Excavation of Western Han Wooden Slips on the Site of the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom

Guangzhou Municipal Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology  
Institute of Archaeology, CASS  
Preparatory Office for the Museum of the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom

Key words: Palace-Nanyue Kingdom (Western Han)  
Wooden Tablets-China-Western Han Dynasty  
Inscriptions-Chinese Recording and Registration-History legal documents

The site of the palace of the Nanyue Kingdom (203–111 BCE) of the Western Han Dynasty is located in the midst of the old urban district of Guangzhou City (Figure 1). From November 2004 to January 2005, the joint archaeological team of Guangzhou Municipal Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, Institute of Archaeology, CASS and Preparatory Office for the Museum of the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom excavated a well (numbered as J264) in this site, from which more than one hundred inscribed wooden slips were unearthed. This is regarded as a new and significant discovery of the Nanyue Kingdom Archaeology.

The Well Site J264

(1) General Status: This well is superimposed by the foundation layer of architecture of the later phase of Nanyue Kingdom. It was 3.08 meters in depth; the upper part of the shaft, which was 0.85 meter high, 0.82 meter in inner diameter and 1.16 meters in outer diameter, was lined by 15 layers of circle bricks, and the lower part, which was 0.92 meter in inner diameter and 2.06 meters high, was hooped by six cylindrical pottery well curbs. The bottom of the well was paved with three wooden planks into a north-declining slope (Figures 2 & 3).

Slots were opened on the east and west sides of the brick linings, and a pottery pipe was laid in the brick linings on the north wall. Our observation proved that the slots were intentionally made and the pipe was set when the brick linings were built. To the east of the well, the ground was paved with plain oblong bricks and split into south and north parts by a wooden ditch 0.23 meter in width and 2.95 meters in length. The north part of the
brick-paved ground was slightly declining to the south with a height difference of 0.19 meter and the south part of the brick-paved ground was slightly declining to the north with a height difference of 0.084 meter. The east end of the bottom of the wooden ditch was 0.048 meter higher than its west end, which was aiming at the slot on the east side of the well’s brick lining.

A ditch in east-west direction, which was 2.24 meters long, 0.42 meter wide and 0.25 meter deep, was found to the west of the well, and the east end of the ditch was aiming at the slot on the west side of the well’s brick lining. The west end of the bottom of the ditch was 0.026 meter higher than its east end where trace
of wooden plank was found. No remains of brick pavements were found on the ground to the west of the well.

Three pottery pipes, each of which was 0.65–0.7 meter long and the length of the fitted pipeline with which was 1.68 meters, were found to the north of the well. This pipeline was declining to the north and linking to the covered wooden ditch numbered as G154. The height differences and the declining directions of the slots on the brick linings, the ditches and the pipeline hinted us that the ditches to the east and west of the well were used to conduct water into the well and drain it through the pipeline out to G154.

(2) Accumulations in the Well: The accumulations in the well could be divided into 16 layers; based on the components in them, we concluded that Layers 1–5 were garbage filled in after the abandoning of the well, Layers 6–15 were deposits during the using period of the well and Layer 16, which was a sandy mud layer eight centimeters in thickness and with some shards of cord-patterned tiles, was formed before the using of the well. Many shards of cord-patterned tiles were unearthed from Layers 1–5, large amounts of fruit stones were found in Layer 6 and large amounts of tree leaves were found in Layer 7. The wooden slips were unearthed from Layers 6–15, but most of them were found from layers 8–14 (Figure 4). In the deposits of Layers 6–15, many plant seeds, cores and kernels and animal bones and other remains were found. The preliminary observation showed that the bones were mainly of birds and fishes, and the floatation identified more than 20 botanical species from the plant remains, most of which were plum stones and muskmelon seeds.

Apart from the remains mentioned above, some fragments of pottery pipes and stone slabs were also found in this well.

Wooden Slips

Over one hundred wooden slips were unearthed from J264. The intact wooden slips were usually 25 centimeters long, 1.7–2.4 centimeters wide and 0.2 centimeter thick. Except for one slip with two and half lines of characters, all of the other slips had only one line. The characters were written with Chinese ink in Lishu (official script) style, some of which had traces of Zhuanshu (seal script) style. The numbers of characters on the slips were varying sharply, the most one of which on a slip were 23 while the fewest one, three; but most slips had 12 characters. The slips had been completely disordered when they were discovered and no binding traces were found on them. We chose some slips to interpret as the following:

009: [illegible characters].

Purple ... Bird three...].

[White ... one].

