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Source: *Representations*, No. 8 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 61-83

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928558>

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Representations

The Structure of Narrative in Early Chinese Pictorial Vessels

IN MANY developed pictorial traditions, narrative art is bound to the existence of a prior text and necessitates consideration in terms of that originating source. To generalize, however, and to insist that a prior text is a condition for visual narration is mistaken. Indeed, it can be argued that the existence of a prior text should be of secondary significance in the viewing of narrative representation through pictorial forms. The assumption of a verbalized antecedent shapes and even distorts the pictorial formulations as they are analyzed, assigning to as-yet unnamed images and undefined relations the certainty and the historical load of the verbalized model. In some cases that process may have some validity. In others, it derails the analytical and interpretive process. The appearance of images bound in relations of cause and effect may reveal a structural order in which is embedded an actual or implied joining of a beginning, a middle, and an end, and in which are described a gathering and intensification of relationships not known from any prior tale. Through the use of image repetition, image mirroring and image alteration, a tale may emerge that is told first and perhaps only through visual signs: a tale for which a prior text may either be unknowable or of indifferent value. When the originating fable or event cannot be known, the ordering of visual signs into narrative structures is our sole indication of narrational content. Taken together, the images function to create a text in which a rudimentary story describing action and reaction is developed. On this level of gesture and posture, groups of interacting figures demonstrate narrative structures of an immediate, recognizable character. But the stories told by these interacting figures is qualified by other means: by the use and modification of an archaic frontality, by framing or bordering, and by the larger contextual determinants inherent in the relationship between viewer and the object viewed. In these ways both the narrative structures of the known and the structural process of knowing are qualified. The emphasis is shifted from the tale told to the tale's telling. A situation is created in which the apparently simple interactions of figures slip in meaning, acquiring an unconscious rebelliousness while they elaborate a tale for which there was no name. Narration at this level also has structure, like bedrock, with its own properties and laws of cause and effect; but it is a shifting structural bed which sharply modifies the narrative structures

found above it. It is these two narrative structural layers—independent yet interacting—which are examined in this paper, using as example and context Chinese bronze pictorial vessels of the sixth through fourth centuries B.C.

The pictorial vessels to be considered here exemplify a large number of such objects produced in an age of pronounced social upheaval.¹ Originally a warm reddish-gold in color, frequently weighty and imposing in size, they were almost certainly used in the endless ceremonies performed by Chou nobility: to honor their ancestors, to honor themselves, and to mark their momentary claim to power and wealth. In an age which seems to have not yet known portrait painting or any other kind of self-imaging, the figures on pictorial vessels indicate a new fascination with human activities and the human world. Traditionally, the late Chou dynasty pictorial vessels have been discussed in terms of their value as documents of material culture and historical events. The images on their surfaces clarify the manner in which the great bronze bells and stone chimes used in Chou ceremonies were hung and struck,² just as they document the early existence of a developed architectural tradition based on a post and lintel system and on the use of complex brackets and extended eaves. The representations of libation ceremonies, hunting scenes, archery contests and battles have been cited as clear pictorial counterparts of the descriptions found in the Chou classic, the *Shih Ching* (*Book of Songs*)³ and in contemporary books of ritual such as the *Li-chi* and *I-li*. Scholars have returned to the pictorial vessels as sources for the study of Chou customs,⁴ many referring to images of fantastic animals, animals in combat and strange masked men as indicators of the extent to which Chou culture of the sixth–fifth centuries B.C. was influenced by the taste and mores of the steppe nomadic culture to the north and northwest.⁵ Studies of the origins of Chinese painting and the organization of pictorial space almost universally refer to the pictorial bronzes as primitive vestiges of a now-lost tradition of painting.⁶ In these cases—and perhaps too quickly—the pictorial images on the bronze vessels are reduced to the status of primitive solutions, unassuming line drawings which function “more like an elaborate pictograph to be *read* for its contents than as a convincing pictorial evocation of the event.”⁷ Derivative, documentary, reflective: in almost every discussion of the vessels, value and meaning are referred to and honored in light of a prior text. The approach to be taken in this paper is different. Setting aside questions of historical documentary value and iconographic meaning, as well as the issue of artistic intention, this study posits signification in the structuring of images as they are qualified by the larger structure of the vessel itself, and by the vessel’s relation to a hypothetical viewer or celebrant. It accords to the organization of individual images and image groups an inherent order; even, one might say, an inherent existence as text which only in the process of verbalization becomes torn from its pictorial language and subordinated to the domination of words.

The relative neglect into which the study of ancient Chinese pictorial vessels has fallen may be explained by a number of historical factors, including contemporary academic taste. Beyond such considerations, however, remains the fact that the scenes of conventionalized hunts, ceremonies and battles do not at first energize traditional terms of art-historical discourse. The products of anonymous craftsmen in unidentified workshops, mass-produced for the conspicuous consumption of ambitious lords in a period of intense social and political ferment, the pictorial representations on Chou vessels defy discussions of an individual artist's oeuvre and thwart the certainty of clear stylistic development. Analysis in terms of formal concepts leads, as in the case of Charles D. Weber's study,⁸ to the identification of vessel types, stylistic categories and related workshops. Beyond that, rigorous stylistic analysis becomes repetitive or meaningless. Iconographic analysis by reference to contemporary texts may illuminate some of the scenes, but only tentatively.⁹ Nonetheless, the neglect of these vessels and their pictorial representations remains difficult to explain since they occupy a place in the development of Chinese art roughly comparable to that held by the figures on Greek geometric vases: they are the beginnings of a tradition that includes not only figural representation but, more importantly, narrational formulations on which will depend all future structuring of narrative art. But where Greek art continued to be an art of the human figure, the same is not true of the arts of the late Chou and Han dynasties. It is perhaps that ensuing historical distraction away from the human figure as a prime vehicle for expression that best explains the neglect now accorded these figural vessels.

