

# CULTURAL HERITAGE



**Above:** A bird's-eye view of the Wangjiazui area of Zhouyuan Site, in Baoji, Shaanxi province, with the No 1 building (left) dating back over 3,000 years. **Top left, middle and right:** Some relics of the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century-771 BC) that were excavated from the Zhouyuan Site: an oracle bone with inscription recording a Zhou king's assembling order for vassal state leaders; pottery vessels; and a fragment of bronze ware.

## A plain that echoes with legends

New discoveries at the Zhouyuan Site in Shaanxi province shed light on key period in early formation of China, **Wang Kaihao** reports.

The overwhelming popularity of the animated film *Ne Zha 2* has piqued public interest in its source material, the 16th-century classic *Fengshen Yanyi* (Investiture of the Gods).

If one strips away its mythical veil — an act that in European terms is akin to stripping away the mythology surrounding the Trojan War — it is possible to question the historical reality behind the depiction of King Wu's decision to overthrow the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century-11th century BC). But how did the Zhou leader rise to become the "supreme ruler of all under heaven" depicted in the story?

Recent archaeological studies in Baoji, Shaanxi province, have gradually helped the heroic saga emerge from myth, revealing its true form. From at least the time of the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century-771 BC) and even earlier, clues existed about the way power was incubated during this pivotal period of early Chinese history.

The Zhouyuan Site covers about 33 square kilometers. As its name, which means "plain of Zhou", indicates, this tableland to the south of the Qishan Mountains has long been seen as key to decoding Zhou culture. Archaeological research began here as early as 1942 and large-scale excavations were conducted twice in 1980 and 2000.

"However, archaeologists still lacked high-level remains from the pre-Zhou culture, and the layout of settlements could not be clearly seen," says Chong Jianrong, director of the Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology.

"Pre-Zhou" refers to the period when the Zhou still paid allegiance to the Shang Dynasty and prospered in present-day Shaanxi, before taking up arms against the Shang ruler and replaced it. The last Shang king was notorious in history for his cruelty and debauchery.

Chong's mission has been to find the physical evidence to fill in concise historical descriptions.

He says that in recent years, exploration of the Zhouyuan Site has focused on uncovering the settlement structure of the Shang and

Western Zhou periods.

By emphasizing the search for wall systems and large-scale buildings belonging to pre-Zhou culture, through extensive tracking, drilling and targeted excavations at key sites, researchers have discovered a large pre-Zhou rammed earth building complex in Wangjiazui in the southwest of the site.

"For a long time, many scholars believed that Zhouyuan is where the ancestors of the Zhou people settled after moving to the Qishan Mountains," Chong explains. "But some questions remain unanswered due to lack of clear evidence."

Now, a belt of large rammed earth pre-Zhou structures has been discovered. It runs 150 meters from north to south, and two large buildings have been fully unearthed.

The No 1 building is composed of a gatehouse, east and west wing rooms, front hall, rear chamber, and front and rear courtyards. It occupies an area of some 2,500 square meters.

"It is the largest and most complete large-scale pre-Zhou rammed earth building discovered to date, and provides crucial evidence that confirms speculation that Zhouyuan was the Zhou capital at the time," Chong adds.

### City of wonders

Last week, the findings from Zhouyuan were included in the Top 6 List of New Archaeological Discoveries of 2024, which was released by the Institute of Archaeology with Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Recent physical evidence also indicates a truth: This "capital city" not only functioned as a center from which the Zhou ended a chaotic era and overthrew Shang rule, it also continued to prosper as a hub ruling over a vast territory after the war.

Chong's team also discovered triple-layered city walls dating to the Western Zhou Dynasty, a palace city that occupies 500,000 sq m, a "small" 1.75-square-kilometer city around it, and a "large" city that covers a further 5.2 sq km.



**Above:** An imagery picture of the southern gate of the palace city on Zhouyuan Site, based on archaeological findings. **Left:** A moat ruin by the southern wall of the palace city. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



It is the biggest Western Zhou city ruin ever found. So far, the southern gate of the palace city and the eastern gate of the "large" city have been excavated. Chong says they reveal the "aura of a king's capital", as the grand scale and complex structures were not only impressive for its time, but would still have been extraordinary compared to other cities a few centuries later.

For example, the "large" city gate tower is 95 meters long and 10 meters thick. Entry roads into the city were more than 30 meters wide and linked to a network of urban traffic. Fortified barbicans can be

seen on both gate ruins.

Outside the western wall of the palace city, there is a north-south road with a three-layered surface. The two lower layers are paved with large stones and small, densely packed pebbles. Wheel ruts are still visible. Along the edge of the wall, archaeologists have also found pottery drainage pipes.

"The findings not only advance our understanding of the form and nature of the Zhouyuan settlement, but also provide indispensable research material for the history of urban development in China," Chong says.

Now 206 oracle bones, including 29 inscribed with characters, have recently been unearthed at Zhouyuan. The inscriptions include those related to astronomy, calendar systems, historical geography, military warfare, and numerical divination.

