

The Transformation of Supreme Deity Worship and the Decline of the Taotie Motif from Late Shang to Early Western Zhou China

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between religious change and artistic transformation in the period between the Shang (c. 1600-1046 BCE) and Western Zhou (1046-771 BCE) dynasties, and how the change of Shangdi to Tian worship led to the deterioration of the taotie motif in bronze ornamentation. The study uses oracle bone and bronze inscription texts and archaeological data to follow how the concept of supreme deities evolved and how it was reflected in material culture. The anthropomorphic Shangdi of the Shang dynasty demanded shamanic intercession by means of divination and offerings, which were depicted in the fierce, complicated taotie designs that filled ritual bronzes. These motifs were marked by large eyes, relief, and supernatural urgency, and they functioned as visual parts of shamanic cosmology and divinity speech. The Tian innovation of the Zhou as an abstract, morally normative supreme authority radically transformed religious practice by stressing virtue-based rule via the Mandate of Heaven over and above shamanism-based mediation. This theological change directly led to the artistic decadence of taotie iconography, which was simplified, pushed to the margins, and later displaced by geometric designs, ancestor imagery and historical texts. The paper illustrates that the loss of the taotie reflects not only aesthetic evolution but also a basic rationalization of religious power, the earliest form of a rationalized political symbolism replacing shamanic visual culture in the material record.

Keywords

Shang dynasty, Zhou dynasty, taotie motif, Shangdi, Tian, shamanism, bronze art, religious transformation, Mandate of Heaven, visual culture, oracle bone inscriptions, ritual vessels, divine authority, Chinese civilization.

1. Introduction

The period between the Shang dynasty (c. 1600-1046 BCE) and the Western Zhou dynasty (1046-771 BCE) constitutes one of the most drastic transitions in early Chinese civilization, which includes the most profound shift of political order, religious thinking, and material culture.[1] Past research on the development and stylistic evolution of bronze ornamentation has devoted much attention to the material environment, sociopolitical institutions, and the change in ritual practice, including technological changes in bronze casting and modifications in hierarchical structures and the ritual system.[2] Although a few works have mentioned the human-divine relationship, there is a lack of reviews on how the change of the perception of the supreme deity, that is, the substitution of Shangdi with the Heaven (Tian) of the Zhou, affected the iconography of bronze wares, especially the development and the subsequent decay of the taotie motif.[3]

This paper attempts to fill this gap by exploring how such shifting in metaphysical imagination (numinous power to moral authority) is reflected in the visual culture, and how the emergence of Tian-centered cosmology was accompanied by the downgrading of the shamanic

representation, as was the case of the taotie design.[4] Textual analysis and cross-methodological techniques are used in the study; it relies on oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, and more contemporary archaeological readings, as well as comparative readings of Shang and Zhou's theological systems and artistic motifs. The focus is to trace the transformation of religious thinking that altered not only the ideologies of cosmology and politics but also the language of ritual in material terms.[5]

2. From Shangdi to Tian: The Reconfiguration of Supreme Authority

2.1. The Shang Conception of Shangdi

The Shang dynasty only focused on the centralism of religious power. The Shangdi was a personified and interfering religious figure who believed he was in charge of the universe and directly affected the people's lives.[6] Oracle bone inscriptions indicate that Shangdi was envisioned as an active participant in world affairs, who could provide or withhold rain, decide the course of military action, and influence the well-being of rulers.[7] The Shang king was at once a political leader and a shamanic mediator, who fulfilled the principle of *jun wu he yi*, the unity of kingship and shamanism, in which divine will was reached through divination and ritual interaction.

The oracle bone inscriptions show that Shangdi was not a remote cosmic order but a god who was begged, negotiated with, and appeased by making great ritual offerings.[8] Statements like whether Shangdi would command rain were recorded during divination sessions. Moreover, shall not Shangdi visit us with calamity in the harvest? Pointing to a view of divinity that was familiar and unforeseen. Such a relationship demanded continuous ritual care and mediation by shamans, making the Shang ruler the pivotal point between the world of people and gods.[9]

2.2. The Zhou Innovation of Tian

The Zhou dynasty has, in essence, transformed the notion of supreme authority by the addition of Tian (Heaven) as the ultimate metaphysical value.[10] In contrast to the individualistic Shangdi, Tian was envisioned as an abstract, ethically rule-based being that controlled the universe by moral standards, as opposed to random will. [11] Such changes can be found in the early Zhou bronze inscriptions, which refer to Heaven and its virtuous decree and the duty of a ruler to uphold governance with morality according to the will of Heaven.

