

Moderator's introduction to the workshop

The points of detachment between different civilizations were once their nodes of connection. Searching for the common genes shared by all cultures and communities helps to dissolve divergence, bias and misunderstanding and thus facilitates the creation of a harmonious, peaceful and globalized world with joint efforts, which should be our priority under current circumstances in the world. Answering this pressing call, Peking University's Institute of Area Studies specially invited three generations of researchers to thoroughly discuss the topic "The Origin and Development of Early Civilizations." Attendees at the conference exchanged ideas on the origin and development of early civilizations through comparisons between the early civilizations of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and China. Utilizing the latest findings in archaeology, paleography and art history, the scholars engaged with various topics – including the origin of scripts, city types in early states, the influence of geography on early civilizations, cosmologies of ancient civilizations, mythology and art – in their discussion on the development patterns of ancient civilizations. They endeavored to learn lessons from the rich intellectual wealth of these three ancient civilizations and draw inspiration for contemporary societies.

Xu Hong, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who used to lead the archaeological excavations at the Erlitou site, pointed out that scholars shouldn't restrict their focus locally. Instead, they should approach research topics with concepts and perspectives used in global history to facilitate research that could contribute to the development of a global history of civilizations. He proposed dividing the ancient civilizations of China into three stages. First, an era in which numerous small countries coexisted, representing a bright constellation of stars. Second, an era of kingdoms with the central entity like a glorious moon and surrounding small entities like sparse stars around it. Last, a period of empires that lit the entire sky like a full moon with no rivals. Researcher Xu Hong contended that Erlitou culture not only established numerous traditions and systems that later generations inherited, but also resembled the beginning of the integration of multiple smaller civilizational entities into one interrelated civilization in China. From a global history perspective, the bronze civilization spread in a clear pattern, in which Erlitou is a crucial chain in its eastward diffusion. Around 3,700 years ago, the east part of Asia joined the larger system of the Eurasian bronze civilization and ancient China thus started to become closely

connected to the rest of the world.

Prof. Zheng Yan from the School of Arts at Peking University argued that the structure for written works on prehistoric art history should follow three principles: First is the expansion of the concept of art. The concept should not be restricted to the forms or patterns of specific artifacts, but rather expand to cover broader materiality, spatiality and visuality to lay emphasis on the development and morphology of materials, techniques and expressive languages used in all artificial objects. Second is the attention on the meaning of the origin of each artistic form and artistic language, which helps to organically connect the form, function and notion of an artifact. Third is a discussion beyond the concept of grand unification theory of the diversity of prehistoric art both in geographical regions and temporal stages. Moreover, art historians should be equipped with comparative tools to pay attention to both research in prehistory and writings on the early art history of other cultures, as well as research methods in related fields such as archaeology, to generate a more comprehensive reading of available resources.

Prof. Gong Yushu of the School of Foreign Languages at Peking University argued that the early writing systems in Mesopotamia had three major functions. The first is to assist memory. Writing helps people memorize the main components of the language and can be interpreted by readers according to context. The second is to record the language. Scripts are symbols that record the language and a visualization of the language. The third is to enable communications across space and time. This is the principal function of a writing system. As for how writing systems may have originated, the token-origin theory has challenged the theory that pictures were the precursor of scripts and suggests that physical objects may evolve into scripts. Chinese archaeologists could learn from studies on the origin of Mesopotamian scripts and discover new clues about their own research.

Assistant Professor Jia Yan demonstrated that the environment in which early civilizations were born shaped the beliefs and artistic forms of people, an example of which is the special case of a “stone age without stones” in Mesopotamia. Drawing the boundary of art is an eternal problem when studying ancient civilizations. Jia Yan argued that we should discuss “art” in the holistic cultural or historical context and not overlook the material cultures behind it. For example, the clay boat of Eridu to a certain degree bears the mark of a civilization at the time of its inception, and can function as a window for us to investigate the origin of Mesopotamian civilizations.

Lecturer Huang Qingjiao from the Central Academy of Fine Arts said that as script was yet to mature in the predynastic period in Egypt, images were the main form of the expression of power. Early ruler's selected certain images from an extremely complicated and diverse collection of images of violence and standardized them as an expression of the power of rulers. The contents and forms of these images of violence manifest the desire for dominion of the owners of the images or those who ordered their creation. They also indicated the standardization of the representation of kingship in art works. During the process of their canonization, the images of violence entered the historiographies of early ancient Egypt. The early states of ancient Egypt transformed the images of violence into a fixed schemata and limited form language which became a powerful means to popularize the ideology that kingship is mandated to maintain cosmic order.

Assistant researcher Wen Jing from the Institute of World History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences stated that the academia generally considers that Egypt and Nubia followed a center-periphery mode of development and argued that it is an Egypt-centered hypothesis and may not be historically accurate. Archaeological excavations in the area showed that during the expansion of the Egyptian Naqada culture, the A-Group in Nubia was also expanding. Wen Jing argued that early Egypt and A-Group people in Nubia could very possibly have been in a competitive relation with complementary resources. However, as A-Group lacked military capabilities, it was defeated by the violent Naqada people and vanished in history.

Based on the talks and discussions of this workshop, the Institute of Ancient Eastern Civilizations plans to organize a series of exhibitions titled "The Origin and Development of Early Civilizations" that incorporates the latest research findings. The series will take on a comparative perspective looking at early civilizations including ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and ancient China while shedding light on the latest findings in archaeology, paleography and art history in its approach to answering the following three questions: the origin of script in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and ancient China; the types of cities in early civilizations; and cosmologies of ancient civilizations embodied in mythology and art.

