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Chinese Bronzes Through Western Eyes

Western scholars who study China and Chinese scholars who study their own tradition often find themselves confronting one another in mutual incomprehension, each locked in their own traditions with a sense that they have some critical knowledge or methodology which the other side is missing. This is nowhere more apparent than in the study of ancient Chinese bronzes, where Chinese and western scholars have approached the vessels from radically different perspectives. Nevertheless, a particular value of the intercourse between two cultures, such as that of China and Europe or America, is that in attempting to explain ourselves to others, we become more aware of the particularity of our presuppositions.

My aim is to make the concerns and methodologies of western scholarship in this field more understandable to a Chinese audience by tracing their history. I also wish to make the context and rationale behind my own hypotheses concerning meaning in Chinese bronzes more explicit.¹ Although I have made a number of revisions in the following account, it remains a history of western, as opposed to Chinese, scholarship on Chinese bronzes.

¹ Allan, Sarah 1993: 'Art and Meaning' and 'Epilogue,' in Whitfield, Roderick 1993, ed: *The Problem of Meaning in Early Chinese Ritual Bronzes, Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia*, 15, London: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS): 9-33, 161-76.

Western Studies of Chinese Bronzes in the 20th Century

Chinese bronzes carry a different meaning in the context of western museums and collections from that which they carry in China. Chinese have always valued bronzes as historical objects and studied them for the light which they shed on their ancient history. Thus, Chinese scholars have been most interested in inscriptions and their interpretation. Furthermore, although a great many bronzes were collected and often handed down through generations before the advent of modern archaeology, a much greater number of bronzes have been excavated archaeologically during the last 40 years. Since 1949, these bronzes, which may be studied within a known context, compared with other objects and dated accordingly, have become the focus of scholarly attention.

In the West, however, Chinese bronzes have been seen primarily as art objects to be displayed in museums alongside other non-western objects, to be admired for their intrinsic beauty, often by people with little knowledge of or interest in ancient Chinese civilisation. Since the bronzes were robbed from tombs or hoards rather than excavated scientifically, their provenance can only be surmised or deduced. Each bronze stands in isolation, its original context left to the imagination, and so the studies have often been highly theoretical and

highly contentious. In the following, I will recount briefly some of the contributions of western scholars to the study of Chinese bronzes. Many of the flaws are now, with the hindsight of modern archaeological evidence, obvious, but the methodologies are nevertheless of interest, as are the critiques which have been made of them. I will also discuss some of my own attempts to resolve some of the issues which others have raised before me. I will confine myself here to the studies of Shang (c1700-1100 BC) and early Western Zhou dynasty (c1100-771 BC) bronzes which have, in any case, been the focus of western scholarship.

The first comprehensive studies of Chinese bronzes by a western scholar were made by Bernhard Karlgren in the 1930s and published in the *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, Stockholm. Most important were his 'Yin and Chou in Chinese bronzes,' published in 1936,² and 'New Studies on Chinese Bronzes,' published in 1937.³ These articles followed an exhibition of early Chinese bronzes held in Stockholm in 1933 on the occasion of the 13th International Congress of the History of Art which had excited considerable interest and for which Karlgren had written the catalogue. In 1935, the Chinese government lent pieces to an exhibition held in London and it too aroused interest among western art historians.

Karlgren was a sinologist and had already done extensive work translating and annotating classical Chinese texts. He was well acquainted with Chinese scholarship and, of course, knew about the excavations at Yinxi of the last Shang dynasty capital, but the results of these excavations were not yet published and his researches were entirely based upon the bronzes themselves. Karlgren made no reference to any archaeological material in these studies. Instead, he attempted to create an internally consistent 'scientific' system by means of which they could be dated and classified. Because they were primarily interested in the bronzes as art objects, many of the bronzes that western collectors valued most highly were uninscribed. Nowadays, comparison with archaeologically excavated pieces is the primary means of dating such objects; but in the thirties, Chinese archaeology was just beginning and there was no archaeological context which could be used for dating. Karlgren's problem, then, was to derive a means of dating uninscribed bronzes entirely on the basis of their appearance.

Karlgren's method was very ingenious. His aim was to use the inscribed bronzes to provide a scientific means of dating uninscribed bronzes on the basis of their style. Thus, in order to distinguish Yin (*i e* Shang) from Zhou vessels, he first examined a large number of inscribed bronzes which included 'real texts' — texts with content other than formulaic expressions — in order to determine whether they were made by the Zhou. By this method, he determined that certain formulaic expressions such as *ju* (as he transcribed the character), *xi zi sun* and the *ya*-shaped cartouche, never occurred in inscriptions which were clearly identifiable as Zhou. Having dated the bronzes by this means, he then classified the motifs typologically and determined that certain motifs only occurred on vessels which he had classified as Yin, and others only on those which were Zhou. Thus, the motifs (and certain other stylistic elements such as vessel shape and type) could be used as criteria to date other uninscribed bronzes to the Yin or Zhou Dynasties. He then went on to establish similar criteria for use in distinguishing early Zhou bronzes from those cast after the reign of King Mu (c956-918 BC). He called Zhou bronzes cast before the reign of King Mu 'Yin-Zhou' since he regarded their style as a continuation of Shang bronze styles.

In 'New Studies,' Karlgren made a typological classification of the motifs on bronzes which he had previously determined were in the Yin style. His purpose was to discover which motifs could occur together with one another on the main body of the vessels. Thus, he divided the motifs into three groups, A, B, and C. The A elements were more pictorial and included such motifs as

² Karlgren, B 1936: 'Yin and Chou in Chinese bronzes,' *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*. 8: 9-156.

³ Karlgren, B 1937: 'New Studies on Chinese Bronzes,' *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*. 9: 1-117.



