

# The Laosicheng Site in Yongshun County, Hunan

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## Abstract

Since 1995, four terms of survey and excavation have been conducted on the Laosicheng Site in Yongshun County, Hunan Province. It resulted in the preliminary clarification of the distribution of the functional areas within the city. The palace and government office areas were in the center of the city, around which were a residential area, a *tusi* graveyard, a religious activity area, a villa and garden area, and so on. The building materials revealed in these areas include bricks, tile-ends and eave tiles. The unearthed porcelain sherds are largely of blue-and-white wares, and their inscriptions contain rich information on the *tusi* system of Yongshun County. The Laosicheng Site and the structures nearby it were mostly built in the Ming Dynasty. The excavation of the site is very significant to researches on the internal structure of *tusi* society in Yongshun County, the *tusi* domination system, and the relationship between the central government and the minorities in the Ming Dynasty.

**Keywords:** Laosicheng Site (Yongshun County, Hunan); Ming Dynasty; *tusi* (hereditary headmen system)

## General introduction

The Laosicheng Site is situated 19.5km to the east of the seat of Yongshun County, at Sicheng Village of Lingxi Town on the bank of the Lingxi River. In the past, it was the seat of Yongshun Xuanweisi (pacification office) in the Ming Dynasty, and its remains constitute the largest-scale and best-preserved *tusi* city site in the Tujia ethnic area within the Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing and Guizhou region (Figure 1).

In October to December 1995, September 1996 and October to November 1998, the Hunan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, along with the Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture Bureau of Cultural Relics and the Yongshun County Bureau of Cultural Relics, carried out three terms of survey and excavation on the Laosicheng Site and related vestiges around the site. In April 2010 to January 2011, they conducted there the fourth archaeological excavation in coordination with the drawing of the Program of Protecting and Restoring Works of the Laosicheng Site Proper.

The surveys and excavations in those years roughly



**Figure 1** The location of Laosicheng Site.

clarified the distribution of various functional areas in the city. The palace and government office areas lay in the center, around which were a residential area, a religious activity area, a *tusi* graveyard, a villa and garden area, etc. The location of Laosicheng City in the remote and barren mountainous district was mainly for military purposes because the natural terrains there provided strong defense and around the locus were a series of precipitous military passes advantageous to the formation of perfect defensive facilities.

## The remains

1. The palace area. This quarter is situated in the north of the city. It has a roughly oval plan, a relief sloping downward from the northeast to the southwest, a circumference of 436m and a total area of 1.4ha. On the periphery are four palace gates. The Great Western Gate was the main entrance, which left over parts of steps and, on the south, foundations of a gate tower. The northwestern, southwestern and southeastern corners have a gate each. The enclosing walls measure about 1m thick and are largely built of stone blocks and boulders with mixture of tung oil and lime as cohering material. Their remaining height is 2m or so except for the northwestern wall keeping in a better condition and reaching 6m in maximum height (Figure 2).

The Great Western Gate faces the west with a slight bearing to the south. Its façade is joined with Right Street, a pebble-paved old road extending to River-bank Street. The gate passage is paved with pebbles and furnished with steps built of narrow red stone slabs. Between the



**Figure 2** Southern wall of the palace area (S-N).

lower pebble steps at Right Street's eastern end and the higher terrace inside the western gate is a 1.6m difference in height. Originally the gate passage was steps built of narrow red sandstone slabs in winding flights; presently most of the stone slabs have been removed by later residents and only some fragmentary ones are left. The palace wall on the north of the western gate is preserved in a better condition. It is lined with red sandstone slabs laid in staggering bond, and an open drain ditch runs along its inner side. A spacious terrace remains inside the western gate; its floor is paved with stone slabs in various sizes and dense pebbles; and its vestiges are better preserved. On the south of the gate are the foundations of a watchtower (Figure 3).

The buildings in the palace area are erected on four- to five-tier terraces according to the hill terrain, all of which bear remains of buildings and between which are stone terrace walls that are also used as building walls in some cases. In addition, some damaged walls remain in the city; they are different from the terrace walls in date. The building remains are 0.3-0.5m below the modern ground; the accumulations have a thickness of 1m in general and some reach 2m or more (Figure 4).