Since the pictorial images of late Chou bronzes are inextricably bound to their vessels, their absolute existence as visual signs is qualified by the spatial relation between viewer and vessel, established through handles, rings, and the relative proportions of sides. Moreover, since the spatial order of the vessel designates the viewer's approach, it is the vessel itself which establishes a primary attentional level: that on which the viewer confronts the vessel as a formal sculptural order and through which is defined the viewer's experience of central approach and diversion. On any given vessel, the pictorial images conform to or defy the relational structure governing viewer and vessel by establishing a secondary system of order in space and time, and by indicating the secondary level of the viewer's attention. To the extent that they conform to the structured order of the vessel, the images reassert (or at least do not significantly dispute) the dominant decorative or ceremonial function of the vessel. To the extent that they deny that order, they place a traditional concern for the hieratic or decorative in tension with emerging narrative formulations seeking to free themselves from the externally imposed constraints of the vessel's sculptural existence.

The late Chou pictorial bronzes were the direct descendants of a thousand-year-old bronze casting tradition—the most important artistic tradition in ancient

China. Within that tradition anthropomorphic images were rare. It was the zoomorph of fantastic or naturalistic appearance which constituted the vocabulary of pictorial images in Shang (ca. 1500–1028 B.C.) and early Chou (1027–late sixth century B.C.) China. Whether or not the pictorial images of late Chou vessels were a reflection of or inspired by contemporary advances in painting, they were bound to structures of order which arose from apparently non-narrational concerns. This origin is revealed by late Chou vessels that are virtual structural twins of pictorial vessels, but that are ornamented with the traditional dragonated and rope motifs (Fig. 1). Within the dragonated ornament, itself the last vestige of the ancient zoomorphic pictorial tradition, centrally located masks reinforced by the vessel's handles confirm the formal and ordered approach of viewer to vessel. Such vessels and their ornamentation clearly echo—albeit it a great distance—the hieratic order and formality of the great Shang bronzes, when zoomorphic imagery obeyed the dictates of central axis and bilateral symmetry (Fig. 2). In that earlier period, vessels were the explicit mediators between human society and the spirit realm. They contained the meat and wine offered by the king to the ancestors. The order of the vessels' shapes surely established the king or impersonator's axis of approach, thereby mapping the spatial ordering of the ceremonies. With the advent of the Chou dynasty, down to the period of the pictorial vessels, bronzes continued to function as prime objects within that most important of ceremonies, the ancestral cult. But by origin the Chou were probably not true Shang Chinese. Their lack of interest in traditional Shang decor and their use of the vessels as major historical records ended by diminishing the



FIGURE 1. *Opposite: Chien*. Late Chou dynasty (5th cent. B.C.).
W. 51.7cm. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

FIGURE 2. *Below: Tsun*. Shang dynasty (12th–11th cent. B.C.).
H. 36.8cm. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



traditional formality of the ceremonial bronzes. The sculptural extravagance of late Shang bronzes disappeared. Interest returned to the essential vessel shape, and the insistent central axis softened, subsided (Fig. 3), at times seemed to disappear, only to reemerge in the seventh century. From that time until the appearance of pictorial vessels, dragonated heads originated in centrally located animal heads and horizontal bands of abstracted decor confirmed the formality of the vessel's presentation to the viewer (Fig. 4).

During the late Shang dynasty (ca. 1300–1028 B.C.) the combination of zoomorphic motifs and their ordering by reference to a central axis confirmed the implication of terse ancestral dedications cast into the vessel: that there was no break between this realm and that of the spirits, and that the interpenetration of the two realms was mediated by king or impersonator, ceremony and vessel. By contrast, the long inscriptions on Chou bronzes recited the honors accorded the owner of the vessel and invoked the respect of all future generations.¹⁰ Such laudatory statements, directed as they were to more immediate concerns, combined with increasingly decorative ornamentation to demonstrate the extent to which stern values of the spirit realm had been supplanted by worldly values of men. Such changes paralleled the decreasing presence of *T'ien* (the Chou inter-