Figure 1 • A bronze gu, Middle Shang period, height 23.2 cm, Linden Museum, Staatliches Museum für Volkerkunde, Stuttgart (OA 20.340L). Photo courtesy of the museum

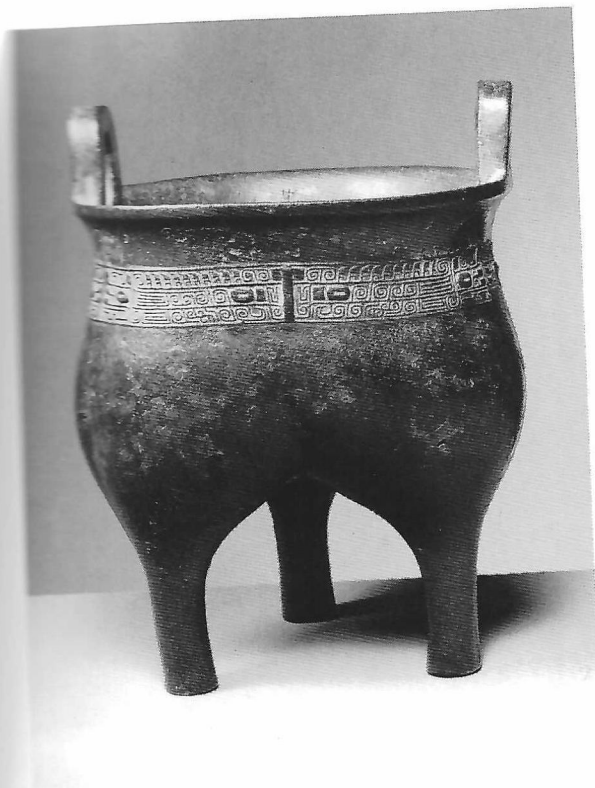


Figure 2 • A bronze li-ding, Western Zhou period, Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm (110.04:170). Photo courtesy of the museum

the mask *taotie*, the bodied *taotie*, bovine *taotie*, the cicada, and the vertical dragon. B elements were more abstract and included such motifs as the dissolved *taotie*, the animal triple band, the de-tailed bird, the eyed spiral band, the eyed band with diagonals, the circle band, the square with crescents, compound lozenges, spikes, interlocked Ts and vertical ribs. C elements, usually found in a subordinate position, included the deformed and the dragonised *taotie*, trunked, beaked, jawed, turning, feathered, winged, S and deformed dragons, birds, snakes, whorl circles, blades and spiral bands. A and B elements, he argued, were mutually exclusive, whereas C elements could occur with either A or B elements. Therefore, he concluded, there were two distinctive, though closely related styles and workshops in the late Shang period.

Although Karlgren's analysis was criticised early on, it has nevertheless exerted considerable influence. The names which he gave to the various motifs are still in common usage and his argument for the coexistence of two styles has, for example, been used by K C Chang as evidence to support his theories concerning the dualistic nature of the Shang royal house. Karlgren considered his A style which included the more animalistic types of *taotie* and the cicada to be primary, whereas the B style which included a number of geometric motifs, the so-called dissolved *taotie* and the animal triple band was secondary. The B style derived from the A style, but the A style continued and coexisted with it. Karlgren's assumption

that A was prior to B was primarily for theoretical reasons. He assumed that the earliest *taotie* must be relatively realistic; thus the plastic representations with realistic animal features would come before such motifs as the animal triple band which he interpreted as an abstraction of the more realistic forms of the *taotie*. He was also influenced by the predominance of geometric motifs on Zhou bronzes after the reign of King Mu. He saw this 'middle Zhou' style as a natural development of his B style, thus confirming his hypothesis of a progression from realism to a dissolved geometric style.

Karlgren continued to write about bronzes until his death in 1968 without substantially revising his original hypothesis, even though it was strongly criticised by many other scholars. For example, H G Creel, who had been present during some of the excavations at Yinxu and was better acquainted with the excavated materials, criticised Karlgren's analysis of the inscriptions, pointing out that even short inscriptions were relatively late in the Yin sequence.⁴ Moreover, the art historian J Leroy Davidson recognised a distinction between two types of abstraction which Karlgren had grouped together, the 'dissolved *taotie*' (actually an Erligang-style *taotie*) and the 'animal triple band,' and that the former was earlier than the latter (see, for example, figures 1 and 2). Thus Davidson became the first western scholar to successfully place Erligang-style vessels at the beginning of the Shang sequence.⁵

Anyone acquainted with bronze inscriptions today will know that the type of bronze inscriptions which Karlgren used to establish his Yin and Zhou styles—inscriptions which were long and complicated enough to be considered 'real texts'—were all Zhou or at least very late Yin Dynasty. Another problem with Karlgren's analysis which has not been generally recognised is that he did not distinguish between cast and inscribed inscriptions and that he included many fake inscriptions in his analysis. Thus, for example, a *yan*-steamer from the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities at Stockholm is included by Karlgren in his 'Yin and Chou in Chinese bronzes' as an example of Yin bronze because it has the single character *ju* which is one of his Yin criteria

⁴ Creel, Herlee G 1936: 'Notes on Professor Karlgren's System for Dating Chinese Bronzes,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1936, 3: 463-473.

⁵ Davidson, J Leroy 1937: 'Toward a Grouping of Early Chinese Bronzes,' *Parnassus* 9.4 (April 1937): 29-34, 51.

(figure 3). However, an examination of the vessel (which was also available to Karlgren) shows clearly that the inscription was engraved, not cast. Furthermore, the bronze is demonstrably Western Zhou by comparison with excavated pieces.

Although we now know by comparison with archaeologically excavated bronzes that this *yan* is Zhou not Yin, the bovine *taotie* which decorate its legs are the type of realistic, animal-like *taotie* that Karlgren placed at the beginning of the Yin period and assumed were its most primitive form. In his scheme, *taotie* of this type are an A element, though the detailed birds in the top band are a B element; and Karlgren acknowledged that this type of vessel, as well as a similar *yan* with an animal triple band motif on the upper part of the steamer, were exceptions to his rule. Indeed, he used the latter vessel to support his claim that the animal triple band was a dissolved form of the realistic *taotie*, taking it as the equivalent of the de-tailed bird which logically could only derive from a bird to which the tail was still attached. (Interestingly, Karlgren made a similar assumption of the priority of realism in his studies of early myth and legend—*i e*, that myth, being unrealistic, must derive from real historical prototypes; however, in both cases he worked from a theoretical premise and offered no concrete evidence).

