

Prospects for Archaeological Research on the South China Sea Region

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Characteristics of the Region

The region off the south China coast is geographically referred to as the South China Sea. Within the region, more than one hundred and fifty islands and reefs are scattered over an area of 1.6 million square kilometres. The largest island in the region is Hainan, which is today an established province. The remaining smaller islands are divided into four main archipelagos: the Dongsha-Qundao (Practus Isles), Zisha Qundao (Paracel Isles), Chungsha Qundao and Nansha Qundao (Spratly Isles). Archaeologically speaking, the coastal areas bordering the South China Sea should also be included in the same region, such as Canton, Kuanghsi, Fukien, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia (including Sarawak and Sabah), Indonesia's Sumatra and Borneo, Brunei, as well as the northern and western coastal areas of the Philippines and adjoining islands. The region



Taiping Island, Nansha Qundao (Spratly Isles)

is characterised by its vast areas of ocean and its numerous islands.

Except for Hainan Island, none of the islands - which are basically composed of coral reefs in the South China Sea - exceeds an area of two square kilometres. Due to the location of these islands, their ecological environment belongs to that of tropical islands of the West Pacific, which produces a great variety of oceanic tropical woods and seaweeds. The seas surrounding these isles contain abundant maritime

fauna and flora, and have come to be regarded as excellent fisheries.

The South China Sea region is located in the southwest Pacific, and therefore forms a passageway between East and West, while being surrounded by many different countries. Even during earlier era, this oceanic area has been a culturally complex region. Human activities in the area may date back to prehistoric times, with the Austronesian peoples playing the most important role. Most scholars in the field

agree that the Austronesian peoples originated from the southeast coastal areas of mainland China (Li Jen-Kuei, 1979:3,4; Chang Kuang-chih, 1978:1-14). Regardless of the motives for successive waves of migration by these peoples occurring from around 3000 B.C., and the scholarly speculations about the routes they followed, all possible routes linking the original homeland of these peoples to the different Southeast Asian regions they migrated to, are related to a movement of expansion towards the sea, and the South China Sea region is closely related to this movement.

According to Chinese historical records, as early as the Han Dynasty, the Chinese already knew about the existence of this vast region. From the travels of the Chin dynasty Buddhist monk Fa Hsien, who returned from India in a merchant vessel along the maritime route between India and China, we know that during that period, merchant vessels were sailing back and forth between the Indian ocean and the South China Sea. Maritime transportation gradually developed between the Sung and Yüan Dynasties, and reached its peak during the

Ming dynasty. An obvious example is the expeditions of Cheng Ho, who sailed seven times to Southeast Asia with a large fleet. During these journeys, he reached as far as



A porcelain bowl, Ming Dynasty, Dangsha site excavation.

the east coast of the African continent (Sun Kuang-ch'i 1993:83-87). The status of this maritime thoroughfare has to this day become even more pronounced and whose importance is not likely to be diminished in the future.

Another characteristic of the area is its complex racial and cultural environment. The countries bordering the South China Sea are home to a great variety of ethnic groups. But these countries mostly belong to the Austronesian ethnic group, with the exception of the predominantly Han-Chinese population of the provinces of southeast China. In many ways, the peoples of the above countries share similar cultural characteristics,

and speak languages that belong to the Austronesian language family.

The four archipelagos of the South China Sea have no permanent residents. Possible reasons may include: (1) the islands are too small, that there is less room for human activity on these islands than on sea; (2) the necessary resources for life on land, such as animals, plants, and water are by far inferior to maritime resources, while water supplies are too limited to sustain agricultural activities; (3) the scarcity of land resources would have forced ancient populations of the islands to depend on the sea for livelihood. Due to these limitations, people could only survive in small groups and were not able to stay for long. One of the characteristics of the islands in this region is that they have not had prolonged human habitation (Chen Chung-yu, 1995:45).

The Urgency for Research

From an ecological perspective, each different natural environment forms a complete eco-system, be it that of a small island or that of a large one. Within this system, all biological factors should be able to remain in a state of balance. But due to the small

area of the islands, small groups of living beings are easily harmed, even destroyed, thereby causing the state of balance to undergo change, eventually affecting the entire ecological balance. In view of this, ecologists have frequently warned that the natural environments of islands are most delicate (Lu Kuang-yang, 1985:33-36). In 1867, the British naturalist Cuthbert Collingwood visited the Practus Isles to observe their natural environment.

According to his records, there were a lot of trees and bushes on the islands at that time (Collingwood, 1867), a feature the islands do not display any more. This is a striking example of habitat loss.