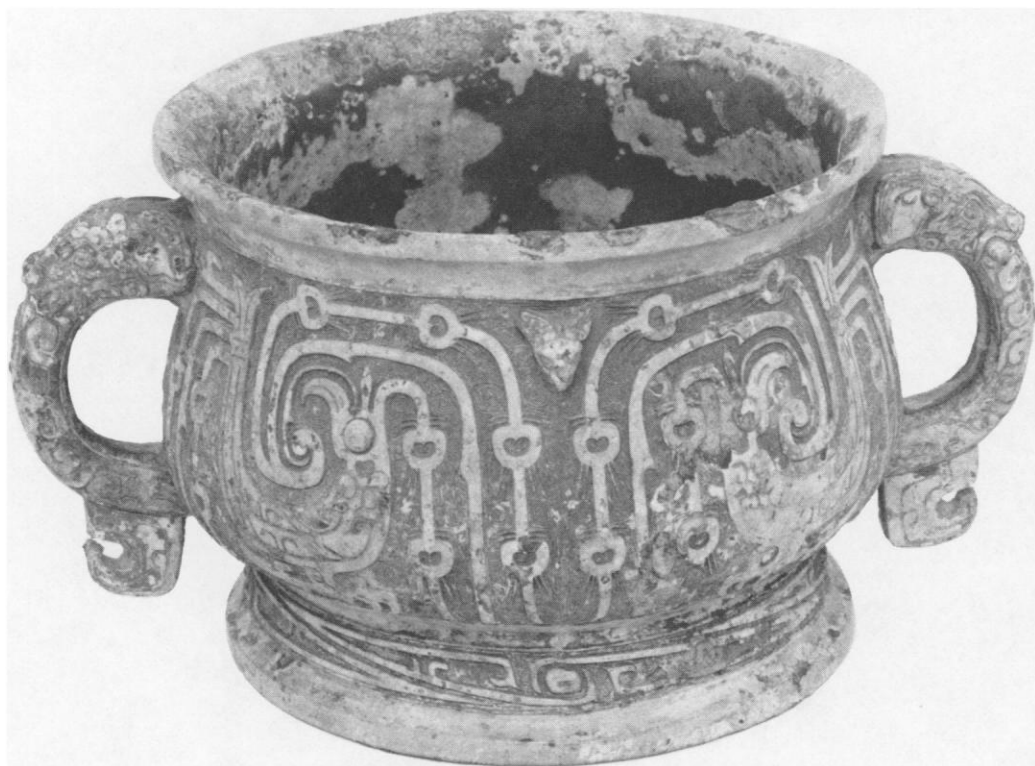




FIGURE 3. *Opposite: Kuei*. Early Chou dynasty (10th cent. B.C.).
Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury. The Minneapolis
Institute of Arts.

FIGURE 4. *Above: Hu*. Late Chou dynasty (5th cent. B.C.).
H. 44.8cm. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



FIGURE 5. Basin excavated at Chao-ku, near Hui-hsien, Honan. Late Chou dynasty (late 6th–early 5th cent. B.C.). From: *Hsin Chung-kuo ti k'ao ku shuo huo* (Peking, 1962), p. 66.

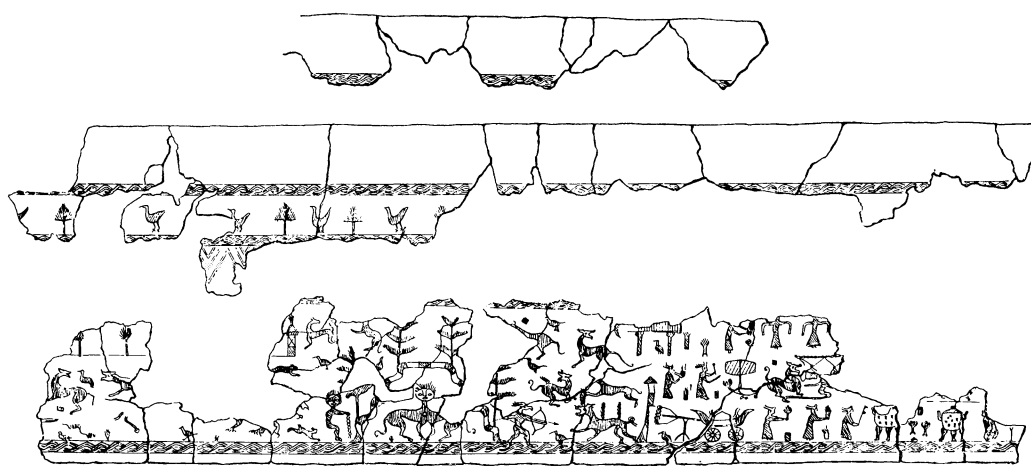
pretation of the Lord on High) during the Chou period and the gradual emergence of mythic heroes as prime originators of civilization.¹¹

It was on this stage that pictorial vessels suddenly appeared in the late sixth century B.C. Although vessels with zoomorphic and abstract ornamentation continued to exist through to the end of the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.), pictorial vessels seem to have enjoyed an instantaneous if short-lived success. While much of the imagery of early pictorial vessels remained zoomorphic, human representations quickly made their entry: first in the guise of strange demonlike creatures and then increasingly in terms of ceremonial participants who finally almost altogether displaced the representation of animals. The implications of these changes are important: they indicate that after almost 1500 years of history, the Chinese had finally come to believe that human beings and the human realm were appropriate subjects of representation. They indicate a fascination with this world and with human actions.

The earliest, still-zoomorphic beginnings of narrative structuring are represented by a footed basin from the Musée Guimet, formerly in the Wannieck collection. A band of intertwined dragons on the vessel's exterior joins it to the Li Yü vessels of the late sixth or early fifth century.¹² Within its bowl, rows of alternating fish (seen from the side) and turtles (seen as if from above) suggest a watery region, while around the uppermost part of the interior, stamped profile ducks imply the bank of a pond. Around the top edge of the vessel lip, incised stags run from left to right. The use of zoomorphic motifs to create a metaphor for a watery environment is not original here.¹³ But the Wannieck vessel is different: its bands of dragons and stamped animals contain the emblems of a complete landscape. The dragons of ethereal substance form the surrounding field, while stags, birds, fish, and turtles suggest forest, margins of marshes, and water itself. If one were to reason that landscape could be represented by its inhabitants, rather than by its contours, then this basin would offer a remarkably coherent landscape.

