

# Essence of China on display at Shanghai Museum

Wang Jie

**M**o Yan, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, visited an exhibition at Shanghai Museum over two days, commenting — “How splendid and glorious the ancient Chinese civilization was!”

“The Making of China: Civilization of the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties,” really deserves this year’s “best exhibition” title.

“It took us more than two years to prepare for the exhibition, not to mention the difficulties and challenges amid the pandemic,”

said Yang Zhigang, director of Shanghai Museum.

In fact, this is the very first part of the exhibition series — “The Essence of China” — in collaboration with Henan Museum.

Henan, a province in China’s central plains, used to be regarded as the “Center of the World” in ancient China. One of the cradles of the

Chinese civilization, the area served as the capital of the Xia (2070-1600 BC), Shang (1600-1046 BC) and Zhou dynasties (1046-256 BC).

“Henan Province is where the civilization of Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties originated and flourished,” said Ma Xiaolin, director of Henan Museum.

“The diverse cultures of China, through ages of evolution and integration, merged into an advanced civilization in the region. Here the kings ruled from their capital and kept the whole territory under control. By then, the structure of Chinese society had undergone profound changes, and an early state came into shape.”

Undoubtedly, it is bronze that represents the glory and wonder of ancient Chinese civilization.

The exhibition features more than 310 cultural relics including ancient bronze vessels. It is rare for visitors to see such a collection.

“The growth of agriculture and further division in handcraft industry led to a leap in

productivity, setting the stage for the exquisite bronzes and the splendid ritual system,” said Hu Jialin, a researcher with Shanghai Museum. “The bronze civilization laid the foundation for the culture and spirit of China.”

The highlight of the exhibition is a *Ding* (food vessel) with the grid pattern of the late Xia Dynasty. Actually it is the earliest *Ding* ever found in the country.

At the root of Henan bronze culture was the Erlitou Culture during the Xia Dynasty, which left behind only a few bronzes of limited types, and this earliest *Ding* is one of them.

Erlitou, a site in Yanshi at the confluence of the rivers Yi and Luo, is generally recognized as the capital of the late Xia Dynasty.

Covering almost 4 million square meters, the site was a large city carefully designed with a comprehensive layout, serving as milestone in China’s urban planning.

Here have been found China’s earliest palace complex built on



Turquoise-inlaid plaque with the animal-mask pattern, late Xia Dynasty

a central axis, earliest palace city, earliest closed state-run handicraft workshops and earliest ritual bronze sets.

Visitors would also find “Narrow-waisted Jue,” a kind of wine vessel excavated in Erlitou.

If visitors closely inspect the bronzes at the exhibition, they might find different traits of these vessels in different periods.

For example, the ripening of bronze art reached its climax during the early Shang Dynasty. At that time, a system of sacrificial vessels, predominated by those for alcohol, took shape. The ritual bronzes unearthed are more serene and sophisticated in details.



Owl-shaped Zun (wine vessel) with the inscription: “Fu Hao,” late Shang



Rectangular Sheng (measuring vessel) commissioned by Shang Yang, late Warring States



Tortoise plastron with divinatory inscriptions, late Shang Dynasty



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