Since the islands in the South China Sea have only limited food and water resources, there have never been large village communities nor any permanent residents. The cultural remains of ancient human inhabitation are hard to preserve, and archaeological research has not yet been carried out at the sites. Therefore, only a very small number of the artifacts

and remains of ancient island cultures are known at this moment. In a situation where remains are sparse, these tend to be even more easily damaged by human actions. For example, the fishing village on the northeast part of Practus Island which Collingwood saw one hundred years ago (*ibid.*); and in 1906 when Nishi Zawa, a Japanese, occupied this island by force, and the Ching Dynasty government investigated

guano was collected on these islands for its phosphoric content, causing most of the surface to lose a layer of about 1 to 2 metres in depth. Such a surface soil loss would have caused extensive damage to any archaeological remnants (Chen Chung-yu, 1995:21-24).

Since the international energy crisis of the 1970's, every nation has been looking for new oil resources. The existence of large oil deposits in some locations under the

South China Sea was discovered. This has led to a struggle for control over these islands and to intense rivalry among nations over their jurisdiction. As many neighbouring countries vie with one another for territory, strategies for land

use with military priorities are of course in the first place concerned with military goals. In addition to this, with the exploitation of these oil deposits for economic profit, it is inevitable that any material for academic research and the progress of this research will be neglected. The damage and destruction of limited archaeological material here



Porcelain shreds, Ching Dynasty, Dangsha site excavation.

Chinese fishermen and made a similar report (Chen T'ien-tz'u, 1928:65-67). But today not even a single foundation of the houses of these fishermen remains. This is because in less than one hundred years the Practus Isles were twice occupied by the Japanese. In 1946, after the 2nd World War, the Nationalist government took over. During the 1960's

are obvious. It is therefore highly urgent that archaeological research in this region be expanded. This need is moreover not only true for archaeology, but also for other related fields of academic research.

Prospects for the Study of Prehistoric Culture

Upon considering the development of human culture in the south and south-east coastal area of China (including Taiwan), and throughout South East Asia, one may presume that the survey and research of the islands in the South China Sea

Chung-yu, 1994). But field work on the Practus Islands and on Taiping Island of the Spratly Isles has not yet led to the discovery of any prehistoric artifact or remains. Two possible hypotheses can be offered: (1) no prehistoric material has ever existed at the site; or (2) prehistoric material exists but has not yet been discovered, or has been destroyed completely.

The first hypothesis is very improbable because of the expansion of the Austronesian peoples in ancient times. Despite the fact that scholars have different opinions on the origins of the ancient

Austronesians, most scholars agree that they originated in southern China and began to expand over the Pacific ocean about 5,000 years ago, reaching Easter Island to the east and Madagascar to the West about 1,000

years ago. The groups migrating from southern China to the islands of Southeast Asia must all have, at least, passed through the South China Sea. It is impossible that they would not have stayed on the islands in this area. Some

neolithic artifacts and remains have actually been discovered on Kanchuan island of the Paracel Isles (Wang Heng-chieh, 1992:770-772). It is therefore reasonable to expect that there should be remains of prehistoric culture on the islands of the South China Sea. Development of the islands and lack of archaeological research are the main reasons for the scarcity of these remains. It may be that the conditions of these two islands are not representative of the entire region. However, research prospects for the Prehistory of this region appear to be promising.

In the past two years, in order to become familiar with all existing information on archaeological research in this region, I have collected related references and publications as well as done some editing work (Chen Chung-yu, 1996). Among the approximately 7,000 Chinese and English bibliographic titles, apart from a few scattered notes on the discoveries of prehistoric culture, there is only one formal archaeological report referring to prehistoric findings (Wang Heng-chieh, 1992). It is clear that the South China Sea region is basically still a vast stretch of virgin soil for archaeological research and further development. Meanwhile,



*Taiwang Temple, Dangsha dao
(Practus Island)*

would turn up some prehistoric artifacts and evidence, particularly when taking into account the expansion of the Austronesian peoples in ancient times as they island-hopped through the entire South Pacific (Chen

different levels of archaeological research have been carried out in the areas and nations surrounding this oceanic region.

