

# Chinese Bronze Vessels

Chinese civilization made great advances as it emerged from the Neolithic period and entered the Bronze Age. One factor in this change was the ability to locate and extract natural deposits of copper and tin for making bronze. Foundries capable of heating the ores to high enough temperatures for mixing and casting metal were established in northern areas of China around 1700 BCE.

(<https://asia.si.edu/learn/ancient-chinese-bronzes/>)

For the ruling elite of ancient China, prestigious objects made of bronze signified supreme political power as well as devout spiritual beliefs and exalted social status. Foremost among these bronzes are vessels that were made for the preparation and offering of food, wine, and water in ceremonial banquets conducted to seek and repay divine ancestral goodwill. Ancient Chinese wine was fermented from grain rather than fruit and, like beer, is best described as a type of millet ale.

(<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/26647/wine-container>)

Although the shapes of archaic vessels are normally given names in their English equivalent, the Chinese actually have precise names for 96 specific shapes for these ritual bronzes ([Asian Art Newspaper](#)). The vessels listed below correspond to the chart of vessel types. Unless otherwise noted, the source of information is from [artsmia.org](http://artsmia.org).

## Food Vessels

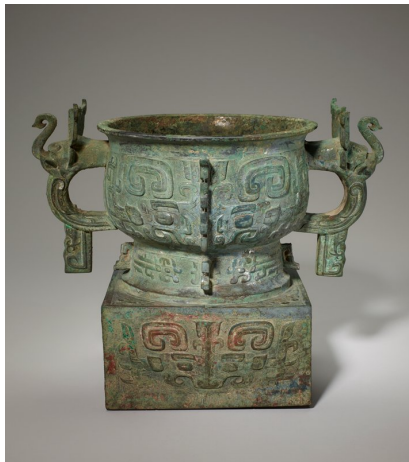
### Ding



Ding – rhymes with “sing” (falling and rising tone)

The ding food cauldron was the most prominent type of ritual vessel in China's Bronze Age. It was among the first cast vessels. Ding were used to cook meat during a ceremony devoted to ancestral spirits. The vertical handles allowed the vessel to be placed over a fire. There were many variations of the ding. This example with squared body is known as fang-ding, or squared ding. The dominant taotie animal-mask motif appears on each face of the vessel, divided by flanges on four corners.

## Gui



Gui – rhymes with “sway” (falling and rising tone)

This gui demonstrates the inventiveness with which Western Zhou artisans adapted Shang forms. The main body is a standard gui with a deep bowl, while the looped handles on either side of the body are innovatively rendered in the form of an elephant's head and trunk. Furthermore, the vessel is elevated by a high, square base. On the main body, the flanges form the centerlines of the familiar bodied taotie. On the base it is the same motif except for the central line, here a slight ridge instead of a flange. The handles, which combine a crested elephant head with a bird's body, are the most remarkable feature of the vessel. The bow displays the wings of a bird in relief, and the projection at the bottom contains the bird's curled tail and its feet descending almost to rest on the tail. The elephant head has large C-shaped ears, raised trunk, and protruding tusks.

## Li



Li – rhymes with “see” (falling tone)

This three-lobed vessel is cast in flat relief with three taotie masks comprising the chief decoration. While the motifs on the upper frieze, where space is more restricted, are simple stylized Ts, the masks on the legs are impressively complex. The pronounced bulging eyes are surrounded by coiled horns; its body and curled tail is shown in profile surrounded by spirals. The tripod is a good example of a Shang bronze ritual vessel whose basic shape evolved from Neolithic and early Bronze Age ceramics.

## Xu



Xu – this one is a little hard to compare to an English word. The best way I can describe it is “she-you”, but all one syllable, and with a slightly closed mouth. (falling and rising tone)

This is one of a pair of Xu vessels. These rare vessels reflect a fundamental change in form and decoration in bronze casting around 900 to 700 BCE. Gone are the animal masks, vibrant animal motifs, and spiral background patterns of Shang and earlier Zhou vessels. In their place is a severe, totally abstract patterning composed of horizontal flutes and “wave” and “shield” bands. The heavy, squat form, as well as the nonsymbolic decoration, epitomizes the so-called Western Zhou style.

