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ABSTRACT

Two early Shang (ca.1600–1200 BCE) works of art are critical in demonstrating the thesis that Shang ritual imagery was meaningful as a royal symbol of metamorphosis, in the context of urbanization from its earliest manifestation during the Early Shang era and throughout the heyday of Shang culture. Due to the abundance of newly excavated artifacts and art and of paleographic data in the form of oracle bone inscriptions, it is possible to begin to explain Shang (ca.1600–1046 BCE) religion and its artistic symbolism. As I identified in my recent book, *The Meaning of the Graph Yi 異 and Its Implications for Shang Belief and Art* (2008), the belief in metamorphosis *yi* 異 was basic to the socioreligious practice of Shang and remained key throughout Sinitic history. This belief in metamorphic power, and the artistic program to which it gave rise is recorded in two kinds of primary sources, written inscriptions and a vocabulary of standardized visual elements, both of which are analyzed in the present manuscript.

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1. Introduction

For decades, the misunderstanding that Shang art is not meaningful has plagued Shang studies, and continues to do so today. As I demonstrated in my recent book, *The Meaning of the Graph Yi 異 and Its Implications for Shang Belief and Art* (2008), belief in metamorphosis as a fundamental religious principle was firmly established in the Shang as a key element of religious practice and remained so during the subsequent Western Zhou and later eras. This belief in metamorphic power, and the artistic program to which it gave rise are documented by data in written inscriptions and by a vocabulary of standardized visual elements. Both are core considerations for the study of early Sinitic culture and its art.

The argument for meaning in early imagery and art stands in marked contrast to the contentions of those who deny that such art conveys symbolic meaning, as set forth in Max Loehr's theory of style in Shang art, formulated in 1953. Loehr's stylistic theory of the evolution of Shang imagery was mistaken from the outset. Writing more than sixty years ago, Loehr had limited access to abundant written data in the form of oracle bone inscriptions, and the number of Shang bronzes and other archaeologically recovered materials available to him was also relatively limited. His theory was also anachronistic, and ignored

the social and cultural context of the bronze vessels under consideration. Erroneous to begin with, Loehr's theory today is outdated and obsolete; yet it continues to influence, and distort, the study of Shang art. Shang imagery since its origin and throughout its evolution was profoundly meaningful. This new understanding of Shang art has been documented in various recent publications, my own and others, and by the new evidence of certain art works from the Early Shang period. While most of the evidence for Shang culture has come from the Late Shang capital at Anyang, increasing amounts of evidence from Early Shang sites adds considerably to the evidence for a consistent evolution of imagery and its urban contexts.

Before addressing material for the extensive urban settlement of Early Shang China and the presence of "urban daemons" in the art of those cities, it is necessary to clarify why my approach is superior to the argument that Shang ritual art décor lacks symbolic meaning, as initially propounded by Loehr (1953) and perpetuated by some of his followers. (see Bagley, 2008)¹ Unlike Loehr and his followers, I apply a holistic viewpoint to an analysis of Shang art and culture, one that combines contemporary written, archaeological and visual data. And it is important to note that even the relatively few scholars who in recent

¹ Jessica Rawson, for example, in following R. Bagley's thesis about imagery states that imaginary creatures were much easier to use to fill compartments than real creatures (Rawson, 1987: 28)

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years defied the Loehr-imposed orthodoxy to argue for meaning as an integral part of Shang imagery (e.g., Kesner, 1991; Chang, 1983; Paper, 1985: 51–61) have not done so from a holistic point of view. Chang and Paper, for example, correctly maintained that shamanic belief appears prominent amidst Shang cultural remains and social practices, yet neither built their arguments on a combined analysis of written and visual evidence. As I demonstrated in 1998 and echoed in a thesis proposed by Ledderhose (2001: 35, 25–41), imagery of the Shang period is standardized with interchangeable parts— an approach to the creation of imagery that is at the basis of most ancient cultures whose art is religiously meaningful.

In proposing that Chinese art is based on a distinct modular system, Ledderhose maintains, for example, that “[t]he anatomical parts of the *taotie* [Han term appropriated for what is here defined as a metamorphic power mask of Shang time, author’s insert] ... may be regarded as modules in a decorative system...they are composite, interchangeable parts combined into units.... always composed of a limited number of distinct anatomical parts, hardly ever more than ten... [including] nose, eye, eyebrow, ear, horn, upper and lower jaw, body and front paw with claws.”² The term “*taotie*” refers to the ubiquitous frontal and displayed image on ritual art works that is composed of human and animal parts. As I showed in 1998, and review again below for the sake of clarity, Shang imagery has standardized attributes that render an image meaningful. These attributes are deployed in adherence to a formula that was initiated by the Early Shang period and that lasted throughout the heyday of the kingdom. The stylistic analyses of Loehr and his followers can no longer be accepted as valid. Not only is Shang imagery modular but its modules are meaningful. The basic orientation of Shang bronze decor focuses on the theme of metamorphism. The modules combine to convey meaning, whether through the body extension of a symbolic cicada, a schematic human body signified by limb extensions ending in bird claws, or by interchangeable semi-human and animal mask components. The property of metamorphism is the key to understanding these images as meaningful composites formed from modular components.