The Mandate of Heaven appeared, becoming the main organizing principle of Zhou political theology and setting the rule up as a matter of moral virtue and ethical governance, rather than the access to divine power through shamanism.[12] Heaven could no longer be a force that must be appeased by direct communication through divination, trance, and offering, but a moral regulator whose will is manifested by historical results and dynastic legitimacy.[13] This theological novelty fulfilled the concrete political role of justifying the overthrow of the Shang by the Zhou at the same time as setting new standards of state authority founded on virtue as opposed to divine descent.

The Zhou emperor was reimagined as the Son of Heaven, which did not focus on shamanic authority but on filial duty.[14] This change shows the wider shift toward a non-animistic and non-shamanistic worldview toward what can be described as proto-rational moral government, in which the divine power worked through the principles of justice instead of supernatural intervention.

2.3. A Table Showing the Fundamental Differences between Shang and Zhou Conceptions of Divine Authority

Table 1. summarizes the fundamental distinctions between the Shang and Zhou conceptions of divine authority.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Shang and Zhou Concepts of Divine Authority

Aspect	Shang Dynasty	Zhou Dynasty
Supreme Deity	Shangdi - Personalized, interventionist	Tian - Abstract, morally normative
Divine Access	Direct shamanic communication	Moral virtue and ethical governance
Royal Authority	King as shaman-intermediary	Son of Heaven - filial responsibility
Legitimacy	Divine lineage and ritual power	Mandate of Heaven based on virtue
Divine Nature	Accessible, unpredictable, requiring appeasement	Impersonal moral regulator

3. The Collapse of Shamanic Centrality and Its Artistic Reverberations

3.1. The Taotie as Shamanic Symbol

The taotie motif's fierce look, symmetric form, and unclear zoomorphic qualities can be considered a pictorial byproduct of shamanic mediation and divine experience. The archaeological material of Anyang and other Shang sites shows that the taotie patterns were prevalent in the ritual bronze vessels' decorative programs, especially those employed in ancestral worship and divination rites.[15] The motif's large eyes, violent appearance, and supernatural qualities indicate the role of the mediator between the world of humans and gods, and perhaps the shamanic vision experience or the manifestation of the spiritual power.

Further archaeological research at Sanxingdui has also supported the shamanic theoretical approach to the meaning of taotie images, where bronze masks and other ritual items also share the zoomorphic characteristics with spiritual transformation and divination.[16] Ritual vessels were common in the early Chinese culture, which implies that the taotie designs had an important part in a ritual, which was performed to establish communication with heavenly powers and ancestors, which confirms the assumption that the design of taotie can be interpreted as a visual form of shamanism cosmology.

3.2. The Marginalization of Shamanic Authority

When shamanism lost its political position as the state of Zhou, and the king was no longer believed to be the divine messenger, but as a moral model with duties to Heaven, the spiritual role of the shamanic imagery inevitably decreased. Zhou dynastic theology developed genealogical connections between their forebears and Heaven, where the ancient duality of gods and humans was replaced by the ancestral legitimation and the secondary sidelining of the shamanic visualization.[17] Early Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, as they become increasingly moralistic, begin to stress moral rightness, ancestral merit, and historical precedent instead of supernatural power and divine vision as the sources of authority.

The diminished significance of shamanism also manifests in the shifting of royal burial procedures and ritual procedures, as Zhou tombs become less concerned with markers of shamanic authority and more concerned with the signs of moral authority and administrative skill.[18] The transformation implies a fundamental change in the understanding of the royal power, from the charismatic power founded on access to the spiritual world to the bureaucratic power founded on the moral right.

3.3. Artistic Consequences of Religious Change

Therefore, the taotie image's decay is the decay of what we may call the aesthetic of the uncanny, the visual embodiment of extra-natural potency and shamanic experience, recapitulated by an ethos of ethical and historical rationality. The geometric motifs, ancestral-related motifs, and

historical scripts of the Zhou bronze vessels were more prevalent than the mystical and threatening motifs of the Shang ritual art.[19] This shift in the visual culture is also synchronous with the larger theological change in focus on the divine power to the virtue, the supernatural to the moral rule.

4. Formal Transformations in the Taotie Motif: A Mirror of Metaphysical Change

4.1. Late Shang Taotie Characteristics

The taotie had an impossibly intense and intricate presence on the visual surface of ritual bronze vessels during the late Shang period[15] These motifs were bold, symmetrical, and highly stylized with layered compositions with protruding features, curved horns, and glittering eyes, which appeared to create a numinous presence, as shown by archaeological specimens of the Anyang site. The traditional taotie of Anyang style had well-shaped snouts, enlarged open mouths, erect horns, and bold surface relief produced by intricate casting methods.

