

A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON MAT-LEVEL FURNITURE IN SHANG AND ZHOU DYNASTIES

Mihaela LIU

Nanjing Forestry University, College of Furnishing and Industry Design
Str. Longpan nr. 159, 200037 Nanjing, China
Tel: 00862585428621, E-mail: mihaela.anghel1991@gmail.com

Ting GAO

Wuyi University, Academy of Arts and Design,
No.22 Dongcheng Village, Pengjiang District.529020 Jiangmen, China
E-mail: 1532746039@qq.com

Zhihui WU

Nanjing Forestry University, College of Furnishing and Industry Design
Str. Longpan nr. 159, 200037 Nanjing, China
E-mail: 467213464@qq.com

Xinyou LIU

Nanjing Forestry University, College of Furnishing and Industry Design
Str. Longpan nr. 159, 200037 Nanjing, China
E-mail: liu.xinyou@njfu.edu.cn

Jingwei AO

Zhejiang Yunfeng Moganshan Floor Co. LTD.
Industrial park, zhongguan town, deqing county 313220 Huzhou, China
E-mail: jingweiao@126.com

Abstract:

The paper presents the lifestyle in Shang and Zhou dynasties sitting on the ground. Furniture used in this period is called mat-level furniture and is including Xi, Zu, Ji and Jin. This kind furniture is considered as the origin of traditional Chinese furniture. The furniture material was bronze, wood, grass and bamboo. The furniture patterns, such as taotie pattern, kui dragon pattern and cicada pattern, were not only used just for decoration. Their images had supreme magic power at that time, and they were magic tools to help wizards to communicate with the world. This study hopes to provide a better understanding of Chinese furniture history and Chinese furniture culture.

Key words: Shang and Zhou dynasties; bronze; mat-level furniture.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese furniture started as stone and bronze furniture of several thousand years ago. Following changes in lifestyles, Chinese furniture has evolved from mat-level furniture, low-rise furniture to high-rise furniture (Liu et al. 2013, Zhang 2009). The Shang and Zhou dynasties (from 17th century BC to 771 BC) were slave societies in China with highly developed civilizations, which played an important role in the ancient history of the world. The cultural relics unearthed in the Shang and Zhou dynasties proved that the casting technique and aesthetic taste were excellent at that time. The main material of Ritual vessels, weapons, daily utensils and tools was bronze.



a



b

Fig. 1.

The statues from Shang tomb in Anyang, Heenan province: a. Jade statue, b. Stone statue.

The representative lifestyle was seating on the floor in Shang and Zhou dynasties. Kneeling was a way to sit on the floor: two knees and the insteps of both feet landed on the ground, with the hips on the heels (Shi 2008). According to the research of Mr. Li ji, "kneeling sitting is the living style of the ruling class of the Shang dynasty, which gradually became a ritual of offering sacrifices to ancestors, gods and guests. After Shang dynasty, the system of "rites" was developed in Zhou Dynasty. The most famous philosopher born in Zhou dynasty highly praised the etiquette and custom of kneel sitting. The statues from Shang tomb in Anyang, Heenan province (see Fig. 1) and some Chinese characters (inscriptions on bones see Tab.1) with kneel sitting from reflect people's living conditions at that time, the furniture used in this period named mat-level furniture and the main types of furniture included "席(xi)", "俎(zu)", "几(Ji)" and "禁(Jin)".

Table 1

Some Inscriptions on bones with kneel sitting form in Shang and Zhou dynasies

Inscriptions on bones		Chinese characters	English meanings
Shang dynasty	Zhou dynasty		
		女	Female
		母	Mother
		兄	Elder brother
		邑	City

