THE POLITICAL AND RITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
BRONZE PRODUCTION AND USE IN
ANCIENT YUNNAN

BY

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Abstract
The exceptional quality and enormous quantity of bronzes included in the elite tombs of
the Dian Culture in central Yunnan Province provide an excellent opportunity to explore
the interplay among craft specialization, ritual, and political power. Although Yunnan
contains some of China’s richest deposits of copper, lead, and tin, the early phases of
bronze metallurgy there are still very poorly represented in the archaeological record.
By the mid-first millennium BC, however, the technology of bronze production had
reached a very high level of sophistication, and bronzes played a crucial military, ritual,
and social role in Dian society. It appears that a close, symbiotic relationship existed
between Dian metallurgical craftsmen and their elite patrons. Present evidence suggests
that possession of bronzes, and the control over the means to produce them, invested
the Dian elite with the ability to acquire and maintain power and control over their own
people and many of their neighbors. Among the Dian, primarily endogenous political
and ritual developments fostered the rapid specialization of the metallurgical craft.
Under the patronage of the Dian elite, metalworkers developed complicated methods of
casting using piece-molds and investment processes (such as lost wax casting), combined
with a variety of mechanical joinery techniques to produce vibrant and detailed scenes
of warfare, ritual, and other aspects of Dian life. With the careful attention devoted
to details of ethnic identification, military prowess, social status, and ritual activities,
these objects both legitimated and maintained Dian political and religious power and
prestige in the eyes of the Dian people and of their non-Dian neighbors.

Introduction
The relationship between craft specialization and political, ritual, and
social complexity continues to be the focus of much archaeological
debate. In an effort to better understand the external and internal
forces that shaped these changing relationships in antiquity, a number
of scholars (see, for example, Brumfiel and Earle 1987a; Wailes 1996)
have examined the nature of craft specialization in a variety of cultural contexts. In many of these cultures, specialization was closely linked to vigorous economic growth, either by individual entrepreneurial artisans seeking to capitalize on the efficiencies conferred by specialist production, or by local rulers who regarded specialization as necessary or desirable for improved economic management and risk control (Brumfiel and Earle 1987b). In other cultures, however, craft specialization seems to have been more of a political rather than economic development (Peregrine 1991). Under the patronage and control of the local ruling elite, the process and products of specialist production both conferred and maintained political, ritual, and social power and authority in the hands of that elite. This political model is supported by recent archaeological work on the ancient Dian Culture in Yunnan Province in southwest China, and provides a key to understanding the intimate interplay between the sophisticated development of one such craft—bronze metallurgy—and the emergence of the highly stratified, militaristic, and ritually oriented society of the Dian in the mid to late first millennium BC.

From its initial appearance to the advent of iron, bronze metallurgy across much of mainland Southeast Asia was marked by a rather uniform range of technically and stylistically simple tools and small ornaments, a technology appropriate for the village-based agricultural societies that inhabited this region during the first millennium BC (White 1988; Higham 1988, 1989, 1996; Ha Van Tan 1980). A clear understanding of the nature and extent of economic and social contact among these societies must await further scholarly investigation. The present evidence suggests that the very uneven distribution of copper, tin, and lead ores throughout south China and Southeast Asia apparently acted as one type of catalyst for the development of trading networks across the region, by which a basic knowledge of bronze metallurgical technology seems to have been shared (Murowchick 1988a, b; 1989a). However, unlike the later introduction of iron, the spread of bronze use in Southeast Asia seems to have brought with it no major societal changes or disruptions.

In central Yunnan, on the other hand, the emergence of the Dian (or Shizhaishan Culture during the mid- to late first millennium BC was accompanied by a profound quantitative and qualitative change in bronze production and consumption.1 Instead of remaining

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1 The majority of archaeologists and historians refer to this culture as the Dian, following Sima Qian’s reference to them in the Shi ji and to finds such as the gold seal from tomb M6 at Shizhaishan which reads, “Dian wang zhi yin 滇王之印 (Seal of the King of Dian).” However, although the Dian appellation seems to be appropriate for the relatively late site of Shizhaishan, it should be noted that some scholars believe