The main buildings of the palace area are in the center by the south, on the central axis through the Great Western Gate. They extend eastward and upward along the terraces inside the gate, forming four-tier terraces until the top of the palace wall. Exploring operations have so far discovered two flights of steps linking these terraces. The foundations of the main buildings are all made of rammed earth and higher than the surrounding ground in height. Their vestiges include terrace walls, wall foundations, wall bodies, steps, aprons and drains. The main drain in the palace area is G17 plus G16, which joins with the aprons below the southern and western walls of the main buildings and runs to the outside through the culvert beneath the northwestern palace wall. Road L1 and drain G4 functioned as the chief linking and draining ways for the main buildings of the palace area; they run from the hillside to the southern hill foot (Figure 5).



**Figure 3** Great Western Gate of the palace area (S-N).

Road L1 stretches from the north to the south, passing through excavation grids TN4E5 and TN3E5, and measures 6.7m in total length and 1.27m in width. Its eastern side revetment is just the wall of drain G4, and the western side revetment is revealed in excavation grids TN4E5 and TN3E5 and measures 5m in remaining length, 0.69m in width and 0.4m in height. It is built of pebbles in vari-



**Figure 4** Buildings in the palace area (W–E).



**Figure 5** Road L1 and drain G4 in the palace area (S–N).

ous sizes, which are selected in size and altered in arrangement in accordance with their locations and functions: the smallest pebbles are used for paving the middle strip of the road and formed into herringbone pattern, while the large ones are used for building the revetments of the roadbed's sides, which reflect the fastidiousness of the then works. The earthen coverings on the revetments are pure grey sandy soil specially fetched from the bank of the Lingxi River. During the function of the road, these revetments were always covered beneath the grey sandy earthen layer.

Drain G4 runs from the north to the south, passing through excavation grids TN4E5, TN3E5 and TN3E6, and measures 25.3m in overall length, 0.56–0.77m in bottom width, 0.03m in remaining depth for the northern end and 0.8 and 2.2m deep for the middle and southern sections respectively. The walls and bottom are built and paved of pebbles and plastered and coated with lime mortar. At the outlet of the drain, three concavities were discovered on either side, each having a side length of 20cm and a depth of 25cm. They are symmetrical to each other and must be the remains of a timber passage.

Road L1 and drain G4 are excellently built according to the hill terrain slightly sloping down from the northwest to the southeast. They also implied the concrete location and architectural rank of the main buildings in the palace area. As the building area expanded again and again to the hill foot in later times, G4 must have been repeatedly elongated until the period of erecting house F2 when this drain finally destroyed in the clearance of the building plot. Excavation shows that the water conducted by G4 was drained into drain G10 by partially overflowing on a pebble pavement. L1 and G4 were constructed in the early Ming Dynasty. The enclosing walls of the palace area and drain G10 had emerged, respectively, as a part of the defensive system and that of the draining facilities before the existence of L1 and G4.

G10 was an important drain in the palace area. It starts from the middle of the eastern enclosing wall on the hilltop of the palace area, extends downward to the south along the inner side of the wall, passes by the inner side of the whole southern wall and that of the western wall's southern end, and reaches the two outlets at the southern

end of the Great Western Gate. Thus it forms roughly a semicircle and skirts the palace area. The whole drain measures 132m in length, 1m in width and depth and is furnished with two small bridges Q1 and Q2 crossing it. Its outer wall is the palace city wall with a thickness of approximately 1m, while the inner wall measures about 0.5m in thickness. The outer wall is built of larger pebbles and rock blocks, which are pointed with lime mortar, coated with putty on the two sides and filled with pebbles and soil in the body. The bottom is paved with standing pebbles.

Sectioning at two loci revealed that the drain bottom was paved twice with pebbles and in both cases the palace enclosing wall was used as the drain's outer wall. G10 as a part of the drainage already existed at the beginning of the city's construction roughly in the early Ming Dynasty. It continued to function in the mid and late Ming when Building F2 as well as the terrace wall and Bridge Q1 joining with it were rebuilt, but the bottom may have been repaved with pebbles and the new pavement was kept all along without repair until the abandonment of the city. The accumulations in G10 are 0.2 to 1.6m thick with the eastern part thinner than the western. The relics unearthed here are later in date than the construction of the drain, belonging roughly to the mid and late Ming Dynasty.

