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A Study of Shang-Dynasty Owl-Shaped Bronzes

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Abstract

At present, a total of 27 owl-shaped bronze vessels from the late Shang Dynasty have been collected both domestically and internationally. They may be divided into two major categories: owl-shaped Zun（尊） and owl-shaped You（卣）. Owl-shaped Zun are mostly three-footed or two-footed standing forms, emphasizing stability and solemn authority; owl-shaped You adopt a back-to-back conjoined structure of paired owls and combine realism with practical function. In terms of decoration, these vessels usually follow the principle of "assigning motifs according to form," combining realistic motifs that reproduce the biological features of the owl with taotie masks, cloud-and-thunder patterns, and other motifs that symbolize divine authority and ritual order. They also make skillful use of the "three-layer relief" technique, producing a complex and highly stratified visual effect. Owl-shaped bronzes are not only outstanding representatives of Shang bronze art but also material carriers of ideas such as reverence for deities and spirits, following the natural order, and vessels embodying ritual.

Key Words

Owl-shaped bronzes, Form and decoration, Foncepts of artifact-making

In early Chinese material culture, shaping vessels on the basis of animal prototypes was one of the methods of ancient artifact-making. Among such forms, pottery and jade objects modeled on owls had already appeared by the Neolithic period: several owl-shaped jade objects have been unearthed from Hongshan cultural sites（紅山文化遺址）[1], and an owl-shaped Ding（鼎） of the Miaodigou type of Yangshao culture（仰韶文化廟底溝遺址）has been discovered in Shanxi[2]. By the late Shang dynasty, a relatively large number of owl-shaped objects appeared among bronze vessels and are particularly noteworthy. On the basis of collecting such objects, this paper undertakes a classificatory study of owl-shaped bronzes and discusses the ideas of artifact-making embodied in them, in the hope of inviting correction from specialists.

1. Discovery and Classification of Owl-Shaped Vessels

Owl-shaped bronzes refer to bronze objects whose overall form is based on the owl. Their solemn and majestic modeling, intricate and refined ornamentation, and profound cultural connotations make them an especially representative component of Yin-Shang bronze art. According to currently available materials, 27 owl-shaped bronzes have been identified. They can be divided chiefly into two categories, owl-shaped Zun and owl-shaped You, as outlined below.

1.1 Overview of the discovery of owl-shaped Zun(尊)

The owl-shaped Zun is an important representative of late-Shang animal-shaped bronze Zun and was chiefly popular in the late Shang period. On the basis of published archaeological data and records of museum collections in China and abroad, 9 Shang bronze owl-shaped Zun can currently be verified; the overwhelming majority were dispersed overseas in earlier years. Chen Mengjia, in his Collection of Records on Yin and Zhou Bronzes Plundered by American Imperialism, included 6 late-Shang owl-shaped Zun, among them the Ya Shou owl Zun[3].

Three owl-shaped bronze Zun from Shang contexts are currently known in China, all unearthed from elite tombs at Yinxu（殷墟） in Anyang. Two were found in the Fu Hao tomb（妇好墓） at Yinxu[4]; their forms are basically consistent, each taking the owl as the principal standing form. Another example was unearthed from Shang Tomb No. 1885 at Xibeigang, Houjiazhuang, Anyang, Henan. Its cover is lost,

but the form and posture of the lower vessel body are close to those of the Fu Hao owl Zun[5].

