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Historical Starting Point, Contemporary Vision and World Insight

— New Thinking for the Study of Ancient Chinese Capitals

Xiao Zhenghong*

Abstract: The topic can be summarized in three interconnected aspects; historical starting point, contemporary vision, and world insight. The historical starting point requires the study of ancient Chinese capitals to abide by rigid academic principles and must be based on historical facts. Contemporary vision refers to the obligation to contribute to contemporary society and civilization through ancient Chinese capital research. World insight expresses our need of an integral and systematic concept to correctly assess the historical status and role of ancient Chinese capitals in the larger context to unveil the unique cultural values and historical significance of ancient capitals across China. Chengdu is an ideal case for us to explore new research approaches from the above three aspects.

Keywords: study of ancient Chinese capitals; Chengdu

It has been just over 30 years since the establishment of the Ancient Chinese Capital Research Society. As an independent subject, study of ancient Chinese capitals is still quite young, but its academic foundation is by no means shallow. It has a unique academic tradition and style. However, just like contemporary Chinese society, the study of ancient Chinese capitals is also faced with a major challenge concerning its further development in this new era. This inevitably arouses our concern and sense of responsibility. As Jia Yi in the Western Han Dynasty put it, “Peace is not developed within a day. Neither is a crisis. In fact, both peace and crisis

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are the result of gradual change, for which both must be carefully observed.”^① Jia Yi's argument also applies to the study of ancient Chinese capitals. Evidently, without crisis awareness and innovative initiative, we cannot make progress in this field. It is precisely because of this that the Ancient Chinese Capital Research Society and the Ancient Capital Research Society of Chengdu agreed to jointly host the Ancient Chinese Capital Research Summit and the Seventh Representative Conference of Ancient Chinese Capital Research Society and Academic Symposium on the Ancient Capital Culture of Chengdu. We sincerely hope through our academic discussions at this conference, we can develop a framework for our theoretical and methodological exploration, reach a consensus on how to strategically promote social progress, and propose new development concepts and planning. We need to refresh our vision and mindset in a bid to make innovative progress both in academic research and social services.

This topic can be summarized in three interconnected aspects; historical starting point, contemporary vision, and world insight. The historical starting point requires the study of ancient Chinese capitals to abide by rigid academic principles and must be based on (rather than go against) historical facts. Contemporary vision refers to the obligation to contribute to contemporary society and human civilization through ancient Chinese capital research. World insight expresses our need of an integral and systematic concept to correctly assess the historical status and role of ancient Chinese capitals in the larger context to unveil the unique cultural values and historical significance of ancient capitals across China. In this regard, Chengdu is an ideal case for us to explore new research approaches from the above three

aspects.

In the history of ancient Chinese capitals, Chengdu is apparently quite a special sample. We acknowledge the fact that tremendous achievements have been made in previous studies in this field. Still, we must be aware that due to our predecessors' classic definitions and classification criteria, relevant researches have mainly focused on capitals in the Central Plains, or have been conducted studies from the standpoint of dynastic systems. Such an academic tradition, though of great significance, may overlook other aspects and issues concerning the study of ancient Chinese capitals.

As far as we are concerned, there are some noteworthy points.

First, more attention should be paid to the origin and diversified development of ancient Chinese capitals. We should understand and interpret the development of ancient Chinese cities and capitals within an integrated framework. The community of the Chinese nation was formed and developed in a vast space. Due to different geographical conditions, urban origins vary from city to city and the forms and connotations of urban development are subsequently diversified. In fact, the definition of China itself has been in constant evolution. When it comes to the community and spiritual home of the Chinese nation, formation and development are fundamentally based on the evolving definition of China. How was the integration in multi-integration embodied in the early days of the Chinese civilization? In the understanding and interpretation of multi-integration, special attention needs to be given to the connections among different components, whose inherent correlations and essential characteristics can be proved by archaeology and documents. The formation and development of China has been a long-term process,

^① It is quoted from *Biography of Jia Yi*, Vol. 48, *Book of Han*.

and our discussion today must be based on the historical facts of a particular space in a particular era. The time-and-space intertwining complicates relevant research. The degree of interregional connection varies from era to era; and there are no clear boundaries between such variations, for they are all part of a gradual process of spatial change. For this reason, there may be different understandings of the concepts of center and periphery.

