



Section 2. History

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A HISTORIC AND AESTHETIC ANALYSIS OF GREEK "DARK AGE" GEOMETRIC POTTERY AND CHINESE RITUAL BRONZES

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Abstract

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of sampled Greek geometric pottery and Eastern Zhou bronze vessels, highlighting aesthetic parallels despite the civilizations' geographical and cultural separation. Through a comparative material and aesthetic analysis grounded in an investigation of their isolated cultural and socio-economic contexts, the paper reveals how each tradition reflects the unique developments of the disparate societies which produced these items. Despite a lack of direct interaction and the historical challenge of Eurocentrism in scholarship, this analysis bridges a gap in comparative studies, highlighting the intricate ways in which shifts in power, social hierarchy, and economic strategies are mirrored in ancient artistry. The investigation, enriched by a review of archaeological and art historical scholarship, sheds light on the profound, yet distinct, impacts of each civilization's milieu on their artistic expressions. This comparative approach not only bridges historiographical divides but also invites a re-evaluation of ancient artistic narratives, suggesting new approaches and methodologies to the study of ancient aesthetics and culture.

Keywords: *Greek Geometric Pottery, Eastern Zhou, Bronze Vessels, Ancient Greece, Ancient China, Aesthetics, Art History, Comparative Art History*

Introduction

Ancient Greece, comprising a variety of cultures across the Aegean over an extended chronology, is known for its material pottery culture, a medium which was developed over several centuries, the output of which survives in numerous artefacts and fragments today. Within roughly the same

period of time, though geographically separated, China's historic bronze vessels were being developed in similar fashion. Their cultural significance can be traced from the Xia period to the Shang and the Zhou dynasty, surviving even in the Eastern Zhou domain when central political power was weakened.

Despite their importance in global human history, there remains a relative dearth in comparative studies of these two societies and their material culture. This is likely due to a combination of factors: the lack of direct interaction between the two cultures in this time period makes comparative analysis more difficult than a comparison of, for example, Greece and Rome. Another factor is that the prevalent eurocentrism in the study of art history and archeology in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries prevented the integration of the study of Chinese artifacts to mainstream European academic discourse. The case-study presented here, focusing on Greek geometric pottery styles and Eastern Zhou bronzes, seeks to address this in part.

In this paper, the author attempts to compare the two styles to contrast and analyze the respective socio-cultural structures and their effects on aesthetic production. Noting the apparent aesthetic similarity between the two artistic traditions, at first, the author envisioned utilizing the theory of structuralism to draw conclusions about the shared aesthetic preferences and artistic developments across cultures. However, as the specifics of artistic development in both cultures were further investigated, it soon became apparent that due to the complex variety of factors influencing aesthetic production, it is near impossible to argue for a unifying trend human aesthetic preference or development. Rather, the paper seeks to use comparison as a methodology to analyze the socio-cultural milieu which engendered the items, and to subsequently highlight the effect of various economic, social, and political changes on aesthetic production in two disparate cultures.

The structure of this paper is as follows: First, the author outlines the social, political, and economic contexts that produced the artistic tradition of Chinese ritual bronzes and the Greek Geometric pottery, noting the stylistic changes that correspond to contextual alterations, followed by a detailed comparison of the relationship between stylistic developments and context. Finally, a comparison of two vessels from the respective traditions is conducted, one from Late Geometric Greece and one from Eastern Zhou. The similarities and differences both

visually and contextually are investigated as embodied in surviving artifacts.

Literature Review

This paper draws on a variety of sources from disciplines including history, archaeology, and aesthetics. Studies in the art of Greek Geometric pottery and Chinese ritual bronzes fall primarily into the field of archeology; given the dates of much of the significant excavations, this is another contributing factor to the dearth of comparative scholarship. Most of such sources referenced in this paper are dated to the 20th century, aligning with periods of time where archeological findings triggered an explosion of academic scholarship on these two topics.

The paper also utilizes a variety of sources concerned with the surrounding historic cultures, including analysis of ancient oral traditions such as Homer, as well as archeological research on Greek and Chinese excavation sites. In addition, the author conducts a detailed visual analysis of the Dipylon vase at the National Archaeological Museum, Athens and the Wine Container (hu) at the Metropolitan Museum of art as part of the comparison.

The most significant sources used in this paper are *Geometric Greece: 900–700 BC* by John Coldstream and *A General History of Chinese Art* by Chen Shouxiang. Both offer overviews of the artistic developments in Greek Geometric pottery and ritual bronze in China respectively, illuminating the artistic development of both material traditions. In addition, other scholars often mentioned are Sarah Allen and David S. Nivison, titans in ancient Chinese studies. The author is further indebted to Whitely for their discussion of the Greek Dark Ages, and Desborough for his on the Protogeometric period

Historical Context: China

The Bronze Age of the ancient Chinese culture spans approximately three periods – the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou – with bronze being introduced approximately in 2000 BCE. Together, these ‘mysterious’ dynasties are best known for their bronze wares, which generated significant cultural influence, as bronze wares continued to dominate even after iron was introduced in the Spring and Autumn Period. The Xia Shang Zhou dynasties are consid-

ered mysterious due to the legendary figures and stories about the era that complicate our perception of the period (Chen, 2022). While Yangshao Culture, Longshan Culture, and Liangzhu Culture marked the formal beginning of 'Chinese culture', the Three Dynasties laid the foundations for Chinese aesthetic production. In the traditional historical narrative, the Three Dynasties are considered as Xiaokang (Modest Prosperity), which underlines its transformation from the Datong (Great Unity), the period before which is characterized in the sources as one of perfect egalitarianism and shared ownership (ibid).

