

Hubei Heritage

Hubei province is in eastern China, on the middle reaches of the Yangtze/Chiangjiang River, downstream of the Three Gorges Dam. It is a beautiful area, a tourist destination which is now being enhanced by heritage projects and new or enlarged museums. Archaeologists from the University of Nanjing took members of the Society for East Asian Archaeology on a tour of five key archaeological sites covering the period from late Neolithic (4th millennium BCE) to the start of China's first Empire (221 BCE), all within 150 km of Wuhan, the provincial capital. Hubei is on the loess-lands and archaeological sites are all dug into this dense layer of friable 'yellow earth', which presents serious physical conservation problems. The usual solution is to roof over the entire site.

Heritage guidelines are laid out in the ICOMOS *China Principles*. However, the real challenge for authorities is to make these earthen sites intelligible to the public. A hole in the ground—however large or skilfully excavated—is not exactly thrilling or informative. Current plans, as I understood them, are to create 'archaeological parks' with appropriate signage for individual site-components. Augmented-Reality techniques are an obvious way to go and I am sure that China's tech-savvy scholars will create some interesting apps for the ubiquitous smartphones.

The earliest place on our tour was the great Neolithic type-site of Qujialing (c. 3300–2500 BCE). This is still open and is about to be made into an archaeological park. I hope it will be possible to retain a sample of the now-abandoned farm buildings with their mud-brick walls and tiled roofs. Relatively close by is the important site of Shijiahe, once a large walled settlement (c. 2500 to 2000 BCE), with splendid jades. Both of these places were discovered in the 1950s and have been excavated on and off ever since.

Hubei's most important resources in antiquity were alluvial gold and copper. Across a lake from Wuhan city is Panlongcheng (16th to 12th centuries BCE) which may have been a transportation hub for copper going north to the Shang kingdoms. The site includes cemeteries, metalworking areas and a walled-and-moated compound, 290 x 260 m, enclosing two 'palaces', built of timber on rammed-earth platforms. The park is projected to be over 4 km² in area and there is a grand new museum to house the spectacular jade and bronze ritual implements recovered in excavations. The area around the park's entrance and museum are currently being landscaped with ornamental trees: magnolias, *Albizia* silk trees and crepe myrtles. The garden aesthetic signals that this is a place of leisure and culture and seems well suited to the needs of city-dwelling visitors. The site is already well-known to young people as it features in a popular game, the *Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom* series.

South of Wuhan is Tonglushan, 'Green Copper Mountain', a gigantic deposit of malachite, which has been worked from the late second millennium BCE. It flourished during the Spring & Autumn and Warring States periods (771 to 221 BCE), when it is estimated that 40,000 tonnes of copper were produced. Smelting was carried out on site. Today the old mine-workings—pits, tunnels and timber props—are enclosed within a museum building and two smelting furnaces have been reconstructed outside. The whole area has been landscaped with signage explaining the mineralogy of the various rock outcrops; in spring it will be pink with *Elsholtzia splendens* the 'bronze flower'. A new museum is in construction over the workers' cemetery, discovered in 2014.

Copper production sustained the statelet of Zeng, a sort of buffer between the Warring States—the old Zhou kingdoms of the Yellow River in the north and the vast kingdom of Chu along the Yangtze and further south. Zeng state was little known until the sensational discovery in 1978 of the waterlogged tomb of one of its rulers, Marquis Yi, at Leigudun. A museum was built at nearby Suizhou to house and analyse the 10,000-plus grave goods. These have now been moved to the Hubei Provincial Museum in Wuhan, but replicas can still be viewed at Suizhou, along with authentic artefacts from the tombs of several other Zeng rulers and from the Zeng metalworking site of Sujialong.

Marquis Yi, buried in 433 BCE, was a personal ally of the king of Chu who contributed the largest of the bronze bells in the great set of 65, mounted on a timber framework (10 m long overall and c. 2.7 m high). This was a time of considerable innovation, in the fields of war (the crossbow and Sun Tzu's *Art of War*) and of metallurgy, with the development of cast-iron for farming implements and lost-wax casting of bronze, as seen in Yi's magnificent wine-service and the stands for the drums and bells. His soup-tureen was made of over 2 kg of gold, cast in a piece-mould as if it were bronze.

Yi's tomb is infamous for the burial of fifteen young women—servants or musicians?—laid out in individual lacquer coffins. His own coffin was accompanied by those of eight other young women and a dog. The women are mentioned in museum labels, but there is no information about their manner of death, not that of Yi himself. Neither is there any image of the bodies, and this reminded me that Chinese curators are more respectful of human remains than westerners. I have never seen a human skeleton in a Chinese museum, even in photographs. Having said that, there are in fact two Early Man skulls on display: fossils of Yunxian Man (c. 500,000 years old), labelled as *Homo erectus*.

The Hubei Provincial Museum has another outstanding exhibit from the Warring States: the sword of King Goujian of Yue (r. 496–465 BCE), considered a masterpiece of bronzeworking with a separate high-tin alloy used for the blade-edges. The museum is well worth visiting. It is visitor-friendly, with bilingual labelling. Re-enactments of Zeng music and dance, based on the 125 musical instruments recovered from Yi's tomb are held daily and there is a western-style rooftop café. Admission is free.