

INTERVIEW

The International Centre for Chinese Heritage and Archaeology (ICCHA): Interviews With Peter Ucko (UCL) and Qin Ling (University of Beijing)

Interviews Conducted by Edgar Samarasundera and Michael Seymour, Spring 2005

The International Centre for Chinese Heritage and Archaeology (ICCHA) was inaugurated in December 2003. The centre aims to promote collaboration between China and the UK in the spheres of archaeology and cultural heritage. Two members of the project's steering committee, Professor Peter Ucko and Dr Qin Ling, were interviewed by PIA. For further information on the ICCHA, visit <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/china-archaeology>.



Peter Ucko

Professor Peter Ucko served as Director of the Institute of Archaeology (IoA), UCL, and Professor of Comparative Archaeology from 1996 until September 2005 and is now an Emeritus Professor at the IoA. Prior to joining UCL he was Professor of Archaeology and Dean of Arts at Southampton University. His BA in Anthropology was completed at UCL in 1959, and he obtained a PhD in Prehistoric Archaeology and Egyptology from the same institution in 1962. He has a long-standing interest in World Archaeology, one example of which is his work in founding the ICCHA. Other recent projects that he has been involved with include "Faces Across the North Sea", carried out with staff from the University of Trondheim in Norway, and a study of Palaeolithic painted pebbles conducted in conjunction with the Musée de St Germain-en-Laye in Paris, France.



Qin Ling

Dr Qin Ling began a Bachelor's degree in archaeology at Peking University, Beijing in 1994, during which she specialised in the late prehistory of China. She went on to study for a Master's degree and PhD in Neolithic Archaeology at Beijing, and subsequently became a lecturer at that institution's School of Archaeology and Museology. Much of her field research has been in southern China, focusing on early agricultural societies. She has a growing interest in environmental archaeology and in the application of spatial technologies in archaeology. During 2004-2005, she came to London for six months to study archaeobotanical methods with Dr Dorian Fuller (IoA) as part of the ICCHA initiative.

Peter Ucko

How did the ICCHA come into being?

Well, it's a long story. I first went to China in 1985, to try to find out whether Chinese archaeologists would be interested in coming to the 1986 World Archaeological Congress at Southampton. In the end I think 11 came, which was by far the biggest group of Chinese archaeologists at that time to have come abroad together. I decided there had to be some sort of formal link, and I've been working at that since then. When I came

to the IoA, about nine years ago, I took five of our staff to China, each for a week, and in this way we lectured for five weeks. In discussions after the lectures and seminars, the idea of something formal kept coming up. Then, a few years ago, I took another four staff members with me. Stephen Shennan (IoA) went to Shandong while the rest of us stayed in Beijing and lectured or went out to sites from there. At the end of that we agreed to try to set up some formal grouping which eventually became the International Centre, for which we had an official opening in China in December 2003. It's run by a joint steering committee that's half Chinese and half British.

What do you consider to be the main opportunities and obstacles in this collaborative venture?

I see a lot of both, and I'm not sure which is going to win out at the moment! The opportunities are vast, absolutely vast – for example, there are endless collections in museums which aren't being curated or studied in the way that the Chinese or the British would like to see them studied. The Chinese, as opposed to when I first went, are now very keen on collaboration, and I receive letters almost daily from China asking us to collaborate on projects.

There are possibilities for our students to do placements in China and huge possibilities for staff and student exchanges. However, the difficulties are just about as enormous as the possibilities. First of all there is the language, and whereas most of us could go out and learn French or German (although even that's quite painful!), trying to learn Chinese is a different ball-game altogether. Of course, the Chinese are beginning to use English more and more, and so that will help in the long run, but at the moment it's a barrier. It's a barrier for meetings, it's a barrier for discussion, it's a barrier even in the field if someone has to have an incredibly good interpreter with them. A lot of what we're talking about is the Chinese trying to explain to us what they do differently, and me trying to explain to them some of the archaeological concepts that we use. Many of those concepts can't be translated easily. It takes a long time for the interpreter to do his or her work, and even then one isn't quite sure that the result conveys exactly what was originally meant.