Bird: Nanyue Kingdom was located in the subtropical zone to the south of the Five Ridges and rich of rare birds, which was important tribute of Nanyue Kingdom to the imperial courts of the Central Plains. It is recorded in the Nanyue Liezhuan (Biography of Nanyue) of Hanshu (the Book of Han) that “Hereby, facing to the north (as subject to monarch), through my envoy, I (Zhao Tuo) pay a pair of Bi-discs made of white jade, one thousand halcyons, ten rhinoceros horns, ... forty pairs of kingfishers and two pairs of peacocks as tribute (to Your Majesty).”

052 (Figure 5:1): [Ask Ying, the words are: tenderly, wine is in the room, maybe smaller half (of a pitcher or some other container)].
Xun  ᵃ, which was an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasties, is explained as “Ask” in *Shuowen Jiezi* (Explanation and Study of Principles of Composition of Characters by Xu Shen).

Ying  ᵃ is a personal name common in the Qin and Han Dynasties: the famous characters with this name are Zi Ying (the King of Qin), Zhao Ying, Chen Ying and Guan Ying.

Shao Ban  ᵃ is an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasties; Wei Zhao’s commentary to *Xiang Yu Benji* (Basic Annals of Xiang Yu) of *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian) explained that “generally, two thirds of an amount is called ‘larger half’ of this amount, while one third, ‘smaller half’.”

Zhong guan  ᵃ (Pot-shaped jujubes) of the fourth month, (they were) handed in to the Court Revenues as land tax.

No records about Zhong guan  ᵃ (palace revenues) of Nanyue Kingdom were found in historic literature.

Zu  ᵃ was explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “Tian Fu  ᵅ (land tax or farm tax)”. It is recorded in *Shiji* that in 594 BCE, farm tax (named Zu  ᵅ) was begun to levy in the State of Lu.

It was recorded in Chapter Yue Ling  ᵃ (Proceedings of Government in the Different Months) of *Li Ji* (the Book of Rites, English translation by James Legge) that “...and then to...the area (of the hunting park) is spacious, and the guards have not watched and taken care of it properly, so that the deer (in the park) died and rotten.”

Tang  ᵃ meant “broad” or “spacious” when it was used as adjective. The case of this usage was in Yang Xiong’s *Gan Quan Fu* (Rhapsody of Palace of Sweet Springs).

Yuan  ᵃ is idiom of the Qin and Han Dynasties meaning “not properly”.

*Guangzhou Municipal Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, et al.*
Figure 5. The Wooden Slips Unearthed from J264
Deer was a popular animal in hunting parks of the Qin and Han Dynasties.

090 (Figure 6:3): [A tree of white jujube from Gaoping, number forty-three...hundred and twenty-six fruits].

Gaoping[... 書] was a place name existing in the Warring-States Period through the Qin and Han Dynasties; as records in Shiji, it was in the territory of the State of Wei in the Warring-States Period.

091 (Figure 6:4): [...Zhang Cheng, (who was) the houseman of late princess named Dan, in the tenth month of the twenty-sixth year attended...as envoy...Panyu].

Zhang Cheng would be a personal name.

Gongzhu[... 書] (Princess) is the title of emperor's daughter; as the law of the Han Dynasty, the feudal princes' daughters could not be entitled as Gongzhu and the story about Gongzhu in Nanyue Kingdom was not found in any historic literature.

Dan would be the name of the princess of Nanyue Kingdom.

Sheren[... 書] was title of low-ranked official or certain status, maybe clerk, houseman or guest receiver. No records about this title in Nanyue Kingdom were found in historic literature.

Panyu[... 書] was the seat of Nanhai Commandery of the Qin and Han Dynasties, the capital of Nanyue Kingdom and the most important city to the south of the Five Ridges. It was described in Di Li Zhi (Essay of Geography) of Hanshu (the Book of Han) that "(Nanhai Commandery) is located nearby the sea, and plenty of rhinoceroses, elephants, turtles, pearls, silver, bronze, fruits and textiles. The merchants from the Central Plains are usually getting much richer when they do their business there. Panyu is its metropolis."

097 (Figure 6:5): [Could not arrive, (at) dusk, Shu saw the village head named Xian drive the...he was herding]...Fo de[... 書] is an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasty meaning "Cannot (achieve doing something)."

Rixi shi[... 書] meant "time of sunset" or "(at) dusk". It was recorded in Shiji that Chunyu Yi, a famous medical doctor, wrote in his notes that "I tested him (a patient) again, and said,'he will be dead at Danri Rixi... And he really died at that time." Sima Zhen explained' Danri Rixi[... 書] "as' Danri[... 書] meant tomorrow and Rixi[... 書] meant at dusk; Chunyu Yi said that the patient would die at dusk tomorrow."

Shu[... 書] would be a personal name.

Dian[... 書] was abbreviation of[... 書] (village head) and Xian[... 書] would be the name of this village head.

Mu[... 書] was explained in Shuowen Jiezi as "man herding cattle"; also can mean "to herd".

