

The Compton Verney Chinese Collection

The Compton Verney Chinese Collection includes objects dating from a period that spans more than three thousand years, with the core of the collection being bronze ritual vessels from the golden age of Chinese bronze production, 1200 - 221 BC.

Sir Peter Moores, founder of Compton Verney, began collecting a small number of Chinese bronzes in the 1990s; and in the years since, Compton Verney has amassed one of the largest and most important groups outside China.

The collection is arranged thematically, with emphasis on the ways in which vessels were used and on their continued importance in both China and the West.

Guide

All objects in the Chinese Collection have a wall caption in the gallery. This guide provides further information about the most important works in the collection and their context. If you would like to know more about any of the objects, please speak to a member of our gallery staff.



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Legacy of the Chinese Bronze Age

Vessels made from bronze for use in rituals were among the most highly prized and technically sophisticated objects manufactured in early China. As important to the Chinese as stone temples and sculpture were to their contemporaries in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece, these vessels have had a profound and continuing influence on Chinese art.

The spirits of ancestors were seen as a powerful force by the ancient Chinese. Their help was sought by offering food and wine served from bronze vessels at elaborate ritual feasts. When members of the elite died, sets of bronze vessels were also put into tombs, further strengthening the bond between life and afterlife.

Chinese bronzes have been sought after for centuries by collectors, not only for their austere beauty, but also as material remains from an age of sage kings and great philosophers. The shapes and decorations on these vessels have been continuously re-used and re-worked, not only in bronze, but in a range of other materials including jade, cloisonné enamel and porcelain.

Throughout Chinese history, adaptations of bronze vessel types have been used in a variety of ritual spaces: in court as symbols of authority; in Buddhist, Daoist and other temples as incense burners; and on home altars honouring ancestors and deities of all kinds. Gradually, in the holds of European ships trading porcelain and in packs on the Silk Road, vessels with shapes echoing bronzes of the second millennium BC were spread throughout the world.



Two Guardians

Gilt bronze, Ming dynasty, 1400-1500

These two figures, in elaborate military costumes, represent two of the Four Heavenly Kings (*si tianwang*) who watch over the earth from the four directions. The figure bearing the sword is the Guardian of the West, while the Guardian of the East holds a structure for containing holy relics, known as a *stupa*.

‘Sculpture’, in the sense that we think of it in the West, was a relative latecomer to Chinese art. Initially, most early Chinese sculpture such as the well-known terracotta army of the First Emperor, or Compton Verney’s large bronze Heavenly Horse, was not intended for display in the world of the living but was made for tombs to accompany the deceased into the afterlife.

Sculpture intended to be seen by the living only became common well after the arrival of Buddhism during the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 24-220). Although Buddhism itself came from India, Buddhist sculpture arrived in China through the Central Asian states. These had been founded as outposts of the Empire of Alexander the Great, so some sculpture showed the direct influence of Hellenistic Greece.

By the Ming Dynasty however, when these sculptures were made, those influences were no longer so evident.



Ritual wine vessel, *zun*

Bronze, late Shang dynasty, c.1200-1050 BC

This large bronze wine vessel’s dense decoration, mixing zoomorphic and geometric elements, is typical of the Shang dynasty when bronze casting reached its early peak. This shape, too, is distinctively Chinese: the flaring mouth and tall base of the *zun* are shared by the shape of the smaller *gu* vessel, and both are iconic elements in early ritual sets. The *gu* lacks the bulging bowl sometimes found in the mid-section of the *zun*. Although both were originally wine vessels, in later eras both were commonly adapted for use as flower vases and made in ceramic, jade, cloisonné enamel or other materials.



Ritual wine vessel, *hu*

Bronze, middle Western Zhou dynasty, c.950-850 BC

In the 28 centuries or so since this wine vessel was cast, it has developed a rich textured patina in shades of blue and green, but was probably highly polished when originally in use, to show off the finely-cast design on its body. The *hu* was usually made with a lid, but many of the lids have been lost over time, perhaps partly because later owners often used the vessels as flower vases.

Bronze vessels were made primarily for use in the ancestral temple, but ancestors were not the only supernatural beings to whom the Chinese made ritual sacrifices. In the Shang dynasty, for example, people worshipped a god known as Shangdi 'the High Lord' and the Zhou worshipped Tian, literally meaning 'heaven'. Other spiritual powers were closely associated with the natural world: among these, mountains and mountain spirits were of particular importance, because mountains served as a physical connection between the underworld, the world of man and heaven.

Mountains were thought to be the home of immortal beings and miraculous beasts, and frequent offerings were made at them throughout Chinese history. Of supreme importance were the Five Sacred Peaks: one in each of the cardinal directions and one in the centre. In Imperial times, some of the most solemn of state rituals were undertaken on the summit of Mount Tai, Sacred Peak of the East, and the Emperor himself would make the arduous ascent up the slopes to perform the sacrifices.

Ritual Spaces: The Temple

Bronze vessels were produced for serving food and drink at banquets held in a family's ancestral temple. Made from wood, and with only the remains of their foundations surviving, these temples appear to have been enclosed courtyards with a structure on a raised platform at one end and covered galleries along the sides. This architectural plan remained common in China for millennia.

The rituals held in such temples undoubtedly varied by region and time period, but were always large feasts to entertain and supplicate the spirits of the ancestors, using music and dance, as well as food and wine which were served from bronze vessels. In later Chinese history, at a range of other sacred spaces, including Buddhist and Daoist temples, shrines to local spirits and home altars, offerings of food, flowers and incense would be made in vessels intended to resemble early ritual bronzes.



Ritual wine vessel, *fanglei*

Bronze, early Western Zhou dynasty, c.1050-950 BC

The wine vessel known in Chinese as a *lei* took its shape from a simple, round pottery jar, but here in bronze the sides have been squared. *Fang* means rectangular in Chinese and this is a variation seldom attempted in pottery. *Lei* and *fanglei* are among the largest bronze vessels, often having a capacity of many litres. They are widely believed to have been used for holding wine, so are a good demonstration of the important role wine played at ritual banquets.



Wine vessel, *bianhu*

Bronze, Warring States period, c.400-200 BC



Moon flask, *bao yue ping*

Cloisonné enamel, Qing dynasty, c.AD 1700

Many of the bronze vessels later reworked in other materials came from early standardised ritual sets produced in the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties, such as the *gu*, *ding* and *gui*, but this is not universally so. The bronze *bianhu* - meaning something like 'flattened vase' - was only introduced in the Warring States period when social and political change was bringing old rituals to an end. One such change was the increasing presence in China of nomadic peoples, and it is likely that the *bianhu* was inspired by practical vessels used for carrying water on horseback.

Practicality was not an issue for the bronze, cloisonné or jade versions of this vessel. Whether they are called *bianhu*, moonflasks or pilgrim flasks, later versions offered a large surface for opulent decoration.

The panels on this bronze *bianhu* contain finely detailed cloud scrolls and are separated by borders inlaid in silver which has turned black over time.

