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Guest Editorial

China's 2025 'Top 10 Archaeological Discoveries'

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Although China has a long tradition of historical writing, antiquarian scholarship and collecting, archaeology as a modern discipline is comparatively young, and yet the scale and volume of modern fieldwork in China probably now outstrip those in any other country. Every year for more than 30 years, the archaeology sector in China has selected 10 archaeological sites as its 'Top 10 Archaeological Discoveries in China', popularly known as the 'Oscars of Chinese Archaeology'. Founded in 1990 as an initiative between the Chinese Archaeological Society and the bi-weekly newspaper *China Cultural Relics News* (中国文物报), the selection process was upgraded in 2009 to be supervised by the National Cultural Heritage Administration (an administrative agency affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China), establishing it as a highly authoritative industry benchmark. In 2019, the selection regulations were revised, and the approval process was further standardised. Projects can be either archaeological research programmes or excavations conducted during infrastructure construction, and they are nominated by the organisations themselves. Decisions are announced annually in April, covering the previous calendar year. Our aim here is to bring this internationally important competition to a wider audience through a description of the selection process and a summary of this year's 10 sites, rather than to provide comments on the final selection.

A panel of more than 100 council members of the Chinese Archaeological Society assess the applications and create a short list of 20 projects, which are then evaluated by a committee of around 21 senior archaeologists. This process requires excavation team leaders to deliver a 15-minute presentation followed by a Q&A session; these are now livestreamed across multiple national and social-media platforms, allowing the public to follow professional archaeological debate in real time. The scale of this engagement can be considerable: when the final-selection process moved entirely online in 2020, the livestream attracted 22.78 million cumulative views by the morning of the second day, after a full day and a half of project presentations, subsequently exceeding 40 million views following the final announcement. This openness not only strengthens professional scrutiny and accountability, but also turns the selection into a major annual event for public engagement, stimulating wider interest in archaeological research and heritage protection in China. Importantly, the nomination process often precedes the publication in formal or traditional channels for major excavations, so it is an extremely useful way of keeping abreast of the most recent finds for both Chinese and international scholars.

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The selection process prioritises not just what was found, but also how it was excavated and what groundbreaking discoveries and significance does it hold. Principal selection criteria are:

1. Academic significance, encompassing historical, scientific and artistic value. Most importantly, the selection assesses whether the discovery provides entirely new, critical information for archaeological research or fills gaps in specific regions or fields of study.
2. Operational standards and technical methods, including excavation procedures and whether new technological tools (such as 3D scanning and laboratory-based archaeology) are actively employed.
3. Cultural heritage preservation (social responsibility), including whether appropriate protective measures were taken during excavation, and whether the site's long-term preservation and utilisation have been considered.

The current selection process favours proactive academic exploration and breakthroughs in under-researched geographical areas (such as archaeology in frontier regions), but there are no quotas with regard to period or province. The full details of this year's awards are available on the Xinhua news agency's website (https://english.news.cn/20260429/afe8eff7332c407d80f6264dc56ba1a2/c.html).

Background

Previous results of this competition provide an over-arching view of how the archaeological sector has developed in China during the past four decades (see online supplementary material, Table S1, for the complete list of winners). In the first 35 years, Henan province had 57 awards, as befits the province that is the core region for the early Chinese dynasties from the Bronze Age (*c.* 1750–221 BCE) onwards, also covering central Neolithic cultures (*c.* 10 000–2000 BCE), and important topics such as the source of Chinese civilisations (Figure 1). Shaanxi province, including the major capital Xi'an in many Chinese dynasties, has the second highest number of awards with 33, but work in Jiangsu (24 awards), Shandong (23), Zhejiang (21), Shanxi (20), Gansu (17) and Hubei (16) has also been recognised over the years. From an overseas perspective, the variety of winning sites provides an interesting window on changing academic priorities within China, but also reflects an aspect of China's changing perception of its own history. The shift of focus from the key Shang and Zhou sites in the Central Plains to the 'peripheral' sites on the boundaries of modern China shows an increasing appreciation of the role of the interaction between Central China and the neighbouring peoples in the development of Chinese history.

