

Good article review on art in the tomb

[Science](#), [Archaeology](#)



Introduction:

In the introduction, Clunas insists that Chinese art is quite a recent invention, in actual fact, not more than a hundred years old. Although the textiles, pieces of calligraphy, paintings, sculptures, ceramics and other works of art date from over 5, 000 years old, the idea of grouping Chinese art is a much more recent phenomenon. The book is purposely called ‘ Art in China’ and not Chinese art since it is principally written out of a major distrust of the existence of unifying principles that bring together art from a particular country.

There are several abrupt decisions that have been made in the text where buildings have not been covered. Chiefly, the book presents a series of life histories with the art objects emphasised accordingly. The structure of this book is also quite original, being neither fully chronological, nor fully thematic. Tombs are treated as artistic sites as well as market places where the objects are treated with importance and the detail that they deserve.

Chapter 1

In this chapter, Clunas focuses extensively on the changes and developments that permeated Chinese art between the Neolithic period and the Bronze Age period. There are various objects that now lie in the National Palace Museum on Taiwan and that lay claim to being some of the most important in our study of this period. One of the most important objects is the Jade Tablet where the motif of a bird of prey has come up for considerable study, especially when attempting to date this object. New archaeological and scientific techniques have allowed us to put a date to

such objects, and this one appears to have been made as early as 2500 BCE that means that it comes from the Longshan culture or today's province of Shandong that is situated near the mouth of the Yellow River.

The tablet is a typical example of how Chinese objects can be studied in great detail. One first attempts to understand the tablet's inscription that dates from around 1780 BCE, where the emperor who wrote it, came up with a detailed description of the eagle and the bar. This enables the researcher to delve deeper into the lives of the Chinese who inhabited these areas and also enables our understanding of the various cultural elements that permeated their society. From this stone, we also learn that jade was an important material for the Chinese - it was widely used in all sorts of sculpture forms, and its prevalence amongst these archaeological finds only reaffirms its importance in the cultural scheme of things. Finally, this tablet provides a unique insight into how the various artefacts were interpreted as well as their attribution to China's historic dynasties.

Techniques

Clunas goes on to talk about the beginning of the making of objects in bronze as an important watershed in technique. This, is represented as a founding moment in Chinese culture and it is very true that the vessels and weapons that were made from this alloy of metal and tin, involved considerable technique. Recent findings have shown that a number of skilled specialists, who were probably also hereditary, came up with the vast bulk of the treasures that have recently been discovered. Closer examination of these objects shows that most of them have signature techniques and the creativity of these objects show that these skilled craftsmen enjoyed

considerable patronage from the ruling classes of the time.

The chapter continues by discussing an important model that was conceived by the American scholar, Robert Bagley in which he explains that bronze working technology was first developed in the North China Plain, or to be more precise, the areas around the Yellow River around 1500-1300 BCE. The political power of the Shang emperors and dynasty, allowed this technique to flourish considerably since there have been considerable discoveries of bronze ornaments and weaponry that date from this period.

However, Clunas seems to argue that although there seemed to be political polity in the China of the Shangs, this was evidently only a fabrication of the early 1920's government where the new Chinese Republic was attempting to come to terms with its past. The sheer beauty of the objects and their advanced technique gives rise to the claim that there were several factions combating for power and control in the Yellow River region in those early far off days. Further excavations that took place in the post Mao Tse Tung era also gave lie to the theory that there was some sort of cultural unity between the Chinese during that period. The truth was that there were several clans combating for control of the region, and this meant that their sponsoring of art took on a wider and a more elaborate as well as ambitious turn, as time went by.

The Chengdu excavations

Probably the most important part of the article, is the section dealing with the excavations at Guanghai Shanxingdui near Chengdu that was discovered in 1986. These excavations upset all previous models of early Chinese culture and several theories by archaeologists that had previously

stood for centuries, were thrown out of the window in one fell swoop. The find was located just outside a fortified walled city and part from a vast number of human bones, several precious objects were discovered; these included, gold, stone and jade objects as well as a number of pottery objects that were previously unknown.

However, Clunas identifies the two lifelike bronze statues that were found on site, as being the most important for our continued understanding of Chinese art. One of the statues stands at a massive 2.62 metres, and is technically on a par, or can even be said to surpass, the archaeological finds of the Anyang period that was long thought to be the cradle of Chinese civilisation. The most important factor of this discovery, according to Clunas, was that the figures did not look Chinese, so they created a cultural and historical dilemma for their discoverers. Principally, the difference was due to the figures having stark shining eyes and they seem to be intrinsically attempting to portray man in all his glory, something that departs considerably from the artistic trends that were known to have come from China in those times. This representation of the human figure was described by several scholars as being ‘un-Chinese’ leading to several conflicting and contrasting theories on their provenance.

Bronze construction and skills

Although there are several theories that may explain how the bronze was shaped into figures and objects, Clunas laments that there is very little knowledge on who the craftsmen and artisans who made these magnificent objects were. He expounds on a theory, that the ‘consultant’ or advisor to such craftsmen must have been a priest or a holy figure of some sort since

the spiritual connection is quite far advanced in some of the works such as the elaborate bronze vessel that is discussed at length. However, he laments that we know absolutely nothing on how the workshops for the making of these objects were organized or whether there was any form of division of labour. It seems that the secrets of these great artists died with them. However, Clunas is much more positive when identifying the techniques used for making objects from bronze. The very complex casting process included the working in clay of a negative model of the finished vessel that was made in sections – this was eventually fitted together with extreme care to produce the final mould. Clunas notes that an examination of some of the bronze objects found in tombs do reveal fine cracks that were undoubtedly due to the bronze not settling properly on the clay. After this process was completed, the clay core was then fitted into the mould and the molten metal eventually poured into the space to form the vessel. It is probable that the Shang and Zhou bronze objects would have shone very brightly when first made although they are now quite popular for their green oxidisation patina.

The Terracotta Army

Probably the greatest Chinese archaeological find was the Terracotta Army that was discovered at Lintong near Xi'An. Here, Clunas explains the discovery of this vast underground cavern as one of the most important archaeological finds of the millennium. This could be seen as the apex of funerary art, although rulers usually took some small artefacts with them to the afterlife and there were a few who even took some of their wives and elders, this emperor beat everyone else by taking his entire army with him.

Although the rulers of the period had access to the control of important luxury materials such as bronze and jade, this emperor decided to reconstruct his army in clay, a unique and highly original process. Clunas goes on to describe how this process must have included the burning of hundreds or thousands of tonnes of firewood to reach the desired temperatures for the moulding of the clay figures. He describes the Terracotta Army as a triumph of bureaucracy as much as art.

Clunas talks about further important excavations from periods such as the second century BCE where silk made its first appearance - several banners made out of this luxurious material were discovered in Sichuan province. The chapter is important since it traces the use of materials across the centuries culminating in clay and silk when previous expertise had been in jade and eventually bronze.