

Study on the Research Value of Sun God Bird in Ancient Shu Civilization

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ABSTRACT

Through the analysis of the image, production technology, meaning and communication thought of the sun god bird, this paper shows the outstanding manual skills of the ancestors of ancient Shu, the understanding of astronomy, the philosophical thought of "the unity of heaven and man", the worship of the sun, the bird totem, the regime change of the Duyu dynasty and the Kaiming dynasty, etc., at the same time, it is also mentioned that the current research on the sun god bird and the ancient Shu civilization is still continuing. The value of sun god bird to studies on ancient Shu civilization is still being developed, thus highlighting its role featuring richness and multi-angle significance.

Keywords: sun god bird, ancient Shu civilization, totem worship, value

I. INTRODUCTION

"Sun god bird", the foil decoration, has attracted much attention since it was unearthed in 2001. On August 16, 2005, it stood out from more than 1,600 candidate patterns and became a symbol of China Cultural Heritage, as well as the core pattern of the city logo of Chengdu. The splendid and mysterious ancient Shu civilization has been an eternal mystery that archaeologists have tried to solve. So, what is the connection between the two? What is the value of studying sun god bird to uncover the ancient Shu civilization? These are the issues this paper aims to solve.

II. THE SUN GOD BIRD REFLECTS THE PRODUCTION AND LIFE OF THE ANCIENT SHU PEOPLE

The gold leaf of sun god bird unearthed at Jinsha site is 12.5 cm in outer diameter, 5.29 cm in inner diameter, 0.02 cm in thickness, and weighs only 20 grams. It is made of very thin gold foil. It has two layers: the inner layer and the outer layer. The inner layer is equally spaced with 12 ivory rays, while the outer layer is composed of four divine birds, which fly counterclockwise. The use of superb hammering and cutting technology makes the whole pattern lines concise and vivid, smooth and dynamic. The high production level of manual industrial production in ancient Shu is amazing.

In addition to showing the craftsmanship of the ancient Shu people, the sun god bird also left clues about calendar used then. The number of flying birds

and sun awes is 4 and 12, respectively, indicating specific meaning. In the outer layer, there are four birds flying in reverse direction, and each bird has three crescents, representing three months of a season. The four birds refer to the cycle of seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter, reflecting the concept of four seasons of the ancient Shu people. The 12 vortex-shaped rays in the inner layer, much like crescent moon, represent the cycle of 12 months. The four birds move in the opposite direction to the sun and 12 crescent moons, which vividly shows the passage of time and the cycle of four seasons. It also reflects that the ancient Shu people used a lunar calendar with 12 or 13 months in a year. [1]

The sun god bird is closely related to sun and nature, further highlighting the importance of sun in the life of the ancient Shu people, then why so? This is inseparable from production mode and geographical conditions. The sun must be very important for farming life, and the land of ancient Shu is located in a mountain basin, where is rainy and foggy. What's worse, the duration and intensity of sunshine are far less than that of elsewhere. Naturally, the sun is more precious and the sun worship is stronger.

In addition, the sun god bird is also a gold artifact, an outstanding representative of more than 200 pieces of gold artifacts unearthed at Jinsha site. According to *Huayang Guozhi*, "when Yu the Great controlled the flood, he began to channel the water from Mount Min." "With abundant springs and dense forests, it is the first of four rivers that flow into the sea: the Yellow River, the Yangtze river, the Huai river and the Jishui river." "The treasures of Shu included jade, gold, silver, pearl, copper, iron, lead and tin..." The state of ancient Shu

produced gold, and the materials used to make gold ware were local materials. The most famous gold mines — Songpan Zhangla in the upper reaches of Minjiang River and Xiaojin County in the upper reaches of Dadu River — were also within the scope of the activity center of the people, [2] which could prove the relationship between the people of ancient Shu and gold ware making.

Therefore, the sun god bird is closely related to the manual production, agricultural production, geographical conditions, calendar usage, and natural resources of the ancient Shu people.