The influence of this award has long since transcended academic circles, garnering widespread public attention and significantly driving the development of Chinese archaeology and the popularisation of archaeological finds. The national significance of the results is threefold. For archaeologists, the annual presentations encourage excavators to explain their methods, evidence and interpretations to specialists and the public. For the discipline, the events promote collaboration among field archaeologists, environmental

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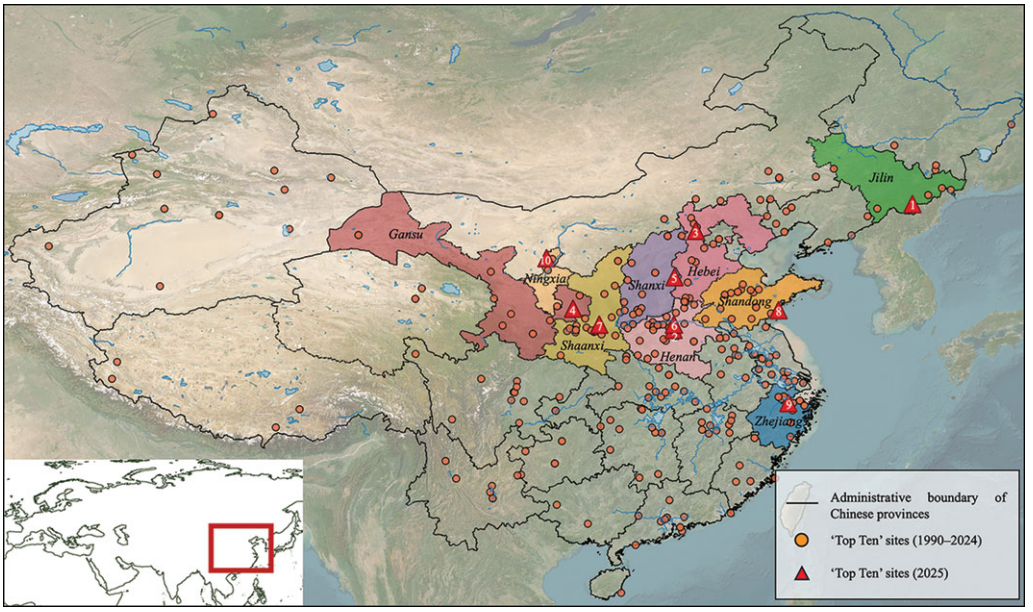


Figure 1. Sites of the 'Top Ten' archaeological discoveries in China since 1990. Site numbers for 2025 correspond to the numbered list in the text (figure by Dr Wu Siyi 吴思仪).

scientists, dating specialists, materials scientists and conservators. For the wider society, they turn buried remains—often uncovered during rapid urban and infrastructure development—into publicly recognised heritage sites. Although there is no prize associated with the awards, because of the competitiveness and the national nature of the scheme, many successful sites have used the prestige of the award to leverage further funds, sometimes allowing the development of archaeological parks and site museums. This brings archaeology even closer to the general public, attracting national and international tourism, thereby helping to support the local economy.

The international significance of these awards is manifold. China has some of the most spectacular archaeological sites in the world and, because of substantial national-level support and solid long-term public interest, has historically spent substantial public funding on excavation, conservation and presentation of its archaeological heritage. As one of the independent cradles of urban civilisation and crop domestication, China has contributed significantly to prehistoric continental exchange systems through commodities such as millet, rice, jades, silk, lacquer and metal. For much of the past 2000 years, China has been one of the world's largest economies, at times exerting considerable influence across Eurasia via the overland Silk Roads, and, since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE), by engaging in international trade in products such as tea, silk and porcelain via the maritime Silk Roads, in return for silver bullion. What is discovered in China is therefore of global significance.