The Wannieck basin's dragonated bands obey a traditional intertwining of bodies, in which the tail of one beast ultimately ends in the jaws of another, or in which each identical beast turns on itself, thereby denying any possibility of psychological interaction. By contrast, the stags, birds, fish and turtles all follow each other in rows, creating the experience of a spatial and temporal continuity that promises narrational content. In contrast to the tangled dragons, the realistic

FIGURE 6. *Lien*, excavated at Liu-li-ko, near Hui-hsien, Honan. Late Chou dynasty (late 6th–early 5th cent. B.C.). From: Kuo Pao-chün, *Shan-piao-chen yü Liu-li-ko* (Peking, 1959), fig. 29.



animals each exist in a spatial individuality, heightening our sense of something real and specific, even if all animals of each type are exactly the same. Through its unusual ordering of zoomorphic images, the Wannieck vessel demonstrates a number of pictorial modifications essential to the development of a narrational content: the untangling and individualizing of realistic images;¹⁴ the fitting of those images into some kind of a coherent order suggesting the extension of space and time; the ordering of image types according to an assumed orderly environment; and the separation of fantastic from realistic zoomorphic forms. The basin as a whole may be considered landscape through metaphor. Its roots in ancient traditions (e.g., the basin shape itself, the traditional suggestion of a watery environment in *p'an* vessels, and the dragonated band) also suggest that one might consider all ancient vessels as metaphorical landscapes—but landscapes of the spirit realm. The structure of the Wannieck basin, with its separation of realms and its clear environmental implications, opened the way for the presentation of human beings within a coherent and earthly landscape.

The appearance of that human-inhabited landscape had its acknowledged beginnings in a group of thin-walled engraved vessels believed to have been produced in the southern Shansi-northern Honan region in the late sixth–early fifth century B.C.¹⁵ Exemplified by a basin excavated at Chao-ku, near Hui-hsien, Honan (Fig. 5), these vessels include humans, animals, structures and trees in registration. The vessels are noteworthy for their images of ritualized ceremony involving music making, libation, and archery, as well as chariots, horses, boats, rudimentary trees and large birds—all arranged with reference to base lines dividing one register from the next. Most striking, however, is the clear statement of psychological interaction carried by posture and gesture. In the Chao-ku vessel, long-robed figures hand objects to each other, while archers in different states of readiness suggest transformation of psychological states in space and time. In front of the archers hasten long-legged birds, each alternating with a schematic tree, all suggesting temporal and spatial change as well as varying reaction to the archers. Here, as on the Wannieck basin, repetition of motif creates the impression of spatial and temporal extension, while modification of the same basic motif suggests the change of objects in time. This, together with the juxtaposition of objects apparently related in an action/reaction relationship, introduces a new element of instability into vessel decor. In the Wannieck vessel, rows of realistic animals contradicted the centering of the dragon band by reference to plastic masks; but the animals did follow and reaffirm the essential circular shape of the vessel. In the Chao-ku vessel, however (as well as in others of this engraved type), the vitality of the interacting figures and animals draws attention to the reciprocation of action and reaction, and away from the circularity of the vessel. The images begin to suggest the telling of a tale within a tale.

All the images on the Chao-ku vessel are presented in a strict profile or three-quarter position. This is also true of most of the images on a well-known *lien* (cosmetic box) from Liu-li-ko (Fig. 6), with the exceptions of two monstrous images in the hilly landscape section of the decor. Under a stylized hill (left of center, along the lower edge), as if encased within it, stands a creature with a frontal human head and two profile horselike bodies. Whether this is meant to be read as a two-bodied creature or as a frontally viewed creature whose body must be split in order to be seen is not clear. Just to the left and “outside” the hill, another strange one-legged creature is seen in profile, its round head turned frontally. This creature almost certainly represents the *kuei*, a one-legged magical creature of the forest.¹⁶ The two monsters’ frontal heads are striking contrasts to the dominant rule of profile and three-quarter view and suggest a hierarchy of order which distantly echoes that of the great Shang dynasty vessels: an order in which frontality suggested a superior status and in which lesser creatures—fantastic or realistic—were placed in opposing profile relations. Whatever the meaning here, the distinction between frontality and profile or three-quarter views was clearly deliberate and significant, suggesting that frontality was reserved for the more powerful spirits while lesser spirits, humans and animals were never so shown.

Some of the images ornamenting the Liu-li-ko *lien* clearly serve as single emblems of what must have been familiar mythic situations or narratives. Others more readily indicate familiar ceremonies, in which cause and effect is implied represented (e.g., in the juxtaposed images of drummer and drum). Only in the case of the bird-headed archer and attacking animal is there a clear statement of cause and effect, action and anticipated reaction. The lack of frames or borders between apparently different scenes, as well as the “coming and going” of figures, from left and right, deny the narrational potential promised by the juxtaposition of such strange settings and creatures. If there were a story behind these images, it had to have been known to be read. We find here less indication of narrational formulations than on the more orderly Chao-ku basin.

