

comprehensive bibliography, especially in respect of works by Chinese colleagues published over the past 15 years.

The study of Chinese Neolithic signs is still in its infancy. Much of these materials remains unpublished and a serious attempt at relating them to the Chinese writing system requires a thorough archaeological investigation of related artefacts and their signs as systems in their own right, without the teleological prism of Chinese script. Such an approach has only recently gained sway and its potential has not been fully harnessed in this book. Still, while its conclusions must remain tentative, the great asset of *The origins of Chinese writing* is in laying out all the evidence together with over a hundred illustrations for the readers' assessment. Without doubt, this publication will serve as an indispensable resource for both students and scholars inside and outside the field of Chinese studies and will provide an important impetus for further investigations of the origins of Chinese writing.

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QIN CAO. 2022. *Weapons in Late Shang (c.1250–1050 BCE) China: beyond typology and ritual*. Milton Park: Routledge; 978-0-367-63077-5 hardback £130.



In *Weapons in Late Shang (c. 1250–1050 BCE) China: beyond typology and ritual* (hereafter *Weapons*), Qin Cao presents a fresh look at an understudied topic. In doing so she shows the potential of artefact-based studies to shed new light and, somewhat paradoxically, contextualise times and places generally presented in broader terms. Perhaps akin to micro-history's potential to 'see a world in a grain of sand', well-done artefact studies such as Cao's cannot only bring forth overlooked aspects of past societies but, moreover, focus attention on concrete things and their entanglements, material and otherwise. Key to the effectiveness of Cao's study in this case is the biographical perspective she adopts. In Chapter 1, Cao

effectively introduces and justifies her focus on weapons before outlining her theoretical approach, its connection to and divergence from previous object biographies, and then moves on to a careful introduction to the diverse methodologies she employs in her study. Cao's bibliography is deep and broad and her eclectic assemblage of theory and method is at once well-integrated, innovative and all too rare within Chinese archaeology. In Chapter 2, Cao gives a brief but well-researched historical contextualisation for her study of weapons, ending with a critical typology of Shang weapons and their characteristics.

Chapter 3, on one level begins her biographical study with 're-birth', but on another level serves the function of a further contextualisation. This begins with a case study of a Shang

weapon and a flow chart of its biography which then sets up a critical engagement with previous scholarship, its interpretive frameworks and their diverse sources. This includes a concise critique of Chinese archaeology and anachronistic historical frameworks more generally. Chapter 4 introduces the method of metalwork wear analysis and while it could be considered to largely reflect the ‘lives’ of Shang weapons, as Cao notes, it provides results relevant to all stages of weapon biographies. Although the analysis was mostly limited to weapons from the British Museum collections, she was able to show that they had diverse biographies and that many of them had been sharpened, providing strong evidence against the notion that Shang mortuary weapons were merely symbolic. Chapter 5 is ostensibly about the birth stage of Shang weapons, but as with the other chapters the analyses concerning production are relevant to other stages as well. This includes the division Cao is able to make among dagger-axes and the plausible conclusion that one particular type was generally made for purposes other than battle.

Chapter 6, the longest and something of an analytical climax, brings together use-wear, typological, statistical and inscriptional analyses on the formation of tomb assemblages—the archaeological context of nearly all Shang weapons. Focusing on the Guojiazhuang cemetery at Anyang, Cao comes to many novel and interesting conclusions, some more convincing than others but all demonstrating her larger point of the diverse biographies of even a single category of mortuary object and the potential of this kind of study to deeply nuance, if not disrupt, widely accepted narratives.

Beyond minor bibliographic errors, some inconsistencies in translation and a few specific arguments with which I disagree, the only issue I have with *Weapons* is that it did not lean harder into an ontological perspective. Not only could a different narrative format—one that followed the trajectories of weapons and classes of weapons, as opposed to one adhering to the traditional analytical structures of a dissertation—better serve a bibliographic approach, but the oddly secular-modern insistence in arguing against ritual is itself in need of nuancing. The ‘ritual’ that Cao is arguing against, but never defines, appears to be a combination of anachronistic applications of Confucian *li* and largely unexamined and outdated anthropological theories about ritual common in the Chinese archaeological literature. These assume that ritual is a separate, religious realm of human practice which belongs with the irrational and the sacred in opposition to the rational and the secular. In her attempt to argue against ritual in this sense, Cao ends up trying to refute the death-artefact hypothesis (for which there are multiple lines of contemporaneous evidence) and instead speculating about weapon dances, as if Shang dances and other ceremonies were not also marked and significant doings, or, in other words, ritual. Nevertheless, *Weapons* is an excellent addition to the growing library of Chinese archaeological studies in English—it is fresh in its approach and largely convincing in its numerous novel interpretations.

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