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And the winners are

The 2025 'Top 10 Archaeological Discoveries in China', announced in April 2026, range from sites that help explain Palaeolithic mobility and early fermentation through to Shang urbanism, Qin imperial landscapes and a Western Xia kiln complex for porcelain production. The winners are listed here in chronological order; the sequence does not reflect an objective ranking of archaeological importance. Given the diversity and competitiveness of the finalists, the Top 10 is essentially an annual snapshot of what the Chinese archaeological community considers particularly significant at a given moment. The value of the exercise is enhanced by considering projects from different periods, regions and archaeological traditions, since each is required to articulate their evidence, methods and wider significance in a systematic manner that can be appreciated not only by specialists but also by the wider academic and public communities.

1. Eastern Changbai Mountains Palaeolithic site cluster, Jilin

Project directors: An Wenrong, Xu Ting, Li Feng, Wang Chunxue & Gu Lingbo.
Excavating institutions: Jilin Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology; School of Archaeology and Museology, Liaoning University; School of Archaeology and Museology, Peking University; School of Archaeology, Jilin University.

Recent work in the eastern Changbai Mountains has transformed what was previously regarded as a poorly understood peripheral region into one of the most important Palaeolithic landscapes of Northeast Asia. Survey has identified more than 1000 localities with stone artefacts, while excavations at five key sites have established a sequence extending from approximately 220 000–13 000 years ago. At Huadian Shoushan Xianrendong, the earliest occupation pushes the known presence of hominins in the Changbai Mountains back to *c.* 218 000 BCE, providing the earliest secure record of human activity in the region.

The later sequence is equally significant. At Helong Dadong, a long-standing small-flake tradition was followed around 26 000 BCE by blade and pressure-produced microblade technologies. This later phase also yielded engraved hematite objects and stone containers. Such finds broaden the significance of technological change: innovation involved not only increasingly efficient ways of making tools, but also new relationships with colour, surface, form and potentially symbolic expression. Rather than treating 'art' as a sudden behavioural threshold defined by figurative images, Changbaishan encourages a wider conception of early aesthetic and symbolic practices embedded within everyday materials and technologies.

This evidence also sits within an extensive obsidian network linking Changbaishan with the Russian Far East, Korean Peninsula and regions as distant as Shanxi. Together, these discoveries present Northeast Asia not as an isolated margin of Palaeolithic Eurasia, but as a long-lived arena of human adaptation, technological innovation, symbolic behaviour and interregional connection.

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2. Peiligang Site, Xinzheng, Henan

Project director: Li Yongqiang.
Excavating institutions: Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Zhengzhou Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

Peiligang provides an unusually long view of the Late Palaeolithic–Neolithic transition. Beneath the Neolithic settlement, deposits dating to *c.* 34 000–12 000 BCE preserve changing lithic technologies and the manufacture of ostrich-eggshell ornaments, providing early evidence for adornment, visual communication and potentially group or personal identity.

By the Peiligang-culture period (*c.* 7000–5000 BCE), these developments were embedded within a much more structured settlement of approximately 60 000m^2, divided into residential and cemetery zones. Variation in grave size and assemblages—including grouped pottery vessels, grinding stones and turquoise—suggests increasingly differentiated social roles, while the relationship between cemetery organisation and residential areas indicates a multilevel form of social organisation rather than an undifferentiated village community. The site also preserves what the excavators identify as the earliest known red-fired-earth architectural remains, providing an important antecedent for later Chinese traditions of fired-earth construction. Equally striking is a multiroom structure containing anthropomorphic clay figures, including a human face wearing a distinctive crown-like headdress and displaying fangs. These images link to a question of global interest: when and how did supernatural beings begin to acquire recognisable human or hybrid forms?

Also significant are developments in everyday material life: mixed millet–rice agriculture, intensive use of perilla as a flavouring plant, fermentation using *Monascus* mould, and increasingly complex fibre processing and dyeing. Peiligang therefore broadens our understanding of Neolithisation beyond a linear domestication narrative: multisensory archaeology interconnecting sight, taste, smell, colour, clothing, intoxication, together with the emergence of ritual specialists, shared cosmologies and the materialisation of religious concepts alongside increasing social complexity in the beginning of the Neolithic period.

