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## The Aesthetic Standard of *Wen*: A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Early Artworks

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### Abstract:

A comparative study of the ancient Chinese and Western artworks over the same period (from approximately 3300 B.C. to 200 B.C) shows that the dense and rich decorative patterns on the bronze wares in China represent a strong aesthetic appreciation of patterns/embellishment, while their counterparts in the West demonstrate an aesthetic orientation rooted in science, evident in nude bodies in bronze and marble. It is argued that there was a very obvious essential difference between Chinese and Western aesthetic values, and these divergent aesthetic orientations were present at the origins of the Pre-Qin and ancient Greek arts where they have been absorbed into the foundation of each culture.

**Keywords:** Chinese aesthetic feature, Western aesthetic feature, *wenhua*/embellishing, science

### Izveček:

Komparativna študija starodavnih kitajskih in zahodnih umetniških izdelkov iz enakega obdobja (od približno 3300 do 200 p.n.š.) razkrije, da strnjeni in bogati dekorativni vzroci na kitajskih bronastih posodah predstavljajo močno estetsko vrednotenje vzorcev oz. okrasja, medtem ko izdelki na zahodu nazorno prikažejo estetsko usmerjenost, ki izvira iz znanosti, kar je jasno razvidno iz bronastih in marmornih golih teles. Članek prikazuje, da so obstajale bistvene razlike med kitajskimi in zahodnimi estetskimi vrednotami. Tovrstna raznolika estetska vrednotenja so bila prisotna že v izvorni umetnosti obdobja pred

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dinastijo Qin in stare Grčije, kjer so bile kot take vsebovane v osnovanju posamične kulture.

**Ključne besede:** Kitajske estetske poteze, zahodne estetske poteze, *wenhua*/okras, znanost

## 1 Introduction

What is the essential feature of Chinese aesthetics? This is an interesting yet seemingly unanswerable question. Although this question has been discussed at great length from various points of view, little reflection and understanding has been addressed to the fundamental character of Chinese art. And almost all of those referring to the features of the Chinese art or aesthetics trace the origins of the Chinese and Western arts to the ancient Pre-Qin (先秦 the times before 221 B.C.) and ancient Greek eras respectively, which is obviously absurd (Liu 1999). This paper aims to elaborate this point by emphasizing certain features of ancient Chinese and Western arts and their aesthetic values, mainly through a comparative study of artworks made from 4000 to 2100 years ago.

We would like to make the following explanations in order to generate further discussion.

- A. In a sense, as a part of human culture, the features of art in the world are largely identical but with minor differences. Thus in this paper what is referred to as a typical feature of Chinese aesthetics, the *wenshi* (紋飾 embellishing/patterning) feature, is not contained exclusively in Chinese culture. Rather, it means that the Chinese culture is permeated with the embellishing or ornamenting elements: in other words, it has more complicated and enriched expressions of embellishing or ornamentation than other cultures.
- B. The reason we coin a term *wenhua* (紋化 embellishing/ornamentation) to describe the aesthetical orientation of Chinese artworks is that the character *wen* (紋) epitomizes Chinese aesthetic ideas and the common feature of the Chinese artworks. The original character of *wen* (紋) is *wen* (文). According to *Shuowen jiezi* (*Origin of Chinese Characters*), the earliest dictionary compiled in the Eastern Han Dynasty (東漢 121 A.D.), it means interlaced strokes (文, 錯畫也) (Xu 1981, 450). Wan

Yun's (王筠) definition more clearly states that “*wen* (pattern) forms through interlaced drawing” (錯而畫之，乃成文也) (Wang 1987, 56). That is the original meaning of *wen* (文), but it also includes embellishment, or beautification (紋化). This argument has been challenged by the modern expert palaeographer Zhu Fangpu (朱芳圃), who claims that the original meaning of *wen* is rather that of tattoo, of drawing patterns on the human body (Zhu 1962, 67). Whether Zhu's scepticism is right or wrong, it offers further evidence of the existence of the beautifying feature of Chinese culture. In other words, the etymological study suggests that such a beautifying feature was already mature in the preliterate Chinese culture.

