



Preface

Copper is the earliest known metal to have been used by humankind. As early as the late Neolithic Age, ancient people discovered natural copper, which has a pink-golden color and luster and high ductility. They cherished the metal and used it to make small accessories and knives. But copper is not hard enough to be used in a wide range of applications. Later, people mastered the technology of smelting copper from its ore and adding suitable amounts of tin or lead to increase its hardness and lower its melting point. The processed metal was easier to cast and resistant to abrasion, and could be used in manufacturing craftsmen's tools, household utensils and weapons. The alloy produced is what we now call bronze.

The introduction of bronze ware marks an important leap in the history of civilization. Bronze ware changed people's living and working conditions, and greatly improved society's productivity. As a result, industry and all aspects of society experienced profound transformations. From that moment, human society ended the Neolithic Period and entered into the new Bronze Age.

Most of the numerous surviving bronze wares in China have come from archeological excavation. Some were discovered in ancient times and treasured until today, but many more have been unearthed in modern archeological digs.



CHINESE BRONZE WARE

In contrast to the Bronze Age cultures of other countries and regions, ancient China attached great religious and political significance to bronze ware. Through the monopoly of raw bronze materials and smelting and foundry technology, the ruling classes cast bronze ware in various forms representing their military power and wealth.

The discovery and utilization of bronze also opened up new areas for artistic creation. In the Shang (c. 1600–c. 1046 BC) and Western Zhou (c. 1046–c. 771 BC) dynasties, the variety of forms, the enormous volume, the mystery and complexity of patterns and the abundance of inscriptions on bronze ware had a spiritual meaning that artwork created from different materials could not achieve. Bronze art, therefore, represented the next stage of artistic development following the colored pottery of the primitive society of ancient China.



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Song Li
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Bronze Age



CHINESE BRONZE WARE

The term “Bronze Age” can be traced back to the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1836, Danish scholar C. J. Thomsen (1788–1865), the first curator of the National Museum of Denmark, defined a time sequence of three comparatively independent ages: the Stone Age (Neolithic), Bronze Age (including brass), and Iron Age. This chronology was gradually accepted by archeologists and historians.

Archeological investigation shows that most ancient peoples experienced the Bronze Age. In Egypt, bronze ware first appeared in the Middle Kingdom period (2133–1786 BC) and reached its peak in the New Kingdom period (1567–1085 BC). In Mesopotamia, bronze ware appeared in the First Dynasty of Ur (c. 2700–2371 BC) and prevailed in the Third Dynasty of Ur (c. 2133–2006 BC). The Bronze Age of the Indus Valley occurred in the period of Harappan Culture (c. 2350–1750 BC).

China’s Bronze Age endured for 1,800 years from the Xia (c. 2070–1600 BC) and Shang (1600–1046 BC) to the Zhou (1046–256 BC, including Western and Eastern Zhou) dynasties, and thus occurred later than in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. However, China’s bronze ware holds a unique position in the history of civilization compared to the rest of the world, thanks to its remarkable variety, distinct forms and sophisticated metallurgical technologies.

According to ancient literature, records of the excavation and appreciation of bronze ware of the said three dynasties began to appear in the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 25). Following the boom in sigillography (the study of seals and signets) in the Song Dynasty (960–1276), the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) witnessed the zenith of the study and textual criticism of bronze ware, producing drawings and catalogues of ancient bronze ware, and undertaking extensive research on inscriptions, patterns, forms, structures, names and production years. Research into inscriptions, forms and structures through mutual



verification between inscribed wording and historic classics was all-encompassing in this period. However, the study of large quantities of bronze ware from the perspective of art history began with research on stage division and style evolution, of which the foundation was laid in the 1930s. Modern science and archeology explain much more – the social, political, economic and cultural background of the origin and development of ancient bronze ware – corroborated with literature and evidence for the motivation for production. This has allowed more profound understanding of the Chinese Bronze Age.