The Xia

The Xia, the first and most enigmatic dynasty, is commonly believed to be a myth constructed to serve the purpose of legitimizing the rule of the Shang and Zhou. This conception persists despite the excavations of Erlitou in Henan dated to be from the traditionally designated period of the Xia (2200–1760 BC). It is both the result of the scarcity of historical records that remain about the Xia and of the mythological and supernatural elements that are often intertwined in these accounts. Allen (1984), who shows considerable skepticism regarding sources with supernatural elements, argues that the Shang-era people created the idea of the Xia, which represented the darkness overcome by the all-powerful sun kings; whereas the Zhou rulers transformed the Xia into a dynasty to support their claim to the mandate of heaven. Some scholars have attempted to prove that the Xia did, in fact, exist through accounts of the Bamboo Annals, a controversial source detailing early Chinese history. While there is continued debate on the validity of the modern version of Bamboo Annals (The Bamboo Annals are a controversial set of Chinese historical court records of the Xia, Shang, Zhou, and the following Qin and Wei dynasties. The original version was discovered in the tomb of a Wei ruler in 281 AD, but was damaged by the grave robbers that discovered it. The original bamboo annals had disappeared entirely in the Song dynasty. There are currently two versions to the Bamboo Annals, the guben, a reconstruction of parts of the document from Pre Song quotations, and the jinben, which is a post Song fabrication). Nivison (2018) argues

that the Bamboo Annals provide a credible and detailed overview over the monarchs of the Xia dynasty, showing us that the Xia were more than mythology to those concerned with producing records.

Due to the 'Doubt Antiquity' movement, scholars often refrain from defining Erlitou in conjunction with Xia dynasty mythical accounts (Otherwise known as the Yigu, the doubt antiquity movement in the early 20th century was triggered by the collapse of China's imperial system. Iconoclasts began to question China's past due to a lack of ancient texts (Johnson 2016)). But if we are to focus entirely on archeological analyses of cultures in the period of the Xia, excavations reveal Erlitou to be a state centralized and complex, though the level of centralization is debatable (Allan, 2007). For a Bronze Age culture from the second millennium BCE, Erlitou displays high levels of sophistication and centralization, similar to the Aegean cultures in Crete and Mycenae. The most significant discovery are the remains of a walled palace at the center, with a grid of wide roads surrounding it. The palace is built in the form of capitals in coming Chinese dynasties: rectangular, in a courtyard-style and oriented in the north-south axis. In addition to the palace, dwellings, bronze and turquoise workshops, pottery kilns, tombs, and bronze workshops have been uncovered (ibid). Erlitou also expanded through outposts, through which resources such as salt, copper, and precious stones were acquired. Such expansion is unprecedented for the time and region, illustrating the centralized nature of Erlitou culture (Liu, 2009).

Bronze manufacturing, characteristic to Erlitou culture, also contributed to ongoing political centralization to Erlitou culture, or early China during the Xia time span. The production of bronzes implies a certain degree of centralization: territorial expansion to acquire bronze alloys, and the process of mining, smelting, and casting, transporting raw materials requires some degree of centralized management (ibid). This socio-political landscape of China is crucial to understanding the art form of Bronze ritual vessels, its sophistication and its aesthetic development.

Although the Erlitou political influence is limited to the middle Yellow River region, it exerts some influence over surrounding

cultural centers, evidenced in the adoption of Erlitou bronze vessel styles in different areas in China (ibid). The painted pottery of Dadianzi culture, from the same period as Erlitou, is highly influenced by Erlitou styles of bronze plaques with turquoise inlay. Yet, it is also important to note the degree of influence is highly limited. Sanxingdui in southwest China developed its bronze tradition indigenously as Erlitou's contemporary (Barnes, 2015).

The Shang

While little is known about the Xia, there is far more information available regarding the Shang, in terms of both surviving archaeological and literary sources. The actual site of the legendary last capital of the Shang Dynasty, Yinxu, was discovered in the late twentieth century; the list of Shang kings has been confirmed and is no longer the subject of extended debate, unlike those of the Xia (Allan, 2007). The Erligang culture is the central culture associated with the early Shang, found in the sites of Zhengzhou and Yanshi in Central China. Archeologically, Erligang seems like more of a continuation of Erlitou, since no clear evidence of "rupture or material decline", or dramatic stylistic shift is identified, yet it is often identified as early Shang (ibid). Greater centralization and greater influence of the Shang is revealed by the spread of Shang bronze styles, as similar vessels have been uncovered in Anhui, Guangxi, or Guangdong. Allan suggests that the Shang stylistic influence derives from its wealth and domination. The wealthy acquired similar vessels and emulated the Shang practices and rituals as to signify elevated their status. The level of emulation varied depending on geographical location. Shang vessels styles often underwent localization like in Dayangzhou Xin'gan in Jiangxi Province. Cultures surrounding the Yangzi, for instance, persisted in their local traditions and preferred Shang styles, Zun and Lei. Similarly, in remote regions, Shang bronze vessels are used out of their original ceremonial context (ibid).

