

The Aesthetic Characteristics of Sanxingdui Bronze Ornamentation - Taking Bird Ornamentation as an Example

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Abstract:

This study takes the bronzes excavated from the Sanxingdui in Guanghan as an example, lists several common motifs among them, and discusses them with the bird motif as an example. This study is conducted from an iconographic perspective, with the first level described in detail in terms of the primitive natural meaning; the second level analyzes its meaning and the formal laws displayed by the bird ornament; and the last level, delves into the bird ornament itself, considers the aesthetic characteristics of it, and explores the spiritual picture of the ancient Shu people. In the view of the ancient Shu ancestors, birds, as a bridge of communication in the interaction between humans and gods, were the most important aspect of ancient Shu beliefs. More than a mere ornament or embellishment, bird decoration was given a deeper meaning, reflecting the core of ancient Shu ancestors' belief in the "unity of humans and gods" and the "representation of images".

Keywords:

Sanxingdui Bronze, Ornamentation, Bird Ornamentation, Aesthetic Features

1. Introduction

In 1929, a farmer, Yan Daocheng, stumbled upon a pit of jade artifacts while panning a ditch. From here, the site of Sanxingdui finally saw the light of day after a thousand years. In 2021, with the excavation of six new sacrificial pits and the excavation of nearly 10,000 artifacts, the "Sanxingdui Craze" was once again unleashed.

With the advancement of technology and the continuous excavation of archaeology, China's research on Sanxingdui has been intensifying, and people are once again aware of the splendor of the ancient Shu civilization.

At present, most of the research is still conducted on bronze styles and rituals of the ancient Shu state, so although the historical research on the general development of the ancient Shu state has been relatively in-depth and clear, the research on bronze ornamentation and the study of aesthetic features is still lacking.

At the archaeological level, many archaeologists and scholars of archaeology, supported by rich samples of excavated artifacts from Sanxingdui, have closely examined the artifacts, studied the age to which they belong, the location, the ethnicity to which they belong, the style of artifacts, etc., gradually building a complete picture of the ancient Shu sacrificial pits, the complete appearance of the Sanxingdui site, and then deducing the prosperous scene of this place a thousand years ago; in terms of cultural research, a large number of scholars have linked the history of the Yin and Shang, Zhou, and Qin dynasties, compared the similarities of bronze artifacts, and delved into ancient texts to seek the relevance of the ancient Shu civilization to that of the Central Plains; however, not so much research has been done on the areas outside the Central Plains, west and south of the ancient Shu. The silk and sea shells unearthed in the newly unearthed sacrificial pits in 2021 confirm the authenticity of the existence of the “early Silk Road”. [1] However, the research on the style and decoration of the bronze wares of Sanxingdui still remains at the level of analysis and description, although some scholars are trying to elaborate on the aesthetic aspects of Sanxingdui, but it is still slightly less than other materials. According to Xinhua experts, since the first archaeological excavation of the site of Sanxingdui began, there have been 37 times, and the total excavation area is still less than 20,000 square meters, while the total distribution of the site of Sanxingdui actually amounts to 12 square kilometers, and the current excavation area only accounts for two thousandths of the total area. [2] If the bronzes of Sanxingdui cannot be analyzed and elaborated from an aesthetic point of view, and the relevant connections between ancient Shu and its surrounding areas excavated from the aesthetic level cannot be compared, from which a good foundation is laid, then it is predictable that not only is it difficult to advance in aesthetic education, but it is not even conducive to the later exploration of the civilization of ancient Shu.

When studying historical subjects, horizontal comparison of the development of different types of objects at the same point in time, or vertical study of a certain development phenomenon at different points in time, is a clearer way to be able to connect scattered historical materials through comparison. Therefore, this paper will take the bronzes excavated from Guanghan Sanxingdui as an example, list the most important bronze types and several common ornaments among them, and discuss the bird-related ornaments as an example, analyze them at the aesthetic level, and deduce the aesthetic concepts of the ancient Shu ancestors by looking at the small. Only in this way can we correctly deduce the spiritual world of the ancient Shu ancestors and their perception of nature, heaven and earth, and everything else, which will be beneficial for future scientific research and provide the right guidance for the future combing of Samsung pile-related materials.