The Institute proposed to further explore the possibility of opening courses in museums that are targeted at the general public based on the exhibition series. It is envisaged that two to three key artifacts would be selected from each museum as main

departure points for course development; course contents would then be designed with reference to the historical information carried by these artifacts as well as local cultures. Course systems imbued with each museum's local characteristics would thus gradually take shape, which would eventually form a comprehensive museum course system with Chinese characteristics. The institute hopes to convey the locality of cultures via the locality of languages, thereby helping museums exercising their function of public education, turning them into a crucial supplement to traditional history education.

Yan Haiying

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Xu Hong, a research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, gave a presentation on the topic “The Two Major Phases of Early States’ Development in Continental East Asia.” He pointed out that although various disciplines all tend to fragment in their development, Global History is more like a research concept and direction rather than a distinct discipline. Everyone should position their research in a larger, wider context. Xu Hong mainly focuses on early cities in China, early states and early civilizations. He shared with the audience the history of researching early ancient China in China’s archaeological community.

Distinct from the communities of non-native researchers working on Egyptology, Assyriology and studies of civilizations in the Hindus valley, the archaeologists of China form the only academic community in this field of studies comprised mostly of native researchers since its inception. Li Ji, the founding father of Chinese archaeology, excavated the Xiyin site in Xia county, Shanxi Province from 1921 to 1926. In 1928, the Institute of History and Philology of Academia Sinica, a Chinese national level institution, entered Yinxu to direct fieldwork. This is vastly different from the situations in Egypt, in Syria and Iraq, and in Pakistan and India, where European and North American scholars still dominate excavation and research to this day. The advantage of the current situation is the benefit of strong institutional heritage within the country – for example, the discovery and decryption of *jiaguwen*, the inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty, was much smoother than the transliteration of the Egyptian scripts on the Rosetta Stone by the French scholar Jean-François Champollion. Disadvantages also exist: native scholars inevitably carry their own nationalistic sentiments into historical and cultural research which should be guided by logic and reason.

Looking at it from the angle of scientific principles, research on early ancient Chinese history has always been troubled by the lack of sources. Archaeology in China has been divided between two discourses since its incipience. On the one hand there is the discourse of historiography, in its narrow sense, which spans from the dawn of civilization to this day, with written texts as its source, and the history of Pangu, Fuxi, Nüwa, the Three Kings and Five Sovereigns, as well as the Xia, Shang and Zhou

dynasties as its content. On the other hand, there is the discourse of archaeology, naming archaeological cultures after localities, and historical periods after crucial archaeological cultures. Xu Hong contended that the two discourses could only converge at the site of Yinxu due to the fact that the oracle bone scripts found there can be cross-referenced in the historical texts on the origins of the dynasty. Before the excavation of the site of Yinxu, however, most if not all of the research that attempted to draw connections between excavated silent archaeological relics and nations or tribes recorded in historical texts was based on deduction and hypotheses, and hugely uncertain.

Under such circumstances, several major cognitive patterns have been proposed to understand the process of the Chinese civilization's formation. The topic was beyond the scope of discussion during the Republic of China era due to a lack of source materials, as excavations had just started. After the archaeological research, Prof. Li Ji relocated to Taiwan, and lost direct access to archaeological findings in his research on the prehistory of China. In the Chinese mainland, however, the richness of fieldwork done in Central Plains, and the abundance of historical texts, resulted in the formation of the Monism centered on the Central Plains, known as the theory of taking the Central Plains as the sole center, during the 1950s to 1970s. Later on, archaeological excavations in the late 1970s and 1980s in the periphery of the Central Plains produced key findings including the Hongshan and Liangzhu cultures, based on which Prof. Su Bingqi proposed viewing early civilizations as a constellation of stars. The theoretical field of early Chinese civilization's origin thus turned from a single origin toward a pluralistic origin. But Su Bingqi did not lay particular emphasis on the pluralistic origin theory, nor did he negate the Monism centered on the Central Plains with the pluralistic origin theory. Prof. Zhang Guangzhi's "Mutual Influence Circle" hypothesis as well as Prof. Yan Wenming's "Multi-Petal Flower" and "United Pluralism" hypotheses could in fact all be regarded as different forms of a neo-theory of taking the Central Plains as the center which acknowledges pluralistic origins but stresses that the Central Plains eventually rose to become the center of civilizations. However, each scholar had their own emphasis. For example, Yan Wenming, Prof. Su Bingqi's student, agreed with the pluralistic theory but also argued that the Central Plains had already become the center of the multi-petal flower of civilization as early as the Miaodigou phase of the Yangshao culture during which colored pottery was at a peak. In 2000, Prof. Yan Wenming's

student Zhao Hui proposed a corrective to his supervisor's hypothesis and argued that the rise of the Central Plains to the status of civilization's center did not happen in the Miaodigou phase of the Yangshao culture but later, during the late period of the culture, because in this period the prehistoric civilizations in the peripheral regions all expanded toward the Central Plains and the Central Plains did not radiate outward to its peripheries. However, in 2006, Zhao Hui amended his own hypothesis in a new article and placed Central Plains' arrival at the center of civilizations even later from the late period of the Yangshao culture to the Longshan culture.

Xu Hong proposed dividing the ancient civilizations of China into three stages separated by two critical points. The first phase (the Yangshao-Longshan era) was a center-less, pluralistic era, one that Prof. Su Bingqi referred to as the "constellations of stars," also known as the era of small states and referred to by Zhao Hui as the era of ancient states. The second phase was the civilizations of the three dynasties, Xia, Shang and Zhou, usually referred to as the era of kingdoms. The third phase is the era of empires, which lasted from the Qin to Qing dynasties. The Erlitou culture is the first critical point while the establishment of the Qin dynastic empire is the second. If the era of small states is analogical to constellations of stars, then the era of kingdoms could be seen as a bright moon surrounded by sparse stars. The central entity in the Central Plains came into existence while other stars of civilizations existed in its periphery, only a bit dimmer. When the era of empires started, it was like a glorious moon rising to a night sky unrivaled in its brightness, marking the start of the age of a centralized polity in the Central Plains.

