A Late Shang Jue (British Museum number 1935,0115.22)



Fig. 1: Late Shang Bronze *Jue.*



Fig. 2: *Taotie* detail.

Introduction

This Late Shang vessel was acquired by the British Museum (BM) in 1935. Provenance is not stated, being described as 'Found/Acquired' in Zhangde, Anyang (Henan Province), and purchased from the Karlbeck Foundation.[1] The vessel is 18.4 centimetres high, 16 centimetres wide with an 8.50 centimetres container depth. Cast in leaded bronze, the *jue* stands on three pointed and tapering legs and has two small side handles. A narrow extended spout has a counter-balancing tail, and there are two pegs projecting upwards at the base of the spout, both capped and slightly forward of the mid-point of the vessel. Two Shang '*Taotie*' masks form symmetrical, highly stylised low relief decoration, against a background of *leiwen* and *yuwen* patterns below an upper band of schematic, inverted cicadas. The vessel is not dated, being described by the BM as Late Shang, 1200BC-1050BC (presumably on stylistic grounds).

The *jue* reached its mature design during the Late Shang period, and is recognised as a fundamental part of Shang ritual (e.g. Childs-Johnson, 1987:183). Whether Shang rituals represented bureaucracy, shamanism (Paper, 1995:31), or were even recognisably "religion" (Eno, 2009:42) is not addressed here, and this review focuses on the *jue* itself. The archaeological context, history and ritual usage of *jue* are outlined, and with brief comparative studies and theoretical perspectives the place of the *jue* and the materialism of bronze itself within Shang culture are examined.

The archaeological record

Jue vessels are present in the Chinese archaeological record the late neolithic onwards, the final design remaining essentially unchanged from the Late Shang period onwards (Rawson, 1992: quoted in BM curators notes, Fig: 5). Up to the early Shang period *jue* were predominantly ceramic (e.g. Fig: 5), with an increasing use of bronze for ceremonial and ritual vessels taking place between 1600BC and 1500BC (Rawson, 1992: quoted in BM curators notes, Fig: 5). The transition to working bronze probably originated from cultural and trade exchange with surrounding cultures, Pollard *et al* (2017: introduction) suggesting interchange with Altai and Siberian steppe cultures, whose bronze

technology perhaps diffused into central China across the Loess plateau during a period of significant cooling climate that precipitated a southwards population movement. Quite how these trading networks coped and responded to the enormous material demands generated by the expansion of Shang bronze manufacturing from the Anyang period onwards is unknown (Pollard *et al,* 2017: introduction).



Fig: 3. Sheet bronze *jue,* Erlitou culture.



Fig: 4. Early Shang sheet bronze *jue.*

Some bronze *jue* from the late Erlitou culture period and early Shang differ markedly in design and manufacture from later Shang vessels. Worked from sheet bronze, they display an exaggerated, elongated style (Figs: 3-4) possibly a consequence of the relative lightness and ease of working sheet bronze, and some early Shang ceramic *jue* initially copied the design of these early bronze *jue* (Fig: 5) Increasing sophistication of Shang bronze technology led to the development of a unique multiple stage ceramic/bronze casting process allowing the metalworkers to produce increasingly complex relief decoration in advance of casting, with legs and posts being added to the vessel later. Lead *jue* were occasionally made (Childs-Johnson, 1987:182-184), and ceramic *jue* (*mingqi*) continued to be produced, representing a significant number of the vessels in the Erlitou site (Childs-Johnson, 1987:184). The *mingqi* design diverged and simplified in time - Childs-Johnson (1987:184) prefers "deteriorated" - away the bronze type towards the end of the Shang period, with the pegs/posts present at the base of the spout on the bronze vessels being discarded, perhaps as the robust (and expensive?) bronze design was unnecessary as ceramics could not be heated like bronze.

The late Shang *jue* design persisted through the succeeding Zhou dynasty, continuing into later dynasties who often produced bronze and ceramic replicas (Figs: 6-7). Later *jue* were also still used for ritual, such as the Ming ceramic *jue* (Fig: 7) which formed part of an imperial ceremonial set (BM curators notes, Fig: 7). Interestingly this ceramic *jue* reinstates the upstanding pegs (much simplified) on the spout, possibly a deliberate archaicism suggesting Chinese antiquarianism. And in modern China, accurate brass and bronze reproductions are widely available (Figs: 8-9).

