Yin Xu (China) No 1114

1. BASIC DATA
State Party: The People’s Republic of China
Name of property: Yin Xu
Location: Anyang City, Henan Province
Date received by the World Heritage Centre: 31 January 2002
Included in the Tentative List: 12 February 1996
International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the nomination: No
Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is an archaeological site.

Brief description:
The archaeological site of Yin Xu, close to Anyang City south of Beijing, is an ancient capital city in the late Shang Dynasty. It was built at the time of great prosperity of Chinese Bronze Age, from 1300 to 1046 BC. The site has revealed a series of royal tombs and palaces, which are prototypes of later Chinese architecture. Yin Xu is also significant in providing testimony to the development of many fields of science and technology in China, particularly to mature Chinese written characters, as early as 1300 BC.

2. ACTIONS
Background: This is a new nomination.
Date of the Technical Evaluation Mission: 25-29 September 2005
Dates of request for additional information and of receipt from State Party: ICOMOS has sent a letter to the State Party on 30 January 2006 and the State Party has provided information on 24 March 2006.
Consultations: ICOMOS has consulted its International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management.

Literature: There is a rich literature on Yin Xu, consisting of reports and scientific treatises on the excavations and the identification and evaluation of the finds, published in various archaeological and scientific journals.

Date of ICOMOS approval of this report: 10 April 2006

3. THE PROPERTY
Description
Yin Xu is located across both banks of the Huanhe River in the northern suburbs of Anyang City, a Chinese city known for its history and culture, some 500km south of Beijing.

The core zone property proposed for inscription consists of two separate areas: 1) the Palace and Royal Ancestral Shrines Area, ca. 200ha, near the village of Xiaotun, and 2) the Royal Tombs Area, 214ha, near the villages of Qianying and Wuguan. The single buffer zone (720ha) encloses these areas as well as extending to the Huanbei Shang city-site further east.

Known as ‘Beimeng’ in ancient times and ‘Dayishang’ and ‘Shangyi’ in oracle bone inscriptions, Yin Xu was the capital city of China during the Late Shang Dynasty. It is also the site of the earliest capital city in Chinese history recorded in early historical sources, the existence of which has been confirmed by oracle bone inscriptions and through archaeological excavations. It now has a history of 3,300 years.

The Palace and Royal Ancestral Shrines Area (1,000m x 650m), the most important component of Yin Xu, is located on the southern bank of the Huanhe River. More than 80 house foundations of rammed-earth have been discovered in this area. These are divided into three groups: A, B and C. They are aligned according to the pattern of ancient Chinese palace architecture with main halls in the front, bedrooms in the rear, ancestral shrines on the left and altars on the right. The group of 53 house foundations form the main section of the area and the centre of the whole capital city of Yin Xu. In addition to these, the tomb of Fu Hao and the foundation site No. 54 can be considered as the most important remains of this area, because it has been preserved in its integrity. On the western and southern sides of the Palace and Ancestral Shrines Area runs a defensive trench: 1,100m north-south and 650m west-east direction. It is 10-20m wide and 5-10m deep. The northern and eastern ends of the ditch end at the Huanhe River thereby enclosing the Palace and Ancestral Shrines Area between it and the river. Thus it functions in a manner similar to city walls at other sites but also works as an effective flood-control system.

The Tomb of Fu Hao, located to the southwest of the house foundations in Group C, is one of the most important archaeological discoveries in the Palace and Ancestral Shrines Area of Yin Xu since 1928. Fu Hao was a consort of Wu Ding, the 21st king of the Shang Dynasty. This is the only intact tomb of a member of the royal family of the Shang Dynasty discovered since the start of scientific excavations. Above ground, on top of the tomb, there was a hall called muxinzong in the oracle bone inscriptions. The large number and superb craftsmanship of the burial accessories bear testimony to the advanced level of Shang handicraft industry, and form now one of the national treasures of China.

