

Spring 2026 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Asia Reimagined: Mapping Cultures Beyond Borders
Sponsored by the Society for Asian Art

Influence of the Eurasian Animal Style on Chinese Bronze and Gold Ornaments from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (8th–3rd centuries BCE)

Dr. Yang Liu, Chair of Asian Art & Curator of Chinese Art
Minneapolis Institute of Art
May 15, 2026

Dynasties and Cultural Horizons

Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE) – Period of the Zhou dynasty marked by political fragmentation and cultural dynamism; divided into:

- Spring and Autumn Period (770–481 BCE)
- Warring States Period (481–221 BCE)

Northern Frontier Zones (ca. 8th–3rd centuries BCE) – Regions along the northern borders of Eastern Zhou states (including present-day Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Gansu), where sustained interaction between steppe populations and Chinese societies fostered the exchange and hybridization of artistic styles in bronze and gold ornament.

Steppe Cultures (ca. 9th–3rd centuries BCE) – Nomadic and semi-nomadic societies across the Eurasian steppe, associated with mobile pastoralism and distinctive animal-style art characterized by dynamic, interlaced animal forms.

Scythian Culture (ca. 8th–3rd centuries BCE) – A major nomadic culture of the western and central Eurasian steppe, known for highly developed animal-style ornamentation in gold and bronze that shares formal and thematic affinities with materials found in northern China.

Chronology

- ca. 1000–700 BCE – Early development of steppe animal-style motifs in Central Eurasia
- 770 BCE – Beginning of the Eastern Zhou dynasty
- 7th–5th centuries BCE – Increasing interaction between northern steppe groups and Chinese states
- 5th–3rd centuries BCE – Peak transmission and adaptation of animal-style motifs in Chinese decorative arts
- 221 BCE – Unification under the Qin dynasty (end of Eastern Zhou period)

Key Terms

Animal Style – A visual tradition characterized by stylized, often interlaced depictions of animals in dynamic poses (combat, contortion, predation), common across Eurasian steppe cultures.

Ordos Region – Area in present-day northern China (Inner Mongolia) where many steppe-style bronzes and gold ornaments have been found; key zone of cultural exchange.

Animal mask (taotie) – Traditional Chinese zoomorphic mask motif seen on ritual bronzes; differs stylistically from steppe animal style but sometimes interacts with it.

Openwork – Decorative technique involving pierced designs, commonly used in steppe-influenced belt plaques and ornaments.

Nomadic-Sedentary Exchange – Cultural and material interactions between mobile steppe populations and settled agricultural societies of ancient China.

Belt Plaques – Functional and decorative steppe objects, often cast in bronze or gold, featuring animal combat scenes.

Materials and Techniques

- Bronze Casting – Long-standing Chinese tradition using piece-mold casting; adapted in some steppe-influenced forms
- Gold Working – Casting and hammering techniques seen in luxury ornaments
- Inlay (turquoise, glass) – Occasionally used to enhance visual impact

Motifs and Iconography

- Predatory animals (tigers, wolves, eagles)
- Combat scenes (animal vs. animal)
- Coiled and interlaced bodies
- Hybrid creatures (real and imaginary)
- Emphasis on movement and tension

Key Sites and Regions

Ordos (Inner Mongolia) – Major archaeological source of steppe-style artifacts found within Chinese territory
Northern Frontier Zones (Shanxi, Shaanxi, Gansu) – Regions where steppe and Zhou cultures intersected
Altai and Central Asian steppe regions – Broader zones of origin for animal-style traditions

Key Themes

Cultural Exchange and Mobility

Trade, warfare, and migration facilitated artistic transmission across Eurasia.

Adaptation and Hybridization

Chinese artisans incorporated steppe motifs into local traditions, creating hybrid visual languages.

Function vs. Symbolism

Steppe objects often served personal adornment (belts, horse gear), while Chinese bronzes retained ritual functions.

Identity and Power

Adoption of animal-style motifs may reflect status, frontier identity, or affiliation with martial values.

Selected Objects to Know

- Ordos bronze belt plaques with animal combat scenes
- Gold ornaments from steppe burials showing dynamic animal forms
- Eastern Zhou bronzes incorporating non-traditional zoomorphic motifs
- Hybrid objects combining Chinese casting techniques with steppe iconography

Recommended Reading

Aruz, Joan, etc. eds., *The Golden Deer of Eurasia*, New York City: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000,

Bunker, Emma, et al., “*Animal Style*” *Art from East to West*, New York: The Asia Society Inc., 1970,

Bunker, Emma C. *Ancient Bronzes of the Eastern Eurasian Steppes*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997.

Bunker, Emma, *Nomadic art of the Eastern Eurasian Steppes The Eugene V Thaw and Other Notable New York Collection*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum, 2002,

Jacobson-Tepfer, Esther. *The Hunter, the Stag, and the Mother of Animals: Image, Monument, and Landscape in Ancient North Asia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Linduff, Kathryn M. (ed.). *The Archaeology of Ancient China and Its Neighbors*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

So, Jenny F. and Emma C. Bunker, *Traders and raiders on China's northern frontier*, Washington D. C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1995

Rawson, Jessica and Emma Bunker, *Ancient Chinese and Ordos Bronzes*, Hong Kong: The Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong, 1990.