

Archaeological Excavation and Early Research of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien

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Abstract: The archaeological excavation of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien is an archaeological activity jointly carried out by many archaeological institutions in Sichuan in the 1940s. Based on early papers studying this topic, as well as news reports and some original archives, this research summarizes the excavation of this tomb and early research on it from the perspective of academic history.

1. Introduction

The archaeological excavation of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien is an archaeological activity jointly carried out by many archaeological institutions in Sichuan in the 1940s. As the first excavation of ancient imperial tombs in the history of Chinese archaeology, it attracted wide attention from scholars at home and abroad. This kind of attention has continued since 1949. Most researchers study the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien from the perspectives of history, archaeology, architecture and the art history. However, little attention has been paid to the excavation of this tomb and relevant research before 1949.^[1] Therefore, based on early papers, news reports and some original archives, this paper summarizes the excavation process and early researches on the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien from the perspective of academic history.

2. The Excavation Process

The excavation of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien can be divided into two stages. The first stage was carried out by the Sichuan Museum and the West China Union University Museum. It lasted from September 16, 1942 to the end of November. The second stage was from March 1, 1943 to September 21, 1943. The excavation was carried out by the Sichuan Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities, the Institute of History and Language of the Academia Sinica (hereinafter referred to as the “Institute of History and Language”) and the Preparatory Office of the National Central Museum (hereinafter referred to as the “Central Museum”).

Before the official excavation, the site of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien had been mistakenly recognized as the Fuqintai (the platform of playing piano) of Xiang-ru Si-ma in the Han Dynasty. In the winter of 1937, Han-ji Feng visited the site which had been damaged by various construction projects for several times. He deduced from the objects found on the scene that it was not the Fuqintai but a tomb.^[2] In the autumn of 1939, when the Baotian Railway Bureau dug an air-raid shelter near the tomb, a “solid stone wall made of ancient bricks” was found.^[3] The Railway Bureau reported the finding to the provincial government. Han-ji Feng then rushed to the site for investigation. When he saw the brick wall, he was sure that it was a tomb. He explained the importance of this discovery to the Railway Bureau and asked them to fill the soil back to protect the site.^[2] At that time, someone told You-shou Guo, the director of the provincial education department about the finding. Guo advocated to continue excavation in order to discover ancient cultural relics.^[3]

In 1940, the Sichuan Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities was established and held its first meeting on August 31. At the meeting, one of the main points of Guo’s report was to entrust Han-ji Feng to investigate this site. Another issue discussed at the meeting was that the Sichuan

Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities and the National Sichuan University jointly organized the Sichuan Museum Preparatory Office^[6] to prepare the establishment of the Sichuan Museum. In the spring of 1941, the Sichuan Museum was established and its director was Han-ji Feng. After its establishment, the museum cooperated with the Sichuan Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities to prepare for the excavation of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien. They invited Jin-ding Wu and Ji Li from the Institute of History and Philosophy to visit the site.^[2] Subsequently, the Sichuan Museum submitted an excavation application to the Central Antiquities Preservation Commission, which was soon approved.

Since September 16, 1942, the first stage excavation was officially launched. The participants included Han-ji Feng and Fu-zhang Liu, as well as De-kun Zheng, Ming-jun Lin and Michael Sullivan of the West China Xiehe University Museum. According to Han-ji Feng, in the early stage, because the site was in the suburbs, the excavation team acted with extreme caution. The provincial government dispatched personnel to supervise and guard the excavation site day and night. It intended to announce the excavation to the outside world afterwards. Unexpectedly, some residents did not understand the behavior. Rumors that they were “excavating golden dolls” spread. October 20, violent events happened and antiquities were destroyed. The excavation was interrupted. Later, the excavation team reported to the provincial government, which sent troops to guard the site. Excavators went back to work on 6 November^[7] and stopped at the end of November.^[8] The first stage of excavation ended. At this stage, it was proved that the tomb was the Yongling Mausoleum of the former Shu Dynasty; many important discoveries were made.

The second stage lasted from March 1 to September 21, 1943. The excavation work was jointly carried out by the Sichuan Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities, the Institute of History and Language of the Academia Sinica and the Central Museum. In January 1943, three institutions signed the *Measures for the Preparatory Office of the National Central Museum and the Institute of History and Language of the Academia Sinica to Assist Sichuan Museum in the Arrangement of Qintai Materials*, as well as the *Organizational Rules for the Qintai Report Arrangement Committee*. The “Qintai Arrangement Working Group” (hereinafter referred to as the “Working Group”) was formally established. According to the regulations, the whole excavation was “presided over by the Sichuan Commission for the Preservation of Antiquities and designated to be carried out by the Sichuan Museum”; the Institute of History and Language and the Central Museum need to “render all technical and personnel assistance to the extent possible”.^[9]