In contrast to Karlgren's theories, which were based upon a statistical analysis of individual motifs and upon the premise that realism precedes abstraction, were the theories of the art historians Bachhofer and Loehr. Bachhofer was a student of the great German historian of European art, Wölfflin, who believed that the art of a given period and place represented the spirit of the people (their 'Zeitgeist'). This school was concerned with overall style and their theories were both evolutionary and deterministic. Thus, Bachhofer rejected Karlgren's theory of two rival workshop traditions because of his premise that in any one era "one style must reign supreme."⁶ His analysis of Chinese bronzes was also strongly influenced by European art-historical categories, such as classical, baroque, and neoclassical. In terms of Chinese bronzes, this meant that he saw a 'restrained' Anyang style as preceding an 'ornate' style with raised relief and projections in the early Western Zhou which in turn gave way to a 'severe' style during the reign of King Cheng (c1042-1006 BC). Bachhofer's analysis of particular bronzes was not particularly successful, however, and he was immediately challenged by, for example, Otto Maenchen-Helfen, who pointed to contradictory styles among contemporaneous inscribed bronzes, such as the so-called Nie Ling and Chen Chen sets.⁷

More influential than Bachhofer himself has been his student Max Loehr. Loehr criticised Karlgren's typological studies, stating:

"The order arrived at is an historically incomprehensible grouping of Shang vessels into three categories based, not on styles, but on motifs ... It is a system that rests on the *a priori* concept of the absolute earliness of 'the true, realistic' *taotie*. It does not offer a logical explanation of the supposed subsequent changes, a history of styles. Consequently, the system is strangely static; the earliest stage is 'already highly developed, magnificent bronze art' ... Likewise, the style supposed to be at the end does not tally with what we do know of the Early Western Chou."⁸

Loehr's first article on Chinese bronzes appeared in 1936, but that for which he is most famous was published in 1953.⁹ In it, he successfully established a sequence of five styles based entirely upon art-historical criteria without reference to archaeology or inscriptions. The priority of his first three styles was confirmed by the publication of the excavations at Zhengzhou and Huixian.



Figure 3 • A bronze yan, Western Zhou period, Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm (K.14.756). Photo courtesy of the museum

⁶ Bachhofer, Ludwig 1944: 'The Evolution of Shang and Early Chou Bronzes,' *The Art Bulletin* 27: 238-243; see also Bachhofer, Ludwig 1945: 'Reply to Maenchen-Helfen,' *The Art Bulletin* 27: 243-246.

⁷ Maenchen-Helfen, Otto 1945: 'Some Remarks on Ancient Chinese Bronzes,' *The Art Bulletin* 27: 238-243; see also Bachhofer, Ludwig 1945: 'Reply to Maenchen-Helfen,' *The Art Bulletin* 27: 243-246.

⁸ Loehr, Max 1953: 'The Bronzes of the Anyang Period,' *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 7:44.

⁹ Loehr 1953: 42-53; and Loehr 1936: 'Beiträge zu Chronologie der ältern Chinesischen Bronzen,' *Ostasiatische Zeitgeist* 22 (N F12): 3-41.



Figure 4 • A bronze li-ding, Middle Shang period, from Christian Deydier Oriental Bronzes, London (formerly Neiraku Bijutsukan collection, Nara). Photo by Prudence Cuming Associates

Loehr further elaborated upon his sequence in a book, *Ritual Vessels of Bronze Age China*.¹⁰ Loehr emigrated from Germany to the United States after the end of World War II and he has had great influence through his students such as Alexander Soper, James Cahill, Virginia Kane and Robert Bagley, as well as by his own writings.¹¹ Since many art historians still use his stylistic sequence as a means of describing Shang bronzes, I will summarise it briefly below.

Loehr's Styles I and II are the characteristic styles of bronzes of what we now know to be the Erligang period. Style I is "executed in thin relief lines on a smooth surface. [The motifs] are arranged in horizontal friezes, which are usually bordered by rows of small circles. The motif consists of meanders: bands with oval eyes connected by diagonal lines or tangential curves." Style II (figure 1) "differs from the first style in that the ornaments appear to be incised." Loehr placed Style I before Style II because the raised relief of Style I could be made by incisions on a mould whereas Style II requires a more complex casting process with incisions on a model. Style III (figure 4) differs from Style II in that the decoration is no longer contained in narrow bands but has expanded to fill the surface of the vessel. A peculiar feature of this style is that hooked lines, often called quills, rise from the bodies of the *taotie*. In Karlgren's terminology this motif is a B style 'dissolved *taotie*,' but Loehr has placed

it correctly in sequence before the fully developed *taotie* motif.

In Loehr's Style IV (figure 5), the *taotie* is clearly delineated and the image is distinguished from the ground. There is now a *leiwen* (squared spiral) background, but the motifs are still flush with the surface. Style V (figures 6, 7) differs from Style IV in that "the ornaments now rise above the meandered ground in sharply outlined, somewhat simplified and thus clarified forms, which are arranged in a rigid order." Loehr further distinguished three subtypes of his Style V: *a*) with all-over *leiwen* ornament on a *leiwen* ground; *b*) ornament without *leiwen* on a *leiwen* ground; and *c*) without *leiwen* on the ornament or on the ground.¹²

Loehr first analysed the bronzes stylistically, by comparing them with one another, and then, having established his sequence, he turned to other evidence, such as inscriptions and comparable vessels which had been excavated archaeologically, to date the changes which he had already discerned. He originally assumed that his sequence all took place during the Yinxu period. The discovery that the first three styles were already present in the Erligang Period was nevertheless regarded as a validation of the sequence. More recently, of course, the discovery of the Fu Hao tomb has indicated that the entire sequence had already taken place by the reign of Wu Ding. Furthermore, as Robert Thorp has observed, there is still no archaeological evidence for the priority of Style I over Style II (both Erligang period) or of Style IV over Style V. Thus, these styles can also be regarded as artistically complementary, rather than as sequential developments.¹³

Figure 8, a square *yi* with a rather crude, incised *taotie* as its main decor, set off by the raised relief of Loehr Style Vb in the bands above and below, is an interesting anomaly. Loehr did accept that there might be an overlap in style periods, but his assumption of a single line of development, as William Watson observed, tends to reduce all stylistic variation to a problem of sequence.¹⁴ Although Loehr's hypothesis concerning the direction of development has been confirmed by the archaeological evidence, many style elements, such as plastic modelling, cannot be explained by a unilinear scheme of development on the

¹⁰ Loehr 1968: *Ritual Vessels of Bronze Age China*, New York.

