

Proof of China's diverse origins

Relics dating back between 5,000 and 3,000 years, unearthed from Sanxingdui Ruins, are on display in a Sichuan museum

By HUANG ZHILING

huangzhiling@chinadaily.com.cn

For history buffs visiting Chengdu, the capital of Southwest China's Sichuan province, a visit to the Jinsha Site Museum — a treasure trove of relics dating back to 3,000 years ago — is a must.

One of the most impressive relics is a little bronze statue with a crown and clenched fists.

But if that does not impress you, there is a lookalike bronze statue in the Sanxingdui Museum in Guanghan, a less-traveled city, some 40 km from Chengdu.

And compared with the little bronze statue in the Jinsha Site Museum which can be held in one hand, the statue in Sanxingdui Museum is 2.62 meters high and weighs 180 kilograms.

The Sanxingdui statue — like the one at the Jinsha Site Museum — is believed to represent a king or a sorcerer from the Shu Kingdom, the name for Sichuan in ancient times.

The big statue, which is believed to be about 3,100 years old, is among more than 10,000 relics unearthed from the Sanxingdui Ruins in Guanghan.

The relics, dating back between 5,000 and 3,000 years, include gold, bronze and jade articles and many of them are on display in the Sanxingdui Museum.

Sanxingdui, which literally means “three star mounds”, is so named because the ruins are located in a village where there were three mounds.

The discovery of the Sanxingdui Ruins was accidental.

It seemed to appear from nowhere, said Chen Xiaodan, a leading archaeologist with the Sichuan Provincial Museum in Chengdu who participated in the excavation of the ruins in the 1980s.

In the spring of 1929, Yan Daocheng, a villager in Guanghan, found a stone while digging a ditch in his fields.

Removing the stone, he found a hole beneath it. And in the hole were objects made of jade.

Fearing that fellow villagers might learn about his discovery, Yan immediately covered the hole with the stone and mud and returned home.

Later that night, Yan and his family reopened the hole and removed more than 400 jade objects. Yan later sold some of the objects in Chengdu, arousing the attention of cultural relics dealers who flocked to Guanghan.

“The popularity of Guanghan jade in turn attracted the attention of archaeologists,” said Chen.

Then, in 1933, an archaeological team headed by David Crockett Graham, the American curator of the museum at Huaxi University in



From left: A bronze standing man figure; a bronze dragon column shape artifact; the back side of the man with a gold mask; a bronze man figure with beast-head helmet; a man with a gold mask. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



A bronze celestial tree in the Sanxingdui Museum.

Chengdu, headed for Sanxingdui to undertake the first formal excavation of the ruins.

Since then, several generations of archaeologists have worked in the Sanxingdui Ruins which cover 12 square kilometers.

Archaeologists were excited by more discoveries in the 1980s, which included the remains of large palaces, the remnants of eastern, western and southern city walls in 1984, and the discovery of two large sacrificial pits in 1986.

The discoveries prove that Sanxingdui contains the ruins of an ancient city that was the political, economic and cultural center of the ancient Shu Kingdom.

The Sanxingdui Ruins is seen as one of the most important archaeological finds of the 20th century in China.

Before the excavation of Sanxingdui, it was believed that Sichuan had a history dating back 3,000 years. But thanks to the excavation, it is now believed that civilization first appeared in Sichuan 5,000 years ago, said Chen.

The Sanxingdui Ruins, located on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, also serve as proof that the origins of Chinese civilization are diverse, for the Sanxingdui Ruins dispels theories that the Yellow River was the sole starting point of Chinese civilization, according to Duan Yu, a historian with the Sichuan Provincial Academy of Social Sciences.

The Sanxingdui Museum, which was opened in late 1997 by the tranquil Yazi River, draws visitors from different parts of the world.

Yazi means duck in Chinese, and white ducks can be seen in the river.

Visitors to the museum are greeted by dozens of large bronze masks and bronze human heads with angular human features, exaggerated almond-shaped eyes, protruding pupils and large ears.

The masks and heads with their bizarre looks might appear to be the work of aliens, because no human race looks like them, said Tang Min, a guide.

But according to the *Chronicles of Huayang*, a book about history, geography and people in Southwest China compiled by Chang Qu, a historian in Sichuan, from 348 to 354, bronze masks with protruding pupils in the Sanxingdui Museum have something to do with Can Cong, the founder and king of the Shu Kingdom.

The book described him as having protruding eyes, said Tan Jihe, a historian and president of the Sichuan Provincial Association of History.

Other exhibits at the Sanxingdui Museum shed light on kings of the Shu Kingdom.

One of them is a gold scepter 143 cm long, with a diameter of 2.3 cm and weighing 463 grams.

It was unearthed in the Sanxingdui Ruins in 1986 after the Sichuan Provincial Archaeological Team took action to stop a local brick-making factory from digging up the mounds.

Speaking about the find, Chen, who was then a team leader, said that after his team found the scepter, Chen told onlookers that the scepter was made of copper.

Later, in response to the team's request, the county government of Guanghan sent 36 soldiers to guard the site where the scepter was found.

The scepter has the images of the heads of two smiling men, each with a crown, and the patterns of two fishes and two birds.

The crowns, fishes and birds on the scepter form a pictograph meaning King Yu Fu and the scepter could have belonged to him, said Chen.

Fish and birds are believed to be totems of Yu Fu, which means fish cormorant in Chinese, he said.

Information about Can Cong and Du Fu, the two kings of the Shu kingdom, is scant, which is evident from the lines of a poem by Li Bai (701-762), the greatest ancient Chinese poet from the school of romanticism.

His poem “Traveling on the Shu Path is like ascending to the sky” is known to every Chinese high school student and prescribed reading for every foreign student learning Chinese literature.

In the poem, Li says that though Can Cong and Yu Fu established the Shu Kingdom, people know very little about them.

For now, the bronze masks with the protruding eyes and the gold scepter tell us almost all of what we know about two kings of the Shu kingdom, say archaeologists.

From the Sanxingdui Museum, visitors have to travel about 2.8 km west to reach the entrance of the Sanxingdui Ruins, where they can see what is left of the mounds, the remnants of the city walls and the two sacrificial pits unearthed in 1986.

Most of the key exhibits in the museum come from the two pits, said Chen.

Many of the exhibits in the Sanxingdui Museum look like those in the Jinsha Site Museum, although those in the former are much larger.

It is assumed that creators of the Sanxingdui culture moved to Chengdu and created the relics on display in the Jinsha Site Museum after a disaster like a flood in the Yazi River befell Sanxingdui, said Zhu Zhangyi, archaeologist and deputy curator of the Jinsha Site Museum.

On Feb 8, 2001, when builders were working at a construction site in Jinsha village, in Chengdu, they found ivory and jade articles in the piles of mud.

Since then, archaeologists have excavated some 10,000 relics, including gold, jade, bronze and stone ware as well as elephant tusks, pottery and ceramic pieces.

And a large number of those relics unearthed from the Jinsha Ruins, like the little bronze statue with a crown and clenched fists, are on display in the Jinsha Site Museum which opened in 2007.