3. Zhengjiagou Site, Xuanhua, Hebei

Project director: Zhang Xiaozheng.
Excavating institutions: Hebei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology; Zhangjiakou Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology; Xuanhua District Cultural Relics Management Office.

China is renowned for its long tradition of jade working, and the Hongshan culture (*c.* 4500–3000 BCE) of north-eastern China represents one of the earliest major traditions in which jade acquired pronounced ritual and social significance. Zhengjiagou is therefore striking because it lies far to the south-west of the better-known Hongshan heartland, in the Zhangjiakou region between the Yan, Yin and Taihang mountains—an

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important corridor linking the northern steppe with agricultural communities further south.

The excavated stone mound covers an area of approximately 1448m^2 and contains more than 110 burials and 190 ritual pits, with more than 600 objects including jade dragons, axes, linked discs, amazonite, shell ornaments and painted pottery. Of 110 tombs, 107 were secondary burials, sometimes represented only by selected skulls and limb bones, while repeated burning and offerings characterised the adjoining ritual zone. Although stone-built funerary monuments are characteristic of Hongshan ritual landscapes, monumental stone burial traditions were also widespread farther north across the Eurasian steppe.

4. Nanzuo Site, Qingyang, Gansu

Project director: Chen Guoke.
Excavating institutions: Gansu Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology; Renmin University of China; Lanzhou University.

Dating broadly to *c.* 3100–2700 BCE, Nanzuo was an exceptionally large late Yangshao culture settlement on the Loess Plateau. Recent survey and excavation suggest an overall extent of approximately 6km^2, including a 2.3km^2 principal occupation zone and a 0.3km^2 monumental area. At its centre, nine large rammed-earth platforms, enclosing ditches and substantial architectural complexes were laid out around a north–south axis. A high-status walled compound of about 4000m^2 contained the monumental building F1 (House Number 1), while platforms and other major buildings were positioned symmetrically around the central axis, indicating that much of the core was conceived and constructed according to an integrated spatial plan rather than through incremental household growth.

The importance of Nanzuo is not only that it provides another candidate for one of the world's earliest cities or states, but it also expands the comparative range of ways in which large-scale political organisation could emerge. Here, authority appears to have been constructed through the co-ordination of labour, the spatial ordering of people and resources, and also luxury goods and feasts, together with the selective conversion of long-distance connectivity into locally meaningful forms of prestige and ritual power. The underlying labour investment was considerable. The inner and outer ditches alone have been estimated to involve approximately 750 000m^3 of earth, an illustrative calculation suggesting that some 5000 labourers working for a year would have been required, without including those provisioning the workforce or constructing the buildings themselves. Specialist production is equally apparent. Pottery was generally fired at temperatures above 1000°C, with fine wares reaching around 1100°C; exceptionally thin white vessels were manufactured from carefully selected low-iron clays, kaolin and porcelain stone, while mould-made fired red bricks—among the earliest presently known in China—occurred particularly in high-status architectural contexts (Figure 2). Rare white-and-black ceramics, turquoise, cinnabar and other objects further connect Nanzuo with communities extending towards the middle and lower Yangzi and the lower Yellow Rivers.

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Figure 2. Painted pottery discovered at Nanzuo (photographs by Dr Chen Guoke 陈国科).

5. Zhongcun Site, Xiyang, Shanxi

Project director: Fan Wenqian.
Excavating institutions: Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology; Shanxi University; Jinzhong Museum; Xiyang County Cultural Relics Institute.

Zhongcun (dated to 1880–1450 BCE) provides an unusually vivid picture of the lives and deaths of high elites during the beginning of the Bronze Age in central China (Figure 3). Six high-status graves present a strikingly gendered mortuary ritual: male bodies were covered extensively with cinnabar, whereas women received only partial applications; with the exception of M11, male burials were also distinguished by shell ornaments placed on the head. The largest tomb, M10, measures approximately 46m^2, with a stone outer chamber, wooden inner chamber and three coffins, making Zhongcun the highest-ranking elite cemetery currently known from the period conventionally associated with the Xia, the first Chinese dynasty recorded in the later textual records. Ancient DNA adds an exceptional social dimension: the principal males in M9 and M10 were father and son, indicating that this was a patrilineal family cemetery in which high status was continued across generations—a social feature throughout Chinese history.