THE TYPES OF MAT-LEVEL FURNITURE

"席(xi)"-mat

"席(xi)"-mat is considered as bed and chair origin. Shang and Zhou dynasty is called the period of living on mat, when mat was the essential object in daily life. From Kings and princes' important events such as pilgrimages, treats to shoot, worships god, worships the ancestor to the common wedding and funeral, lectures, entertainment and daily life both were processed on the mats. In the ritual and music system of the Zhou dynasty, there were strict regulations on the production and use of mats. The book named „Rite of Zhou dynasty" said understanding five type of mats and five types of tables can know their owner social position. The philosopher from East Han dynasty Zhengxuan noted: five types mats named „莞(guan)", „纁(sao)", „次(ci)", „蒲(pu)" and „熊(xiong)" and their using places. 莞(guan) mat was made of one kind of scirpus grass growing in the south of China. Dongguan is named for the growth of scirpus grass. 纁(sao) mat was made of colored water grass. 次(ci) mat was made of bamboo. 蒲(pu) mat was made of water grass. 熊(xiong) mat was made of bear skin. The quality of material and the level of adornment and craft decided the mat level and also affect the display space. The layers of mat also followed rite rule, the King can use three layer of mat, and government officials can use mat with two layers and the others can use single layer mat. Furthermore, the shape and size of mat presented the owner social position. Single mat, a mat for one person, was used for respected or elder person. Chairman should sit on the single mat, and the word „chairman" is originated from the single mat. Multi-mat usually used for four people, the elder people should sit on one side not in the middle. If there are five people, the elder people sit on the single mat and the other sit on multi-mat. Pair-mat is used for talking and eating or drinking. Special mat is used for patient and beravement.

"俎(zu)" and "几(Ji)"

"俎(zu)" and "几(Ji)" are considered as the origin of table and desk. The book „ci yuan" said 俎(zu), one kind of sacrificial tool made of bronze or wood, finished with lacquer, used to put sacrifice such as head of pig, sheep and caw. In order not to keep the blood of animal, the edge of the board is 1cm above the surface. In Fig.2 a bronze 俎(zu) decorated with cicada pattern unearthed in Shanxi province, with a height of 18.8cm, a weight of 4kg. The shape is vigorous and steady, both sides are upturned and decorated with dragon patterns. It is mainly used for serving meat and cutting meat. The edge of the 俎(zu) is decorated with a circle of cicada patterns and gluttony patterns on the outside of both feet. 几(Ji) is similar with 俎(zu), but with light structure, aesthetic shape (see Fig.3). „几(Ji)" is used for daily life as usual.



Fig. 2.
組(zu)decorated with cicada and dragon patterns.



Fig. 3.
几(Ji)in Zhou dynasty

"禁 (Jin) "

禁(Jin), Chinese maening is forbid. Jin made of bronze, is also one kind of sacrificial tool, used to hold wine. People in Zhou dynasty summarized the reasons for the demise of the Xia and Shang dynasties, both of which were drinking excessively. That is why this kind sacrificial toolcalled Jin. Yu (one king) may have been the first emperor to put forward the prohibition of wine. Jin is the vessel for carrying wine. In the furniture category, it is also used for storing wine, it has storing meaning. Therefore Jin is considered as the origin of storing furniture.In the sacrificial activities, wine will be put on the Jin, in order to express the heaven and earth wishes.Jin is actually the stage of furniture, and also the matrix of boxes, cabinets, cabinets, such as the jin decorated with kui dragon pattern inwestZhou dynasty (Fig. 4).



Fig.4.
Jin decorated with kui dragon pattern inwestZhou dynasty.

DECORATIVE PATTERNS OF MAT-LEVEL FURNITURE

The gluttony patterns, Kui patterns and cicada patterns are the common patterns used to decorate furniture in Shang and Zhou dynasties.

The gluttony patterns(Fig. 6), also called Taotie is the common name for a motif found on Chinese ritual bronze vessels from the Shang and Zhou dynasties (Zhao and Zhang 2019). The design typically consists of a zoomorphic mask, described as being frontal, bilaterally symmetrical, with a pair of raised eyes and typically no lower jaw area. Some argue that the design can be traced back to jade pieces found in Neolithic sites such as the Liangzhu culture (3310–2250 BC). There is also notable similarity with the painted pottery found at Xiajiadian.In ancient Chinese mythology like "Classic of Mountains and Seas", the taotie (饕餮) is one of the "four evil creatures of the world" or four fiends, along with Hundun (混沌), Qiongqi (窮奇) and Taowu (梼杌). On the opposite side, there are Four Holy Creatures in Chinese mythology which are called Azure Dragon, Vermilion Bird, White Tiger and Black Tortoise. The four fiends are also sometimes juxtaposed with the four benevolent animals which are Qilin(麒麟), Dragon (龍), Turtle (龜) and Fenghuang (鳳凰). It is uncertain if the mask design on bronze vessels is related in any way to the mythological creature.

