

CHAPTER ONE

WEN DING: GAGING THE WEIGHT OF POLITICAL POWER

THE PRIMARY SYMBOLS OF KINGSHIP IN EARLY CHINA

Civilization represents the “overarching social order in which state governance exists and is legitimized” (Baines and Yoffee 1998:254). In early states and civilizations, the transmission of aristocratic knowledge of their core symbols and exclusive access to them were the primary concerns of the elite class and elite culture. Core symbols, along with the knowledge and narratives associated with them, not only resonate with a coherent synthesis of meaning, but also embody social order itself.

This book links the concept of social memory to physical landscape and political power, using a broad perspective to analyze how the manipulation of symbols created the foundation for legitimacy in early China (Connerton 1989; Fentress and Wickham 1992; Alcock 2002; Ricoeur 2004; Davis 2007; Yoffee 2007; Mills and Walker 2008). By examining the emergence of exclusive symbols that represented political and ritual authority in early China, I will analyze the state formation process and the development of the overarching social orders that defined the early *Sandai* civilization. This investigation into the cultural and symbolic representations of kingship and statecraft involves a syncretic approach which aims to address the “originality of China” in the anthropological study of states and civilizations (Berr 1930). The aim is “not to spot something essentially Chinese in its earliest manifestations, but to show

how a notion of a distinct and lasting cultural identity gained momentum in a certain place and time” (Schaberg 2001:505).

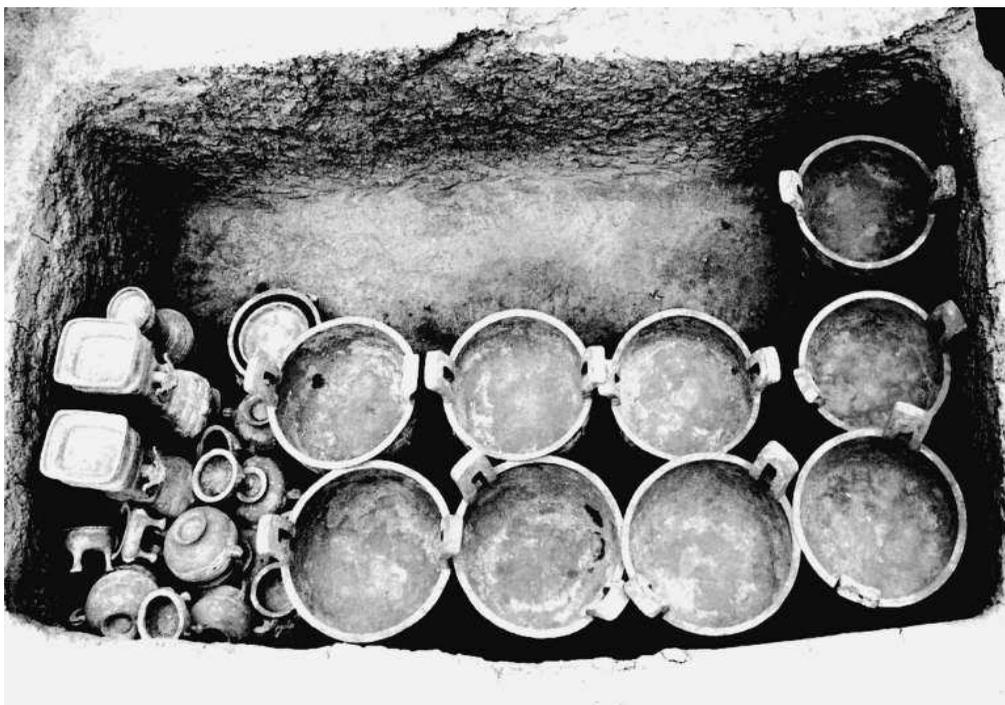
Although not explicitly defined, the notion of core symbols for representing kingship and legitimacy runs throughout the historical narratives of early China in the first millennium BCE. The most famous rhetorical connection between symbols and political authority is attributed to a 606 BCE exchange recorded in *Zuo zhuan* between a Zhou noble and a Chu king in the suburb of Luoyang, the center of the Zhou world:

The Master of Chu attacked the Rong of Luhun, and consequently reached the Luo River. He drilled his troops at the border of Zhou. King Ding sent Wangsun Man to honor the exertions of the Master of Chu. The latter asked about the size and weight of the bronze *ding* vessels [in Zhou royal palace]. Wangsun Man replied, “Size and weight depend on virtue, not on the *ding* vessels. In the past, just when Xia possessed virtue, men from afar depicted various creatures, and the nine superintendents submitted metal, so that the *ding* vessels were cast with images of various creatures. The hundred things were therewith completely set forth, and the people thus knew the spirits and the evil things ... Thus, [the Xia people] were able to harmonize with those above and below them and to receive Heaven’s blessings. The last Xia king, Jie, possessed dimmed virtue, and the *ding* vessels were moved to the house of Shang, there to remain for six hundred years. The last Shang king, Zhòu, was violent and tyrannical, and the *ding* vessels were moved to the house of Zhou. When virtue is bright and resplendent, the bronze *ding* vessels, though small, are heavy. When virtue is distorted, dimmed, and confused, the *ding* vessels, though large, are light. Heaven blesses those of bright virtue, giving them the place for realizing and maintaining it. When King Cheng put the *ding* vessels in place at Jiayu, he divined about the number of generations and got thirty; he divined about the number of years and got seven hundred. This is what Heaven has commanded. Although Zhou virtue is in decline, the heavenly command has not yet changed. The question of whether the *ding* vessels are light or heavy may not be asked yet. (adapted from translation by Durrant et al. 2016: Lord Xuan 3.3)

In his rebuttal against the Chu challenges to the Zhou royal power, the Zhou storyteller articulated the dynastic historiography in its most condensed form, seamlessly merging together food, ritual, technology, and historical conceptions of time and space in the biography of the legendary *ding* vessels. These bronze vessels permeated all aspects of civilization as presented in the classical tradition and the Zhou possession of them marks its exclusive claim to kingship and legitimacy (Figures 1.1 and 1.2). The Chu’s expression of covetousness for these legendary vessels was perceived as an ultimate challenge to the Zhou’s claim to the Mandate of Heaven.



1.1. The bronze *ding* vessel sponsored by Prince Zi Wu. Also known as Zi Geng (d. 552 BCE), Zi Wu was a son of King Zhuang – the Chu king featured in the *Wen Ding* story. Measuring 76 cm high and 66 cm in diameter, this vessel is the largest of a set of seven *ding* vessels excavated from the elite tomb M2 at Xiasi, Xichuan, a Chu cemetery of the middle to late Spring and Autumn period. (Image courtesy of National Museum of China.)



1.2. A set of nine bronze *ding* vessels excavated from a ritual dedication pit (T602K15) sponsored by the rulers of the Zheng state during the Spring and Autumn period (after Henansheng 2006, vol. III, Color Plate 5).

This famous story in *Zuo zhuan* gave rise to the phrase *wen ding* (問鼎), an inquiry on the tripod vessels. The concept of *wen* (asking) was endowed with multiple layers of meaning – inquiry, divinity, and contest, which concerns the exclusive access to the pathway toward political authority. At the same time, understanding *wen ding* as an inquiry addressed in the form of divination to these bronze tripod vessels identifies them as sources for political wisdom and mediums of religious communication (Chang 1983). For the next two millennia, the phrase *wen ding* was used as a verb in the Chinese language, epitomizing the ultimate challenge to legitimacy by characterizing both the pursuit of and contention with political authority. The symbolic significance of this story for early China resembles that of the Palette of King Narmer in Egyptology, which serves as an ideal point of entry for investigating the rise of kingship (Chang 1983; Wu 1995).