Our research of ancient Chinese capitals mainly relies on existing historical records, supplemented by archaeological findings. Such a research method helps to build a basic system and a cognitive framework regarding the development of ancient Chinese capitals. Yet, there were times when we marveled at the accidental discover of an ancient Chinese capital not mentioned in any historical record. The latest example is the Shimao Site. It is now understood that the Shimao Site is the largest known townsite between the late Longshan Period and the early Xia Dynasty. It is located on the hillside to the north of the Tuwei River in Shimao Village, Gaojiabao Town, Shenmu County, Yulin City, Shaanxi Province. It belongs to the north margin of the Loess Plateau in northern Shaanxi and is a magnificent stone-built townsite. Although we are still deepening our understanding of the Shimao Site, researchers of ancient cities, particularly ancient capitals, are amazed by this stone-built townsite. To some extent, this discovery overthrows our traditional approach which traces the origin of ancient cities to the Central Plains and follows the dynastic systems prescribed by official historical records. The discovery of the Shimao Site is arguably an accidental event, but its inevitability lies in the fact that it is an objective existence, which might not have been known to people over a long period of time. The same is also true of the Sanxingdui culture. How can we objectively interpret the ancient Shu Kingdom and

recognize the historical status of Chengdu without taking Sanxingdui into account? Please note that the examples of the Shimao Site and the Sanxingdui Site are only a part of a bigger picture. There will probably be similar ancient townsites discovered in the future. Typical cases like the Shimao Site and the Sanxingdui Site, which are respectively located in the north and south, indicate a necessity to value their variety and diversified development. In terms of urban development, modern cities are not that different from their ancient counterparts. Restricting our research practice to a single urban development path may group many diverse ancient Chinese cities into an oversimplified interpretive model. Because of this, we may consider traditional Chinese culture, with the city as the key manifestation, to be a single structure and connotation, and replace or cover other traditional cultural forms and types with a mainstream or dominant one, which is definitely not an appropriate academic mindset.

Moreover, during our research, we must pay close attention to the development process of ancient Chinese capitals. This ancient study is undoubtedly of modern significance, for it can offer important references to modern urban construction and social progress. However, the research object confines this field within the realm of historical studies. When historical concepts are applied to explain ancient Chinese capital research, it is inevitably attached with two primary meanings. First, historical concepts indicate the fact that ancient Chinese cities belong to a particular era, for which they take on corresponding epochal characteristics. Second, it also means those ancient Chinese cities are always in a developmental process and therefore, instead of being static and invariable, are the outcome of a dynamic process. Given that, when exploring ancient Chinese cities, including ancient capitals, we should examine their whole development process, from origin, through development to decline and fall,

and evaluate their status and role from a historical perspective. A truly great historical city may have contributed significantly and even played an indispensable role during a specific period in human history. It may be the very spatial base of a modern city, or may be nothing but its shadow. In the eyes of some modern people, it is like an ancient legend. Indeed, a city is fortunate to fall into the category of the former. The existence of the latter one, however, is no obstacle to our full affirmation of its previous glory, either. For this reason, we should expand our research into a variety of cities in different historical periods. There are ancient cities only witnessing temporary prosperity in history or that are far away from the Central Plains—a traditional core area of China's imperial regime. If they have played an important role in the social development of a particular region at a certain historical stage, they deserve our attention and require us to make a correct and objective assessment of their value as a historical and cultural inheritance from the perspective of regional development. Even if they no longer offer any spatial or material support to today's urban development, they still represent an unforgettable tradition and therefore should be deemed an important part of modern civilization and urban spirit.

