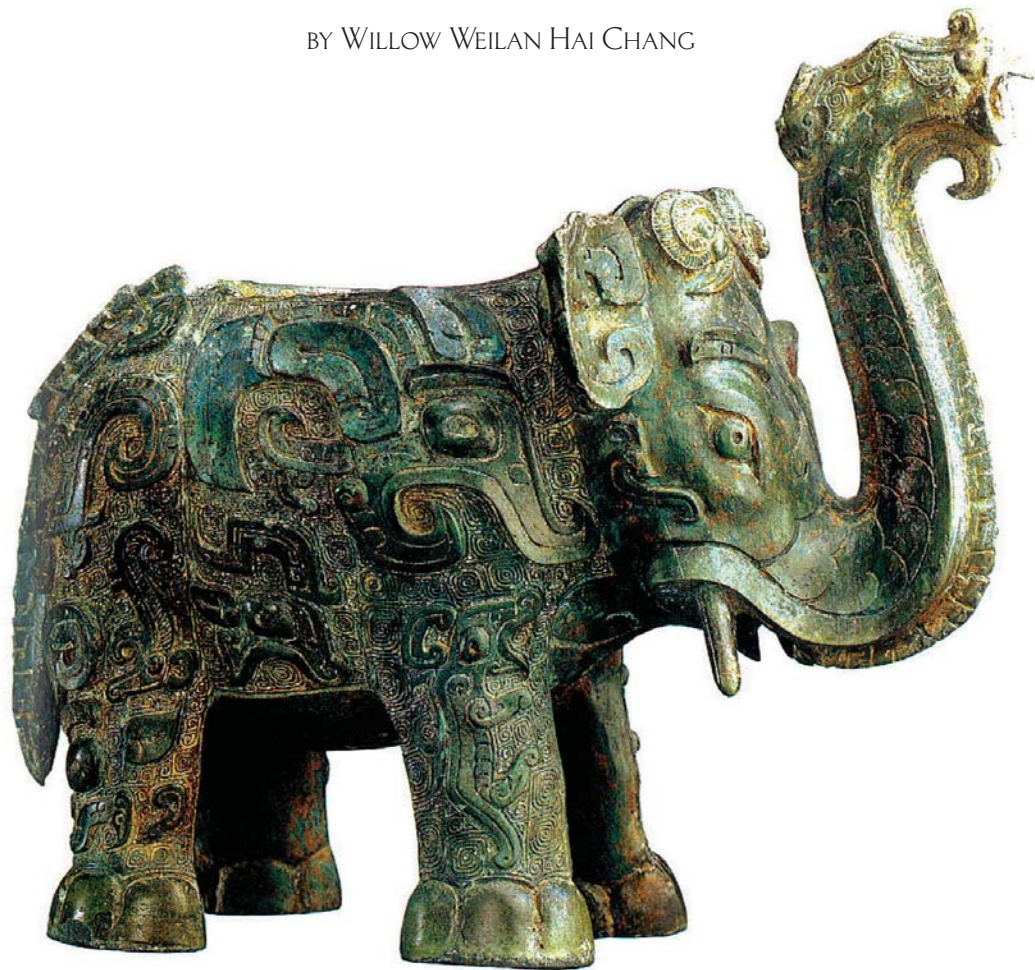


A CRADLE OF CHINESE CIVILIZATION ALONG THE YANGZI RIVER

BRONZE TREASURES FROM HUNAN

BY WILLOW WEILAN HAI CHANG



Elephant-shaped *Zun* Vessel
1975

Late Shang period, 12th–11th century BCE
Unearthed in 1975 at Shixingshan, Liling
Bronze. H. 8.97, W 10.43 in
Courtesy, Hunan Provincial Museum

This elephant-shaped *zun* stands on four stout legs and is hollow inside, enabling the beast to serve as a vessel. Its long and tapering raised trunk acts as a spout. The vessel would have originally had a lid, but it had already been lost at the time the elephant was accidentally unearthed in 1975 by peasants digging and planting trees on the Shixingshan hill.

The vessel is celebrated for its lifelike shape and elaborate surface decoration of various animal designs, including beast masks, tigers, dragons, snakes, and birds; all the zoomorphic designs are in high relief against the finely cast *leiwen* ground. The elephant's surface decoration clearly bespeaks the style of Shang art in north central China, but its lifelike animal shape points to a characteristic not encountered in that region though popular in southern China's Yangzi river valley.

The elephant form of this vessel is among the few known examples, two of which are in museums (The Freer and Sackler Galleries, Washington, D.C.; and Musée Guimet, Paris).