¹¹ See, for example, Soper, Alexander C 1966: 'Early, Middle, and Late Shang: A Note,' *Artibus Asiae* 28: 5-38; Kane, Virginia 1973: 'The Chronological Significance of the Inscribed Ancestor Dedication in the Periodisation of Shang Dynasty Bronze Vessels,' *Artibus Asiae* 35: 335-370, Kane 1975: 'A Re-examination of Anyang Archaeology,' *Ars Orientalis* 10: 93-110; Bagley, Robert W 1987: *Shang Ritual Bronzes in the Arthur Sackler Collection*, Cambridge, Mass: Arthur M Sackler Foundation.

¹² Loehr, Max 1953: 48.

¹³ Thorp, Robert L 1988: 'Archaeology of Style at Anyang: Tomb 5 in Context,' *Archives of Asian Art* 41: 47-69—1985: 'The Growth of Early Shang Civilisation: New Data from Ritual Vessels,' *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45: 5-75.

¹⁴ Watson, William 1968: 'The Five Stages of Shang,' (Review of Max Loehr, *Ritual Vessels of Bronze Age China*), *Art News* 67.7 (November 1968): 42-47, 62-64.

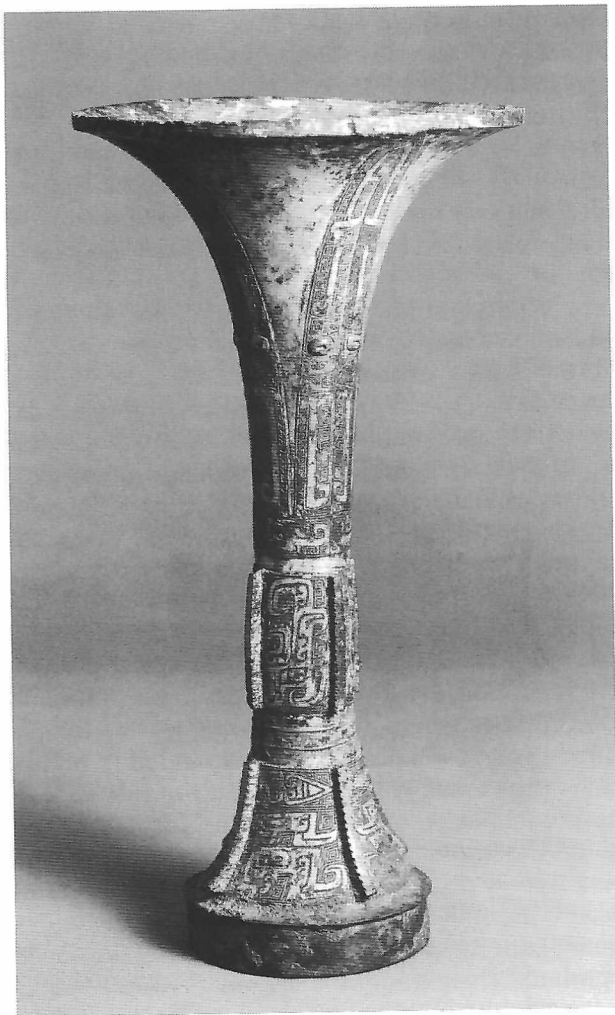


Figure 5 • A bronze gu, Late Shang period, Staatliches Museum für Volkerkunde (52-14-2), Munich. Photo courtesy of the museum



Figure 6 • A bronze square gu, late Shang period, Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst (C76.4), Köln. Photo courtesy of the museum and Rheinisches Bildarchiv

central plains. More recent archaeological evidence suggests that regional innovations and influence played an important role.

Loehr had criticised Karlgren's analysis on the grounds that the realistic animal forms which he assumed were the earliest forms of the *taotie* represented a fully developed bronze art. Loehr, on the other hand, assumed that neolithic painted pottery with geometric motifs would eventually prove to be the origin of Shang bronze art. Just as Karlgren assumed that realism must precede abstraction on theoretical grounds, Loehr was committed to a theoretical view that geometric design precedes abstraction. Thus, in *Ritual Vessels of Bronze Age China*, Loehr quoted Susanne K Langer's *Feeling and Form*:

"The fundamental forms which occur in the decorative arts of all ages and races—for instance, the circle, the triangle, the spiral, the parallel—are known as motifs of design. They are not art 'works,' not even ornaments, themselves, but they lend themselves to composition, and are therefore incentives to artistic creations ... A comparative study of decorative art and primitive representational art suggests forcibly that form is first, and the representational function accrues to it."¹⁵

Langer had not, however, made a comparative study: her position here was simply a theoretical, philosophical one.

¹⁵ Langer, Susanne K 1953: *Feeling and Form*, New York, 69-70.

An important concomitant of Loehr's thesis that Shang art derived from geometric design was that it could not have any symbolic or iconographic meaning. This question of the meaning of Shang bronze art is also one which has excited much interest and argument among western scholars. According to Loehr:

"If the ornaments on Shang bronzes came into being as sheer design, form based on form alone, configurations without reference to reality or, at best, with dubious allusions to reality, then, we are almost forced to conclude, they cannot have had any ascertainable meaning—religious, cosmological, or mythological—meaning, at any rate of an established literary kind."¹⁶

¹⁶ Loehr 1968: *Ritual Vessels of Bronze Age China*, New York.

¹⁷ Robert W Bagley in Fong, Wen C 1980: 'The Study of Chinese Bronze Age Arts: Methods and Approaches' in *The Great Bronze Age of China*, 20-34. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art: 101. See also Bagley 1987: 49 -50.

¹⁸ Karlgren, Bernhard 1930: 'Some Fecundity Symbols in Ancient China,' *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 2.

¹⁹ Ackerman, P 1945: *Ritual Bronzes of Ancient China*, New York.

²⁰ Hentze, Karl 1932: *Mythes et symboles lunaires*, Anvers. Hentze 1937: *Frühchinesische Bronzen und Kultdarstellungen*, Antwerp; Hentze 1941: *Die Sakralbronzen und ihre Bedeutung in den Frühchinesischen Kulturen*, 2 volumes, Antwerp.

²¹ Waterbury, Florence 1942: *Early Chinese Symbols and Literature: Vestiges and Speculations*, New York.