It is in the so-called hunting *hu* that one finds a significant tilting of the image away from decorative ornamentation and towards narrational formulation.¹⁷ In this group of vessels, scenes are most commonly arranged with reference to a central axis and with reference to the vessel’s own organization of approach. Thus, scenes are symmetrically arranged on either side of the central axis and appear as repetition or mirror-image (Fig. 7).¹⁸ This centralized ordering is emphasized by the use of framing to control image groups, separating one group from another and mitigating any potential sense of a continuity essential to the development of a narrative. Most of the figures are arranged either in profile or in a three-quarter view, which accords to the hunting figures and bird-men a

greater immediacy through the implication of twisting in space. Frontality is reserved for a strange horned and human-headed bird (Fig. 7, bottom register). One must ask whether or not this figure's frontality, like that of the earlier *lien* images, derives from a technical necessity: the difficulty of showing an effective anthropomorphic face in profile. But within the total context of the vessel's imagery, the granting of centrality, frontality and singularity to the human-headed bird-man would seem to indicate a superior status, suggesting a point of narrative emphasis.¹⁹

Most of the image groups on this vessel are arranged in relations of cause and effect, thereby promising the continuity of narration; but the repetition of the same motifs and their subordination to the framing imposed by the vessel's architectonic structure contradicts that promise of narration. Other vessels, however, demonstrate a significant transition toward coherent narrational formulation. A square *hu* in the Avery Brundage collection contains on its stand a profile



FIGURE 7.
Hu. Late Chou dynasty (5th cent. B.C.). H. 39.4cm without lid. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection.



FIGURE 8.
Left: Square hu on pedestal.
 Late Chou dynasty (5th cent.
 B.C.). H. 26cm without lid.
 Asian Art Museum of San
 Francisco, The Avery
 Brundage Collection.



FIGURE 9.
Right: Square hu. Late Chou
 dynasty (5th–4th cent. B.C.).
 H. 37.2cm. Courtesy of the
 Freer Gallery of Art,
 Smithsonian Institution,
 Washington, D.C.



FIGURE 10. *Above:* Decorative panels from a *hu* inlaid with copper, excavated at Chia-ko-chuang, Hopei. Late Chou dynasty (first half 5th cent. B.C.).

FIGURE 11. *Below:* *Tou*. Late Chou dynasty (first half 5th cent. B.C.). Shanghai Museum.

bird with snake and two confronting figures with a tree branch (Fig. 8). These figures are similar to if not quite identical with those on the stand of another square *hu* in the Eric Lidow collection, Los Angeles.²⁰ But while the upper part of the Lidow vessel is embellished with images and abstract decor that reaffirm centrality, axiality, and decorative intent, the images on the Brundage vessel tend to diminish those very values. Asymmetry rules in the two central registers, where action moves from left to right implying if not a sequence of events, then at least the viewer's sequential perception of events. In the topmost and lowest registers of the vessel body, centrality is either offset or affirmed and then denied by variations in individual images. In other words, the artist seems here to have taken note of the center—of its traditional primacy—but to have determined to exploit the off-centered as a means to suggest narrational vitality. The off-centered, the unstable, affirms the significance of the tale told in the scene, without regard to the primacy of the vessel and without regard to the vessel's traditional priority in the structuring of the viewer's approach. But this rebellion, like that suggested also in the second register from the top of the Freer Gallery square *hu* (Fig. 9) is short-lived: the movement of each scene is ultimately stopped, controlled, dismissed by the insistent closure of side and border.

Distinguished from the so-called hunting *hu* is a group of vessels decorated with human figures and fantastic animals that seem to be accosting each other with a wild abandon. Tentatively dated to the first half of the fifth century B.C.,²¹ these vessels are marked by the use of rope patterns to divide registers and vertical sections within registers, but also by the appearance of an overall imagistic decor. This group may be exemplified by a *hu* (Fig. 10) with rope patterns excavated at Chia-ko-chuang, T'ang-shan, Hopei, as well as by a *tou* from the Shanghai Museum (Fig. 11). On both vessels patently fantastic creatures confront one another or human figures, or simply float like space fillers between other groups. Within each large group of figures registration is now promised, now rejected, as if the even distribution of images across the surface was of greater concern than were the dictates of narrational clarity. In fact, one may argue that here space is seen as a negative interval needing to be filled rather than as an interval capable of heightening psychological tension.

The *hu* and the *tou* are two opposing instances: the *hu* presents its images in terms of four different scenes (excluding that repeated twice on the lid), each repeated twice, each bordered by rope patterns. The *tou*, by contrast, shows an indeterminate number of scenes without border or clear registration. The extreme confusion of the scenes on both vessels, the fact of the action going back and forth within the same local area rather than carrying the eye around the vessel in a sequence of cause and effect relations, effectively prevents the emergence of narrational implication. The scenes seem, in both cases, like the repetition of a good visual joke, decorative and lively, with neither beginning nor end. In the

case of the *hu*, the rope borders act to cancel continuity of movement from one framed scene to the next, insisting on the limitation of narrative continuity. In the case of the *tou*, directional confusion serves to stabilize movement into local areas, negating the promise of the vessel's framelessness. On the other hand, the ropes on the *hu* establish an axiality which is ignored by the image groups; and on the *tou*, the images are arranged in a manner which is totally oblivious to the principles of centrality and axiality. In this respect, the pictorial motifs on these and like vessels dislodge themselves from the supremacy of the vessel's structure and—at least in the case of the *tou*—establish a fictive world at cross-purposes with that determined by the approach of viewer to vessel. In other vessels of this type, one occasionally finds an increased ordering of images into narrational patterns, where the simple regular succession of romping images promises a continuity of action and reaction without end.²² On a basin in the Avery Brundage collection,²³ one small figure stretches out his arms in seeming response to the hair-pulling he is receiving from another, and a goatlike beast leaps as if howling, as a strange creature bites its rump. In this rudimentary storytelling, the joining of images demonstrates the manner in which signs can shift in signification through a simple variation in the ordering of images and image groups. Nonetheless, these narrational impulses are momentary and frail, still subordinated to the larger ornamental purpose determined by the dominant structure of the vessel.

