The Wild and the Numinous: Animals in Shang Art

Much ink has been spilt on the subject of Shang bronze motifs and what (or even whether) they represent. While most of the controversy has revolved around the motif known from later texts as the taotie with its staring eyes and abstract composite form, this discussion will focus on the animals depicted in Shang art as a point of entry. By looking at the representation of animals across media and contextualizing this with inscriptions and archaeological evidence I will attempt to marshal all available evidence for a multi-disciplinary exploration of Shang animality. From this synthetic vantage point we will re-open the issue of representation in Shang art and hopefully reach some new conclusions.

The most prominent living proponent of the non-representational nature of Shang art is Robert Bagley. Building on the work of his teacher Max Loer, Bagley has argued that the designs on bronze vessels were originally not representative of anything beyond decoration and that later motifs are merely formal developments out of abstract décor. Whether or not this is the case, it is a widely noted fact of comparative art history that Shang art rarely depicts human forms and leaves no representations of its rulers. Could it be that Shang art is merely decorative rather than representative and that its form carried no meaning beyond aesthetics? Turning the question on its head, if we must view the statues of Mesopotamian gods and kings as presencing rather than representational, and Egyptian art as involved in ritual communication that made it more signifying than representational, perhaps it is the dichotomy of decorative vs. representation that is the problem. If visual art must always be contextualized within visual registers and formal traditions of doing within worlds of things, then we cannot hope to understand Shang art without understanding its entanglements. I do not believe we have a good answer yet to the question: what was Shang art?

If my window into Shang art is animals, then it is only fair to ask “what is an animal?”. Or, more to the point, “what is a Shang animal?”. While all human cultures organize the world into categories of being - from inanimate objects to gods - it does not follow that they organize them in the same way. I believe it is important to understand Shang categories of relational being before we can interpret their appearance in Shang art. Combining zooarchaeological evidence – from middens, sacrificial pits and tombs – with inscriptive evidence – of divining, hunting and sacrificing – we will sketch an outline of animality and its place in the Shang hierarchy of being.

Turning to Shang art of the Anyang period we will explore animal representation across visual genres. Although K.C. Chang once argued that the animals depicted on Shang bronzes represented the sacrificial victims sent as messengers to the gods and ancestors in shamanistic rituals, I will demonstrate that the animals depicted are all, or nearly all wild or supernatural. Using oracle-bone and archaeological evidence I will argue that although wild animals are hunted, only domestic animals are sacrificed, and thus the animals on Shang bronzes cannot be representations of sacrificial victims. Furthermore, looking across a range of visual
art materials, we will isolate a vocabulary of conventions for animal representation that will assist us in identifying elements of more abstract figures.

Looking back in time, I will show that contra Bagley, there is an obvious trans-media repertoire of visual art that transcends bronze and demonstrates that Anyang period bronze designs belong to this evolving vocabulary. It is a vocabulary that, moreover, refers to a world beyond the formal development of bronze decoration.

Finally, through setting the wild and supernatural creatures invoked across Shang visual media back into the world glimpsed in the oracle-bones, we will arrive at a better set of questions. Given the blurry line between the wild and the sacred; the numinous power of the mountains, rivers, land, clouds, winds and directions; and the immense resources the Shang devoted to pacify the awesome destructive power of the wild – perhaps we should ask if there is some connection between the visual forms of the Shang’s most costly ritual paraphernalia and the practices in which they took part. Why, wild animals hunted, but only domestic animals sacrificed? Why, if Shang bronze decoration developed through its own formal pathways without reference to other media or the outside world, were only wild animals represented. Did the Shang people really practice a this-worldly religion lacking in fantastic creatures until they were imported from the West or do later texts like the Shanhaijing hint at ancient indigenous traditions with richer imaginations than hitherto suspected? Finally, what was Shang visual art for? What did it do? It is my hope that through presenting these collected fragments of evidence we can collectively come to a better understanding of not only Shang visual art but the Shang itself.

1) Domestic animals depicted in the oracle-bones are used for sacrifice but not wild animals. Wild animals are hunted and trophies taken (like human enemies).
   a. The powers of the land are worshipped and receive sacrifice.
   b. Dragons and other nature powers are attested in the oracle-bones
   c. Names of the winds seen in Shan Hai Jing and OBI

2) Zooarchaeological data – shows that wild animals are found in palace-temple area, regular people did not have access to many wild animals

3) Later texts such as Shang Hai Jing and Han texts show interesting human-animal hybrids for the sage kings and deities.