New developments in Chinese archaeology

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Introduction

In April 2009, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (hereafter SACH; a unit of the Ministry of Culture) of China released a new *Archaeological fieldwork manual*. Borrowing concepts and technical guidelines from British and Japanese manuals, the manual thoroughly revamps the previous version which was first published in 1984. The updated version aims to change profoundly archaeological survey, excavation, storage and conservation methodologies across the nation (Zhao 2012).

The new manual

In 2005, SACH commissioned Beijing University to undertake a major revision of the 1984 *Manual* drawing upon global developments in archaeological thinking, fieldwork techniques, and storage and conservation guidelines (Zhao *et al.* 2009: 2). The new *Manual* makes wide-ranging recommendations: for example, it calls attention not only to stratigraphy, but also to spatial organisation and formation processes; it stipulates the use of sieving and flotation to recover small animal bones, seeds and artefacts; it recommends that pottery and stone artefacts are not cleaned so as to preserve starch residues for future research. As a result of these and many other guidelines, archaeological projects should no longer focus narrowly on chronology and culture definition and should become more open to specialists from various other disciplines. Unlike in the past, archaeology and other sciences are to be closely integrated (SACH 2009; Zhao 2012).

The manual also defines new data recording and publishing procedures. The former comprises three complementary parts: detailed documentation, mapping and photography/filming of all aspects of the excavation process (SACH 2009: 6–7). These documents, together with artefacts and samples, are to be properly archived so as to be accessible to scholars of any discipline (SACH 2009: 7). As regards publishing, although the old *Manual* mandated full publication, in reality excavation reports were little more than a presentation of limited examples of features and artefacts, serving largely to illustrate chronology and cultural affiliation (Ministry of Culture 1984: 7). This narrow focus significantly slowed, and sometimes rendered hopeless, the publication of reports and significantly constrained Chinese archaeology (Zhao *et al.* 2009: 3–4). The new *Manual*, with its priorities in multidisciplinary and comprehensive research, presses for faster and comprehensive publication of detailed descriptions of site formation, plans, archaeological features and all artefacts without distraction by time-consuming research articles (SACH 2009: 8–9; Zhao *et al.* 2009: 6).

In order to make these principles and standards operable, the new *Manual* provides technical guidelines, including those for survey, excavation, mapping and sampling (SACH 2009: 11–43). It also requires that conservation be incorporated into project design. In the past, individual excavators determined how much (or little) effort was placed on conservation; there was no mandatory requirement in the old *Manual*. Realising that cultural artefacts are most vulnerable to damage at the moment they are excavated, the new *Manual* requires excavators to make provision for trained personnel and equipment for on-site conservation.

Trial application

As with other national policies and regulations, SACH has adopted a 'test-and-refine' approach to the new *Manual*. It has commissioned several trial applications to assess its effectiveness and to detect potential problems (Zhao 2012). For example, in 2011 a group of archaeologists from province- and local-level institutions undertook a systematic survey of the Chalcolithic walled settlement of Shimao in Shenmu County, Shaanxi Province (Yang 2011). The Shimao site had already been subject to earlier survey and

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200901124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

excavation but remained poorly understood (Dai 1977; Banpo Museum 1983; Wang & Sun 2011).

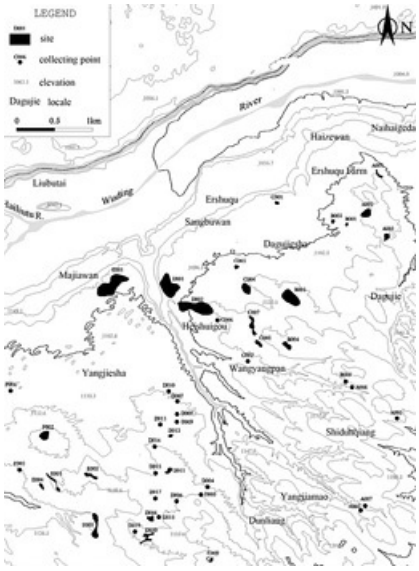


Figure 1. *A map of the full-coverage survey of the Wuding River valley in northern Shaanxi Province (another Manual-related project aimed to map all sites from Neolithic through Qing Dynasty). The Wuding project was done in 2010. Map provided by Dr Zhouyong Sun.*

The 2011 work included intensive field-walking to collect surface artefacts and the mapping of structures with GPS (Yang 2011). Field survey of this kind was introduced to China during the 1990s through a number of joint projects (e.g. Sino-American Joint Huan Valley Fieldwork Team 1998; Sino-American Joint Liangcheng Region Archaeological Team 2002; Chen *et al.* 2003; Sino-American Joint Chifeng Archaeological Project 2003). The *Manual* significantly raises the standards for such regional survey work, requiring detailed topographical, environmental and archaeological recording in addition to the narrower obligations of the previous guidelines. For example, it requires the preparation of large-scale maps and aerial photographic coverage in advance of fieldwork (SACH 2009: 1–3). As a result, the Shimao survey accurately mapped the settlement's two wall circuits and established its size, 425ha. Pottery sherds indicate occupation during the late Longshan period (2600–1900 BC); this preliminary chronology will be refined by radiocarbon dates of samples collected during the survey (Yang 2011). The discovery of the hitherto neglected walled settlement, the accurate mapping of the site, and other abundant fresh data hence produced make the project a showcase of field survey for SACH (Figure 1). Indeed, without the inspiration of the*Manual*, it could have operated in the traditional manner and given much less data, albeit with contemporary technologies, as happened with the third nation-wide survey of cultural heritage in China in 2007–2011.

Conclusion

In recent years regional survey, zooarchaeology and archaeobotany have been used by various projects in China, but by codifying and endorsing these practices on a national level, the new *Manual* marks a milestone in the development of Chinese archaeology. Since 2009, the technical guidelines contained in the *Manual* have been integrated into SACH's annual training programmes for fieldworkers as well as university curricula, and SACH monitors the implementation of the *Manual*'s guidelines through its inclusion in the review of excavation projects (Zhao 2012). Although to date only a few trial applications have been undertaken, it will potentially have great influence on the practice of Chinese archaeology in years to come. As well as defining new standards for fieldwork, the new *Manual* requires archaeological institutions to build storage facilities and purchase new equipment, and encourages them to hire more conservators and to support more conservation centres. In addition, it advocates more rapid publication and higher-quality reporting, and consequently it will provide a solid foundation for future scholarship. As the guidelines in the new *Manual* come into force, Chinese archaeology will be transformed.

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200901124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Xingcan Chen for his valuable comments on the draft of this article. All errors remain my own.

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https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200901124 Published online by Cambridge University Press