The Shang dynasty oversaw the further development of a slave owning society, as well as increasing social stratification, resulting from private ownership and inheritance. Struggle and tension between the classes, nobles, commoners, slaves, replaced supposed mutual love and harmony. The Shang capital,

Yinxu (Anyang), was the center of administration and religion. Sharp and permanent class divisions had the king, his family, princes, courtiers at the top, farmers, and craftsmen at the bottom. The upper classes received tribute both in grain and in precious objects, lived in large houses and were buried in pits filled with furnishing, slaves, chariots. The lower classes comprised of farmers and craftsmen, who produced bronze, lacquer, and wood works. They used pottery vessels instead of bronze vessels and lived in pit houses. The captives are the worst off, as they were coerced to aid in earthworks and were often sacrificed in temples or burials (Chang, 1977).

The Zhou

The Zhou dynasty is considered to be a continuum of the Shang. The pre-dynastic Zhou culture was highly influenced by Shang culture. Mustering strength as a political entity and rival of the Shang, the Zhou dynasty eventually overthrew the Shang (Barnes, 2015). It is this culture which produced the object and style in question.

The Zhou dynasty was established by King Wu in 11th century BCE, with its capital in Haojing (current day Xi'an, Shan'xi province) (Wang, 2019). Because the Zhou dynasty did not have clearly distinct religious and political practices of their own, they inherited Shang ritual and political practices, enabling them to further elaborate and extend inherited traditions (Aiguo et al., 1989). While the Shang dynasty distinguished class through the acquisition of bronze vessels, the Zhou developed a practice of inscriptions on bronze vessels to accommodate a more systematic network of political authority. Inscriptions on bronze vessels recorded mandates from the central power of the Zhou, which bestowed legitimate control to local authorities (Allan, 2007). Inscriptions recorded not just "grants of authority", but also appointments, wars, lawsuits, to be passed on to later generations. Furthermore, the hierarchical tripod lining system was developed, in which higher ranking noblemen were allowed more tripods and more meat (Wang, 2019).

In the Zhou dynasty, class distinctions increased in significance. The Shang was the first class-based society in Chinese history and was termed the slave society. However, in the Zhou dynasty a feudalist society began to

take hold, where royals, statesmen and noblemen were designated different areas to establish regional states via mandate, resulting in the expansive territory for the Zhou Dynasty (ibid). And like previous periods, increased social stratification was paralleled with the further development of the system of slavery. Though independent, regional states owed allegiance to the Zhou due to superior standing religiously and militarily (Feng, 2003). Greater centralization allowed for more organized production of handicrafts in state owned workshops, which manufactured items with advanced division of labor (Wang, 2019).

Though the Zhou dynasty was kept peaceful through the perfection of Shang practices, the Zhou weakened due to power struggles, riots, and outside forces. Eventually, the barbarian tribe Quanrong invaded the capital in 771 BC, officially ending the Western Zhou. The Zhou dynasty persisted in the form of Eastern Zhou, with King Ping relocating the capital to Luoyi (Luoyang, Henan Province) in 770 BC (ibid).

The Stylistic Development of Bronze Vessels

The three dynasties were similar in their emphasis on ritual activity and the involvement of bronze vessels in them. "Record on Example" in the Book of Rites summarizes the development between the above-mentioned periods as the following: The Xia period is characterized by "respecting fate", the Shang "respecting gods", and the Zhou "respecting rites", composed of rituals and music which they established based on Shang traditions (Chen, 2022). Thus, while the stylistic development of Chinese Bronze vessels in the three kingdoms period can be considered to be, overall, conservative, it does closely follow the developments of Chinese ritual culture.

One tradition that has been held consistent throughout the evolution of bronze vessels is that of high abstraction, achieved through the omission of details when representing concrete forms in favour of patterns. The tradition originates in prehistoric China where, rather than presenting people or animal life in a realistic manner, they are consistently altered and stylized, perhaps even rendered into symbols, as depicted upon pottery vessels. Thus, bronze vessels

inherited this practice of depiction, as well as the application of these patterns and motifs through integrating them along with complementing geometric patterns, as it is for primitive Chinese pottery vessels (Chen, 2022). Further stylistic changes in bronze vessels are generally related to the balance and harmonization of the different decorative elements to achieve different visual effects.

The changes in bronze vessel styles correlate with dynastic changes, and an overview will be given below. Bronze vessels produced within the realms of the Xia period are distinguished by their simplicity and rawness, due to lack of technological development. Shang dynasty bronzes are solemn and 'mysterious', as influenced by the culture's heavy ritualistic culture and beliefs in ghosts and spirits. This style persisted in the Western Zhou during peak of political centralization in the three dynasties. Shang and Western Zhou bronzes are both influenced by the belief sense of divine and royal power, and the vessels are meant to showcase that of its owner.

In the Late Western Zhou Dynasty to Early Spring and Autumn Period, bronze vessels turned towards a more ornamental style due to the fading out of strict ritualistic practices – part of the political centralization of the Zhou dynasty. Towards the Warring States period, bronze vessel styles moved toward greater brilliancy as bronze ware became increasingly dissociated from royal and ritual use and became more of a status symbol. This enhanced artistic freedom, encouraging the invention of new ornaments (ibid).

The section above serves to provide a concise but relevant overview of the key social, political, and technological developments necessary for contextualizing the bronze studied in this paper. The author proposes that the discursion is justified insofar as the dearth of similar comparative analyses within scholarship more generally has produced excellent scholars of Ancient China with limited knowledge of Ancient Greece, and vice-versa. This same justification is extended to the next overview, which treats the cultural history of the Greek Geometric style in similar vein.