2. Literature exploration

Before studying the Sanxingdui motifs, this study will first clarify some concepts related to Sanxingdui. We will start from the most superficial concepts and analyze the data layer by layer in order to finally reach the deeper level of what this study really wants to study. The bronze ornamentation is a visual art that preserves the ritual system, religion, mythology and aesthetic concepts of the ancient Shu people, and contains a wealth of information that we need to explore.

2.1. *Ancient Kingdom of Shu*

- (1) The basic situation of the ancient state of Shu

First of all, a definition of the concept of “ancient Shu” is needed. The term “ancient Shu” in this study refers only to the Sanxingdui and the civilization behind it. The Huayang Guozhi - Shu Zhi" has written: ‘its land east of Ba, south of Yue, north and Qin, west of the Amu E, mountain.’ [3] The style of the Sanxingdui artifacts is very different from those in the Middle Kingdom culture, proving that this was once an independent civilization different from that of the Middle Kingdom: the ancient Shu civilization was a large and mature country with cities, sophisticated bronze casting methods, large altars, a perfect ritual sacrifice system, unique architecture, casting aesthetic style, and frequent exchanges with neighboring countries, never closed and primitive.

(2) Research on the ancient Shu Kingdom in the academic community

At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was popular in Chinese historiography to question the ancient trend. Under the influence of this trend, scholars at the time rightly questioned the existence of the legendary ancient state of Shu. With a series of major archaeological discoveries at Sanxingdui, the true nature of the ancient Shu Kingdom was uncovered little by little from the thick layers of dusty earth that had been sealed for thousands of years. In fact, for the denial of the historical community, in the 1950s, Mr. Meng Wen Tong has pointed out that: “Shu” called the Jamsong, Park, fish eider, Pu PI, Kai Ming is both the name of the dynasty, but also the name of the tribe. [4]

In the 1940s, Mr. Gu Jie Gang also pointed out that “the culture of ancient Shu actually developed independently, and its integration with the culture of the Central Plains was since the Warring States.” [5] It is clear that the stylistic style of the ancient Shu Kingdom was inherited from the Yin and Shang dynasties, and then developed a stylistic style that was uniquely its own. In addition to this, there is the similarly styled Jinsha site. Many scholars believe that the relationship between the Sanxingdui site and the Jinsha site should be one of inheritance and development, and scholars speculate that it is possible that the ancient Shu ancestors migrated from the Sanxingdui site to the Jinsha site and developed and settled here. [6]

(3) Social production in ancient Shu

The early emergence of agriculture in Shu was recorded in the “Records of the King of Shu” as “the fish eider field in Yushan”. The stone production tools excavated from Sanxingdui Pit 1 also corroborate this record, with a total of 40 pieces of axes, shovels, jins and chisels unearthed. After categorizing and analyzing them, the archaeologists determined that they were all exquisitely ground stone tools. [7] It can be assumed that the ancient Shu ancestors had already specialized in production tools and had combined tools, which shows the richness of agricultural products and prosperity of agricultural production at that time.

The manufacture and use of metal objects is an important yardstick reflecting the degree of productivity progress of ancient society. [8] Among the many artifacts excavated from the Sanxingdui site, gold products and large bronze groups are the most imposing and spectacular. In addition to bronze and gold artifacts, artifacts such as jade and pottery were also excavated from the two pits. [9] These artifacts, which are very different in style from other bronzes of the same period that have been excavated in China, also reflect the high level of casting of the ancient Shu people.

2.2. History of the excavation of Sanxingdui

The Sanxingdui site is located in the city of Guanghan in the northern part of the Chengdu Plain in Sichuan Province, which is located in the core area of the hinterland of Chengdu, known as the Kingdom of Heaven, and has been known as “the gateway to Yizhou, the main thoroughfare of Shu Province, and the paved road to Beijing” since ancient times, and is the northern gate of Chengdu. [10] Sanxingdui originally refers to the ancient city of three undulating connected “yellow mounds”, its shape is like three stars in the sky, and its north of the Moon Bay shaped like a crescent moon across the north of the Mamu River, so the name “three stars with the moon”.

In 1929, while panning a ditch, farmer Yan Daocheng stumbled upon a pit in which a large number of jade artifacts were buried. However, its real large-scale continuous excavation came after the 1980s and 1990s.

