

MA CHENGYUAN 馬承源 (1927–2004)

Ma Chengyuan, Director Emeritus of the Shanghai Museum and renowned scholar of ancient Chinese bronze vessels, died at his home on 25 September 2004; he was seventy-seven.¹ Mr. Ma was one of the mainland Chinese scholars best known in the Western scholarly and artistic communities, having first been introduced to them when he headed the Chinese committee responsible for the Great Bronze Age of China exhibition that opened at the Metropolitan Museum of New York in 1980.² His first trip to the West was to attend the opening of that exhibition and to participate in associated conferences in both New York and Berkeley. From that time on, he was unwavering in his commitment to international scholarly and cultural cooperation. Upon becoming Director of the Shanghai Museum in 1985, he quickly moved to elevate the museum's galleries and operations to international standards, and began also to plan his greatest accomplishment: the construction of a new museum building. Opened in 1996 on a prime spot in the center of the city, People's Square, the new Shanghai Museum was immediately acclaimed throughout China and the world as the icon for a new Shanghai, and Ma Chengyuan was universally acknowledged for his role in its building. In that same year, he was awarded the John D. Rockefeller 3rd Award by the Asian Cultural Council of New York; two years later (1998), he was awarded the French Légion d'Honneur by President Jacques Chirac of France. By the time of his death, he was very much both a man of Shanghai and of the world—and had done as much as anyone to integrate the two.

Ma Chengyuan was born on 3 November 1927 in Zhenhai 鎮海, Zhejiang, at the mouth of Hangzhou Bay just across from Shanghai. Having moved to Shanghai at a young age, he studied history there at Daxia daxue 大夏大學. His university education was briefly interrupted when he was forced to flee the city to escape arrest for his membership in the

1. For details regarding Ma Chengyuan's life and especially his early career, I am much indebted to Jay Xu, who shared with me the draft of an obituary he has written for *Artibus Asiae*, to which the reader is directed for further information.

2. Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.) (Wen Fong ed.), *The Great Bronze Age of China: Treasures from the Bronze Age of China: An Exhibition from the People's Republic of China* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Ballantine Books, 1980).

Chinese Communist Party. With the change in regime in 1949, he finished college, having first secured his revolutionary credentials. After a brief stint at the Department of Education, in 1954 he joined the fledgling Shanghai Museum, first becoming deputy chief of the department in charge of storage and acquisitions, and then deputy chief of the curatorial and exhibition department, responsible for Chinese bronzes and epigraphy. He became Director of the museum in 1985, a post that he held until his retirement in 1999, when he was named Director Emeritus.

Although it is as Director of the Shanghai Museum that Ma Chengyuan is best known, his real passion was always ancient Chinese bronze vessels. In the epigraph to his selected essays, *Zhongguo qingtongqi yanjiu* 中國青銅器研究,³ he stated: “The past years have brought all sorts of obstacles but no matter what the circumstances have been, I have never set aside my first love: the quest for every sort of knowledge about bronze vessels.” By a relatively early age, Ma was already acknowledged as an expert on ancient bronzes. He edited the museum’s *Shanghai bowuguan cang qingtongqi* 上海博物館藏青銅器⁴ and, as noted above, headed the Chinese organizing committee for the Great Bronze Age of China exhibition in 1980. With the resumption of academic publication in the 1980s, he was responsible as either author or editor (often without explicit credit) for a series of monographic publications: *Zhongguo gudai qingtongqi* 中國古代青銅器,⁵ an English translation of which was published as *Ancient Chinese Bronzes*;⁶ *Shang Zhou qingtongqi wenshi* 商周青銅器紋飾;⁷ *Shang Zhou qingtongqi mingwen xuan* 商周青銅器銘文選;⁸ *Zhongguo qingtongqi* 中國青銅器;⁹ and *Zhongguo qingtongqi quanji* 中國青銅器全集.¹⁰ He was also the driving force behind the publication of the museum’s own journal: *Shanghai bowuguan guankan* 上海博物館館刊, the name of which was changed to *Shanghai bowuguan jikan* 上海博物館集刊 with volume 2, each issue of which contained at least one article by him on some aspect of ancient bronze vessels. In addition to his work at the Shanghai Museum, he was also called upon by museums around China for his expertise. It was while working outside of Shanghai that he made his two most noteworthy discoveries. In 1975, while cleaning the *He zun* 何尊, a vessel discovered ten years earlier in Baoji 寶鷄, Shaanxi, he discovered the 119-character-long inscription deep within the vessel,

3. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 2002.

4. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin meishu, 1964.

5. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin, 1982.

6. Hong Kong and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

7. Beijing: Wenwu, 1984.

8. 4 vols. Beijing: Wenwu, 1986–90.

9. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 1988.