Six Shang owl-shaped bronze Zun are held in overseas collections, distributed among museums in the United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Four are in the United States, respectively in the Sackler Gallery, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and the Yale University Art Gallery. The Sackler Gallery houses one example, the Ya Shou owl Zun, 16.3 cm high and in a standing posture. The head serves as the cover; the pointed beak turns upward; the vessel body has an open mouth, upright neck, swollen belly, and thick, strong feet; and the drooping tail functions as an auxiliary support. The inscription “Ya Shou” is cast inside the cover and on the outer base[6]. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art houses one example, 24.1 cm in overall height and reportedly unearthed at Anyang, Henan. Its overall form resembles an owl, with round bulging eyes, high feathered horns, and a drooping tail[7]. The Minneapolis Institute of Art also holds one example; the vessel is wholly owl-shaped, and its facial features resemble the image on the back of the Fu Hao owl Zun. It has a pair of ears on the two sides of the head, stands on two feet, and has four sharp claws curved inward[8]. The Yale University Art Gallery holds one example in which the entire head of the owl-shaped Zun can be removed as a lid; the top of the head has cat-ear-like projections, the eyes are large, round, and protruding, a pair of ears grows beside the eyes, the body stands upright on the ground, and the tips of the feet curl upward[9] In addition, the Sen-oku Museum in Tokyo and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London each house one example. Their forms are similar to the Yale example, with the slight difference that the owl Zun in the Victoria and Albert Museum maintains its balance solely on two feet.

1.2 Overview of the discovery of owl-shaped You（卣）

Among Shang bronze You in bird and animal forms, owl-shaped You constitute the most numerous category. A synthesis of existing published collection records and archaeological data indicates that 18 late-Shang bronze owl-shaped You, either transmitted or excavated, are known in China and abroad.

Fifteen Shang owl-shaped bronze You are currently known in China. They are held in multiple locations, and their findspots cover Henan, Shanxi, Hunan, Shandong, Hubei, and other core areas of Shang culture. In terms of form, the conjoined structure of two owls standing back to back is the dominant type.

Henan has yielded the largest number of owl-shaped You. In 1980, two Shang bronze owl-shaped You with different decorative styles were unearthed from the Tianhu cemetery（天湖墓地） in Luoshan County, Xinyang, Henan. Among them, the Houli Village(後李村) owl You is especially representative: four vertical flanges form two sets of owl heads, and animal heads decorate both ends of the handle10. In the same year, one owl You was excavated from Dasi Kong（大司空）M539 at Anyang; it has large, raised round eyes, small ears on the lid, and a beak-like element at the end of the wings that turns downward and inward, resembling a bird tail11. In 1999, one bronze owl You was excavated from Miaopu North（苗圃北地） M229. The vessel is formed by two back-to-back owls conjoined into one; it has a cover whose rounded surface forms the owl heads, while the vessel body forms the owl bodies. Four hoof-shaped feet correspond to the two feet of each owl. On the upper belly, between the two owls, are symmetrical semi-ring ears through which a twisted-cord handle passes12. In 1999, one bronze “Yang” owl You was excavated from Angang M788 in Anyang, Henan. Another Shang bronze owl You was unearthed from the Xiaohu Village cemetery（小胡村墓地） in Xingyang, Henan. The entire vessel is ingeniously composed of two owl forms standing back to back; the two ends of the cover constitute the birds’ heads, with upturned beaks and protruding round eyes. Each of the two bulging ends of the vessel body is decorated with

a pair of wings, resembling an owl's abdomen. In the middle of the upper belly are two symmetrical beast-head-shaped pierced lugs, and the four feet take the form of thick bird claws13.

Finds from other regions are comparatively scattered. One owl You was unearthed at Erlangpo（二郎坡）, Lvliang, Shanxi; it is simply decorated, with the bird head serving as the cover, the bird body forming the vessel, a hollow belly cavity, and no spout14. One owl You from Yingcheng（應城）, Hubei is oval in shape, with a cover and handle and four short hoof-like feet at the base. Its form consists of two owl bodies joined back to back and facing opposite directions. The two beaks, four eyes, and four feathered tufts appear on the cover; the knob is mushroom-shaped, and the four wings are placed on the body of the You. The vessel is finely cast, solemn in posture, and strongly three-dimensional15. Three examples have been unearthed in Hunan. One, excavated in 1986 from Yuelong Village, Jintian Township, Shuangfeng County, Loudi（婁底市雙峰縣金田鄉月龍村）, has a cord-shaped handle and a melon-ribbed lid knob; the owl beak is thick and upturned, the wing tips curve inward, and the overall body is relatively flattened16. The Hunan Museum also holds two Shang bronze owl You. The Shanghai Museum now houses three Shang bronze owl-shaped You17, respectively known as the Owl You, Ge Owl You（戈鴞卣）, and Xi Owl You（徙鴞卣）. One Shang bronze owl-shaped You was unearthed at the Daxinzhuang（大辛莊） site in Jinan. It presents two owls standing back to back; the cover forms the owl heads, with pointed beaks and round eyes, while the vessel body forms the owl bodies and the claws serve as four feet. The cover and vessel body are decorated respectively with owl ears and paired wings. The overall form is rather short and plump18.