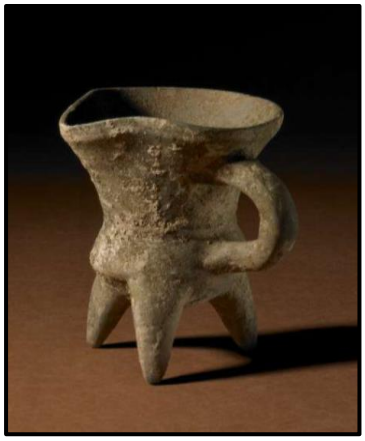


Fig: 5. Early Shang ceramic *mingqi.*



Fig: 6. Bronze *jue,* Ming Dynasty.



Fig: 7. Porcelain *jue,* Ming dynasty.





Figs: 8 & 9. Replica *jue,* modern China.

Ritual

Whilst tracing the development of the *jue* character/glyph Elizabeth Childs-Johnson (1987:186-192) examines multiple oracle bone inscriptions that specifically describe the usage of the *jue* for ritual offerings throughout the Shang period. These inscriptions show the nature and scope of the rituals changing across time, and from Shang period IIb onwards to the end of the dynasty (period V) *jue* wine ceremonies increasingly became precursors for other ceremonies, and were usually 'night-time' / 'torchlight' offerings. [2] The inscriptions make it clear that offerings and sacrifices, often including heated wine libations from a *jue*, were directed to the Shang pantheon of ancestors and deities, "forces whose future intentional actions were topics of divination" (Eno, 2009:54).

The splayed and pointed legs allowed a bronze *jue* to be pushed securely into hot coals of a fire pit whilst the wine was heated, and Elizabeth Childs-Johnson (1987:184) notes soot deposits on numerous excavated *jue*. Thongs, moistened ropes or linen looped under the pegs could raise the *jue,* as the bronze would have been too hot for handling. The libation could have been performed by tipping the tail of the *jue* with a bronze (or ivory, or jade?) rod, and completed either by one person, or a pair to enhance the performance.

Besides oracle bone inscriptions, there is no textual evidence around Shang rituals. Later explanatory texts from the Zhou & Han periods were written on bamboo and wood slips, paper and silk, which as K C Chang observes (1983: 5), have not survived the passage of time well. Additionally, surviving literature such as *Li Ji* and the *Yi Li* are confused, with names and meanings changing across time – for example the *jue* glyph in late Zhou dynasty literature denotes a goblet, and as opposed to the Late Shang ritual outlined in the oracle bone incriptions, the *Yi Li* ascribes a very different hospitality function to the *jue* (analysis in Childs-Johnson, 1987:172-173). Drawing on later texts though, Jordan Paper (1995:31-39) looks at the Shang Odes, to examine the links between sacrificial ritual and clan ceremony, proposing that the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynastic families, the Ssu, Tzu and Chi, were effectively interlinked extended clans who utilised ritual to maintain their political suzerainty. K C Chang (1983: 9-32) also analyses this, suggesting that ancient Chinese state and society was organised around such blood lineage and clan affiliations. These interpretations are supported by clan glyphs (Figs: 10-11) often appearing on *jue* (and other vessels) in bronze assemblages interred in elite tombs (Figs: 12 & 13). The Zhou ritual assemblage (Fig:12) originates from different foundries, varies in style, and is interpreted (Fig: 12, curators notes) as the accumulated wealth of an elite family/clan shrine. Bronze *jue* were elite and highly valued ritual objects, and were marked as such.





Figs. 10 & 11. Clan glyphs/identifiers.



Fig: 12. Zhou ritual vessels and altar.



Fig: 13. Shang (Ssu clan) ritual assemblage.

Theory

As an iconic highly performative examples of astonishingly proficient Shang bronze metalworking, *jue* invite theoretical perspectives to understand their importance in Shang ritual and culture.

