

The production context of the Zeng State bronzes from Yejiashan Cemetery of the Western Zhou Dynasty

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Abstract

In 2011 and 2013, 65 Western Zhou tombs of the Zeng State were excavated at the Yejiashan Cemetery in Suizhou City, Hubei Province. Among them, M1, M28 and M27 and M65 and M2 are the tombs of the earliest three generations of rulers and spouses of the early Western Zhou Dynasty. The bronzes unearthed from the Yejiashan Cemetery exhibit not only the characteristics of the common Western Zhou style in typological morphology and assemblage, but also local features reflecting local production. In the technical sense, the bronzes from the Yejiashan Cemetery bear special traits in modeling and molding details: some are of the style other than that of the Zhou, and others are imitations of the same type of bronzes. The characteristics of the bronzes of the Zeng State indicate that in the early Western Zhou Dynasty, the Zeng State has the capability of producing bronzes as it does during the transitional period from the Western Zhou through the Eastern Zhou Period.

Keywords: Bronzes—production—history—Western Zhou Dynasty; Yejiashan Cemetery (Suizhou City, Hubei); Zeng State

About the research topic

In 2011 and 2013, the Hubei Province Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology excavated the entire Yejiashan Cemetery, which comprises altogether 140 tombs. The numerous bronze inscriptions from these tombs attribute the cemetery to the Zeng State of the early Western Zhou Dynasty. Among them, tombs M28, M65, and M111 are of the lords of the Zeng State, whereas tombs M2 and M27 are of their consorts or other aristocrats of the state. The bronzes from these tombs, therefore, represent the general characteristics of those of the Zeng State in the early Western Zhou Dynasty.

As with cemeteries of other Western Zhou states, bronze artifacts, particularly ritual vessels, constitute the core of the grave goods of Yejiashan. During the Western Zhou, bronze industry was one of the most important components of the social production, in terms of both the amount of social resources mobilized and technological expertise deployed. Many scholars believe that the Western Zhou court, for the purpose of maintaining the centralizing of the political power, monopolized the

bronze production. As a vassal state of the time, did the Zeng State own the capacity of independent bronze production in the early Western Zhou as it did during the late Western Zhou period? This is the question that this paper aims to tackle with.

Cultural attribution of the Yejiashan bronzes

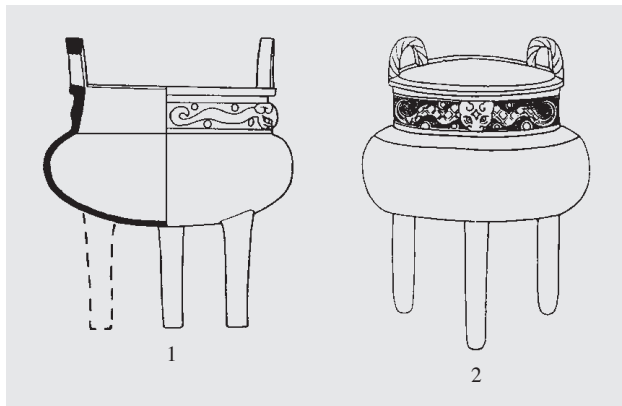
The numerous appellations “Marquis of Zeng” seen in the inscriptions of the bronzes unearthed at Yejiashan indicate that the Zeng State belonged to the Western Zhou political and cultural system. But the Yejiashan Cemetery, which is located in the Suizhou-Zaoyang Corridor to the south of the Qinling-Tongbai Mountains, is far away from the cultural center of the Western Zhou. Whether the Yejiashan bronzes bore the typical assemblage and morphological characteristics of the Zhou Culture is a key question for addressing their relationship with the early Western Zhou bronzes and the culture of the Central Plains.

The bronze artifacts from Yejiashan, in both assemblage and typology, are of the Zhou culture. They are rather diverse in typology and large in quantity, consisting of food, wine, and water vessels, and are thus rather complete in assemblage (Table 1). *Ding*-tripod and *gui*-turen are the commonest components of food vessels, whereas *jue*-cup, *zun*-wine vessel and *you*-wine jar are large in quantity. These food and wine vessels, their morphological characteristics, and ornaments are commonly found in early Western Zhou tombs in the Zhouyuan and Feng-Hao areas as well as in tombs of rulers of other local states, such as M251 and M253 at Liulihe in Beijing, M1 and M4 at Gaojiabu in Jingyang, Shaanxi Province. It is obvious that after the founding of the Western Zhou dynasty, the Zhou culture swiftly spreads to the Suizhou-Zaoyang Corridor, where the Yejiashan cemetery is located.