The cloisonné moonflask is decorated with the eight Buddhist emblems: the Chakra or Flaming Wheel, crushing all delusions and superstitions; the Conch Shell, a symbol of royalty, dignity and high rank; the Umbrella, a symbol of spiritual authority and charity; the Canopy or Bell, implying respect and the sound that disperses evil spirits; the Lotus Flower, a symbol of truth, fertility and purity; the Vase, symbolising perpetual harmony; a pair of Fish, a symbol of marriage and fertility; and the Endless Knot, a symbol of longevity, infinity, and eternity.



Ritual wine vessel, fangjia

Bronze, late Shang dynasty, c.1200-1050 BC

This vessel, bearing owls on three of its four sides, is not only one of the most finely made bronzes in the collection but is also among the earliest. Bronze making reached a peak at the end of the Shang dynasty from about 1250-1050 BC, and this vessel was almost certainly made in one of the best bronze foundries of the Shang capital. It derives from the basic shape of a round wine warming vessel called a *jia* which was first made in pottery; but this square version, a *fangjia*, with slender pointed feet, squared sides and elaborate decoration, could only have been produced in bronze.

This is however as much a masterpiece of pottery production as of bronze casting in the foundry. It was cast in an elaborate set of interlocking pottery moulds in perhaps 20 or more sections. The exquisitely detailed designs on this vessel were not cut or hammered into the metal after it was made, but were cast. This means the mould from which it was made must have had a complete version of the decoration in negative relief, durable enough to survive the intense heat of the molten bronze. Recent discoveries of ancient foundries are helping to explain ancient Chinese casting methods, but the techniques used to produce such spectacular results are still debated.



Ritual wine vessel, you

Bronze, late Shang or early Western Zhou dynasty, c.1100-1000 BC

The Zhou people, who conquered the Shang around 1050 BC, came from what the Shang considered to be the western hinterlands of China, near what is now the modern city of Xian. When they took over, the Zhou initially adopted the ritual systems of the Shang more or less as a whole, but showed a clear preference for bronzes that were extremely extravagantly decorated, sometimes aggressively so, of which this is a fine example.

Because this vessel dates from the time of the Zhou conquest of the Shang, it is highly likely that one or more of the early Zhou rulers - King Wen, King Wu or the Duke of Zhou - were living when it was cast. Traditionally, these three figures have been seen as paragons of virtue, though some modern historians, using recently excavated bronze inscriptions as a key source, have questioned this view.



Ritual food vessel, dui

Bronze, Warring States period (475-221 BC)

This striking vessel was made for serving steamed millet or rice, and is composed of two matching halves; the upturned cover has the option of being used as a matching serving vessel. The recesses in the face of the vessel were originally filled with inlays in contrasting malachite and copper. It was made at the end of the Zhou dynasty during the Warring States period, a time of intense fighting. The Zhou Kings had long since lost the ability to control the states nominally under their control, and they also lost the ability to enforce ritual standards so this period is noted for its wide variety of regional bronze designs.

Chinese Rulers: The Early Zhou Kings

Bronze vessels have been collected, treasured and imitated over the centuries in large part because they come from what was traditionally seen as an unparalleled golden age in Chinese history: the time when the classic texts were composed and when the country was ruled by sage kings.

Most highly venerated among the early kings were the first three rulers of the Western Zhou: King Wen 'The Civil King' who was the last leader of Zhou state while they were still vassals of the Shang; King Wu 'The Martial King' who defeated the last, supposedly corrupt, Shang king about 1050 BC; and the Duke of Zhou, brother of King Wu and Regent to his brother's young son.

To Confucius, a political advisor, educator and ritual specialist living some 500 years later, the perfection of these rulers was reflected throughout the state they ruled: in its government; in its art; and, above all, in its ritual.

To later followers of Confucius, bronzes - the sole material remains of those rituals - were imbued with a special significance.

Ritual Spaces: Court

In ancient China, ancestral ritual and political power were inextricably intertwined. Powerful ancestors, if properly looked after by the living, provided favour and support to their descendants and in a more concrete sense, they provided a family with the hereditary titles that allowed them the land and soldiers that they needed to thrive. Local rulers were granted territory at investiture ceremonies when the Zhou King frequently bestowed horses, chariots, weaponry and above all, bronze - for use in casting vessels. It was hardly surprising that bronzes became one of the supreme symbols of political authority in China, much like the crown, sceptre or throne did later in the West. Two vessels were most important in this regard: the ding and the gui. After 950 BC, the number of these vessels that a ruler was allowed to display was correlated, at least in theory, to his rank in the nobility.



Ritual food vessel, *Teng Hu gui*
Bronze, early Western Zhou dynasty, c.1050-950 BC

The inscription inside the bowl of this grain vessel indicates that it was made by a man named Hu from the state of Teng and is dedicated to his 'august, late father, the Lord'. The state of Teng, in modern Shandong province, was at the opposite end of the kingdom from the main Western Zhou capital, more than 750 km away. The Zhou kings did not administer this vast area directly - that would come only with unification under the First Emperor in 221 BC. Instead, they granted territory to families in exchange for loyalty and military support. Many of these states were led by local elites, but the Western Zhou kings, in an attempt to strengthen their control, interspersed these with states headed by members of the royal clan. Teng was one such state, so, although accounts of Hu from Teng do not appear in traditional histories, he was apparently a relative of the Zhou King.

The extravagantly plumed birds on the base and neck of this vessel are hallmarks of Western Zhou bronze design.



Ewer, *he*
Bronze, Warring States period (475-221 BC)

The Chinese made bronze vessels in a variety of shapes for pouring liquids. Early ones, shaped more like pitchers, were probably used for pouring wine. This one was made for pouring water; not drinking water though, but water for ritual hand-washing as part of the sacrificial ceremony. Originally, it was almost certainly paired with a basin.



Ritual wine vessel, *lei*
Bronze, early Spring and Autumn period (770-475 BC)

The dark, lustrous surface - or patina - on this wine container is probably the result of careful polishing by one of its previous owners. Bronzes have been collected for many centuries, not only in China but also in other East Asian countries and more recently in the West: this particular vessel was in a Japanese collection by the early 1900s. Some collectors have sought a polished appearance while others favour the often colourful corrosion products that have formed on the object's surface over centuries which give them a more ancient appearance. It is not known what a particular bronze looked like while in use.

Chinese bronze casters probably had a number of techniques for altering the appearance of bronze, and unless constantly re-polished, bronze will almost always tarnish to a dark colour. However, a few vessels have been discovered in modern times that are largely un-patinated, and these have a rich golden colour.



Ritual Feasts

Bronze vessels were made first and foremost to serve food and drink at sacrificial banquets honouring a family's deceased ancestors. In China, ritual offerings to ancestors were probably being made long before the Bronze Age began and they have continued uninterrupted to the present day. The form these rituals have taken, however, has often changed. Around 850 BC, the sets of vessels used at ritual banquets altered dramatically, undoubtedly marking a major transformation in the rituals themselves.