This denial of meaning has been passed down to Loehr's students, most prominently Robert Bagley, who has declared, "The history of the motif suggests that Shang decoration is an art of pure design, without any specific symbolism attaching to particular motifs. The later versions of both dragon and *taotie*, with their protean shapes and incessant permutations, would seem to bear out this suggestion which was first made by Max Loehr."¹⁷

In contrast to the Loehr school, a number of early attempts were made by western scholars to interpret the meaning of Shang bronze art, none of which are followed by modern scholarship. Karlgren himself wrote an early article on fecundity symbols in which he identified the cult of the earth god, *sbe*, as a phallic cult and identified the so-called 'bottle-horn' of the *kui*-dragon as a phallic representation.¹⁸ Similarly, Phyllis Ackerman's *Ritual Bronzes of Ancient China*,¹⁹ based on her studies of Near Eastern art, gave a prominent role to phallic symbols. Not only did Ackerman assume a common mode of thought between the Near East and China and interpret Chinese motifs accordingly, she believed in the diffusion of Near Eastern forms to China, as did many western writers of this period.

The most prolific early advocate of an iconographic interpretation of Shang bronze motifs was Carl Hentze. Hentze theorised that lunar myth and symbolism was fundamental to early Chinese religion. On bronzes, buffalo horns represented the moon because of their crescent shape. The *taotie* was also a lunar divinity, representing not death and darkness but the liberator of light and life. In later studies, he included the sun and star cults in his interpretations and he brought the Chinese materials together with those of American Indians in an attempt to find circum-Pacific cultural links.²⁰ Florence Waterbury, on the other hand, argued that the *taotie* was a tiger and a solar rather than a lunar deity.²¹

These interpretations have had very little influence on later scholars. One reason is that Loehr's argument that the *taotie* originated in abstraction and that zoomorphic representations are relatively late and unimportant in Shang art has been very influential. It is impossible to understand the *taotie* motif with its continual permutations as having any representational model and so it cannot be understood as the depiction of any particular animal or deity. Another reason is that neither the psychological and the diffusionist hypotheses were formulated upon an analysis of early Chinese culture. They are entirely theoretical, built up upon suppositions about early China without any evidence from contemporaneous inscriptions or archaeological evidence and, as evidence has accumulated subsequently, they have not found any support.

A more recent response to the problem of understanding the meaning of the *taotie* and other bronze motifs has been the use of anthropological analogy. This analogy is made with Native American art which, as Hentze observed early on, often looks very much like Shang art although it is much later in time. Both Jordan Paper and Elizabeth Childs-Johnson have argued that the *taotie* represents a shaman's mask. According to Paper, the *taotie* is a "horned, jawless mask with body or remnant of body symmetrically attached to each side." He also noted that such split animal designs are circum-Pacific in occurrence and that in America a special headdress with horns or feathers was characteristic of shamanistic garb, the horns—a male characteristic in animals—symbolizing



Figure 7 • A bronze ding, Late Shang period, Staatliches Museum für Volkerkunde (56-6-1), Munich (formerly von Lochow collection). Photo courtesy of the museum



Figure 8 • A bronze yi, Late Shang period, Museum Rietberg. Photo courtesy of the museum.

superior power.²² Childs-Johnson has also identified the *taotie* as a shaman's mask, stressing the mask's connotation of transformation of the spirit. In her analysis, she has also sought confirmation in the oracle bone inscriptions, citing, for example, the characters *gui* and *zhu* as evidence of the use of such masks in Shang times.²³

K C Chang's interpretations of Shang bronze motifs are well-known through publications in Chinese as well as English. Chang has also relied on anthropological analogy with Native American cultures, as well as citing later Chinese texts, such as the *Shanhaijing*, which may have their origins in earlier oral traditions. Chang's interpretation places particular emphasis on a group of bronzes in which a man is held in the mouth of a tiger, such as the famous *you* jar in the collection of the Cernuschi Museum, Paris, said to have come from Hunan province (figure 9) and the almost identical vessel in the Sumitomo Collection, Kyoto. The same theme also occurs at Anyang—on a *yue* axe from the tomb of Fu Hao and the handles of the Simu Wu *ding*, but the other excavated examples are southern.

Parallel motifs are found in America and are associated with the idea of an alter ego — *ie* a child is given an animal at birth by a shaman who then acts as his protector, helper, companion and alter ego. The jaguar was associated with the highest ruling class in South America and had a mythological particular significance. Thus, Chang suggests, the tiger may also refer to the king in China and the man-beast motif to the

king in his role of supreme shaman performing the act of crossing to the other world. Chang has further argued that the bronzes are decorated with mythological animals which served as agents of the shamans (*wu*) in communicating with the other world.²⁴

Western scholars have criticised Chang's analysis on a number of different grounds. One objection is that the bronzes upon which his analysis is based are characteristically southern and not representative of the Shang. Another is that there is no evidence for shamanism in Shang religion as known from the oracle bone inscriptions. Shamanism is usually understood as involving spirit travel or possession from which divine knowledge is obtained, but the cracks on the oracle bones were a physical manifestation of the spirits' will which performed the same function as a shaman's flight. With the discovery of the Liangzhu jades, this criticism is less powerful than it appeared earlier. They cannot prove the existence of shamanism in the Shang, but they do include a motif in which man and animal are combined and the human figure wears a feathered headdress, the characteristic garb of a shaman; and this motif may well be the origin of the *taotie*.²⁵ A further objection is an art-historical one: Chang's thesis that the bronzes are decorated with mythological animals implies that they are representations and he assumes a realistic prototype. In this regard, he has made use of the sequence of development determined by Li Chi that is similar to Karlgren's in assuming the priority of realism and rejected by most modern art historians.²⁶

In *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art and Cosmos in Early China*, I attempted to resolve the problem of the meaning of the *taotie* and other motifs on Shang bronzes and proposed a new hypothesis concerning the meaning of the *taotie* and other Shang bronze motifs.²⁷ In order to meet the objections raised against previous theories, any hypothesis should be able to: 1) account for the many permutations and transformations of the *taotie* in the Yinxu period; 2) make sense of the historical development of the *taotie* from the Erligang to the Yinxu period, and also from the earlier Liangzhu jade motifs which influenced the bronze motif; 3) relate the bronzes to Shang religion as known from oracle bone inscriptions and other archaeological remains.

A difficulty in attaching any particular meaning to the *taotie* as it appears

²² Paper, Jordan 1978: 'The Meaning of the T'ao-t'ieh,' *Journal of the History of Religions* 18.1: 18-41.