The cemetery was also embedded in remarkably extensive exchange networks. Turquoise from Zhongcun has been traced to the Luonan mining area around 500km away, while the shapes of the M10 turquoise inlays closely resemble those on plaques from Erlitou approximately 330km to the south, the major contemporary centre often associated with the Xia dynasty. Cinnabar probably derived from the Hunan–Guizhou mercury belt, and shells from the Yellow–Bohai coast. Zhongcun therefore provides a new set of archaeological records to investigate the rise of Bronze Age and early dynasties in China.

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Figure 3. Overview of the excavation at Zhongcun (a), objects (b) and tomb M10 (c) (photography by Prof Chen Xiaosan 陈小三).

6. Zhengzhou Shang City, Henan

Project directors: Yang Shugang, Yang Wensheng & Liu Wenke.
Excavating institutions: Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology; Zhengzhou Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

Zhengzhou Shang City enclosed more than 10km^2 with rammed-earth walls and it is the largest and highest-ranking urban centre presently known from the Early Shang period (*c.* 1500–1400 BCE). Recent excavation makes it possible to see this city not simply in terms of walls, burials and hoards of bronze ritual vessels, but through the infrastructure that allowed a large political centre to function in practical terms. Two substantial storage complexes have been identified: one contained 17 parallel rammed-earth buildings covering more than 10 000m^2, while another comprised seven similar structures. A newly exposed urban water system extended for approximately 540m, combining modified natural channels with artificial canals, stone revetments and water-diversion facilities. Together, these discoveries provide rare direct evidence for the storage, redistribution and management of water and resources within an early city.

This site was already known for its early specialised production and ritual in Chinese archaeology; the discoveries of copper ores, moulds and crucibles demonstrate for the first time that primary copper processing and large-scale bronze casting occurred within the inner walled area (often called palatial area). Scientific analyses link some copper ores to the Ruichang–Tongling mining region in northern Jiangxi, revealing resource networks extending to the Yangzi region. Bone, antler and ivory working was similarly specialised.

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7. Changchun Site, Fuping, Shaanxi

Project director: Li Yanfeng.
Excavating institution: Shaanxi Academy of Archaeology.

Changchun provides a new site in which to study how the Western Zhou dynasty (*c.* 1046–771 BCE) organised territory beyond its royal centre. Located where the Shichuan River passes from the Loess Plateau into the Guanzhong Plain, Changchun is a typical frontier site between the pastoralist groups (including various types of Rong people, some of whom overthrew the Western Zhou dynasty in 771 BCE) and the agricultural people. The whole site covers approximately 2.2km^2, with the cemetery alone extending over about 200 000m^2, containing more than 3150 identified graves and chariot pits, including 12 large, ramped tombs (Figure 4). Elite graves were accompanied by chariots, jade, stone chimes and gold ornaments, while smaller burials occupied the same carefully bounded cemetery, revealing a strongly differentiated but spatially integrated community.

A network of artificial channels divided the inhabited area into a multiblock planned layout, while a specialised craft zone contained pottery, bronze and evidence of bone-



Figure 4. Burial (a), bronze (b) and jade (c) discovered at Changchun (photographs by Dr Chong Jianrong 种建荣).

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working. The pottery workshop alone covered about 50 000m^2 with 30 kilns; some workshops were associated with small graves, suggesting that production could be organised through household-based craft groups rather than exclusively through centrally controlled institutions.

Regional survey has identified more than 40 Western Zhou settlements in the Shichuan valley, with Changchun apparently forming the principal centre from the middle Western Zhou (*c.* 950–850 BCE) onwards. The site raises a broader question: how were early territorial states governed between capitals and villages? Changchun indicates that political integration depended on a few important factors, including strategically placed regional centres combining elite residence, mortuary hierarchy, specialised production and control of communication routes.