One of the challenges has been trying to introduce theory. When I first went to China in 1985, the most recent thing they'd had from over here was Gordon Childe. Since then, publications have begun to be translated. For example, we've had a two volume book prepared here at the IoA on archaeological theory, and we have publishers' and authors' rights to put it into Chinese. But we can't find anybody anywhere – at the United Nations, UNESCO or anywhere else – who's willing to pay for translation into Chinese. It's an absolutely crazy situation. The China-UK Task Force [a collaboration between the two governments] has given no money at all to translate documents into either language. The money side is terribly, terribly difficult. At the moment the ICCHA has a small grant from the Sino-British Fellowship Trust, but it's only for one year. We also have money from the Kwok Foundation in Hong Kong, but it's a lot less than we originally thought and only for three years. We have studentships funded, but we have no money for projects. We have projects that have been agreed by the steering committee, but we can't fund any of them. So money and language are huge problems.

Are there any differences in perceptions between the two sides regarding the aims of the ICCHA?

The collaboration is all about trying to discover each other's points of view. However, what was meant by collaboration wasn't at all clear until this recent steering committee meeting. For the Chinese, when they offer to collaborate with us, even if they've been excavating a site for the past year, they expect us to share the cost of that first year even though we weren't involved. So we're supposed to pay half of that and then half the costs each following year, which is a new concept to us! We thought that we'd come in once they'd done their first year, and since they'd been doing it already they would have had to pay for it anyway. That was a learning experience at the last meeting of the steering committee.

There is great difficulty, so far, in explaining what some of our MAs are about. Public archaeology, for example, is a concept that they've never had before, whereas the managing of archaeological sites – although they don't have anything like an MA – they immediately understand. Public archaeology and education, opening up tourism to the Chinese and foreigners, take a lot of explanation and a lot of patience, and I'm sure they would say the same thing for their side. There are things we don't understand. Peking University's fieldwork training for their students is three months solid in the field with Qin Ling. It's incredibly different, and we can learn from that. From both sides, it's about trying to understand each other and learn from each other. I don't make a distinction between anthropology and archaeology, but I would also expect us to cover things which other people might call anthropological or ethnographic. Again, that's a great matter of dispute for the Chinese – what the role of ethnography is – and that's one of the things on which we haven't understood each other's positions properly. But some of the Chinese archaeologists are beginning to do ethnographic work, and we totally support that.

There are now Chinese support groups for students in London, a meeting of one of which I recently attended. In the audience were two Chinese students who were self-funding, one of whom was studying the Egyptian MPhil at Cambridge, and the other an MSc in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics (LSE). I had a long conversation with her. She had learned none of the relevant concepts in China, where there is no social anthropology of the Anglo-American sort. As you can imagine, it's a difficult degree at the LSE for an English speaker, let alone somebody from another language group. Since none of the concepts had been taught in China, it was all completely new. They are beginning to get at social anthropology, however, and there will be some collaboration with archaeology.

The first full-time appointments in Chinese Archaeology are divided between UCL and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Is this pattern likely to be continued in terms of future appointments in, say, the Archaeology of Africa or South Asia?

I would hope so. For the last five years we have wanted to share an Indian and a Japanese position. I would hope that if it's successful for China, it will develop for other countries too.

In this edition of PIA we are holding a Forum on the present and future of the British Schools, Institutes and Societies abroad. What differences are there between the structures and aims of these institutions and those of the ICCHA?

The concept is totally different. We are there to do collaborative research, to exchange students and so on. The British Schools are there to be British, and then to collaborate. The ICCHA is equally balanced between China and Britain. We share a budget with the Chinese; the British Schools have their own budgets that people can apply for.