In both categories and decors, almost all bronze wares from Yejiashan find counterparts among typical Zhou-style artifacts. The *ding*-tripods from M65 with animal masks (M65:46), *kui*-dragon and roundel motifs (M65:42, 44 and 45), and flat legs (M65:41), for example, all have counterparts in the bronzes unearthed from tomb M253 at Liulihe in Beijing. Among the bronzes from Yejiashan, it is rare to find outstandingly peculiar items. Two circular *lei*-wine jars from M27 are identical in having the height of 52.8cm, protruding flanges, animal horns and standing birds, which feature exquisite forms, and are unparalleled in the core area of the Zhou culture. A number of scholars have noticed that the nine circular *lei* from Zhuwajie in Pengzhou, Sichuan, are similar to those from M27 at Yejiashan in terms of form, protruding ridges, animal-

Table 1 Composition of bronzes from four tombs at the Yejiashan Cemetery (The italic numbers indicate the non-Zeng bronzes).

Tomb	<i>Fangding</i> - quadripod	<i>Ding</i> - tripod	<i>Yan</i> - steamer	<i>Li</i> - cauldron	<i>Gui</i> - tureen	<i>Jue</i> - cup	<i>Jia</i> - wine vessel	<i>Gu</i> - goblet	<i>Zhi</i> - cup	<i>Zun</i> - wine vessel	<i>You</i> - wine jar	Square <i>lei</i> - wine jar	Circular <i>lei</i> - wine jar	<i>Hu</i> - pot	<i>Gong</i> - pitcher	<i>He</i> - pitcher	<i>Pan</i> - basin	
M1		4	4	1	1	2	2+1	1	2	1	1	1	1					
M2			3+2	1	1	2												
M27		2	4	1	2	2+2	2		1	4	1	1		2	1	1	1	1
M65		1	5+1	1	1	3+1	2			1	1	1		1			1	1

**Figure 1** *Ding*-tripods of the Western Zhou Dynasty with double-bodied dragon motifs on upright necks.

1. Unearthed at Yejiashan (M1:14); 2. Fu Xin *Ding* collected in the Palace Museum at Taipei.

head handles, and animal mask designs. This type of circular *lei* has also been found from the bronze hoard at Harqin Left Wing County, Liaoning, as well as in various regions of the Zhou culture. The cultural context of these wares is yet ambiguous and there is no ground to say that they are produced within the Zeng State.

The *ding*-tripod (M1:14) from Yejiashan is rare in having an upright neck and a bulging belly (Figure 1:1). The double-bodied dragon motif against *yunlei* (circular and square spirals) ground pattern on the neck is commonly seen upon the *fangding*-quadripods, *zun*-wine vessels and *you*-wine jars, but rarely encountered upon *ding*-tripods. The composition of the three units of motifs is even more unique, with each dragon corresponding to each leg rather than located between legs as regularly seen upon *ding*-tripods. Such eccentric *ding* find two counterparts among traditionally transmitted artifacts collected in the Palace Museum at Taipei. Both items bear inscriptions, one of which is smaller and morphologically closer to the Yejiashan item (M1:14); its inscription contains “Fu Yi 父乙” and a clan emblem (see no. 1532 in *Yinzhou jinwen jicheng*). The other (Figure 1:2) bears the inscription of

“Fu Xin 父辛” and one/two clan emblem (see no. 1888 of *Yinzhou jinwen jicheng*). The decor of both *ding* is comprised of double-bodied dragon motifs with heads facing the legs against *yunlei* ground pattern. But different from the Yejiashan *ding*, the ones collected in the Palace Museum at Taipei are furnished with rope-like handle. The Yejiashan and Palace Museum items are all of the Zhou culture.

The vast majority of ritual vessels from the Yejiashan Cemetery are unanimously of the Zhou style. The *ding*-tripods with solid legs and the ring-footed *gui*-tureens with double grips, which are deposited in tomb M1 in considerable quantity, are uniform in form and decor, with repetitive application of *kui*-dragon alternated with roundel motifs and *yunlei* ground pattern, which renders it very difficult to distinguish their dates. Four *yan*-steamers were found in four tombs (including M1), one per tomb, are identical in form, size and decor. The elephant-eyed *li*-cauldron is rarely seen in early Western Zhou tombs, but it is present in each of the tombs M1, M27 and M65; these items are all similar in size, the shape of the joint crutched *li*-cauldrons with column-shaped feet, which were popular in the early Western Zhou Dynasty, furnished with double upright ears and stylized animal mask decor, a pair of plump C-shaped elephant ears and a lozenge-shaped protrusion between the bulging eyes representing the elephant trunk (Figure 2).

The lack of peculiar features among the Yejiashan bronzes seemed to imply that they are produced in the royal workshops of the dynasty. On the contrary, many unique items have been uncovered at the feudal lord cemeteries of Zhuyuangou in Baoji, Hengshui in Jiangxian and Dahekou in Yicheng. The human-headed *pan*-basin, bird-shaped *he*-pitcher, and single-handled jar, for instance, have no counterparts among the Zhou-style bronzes. Although the early bronze wares from M1 are generally of the Zhou style, certain features of them such as the lid on the *fangding*-quadripod, and the three solid legs under the *gui*-tureen are quite unique. It is therefore quite certain that these bronzes are locally produced.