III. THE SUN GOD BIRD REFLECTS THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE ANCIENT SHU PEOPLE

Sun god bird, a spiritual product, is best known for the concept of "sun god bird and sun worship", but the authors believe that sun worship is only a part of the broader religious thought in the spiritual life of the ancient Shu people reflected by the bird.

From the sun god bird, people can intuitively feel the worship of the ancient Shu people to the sun and birds. The four birds flying in the outer ring remind some scholars of the legend that "the descendant of Emperor Jun is Zhongrong ... people there can drive four kinds of beasts" [3] in *The Classics of Mountains and Seas*. A simpler and more intuitive understanding is that the sun is spinning fast with four god birds holding it, vividly showing the ancient myth of "Jin Wu Fu Ri (the golden crow holds the sun)". This shows ancient Shu people's concept of bird worship and bird totem, and the sun worship and the sun myth are closely related to each other. And the myths about the sun and god birds are abundant, which reflects the rich spiritual world of the ancient Shu people.

The prominent sun worship and bird worship tend to make people ignore the moon worship hidden in them. Combined with the use of lunar and solar calendar mentioned above and the appearance of 12 crescent-shaped swirling rays of light, the idea of moon worship can be revealed. The sun worship in Sanxingdui culture has become more and more prosperous, while the moon worship has gradually declined accordingly. In the Jinsha site culture, due to the development of calendar, and the relationship between synodic month and tropical year was mastered, the moon worship was taken seriously again. Because of the moon's remoteness and the mysterious dominance of the moon god in the night, anything connected with it may become a substitute or part of it. Hence the ivory worship and toad worship. [4]

The pattern of sun god bird also contains the philosophy of "the unity of heaven and man". The sun, which spouts 12 rays around it, presents a strong sense of movement, symbolizing light, life and eternity. The

"twelve" and "four" of the twelve sun rays and the four birds are figures often used in Chinese culture, such as the twelve months, the twelve zodiac signs, the four seasons, and the four directions of north, south, west and east, which express the deep understanding of the natural law of the ancient Shu people. The four birds flying around the sun reflect their yearning for a better life and embody freedom, beauty and unity. The overall perfect circular pattern implies national unity, harmony and inclusiveness, and the circular enclosure also reflects the concept of protection. [5]

Therefore, the spiritual life of the ancient Shu people reflected by the sun god bird is full of imagination, colorfulness, scientific cognition, and beautiful pursuit.

IV. THE SUN GOD BIRD REFLECTS THE CHANGE OF DYNASTY OF THE ANCIENT SHU PEOPLE

To explore the research value of the sun god bird, it's unacceptable to simply treat it as a handicraft to see the spiritual quality and lifestyle contained in it. The sun god bird is a product of an era and a witness to the ancient Shu Dynasty. There is a prose in *Difficult Roads in Shu* that portrays the ancient Shu: Can Cong ji Yu F, kai guo he mang ran. It is said that Emperors 'Can Cong' and 'Yu F' founded this country in the misty ages of the past. The 'Can Cong' and 'Yu F' mentioned here are two periods in the ancient Shu civilization. So why can't talk in detail? The reason lies in the mysteriousness of its civilization. First of all, it is necessary to pinpoint the ancient Shu civilization, and distinguish it from the later dynasties that adopted Shu as national title. The state of Shu in the pre-Qin period is the ancient Shu (In 316 BC, king Huiwen of Qin sent Zhang Yi and Sima Cuo to attack Shu along Shuniu Road. Kaiming XII, the King of Shu, was defeated and killed, and the ancient Shu fall.), and the ancient Shu civilization refers to the civilization of ancient state of Shu. It is known as one of the three ancient civilizations of ancient China, together with the Huaxia civilization and the Liangzhu civilization. The word "Shu" is first found in the oracle bone of the Shang Dynasty, but there is no historical document that specifically records the historical development of ancient Shu in detail. It was not until the Eastern Jin Dynasty that the history and legends of Shu were recorded in Chang Qu's *Records of the State of Shu of Huayang Guozhi*. Against such background conditions, the scarcity of literature resources makes the research of archeological discoveries even more important.