Historical Context: Greece Minoan

Archeological study of the island of Crete reached a zenith in the twentieth century, decades after similar investigation of many other sites in Europe. The historical narrative of the Minoan civilization has been subsequently constructed through using information gleaned from excavation. Like in China, much of Minoan history is surrounded by myth, such as the stories of the Minotaur in the maze of Knossos, and Daedalus and Icarus's escape with wax binding feathered wings. In fact, in 1917, after excavations conducted by Evans in 1900, it was commonly speculated that the island of Crete was in fact the mythical city of Atlantis (Balch, 1917).

Archeological findings dated to between 3100 to 1900 B.C. reveal various small settlements and burials, which indicate trading networks with Egypt and the Near East, exchanging goods and items ranging from cloth, timber, foodstuff, olive oil, for copper, tin, gold, silver, and ivory (Lobell, 2015). After around 2000 B.C., Minoans developed a palatial system, where the appearance of palaces, or multistoried building complexes, such as the site of Knossos, associated by Evans to the mythical Minotaur, showcased the sophistication of Minoan civilization. These palaces were often equipped with elaborate staircases, sophisticated drainage and plumbing, and were decorated with brightly colored frescoes. Minoan civilization collapsed suddenly around 1450 B.C., indicated by the widespread destruction of palaces (ibid). It should be noted that while the use of the English "palace" reflects their size and scale relative to surrounding buildings, these complexes are described by historians as "autonomous entities used for communal rituals and ceremonies" rather than centers for centralized administration (ibid).

Unique Minoan culture is exemplified by their distinct writing system, Linear A, as well as in their pottery. Minoan pottery is generally decorated with various motives of great vitality: abstract curvilinear patterns and natural forms such as marine creatures, frogs, flowers, and leaves; organized in side-by-side units and spiral strips, later in radiating and revolving schemes (Higgins, 1981). Sadly, while many pottery fragments remain, Linear A is left undeciphered to us today and

much of the civilization remains shrouded in mystery.

Minoan culture exerts a strong influence on its contemporaries and those that follow, including that of Mycenae, such that Cretan-inspired skills, techniques, styles, and symbols are often evident in the material culture of early Mycenae. Minoanization, or the process in which other Aegean civilizations adopt Minoan traits, is theorized to have been caused by either trade, where interaction breeds emulation, or import substitution, where deliberate imitation of Cretan pottery "substitutes" were created, depending on the specific civilization addressed (Broodbank, 2004). What is known, however, is the close relationship between Crete and Mycenae, evidenced by mostly pottery remains in sites such as Midea, of both Cretan imports and imitations of Cretan pottery (Demakopoulou, 2004).

Mycenae

By the Late Bronze Age, around 1600 to 1100 BC, mainland Greece was dotted by the city-states of Pylos, Tiryns, Midea, Orchomenos, Thebes, and Athens. However, the most significant site was none other than Mycenae, after which the culture of Late Bronze Age Greece was named after. Written texts in Linear B used in administration documents reveal uniformity and standardization, with standardized clay tablets, terminology, and systems of taxation and distribution. Politically, in Mycenaean kingdoms the central palace, or palatial center, governed over the territory, which was divided into provinces, each with its administration center. Provinces were then divided into districts, *Damoi* in Greek, often headed by leaders, *Basileus* in Greek (Kelder, 2010). Mycenaean kingdoms were also often recorded to have been in contact with other Mediterranean cultures. The Tanaju kingdom centered around Mycenae was recorded to have diplomatic contact with Amarna period Egypt, with whom the Mycenaeans exchanged diplomatic gifts and traded with. Such trade resulted in import of Mycenaean pottery, the presence of olives, and the possible depiction of Mycenaean warriors on a papyrus scrolls (ibid). Similarly, written records dating from 1400 to 1200 BC of Hittites in Anatolia reveal dislike and discontent directed at the Ahhiyawan kingdom from the Aegean, whom they

admit being a “Great Power”, an independent state with sizable military and territory (ibid).

Mycenae held an impressive array of art forms, especially goldwork, made into funeral masks, and vessels. Mycenaean art forms were originally influenced by Minoan imports; for instance, a gold cup that is said to be from Mycenae from the sixteenth century has no close equivalents in Mycenaean goldwork, but its shape is close to Minoan terracotta cups of the early fifteenth century BC (Hemingway, 2012).

To some extent, despite being a separate cultural entity, Mycenae was a continuum of Crete. Mycenaean Linear B was used on the Greek mainland and Crete 50–150 years later than Linear A, and they are closely related, according to research by Dr. Ester Salgarella. Linear B utilizes the same graphic system, or script, as Linear A, though the language is different (Claus, 2023).

The Greek “Dark Ages”

While China enters the Zhou dynasty in first millennium BC, complex socio-political entities in the Mediterranean “collapse” into what is commonly referred to as the Dark Ages. The causes of the aforementioned collapse are debated, though one popular but not widely accepted theory is the Dorian invasion (Cook, 1962). The “Dark Ages” typically describes the Greece’s transition from the late bronze age to the early Iron Age, roughly from 1200 BC to 770 BC, starting with the fall of Mycenae and ending with the rise of Greek city states (Lemos, 2023). The period receives its name from the perceived decline in the sophistication of culture: “depopulation and migration, poverty in material culture and living standards, a sharp decline of high art, the loss of writing, the demise of contacts within the Aegean, and relative isolation from the Mediterranean” (Kotsonas, 2016). Most significantly, the fall of Mycenaean *polities*, or early government structures, was accompanied by the entire loss of Linear B writing of Mycenae, leaving a gap in historical records up to 700 BC, when literacy re-emerges with the adaption of the Phoenician alphabet (Stanislawski, 1973). Without historical records, the history in this period is clouded by mystery, another reason it is referred to the “Dark Ages”, drawing the par-