²³ Childs-Johnson, Elizabeth 1987: 'The Ancestor Spirit and Animal Mask in Shang Ritual Art,' paper prepared for the International Symposium on the Yin-Shang Culture of China, 10-16 September, 1987, Anyang.

²⁴ K C Chang's works on this topic in English include Chang 1981: 'The Animal in Shang and Chou Bronze Art,' *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41: 527-54; Chang 1983: *Art, Myth and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Yale University Press; Chang 1990: 'The Meaning of Shang Bronze Art,' *Asian Art* 3.2 (Spring 1990): 9-17.

²⁵ Li Xueqin 1993: 'Liangzhu Culture and the Shang Dynasty *taotie* motif,' in Roderick Whitfield 1993: 56-66.

²⁶ A summary and evaluation of the critiques of K C Chang's theories is given in Kesner, Ladislav 1991: 'Taotie Reconsidered: Meanings and Functions of Shang Theriomorphic Imagery,' *Artibus Asiae*, 41, 1/2: 29-53.

²⁷ Allan, Sarah 1991: *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art and Cosmos in Early China*, Albany, New York.

on Yinxu bronzes is that it is continually changing. Its only constant feature is a pair of eyes, either round animal eyes or human eyes with pupils. It normally has a nose, at least an upper jaw, often with two fang-like canine teeth, ears and/or horns. The horns are those of various animals, most commonly sheep, oxen and deer. Ears may replace horns above the eyes (which often have human eyebrows), either the round ears associated with a tiger, or pointed ears which are difficult to identify. Human ears may also be placed at the side of the head. The animal face may have two bodies attached on the sides, often making a visual pun of a split animal which is also two animals facing one another. These bodies are most often one-legged, suggesting a water creature, and may detach themselves to become separate dragons. Even the horns themselves may be transformed into dragons.

The *taotie* has many different permutations and there is no clear line which divides one type of *taotie* motif from another. Since further potential permutations are always implied, a comprehensive classification of the different types of the motif is not possible. Yet anyone acquainted with Shang bronze art, however superficially, can readily identify the motif. Furthermore, although the constant permutations suggest that no real or imaginary creature could have served as a model, it is clearly animalistic with an admixture of human features. Western scholars who have offered iconographic interpretations have suggested that it is an ox, a tiger, a lion-griffin (a mythological creature in ancient Iran) and a mythological deity; but since it has no definite form, all of these suggestions must be rejected as Loehr and his students have argued. How then are we to interpret it, or should we accept their argument that it is simply meaningless design? We should, I believe, look for a different kind of meaning.

Shang art has many features in common with other so-called primitive arts. Thus I have formulated an hypothesis concerning the nature of primitive art more generally in order to provide an interpretative framework. This involves a broader theory which encompasses the nature of myth and mythic thought. The characteristic feature of myth, as I have defined it, is that it breaches the boundaries of natural reality. It does so not because early men were unaware of the limitations of the natural world, but deliberately, in order to force a suspension of ordinary logic. The breach serves as a sign that the tale is sacred rather than mundane, with a meaning which transcends that of ordinary reality. Similarly, so-called primitive art breaches the boundaries of physical reality, combining parts of different creatures, stretching this and shrinking that, making flat what should be round or round what should be flat. Such art is not abstract or geometric, but neither is it representational.

Many scholars have noted that writing is essential for the development of historical as opposed to mythological thinking.²⁸ Clearly, the Shang had a fully developed writing system with a long history before the Yinxu Period from which we have extant oracle bone inscriptions. My argument is that it is not writing itself, but the development of a corpus of literature which changes the way men think. In Shang times, the uses of writing appear to have been limited primarily, at least, to divination and prayer. Although there may have been some other documents, literature only became extensive during the Zhou. Historical records allow man to recognise historical change by giving the past a definite form which cannot be reshaped as memory becomes weaker and events more distant. Literature also has another important aspect: it allows us to externalise our thoughts. Once written down, our ideas have a life of their own and we can think about them, criticise them and contemplate their reality. Thus, at a certain point, a mode of artistic representation develops in which art is secondary to concepts, illustrating ideas that are essentially verbal. Such art may be interpreted iconographically because the symbols refer to literal concepts, but in mythic art, the motifs derive directly from the structure of religious beliefs rather than secondarily from articulated ideas. They allude to themes which are also present in myth but do not depict them.

In Shang bronze art, the many permutations of the *taotie*, *kui*-dragon, and other motifs are characteristic of primitive art as I have understood it. The

²⁸ See, for example, Goody, Jack 1968 ed. *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, especially the paper by Jack Goody and Ian Watt, 'The Consequences of Literacy.'



Figure 9 • A bronze *you*, Late Shang period, Musée Cernuschi, Paris (MC6155)

²⁹ Allan 1991: 112-23.

wreak random violence on the Shang people because of any unfulfilled needs.²⁹ We should look then to this context of ritual sacrifice and food offerings to the spirits for our understanding of the motifs which decorate the bronzes.

Many scholars have noted that the horns and ears of the *taotie* are those of animals used in sacrifice, such as sheep, oxen, deer, and tigers and, as I mentioned above, the motif often includes human as well as animal elements, such as eyebrows and human ears or nose. Thus they have argued the *taotie* represents sacrifices. My argument is, however, that it alludes to these animals and the theme of sacrifice, but it does not represent them. The *taotie* is also in part a dragon. Dragons, which also stand as an independent motif, are associated with the Yellow Springs, the watery underworld of the dead. Commonly, the *taotie* has an open mouth or the upper jaw alone may be depicted. Since these are, after all, implements in a cult of food offerings to the spirits, this suggests a theme of eating.