On March 2, the second stage of excavation was officially started. Jin-ding Wu from the Institute of History and Language acted as the field guide and presided over the excavation. According to Han-ji Feng, the excavation was carried out from two aspects. “On the one hand, the tomb was excavated from the front grave mound of the south to explore the external and closed condition of the front door; on the other hand, the silt in the north tomb accumulated during the first stage was cleared to find out its internal structure.”^[10] After more than half a year, the working group made many important discoveries. On September 21, the working group invited all members of the Qintai work supervision delegation to supervise on site, and all the unearthed objects were handed over to Sichuan Museum.^[9] So far, all the excavation work has been completed. Later, the group moved to the Sichuan Museum in Xipu. From September 22, Jin-ding Wu handed over more than 200 photographs, 2496 note cards and 668 unearthed utensils to the Sichuan Museum for preservation and sorting.^[11]

3. The Propaganda of Excavation

Due to the violent events in the first stage, the team paid special attention to propaganda work in the process of excavation, and periodically released relevant information in newspapers and magazines at home and abroad. In 1943, while the excavation was still in progress, the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* took the lead in reporting the excavation of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien.^[12] In 1944, the *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography* published the English article, *The Discovery and Excavation of The Royal Tomb of Wang Chien* written by Han-ji Feng; in the same year, the article was reprinted in the form of a single book by the Sichuan Museum.^[13] In

1947, *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* published this article again with the reference of the single edition printed by the Sichuan Museum.^[14] In addition to Han-ji Feng, De-kun Zheng and Sullivan also published articles in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* in 1945 and *The Illustrated London News* in 1946 to introduce the excavation.^[15] In addition, local newspapers in Chengdu during the Republic of China, such as the *Xinxin News* and *West China Evening News*, also published tracking reports on the excavation of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien. Other domestic periodicals, such as the *Shenbao Newspaper* as well as the *Beijing and Shanghai Weekly*, also reported the excavation or introduced unearthed objects, and published multiple photographs of unearthed objects.^[16]

In addition to releasing excavation information in newspapers and magazines, the working group also formulated procedures and allowed some people to visit the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien.^[8] Large numbers of people requested to visit the site; the working group formulated *Rules for Visiting the Sorting up of Qintai Materials*, which stipulated that general visitors were refused except for academic research needs. Visits should be introduced by “the leader of the working group, or the chairman and vice-chairman of the Sichuan Committee for Antiquities Preservation or the honorary sponsor of the group”. Group visits were refused. In addition, the rules also limit the time and numbers of visitors and require visitors to comply with the relevant regulations.^[17]

After the excavation, excavators also gave speeches or exhibited unearthed objects to the public. On September 19, 1943, Han-ji Feng gave a speech at Shaocheng Park Library, introducing the excavation process and unearthed objects in detail.^[18] In addition, artifacts unearthed at the first stage were exhibited in the Sichuan Museum Office on the second floor of the Provincial Library from January 2 to 4, 1943; part of the exquisite artifacts unearthed in the second stage were exhibited in the Sichuan Museum located in the Mingyuan Building from February 13 to 19, 1948.^[19]

4. Early Study on the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien

After the excavation, related research carried out in full swing. In 1944, Han-ji Feng published an English article, *Discovery and Excavation of The Royal Tomb of Wang Chien in China*.^[20] In the article, Feng starts from the legendary Qintai of Xiang-ru Si-ma, talks about Chien Wang’s life and his era, and then got down to the point. He introduced the geographical environment and the mausoleum of the tomb in detail, explained the discovery process, as well as the structure of the tomb chamber and unearthed objects. Finally, Feng summarized the important value of the excavation. This article was a brief report on the excavation of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien and was Han-ji Feng’s first paper on this tomb.

In 1945, De-kun Zheng published his research results in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*.^[21] Unlike Feng’s excavation briefing, Zheng’s article focuses on introducing the tomb in accordance with the excavation process. He also talked about Xiang-ru Si-ma’s Qintai and the discovery of and the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien. After introducing Wang’s life, he began to describe the excavation and discovery of the second stage, focusing on the construction of the royal tomb and the coffin bed in the middle room, as well as the value of the excavation. This article comprehensively introduced the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien and its excavation in western academic journals for the first time, which was conducive to the spread of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien in the academic circles of Europe and the United States.

However, the publication of the official archaeological report of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien went through many twists and turns. According to the arrangement, the first stage report was prepared by Han-ji Feng and the second stage report should be written by Jin-ding Wu.^[22] However, Wu passed away without completing the report, leaving only the first draft. After Wu’s death in 1948, Han-ji Feng had to complete the excavation report. It was not until the 1960s that the excavation report of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien was published.^[10] After that, relevant researches on the tomb began to emerge.

5. Conclusion

Today, the Yongling Museum of Chengdu has been established on the site of excavating the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien. In the exhibition hall of the museum, precious objects unearthed before 1949 are displayed, telling visitors the history of Chengdu with more than a thousand years and the story of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien unearthed more than 70 years ago. The research of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien is also continuing in an orderly manner. Only on the premise of fully understanding the excavation process and research results before 1949, can we have a clear understanding on relevant researches and achievements after 1949, and can we have a systematic understanding on the study of the Royal Tomb of Wang Chien with the history for more than five decades.

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