Numerous pits containing bovine shoulder blades and turtle plastrons have been found distributed within the Palace and Ancestral Shrines Area of Yin Xu. Since the end of the 19th century when oracle bone inscriptions were first discovered, a total number of about 150,000 shoulder blades and turtle plastrons have been found at Yin Xu.
The Royal Tombs Area is located on the highland at the northern bank of the Huaihe River. It is an important part of Yin Xu, and can be divided into the eastern and the western parts. Since 1934, 13 large royal tombs (including an unfinished tomb) and more that 2,000 attendant tombs and sacrificial pits have been excavated. The western part contains eight tombs arranged in four pairs, one tomb in the north, the other in the south, with the pairs running from west to east. The eastern section of the Royal Tombs Area contains five large tombs. They face either north or south. Scholars believe that these two groups of large tombs are the royal tombs of the Late Shang Period. Scattered among the royal tombs in both sections of the Royal Tombs Area are more than 2,000 smaller graves. Most of them are sacrificial pits, and believed to be the remains of sacrificial victims, which the Shang kings offered to their ancestors.

History

Yin Xu is an ancient capital city that rose in the late Shang Dynasty, a time of prosperity of Chinese Bronze Age. Around the 17th century BC, the Shang tribe, an important branch of the Chinese nation, beat the Xia Dynasty and established a slave dynasty in central China, the second of its kind in Chinese history. The territory of this new dynasty extended to the great ocean in the east, the present-day Sichuan in the west, the Liaohe River Basin in the north, and the Dongtinghu Lake in the south. It was one of the most powerful states in the East Asia during the Bronze Age.

In about 1300 BC, Pan Geng, the king of the Shang Dynasty, removed his capital from Yan to Yin Xu and built the latter into a magnificent capital city. Since then, this capital city continued being built by 12 kings in eight generations of the Shang Dynasty during 255 years. It remained the political, economic, military and cultural centre of China during the prime of its bronze age. Around the year 1046 BC, King Wu sent a punitive expedition against King Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang Dynasty. Yin was deserted and the city was turned into ruins, hence the name Yin Xu (the ruins of Yin) in historical sources.

During the Qin and Han dynasties (221 B.C. to AD 23), references to Yin Xu were made frequently in history books. Epigraphy became popular during the Song and the Yuan Dynasties (AD 10th to 14th century). The frequent unearthing of bronzes around Xiaotun village aroused the attention of educated people. This city was then thought to be Xiang, the residence of the 12th king of the Shang Dynasty. In 1899, Wang Yirong, an epigrapher of the last years of the Qing Dynasty, discovered and proved that oracle bone inscription was the language used in the Shang Dynasty. After verification and exploration by many other scholars, Xiaotun of Anyang where oracle bone inscriptions were unearthed came to be established as the site of Yin Xu as recorded in Chinese classics.

Between 1928 and 1937, the Institute of History and Philology of the then Academia Sinica carried out 15 large-scale excavations at Yin Xu, and discovered the Palace and Ancestral Shrines Area, the Royal Tombs Area and large numbers of other cultural remains. As a result, this capital city of the Shang Dynasty has gradually come to be known, and its position as China’s first ancient capital, proven by written documents, has been firmly established. The excavations were completed after the Second World War. In 1995, Anyang City established the Yin Xu Management Department to take charge of conservation and daily management of Yin Xu.

Protection and Management

Legal provision:

The nominated property is state owned. The site is protected by the laws of the People’s Republic of China, including: the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics, the Law on Environmental Protection, and the Law on Urban Planning. It is also subject to the various regulations and rules in force in Henan Province.

Management structure:

The principal management authority lies with the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of the People’s Republic of China (Beijing) in collaboration with the Henan Provincial Administration of Cultural Heritage (Zhengzhou City) and Anyang City Bureau of Culture (Anyang City).