The display case on the left shows a set of vessels used after these changes and the case on the right contains earlier vessels from about 1100-1000 BC, one of the golden ages of bronze casting and design.

Vessels were made in a wide range of shapes and then assembled into standardized sets. The guide for this section focuses on the most common and important types of vessels from each of these two periods.

Vessels from around 850-750 BC

Sometime around 850 BC, for reasons that are not well understood, bronze vessels changed quite suddenly and dramatically, and it is assumed that the rituals in which they were used were transformed to a similar degree. In particular, wine vessels were almost completely abandoned: a single pair of *hu* vessels, although usually quite substantial ones, took the place of the wide variety of wine vessels in the earlier sets. Food vessels now became the focus of ritual sets, especially the *ding* and the *gui*.

Decorative styles changed too. The dense overall decoration of Shang and early Western Zhou bronzes gave way to simpler geometric designs. Often, these designs were in imitation of those seen on objects made in more humble materials, especially pottery; grooves that could be easily produced on a potter's wheel or ridges incised in clay with a stylus became popular bronze designs.



The *ding*

Ritual food vessel, *ding*
Bronze, late Western Zhou dynasty, c.850-771 BC



Ritual food vessel, *ding*
Bronze, Western Zhou dynasty (c.1050-771 BC)

After the ritual reforms, sets of *ding* reflecting the rank of their owners took centre stage - but neither the *ding* nor the *gui* was a new vessel type, the *ding* in particular having been made in imposing versions throughout the Shang dynasty. *Ding* were most commonly made with round bowls and three legs, but were also made with a square body standing on four legs.



The *gui*

Ritual food vessel, *gui*
Bronze, late Western Zhou dynasty, c.850-771 BC

The *gui* was a relatively minor type in Shang sets, but its importance steadily increased throughout the Western Zhou, when it was often made with an imposing square base imitating a bronze altar and given extravagant decoration. After the ritual reforms, the number of *gui* used for sacrifices, like the *ding*, was a reflection of the rank of the owner.

Ritual Spaces: Tombs

The vessels in the Compton Verney collection were made for use at ritual banquets, but they survived not because they were passed down over the centuries, but because they were also enclosed in tombs and unearthed many centuries later. The encrustation which marks the surface of many of these vessels is partly the result of having spent many centuries underground. Vessels were placed in tombs to supply the dead with food and wine, and at least one has been found - sealed by corrosion - containing wine from 3000 years ago.

They were probably not just containers for carrying their contents to the afterlife however. The dead may have been required to continue the rituals in the afterlife, this time honouring ancestors who had preceded them, or the vessels may have helped the dead receive the sacrifices offered to them by the living.



The *hu*

Ritual wine vessel, *hu*

Bronze, late Western Zhou dynasty, c.850-771 BC



Ritual wine vessel, *hu*

Bronze, Western Zhou dynasty (c.1050-771 BC)

Early *hu* vessels were little more than a variation of the *you*, but after the change in ritual, pairs of imposing *hu* (more examples of which can be seen in the Wine, Cooking and Food section of this gallery) established it as a major vessel type. The *hu* retained its popularity long after the Bronze Age ended. Excavated vessels were sought after by collectors, and versions in porcelain or other materials were used on altars and in homes to hold flowers.



Water ewer, *he*

Bronze, late Western Zhou dynasty, c.850-771 BC

This vessel displays an enormous number of animal figures: five birds perch on the lid; a tiger serves as the spout; two more tigers and a bear-like creature climb toward the lid from the handle forming a hinge and each leg takes the shape of a strange creature whose arms end in dragon heads sitting up on the back of a tortoise. The vessel shape itself is suggestive of a four-legged beast, and even the numerous small bosses on the body represent the eyes of intertwined dragons, although these are so stylized they are nearly unrecognizable.

Vessels from around 1050 BC

Vessels were assembled into sets for feasts in ancestral temples, and the composition of the sets varied considerably over time. In the early period, the Shang, wine vessels predominated. This grouping reconstructs a set of vessels that might have been used around 1050 BC, the time when the Shang dynasty was conquered by the Zhou. Many details of how these rituals were carried out have been lost, but the degree to which sets and vessel shapes were standardized suggests they proceeded in a prescribed, orderly fashion. The shape and number of wine vessels, for instance, make it evident that the warming and pouring out of wine was a key element. The major types of wine vessels in this set are below.



The *jue*

Ritual wine vessel, *jue*
Bronze, late Shang dynasty, c.1200-1050 BC

The *jue* is one of the most distinctively shaped vessels. Even today, images of this vessel on posters and advertisements are used as emblems of ancient China. It has three legs, a handle, and a spout at one end which are matched by a pointed 'tail'. Two posts with caps rise from the rim. Its shape suggests that it was used as a small pitcher, though some think it was used as a cup.



The *jia*

Ritual wine vessel, *jia*
Bronze, Western Zhou dynasty (c.1050-771 BC)



Ritual wine vessel, *jia*
Bronze, Shang dynasty (c.1500-1050 BC)

The *jia* shares several features with the *jue*: three (or more rarely four) legs, a handle and capped posts. It is much larger though, and clearly intended to hold multiple servings of wine. The *jia* also has a wider range of body styles. The posts may have been used to help move it on and off a source of heat, since wine was often served warm.

Rulers: King Wuding and Lady Hao

King Wuding of the Shang dynasty, whose reign began around 1250 BC, and his consort, Lady Hao (Fu Hao), were both mentioned in traditional Chinese histories, but did not play an especially prominent role. Modern archaeological discoveries have changed this dramatically.

In the early 20th century, thousands of inscribed bones used for divination bearing the earliest full examples of the Chinese written language were uncovered outside the modern city of Anyang, site of the last Shang capital. The earliest and most informative of these inscriptions date from Wuding's reign and make it clear that Shang power was at its height. The inscriptions also relate that one of Wuding's wives - he reputedly had sixty - was especially powerful. Lady Hao, as she was known, officiated at religious ceremonies and led troops into battle.

In 1976 the intact tomb of Lady Hao was found and excavated - the largest undisturbed Shang tomb found to date. The tomb contained thousands of items in bronze, jade, bone and other materials, and has proven

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invaluable in understanding early Chinese culture. Although most of Compton Verney's Shang dynasty bronzes date to a century or more after the time of Wuding and Lady Hao, their shapes and dense decorations are clearly derived from vessels made during their time.



The *gu*

Wine vessel, *gu*

Bronze, late Shang dynasty,
c.1200-1050 BC



Wine vessel, *gu*

Bronze, late Shang dynasty,
c.1200-1050 BC

The *gu*, a goblet with a flared foot and rim and a band at the midsection, is probably the most commonly-found bronze type; the tomb of Lady Hao, for example, contained fifty of them. The shape was easy to reproduce in other materials and put to other uses, so the *gu* is the most widely travelled of traditional vessel shapes. Porcelain versions, used as vases, were shipped throughout the world in the 1600s and later made in European potteries such as Meissen, Worcester and Stoke-on-Trent.



