

DIAN BRONZE ART: ITS SOURCE AND FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

The stylistic variation in Dian bronze art delineates the society of the Dian culture (4th century BC-1st century AD) as a hierarchical one that also had affinities to a wide range of alien cultures. Further studies of archaeological materials uncovered in Yunnan sites reveal that population movements, continual cultural assimilation, and frequent technological exchanges in and around Yunnan resulted in the creation of a hybrid bronze art, which was eventually transplanted on to the indigenous cultural stratum in east-central Yunnan.

INTRODUCTION

Long before the first Dian site in Yunnan was officially excavated in 1956, Yunnan bronzes were already being scrutinized in museums in the west (Janse 1930: 178, 1931: 100-101). These artifacts, primarily stray finds of weapons and tools with aberrant typological characteristics and surface ornamentation, were compared with artifacts from the Dong Son site of Vietnam (Janse 1936: 42-44). They also had led to speculations that “a particular province characterized by small bronzes of a special type and of drums” could have existed in southwest China (Karlsgren 1942: 26). Frequent sightings of additional stray finds in the Lake Dian area (Gray 1949-50) eventually led to a series of archaeological excavations in east-central Yunnan. The data accumulated for more than half a century have now attested that comparable artifacts from the Dong Son region and Yunnan belonged to two cognate cultures in the Yue-based cultural sphere of southwest China and the Indochinese peninsula. While prevailing in parallel as part of an indigenous Southeast Asian continuum, both regional centers were prolific consumers of bronze kettledrums and metal implements. How these two cultures interacted with each other in the context of Asian metallurgy has yet to be elucidated, but it is evident that besides their obvious Dong Son affinities, the bronzes from Yunnan also exhibit prominent traits pointing to areas north and west of Lake Dian as possible sources for their inspiration.

The Bronze Age culture of east-central Yunnan is officially named after its type site at Shizhaishan (Yunnansheng Bowuguan 1959), but is better known as the Dian



Figure 1. Sites and regions discussed in the text.

culture. The Shizhaishan necropolis and similar burial grounds at Lijiashan (Yunnansheng Bowuguan 1975; Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2001b), Tianzিমiao (Kunmingshi Wenwu Guanli Weiyuanhui 1985), and at most recently excavated Yangfutou (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2001a, 2005) were cemeteries belonging to communities ruled by powerful overlords (Fig. 1). Others were clustered graves of less socially advanced groups (von Dewall 1967: 15-17; Jiang 2002: 157). The excavated sites represent different stages of the culture from the 4th century BC to the 1st century AD. Data taken from these burials in conjunction with textual materials have provided a historical framework and ethnological references for the Dian culture, which did not have a written tradition of its own. The Chinese inscription on a gold seal discovered in one of the rich graves at Shizhaishan has identified its owner as chief of the “Dian Kingdom,” which corresponds to the name of a small fief of the Han court mentioned in the

Shiji chronicle compiled during the 2nd century BC (Sima 1970: 959). The Dian state was described as one of the numerous sedentary groups spread over a vast territory covering southern Sichuan, eastern Yunnan and western Guizhou; all of these people dressed their hair in bun-shaped topknots, cultivated crops and lived in villages. They were part of a mosaic of farming and stock-raising communities in the remote Southwest.

The Dian were also stated to have been part of a distinct confederacy, called Mimo, distinguished from other sedentary polities known as “chiefs,” although there is no elaboration about how and why the Mimo confederacy was different. In descriptions for an expansive area north and west of Dian there are lists of nomads and semi-nomads; among them were subgroups called Sui and Kunming living in regions contiguous to the Dian domain. These nomadic people were said to have braided their hair; they moved their homes freely with herds of domestic animals but were not led by political leaders. Additional descriptions regarding the Kunming people suggest that these pastoral nomads were not allies of the Dian, and were viewed as a hostile force when the Han attempted to establish a commercial route crossing Dian toward the west in 122 BC. However, additional textual materials reveal that the Dian people possibly were familiar with the subsistence mode of the Kunming people. According to historical accounts of Yunnan in the post-Han conquest era (shortly after 109 BC), horses and cattle counted in tens of thousands existed in the Lake Dian area (Chang 1976: 56).