The technical study of the Shang bronzes shows that the taotie motifs were not just decoration but also an element of the structural design of the vessels, where the eyes could be located at strategic places where handles or other practical components were mounted.[19] This entrenchment implies that the taotie was not just a mere decoration; it was perceived as a part of the ritual effectiveness of the vessel, and it may have represented the edge of the human and numinous worlds.

The sculptural character of the late Shang taotie designs is also highly sophisticated, with a degree of relief often having several stages, making them highly complex with visual effects that would have been especially impressive when seen under flickering firelight at ritual ceremonies. The psychological effects of these designs, i.e., the capability of creating a sense of supernatural presence, indicate their role in the achievement of altered states of consciousness, which is related to shamanic practice.[20]

4.2. Early Western Zhou Simplification

In the early Western Zhou, there is archaeological evidence of a significant change in taotie design. This motif is more decorative, flattened, and simpler than spiritual, moving away to the peripheral areas of the lower foot or rim bands.[21] Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Zhou artisans progressively stripped the taotie of its most unsettling and exaggerated elements and simplified the layered compositions to more linear and geometric forms. The iconography was becoming dominated by stylized features, including horns of bulls and elongated features, and significant components, like the thunder pattern, and subsidiary bird ornaments, were reduced or removed altogether. This reduction was not purely aesthetic, but indicated a shift in ritual needs and theological focus, with Zhou religion focusing more on moral education and ancestor worship than on shamanic experience. A comparative study of the transition period bronze vessels shows a gradual transformation process instead of a radical one, implying that the Zhou rulers continued with the Shang ritual forms, gradually integrating them into new theological systems. This evolutionary process provides clues to early Chinese civilization's practical religious and political transition issues (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. shows the TaoTieh Pattern on Chinese antiques

Late Shang (c. 1200-1046 BCE):

- Complex, layered relief: Taotie designs had several levels of casting depth and presented intricate three-dimensional effects, making them appear more mystical under ritual firelight.
- Prominent eyes and fangs: Hyperbolic eye characteristics and menacing teeth were the attraction centers, perhaps symbolizing the shamanic eye or the god at the ritual moments.
- Integrated structural design: The taoties were not simply ornamental but were structurally combined with vessel architecture, with eyes set on the points of attachment of handles and the mouths set on the openings of vessels.
- Central vessel placement: In most cases, motifs took center stage in the central decoration areas of the vessels' bodies and provided the central focal point of visual and ritual emphasis during ceremonial actions.
- Supernatural intensity: The general aesthetic focused on supernatural strength in the aggressive expressions of the features, and a sense of divine fear was needed in the shamanic activity.

Early Western Zhou (c. 1046-950 BCE):

- Simplified linear patterns: Zhou artisans simplified the complicated layered designs to flatter, more geometric designs focused on clarity rather than mystical ambiguity.
- Reduced supernatural elements: Menacing features, such as fangs and vicious expressions, were softened or removed, and this was due to a decrease in the use of shamanic intimidation.
- Peripheral placement: The Taotie designs shifted off the center of vessels to the rim band and the foot design, showing that they were no longer viewed as vital in the rituals.
- Geometric emphasis: Naturalistic animal features were substituted with abstract patterns, implying the change of approach to mathematical order instead of organic spiritual force.
- Decorative function: The motifs were mainly decorative and did not assist in divinity communications or shamanic transformation.

Middle Western Zhou (c. 950-850 BCE):

- Minimal taotie presence: The classical taotie motifs were uncommon or disappeared altogether, favoring Zhou decorative programs more focused on human authority than supernatural power.
- Abstract geometric patterns: The decoration of the vessels was based on the abstract geometric patterns that portrayed a sense of order, hierarchy, and rational organization instead of mystical chaos.

- Historical inscriptions: Bronze vessels became increasingly inscribed with long textual records of historical events, royal edicts, and genealogy, and less with shamanic imagery.
- Ancestral references: Ornamental programs stressed kinship relations and family continuity and were compatible with the Zhou stress on hereditary authority rather than shamanic charisma.
- Moral symbolism: Aesthetic features could contain ethical ideals and social duties, such as the focus on the moral governance of the Zhou and the Mandate of Heaven.