As we approach the cultural assumptions of these stories, “it was the invention and manipulation of those stories,” Pines et al. (2014b:13) argue, “rather than their historic ‘truth,’ which mattered most.” These questions thus summarize this book’s central concern: What made the *wen ding* story such a compelling representation of power to the learned elite of classical and imperial China? Why did possession of these core symbols and use of this rhetoric collectively define the ideology of kingship? How did social memory and state formation contribute to the emergence of these primary symbols? Using the *wen ding* narrative as a lens to observe the diverse aspects of early China’s political evolution, this book aims to explore the process through which diverse manifestations of political authority were forged together into a single, coherent narrative of the historiography of power. To borrow a term from Foucault (1972), I hope to offer an archaeology of knowledge on the emergence and transformation of these legendary bronze vessels, from culinary wares to symbols of kingship, within the contexts of changing techniques, technologies, and political structures.

THE RITUALIZATION OF POWER

In the *wen ding* story, the Zhou storyteller skillfully manipulated a historical lore that wove together the notions of power in its temporal, spatial, and technological manifestations. While it is a retroactive narrative about what the core symbols *should be* (Wu 1995:10), *Zuo zhuan* and its intended readers operate within an overarching cultural order shared by the cultured elite of Zhou society. Within this classical tradition, the place of the *wen ding* story closely resembles Mauss’s notion of total social phenomenon (or social facts), which pervaded every sector of culture in early China, simultaneously expressing a great many institutions, and at once “juridical, economic, religious, and even aesthetic and morphological” (Mauss 1990:79). Using the *wen ding* story as my

archaeological trowel, I will examine the cultural, political, and technological assumptions that made the story so compelling in the cultural milieu of Zhou society, hoping to unravel the complex entanglement of power and knowledge in early China.

The *wen ding* narrative assumes a tripod form, much like that of the *ding* vessel itself: the practice of bronze metallurgy, a historical concept of civilization, and a Central Plains-centric ideology of political landscape. These notions of form, materiality, time, and space become integral parts of the *ding* symbol through the process of ritualization – the transformation from a common utensil to an exclusive “ritual vessel,” the recognition of certain raw materials as sacred, or the identification of a specific place in the landscape as the *axis mundi* (Bell 1992, 1997; Wu 1995).

Ritualization, kingship, and power are intricately connected. As Bell (1992:140–41) put it: “Ritualizing schemes invoke a series of privileged oppositions that, when acted in space and time through a series of movements, gestures, and sounds, effectively structure and nuance an environment ... Ritualization always aligns one within a series of relationship linked to the ultimate sources of power.” In the *wen ding* narrative, each ritualization process was framed in a distinct temporal, geographical, and technological history, converging within the larger framework of prehistoric social interactions that led toward the rise of the classical tradition in which works like *Zuozhuan* were produced and transmitted. This discussion on diverse aspects of ritualization will serve as the roadmap for my archaeological inquiry on the emergence and changing configuration of this knowledge leading up to Zhou society.

The Ritualization of Food and Culinary Vessels

The bronze *ding* vessels were the primary meat-cooking vessels of the classical tradition; together with the cattle-based domestic animal set, they constituted defining attributes of the culinary tradition in classical China. Ranking high on the list of ritual institutions in early China, this culinary tradition included food techniques, ritual bronze vessels, feasting, ritual offerings of animals, cereal food, and alcoholic beverages (Chang 1977, 1983; Sterckx 2005). Serving protocols and the symbolism attached to the vessels are as important as the food contained within; thus all three constitute important attributes of the classical tradition (Chang 1977). In the classical narratives, e.g. *Zuozhuan* and *Shiji*, the extent to which the bronze *ding* vessels possess the aura of wealth and kingship delimits classical civilization: those who did not adopt the symbolism – either by deliberate refusal or through simple lack of awareness – resided beyond the geographic extent of civilization.