In May 2018, the Chinese Civilizations Origin Seeking Project announced the three milestones of the Chinese civilizations. The first milestone happened around 5,800 years ago when traces of civilizations began to appear in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River and the Yangtze River as well as the west Liao River drainage basin. The second milestone falls around 5,300 years ago when all regions within contemporary China entered civilization and continued to achieve developments at around 4,000 years ago, producing the Liangzhu culture and sites including Taosi and Shimao. The third mark isn't the start of the Xia dynasty in 2070 BCE as announced by the Xia, Shang and Zhou Chronology Project, but around 3,800 years ago when the Central Plains saw the appearance of more mature forms of civilization which started to exert influence on peripheral areas. The Central Plains hence became the core and

lead of the general progress of Chinese civilization. This milestone is the Erlitou culture.

In the scope of global history, the earliest civilizations that utilized metal originated in the east Mediterranean basin, West Asia and the Middle East, marking the first milestone since the early humans left Africa. Features like agriculture, early scripts and early states all appeared in this region. East Asia apparently lies at the receiving end of technologies and thus the end of the transmission chain. For example, the use of metal reached Central Asia and where it is now Xinjiang around 4,000 years ago, entered the Hexi Corridor around 3,700 years ago and spread across Northern China and the Central Plains including Erlitou, and eventually arrived in Shandong in the late period of the Erligang culture around 3,400 years ago. Much later, around 2,000 years ago during the Spring and Autumn period, the utilization of metal became known in the Korean Peninsula, and it was even later, during the Warring States period of Chinese history, that it spread to Japan. Along with the eastward spread of the smelting and forging technologies of bronze, other developments followed: domesticated crops and animals such as wheat, sheep and cattle, the adoption of horses to pull wheeled vehicles, large-scale burial customs with four-ramp tombs, and the custom of divination using bones, none of which — including the oracle bone scripts — have clear clues to their origins in the Central Plains. Many of them are now proved to be foreign to the region. Looking further ahead, I argue that the four earliest cultures to have entered the bronze age were the Siba culture in the Hexi Corridor, the late period of the Qijia culture in the Gansu-Qinghai region, the lower Xiajiadian culture in the region covering east Inner Mongolia and west Liaoning and phase II of the Erlitou culture. Therefore, it was not until 1700 BCE when bronze started to play an important role in human life.

Prof. Lin Yun of Jilin University made a lively analogy: the bronze age civilizations in Inner Asia were like a whirlpool that splashed froth in the vicinity, resembling the outward spread of the bronze age civilization. Were the above-mentioned sites in East Asia that first entered the bronze age several examples of this splashed froth? Therefore, we must keep an open mind and broad horizon to fully comprehend the spread of bronze age civilization in China and even the rise of states in China as well as to enhance our knowledge of and research in history.

The presentation of Prof. Zheng Yan from the School of Arts at Peking University was titled, “The Fundamental Questions in the History of Chinese Prehistoric Art.” He contended that Chinese archaeology has in the past 100 years accumulated great

quantities of materials for research on prehistoric and primitive China but domestic studies on the history of Chinese fine arts have been the quietest during the same period. New archaeological findings continuously bring out new materials, some of which have excited great interest in the general public, whereas very few in the field of fine arts history touched on the topic. Zheng Yan's research focused on what has been happening within the history of fine arts and disregarded the discussions of archaeologists for two reasons. First, he intended to shed light on the problems within art history in its research on the history of prehistoric art and early art history. Second, although archaeology does similar research, it is not for the purpose of writing art history. Even though the research methods of art history are used in archaeology, their application lacks consciousness and awareness.

Zheng Yan argued that the drawbacks of contemporary Chinese research in the history of fine arts lie in the following aspects. First is the severely outdated understanding and knowledge of archaeology. Second is the out-of-date definition and perception of "art" and "fine arts," which still basically runs along the lines of the 19th and 20th century concept of "fine arts." Although many speak of the concept nowadays, it is a product of the traditions and context of its time in Europe, which could be neither applied to contemporary arts nor used for art forms that appeared earlier. Third and the most important is a lack of historical consciousness. In this aspect, the German historicism's critique in the late 18th century to the early 19th century on the universality of rationality and the just enlightenment of faith still rings relevant today. This historicist critique attacked two practices; one is abstraction detached of specific historical context, while the other is the application of current standards on cultures of the past. We can see that as of the above two aspects, Hegelianism was the mainstream of thought in the writing of the Chinese history of fine arts during the 20th century. While the West has already moved past this phase of Hegelianism, we in China are still very much in it. With the rise of nationalist sentiments, this trend is set to become even stronger.

Zheng Yan contends that the question of how art history research should be carried out in the future is one that we haven't seriously pondered or even formally asked yet. He often recommends students to draw inspiration from books and articles by previous scholars: Prof. Zhang Guangzhi's famous lecture handouts for undergraduate students *Fine Art, Mythologies, and Sacrifice*, Prof. David N. Keightley's *Archaeology and Mentality: The Making of China*, and the famous fine arts theoretician Prof. Liu

Dunyuan's *On the Technologies and Arts of Potteries of the Longshan Culture (Shandong)*, published in 1959. Drawing on the works of these professors, Zheng Yan proposed a new structure for writing the history of prehistoric art characterized by the following traits.

First is the expansion of the concept of art. It should not be restricted to the forms or patterns of specific artifacts, but rather expand to cover the broader materiality, spatiality and visuality so as to lay emphasis on the development and morphology of materials, techniques and expressive languages used in all artificial objects. Settlements, architectures, artificial landscapes, burial sites and many other creations should all be regarded as research subjects. Therefore, scholars should not only pay attention to items excluded by typological studies but also fully utilize and understand the outcomes of typological studies in archaeology from art history's point of view, before translating these outcomes into a fundamental background network made up of the totality of material and visual cultures across different cultural periods and eventually proposing an explanation.

