The study of surface decoration is one important aspect of research on Yinxu bronzes and has been a particular focus of investigations of bronzes from the Three Dynasties. Previous scholars have already made great strides in this line of research and they have provided not only an important precedent for making chronological distinctions among the late Shang bronzes, but they also have penetrated into the depths of Shang society and touched on Shang thought patterns and ideology. If archaeological discoveries accurately can illuminate aspects of society then we can use such information for advancing the study of the Shang. However, the study of the orientation of bronze decorations, and research on the classification and hierarchy of these decorations, all require further development. Most important among these is the study of the directionality of decorations.

The “orientation” (or directionality) of bronze decorations is based on the common motifs used on the bronze, i.e. the principal one or two decoration types used on the frontpiece (*zhengmian 正面*), not on other decorations, which may be found on the flanks. The orientation of the decoration on the frontpiece should represent the aspect of orientation that was presented and visible during the ritual activities in which the Shang people used the bronzes. In this respect the orientation of this part of the surface decoration is representative of the orientation of the bronze as a whole.

I. Theoretical Foundation for Discussing the Orientation of Bronze Decoration

A central characteristic of the decoration of the Shang and early Zhou bronzes is zoomorphic imagery. In the past, scholars have focused discussion on the significance of this imagery and produced a fractured field of analysis with dozens of different opinions. These can be divided into two major viewpoints, each representing a distinct perspective on the significance of the imagery. Many scholars propose that these animal images represent ancient totems, the natural world, or mythological gods and spirits. Others dispute the idea that these images contain specific sociological meanings and argue instead that they develop from purely geometric origins that are independent from realism or employ structures that are only faintly suggestive of realistic subjects.

Shang period bronze motifs include “animal mask” imagery, various types of dragon imagery, tiger designs, phoenix designs, and owl designs, etc. These must have had some special significance in the mind of the Shang people. Perhaps they represented certain levels of social status or incomparable authority, or perhaps they embodied some core social concept (for example the motifs used on Yinxu ritual bronzes can be divided into primary and secondary groups [and may therefore indicate a division in the aristocracy]), or even acted as some sort of medium through which Shang people could conceptually communicate with heaven or ancestral spirits.

Now in order to fully explore such potential meaning in bronze decoration one should consider the most complete and representative example of a motif, that which is seen by the viewer in its entirety on a frontpiece. Potential viewers would include the ancestral lords and kings towards whom the rituals would be directed as well as various spirits in the Chinese pantheon. In the Shang cosmological system, the recipients of ritual sacrifice and the imaginary spirits could all see the motifs on the bronzes. There may have been some among them for whom these mysterious images held meaning.

The “viewer” is a notion with specific meaning...
that has its origins in Western art history. Prof. Wu Hong points out that, “the production of art involves not only production, but also the concepts of use and viewing.” The decorations on bronzes were an important genre of art during the Shang period and the process of their production certainly involved consideration of the “viewer.” For this reason we must consider the “viewer” in any analysis of these designs.

Bronze ritual objects were an important type of utensil in sacrificial activity. The manner of their placement during the stately sacrifices should have been of paramount importance to the Shang people. Analysis has shown that one effective approach to the issue of “viewing” is to realize that the overall arrangement and orientation of decoration on ritual bronzes may have been affected by this knowledge of the importance of placement.

In addition, scholars concur that the most characteristic aspect of Shang and Zhou bronze art is its symmetry. Some believe that the symmetrical aspect of the animal mask design involves a central concept that clearly implies veneration, and that such symmetry possesses an eternal sense of grandeur. Furthermore, the Shang not only invested precise symmetry into both the vessel morphology and surface decoration of their bronzes, they also followed strict rules of symmetry in the placement of their ritual bronzes during the solemn ceremonies associated with sacrificial activity. This symmetry in both bronze vessel shape and decoration did not always exist, however, but in fact emerged through an evolutionary process. Many early bronzes do not follow the symmetric principle but by the late Shang period it was pretty much established practice.

II. Orientation of Decoration on Ritual Bronzes from Yinxu

Yinxu bronzes can be separated into three general categories: square bronzes, circular bronzes, and zoomorphic bronzes.

Truly square bronzes include zun-wine vessels, hu-pots, lei-drinking vessels, fou-water jars, jia-wine cups, gu-chalices, jue-wine vessels, you-wine containers, and tetrapodal he-liquid containers. Usually the decoration is identical on all four sides on square bronzes without handles, spouts, and tails such as zun, hu, fou, and gu; any one side could be considered the frontpiece. For those bronzes with handles, such as jia, the side of the vessel body opposite the handle is considered the frontpiece. On lei, surfaces without loop handles are the vessel frontpiece. For jue the frontpiece is the area without a spout, handle, or tail where the decoration is most complete. He are close to square and all four sides have identical decoration but the flamboyance of the ornamentation on the spout area is associated with the importance of the spout to the function of the he so for this reason we can conjecture that the side with the spout should be the frontpiece. On bronzes with inscriptions the rule is that the surface with the same orientation as the one with the inscription should be considered the frontpiece design.