- C. In this paper, the word “West” is used in its broadest sense with respect to China, intended to gloss both Mediterranean and Mesopotamian cultures. In this paper the artworks used for comparison are mainly from ancient Greece, Egypt and China.
- D. Another indefinable term applied in this paper is “Bronze Age.” Worldwide, the Bronze Age generally followed the Neolithic age, but the dates varied in different areas. The end of Bronze Age in any particular culture is to some extent a convenience for classification purposes, and is also considered to have varied geographically (Childe 1930; Fong 1980, xv). Historians also have different opinions regarding the ending date of the “Bronze Age” in China either by the replacement of iron tools as is applied in European and Middle Eastern history or by the persistence of bronze in tools, weapons and sacred vessels. When we mention the Bronze Age in China, we adopt the commonly accepted timeline, from 21st century B.C.–500 B.C. (White 1956, 208; Barnard 1961, 14; Chang 1986, 1; NGA 2010; Liu 2005; Jiang 2010). Therefore, for the purpose of a comparative study of bronze wares in China and the West, the term “Bronze Age” will be used in its broad sense, namely the period of any culture during which the most advanced metalworking in that culture uses bronze. It refers to a period approximately lasting from 3300 B.C.–500 B.C. and bronze wares made in ancient Greek, Egypt and China during this period of time will be put together for comparison.

## 2 The Chinese Aesthetic Feature of *Wenhua* (紋化) in the Bronze Age

From the late Xia Dynasty (夏, 2070–1600 B.C.) China entered into the Bronze Age, an advance that featured the diversification of *wenhua* (紋化 embellishing/ornamentation). The colours and lines of *wen* (紋 patterns) on various bronze wares are more distinctive, with richer and more advanced grains, lines and textures. They are mainly patterns representing animals and plants. Most of these are related to the worship of dragon and phoenix, such as the *taotie* (饕餮), a bizarre, imaginative animal, and the *kuilong* (夔龍), a one-legged monster dragon, or the crawling dragon, coiled dragon, symmetrical twin dragons, flood dragon, serpent, and sea horse, etc. There are also patterns representing the more familiar bird, tiger, goat and dog, etc.<sup>1</sup>

A number of works on Chinese aesthetic features assert that Chinese people in the Bronze Age believed in a “Ferocious beauty 獷厲的美” (Li 1994, 32)<sup>2</sup>. That is, that beauty lies in ferocity, horror and solemnity, among which *taotie* is a typical representative. Nevertheless, few mention the strong characteristics of embellishing/ornamentation in these bronze wares. Here is an exception, an historian’s comment on the Simuwu quadripod (司母戊鼎, see Fig. 1)—the largest and the most famous bronze sacrificial vessel in the world, unearthed in the mausoleum area of the Yin 殷 ruins. It documents the embellishing feature of Chinese aesthetic appreciation.

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<sup>1</sup> Aesthetic studies on bronze artworks usually pay close attention to the religious meanings of the patterns. Granting these, the fact remains that no matter how many religious attributes those patterns contain, they also embody the development of the aesthetic sense of patterning.

<sup>2</sup> Li Zehou (李澤厚), a contemporary Chinese aesthetician, notes, “According to historical records, the *Taotie* was an auspicious symbol. ... All *Taotie* designs and motifs communicate an overwhelming feeling of mystery, power, terror and ferocity.” (Li 1994, 32–34)

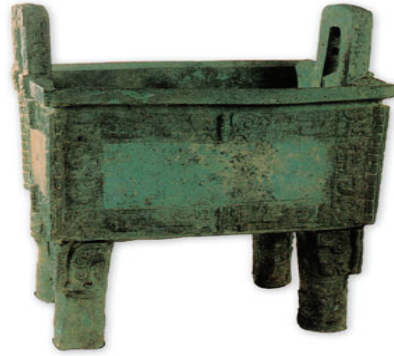


Fig. 1: Simuwu Quadripod in the National Museum of China. (After: Wen 2008)

司母戊鼎紋飾美觀，工藝精巧。除鼎身四面中央是無紋飾的長方形素面外，其餘各處皆有紋飾。鼎身四面在方形素面周圍以饗饗作為主要紋飾，四面交接處，則飾以扉棱，扉棱之上為牛首，下為饗饗。鼎耳外廓有兩隻猛虎，虎口相對，中含人頭，好像被虎所吞噬，俗稱虎咬人頭紋。耳側以魚紋為飾。四隻鼎足的紋飾也匠心獨具，在三道弦紋之上各施以獸面。(Wen 2008)

The Simuwu Quadripod is famous for its exquisite craft and delicate decorative patterns. The four spaces and the central part of the body are unadorned rectangles. But around the four rectangles it is adorned with “Taotie” patterns (紋). The four junctions are decorated with lines of door leaves, above which were figures of oxen and below images of Taotie. The external sides of the ears of the vessel are decorated with two facing tiger heads, with a human head in each tiger’s mouth, hence, named “the pattern of tiger biting man’s head”. The other side of each ear is decorated with patterns of fish. The decoration of the four legs of the vessel show even greater originality, with animal faces over three wavelike lines<sup>3</sup>.