In spite of the outstanding monotony of the styles of the Zeng bronzes from the Yejiashan Cemetery, it is



Figure 2 Elephant-eyed *li*-cauldrons unearthed from the Yejiashan Cemetery.

1. M1:021; 2. M65:52.

still likely that they are locally produced. As the Zhou culture radiates out to the periphery, the bronze wares are therefore stylistically unanimous and repetitive. Therefore the bronzes produced by the feudal states are probably even more uniform than those of the political centers. During the transitional period from the Western Zhou to the Eastern Zhou, the Zeng bronzes are mostly locally produced; the types, decors and the associations of the types and decors exhibited a tendency of standardization, so did the wares from the Yejiashan Cemetery.

Local features of the Yejiashan bronzes

The unanimity of the early Western Zhou Zeng bronzes certainly do not fully substantiate that these bronzes are independently produced by the Zeng State. But in fact, the Zeng bronzes display regional and local details that indicate local production.

As with the other early Zhou tombs, the Yejiashan tombs are often furnished with bronzes inscribed with clan emblems that have nothing to do with the social statuses and clan affiliations of the occupants. While the bronzes do not denote the production context, they lend us some clues into the production issue of the Zeng State bronzes. The four tombs M1, M2, M27 and M65 yield 80 bronze vessels. Among them 15 items bear inscriptions definitely showing that they did not belong to the Zeng State; these inscriptions refer to various states; only M27 yielded a set of *zun*-wine vessel and *you*-wine jar both with inscriptions of Yu Bo Peng (Peng, the Earl of the Yu State). Among the non-Zeng bronzes, however, the *jue*-cup, *jia*-wine vessel, *gu*-goblet, and *zhi*-cup that were

vanishing in the Western Zhou appeared frequently in the grave goods, suggesting that they are devalued. In the tomb M65 of later period, only one *ding* and one *gui* of the non-Zeng category are present; the low frequency of them shows that external bronzes decrease in late tombs. On the contrary, the status-indicating wares from the Yejiashan tombs are usually centered by *ding* and *gui*. The occupant of M1, whose name is Shi, is ascribed with four *fangding*-quadripods, two *ding*-tripods, and one *huoding* (cooking *ding*), all of which are inscribed with his name. The name of the occupant of M65, Marquis Jian of Zeng, appears upon the *fangding*, *ding*, and *gui*-tureens unearthed from his tomb. In M2 and M27, tombs of consorts of the lords of Zeng, the status-marking inscriptions containing Marquis of Zeng are inscribed also upon the *fangding*, *ding*, *gui*, and *yan*. It is apparent that the ritual vessels from the tombs of the Zeng rulers were intentionally assembled, which suggests that the Zeng State produced bronzes to meet its own demands.

The two circular *lei*-wine jars from the Yejiashan tomb of M27, as described earlier, bear features that are absent among typical Zhou bronzes. The typological characteristics of the two items are also seen among the E State bronzes in the same region. The circular *lei* from M27, which exhibit protruding flanges, animal head-shaped grips, animal heads between the two grips are identical to that on the square *lei*-wine jar of the Marquis of E from M4 at Yangzishan. Noticeably, a jingle-bell with a tongue beneath the ring foot of the circular *lei* from M27 also finds its counterpart beneath the base of the square *lei* from M4 at Yangzishan. The historically transmitted *gui*-tureens of Marquis of E likewise bear

tongue-containing jingle-bells beneath their ring feet or square stand. Such feature is usually present in peripheral regions of the late Shang and early Western Zhou, but merely a non-mainstream element among the Shang and Western Zhou bronzes. It has been found in southern Shanxi, the cemeteries of the Yu State in Baoji, and in Suizhou as well. The discovery of such bronzes at Yejiashan and Yangzishan is a reappearance of such regional style. Overall, the two items from M27 are indicative of the regional characteristics of the Suizhou-Zaoyang Corridor.

Another noticeable phenomenon of the Yejiashan bronzes is the imitation of bronze wares of the same categories, which occurs to two items from M65 (Figure 3).

The three *ding*-tripods from M65, including Marquis of Zeng Jian *Ding* (M65:44), are made identical. They all bear early Western Zhou styles, including peach-shaped and sagging bellies, triple solid column-shaped legs, and double rope-shaped grips. While such wares differ in the composition of alternative dragon and roundel motifs, in the headings of dragon motifs and the number of dragons, those from M65 are identical in having a roundel at the center and two dragons at either side, and an additional dragon at the left side heading right. The rubbings of the two items M65:44 and M65:45, the leftmost dragon all straddles the casting seam of the legs of the *ding*.