Although the limited textual references tell little about the organization of Dian society, the validity of these textual materials already has been born out by data generated through fieldwork. Among the excavated artifacts are large quantities of metal agricultural tools suitable for use on arable land. Others decorated with images of wild and domesticated animals and of realistically modeled nobles, peasants and herders display a wide range of coiffure and costume styles. These human figures are thought to portray the Dian, Kunming and other southwestern peoples who encompassed pastoral nomads, semi-nomads, and farmers (Feng 1961, Wang 1979). Detected in the Dian finds also are occasional metropolitan Chinese bronze artifacts and characteristic artifact types of southwestern China, in addition to others showing discernible traits from pastoral cultures in the Chinese northern zone as well as Eurasian Steppe. Such a *mélange* suggests that cultural and technological exchanges between Yunnan and adjacent regions contributed to the evolution of the Dian bronze industry.

Nevertheless, available stratigraphic data have yet to be applied to this issue, because relevant published data are mainly from burials, and archaeological materials from habitation sites are essentially absent. On the other hand, the grave materials, consisting of bronzes embellished with a wide array of iconographic detail in different styles, have given important cultural and technical messages previously ignored by Chinese historians. In the



Figure 2. Heger I Drum from a Dian site (photo by author)



Figure 3. Cowrie vessel from Shizhaishan tomb 71 (permission from Yunnan Provincial Institute of Relics and Archaeology).

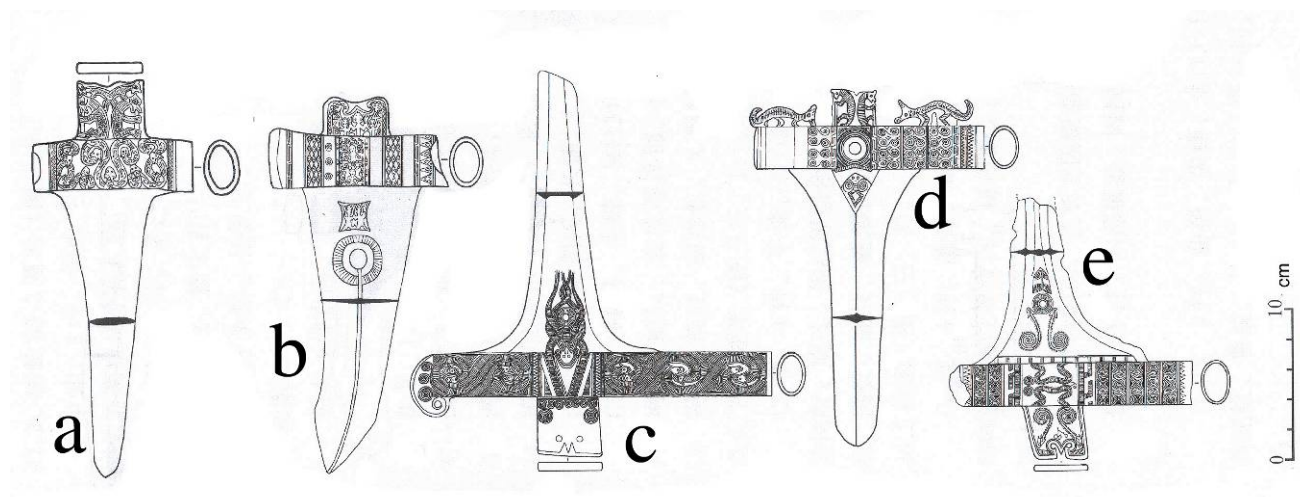


Figure 4. Drawings of bronze halberds from Dian sites (based on *Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo et al. 2005, vol. 1: 42*).