A transition to full narrational formulation can be found in a group of vessels with a variety of pictorial themes produced primarily by inlaid metal. These vessels are usually dated to the first half of the fifth century B.C.²⁴ A *chien* from the Freer Gallery reflects the ancient tradition of ornamenting *p'an*: on the lip is engraved a continuous row of chasing animals (?), while inside the bowl geese walking and swimming, fish, and turtles recreate the ambiance of a marsh or pond. On the exterior of the vessel appears a hunting scene, including men on foot and in chariots, and others shooting long-necked birds with bolo-like snares (Fig. 12). Despite the jumble of images, the grouping of several related figures offers a new narrative coherence. By gesture and posture the figures in the chariots are joined to their horses and to the animals driven before the chariots, as well as to those attacked by archers in the rear. Almost all animals and men are joined in relations of action/reaction, attention/anticipation. Particularly striking is the appearance of fish under the bird hunters (Fig. 12, far left), implying thereby a marshy landscape in which occurs the hunt. Indeed, the fish, hunters, and birds become coherent signs of a landscape setting, and with this emergence of coherent context is implied the narrative structuring of a hunt. The implication of a marshy landscape here indicates by analogy that the adjoining charioteers and animals are also within a landscape: one which must have been as clearly implied to contemporary viewers as the marsh landscape is suggested to

us. Finally, the action of men and animals flows across this vessel without regard to the vessel's clearly indicated order of approach: the vessel as a quartered structure inviting a specific and formal relation to the viewer is denied or ignored by the figures moving over its surface.

A decisive separation between the structured relation of vessel and viewer and the narrational impulses carried by figural representations appears in vessels such as an inlaid *tou* from the Walters Art Museum (Fig. 13), an inlaid *hu* from the Curtis collection, Musée Guimet,²⁵ and finally in such vessels as the Jannings *hu* (Fig. 14). On the Walters and Curtis vessels riotous hunting scenes are juxtaposed with scenes of a far more orderly type, in which the rawness of nature detailed in some registers seems deliberately contrasted with the order and harmony of the arts of civilization. Scenes of libation and music, of sedately moving figures with spears, and of bolo hunters within a marshy landscape present groups of images in continuous scenes of action and reaction. Even if these images reflect no specific prior text, they tell a tale of sustained cause and effect, while clearly depicted structures expand the figures' signifying power by establishing a recognizable and measurable environment. These architectural structures serve the same purpose as the fish in the bolo-hunting scene: they locate the action in space and extend it in time. They also imply that where we see no environmental context, contemporary viewers may very well have understood one. The wild men and animals on the Walters Art Museum *tou* may have been sign enough of a wild landscape to have filled out a contrast between the sedate figures and structures above and their uncultivated world.

On these vessels, as on the even more fully advanced Jannings *hu*, where hunt scenes have been replaced by orderly battles, there is no concern for symmetry or centralized axis. Order lies entirely within the logic of the pictorial narrative rather than in structures imposed by the vessel itself. Entirely absent is the centralized formality of the ancient Shang-Chou bronze tradition. Figures and animals assume three-quarter positions, calculated to intensify the expression of action/reaction established by their gestures and postures. The total absence of frontality confirms our earlier hypothesis that its appearance on late Chou vessels was still bound to an ancient tradition of signifying spirit power or a godhead. With frontality dismissed, we finally seem to have been lodged in a realm entirely of and for human beings, in which power now resides in the instruments of human ritual and warfare.

The appearance and rapid development of the pictorial vessels trace several interconnected transitions, all of decisive importance for the development, within Chinese pictorial arts, of narrative structures. We find the transformation of the zoomorph from a hieratic image bound to a hierarchic spatial ordering to beasts both hunting and hunted, within an earthly realm of cause and effect. We find the appearance of human images, expressed first in fixed formulae, repeated



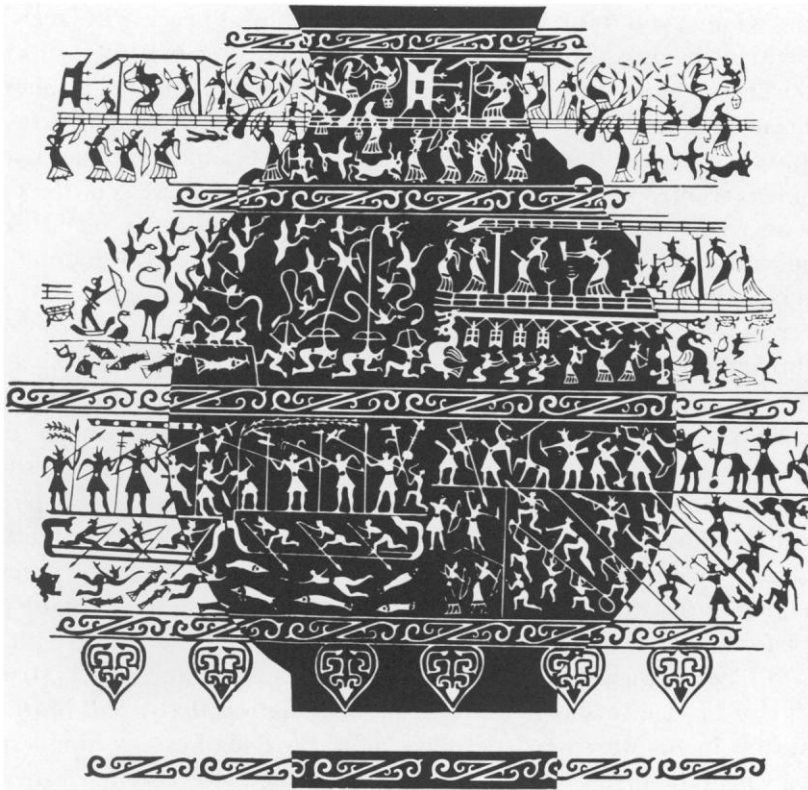


FIGURE 12. *Opposite, above: Chien*. Late Chou dynasty (late 6th–early 5th cent. B.C.). H. 28.0cm. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

