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BOOK REVIEW

Phoenix Kingdoms: The Last Splendors of China's Bronze Age. Edited by Fan J. Zhang and Jay Xu. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022. 240 pages, 320 images, and 4 maps. $65.00 (cloth), $40.00 (paper).

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There was once a desire among sinologists that the fascinating archaeological discoveries from the middle Yangzi, highlighted by the cultural gains from a number of recently excavated cemeteries and sites, identified with the mysterious state of Zeng 曾, be brought to an American audience. The wish has now been impressively fulfilled by the exhibition "The Phoenix Kingdoms: The Last Splendor of China's Bronze Age," in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco from April 19 to July 22, 2024. The volume under review, edited by the curators of the museum with contributions by eight scholars of ancient Chinese art and archaeology, duly introduces the cultural and historical contexts of the selected artifacts in each material category as a catalogue should, but certainly it also expands the exhibition's influence beyond the physical confines of the hosting museum.

The volume offers rich discussions of the development of craftsmanship with respect to regional styles of bronzes, jades, pottery, lacquerware, etc., and probes ways to understand their special cultural and religious meanings, imbedded in a grand narrative of the rise and maturity of a Chu (or Zeng–Chu) culture in the middle Yangzu region. For instance, Jay Xu's Chapter 1 includes a concise review of the history of the discoveries of the Zeng cemeteries and introduces inscriptional evidence that identifies Zeng as one of the regional states that derived its origin from the Zhou royal house.[1] As such, early Zeng bronzes as well as burial customs—for instance, those from Yejiashan—adhered closely to the standard practices in the Zhou central region in Shaanxi. Only in the seventh

[1]In delineating the history of discovery of Zeng-related bronzes, Jay Xu mentions the 1933 discovery at Lisangudui (Zhujiaji) in Anhui of a group of Chu bronzes that included a pair of *hu* vessels cast for Zengji Wuxu 曾姬無卹, consort to an early Warring States Chu king (21). It may be interesting to add the more famous Zengbo Qi *fu* 曾伯霥簠, a bronze cast by a head of a Zeng elite lineage. The cover of the bronze was in the collection of Chen Jieqi 陳介琪 by 1884 at the latest, and it gave the famous scholar and collector his studio name "Fuzhai" 簠齋; the vessel itself was known as early as 1804. Multiple bronzes cast for the same Zengbo Qi 曾伯 霥 were found in tomb no. 79 at Sujialong in 2016, identifying him as the occupant of the tomb, and Sujialong the base of his lineage.

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century BCE did variations of the original types inherited from the Zhou begin to occur in the local Zeng inventory, suggesting that Zhou–Zeng political and social relationships remained close for centuries. Chapter 2, written by Fan J. Zhang, discusses the rise of the state of Chu in the middle Yangzi region based on information in transmitted texts, followed by a survey of how archaeological discoveries since 1933 have gradually revealed the material-cultural image of Chu.

Chapter 3 by John Major analyzes the cosmology and the world of religion of Chu, situating it in the broad religious and intellectual traditions of early China. Chapter 4 by Colin Mackenzie focuses on the culture of jades in the middle Yangzi, tracing its origins as far back as the local Shijiahe culture (ca. 2200–2000 BCE); Mackenzie further discusses the formation of a distinctive southern "Chu-style" of jade culture fully expressed in numerous jade objects excavated from the two tombs in Jiuliandun. In Chapter 5, Haicheng Wang examines the burial practices in the Yejiashan cemetery in Hubei, paying special attention to the inclusion of the bells, considered to be essentially imported southern products. The rest of his chapter discusses how bells were developed into carefully formed sets with fixed pitches that are named differently between Zeng and Chu, tracing the music and ritual tradition of Chu to two early sets: twelve bells cast by a certain Chu Ji 楚季 from Zhijiang, and eight bells by Chugong Ni 楚公逆 from the Jin cemetery in Beizhao, Shanxi.[2] The evidence suggests that both Zeng and Chu were participants in and beneficiaries of a common process of developing bell-centered ritual and music system in the Zhou cultural world.

In the final chapter, Guolong Lai and I-fen Huang focus on the "Chu-Style" lacquerware and textile products, using artifacts from Zhaoxiang tomb no. 4 as examples for the early period (sixth century BCE) and those from the tomb of Marquis Yi at Leigudun as examples of a later period (late fifth century BCE); the main body of the chapter, however, is given over to a new interpretation of the so-called "spirit artifacts" (*mingqi*) (see below), and to identification of what has been deemed a "tomb-guardian," a lacquerware standing beast with antlers growing out of its head (68–69, cat. 117), as the image of a phallus representing the fecundity god, often found in the tombs of noble Chu ladies. As introductions to the various types of artifacts on display, or taken together as an introduction to the Chu culture in general, the essays are qualified works to raise interest among readers, and the volume as a whole fulfills its role in explaining the exhibition. Viewers who take time to consult the volume will find it has much to offer.