The *zun*

Ritual wine vessel, *zun*

Bronze, late Shang/early Western
Zhou dynasty, c.1200-950 BC

With its signature flaring rim, the *zun* often looks like a large version of the *gu*. The *zun*, however, is found in a wider range of shapes and decorative styles. The dramatic, thick flanges on this example are unlikely to be found on a *gu*.



The *you*

Ritual wine vessel, *you*

Bronze, late Shang/early Western
Zhou dynasty, c.1200-950 BC



Ritual wine vessel, *you*

Bronze, Shang dynasty
(c.1500-1050 BC)

Like a number of other wine vessels, the *you* held multiple servings of wine. It's not known why rituals required so many different types of wine serving and storage vessels, or how their functions were differentiated, so to a large extent historians can only speculate from the shape. The fact that the *you* always has a lid and handle, for instance, may indicate that it played a key role in storing and transporting wine.



Bronze bells

Given the importance of bronze in Ancient China it is not surprising that bells, the main type of musical instrument made from bronze, received enormous attention. One of the earliest metal objects ever found in China, dating to about 2000 BC, appears to be a copper bell, and the tomb of Lady Hao from around 1200 BC contained a set of bells. However it was during the Zhou period that bell casting reached its zenith. Bells made into tuned sets - not produced in Europe until the Middle Ages - were common during the Western Zhou. By the 5th century BC such sets could be quite enormous, the largest set found to date having 64 bells and requiring a team of musicians.

Instruments excavated from tombs and descriptions of musical performances clearly show just how important music was in the temple, the court and the homes of the elite. Besides bells, excavated instruments include: tuned sets of stone chimes; wood, pottery and bamboo flutes; zithers with silk strings; mouth organs made of gourd and bamboo; and a variety of drums.

Large bell, *nao*

Bronze, late Shang or early Western Zhou dynasty, c.1100-1000 BC

This massive bell, weighing 96 kilos, comes from the Yangzi river valley in what is now central China, but from the perspective of the Shang and Zhou people in the north, this area was the southern borderland. It was apparently here that bronze casters perfected the technique of making bells that played two different notes depending on where they were struck. If struck with a mallet in the centre of the rim this bell plays a note; then if struck near the corner it produces a different, higher note.

Although Zhou dynasty bells were often given lengthy inscriptions, the one on this bell is a much later addition. Like genuine inscriptions, however, it extols the virtue of the bell's owner and his ancestors. Because inscribed bronzes have been so highly valued by later collectors, inscriptions have been frequently added to bronzes after excavation.



Bell, *bo*

Bronze, Spring and Autumn period (770-475 BC)

Chinese bells were mounted in a number of ways, often on racks. In general, earlier bells were played with the mouth facing upwards and later bells were played with the mouth facing downward or at an oblique angle. Once held in their rack, bells could be struck with a mallet.

Bells were more than musical instruments: like *ding* and *gui* vessels, they were markers of status. Sumptuary regulations detailed how many bells each rank in the nobility was allowed to display in his ancestral temple, though these regulations were frequently flouted. The level of detail that went into decorating bells is also a clear sign of how highly they were valued. The casting on this bell is particularly fine, especially the fine scrollwork on the face of the bell and the dragons which adorn the flat surface on top of the bell and the loop from which it is suspended.



Bell, *zheng*

Bronze, Eastern Zhou dynasty
(770-221 BC)

The *zheng* is a relatively rare type of bell. When made singly, it may have been intended as a military signalling device. When made as part of a set, it was probably used for musical performances. The short shank was probably fitted onto a handle or stand made of wood or some other material. *Zheng* bells seem to have been made for only a few centuries at the end of the Zhou dynasty, and in a limited area along the eastern seaboard.

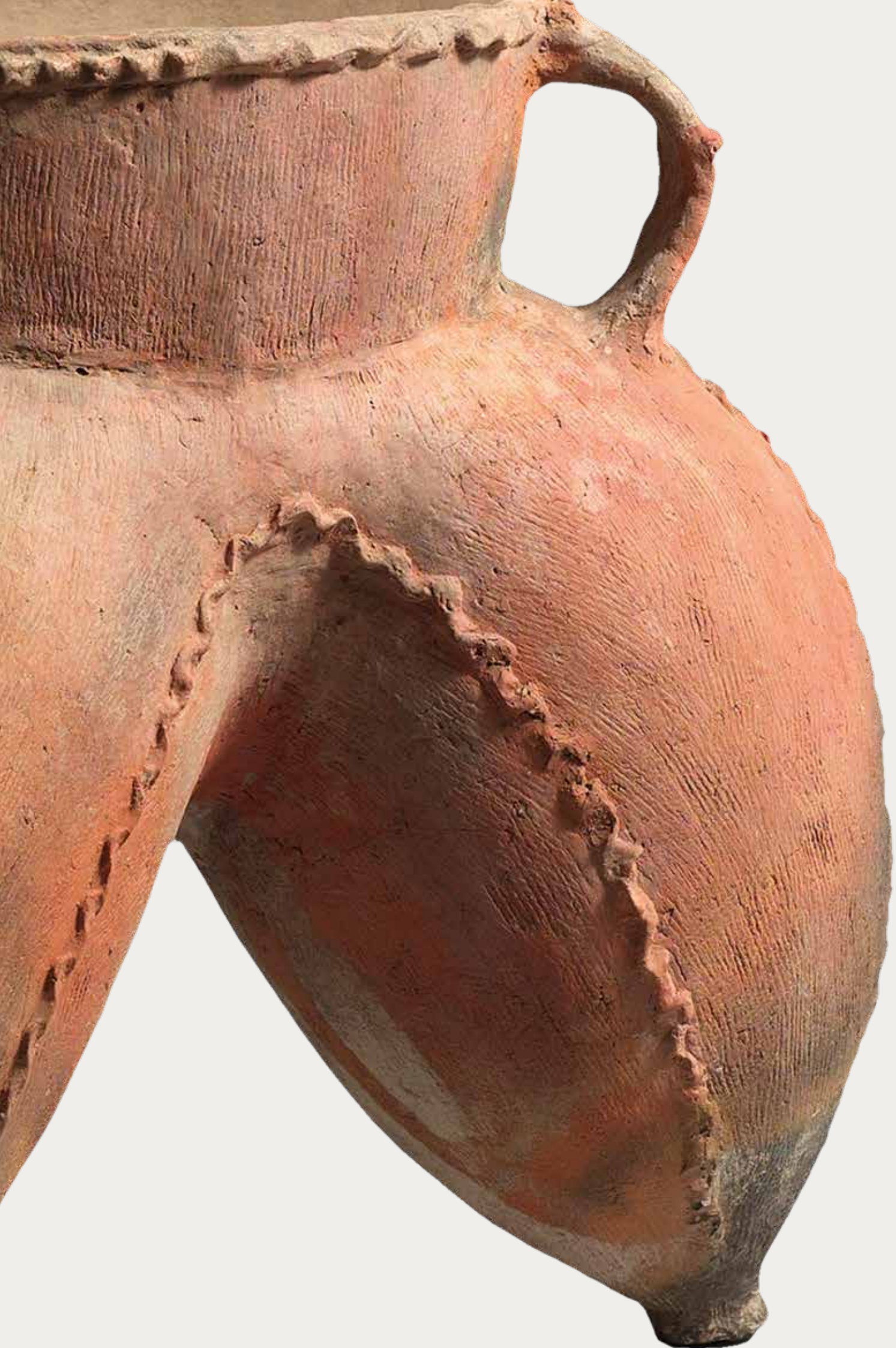
This bell is very unusual since it has so much decoration on the face, since many *zheng* bells have little or no decoration. Each face here has an elaborate symmetrical design of intertwined dragons, featuring four full dragon heads and a further two eyes.