Second is the particular attention on the meaning of the origin of each artistic form and artistic language. Tracing these origins requires a comprehensive consideration of all kinds of historical phenomenon and their specific historical meanings, which demands a concrete method to organically connect the form, function and notion of an artifact. Researchers should regard the artifact as both a product of people's production, life, religion and knowledge and an active factor that shaped people's life and religious powers.

Third is the discussion of Chinese prehistoric arts' different regions and temporal stages as well as their diversity beyond the concept of the grand unification theory. This asks art historians to follow findings and the latest research outcomes in archaeology and discover problems of the history of fine arts within them. Moreover, art historians should be equipped with comparative tools to pay attention to other researchers' works and learn from them how they studied the prehistoric period of other cultures and how they approached the writing of early art history.

From these perspectives, Zheng Yan revealed that he had drafted an outline of the history of prehistoric arts in China while he was editing the textbook *History of Chinese Fine Arts*. He confessed that if a textbook is to be written based on the outline, its structure would still be very conservative. For instance, the expressions of periodical and regional features could only be restrained in a framework of different types of

material relics. However, he still intended to break free from the simplistic “artifact + motif pattern” research framework as much as possible and observe the items in relation to factors such as their environment, how they were made, and how they fit into the daily life and religious practices of their time. He might add in more materials later such as the layout of Banpo or Jiangzhai villages or large squares. During the review of the manuscript, quite a number of scholars questioned Zheng Yan’s decision to write about squares in the textbook. He responded that it is because the textbook also includes Tian’anmen Square and the layout of Tang dynasty’s Chang’an city, which fall under the wider concept of material and visual culture instead of the traditional “fine arts.”

Zheng Yan also mentioned a recently published article by Prof. Li Min published in the journal *Dushu* on the impact of natural phenomenon on people in societies in prehistoric times. For example, iron that was first used by people came from iron meteorites. Processing and decorating iron meteorites was related to art. How did the people back then perceive such alien things that fell from the sky? Did they regard them as something that was related to fate, religion, or kingship? Would these perceptions have an impact on the patterns and designs of the items they produced? Very few today approach the issues of early civilizations from similar perspectives.

Zheng Yan believed that the understanding of early arts could be restricted by the variety of theories and methods in art history studies which rose from the perspective of collection, exhibition, creation and perception. Most researchers are keen on interpreting the patterns on the colored potteries and jade wares from a perspective of look-alikes. For example, they tend to emphasize beast-face patterns and taotie patterns on bronze wares and often try to figure out which represents an ox and which represents a sheep. But they pay little interest to seemingly abstract geometric patterns and care little, for example, to see a certain design as a cloud or a thunder in the cloud-and-thunder pattern. Moreover, due to insufficient research methods, despite researchers’ deep interest in studying artifacts such as the stone axe picture or the pottery jar, they do not know where to start to understand such ordinary wares. Archaeology, however, is the study of mostly common objects. Such a situation must push us to consider the future relation between art history and archaeology and to reflect on the methodology of art history.

Prof. Gong Yushu of the School of Foreign Languages at Peking University talked about the origin of cuneiform writing, starting by introducing stories in the famous legendary Sumerian account of Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta.

It is said that Enmerkar, king of Uruk, wanted to send an envoy to Aratta in the Iranian mountains. However, he realized that the messenger could not recount his exact words that he would like relayed to the lord of Aratta, and thus carved writings on mud slabs to record his message. This legend is an example of the myth of “a hero creating the writing system,” common among ancient civilizations, and it shows the three functions of the early writing systems in Mesopotamia. The first is to assist memory. Script was invented to assist memory and ensure the successful relay of words in a diplomatic mission. This is also evident from a feature of early cuneiform: only major components of the language such as nouns were embodied by the script, whereas the rest was free to interpret. The second is to record the language.

Scripts are symbols that record the language and a visualization of the language, and it is clearly stated in this myth that Enmerkar invented script to record the language as he wrote his words on a slab. The third is to enable communications across space and time. This is the principal function of a writing system, which allows us to communicate when unable to speak face-to-face. These three functions of script are clearly expressed in the myth of Enmerkar.

There are other hypotheses of how writing systems originated, including the pictographic origin hypothesis, the 21-symbol combination hypothesis, the seal hypothesis, the carved symbol on potteries hypothesis, the numerical origin hypothesis, the token-origin hypothesis and the Indo-European origin hypothesis. Apart from the token-origin and the Indo-European origin theories, most other hypotheses did not have any significant impact, nor were they well fleshed out.

Gong Yushu said that the token-origin hypothesis is proposed by the archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat, who authored *Before Writing* and *How Writing Came About*, the latter of which has been translated into Chinese and published by the Commercial Press. This hypothesis is closely connected to the French scholar Pierre Amiet, who first proposed that the clay tokens might be related to written language but did not pursue this thread further. Schmandt-Besserat started her studies afterwards and has spent all her energy on the topic of clay tokens, which almost all her published articles revolve around.

She argued that the cuneiforms did not originate from pictures but directly from three-dimensional clay tokens. Shortly after the “neolithic revolution,” around 8000 BCE, people began to use clay tokens to keep accounts of numbers and events. The clay tokens used at this time were diverse in shape and form but did not bear any holes

or carvings and were in this sense simple. They can be therefore referred to as simple clay tokens. Around 4000 BCE, holed, carved, and holed and carved clay tokens — the so-called complex clay tokens — began to appear. It was also from this time that people started to thread clay tokens together or wrap them inside hollow mud balls to preserve. Before these mud balls dried and hardened, people stamped markings on them to indicate ownership with round, flat seals which were later replaced by cylindrical seals.