Kui (Chinese: 夔; pinyin: kuí) is a polysemous figure in ancient Chinese mythology. Classic texts use this name for the legendary musician Kui who invented music and dancing; for the one-legged mountain demon or rain-god Kui variously said to resemble a Chinese dragon, a drum, or a monkey with a human face; and for the Kuiniu wild yak or buffalo. While Kui 夔 originally named a mythic being, Modern Standard Chinese uses it in several other expressions. The reduplication kuikui 夔夔 means "awe-struck; fearful; grave" (see the Shujing below). The compounds kuilong 夔龍 (w ith "dragon") and kuiven 夔文 (w ith "pattern; design") name common motifs on Zhou Dynasty Chinese bronzes(Song 2019). The chengyu idiom yikuizhi 一夔已足 (lit. one Kui already enough) means "one able person is enough for the job".

As a kind of realistic patterns, cicada patterns are different from fantasy animal patterns such as taotie patterns and kui patterns. The cicada pattern on the Shang and Zhou bronzes has many connotations. In the final analysis, it is a tool of royal rule. Shang and Zhou dynasties are a special stage of combining the governance of man with the governance of god. Bronze ware is a magic instrument for wizard to communicate the world. Cicadas pattern is the assistant of wizard.

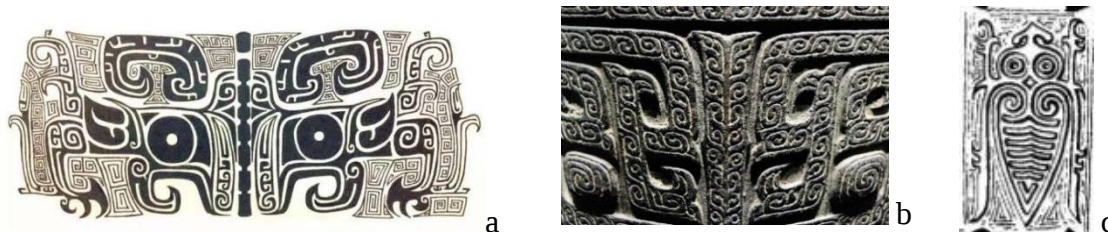


Fig.5.

Decorative patterns of mat-level furniture: a. gluttony patterns, b. Kui patterns, c. cicada patterns.

CONCLUSIONS

The furniture of Shang and Zhou dynasties was the product of the royal ruling class and closely related to the prosperous sacrificial activities. Furniture not only has the use function, more importantly, it is a ritual vessel, bearing the worship of nature and divine power in the Shang and Zhou dynasties. The mat-level furniture in Shang and Zhou dynasties is considered the origin of traditional furniture including Xi, Zu, Ji and Jin. Materials used for the furniture are bronze, wood, grass and Chinese lacquer for finishing. The furniture patterns, such as taotie pattern, kui dragon pattern and cicada pattern, are no longer just used for decoration. Their images have supreme magic power at that time, and they are magic tools to help wizards to communicate the world.

REFERENCES

- Liu XY, Timar CM, Yi SL (2013) *A study on the history and materials of traditional Chinese furniture*. PRO LIGNO 9(4):246-256.
- Shi LZ (2008) *Tentative study on traditional furniture of northeast China*. Furniture and interior design 1:54-55.
- Song M (2019) *Study on the symbolic meaning of kui Patterns in Shang dynasty*. Journal of xiangnan university, 40(01):46-51.
- Zhao J, Zhang CF (2019) *Symbol recognition analysis of taotie pattern*. Design, 32(05):72-73.
- Zhang XM (2009) *Chinese furniture exploring China's furniture culture*. China Intercontinental Press, Beijing:3-8.