In 1995, the People’s Government of Anyang City has set up the Yin Xu Management Department for the management of Yin Xu area, and to exercise strict control over land use (industrial, agricultural, residential). In 2001, an Overall Programme for the Protection of Yin Xu was adopted.

Resources:

There are three main sources of financing for the protection and conservation, i.e. the State, the Henan Province, and Anyang City.

Justification of the Outstanding Universal Value by the State Party (summary)

The nomination highlights the historical significance of Yin Xu, the capital of China in the Late Shang Dynasty, 14th to 11th centuries B.C., the golden period of the early Chinese culture, crafts and sciences. The site is especially remarkable in providing archaeological evidence for the development of royal architecture and funerary traditions. The most important discoveries on the site include the so-called oracle bone inscriptions, carrying the earliest evidence for already mature modern Chinese characters, exquisitely decorated ritual vessels, jade and bone carvings and ceramics.

Criterion i: The remains at Yin Xu are masterpieces of human art, science and technology. The main importance of Yin Xu for China and the world as a whole is the outstanding achievements in art, science, and technology of the Late Shang period exemplified by the remains excavated here. Oracle bones carry the earliest systematic written language and one of the major ancient written languages in the world, as early as 1300 BC. Many scientific and technical achievements were made during the Late Shang Period. Oracle bone inscriptions reveal that the Shang could already record solar and lunar eclipses and star configurations accurately. …
Criterion ii: The Late Shang culture of Yin Xu has had far-reaching influences on the formation and development of Chinese culture. The writing system used in the oracle bone inscriptions has played an important role in the diffusion and development of Chinese civilization for thousands of years. The bronze culture of Yin Xu is a reflection of the artistic level and social customs of the Late Shang Period and represents the highest level of development in China’s ancient bronze culture. The ritual system of the Shang, based on ancestor worship and the use of bronze ritual vessels, greatly influenced other cultures surrounding it.

Criterion iii: The rich cultural remains at Yin Xu provide evidence for extinct cultural traditions. The Late Shang Period, the capital of which Yin Xu was, created a brilliant Bronze Age culture. With the course of history and the development of society, the art of divination, the Shang burial rites, the practice of offering sacrifices, and other such systems widely used by the Shang lost the basis for their existence and became gradually extinct. The discovery and excavation of Yin Xu have provided evidences for the existence of these lost cultural traditions.

Criterion iv: The buildings at Yin Xu, including palaces, ancestral shrines and the royal tombs, are masterpieces of palace and mausoleum architecture of early Chinese history. The foundations of some 80 structures are in three distinct groups, which have been determined to be palaces, ancestral shrines, and altars respectively. This layout can be considered to be an early form of later Chinese palace architecture characterized by main halls in the front, bedrooms in the rear, ancestral shrines on the left, and altars on the right. The Royal Tombs Area at Yin Xu is thus far the oldest perfectly conserved in China.

Criterion vi: Excavations at Yin Xu have provided reliable material evidence for the history of early Chinese language, ancient beliefs, social system, and major historical events. Archaeological excavations at Yin Xu over the past 80 years have unfolded the rich and colourful history of China’s Late Shang Period and provided reliable material evidence for the history of early Chinese language, ancient beliefs and social systems, and major historical events.

4. EVALUATION

Conservation

Conservation history:

The site was excavated from 1928 to 1937, and again from the 1950s. There has been a recent discovery nearby revealing the site of Huanbei Shang city, which has been included in the buffer zone, but which has not yet been excavated. The excavations are no more continued in the nominated core zone, though it is possible that new discoveries may come up in the surrounding area in the future.

Most of the excavated sites have been reburied, taking care that their conservation is guaranteed. After reburial, the sites have been marked on the ground, using appropriate techniques, such as plants or rammed earth, indicating the principal features as well as displaying a few replicas that help to explain the site. The bones found in ancient tombs and burial sites have been left in situ, while the movable objects have been removed and are displayed in the site museum, which has been built at the margin of the site and placed underground. A protective earth layer has been added to the mausoleum and the pit walls have been protected so that they do not collapse.