However, there was an intrinsic drawback to the preservation of clay tokens in mud balls: if the preserver forgot the numbers and types of clay tokens sealed within a mud ball, they could not confirm the contents without breaking the fully sealed ball. It was perhaps to overcome this imperfection that people started to imprint each token on the mud ball before they sealed them in. In this way, they could know the shape and number of tokens within a mud ball from the imprints on the ball anytime they needed without having to break the seal to access the tokens.

Now that the imprint could play the role of the tokens, the mud ball became obsolete. Mud slates with token imprints without concealing the tokens themselves naturally appeared, and since the mud did not have to wrap the tokens in it, it evolved from a hollow, round ball into a solid, rectangular slab. Initially, the slabs were uneven, but they soon became flatter, perhaps to minimize contact between the hand and the back of the slab when people flipped the slab and wrote on the other side. The imprint of tokens on the slate were often not clear enough and each took up considerable space on the not-so-large slates. Another revolution hence came about — people started to use reed pens to draw patterns of tokens on the slate. The three-dimensional clay tokens evolved into the two-dimensional scripts. This last stage of development of the clay tokens marked the creation of script.

Finally, Prof. Gong Yushu quoted the sinologist Robert Bagley from one of his articles published in 2004 on clay tokens, rephrased as follows. In the past few decades, the studies on the origins of Mesopotamian writing systems changed our opinions on the direct precursor of writing, which was considered to be pictures. How did the clay tokens evolve into writing? This changed the conception of the direct precursor as writing could have come from tokens, which means objects could also evolve into writing and the precursor of writing could be objects and not necessarily pictures. Chinese archaeologists, equipped with the knowledge of the origins of Mesopotamian writings, may well discover the missing link that has stayed hidden so far.

Assistant Professor Jia Yan revolved her speech around the clay boat unearthed in

what was the ancient Mesopotamian city of Eridu, and talked about how the environment in which early civilizations were born shaped the beliefs and artistic forms of people. Jia Yan pointed out that since resources in southern Mesopotamia were extremely scarce and rarely anything existed on the surface of the earth except water, mud and reeds, no artistic forms such as cave paintings that were common in most early civilizations could be found. Hence, the early art in Mesopotamia mainly took the form of clay sculptures, which gives the special case of “a stone age without stones” in Mesopotamia. Therefore, this clay boat represents the earliest artistic norm and form in Mesopotamia.

The artifact was discovered in Eridu, an ancient Sumerian city in Mesopotamia, whose name meant “the land of power” or “the land of guidance” in Sumerian. According to Sumerian flood myths, it is the first city built by the humankind and was governed by Enki, the god of water and the creator of all beings, whose figure often appears riding in boats. Therefore, the reed boats, the original models of the clay boat, were not only the necessary form of transportation in ancient Sumerian life, but also closely connected to gods, kings and temple ceremonies.

Jia Yan argued that drawing the boundary of art is an eternal problem when studying ancient civilizations and that we should discuss “art” in the holistic cultural or historical context and not overlook the material cultures behind it. The clay boat of Eridu to a certain degree bears the marker of a civilization just around the time of its inception and can function as a window for us to investigate the origin of Mesopotamian civilizations.

The predynastic Tomb 100 in Hierakonpolis is the earliest known tomb of ancient Egypt that has painted walls. Associate professor Huang Qingjiao from the Central Academy of Fine Arts laid eyes on the violent imagery depicted in the painted wall of the tomb and discussed the possible origins of these scenes of violence, their typical patterns and motifs, their evolution, and the similarities and differences between combinations of images on various media. By doing so she aimed to generate a clear overview of the abundant pictographic elements of the scenes of violence in the predynastic period and the formulation process of their patterns, through which she looked into the topic of the early state and kingship in ancient Egypt.

The images of violence in ancient Egyptian culture are commonly used as a visualization of kingship and existed since the formation of states in the early predynastic period until the Romans came to rule Egypt. One of its typical images is a

tall king in a crown with one hand seizing the enemy while the other is raised high holding a staff and ready to hit. This image announces the sanctity of kingship on various forms of art including clay pottery, reliefs on the sacrificial temples of pyramids, and reliefs on the exterior walls of temples.

As Hierakonpolis Tomb 100 is to date the only discovered predynastic tomb that has decorated walls and is peculiar and exceptional, it attracts the attention of scholars studying early states and especially early kingship. Currently, three explanations of the decorations circulate in academia. One sees decorations as a rendition of a historical event and considers this figure of tall stature with a belt fastened at his waist and a staff in his hand a local leader or early king of Hierakonpolis participating in a war or a hunt. Another opinion thinks of the decorations as a depiction of religious or witchcraft activity, a common way to interpret early arts around the world. The third explanation is that such images were the artistic expression of the ideology of kingship. New expressions of power arose with the emergence of new social and economic structures in the Naqada II Period, and that artistic language was used to convey the relations of opposition, control, and conquest. Neither of the first two explanations can be easily refuted from a historic or religious point of view, but nor could they easily be proved. Huang Qingjiao is inclined to take the position of the third explanation and sees it as a representation of power and an illustration in imagery of the transition to early states and kingship.