The earliest records of the ancient bronzes of Hunan Province, China, come from the Song dynasty (960–1279) scholar Hong Mai (1123–1202). In his book *Notes of Rong Studio* (*Rongzhai Suibi* [ca. 1196]), he recorded that in 1187, a Western Zhou dynasty (11th century–771 BCE) tomb was looted and bronze objects were found within. Centuries later in the 1920s, several exotic-shaped vessels came to market and garnered worldwide attention. One of these was an elephant shaped *zun* (wine vessel) exhibited in the Musée Guimet in Paris. However, the serious study of the Hunan bronze began in 1981 when archaeologist Gao Zhixi raised the question in an essay as to “whether the Shang bronze culture has crossed Yangzi River or not.” At the time of his inquiry, excavations since the 1950s had turned up a number of Shang (16th–11th century BCE) and Zhou dynasty bronze vessels,

including the famous human-faced rectangular *ding* (cooking vessel), which was excavated by a peasant in his village in Huangcai, Ningxiang, in 1958. In subsequent decades, more extraordinary bronze vessels were unearthed in the Ningxiang area, Hunan Province.

Still, it was unclear as to why these exquisite bronzes were found in the open fields of Ningxiang, with no apparent relationship to activities in the region. Then, in 2004, an archaeological excavation revealed a lost ancient civilization at the center of the mid-Yangzi River valley in the Xiang Jiang River basin—the Ningxiang Tanheli city site. This discovery, by a team from the Cultural Relics and Archeological Research Institute of Hunan Province led by Xiang Taochu, provided clues as to how the found artifacts could weave into a cultural context of the Bronze Age.

**Rectangular *Ding* with Human-Face Design
1958**

**Late Shang period, 12th–11th century BCE
Said to have been unearthed in 1958 at
Zhaizishan, Huangcai, Ningxiang county
Bronze. H. 15.16, W. (at mouth) 11.73,
D. (at mouth) 9.33 in.
Courtesy, Hunan Provincial Museum**

Dating from the Shang dynasty, this is the only known example of a bronze-age vessel depicting a human face. Technically sophisticated and set against a *leiwen* background of rectilinear spirals and interlocking lines, the face, repeated on each of the four sides, is thought to be the image of a tribal leader who conducted religious ceremonies. Additional imagery includes C-shaped ears, and S-shaped horns in relief; heavily notched flanges running down each corner; intaglio, confronting dragons on the outer face of each handle; and beast masks (*taotie*), at the top of each leg.

This rectangular *ding* is said to have been unearthed in 1958 by a farmer in Huangcai, Ningxiang County, who did not recognize its value and sold it to be melted down with other scrap metal. Fortunately, in 1959, a staff member from the Hunan Provincial Museum discovered this rare vessel at a scrap metal depot in Changsha, capital of Hunan province, and purchased it for the museum.

On the interior bottom, the vessel is cast with two graphs transcribed as *da* 大, “big,” and *he* 禾, “grain” (perhaps an emblem or clan sign).



The Tanheli city site occupies an area of over 20,000 square meters, and within its city walls are remnants of moats, ruins of dwellings, and tombs. The site is of great significance to the study of Hunan's regional history, bronze culture, and the formation of early state and society. It also provides important material objects for researching the bronze civilization in the region. Of the 400 bronze relics of Shang and Zhou dynasties from Hunan Province, more than 300 pieces—close to 80%—are from the Tanheli site. These bronze vessels, used mainly for ritual ceremonies, strongly suggest that during the late Shang dynasty to the Western Zhou dynasty, this ancient city was one of the important centers of southern Chinese civilization, and is an important locus for the study of Chinese Bronze Age culture.

The first-ever comprehensive exhibition to focus on ancient bronzes from this region in Hunan is on display at the China Institute

Gallery at the China Institute in America in Manhattan from January 27 to June 12, 2011. *Along the Yangzi River: Regional Culture of the Bronze Age from Hunan*, includes more than seventy objects culled from the collection of the Hunan Provincial Museum, and other local museums and institutions. The exhibit explores a local culture through its vital creative output, unearthed from pits, tombs, and sites in Ningxiang and Xiangxiang, and contributes to a fuller understanding of early Chinese culture and civilization. Organized by Willow Hai Chang, Director of China Institute Gallery, the exhibition, is co-curated by Chen Jianming, Director of the Hunan Provincial Museum; Jay Xu, Director of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; and Fu Juliang, Curator of Bronze Collections, Hunan Provincial Museum. A bilingual catalogue is available. For information, visit www.chinainstitute.org or call 212.744.8181.