The Marquis of Zeng Jian *Ding*, however, differs from the other two from the same tomb. The decor of the former item is exquisite, whereas that of the latter two are rendered without much care and control. The roundels of M65:45 are not located at equidistant positions, and they degenerate into low and flat discs; in the meantime the dragon motifs and *yunlei* ground patterns are sketchy and coarse. In size, the Marquis of Zeng Jian *Ding* measures 24-24.3cm in diameter, 28.9cm in height, and weighs 3975g, whereas the corresponding parameters of the item

M65:42 are 19.7cm, 22.9cm, and 2270g respectively, and those of the item M65:45 are 19.4-19.8cm, 24cm, and 2160g. The latter two, similar in size, are both smaller and lighter than the Marquis of Zeng Jian *Ding*; they must have been rough imitations of the latter one.

This is by no means a special case; it also occurs to two *gui*-tureens from M65. Among the four *gui* from this tomb, only the Marquis of Zeng Jian *gui* (M65:49) and Zuo Zun Yi *gui* (M65:50) are identical in having flaring rims, basin-shaped bellies and ring feet. They differ only in the form of grips. Those of M65:50 slightly bend out and the animal heads are simpler than those of M65:49. The decors of both items comprise a band of three animal masks, which consists of an animal mask at the center, bodies and tails represented by fine-lined *yunlei* patterns stretching at both sides, and feather along the bodies, around the neck and the belly (Figure 4). The animal masks of both items, which are relatively wide, with their animal heads in low relief, display the same composition and position. They likewise differ only in the craftsmanship. That of M65:50 features shallower and stiffer lines, whereas that of M65:49 features denser and smoother lines. That of M65:50 is simplified and irregular with its eyes simply protruding, whereas that of M65:49 have their pupils engraved out. The rough craftsmanship of M65:50 is also shown in the inscription “Zuo Zun Yi 作尊彝”, which is blurred. The two items also differ in size and weight. While the item M65:49 measures 22.4cm in mouth diameter, 17.5cm in height, and weighs 3530g, the item M65:50 measures 17.5-18.4cm in mouth diameter, 13.4cm in height, and weighs 2510g. The item M65:50, smaller and lighter, appears to be a rough imitation of M65:49.

The abovementioned two imitations are both “manufactured” by Marquis of Zeng named Jian. The *ding* of this series is not singular. In tomb M2 there is



Figure 3 The *ding*-tripod of Marquis Jian of Zeng and its imitations unearthed from Yejiashan M65.

1. Marquis of Zeng Jian *Ding* (M65:44); 2. The rubbing of the decor of Marquis of Zeng Jian *Ding* (M65:44); 3. The rubbing of the decor of the imitation of Marquis of Zeng Jian *Ding* (M65:45); 4. The imitation of Marquis of Zeng Jian *Ding* (M65:42).



Figure 4 Decors and inscriptions of the *gui*-tureen M65:49 and its imitation M65:50.

1. Marquis of Zeng Jian *Gui* (M65:49); 2. “Zuo Zun Yi” *gui* (M65:50).

(Top. The decor on the neck; bottom. The decor on the ring foot; right. The inscription)

another piece (M2:6), which matches M65:44 in form, decor, inscription and size. The tomb M65, which was estimated to Jian, would be slightly later than M2, which was attributed as his consort’s tomb; the Marquis of Zeng Jian *Ding* from M2 is likely a gift from Marquis of Zeng Jian himself; later the marquis orders imitations so as to maintain the original assemblage. The imitation of the Marquis of Zeng Jian *Gui* occurs likely in the similar context; this item and the *ding*, both of which carry the identical inscription “Zeng Hou Jian zuo baoyi 曾侯諫作寶彝 (Marquis of Zeng named Jian, makes this treasurable vessel)”, are doubtlessly of the same assemblage; they are produced prior to the interment of M2. The imitations are produced at a later date. All in all, the imitations found in M65 are another testimony of the local bronze production of the Zeng State bronzes.

Summary

Our analysis indicates that the Zeng State in the early Western Zhou, as that in the transitional period between the Western Zhou and the Eastern Zhou, possessed the capability of independent bronze production. Our analysis indicates that the E 疆 (鄂) State also had the same capability. Referring to the unique properties of the bronzes unearthed at the Hengshui Cemetery at Jiangxian County and the Dahekou Cemetery at Yicheng County, both of the Jin State in present-day Shanxi Province, it is a popular phenomenon in the Western Zhou Dynasty that the states of the feudal lords operated independent bronze production. As an important component of economic

activities of the time, it implies that the local states under the feudal system of the Western Zhou Dynasty were economically independent.

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Postscript

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