FIGURE 13. *Opposite, below: Tou*, inlaid with copper. Late Chou dynasty (first half 5th cent. B.C.). H. 19.4cm without cover. The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.

FIGURE 14. *Above: Hu*, formerly Werner Jannings collection, Peking. From: *Chan-kuo-hui-hua tzu-liao* (Peking, 1957), fig. 20.

again and again around the vessel surface and finally appearing as freely interacting sentient beings, responding—like the animals—in earthly terms. Frontality charged with the supremacy of a spirit realm and reaffirmed by alignment along a central axis is reduced, retrenched, finally disappears, itself also a victim of earthly concerns and mortal terms of being. At the same time, the rigidity of the profile is relaxed by increasing use of a three-quarter view: as if that posture was the one most essentially bound to human actions, in human terms. But the three-quarter view denies a flat surface and disrupts an easy assumption of fixed relation between vessel and viewer. It is as if the small images of men and animals became rebellious once assured of their rightful place within the order of the vessel: breaking axial symmetry, disputing the formalized approach of viewer to vessel, they came to insist on the subordination of vessel to image and, consequently, on the exhaustion of the vessel as a pictorial vehicle. In the earliest pictorial vessels, this tendency of men and animals to despoil the vessel's supremacy was held in check by the domination of borders. But borders, too, passed as human and animal images pressed the cause of narrational continuity. The expression of beginning, middle and end, of cause and effect, of existence in human terms rather than in terms of eternal gods and spirits: this was the victory of the pictorial vessels of the late Chou. Yet the victory was short-lived, for in the process of freeing image formulation from the dictates of the vessel's structure, the ability of bronze vessels to carry image making was destroyed. More effectively flexible media were needed, media more capable of establishing a neutral plane on which the images themselves could become determinants of their relationship with the viewer. Perhaps Weber and Consten are correct in surmising that the last groups of pictorial vessels are merely echoes of a more vital painting tradition, all traces of which are effectively lost. It is also possible, however, that the late pictorial vessels served as catalysts to the development of figural painting, creating thereby a child which surpassed and rendered the parents unnecessary. If the development and demise of pictorial vessels was ultimately bound to the development of narrative structures, so also was the emergence of landscape representation and its particular narrative role within the context of Chinese cultural traditions. The vessels we have considered make it abundantly clear that the emergence of landscape representation rested upon signs and symbolic values carried primarily by human and animal images, and not necessarily on the signs of trees or grass or mountains. In these early indications of narrative interest, a fish meant water, a goose a watery margin, and a ferocious beast meant either forest or plain.

At the beginning of this discussion there were identified two layers of narrative structuring which shaped the emergence of pictorial narrative without any necessary reference to a prior text. In the case of the Chinese pictorial tradition, narrative structures imposed on the interacting figures by the sculptural order

of the vessel, and by the resulting experiential order in the relation of vessel and viewer, were gradually subordinated to the structures of narrative developed through the pictorial interactions of images. Yet it is also striking that in the increasing emergence of narrative continuity germinated the seeds of its own deconstruction, each new indication of extended action/reaction thwarted by the sculptural order imposed by the vessel and finally by the very nature of the vessel itself.

Notes

1. This was an age characterized by one scholar as having been founded on the “crisis of aristocratic society,” in which great families met ruin as minor gentry swarmed to the princely courts in search of power. See Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization* (Cambridge, Eng., 1982), pp. 62–82; and Cho-yun Hsu, *Ancient China in Transition* (Palo Alto, Ca., 1965).
2. See, e.g., Wen Fong, ed., *The Great Bronze Age of China* (New York, 1980), p. 315, where the correct arrangement of a set of bells excavated in 1972 is referred to the order indicated in pictorial vessels.
3. See, for example, songs no. 205 (p. 218) and no. 233 (p. 237) from the *Shih Ching*, in Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs* (New York, 1960).
4. See, for example, K. C. Chang, “Food and Food Vessels in Ancient China,” in his *Early Chinese Civilization: Anthropological Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 115–48.
5. Jenny So, “The Inlaid Bronzes of the Warring States Period,” in *The Great Bronze Age of China*, p. 309; and the discussion of Asian steppe influence in Charles D. Weber, *Chinese Pictorial Bronze Vessels of the Late Chou Period* (Ascona, Switzerland, 1968), pp. 223–37.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 191 and 203; and Eleanor von Erdberg Consten, “A Hu with Pictorial Decoration,” *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, VI (1952), 29–31. Weber follows Consten in concluding that the monumentality of the battle scenes on such vessels as the Jannings *hu* and the Shan-piao-chen *chien*, as well as the coherent mulberry-picking and archery-contest scenes, were derived from more advanced and unified formulations in painting. Both scholars maintain that the sophisticated qualities of these scenes on late pictorial vessels, in contrast to the additive and primitive scenes of fantastic hunts, were indebted to advances that had already been made in now-lost paintings.
7. So, “Inlaid Bronzes,” p. 309.
8. Weber’s study remains the only extensive stylistic consideration of this group of vessels in English, and the only comprehensive compilation of reproductions and drawings of these vessels. For the convenience of the reader, I refer to reproductions in Weber’s book wherever possible, rather than to reproductions in many different volumes (many in Chinese and Japanese). I am greatly indebted to Weber’s careful stylistic analysis and chronological formulations, and depend heavily on his conclusions. The analytical approach used here, however, as well as the conclusions, are entirely my contribution and responsibility.