The early history of the ancient Shu civilization was divided into Shushan, Cancong, Baiguan, and Yufu, and the later monarchy period can be divided into Duyu Dynasty and Kaiming Dynasty. The Jinsha site in Chengdu, where the "sun god bird" gold foil was

unearthed, belongs to the period of Kaiming Dynasty. After analyzing the exquisiteness and gold content of the sun god bird, it can be concluded that it is an unearthed cultural relic of high status, value and special cultural significance, which should be a cultural symbol of the royal class of ancient Shu. However, it is generally believed that the totem of the tribe that founded the Kaiming Dynasty is "kaiming beast". What is that? According to *the Classics of Mountains and Seas: Haineixijing*, there is a deep pool of 300 ren (an ancient measure of length equal to seven or eight chi) deep in the south of Kunlun Mountain. The body of the kaiming beast is like that of a tiger, but it has nine heads. The nine heads are all human-like faces, facing east at the top of Kunlun Mountain. [6] This shows that the kaiming beast is a nine-headed, tiger-shaped image that is definitely not a bird. It is also said that the totem of the Kaiming dynasty is a turtle, and birds have nothing to do with it. Doesn't this conflict? There is only one explanation. The gold foil of the sun god bird is a relic of the former dynasty. The previous period of the Kaiming dynasty is the period of Yufu, during which the king was Du Yu, also Emperor Wang. When it comes to Emperor Wang, the phrase "The cuckoo was entrusted with the tender soul of a king" by Li Shangyin is well-known. It is also recorded in *King Shu-chi* and *Huayang Guozhi* that Emperor Wang became a cuckoo. Most of the goldware unearthed from the Jinsha site belonged to the Kaiming Dynasty. In terms of the exquisiteness, they are not as good as that of the Sanxingdui site. As long as the gold mask unearthed from the Jinsha site is compared with the bronze mask from the Sanxingdui site, it can be clearly seen that this is consistent with the gradual decline of the Kaiming dynasty. [7] Only the gold foil of the sun god bird is an exception. Its exquisiteness is equal to any goldware unearthed from the Sanxingdui site, which further shows that it should be a relic of the former dynasty.

It was the combination of the Duyu tribe and the Zhuli tribe that overthrew the Yufu regime. According to *Huayang Guozhi*, after Duyu proclaimed himself emperor, he "taught the people to work in agriculture", which greatly promoted the development of agriculture in the ancient Shu. With the strength of the country and the stability of the regime, the status of Zhuli tribe improved significantly. [8] In this regard, Mr. Wang Yan stated that the Zhuli tribe is qualified to share equal position with Duyu tribe in terms of political relations, cultural morphology, or totem logo in the history of ancient Shu. He proposed that the gold foil of sun god bird adopted the expression form of "hollowing and inscriptions", which was obviously the product of "farming culture" and had obvious symbolic and commemorative significance, and should be the tribe logo of Zhuli tribe where the wife and heir of emperor come from. Perhaps in the near future, the sun god bird

in the form of "hollowing and inscriptions", which belongs to the Duyu tribe, will be brought to light again. Before that, people could still think of it as a joint totem of Zhuli tribe and Duyu tribe. [9] There is a phrase in *Sichuan Zongzhi* of Jiaqing period of Ming Dynasty quoted from *King Shu-chi of Taiping Yulan* goes that Duyu tribe "from Tianhui mountain" join together with Zhuli tribe in Jiang Yuan. [10] Tianhui mountain is in the east of Jiang Yuan, and the direction where Duyu comes from is where the sun rises. The sun makes everything grow, and Du Yu brings agricultural harvest, which has certain commonality to some extent, so there may be such an artistic expression that the sun represents the Duyu tribe, and the god bird flying around the sun refer to the Zhuli tribe that offered huge support.