Archaeological research on the southeast coastal provinces of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong has been developing over a period of almost one hundred years. Related material is much more extensive than that of the islands in the South China Sea. Archaeological research in Southeast Asia may be divided into two periods: the first period starts from the end of the 19th century and runs into the 1950's, when all main archaeological efforts were undertaken by western scholars. Among these, the main work was done by the French in Indo-China; the English in Thailand, the Malaysian peninsula, Burma, Borneo and Singapore; the Dutch in Indonesia and Sumatra, and the Americans in the Philippines. It was unavoidable that these areas of study were divided along the lines of the colonial administration. The second period began around the 1960's. As the countries of Southeast Asia gained their independence, native scholars of these countries gradually realised that archaeological research should become indigenous. Subsequently they

also realised the necessity of training native talent as well as of the protection of native cultural resources, amongst others. Up to now, these policies have not only brought forth results at different levels, but also led to the establishment by these respective countries of

independent institutes devoted to archaeological research. However, each country naturally tends to focus research on national culture and territory, while very little integrated research has taken place on the international level.

Within such an environment and atmosphere, future archaeological research on the South China Sea region will roughly proceed along the two following paths: (1) active promotion of archaeological fieldwork, excavations and research on the different islands; (2) given the extreme rarity of, and the difficulty in, obtaining material concerning these islands, comparative and integrated studies should be made with the help of material from neighbouring or related areas.

These two paths of research will lead archaeological research towards a clearer

understanding of the differences and similarities between the prehistoric cultures of the islands in the South China Sea as well as providing an

idea about the prehistoric relationship these islands have had with Taiwan, while also allowing us to discuss the cultural relationship between the Austronesian peoples and the South China Sea during the expansion of the former into the Pacific and Indian oceans. The ultimate goal of this line of research is to establish a prehistoric history of the South China Sea region.

Prospects for Archaeological Research into Historical Times

According to Chinese historical records, development of the South China Sea region by the Chinese people can be divided into approximately four stages: (1) the first stage started from the Eastern Han dynasty, when records tell us of a vast

As the countries of Southeast Asia gained their independence, native scholars of these countries gradually realised that archaeological research should become indigenous

ocean to the south of Kuang-nan, commonly known as the "Swollen sea" (Zhanghai), with perhaps already human activity or even residence on the islands of this sea; (2) in the Sung-Yuan period, people gradually started to investigate its oceanic currents, its islands and their resources; (3) during the Ming dynasty overseas trade expanded greatly under official guidance; and it was common for Chinese fishermen to expand their activities to the islands in this sea, representing the high-tide of the development of the area; (4) from the Ch'ing dynasty

through to the Republic, these islands became officially a part of the Chinese territory. Each of these four stages has its own

historical significance and developed at gradual pace. Owing to the size of this oceanic region, each archipelago has a different relationship with the mainland; the degree of which depend on proximity (Chen Chung-yu, 1995:5-19).

Since the latter Shang dynasty, the power of chung-yuan (central plains) culture gradually began to expand

southwards. Because of this, the original cultures to the south of the Yang-tzu river, such as the Chu and Wu-Yueh cultures, were forced to move further south into the Min and Yueh regions. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the Austronesian people later expanded toward the southern seas (Bellwood, 1984; Kwang-Chih Chunug, 1987). This expansion towards the ocean in the south did not cease. After the Nan-yueh kingdom became part of China, an increasing number of Chinese were probably active in the oceanic area, while Chung-

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yuan continued to expand southward. After the Sung and Yuan dynasties, a common trend of expansion

into Southeast Asia gradually took shape. The South China Sea is located in the centre of southeast Asia and should be regarded as a focal point of historical interest.

Historical times present us with many topics for research. Since this article focuses mainly on archaeological research, the following three subjects may be considered to be of the greatest importance:

1. Research on **maritime trade**. Between the Han and the Tang dynasties, China developed the so-called 'Silk Road' trade, which ran from northwest China to the Western world. As a result, merchants from both East and West traveled back and forth along this route. Since a large part of this route stretched across a region of vast desert lands, camels were the main vehicle of transportation. The weight these animals could carry, and the available supplies along the road were severely limited. While the primary trade goods, silk, was light and easy to transport, other goods could be heavy and fragile, such as ceramics, and thus not well suited for travels along this route. Thus, sea transportation was established to meet this need. This route, represented by the trade of ceramics, may be called the 'Pottery and Porcelain Road'. Trade in antiquity, needless to say, depended mainly on the exchange of goods; the objective was to exchange the products unique to each region. Since archaeological methods are based on the study of material culture, archaeologists have much to contribute here.