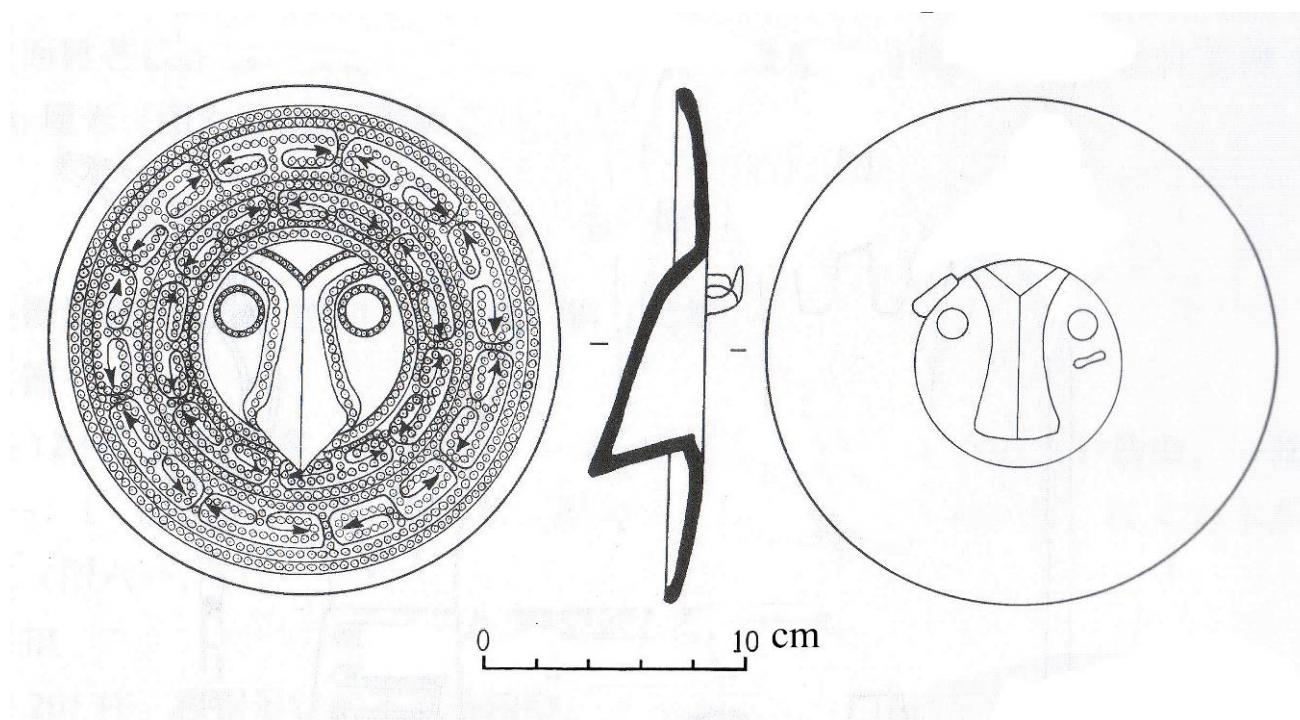


Figure 5. Drawing of bronze buckle with face motif (based on *Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo et al. 2005, vol. 1:74*)

light of recent excavations that supply for the first time a complete stratigraphic sequence for studying Dian archaeology, the question of how distinct traits were integrated into the Dian culture can now be interpreted through an analysis of the stylistic variations in Dian decorative art.

STYLES IN DIAN BRONZE ART

Executed in different techniques and rendered in varied artistic styles, distinct Dian artistic vocabulary is expressed in an assortment of figurative forms, frequently in combination with geometric patterns that can be traced back to pottery designs of the Neolithic cultures in south-

west China and Indochina (Kan 1982: 3-11; Watson 1992: 176-179). These geometric designs were often used to complement animal and human representations on signature items of the Dian culture, such as the hourglass-shaped Heger Type I drums (Fig. 2) and a variety of cowrie shell holders (Fig. 3). Stylistically, the figurative designs can be divided into two major groups: schematic and realistic. The stylistic distinctions between these two groups cannot be ascribed to temporal difference because both existed side by side throughout the entire life span of the culture. These two must have been interrelated, as schematic figures often occur together with elements belonging to the realistic style on the same artifacts. Since

these two types of design look stylistically and iconographically incompatible when appearing in juxtaposition, the use of a mixed artistic idiom on the Dian bronzes demands an explanation.

The Schematic Style

The schematic ornamentation consists of conceptualized human and animal forms in high and low relief, linear relief, or intaglio design (Fig. 4a-c, e). These designs are either shown in geometric symmetry or as repetitive patterns, and are laid out in an orderly manner over a blank background. Among the schematic motifs is an awe-generating humanoid face on a round buckle (Fig. 5), known from the older graves at the Yangfutou site. This appears to have been a shared motif with sites in north-eastern Yunnan (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 2003: 80-91), where influence from the Yelang culture of Guizhou also can be felt. However, for an unexplained reason, this unique face motif ceased to be used in tombs near Lake Dian after the middle of the 3rd century BC. Other designs at Dian sites represent amphibian figures commonly found on *ge* halberds (Fig. 6), which were also popular in Bronze Age sites in Guizhou. There are also