And it's important to note that "the sun god bird gold foil" appeared in the Jinsha site in a "captured" and "destroyed" manner. Based on this, combining Xu Xueshu's research on more than 10 bound stone figures kneeling on the ground unearthed in Jinsha River site, what can be explored is the tragic fate of the Zhuli tribe in the later period of Kaiming dynasty. Then the authors went on to explore why this happened. According to *King Shu-chi*, there was a man called Bie Ling in the state of Chu whose body was gone and none of the Chu people could find it. It turned out that he went to the state of Shu and was appointed as Prime Minister by the King of Shu. Later, he went to control the water, and the emperor Wang had an affair with his wife. The king himself felt that his virtue was not as good as Bie Ling and abdicated. [11] The crown abdication was also mentioned in *Huayang Guozhi*. [12] However, the crown abdication here makes no sense. Another phrase in *Sichuan Tongzhi* of Jiaqing era of Qing Dynasty quoted from *Taiping Yulan* goes that since his escape, emperor Wang has been trying to restore the throne, but failed. After his death, he turned into a cuckoo bird, which mourned day and night in the spring. After hearing this, the people of Shu said, "this is the spirit of our king Wang." [13] There are many similar records [14]. The transition from the Duyu dynasty to the Kaiming dynasty was by no means peaceful.

To sum up, sun god bird is the product of the Duyu dynasty and Kaiming dynasty, as well as the witness of the change of these two dynasties. The research value of sun god bird lies not only in exploring the historical facts related to the overthrow of Yufu's regime by Duyu tribe and Zhuli tribe, but also in further proving that Duyu did not abdicate voluntarily, and the reign of Kaiming Dynasty was not smooth, and it had suppressed tribes like Zhuli.

V. THE SUN GOD BIRD REFLECTS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ANCIENT SHU CIVILIZATION AND OTHER CIVILIZATIONS

The ancient Shu civilization has great uniqueness and particularity due to its geographical conditions, but the connection between the ancient Shu civilization and other civilizations cannot be denied. Efforts should be employed for bold speculation, active exploration, rigorous research, and dealing with the issue with an open and inclusive mind. Which civilizations are related to the ancient Shu civilization? What kind of connection exists? In what way should people study this issue? Sun god bird is a good starting point, and many scholars have seized this point and put forward their own ideas and basis.

Here is an example of the study of ancient Shu civilization and Tibetan culture. An article in *Journal of Ethnology* provides a detailed Tibetan cultural interpretation of the sun god bird: What the sun god bird shows seems to have something to do with the ancient Tibetan people's concept of siba gaba and the wind wheel jiongwa. It is no exaggeration to say that, if the Tibetan concept of siba gaba and the wind wheel jiongwa are an expression of the concept of time, space and cosmology in ancient Tibetan literatures, then the pattern on the sun god bird is an archaeological expression of this concept. The hollow design of the sun god bird is a view of the cosmic origin that is born out of nothing and is bright and dark. The ring shape expresses the universe ontology view of the element rotation birth theory. The rotating-toothed shape indicates the wind wheel, and the 12 rotating-toothed shapes and the 13 hollow-outs express the view of space-time of Shifang Sanshi (All space and time). The toothed ray and the four birds were in a counterclockwise direction, in the same direction as the "卍" character, the symbol of Tibetan Buddhism. Similarly, According to *The Biography of the King Bird Khyung*, four birds flying in the same counterclockwise direction represent the origin of the male god bird Khyung as the king of the world. [15] Based on Tibetan literature and the Tibetan cultural interpretation of the sun god bird, the authors found many aspects of coincidence. Is there really a relationship between ancient Shu civilization and Tibetan culture? How did this happen? This is yet to be confirmed by stronger evidence.

There are still many unsolved mysteries about the ancient Shu civilization, and new research and findings are constantly coming out. The authors believe that the analysis and comparison with the sun god bird as the entry point will help find more possibilities for the existence of relations between the ancient Shu civilization and other civilizations, and to extend the updated research results that are conducive to the development of the discipline.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the sun god bird can not only reflect the production and life of the ancient Shu people, but also indicate their spiritual world and the passage of dynasties. The relationship between the ancient Shu civilization and other civilizations can also be explored from the perspective of sun god bird. The research on sun god bird and the ancient Shu civilization is still being updated, and the value of the bird is still being exploited. Therefore, the value of sun god bird for the study of ancient Shu civilization is rich, multi-perspective and immeasurable.

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