The ritualization of food vessels must be approached as part of a study of food techniques, which involves meals, cooking, utensils, food ideologies,

condiments, and drinks (Mauss 2006:115). Many ritual protocols described in early Chinese texts deal with food techniques – the preparation of food, the fermentation of alcohol, the arrangement of the dishes, the instruments of consumption, and formalized seating – that left abundant archaeological imprints in mortuary contexts through food remains and culinary assemblages (Chang 1977; Yu and Gao 1978–79; Appadurai 1986; Okamura 2005; Falkenhausen 2006). Important to the process of socialization was an awareness of an embodied cultural order and protocols involving food vessels and culinary techniques.

These techniques manipulated “materiality, artificiality, the appropriation of nature, the production of goods and the application of knowledge, usually augmented with references to society, culture or civilization” (Schlanger 2006:2). Techniques are socially produced and always embedded in a symbolic system (Lemonnier 1993:22). They played a meaningful role in the social transmission of knowledge and in shaping the world’s everyday experience.¹ Techniques connect individuals with cultures and society by reproducing the cultural milieu and social relationships in the context of storytelling:

The resident master craftsman and the traveling journeymen worked together in the same rooms; and every master had been a traveling journeyman before he settled down in his hometown or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place. (Benjamin 1968:85)

Techniques imbued objects with cultural memory, crafting a biography of things and a history of techniques that bridges archaeological remains and social history.

Symbols of authority embedded in and elaborated from food techniques and daily practices are deeply penetrating – they make the social order associated with them appear as a natural extension of human experience. While exclusive association with the production and maintenance of high culture like the bronze *ding* vessels made inner elites the focus and repository of civilizational meaning, food symbols derive part of their power from their capacity to evoke a collective response in everyday practice. They are rooted in and respond to the basic structural principles embedded in practices and bodily techniques:

The use of oral symbols is but one case of the use of symbols: any traditional practice, endowed with a form and transmitted through that form, can in some measure be regarded as symbolic. When one generation hands down to the next the technical knowledge of its manual and bodily actions, as much authority and social tradition is involved as when transmission occurs through language. In this there is truly tradition, and continuity. (Mauss 2006:76)

From these daily rituals and their associated material manifestations, the emerging political authority took up its elementary forms and designs for elaboration. These food vessels were the foci of social life and the carriers of social memory, thereby connecting the everyday culinary practice with the ultimate symbol of power (Henansheng 2013).

Food is an important means of engaging with the ancestors and deities in ancestral rituals (Ahern 1981). Food also binds people to their faiths through powerful links between food and memory (Feeley-Harnik 1994, 1995). Through its association with supernatural beings and processes, food can be sacred. The storyteller's statement about a vessel's ritual qualities echoes the nearly universal property of food vessels as observed by Mauss (2006:110): "Almost all pots have symbolic values ... Very often the pot has a soul, the pot is a person. Pots are kept in a specific place, and they can often constitute objects of considerable religious importance." Defying a strict opposition of the symbolic versus utilitarian, every pot, no matter how modest in construction and material, could potentially serve as a "ritual vessel," or at least the focus of ritual attention.

Whereas textual and verbal discourse was lost to the passage of time, the deeply engrained realms of food techniques and culinary vessels offer a window on to past cultural choices and their power relations. These culinary traditions concerning forms, aesthetics, techniques, ritual order, and gift transactions did not directly engage political authority; yet, they constitute cultural realms in which political authority could act. Through ritual use, the bronze *ding* vessels became the focus of the ritual economy – "the material, the shape, the decoration, and the inscriptions of these bronzes were meant to attest to something entirely beyond the range of ordinary experience, to demonstrate that the vessels, as *liqi* or ritual paraphernalia, were sacred and unworldly" (Wu 1995:70).