Ritual wine vessel, *lei*

Bronze, Eastern Zhou dynasty
(770-221 BC)

We know from the inscription on the outside of this vessel that it comes from the state of Chu on the southern border. As the power of the Zhou kings waned, Chu grew into a large and powerful state with distinctive art and literature. This had a profound influence on later Chinese culture, which is partly because the Emperors of the Han dynasty were originally from Chu. During the Han dynasty, southern influence on Chinese culture became more widespread.



Wine, Cooking and Food

The oldest human pottery ever discovered is a fragmentary cooking pot, some 20,000 years old, that was found in what is now eastern China. Over the subsequent millennia, China was home to a variety of cultures making distinctive vessels out of clay, not only for cooking, but for serving food and wine as well.

By 1500 BC these vessels were being adapted in bronze, and were at the centre of religious life, as food and drink served from bronze vessels became the most important offering made to the spirits of ancestors.

Wine

Wine was of central importance at rituals, especially during the early period of the Shang dynasty. Texts and bronze inscriptions mention a variety of wine types, including some that were given to nobles as gifts directly from the King. The main ingredient for most of this 'wine' was grain, either millet or rice, which makes it technically closer to beer than to the grape wine we drink now. Winemaking methods were similar to those used today to make the rice wines which are drunk widely in East Asia, such as Chinese *huangjiu* or Japanese sake.



Ritual wine vessel, *hu*

Bronze, middle Western Zhou dynasty, c.950-850 BC

Around 850 BC, most wine vessels developed in the earlier period were discontinued, and *hu* such as this became the primary vessel used for wine. They were made in pairs and commonly quite large. The decorative band near the top of this vessel features birds with long elegant plumage in typical Western Zhou style.



Ritual wine vessel, *hu*

Bronze, middle Western Zhou dynasty, c.950-850 BC

During the Shang dynasty, bronzes most often featured the face, and sometimes the body, of a creature known by its later name, the *taotie*. During the subsequent Western Zhou period, the popularity of the *taotie* design declined. This wine vessel is one of the latest types of vessel to use the *taotie* as its main design element and here it is unusually proportioned when compared with earlier bronzes. The rectangular eyes are placed low and rather far apart and, other than the curved jawline below the eyes, the rest of the design dissolves into the abstract decoration.

The handles on this vessel originally took the form of two elephant heads with their trunks raised. Inside the broken trunks, though, are the remains of the pottery core mould used to cast the elephants' heads. From the side, you can see how the handles were fixed onto the body, with the heads cast separately and then set inside the mould of the vessel body. Then the bronze was allowed to flow into the hollows at the base of the handle loops.



Cooking and Food

The grains used in ancient China, millet and rice, required boiling to release their full nutritional value. So from an early period ceramic containers were used for boiling. From these the vessels in bronze are descended. The need to boil probably explains the emphasis on containers in the offerings to the ancestors.

Ancient texts and archaeological discoveries have provided a detailed, if incomplete, picture of the food that was served at ritual banquets. We know a good deal about the techniques used and the meats, vegetables and fruits assembled, but recipes are not known. In some respects, the food for ritual feasts was probably quite different from food in China today. Millet is a minor food crop today, but to the Zhou people it was not only a staple grain but an object of reverence, and they traced their ancestry from a mythical 'Lord Millet'.

Continuities with today's cuisine are nonetheless considerable. Most importantly, from Neolithic times to the present, people in China and most of East Asia have shown a preference for steamed or boiled grains, boiled wheat noodles having replaced millet alongside rice. These still form the basis of most meals, supplemented by vegetables, meats and condiments.

Tripod cooking vessel, *li*

Pottery, Neolithic or early Bronze Age, c.4000-1000 BC

Pottery cooking vessels have an incredibly long history in China: fragments of what is thought to be a pottery cooking vessel have been found in China that date to 18,000 BC. Much later, during the Neolithic period (c. 4500-2000 BC), China was home to a great variety of cultures making distinctive pottery, much of it used for cooking. One of the most recognizable shapes used was the *li*. Its three hollow legs not only provided stability when set over a fire; they formed a large surface area for transferring heat to the contents of the pot, which was used for boiling or steaming.



Ritual food vessel, *ding*

Bronze, Shang dynasty (c.1500-1050 BC)

Pottery was important for the development of bronzes in at least two important respects. Firstly, with few exceptions, bronzes were made in shapes that derive from earlier pottery vessels. Secondly, Chinese bronzes were made in complex interlocking pottery moulds, a technique rarely used elsewhere, so that their production was dependent on advanced ceramic skills.

This massive bronze vessel shows traces of the way it was made. The lines running down the sides of the body and legs which form a triangular shape on the bottom of the vessel show where the pottery mould sections used to cast the vessel were joined. On many other vessels in the Compton Verney collection these mould sections are not visible, which is either because the sections were very close-fitting or because they have been ground smooth, though sometimes they can be detected on x-ray images.



Ritual food vessel, *ding*

Bronze, Spring and Autumn period (770-475 BC)

Ding originated as cooking vessels, but smaller ones were probably used for serving food rather than cooking. Later versions were frequently made with lids. The lid of this vessel is decorated with small reclining oxen.



Water vessel, *jian*

Bronze, Warring States period (475-221 BC)

Displaying huge vessels was intended to impress the viewer with the wealth and status of their owner. *Jian* belong to the third main class of vessels: water vessels. They were probably meant to store water used for ritual hand washing, but their name hints at another use: the ancient form of the character for *jian* is clearly a pictograph of a person leaning over a vessel. Since the word *jian* is also used to mean 'mirror', it seems that by keeping water motionless in these massive containers they could be used as a reflective surface.



The Horse in China

Horses, first domesticated on the Eurasian steppe, were introduced into China along with the chariot around 1200 BC, at the height of the Shang dynasty. The practice of riding on horseback, also adopted from the steppe, is first recorded in China in the 4th century BC. However, China lacked land suitable for pasture and quality breeding stock, so throughout its history the Chinese remained dependent on their neighbours to the north and west for the best horses. Until the arrival of gunboats from the West in the 17th century, these same horse-breeding nomadic peoples were the greatest threat to China's security. Thus horses – both acquiring them and defending against them – played a crucial role in China's foreign relations.