Three Shang owl-shaped bronze You are currently known overseas, held in museums in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan. The Fitzwilliam Museum at the University of Cambridge holds one bronze You whose handle is lost. Its cover has a clearly heart-shaped face plate, round protruding eyes, recessed eye sockets, anthropomorphic ears, horns on the top of the head, a downward-curving and outward-projecting pointed beak, wing tips that turn inward like a beak and resemble a bird tail, and four claw-shaped rather than hoof-shaped feet. A single-character inscription is present inside the vessel19. The Freer Gallery of Art in the United States houses one owl You with round, bulging owl eyes, small ears on the lid, and four vertical flanges on both the cover and body, which respectively form the two owl heads and separate the two pairs of wings on the vessel body20. The Sen-oku Museum in Kyoto, Japan holds one Shang bronze owl You whose form resembles the Shang bronze owl You in the Shanghai Museum collection.

Taken together, observation of the 18 owl You in Chinese and overseas collections shows that these objects are concentrated in the Anyang Yinxu area and surrounding Shang cultural sites and are now distributed among major museums in China and abroad. Although their findspots and collecting institutions differ, owl You display clear formal commonalities: most employ a conjoined structure of two owls standing back to back, with rounded, swollen bodies and short, thick feet.

2. Formal and Decorative Features of Owl-Shaped Vessels

The formal and decorative features of Shang owl-shaped bronzes developed around the dual cores of realism and practical utility, achieving a high degree of integration among function, art, and belief. Its form and decoration are not a fixed single style, but gradually mature over time. The design details are highly realistic, while cleverly integrating practical functions and innovative concepts to form a mature paradigm: the appearance presents a sense of reality, and the interior is both practical.

2.1 Formal features

Although both Zun and You take the owl as their outward form, they differ in specific modeling

features. The following is an analysis of these two categories..

2.1.1 Formal features of owl-shaped Zun

The evolution of owl-shaped artifacts in the Shang Dynasty can be divided into two stages. In the early Shang, owl images on bronzes mostly appeared as planar motifs. By the late Shang Dynasty, the artistic level of owl-shaped bronzes reached its peak, and owl elements began to transform into fully three-dimensional owl forms, with a greatly enhanced degree of realism. In plastic art, the owl-shaped bronze artifacts of the Shang Dynasty have always balanced the two cores of realism and practicality: on the one hand, they take the natural form of the owl as the basis of creation, which not only reproduces the original biological characteristics of the bird, but also artistically exaggerates the key parts; on the other hand, they are not limited to simple morphological imitation, but cleverly integrate practical functions such as wine storage and sacrifice into the design, thus achieving the deep integration of form and function.

In terms of realistic performance, the owl-shaped bronze statue in the late Shang Dynasty accurately refined the core biological characteristics of the owl, and often integrated the unique forms such as hook-shaped beak, round eyes, erect ear feathers, and wide wings into the shape of artifacts. For example, the two owl Zun from Yinxu M5 (Fig.1) are similar in form: both have wide-open round eyes, erect small ears, and a sharply hooked beak. Their head-raised, chest-forward posture, together with a full and slightly protruding chest and thick, sturdy claws, vividly reproduces the natural appearance of the owl while endowing the vessel with a majestic, vigorous, and lifelike artistic character.