In the early predynastic period during the Naqada period, material culture or the quantity and delicateness of funerary objects were mainly used to reflect the power and identity of a tomb's occupant in the burial. This is especially evident in the expression of control over other people or animals in the form of images of capturing and beating enemies or hunting animals. In the late Naqada period, early states gradually formed, and the early rulers selected several images from the complex and diverse imagery of violence to be the standard expression of their power. One of these images is a tall man with one hand holding a staff with the other seizing the enemy, ready to hit him. The most classic example is the Narmer Palette of the Naqada III period found buried at Hierakonpolis. It is a 63-centimeter tall, 1-centimeter thick, shield-shaped palette made from dark grey-green siltstone on which is carved various symbols and figures. Many scholars take it as the historical evidence of a unified Egypt in its early history, because on the recto side there is a picture of Narmer wearing the White Crown of Upper Egypt

while on the verso side there is a picture of him wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt. The king in the crown, the falcon representing Horus who is the symbol of kingship, and the *serekh* are all expressions of kingship. The content and forms of these violent images implied the eagerness for dominion of the person who owned or commissioned this palette. They also showed that the concept of kingship in artistic expressions had already been standardized. The image of the king holding a staff high to smite his enemy as depicted in the decorations on the wall of Hierakonpolis Tomb 100 is even clearer on the Narmer Palette. Such an image later became the standard for violent imagery and was repeatedly used.

The violent imagery also entered the historiography of early ancient Egypt when it became canonized. Ancient Egyptians initially did not record events on papyrus but rather “tags,” which were quite peculiar in their make. They usually had a hole in one of the corners, which might mean that multiple “tags” were strung together to complete the historiography of a certain king’s reign, and then buried in the tomb of kings in the early dynasties at Abydos. Narmer’s records also used a combination of violent imagery and writings to document the military activities of King Narmer, such as the conquest of 3,000 Libyans.

After the emergence of the early state at around 3000 BCE, the violent imagery began to be used in the cave paintings in the Sinai Peninsula on the northeastern frontiers of Egypt. Some were used to announce the Egyptian king’s rule over the local people. Ancient Egypt began to send expeditions to the first and second cataracts and Nubia in the south and even further to what is now Ethiopia, as well as to the northeast to Sinai, where resources much needed by the rulers including turquoise, malachite, and copper lie. Later, as writing in Ancient Egypt matured and the content accompanying the images in writing increased, the images expressing the concept of kingship crystalized and formed standard patterns. The early states in Ancient Egypt transformed the violent imagery into a fixed motif and finite formal language and thus a powerful weapon to announce the king’s maintenance of the cosmic order.

Huang Qingjiao summarized the above with the following conclusion.

First, imagery was the main media for power expression in the predynastic period of Ancient Egypt when writing had not yet fully developed. The violent image depicted in the decorations on the walls of Hierakonpolis Tomb 100 were a discourse of images for the predynastic rulers to express power. Featuring a king smiting his enemy, which

became the typical motif of the violent imagery, it was a crucial link in the early development of violent imagery in Ancient Egypt.

Second, the violent image in Hierakonpolis Tomb 100 could very possibly be a result of imitation by early Ancient Egyptian craftspeople of patterns on burial objects. To date, it appears that the wall decorations of Tomb 100 are an exception and is not typical of the burial traditions then. Rulers relied mostly on material remains and abundant burial objects to show off its power. At the same time, early rulers of Ancient Egypt might have chosen from a pool of violent images that expressed power and eventually, the image of the king smiting his enemy became the classical motif for kingship in the Ancient Egyptian civilization.

Third, after the emergence of early states, violent images began to be accompanied by writings and were used to record the military conquests of kings in historiographies. These images were also used to announce the conquest of Ancient Egypt's frontiers by the Egyptian kingship. As the writing system of Ancient Egypt matured, the violent imagery gradually simplified and standardized to represent illustrations in epigraphs instead of the main body of documentation.

Assistant research fellow Wen Jing from the Institute of World History of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences discussed how civilizations originated using the example of Nubia's A-Group and the birth of early Egypt.

Egypt spreads from the Nile Delta to Aswan, while Nubia takes up great proportions in southern Egypt — it refers to the vast area along the Nile between the first Cataract to the fifth Cataract. Nubia was divided into two parts — Upper and Lower — like Ancient Egypt was. Lower Nubia was the northern part while Upper Nubia referred to the southern part.

A-Group culture was a neolithic culture that flourished in the region south of Aswan, north of the second Cataract of the Nile. It is commonly divided into three periods: Early A-Group (3800-3400 BCE), Middle A-Group (3400-3200 BCE), and Terminal A-Group (3200-2900 BCE). Middle A-Group is also known as the classical period.

Wen Jing said that in classical textbooks or articles, it is generally considered that Egypt and Nubia followed a center-periphery model of development, which is problematic as most of the conclusions were made by Egyptologists. Scholars who take the Egyptian civilization as the center argued that since Ancient Egypt is known to have

evolved into a powerful civilization, it should have also been a center of civilization back in the late neolithic period. Moreover, it must have been superior while others surrounding it were peripheral. In fact, however, a more sound and comprehensive approach is to take the whole of northeast Africa instead of only Egypt as the center of research and then observe the cultures and their interactions with each other, thereby studying the evolution process of civilization in this region.

Research fellow Maria Carmela Catto studied the development of cultural communities in northeast Africa during the neolithic period, 5000-3000 BCE, by researching the manufacturing technology, surface treatment, decorative patterns, and shapes of wares such as pottery. During 5000-4500 BCE, there were five different cultural communities: Egypt, Nubia, Sudan, Butana-Gash (to the east of Khartoum), and Laiya (the Western Desert). Later in 4500-4000 BCE, distinctions between different cultural communities grew more apparent. Egypt included the Badarian culture located in Nabta, Dakhla and Upper Egypt. Nubia consisted of the Abkan culture at the second Cataract, the Kerma culture in the Dongola Reach, and a culture related to the Abkan in Laqiya. Sudan's activities were limited to around Khartoum.

Coming to 4000-3500 BCE, Egypt included the Naqada culture, which was closely related to the Delta and the Near East. Sudan grew to include not only Khartoum but also Upper Nubia and Gilf Kebir, in the Western Desert. When it came to 3500-3000 BCE, the gap between the communities further widened. Egypt now comprised the Naqada culture solely. The Nubian community was made up of only the A-Group culture which occupied Lower Nubia and Laqiya. Sudan covered Khartoum and Upper Nubia. Outside the Egypt-centered perspective, while the Naqada culture expanded during this last period, the A-Group culture was also expanding.

