

**Fall 2012 Society for Asian Art Lecture Series**  
**The Culture and Arts of China from Neolithic to Tang**

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**The Beginnings of the Bronze Age in China:  
Anyang and Its Predecessors, ca. 1500-1300 BC**

**Archaeological sites, dates, and periods**

*Early Bronze Age (EBA)*. A convenient term for the time I will be talking about, the second half of the second millennium BC. Many scholars would assign the entire period to a dynasty called Shang, but we have epigraphic evidence for a dynasty of that name only from the last two centuries of the second millennium and only at a single site in north China, Anyang.

The major archaeological sites of the EBA that I will mention are

*Erlitou*. Type site of the Erlitou culture, near modern Luoyang, just south of the Yellow River. Bronze vessels are found only in the upper levels at the site, for which 1500 BC is a convenient ballpark date. They are few and simple—at latest report a *ding*, a *he*, two *jia*, and fourteen *jue*.

*Erligang*. Type site of the Erligang culture, just south of the Yellow river, in the modern city of Zhengzhou, about 40 miles east of Erlitou. The Erligang culture belongs to the first two centuries or so of the EBA, i.e. about 1500-1300 BC.

*Panlongcheng*. An outpost of the Erligang culture near the Yangzi river, on the outskirts of the modern city of Wuhan, 300 miles south of Zhengzhou. Bronzes found here are indistinguishable from bronzes found at Zhengzhou.

*Anyang*. A city 90 miles north of Zhengzhou (and north of the Yellow River) known to have been ruled by nine kings of a dynasty called Shang. The Anyang excavators found divination inscriptions written by these kings. (No pre-Anyang inscriptions have yet been found; the earlier part of the Bronze Age for the moment belongs to prehistory.) The Anyang kings began their rule sometime in the 13th century BC, sometime after the end of the Erligang period. The first of the nine, named Wu Ding (his wife was Fu Hao), may have died about 1200 BC. The Anyang kings were overthrown by the founders of the Zhou dynasty in the latter part of the 11th century BC.

**Names and terms**

Li Ji (1896-1979). Director of the 1928-1937 Anyang excavations.

*Bronze*. Copper alloyed with tin or lead or both.

*Bronze ritual vessel types*. The names by which we refer to the various vessel shapes are in some cases modern conventions, in other cases ancient names known from inscriptions on the vessels. Several dozen reasonably standardized shapes were employed in EBA rituals. Among them are *he* (a spouted pouring vessel with domed cover), *jue* (a small tripod pouring cup with a strap

handle at the side and capped posts on the rim), *jia* (a larger round-bodied tripod with strap handle and capped posts), *ding* (a tripod bowl), *fangding* (a rectangular version of the *ding*), *gu* (a beaker), *you* (a bucket with lid and swing handle), *pou* (a low round vessel), and *fangyi* (a rectangular vessel with roof-shaped lid).

*Taotie*. Conventional name for the principal motif of EBA bronze decoration. It is a pattern unit, usually rectangular, with two eyes at the center. The eyes belong to a staring animal-like face that is sometimes clearly and boldly drawn, sometimes very vague and elusive. When space allows, the face often has two bodies attached to it, one on each side, shown in profile.

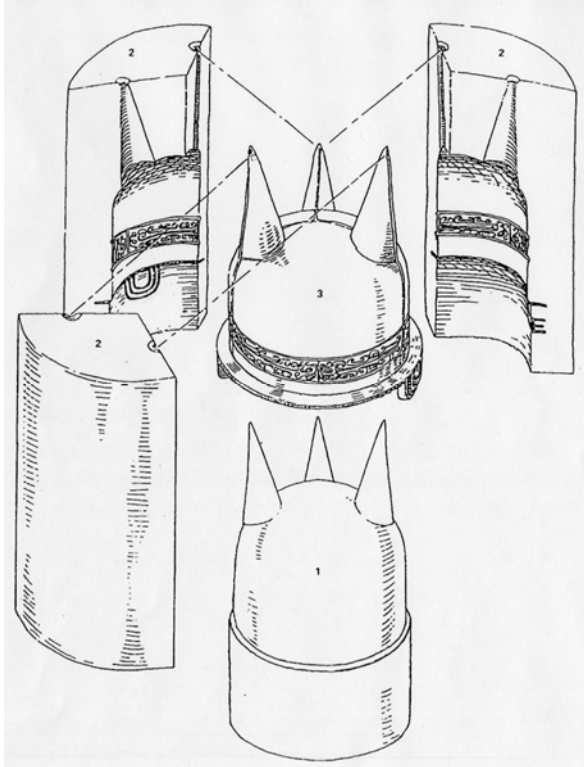
### **Further reading**

Robert Bagley, “Shang Archaeology,” chapter 3 in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China* (Cambridge University Press, 1999). The chapter is a detailed survey of EBA archaeology. Pages 141–55 give a concise introduction to bronze vessels. Pages 155–71 and 180–208 deal with the Erlitou, Erligang, Panlongcheng, and Anyang sites.

Robert Bagley, “Shang Ritual Bronzes: Casting Technique and Vessel Design”, *Archives of Asian Art* 43 (1990), pp. 6–20. A description of bronze-casting technique and its evolving relationship with vessel shapes and decoration, important matters that the lecture can only mention in passing.

Max Loehr, *Ritual Vessels of Bronze Age China* (New York: Asia Society, 1968). An exhibition catalogue with good illustrations and commentary. Catalogue numbers 4, 7, 12, 16, 18, 21, 54, and 59 are from the Brundage Collection.

René-Yvon Lefebvre d’Argencé, *Bronze Vessels of Ancient China in the Avery Brundage Collection* (Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1977). Admirable for its photographs of groups of bronzes, which give a sense of scale and three-dimensionality missing from the photographs of single objects found in most books.



*Diagram showing the relationship between a bronze tripod bowl (a ding) and the mold in which it was cast.*

1. Clay core. The vessel was cast upside down so that this core could be supported from beneath. It corresponds to the interior of the vessel (the vessel's legs are hollow and open to the interior).
2. Clay mold sections. These were formed on an undecorated model, removed from it, and then carved with decoration. (Because the same self-contained pattern was carved into each section, the belt of decoration on the finished vessel consists of three matched units.) To cast the bronze, the three mold sections were fitted together around the core, and molten bronze was poured into the narrow space between them and the core.
3. The finished bronze, showing mold marks along the lines where the mold sections met.