Building foundation F10 is the relatively intact remains among those excavated so far in the palace area. Its southern wall is well preserved on the whole, the recovered part has a length of 13.3m, a height of 3.5m and a thickness of 0.6m, and the body is built of rock blocks pointed with lime and sandy clay mortar and solidly and smoothly coated on both sides with mixture of lime, tung oil and cotton fibers. On the even top survive scattered grey bricks, which must have been left over from the building material for the wall's upper part. The western and northern walls are identical with the southern one in building technique and are also partly preserved to the present. The eastern wall is not excavated; its condition is not clear yet. The doorway is located at the southern end of the western wall and joins with downward pebble steps. A partial excavation revealed the lowermost pebble step. The interior of the building is divided into a front and a rear parts, whose partition is 12.3m in length, about 0.75m in width and 0.1 to 0.2m in remaining height as known from its survival foundations, which are built of pebbles for the two sides and filled with lime and sandy earth in the body, and a brick step remains in situ, between two stone pillar bases, where a doorway might have been furnished originally. The front hall is 6.3m in depth and 8.2m in width and has been partly intruded by a later structure. The floor of the front hall is paved with square bricks, all of which are bedded with fine sand and part of which are paved diagonally. Its top covering might have been a patio-style roof. In the western side room, beneath a pavement of square bricks, a heating structure (No. K1) was discovered to be a sort of underground warming facilities. It is composed of the hearths, heating tunnels and a warming

surface. This structure measures 6.2m in length, 1.95m in width, 0.3m in height for the warming surface and 0.35–0.65m in height for the hearths. It is preserved in a good condition except for the southeastern corner intruded by a later building. Two hearths are found; a square one for burning firewood and the round one for keeping tinder; their walls and bottoms are all built of bricks; and the interior contains charcoal fragments associated with some white porcelain sherds. The heating tunnels are also made of grey bricks; of them the one between the two hearths has a length of 1.3m, a width of 1.1m and a depth of 0.25m. The warming surface is rectangular; its upper layer is formed of square bricks with dimensions of 34 x 34 x 6cm; and the lower layer is made of 30 x 18 x 8cm grey bricks and iron bars and is superimposed upon the heating tunnels that are structured of standing parallel bricks, pointed with limb mortar and joined with each other. In the east of F4 is the cellar H3. The unearthed objects suggest that F10 is datable roughly to the mid and late Ming Dynasty (Figure 6).

2. The government office area. It lies to the south of the palace area and measures 408.8m in perimeter and 8762.4sq m in area. The eastern, southern and western walls are preserved in a relatively good condition, generally 1-2m in remaining height. The survival foundations of the western gate are exposed on the ground up to now. The gate has a width of 3.4m; it is furnished with steps built of long narrow stones and directly linked with Main Street in the lower zone.

Originally in Laosicheng City was a dense gridiron network of streets and alleys. Tradition has it that there were eight streets, five alleys and two intersections, which left over a lot of place names, such as Main Street (New Street), River-bank Street, Wutun Street, Zijin Street, Left Street, Right Street and Yudu Street, of which Main and Right Streets are the best preserved. All streets and lanes are paved with reddish-brown pebbles, which are formed into triangular, lozenge and other geometric patterns full of neatness, archaism, gracefulness and ethnic features (Figure 7).

3. The Zijin Hill Graveyard. It is located in the southeast of Laosicheng City and is the burial ground of the Yongshun *tusi* clan of the Ming Dynasty. As known from coring test, it occupies an area of about 1500sq m and is composed of above 30 tombs of *tusi* and their relatives. The eight graves exposed on the ground and looted in the past are recovered in the excavation.