Third, during our study of ancient Chinese capitals, special attention needs to be given to the theory of relationships. The so-called theory of relationships opposes the isolated evaluation of a city's origin, evolution, function and role. The development of modern cities relies on their surrounding environments, which is nothing new to us all. How did cities in ancient times develop? In fact, their development track was like that of modern cities. In a traditional self-sufficient society, social components tended to remain isolated from each other. Still, interactions were almost everywhere. Isolation and interaction are just two different sides

of the same process. Therefore, for the study of ancient cities, special attention should be paid to both their natural and social environmental systems where those cities were based and given full play to. That is to say, when we study an ancient capital, we need to place it in a broader view. The theory of relationships enables us to attach equal importance to a city's external relations, as well as its internal functions and structures. Different from narrow-minded intra-regional relationships, such external relationships are expected to be open and integrated. For example, an analysis of an ancient capital in an alternative-capital system cannot be made without mentioning the role of the other capital, for the two capitals were interdependent. Also, when evaluating Zhangye, an ancient city along the Silk Road during the Sui and Tang dynasties, we must consider the faraway capital Chang'an (currently Xi'an), for Zhangye's status and function was closely associated with Chang'an. Likewise, when evaluating other ancient cities in remote areas, we should not only focus on their unfavorable geographical conditions, but also consider the entire system, which may concern their relationships with core areas of the imperial regimes in power at the time. In some cases, we may also need to evaluate ancient cities without regards to the borders of modern countries by looking at the big picture of international politics and cultural development. Our studies of ancient Chinese capitals must avoid becoming isolated and restricted to the scope of ancient China, and thus develop into a prominent international study. Special attention should be paid to the rational utilization of comparative research methods. Such comparisons need to include ancient cities both at home and abroad, not just among ancient Chinese capitals. Due to the existence of different civilization systems and various developmental environments unique to their corresponding regions, there has been a diversity of development paths and models. Such a diversity

is bound to be embodied in the urban development system, form, and function. We hope that through comparative research we can determine the unique value of each city, instead of simply highlighting the historical significance of some and overlooking, or even denying, that of others. Different ancient cities require different research methods, and we must resist hastily rating them as being advanced or backward.

Fourth, we should always pursue the integration of an ancient capital's inner spirit with its external manifestation. For an ancient capital, factors like urban size and duration of existence count. However, any failure to examine its era-specific ethos may result in a one-sided view. We believe all city construction must be based on a unique philosophy. There is a soul in every city. For truly great cities, what really matters is not their urban scale, but their urban philosophy and spirit. Essentially, great cities over all times, without exception, embody the great philosophy and spirit of their era. It is noteworthy that in terms of urban inclusiveness, initiative, innovation, benevolence, moral integrity, literary and military ideals, religious beliefs, ethnic identities, humanistic environments and harmony between man and nature there are identifiable differences among ancient Chinese cities and capitals. The unique ethos of an ancient capital, developed over time, has formed its cultural tradition and become an indispensable part of the urban structure. Even today, this ethos exerts its impact on a city's image and development. Today, when identifying the spirit of a city, we rely heavily on analyzing and summarizing its time-honored ethos. In this sense, contemporary study of ancient Chinese capitals must seek an integration of its inner spirit with its external manifestations.

By modifying our research focus and methods we expect to significantly extend our academic scope. We hope our case study of the famous

historic city of Chengdu can become the example for relevant research. Chengdu is of special significance in the history of ancient Chinese capitals and it is not feasible to have a simple view of Chengdu or other similar ancient Chinese cities merely by drawing on the successful experience of previous ancient capital studies. It seems that researchers in this field tend to highlight the significance of ancient cities in the core area of the imperial regime and overlook peripheral cities. In fact, "periphery" is relative to "core area." An adjustment in our perspective of spatial dimensions can definitely bring about a different approach. Such an adjustment mainly concerns two aspects. First, it requires a holistic view of China. Second, it means placing China and its components into a global view. Through this adjustment, we will be able to evaluate different ancient capitals more objectively and avoid applying a single model to evaluate all ancient cities and their historical status.