In the context of the current rapid pace of economic growth and large-scale civil engineering projects in China, how might the centre contribute to rescue archaeology and heritage management?

I told you I receive requests almost daily, and one of them is to go to the Three Gorges [Hubei Province]. Because of the dam project, they want to collaborate with us. It may even redefine our own field unit. Instead of exclusively working in England, it may have a role to respond to some of these Chinese requests.

In terms of contributing to heritage management, absolutely. We talk all the time about the university in Beijing and us being the organisers of the ICCHA, but the Cultural Relics Bureau is also involved and in charge of heritage legislation and development. They're terribly keen. They are the ones who understand what we're talking about by 'public archaeology', far more so than the university. We don't necessarily have the same ideas, but they are the ones who understand legislation and site protection; they're the ones who put sites up for the World Heritage List and so on.

What sort of changes in the emphasis and remit of the ICCHA do you envisage as the Centre develops?

Change is going to be huge in the ICCHA. When we set it up, China was looking to us for funding, but now they have much more funding than us. I'm sure that eventually funding will not be arranged through Hong Kong, but through the Chinese government. It's quite likely that from our side we will be getting the money through some of the great developments in China. At some stage soon, I predict, the Chinese will start enforcing legal requirements more thoroughly before pulling down buildings, putting up developments for damming or whatever. All the things we are used to are beginning to be talked about in China – environmental surveys, archaeological surveys – before development. If that really becomes legal in China, the whole picture changes.

What is the model for the funding of the ICCHA, both for the near future and the long term?

It is uncertain. Until recently we were getting such good funding from Hong Kong that I was quite relaxed about that. It was sufficient for the student requests we have, but that's now been decreased by Hong Kong. I'm now getting acutely worried because we have no money yet for projects, funding for studentships is going down, and I have no idea why. It wasn't at the top of my agenda – China is just one bit of the world that

I deal with – but it is now going to be high up on my agenda, particularly when I retire. I'll have to look for a different source of financial support from China. The other thing I haven't mentioned is that we expect to hold a conference in 2006 in Beijing, run by the Chinese, on the concepts we have in archaeology and how they affect the way we dig. They want that conference to be a world thing. They will have speakers from Africa, as well as delegates representing 30 different universities in China, us, and everywhere else in the world. The conference will be all about how theory affects practice. This will be a breakthrough because no one has ever talked about that before in China, as far as we know.

Is World Archaeology starting to grow in Chinese universities?

Not yet. In the last few months, the Chinese have been told [by the Chinese government] to get to terms with the world in all sorts of spheres. How much of that is to do with the 2008 Olympic Games going on there, I don't know. Quite recently, archaeologists have started enquiring as to whether they could have collaborations outside China, for example in Africa. They don't yet have experts on other parts of the world in archaeology departments. They've had long relationships working with Japan, but they now wish to have people specialising in other parts of the world as well. Professor Li Boqian, who was head of the department at Peking University, is now head of a centre about the Near East as well as China [the Peking University Centre for the Study of Ancient Civilisations], so there is no doubt that they are now beginning to look outside.

The ICCHA is one example of your long-term interest in World Archaeology. To conclude this interview, we would like to invite you to reflect on the impact of your work in this area, and on where World Archaeology as studied in the UK might be in 10 years' time.

You should ask me that after I've had some time to think about it – once I've retired! I hope that it's had some effect in highlighting the fact that almost everywhere in the world, people are thinking about the past, and always have. I think – I hope – that my work has at least made some archaeologists realise that it is not only they who are concerned with the past, and that we ought to be listening to the other people as well – which I hope will happen more and more and more. I hope that comparative archaeology will develop more and more, and that we've done a bit to keep that going. There were many parts of the world that were not involved in any comparative studies dialogue, and in spite of postcolonial theory, I don't see much point in not having comparative archaeology, otherwise it loses most of its appeal as far as I'm concerned. A number of countries, including China, were not part of this dialogue, but have now been brought in and so feel that they get as much of a say as Europe has. They're not accepting all the European models as being necessarily the correct ones for them. South America has started its own theoretical archaeology group; Sri Lanka wants to excavate with the IoA – a lot of places now have regular dialogues and comparative work between them, which years ago no one would have dreamed of. I hope that all that will continue to develop.

