential ruins of Chu’s peerage and officials. This conclusion is more in accordance with the historical background of that time and more credible. Hence the location of Shouying, its specification and the cemetery outside the city are all confirmed.

The exploration of Chu’s capitals and the shift of its political, economical and cultural center are important issues in the study of Chu culture. In this paper I make a brief account of the archaeological work done on the issue of Chu’s capitals in decades and hold the viewpoint that Danyang in Western Zhou period may be located in Shangzhou of Shaanxi and transferred to Xichuan of Henan where two rivers Dan and Xi converge; the first capital in early Spring and Autumn period ought to be located in Yicheng Plain; Ji’an city in Jiangling is very likely the city captured by Qin’s general Bai Qi in 278 BC and continued to be Chu’s capital from the middle Warring States period to its fall. Chenying in the end of Warring States period is located in Huaiyang City while Shouying is in the area near the city gate of Shouxian County, Anhui Province. Evidently we can discern that the political, economical and cultural center of Chu was shifting from north to south and from west to east. This process is in accordance with the historical context that in the beginning years of Chu’s establishment a close cultural intercourse existed between Zhou and Chu and Chu had inherited a lot from Zhou while later Chu rose and expanded its territory by annexing numerous states and gradually asserted and featured its own culture.

Reference Works


Note: The original paper, published in Wenwu 文物 (Cultural Relics) 2006.8: 63–68, is written by Wang Hongxiang. This summary is prepared by the author himself and English-translated by Wang Yanhui 王艳慧 and Wang Shufang 王淑芳.