

Chinese culture at the crossroads

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Recent archaeological discoveries from far-flung corners of China are forcing scientists to reconsider the origins of ancient Chinese civilization - and a new crop of young archaeologists are delving into the modern nation's roots. In the August 21 issue of the journal *Science*, a group of articles by *Science* news writer Andrew Lawler explore how, over several millennia, the most populous and economically vibrant nation in the world evolved from a much wider array of peoples and cultures than once imagined.

Lawler crisscrossed China recently for three weeks, traveling from the country's steamy southeastern plains to the rugged westernmost province of Xinjiang, interviewing dozens of archaeologists at a host of sites. This special news package puts a spotlight on how the various archaeological findings of the past decade are challenging what the Chinese people once thought about their country and themselves. As a construction boom continues to alter the physical face of the country - inadvertently uncovering vital clues to China's past, illuminating ancient trade routes and long-lost cultures - a new and more complex history of the Chinese people is emerging right before their very eyes.

The wealth of these recent archaeological discoveries demands a re-write of some history books - and young scholars are even now questioning the existence of a legendary Chinese dynasty, the Xia. Less willing to take ancient texts at face value than their predecessors, this new generation of Chinese researchers is relying on physical data - and more "Western" methods - in their attempts to accurately retrace Chinese history.

But looting and development threaten to destroy the country's heritage. In a land full of wealthy tombs and poor farmers, grave robbing has been an ancient tradition. China's current construction boom poses yet another threat to archaeological sites, though new laws are attempting to halt such damage. Those who destroy evidence of the country's rich history now face jail time and even the death penalty (though no one appears to have been executed for looting yet). Meanwhile, archaeologists are finding novel ways to work with developers and provincial governments to rescue at least some ancient sites from the destruction that comes with the country's economic growth.

"The exciting discoveries made recently across China, coupled with the country's fast-paced development, make this an opportune time to dig into new questions about China's origins, the state of its threatened ancient sites, and the increasing expertise of its archaeologists," says Andrew Lawler, author of the *Science* news package.

Lawler's special news package on Chinese archaeology covers the accidental discovery and later excavation of Jinsha, an ancient site located near downtown Chengdu in Sichuan, and about 600 miles (1000 kilometers) from the traditional center of Chinese civilization along the Yellow River. Long assumed to have been a cultural backwater, researchers have only recently gleaned the real history of Sichuan's surprisingly ancient and rich culture, which is thousands of years older than they had once believed. Now, thanks to a group of savvy archaeologists and their allies in the city government, Jinsha has become a museum, protected from looters and complete with adjacent land reserved for further archaeological digs in the future.

Another article by Lawler illuminates the earliest Silk Road which brought valued goods like bronze from the west and possibly the staple grain of ancient China, millet, to the west. These recent discoveries have led Chinese researchers to acknowledge significant outside influence on

their ancient culture, breaking an old taboo put in place when China was largely closed to the outside world.

Source: American Association for the Advancement of Science

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