Qin Ling

How did you become involved in archaeology, and what has been your career to date?

I started my undergraduate training in archaeology in 1994. At first I wanted to do something in museums, like calligraphy or Chinese painting, but after a practical course with four months of fieldwork in the third year, I decided that I wanted to focus on archaeology and in particular the Neolithic. I did a Master's on the Neolithic for two years, then I had the opportunity to get involved with a field project in southern China, and I have continued to work on that. From there I went on to my PhD and after that my university (Peking University) decided to hire me. There were no gaps between my degrees at all – it's really very simple – so it was ideal!

You came to UCL to study archaeobotanical methods. How is environmental archaeology incorporated within the wider context of fieldwork in China?

Does this differ from the way things are done in the UK?

Oh yes, I think it's quite different. In the 1960s and 1970s there were some big discoveries of sites with well-preserved agricultural remains relating to the origin of rice growing in China. At those sites, animal bones and waterlogged plant remains (including wood structure, seeds, fruits and nuts) were also found, so specialists were brought in from outside archaeology. These specialists pointed out that, in addition to identifying these remains, they could also help in reconstructing the whole environment. 'Archaeologists' in China are the people who carry out the fieldwork and put together the chronologies and who try to link material culture with them; environmental archaeologists are still regarded as specialists from outside archaeology and are in fact based in other departments, such as biology and geography.

During the 1980s, senior professors had more contact with western academics. They came into contact with techniques like pollen analysis and started to promote such methods in China. Now, changes in culture are very often put down to changes in the environment or in the climate because there is more evidence available from the natural environment than from artefacts. More and more, archaeologists have tried to explain changes in settlement patterns and everything else as being caused by changes in the natural environment.

To what extent are more recent methods, such as radiocarbon dating and GPS-based mapping, used within projects?

Fieldwork is really done in two parts, the excavation and post-excavation. Those who dig do their work and then take their samples away to be analysed. Then the post-excavation work is done. This is different to England where you have the different specialists working together and mapping is carried out from the start. The Chinese practice is becoming more integrated, however. For instance, the 'digger' generally would be expected to be very familiar with the local material and might take responsibility for the post-excavation as well. At our university, all undergraduate students undertake training for various techniques such as Total Station measuring and GPS mapping, which means we don't have specialist archaeological surveyors as such.

Radiocarbon dating is very important in China now. Our university and the Institute of Archaeology in the Chinese Social Science Academy (CSSA) are the only two archaeological institutions with dating labs. At our dating lab we can do Advanced Mass Spectrometry (AMS), regular radiocarbon dating, thermoluminescence (TL) and so on, while the Institute of Archaeology in CSSA can do regular radiocarbon dating. In addition, there are a few institutions for other fields that also accept archaeological samples for dating. One difference with the UK might be the way of publishing data: it is not only the person who provides the sample who will publish their new dating results from a given lab, but the lab will also publish the data each year, and the *Chinese Archaeology Annual* will publish the data as well.

How is archaeological research funded in China?

Funding is quite different from the UK. We had a National Bureau of Archaeology, but their name has changed to the State Administration of Cultural Heritage recently. They are the main funding resource for research projects in archaeology. Because of the change in name and emphasis, projects now need to have a heritage focus, and in funding applications you must address the protection of heritage and the issue of public education. Alternatively, if you apply for funds for training or your position is in a university, the funding can come from the Ministry of Education as well. These funds can be used to support research that enables further training, and to buy equipment. In the UK you generally have a budget to cover a person – a PhD student or post-doctoral researcher – to work on that project. For us, the person's time is not included in the project budget – salaries are treated separately. Instead, we calculate the cost of the materials and processes, so the budget is based on the cost of processing samples for flotation, for example.