Within this short Chinese passage describing the Simuwu quadripod, the author, Wen Caifeng, repeatedly uses the expression *wen* (pattern/embellish/embellishing/beautify)—8 times the character 紋 (*wen*) and seven 飾 (*shi*) and 紋飾 (*wenshi*)—to depict the bronze, underlining the aesthetics of *wenhua* (ornamentation) of that time.

This Chinese embellishing feature is also embodied in the Four-goat quadripod 四羊方尊 (Fig. 2), often to be deemed a symbol of perfect bronze wares. This

<sup>3</sup> All translations in the text were made by the authors

statue is adorned with lines in bold relief and plane patterns; it also has the patterns of a goat's head and legs, with dragon like lines mingled with the horns of the goat. It embodies the height of the ancient embellishing/patterning art (*wenshi yishu* 紋飾藝術) with complicated interlaced lines and dignified, elegant styled patterns. These famous artefacts demonstrate an ancient strong conviction of beautifying through embellishing/patterning (*yiwenweimei* 以紋為美).



Fig. 2: Four-Goat Quadripod in the National Museum of China.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 3: A kneeling bronze human figure, Sanxingdui Museum, Chengdu.

We ought to ask next whether such embellishing features could have also found expression in the bronze statues of that time. The answer is yes. The bronze wares (mainly body statues and masks) unearthed in Sanxingdui site (三星堆遺址) near Chengdu document a culture existing contemporaneously with the Early and Late Shang (1600–1027 B.C.), and the influence from both Shang and Sanxingdui. Fig. 3 is a kneeling bronze human figure with an exaggerated head and a patterned chest. But it does not show a sense of physical beauty, as we usually find in the

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<sup>4</sup> All the photos in the text, unless stated otherwise, are taken by the authors.

contemporaneous Greek sculptures. There is no sense of proportion or symmetrical features in the statue.

Fig. 4 is a bronze mask, most common among the unearthed relics in Sanxingdui site; it is a patterned ornamentation for a man's head. The casting technique of these bronze masks is said to be the most advanced among those contemporaneous ancient civilizations. The greatly exaggerated eyes, mouth and ears in these masks display both the basic characteristics of the aesthetic value of literary embellishment common in ancient China, and a new way of displaying the human body in the Shang Dynasty. Unfortunately, there are neither any statues of a naked human body, not even a slight sense of physical beauty that was common in ancient Greek bronze statues.

On a technological level it is hard to judge about which is better between Greek and Chinese bronze artworks in this period of time. But aesthetically, it is not so hard to find that the Greek aesthetic standard represented by its beautiful statues of the human body had already reached an entirely new level. The key point about this sense of beauty being different from that of the contemporaneous Chinese bronze works lies in its scientific and empirical features.



Fig. 4: A bronze mask, Sanxingdui Museum, Chengdu.

Let's take a look at the Egyptian bronze mirror (see Fig. 5). The handle of the mirror is a statuette of a naked female with a graceful figure. Each part of the girl's body is in accordance with the Pythagorean idea of beauty in terms of proportion, measure and number (Tatarkiewicz 2005, 80). Thus, it is safe to say it is a mark of

a monumental artwork of both the Egyptian bronze smithery and the mature sense of physical beauty from about 3500 years ago.