Technically, the volume was decently produced, with beautiful illustrations, cover and title pages impressively designed, and other reference images clearly reproduced. The item-specific captions are often concise and carefully written, providing information about the object's condition, feature description, and brief contextualization in the Chu or Zeng culture. The selection of the artifacts is period-balanced in accordance with the exhibition's guiding paradigm of a regional formative "Zeng–Chu culture," representing most important archaeological sites that have been excavated in the past twenty years. What is missing from the information, regrettably, is the excavation number for all artifacts that were unearthed through scientific archaeological excavation. These numbers are "birth certificates" assigned by the archaeologists that indicate the object's genuineness and often differentiate specific items in a set of identical objects, so as to conveniently

[2]Another bell cast by the same Chugong Ni 楚公逆 was found in Jiayu 嘉魚 County in Hubei in the Zhenghe 政和 Era (1111–1118 CE), or probably even earlier. For an analysis of this bell, no longer extant, and its inscription, see Constance A. Cook, "Myth and Authenticity: Deciphering the Chu Gong Ni Bell Inscription," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113.4 (1993), 539–50.

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allow the archaeologists to return them to their original burial contexts. For this reason, exhibited items should always be identified by their excavation numbers.

By the same token, the volume also lacks a good topographic map showing details of riverways and mountain ranges, with the archaeological sites dotted in, to allow scholars to interpret their relationship to the environs. (The current administrative map on page 15 lacks details of the essential features of the land and cannot serve this purpose). Further, the current arrangement of inscriptions in an index list on pages 221–23 fails to accentuate their importance as both textual evidence and works of calligraphy.[3] Although this treatment of inscriptions is excusable in a catalogue that emphasizes eye-pleasing splendors of objects, the volume would have been much improved for scholarly use by the inclusion of qualified presentations of the inscriptions, ideally where their objects are discussed, as they often provide key evidence for the contributors' arguments. Despite these shortcomings, the volume largely stands as a fine catalogue, and an impressive presentation of the material wealth and beauty of a middle-Yangzi Bronze-Age culture.

The scholarly contribution of the volume, in my view, lies in the new questions raised and valuable insights offered by the contributors in their essays, however sketchily. They deserve fuller studies that may lead to deeper understandings of the middle Yangzi region and its cultural heritage. In his essay, while accepting the proposition of "Phoenix Kingdoms," John Major very sensitively traces the origin of bird symbolism not to the indigenous culture of the middle Yangzi, but to the bird patterns that became so popular on mid-Western Zhou bronzes, fashioned in various magnificent forms of phoenix. Furthermore, he refers to a cosmological basis for the Zhou belief in this sacred bird as the worldly host of the planetary conjunction in 1049 BCE in the form of "a bird holding a scepter in its beak," symbolizing Heaven's mandate to Zhou (40–42).[4] This Zhou-(Zeng)-Chu link in religious beliefs in the phoenix bird may be a critical hidden stream in early Chinese civilization that deserves further studies. Major's essay is the one that shows the most impressive level of erudition and ability to draw references broadly from the cultural and intellectual legacies of early China. This places John Major in a position to raise the issue about Chu shamanism as a possible source for philosophic Daoism. His demonstration of shamanistic practices in Chu literature and iconography forms a solid step toward understanding this link (44), although he seems to deny the possibility that the *Daodejing* was a "Chu" text.

Turning from practice and text to objects, what was the role of Zeng in the formation of the "Chu jade style," and how, then, should a "Chu Style" be defined? This is a key question in Colin Mackenzie's discussion of the jade objects. Mackenzie opines that early Zeng jades show no distinction from northern, Zhou jades, but from the time of Marquis Yi in the late fifth century BCE, Zeng jades began to show new traits, such as openwork and modeled surfaces, which were adopted and fully developed later in the Chu culture. This opened a "Chu-Zeng sphere" of jade production, but perhaps also of a general Chu-centered regional material culture. But Mackenzie's conclusion that the "Chu-Style" jades are objects that carry non-Confucian values and are media of expression of distinctively southern, Chu, beliefs, is less precise and hardly persuasive (53–54). Examples to support this proposition are those jades that show an intimate relationship between human and bird or dragon, especially those from the Chu tomb in Jiuliandun. However, on the one

[3]Certainly, the inclusion of good photos of the inscription (for example, p. 134) could have offset this problem, but such photos are rare in contrast to the many bronzes with important inscriptions.

