

Preface

WHEN I BEGAN to organize the conference that led to this volume, one of my first tasks was to design a mission statement that would explain to participants and to our general audience what the conference would be about and what we hoped to accomplish. The goals it sets forth are shared by this book:

Named after a type site discovered in Zhengzhou in 1951, the Erligang civilization arose in the Yellow River valley around the middle of the second millennium BCE. Shortly thereafter, its distinctive elite material culture spread to a large part of China's Central Plain, in the south reaching as far as the banks of the Yangzi River. Source of most of the cultural achievements familiarly associated with the more famous Anyang site, the Erligang culture is best known for the Zhengzhou remains, a smaller city at Panlongcheng in Hubei, and a large-scale bronze industry of remarkable artistic and technological sophistication. Bronzes are the hallmark of Erligang elite material culture. They are also the archaeologist's main evidence for understanding the transmission of bronze metallurgy to the cultures of southern China.

This conference brings together scholars from a variety of disciplines to explore what is known about the Erligang culture and its art, its spectacular bronze industry in particular. Participants will ask how the Erligang artistic and technological tradition was formed and how we should understand its legacy to the later cultures of north and south China. Comparison with other ancient civilizations will afford an important perspective.

To the goals stated above may be added one more—to bring the Erligang civilization to the attention of a wider audience. Sixty years have now passed since the discovery of the Erligang site, but the Erligang culture is still as unfamiliar as it is poorly understood. This volume aims to change that. For sixty years, Erligang has been filed under the heading “Shang archaeology,” an unsubstantiated affiliation that risks distorting our view of the archaeological evidence by filtering it through the lens of much later historical texts. Nothing but contemporary written evidence could tell us the political identity of the rulers of the Erligang state. Insisting on a connection with the Shang dynasty attested later at Anyang shifts attention to the more thoroughly explored Anyang site and obscures the role of Erligang in the rise of civilization in East Asia.

But the absence of written sources contemporary with Erligang does not leave us helpless. Archaeology has revealed a startling wealth of Erligang material remains. We must address the problem of how to interpret the archaeological record on its own terms. To do that, we need to release ourselves from the preoccupations of later textual traditions and begin to explore the Erligang civilization with fresh eyes.

How do we approach the Erligang material record without the aid of contemporary texts and without the interference of later ones? In some way, every contributor to the volume has had to grapple with this problem. In the remainder of this preface, I would like to introduce their papers and the different methodological tools they use, from art history to cross-cultural comparison.

The volume opens with the introductory chapters of Robert Bagley and Zhang Changping. In chapter 1, Bagley discusses how the discovery of the Anyang site and

its subsequent excavation by Li Ji in the 1930s shaped interpretations of the origin of civilization in China. He traces Li Ji's thinking as Li attempted to "account for the sudden appearance of a whole complex of cultural possessions: rammed-earth construction, chariots, human sacrifice, writing, and bronze metallurgy" as the product of cultural contact involving prehistoric cultures in China and civilizations in the Near East. Bagley then describes how discoveries of Erligang bronzes and cultural sites beginning in the 1950s began to transform our view of the rise of civilization in East Asia. He closes by pointing out that important cultural contributions commonly credited to Anyang actually belong to the Erligang culture. In order to see them more clearly, he says, we must approach Erligang as a prehistorian would, "through material artifacts and cross-cultural comparison" without presuppositions derived from later texts.

In chapter 2, Zhang Changping turns from the Central Plain to southern Hubei and the Erligang city at Panlongcheng. With most of the Erligang city at Zhengzhou buried under the modern city, Zhang shows that the Panlongcheng site can tell us things about the Erligang culture that we cannot learn from Zhengzhou. His chapter sets out the history of the discovery and interpretation of the Panlongcheng site and explains its connection to Erligang finds in the Central Plain. Pointing out that the richest Erligang tombs ever found belong to the cemetery at Panlongcheng, he notes that the bronzes found in them allow us to study aspects of Erligang social stratification not currently accessible to study at Zhengzhou.

The next two chapters employ one of the primary tools of the prehistorian, cross-cultural comparison. In chapters 3 and 4, Wang Haicheng and John Baines throw light on the expansion of the Erligang state by examining similar instances of sudden, large-scale disseminations of elite material culture elsewhere in the ancient world. Wang focuses on comparisons with ancient Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and the Olmec civilization; Baines offers a close reading of possible Egyptian parallels.

Acknowledging the great difficulty of reading political events out of the geographic distributions of material remains, Wang proposes a stratified definition of the Erligang culture that recognizes the different social mechanisms by which different classes of object enter the archaeological record. His analysis of the organization of the Erligang state focuses on two kinds of object, ritual bronzes and utilitarian ceramics, and asks what each kind can tell us about the nature of the Erligang state. He then assesses comparative models of empire that center on resource procurement and trade and suggests an alternative that takes into account ideological motives.

