Guangzhou Summer Internship Report

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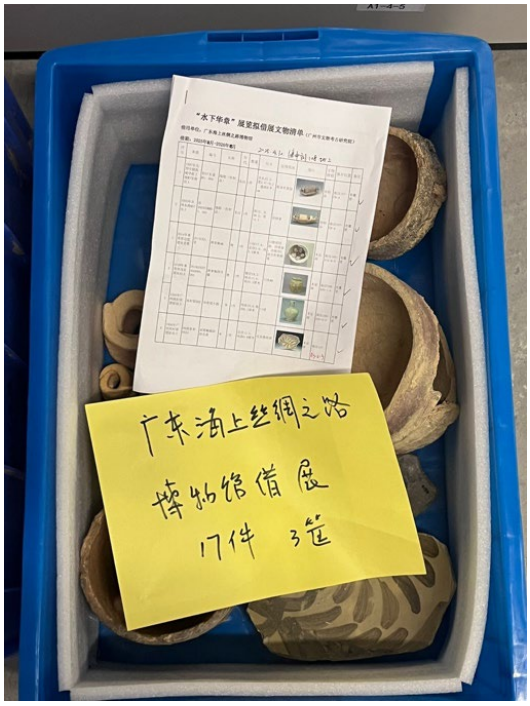
I am profoundly grateful to the Department of Anthropology for granting me the invaluable opportunity to undertake a six-week summer internship at the Guangzhou Municipal Institute of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology. This experience was not merely a professional requirement but a transformative journey that bridged the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired in university lectures and the tangible reality of archaeological practice. As the initial centre of Lingnan cultural development, Guangzhou naturally abounds with ancient archaeological resources, which undeniably augmented my understanding of Lingnan characteristics found in artefacts unearthed in Hong Kong. This connection provided a crucial macro-level perspective, allowing me to see Hong Kong not as an isolated entity but as a part of a vibrant ancient cultural tapestry. During my internship, I was assigned to the Department of Artefact Preservation, where I assisted in daily operations, from organising excavation reports in the office, to helping arrange artefacts within the storehouse, and even participating in the return of loaned relics. Each of these experiences proved immensely beneficial, and I shall elaborate upon them in detail below.

My principal responsibility entailed cataloguing published research from the institute, spanning from the 1950s to the present. This task, which might sound mundane to an outsider, was in fact a privileged deep dive into the intellectual history of Chinese archaeology. It was a process of connecting with the scholars whose work I had only ever encountered in bibliographies. This process allowed me to read numerous excavation reports specific to Guangzhou, with the three major discoveries from the Qin and Han dynasties - the Qin Shipyard Site, the Mausoleum of the Nanyue King, and the Palace of the Nanyue Kingdom - leaving the deepest impression on me. The revelation of the Qin Shipyard Site holds tremendous significance for Lingnan studies, as it proves that, contrary to the notion of Lingnan as a primitive land, advanced shipbuilding techniques existed as early as the Qin dynasty. Nevertheless, the plethora of scholarly debates

regarding whether the site was a shipyard or merely a wooden structure reminded me that the “common sense” assumption of its function as a shipyard is, in reality, merely the viewpoint of one academic school, led by the dean of archaeology of Guangzhou - Mai Yinghao (麥英豪). This realisation was a significant epistemological shift for me; it prompted me to remember that debates from various perspectives are vital to find archaeologists' final pursuit - "truth". It underscored that archaeology is a dynamic dialogue of interpretations, where each generation re-examines evidence through its own theoretical lens. This intellectual humility, understanding that today's consensus might be tomorrow's debated theory, is one of the most valuable lessons I will carry forward.

Given that any earthworks in Yuexiu District, once the site of the ancient Panyu city, almost invariably reveal relics, Guangzhou stands as a vivid case study in urban archaeology. During my internship, I was fortunate enough to follow colleagues from the Department of Archaeology to inspect the construction site at the First People’s Hospital. The contrast was striking: the relentless noise and motion of modern construction machinery against the patient, meticulous scraping of trowels. Excavations commenced in 2022, and even in the third year, new discoveries continue to emerge. It is thus no wonder that when I talked to the local residents, they expressed frustration over the slow pace of infrastructure projects, highlighting the challenge of reconciling urban development with cultural preservation, which is also thought-provoking. This experience moved the ethical dilemmas of cultural heritage management from abstract concepts to tangible reality, forcing me to consider the competing values of progress and preservation, and the immense responsibility archaeologists bear as mediators between a city's past and its future.

The heart of my internship, however, lay within the spaces of the artefact storage facilities. On my first day, my senior led me through the underground artefact vaults, introducing me to the



institute's collections room by room. The scale and diversity of the collection were overwhelming, a physical manifestation of centuries of history. I am especially indebted to Ms. Long for her thorough explanations, which greatly enhanced my understanding of preventative conservation measures and equipment, as well as the properties of Lingnan's glass-based jewellery artefacts. Working in the storage rooms was an unforgettable experience; although matching artefact serial numbers from inventory lists proved somewhat tedious, the excitement of handling such a vast array of relics was unparalleled. Careful attention and composure are imperative when handling artefacts, especially given their fragile state. I was taught to first assess the condition of each item, locate its stress points, and then lift it gently with both hands, before placing it on anti-slip mats or in protective cases, subsequently reorganising locations or preparing items for loan. This physical interaction with history was profoundly intimate. Along the way, I also encountered many relics I had never seen before (such as real human skulls), and saw treasures left behind by predecessors from the last century - many of which had intact glazes and exquisite forms - which was truly eye-opening. Feeling its weight and texture with hands created a connection to its maker that no textbook ever could.

On one particularly memorable occasion, I had the privilege of taking part in the handover procedures between the institute and the Guangzhou Museum, returning more than twenty invaluable cultural relics to our custody. The atmosphere was one of focused, silent intensity. After carefully transporting each container to the storehouse, the museum staff meticulously extracted every artefact from its case, placing them on a turntable for the senior to inspect and document their precise conditions and whether inscriptions were present, and, if so, what those inscriptions said. It was a masterclass in professional diligence. Among these, the object that left the most indelible impression on me was a severely damaged bronze vessel. Upon its

removal, it was immediately apparent that its legs were corroded, with fragments of rust flaking off as it was moved, causing palpable tension among all present. We all held our breath, understanding that we were seeing the slow, inevitable decay of a priceless object. Ultimately, the detached rust pieces had to be collected in a small plastic bag for safekeeping. This incident deeply underscored for me the delicate and demanding nature of artefact conservation, and the reverence needed in handling such fragile treasures.

Finally, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to Director Mo, Ms. Long, Ms. Huang, Mr. Liang, Mr. Huang, and Mr. Kai Sheng of the Department. I am deeply appreciative of their guidance, patience, and encouragement throughout my internship, as well as their support in enabling me to learn more about cultural relics and archaeological excavations through participation in diverse activities and tasks. Their mentorship has afforded me a profound insight into both artefacts and the broader museology profession, making this summer an enriching and rewarding experience.