We sincerely hope our research and evaluation of Chengdu can generate a positive response, provoke critical thinking, and set up an example to advance the Ancient Chinese Capital Research Society's future research. For this summit, Chengdu is not just a host city, but also an ancient capital with symbolic significance. It has the potential to become an "academic metaphor" broadening our mind and advancing our research.

The last part of this speech concerns my academic view of Chengdu's historical status as a major ancient Chinese capital.

As abovementioned, when it comes to Chengdu's historical status as a major ancient Chinese capital, there are a range of conceptual issues, such as the origin of local civilization, the relationships between different regions (particularly between peripheral regions and the Central Plains) and regional influence. In this regard, we need to innovate existing theories, push the limit of outdated concepts and establish a new thinking within a

multi-integrated framework.

The view that Chengdu is a special sample in the history of ancient Chinese capitals is on solid academic ground. Indeed, Chengdu's remarkable development path is unique. At its early development stage, there were civilizations like Sanxingdui and Jinsha, whose origins and development paths were distinctly different from those in the Central Plains. Their profound connotations and forms of expression represent a special type of civilization in early human history. The exquisite unearthed relics (such as the bronze sacred trees and gold foil masks at Sanxingdui, and the bronze head sculpture and solar divine bird at Jinsha) demonstrate the brilliant culture of the ancient Shu Kingdom over 3,000 years ago. Following the eras of the Sanxingdui and Jinsha civilizations, Chengdu has made plausible achievements in urban construction and cultural development at almost every stage of Chinese history. Looking back, we have every reason to believe Chengdu has shaped its own style in terms of

geo-relationships, political status, approach and level of economic development, form of culture, city ethos, ethnic composition complexity and integration, social structure, and more importantly its external relationships with Southwest Asia. It is an important representative, if not the only representative, of a typical pattern in the history of ancient Chinese capitals. Such uniqueness relies on comprehension and cognition, for it is a comprehensive expression involving both analytical research and integrated interpretation. Just like many other cities, Chengdu is rich in prominent symbolic expressions. But this does not mean its special historical status can be decomposed to individual symbols. Instead, it must be understood as an integral whole of cultural, ethical and material development.

Chengdu is undoubtedly a renowned ancient Chinese capital. Currently, scholars are divided in their view concerning the definition of major ancient capital, which is not surprising. There are two reasons for this division of opinion. One is the



Sanxingdui

criteria of a major ancient capital, which is overt. The other is cultural attitude, which is covert. So far, cultural attitude has not yet been given adequate attention, as opposed to this field's unanimous dwelling on the criteria. In most cases, whether a city can be included in the list of ancient Chinese capitals triggers few disputes. When it does trigger certain disputes, it is probably because of its short existence as a capital or its exclusion from the orthodox Chinese dynastic system. When it comes to the evaluation of a major ancient capital, however, the situation is quite different. Basically, the criteria of a major ancient capital should remain objective. Usually, the public is curious about whether an ancient capital is really big enough to be identified as a major ancient capital from an objective point of view. Regarding this, it is necessary to re-examine the criteria of a major ancient capital. How big is big enough? What does major really refer to? Initially, major ancient capital was only a vague term, whose clear definition, as usual, came much later. The term major ancient capital first emerged during the first half of the 20th century, or rather, the Republic of China era. A review of its academic history can give us a clear picture of its formation, development and evolution. When discussing the criteria of a major ancient capital, most scholars now tend to condense the views of previous eminent scholars into a few salient points. They hope to form a pattern based on their predecessors' common view of typical capitals and use this pattern to compare relevant cities. Such a comparative research method identifies those patterned components as its evaluation criteria. Thus, scholars tend to abandon the systematic and integral research approach highlighting the individuality and integral architecture of a research object, and apply a comparative approach which ignores the connections among cities and isolates relevant factors.

