

The Relationship Between "Dao" and "Qi" in Pre-Qin Aesthetics: A Perspective from Bronze - Vessel Art

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Abstract: The Pre-Qin period is an early stage in Chinese history, achieving remarkable accomplishments not only in politics and philosophy but also in aesthetic thought, leaving a significant mark. During this era, various schools of thought flourished, laying a solid foundation for the development of aesthetics in later generations. In the vast realm of Pre-Qin aesthetics, the relationship between "Dao" and "Qi" is particularly noteworthy. As a philosophical concept, "Dao" in Pre-Qin aesthetics is manifested as the exploration and pursuit of the essence and laws of the universe and all things; while "Qi," as the carrier of material culture, bears people's aesthetic concepts and life ideals. The inclusion of Pre-Qin bronze ware in the aesthetic perspective represents a logical progression from textual interpretation to the study of artifacts in Pre-Qin aesthetics. Bronze ware art, as an important form of art during the Pre-Qin period, reflects the close connection between "Dao" and "Qi" through the unity of its patterns, shapes, practical functions, and aesthetic value. This paper will explore the relationship between "Dao" and "Qi" in Pre-Qin aesthetics from the perspective of bronze ware art. By examining the historical development, stylistic characteristics, and philosophical connotations of bronze ware art, it reveals its significant position in Pre-Qin culture and further uncovers the profound implications of Pre-Qin aesthetics.

Keywords: Pre-Qin Aesthetics; Dao and Qi; Bronze Ware Art; Aesthetic Value

1. An Overview of Pre-Qin Aesthetic Theory

The Pre-Qin Period was a significant time for the development of Chinese ideological and cultural aspects, as well as a crucial stage for the formation of Chinese aesthetic spirit. It established the basic categories and thinking patterns of Chinese aesthetics, and also shaped

the spiritual qualities and development path of Chinese aesthetics. [1]

1.1 The Philosophical Meaning of "Dao" and Its Role in Pre-Qin Aesthetics

In Pre-Qin philosophy, Laozi explored all things in heaven and earth from the perspective of "Dao", seeking the origin of all things. This is the beginning of ancient Chinese "ontology". [2] Daoism views the "Dao" as art's essence and creation should follow nature. Confucianism, while differing in its interpretation of the "Dao", also believes art should reflect the "Dao" and stresses the integration of morality and humanity in art. In pre-Qin aesthetics, "the Way" (Dao) is of paramount importance, serving as the soul and guiding principle of artistic creation. Both Daoism and Confucianism agree that artistic creation should follow "the Way." Daoism exalts natural aesthetics, advocating that art should harmonize with nature and reveal its intrinsic rhythms, thereby manifesting "the Way." At the ultimate level of value, the cosmic order serves as the transcendental basis for both social and ethical orders, thereby becoming the metaphysical ground for "art conveying the Way." [3] In Pre-Qin aesthetics, the "Dao" is the core of art, offering its foundation, principles, and defining the highest aesthetic realm. Daoism seeks natural, tranquil, and simple beauty, while Confucianism pursues perfect goodness and beauty, stressing moral, humanistic, and social beauty. The close relationship between "Dao" and "Qi" forms the core of Pre-Qin aesthetics. Bronze art reflects this relationship and shows the aesthetic achievements of the Pre-Qin period.

1.2 The Definition of "Qi" and Its Functions in Pre-Qin Society

In Pre-Qin aesthetics, "Qi" are practical, culturally - meaningful tools or utensils. They are man - made, created with specific purposes through material and form selection. [5] In the Pre-Qin era, bronze ware was practical and finely crafted, playing an integral role in society.