Figure 1. Realistically modeled bronze owl-shaped Zun (A) Collection of the National Museum of China; (B) Collection of the Henan Museum

At the level of practical function, artisans did not confine themselves to pure naturalistic realism; rather, they exaggerated and optimized details in accordance with the use of ritual vessels, allowing the overall form to serve practical needs. For example, the legs of the Fu Hao owl Zun are thick and strong, with firm, powerful lines and broad, heavy feet. They do not resemble the thin, bony claws of birds in nature, but rather the iron hooves of ancient warhorses, conveying a powerful state[21]. This design both accords with the owl's biological habits and, through exaggerated proportions, reinforces the vessel's stability and solemnity.

In addition, on the basis of the forms of extant objects, Shang owl-shaped Zun may be divided into two types: two-footed owl Zun, in which the owl's two feet serve as the vessel's support points, and three-footed owl Zun, in which the drooping tail joins the two feet to form a three-point support. Most known examples are three-footed owl Zun, including the two Fu Hao owl Zun from the Fu Hao tomb at Yinxu, Anyang (Fig.1), the Houjiazhuang owl Zun, the Sackler Gallery owl Zun (Fig.2,A), the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art owl Zun, the Minneapolis Institute of Art owl Zun (Fig.2,B), the Yale University Art Gallery owl Zun (Fig. 2,C), and the Sen-oku Museum owl Zun in Japan. In three-footed examples, the tail is usually broadened and lowered, forming a three-point support structure together with the two feet. Even when filled with wine, the center of gravity can remain stable, meeting the ritual requirement that the vessel not topple when placed for sacrifice. The Fu Hao owl Zun is a typical example: its two strong feet and drooping broad tail touch the ground together to form three stable support points, while also serving as feet that support the weight and balance of the entire Zun. A two-footed owl Zun relies solely on the owl's two feet to bear the vessel's full weight; the tail hangs naturally but does not touch the ground and provides no auxiliary support. Only one such example is currently known, in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Fig. 3).



Figure 2. Three-footed owl-shaped Zun in overseas collections (A) Collection of the Sackler Gallery, United States; (B) Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, United States; (C) Collection of the Yale University Art Gallery, United States.



Figure 3. Two-footed owl-shaped Zun (Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum)

In sum, late-Shang owl-shaped bronze Zun combine realistic animal imagery with practical vessel function, making them exemplary works in which functionality and artistry are highly unified within late-Shang bronze art. While retaining a realistic appearance, these vessels are maximally adapted to the practical demands of sacrificial contexts, achieving the integration of artistic expression and utilitarian function.

2.1.2 Formal features of owl-shaped You

Among the various owl-shaped bronzes unearthed from Shang contexts, bronze owl You not only rank first in quantity but are also the most representative objects for demonstrating the craftsmanship and cultural connotations of Shang owl-shaped vessels.

Compared with ordinary Shang bronze You, the most prominent feature of owl-shaped bronze You is the realistic style that permeates the entire form. Conventional Shang bronze You generally take oval or square bodies as their main forms and have regular vessel shapes. In order to convey the owl's biological characteristics accurately, however, Shang bronze owl You broke with the traditional formal paradigm of the bronze You and introduced innovative transformations. Rong Geng, in General Study of Shang and Zhou Ritual Bronzes（《商周彝器通考》）, proposed that "owl You generally consist of two owls joined together" as their core formal feature; that is, the vessel as a whole adopts the form of two owls standing back to back and embracing, joined into one, with two symmetrical heads and two bodies leaning against each other. Shang bronze owl You usually use the owl head as the cover, with eyebrows, eyes, hooked beak, upright ears, and other details rendered vividly to reproduce the owl's expression. At the same time, the ring foot is transformed into bird feet, resulting in a four-footed stance. The owl You from Shilou Erlangpo (Fig.4,A), Yingcheng (Fig.4,B), Luoshan (Fig.4,C), and Loudi (Fig.4,E), among others, all use the head as the cover and exaggerate the four feet of the owl. Their thick feet form four load-bearing points that support the body, extending realism throughout the vessel as a whole.