099 (Figure 7:1): [On the day of) Bingwu, Zuobeilang (might be an official title) Qu and others went to the dead Caterer-in-chief...out and in].

Zuobeilang[... 書] is not seen in historic literature. Qu[... 書] would be a personal name.

Taiguan[... 書] (also[... 書] in historic literature) was official in charge of catering in the court.

Chu Ru[... 書] is an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasties, meaning "(to go) out and (to come) in" or "to pass (through)"

105 (Figure 7:2): [The strong slave named Hu...not get the mice, (so) should be flogged (as a punishment) fifty beats].

Da Nu[... 書] is explained as "tall and strong slave" in Yan Shigu's commentary to Hanshu (the Book of Han).

Hu[... 書] would be a personal name.

Bu de[... 書] is an idiom in the Qin and Han Dynasty meaning "Cannot (achieve doing something)".

Shu[... 書] literally meant "mouse", and is explained in Shuowen Jiezi as "the general name of any animal who tunnels".

Chi[... 書] was a punishment in the Han Dynasty, which had been flogging with a bamboo or wooden slat on the back, and Emperor Jingdi changed as on the buttocks.

108 (Figure 7:3): [...Army. Got time to go to court, Ying, timely get wine and food. Ying...]

Ying[... 書] would be a personal name, which was popular in the Qin and Han Dynasties.

Ji shi[... 書] was an idiom in the Qin and Han, meaning "in time", "timely" or "at this moment".

Jiu[... 書] is explained in Shuowen Jiezi as "to reach high".

Jiu shi[... 書] is an idiom in the Qin and Han, meaning "wine and food" or "meal".

116 (Figure 7:4): [Cannot stand (something bad)... pain, then go. Two days, under the high steps...]

Bi[... 書] is explained in Shuowen Jiezi as "the steps ascending to the high" and Bi xia[... 書], literally mean-
Excavation of Western Han Wooden Slips on the Site of the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom

Figure 6. The Wooden Slips Unearthed from J264
Figure 7. The Wooden Slips Unearthed from J264
Excavation of Western Han Wooden Slips on the Site of the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom

Postscript: the original report was published in *Kaogu* (Archaeology) 2006. 3: 3–13 with three illustrations and four plates, written by Han Weilong  Han Weilong, Liu Rui  Liu Rui and Mo Huixuan  Mo Huixuan and revised by Liu Rui. English version is translated by Ding Xiaolei  Ding Xiaolei.

ing" (the guard or attendant) under the steps of the court where the emperor is staying”, is metaphor used to mean “ the emperor”, his (your) majesty”.

118 (Figure 7:5): [go to order to pierce (?) the skin of Ku’s neck, and release...]

Shi  is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “ to go...dialect of Song and Lu (present-day eastern Henan and southern Shandong)”.

Ku  might be a personal name.

Zhi  is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “ to release (or to absolve)”.

Dou  is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “ to meet (or to run into)”.

Fu  is a personal name.

Conclusion

Based on the arrangement of the ditches and pipeline linked to the well, the slots on the well’s brick lining, the accumulations in the well and the layout of the architectural remains around the well, we think that this well was used to gather the water from its east and west sides and conduct it to the north through the pipeline. This well was opened and used in the early period of Nanyue Kingdom.

The date “ Nian liu nian  (the 26th year)” on Slip 91 could be confirmed as the 26th year of reign of Zhao Tuo, the founder of Nanyue Kingdom. The preliminary identification and explanation showed that they were mainly residence booklets and legal documents.

No traces of bindings have been found during cleaning-up to these wooden slips; the contents showed that some slips were independent files and some have been combined into a multi-slipped file with other wooden slips.

Generally, wooden slips of Nanyue Kingdom were 25 centimeters in length, which was one chi and one cun of Qin and Han measure system and longer than the common writing slips of the Qin and Han Dynasties; the width of these wooden slips was generally 1.7–2.4 centimeters, which was two to three times of that of the slips of the Qin and Han Dynasties (usually 0.8 centimeter in width) and as wide as the “ Lianghang (two lines)” slips. The numbers of characters on the slips were varying sharply, but generally the slips originally combined with other ones bore twelve characters or so; the characters were written large and sparse, which was much different from that of the Qin and Han Dynasties (each slip usually had twenty to thirty or even more characters). The writing habits of using larger wooden slips and fewer characters on each slip than the common Qin and Han writing systems is a new discovery in the system of wooden and bamboo documents of the Qin and Han Dynasties.

The wooden slips unearthed from J264 filled a gap in the wooden and bamboo documents in Guangdong region and made a breakthrough in archaeology of Nanyue Kingdom. This discovery enlarged the scope of the researches on the history of Nanyue Kingdom, made up the insufficient data in historic literatures on Nanyue Kingdom and enriched the researches on systems and script studies of the Qin and Han Dynasties.