In a response to Wang's chapter, Baines presents a detailed comparison between developments during the early Bronze Age in the Central Plain and during the period in Egypt that offers the closest parallels, Naqada IIIA-B. He stresses the complexities involved in making close cross-cultural comparison and provides a wealth of detailed examples. Baines notes that the consequences of the Erligang polity's expansion were dramatically different from those of the Egyptian extensions into Lower Nubia and that both used very different strategies in interactions with local populations. He closes by discussing the different patterns of material culture in Egypt and Erligang, giving special attention to the social implications of inventories of elite and nonelite material culture.

Roderick Campbell and Yung-ti Li turn our attention inward to the problem of diachronic comparisons between early Bronze Age sites within the Central Plain. Campbell opens chapter 5 by pointing out the shift in recent archaeological theory from definitions of civilization based on social-evolutionary typology to ones that seek to identify "a cultural order and sets of central symbols through which the rule of a coterie of inner elites was legitimated." Taking into account both definitions, he first explores the indexes for the scale and complexity of the

Erligang state by comparing architectural and ceremonial works at Zhengzhou as well as the geographic distribution of Erligang elite material culture with the evidence from earlier and later states at Erlitou and Anyang. He then looks at a suite of practices and artifacts that were the foci of political power at Erlitou, Erligang, and Anyang and concludes that “the central symbols of the Erligang world order and their social economies of production were similar to those found at Erlitou and Anyang whatever their exact articulation with power.”

Yung-ti Li sees the archaeological record very differently, putting his emphasis on discontinuities between successive early Bronze Age polities in the Central Plain. In chapter 6, suggesting that a set of unexamined assumptions stemming from traditional Chinese historiography has interfered with the archaeological study of the Erligang civilization, he traces the influence of traditional dynastic models on the territorial maps of early Bronze Age states created by archaeologists and on their use of data from the geographic distribution of pottery remains. He concludes that the dynastic model that grew up around historical research at the Anyang site is both incompatible with the Anyang-period archaeological record and inappropriate to earlier Bronze Age states in the Central Plain. Li proposes that a new model of interregional interaction is needed in order to rescue archaeological research from a model supplied by traditional historiography.

The next section continues the research program that Li suggests by turning away from the Central Plain to cultures in the south that were contemporary with Erligang and Anyang. After the Erligang expansion, the archaeological record of China looks very different. Most notable are the beginnings of the first large-scale bronze-using societies outside the Central Plain. The most impressive are in the south. Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the impact of the Erligang expansion on this region.

In chapter 7, I explore the potential of art history to inform archaeological analysis. Relying on close art historical readings of bronzes, I suggest that Panlongcheng and points east felt the initial impact of the Erligang expansion in the south. I introduce the bronzes found at Xingan Dayangzhou in Jiangxi province as the earliest evidence for a large-scale bronze industry south of the Yangzi and then examine their connections with other early bronze finds in the lower Yangzi region. In conclusion, I discuss possible motives for Erligang settlements in the south and make a case for the existence of sophisticated societies in the lower Yangzi region before the moment of contact.

In chapter 8, Robin McNeal explores the emergence of bronze-using cultures in Hunan. Giving careful attention to topographic features, he traces a group of interaction networks that were central to the rise of civilization in Hunan. As he describes it, this region seems to have been rather different from the lower Yangzi region: he draws a picture of early Hunan as a “perpetual frontier.” McNeal argues that Panlongcheng was just one hub in a complex of intersecting and overlapping networks that connected the Erligang culture with Hunan, acting as a “conduit for power, ideas, goods, people, and practices.”

Chapter 9 closes the volume with the thoughts of Maggie Bickford, a historian of Chinese painting, on the value of the study of Erligang bronzes for art history. She makes a case that sophisticated methodological tools were developed in the field of bronze studies precisely because the art historian studying bronzes could not rely on textual sources for explanations of the objects. The study of early bronzes “calls for the fundamental skills of the art historian—sustained, directed observation, rigorous visual thinking, precise articulation.” These, she says, are the skills necessary for an object-oriented approach to art history, an approach that emphasizes an understanding of the materiality of the object and the visual thinking behind it. Bickford concludes by drawing attention to the problems that confront the field of Chinese painting when art historical work of the type practiced in bronze studies destabilizes the master narratives of the field.

It is a pleasure to record my debt to the friends and colleagues whose unstinting labors produced first the Erligang conference and now this book. At the conference, Alain Thote, Directeur d'Études, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, served as discussant, while Magnus Fiskesjö, associate professor of anthropology at Cornell University, and Jay Xu, director of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, served as session chairs. I am sure that the speakers join me in thanking them for their expert orchestration. The speakers, who have turned their presentations into splendid essays, have my deepest gratitude. They made the conference a success, and my job as editor satisfying and easy.

Two contributors deserve special mention. The first is Zhang Changping, whose zeal to make Panlongcheng and its bronzes better known laid the foundation for both the conference and the book. Several speakers are in Professor Zhang's debt for opportunities to examine with him the bronzes in the Hubei Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology. To him I owe also the opportunity to make the new photographs of the bronzes that are reproduced throughout the volume. The second is Robert Bagley, who published the first English-language article on Panlongcheng in 1977 and has been a pioneer in the study of Erligang ever since. His work was a major inspiration behind this project, and his advice and expertise have been invaluable.

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