A B C D E

Figure 4. Realistically modeled bronze owl-shaped You (A) Shanxi Museum; (B) Xiaogan Museum; (C) Henan Museum; (D) Henan Museum; (E) Loudi Museum

In terms of practical function, the abdominal design of late-Shang bronze owl You is particularly ingenious, balancing the formal beauty and practical requirements. The slightly drooping and naturally bulging abdomen of the owl You closely matches the natural outline of an owl with its wings folded. This not only reduces the stiffness that may be generated by the highly concrete form, making the overall line of the container smoother and more relaxed, but also effectively increases the internal volume. In other words, compared with ordinary You, the owl You has a larger abdominal capacity, which can better meet the need to hold a large amount of wine in business sacrifice ceremonies. This meets the core functional requirements of the ritual container under the background of sacrifice, and further confirms the design concept of the integration of form and function in Shang owl You.

2.2 Decorative features

The coexistence of realism and ritual order is a defining decorative feature of Shang owl-shaped bronzes. Their motifs may be divided into two broad categories. The first consists of “realistic motifs,” namely motifs that directly reproduce parts of the owl’s body; the second consists of “ritual motifs,” namely the common motifs on Shang bronze ritual vessels that symbolize divine authority and ritual order. The owl-shaped bronze artifacts of the late Shang Dynasty achieved a balance between natural realism and ritual sensibility: they did not violate the biological characteristics of owls, but also strengthened the attributes of artifacts as ceremonial vessels through layered patterns. Each owl-shaped bronze artifact is a bronze treasure that integrates artistic value, practical function and cultural connotation, highlighting the high level of bronze craftsmanship in the Shang Dynasty.

2.2.1 Decorative features of owl-shaped Zun

Owl-shaped Zun were chiefly popular in the late Shang dynasty. Its decorative pattern always follows the core principle of "decoration according to the shape". According to the morphological characteristics of different parts of the artifacts, the craftsmen carefully select the corresponding patterns and casting techniques to achieve the perfect integration of the instrument model and decorative aesthetics. This fully shows the precise control of bronze materials and casting technology by craftsmen in the Shang Dynasty, and also reveals the high level of bronze technology at that time.

The Fu Hao owl Zun is densely covered with patterns over the entire surface. Its ornamentation is complex and varied, with clear changes in layering, and every detail is executed with extreme refinement. The decoration strictly follows the late-Shang “three-layer relief” casting technique: the main motif is first applied over a ground pattern, and secondary motifs are then incised on the surface of the main motif. Through the superimposition of three layers of ornament, the vessel achieves a richly stratified and strongly three-dimensional decorative effect, avoiding the monotony of a single motif. Taking the wing-feather ornament as an example, artisans artistically simplified the owl’s natural wing feathers into fine feather patterns. Each feather is carefully outlined with delicate incised lines; the texture is clearly legible and perfectly reproduces the fluffy quality of owl plumage. Along the edges of the feather motifs, cloud-and-thunder patterns are deftly added, creating a decorative hierarchy with clear primary and secondary elements. Cloud-and-thunder motifs first appeared in the late Neolithic period and occurred in large numbers on bronzes by the Shang and Zhou periods, often functioning as ground patterns or auxiliary motifs that set off the main motif. This decorative approach both conforms strictly to the Shang “three-layer relief” technical norm and accurately reproduces the texture of owl feathers, thereby enhancing the vessel’s realism.

2.2.2 Decorative features of owl-shaped You

The ornamental system of Shang owl-shaped bronze You is clear and orderly. It may be divided into two major types: vessels whose bodies have ground patterns and vessels whose bodies have almost no ground patterns.

Bronze owl You with ground patterns on the body include the owl You from Dasi Kong M539 (Fig.5,A), the Houli Village owl You from the Tianhu cemetery (Fig.4,D), and the owl You in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Fig.5,B). Such owl You usually have bodies filled with shallow relief and dense, intricate ornamentation, often including kui-dragon motifs, serpent motifs, taotie masks, cloud-and-thunder patterns, and scale patterns. In the Houli Village owl You, for instance, the upright feathered horns on the owl’s head are rendered as large horn-like motifs on the cover, while the body carefully depicts the owl’s spread wings. The feather details are complex, refined, and clearly layered, fully displaying the owl’s fierce posture and gorgeous plumage. In terms of ritual motifs, the patterns on the body of the Houli Village owl You are transformed in accordance with the owl’s formal features and the “three-layer relief” technique.