Within this tradition, bronze *ding* vessels represent the legitimate forms for engaging with ancestral ritual and "embodying and consolidating the web of social relationships" (Wu 1995:71). The display of these vessels lends weight to the social reproduction and negotiation at work in the community's major gatherings, e.g. ancestral veneration, rites of passage, weddings, and alliance-making (Rawson 1999a; Childs-Johnson 2012, 2014). Their use for divination in the *wen ding* narrative further attests to these potent vessels' religious efficacy.

While eating "embodies desirability within an historical food tradition" (Hastorf 2017:10), the culinary vessels chosen for the occasion were also historically contextualized. The ritualization of *ding* vessels as the symbol of kingship must be approached within the full culinary assemblage in use at the time, particularly their relation to their conventional counterparts – the pottery *li* tripod vessels, which were reserved for mundane household cooking in Shang and Zhou society. Although the code of conduct is more politically situated for elite feasting or ritual sacrifices involving the use of bronze *ding* vessels, social demarcation and identification are often present in simple and unconscious

matters, because even the most mundane episodes of daily consumption are deeply laden with cultural meanings and classification schemes.

The parallel history of the *ding* and *li* vessels throughout Shang and Zhou society attests to the cultural and political choices entailed in ritualization. Both the Shang and Zhou culinary traditions, for example, prepared the daily meal with the pottery *li* vessels. The choice of the *ding* vessel as the ritual vessel, therefore, did not necessarily arise from an elaboration of the utilitarian *li* pottery ware used by mainstream society. If the ritual vessels preserved social memory, whose memory was commemorated in this choice of ritual vessel form? How did the *ding* vessel form, among a variety of vessel forms used in early China, come to symbolize wealth, kingship, and the center of the known world, while others like the *li* tripod vessel did not?

These questions underscore the plurality of prehistoric traditions, wherein the rise of the classical tradition embraced competition among multiple histories and narratives. In this historic process, the symbols associated with different networks of power rose and fell with changing political fortunes. The emergence of a set of core symbols out of these complex interactions amounts to a tectonic shift in the political and cultural landscape, which could not have materialized without some repercussions. Tracing the biography of these vessel forms through time and space helps reveal the historic process that gave the hegemonic discourse its distinct shape.

The Ritualization of Metallurgy

Technology encompasses the objects' production processes, including shared (or secret) human knowledge (Miller 2007:4). In the *wen ding* narrative, metallurgy marks a new epoch and delineates political space. In early imperial works like *Yue jue shu*, authors on the evolution of early Chinese technologies attribute the beginning of its Bronze Age to the onset of the Xia dynasty (Chang 1983). In the *wen ding* story, the Xia dynastic founder used metallurgy to transform the political landscape into bronze vessels at the close of the third millennium BCE. Thus, their legendary production was celebrated as one of the most momentous events in early China, commemorating the end of the legendary era and the beginning of the dynastic regimes (Wu 1995:5).

The supernatural properties associated with bronze provided the ideological foundation for the ritualization of metallurgy. These vessels became part of the ritual apparatus for the performance of religious ceremonies directed at royal lineage ancestors and natural deities. K. C. Chang (1983:97) identifies ritual bronze vessels as mediums for religious communication and the path to political authority in early China:

[T]he possession of such sacred bronze vessels served to legitimize the king's rule. These vessels were clear and powerful symbols: they were

symbols of wealth because they *were* wealth and possessed the aura of wealth; they were symbols of the all-important ritual that gave their owners access to the ancestors; and they were symbols of the control of metal, which meant control of exclusive access to the ancestors and to political authority.

The major preoccupation of statecraft, therefore, was to guard these vessels in the royal capitals of the early states and to secure the raw materials for their manufacture (Chang 1983; Wu 1995; Liu and Chen 2003, 2012). The elite's obsession with bronze ritual vessels became the defining attribute of the political ideology (Liu and Chen 2012:296).