The whole graveyard consists of four to five rows of tombs built in accordance with the hill terrain. The ground level buildings and equipment include mounds, sacrificial altars, splay gables, waist-band-decorated passages, southern and northern spirit roads, stone human and animal statues and screen walls (Figures 8 and 9). Some valuable grave goods were unearthed from the graveyard (Figure 10). The burial chamber is usually built of specially made relief-decorated grey bricks for the foundations and grey bricks for the vault; it is furnished with a shrine at the head; and the motifs in relief include the human figure,



Figure 6 Building foundation F10 in the palace area (N-S).



Figure 7 Pebble-paved Right Street (W-E).

rosette design, tendril and cloud pattern. The coffin platform is paved with grey sandstone slabs and decorated with the Big Dipper constellation design in some cases. In tomb type there are single-, double- and triple-chamber graves; the latter one has a winding corridor in the front and passages between the chambers (Figure 11). This discovery is of great value to the reconstruction of the whole appearance of the Ming Dynasty *tusi* lineage graveyard and researches on the then burial culture, *tusi* pedigree and building techniques.

The Peng Shiqi couple's joint burial excavated this time is excellent in building and gorgeous in decoration and can be regarded as the masterpiece of the Ming

*tusi* tombs. Peng Shiqi, Peng Zongshun and Peng Yinan were all distinguished figures with brilliant military feats among the Yongshun *tusi*. They commanded the local militia to resist Japanese pirates, rendered meritorious service for our motherland's peacefulness, and thus became Tujia national heroes. The epitaphs of these headmen and a number of their relatives unearthed from the graveyard constitute valuable historic materials to the study of *tusi* society.

4. The south of Laosicheng City was a religious activity area in the *tusi*-ruled period and also the common people's spiritual center in the *tusi* magistracy. According to archaeological exploration results and records in local chronicles, the confirmed monuments include the Sect Founder Temple, Avalokitesvara Pavilion, Grain God Temple, Guandi Temple, Jiangjun-Hill Temple and "Eight Great Deities" Temple. These diverse religious units and their regular activities and sacrificial ceremonies played an important role in uniting the people and strengthening social cohesion. In the rather frequent battles of the *Tusi*-ruled period the Jiangjun-Hill Temple and Guandi Temple repeatedly inspired the people's fighting spirit by means of supernatural deterrence.

5. Advancing upstream along the Lingxi River, you can enter the tranquil area be-

hind the noisy downtown streets, where the villa and garden district of the *Tusi*-ruled period will offer you great pleasure with its lofty mountains, limpid brooks, white beaches and gently undulating hills setting off numerous *tusi* manors, villas, fishing docks and other facilities. On the cliff-sides by the Lingxi River, eight interesting inscriptions will tell you stories of *tusi* wandering and feasting with their relatives and friends in the picturesque scenes. For example:

“余思全暇时常侍老母同眷属游景，因酣起以记之 [At my free times, I, Silei (assumed name of Peng Shiqi, the *tusi*) often accompany my aged mother and other relatives in sightseeing among the natural scenes. Now I



Figure 8 Zijin Hill Graveyard (W-E).



Figure 9 Stone carvings on the sacrificial altar in the Zijin Hill Graveyard (N-S).



Figure 10 Gold Object from the Zijin-Hill Graveyard.