Bronze Ware in the Xia Dynasty

The ancient Chinese believed that the origin of bronze ware was mysterious and sacred. Many vivid myths and legends about the origin of bronze were recounted during the ancient dynasties. At present, the earliest bronze ware to have been discovered in China are the bronze knives and bronze ware relics, cast in 3000 BC, which were unearthed in Dongxiang, Gansu in 1975.



Xia. *Jue*
 20.7 cm high. Unearthed in
 Erlitou, Yanshi, Henan in 1984.
 (Collection of the Archeological
 Research Institute of the Chinese
 Academy of Social Sciences.)

The ancient Chinese regarded sacrificial bronze cooking vessels as the most noble. Ancient literature indicates that the earliest casting of bronze *ding* (a cauldron with tripod legs) started in 2070 BC, the beginning of the Xia Dynasty, the first national regime in Chinese history. It is said that Yu, the founder of the Xia, and his son Qi issued decrees to cast nine large bronze *ding*. They were later passed down through the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties.



CHINESE BRONZE WARE

The Xia Dynasty's 470-year-long reign was a period of growth and expansion in Chinese bronze art. However, a preceding period of more than twenty centuries passed between the discovery and use of natural copper and the development of bronze smelting and bronze production.

Archeological discoveries from the Xia Dynasty chiefly include the late period of Henan's Longshan Culture (2700–2100 BC) and the Yanshi Erlitou Culture (1800–1600 BC), situated in today's middle and western Henan and southern Shanxi provinces.

Many Xia Dynasty bronze artifacts were excavated from these sites, including artisans' tools like knives, chisels, awls and barbs; weapons such as dagger-axes, axes, arrowheads; vessels such as *jue* (an ancient wine vessel with three legs and a loop handle), *gu* (beaker), *he* (ancient utensil) and other containers. However, traditional *ding* were not found.

In the Xia Dynasty, bronze ware was made using forms of pottery as a model. Some bronze *jue* and *he* unearthed at the Erlitou site are similar in shape to their pottery counterparts. However, over time, bronze ware moved away from pottery forms and structures, forging its own independent designs.

The production of quite sophisticated bronze *jue* and other vessels indicates that the Xia made great progress in bronze-casting technology. A mold with the intended shapes was first made from clay for casting. A single mold was enough for casting simple items like knives and arrowheads. Two molds were required for more complicated pieces. For vessels like *jue* and *ding*, several molds and inner molds were necessary and some accessory components had to be welded together.

The Xia Dynasty's bronze vessels seldom have simple patterns. On the contrary, the excavated bronze plates of the

Erlitou Relics

The Erlitou Relics site, located at Erlitou Village, Yanshi, Henan Province, was discovered in 1959. For a long time, there were two opinions about the Erlitou Culture in academic circles: some experts believed Phase I to Phase IV of the Erlitou Relics were part of the cultural relics of the Xia Dynasty (2070–1600 BC) and the site where the relics were discovered was the capital of Xia. Others believed Phase I and II were cultural relics of the Xia Dynasty, but Phase III and Phase IV were relics of the Shang Dynasty (1600–1100 BC) and the site was the capital of Shang. With completion of the Xia and Shang chronology project, most scholars accepted that the major part of Erlitou Culture dated to the time of the Xia Dynasty and Erlitou was the capital of the middle and late Xia Dynasty.



BRONZE AGE



Xia. Bronze Plate Decorated with Inlaid Turquoise
 16.5 cm long. Unearthed in Erlitou, Yanshi, Henan
 in 1984. It is the earliest discovery of a *taotie* image.
 Several pieces of similar works were found with the
 image varying slightly. (Collection of the Archeological
 Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social
 Sciences.)

same period, displaying elaborate designs and complicated turquoise mosaics, are considered the most exquisite artwork created by the Xia's bronze artisans.

The bronze plates, unearthed from tombs of noble families and found at the owners' waists, are rectangular with rounded edges and corners and slightly narrower in the middle. The plate, having two loops on each side, is presumed to be an ornament that was sewn onto hemp clothes or used as an amulet to protect against evils or devils.