Cloud-and-thunder patterns cover the ground; the handle is decorated with scale patterns; the belly carries four groups of owl curled-tail motifs; four bird motifs appear on the lower belly; and the four feet are decorated with curled kui motifs. The result is a decorative effect in which realistic motifs predominate and ritual motifs serve as a supplement.



Figure 5. Bronze owl-shaped You with ground patterns on the body (A)Unearthed from Dasi Kong Village M539; (B) Collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum

Owl You whose bodies have almost no ground patterns include the owl You from Miaopu North M229 at Anyang (Fig.6,A), the owl You from Late Shang Tomb M28 at Xiaohu Village, Xingyang (Fig.6,B), and the Shilou Erlangpo owl You (Fig.4,A). Such vessels are usually simply decorated, with plain bodies and no ground pattern.



Figure 6. Bronze owl-shaped You with almost no ground patterns on the body (A) Unearthed from Miaopu North M229; (B) Unearthed from Xiaohu Village, Xingyang

3. Concepts of Artifact-Making Embodied in Owl-Shaped Vessels

The vivid and imposing owl images that appear in large numbers on Shang bronzes and jades were not merely artistic creations; they were direct manifestations of the owl's sacred status in the Shang dynasty[22]. Shang owl-shaped bronzes are important material carriers of the spiritual core, religious beliefs, and ritual order of Shang society, binding practical function closely to spiritual value. The ideas of artifact-making embodied in Shang owl-shaped bronzes were deeply rooted in the social environment expressed by the phrase "the great affairs of the state lie in sacrifice and war."(國之大事，在祀與戎）With the owl as their central symbol, these vessels fully manifest ideas such as reverence for deities and spirits, following the natural order, and vessels embodying ritual.

3.1 Owl-shaped vessels and the Shang idea of revering deities and spirits（尊神重鬼）

The belief in "revering deities and valuing spirits" was an important feature of Shang theocratic rule and an ideological bond through which Shang rulers maintained authority. This belief further influenced cultural and artistic production; Shang bronze art was formed under its influence[23]. The Yin-Shang people revered deities and served spirits, and owl-shaped bronzes carried a dual belief system. Textual research has shown that the owl was the "dark bird" in the origin myth of the Shang people, so these vessels bear a strong element of ancestor worship. At the same time, because of its fierce nature, the owl was sacralized as a war deity and endowed with the meanings of protecting military affairs and warding off the calamities of war. It thus suited the ruling demands of Shang external campaigns and played a role in mediating between humans and deities and consolidating royal authority.

3.1.1 A carrier of Shang ancestor worship

The Shang people regarded the owl as the dark bird of their group's origin. "Dark Bird" in the Shang Hymns of the Book of Songs（《詩經・商頌・玄鳥》）is a hymn sung by the rulers and people of Song in sacrifice to the ancestral Shang king Wu Ding（武丁）. The line "Heaven commanded the dark bird; it descended and gave birth to Shang, settling in the vast lands of Yin"（天命玄鳥，降而生商，宅殷土芒芒） offers the Shang people's divine explanation of their ancestral origins[24]. The Records of the Grand Historian（《史記》）likewise contains accounts relating the Shang kings to descendants of a divine bird. Later scholars such as Liu Dunyuan and Ye Shuxian

have used archaeological and textual materials to demonstrate that the "dark bird" worshiped by the Shang was the owl, thereby refuting the traditional "swallow theory" of the dark bird[25]. Shang owl-shaped bronzes are therefore materialized expressions of Shang ancestor worship.

