SOME THOUGHTS ON THE DATING OF LATE SHANG BRONZE WEAPONRY

BY

CHEN FANG-MEI 陳芳妹
(National Palace Museum, Taibei)

Abstract

Past studies of bronze weapons focused on the chronology and spatial distributions of bronze weapons types themselves, but bronze weapons should also be incorporated into the high resolution relative chronologies of the Late Shang period that have been based in pottery and bronze vessel typology, oracle bone inscriptions, and stratigraphy. Studies of bronze weaponry from Late Shang period sites from throughout China suggest the possibility of multiple-interactions with the Anyang Shang capital, and these interactions indicate a complex network of multi-directional cultural relationships between Anyang and other areas.

Prologue

Archaeological data show that the development of bronze weaponry underwent remarkable changes in quality, quantity, and spatial distribution during the Late Shang period (ca. 1300-1050 BC). These changes are represented in five aspects:

First, during the Late Shang period, bronze weaponry began to appear commonly in burials. This phenomenon is a stage of an evolutionary process in mortuary practices that begins in the Neolithic period, with weapons in burials first being made of stone, then jade, and finally bronze. Moreover, bronze weapons found in Late Shang burials are part of a burial system that reflected the social status of the grave occupants.

Second, in the Late Shang period, the production of bronze weaponry was widespread across many regions, from Liaoning in the northeast (Jinzhou Shi Bowuguan 1978: 387; Kezuo Xian Wenhuaguan 1977: 28), to Shandong in the east (Shandong Huimin Xian Wenhuaguan 1974: 208), Sichuan in the southwest (Wang and Jiang 1958: 27-31),...
the Ordos Plateau in the north (Tian and Guo 1986), and Guangdong in the south (Wenwu Bianji Weiyuanhui 1979: 339-346), though the actual locations of production of bronze ritual vessels was not necessarily so widespread. Bronze weapons were common to a greater variety of cultures and regions than were bronze ritual vessels, and they are thus more appropriate for cross-cultural comparisons, as they better reflect cultural interaction among separate regions. Moreover, the rich corpus of archaeologically recovered bronze weapons shows distinctive regional characteristics that reflect the intricate networks of cultural interaction between various regions that resulted through migration, marriage alliances, warfare, and trade. Distributions of bronze weapons give evidence to support the idea of the transformation of cultures during the Late Shang period through “cultural pluralism” instead of through dissemination from a “Central Plains nucleus.”

Third, the distribution of bronze weaponry was very uneven during the Late Shang period. Anyang 安陽 was the major center for the use of bronze weapons in burials. According to a tally made in 1986, weapons represent the most plentiful category of bronzes, with a total of some 2,800 pieces (Chen Zhida 1989: 326). At Anyang were found casting workshops as well as related specialized work areas.¹

Fourth, it was not until the Late Shang period that bronze weaponry can be divided into distinctive regional styles. For instance, in the north, bronze weaponry was distinguished by a number of indigenous characteristics, such as the presence of animal pommel or bell pommel swords and knives and battle-axes with tubular sockets of various shapes (Yang Shaoshun 1981: 211-212; Wu Chenlu 1972: 62-66; Yan Jinzhu 1985: 348-349; Zheng Shaozong 1962: 644; and Tian Guangjin 1986:2). Other regions have their own distinctive features. For example, finds in southern China, such as the tomb at Xin’gan 新干, in Dayangzhou 大洋洲, Jiangxi Province, shows such distinctive weapon types as the ji 戟 combined spear and dagger-axe, the socketed yue 觀 axe, a leaf shaped ge 戈 halberd or dagger-axe, and various shapes of flat-bladed knives or swords (Jiangxi Kaogu Yanjiusuo et al. 1991; Jiangxi Sheng Bowuguan et al. 1994, 1997). In addition, the triangular halberd of southwest China, as well as the halberd with a ridged blade from the Sanxingdui三星堆 Culture in Guanghan County 廣漢縣, Sichuan Province, represent other distinctive regional styles of bronze weaponry (Sichuan Sheng Wenwu Guanli Weiyuanhui 1989: 36-38; Tang et al. 1980: 212).

¹ Three major areas for melting and casting bronze have been uncovered at Anyang. For the Miaopu 茅圃 and Xiaomintun 小民屯 sites, see Zhongguo Shehuikexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1987:11-60 and 66-69, respectively. For the Xuejiazhuang 薛家莊 site, see Zhou and Liu 1963. Although pieces of molds for casting ritual vessels were also found at Xiaomintun, these sites primarily produced tools and weapons.