allel with the medieval Dark ages (The cause to the collapse of Mycenae is often associated with the Dorian invasion, but evidence is flimsy. Debate about it is unproductive since Dorians was historically insignificant. See: THE DORIAN INVASION Author(s): R. M. COOK Source: Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society, 1962, NEW SERIES, No. 8 (188) (1962), pp. 16–22 Crisis in Context: The End of the Late Bronze Age in the Eastern Mediterranean Author(s): A. Bernard Knapp and Sturt W. Manning Source: American Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 120, No. 1 (January 2016), pp. 99–149 Published by: Archaeological Institute of America).

Though historically referred to as the Dark Ages due to a perceived lack of production and political organization, the early iron age was also a period of innovation which laid the foundation for the flowering of culture in the archaic and classical periods by establishing the “Mediterranean way of life” (Stanislawski, 1973, p. 399). This includes the invention of iron, the development of swift sailing ships (and the consequent introduction of piracy), and the development of aesthetic traditions on the Greek mainland as derived from Mycenaean (and thereby Minoan) culture. Piracy then began to dominate the lifestyle of the Mediterranean, as well as olive and wine consumption. Overpopulation induced colonization, often enforced by rich individuals who hoped for profit through commercial agriculture exemplified by the planting of produce. There was also continued commercial trade throughout the Mediterranean, which involved the exportation of Corinthian pottery. Notably, eastern influences are evidenced in Greek adoption of lyric poetry, music, as well as the phalanx unit of soldiers in war, which de-emphasized Homeric heroism and increased the demand for iron (Stanislawski, 1973).

Due to the lack of documentation, the socio-political structure of Greece during the Early Iron Age can only be gleaned through speculation and reconstruction, based in part on the poetry. It is often believed that Homer’s stories reflect proto-geometric and geometric Greece, or otherwise named the Early Iron Age, with its stories originating from Mycenaean Greece and influenced by the “manners and morals as well as the institutions of the heroes from the tenth and ninth centuries” (Drews,

1983, p. 98). Such belief is also where most of the scholarly interest in the Greek Dark Ages lies. It is from such interest that our reconstructions of the culture of the Geometric period are derived. Based on such analyses, Geometric period Greece seems to be politically decentralized – small independent farming and pastoral villages dominated (Whitley, 1991). These societies, referred to as *polis*, are led by a *Basileis*. The specific meaning of *Basileis* has undergone debate. Before and after the Geometric age, the word *Basileis* has been used to refer to kings, or rather, exclusive hereditary leaders of the state, but in Homer's time its meaning is stretched to include noblemen too (Drews, 1983). It is theorized that Dark Age Greek society is dominated by *Basileis* who gained power through military or political prowess, attracting followers who are provided some sort of political centralization and economic assistance, creating brotherhoods, or *Phretre* (Dolan, 1985). *Basileis* can be displaced by rival *Basileis* who are more dangerous warriors or more charismatic politicians (ibid). However, in the passage of time, the expanding and contracting *phretre* stabilized along its borders, developing internal structures, religion, and hereditary membership. The theory is often referred to 'big-men' model, which succeeds in explaining the instability of Greek settlements such as the Lefkandi and Kavousi, especially in the early Dark Ages, in the 12th to 10th centuries BC, though the trend seems to linger in 8th century BC (Whitley, 1991). The model also helps explain why settlements such as the Kavousi, Vronda, and Lefkand are situated around one large house, as the house, according to this model, would be where *Basileis* attracts followers, in a personal level, in extravagant feasts (ibid). Yet, the 'big-men' model is in no sense the only model proposed nor the only model grounded in archaeological evidence. It is likely that Dark Age Greece was more diverse in its social structure, in that social structure could vary by region (ibid). Another model, relevant to the present discussion, is that of the 'Nuristan', which is somewhat analogous to the situation in Athens. The Nuristan model, unlike the 'big-men' model, suggests stable settlements, which seems to be the case for Athens, evidenced by its stable cemetery, which is also all that remains of the settlements (ibid).

The Development of Geometric Pottery Styles

Having provided an overview of the socio-cultural development of Greece up until the relevant point in time, we can now align the development of pottery styles to their historic context.

Mycenean pottery owes much to Cretan influence in its early years, though after the fall of Minoan palatial structures and the rise of Mycenean ones in 1400–1200 B.C., Mycenean pottery developed its regional and distinctive styles. (Hemingway, 2012) (This source from the MET comprehensively explores the art of Aegean civilizations from Minoan, Mycenae, Cyclades, etc.) In the Dark Ages, a new style of pottery, succeeding Cretan and Mycenean styles, was developed in Attica, around Athens – the Protogeometric.