Moreover, it can be gathered from various research projects on the decorative patterns on pottery discovered in northeast Africa, the forms and types of pottery unearthed in Kustur as well as the burials and cave paintings found in Sayala and Nubia that what Egyptologists proposed — civilization spread from Egypt to Nubia — is problematic. The Nubian culture, the A-Group culture, and the Naqada culture might have co-existed and been related to one another. Therefore, the following questions arise: what exactly were the relations between these cultures? Why did the Naqada culture eventually evolve into a state in Egypt but not the Nubian and A-Group cultures?

Wen Jing argued that the Nubian culture, A-Group culture and the Naqada culture

could very possibly have been in a competitive race for complementary resources. During the competition, the Naqada culture eventually evolved into a state while the A-Group culture was strangled in its cradle. Nubia, instead of Egypt, was the most fertile area in northeast Africa. It enjoyed developed agriculture, fishing, and livestock farming as well as abundant mineral resources. However, in its trade with Egypt, it mainly exported raw materials in exchange for handicraft goods and thus eventually lost to Egypt and vanished in history.

Xue Jiang, a PhD candidate from the Central Academy of Fine Arts worked for three years in the Yak Museum of Tibet as part of Beijing's Support Projects in Tibet. He introduced in detail one item in the museum's collection, a Tibetan style iron-handle copper mirror with yak patterns, and the research on it.

This mirror was collected from private possessions in 2016 and was regarded as an item of importance after examination by the National Cultural Heritage Administration and the Institute of Archaeology of Tibet, and has hence been researched. During the research, it was found that a similar copper mirror, unearthed in the Qugong site in Lhasa, was collected by the Tibet Museum. The Qugong site started in the late Neolithic period and ended no later than the Western Han dynasty. Apart from the two copper mirrors found in Tibet, three other similar mirrors exist overseas in Germany, France, and Ladakh. The mirror in Ladakh was heavily damaged during excavation and later went missing.

Xue Jiang compared the two copper mirrors according to their shapes, decorations, materials, and crafting techniques.

The mirror collected from private possessions (private mirror hereafter) differs from the Qugong mirror in its manufacture. The former was made using a "prodding technique" — it is a casted monoblock and carved on after. The Qugong mirror, however, was made from molds. The shape of the private mirror closely resembles that of the Qugong mirror and of the mirrors collected in Germany and France. The mirror face is round and flat with a triangular slant on the rim and a special base connecting it to the handle. Moreover, the private mirror is almost the same in its shape and size as the Qugong mirror, except that the Qugong one has a slightly smaller mirror face.

The private mirror comes with a handle. The mirror itself is bronze whereas the handle is iron. It was found without its original iron handle but the hole in which the handle used to be connected to the mirror was still intact. An analysis of the mirror

face s material showed that it is made from an alloy with exactly the same statistics of that of the Qugong mirror. This proved that the two mirrors were made in the same period in Tibet.

Judging from the yak decorative pattern found on both mirrors, it is almost certain that both were made in Tibet. The yak pattern on the Qugong mirror highly resembles that on the private mirror and depicts typical characteristics of yaks — tall shoulders, large tail, large build, and hoofs different from those of oxen. Images of yaks similar to this pattern also appeared in early cave paintings in Tibet and were painted using similar techniques. Studies by Chinese scholars on the yaks painted with the “prodding technique” in these cave paintings consider them done around 2,000-3,000 years ago. The yak pattern is a peculiar pattern of decoration native to the Tibetan Plateau, created by the people on the plateau.

Apart from the yak pattern, the mirror is also decorated by bird patterns. Similar patterns appeared on some of the late neolithic cave paintings and pottery wares in the Tibetan Plateau and look very much like the paired-bird pattern on the Qugong mirror. However, the cave paintings mostly featured single birds with relatively few paired-birds. Xue Jiang proposed two theories of how the bird pattern on the Qugong mirror evolved. One is that it was influenced by the bird patterns of cultures in the lowlands, while the other is that it was a native invention of paired-bird patterns under the influence of the bird totem in the Tibetan Plateau.

The private mirror and the other three Tibetan-style mirrors are also decorated by geometric patterns mainly made up of a circular pattern, spiral cloud pattern, lozenge pattern, hooked swastika pattern, zigzag pattern, and sawtooth pattern, but little research has been carried out on the patterns. Tong Tao from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences proposed that the patterns on the Tibetan copper mirror were influenced by the Dian cultures in Yunnan. However, the excavation and research on the bronze wares of the Dian cultures have indicated that the time of the burials was about a few hundred years or more than a thousand years later than the Qugong site in Tibet. Xue Jiang therefore argued that the Dian cultures did not have any impact on the Tibetan mirror.

In a series of comparisons, it was found that the patterns on the mirror are almost identical to those on the pottery wares of the Majiayao culture and that the patterns on the pottery jars unearthed in the Qugong site in Lhasa, Tibet, mostly resembles their

counterpart in the Majiayao culture. Many scholars have studied this topic.

First, millet was first domesticated in China. Twenty-five neolithic sites have been found with traces of millet in them and the sites of the Majiayao, Qijia, and Mxhar-ro cultures (in Tibet) all contained carbonized millet. Some researchers theorized that millet spread from China to West Asia along two routes: one spread upstream the Yellow River through the Central Plains then the Gansu-Qinghai region and headed west through Xinjiang, Arabia, Asia Minor, Russia, Austria and spread in Europe. The other spread downstream along the Min River into the river valleys in the Hengduan Mountains on the east edge of the Tibetan Plateau and then further into the regions of Southeast Asia. We can see from the spread of millet that the Tibetan Plateau was the intersection of various cultures between Central Plains, Europe, Inner Asia, and South Asia. The archaeologists Tong Enzheng and Leng Jian's studies also argued that the millet in the Mxhar-Ro culture most probably arrived from the Majiayao culture system.