8. Langyatai Site, Qingdao, Shandong

Project director: Lü Kai.
Excavating institutions: Shandong Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology; Qingdao Institute of Cultural Heritage Conservation and Archaeology.

The site at Langyatai provides rare material evidence for one of the most evocative projects of China's First Emperor (Ying Zheng, reign 247–210 BCE). Situated on a 183m-high coastal promontory surrounded by the sea on three sides, Langyatai had already been an important ritual landscape of the pre-imperial state of Qi (*c.* 1046–221 BCE). Following unification in 221 BCE, the First Emperor repeatedly travelled to the eastern seaboard and ordered monumental construction here. Archaeology has now revealed a vast Qin state project extending from summit to foothill, centred on a T-shaped high-platform of about 45 000m^2. Outside the Qin political heartland—and alongside much better-known imperial undertakings such as the First Emperor's mausoleum and Terracotta Army—Langyatai represents the largest known Qin state-sponsored project yet identified in the empire's eastern territories, materially demonstrating the extraordinary capacity of the newly unified state to mobilise labour, materials and technical expertise far from its capital.

At Langyatai, buildings, courtyards and roads were integrated with a sophisticated water-management system combining underground ceramic pipelines, open drains, stone-lined outlets, filtration devices and rainwater-storage facilities cut into the bedrock; even stone-paved roads were deliberately designed with concave surfaces to channel run-off (Figure 5). Furthermore, the commanding orientation towards the eastern ocean, combined with the earlier sacred significance of the landscape, offers an archaeological route into the First Emperor's broader worldview. The sea was simultaneously a territorial frontier and, in contemporary cosmological traditions, a realm associated with sacred islands, immortality and worlds beyond ordinary political space. Langyatai therefore allows us to ask how engineering, monumental architecture and cosmology were combined to project universal sovereignty in both life and afterlife.

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Figure 5. The drainage system (a) and roof tiles decorated with Qin cloud pattern (b) and inscription (qianqiu wansui 千秋万岁 (A Thousand Autumns and Ten Thousand Years)) (c) discovered at Langyatai (photographs by Dr Lü Kai 吕凯).

9. Yue Capital and Han–Six Dynasties Kuaiji Commandery Sites, Shaoxing, Zhejiang

Project directors: Li Longbin & Luo Peng.
Excavating institutions: Shaoxing Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology; Yuecheng District Cultural Relics Protection Institute.

This discovery provides an exceptional case of urban continuity across political transformation. During the Eastern Zhou period (*c.* 771–256 BCE), it was a major centre of the southern state of Yue, which was traditionally associated with King Goujian (reign *c.* 496–464 BCE). Recent excavations have revealed parts of the Yue city wall, monumental palace-platform architecture and a high-status ritual complex. Beneath one ritual platform were 32 uniformly arranged offering pits, while associated deposits contained weapons, ceramics and sacrifices of horses, cattle, deer, fish and turtles.

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More strikingly, the later Han–Six Dynasties (*c.* second century BCE–sixth century CE) administrative centre of Kuaiji Commandery was constructed directly over the former Yue palace zone, sometimes reusing its foundations and building materials. Four large government buildings have been identified, together with more than 1200 wooden and bamboo documents recording household registers, accounts, legal matters and other administrative business. Official workshops produced armour, coins, mirrors and other types of goods; tin-plated armour represents a particularly unusual metallurgical discovery. This exceptional continuity with the recycling of old architectural components provides an interesting challenge as to how to construct the site biography.

10. Suyukou Porcelain Kiln Site, Helan, Ningxia

Project director: Zhu Cunshi.
Excavating institutions: Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology; Fudan University.

