

The particularity of Sanxingdui culture: a perspective from its absence

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Abstract. Early Central Plains culture in China attached importance to ritual sacrifice and military conquest while Sanxingdui culture lacked bronze ritual objects and weapons. Writing system functioned as a tool for divine communication in the early Central Plains culture. However, Sanxingdui culture had no evidence of a writing system. Objects related to deities were used to mediate interactions between humans and deities in the culture. Moreover, the sophisticated burial system of the early Central Plains culture was different from the tradition of the Sanxingdui culture not valuing tombs, a pattern likely resulting from the allocation of massive social resources to religious worship. These three absences showed that Sanxingdui culture represented a theocratic civilization with religious affairs at its core. Its particularity was shaped by the natural-geographical setting, indigenous cultural traditions, and cross-civilizational interaction. In the future, the application of AI tools and other archaeological science methods can further advance our understanding of the theocratic state nature of Sanxingdui culture.

Keywords: Sanxingdui culture, theocratic civilization, religious worship, natural-geographical setting

1. Introduction

The excavation of two pits at the Sanxingdui site in Guanghan, Sichuan Province during the period from July to August in 1986 rewrote the history of China's Bronze Age. A repertoire of unprecedented artifacts, including bronze standing figures, bronze divine trees, wide-eyed masks, and a golden staff engraved with human, fish, and bird motifs, brought to light a previously unknown bronze civilization. This famous discovery has sparked extensive academic research on Sanxingdui culture, which covers not only fundamental study on chronological sequence and artifact typology but also the discussions of sacrificial rituals and social structures. But the core issues they discussed are as follows. What is the essential nature of Sanxingdui civilization? What role did it play in the late Shang dynasty? When the Central Plains constituted the cultural and political core? Shifting away from conventional emphasis on what survives at the site, this paper adopts a perspective of cultural absence to be expected to approach the particularity of Sanxingdui culture.

2. The absence of bronze ritual objects and weapons

2.1. The absence of bronze ritual objects and weapons

As the *Zuo Zhuan* (左传) notes: "The great affairs of a state lie in sacrifice and warfare". Sacrifice and warfare underpinned the political-social order of the Shang and Zhou periods. There was a sophisticated system of ritual objects in Central Plains bronze culture of the Shang dynasty. Bronze objects discovered from the Yinxu (殷墟) site showed wide diversity and varied decorative motifs. The assemblage and quantity of bronze ritual objects reflected the social status of their owners [1]. When examining bronze objects attributed to Sanxingdui culture, however, a notable pattern emerged: bronze containers unearthed from its pits were overwhelmingly represented by Zun (尊) and Lei (罍). Comparing Zun and Lei from the Sanxingdui site with analogous examples from Central Plains sites in Shang dynasty, Sun Yan argued that these specimens in Sanxingdui sites displayed prominent cultural traits of the Upper Erligang phase and Phases I-II at Yinxu [2]. It evidenced Sanxingdui culture's selective engagement with Central Plains Shang material traditions. Tang Jigen has coined the term "the Zun-Lei Road" to describe this process: Sanxingdui selectively appropriated only the Zun and Lei forms out of Shang culture's extensive repertoire of ritual objects. According to Zhang Changping, such cultural elements including Zun and Lei travelled along the Yangtze River from the South China into the Chengdu Plain [3].

What did Sanxingdui culture lack in comparison with Central Plains bronze civilization? First, Ding (鼎) and Gui (簋), which occupied a prominent position in the Central Plains ritual object system, have not been found at all in Sanxingdui culture. Second, Jue (爵) and Gu (觚), the core combination of Shang wine objects, were also absent. The Sanxingdui people demonstrated a strong sense of purpose in their selection of bronze containers: they adopted only the wine objects associated with sacrificial activities (zun and lei), while entirely bypassing the food objects (Ding and Gui) and drinking objects (Jue and Gu) that marked social rank in the Central Plains bronze ritual system. This was clearly not a consequence of bronze-casting technology, but rather of cultural conceptions. The Sanxingdui understanding of bronze objects thus differed markedly from the Shang-Zhou logic that objects embody ritual order.

The Yinxu site has yielded large quantities of bronze weapons, including arrowheads, Ge (戈), axes, and Yue (钺). Oracle bone inscriptions frequently contained military-related characters such as "Fa (伐)" (to attack), "Zheng (征)" (to campaign), and "She (射)" (to shoot). In Shang culture, bronze weapons served both as practical instruments of warfare and as symbols of military authority. Although some bronze Ge have been discovered from the two pits of Sanxingdui culture, their blades were not sharp. Excavators considered they to be non-functional objects. Sanxingdui culture was largely devoid of bronze weapons symbolizing military authority, whereas remains associated with religious sacrificial activities were ubiquitous. This constituted important evidence for characterizing Sanxingdui culture as a "theocratic state".