Paul Connerton (1989:102-103) provides interesting insights into ritual and ceremonial, noting how repeated, inclusive, significant cultural events are “culturally specific bodily practices”, creating and reinforcing social memory. In oracle bone inscriptions ritual and sacrifice included specifically invited ancestors, deities and nature spirits as well as wider Shang society for authority, and the *jue* played an essential part in these rituals. K C Chang (1983:64) points out, the vessels used mattered in the ritual, and the relief decoration of bronze vessels with animal images was such that "a harmony was secured between heaven and earth, and all enjoyed the blessing of heaven". Performative use accrues status to the users, as in significant social events it is observance and participation that matters (Connerton, 1989: 102-110). Use of such highly symbolic and expensive objects would enhance impact of the ritual, and attendant social/political messaging.

The materiality of the *jue* is a product of Shang metalworking, to which the ruling elite of the sharply hierarchical Shang society devoted enormous resources (Eno, 2009:42). As Alfred Gell suggests, “art” objects can be analysed as products of technical systems whose excellence deliberately elicits a response in the viewer (Gell, 1992:54). This argument disregards aesthetic judgements, and also presumptions of social, political, or religious messaging (Gell, 1992:43) and in the process jettisons conceptual divisions between art objects and utilitarian objects, focusing attention on the object itself. In some ways the Late Shang *jue* is a textbook demonstration of this, where the mastery of bronze technology produced objects of unparalleled virtuosity within an established social and cultural genre. That the Shang elite poured such resources into bronze metalworking supports such an interpretation, and in Shang culture the *jue* were objects of visual and technological excellence, very deliberately “beautifully made, made beautiful” (Gell, 1992: 55).

However, and as Elizabeth Rawson observes, whether used for libation or within a shrine (as in Figs: 12 & 13) “As a group, bronze ritual vessels would have created a striking visual effect” (Rawson, quoted in BM curators notes, Fig: 13). A bronze *jue* would have resonated with the Shang in the same way as the gilt Bhodhisatvas of the Linyin Temple resonate with the citizens of Hangzhou today, with an aesthetic rooted in culture and society. The symbolism, the messaging of status and accrued wealth projected by the *jue* is a visual manifestation of such cultural aesthetics, engaging

with the learned norms, meeting the expectations of Shang society and culture. Zainab Bharani has observed that such aesthetic norms critically inform culture, and so cautions against the western academic propensity to search for the messages encoded in objects to illuminate a culture, and in the process ignore the critical action of the original aesthetics (Bharani, 2014: 8-9, 150-153). Maurice Bloch's illuminating article on Malagasy carvings summarises this neatly as "sometimes they are simply good to look at" (Bloch, 2005: 41). In the modern world, George Frederick Haendel's coronation anthem 'Zadok the Priest' is loaded with political and religious iconography and meaning, is formally performed in elite ceremonies of cultural and dynastic significance, whilst simultaneously being an aesthetically stunning piece of music, pure performance art, both to listen to and to perform (this student's own personal experience). Both aesthetic appreciation and participation matter in ceremony and ritual.

Also, whilst the summer humidity of central China might have tarnish bronze (Rawson, 1992: quoted in BM curators notes, Fig: 12), for display in a shrine or for nighttime rituals bronzes could have been polished so fire or torchlight could play on the burnishing, further enhancing visuality. To disregard the aesthetics of the *jue* would ignore the intention – the performative design - of the vessel and the use of bronze, as repeated and significant visual projections into a shared cultural space. The visuality enhances the aesthetic appeal, in turn enhances the multiple layers of meaning within both object and ritual. And these were important rituals for the Shang, performances where the king spoke to the gods and ancestors, visual demonstrations of his social and political authority, "A means by which authority is legitimized and maintained" (Baines and Yoffee 2000; Demarest 1989, both quoted in Flad, 2008: 403). The most important rituals and ceremonies deserve the finest objects.