Protogeometric pottery, unearthed in Athenian sites such as Kerameikos and the Agora, is distinguished by its highly geometric, simple, harmonic style. With the appearance of the Protogeometric comes the resurgence of exemplar production: clay is better prepared and baked, the paint is better burnished and lustrous, and pottery shapes are firmer, more proportioned, and symmetric. The style showcases a continuum of traditional pottery shapes, though the style of ornamentation seems to diverge from previous ones. In the later stages, the dark ground technique meant much of the vessels were covered in black, with few bands of ornamentation comprised of concentric circles and semicircles with or without central filling; hatched triangles, rectangles, diamonds, check-patterns, opposed groups of diagonals, wavy lines, and zig-zags. Unlike previous Mycenean styles, which conceive the entire vessel as a whole and are decorated as such in fluidity, the Protogeometric vessels are divided into distinct sections: the neck, the shoulder, the belly, section from the belly to the foot, and the foot is similar to bronze vessels in China. According to Desborough (1948) and Cook (1997), in the Protogeometric, within the system of sections, ornamentation is confined to only one section of the vessel, usually the neck, giving the style its reserved, simplistic look. This change toward a more geometricized and less organic aesthetic composed through a more orderly system

would sustain a long-lasting influence on later vessel styles.

After the Protogeometric style, the Geometric style succeeds it as the dominating style. Developed in 900 B.C., it too existed within the realm of the Dark Ages in Athens, though like Cretan and Mycenaean styles, its influence far extends beyond where it originated. Like the Protogeometric, Geometric pottery has generally been discovered in burial sites, and in the same sites too, much to our convenience.

Geometric pottery went through a rapid stylistic transition at the start. In the Experimental Phase (EG I), only a select few Protogeometric motifs such as the zigzag, the check pattern, the dogtooth, and the groups of opposed diagonals were inherited. The Geometric style rejected Protogeometric circular ornamentation, instead embracing a much more rectilinear style, with the battlement and the meander as its defining features. EG I kept the Protogeometric dark ground technique, though with a glossier glaze and different position of ornamentation. The revolutionary structural change is a result of its shift towards rectilinearity. In the Protogeometric phase, decoration is limited to the shoulder, which was the most suitable for circular ornamentation. In the EG I however, decoration is often placed in narrow bands at the neck (between the handles) and belly, where the smoother surfaces are better suited for its more reserved linearity style. Later Geometric phases will inherit the experimental phase's rectilinearity, though not its structure (Coldstream, 2005).

Following EG I, EG II, the Athenian Geometric phase of the Geometric style cemented the inventions and breakthroughs of EG I, consolidating into a formulaic system of decoration: a panel of decoration at the handle and one zone elsewhere. The main invention in EG II is the gradual distinction between larger and smaller motifs, the latter of which evolves to serve the role of the ancillary. The most common large motif is the meander, the most common ancillary the dogtooth and the zigzag (ibid).

Around 850 B.C., 'Dark Age' Attica experienced rapid advancement in naval technology and communication, trade with the near East such as Levant and Phoenicians,

and material prosperity. One consequence of increased trade with Phoenicians was the acquisition of gold and ivory as well as the advanced techniques needed to shape them, which appear to have been lost in the intervening period after the demise of Mycenae. This was accompanied as by the Phoenician alphabet, which was adopted in lieu of both Linear A and B. New economic conditions stimulated, yet again, a change in styles, this time the transition from early to middle geometric pottery. In the MG I phase; we notice an expansion of decoration panels. At some point panels at the neck expand to coincide with the entire length of the handles.

Some additional stylistic changes occurred in the MG II, 830–770 B.C., with the invention of the hatched meander, which, along with the multiple zig zag, acted as the central bands of ornamentation, supported by ancillary motifs.

With the coming of the Dipylon Master we welcome the final Late Geometric stage (ibid) (The Dipylon Master was a revolutionary ceramicist who invented the late geometric style. Ibid). The Dipylon pioneers stylistic change by covering the entire vessel with continuous web of ornament, while retaining emphasis of the focal points of the vessel, the neck, shoulder, the belly, through larger main motifs or figured scenes, harmoniously supported by minor motifs. The Late Geometric stage undergoes two smaller sub phases, though it coincides more with the vitality of specific painters and workshops (Coldstream 2005). The final exhaustion of Geometric styles coincided with the rise of the human figure being depicted extensively in pottery, first in black figure and later in red figure too (Cook, 1997).

Like Chinese Bronze vessels, Greek pottery vessels appear to have had certain ritualistic functions. Most of these vessels, such as amphorae and urns, are part of Dark Age burial practices (Coldstream 2005). According to accounts, in the ceremony, while the corpse is being burned on the pyre, relatives and friends hold a funeral feast in the person's honor. Several vessels are thrown into the pyre and smashed. After the cremation, the charred bones are collected and placed into the urn, which is lowered into the trench along with his or her possessions, often related to the person's profession. The hole is

afterward filled in, then marked with a stone slab (*ibid*). The amphorae accompanying the burial are often extremely ornate, due to their dual function as a symbol of wealth and status, in similar vein to the Chinese bronzes.

Stylistic Comparison

A synoptic view of the twin histories of Ancient Greece and China have been given in order to highlight the effects of shifting social and political terrains on the functions and design of particular artefacts. We come now to a comparative analysis of the material evidence of the two aesthetic traditions. Below are pictures of two vessels from Attica and China respectively, in the same time frame. The artifacts selected below are considered by scholars to be typical of the styles they belong to.