[4]See David Pankenier, "The Cosmo-Political Background of Heaven's Mandate," *Early China* 20 (1995), 121–76.

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hand, intimate human–animal relationships were also evident in the north, or even broadly in the steppe region, while on the other hand, Confucian texts have been found in many Chu tombs (for instance, at Guodian) in the past decades, showing that Confucianism was an important stream in the complex intellectual world of Chu. Given these two facts, it is hard to conceive of a "Chu Style" as a non-Confucian tradition.

Leaving aside the complex issue with regard to the identification of the occupants of the large tombs at Yejiashan with early Zeng rulers (224), the origin and early location of Chu continue to present a challenge to anyone who strives to understand the early history of Chu. The editors of the volume accept the tradition that Chu was a "fiefdom" established by the Zhou court and moved from the central plains to its new location in the middle Yangzi (17, 29), a hypothesis that has never been proven in modern historiography, and not at all in archaeology.[5] Haicheng Wang instead points to the region between the Ju and Zhang Rivers in Zhijiang 枝江, near the north bank of the Yangzi River, as the location of the earliest Chu capital (62). Near this location was the discovery of twelve bells at Wanfunao, cast by a Chu elite man, Chu Ji 楚季, during the mid-Western Zhou period. However, this is again different from where the majority of historians have located the earliest Chu capital Danyang, in the upper Han River valley far to the north. Barry B. Blakeley's early analyses of the Chu campaign against Zeng in 701 BCE, combined with geopolitical information about King Zhao's southern campaigns recorded in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions from the north, make a location of the early Chu center in the Han River valley far more convincing.[6] One should also not forget that the earliest bronze bell of any Chu ruler, namely Chugong Ni, was discovered in Jiayu near present-day Wuhan, 280 km to the east of Zhijiang.[7]

Guolong Lai and I-fen Huang's new notion of "spirit artifacts" (*mingqi*) in Chu tombs not as cheaper substitutes for real ritual bronzes, but as products intended to demarcate the difference between the dead and the living world, also deserves further study (68). Given the long history of such inferior tomb objects, going back at least to the late Shang dynasty (where lead vessels are found in burial contexts), and more often seen in Western Zhou tombs as pottery, lead, or copper replicas, the economic motivation of installing such inferior objects in tombs is beyond question. Since all of these "spirit artifacts" are found in burial contexts, the argument that they were intended to mark the world of the dead can certainly be made, and practically it can hardly be wrong. However, to make a non-economic argument about the motivation, hence the primary cause for the production of the *mingqi*, is a formidable task that requires careful analysis of textual information in order to avoid the trap of truism. In fact, it is not always easy to determine whether a set

[5]According to this tradition, King Cheng of Zhou awarded the hereditary title viscount (*zi*) to Xiong Yi, the great-grandson of Yu Xiong, the Chu ancestor. The Chu ruler was indeed referred to as *zi* in the oracle bone inscriptions from Zhouyuan, but later studies suggest that this was a way the Zhou elites referred to foreign leaders, usually those who were in hostile relationship. Probably the very tradition about Chu receiving a title from Zhou was generated from the Central-Plains-centered historiography that emphasized Zhou hegemony. On the title *zi*, See Li Feng, "Transmitting Antiquity: The Origin and Paradigmization of the 'Five Ranks,'" in *Perceptions of Antiquity in Chinese Civilization*, edited by Dieter Kuhn and Helga Stahl (Heidelberg: Edition Forum, 2008), 103–34.

[6]See Barry B. Blakeley, "In Search of Danyang I: Historical Geography and Archaeological Site," *Early China* 13 (1988), 116–52; "On the Location of the Chu Capital in Early Chunqiu Times in Light of the Handong Incident of 701 B.C.," *Early China* 15 (1990), 49–70. On the geopolitics of middle Yangzi and the location of Chu during the Western Zhou, see Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou, 1045–771 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 328–29.

[7]See note 2 above.

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of lacquer vessels (especially when of good quality, such as those from Jiuliandun; cat. nos. 108–111, 113) in the form of real bronzes was *mingqi*, or was merely the transmedia production of vessels to serve the same ritual purposes as bronzes in the world of the living, then later buried with the dead. The demonstration that real "spirit artifacts" for religious purposes, such as the "stand of the fecundity god" (69), were included in the same burial context does not lend direct support to identifying other lacquer vessels as such.

