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SHANG AND ZHOU BRONZE NAO BELLS EXCAVATED IN SOUTH CHINA

ABSTRACT:

Twenty-two bronze nao-bells dating to the late Shang and early Western Zhou periods have been unearthed from the five southern provinces of Hunan, Jiangsi, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Fujian. Of these, sixteen were from Hunan, three from Zhejiang, and one each from the remaining three provinces. These bells can be classified into four categories: type A has an animal mask decoration (eleven examples); type B has a cloud pattern (three examples); type C has nipples (only one example); type D has stalks (mei 枚, seven examples).

The nao is a bell that can produce two tones. It can be used in sacrificial offerings as well as war. Because most of these bells have been discovered at the top, mid-section, or foot of mountains or on the banks of a river, we surmise that they may have been used in contemporary sacrifices to the mountains and streams, wind and rain, and stars, etc. Based on the periodization of the style of their shape and decoration we conclude that type A may be as early as late Shang, type B can be assigned to the end of the Shang, type C is from the beginning of the Zhou and type D belongs to the early Western Zhou. They developed from type A to B to C to D and then to the yong-bell. The characteristics of southern nao bells are: they are large, thick and heavy; most have whorls on the circular handle; many animal masks and cloud and lightning patterns are formed from thick lines among the decoration; the entire body is usually covered with decoration; most appear singly, and they were set up on their stands with the mouth facing up. In contrast, northern nao-bells are very small, they have no whorls on the handle, their decoration is simple, and they are unearthed in groups of several together.

Thus there is an obvious distinction between northern and southern nao-bells. In light of the regional characteristics of the bronze nao from Hunan and of the discovery in recent years of bronze arrowheads, bronze slag, and what may be the remains of a bronze casting furnace in the Shang site of Zaoshi 皂市 in Shimen county, these bells may very well have been cast in Hunan. The lower reaches of the Yangtze River may also have been one of the areas producing southern nao-bells. The small nao of the North had disappeared by the time of the early Western Zhou. Therefore, the yong-bell that appears in the North during the middle of the Western Zhou must have been influenced by the large southern nao or yong-bell and is not a direct development from the small northern nao of the Shang.

DISCUSSION:

Gao Zhixi's slides of nao 鈃 bronze bells aptly illustrated the typology presented in his paper.

ON THE FUNCTION AND INSTALLATION OF NAO BELLS:

Chang Kwang-yuan (National Place Museum, Taipei) suggested that nao bells were fitted onto a staff and installed, singly, with the mouth upwards. Such installations would have been very fragile and liable to frequent breakage. Possibly for this reason after the Western Zhou period zhong bells were installed on racks with the mouth facing downwards. Chou Hung-hsiang retorted that such racks hardly seemed safer; he inquired if there were any stone stands for nao bells known, as they existed for chimestones. Gao Zhixi said none had been found so far. Chou continued that the typological differences between nao and zhong bells ought to be explained from their archaeological contexts. Virtually all nao bells known to date have been discovered in caches on hills, slopes, and riversides; conversely, zhong bells have been found mostly in tombs. The two types had altogether different religious connotations.

Hsu Cho-yun (University of Pittsburgh) tried to be more explicit about this difference. Nao bells were to summon the people, or -- perhaps more likely -- gods and spirits. They were not musically scaled as were zhong bells. The function of the nao bells was similar to that of the big bronze drums widely used by non-Chinese peoples in Southern China until fairly recently. Gao Zhixi approved of this suggestion, but stressed the chronological disparity between the nao, which died out after the Shang period, and the bronze drums, which did not appear until almost a thousand years later.

ON THE DERIVATION OF BELL TYPES:

Chang Kwang-yuan thought it conceivable that the zhong bells did not originate from the Central Plains, but from Western China, i.e., from Shaanxi. There were more than just two cultural foci in Bronze Age China. The Western Zhou zhong was influenced by the South Chinese nao. Bronze inscriptions can suggest the specific time and mode of cultural diffusion. As an example, Chang quoted the inscription of the Zongzhou zhong 宗周鐘 (now in the National Place Museum, Taipei), which concerns Zhao Wang's Southern campaign to conquer Chu. This military campaign was surely an occasion for cultural contact, Chang asserted. There was a short dispute between him and Virginia Kane on the date of the bell, Chang considering a date in Zhao Wang's reign possible, whereas Kane pointed to the research of Tang Lan and Nivison which had, in her opinion, proven the bells to date from Li Wang. Kane went on to say that the first zhong bells in Western Zhou date from Mu Wang, and the undeniably Southern characteristics they display could be explained by the

king's Southern campaign.

Virginia Kane also discussed the derivation of the zhong bells found at Puducun 普渡村 (Shaanxi). Whereas Gao had suggested they could have been locally made according to Southern prototypes, Kane insisted that they were stylistically unlike all other contemporary material produced in the region, making it more likely that they were imports from the South -- perhaps as booty from Mu Wang's campaign. She suggested that the reversal of installment position (the major typological difference between nao and zhong) might have occurred in the South, before the zhong type was diffused northwards. Gao Zhixi agreed that there was such a possibility, but continued to regard Kane's hypothesis about the Puducun bells with some skepticism.

Kane said she assumed that the Southern bells were derived typologically from the small bells found at Anyang, which diffused to the South, where they were enlarged and developed independently in accordance with local needs and religious customs. Her reason for so believing was that many trade bronzes from Anyang had been unearthed in South China. Gao still preferred to think in terms of two different strains of development of bells at Anyang and South China. He agreed, however, that there was influence from the North in South China -- in fact, even before Anyang. Perhaps, if Northern stimulus was necessary to trigger the development of the Southern nao bells, this might already have occurred in the Erligang period.

Betty Tseng Ecke (University of Hawaii) related this position to the problem of Northern influences in Chu in a later period. She pointed out that whereas Northern influence on Chu was strong, there was little evidence for a similar process in the other direction. Mutatis mutandis, conditions might have been similar in Shang times. Moreover, as in the case of Chu, the possibility of cultural contact between South China and more southerly regions -- such as Annam and Southeast Asia -- ought to be taken into account even in the Shang period. Gao replied that features indigenous to Southern China should be given special attention in determining the importance of diffusion processes.

Lastly, Hsü Chin-hsiung (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto) presented an epigraphic argument for the Southern origin of bells: the character nan 南 (South) is identified with a character in the oracle inscriptions whose graph closely resembles a hanging bell: 𠂔. This shape could be due to semantic associations in the minds of the Shang people, who might have been thinking of the South in terms of bells, or vice versa.