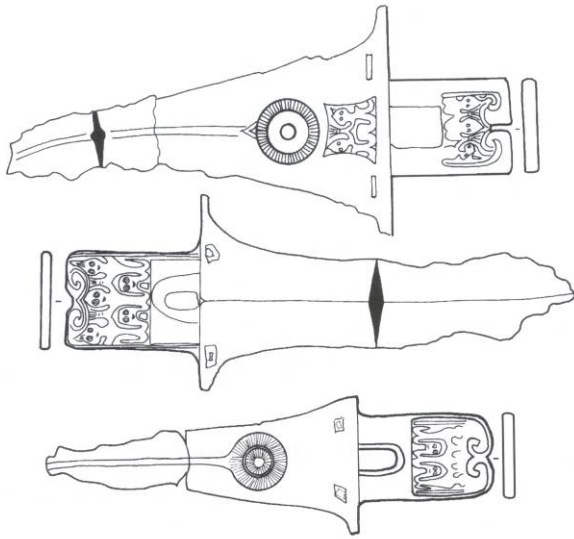


Figure 6. Drawings of *ge* halberds with amphibian designs (based on Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo et al. 2005, vol. 2: 540).

intertwined serpents (Fig. 4c) reminiscent of those on Chu silk banners, and the S-shaped snakes are familiar patterns on artifacts from sites along the Jinsha River, which divides most of Yunnan from Sichuan. Similar S-shaped motif on an openwork plaque from the Motuo site seems to be the northernmost example of this motif known to date (see illustration in Maoxian Qiangzu Bowuguan 1994: 30). There are also feathered oarsmen/dancers, humped buffalo, and water fowl (Fig. 7), appearing as repetitive patterns in zones divided by geometric bands on different sections of Heger I kettledrums. As similar decorative patterns also occur on the pediform axes and situla buckets at Dong Son sites, it seems that these so-called



Figure 7. Rubbings of surface patterns on a bronze kettle drum from Lijiashan (based on Yunnansheng Bowuguan 1975: 134).

drum patterns may not have been conceived as part of the drum structure in the first place. The fact that the outer walls of the oldest drum specimens (Pre-Heger I or Wanjiaaba type) do not bear figurative designs supports this assumption.

The schematized forms of fish, amphibians, cattle and birds were evidently representations of fauna known to the Dian people. They often appear with human images in Dian visual art to illustrate popular themes of southwestern cultures, such as headhunting, warrior dances, bull rituals, and boating events. The amphibian motif as a shared artistic idea defines the rice-cultivating Pu/Liao and Yue-based communities in southern China and in the Dong Son sphere as part of the same cultural continuum, as do images of oarsmen in feathered ceremonial attire propelling canoes and their accompanying geometric decorations (Fig. 7). Discussions of the feather-man motif and its variations on artifacts from the lower Yangzi (Mao 1998: 20-31) have additionally added new dimensions to studies of possible movement of cultural traits.

The Realistic Style

The realistic decoration on Dian bronzes consists of complex designs rendered in line incision, low and high relief, or three-dimensional forms (Figs 3, 8, 9). The motifs consist of life-like figurative elements modeled after human

forms and animal species, and they frequently include minute details. Each of them may appear singly as an independent design, or in groups to illustrate animated narrative scenes, some of which possibly record anecdotes and events that had actually taken place. The majority of these were produced with piece-mould casting and at times finished with conventional joining techniques, e.g. soldering, pre-casting and casting-on. Others, dating from the middle and late phases of the culture, reveal specialized techniques, such as fine line incision, engraving, lost-wax casting, gilding, and a unique tin-plating technique as surface treatment. These forms of decoration are typical on artifacts buried in the richly furnished graves of Dian aristocrats on the eastern shore of Lake Dian and in regions further south, in particular at Shizhaishan and Lijishan. Among unique examples are intricate genre scenes sculpted on the lids of the cowrie containers or converted kettledrums (Fig. 3). The iconographic details and subjects encompassed in these designs reveal different facets of a sedentary community, including ethnicity, commerce, subsistence, transportation, social stratification, costume design, military power, technology, ritual, craft specialization and gender issues (Feng 1961; Pirazzoli t'Serstevens 1974; Wang 1979; Rode 2004; Chiou-Peng 2004). These visual forms can be regarded as archival records of Dian history.

Besides perceivable images, the hidden messages in these realistic representations facilitate exploration of cultural issues that are difficult to address solely with mortuary data. The somewhat rigid, paired animal forms (Fig. 4d) on the transverse sockets of halberds represent one of the oldest groups of realistic animal images in Dian finds. They were possibly endowed with special meanings because they continued to be used along with more stylistically evolved animal representations until the very end of the Dian culture. Of particular interest is that the socketed weapons and tools embellished with these animal designs are reminiscent of characteristic artifact types in pastoral regions of the Chinese northern zone (Tong 1979: 450-451), where prevalent animal art was also associated with metalworking. Additional images of human forms holding *ge* halberds in shamanistic dances (Fig. 8) visually explain the function of a good number of Dian weapons and tools that are coated with a dazzling, silvery tin layer. Scientific studies indicate that these non-functional items were manufactured with a special tin-plating technique (Prof. Rubin Han, University Science Technology Beijing, pers. comm.) that also was popular in the Chinese northern zone (Bunker 1990).

Among the themes rendered in the realistic style, some appear to be atypical for a sedentary agricultural context. The most extraordinary examples are those depicting wild beast and herbivores locked in fierce combat, frequently on openwork relief plaques of unknown function (Fig. 9). They have been compared to the bronzes of the nomadic world in the Eurasian steppes, but the meanings of the Dian specimens have remained a subject of disagreement because the stylistic features and iconogra-



Figure 8. Incised design of priests' dance on a cowrie container (based on *Zhongguo Gudai Tonggu Xuehui* (ed.). 1993. *Tonggu he Qingtong Wenhua de Xintansuo*, p. 101. Nanning: Guanxi Renmin Chubanshe)

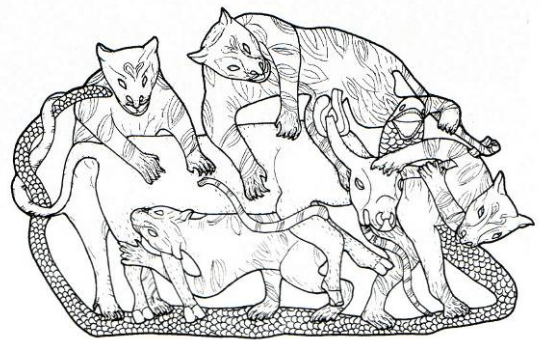


Figure 9. Drawing of openwork bronze plaque with animals in combat (based on *Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo et al.* 2005, vol. 1: 75)

phy of these animal forms clearly were of local derivation. Others, representing herd animals being tended by Dian male figures, suggest that stock-rearing was a gender-related trade in a sedentary community that practiced a mixed economy. Additional illustrations of cattle and horses as tribute (Shiziashan M13: 2), as well as their frequent associations with images of nomadic people (Lijishan M51: 263; Yangfutou M113: 351-14), are also important for exploring the subject of pastoralism in the Dian culture. They convey the idea that stock animals were imports from pastoral regions as well as valuable commodities in the Dian community.

The various relief and plastic models of mounted Dian males are also of interest. Some are portrayed with different types of horse gear that illustrate the evolution of Dian equestrian art (Chiou-Peng 2004: 298-301), while others in full equestrian paraphernalia (Shizhaishan M10: 2) display Central Asiatic artifact types such as short daggers, arm and shin guards (Knauer 1993: 248-251). The results of these studies, when combined with data gained from horse bones from Yunnan sites, point to the pastoral Di/Qiang cultural zone in western Sichuan and northwestern Yunnan as the immediate source of Dian equids and horsemanship (Chiou-Peng 2004: 306-311).

DIAN DECORATIVE ART IN RELATION TO MORTUARY DATA

The composite nature of Dian artistry has an analogy in mortuary practice at around 40 ancient cemeteries in the vicinity of Lake Dian (Jiang 2002; Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005). At these sites, bronzes decorated with designs in realistic style have been discovered in a small number of well furnished graves, presumably those of the Dian ruling elite. These artifacts usually were buried together with items decorated with schematic motifs, which also appear commonly on bronzes in the smaller grave pits thought to be those of warriors and commoners. The small graves also contained coarse ceramic wares typical of the Dian region, but rarely yielded bronzes displaying realistic designs.

Of all the Dian graves, the largest were constructed mostly on hilltops and surrounded by smaller ones on the slopes below. Both large and small graves usually contained single inhumations in rectangular shaft chambers, while the earlier graves may additionally have at the base a small quasi-rectangular depression similar to the “*yaokeng*” sacrificial pit known in the Chinese central plains. The inclusion of a *yaokeng* ceased shortly after the middle of the 3rd century BC. There were a few with multiple tomb occupants of the same or opposite sexes, and secondary burials also occurred. Traces of human sacrifice were detected in some graves (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005, vol. 1: 18), while others witnessed signs of limb severing (Yunnansheng Bowuguan 1959: 10; Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005, vol. 1: 18), a custom prevalent in the Di/Qiang complex along the northwestern periphery of China (Yang 2002: 68). At the Shizhaisan sites, natural boulders originally deposited in the soil served as the sides of the burial chamber (Yunnansheng Bowuguan 1959: 10), while the grave pits of tombs at Lijiashan were cut with metal tools directly into the surface of large boulders in the soil (Xinning Zhang, Yunnan Institute of Archaeology, pers. comm.). The burial chambers of some graves were filled with layers of river pebbles or fine-grained soil (Yunnansheng Bowuguan 1959: 10); others had rock formations as aboveground markers or large conical-shaped rocks planted onto the grave pit after burial (Jiang 2002: 76; Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2001b: 26-27). These structures recall the stone graves and dolmens characteristic of cultures in western fringes of Sichuan and Yunnan and near the Chinese borderlands along the line of the Great Wall.

A survey of datable artifacts from Dian burials explains the evolution of Dian bronze decoration as a well-established hybrid art. Both artistic styles were in use around 350 BC, but decorative motifs and patterns executed in schematic style were dominant during the earlier stages of the Dian bronze industry. Schematic decorations continued to represent the popular decorative style till the very end of the culture, with little modification. They identify a prevalent artistic tradition in the cultural substratum of the Dian community, shared with cultures in surrounding regions. Artifacts embellished with both

schematic and realistic styles were therefore consistently interred in the rich Dian graves of all ages, while the smaller graves, if furnished with bronzes at all, only had items adorned with schematic patterns and geometric motifs.

During the earlier stages of the Dian culture, archaic realism was the norm for representing realistic figures, possibly due in part to technical constraints. It is possible that realistic decorations were applied to artifacts of perishable materials prior to being transcribed into bronze. The realistic representations on Dian artifacts underwent stylistic changes and became increasingly complex when more advanced bronze techniques became feasible, especially between the 3rd and 1st centuries BC as these designs delineated a full-bloom realistic art, reserved for use within the upper echelons of society in east-central Yunnan. Finally, at the end of the first century AD the distinct hybrid decorative art of the Dian culture became obliterated due to infiltration of metropolitan Chinese culture.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF DIAN DECORATIVE ART

For decades after the gold seal was recovered from Shizhaishan, issues concerning the evolution of Dian culture and art remained inconclusive, until the Yangfutou site was discovered in the 1990s. The excavation of this site brought to light the earliest known group of Dian graves and permits a sketch of the successive stages of Dian material culture over the course of 4th century BC to 1st century AD (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005, vol. 2: 715). The burials were mainly in shaft tombs that were frequently provided with outer and inner coffins supported by side and base boards. The burial chambers were often plastered with sticky clay, and could additionally have ledges on their sides and *yaokeng* pits in their bases (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005, vol. 1: 16-17). These uniquely structured graves were clearly modeled on Chu graves of the middle Yangzi, except that they were furnished with hallmark items of the Dian culture.

The lowest stratum at Yangfutou represented an evolved bronze tradition with artifact types that have no precedents in the pre-Metal Age culture of the same area which was suffused with polished stone adzes and small coarse, rice-husk tempered red ceramic bowls or plates (Kan 1982: 15). Unique burial goods in earliest Yangfutou graves include a kettledrum (M19: 151), a cowrie container (M30: 31), realistic animal sculptures (M19: 139), and items decorated with animal themes (M19: 211-2). Found also were *fu* cooking vessels of shapes characteristic of southwestern China, although some with three legs resemble *ding* vessels from the Central Plain. These distinct bronze *fu* along with *ge* halberds with amphibian designs (Fig. 6) and the round buckle (Fig. 5) resemble characteristic artifacts at sites near the Guizhou border (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 2003), and therefore imply communications with cultures of Pu-Liao affiliation. There were also fine burnished tall black or brown clay jars with broad shoulders, flared mouths and

leaf impressions at their bases, found exclusively in the lower archaeological layers. These unique ceramic wares are totally different from the coarse pre-Metal Age pottery of the Lake Dian region, but compare closely with those from the stone graves of pastoral cultures near the Yunnan/Sichuan border and further west. This type of dark colored Yangfutou pottery was gradually replaced by the coarse red clay dishes, bowls and jars characteristic of the Dian culture (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005, vol. 2: 718-719). Additional artifacts seen for the first time near the Lake Dian included lacquered wood and ceramic wares with black and red patterns, reminiscent of the lacquer designs of the Ba/Shu cultures of Sichuan and the Chu of the middle Yangzi. Some of these designs occur on a type of curved wooden handle that likely was based on a model known from earlier Chu graves (Henansheng Wenwu Yanjiusuo, 1986: pl. 73). It is clear that intrusive elements identified at Yangfutou accounted for the manifestation of a sophisticated bronze tradition in the Dian region, although these traits were gradually incorporated into the local system over time (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005, vol. 2: 716-720).

The Yangfutou burials had parallels at earlier Bronze Age sites in central Yunnan, in particular those in the Chuxiong region (Yunnansheng Wenwu Gongzuodui *et al.* 1983: 347-382; Zhang 1994: 24-34), approximately 100 km from Kunming. The Chuxiong burials consisted of a few 7th century BC graves that were constructed after Chu models, as seen in the use of wooden coffins, lateral and base boards, *yaokeng* pits and sticky clay fillings. However, some of these coffins were of hollowed logs like the "boat burials" of the Ba/Shu culture to the north. The Chuxiong bronze assemblage comprised an excessive quantity of weapons and sizable amount of cultivation tools, along with cauldrons of *fu* type, round buckles, rudimentary kettledrums and sets of large bells, many ancestral to more advanced forms produced subsequently at Yangfutou and others in the Dian region (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005, vol. 2: 716). The amphibian figures found on the inside of one of the rudimentary kettledrums of pre-Heger I or Wanjiaba type (Yunnansheng Wenwu Gongzuodui *et al.* 1983: 367-369) and a circular ornamental plaque from the same region (Li *et al.* 2000: 107-108) are the earliest examples of schematic decoration used near the Lake Dian area. Sporadic examples of Pre-Heger I drums excavated in western and central Yunnan and in the Lao Cai area of northern Vietnam (Li *et al.* 2007; Pham 1997: 45-59), as well as similar round plaques at the Yangfutou site in the Lake Dian area and a site near the Yuan River (upper Red River) further south (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005, vol. 3: 849; Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1992: 48), offer indisputable evidence of intermittent cultural exchanges between central Yunnan and its surrounding regions over an extended period of time.

At the one of the Chuxiong sites, the stratum containing graves with kettledrums was found to have been superimposed on top of a distinct early 1st millennium BC

layer, representing an overlay of new elements on the existing tradition (Wang 1985: 123-125). The bottom layer was characterized by distinct grave goods in rectangular earthen pits, including an ornamental plaque decorated with realistic bear sculptures, large ceramic amphorae (often with leaf-shaped impressions at their bottoms), and daggers/swords with a spiral hilt connected to the blade with a three-pronged guard (Yunnansheng Wenwu Gongzuodui *et al.* 1983). These artifacts recall items from rectangular stone-lined graves typical of the Cist Grave culture (Wang 1985: 126) in the pastoral region of western Sichuan, northwestern Yunnan and areas near the upper Yellow River.

On the other hand, the tombs in the upper Chuxiong layer were the material remains of sedentary people, who probably took over the region by force using their metal weapons and perhaps equestrian skills. The date of this incursion into central Yunnan was concurrent with Chu expansion in the middle Yangzi region (7th century BC). This artifact assemblage implies that the new ruling elite exercised resource control and practiced ceremonialism, implemented through a variety of bronze ritualistic items and musical instruments, including the rudimentary bronze kettledrum, which was one of the new musical instruments invented here, possibly based on the shape of a ceramic pot of *fu* type. However, the origin of this new group cannot be determined, except that the burial customs might link them to an area under the cultural influence of both the Chu and Ba/Shu traditions. This could have been a locale not far from the Jinsha River, near the Yunnan-Sichuan border.

The Jinsha River meanders across the topographical relief in Sichuan-Yunnan highland to become the Yangzi further downstream. As revealed in archaeological and historical data, it was a cultural crossroads for northern and southern traits (Yang 2002). Box-shaped stone graves, shaft tombs, and dolmen-like communal structures disseminated along the hillsides and valleys of the Jinsha River and its tributaries attest to the existence of a wide spectrum of socially and ethnically distinct peoples in habitat of varied ecosystem (Tong 1980: 429-438). Among them, the stone graves are believed to have belonged to members of pastoral Cist Grave culture descended from Di/Qiang population of upper Yellow River, while the dolmen burials are thought to have housed sedentary Pu-Liao (Tong 1980: 429-441) who had interacted with Chu in the middle Yangzi (Wang 1979: 436). Moreover, characteristic burial goods of the Cist Grave culture found in many of these dolmen burials and shaft tombs suggest communications between different cultural groups.

The arrival of northern stock in the Chinese Southwest was possibly propelled by ecological changes in the Chinese northern zone during the 2nd millennium BC (Fukusawa *et al.* 2002: 325-326). Among the earliest immigrants in Yunnan likely were some who constructed stone-lined pre-Metal Age graves in areas corresponding to the Chuxiong autonomous region of today, where correlated subterranean dwellings and lithic tools are noted

for their recognizable upper Yellow River affinities (Li *et al.* 2000: 71-76). The remains in afore-mentioned early 1st millennium BC earthen pits at the Chuxiong site possibly were also created by these Di/Qiang stock, because their grave offerings (animal art in bronze, amphorae, short daggers) appeared comparable to the belongings of the grave master in a stone grave in the Cist Grave zone, whose skull shape compared well with those of Bronze Age burials near the Great Wall (Li 1988: 21-22).

Additional early Di/Qing immigrants in Yunnan may have come into contact with the indigenous population in the valleys of the middle Lancang and Nu Rivers, a region characterized by crude flaked shouldered stone adzes (Yunnansheng Wenwu Gongzuodui 1977), that are also common in the upper Jinsha River and areas further north (Tong 1980: 439; Zhang 1981: 94). The distinct rounded shoulders and arched blade of this tool type were subsequently applied to socketed bronze axes at sites around Lake Er. These stone and bronze tools point to possible transmission of cultural and technological ideas along north-south oriented valleys that connect Yunnan with the Indochinese peninsula (Watson 2002: 177-179). Chinese archaeologists are of the opinion that the stone adzes from the Lancang River were associated with the culture of Kunming people, who practiced transhumance at high altitude (Tong 1980: 440) and existed in the Chinese Southwest as part of the Di/Qiang complex (Wang 1979: 437).

During the 2nd half of the 1st millennium BC, the shouldered socketed bronze axes appeared as salient artifacts at sites in western Yunnan, seen in an area stretching from the Jinsha River and Lake Er in the north to Chuxiong and the headwaters of the Yuan-Red River in the south (Zhang 1981: 94). They were buried in stone graves, shaft tombs and dolmens, frequently in conjunction with agricultural tools and objects characteristic of the Cist Grave culture. At times, the socketed axes were also placed in rich graves along with artifact types found subsequently at Dian sites, for example, miniature bronze models of pile-dwellings, domestic and herd animals, in addition to kettledrums, bells, and other emblems of power (Yunnansheng Wenwu Gongzuodui 1964). These visual evidences portray farmers and herders living in close proximity (Yang 1992: 41-44; Li 2001: 60), including some being governed by aristocrats who commanded both schematic and realistic decorations for ritual bronzes. These material goods are indicative of a cultural continuum consisting of ethnic peoples with different socio-economic capabilities and subsistence modes.

Political instability oscillating from north of the Jinsha River around 350 BC likely was one of the factors to have motivated the forefathers of Yangfutou inhabitants to explore a new territory. Some of them could have resolved to settle in the western vicinity of Lake Dian, as suggested by the discovery of a rudimentary kettledrum (Li *et al.* 2007: 210), tall ceramic jars, and Dian-type bronzes in this area (Yunnansheng Wenwu Gongzuodui 1965). Others occupied the rice-cultivating plains at the northern edges of Lake Dian (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yan-

jiusuo *et al.* 2005) and proceeded to implant their habitual mixed economy on the local substratum, thus distinguishing themselves from traditional farming communities in nearby regions. The kinsmen of Yangfutou evidently dispersed toward the south along the eastern shore of Lake Dian (Yunnansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo *et al.* 2005. vol. 3: 721). The communities dominated by these affluent elites perfected an artistic idiom that synthesized schematic and realistic expressions, while others composed of warrior-farmers only had easy access to the widely circulated schematic art (von Dewall 1967: 17). Realistic animal representations in the rich graves at Shizhaishan and Lijiashan were emblems to maintain alliances among Dian elites of nomadic descent, while the use of schematic decoration in Dian and other MIMO communities affiliated the local substratum with a broader cultural base of Pu-Liao and Yue in South China and Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSION

The hybrid artistic styles on the Yunnan bronzes illustrate the evolution and nature of the Dian culture, which was ethnically and socially complex. The realistic animal and human designs imply close ties with cultures near the steppes and the Jinsha valley, while the schematic boating scenes and amphibian patterns suggest affiliations with riverine cultures of southern regions. The former represented a Dian aristocratic art while the latter expressed the artistic traditions of the general Dian populace. Population movements and cultural assimilation induced long and short-range transmission of technical and artistic ideas in Yunnan. They led to the creation of an extraordinary bronze art near Lake Dian that blossomed during the last three centuries of the 1st millennium BC.

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