Hidden approximately 10km inside the Helan Mountains, Suyukou was an exceptionally sophisticated centre of ceramic production for the court of the Western Xia dynasty (1038–1227 CE). The kiln complex extends over approximately 4ha and contains at least six kilns; excavations around two of them have revealed a complete production landscape, including clay-preparation areas, potter's-wheel installations, glaze vats, storage facilities and firing areas; while mines for clay, quartz, limestone and coal have been identified in the surrounding mountains. The principal products were exceptionally fine white porcelains, characterised by dense white bodies, slightly bluish translucent glazes and very high translucency (Figure 6). Their close correspondence with vessels from Western Xia imperial tombs, together with saggars stamped *guan* (official), identifies Suyukou as a court-directed production centre rather than an ordinary commercial kiln (e.g. Lingwu kiln).

What makes Suyukou remarkable, however, is not simply the quality of its porcelain but the technological choices made to achieve it. Quartz was deliberately incorporated on an unusually large scale into the body, glaze and even the saggars; and stacked saggars were carefully sealed with glaze during firing to minimise contamination and maintain a clean firing environment. These practices produced ceramics of exceptional whiteness, translucency and glass- or jade-like brilliance. Rather than reproducing an established Song dynasty recipe, Western Xia potters assembled technologies circulating across northern and southern China and adapted them to the local raw materials of the Helan Mountains.

The choice was apparently aesthetic as much as technical. The Western Xia court had access to several prestigious traditions of Song white ware, including the warm, ivory-toned porcelains associated with Ding kiln in Hebei province—which was active from the Tang (618–907 CE) to Yuan dynasties (1217–1368)—and the more translucent bluish-white wares of the Jingdezhen–Hutian tradition (*c.* tenth–seventeenth centuries CE). Suyukou appears to have pursued the latter visual effect—whiteness combined with translucency—but achieved it through a distinctive quartz-rich recipe. The site

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Figure 6. Landscape (a) and kiln structure (b) of Suyukou; right) transparency of the product; (c) photographs of fragmented white porcelain with torch light underneath (photographs by Prof Zheng Jianming 郑建明).

suggests an important possibility: technological innovation at Suyukou was driven not by resource constraint alone, but by a state-defined aesthetic objective. In this sense, Suyukou challenges the conventional distinction between northern and southern ceramic traditions. Rather than asking how a northern frontier state acquired sophisticated technology from the southern Song, the site raises the question of how access to Song technologies, local mineral resources and Western Xia court patronage combined to turn a frontier landscape into a centre of technological innovation. It appears that political frontiers could generate their own centres of specialist production, transforming rather than merely consuming technologies circulating across Eurasia.

Concluding thoughts

Although many countries have various competitions for their own best archaeological work (often organised by TV companies, popular archaeological magazines, or professional and amateur organisations), China's Top 10 is different in that it is officially supported at a national level, and the results can have positive consequences for the successful sites and excavation teams. The scale, continuity and public visibility of the Top 10 are also unusual. The competition is intense, and the breadth of the winning projects requires archaeologists from different periods, regions and material cultures to explain their discoveries, methods and significance in a coherent and easily understood manner.

Why this format has flourished in China probably reflects a particular conjunction of circumstances: that is, the exceptional and increasing pace of archaeological discovery over the past 30 years, sustained national and provincial investment, competition

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between institutions and regions and an enduring public curiosity about the past. It may also resonate with much longer historiographical traditions in China in which precedent and comparison have provided important ways of making sense of historical change, not simply establishing what happened, but asking why societies followed similar or divergent trajectories and how individual and collective identities were shaped. From this perspective, the final result itself is perhaps the most superficial aspect of the exercise. More revealing is the annual conversation that it generates with people outside the sector, making visible the process by which archaeologists assemble fragments recovered from excavations and laboratories into broader narratives about the past. By opening this process to both academic as well as public scrutiny and participation, the Top 10 does more than communicate archaeological results: it invites a wider audience into the co-production of archaeological knowledge, and perhaps encourages people to see themselves not simply as observers of the past, but as participants in its continuing interpretation and preservation. It is now a major driver for heritage development in China, and is therefore of international significance.

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Online supplementary material (OSM)

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