2.2. The absence of writing system

The absence of ritual objects and weapons highlighted the differences between Sanxingdui culture and the Central Plains culture; the absence of writing system, however, further underscored the particularity of Sanxingdui culture. Mature oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions cast on ritual objects are well attested in the Shang dynasty. However, no identifiable character has been found among the objects unearthed at the Sanxingdui site. He Zheng identified eight incised symbols discovered in Sanxingdui culture [4], but incised symbols were not characters. At its inception, writing system was controlled by only a tiny minority of the social members. Kwang-chih Chang believed that writing system served as a tool for communication between people and the deity and as a symbol of social power [5]. Rather than relying on writing system, the

high-ranking elites of Sanxingdui culture expressed their beliefs through objects of special meaning and function, such as divine trees and sun-shaped objects [6]. The absence of writing system was not unique to Sanxingdui among the archaeological cultures along the Yangtze River during the Shang dynasty. No inscriptions appear on any locally made bronze objects discovered from Hunan or Xin'gan Dayangzhou (新干大洋洲) in Jiangxi. This reflected the limited influence of Shang culture and the distinctiveness of regional cultures. Writing transcended the limits of oral memory to transmit knowledge, rituals and beliefs across time and space, serving as a core instrument for complex states to administer affairs and consolidate social consensus. Unlike the Central Plains civilization, which maintained monarchical order through writing, Sanxingdui culture lacked a mature writing system and transmitted beliefs and social norms via ritual artefacts and sacrificial ceremonies.

2.3. The absence of tombs

The Shang dynasty possessed a relatively well-developed burial system. Archaeological findings include large-scale tombs such as the royal cemetery at Yinxu and Fu Hao's tomb, as well as medium and small-sized tombs. The scale of a tomb, differences in its structure, and the quantity of funerary objects all reflected the social rank of the deceased. Tombs dating to the Sanxingdui culture period, however, were extremely rare. The preliminary archaeological report in 1987 on the Guanghan Sanxingdui site mentioned that four tombs had been discovered in the Sanxingdui site area in 1980s: three were children's tombs, mostly with flexed body positions, and one was a small-scale female tomb with an extended supine burial [7]. Excavators believed that the 29 tombs at the Rensheng (仁胜) Village cemetery belonged to Phase I of the Sanxingdui culture or even earlier, also known as the Baodun (宝墩) culture, and did not belong to the Bronze Age. In a lecture on 18 May 2026, Sun Hua noted that no tombs have yet been found that can be definitively attributed to the Sanxingdui culture. Based on the burial practices of large tombs at Shangye Jie (商业街) in Chengdu—likely tombs of rulers of Shu in the Warring States period—he speculated that Sanxingdui culture may have practiced water burial. In recent years, archaeologists working in Sichuan have conducted extensive coring surveys, continuously searching for Sanxingdui culture tombs, yet no definitive burials have been found. Sun Hua's hypothesis of water burial may offer a direction for future survey. It is also possible that Sanxingdui culture did not attach great importance to burials. High-ranking elites may have been interred with few funerary objects. This was consistent with a theocratic state that devoted the bulk of its social wealth to worship the divine.

2.4. The particularity of Sanxingdui culture

These three dimensions of absence supported a holistic judgment. Sanxingdui culture was a theocratic civilization centered on religious sacrifice. In his research on the origins of Chinese civilization, Su Bingqi proposed a three-stage model of the development of Chinese civilization: ancient states, regional states, and empires. Li Boqian further divided ancient states into two types: monarchical states and theocratic states [8]. Based on several groups of artefacts of Sanxingdui culture, Zhao Dianzeng summarized its particularity as a theocratic state. These included the prevalence of eye worship, the existence of a shamanic ritual elite, the promotion of animistic beliefs and the paramountcy of sacrifice [9]. This judgment stood in stark contrast to the Central Plains Shang civilization. In the Shang dynasty, bronze objects were used primarily for sacrifice and burial, with the core logic of ritual. In Sanxingdui culture, by contrast, bronze objects were used almost exclusively for sacrificial activities, with the core logic of the divine. Ritual regulated social order through hierarchical object systems, while the divine maintained social cohesion through religious rituals. In other words, theocratic power dominated everything in Sanxingdui culture.