Fig. 5: Mirror with a handle in the shape of a young woman, bronze, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

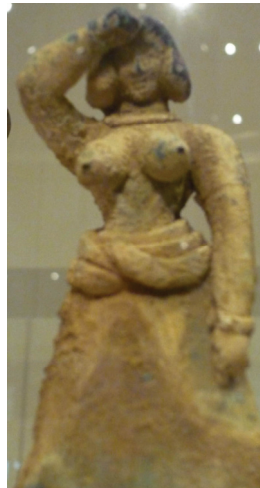


Fig. 6: Bronze female figure, Cretan, Late Minoan I, ca. 1600–1450 B.C. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 6 is a Greek bronze statue of a half-nude girl made in about the same era. Her high and rounded breasts and slender waist reveal her well-proportioned figure and exuberant vitality. It demonstrates not only the high technology in Greece, but also the mature notion of bodily beauty and aesthetic appreciation,



which is not surpassed by other nude artworks in the Axial Age (around 800–200 B.C.).

Aestheticians have sought to explain why ancient Greece became the place of the most brilliant body artworks by claiming that the Pythagoreans found and refined the whole theory of body art. However, these two pieces of artwork from Egypt and Greece irrefutably demonstrate that this sense of physical beauty had existed and already been applied a thousand years before the Pythagorean School. So it might be safe to say that it was this sense of physical beauty that provided the Pythagoreans' theoretical premise, rather than the Pythagoreans who created the theory of physical beauty.

### 3 The Chinese Aesthetic Idea of *Wenhua* in the Axial Age

In China, the period from the Western Zhou Dynasty (西周 ca. 11th century–771 B.C.) to the Qin Dynasty (秦) is roughly the time Karl Jaspers coined “the Axial Age”<sup>5</sup>. During this period the feature of embellishment, evident in bronze wares of the Shang Dynasty, became stronger, with more advanced and more intricate patterns of the animal images.



Fig. 7: Ritual wine container (Hu 壺), Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770–256 B.C.), bronze inlaid with copper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher, designate the term “Achszeit” (Axistime, or Axial Age) to describe the period between around 800–200 B.C., during which similar revolutionary thinking appeared in China, India, and the Occident (Jaspers 1953, 19).



Fig. 8: Bronze Hydria (water jar) Greek, third quarter of the 6th century B.C. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 7 is a bronze jug from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (東周 ca. 770–256 B.C.) in China, and Fig. 8 is a jug cast about the late 6th Century B.C. in Greece. From their appearances we can see that the former has more detailed decorative patterns than the latter. The authors viewed a dozen Greek bronze jugs made in this era (Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) and found that these bronze all show this common feature with other Greek bronze wares made about 4000 years ago, albeit with small discrepancies in model and usage. In contrast, Fig. 7 reveals a feature shared with other bronze jars made in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, with the detailed patterns.

When we turn to human statues in ancient China and Greece the identifiable differences are manifest. Greece in the 600–1 B.C. is often praised by artists and aestheticians as the most glorious place for the expression of physical beauty. Numerous exquisite nude statues made during this period have been studied. During this same period in Northern China there were intact bronze human figures, yet these statues possess the typical Eastern aesthetic feature: embellishment.

Let's look closely at the roughly contemporaneous bronze chariot driver from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty to the Warring States Period (戰國 475–221 B.C.) in Fig. 9. Apart from the heavy cotton-padded jacket and the spiral-shaped coil in his hair highlighting the dress style of the chariot warrior of the time, the patterns on the jacket are the most striking feature. They demonstrate a strong sense of embellishment. In addition, the facial expression of the warrior is quite free, or we may say spiritual, rather than being specific and precise. What's more, the proportion of the warrior's body is not in strict accordance with the anatomical

principle we often find in the Greek statues of this time. Thus, this bronze statue of a warrior can be seen as an epitome of the Chinese aesthetic appreciation.



Fig. 9: Figure of a charioteer, Eastern Zhou Dynasty to the Warring States Period, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

However, when we switch to the Greek tradition, we see a different picture. Fig. 10 is a statue of a Greek athlete. Just like the Chinese warrior he is posing and making a gesture of driving a chariot. But the difference is that the latter is naked, with each part of his body conforming to the golden ratio. This is extremely different from the ornamental features of the Chinese warrior statue.



Fig. 10: Bronze athlete, Greek, ca.450 B.C. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 11: Maogong Ding Tripod 毛公鼎. (After: Ting 1970, 16)

When talking about the typical embellishing feature in the ancient Chinese sense of beauty, we should bear in mind one key thing: The new way of ornamentation appeared in the Pre-Qin era—using Chinese characters as an embellishing pattern (*Yiwenweishi* 以文為飾). For example, the three most important implements—The Maogong ding tripod (毛公鼎, see Fig. 11, 12), San plate (散氏盤, see Fig. 13) and Guojizibai plate (虢季子白盤, see Fig. 14)—were not only fully engraved with patterns inside and outside, but also patterned with characters. These characters, i.e. the earliest calligraphy, add to these implements both a sense of beauty and a precious value of historical material. In this way, the feature of using characters as ornamentation marks great progress in the Chinese sense of embellishment (*wenhuaguan* 紋化觀).