Beyond utility, its aesthetic and monetary value led to diverse developments. It symbolized power, reflected religious morality, and preserved cultural heritage. The use, aesthetics, and social symbolism of objects were interconnected. The diversity and unity of ancient lifestyles influenced the shapes and patterns of objects due to interconnected external factors. [6] Bronze decorations were ornamental and warned. Inscriptions recorded nobility info and values. As ritual vessels, they showed social hierarchy. Pre-Qin artifacts were linked to social life. They guided behavior, shaped customs, and their inheritance was a major cultural event. In ancient times, important national matters were sacrificial rites and military affairs. Bronze vessels were symbols of noble families, essential in ancestral temples. They were finely - made with strange shapes and gorgeous patterns, offering a visual feast. [7] Through the production, use, and inheritance of “vessels”, we can catch a glimpse of the cultural aspects and values of Pre-Qin society and understand its significant historical status.

1.3 The Dialectical Relationship Between “Dao” and “Qi”

In Pre-Qin aesthetics, “Dao” and “Qi” are interdependent. “Dao” gives “Qi” aesthetic standards, and “Qi” made and used by “Dao” shows aesthetic value. “Qi” is the material carrier of “Dao”, helping people grasp its essence. Over time, “Qi” evolves and “Dao” expands. “Qi bears Dao” underpins ancient Chinese aesthetics, giving rise to views like “Dao precedes Qi” and “All under heaven is Qi”. In ancient Chinese creation, the “Qi-Dao” relationship is key, with “Qi reveals Dao” as a core idea. [8]

2. The Embodiment Of “Dao” And “Qi” In Bronze - Vessel Art

Bronze vessels, symbols of ancient Chinese civilization, originated in the late Neolithic Age as small tools and decorative items. As metal - smelting technology advanced, they evolved from practical tools to ritual and musical instruments, becoming a mark of noble status. The Shang Dynasty was the golden age of bronze - vessel development, producing numerous exquisite, elaborately - decorated, solemn, and dignified vessels rich in symbolic meaning. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, bronze - vessel art focused more on standardization and

serialization. In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, social and cultural changes led to diverse bronze - vessel art with varied shapes and more personalized decorations and inscriptions. Pre-Qin design aesthetics shows that the Chinese nation elevated artifact design to a philosophical and aesthetic level early on. [9]

In the Xia Dynasty, bronze vessels were simple and primitive. During the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, they were divinized, with a sense of dignity, power and mystery. From the late Western Zhou to the Spring and Autumn Period, bronze vessels showed orderliness and standardization, reflecting rational emotions and a growing focus on sensory aesthetic needs. This evolution illustrates how bronze - vessel art mirrored societal aesthetic preferences, the characteristics of the times, and the profound exploration of natural, cosmic, and life philosophies.

3. Case Studies Of Bronze Vessels And “Dao”

3.1 The Connection Between Bronze - Vessel Art Style and “Dao”

The Shang - Dynasty “Si mu wu ding” is huge and solemn, symbolizing cosmic order and authority. Its four steady legs symbolize the earth, and its broad belly represents inclusiveness. The taotie patterns on it were used to seek blessings and keep evil away. Despite the taotie's fearsome appearance, it reflects a romantic view of fate and shows the Shang people's innocence. [10] The Western Zhou “Da Ke Ding” has a concise and solemn shape, decorated mainly with qu qu and animal - face patterns. This reflects the Western Zhou's focus on ritual order and fits with the concept of the “Dao”.

Bronze - vessel patterns and inscriptions blend art and philosophy. The Shang - Dynasty “Si Yang Fang Zun” features sheep heads symbolizing good fortune and fertility, reflecting harmony between life and nature. Its taotie patterns show reflection on cosmic changes. The Western Zhou “Mao Gong Ding” has an inscription recording Mao Gong's achievements and the king's rewards, reflecting the relationship between virtue and power. Phrases like “morality aligns with the universe” show the Pre - Qin understanding of morality and cosmic order.

