

HOW ORDINARY FRAGMENTS PIECE TOGETHER A PICTURE OF THE PAST

Weaving diverse socio-cultural studies, XMU's humanities and social science researchers have brought new perspectives from land and sea.



A series of pioneering studies by Chuanchao Wang yields genetic information on Asian populations.



a. Shipwreck archaeology at Quanzhou Beach, 1973
 b. Underwater archaeological studies reveal new insights into maritime cultural history.
 c. Michael A. Szonyi (central left) and Zhenman Zheng (central right) established a studio for archiving local documents in the Yongtai County of Fuzhou, the provincial capital of Fujian province.
 d. Rong Hu (right), the dean of SSA, leads field research into Fujian villages.

The rich historic, cultural, and geographical diversity of southeast China offers great opportunities for humanities and social science researchers, fostering the growth of academic programmes at XMU. With renowned strength in historical research, archaeology, and anthropology, generations of XMU scholars have developed new methodologies and theoretical frameworks, and unravelled valuable resources, contributing to regional cultural heritage.

Breaking new ground in historical research

XMU is renowned for its emphasis on local historical documents for studying Chinese history. The tradition started in 1940s when the late historian and XMU professor, Yilin Fu, discovered some deeds from a local villager's home. Fu found these rich sources for studying socio-economic history of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and launched a new field for Chinese socio-economic history, based on fieldwork evidence.

Carrying on this tradition, Fu's student, Zhenman Zheng, an XMU professor of history, is keen to unravel clues from local historical documents, from genealogy records and commercial contracts to local drama scripts. "They reflect the everyday reality of life," says Zheng. "This provides an alternative perspective from the official history, and helps reveal the mechanisms for Chinese socio-historical development."

Zheng led a key project on local historical documents and cultural inheritance in 2004, in which he surveyed folk documents for their preservation status, along with their contextual history. He established a framework and methodology to study local documents systematically. His research has led to many books, and a dedicated centre was established to organize research and train students in this field.

The growing archives and materials demand new technologies and strategies for classification and conservation, leading to the rise of digital humanities at

XMU. Since 2009, in collaboration with the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University, Zheng's team has built databases, including on deeds and historical geographic information systems, facilitating multidisciplinary studies on Chinese local history.

A wealth of data is collected from fieldwork, which Zheng says is not only the source of materials, but also of new ideas. "Fieldwork for humanity scholars is like a laboratory," says Zheng. "We test our ideas in fieldwork, as being on site helps interpret historical events." Since 1996, XMU history department has organized student field trips to villages and towns in Fujian and Jiangxi provinces to collect rich first-hand materials.

The value of local documents and fieldwork has also attracted international scholars interested in Chinese history. International conferences, scholar exchanges, and joint research projects have been organized to explore this field, while Zheng has conducted fieldwork and co-authored with international collaborators.

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dedicated to this subject among Chinese universities. It has led multiple national-level social science projects, including exploration of the association between Chinese ceramics and maritime civilization, and excavating and studying shipwrecks in China's seas. Archaeological exploration in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region has investigated aboriginal culture and seafaring history. The studies have deepened understanding of the heritage of the Maritime Silk Road.

Bringing submerged stories to the surface

Located in southeast China's port city of Xiamen, XMU has developed a traditional strength in maritime archaeology.

Studies on maritime cultural history have been emphasized since the 1930s. From research into maritime transport history of the South China Sea islands in the 1950s, to excavation of shipwrecks from the Song dynasty and exploration of historical exports of Chinese ceramics in the 1970s, the maritime archaeology programme has flourished at XMU. As advanced technologies for underwater archaeology emerged in the 1990s, relevant courses were set up, attracting master's and doctoral students.

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Fieldwork by XMU archaeologists led to the discovery of relics in a 3,000-year-old settlement on Pingtan Island in Fujian. It reveals insights on southeast China's maritime culture, along with the origin and historical development of Austronesian languages in the region.

The site was set up as a training ground for undergraduates to hone fieldwork skills. XMU researchers have also uncovered relics of ancient city walls in Ningbo, more than 800 km north of Xiamen, informing understanding of local

architectural history and port city evolution.

Advancing social and anthropological studies

For anthropologists at XMU's School of Sociology and Anthropology (SSA), genomic tools can be integrated with archaeology to explore population history. A team led by Chuanchao Wang, director of SSA's Institute of Anthropology, is dedicated to unravelling genetic information on East Asian populations, which is poorly understood due to the lack of DNA data.

In a study recently published in a preprint paper, Wang and a large group of international colleagues analysed genome-wide data from 191 individuals of different East Asian populations dating to 6000 BCE - 1000 CE. This is the largest ancient genome study for East Asia to date. They also reported microarray typing data of 383 samples from 46 present-day ethnic groups, along with data obtained using carbon-14 dating techniques.

Pioneering work using ancient DNA to trace East Asian population history over the last 8,000 years, the study offered insights on origins, ancestry lines, migration routes, and linguistic affinities, from Yamnaya culture across Russia to Jōmon people of Japan. "It's a result of cross-disciplinary collaboration, and marks a step forward for the study of ancient genomics in China," says Wang.

SSA researchers are also interested in exploring contemporary societies. Transformations in rural China, brought by rapid industrialization and economic reform, have attracted Rong Hu, the dean of SSA, who is renowned for his study on village governance.

Following the fieldwork tradition of XMU's sociological and anthropological studies, Hu has led his students to villages in Fujian and beyond to collect raw materials. In one study, they used large-scale survey data to investigate farmers' appeals to authorities, and what these say about their trust in governments.

The study showed that

petitions are associated with the loss of political trust, highlighting the importance of institutional reform to improve the system that safeguards the interest of farmers.

Interested in the influence of social capital and other factors on farmers' political participation and trust, Hu has also investigated village committee elections, which serve as channels for villagers to articulate their interests. Many of his studies have policy implications, enabling actionable strategies for local government bodies.

Studies by Hu's SSA colleagues on Southeast Asian ethnic groups and aboriginal minority groups of Taiwan have also informed relevant policy-making, in addition to improving understanding about sociocultural history of those populations.

Ongoing studies by SSA researchers have presented new sociological approaches tailored to explore contemporary Chinese society, while providing new ideas for international academic exchanges. ■