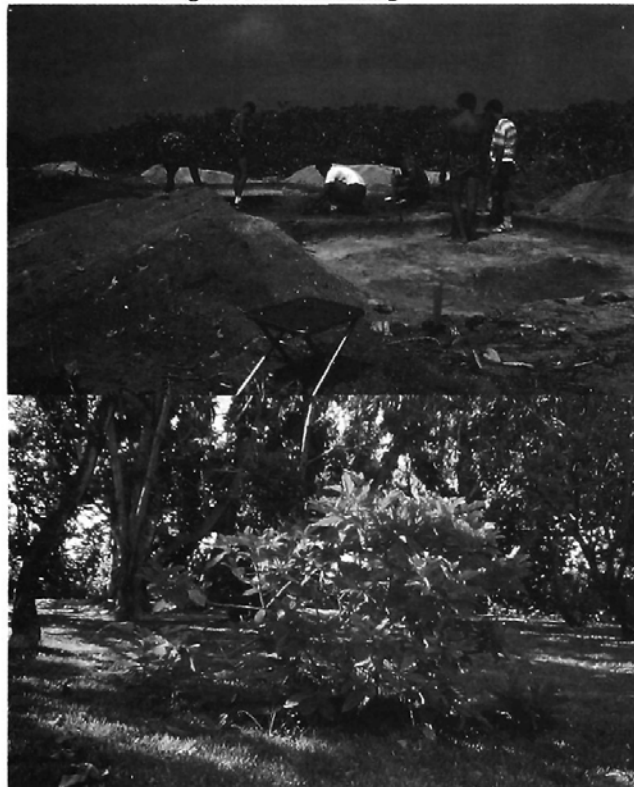
2. Research on **evolution of life and habitations** in the

oceanic region. Regional expansion by ancient peoples was generally motivated by their struggle for survival or the search for resources. From the movements of the Austronesians in prehistoric times, to the contemporary search for oil in this area, a similar set of motives were active. Taking fishery in this region as an example, the use of primitive tools and techniques can still be found, even if highly developed methods and techniques are in general use. Such is the case with the outrigger canoe widely used in Southeast Asia; the boat construction by the Yami tribe of Orchid Island near Taiwan; and the Chinese fishermen's continued use of traditional compass and 'Chen-lu-po', or old sea-route records, amongst other. Archaeological and ethnographic research can reveal the origins of these traditions.

3. The study of **migration patterns**. People of this oceanic region have since antiquity migrated in search of

new land. Expansion of the Chinese into Southeast Asia was an intensely communal phenomenon. When the Chinese migrated, they did so in the company of friends and relatives, and settled thus in communities of their own, sometimes even forming a complete village. This accounts

Dangsha Site excavating



Tropic forest, Taiping Island.

for the existence of the many 'China Towns' found overseas. Through northern Borneo and Sabah in Malaysia, there runs a river which is called the 'Kinabatangan' (Chinese River). Legend has it that in ancient times, the Chinese

established a kingdom along its banks. A princess of that kingdom was married to a sultan of Brunei (New Strait Times, May 5 1966). Mr Peter Koon, archaeologist at the Sabah Museum, has informed me that he wished to look for early Chinese settlements and use archaeological methods to study their patterns. This type of migration tale probably emerge frequently in the ancient South China Sea. There are perhaps even more tales and legends of migration amongst the various peoples of Southeast Asia, and the only way to confirm them is to carry out archaeological and ethnographic research.

Conclusion

There is great potential in undertaking an archaeological study of the South

China Sea area, both of its the prehistoric and historic periods. But the topics involved require a multi-disciplinary approach. For example, the study of trade and livelihood in the South China Sea region involves research on the technical

history of maritime transportation, and requires knowledge of techniques of boat-building, navigation, and astronomy, as well as marine biology. Trade is inescapably linked to economics, while objects of trade should be discussed in connection with their art-historical as well as technological researches. The most obvious example is the general term 'trade ceramics', which has always been a subject of art-historical research. Research on South East Asian migration history is very closely related to cultural anthropology and ethnography. For archaeological research on settlement patterns, both the theory and ecological information should not be neglected. Archaeology is, therefore, only one segment in the research on the South China Sea region; a kind of research that requires, in order to be successful, an integrated multi-disciplinary approach.

Archaeological research on the Practus Isles, and on Taiping Island of the Spratlys, which only represent a very small part of the region, is now underway. However, dozens of other islands exist for which no records have been found. There is also a lack of information exchange on archaeological researches carried out on isles in this

region or in neighbouring territories, causing current research great difficulties. Archaeological research on the South China Sea region is, therefore, in need of more information exchange, and co-operation in field investigation and excavations at the international level, with great potential for exciting academic research. ■

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