9. The scenes on these vessels defy easy interpretation. Scholars have pointed to shamanic traditions of both Chinese and non-Chinese origin, to Chou festivals of fertility, courtship and ancestor worship, and to Chou heroic myths. The situation is complicated by the fact that many of the images appear to have roots in the traditions of Chou China's nomadic neighbors, for whom we have no adequate literary sources. The most easily interpreted of the pictorial representations remain the latest: those showing libation scenes and scenes of archery contests, music making and the hunting of animals and birds. For some discussion of meaning, in English, see: Weber, pp. 223–236; Consten, pp. 18–32; Bernhard Karlgren, “Legends and Cults in Ancient China,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, 18 (1946), 199–365. For an extended discussion in Japanese, see: Hayashi Minao, “Sengoku jidai no gazo mon,” *Kokogaku Zasshi*, XLVII:3, 27–49; XLVII:4, 20–48; and XLVIII:1, 1–21 (1961–62).
10. For a discussion of the radical change in bronze inscriptions and in the resulting documentary value of the vessels, between the late Shang and the Chou dynasties, see William Watson, *Ancient Chinese Bronzes* (London, 1962), pp. 68–80.
11. See K.C. Chang, “A Classification of Shang and Chou Myths,” in *Early Chinese Civilization*, pp. 149–73.
12. Reproduced in Weber, *Chinese Pictorial Bronze Vessels*, fig. 9. By “narrational space” I refer to a delimited surface organized in such a manner as to encourage the impression of a coherent storytelling, or one which gives the impression that some story—some coherent indication of cause and effect—is being related through visual images. For a full discussion of the Li Yü vessels, see: George W. Weber, Jr., *The Ornaments of Late Chou Bronzes: A Method of Analysis* (Rutgers, N.J., 1973), chaps. 5 and 6. Also see fig. 1 above, p. 64, for an example of Li Yü decor.
13. Throughout both the late Shang and Chou periods one finds flat basins, called *p'an*, frequently ornamented in the interior with images of water-inhabiting creatures: fish, serpentine dragons, and around the outer circle of the bowl, water birds. See, e.g., Weber, *Chinese Pictorial Bronze Vessels*, fig. 15.
14. The disentangling of images on late Chou bronzes was a momentous if not entirely new element in bronze decor. From the Shang period on, one frequently finds individual images used to highlight or offset tangled forms. But in the context of late Chou serpentine decor, the tangled image (e.g., twined snakes or dragons) was the rule, so that the disentangling of these elements reestablished an opportunity for perceptual foci allowed only by individual images.
15. Weber's Group IV: vessels with scenes in engraved line, *Chinese Pictorial Bronze Vessels*, (pp. 49–90).
16. Karlgren, “Legends and Cults,” p. 258.
17. These vessels are described by Weber in his Group VII: vessels decorated with bird-men, men and animals in combat, and other scenes in flat relief (Weber, *Chinese Pictorial Bronze Vessels*, pp. 113ff). Weber assigns a date of late sixth–early fifth century B.C. and a provenance of the Hui-hsien region. He associates the hunt scenes and those involving birds, serpents and bird-men with traditional and conservative religious observances, while scenes involving chariots, mulberry trees and bolo hunting may have some basis in religion but derive more directly from a contemporary, “albeit now lost,” tradition of paintings of everyday life (*ibid.*, p. 146).
18. Vessels of a similar type, varying in details of organization but frequently carrying the same images and image groups, are well known. Cf. that excavated from Liu-li-

ko, Honan, reproduced in drawing in Weber, *Chinese Pictorial Bronze Vessels*, figs. 42 and 43b.

19. On the Brundage vessel the frontal figures are not aligned with the central axis; but on other vessels of the same type they are. On *hu* from Liu-li-ko, Honan, and from the Chinese National Palace and Central Museum, T'ai-pei, horned human-headed birds are placed along the central axis in the second register from the top. Their frontal faces—the only frontal faces among all the images of these vessels—distantly recall the association of large frontal masks with the axes of Shang vessels of the Anyang period (*ibid.*, fig. 43).
20. Drawing reproduced in Weber, *Chinese Pictorial Bronze Vessels*, fig. 45b.
21. Weber's Group VIII, believed to have come from the southern Shansi-northern Honan region (*ibid.*, pp. 169–183).
22. Cf. the *hu* in the King Kwei collection, Hong Kong, reproduced in Weber, *Chinese Pictorial Bronze Vessels*, figs. 64a–f.
23. *Ibid.*, figs. 65e and 65g.
24. These, perhaps the best known of Chou China's pictorial vessels, are included in Weber's Group IX (*ibid.*, pp. 183–206).
25. *Ibid.*, fig. 67.