Because horses were so valuable, they were rarely used as ordinary draught animals; instead, they were reserved for military use or as status symbols. Early chariots were often gifts directly from the King, and were richly decorated with painted wood, exotic animal pelts and the most precious material of all: bronze. Along with sacrificed horses and drivers, a chariot was often buried alongside its owner. Later, horses would accompany their masters to the afterlife in effigy only, either bronze or pottery.

Throughout later ages, the horse continued to be a potent symbol in Chinese art of military and political power, and often of a wildness bordering on barbarism.



Heavenly Horse, *tianma*

Bronze, Han dynasty
(202 BC-AD 220)

Late in the 2nd century BC, during the Han Dynasty, while the Chinese were fighting nomadic tribes to the north, word of horses far to the west reached the court of their mighty Emperor Wu, 'The Martial Emperor', who reigned from 141-87 BC - stories of horses so swift and strong that they were rumoured to sweat blood and gallop hundreds of miles a day. Assumed to be of miraculous origin, they were called *tianma* - 'heavenly horses' - and an army was dispatched to secure them. With great difficulty, a breeding supply was brought from the state of Dayuan in the Fergana valley (present day Uzbekistan) back to China, and the 'heavenly horse' became the most prestigious breed a nobleman could own.

This bronze representation of such a horse was made for the tomb of a nobleman, and was probably part of a team of two or four pulling a chariot for the deceased to use in the afterlife. It was made in nine close-fitting sections which were then riveted together, the rivets still visible today. Not only did casting in sections reduce the size of the moulds required, it may have allowed artisans to produce horses in a variety of postures by substituting different legs, tails and heads.



Set of 12 Equestrian Figures

Pottery, Tang dynasty,
c.AD 700-800

The Emperors of the Tang dynasty had strong family connections to nomadic people of the Northwest, and as such were devoted horsemen. The second Tang emperor famously commissioned portraits for his tomb of his six favourite horses. Because equestrian skills were so highly valued at this time, effigies of horses and their riders were very popular in Tang tombs, including polo players, mounted musicians - both frequently female - and many horses posed as objects to admire.

These horses, intended to accompany a member of the Tang elite into the afterlife, were made roughly a thousand years after the celebrated terracotta army of the First Emperor of Qin. Like that army they stand at a point midway between being unique, individual creations and being identical products of mass production. The bodies of the horses and riders would have been made from the same set of moulds, but care has been taken to give them individual character too: there are several different heads on the riders; some have facial hair and some are without; the horses have saddlecloths of either leopard or tiger skin and individually applied manes; and the clothing of the riders and coats of the horses are painted in a variety of colours.



Chariot fittings and weapons

Centuries before the art of riding horseback was mastered, horses were used to pull chariots used in warfare and hunting. The chariot skills of the Zhou people seem to have been an important factor in their conquest of the Shang, and both Shang and Zhou nobles were buried with chariots alongside sacrificed horses and sometimes chariot drivers too. Though wooden chariots had to be relatively lightweight in order to be carried over uneven ground, these high-status items were nonetheless adorned with luxurious materials including bronze fittings. These had to be strong and durable, and also able to take finely detailed decoration, as seen on the harness and other chariot fittings here.



Ritual water vessel, *jian*

Bronze, Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-221 BC)

In the 1950s Chinese archaeologists uncovered the remains of a large bronze foundry in Houma in Shanxi province, dating from the 7th to 5th centuries BC. This was undoubtedly one of the largest manufacturing complexes in the world in its day. It was located at the site of the capital of the ancient state of Jin, the strongest of the era's regional powers. Excavation of the site revealed widespread use of ceramic 'pattern blocks' which were used to apply identical decoration to casting moulds in a variety of different vessels. The intertwined dragons on the rim of this vessel match those found on such pattern blocks.



Vessel Shapes

Most bronze vessels evolved from Neolithic pottery shapes and were produced before writing was in use in China, so it's not possible to be certain what their makers originally called them. The names used for them today were standardized in the 11th century, and were based on ancient bronze inscriptions, old ritual texts and guesswork. But regardless of the accuracy of the names, it is clear that later generations venerated ancient forms, and frequently sought to bring them to mind as they transformed vessel shapes and decorations to suit their own uses and tastes.



The lei

Large, shouldered pots, sometimes called *lei* and sometimes *fou*, are among the largest wine vessels. Some have a ring near the base on one side which would have made pouring easier.

Ritual wine vessel, lei

Bronze, Western Zhou dynasty (c.1050-771 BC)

The overall shape of this vessel is reminiscent of pottery, but the decoration is clearly derived from other bronze vessels. The eight blade-shaped panels on the body each have a pair of upright facing dragons shown in profile and, when viewed as a whole, their eyes and jaw outline are meant to suggest a single *taotie* 'monster' mask. The significance of round whorl designs on the shoulder is unclear, though similar designs occur on a great number of early bronzes and are traditionally said to be a symbol meaning 'fire'.

The dou

Footed bowls, *dou*, are ancient vessels, but in earlier periods they are rarely found in bronze. They are smaller vessels, used for eating rather than serving and were therefore required in larger numbers, so may have been made primarily in pottery and lacquer. However, at the end of the Bronze Age, they suddenly appear in large numbers in bronze, for reasons which cannot be explained.

**Rulers:
The Qianlong Emperor
(1711-1799) reigned 1735-1796**

The fourth Emperor of the Qing dynasty was named Hongli, but he is usually referred to by the title of his reign period, Qianlong. He was an older contemporary of George III and was the last of the supremely powerful Chinese Emperors. During his reign China was the largest, most populous and perhaps wealthiest nation on earth. His reign is considered one of China's golden ages; but, by his death in 1799, economic and political problems - exacerbated by the burgeoning influence of British and other Western powers - were beginning to weaken the dynasty, which would eventually collapse in 1911, ending over 2000 years of Imperial rule.

Qianlong's influence on the arts in China was immense. He was a prodigious poet, calligrapher and painter, but his most lasting contribution to art in China was as a patron and collector. He commissioned huge numbers of paintings, porcelains, jades, cloisonné enamels and countless works in other media. Beyond support for traditional art forms, he also sponsored western styles of painting and architecture

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with the help of Jesuit missionaries. Under his rule, the Imperial collection, which was already vast, was greatly expanded. The two catalogues of Imperial bronzes compiled during his reign listed over 4,000 objects, but still may not have been a complete catalogue of his collection.



Ritual food vessel, *dou*
Bronze, Warring States period
(475-221 BC)



Ritual food vessel, *dou*
Black pottery, Warring States
period (475-221 BC)

These two *dou* vessels are roughly the same age, but the black one recalls older vessels which had been made in unadorned pottery since the Neolithic period.

On the other hand, the decoration on the bronze *dou* is very distinctive of its age. On close inspection, the seemingly abstract design on its body is in fact composed of hundreds of tiny dragons. The small squares making up the pattern each contain two circles, marking the eyes of intertwined dragons.