Before identifying control strategies, we must understand that the ritualization of metal first involves changes in the regime of value and technological knowledge for prospecting and production. Cross-culturally, bronze was neither a hallmark of states and civilizations, nor a universal medium for ancestral ritual and religious communication. Metalworking traditions in the Near East, Europe, and the New World, for example, predate state formation, sometimes by millennia (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005; Pernicka and Anthony 2010; Renfrew 2011; Roberts and Thornton 2014). In early China, the rise of political authority in large settlement centers with marked social differentiation predated metallurgy's introduction in the late third millennium BCE (Chapters 2 and 3). The close association of metallurgy, religious communication, and political authority in early China, therefore, needs to be investigated as the product of a ritualization process.

Values, aesthetics, and experience associated with metal were intricately intertwined in the bronze *ding* symbolism. The cultural perception of materiality played a significant role in the ritualization of bronze (Sherratt 2006). The transformation from stone to liquid to resonating, shiny, solid, and durable vessels during the metalworking process would seem magical to prehistoric communities, providing considerable prestige to those capable of harnessing such power (Wu 1995:5–6). Metallurgy, therefore, was nothing short of a spectacle in the cultural world of early China. A study of changing configurations of technologies and the shifting historical and cultural values that surround them offers critical insights into the ritualization of metallurgy (Doonan et al. 2014). The preexisting technological logic, such as the fragility of coastal fine wares, provides the important conceptual basis for bronze vessels to acquire their distinctive values in China.

Despite the critical importance of bronze in religious communication and political representation, neither Chang (1983) nor Wu (1995) addressed the source of metallurgy, which provides the critical link between early China and its world. The unresolved question for the ritualization of metallurgy regards the cultural responses to the new technology: How did a millennia-old Eurasian technology become the medium of religious communication in

early China? In the course of this transformation, how was the perception of bronze vessels related to the existing mediums of religious communication and representations of power? The expanding Eurasian metallurgical network during the third millennium BCE bears critical clues for understanding the cultural transformations that turned metal vessels into political and religious symbols of early China.

Archaeological evidence for the first introduction of bronze vessels in early China can reveal the potential convergence and divergence between textual narrative and technological history. As recent archaeological research on early metal prospecting, mining, and metalworking reveals uneven access to metallurgic knowledge as well as uneven mineral distribution across early China, the rise of bronze vessels as primary symbols of political authority for early states implies a significant shift in the technology of power. This unevenness in metalworking knowledge and raw material transformed the ways in which the political landscape was envisioned and controlled (Chang 1983; Liu and Chen 2003, 2012). Since the production of the first bronze vessels allegedly used metal ore from various parts of the political landscape in the *wen ding* narrative, spatiality and metallurgy were integrally connected in the ritualization of bronze vessels.

The Ritualization of Time, Place, and Space

The symbolic significance of the legendary bronze vessels cannot be understood outside of the spatiality and temporality of the political landscape they allegedly represent. Instead of approaching time as a continuum, authors of *Zuozhuan* framed time in terms of the *Sandai* historical tradition, from the legendary creation of these tripod vessels at the onset of the first dynasty at the end of the third millennium BCE to the waning of Zhou royal power in the mid-first millennium BCE. The emic concept of *Sandai* describes the broad patterns of political authority in Bronze Age China, as remembered and described in early textual traditions from the first millennium BCE.

Literally meaning the “Three Dynasties,” *Sandai* refers to the three dynastic regimes, namely Xia (c. 2100–1600 BCE), Shang (c. 1600–1046 BCE), and Zhou (c. 1046–256 BCE). This historical epoch started in the period of extraordinary drought and flooding of the late third millennium BCE, when “exceptional circumstances of major historical disruptions and social transformations” broke the “cosmological continuity” (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005:316). These dynastic powers allegedly claimed hegemony in the Central Plains through the second and first millennia BCE. As a time period, *Sandai* also includes contenders during interregnums that failed to be recognized as legitimate lines, or were erased from the historical memory.