The site is a flat basin, which used to be inhabited by farmers cultivating corn. As a result of the excavations, the fields have been removed from the area and some 688 houses have been demolished. Wooden fences have been set up around the archaeological sites. The factory for food production that was in the buffer zone has been removed, and no new industrial buildings will be built in the area.

State of conservation:

In the overall, the site is in good state of conservation. Most of the excavated pits have been backfilled taking care that conservation be guaranteed. The sites that are open and presented to the public have been conserved and protected.

Protection and Management:

The site is fully protected under national legislation. There are two core zones: i.e. a) the site of the royal tombs and b) sites of the palace and royal ancestor shrines. A buffer zone surrounds the core zones and also includes the Huanbei Shang city site. It covers an area of ca 4km east-west and 3km north-south. The sites of some ten villages are within the buffer zone, and a railway is crossing it. The protected zones are considered properly defined from the point of view of the archaeological areas, and they include all the known historic features.

ICOMOS considers that the management system is appropriately organized for the site. Excavations in the nominated area will be not be continued. However, several academic societies are actively involved in research of the finds in the area of Yin Xu, including: The Society for the Study of Yin and Shang Cultures, The Society for the calligraphy of Oracle Inscriptions. In addition, a new Department of Yin-Shang Culture was recently established at Anyang College of Education. Apart from the members of the commissions and archaeologists, there are full time wardens and some 20 full time guides. The subterranean site museum was constructed recently in the eastern corner of the site, taking care not to disturb the archaeological remains or the skyline.

Risk analysis:

Yin Xu is located in agricultural area, and it has been subject to some development due to villages in the region. Some industrial plants have been of concern, including the food stuff factory in the buffer zone. Nevertheless, the factory has now been demolished and no new industry will be built here. A railway is crossing the buffer zone. However, it is far from the archaeological areas, and no construction is allowed along its track.

The region has semi-damp continental monsoon climate. It can be hot in the summer and fairly cold in the winter. The major threats to the site are the floods especially due to the river Huanhe, which often is subject to strong storms upstream. The management has however taken measures to prevent flood damage. Two reservoirs have been built upstream so as to control the level of the river, and the
river beds have been improved. While the excavated remains are underground, the pits that are presented to the public are consolidated so as to prevent collapse. The region of Yin Xu is subject to earthquake hazard, but this has not been a major impact on the site.

At the moment some 200,000 people visit the site annually, mainly Chinese. The visitors include many young people, for whom there are educational programmes interpreting Chinese characters. Modern facilities are available, including hotels of different categories. An annual festival is organised to promote the site. Most visitors come to the site in spring or autumn, and the numbers have recently been growing. Measures have been taken to protect the site and guarantee the safety of visitors.

**Authenticity and integrity**

*Authenticity:*

The authenticity of the ancient remains has been verified in reference to the Shang Dynasty that had Yin Xu as their capital from 1300 to 1100 BC.

*Integrity:*

While taking into account that the site of Yin Xu has been subject to excavations for some 80 years, it can be considered to have maintained its historical integrity. The tombs and sacrificial pits have been left in situ, and most of the pits have been reburied after excavation, and only selected areas are presented to visitors. The reburied pits are indicated on the ground. Movable objects have been taken to the site museum, and some replicas have been displayed on the site as part of the presentation. Only limited reconstruction has been made as part of the presentation to visitors.

The overall integrity of the landscape is also under control. The archaeological site is in a rural context with some villages, roads and a railway. However, there is strict planning control, and the existing building stock consists of traditional style buildings that are maximum two stories high.

**Comparative evaluation**

Yin Xu is of outstanding interest having been the largest and most important of the capital cities of China in the Late Shang Dynasty. It has provided unique material evidence to the history of China in a crucial creative period. It is comparable with ancient civilisations in Egypt, Babylon and India, and is distinguished for its outstanding universal value in this context. The site provides documentary evidence to the first important development phase of the Chinese royal architecture, anticipating the great Imperial palaces and tomb ensembles.