2.3. The current status of research on the site of Sanxingdui in the academic community

At present, many archaeologists have arranged the artifacts excavated into different categories and have formed a better system of cultural relics from the site of Sanxingdui. Through the study of the artifacts, we have basically clarified the age, location, kinship, migration trajectory, nature of civilization, political and military situation, etc., and can recover the picture of life of the ancient Shu civilization to which the Sanxingdui site belongs. [11] However, the research on the site of Sanxingdui is still at the surface stage. Although some scholars have examined the artistic value of the bronze art of Sanxingdui from the aesthetic aspect, starting from the excavated artifacts of Sanxingdui. However, compared with their research in archaeology, such research is still not deep and extensive enough. There is still much room for us to explore the aesthetic and cultural research of Sanxingdui.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a combination of research methods in three main ways: literature analysis research, content analysis research, and inductive research. Based on the judgment of the research object, the collection and analysis of the literature will be the first step. After the literature analysis, we will start with the content of the literature, analyze and organize the needed contents. Finally, the induction of the needed contents is organized into a table and aesthetic analysis is performed.

3.1. Research Methodology

(1) Literature analysis study

The literature analysis method for this study will mainly refer to the following.

1. Ancient Shu civilization: a cluster of sites including more than thirty ancient cities of Sanxingdui, with the Sanxingdui site in Guanghan as the main site.

2. The site of Sanxingdui: Explore the bronze artifacts excavated there, analyze the ornamental features, and summarize their aesthetic characteristics with the bird pattern as an example.

3. Complete collection of bronzes: More than twenty pieces of bronzes from the Xia Dynasty and more than one hundred and thirty pieces of bronzes from the early and middle Shang Dynasty have been selected for reference and comparative analysis.

(2) Pictorial studies

What is iconography? Historically, iconography is a method of art history used by artists to explain the meaning of plastic art and other kinds of plastic activities with

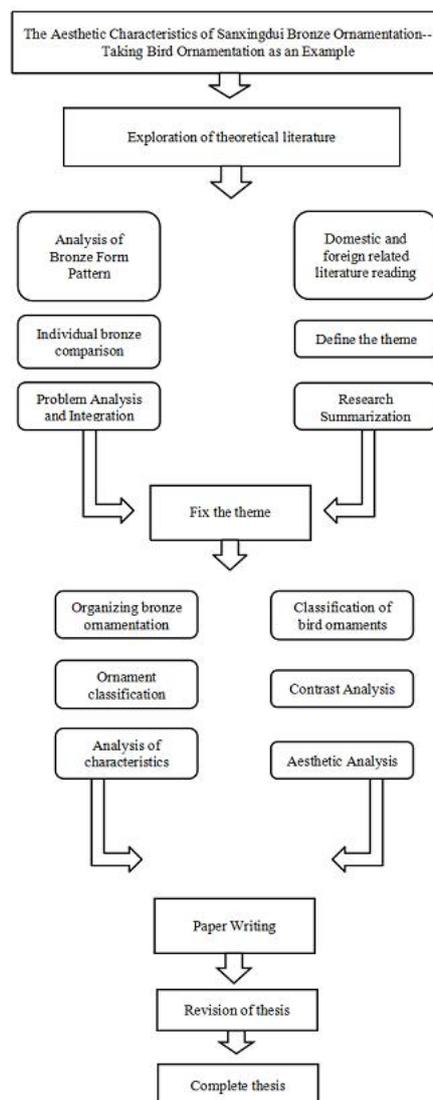
the goal of understanding the content of images, explaining their meaning [12] and illustrating the meaning that the author wanted to convey through the work. The concern of this paper is to explore the aesthetic characteristics of the bird decoration of the bronze vessels from the Sanxingdui site.

In his book, Panofsky divides the study of iconography into three levels, namely, the pre-iconographic description stage, the iconographic analysis stage, and the iconographic interpretation stage. Within these three levels there is a sequential correlation and an emotional progression. In the first level, the bronze bird ornaments at Sanxingdui are described in detail in terms of their original natural meaning; in the second level, their meaning is analyzed, and the formal laws and the context associated with them are analyzed; in the last level, the bird ornaments themselves are explored in depth, and the aesthetic features of them are considered, and the spiritual picture of the ancient Shu people is explored.

(3) Inductive research

This study will list the Sanxingdui bronze ornaments, sort them into categories, and roughly summarize their characteristics. The organization chart is below.

3.2. Steps and process of the study



3.3. Data collection and organization

The details of the classification of Sanxingdui bronze ornaments are organized in the following table.