Identical inscriptions cast into the lids and cauldrons of both vessels read:  
Boxian has made this sacrificial xu vessel;  
may one forever treasure and use it.

## Dou



Dou – sounds like “dough” (falling tone)

The deep bowl of this food-offering vessel is set on a high slender foot with matching cover to form a sphere. The upper half has three faceted projections that serve as tripod legs when the cover is turned over for use as a bowl. All elements are decorated with fine linear scroll motifs, fretwork patterns, and triangular panels that vaguely recall earlier bronze styles and motifs.

With the dispersal of wealth and political authority during the Eastern Zhou (c. 770–256 BCE), the number of local foundries increased and workshops developed regional styles. Variety was a hallmark of the era. This vessel was made in the State of Yan (in present-day Beijing). Artisans looked to earlier bronze-casting traditions and revived certain elements of animal-based decoration like the cicada-inspired triangle panels on this dou.



## Yan



Yan – rhymes with “ten” (falling and rising tone)

The yan is a type of steamer, or cooking vessel, used chiefly for grain. It consists of a zeng, or deep upper bowl with a pierced bottom, which was placed upon or attached to a lower, legged vessel known as a li (in this example the two parts are cast into an inseparable unit). Water contained within the li would be boiled, steaming the food in the upper bowl.

Yan first appeared during the late Shang dynasty (c. 1300–1046 BCE), around the 12th to 11th century BCE. It remained a popular form through the Western Zhou Period. This is a typical yan from the early Western Zhou period. The decoration on the upper section is fairly restrained, with only a narrow ornamental band of animal masks below the lip. The three lobes of the li end in cylindrical legs decorated with buffalo heads: the ridges down the center of each lobe serve as the noses of the animal masks.

## Water Vessels

### Jian



Jian – jee-yen (all one syllable) (falling tone)

This jian is a water basin, It is a large bowl-shaped vessel with a deep body and heavy rim, is decorated with a dense serpentine pattern and four attached animal-head ring handles. The interlocked serpentine relief appears in three bands encircling the neck and the main body, separated by a frieze of braided ropes. Intertwined dragons wriggle within these bands, their bodies embellished with incised spirals and meanders.

The vessel bears an inscription on the interior wall, which reads: The jian for amusement of the son of Lord Zhi. Zhi was a ruling family of the Jin state, and Zhi Yao, the last member of its lineage, was killed in 453 BCE. The decorative style, together with the inscription, identify the vessel as cast at the foundry of the Jin state.

### Pan



Pan – pahn (rising tone)

The pan basin began to appear in the early part of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1300 BCE) and became prevalent during the later Shang and the subsequent Zhou dynasty (c. 1300–256 BCE).

The pan was often found coupled with *yi*, a vessel used for pouring water. Such pairings may not have only occurred in burials, but in ritual ceremonies in ancestral temples as well. Despite the fact that it has the broad shallow bowl and deep foot typical of pan, the composition of this vessel is unusual, for it does not actually rest on the foot. It is supported instead by three small human figures that face outward as they grip the rim of the foot. Their bent knees suggest the weight of their burden, as does the strained position of their heads, held close to the bottom of the bowl and bearing part of its weight. On each of two handles, an ox reclines calmly, its head turned outward and its legs folded under the body. The division of the vessel into the usual four sections is achieved by dragons that climb vigorously up the sides of the bowl and bite on its rim.

## Yi



Yi – yee (rising tone)

This gourd-shaped vessel is known as a yi and was used as a water container. Yi first appeared during the mid–Western Zhou dynasty (c. 976–886 BCE), and were prevalent in the later Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods (c. 885–476 BCE). Before conducting a ritual activity or sitting down to a ceremonial feast, nobility would wash their hands with water poured from a yi like this one. Archaeological excavations reveal that yi were often paired with pan basins. Later, in the Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE), yi evolved from a footed vessel with rich decoration and an animal-mask handle, such as this one, to a simple flat-bottomed vessel with restrained decoration and a ring handle. The charming features of this vessel include the handle, surmounted by a horned dragon head, and legs, each one a seahorse-like dragon silhouette.