In terms of technology my department, at Peking University, may not be a very typical case because we are probably the best resourced. Since 1998/1999 some departments, like ours, have started setting up GIS laboratories. The funding for these is for training – it is money for education rather than for research, but it's really convenient because the technology can be used in research as well. Provincial and county archaeological units and universities are now aware of the potential of such technology and have begun applying for their own equipment funding. I think that all provincial archaeological units and universities now have a Total Station. Because we have funds for buying technology for training purposes we can incorporate this into undergraduate teaching, not just training for specialists, so the younger generation are all familiar with it.

As for the training of archaeologists, how is this organised within China in terms of teaching, funding, etc.?

The undergraduate programme in China lasts four years, and the Master's degree two or three years – we just have MA degrees, not MSc degrees, for archaeology. Therefore sometimes the postgraduates will get the MSc degree in other subjects when they do conservation or archaeological science. The PhD usually takes three or four years. The first two undergraduate years are very general and emphasise basic knowledge and archaeological cultures covering the whole history of China. In the third year, you have

the chance to specialise, so if you have an interest in the Palaeolithic, the Neolithic or the historical periods, or if you have an interest in animal bones, you will receive more training related to your chosen area. There are also modules on Field Methods – that's where you encounter GIS, Total Stations and Archaeological Illustration. The only class everyone has to take is the course on Chinese Archaeology, which covers every period from the Palaeolithic to the Yuan [13th century AD] and is taught by different lecturers specialising in each period. The first term of the third year is a practical course. If you decide to do archaeology then you do four months of fieldwork – excavation (which I teach) and post-excavation, often on pottery from the Neolithic or Bronze Age and taught by specialists in those periods. If, on the other hand, you decide to do Museum Studies, you still get classroom teaching but you also have a two-month placement in a museum instead of the full four months of fieldwork.

In the fourth year, people decide whether they want to stay in archaeology or try to find a job outside the field. If you want to stay in archaeology you get involved with a research project at this point, doing excavation or post-excavation work. This is also the chance to get involved with the archaeology of the historical periods, because until now practical experience will have focused mainly on the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. Conservators also take a four-year degree, but their basic training is in things like organic chemistry – it's more isolated from the rest of archaeology than is the case in the UK.

Master's degrees are divided by period so, for example, you would do a Master's in Palaeolithic or Neolithic Archaeology, rather than specialising in a discipline such as Maritime Archaeology or Forensic Archaeology as people do in the UK. Students can also specialise in the porcelain of all periods, because porcelain is typical of China and is regarded as culturally important. This also applies to the Master's degree in the Archaeology of Buddhism and more recently the study of communications between China and the west [i.e. Central Asia]. This degree includes Islam in China, for example. There is also an MA in Museum Studies.

In China, PhD students do not start with a research project but take taught courses for their first year. In the first term of the second year, students sit an oral defence to confirm that they can be a candidate for a PhD. At this stage a particular project title is still not necessary. Then at the beginning of the third year they defend their opening title in an oral exam. It is only in the final year that the real research is mostly done. The good student will start it much earlier, of course, but in practice things do not necessarily happen this way.

Are there particular periods, regions or themes that are focused on specifically within Chinese archaeology at present?

I think we can trace things back to the beginning of the 20th century when the people who first started doing archaeology in China were not Chinese. Back in the 1920s [the Swedish geologist Johann Gunnar] Andersson suggested that because the pottery remains he found were similar to those from central Asia, Chinese civilisation had come

from there. Then young Chinese scholars began training in Europe and North America and learned about anthropology and science. Li Ji was one of the first Chinese people to become an archaeologist and he, along with other Chinese archaeologists, started to find indigenous material in central China. So for this historical reason Chinese archaeology began with a focus on prehistory to see whether 'Chinese culture' started from within or came from outside. More recently, archaeology in the regions has grown and has shown a multi-centred origin and development for Chinese culture, though the central plain of China is still considered very important as this is where the origins of the Chinese state and the first three dynasties can be found.