Table 1. Sanxingdui ornamentation finishing.

Ornamentation	Minor Categories	Morphological appearance	Artifacts	Similar ornaments
geometric pattern	cloud and thunder pattern	Circular arc Form curl or square fold gyration Line . The circular arcs are called cloud patterns, and the square folds are called thunder patterns.	The cloud and thunder pattern used on the surface is mainly distributed on the surface of human statues, bronze gods and trees round pedestals, etc.. In objects such as zun and earthenware, they are often used as a base or to form other ornaments. The overall look is not as detailed and neat as that of the Central Plains. Most of the clouds and thunder patterns on Sanxingdui non-vessels are the main patterns, and rarely do auxiliary patterns. They are also used as independent decorations, protruding from the decorated objects.	
	Staple pattern	Protruding papillae, arranged in a single row or square pattern.	It is generally used as a decorative motif, sometimes appearing with the cloud and thunder motif in the zun; in the earthenware, it also serves as the eyes of the taotie motif.	
	swirl pattern	Also called fire pattern. Round, with a rotating arc along the inner rim and a small circle in the middle, resembling a water wave bulge. There are also simple swirling ones.	Sometimes it appears together with the cloud and thunder pattern to serve as a decorative foil.	
	Convex string pattern	Lines highlighting the surface of the object, usually one to three, sometimes alone, sometimes as a backdrop to other decorations.	Generally do decorative ornaments, often in the face, shoulders, neck, feet and other outline set off, but also often in the animal face pattern.	Concave string pattern
	Diamond	A lattice-like	The general usage is	

	pattern	rhombic pattern made up of diagonally crossed sunbursts, with smaller rhombic lattices or cloud thunder patterns overlaid within the rhombic grid.	consistent with the use of the rhombus pattern in the Yin and Zhou, but it is also used as an eye pattern in the Sanxingdui artifacts, see below.	
	Scale pattern	It consists of curves with the same curvature arranged closely in a set order and shaped like fish scales.	Scale patterns are more common on animal statues, decorating the horns and tails of animals. It is also found on the base of the sacred tree of Sanxingdui, on standing birds and other bird-shaped ornaments. The relief standing bird or ram's head on the shoulders of zun, earthenware jars, etc., the horns of the main pattern of animal faces on the abdomen, and the lid buttons of copper round earthenware jars are decorated with scale-like patterns.	
Animal print	Kui Lung Tattoo	On bronze, any dragon like figure showing one foot is called kui or kui dragon, and some kui patterns have evolved into geometric decoration.	Generally do the main decoration, occupy the main position. It is mostly found in objects together with animal heads, such as bull heads, sheep heads or with animal face patterns.	Dragon pattern
	Tiger print	There are also tiger prints that look like cannibals.	Similar to the Taotie pattern and the animal face pattern.	Dragon pattern, totem
	Taotie pattern	Taotie is a beast formed by the ancient people by combining the characteristics of various beasts in nature and their own imagination, in which the face of the beast is huge and exaggerated, and is highly decorative, and is often used as the main ornament on objects.	It is mainly decorated with the head of a beast, which is found on artifacts and is also used as a mask in Sanxingdui, with a round piercing at the tip of the eyebrow and at each corner of the mouth, probably for stringing when worn for dancing or rituals.	Beast face pattern

Unique to the Samsung Pile	Sunburst	The sun motifs in Sanxingdui bronzes can be divided into two branches. The first is a mansard-shaped sun pattern, the center of the pattern with a circle to represent the sun, surrounded by mansard radiation to all directions. The second is the vortex sun pattern, with a circle in the center and a number of curves of the same shape distributed equidistantly around the circle.	The awned sun motif appears at the base of the temple roof and on the neck of the divine beast in the altar, while the swirling sun motif appears on the back of the standing man on the altar and on his pants, etc. In addition, both sun motifs appear on circular bronze pendants.	Lianju pattern
	Eye lines	The overall shape is elongated and resembles the letter s, with feather-shaped ornaments at the corners of the eyes, representing the combination of eyes and feathers. The eye-shaped device consists of rounded eyes, triangular corners of the left and right eyes, and diamond-shaped orbits.	A variation of the rhombus motif, but in the Sanxingdui wares, the eye motif would not only appear in various animal motifs, but also in the beast-shaped decoration. There are also separate eye-shaped wares, which are unique to Sanxingdui.	Diamond pattern
	Manifold feather pattern	The design consists of a bird's head, wing feathers, and tail feathers, with an elongated neck, lateral spread of the wing feathers, and tail feathers parallel to the wing feathers, forming an inverted "F" or the Chinese character for "fly".	Because it is a deformation of the bird pattern, it is commonly found on bird-shaped objects. Bronze sacred trees, even human figures and masks are also seen.	Bird print
	Simplification of	The planar bronze beast face statue is	Among the bronze artifacts at the Sanxingdui	Beast face pattern, Taotie