Finally, Fan J. Zhang as both an editor and a contributor to the volume should also be applauded for his effort to generalize four points of what can be called a "Chu Style" as an art historical phenomenon: 1) the high popularity of phoenix designs on jades, lacquerware, textiles; 2) vivid rendering of Chu gods and creatures, showing the artistic pursuit of naturalism and romanticism; 3) the taste for splendor and flamboyance in sculptures and high reliefs, providing the drive for further technical sophistication and refinement; and 4) the pursuit of novelty and luxury to attain personal pleasure and splendor. Although one is free to choose different terms to describe the features of Chu art works, these four points capture well the essential characteristics of a lively artistic fashion and elite taste that became distinct from the late Western Zhou and early Spring and Autumn practice of designs favoring schematic formations and geometric components.[8]

What is missing from the scholarly agenda of this volume are two chapters. One chapter should have examined the relationship between Zeng and Chu with respect to both political development and material culture; the other chapter should ideally have treated the main topic of the volume, "Phoenix Kingdoms." The major conceptual problem of the volume is, in my view, an ambiguity in positioning Zeng both as a political power and artistic tradition in a volume that focuses on the Chu culture. So far the evidence is slim that Zeng, whose archaeological remains date much earlier, also shared the Chu mentality, in particular a reverence for phoenix, permitting it to be labelled a "Phoenix Kingdom" (quite apart from the fact that Zeng rulers never assumed the title "king"). The problem goes even beyond the boundary of Zeng–Chu relationship with regard to another state, E 鄂, that was once located in the same Suizhou area until its removal by Zhou royal forces in the reign of King Li of Zhou (857/53–842/28 BCE). E had an indigenous culture that cannot fit into the narrative of the Zeng–Chu cultural development (if the latter two formed a continuum).[9] Although a number of contributors offer sensitive comments on Zeng–Chu relations (30, 50–51, 62), a systematic study of Zeng and Chu's political interaction based on texts, especially recently discovered inscriptions (such as that on the Mi Jia 嬭加 bells), augmented by considerations of their cultural connections, could have provided a much richer grounding to the discussion of either Chu or Zeng, whether politics, culture, religion or society.[10]

[8]For late Western Zhou and early Spring and Autumn period fashions in bronze art, see Lothar von Falkenhausen, "Late Western Zhou Taste," *Études chinoises* 18 (1999), 143–78; Jessica Rawson, *Western Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections* (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, 1990), 93–132.

[9]For a discussion of the indigenous features of E bronzes, see Li Feng, "Literacy Crossing Cultural Borders: Evidence from the Bronze Inscriptions of the Western Zhou Period (1045–771 B.C.)," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquity* 74 (2002), 222–31.

[10]See, for instance, Wu Dongming 吳冬明, "Mi Jia bianzhong mingwen bushi bing shilun jinwen suojian Zeng Chu jiaowang de zhengzhi ciling" 嬭加編鐘銘文補釋並試論金文所見曾楚交往的政治辭令 [Supplemental commentary on the inscription of the Mi Jia bell-set and discussions of the political rhetoric in Zeng–Chu diplomacy as seen in bronze inscriptions], *Jianghan kaogu* 2020.3, 115–20.

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As for the main theme of the volume, "Phoenix Kingdoms," the label also needs serious study, preferably in a separate chapter that could establish the phoenix in its various manifestations as the "totem" of the Chu people and hallmark of their culture (33). There is little doubt about the popularity of the phoenix in Chu art designs. It can even be said that phoenix imagery was linked to noble status. However, saying that phoenix is popular is one thing, and arguing that the bird has a religious meaning to the Chu elites who identified themselves with the phoenix bird is quite another. As we know, the cult of birds was widespread in ancient China: for instance, the Zhou loved the phoenix and possibly associated it with the Mandate of Heaven (40–41); the Shang considered that a black bird gave birth to their earliest ancestor. Therefore, it is a legitimate question to ask: what was exactly Chu's relationship to the phoenix? Is it justified to use the phoenix (but not the dragon or the snake, which are equally prominent in Chu art) as the hallmark of the Chu culture (leaving Zeng aside)? The association has not been firmly established despite its wide acceptance among the scholars, and despite the fact that members of the Chu elite loved bird designs and possessed a deep passion for the phoenix's magic power (34). Therefore, an in-depth analysis of textual and literary sources about Chu myth and religion, combined with considerations of the iconographic evidence from Chu tombs, if included, would have served as a strong organizing force for this volume, and may prove to be helpful to scholars in the future.

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