## Wine Vessels

### Jue



Jue – joo-eh (all one syllable) (rising tone)

This jue is typical of the late Shang dynasty. The vessel's large bowl counterbalances the slender, spreading legs. Unusually, the taotie (composite animal) mask around the bowl's waist is blown open, that is, the mask's principal components are disconnected, its horns, shield, and C-shaped mouth line are so filled with spirals that they almost merge with the similarly decorated background.

The deconstructed taotie was a new fashion, just beginning to appear in the late period of the Shang dynasty. A cow-like animal head decorates the top of the handle, and whorls appear on the tops of the two small posts standing on the rim.

## Jia



Jia – jee-yah (all one syllable) (falling then rising tone)

The profile of this jia wine vessel's body is S-shaped, with the inward curvature placed close to the rim of the vessel. Dragonized taotie and rising blades with stylized cicadas decorate the neck belt. The body taotie, on a ground of squared spirals, displays unusual features: horns with alternating T-shaped and straight scores usually associated with flanges, and a hybrid forehead shield with the upper part hooked and the lower half drawn as the round-topped shield.

Notable, too, is the small vertical dragon beneath the tail of the cleft taotie under the handle. The handle is topped with a bovine head and terminates with curved legs ending in hooves. Underneath, in place of an inscription, is a bearded human figure in flat relief on a spiral ground. The pictogram represents a clan's insignia and is seen in many bronze vessels of the late Shang dynasty.

## Zun



Zun – zoo-wun (all one syllable) (flat tone)

Zun is a type of bronze wine vessel used by Shang-dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE) aristocrats during ritual ceremonies to honor their ancestors.

This owl-shaped zun is divided into two sections: the removable owl's-head lid and the bird's hollow body. Vessels shaped like animals constitute virtually the only bronze sculpture known from the Shang period. Besides this owl, vessels in the form of buffalo, boars, rhinoceroses, elephants, and rams have also survived.

This owl is one of the oldest and most naturalistic of the few remaining owl-shaped zun. Its form exhibits the influence of the Shang capital, Anyang, in the North, but the style and casting technique of the vessel (the indentation on the interior walls corresponds to a relief found on the exterior) indicate that it is related to the bronze tradition of the middle Yangzi region in southern China.

## Gong



Gong – long O; rhymes with “cone” but with a “g” at the end (flat tone)

The gong is a type of ritual vessel used to serve wine. It was produced primarily during the reigns of King Wu and King Zhao in the late Shang (c. 1300–1046 BCE) and early Western Zhou (c. 1046–977 BCE,) dynasties.

Found in Anyang, this deep boat-shaped pouring vessel displays almost perfect workmanship. Taotie (composite animal) masks are found on the handle and the lower registers of the sides. Three dragons decorate the surface of the vessel. The consecutive dragons in the neck belt are not identical. On the upper register to the right is a beaked

dragon with a recumbent C-shaped horn. The dragon under the spout of the vessel has a heart-shaped horn. Its enormous beak parallels the curve in the rim.

The lid is fashioned as a beast with bottle-shaped horns and fierce mouth. Its long, dragon-like body extends down the lid and loops at the end. All these features resemble those seen on a pair of gong excavated from the tomb of Fuhao, consort of King Wuding (r. c. 1250–1192 BCE), thus identifying Mia's example to be one of the earliest known gong.

## Gu



Gu – goo (flat tone)

The gu is a tall wine beaker with an unusually taut and graceful silhouette—its trumpet-shaped top tapers to a slim center section before widening again to a slightly flared base. Archaeological evidence reveals that bronze gu first appeared during the Erligang period (c. 1500–1300 BCE) of the Shang dynasty. The gu enjoyed its greatest popularity during the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE), but became less popular in the early Western Zhou (c. 1046–977 BCE), before gradually disappearing during the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE). The gradual decline of the wine vessel may have something to do with the Zhou king's deprecation of alcohol consumption—he believed that overindulgence in alcohol resulted in the collapse of Shang. This gu is decorated with variations of the taotie (composite animal) mask. The background pattern of tight spirals, found all over the vessel, is called leiwen and is a hallmark of Shang bronze casting.