	animal face pattern	the product of the abstract deformation of the facial features of man and beast. Its face is fierce, with rounded eyes, sharp teeth in a wide mouth, sharp and drooping ears, and a pair of curved horns with wide and long upward curl.	site, animal masks make up an important part of the collection, and such masks are also usually a combination of gods and humans, gods and birds, or gods and animals.	pattern, Tiger face pattern
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4. Research Analysis

According to Panofsky, the iconographic approach allows the viewer to return to the artist's creative journey and thus understand the process of meaning-making in an image. In other words, this way of understanding allows the viewer to become the author so that he or she can experience the creation of the artwork again, i.e., "reconstruction of meaning". [13] In this study, the aesthetic characteristics of the Sanxingdui bird decoration will be discussed in detail in three stages: the pre-pictorial description stage, the pictorial analysis stage, and the pictorial interpretation stage.

4.1. Analysis of bird motifs

(1) The original characteristics of the bird decoration

Bird decoration is one of the common motifs on the bronze wares of Sanxingdui. For example, the jade jade jade is carved with bird-shaped translucent carving, and the gold staff is also decorated with bird ornaments. Among the bronze wares, bird decoration is mainly found on the lower part of the belly of round earthenware jars, the shoulders of square earthenware jars, and the deformed bird pattern on the back of human body-shaped bronze plaques.

Most of the animal ornaments of Sanxingdui bronze ware have been processed artistically, and few of them are completely realistic. Some of the bird ornaments have wings that show the majesty of the wings, and some have wings that stand still and are elegant and dignified. But there are also most of the bird-related ornaments are abstracted and geometric processing. Geometric bird ornaments are often rounded lines, rigid and flexible, elegant and dynamic. In the processing of ornamentation, the ancient Shu artisans made the ornamentation more simple by simplifying it and highlighting the main features of the ornamentation to form an ancient and simple temperament.

(2) Aesthetic characteristics of bird decoration

a. Original style closely connected with faith

"The Sanxingdui culture presents the change of religious forms, objects of worship, and major religious concepts, and religious emotions or experiences are closely connected with the aesthetic connotation of Sanxingdui, whose religiously meaningful ornamental symbols are even more homogeneous with the origin of beauty, and are characteristic manifestations of the ancient relic symbols of mythological cosmology." [14] The bronze art of Sanxingdui is a belief in a primitive religion with

strong regional characteristics, full of primitive witchcraft worship. The ornamental symbols on the bronze artifacts are also a realisation of the world of faith in the cultural spirit of the ancient Shu ancestors.

b. Strange and exaggerated style

The exaggerated style exists in all shapes related to Sanxingdui. The ancient Shu ancestors used exaggeration in capturing the abstract forms of Sanxingdui artifact patterns to produce highly heterogeneous forms of abstract patterns. The aesthetic change process of the Sanxingdui motif symbols, which refine the shape characteristics of the object after observation, is an exaggerated deformation based on figurative depiction.

c. Abstraction and geometric simplicity aesthetics

In the bronze pattern of Sanxingdui, we can see the variation process from figurative patterns to abstract geometric shapes. The simplified shape of the divergent feather pattern, which evolved from the bird pattern, resembles the letter "F", and the use of lines to exaggerate the pattern of the bird with wings ready to fly, thick and thin lines, straight lines and curves, graphically demonstrates the charm of exaggerated variation in bronze pattern modelling. The sun motifs of Sanxingdui are also expressed by symmetrical geometric curved strips, and the emitting and rotating round sun motifs still have a strong geometric and abstract style.

4.2. Aesthetic analysis of the spiritual world of the ancient Shu ancestors

The reason why there are so many bird-related decorations in Sanxingdui bronzes is probably due to the totemic beliefs of the ancient Shu ancestors, namely "bird". This bird worship, through the artistic creation of the ancestors of ancient Shu, has led to the creation of a bronze art unique to ancient Shu with the bronze technology inherited from Yin and Shang. The social, political, religious and ideological information contained in the bronze patterns is a projection of the spiritual world in reality.