**Incense burner in the
shape of a *ding***
Cloisonné enamel on gilt bronze,
Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644)



Ritual food vessel, *ding*
Bronze, late Shang/early Western
Zhou dynasty, c.1200-950 BC

The *ding*

The *ding* was originally a cooking pot on three legs, but quickly assumed a significance far beyond these humble origins. Legend held that the founder of the Xia dynasty had nine *ding* cast, one for each province of his kingdom, and these were passed down to later rulers as tangible symbols of heaven's mandate to rule.

Like a crown or throne in the West, the *ding* became an instantly recognizable symbol of political authority. In 116 BC, after Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty uncovered an ancient *ding* vessel, he took this to be a sign of heaven's approval and declared that a new era had begun. From this time onwards, years were to be counted according to their distance from the 'Ding Beginning'.

This symbolic power still applied in late Imperial times. The central hall of the Forbidden City in Beijing - the symbolic centre of a country that considered itself to be the 'Middle Kingdom' - is surrounded by a set of massive *ding* vessels used as incense burners. By Imperial times, the *ding* was primarily used to offer incense, rather than food. The bowl would have been filled with sand to hold incense sticks to please gods and ancestors, and *ding* would have been found on household altars as well as in temples.



The *gui* and its descendants

The *gui* was used for offering steamed grain, usually millet or rice. Early examples descended from pottery prototypes and were little more than simple bowls on a round ring, usually with two handles and sometimes a lid. Over the centuries, many elaborations were added to this basic type: larger handles, four handles instead of two, square bases resembling altar stands or extravagant decoration. As time progressed, even the basic shape of the vessel began to change and at this point sometimes took on a new name: the oblong *xu*, the rectangular *fu* and the spherical *dui*.

Ritual food vessel, *gui*

Bronze, Western Zhou dynasty (c.1050-771 BC)

The most unusual features of this vessel are the four long slim legs ending in hooves, which seem to suspend an otherwise typically-shaped *gui* vessel in mid-air. The rarity of the legs is probably the main reason for the vessel's inclusion in the Imperial collection, where it featured in an illustrated catalogue from the reign of the Qianlong Emperor in the mid-1700s.



Ritual food vessel, *fu*

Bronze, Spring and Autumn period (770-475 BC)

Like the spherical *dui* in the first gallery, this vessel also had a matching lid and body, both of which could be used for serving different kinds of grain. The inscriptions inside the lid and body indicate that each was made for a different member of the same family, so perhaps the two halves originally belonged to separate vessels.

The Chinese learned the technique of cloisonné enamelling from the West, but from the Ming period onward it became an important feature of Chinese decorative arts. To create cloisonné, fine gold wire is soldered onto the body of a metal object - bronze, or sometimes silver. The outlines formed by the wire are then packed with coloured, powdered-glass paste. The object is then heated until the glass melts and is fused to the body. After repeating the process until a sufficient depth of enamel is achieved, the vessel is polished. Even today, many cloisonné vessels are made in shapes meant to recall ancient ritual bronzes.



Vessel and cover in the shape of a *xu*

Cloisonné enamel on gilt bronze,
Qing dynasty, Qianlong period
(AD 1736-1796)

This vessel, produced in enamel during the Qianlong reign, recreates the shape of an ancient *xu* vessel from the 8th century BC, but is decorated in a distinctly late Imperial style. The lid features a late interpretation of the *taotie* design, even though this style of decoration would not have been found on the original bronze *xu*.



Animal Designs

The animal world clearly had great significance for the ancient Chinese. The shells of tortoises and bones of oxen were used to communicate with the spirit world and animals of many types were offered to ancestors and gods in solemn sacrifices. The importance of the animal world can be seen most clearly in the fact that their treasured bronze ritual vessels were often covered with depictions of animals.

The exact meaning of animal decorations is not always easy to determine, but birds in particular play a prominent role in Chinese mythology. The founding ancestor of the Shang dynasty, for instance, was said to have been conceived when his mother swallowed a magical bird's egg. By the Western Zhou period, extravagantly plumed birds adorn bronzes of many types.

Fantastic animals are no less important. The dragon, later to become emblematic of China itself, is commonly found on bronzes, and the most prominent decoration on early bronzes is a mysterious monster-like beast commonly called the *taotie*.



Ritual wine vessel in the shape of a bird, *lei*
Bronze, late Shang dynasty, c.1200-1100 BC



Ritual wine vessel in the shape of a bird, *hu*
Bronze, Warring States period (475-221 BC)

One of the most interesting features of animal decoration in bronze is the way in which scale and realistic representation are manipulated. Some early vessels, particularly those from the south, were highly sculptural, with only lids or spouts revealing that they were intended as containers. Others, like these two bird vessels, use their whole shape to suggest a creature, rather than being explicitly decorated with creatures. Both these vessels are recognizable examples of their type, the *hu* and the *lei*, but are animated by spouts that look like beaks, rings being placed where wings would be and bosses where eyes would be expected.



Ritual wine vessel, *zhi*
Bronze, early Western Zhou dynasty, c.1050-950 BC

One feature of the *taotie* which varies quite frequently is the horns. Often they are simple scrolls shaped like a downward-facing letter 'C', but sometimes they have the appearance of curled ram's horns or realistically depicted ox horns, as seen on this example, where the horns protrude from the body of the vessel. One of the interesting aspects of the *taotie*, is that it becomes more detailed and realistically depicted over time: early versions are little more than a pair of eyes surrounded by a mass of decorative scrolls. Later versions show more distinct features but they are generally made in low relief and often do not stand out from the background designs. The face of the creature is most visible in the latest versions, made in high relief, like the one seen here.



Ritual wine vessel, *fangyi*
Bronze, late Shang dynasty, c.1250-1050 BC

The Chinese name for this type of wine container, *fangyi*, means simply 'rectangular vessel'. The *fangyi* is remarkable partly because it has no known prototype in pottery. Most vessel types were originally patterned after earlier rounded pottery vessels. Later, many were given rectangular shapes with their angularity emphasising their metallic character. The *fangyi* emerged during the Shang dynasty when such squared shapes were most common.



Ritual wine vessel in the shape of two owls, *xiaoyou*
Bronze, Shang dynasty
(c.1500-1050 BC)

Birds play a prominent role in early Chinese mythology. The founding ancestor of the Shang dynasty, for example, was said to have been conceived when his mother swallowed a magical bird's egg. Later, birds were used as emblems of the sun and the south.

Among bird species, owls clearly held a special fascination for early bronze designers. The owl, as seen in the *fangjia* in the adjacent room, is the only clearly identifiable animal to assume the place usually occupied by the mythical *taotie* design on Shang bronzes. Vessels of different shapes and sizes were cast to resemble single owls. Most common of all were vessels such as this, roughly the same size and shape as a standard *you* wine vessel, made in the form of two owls back-to-back. Some of these vessels are thickly decorated with other animals and abstract designs and some, like this, leave the owls relatively free of secondary decoration.