Rectangular bronzes include ding-tetrapodal cauldrons, yi-ritual vessels, and fused yan-steamers. The long and short sides of the abdomens of these bronze types are slightly different. Usually the long sides have more complete designs and the short sides have somewhat simplified decoration. For this reason, the decoration on the two longer sides of these vessels should be considered the frontpiece. Elongated round bronzes are similar in that the side of the longer arc should be considered the frontpiece. For those vessels with inscriptions, the orientation and position of the inscription can help determine which of the long sides on the vessel should be considered the frontpiece.

Truly circular bronzes include ding-tripodal cauldrons with solid feet, ding-tripods with pouch shaped legs that are separated at the crotch, yan-steamers, gui-food containers, zun shaped jia-wine vessels, jia-wine vessels with pouch shaped that are separated at the crotch, zun-wine vessels, gu-chalices, bu-vases, he-liquid containers, you-wine containers, pan-platters, lei-drinking vessels, zhi-drinking vessels, yu-liquid containers.

Typically, the decoration on the abdomen of a ding-tripod comprises three groups. The design found between two loop handles should be considered the frontpiece. The proper placement of a ding-tripod should involve symmetrical orientation of the two loop handles and the placement of two feet forward and the third foot in the rear. Gui without loop handles, circular zun, and bu commonly have three identical sets of the principal design. Any one of these can be considered the frontpiece. Likewise, pan have three identical abdomen design set and any one set can be taken as the frontpiece. The abdomen design between the two loop handles on yu-vessels is the frontpiece on this vessel type. When vessels have inscriptions they should be used to orient the vessel (Fig. 1).

Ding-tripods with feet separated at the crotch are
different. Although such vessels also have three sets of decoration on the vessel abdomen each of these sets is associated with one of the pouch-shaped feet. If we used the above system for orienting circular ding-tripods the viewer would not see any one complete motif but would instead view two partial designs. Only if one leg is oriented forward can the viewer see a complete design set. The orientation of inscriptions on inscribed examples of ding with feet separated at the crotch is, however, identical to that found on other ding-tripods. Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility that the orientation of such ding should be the same as other round ding-tripods.

The lower section of yan is similar to ding with feet separated at the crotch and therefore involves similar problems with orientation. The upper steamer part, however, always has three identical design sets around its abdomen. They are arranged in a fashion similar to that found on circular ding-tripods and likewise the orientation of the vessel should follow the principles of the circular ding-tripods. Among yan with cast inscriptions the inscriptions are all found on the inner wall below the mouth on the upper steamer portion. They are always found opposite the design set that sits between the two loop handles and two legs. This is strong evidence that the surface between the two loop handles and two legs that has a complete design set should be seen as the frontpiece on yan-vessels.

Gu and zhi typically have two identical decoration sets positioned in a fashion similar to those on handleless gui, circular zun, and bu. Either can be taken as the frontpiece. Gui with double loop handles, yu with double loop handle, and you with single, semi-circular hinged handle, all usually have two design sets, which are bound by either the double loop handles or the single arched handle. The orientation of the designs on these vessels is similar to that on circular gu and zhi. Examples of such vessels with inscriptions should be further considered.

Circular zun shaped jia all have three sets of decoration on the body. Based on the assumption of symmetry of the two handles and legs, only the design set opposite the handle can be taken as the frontpiece and therefore this part of the vessel should be faced forward (Fig. 2). This orientation is most conclusively demonstrated by the zun shaped jia-vessel excavated at Taixi 台西, Gaocheng 藁城 (Fig. 2:1).

Lei with circular cross sections also have three distinct sets of decorations. Two sets are found beneath the handles on the shoulders of the vessel. For reasons of symmetry once again, the design set not associated with a handle should be taken as the frontpiece of the vessel.

The spout of a he is amongst the most important features of the entire vessel and is typically the part that is most completely decorated. For these reasons the spout portion should be placed forward during the display of such objects. On the he with a flat bottom and rounded shoulders found in the tomb of Fu Hao 妇好 (M5:837) only the spout area contains decoration while the remainder of the vessel is undecorated. Beneath the spout the characters “Fu Hao” are inscribed (Fig. 3).
The overall ornamentation of this *he* emphasizes the spout portion and therefore the spout area on *he*-vessels should be taken as the frontpiece.