3.1.2 The sacralization of the owl as a "divine" being

The Biao ji chapter of the Book of Rites（《禮記・表記》） states that "the Yin people honored the gods, led the people in serving the gods, placed spirits before ritual, punishment before reward, and were reverent but not intimate."（殷人尊神，率民以事神，先鬼而後禮；先罰而後賞，尊而不親） Revering deities and serving spirits were core characteristics of Shang society, and mediating among Heaven, Earth, humans, and spirits was a central function of bronze ritual vessels. Owl-shaped vessels also served the military and political needs of the ruling stratum. The Shang royal lineage valued martial power and repeatedly pursued external campaigns and internal annexations. Because of its fierce disposition, the owl had already been regarded as a "war deity" in tribal warfare in primitive society. Ma Chengyuan, in Studies of Chinese Bronzes, pointed out that owl images on Shang bronzes should be regarded as representations of a war deity symbolizing martial valor, while also carrying the spiritual meanings of warding off military disaster and ensuring victory in war. The symbolic connotations of bravery, martial prowess, and deterrent power represented by the owl correspond closely to the spirit of a Shang society that esteemed force and was devoted to military expansion. This allowed owl-shaped vessels to transcend the category of ordinary objects and become cultural carriers serving the political rule and military expansion of the ruling class.

3.2 Owl-shaped vessels and the artifact-making idea that "vessels embody ritual"（器以藏禮）

The phrase "trust preserves vessels; vessels embody ritual; ritual enacts righteousness,"（信以守器，器以藏禮，禮以行義）（《左傳・成公二年》）precisely identifies the core meaning of bronze ritual vessels. Sacrificial implements and funerary burial goods correspond respectively to the two central ritual activities of antiquity, sacrifice and burial, and are material carriers of ritual concepts; they are, in other words, "vessels that embody ritual."[26] In the late Shang dynasty, wine drinking was widespread, and bronze wine vessels accordingly became important material carriers for maintaining lineage hierarchy and expressing the exclusive power of the aristocracy. Among the various types of wine vessels, bird- and animal-shaped bronzes were more prestigious and sacred. They were exclusive to the upper aristocracy and served as core symbols of the owner's status rank, political power, and social position[27]. The design ideas and cultural meanings of owl-shaped bronzes also accord deeply with the ritual logic of the Shang, making them important markers in social life for "clarifying noble and base and distinguishing ranks."

3.2.1 The integration of realistic patterns and ritual motifs

The decorative logic of late-Shang bronze owl Zun is clear and explicit: it strictly follows the principle of combining realistic motifs with ritual motifs. Its core purpose is to strengthen the attributes of sacred ritual containers of artifacts, so that they can meet the needs of sacrificial ceremonies in the Shang Dynasty, and become the material carrier of divine authority and hierarchical order. On the one hand, realistic ornament reproduces the biological features of the owl, giving the objects a vivid and natural form. On the other hand, they ingeniously incorporate core ritual motifs of the Shang Dynasty such as beast-mask motifs, cloud-and-thunder motifs, kui-dragon motifs to enhance their sacredness and ritual atmosphere. This decorative logic both satisfies aesthetic demands and conforms to ritual meaning. Realistic motifs endow the vessel with natural vitality, while

ritual motifs bestow them with sacredness and authority.

For instance, cloud-and-thunder patterns are common ritual motifs. However,on the Fu Hao owl Zun, they occupy the position of a background. Their primary function is not mere decorative embellishment, but strengthened the artifacts as a sacrificial vessel properties, and reflects the solemn and holy in the sacrificial occasions. By using ritual motifs as a ground, the vessel further reinforces the sacred meaning of the owl-shaped Zun as a ritual implement and achieves a perfect unity of realistic aesthetics and ritual culture.

3.2.2 Ritual vessels exclusive to the highest aristocracy

The use of late-Shang owl-shaped bronzes was strictly confined to the high-ranking aristocracy. From the archaeological evidence, Shang owl-shaped vessels confirmed as unearthed from Yinxu in Anyang all come from large elite tombs of high status; their users were mostly Shang kings, royal consorts, or lords, that is, members of the highest ruling stratum. Fu Hao is a typical case: as an important consort of King Wu Ding, her tomb yielded two owl Zun of regular form and extremely high status, whereas no owl-shaped bronzes have so far been found in contemporaneous small and medium-sized commoner tombs. This directly demonstrates that owl-shaped bronzes were not common objects used by the populace, but ritual vessels exclusive to the late-Shang aristocracy. Therefore Possession of an owl-shaped vessel signified not only control over sacrificial authority but also the privilege of communicating with the divine; this privilege was an important source of the legitimacy of Shang aristocratic rule.