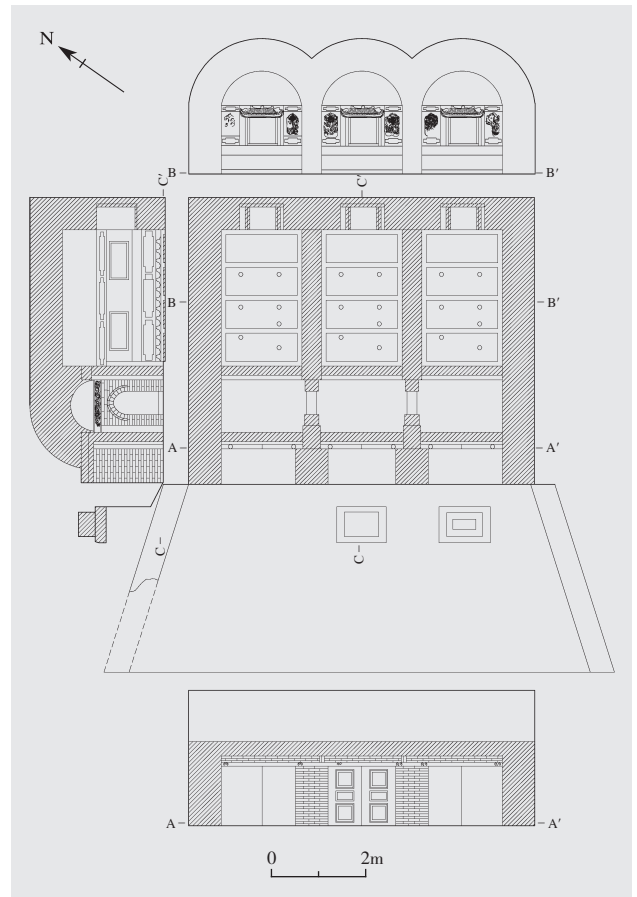


Figure 11 Plan and section of Tomb M11 in the Zijin-Hill Graveyard.

record it with great content].” “弘治己未岁仲夏，余游同世亲冉西坡游此，得鱼甚多，其日从者千余，俱乐醉而归，思全记 [In the fifth moon of *jiwei* year (1499) in Hongzhi Era, I accompanied my intimate friend Ran Xipo in sightseeing within this area and gained fruitful results in fishing. We were accompanied by more than a thousand persons, all drinking and amusing themselves to their heart's content. Recorded by Silei].” “嘉靖乙丑季夏，予□内阁大学士徐门下锦衣金垂川，吕松泉，庠士杜太行携宗族等同游于此，美 [In the sixth moon of *yichou* year (1565), Ming Jiajing Era, Jin Chuichuan and

Lü Songquan, who were the pupils and staff members of Mr. Xu, the grand secretary of the Grand Secretariat, Du Taihang, a government student, and I were in sightseeing along with our relatives. How beautiful the scenery is!]” These inscriptions recorded wonderful scenes of *tusi* families’ daily life and provided interesting data on the culture of Laosicheng City.

6. Unearthed artifacts. The palace area of Laosicheng Site yielded abundant building materials, such as bricks with carved designs, tile-ends and flat eave tiles; their decorative motifs include auspicious animals, talismanic objects and floral designs, which symbolized blessings and prosperity, and at the same time created solemn and magnificent atmosphere in the palace buildings. Storing, warming and draining facilities were all furnished in these buildings. The wooden structure of the main hall of the Sect Founder Temple was fitted so skillfully that even no clear chiseling traces were seen, and the doors and win-

dows were engraved with elaborate designs, which reflect the superb architectural techniques in the Ming palace area (Figure 12).

The porcelain sherds unearthed from the Laosicheng Site are largely of blue-and-white ware and made in Jingdezhen folk kilns except for some products from official kilns. Their inscriptions contain a lot of information on Yongshun *tusi*, such as “宣慰使司佳器 (Fine object of pacification commissioner’s office)”, “永顺司制 (Made for Yongshun pacification office)”, “五百年忠义世家制 (Made for the lineage adhering to virtue and patriotism for five hundred years)”, “大厅忠义堂记 (Object of the Royal and Righteous Grand Hall)”, “都督府役徐沉斌贡 (Tribute from Xu Yuanbin, a staff member of the Military Governor Office)”, etc. It indicates that these porcelain articles were specially ordered for Yongshun *tusi*, which is a rare phenomenon throughout the country (Figures 13 to 15).



Figure 12 Decorated brick unearthed from the Laosicheng Site.



Figure 13 Porcelain bowl (G10 east:87).



Figure 14 Porcelain bowl (G10 east:75).



Figure 15 Inscriptions of the porcelain wares.

## The conclusions

According to the *Yongshun County Chronicles* edited in the Qing Dynasty, after his receiving the hereditary position in the fifth year of Shaoxing Era (1135) of the Southern Song Dynasty, *Tusi* Peng Fushichong was often disgusted with the control from higher authorities, so he moved the county seat to Fushi Prefecture by the Lingxi River, i.e. today's Laosicheng, hence the hill behind this new county seat is now called Fushi Hill.