Figure 1. Belly-handled Amphora Attributed to the Dipylon Painter Greek, from Athens, Late Geometric, 760–750 BCE Pottery. National Archaeological Museum, Athens



Figure 2. Wine Container (*hu*) China, Eastern Zhou dynasty, 770–256 BCE Metalwork. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The Dipylon Amphora

The Dipylon Amphora is covered by geometric ornamentation. It is dated to 760–750 BCE, and is now situated in the National Ar-

chaeological Museum, Athens. Like most Late Geometric style Greek pottery, the only empty black surfaces are found near the foot. There is great variety between the bands of ornamentation, employing a range of traditional patterns, such as the classic hatched meander, dog tooth, and cross hatched diagonals. Key motifs, such as the hatched meander, are meticulously balanced with ancillary motifs to achieve an equilibrium pleasing to the eye. Despite the crowded *horror vacui* composition of the ceramic surface, there is a lack of movement, as the ornamentation is limited to strictly geometric patterns drawn with thin lines on a very small scale compared to the vessel's colossal size, layered in multiple bands.

At the focal point of the amphora, its shoulders, stand several vivid stylized human figures, participating in what seems to be like a burial ceremony. These figures are integrated into and complemented by the uniformity of the rest of the vase, as their presence is minimized through their geometricized body and slender proportions. At the center we find a person lying down, who is supposedly the dead here, surrounded by people both kneeling and standing, with their hands to their heads in despair. The imagery corresponds to the function of the vessel, as the amphora is used in the burial rites described earlier (Bohen, 1991).

The Eastern Zhou Hu

The bronze wine container from the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 B.C.) is dated to the 5th century B.C., and is now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The vessel is topped by a closely fitting lid, elaborately decorated like the vessel itself. The patterns atop the vessel are in low relief rather than painted, now much harder to perceive due to its now mottled surface due to corrosion. Unlike the Dipylon Amphora, this vessel is moderately sized for practical use as a wine container. Like the Dipylon Amphora however, in this vessel ornamentation is also organized into bands. The neck of the vessel is decorated by enlarged dog tooth patterns, the rest of the vessel body is covered by various traditional Chinese patterns in repetition. Like the Dipylon amphora, the Hu also distinguishes between main and ancillary motifs, in which the main animal motifs are framed by Yun Lei motifs atop pro-

truding cornices. These patterns are far from geometric, but rather quite complex and ornate, yet because of its rectilinearity, low relief, and *horror vacui* composition, the vessel radiates, in the author's opinion, a similar austere yet magnificent quality.

Also, very much like the Dipylon Amphora, the Hu also integrates elements that are more representational. Atop the lid, three small animals crouch facing outwards, while the two handles at the vessel's shoulders are shaped like a monster holding a ring in its mouth. These elaborate elements are integrated smoothly into the rest of the vessel.

Development: A Comparative Analysis

The Dipylon Amphora and the Hu are artifacts from wholly unrelated cultural traditions. Despite employing different techniques and materials, there are significant visual similarities to be observed, as demonstrated above in the visual analysis section. Both vessels are decorated by a *horror vacui* composition, with the entire vessel surface covered with detailed and intricate designs and patterns at a small scale, balanced in proportionate bands to achieve a harmonious, elegant, and austere effect. Both vessels are dominated by abstract rectilinear decorations with pictorial representations incorporated within it.

However, the development of the respective artistic traditions differs considerably due to different socio-economic and political circumstances. In Greece, little succession in political centers results in little succession in style. The cultural center shifts from Minoan Crete to Mycenae, then to Athens in the Dark Ages. Because of geographical movement, the change between pottery styles is more drastic. Growing socio-political centers are influenced by previous ones, but as they emerge and begin to dominate, these remnants of older styles are mitigated and eliminated. The only exception is in the Dark Ages, in which cultural center had been situated, unchanged, for two centuries, which led to the consistent development of the Geometric pottery style, which bore greater resemblance to Chinese bronze traditions. In China, while there is a change in dynasties, succeeding dynasties often deliberately maintained a continuity in rites, to justify their political power through

mythical narrative. The Zhou, for instance, focused on succeeding the rites of the Shang, which accounted for their similar styles.

The rarity of art, due to the rarity of its material and the skill needed to create it, endows it with a social function of a status symbol, which holds true for both ancient cultures, despite the differences in social structure (Murray, 1991). In both cultures, the function of these vessels has transcended the original function of vessels, which is to hold or contain something, to symbolize wealth, power, and prestige. Though not much about these ancient social systems are confirmed, scholars propose that while Greek social structures were pervasively more fluid, from the decentralized palatial structures in Minoan Crete and the proposed "big men" model for the Dark Ages, social stratification was significant, and artifacts such as the Dipylon Vase were only to be enjoyed by a select elite. In China, status is frequently inherited, and as in Greece, vessels are important status symbols. Furthermore, in China especially, such vessels hold significance because they symbolize the exercisable power over land and people entrusted by the crown, or a mandate to power. In early Greece, when there is a lack of artistic production, pottery is frequently imported to showcase wealth and power. Similarly, both Greek pottery vessels and Chinese bronze vessels are used in relation to rituals concerning the supernatural. Pottery vessels are used in popular cremation burial practices in the dark ages, whereas bronze vessels are used in elaborate rituals in China to affect nature.

Thus, we can see that the materiality and ornamentation of these two objects encapsulate and represent the histories of the cultures which produced them. While their apparent resemblance may be misleading for anyone seeking to argue for cultural contact, the resemblance nevertheless serves to draw our attention to similar processes and developments within two influential civilizations.