Nearly a hundred finely polished turquoise pieces were closely arranged to form a bulging-eyed *taotie* (a mythical ferocious animal) through rigid design and calculation. This is an early form of the *taotie* theme, which became the dominant decoration on bronze ware in the following Shang and Zhou dynasties.

Jewel-inlaid bronze ware has the beautiful name of "gold inlaid with jade." The combination of jewels and bronze enriched the form and ornamentation of bronze ware. This technology was constantly developing from this period and was prevalent in the later Spring and Autumn (770–476 BC) and Warring States (475–221 BC) periods, contributing to the brilliant, decorative appearance of the bronze ware of those times.

The Xia Dynasty's bronze plates demonstrate that China's bronze ware casting techniques had entered a mature period



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very early in its development. Craftsmen not only focused on the practical use of these items, but also pursued explicit aesthetic intentions.

Bronze Ware in the Shang Dynasty

The Shang Dynasty was established in 1600 BC under the leadership of Tang, chief of the eastern tribes, following the end of the Xia Dynasty. The dynasty lasted for around 600 years. After frequent relocations of the capital in the early period, Emperor Pan Geng moved it to Yin (today's Anyang, Henan) in 1300 BC and it remained there for 273 years. Emperor Wu Ding succeeded to the throne in 1250 BC, marking the heyday of the Shang Dynasty. Historians regard the period before King Wu Ding's reign as the early Shang Dynasty and the period during and after King Wu Ding as the late Shang Dynasty.

Unearthed bronze ware in Zhengzhou, Henan, the capital of the early Shang Dynasty, included intact one-meter-high, 82 kg squares that were made at that time. The late Shang Dynasty witnessed the first culmination of China's bronze art. Thousands of bronze pieces excavated from the Yin Ruins (Yinxu) were found to be intact in many varieties and diverse shapes, with beautiful patterns and sophisticated casting, showcasing the maturity of the Shang Dynasty's bronze ware art. In addition, much bronze ware cast in the late Shang Dynasty was also unearthed in Hebei, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Shandong, An'hui and Liaoning provinces. South of the Yangtze River valley, a bronze culture close to the Shang Culture, but with intense local color, was also discovered at Sanxingdui Site, Guanghan, Sichuan, and Dayangzhou Site, Xingan, Jiangxi, and some other sites in Hunan.

During the world's early civilized period, bronze was mostly used in casting artisans' tools and utilitarian items. However,



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Shang. *Ding*
95 cm high. Unearthed in
Dayangzhou, Xingan, Jiangxi,
in 1989. (Collection of Jiangxi
Museum.)

CHINESE BRONZE WARE

China’s bronze ware had unique features. After the development of a class society, utensils, wine and water vessels and other daily ware were exclusively owned by social elites, resulting in their functions evolving into ritual and divine ware for sacrifices, banquets, funerals and so forth.

As members of a dynasty worshipping immortals and spirits, the nobles and rulers of Shang always prayed for a better future, for enlightenment and the blessing of deities and ancestors. In frequent and important sacrifices, bronze ware played a crucial role: various bronze wine vessels, such as different-sized *jue*, *zun* and *you* filled with wine were displayed on the altar; cooked meals were served in

Anyang Yin Ruins
The Yin Ruins are located on both banks of Huanhe River, northwest suburb of Anyang, Henan Province. It was developed into a grand capital of about 30 sq km in total with 273 years of development from Emperor Pan Geng who moved the capital to Yin to Shang's last Emperor Xin. In the 1890s, oracle bone inscriptions were found in Yin Ruins. Since 1928, all-round and continuous archeological efforts have been made in Yin Ruins. A palace, workshop and tombs were found and a vast number of oracle bones, bronze ware and jade ware were unearthed.



Shang. Chixiao You
19.7 cm high. Unearthed from Erlangpo, Shilou, Shanxi Province in 1957. (Collection of Shanxi Museum.)