As animals closely related to production, birds were considered as gods and ancestors, worshipped as totems of the nation, and became specific symbols. The many ornamental symbols in Sanxingdui bronze modeling originate from the deconstruction of the religious and cultural psychology and thinking side of the deification of the ancient Shu ancestors, which contains the factors of totem worship, ancestor worship and myth worship. The ancient Shu people's reliance on and worship of gods continued from the mask modeling features of longitudinal eyes, broad ears, wide eyebrows, and curved lips to the ornamentation of animal-faced, thunder, bird, and sun patterns.

As a bridge in the interaction between humans and gods, birds were the most important part of ancient Shu beliefs. Sun worship and tree worship, which extend from bird worship, are also reflected in the Samsung Pile bronzes. The bronze sacred tree communicates heaven and earth, and on it stands the golden bird; some of the bronze human figures have bird features; the bronze vessels in the shape of the sun wheel are also often accompanied by bird motifs or bird shapes. When these birds stand on the shoulders of bronze sacred trees, altars, bronze zun, earthenware, combined with cloud and thunder patterns, vortex patterns, and some combined with people, these and in the form of flat ornaments decorate the surface of jade jangles, gold scepters, these symbols of ritual and power, and even appear some human-

headed bird body, bird claws and human body and other hybrid, indicating that it is no longer as a pure ornament or embellishment. It was given a deeper meaning, reflecting the core of the ancient Shu ancestors' belief in the "unity of human and gods" and the "representation of the image".

5. Conclusions

This chapter will present a few conclusions to summarize the above research in addition to what has been described in the previous section. The bronze ornamentation preserves the ritual system, religion, mythological spirit and aesthetic concepts of the ancient Shu ancestors in the form of visual art, and its primitive, strange and magnificent quality shows us the spiritual world of the ancient Shu ancestors. And the aesthetic features of it can be extended to other related discussions, providing some useful opinions and suggestions to the later.

5.1. Study results

This study uses the pictorial research method to discuss in detail the aesthetic characteristics of the Sanxingdui bird ornament in three stages: the pre-pictorial description stage, the pictorial analysis stage, and the pictorial interpretation stage.

The Sanxingdui bronze ornamentation has a primitive style closely related to faith, a primitive religious belief and a primitive witchcraft cult with regional characteristics, in which the ornamental symbols reflect the aesthetic characteristics of the spiritual world of the ancient Shu ancestors. The style of Sanxingdui bronze ornamentation is bizarre and exaggerated, and its shape characteristics are refined through the observation of outside animals and then simplified and symbolized. Therefore, the Sanxingdui ornamentation also has the aesthetic characteristics of abstraction and geometric simplicity. It contains the combination of thick and thin lines, straight lines and curves, with a strong geometric and abstract style.

In the view of the ancient Shu ancestors, birds were the most important part of the ancient Shu beliefs as a bridge between humans and gods. More than a purely decorative or embellished work, bird decoration was given a deeper meaning, reflecting the core of ancient Shu ancestors' belief in the "unity of man and god" and "representation by images".

5.2. Comments and suggestions for follow-up studies

This study analyzes and elaborates the aesthetic characteristics of the bronze decoration of Sanxingdui from an aesthetic point of view, but the research on Sanxingdui is still not so clear and discernible. Therefore, in future studies, it is possible to compare horizontally the development of different types of objects at the same point in time, or to study vertically a certain development phenomenon at different points in time to connect the scattered historical records and excavated artifacts.

The present study has deduced the spiritual world of the ancient Shu ancestors and their perception of nature, heaven and earth, and summarized the core beliefs of the ancient Shu ancestors and their concept of "the unity of man and god", which will be useful for future scientific research and provide a correct guide for the future sorting of the materials related to the Sanxingdui.

The subsequent direction of development still requires attention to the excavation of the Sanxingdui site, whose artifacts can provide the most direct first-hand information for the study of the history of Sanxingdui and the ancient Shu Kingdom. By summarizing the information, it is possible to draw a vague picture of the life of the ancestors of the ancient Shu Kingdom, and even the scenes and processes of their rituals. Subsequent research is still needed from this aspect.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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