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## Zhou Bronze Workshops and the Creative Work of Design and Decoration

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The questions addressed in this article concern foundries, designers, and artistic creation in the Zhou period. First foundry debris and the location of bronze workshops are briefly reviewed. Their growing size in association with the early development of a “market” suggests that patrons may have been less influential in the Warring States period than before, when workshops were located close to the palace and worked mainly for the court. The chronology of the Zhou ritual vessels reveals a very slow artistic evolution. The main factors that may help to explain why significant changes in the development of bronze ritual art did not occur very often are reviewed. It appears that during this development, the ritual vessels that were mostly representative of the owner’s status like the *ding* and *gui* vessels rarely departed from conventional models. However these two types of vessels were inscribed more often than any other types. By contrast, ever since the late Shang period, the vessels which were most innovative on an artistic level, such as *gong* 觥 and *he* 盃 ewers, belonged to the water container category. A hierarchy existed among the bronzes, therefore, which was expressed either by their number (when they belonged to series like the *ding* tripods) and by the presence or absence of an inscription, or by their décor through the contrast between simplicity and originality, not to say eccentricity, as in the case of the water ewers. Whereas the former expressed status or rank, the latter seem to have been more related to personal choices by the patrons as an expression of wealth. Indeed, this article shows that some bronze types were more prone than others to stimulate artistic innovation. The last part of the article tries to identify one particularly innovative workshop, and to determine specific motifs and decoration techniques that may reveal the individual imprint of a bronze designer, or more broadly of a workshop.

**Keywords:** Zhou Dynasty, bronze vessels, foundry technique

In this paper, the questions I would like to address concern foundries, designers, and artistic creation.<sup>1</sup> Bronze casting was a major artistic activity in Early China. Numerous scholars have focused their studies on Shang and Zhou bronzes, and now several in-depth studies on Chinese bronzes provide a fairly good knowledge of their chronology (including the earliest period), shapes, religious and ritual functions, decoration and motifs, inscriptions, styles, regional peculiarities, alloys, raw material sources, casting, and decoration technology.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars have additionally addressed problems related to these themes in very detailed studies focusing on one particular period<sup>3</sup> or

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  - 2 Some of the most comprehensive surveys testify to the vast amount of knowledge that has been accumulated over the recent years since the pioneering works by Rong Geng 容庚, Guo Baojun 郭寶鈞 and Hayashi Minao 林巳奈夫. See Rong Geng, *Shang Zhou yiqi tongkao* 商周彝器通考 (Beijing: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1941), Rong Geng and Zhang Weichi 張維持, *Yin Zhou qingtongqi tonglun* 殷周青銅器通論 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1958), Guo Baojun, *Shang Zhou tongqi qun zonghe yanjiu* 商周銅器群總合研究 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1959), Hayashi Minao, *In Shū jidai seidōki no kenkyū* 殷周時代青銅器の研究 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1984), *In Shū jidai seidōki mon'yō no kenkyū* 殷周時代青銅器紋樣の研究 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1986), *Shun Jū seidōki mon'yō no kenkyū* 春秋青銅器紋樣の研究 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1989). The more recent studies are in particular the Sackler Bronze catalogues by Robert Bagley, Jessica Rawson and Jenny So. See Robert W. Bagley, *Shang Ritual Bronzes in the Arthur M. Sackler Collections* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), Jessica Rawson, *Western Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections* (Washington, D.C./Cambridge, Mass.: The Arthur M. Sackler Foundation/ The Arthur M. Sackler Museum [Harvard University], 1990) and Jenny So, *Eastern Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections* (New York: The Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, in association with the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1995). Besides *The Great Bronze Age of China* edited by Wen Fong (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), two more important syntheses need to be mentioned here, by Ma Chengyuan 馬承源 (*Zhongguo qingtongqi yanjiu* 中國青銅器研究 [Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002]) and Zhu Fenghan 朱鳳瀚 (*Zhongguo qingtongqi zonglun* 中國青銅器總論 [Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009]).
  - 3 See, for example, the remarkable study by Wang Shimin 王世民, Chen Gongrou 陳公柔 and Zhang Changshou 張長壽 (*Xi Zhou qingtongqi fenqi duandai yanjiu* 西周青銅器分期斷代研究 [Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1999]) following Hayashi Minao's pioneering work.