In the field of historical studies, such an

academic paradigm is used worldwide. Yet, its defect lies in its being prone to overlook cultural relativity. For the study of ancient Chinese capitals, the previous criteria mainly highlighted external characteristics, i.e. urban scale, duration of existence, sphere of influence, status in the dynastic system, and its role as a core political, economic and cultural center. There are two factors likely to trigger disputes. One is whether an ancient capital enjoys a favorable geographical location and landscape. The other is its relationship with modern cities. Geographical location is the environmental basis of urban construction. Whether a geographical location is favorable is a matter of relativity and is era-specific. Did Chang'an in the Han and Tang dynasties enjoy favorable geographical conditions? Judging from the political and military strategies on the establishment of a capital there, Chang'an of course enjoyed favorable geographical conditions then. However, when it comes to the potential of economic growth and urban development, this city had no shortage of challenges. Later, the capital moved eastwards, which is precisely because its defects of being the capital became more and more prominent as time went by. As for the relationship between an ancient capital and its modern counterpart, considerations should be given to the progress and setbacks of historical development and its significance in a specific era, which will not be covered in this speech.

As for the understanding of major in major ancient Chinese capitals, it seems that almost all previous definitions of major have attached excessive importance to the external characteristics of those ancient capitals without paying due attention to their inner spirit and cultural ethos. On one hand, external characteristics are of great importance to a city. On the other hand, the spirit and cultural ethos also matter. When evaluating an ancient capital, we need to carefully think about a few questions as

follows. Can it represent an era or the greater region it belongs to? Has it played a vital role in regional development and marked a great presence in its time? Has it exhibited extraordinary sustainability? In this regard, Chengdu can serve as an outstanding example. In terms of city's spirit, cultural ethos and sustainability, Chengdu is not inferior to other major ancient capitals and even arguably ranks among the best. After all, not all major ancient capitals can deliver impressive performance in the abovementioned aspects.

A city's development relies heavily on factors such as environment, developmental path and positioning. Some of those factors fall into the category of objective condition; while others belong to subjective choice. Whether it is from an objective or subjective perspective, no ancient city or capital can entirely copy the developmental route of another. Admittedly, common features or similar formal representations can be found among some capitals in history. Concerning that, some may argue that all capitals have drawn on the experience of their predecessors. Their view is entirely based on the similar formal representations of different capitals. Focusing on the time series of capitals with similar formal representations, this view fails to unveil the essence that those capitals did not blindly copy others, but only shared some basic concept, philosophy and system with others. They simply share similar concepts. Basically, the construction principles of ancient Chinese cities fall into two categories, special principle and general principle. The special principle serves for specific purposes and the general principle serves for rites and ritual-centered philosophy such as ancestral shrine sacrifices, political rulings, function divisions and

cultural symbolizations. Given that, the analysis and evaluation of any city, including Chengdu, must not be limited to comparing its form with those of its counterparts in the Central Plains and other so-called central cities. More importantly, this analysis and evaluation should unveil its unique representation and expression of the city's basic philosophy. In this sense, Chengdu is of special significance to such research objectives. In a way, the so-called sample significance lies exactly in its being outside the Central Plains and at the same time being a central city in China. Should Chengdu also be in the Central Plains, it would probably have been a mere repetition of a same development model there. However, as a central city in a major region of China, Chengdu outweighs many other central cities in terms of city position and role in the spatial system it belongs to. It manages to extend its influence beyond the spatial range of China. Among those so-called major ancient Chinese capitals, there are some renowned cities which in fact do not enjoy such a huge regional impact as Chengdu and this should be regarded as their limitation.

The word major in the term major ancient Chinese capital can also be interpreted as being great. Judging from its external manifestations and inner spirit, Chengdu is arguably a major ancient capital of China. A city cannot expect to be great without corresponding spatial and material bases and external manifestations. Meanwhile, being great also means outstanding city spirit and cultural ethos. For both ancient and modern cities, the combination of external manifestations with internal ethos should form the basis of our primary judgment of their historical status.

(Translator: Wu Lingwei; Editor: Yan Yuting)