5. Semantic Reconstitution: From Animistic Terror to Ancestral Order

5.1. The Zhou Reinterpretation of Spiritual Agency

The Zhou state redefined the spiritual agency based on the lineage and history in place of trance or possession. Western Zhou bronze inscriptions show that the comprehension of divine will relating to genealogical continuity and moral precedent replaced the shamanic revelation.[22] This revolution can be seen through the vessel inscriptions, which stress ancestral righteousness, historical success, and ethical edification instead of supernatural strength or god contact.

Tian was not just conceived as potent, but also as essentially good, an impersonal energy of normative direction concretized in notions of ming zhe and ming li nian, as opposed to fate as arbitrary decree. This theological development necessitated new visual forms that could express moral authority instead of supernatural power, and helped to undermine shamanic imagery in bronze ornament.

5.2. The Rationalization of Visual Culture



Figure 2. shows a Zhou dynasty vessel

This general rationalizing trend in Zhou culture was reflected in the diminution of bronze decor's supernatural and magical content and by substituting the mystic taotie with geometric stripes, linear serrations, and smooth surfaces. As depicted archaeologically, the new decorative programs promoted by the Zhou bronze workshops were founded on the principles of historical narrative, genealogical reference, and moral symbolism instead of shamanic imagery.[23] This change can be described as an early version of religious rationalization, in which divine power was believed to act in a way that was explainable by understandable ethical maxims rather than supernatural intervention. The visual culture of Zhou bronzes was not used to arouse divine dread or to achieve shamanic trance but to strengthen social order, ethical teaching, and historical memory (See Figure 2).

5.3. From Ecstasy to Ethics



Figure 3. shows the history of shamanism. Source: (Shopify API, 2015)

The recontextualization of the ritual as a matter of ecstasy and terror to reason and virtue reflects the general change of non-rational divine fear to ordered, patriarchal, and moral order (See Figure 3). Inscriptions on Zhou bronze gradually focus more on the ethical duties of the ruler, the need to rule virtue, and the historical legitimacy of the authority.[24] This turn to ethical rather than charismatic authority necessitated new forms of artistic expression that would translate ethical rather than supernatural authority. The taotie motif's depreciation is not just a fashion shift but a symbol of the fundamental change in the concept of divine power and its manifestation in the visual image. The substitution of shamanic imagery with geometric designs, ancestral appeals, and historical epigraphs shows how the Zhou established new religious and political legitimacy founded on moral, rather than supernatural authority (See Table 2).

Table 2. shows a comparative analysis demonstrating the parallel transformation of religious concepts and artistic motifs during the Shang-Zhou transition.

Element	Shang Period	Zhou Period	Transformation
Religious Focus	Shamanic mediation	Moral governance	Rationalization
Divine Access	Trance and divination	Virtue and ethics	Institutionalization
Visual Emphasis	Supernatural terror	Historical order	Domestication
Artistic Function	Facilitate a divine encounter	Reinforce social hierarchy	Moralization
Symbolic Content	Numinous presence	Ancestral legitimacy	Genealogization

6. Conclusion

The loss of the taotie motif cannot be interpreted as a simple artistic development or decorative fashion. However, it must be placed in the broader context of the metaphysical and political changes that have defined the Shang to Zhou civilization shift. With the transfer of supreme authority from the mystical Shangdi to a morally ordering Tian, visual culture also began to evacuate the supernatural from its surfaces and replace shamanic images with the symbols of moral authority and historical legitimacy.

This metamorphosis is one of the first illustrations of religious rationalization in the history of humankind, showing how the shifts in theological knowledge can essentially transform the visual language of material culture. The taotie pattern, therefore, is a dying remnant of a world in which shamanic vision, divine terror, and artistic potency used to meet, the fading of which constituted the dawn of new types of religious and political authority founded on moral rectitude instead of supernatural charisma.

The general relation between religious change and artistic change, evident in this study, can be generalized to other situations representing early Chinese civilization. The sequential relationship between the substitution of the Shangdi with Tian worship and the weakening of the taotie image proves that visual culture is not only an ornamental element but a central part of the religious and political ideology. Therefore, analyzing early Chinese bronze art offers essential information into how human cultures build, sustain, and change their understanding of the divine authority and its material embodiment.

A similar study of the relationship between religious change and artistic change in other early civilizations would be a profitable area of future research, as would a study of the later growth of Chinese visual culture as it transformed further through the Eastern Zhou and beyond. This correlation between textual evidence and archaeological and artistic analysis as a methodology used in the present study provides a potential means of comprehending the complicated interplay of ideology and material culture in ancient societies.

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