K C Chang has noted that an open animal mouth signifies passage to the other world in many cultures and argued that the man-in-tiger mouth motif on the Cernuschi *you* represents the crossing of the shaman or shaman-king to the other world. Since the animal is a tiger (at least primarily, for even on this vessel the motif is an admixture of animals) and the tiger was the prototype of a man-eating animal in Chinese culture, we may more reasonably suppose that the passage implied is that of death. As mentioned above, Chang's theories have been criticised on the grounds that they rely heavily on a small group of bronzes, mostly from the south. If, however, we look at the motifs on *yue* axes, we find that the theme may be implied even where it is not depicted. One of Chang's examples is a *yue* from the tomb of Fu Hao in which a human head is held between two tigers (figure 10b). This appears to be a split version of the same motif and the bottom border of the motif is also the upper jaw of a tiger. Thus the blade descends from the tiger mouth, as it does in another example from the Fu Hao tomb in which the motif is a simple *taotie* (see figure 10c). *Yue* with only a human face or simply eyes, such as figures 10e and 10f,

techniques by which reality is violated include disjunctions in which parts of different animals are combined in a single image, double images in which two animals can be seen simultaneously as one, transformations in which one creature or one of its parts becomes another. With a few very rare exceptions, even on the most representational bronzes, realism is contradicted by incongruous features, such as the wings of owls becoming snakes or horns added to a human face. Since the motifs are continually changing, the artist is clearly not seeking to portray real or even imaginary creatures, but he does make use of the natural world in forming his images. If we look to the oracle bone inscriptions and other archaeological remains for the religious context in which these images should be interpreted, we can begin to understand something of their meaning.

Shang bronzes include vessels and weapons. The vessels are analogous to those used by the living, but they were used to feed the dead or, in the case of water vessels, for ritual purification before offerings were made. Weapons are decorated with the same motifs as the vessels and were used for killing, either symbolically if they were ritual weapons, or actually. They include such types as *yue* axes used specifically for the killing of sacrificial victims and *ge*, also used for beheading (as in the character *fā*), either in ritual sacrifice or in warfare (which was in any case a means of garnering sacrificial victims). This cult of sacrifice was the focus of Shang religion, and I have argued that the entire system of oracle bone divination was intended to determine the appropriate sacrifices to the spirits so that they would not

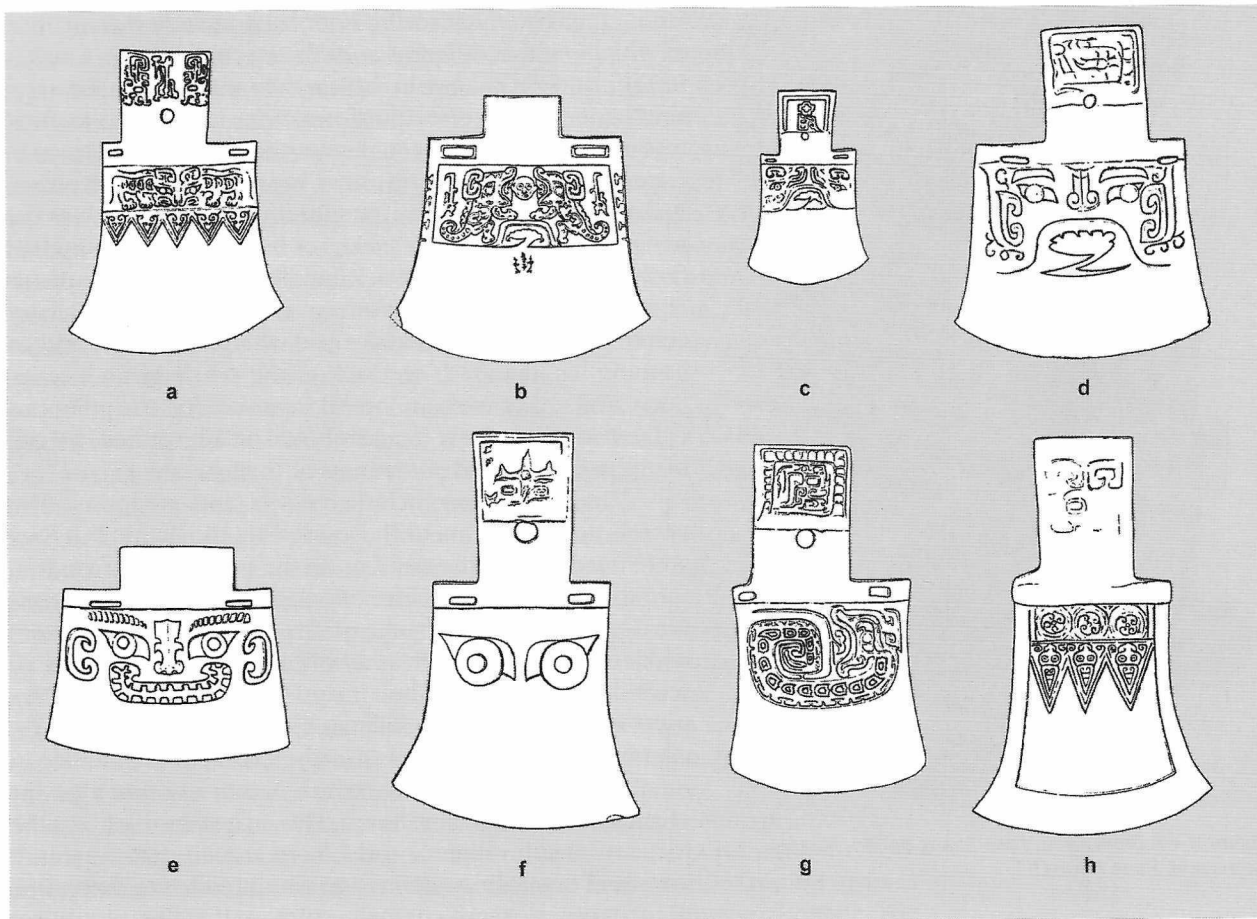


Figure 10 • Examples of bronze yue axes of the Shang period

may also be an abbreviation of this same theme, in which eating, killing and sacrifice are all associated.

Shang bronze motifs include allusions to a certain number of animals which were not used in sacrifice, such as snakes, cicadas, owls and elephants. Significantly, these animals are ones with unusual natural features that are used in many cultures throughout the world for their metaphoric value. Snakes are poisonous, slough their skins as they revive after hibernation and cause a physiological reaction of fear in all higher primates. The cicada burrows in the roots of trees, the number of years varying according to the species, and sheds its skin several times before emerging as a pupa and transforming itself into a flying insect. A more dramatic metaphor for transformation after death is difficult to imagine. Owls, associated in later Chinese folklore with death and therefore a bad omen, are birds of prey who come out at night. Animals such as these also suggest the themes of death and passage to the other world. The elephant, on the other hand, is the largest of all land animals and with his strange trunk appears almost supernatural, to breach the bounds of normal reality. In sum, although the motifs on the bronzes cannot be interpreted in the 'traditional literary sense' as iconography or understood in detail, they do make sense as allusions to the passage of death, eating and sacrifice, which was the central focus of Shang religion in which they functioned as vessels and weapons. The motifs are not representations, but their strange language allows the boundary between living and dead to be transcended.