3.3 Owl-shaped vessels and the idea of following the natural order（道法自然）

In its basic sense, “following the natural order” contains the meanings of respecting, conforming to, and cherishing nature[28]. The Shang people’s original animal worship of the owl is a direct manifestation of this idea in the Shang period. Early people closely observed the owl’s distinctive physiological structure and habits and, on this basis, endowed it with a divinity that transcended the natural world, forming a system of worship that combined the dual meanings of mediating between humans and spirits and protecting agriculture.

3.3.1 The sacred connotations carried by the owl’s special physiological structure

Owls possess acute hearing, and the asymmetrical structure of their ears enables them to locate prey accurately by detecting differences in the arrival time and intensity of sounds at the two ears. Because of the cognitive limitations of the time, ancient people could not reasonably explain this special ability and therefore sacralized it, believing that the owl could break through the barrier between Heaven and Earth and hear the summons of the ancestors. In addition, the owl’s nocturnal habit fit ancient associations among night, dreams, and death[29]. Merchants interpreted the owl's spiritual faculties by drawing upon its innate natural characteristics, which constitutes a vivid manifestation of the concept of modeling after the ways of nature . Consequently, the owl was regarded as a spiritual medium capable of freely traversing the realms of the living, the divine, and the netherworld, thereby bridging the boundary between life and death. By virtue of this distinctive symbolic role, it occupied an irreplaceable and unique position within the comprehensive ritual system of the Shang dynasty.

3.3.2 The practical meaning of the owl’s role in protecting agriculture

The owl preys on rodents, serving as a naturally beneficial bird in curbing rodent infestations. Rodents not only destroy crops and deplete stored grain, but also transmit epidemic diseases, posing a serious threat to agricultural production and people's livelihoods. As agricultural scale continued to expand during the Shang dynasty, grain reserves became central to the sustenance and survival of the tribal polity. In accordance with the natural principle of mutual generation

and restraint among all beings, the ancient populace made full use of the owl's instinctive capacity for rodent control to safeguard agricultural activities. This practice not only actualized the philosophy of Dao Fa Zi Ran (modeling after the ways of nature) in productive and daily life, but also further accentuated the owl's tangible value in protecting the welfare of the people.

In brief, the Shang people, grounded in the natural attributes of the owl, discerned and endowed it with multiple symbolic meanings—namely, its spiritual intermediary function, its role in agricultural protection, and its martial valiance. By adhering to a cognitive logic that conforms to the inherent properties of things, they fashioned ritual vessels in the form of owls, thereby enacting the core pursuit of Dao Fa Zi Ran (modeling after the ways of nature). Therefore, the owl has gradually become a double symbol: it is not only the representative of the bravery of the god of war, but also the patron saint of agriculture. Owl-shaped bronze artifacts with living natural creatures as the medium of religious expression have become a key link between the early animal totem belief and the mature theoc civilization of the Shang Dynasty. Ultimately, they emerged as an iconic cultural symbol manifesting the ancestral vision of emulating nature in the creation of material culture.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, as an important component of Chinese bronze art, Shang owl-shaped bronzes carry profound cultural meanings and the spirit of their age. Taking the owl as their core form and following the design idea of the “unity of form and function,” they accurately reproduce the owl’s biological features while also meeting practical requirements through scientific structural design, becoming exemplars of Shang bronze art. Owl-shaped vessels are not only a perfect fusion of utility and aesthetics, nature and ritual order; they also carry ancient people’s reverence for and reflection on nature and the divine, and they constitute materialized expressions of Shang ideas such as reverence for deities and spirits, following the natural order, and vessels embodying ritual.

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