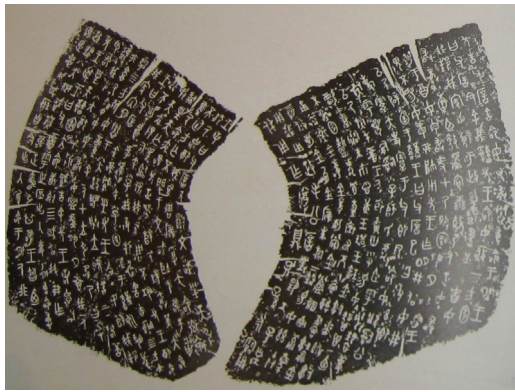


Fig. 12: Inside of Maogong ding tripod 毛公鼎 ornamented with characters.  
(After: Ting 1970, 16)



Fig. 13: San Plate 散氏盤. (After: Ting 1970, 25)



Fig. 14: Guojizibai Plate 虢季子白盤. (After: Ting 1970, 26)

Contrary to this breakthrough in Chinese embellishment with characters, the ancient Greek artists in the Axial age made the most glorious body arts in the history of mankind in their statues of Aphrodite, Laocoon, Zeus (Fig. 15), and so

forth. Associated with these body arts are such aesthetic appreciation of rules as symmetry, proportion, roundness, sphericity, S-shaped curves and the golden ratio, etc. There is no need to repeat this glory, common knowledge to everyone familiar with most artistic theorists and aestheticians. What is important to stress here is that the positivism in the Greek body arts of that time also reached a brand new height. A contemporary Chinese collector Ma Weidu (馬未都) recently visited the Greek Delphi Museum and found details in Greek body art which shows this strong spirit of positivism.



Fig. 15: Bronze Zeus found at Cape Artemisium, ca. 450 B.C., ht. 2.03 m., National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

In Figs. 16 and 17, an incomplete stone carving of a man's body demonstrates a meticulously depicted male closely tied to genuine anatomy, which Ma Weidu highly praised.

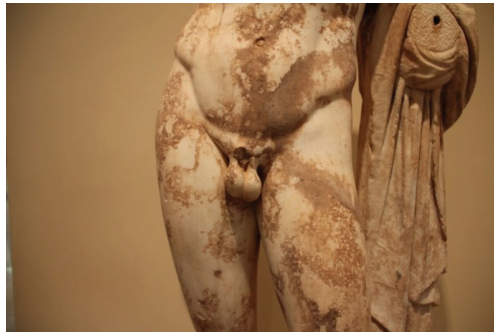


Fig. 16: A Male Torso A. (After: Ma 2011)

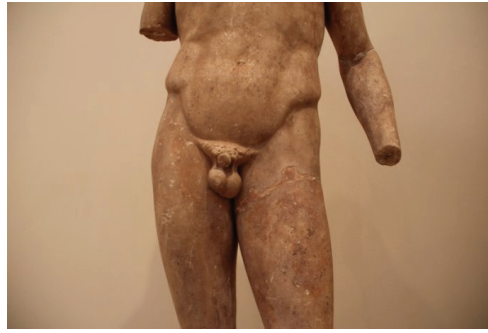


Fig. 17: A Male Torso B. (After: Ma 2011)

The male sex has two testies, which are not in the same plane, one higher and the other lower, generally the testis of the vast majority of men (about 90%) are higher in the left and lower in the right. They are different from other human organs such as ears, nostrils, eyes, hands and feet, which are different but unable to perceive by naked eyes. The testes are not of the same scale and always in upper and lower posture. Those who are not professionals in physiology usually do not know this, but it was accurately displayed in the Greek statues (Ma 2010).

Here, Ma reveals the cultural background of the Greek arts to be the particular stress on solid evidence or science, present at the beginning of Western aesthetic culture. But in these western masterworks, we can not find the typical embellishing feature demonstrated in Chinese artworks.

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