Clearly, this complex imagery is not present in the Erligang period motif in which the *taotie* consists of two staring eyes, the suggestion of an animal face, and undefined bodies on each side. However, this interpretation allows us to make sense of the manner in which the *taotie* develops. All of the allusions

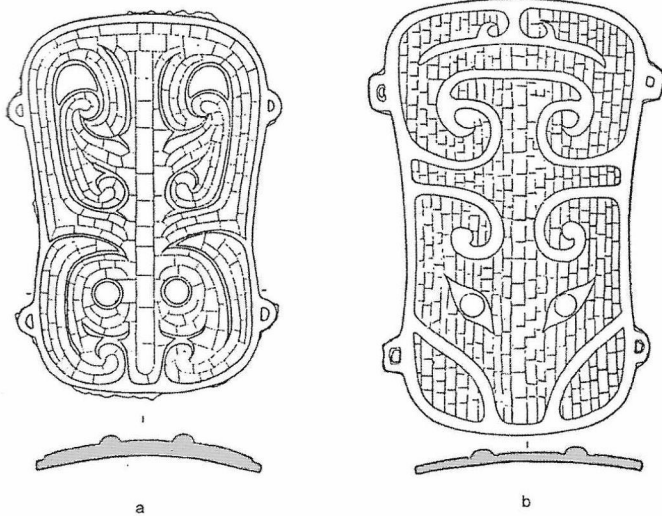


Figure 11 • Bronze plaques inlaid with turquoise, the Erlitou culture, c.1900 BC

present in the later forms are not present in the Erligang period, but the early motif contains the seeds of the later complex imagery. The two staring eyes in the face of an animal—which is suggested but not clearly defined in the early motif—simply allude to the other world, that which sees, but cannot be seen or known precisely. As time passes, the motif is elaborated with familiar themes in Shang religion to become a more complex imagery alluding to the passage to the other world, as I have described briefly above. Such techniques as disjunction and continual permutation and a more precise form of double imagery replace the lack of clear definition in the earlier form. We can no longer, furthermore, see the *taotie* as beginning in the Erligang period and imagine, as Loehr did, that its origin was geometric design. Indeed, its ultimate origin appears to be the man and animal motif

of Liangzhu jades. Bronzes were extremely crude in the Erlitou period and so largely undecorated (technological limitations may also account in part for the simplicity of the Erligang motif). However, even at Erlitou, a prototype of the *taotie* motif occurs on bronze plaques inlaid with turquoise (figure 11).

The theoretical nature of any interpretative framework for bronze motifs means that no analysis can be more than a plausible hypothesis, and my interpretations have proved no less contentious than earlier theories. My analysis began with the hypothesis that the bronzes do have meaning and attempted to discover what that meaning might be in the context of what we know about Shang religion and the ritual function of the bronzes. Robert Bagley, in a colloquy held in London in June 1990, argued that this involves an *a priori* assumption of meaning and that the *taotie* and other motifs on Shang bronzes may be ornament without any particular religious meaning. In a similar vein, Jessica Rawson argued that the *taotie* is a status marker. I accept that my argument is based on a premise of meaning, but I believe that such an assumption is more logical than the contrary premise that they are formal design without meaning. The motifs are not geometric abstractions even in their earliest stages. They clearly incorporate allusions to animals and people in a manner makes sense in terms of the ritual function of the bronzes in the Shang sacrificial cult and Shang religious beliefs more generally as known from contemporaneous inscriptions. Moreover, although participation in sacrifices which use bronze ritual artifacts was an elite activity, the suggestion that the *taotie* motif *per se* is associated with social or political status is purely theoretical. It is not supported by the pattern of occurrence of the motif itself.³⁰

³⁰ Allan, Sarah 1993.

Just as Shang bronzes have been more highly regarded by western collectors than those of the Zhou, western scholars have, in general, been less interested in Zhou bronzes than those of the Shang. In *Yin and Chou in Chinese Bronzes*, Karlgren stressed the continuity of the early Western Zhou with the Shang and used his inscriptional analysis to define the reign of King Mu as the critical period in which Yin-Zhou style ceded to the Zhou. In her study of the Western Zhou bronzes in the Sackler collection, Jessica Rawson has taken up this theme, deeming the change of decorative motifs and the loss of certain vessel types, such as the *jue* and *gu*, in King Mu's reign as a 'ritual revolution.'³¹

A more sophisticated account of the changes which took place at the beginning of the Western Zhou has recently been offered by Wu Hung in his *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture*. By carefully analysing the evolution of inscription formulae, Wu Hung demonstrates a gradual change of the ritual and social function of bronze vessels at the beginning of the Zhou. Thus, he sees the increasing patternisation of Zhou bronze styles as reflecting

³¹ Rawson, Jessica 1990: *Western Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections*, Cambridge, Mass: Arthur M Sackler Foundation.

a change of emphasis from ancestor to living devotee and from temple to palace, reflected in both bronze inscriptions and ritual practice.³²

³² Wu Hung 1995: *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 53-63, 77-78.

Conclusion

In the last 20 years, Chinese archaeology has spread across the country and Shang bronzes have been found in almost every province, many of them from the early period of the dynasty. These finds have outstripped the materials in western collections and the study of Chinese bronzes is now at a critical juncture. Entirely new theoretical models are required to account for this archaeological evidence. These are some examples of current problems:

- Shang and Zhou bronze art can no longer be seen as a self-generating stylistic evolution which took place on the central plains and spread from there outward. A new, non-linear model which can explain the stylistic interplay between the central plains and other contemporaneous cultures is required.
- The only model for stylistic development of bronze motifs in the Shang period remains that of Max Loehr. However, we now know that all of his five styles were fully developed at the beginning of the Yinxu period, so that there is no longer any stylistic model for the development of bronze decoration at Yinxu.
- Most scholars now accept that there was a connection between the man and animal motif on Liangzhu jades and the *taotie*, but how this transformation took place stylistically remains unclear and its implications for the interpretation of the *taotie* have not been fully explored.