10. Beijing: Wenwu, 1993–98.

and published the first study of it.¹¹ Shortly thereafter, in studying the *Zeng Hou Yi bianzhong* 曾侯乙編鐘 bell set, discovered in May, 1978 in Suixian 隨縣, Hubei, he demonstrated that each bell in the set had two different striking points that emitted two distinct tones.¹²

However, it was in his capacity as Director of the Shanghai Museum that Ma Chengyuan made his two greatest contributions to the study of early China. In the spring of 1993, alerted to another set of inscribed bells that had come onto the Hong Kong antiques market, he moved heaven and earth to acquire them for the museum, even though some in Hong Kong had dismissed the inscriptions engraved into the bells as forgeries.¹³ Ma's perspicacity was demonstrated when the subsequent excavation of tomb M8 at Tianma 天馬–Qucun 曲村, Shanxi, produced two bells, overlooked by the tomb's robbers, the similarly engraved inscription of which completed that on the fourteen bells bought by Ma in Hong Kong. The inscription on this set of bells commemorates the accomplishments of Jin Hou Su 晉侯蘇, a lord of the state of Jin in the early eighth century B.C.E., and the set is now regarded as a national treasure. The next year Ma followed this with another remarkable purchase on the Hong Kong antiques market: a cache of about 1,300 bamboo strips with texts written in the orthography of the Warring States state of Chu 楚. Again dismissed by many in Hong Kong as forgeries, Ma acquired these strips for the Shanghai Museum, even though he was treading into a realm for which his expertise with bronze vessels and inscriptions was not directly relevant. More than this, he also organized the scholarly effort to decipher them, serving as the general editor for *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書,¹⁴ and editing the important *Kongzi Shi lun* 孔子詩論 himself. Although Ma's role in these two purchases was not uncontroversial, he has been lionized in the national press for having retrieved these national treasures for the motherland.

As a person, Ma Chengyuan embodied many of the contradictory tendencies seen in his career and scholarship: for instance, the parochialism of the man of Shanghai versus the cosmopolitanism of the man of the world, and the antiquarian of his scholarly research versus the futurist of his museum direction. Although he appeared to mediate these contradictions flawlessly, one could not help sense an underlying tension in him. I knew him well for almost twenty-five years, and yet in many ways

11. "He zun mingwen chushi" 何尊銘文初釋, *Wenwu* 1976.1, 64–65, 93.

12. "Shang Zhou qingtong shuangyin zhong" 商周青銅雙音鐘, *Kaogu xuebao* 1981.1, 131–46.

13. "Jin Hou Su bianzhong" 晉侯蘇編鐘, *Shanghai bowuguan jikan* 7 (1996), 1–17.

14. Five volumes have been published to date: Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005.

feel that I hardly knew him at all. I recall vividly the autumn of 1983, when I was the first foreign scholar to be permitted to do research at the museum. Ma had extended a personal invitation to me the year before, while he was staying in Chicago accompanying the Great Bronze Age show. However, my arrival in Shanghai coincided with the onset of what was termed a campaign against "Spiritual Pollution" (*Jingshen wuran* 精神污染); it was clear that my presence was difficult for all concerned, not least of all for Ma. Nevertheless, during my several months at the museum he spent an hour or more every day sitting with me in my office, where I had been sequestered away from other museum personnel, discussing bronzes and other topics with me. On my next trip to Shanghai, in 1990, the political air had cleared and Ma was then Director of the museum; I was welcomed back as an "old friend." In the autumn of 1993, I happened to meet him in Hong Kong on my way to Xi'an, and he urged me to make a detour to Shanghai to see something special. I did so and he proudly took me to the Shanghai Archives where the Jin Hou Su bells were being stored in preparation for the opening of the new museum. That night we drank deeply to his success, and it was clear that he was supremely proud of what he had been able to accomplish and confident that the best was yet to come. But with the completion of the new museum, he became increasingly busy; inquiries after him on subsequent impromptu visits to the museum found him engaged with a group of fund raisers from here or a high level delegation from there. In 2002, I returned to the museum for another long-term research residence. This time my presence was unproblematic. Ma Chengyuan had instituted a regular policy by which foreign scholars were welcomed to the museum and given every courtesy. However, even though he was no longer Director, still my dealings with him were minimal. Only three times in the course of eight months in Shanghai did I ascend to his fifth-floor office, where he still worked every morning. A promised dinner together never materialized in Shanghai. Fortunately, a year later Ma returned for the last time to Chicago, and there I was finally able to host him at dinner. It was a joy to spend that day in the Art Institute of Chicago, and to see the sparkle in his eyes as he examined the bronzes there. Although he had seen them all before, still each one of them was a rare jewel to him. Ma Chengyuan was, like the museum he built, also a Shanghai icon: a man of action and purpose, confident in his knowledge, and proud of his accomplishments. But most of all he was a lover of Chinese culture, and especially its ancient bronze vessels.

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