It is an anachronistic error to describe Shang bronze decor in terms of the *taotie*— a hackneyed and overused term that has long been condoned by Chinese tradition but which is past due for relegation to the scrap heap. The term is not Shang but Han in origin and for that reason and others cannot be used to discuss or represent Shang imagery. It tells us what Han scholars imagined the meaning of Shang metamorphic imagery to be, but that is irrelevant for understanding what the Shang people themselves understood the imagery to mean.³ I propose that the terms “metamorphic power mask” or “semi-human animal mask” be adopted as a replacement for “*taotie*” due to the obvious association of ritual imagery with the royal Shang symbolism of metamorphosis.

² Ledderhose 2001: 34 and quoted by Wengrow, 2014: 85. Ledderhose misses some important variations of “modular units” when he refers, for example, to paws instead of the more common limb extension ending in claws and to a lower jaw yet lower jaws of masks are rarely portrayed. David Wengrow in his recent study, *The Origins of Monsters* in cultural contexts deriving from ancient cultures of West to East, states, regarding the ancient Chinese context: “Ledderhose describes the *taotie* in terms much closer to those I have used for the design of imaginary composites in the western Old World.” (Wengrow: 85). Yet, Wengrow unfortunately misses the opportunity to discuss what is clearly another example for human image-making in China that appears prominently with the rise of urban centers.

³ see e.g., Kesner’s continued use of the “*taotie*” term and Wang Haicheng’s lack of familiarity with the literature when he is quoted in 2011 by Martin, 2011: 3: “...it was right about the most startling and most fundamental point: the motif [metamorphic power mask, author’s insert] did not originate from depictions of animals but from a free play of lines. Bagley regrets and is somewhat baffled that many readers today have yet to understand what Loehr meant by insisting on this observation. I share his bafflement whenever I come across papers *ostentatiously* talking about the meaning of the *taotie* without ever mentioning its origin.”

2. Discussion

2.1. Two recently excavated Early and Middle Shang art works with metamorphic imagery

The bustling and extensive Early Shang capital of Erligang 二里岗 in Zhengzhou 郑州, as well as other Shang urban sites to the south, west, north, and east at Laoniupo 老牛坡, Panlongcheng 盘龙城, Pinglu 平陆, Xingan 新干, and Daxinzhuang 大辛庄, and a variety of other cities, provide clear evidence of the essentially urban character of Shang culture. Sophisticated urban settlements are characterized by well-fortified citadels and military outposts, metropolitan and regional bronze casting and ceramic factories, lineage cemeteries, residential complexes, and lively trade with extensive social interaction. Already visibly present in these Early Shang urban sites is the characteristic royal cult of metamorphosis, a Shang religious practice depicted in artistic iconography that was standardized in its fundamental elements and which in practice varied between abstract and more representational versions. Particularly noteworthy are the displayed semi-human images and the motif of a “devouring” feline or other wild animal and humans endowed with wild animal features.

Amidst archaeologists and art historians, the consensus is that the Shang period divides into three phases: Early Shang refers to the era of ca.1600–1400 BCE; Middle Shang to ca.1400–1350 BCE; and Late Shang to ca.1350–1046 BCE (see e.g. Liu and Chen, 2012). Early Shang and Middle Shang sites discussed below include the earliest Shang capital at Erligang in Zhengzhou, Henan province; the Middle Shang site of Xiaoshuangqiao (小双桥), also in Zhengzhou, Henan; the Early-Middle Shang site far afield in southeast Jiangxi province at Dayangzhou 大洋洲 in Xingan County and Wucheng 吴城 in Zhangshu County; and the Early Shang site of Panlongcheng in Wuhan County, Hubei province, lying near the Yangzi River in today’s central China.

The recent discovery of a ceramic fragment with imagery from C8F15 at Erligang (Henan.shang: 269–70, 270 fig. 163), and three bronze fixtures with similar imagery from another Shang site, that of Xiaoshuangqiao, neatly amplify and enrich the evidence for metropolitan urban imagery of the Early and Middle Shang periods. The ceramic shard with imagery was recovered from the inner compound of Zhengzhou Shang City, within the remains of building F15 in area C8, which date to the very beginning of Early Shang, Erligang Periods 1 and 2 (Fig. 1A). This surviving clay carving probably once formed part of a circular vessel, possibly representing the belly of a ceramic *gui* 簋 or *dou* 豆 that functioned similarly to a bronze vessel shape, as represented in Fig. 1B or to the stoneware tripod type *gui* from Anyang in Fig. 1C. The image carved into the shard represents a frontal human face with body bifurcated as a profile display of arms and legs extending to left and right of the face. This is a rare type of image from the Early Shang period but it is rare only because very few burials and no royal ones have yet been discovered at the early Shang capital of Zhengzhou Erligang. The image is otherwise completely in harmony with standardized attributes of Shang metamorphic imagery. The bifurcated body extension is represented in what may be defined as a crouched fetal-like position indicative of rebirth or transformation. An animal in profile with open mouth looms at head level in a position as if to devour the human. This devouring, which has and will again be discussed further below, is a standardized module of metamorphic representation that is commonly used in Shang royal imagery to signify change from human to animal or to signify the transformative power of the ruler and his divinity. Small cloud scrolls (or wings) decorate the human body and arms.

A second, surprising discovery is a similar royal image of metamorphosis decorating three separate bronze fittings, two of which were unearthed and one picked up in the 1980’s from a trough of the rammed earth foundations on the north side of the Xiaoshuangqiao site (Fig. 2) (Institute of Archaeology, CASS, 2012.shang: 16–19). Nothing matching these bronze fittings in terms of imagery or shape of object has been discovered from any Shang site, and they remain some of the very few

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