For Chong, one inscription recording a Zhou king's assembly order for vassal state leaders is particularly important. "It directly indicates the royal nature of these oracle bones," he explains. "The order reveals the relationship between central kingship and the vassal states of the Western Zhou."

Many crucial names of people and places can be seen in these rare objects. One character, *qin*, attracted the attention of researchers. It is the oldest-known record of the Qin, who rose from being a marginal group to dominate the trajectory of Chinese history. Its leader, Ying Zheng, united China and became the first Chinese emperor, Qinshihuang, in 221 BC.

"These oracle bones can be clearly dated, and contain valuable information, making them rare documents in the study of Western Zhou history," Chong says.

According to Xu Lianggao, a researcher at the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Western Zhou Dynasty may have had multiple capital cities. Historical records also mention different names for the Zhou. "What relationships exist between these versions of the Zhou? It could also be differences in functional nature. Recent findings at Zhouyuan may provide key answers," Xu says.

Lei Xingshan, an archaeology professor at Beijing Union University, says that the Xia (c. 21st century-16th century BC), Shang and Zhou (c. 11th century-256 BC) dynasties, dubbed "the Three Dynasties", marked the crucial period in the early stages in nation formation.

"It has always been a focus of Chinese archaeology. Zhouyuan stands out as an example that reflects how various cultures merge in Chinese civilization," Lei says.

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By **WANG RU** and **SHI BAOYIN** in Anyang, Henan province

Since opening to the public on Feb 26 last year, the Yinxi Museum in Anyang, Henan province, China's first comprehensive archaeology museum dedicated to the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century-11th century BC), has embraced the enthusiasm with which it has been greeted, and has become a new calling card for the city.

Receiving over 1.8 million visits in 2024, its popularity made a huge splash in China's museum circle last year.

A series of activities marking this anniversary was held in Anyang between Tuesday and Thursday, including lectures, seminars and performances related to Shang civilization.

To celebrate the occasion, a new exhibition, *The Show of King's*

## Yinxu's young museum a big draw for the nation

*Return: The Inscribed Oracle Bone Collections of Tianjin Museum Back to the Great Settlement Shang*, kicked off on Wednesday, with a display of 36 inscribed oracle bones that were discovered at the Yinxi Ruins in the late 19th century.

Directly related to Wu Ding, a Shang Dynasty king, this was the first time these bones, now part of the Tianjin Museum collection, returned to the place from where they were unearthed.

Oracle bone inscriptions, used for fortune-telling and recording, compose the earliest-known established writing system in China. In 2017, the inscriptions were listed in the UNESCO Memory of the World Register program.

"Oracle bone inscriptions can

now be found in more than 200 institutes around the world. In my heart, they are living and want to return to their origins in Anyang. I believe even a brief stay here will bring them comfort. Although this wish seemed difficult to fulfill, it has finally come true," says Song Zhenhao, an oracle bone expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Named after the nearby Yinxi Ruins, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the museum is a display

of the highest civilizational achievements of China during the Bronze Age through more than 4,000 artifacts, including bronze, pottery and jade vessels, and oracle bone inscriptions, according to Shi Jin-song, deputy director of the Institute of Archaeology with the CASS, and also acting director of the museum.

Shi says that Yinxi occupies an important place in the birth and development of archaeology in China.

First excavated in

1928, it is the country's longest studied ancient capital city as excavations continue to this day. It is also a cradle for its most famous archaeologists, many of whom left footprints at the site during their careers.

"At the museum, we can see the beginning and development of archaeology in China, the evolution of ideas, methods and techniques. We can also see the exploration and achievements of Chinese archaeologists," Shi says.

Archaeologist Wang Wei highlights the performance over the past year. "Undoubtedly, this is a good museum, as it provides understandable content to even middle school students and arouses their interest not merely through text, but well-designed displays," Wang says.

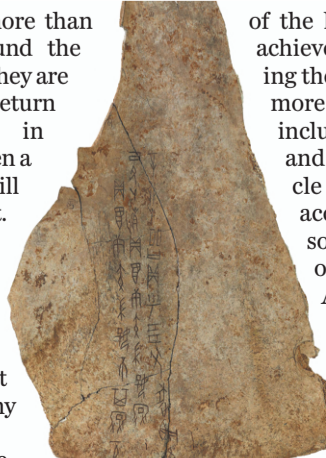
"The artifacts leave a lasting impression on visitors since they are introduced in the most straightforward and effective manner. I believe it has taken a leading position among China's museums."

He Yuling, head of the Anyang workstation affiliated to the Institute of Archaeology with the CASS, says Yinxi Museum may just have celebrated its first birthday, but the Yinxi Ruins date back some 3,000 years.

Consequently, the young institution still has a long way to go to fully illustrate the history and culture it contains.

"The museum has an inexhaustible vitality as we are constantly introducing artifacts and archaeological achievements fresh from the site," He says.

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An inscribed oracle bone on display in Yinxi Museum. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY