



SESSION I: SHANG BEYOND ANYANG

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A REEXAMINATION OF THE ERLITOU CULTURE

ABSTRACT:

Scholarly opinion is divided on the question of whether the cultural remains of Erlitou Periods III and IV belong to the early Shang. This paper carries the analysis of the remains from these two periods one step further, emphasizing a group of new cultural elements, including li-cauldrons, wide-mouthed zun-beakers, curled lip round-bottom pen-basins, and narrow-mouthed long-necked weng-jars and jia-tripods. These artifacts are compared to similar remains from Zhengzhou Erligang and the obvious similarities between the two are pointed out. The Erlitou III and IV group of cultural elements exhibits a tendency to replace and assimilate that group of cultural elements originally presented in Erlitou Periods I and II, thus making clear that the differences and changes between the remains of II and III have epoch-making significance. A similar phenomenon can be observed to take place in the cultural features of the Central Plains with the change in dynasties between the Shang and Zhou and between the Zhou and Qin periods. It is proposed that the changes appearing between the Period II and Period III remains reflect a contemporary social change. Since the foundations of a large palace were discovered among the Period III cultural remains from the Yanshi Erlitou site, and since this site agrees with the location of Tang's capital Xi Bo, as recorded in surviving literature, Erlitou Periods III and IV may already belong to the Shang dynasty. On the basis of this analysis we have reason to believe that during the time of Cheng Tang the development of the culture of the Shang tribe reached a major turning point. At the time of its establishment the Shang kingdom appears on the Central Plains as an early slave state possessing a certain level of civilization. The discovery and identification of the cultural remains of the early Shang will be significant in the exploration of pre-Shang or Xia culture.

DISCUSSION:

Introducing his paper, Yin Weizhang showed slides to illustrate the changes observable in the archaeological record between the early phase and the late phase at Erlitou (Period I/II vs. Period III/IV in the reports). He drew some additional comparisons not contained in his paper, pointing out that the abrupt political change from the Shang to the Zhou was not accompanied, in the archaeological record, by an equally abrupt cultural break; rather, there was a gradual transition between Shang and Zhou cultures. The same was true for the transition between Warring States and Qin. The shape of a bronze ding and hu found in a burial at Yichang 宜昌 reflected obvious features of late Chu vessels, but from the yinwen 印文 on the bronzes we know that this is certainly a Qin period grave.

The first discussant, An Jinhuai (Henan Institute of Cultural Objects, Zhengzhou), expressed strong support for Yin's interpretation of the cultural succession at Erlitou. He pointed out that the later phase at Erlitou was indeed of the same cultural type as that represented by Lower Erlitou.

Kao Ch'ü-hsün (Institute of History and Philology, Taipei) commented on the interpretation of the evident cultural changes between the two phases at Erlitou. Dismissing the view that they could represent two phases of Xia civilization, he maintained that the second phase at Erlitou was Xibo 西亳, an early, possibly temporary, Shang capital. As to the early phase, he found that it did not have any metropolitan characteristics and was probably not the Xia capital. His reasoning relied on historical-geographical sources such as the Han shu, "Dilizhi," and the Taiping huanyu ji, which have consistently placed Xibo in the area of Yanshi. Zhenxun 鄢郢, the last capital of the Xia, should be located between Gongxian and Yanshi. Kao suggested Shaotai as an area where archaeological attention should be directed.

Unlike Kao, who had in fact encouraged Yin to label the transition from the early to the late phase of Erlitou a "sudden change" 突变, Tu Cheng-sheng (Institute of History and Philology, Taipei) stressed that the continuities between the two phases should not be overlooked. Viewing the archaeological evidence from this perspective, Tu urged caution when discussing the observed transition in political terms.