## Lei



Lei – lay (rising tone)

This wine vessel is one of the most splendid examples of Eastern Zhou bronze art and technique. It is decorated with a geometric, brocade-like pattern of gold, silver, and copper inlay—actually, extremely stylized depictions of dragons and birds.

As religious beliefs changed, ritual bronzes became more secular in use and decoration during the Eastern Zhou period. The fearsome taotie (composite animal) masks and symbolic animal motifs of the Shang and Western Zhou periods were increasingly replaced with abstract surface ornament such as “hook and comma” patterns, granulation or, as in this case, metallic inlay. It was done as much to delight the eye as to inspire religious reverence. The vessel is reportedly from Jincun near present-day Luoyang, Henan province, and is part of a magnificent group of burial objects from the royal lineage of the Eastern Zhou.

## You



You – rhymes with “dough” (falling and rising tone)

You vessels like these began to appear during the late 1100s BCE and became prevalent during the late Shang and early Western Zhou (c. 1300–977 BCE).



In line with late Shang tastes, the vessel is richly decorated within seven horizontal registers. These registers are further divided into four panels by heavy scored flanges with tooth-like projections. One noticeable change in decoration is that the bird motif has replaced the ubiquitous taotie animal mask as the dominant decoration. This change heralded a flourishing period from late 900 to 800 BCE, when pairs of large, elaborately designed birds became the visual focus on bronze vessels.

## Zhi



Zhi – jer (like germ without the “m”) (flat tone)

Sacred implements for wine came in a variety of sizes, shapes, and functions. (SLAM.org)  
Zhi, a bronze vessel, was used as a wine cup in ritual ceremonies of the late Shang and Western Zhou dynasties (c. 1300–771 BCE).

## He



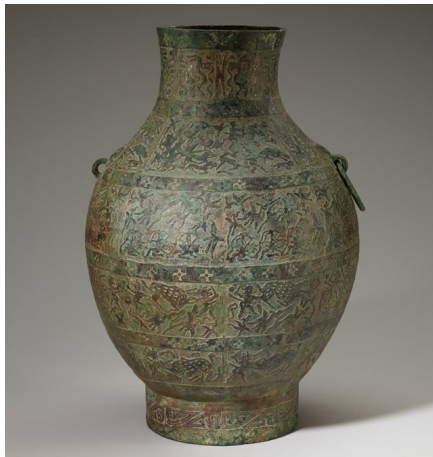
He – huh (like the word “hut” without the T, but with the mouth slightly more closed.)  
(rising tone)

The he wine container is an old vessel type that emerged as early as the Erlitou period, dating from the 17th century BCE. During the late Shang dynasty (c. 1300–1046 BCE), its

shape evolved—its bulging body, with narrow neck and spout, was supported by three cylindrical legs, as seen in this example.

The vessel bears an inscription identifying that it was cast by “Shi” in honor of his father, “Gui.” Recent archaeological activities have established that all bronzes bearing the “Shi” inscription were cast during the late Shang and early Western Zhou periods. The vessel’s main body bears a decorative motif consisting of rows of scales in flat, double-band relief. It is generally recognized that by the mid–Western Zhou period (c. 976–886 BCE) Chinese bronze art began a process of stylistic transformation from that of the waning Shang to that of the distinct Western Zhou. Such change is marked by the replacement of taotie masks with patterned decoration. This vessel, however, demonstrates that in the early Western Zhou, the new decorative trend had already emerged.

## Hu



Hu – hoo (rising tone)

This storage vessel is one of an important group of hunting-scene hu. They show the influence of the nomadic art of China’s northern frontier. The four major bands depict men hunting birds, deer, boars, and tigers with spears, knives, and bows.

Panels on the vessel’s shoulders show an archer shooting from the back of a four-horse chariot with driver. These pictorial scenes of human activity represent a revolutionary departure in bronze art. Previously, during the Shang and Zhou periods, sacred symbols and stylized animals were formally arranged with regard to hierarchy and strict symmetry. The subject here appears secular rather than religious.