Ritual wine vessel, *gong*
Bronze, Shang dynasty,
c.1150-1050 BC

In Chinese, there are several words which are commonly translated using the English word 'dragon', but the most common is *long*. The ancient pictographic form of this character is strikingly similar to the creature depicted on the top of this vessel. It has a serpent's body, open mouth and two unusual horns, often called 'bottle horns'. On bronzes, bottle-horned dragons are more commonly seen in smaller versions contained in decorative bands.



Mirrors

The Han period, when bronze mirrors reached the height of their popularity, was an age of great intellectual and spiritual inquiry. Theories concerning the nature of the cosmos or the relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds abounded. Many elements of Han cosmology can be seen in the decoration on bronze mirrors.



The Round and the Square

In Han cosmology the universe was ordered through the interaction of a number of sets of alternating forces, including: *yin* and *yang*; heaven and earth; the 'five phases' of wood, fire, earth, metal and water; and the forces represented by the 64 hexagrams in *The Book of Changes*. Heaven and earth were governed by the principles of roundness and squareness, respectively. Most mirrors are round, representing the celestial realm, but they frequently contain references to the terrestrial world through squares inscribed inside the circle, raised bosses arranged in a square pattern or emblems of the four directions.



Mountains

Mountains were seen as the physical connection between heaven and earth and recognised as the home to a wide variety of deities, immortals and fabulous beasts. Sacrifices to mountains or mountain spirits were already common during the Shang dynasty, and they continued unabated during the Han and later eras. Sometimes mountains are depicted directly on mirrors and other times they are implied, for instance, through the fact that the Queen Mother of the West was thought to live on the mythical Mount Kunlun.



Queen Mother of the West

The cult of The Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu) had adherents in all levels of society during the Han dynasty. From her court on Mt Kunlun, she controlled elixirs of immortality and access to heaven. On mirrors and tomb graphics she is commonly depicted with attendants who are fabulous creatures or emaciated immortals.



Immortals

The term 'immortals' (*xian*, or *xianren* in Chinese) refers to a diverse group of spiritual beings who were thought to have transcended death or greatly increased their lifespan through the use of elixirs or esoteric practices. Immortals are often depicted as emaciated creatures with feathers or other animal features. In later times, many immortals, including the Queen Mother of the West were incorporated into the Daoist pantheon.



The End of the Chinese Bronze Age

Under the Shang, sacrificed soldiers, slaves and horses were often buried alongside kings or nobles, and the ritual vessels put into their graves were the ones they had used during their life. By the time of the unification of smaller states into a single Empire in 221 BC, however, ideas about the afterlife were changing dramatically.

As demonstrated by the First Emperor's famous terracotta army, the soldiers, servants and horses now entombed with their masters were made of terracotta, bronze or wood. Vessels were often reproductions in non-functional painted pottery or other, more humble materials. During the Bronze Age, the immediate presence of the ancestors had been sought by using music, food and wine to attract the spirits into the temple. Later, although ancestors were still seen as powerful and worthy of veneration and sacrifice, they were ideally kept happy in a realm of their own. Tombs began to resemble lavishly stocked underground palaces where the dead would remain, well cared for, but separate from an earthly existence.



Incense burner, *boshanlu*

Bronze, Han dynasty
(202 BC-AD 220)



Incense burner, *boshanlu*

Bronze, Western Han dynasty
(202 BC-AD 9)

These incense burners have lids shaped like mountains which are interspersed with depictions of people and wild animals. The bases of both feature intertwined dragons and on the larger of the two the dragons on the pedestal are being driven by strange creatures, probably intended to depict immortals. Botanicals would have been placed on hot coals in the bowls of the burners, with the resulting smoke rising up like mountain mist through vents in their lids.

Although other types of censers had been used in China for some time, mountain scenes on the lid seem to have been first made during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty (reigned 141 BC-87 BC), leading to the possibility that they are meant to represent Mount Penglai, a fabled island off the east coast of China. Emperor Wu, like the First

Emperor before him, was said to have sent ships in search of the island, so that he could meet the immortals said to live there.

According to legend, although Penglai had been sighted in the past, every time sailors approached it, it would vanish beneath the waves or float off into the clouds.

If the mountains on Compton Verney's incense burners are indeed meant to represent Penglai, the fact that they are supported by dragons - considered to be water creatures that were also capable of flight - would be quite fitting.

Rulers:

**Emperor Wu of the Han
(156-87 BC) reigned 141-87 BC**

The sixth emperor of the Han dynasty, Emperor Wu ('The Martial Emperor'), is one of the most powerful and quixotic figures in Chinese history. Domestically, he oversaw the consolidation of the Empire, increasing Imperial control over regional powers and establishing Confucianism as state doctrine. Militarily, after breaking a powerful nomad alliance to the north, he was able to secure China's borders and significantly extend them. The Roman Empire, then flourishing on the other side of the Eurasian continent, was the only state on the planet with similar power, though the two were only dimly aware of each other's existence.

Spiritual matters were of great importance to Emperor Wu in both his public and private lives. State rituals, intended to demonstrate or reinforce heaven's approval of his reign, became increasingly frequent and elaborate. In 110 BC, for example, an Imperial entourage travelled more than 700 km to the east to perform rituals on the summit of Mount Tai, one of the five sacred peaks.

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His court was regularly host to spiritual advisers, dismissed as charlatans by sober Confucians, who claimed to have esoteric techniques to increase his life span or have means to introduce him to immortal beings.



Cocoon-shaped vessel, *hu*
 Bronze, Warring States period
 (475-221 BC)



Cocoon-shaped vessel, *hu*
 Painted pottery, Western Han
 dynasty (202 BC- AD 9)

These pots, sometimes called 'cocoon form' or 'duck's egg' vessels in Chinese, derive their shape from leather vessels used by nomadic peoples. They are separated in age by as little as a century or two, but they illustrate a major change in view of the afterlife. Before the unification of the empire in 221 BC, the vast majority of vessels enclosed in tombs were made for use in ancestral temples and only later were they buried. After unification, tombs were increasingly stocked with items made just for the tomb. Objects made for tombs could be quite elaborate, as is the case with the most famous example: the terracotta army of the First Emperor. Even so, such items were usually made from pottery, wood or other less costly material.

Chinese Dynasties mentioned in this Guide

Shang dynasty: about 1500-about 1050 BC

Western Zhou dynasty: about 1050-about 771 BC

Early Western Zhou: about 1050-about 950 BC

Middle Western Zhou: about 950-about 850 BC

Late Western Zhou: about 850-771 BC

Eastern Zhou dynasty: 770-221 BC

Spring and Autumn period: 770-475 BC

Warring States period: 475-221 BC

Qin dynasty: 221-207 BC

Han dynasty: 206 BC-AD 220

Western Han: 206 BC-AD 9

Wang Mang Interregnum: AD 9-24

Eastern Han: AD 24-220

Tang dynasty: AD 618-906

Song dynasty: AD 960-1279

Ming dynasty: AD 1368-1644

Qing dynasty: AD 1644-1911

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