THE USE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RITUAL BRONZES IN THE LINGNAN REGION DURING THE EASTERN ZHOU PERIOD

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Abstract

The paper examines bronze vessels and bells excavated from late Bronze Age élite tombs in Guangdong and Guangxi. Categorized stylistically, such objects represent diverse traditions of manufacture, including 1) that of the Zhou states in the Yellow and Yangzi river systems (especially of Chu), 2) those of the Zhou-related, but basically independent bronze manufacturing cultures along the Middle and Lower Yangzi (known to Chinese archaeology as the Wu and Yue cultures), 3) those of Southeast Asian Bronze Age cultures (proto-Dian, Dongso’n), and 4) that of emergent local Lingnan bronze-casting workshops. The frequency and distribution of objects pertaining to each of these traditions changed somewhat over time; the assemblages from the tombs at Yangjia, Gongcheng (Guangxi) and Songshan, Zhaoqing (Guangdong), representing, respectively, an earlier and a later stage of local development, are scrutinized in some detail.

It is noted that, both in import and in local manufacture, the choice of bronze vessel types emphasizes functional equivalence with the indigenous ceramic inventory while evincing little if any awareness of the conventions governing the composition of Zhou ritual assemblages. Bronzes and ceramics appear to have been used in conjunction at ritual celebrations. Rather than documenting a process of acculturation, objects imported from the Zhou states were adapted to uses specific to Lingnan cultural contexts. One of their main rôles probably consisted in serving as symbolic prestige items to be handled and displayed by their élite owners. The primary rôle of display is indicated also by the fact that locally-made bronze bells are musically useless, and that, differing from their northern prototypes, they are fashioned in such a way as to emphasize visually one side over the other. Adducing cross-cultural parallels, and dwelling upon some ideas stated by K.C. Chang in a 1975 article, the paper speculates about the probable rôle of the exchange of such artifacts and of their local emulation in the emergence of an indigenous élite. Such analysis may yield some insights into local historical developments during the centuries preceding the area’s incorporation into the Qin and Han empires.
Approach

Archaeological discoveries made in China during the last half-century have radically altered our image of early Chinese cultural history, formerly regarded as an essentially unilinear development. We have come to realize that many distinctive regional cultural traditions, with roots going back to Neolithic if not earlier times, coexisted simultaneously with the early dynasties known to traditional history. Chinese culture—to the extent that there was any one such thing—arose from the interaction and assimilation of such regional strains: a gradual process that started very early (see Chang 1986: 234–245) and was by no means ended by the political unification in 221 BC.

The Lingnan 嶺南 region does not come to mind as a major stage of early Chinese cultural history. The literal meaning of “Lingnan” (South of the Mountains) alludes to the geographical separation of the Pearl River (Zhujiang 珠江) and Xijiang 西江 drainage area from the Yangzi river basin to the north by a broad chain of moderately high mountains, which in ancient times constituted a barrier of some significance. To the inhabitants of northern China, this region and its population were anciently known as Nanyue 南越 (the “Southern Beyond”), another term with a literal meaning that bespeaks distance and separation (Qu Jiafa 1991: 132). And indeed, the Nanyue were by no means close neighbors of the Shang 商 and Zhou 周 dynastic states: between them intervened a belt of distinct socio-political entities along the Yangzi river, which are poorly recorded in the historical literature (Kane 1974/75; Rawson 1990, vol. 1: 82–83 et passim; He and He 1986, Wu Mingsheng 1989). During the Eastern Zhou period (770–221 BC), the Yangzi river basin was gradually assimilated, politically as well as culturally, to northern China. The Lingnan region, much further to the south, was only very indirectly affected by these developments.

We know that the inhabitants of the Lingnan region were ethnically and linguistically distinct from their northern neighbors. In early textual sources (all, of course, written in the north), they are lumped with all non-Zhou populations south of the Yangzi under the term “Hundred Yue” (Baiyue 百越), a name that indicates not only their perceived remoteness, but also their political fragmentation. They had no states and no cities: the population was organized at what anthropologists

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