The abdomen of a *jue* is typically adorned with two sets of decorations. One set is symmetrically arranged around the handle, which acts as the axis for the design. The second is found on the opposite side from the handle. This second decoration could be considered the frontpiece of such a vessel. The *jue* is a rather unique vessel type particularly in terms of the manner of placement because, whereas the orientation of decoration and vessel feet can be determined according to the rules of symmetry, the overall vessel shape is often asymmetrical. Nevertheless, the *jue* is morphologically and functionally similar to bronze *jiao*-drinking vessel, which completely obey the principle of symmetry. The position of the frontpiece design is the same as on such vessels: on the side without a spout, handles, or a tail.

Based on the above we can see that among the multiple design groups that are typically found on the abdomen of most ritual bronzes from Yinxu, usually there are one or several relatively complete and viewable design groups that can be designated as the “frontpiece” of the vessel. This face of the vessel should have been the one put forward during ritual activity that employed the bronze vessel and therefore designates the front face of the vessel itself.

It is not only on ritual bronzes that the decoration motifs can be separated into frontpiece and peripheral designs and have a strong directional component. The designs on bronze weapons, musical instruments, and tools that are often excavated in association with these ritual vessels also have clear directionality. By observing the orientation of the decoration on bronzes we can determine not only the function of a particular object but also can consider more thoroughly the significance of the decorations and inscriptions found on the bronzes. For example, bronze *nao*-signal bells, *ling*-bells, spears, *yue*-battle axes, and *ge*-halberd blades typically all incorporate frontpiece designs that are exceedingly powerful and frightening because the typical viewer of such objects would be the enemy of the person wielding the bronze (Fig. 4). The purpose of such designs is to instill awe and fear in this enemy.

Bronzes from outside the Yinxu area also follow this general principle. For example, the collection of
ritual bronzes excavated at the site of Dayangzhou 大洋洲 in Xingan 新干 contains 13 ritual vessels with bands of tiger motifs or bird motifs none of which violate the principles of decoration directionality outlined above. The fact that such locales followed the concepts presented in this essay supports our opinions concerning the frontpiece decorations and the directionality of ritual bronzes from Yinxu.

III. Conclusion

1. The orientation of pre-Yinxu bronze vessel decoration. In fact, before the Yinxu period bronze decorations already showed signs of having well defined directionality, particularly on ritual vessels. For example, bronze jue from the later part of Phase 4 of the Erlitou 二里头 Culture exhibit the roots of planned design orientation.

Starting in the Erligang 二里冈 period bronzes rapidly increased in number and the decorative designs on the bronzes became more and more complicated. Likewise, the orientation of the designs became increasingly standardized. One example of this trend is the difference between the designs on two different sides of bronze jue during this period. Usually one side was executed with care and delicacy while the other side was much simpler and even involved motifs different from those on the first side. This phenomenon can be seen on many ritual bronzes excavated at the sites of Erligang in Zhengzhou 郑州, Taixi in Gaocheng, Wangjinglou 望京楼 in Xinzeng 新郑, Liulige 琉璃阁 in Huixian 辉县 (Fig. 5). At Erligang the orientation of the decoration on ritual bronze vessels gradually became standardized. Because the casting technology during the Erligang period was not yet highly developed, however, some bronzes did not yet achieve symmetrical arrangement of pairs of loop handles or pairs of feet and for this reason the orientation of decoration on such bronzes was not quite uniform.

2. Investigating the principal significance of the orientation of bronze decoration. In the process of determining the orientation of bronze decorations, distinguishing the frontpiece of ritual bronzes is the most crucial step.

First, we can reconstruct the physical arrangement
of ritual bronzes as they were used in certain well-preserved burials based on the determination of the design orientation and frontpiece for a bronze vessel, combined with the knowledge of the overall arrangement of bronze grave goods excavated in such burials.

Secondly, we can “see the forest for the trees,” or in this case, the people behind the material objects. Based on the discernments and conclusions concerning the frontpiece designs on ritual vessels from Yinxu, we can know some information about the manner of placement of ritual vessels in the Shang period sacrificial activity. We can also conduct even more thorough investigations that consider vessel use and other related issues concerning the bronzes discovered in burials and other sacrificial contexts.

Third, we can construct a more convincing verdict regarding the use and significance of the “clan signs” or symbols that commonly appear as single or compound characters marking Yinxu bronzes by considering the orientation of surface decoration on bronzes and the associations between the overall arrangement of the decoration and the placement of the inscriptions.

Lastly, the deductions made regarding the directionality of the decorations on Yinxu bronzes necessitate even higher standards for future excavations of burials. When, in the future, burials are excavated, it will not be sufficient to merely draw top plans of the artifact layouts and photograph their arrangement. Additionally the orientation of every single object discovered in a burial should be marked, especially the bronzes, and in this manner the data available after excavation will allow for the reconstruction of the complete burial as it appears after cleaning. Only in this manner is it possible to replicate burial layouts and use such detailed information to advance further in our ability to recover Shang history.

References


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