3.2 Analyzing the Deep Meaning of Bronze -

Vessel Art Through “Dao” and “Qi”

Analyzing bronze wares reveals the "Dao"-“Qi” connection in Pre-Qin aesthetics. Take the Spring and Autumn Period’s Lianhe Fanghu as an example. Its animal legs, coiled dragons, and a crane about to fly break from traditional wine vessels’ solemnity. the crane symbolizes longevity, luck, and peace, reflecting Zheng’s wish for a war-free, benevolent, and prosperous society. [11] the pot - top crane, about to fly, symbolizes transcendence and spiritual freedom, echoing the "Dao". the decorations include lotus and cloud patterns, symbolizing purity, rebirth, change, and impermanence. They are not only visually appealing but also convey "Daoist" philosophy.

4. The Influence of the “Dao”-“Qi” Relationship on Later Art

4.1 The Influence of the “Dao”-“Qi” Relationship in Pre-Qin Aesthetics on Later Artistic Creation

In Pre-Qin aesthetics, the “Dao” and “Qi” relationship deeply influenced later artistic creation. Their interconnection created diverse aesthetic tensions. By examining these tensions, we can observe the evolution of Chinese aesthetic spirit towards increasing refinement and understatement. [12] In later - era art, “Dao” and “Qi” are closely linked and highly significant. “Dao” guides creation, giving works depth and aesthetic value. “Qi”, ever - evolving, now encompasses all tangible things and design. This relationship drives artists to focus on depth and artistic conception, explore new materials and forms, and promotes artistic diversity and quality. It also offers creative guidance, inspiring profound and uniquely - formed works that leave behind a valuable cultural heritage.

4.2 The Inheritance and Development of Bronze - Vessel Art in Later Generations

Bronze art is an important part of ancient Chinese art, boasting a long history and profound cultural heritage. the Pre-Qin period marked its peak, renowned for ornate decorations, dignified shapes, and superb craftsmanship. It stands as a pearl in the history of Chinese arts and crafts and constitutes a significant component of world bronze art. [13] Bronze art is an important artistic form in ancient China, with a profound cultural heritage. the Pre-Qin period marked its peak, serving as a

symbol of the society and a cultural heritage of that era. Later, bronze art transformed from practical utensils into artworks, attracting attention from subsequent generations.

After the Han Dynasty, bronze art merged Buddhist and Taoist elements, blending practical and religious uses to enrich its cultural depth. It is now a research focus in academic and collecting circles, driving its inheritance and development.

Bronze art carries historical and cultural information, aiding understanding of ancient society and guiding modern cultural development. It displays ancient craftsmen's skills and aesthetics, inspiring modern artists. Bronze patterns are a key resource for exploring traditional culture in modern design art.

Bronze - vessel art remains important in modern creation. It serves educational and cultural roles. Displaying and promoting it popularizes ancient Chinese art and culture, enhancing public cultural quality and aesthetic ability. It also bridges past and present, facilitating China - world communication and cultural exchange.

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the relationship between "Dao" and "Qi" in Pre-Qin aesthetics through the lens of bronze - vessel art. "Dao" symbolizes universal laws and the essence of art infused in bronze vessels, while "Qi" represents the artistic form embodying "Dao". Their integration in bronze - vessel art reflects social values, religious beliefs, and aesthetic tastes; for instance, taotie and dragon patterns serve both decorative and symbolic purposes.

Prominent in Pre-Qin aesthetics, bronze - vessel art mirrors the society and culture of the time and is a treasure in ancient art. It reveals the political, economic, and cultural aspects of the Pre-Qin era. the production and use of bronze vessels showcase the then - current productive and technological capacity and echo the ruling class's ideology and aesthetic preferences. Inscriptions on these vessels record significant historical events and are highly valued for their historical and cultural insights.

Aesthetically, bronze vessels, with their unique shapes, patterns, and inscriptions, reveal the Pre-Qin pursuit of beauty and deep contemplation of nature, the universe, and life. the evolution of their artistic style indicates changing aesthetic concepts, underpinning the development of ancient Chinese art and profoundly impacting

later artistic creation.

Acknowledgements

Category B Project of Wuhan Textile University Faculty Fund (k25004); Wuhan Textile University Fund Project 2025 College Students Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program (2025099).

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