

Taiwan find may throw light on Pacific settlers

April 3 2012, by Benjamin Yeh



This photo, taken last December and provided by Chen Chung-yu, shows a complete skeleton of a stone age male his archaeological research team had unearthed from a tiny Taiwan-controlled Liang island off China.

Taiwanese archaeologists working on an islet off China have unearthed the remains of a Stone Age male who may provide clues about ancient people who eventually dispersed throughout the entire Pacific.

The man, who was about 35 when he died nearly eight thousand years ago, may be a remote relative of Taiwan's [aborigines](#) who today make up about two percent of the island's population, according to the head of the team, Chen Chung-yu.

"Judging from the way the body was buried, it could be a person from what we now call the Austronesia language family," said Chen, a research fellow at Taiwan's Academia Sinica institute.

Taiwan's aborigines belong to the same language family, as do the people who migrated across the Pacific as far as Easter Island off the coast of Chile in [prehistoric times](#).

Chen and his team of three excavated the remains -- a nearly complete skeleton -- on Liang Island, a tiny Taiwanese-controlled [islet](#) 30 kilometers (19 miles) off China's southeastern Fujian province, in December.

The [burial site](#) had emerged purely by chance, as the Taiwanese military was digging up the soil to prepare for the construction of a road on the 1.4-kilometre (0.9-mile island).



This photo, taken last December and provided by Chen Chung-yu, shows an archaeological research team working at a site on a tiny Taiwan-controlled islet off China, Liang Island.

What struck Chen when he carried out the meticulous excavation work was the way the body was buried -- in a foetal position like the one used by Taiwan's aborigines as late as the 20th century.

Further DNA research on the skeleton will determine the genetic make-up of the skeleton, which is one of the oldest and best preserved ever to turn up on Taiwan.

But it is likely that there could be a link, since the ancestors of Taiwan's aborigines, and of most [Pacific islanders](#), are believed to have lived in what is now [southern China](#) at that time.

If this turns out to be the case, the find on Liang Island will add to the understanding of the way of life of the ancestors of the Austronesians just before they set out on their epic journey to people the Pacific.

"The people of the Austronesian language family lived near the ocean and were very mobile," said Chen.

"They had developed some level of shipbuilding techniques that had already enabled them to sail far away from land," he said.



This file illustration photo shows Taiwanese Aborigines dancing during a rehearsal in Taipei, in 2003. Taiwan's aborigines belong to the same language family, as do the people who migrated across the Pacific as far as Eastern Island off the coast of Chile in prehistoric times.

Among the evidence for this, he cited a canoe that had previously been excavated in east China's Zhejiang province.

It is testimony to the ancient settlers' familiarity with the sea that they probably went far offshore on a frequent basis.

Liang Island was not permanently settled, and the 35-year-old may have died during such a routine maritime excursion.

"These people could not possibly stay on Liang Island for long as the islet was too small to supply them with badly needed vegetables," Chen said.

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