Second, Tong Enzheng and Leng Jian compared the shapes of and patterns on the pottery wares found in the Mxhar-Ro site with those of the Gansu-Qinghai region including the Majiayao culture, and proposed that the Majiayao culture, Banshan culture and Machang culture in the Gansu-Qinghai region had had their impact on cultures in the Tibetan Plateau.

In 1976, a bronze knife made from tin-bronze casts was found in the Linjia site in Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province. Dating up to 5,000 years ago, it is by far the earliest bronze alloy ware ever found in China. Lü Hongliang once mentioned that the Department of Archaeology in Sichuan University found an arc-back small bronze knife in the five sarcophagi being excavated in the Qamdo region with a shape similar to that of similar knives found in the Qijia culture, which is another piece of evidence of the relations between Tibet and the Gansu-Qinghai region. Huo Wei argued that the burial structure and traditions in the Gansu-Qinghai region also influenced the Tibetan Plateau and Xinjiang.

Another important feature of the private mirror is that there is a yak depicted standing on the sawtooth pattern, a common scene in the Tibetan Plateau. Xue Jiang speculated that it might be a unique pattern created by the craftspeople in Tibet at the time through observation of real-life scenes while incorporating features from the Majiayao culture. To sum up, Xue Jiang argued that the patterns on the private mirror and the three other copper mirrors were influenced by the patterns on wares found in

the Majiayao culture.

Xue Jiang pointed out that the shape of the copper mirror with a handle is peculiar because mirrors with a handle did not appear in lowland regions of China until the Tang and Song dynasties, and even then, they were cast with long handles. Scholars including Huo Wei and Lü Hongliang proposed that these copper mirrors with handles were made under the influence of Inner Asia and Mongolia, whereas Zhao Huimin argued that it was influenced by India, and Tong Tao thought the influence came from the Dian culture. Xue Jiang argued that little influence could have come from India. First, copper mirrors in India at that time were also cast like those in China, did not have any traces of combination between iron and alloy, and were mainly made up of iron. Second, geographical and climatic conditions then did not allow neolithic cultures in India to extend beyond the unsurmountable Himalayans. Xue Jiang elaborated that following Huo Wei and Lü Hongliang's proposal, we can find proof of the early influence of the Inner Asian Scythian culture on Tibet via a path that went through Ruoqiang (Charklik) in Xinjiang into Tibet.

A comparison shows that the private mirror and the Qugong mirror are like copper mirrors of the Scythian culture in their shapes but differ in their decorative patterns. Early copper mirrors in Scythia were usually decorated by reliefs with mostly local animals and plants and resembled those in Egypt or Mesopotamia, whereas the decorations on Tibetan copper mirrors were devoid of animals. Therefore, Xue Jiang considered that the shape of the Tibetan copper mirror was influenced by the Inner Asian Scythian culture, but their patterns were impacted by the Majiayao culture and were imbued with local creativity.

Referencing the iron and bronze smelting techniques development in West Asia and the Mesopotamia, Xue Jiang speculated that the Tibetan copper mirrors with handles might have appeared much earlier than their counterparts in lowland China, in around the late neolithic period, as the smelting technique for bronze alloy has been found in Tibet. This hypothesis was of much contention in academia since the mirrors age in his proposal was much earlier than what used to be agreed on and was way ahead of many cultures in lowland China. However, after detailed comparison, Xue Jiang's hypothesis was regarded reasonable and it was agreed that the iron smelting and casting techniques in bronze wares manufactured in Tibet evolved earlier than those in lowland China.

In summary, Xue Jiang pointed out that the copper mirror collected by the Yak Museum of Tibet belongs to the same series of products as the other Tibetan copper mirrors with handles. The shape of these mirrors was influenced by the handled copper mirrors of the nomadic cultures of Inner Asia, whereas the decorative patterns on the back of the mirror were influenced by the patterns found in the Majiayao culture in the Gansu-Qinghai region and characterized by local features such as yaks. The mirrors' material was influenced by the metal smelting techniques developed in the Eurasian steppe or the Gansu-Qinghai region, while it was also influenced by local cave painting techniques. Based on this, it can be decided that this copper mirror was made later than the late neolithic period and earlier than the late Western Han dynasty. The native dwellers in the Tibetan Plateau by then had already successfully mastered the smelting and casting techniques of bronze and iron, created a unique shape and decorative pattern for handled copper mirrors peculiar to the Tibetan Plateau, and generated a novel and peculiar technique to create beads by dripping, eventually forming a style found only in the Tibetan plateau for copper mirrors with a handle.

During the discussions, Dong Jing from Beijing Jianhua Experimental School talked about the merging of civilizations during the development stage of Greek and Egyptian civilizations using Thoth worship during Hellenization as a case study. Thoth was the Egyptian God of Writing and Language as well as Magic. After Egypt was conquered by Alexander the Great, the traditional Amun worship in Egypt gradually faded away, whereas popular worship for Thoth thrived. The organizational style of Thoth worship manifested Hellenistic features, borrowing the forms of private association and association codes while still worshipping Egyptian gods and retaining traditional Egyptian holidays and celebrations. The belief in Thoth thus kept on spreading and combined with ancient Greek philosophy to eventually have an impact on the formation of Hermeticism in the Middle Ages, hence preserving numerous elements from the ancient Egyptian civilization for thousands of years and counting.

During the session, the attendants also discussed topics including the expressions of ancient Egyptian kingship, various forms of the origin of civilization, and the evolution of writing. There was also a Q&A session with the audience.