Yue (Battle Axe) with Tiger Motif
1973
Shang dynasty (16th–11th century BCE)
Acquired in 1973 from Changsha
Bronze. L 13.5, W 9.05 in
Hunan Provincial Museum

Its shape and decoration rarely seen in Shang dynasty weaponry, this *yue* is not an ordinary weapon but rather a ritual object and instrument of punishment. A *yue* was the symbol of kingship and the dignity of the state's laws, which is the reason why later potentates carried *yue* even on tours. According to the archaeological record, all large-scale bronze *yue* of the Shang dynasty were unearthed from the tombs of the upper-class, a reflection of the power of the military command and the harshness of their penalties.

This bronze *yue* exhibits a flaring blade and an elliptical *qiong* (axe eye for insertion of the handle). The *nei*, or tang, is decorated with an openwork dragon design, and a relief figure of a tiger stands above the *qiong* near the blade, its mouth open, tail raised, and paws emerging from the body of the axe. The dragon is a spirit creature while the tiger conveys awe-inspiring dignity; thus, the *yue*, by integrating these two images into a whole, is imbued with solemnity and mystery.

Bo with Bird Decoration
1980
Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1050–771 BCE)
Bronze. H 12.6 in
Unearthed in 1980 at Chunkou, Liuyang
Hunan Provincial Museum

Large bronze bells with decorative animal-face patterns, usually discovered near mountaintops, are thought to have been used in the worship of a mountain god. While a bronze *bo* unearthed at Shaodong has four flanges, this percussion instrument only has two, both in the form of a crested phoenix. Both faces of the bell (the *zheng* section) are decorated with deformed beast masks. The beast-mask design is very simple, consisting of round eyes and a cloud-and-thunder pattern (circular and squared scrolls).

The earliest bronze *bo* to date, unearthed at Dayangzhou, Xin'gan, also has only two flanges. Perhaps the number of flanges had to do with the instrument's period of manufacture and its players. Judging from excavated material—similar *bo* have been also been found in Zhuzhou and Hengyang—suggesting the Xiang River basin was an important area of production for this type of bronze *bo*.



Horse-motif *Gui*

1982

Western Zhou (ca. 1050–771 BCE)

Bronze. H 12.05, W 7.87 in.

Unearthed in 1982 at Jinquancun, Lianhechong, Taojiang county
Hunan Provincial Museum

During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, horses were used for pulling vehicles in transportation and warfare and were therefore highly regarded. However, the role of horses was somewhat limited in the hilly regions of southern China, with their undulating mountains and criss-crossing network of waterways. Nonetheless, that the people in southern China also held horses in high regard can be seen in the eight horses decorating this vessel. This elaborate and sophisticated *gui* (food container) is one of the rare relics of the Western Zhou period incorporating the horse, and the manner of display on both the body and the base is not seen in other regions. This *gui* was a ritual device used in sacrifices.

A noteworthy aspect of the casting is the design, which protrudes from the vessel surface with corresponding concavities on the inner surface, resulting in a vessel wall of uniform thickness. In addition to the horses, dragon motifs with spiraling double-bodies, two beast-mask motifs, and four phoenixes are depicted. The horse heads had been lost at the time of excavation, and the frontal view that we see now is a reconstruction based on the shape of the body and neck area.



Hu Ewer with Dragon-shaped Handle, Bent Neck, and Beast-mask Design

1990

Western Zhou (ca. 1050–771 BCE)

or Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE)

Bronze. H 14.96, Diam 2.95 (at mouth), Diam. (at bottom) 4.53 in

Unearthed in 1990 at Feixian Bridge, Xinning
Xinning County Cultural Relics Administration



This wine or water vessel is also known as a *huhu* (gourd pot). Shaped like a calabash, it has a small mouth and a large belly. Unearthed together with this ewer were late Shang dynasty and Western Zhou bronze *ding* vessels as well as jade rings, from which it can be determined the ewer was made in the Western Zhou period. This, therefore, is a relatively early gourd-shaped ewer.

From an analysis of the circumstances around this ewer's excavation and the special feature of a single handle, or *pan* on one side of a back-turned-dragon, it is inferred that the *hu* was made in the Spring and Autumn period. A *kui*-dragon and a triangular meander pattern decorate the body of the dragon. The neck is decorated with *kui*-dragon motifs in the upper tier and an encircling cloud-and-thunder-pattern (circular and square scrolls) band. On the belly are beast-mask and banana-leaf motifs and on the ring foot, cloud-and-thunder and zigzag patterns. One cannot see what is in a gourd-shaped ewer because of the small opening, hence the old Chinese saying that "no one can tell what medicine is in the gourd." [AFA](#)

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