To further illustrate this, we may analyze aesthetic principles underlying ornamentation in the respective cultures, particularly in respect of representation. First, we may draw a close comparison between the geometric patterns from Greek Geometric pottery and the Chinese ritual bronze, taking the

Greek meander pattern and the Chinese *Yun Lei wen* as examples due to their longevity, since both patterns have persisted throughout the stylistic evolution of the respective schools. The meander was derived from the proto-geometric period, heavily influenced by Mycenaean pottery, and was popularized throughout the geometric period despite significant stylistic shifts in the Late Geometric. On the other hand, the *Yun Lei* was also popular throughout the Xia, Shang, and Zhou (Chen, 2022). Visually, these patterns are remarkably similar. They act as bands of ornamentation supplementary to more significant pictorial representations, though they may also in patterned surfaces when pictorial elements were lacking (this is more frequently the case for Greek pottery) (Ibid). The *Yun Lei* motif is composed of lines winding in round and angular spirals, rendering *Yun Lei* decoration bands similar to the Greek meander. However, while attempts in the 1930s to assign the Greek meander representational meaning have failed, the *Yun Lei* is noted to represent the powers of nature, the round spirals representing clouds (*Yun*) and the angular ones representing thunder (*Lei*) (Müller, 1933). In addition, the nature of pictorial representations on the respective vessels also differ. While the figures atop the Dipylon Amphora could be described as narrative and anthropomorphic (Falkenhausen, 2008), the birds atop the Hu vessel is purely decorative, though more naturalistic. Perhaps this early difference in representation accounts for the divergence in the development of these two artistic traditions. The narrative and anthropomorphic depictions enveloped by geometric motifs lay precedent to the development of classical Athenian pottery. On the other hand, due to the political instability, the development of bronze vessels is less traceable. In the Late Eastern Zhou dynasty, anthropomorphic narrative illustrations, or in other words, “figures in action” appeared atop bronze vessels for the first time. These bronze vessels are often termed “pictorial bronzes” (ibid, p. 54). An example of this would be a hu vessel excavated at Baihuatan, Chengdu, Sichuan, canonized in its appearance in *The Great Bronze Age of China* edited by Wen Fong (Fong, 1980) (Fig. 3)

The pictorial representations upon this vessel are quite similar to those upon the Dipylon Amphora. However, in this vessel, the characteristic geometric motifs are no longer present, illustrating how the traditions of bronze vessels have been lost due to political instability.

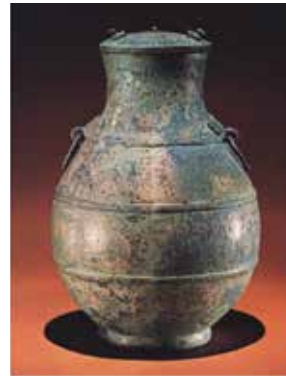


Figure 3. Hu. China, Late Eastern Zhou Dynasty, late 6th–5th century B.C. Metalwork Sichuan Sheng Bowuguan, Chengdu

Thus, we may conclude that Greek Geometric pottery and Chinese ritual bronze traditions resembled in form and style, due to their similarity in composition and compositional elements, but differed in representation, which accounted for its later divergence in form and style.

Conclusion

The incipient idea for this paper was to investigate the underlying causes for the similarities in stylistic motifs among Greek geometric pottery and the Chinese bronzes. The paper has therefore focused on building a synoptic view of the two cultures and contextualizing the vessels therein. The Dipylon Amphora is a product of a long pottery tradition, spanning from Minoan Crete, to Mycenae, then to the Greek Dark Ages, which underwent significant shifts as the cultural center moved from one place to the next. Greek social structures were fluid, and political structures decentralized. Trade in the Mediterranean flourished as Greece participated in a network of artistic influences with other Mediterranean cultures. The Hu is part of China’s long tradition of bronze ritual vessels, which underwent gradual change through the dynasties of the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou. Springing from the mysterious sites of the Erlitou and Erligang, the successors

stayed in these areas and continued their bronze traditions as a symbol of their lineage and mandate to power. Trade is much less significant in ancient China, though artistic influence between various settlements still exists.

In the analysis, the comparison has been conducted in three levels. First, analysis of historical and political development highlighted how (in)stability influenced both Greek and Chinese artistic tradition in terms of consistency. Greek settlements were situated in the midst of the Mediterranean, rendering them susceptible to assimilating stylistic characteristics of nearby cultures. In China however, the lack of independent rival foreign powers maintained a more stable lineage of bronze vessel traditions.

Second, the stylistic traditions were linked to the relevant cultures' sociology, which revealed that while differences in social structure between Greek and Chinese settlements cannot be ignored, in both worlds, the function of these vessels extended beyond physical utility as containers, demonstrating wealth and power. In both cases, the vessels were integrated into elaborate ritualistic practices to further reinforce their importance.

Third, the two specific vessels, both from the final periods of their artistic traditions,

were analyzed aesthetically. From the analysis we may deduce a similar visual preference between the two cultures, which is a tendency of rectilinearity and maximalism in applying abstract patterns, combined with pictorial representations introduced as a focal point. The utilization of this certain style seems to correlate with the intention to consolidate an idea of power and or prestige, as well as the maturation of the artistic tradition that results from political stability, as mentioned before.

By employing a comparative methodology, this paper highlights shared human experiences across different civilizations, prompting a re-evaluation of prevailing narratives in the study of ancient art. This case study illustrates how art reflects the intricacies of societal evolution, political dynamics, and economic strategies, thereby deepening our comprehension of human history. This author advocates for a cross-cultural perspective that addresses historiographical gaps and fosters a nuanced recognition of human artistic endeavors. Through similar interdisciplinary approaches, such papers call for a reassessment of how art history is integrated into larger cultural studies, and the role of comparative analyses in refining our understanding of the interplay between social, political, economic, and aesthetic structures.

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