**Outstanding universal value**

*General statement:*

The outstanding universal value of the archaeological site of Yin Xu can be referred to as an exceptional testimony to the late Bronze Age phase of the Chinese civilisation, 1300 to 1046 B.C. The excavations have provided invaluable material evidence to the history of art and architecture, the development of various fields of science and technology. In particular, Yin Xu exhibits the earliest testimony to the complete set of mature Chinese characters, still in use today. The site is the earliest dynastic capital in China, which has been certified and documented. The rammed earth foundations and remains of early wooden structures represent early prototypes in the development of royal palace architecture in China. Similarly, the tombs and sacrificial pits are the earliest prototypes, later developed into imperial tombs, such as the tomb of the First Qin Emperor in Xi’an (a World Heritage site).

**Evaluation of criteria:**

The property has been nominated on the basis of criteria i, ii, iii, iv and vi:

 Criterion i: The remains at Yin Xu are testimony to remarkable achievements in art, science, and technology of the Late Shang period. Nevertheless, considering that the remains are a testimony to cultural evolution, ICOMOS considers that this is better justified under criterion iii and that the property does not meet this criterion.

 Criterion ii: Yin Xu, the capital city of the Late Shang dynasty, is of outstanding universal value as it exhibits an important interchange of influences in Chinese history, representing the highest level of development in the ancient bronze culture of China. The ritual system based on ancestor worship and the use of bronze ritual vessels greatly influenced other cultures. The same can be said of the development of the types of buildings and royal tombs excavated here. ICOMOS considers that the property meet this criterion.

 Criterion iii: The cultural remains at Yin Xu provide exceptional evidence to extinct cultural traditions in Late Shang Period. Yin Xu was then the dynastic capital during the richest Bronze Age culture in China. The period is testimony to many scientific and technical achievements and innovations, including the combined solar and lunar calendar system, still in use today in China. Of fundamental importance are the oracle bones that carry the earliest evidence to the mature system of written Chinese characters. ICOMOS considers that the property meet this criterion.

 Criterion iv: The palaces, ancestral shrines and the royal tombs of Yin Xu are outstanding examples of early Chinese architecture. They have of outstanding value establishing the early prototypes for Chinese palace architecture and royal tomb complexes, then further developed in the Imperial palace complexes and burial sites. ICOMOS considers that the property meet this criterion.

 Criterion vi: The material remains discovered at Yin Xu provide tangible evidence to the early history of the system of Chinese writing and language, ancient beliefs, social systems, and major historical events, of outstanding universal significance. Yin Xu is valued as the most important archaeological excavation in the history of modern Chinese archaeology. ICOMOS considers that the property meet this criterion.
5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that Yin Xu, The People’s Republic of China, be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria ii, iii, iv and vi:

Criterion ii: Yin Xu, capital of the Late Shang dynasty exhibits an exchange of important influences and the highest level of development in China’s ancient bronze culture, including the system of writing.

Criterion iii: The cultural remains at Yin Xu provide exceptional evidence to cultural traditions in Late Shang Period, and are testimony to many scientific and technical achievements and innovations, such as the solar and lunar calendar system, and the earliest evidence of systematic written Chinese language in oracle bones.

Criterion iv: The palaces, ancestral shrines and the royal tombs of Yin Xu are outstanding examples of early Chinese architecture. They have great significance establishing the early prototypes for Chinese palace architecture and royal tomb complexes.

Criterion vi: The material remains discovered at Yin Xu provide tangible evidence to the early history of the system of Chinese writing and language, ancient beliefs, social systems, and major historical events, which are considered of outstanding universal significance.

ICOMOS, April 2006
Map showing the boundaries of the property
Fu Hao Tomb

Chariots pit of the Shang Dynasty