Was Laosicheng the seat of the Peng lineage's government in the Southern Song or the Yuan Dynasties? This is a hot issue archaeologists have concerned in their field operations for a long period of time. The sectioning of the southern wall of the palace area discovered grey bricks, tile-ends and early Ming porcelain sherds in the earth fillings of the wall and early Ming blue-and-white sherds in the first layer beneath the wall, while the second to eight layers contain no such relics but the white porcelain sherds and carved bricks, semi-cylindrical tiles and other structural members of the Song and Yuan Dynasties. The same phenomena also occurred on the bottom of drain G4 and building foundation F16. It suggests once again that before the building of the palace walls there had been a long living course and the existence of high-ranking buildings. The local chronicles' statement on Peng Fushichong's building Laosicheng in the fifth year of Shaoxing Era of the Southern Song Dynasty may be a reliable historic record.

According to the presently available archaeological data, the enclosing walls, road L1, drains G4 and G10 and building foundation F16 of the palace area on the Laosicheng Site were built roughly in the early Ming Dynasty. Building foundation F2, its related terrace wall, the upper pebble layer of drain G10 and stone bridges Q1 and Q2 were built roughly in the mid and late Ming Dynasty.

The government office area and numbers of related buildings on the periphery of Laosicheng City were largely made also in the Ming Dynasty, including Mengdong Villa built by Peng Xianying, Kesha Government Office built by Peng Shiqi, Xiepu Government Office built by Peng Mingfu and Huwo Villa built by Peng Zongshun. The excavation results from the Zijin Hill graveyard and the tombs around it indicate that the earliest tomb is that of the wife of Peng Xianying, who took the hereditary *tusi* position in the Tianshun and Chenghua Eras (1457–1487) of the Ming Dynasty. The cliff-side inscriptions near Laosicheng are mostly dated from the Hongzhi, Zhengde

and Jiajing Eras (1488–1566) of the Ming Dynasty.

The policy “*gaitu guiliu* 改土归流” (“converting aboriginal to regular”, i.e. abolishing the hereditary chiefs of the minority people and appointing officials by the central government to govern them) that brought the minority regions under direct control by the central government conformed to the general trend of Chinese history. In the sixth year of Yongzheng Era (1728) of the Qing Dynasty, Peng Zhaohuai, the last *tusi*, gave up his position voluntarily and, in the next year, returned to Ji'an County, Jiangxi Province, which was his ancestral home. The other members of the Peng Clan migrated to Kesha or to Xinzhuang nearby Taiping Hill, and the titles of the magistracies under Peng Zhaohuai's rule thoroughly disappeared. Laosicheng City was abandoned from then on. The *terminus ante quem* of building F1 in the palace area and other numerous late remains was the sixth year of Yongzheng Era (1728) of the Qing Dynasty, when the policy “*gaitu guiliu*” was vigorously practiced. Archaeological findings indicate that since the mid Qing Dynasty, high-quality porcelains disappeared, and Laosicheng became the residential area of local people mostly of the Xiang clan. The original buildings collapsed and became ruins, on which some coarse dwellings were built. The old streets continued existing, but no local people were able to amend or rebuild them. Laosicheng lost its prosperity in the past: it became a barren and isolated mountain village incapable to support large population.

In 2001, the Laosicheng Site was promulgated as one of the fifth set of major historical and cultural monuments under state protection. In October 2010, it was elected into the first set of national archaeological site-parks. Erected in precipitous mountains, situated at the foot of a hill and aside a stream and well utilizing the local conditions, it embodied the perfect integration of natural terrains and military defense and constituted an exceptional physical case in the history of Chinese urban development. With its well-preserved basic facilities, as well as rich and varied ground-level and underground cultural remains, it is rare among the extant city sites in China for its authenticity, intactness and sightseeing value.

## Postscript

The original paper written by Chai Huanbo 柴焕波 was published in *Kaogu* 考古 (*Archaeology*) 2011. 7: 33–8 with two illustrations and three pages of plates. The present version is prepared by the author and translated into English by Mo Runxian 莫润先.