At the same time that Andersson was working, the traditional study of Chinese antiquities by Chinese scholars had also begun to improve. A little before Andersson's work, oracle bone characters were beginning to be discovered during the collection of antiquities. From this, people began to learn these ancient scripts and look for more of these bones, leading to a greater effort to establish the historical depth and complexity of early Chinese culture.

How far is rescue archaeology incorporated within civil engineering projects in China? More generally, what legal frameworks impact upon archaeology in China – planning law for example?

Archaeological surveys are incorporated, by law, in new building work [in the National Law for Cultural Heritage]. This is paid for by the developer, but there is a tension between the interests of the developer – who wants the archaeologists to say that what they find is not significant – and the interests of the archaeologists – who want to show that what they find is very significant in order to gain more funding and keep the sites. Local [provincial] governments want to encourage development and construction work, and economic concerns tend to prevail over cultural. It's hard for the archaeologists to do all the survey and excavation they need to do. Sometimes, though, archaeologists are useful to local governments because they can support a claim that a place's heritage is unique and particularly important for tourism. It's hard for archaeologists to achieve a balance between being objective about the significance of what they find and being able to protect it.

In your view, what place do archaeology and heritage hold with the general public in China?

Until fairly recently, there was little public interest in archaeology as such, although there was, of course, great interest in artefacts and history. In the last five years, a lot more attention has been paid to archaeology, particularly in television programmes. Local channels cover local discoveries, and particularly important ones are covered on national television. It can be sensationalist, since they want to see discoveries made live on TV, coffins being opened, etc., but it does encourage public interest in excavations and in how archaeology works. Members of the public visit sites – this is free at some and at others they have to pay. It's a form of public archaeology. Also, members of the public can volunteer to take part in excavations in some cases.

What is the relationship between tourism and heritage in China?

There is a big difference between sites like the Great Wall and the Imperial Palace that receive a lot of their funding through tourism, and sites under excavation that rely on the State Administration of Cultural Heritage for funding. At famous sites, the Bureau of Tourism decides how things are managed and controls commercial aspects like ticket prices. They have a different idea of what's important, and the interests of tourism are the priority; in the Forbidden City there is now a Starbucks, for example. Things are changing, however, because the Government does consult international specialists in cultural heritage for advice, and they are more likely to accept suggestions from them than from Chinese archaeologists. In this sense, Chinese archaeologists now have an indirect input through the international archaeological community.

What benefits and changes do you see emerging from the ICCHA?

One part of it is the training and exchange scheme. For Chinese students there is the opportunity to spend a year, or much more time, at the IoA in London, and for IoA students there is the opportunity for fieldwork training in China. Originally this was only done through individual staff contacts, but now there is a specific fund and all Chinese students know that it is available. It is mainly Master's students who apply for this fund. Other opportunities come from research projects. Last year Dorian Fuller (IoA) came, which was a good opportunity for undergraduates in Beijing to see how things are done elsewhere, for example regarding archaeobotanical methods.

Another aspect is publication: we now have two volumes on the translation and publications list on British and American archaeological theory, edited by Andrew Gardner (IoA) and Peter Ucko and to be translated by me and other colleagues from China, which contain over 60 Anglo-American papers and will be published in Chinese. We are also thinking about starting a bilingual journal which will be called something like 'Comparative Studies in Chinese Archaeology', published both in China and the UK. Of course, we have to find enough money to do this. We also want to work on a website aimed at making it easier for British and American archaeologists to contact Chinese archaeologists and find out about projects and resources. Ideally, when we do projects in the future, we will want to find specialists from both inside and outside China.