3. Factors shaping the particularity of Sanxingdui culture

The conclusion—Why did Sanxingdui take such a distinctive path of development? The relative isolation of the Sichuan Basin was undoubtedly the first factor. To the east, the basin is bounded by the Wu Mountains (巫山) and the Daba Mountains (大巴山); to the north, the Micang Mountains (米仓山); to the west, the Min Mountains (岷山) and Qionglai Mountains (邛崃山); and to the south, the Daliang Mountains (大凉山). In short, the basin is enclosed by mountains. These mountains made the Basin a relatively closed geographic unit.

Second, the basin's favorable natural conditions provided the foundation for the growth of Sanxingdui culture. The Chengdu Plain, which lies within the Sichuan Basin, enjoys an especially good physical environment. As early as the Baodun culture period, rice farming and animal husbandry had been established on the Chengdu Plain. Agricultural and pastoral production could support large settlements and walled sites with populations in the tens of thousands [10]. Archaeological survey and scientific analysis have confirmed that deposits in Dabaoshan (大宝山) of Pengzhou (彭州), Sichuan, were the main sources of the bronze objects and jades discovered in the Sanxingdui site [11, 12]. These mineral resources provided a stable material foundation for the society, with which rulers were able to accumulate wealth over the long term and use it for religious affairs.

The archaeological cultures in Sichuan during the pre-Qin period had been uninterrupted. From the Baodun culture (c. 2500–1700 BCE) and Sanxingdui culture (c. 1700–1100 BCE) to the Shi'erqiao (十二桥) culture (c. 1100–900 BCE) and Shu (蜀) culture, these cultures formed a continuous cultural sequence. The Sanxingdui culture was a point in this sequence. From the ruins of the city wall and pottery, it can be seen that the Baodun culture is the direct source of the Sanxingdui culture [13]. Stratigraphic and typological evidence showed that this continuous tradition was one reason why Sanxingdui culture remained its particularity.

Finally, the selective acceptance of other civilizations also had an influence on Sanxingdui culture. As Sun Yan [2], Tang Jigen, and Zhang Changping [3] had shown, the bronze Zun and Lei objects from Sanxingdui site illustrated the selective use of elements of Shang culture. The bronze-casting technology used in Sanxingdui culture shared a common origin with that of the Central Plains Shang culture, but the types of objects produced there, such as devine trees, human figures, and masks, were not found in the Central Plains. Sanxingdui people used techniques in Central Plains to make objects that fit its own religious faith. The thousands of cowrie shells unearthed at the site might have come from South Asia [14]. The large quantities of ivory in the pits might have come from Yunnan or South Asia [15]. Some scholars also noted that neither the native Shu kingdom nor the Shang court had a tradition of using scepters. The gold scepter from Sanxingdui site may have drawn on scepter traditions from West Asia and Egypt [16].

In a word, the particularity of Sanxingdui culture grew out of both its natural-geographical setting and its cultural tradition, and was equally the product of exchange and mutual influence between civilizations.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of absence, the particularity of Sanxingdui culture lay in its divergence from the bronze civilizations of the Central Plains and middle-lower Yangtze. It had no Ding or Gui, no writing system, no large tomb, no hierarchical settlement. These absences defined a self-contained regional civilization based on theocratic power. Its sophisticated production of bronze and jade artifact marked it as a state-level civilization. However, Sanxingdui culture was different from the other civilizations. Hongshan culture and Liangzhu culture both took theocratic paths and then fell into decline; the Central Plains culture took a monarchical path and eventually became an empire. Sanxingdui culture was unusual not simply for choosing theocracy, but for sustaining it into the Bronze Age. These absences, more than its artefacts, revealed what made Sanxingdui

culture theocratic state. Instead of written documents, elaborate bronze and jade ritual objects functioned as its primary medium for the communication of cosmological doctrines and communal religious values. This reliance on material symbolism rather than textual records constituted one of the most distinctive features of the theocratic state.

Based on the discovery of Sanxingdui's No.1 and No.2 sacrificial pits in 1986, archaeological research on Sanxingdui has spanned a 40-year period. Over the past four decades, scholars have established the chronological sequence of Sanxingdui culture through archaeological stratigraphy and artifact typology, and explored its origins and cultural interactions with neighbouring regions. In recent years, more and more scholars have interpreted Sanxingdui culture from the perspectives of settlement archaeology and environmental archaeology, attempting to clarify the internal functional zoning and spatial layout of Sanxingdui society, as well as the origin of raw materials for Sanxingdui bronze, jade, and ivory objects [17]. Future archaeological excavations and research will draw increasingly on archaeological science methods to supplement dating datasets, refine periodization studies, carry out residue analysis and micro-trace analysis, and deploy AI tools for quantitative archaeology and the reconstruction of sacrificial contexts [18]. The application of AI tools in archaeology will facilitate a better understanding of the theocratic nature of Sanxingdui culture.

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