All this echoes the analysis of Carl Walsh (2019), who emphasised just this integration of body, senses and material in Kerma culture, there mediated by the visual and tactile impact of fine, highly decorated ceramics. The Black Topped Red Polished Ware (BTRPW) ceramic drinking vessels played a critical role in the social life of that culture, enhancing elite status and creating reciprocity in feasting and commensality, and as in Shang China, BTRPW ceramics were interred in elite Kerma graves at death (Walsh, 2019: 188-191). [3] There are differences, as Kerma ceramics enhanced commensality and Shang bronzes enhanced ritual, but in both cultures the individual and kinship group status and identity appears incomplete without the object assemblages, both in life and in death. And there are other similarities, for whilst Kerma ceramics were ceremonially accessible to all levels of society (Walsh, 2019: 191), so were Shang *jue,* both the bronze vessels (Childs-Johnson, 1987: 174) and basic ceramic imitation of *jue (mingqi)* often found in the poorer, category E & F Shang tombs (Zou Heng classification, quoted in Childs-Johnson, 1987: 174, 182-183). Ritual bronze vessels might have been incorporated into the identity of the Shang elite as expressions of power and status, but both object and ritual concept entered the wider society, because they were arguably "tied to a person's conceptions of bodily self and identity" (Walsh, 2019: 175). This follows the New Materialist view of Lynne Malafouris (2008: 15-124), who argued that Mycenaean swords transcended the genre of possession by dominating individual cognition so pervasively that their agency indelibly changed individual identity, and in the same way that Shang *jue (*and other ritual bronzes) became extensions of individual, elite and clan identity and status. [4]

Summary

Archaeological evidence and the oracle bone inscriptions show the Late Shang used *jue* vessels for ritual invocation, primarily offerings to the ancestors and deities. The *jue* performed a critical role in ritual, the actual libation, as a design perfected for libation of warmed wine. Technologically excellent, intricated decorated with highly symbolic designs, the visually stunning vessels represented an investment of time, energy, skill and cost to expressly demonstrate the importance of the ritual contract with the ancestors, and communication with the Shang pantheon. The very presence of a *jue* signified a ritual performance loaded with political meaning and iconography, itself enhanced by the bronze *jue*, a perfect blend of functionality and display, an object designed to be perceived within the society for which it was created (Bahrani, 2014:152-153). The status, agency and importance of the bronze *jue* and the ritual assemblage within the Shang elite was such that they were interred within burial, as fundamental to individual and group identity in death as in life.

Footnotes:

1. Ovar Karlbeck was a Swedish railway engineer in China in the early 1900s. Art objects were often uncovered during construction and passed to his syndicate, which also purchased objects on behalf of a consortium of western museums and private collectors (BM curators notes to Figs: 1 & 2).

2. "Xu 6.12.5 Crack-making ... *Da* [divined] ... we should use *chang* wine in performing the *jue* wine offering to ... in the ancestral temple."

   "Yi 363: Crack-making on the *gengyin* day (the 27th) He divined: sacrificing with the *ge* dagger-axe we should perform a night-time *jue* wine offering to Grandmother *Xin*."

   (Childs-Johnson, 1987:186-192)

3. Disturbingly, both cultures also preferred to accompany elite/royal burials with mass human sacrifice (Walsh, 2019:190; Eno, 2009:42).

4. Other materials probably held equal importance in different areas of Shang culture. For example, jade appears to have had a ritual prophylactic/apotropaic significance in personal ornament and in funerary/burial practice (Eno, 2009:107-108).

Word count: 2538

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Images:

Figs: 1 & 2. Accessed online 10-11-2023: jue | British Museum

Fig: 3. Accessed online 19-11-2023: Erlitou museum allows people to appreciate wisdom of ancient China - Global Times:

Fig: 4. Accessed 19-11-2023: Wine warmer (Jue) | China | Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE) | The Metropolitan Museum of Art (metmuseum.org)

Fig: 5. Accessed 19-11-2023: jue | British Museum

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Fig: 7. Accessed 19-11-2023: jue | British Museum

Figs: 8 & 9. Accessed by student's daughter-in-law Danli in Hangzhou in early November 2023. Exact web page details not known, but probably from Weibo!

Figs: 10. Accessed online 2-12-2023: jue | British Museum

Figs: 11 & 12. Accessed 2-12-2023: Ritual Wine Vessel (Jue) | China | Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE) | The Metropolitan Museum of Art (metmuseum.org)

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