

Application of Chinese Traditional Decorative Patterns on Bronze Ware of Shang Dynasty in the Film & TV Costume Design*

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In contemporary China, some domestic films are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, contributing to more and more excellent film & TV programs, among which, the styling inspired by animal patterns on Late Shang Dynasty bronze ware has given strong vitality to the film & TV programs. This paper is intended to compile and understand the cultural value and artistic features of the patterns on Late Shang Dynasty bronze ware as well as its value in the traditional pattern application. It provides certain references regarding the role of film & TV styling in the inheritance and application of traditional patterns, if we analyze the cognition and status quo of the Late Shang Dynasty bronze ware patterns in the contemporary film & TV styling, and if we go deep into its artistic value and its application within such makeup design and identify the problems and laws in current design cases. Such analysis also provides a way of thinking for the application of traditional patterns in current film & TV costume design.

Keywords: animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty, film & TV styling; film & TV costume design, traditional patterns

Introduction

Film & TV styling and costume design, as a unique symbolic language, plays an essential and irreplaceable role in the expression of the fashion design artworks. In recent years, film & TV series featuring the style of ancient costume, Chinese fantasy and mystery are quite popular among Chinese young audience. Moreover, there are increasingly higher requirements from the audience on the overall styling for those

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characters in the shows. Young audience attach high importance to not only their visual aesthetic needs, but also the inheritance and dissemination of traditional culture.

In July 2023, the movie *Creation of the Gods I*, shot by Wuershan, a renowned Chinese director, triggered a lot of buzz once it was released in China. Featuring the major design elements of bronze culture of Late Shang Dynasty, the movie costume, accessories as well as the makeup styling and scenery setting attracted widespread attention. Thereafter, it was put on the agenda to fulfill the application of the patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty thousand years ago. Heated discussions over this suffices to show the public's expectations and love for the integration of bronze elements into movies. A wide range of costume and textile designs that respect historical timelines, that are innovative yet not exaggerated, that excel realistic significance, that focus on role feature and refuse stereotype, have been brought to the screen. They are highly recognized through the fast dissemination and wide range of films and television programs, and undoubtedly becoming an important source of promoting the cultural legacy in costume and fashion design applications.

Traditional Patterns on Bronze Ware of Shang Dynasty—Cultural Value and Artistic Features

Understand the Patterns and Texture on Bronze Ware of Late Shang Dynasty

Shang Dynasty represents the developmental peak of the of animal patterns on bronze ware. Along with the dynastic change of China, decorative patterns represent social changes and the flow of ideas in each dynasty, carrying along the humanistic spirit, social symbolism, and artistic value. In considering that the primitive society was full of Thoughts of Creation related natural worship, the shapes and the patterns on wares took various animal elements as the main theme, which was prevalent and an important part in the bronze art of late Shang Dynasty. These animal patterns are not only closely related to the daily life and farming of Chinese ancestors, but also the demonstrations of their rich imagination. The three most common types of animal patterns in the late Shang Dynasty are animal face patterns, realistic animal patterns, and fantasy animal patterns (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1
Patterns Classification on Bronze Ware of Late Shang Dynasty

Main Types	Representative pattern			
Animal face patterns	 Animal face with horn curled out	 Animal face with horn curled in	 Tiger head	 Ox head
Realistic animal patterns	 Turtle	 Snake	 Cicada	 Tiger
Fantasy animal patterns	 Tiger-ear dragon	 Phoenix	 Owl and the like	 Sharp-horn bird

* Picture source: Collated and drawn by the Author.

The animal face patterns include those of tiger head, ox head, animal face with horn curled, etc.; The realistic animal patterns include those of tiger, snake, ox, sheep, pig, fish, turtle, cicada, silkworm, etc.; The fantasy animal patterns include those of dragon, phoenix, composite type of animals, etc.

Artistic Temperament Analysis of the Patterns on Bronze Ware

The form of creation in primitive society depends much on the social environment. The traditional patterns on bronze ware of Shang Dynasty convey an independent consciousness of Shang society: a reflection of the power and will of the rulers in the early patriarchal societies (Lee, 2021). The creative form of conveying wills through graphics embodies the aesthetic concept of ancient China's "Casting everything on a tripod" (Zhao & Zhu, 2008), which coincides also with the mode of artistic creation using objects to metaphorically convey meaning in film & TV series, providing unlimited ideographic space for costume design.

The art feature of the patterns maintains the uniqueness of primitive society, as demonstrated from three major aspects: First is the decorative themes of "Worship of gods", as evidenced by the large number of fantasy animal themes that are concrete symbols of "natural gods". Second would be the rough and primitive animal images—in the patterns on bronze ware of early time, the animals are created with angry eyes and tusks wildly exposed. For instance, tiger patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty are basically ferocious, and there are even "tiger cannibalism" patterns that served to intimidate slaves or dispel ghosts (Hayashi, 2016). The deep carved and sharp lines produce an additional savage vitality to the religious symbols and historical weight they carried. Third would be the orderly composition—symmetry and balance are emphasized for the composition of patterns on bronze ware of Shang Dynasty. Take as an example the carving structure of "Three Layers of Flowers" overlapping the patterns (Lee, 2019) (as in Figure 1), it mainly consists of three levels: ground pattern, mainstem pattern, and decorative pattern. This layout enhances the stability and solemnity of the patterns, reflecting the simple understanding of the ancient people regarding graphical order and regularity.

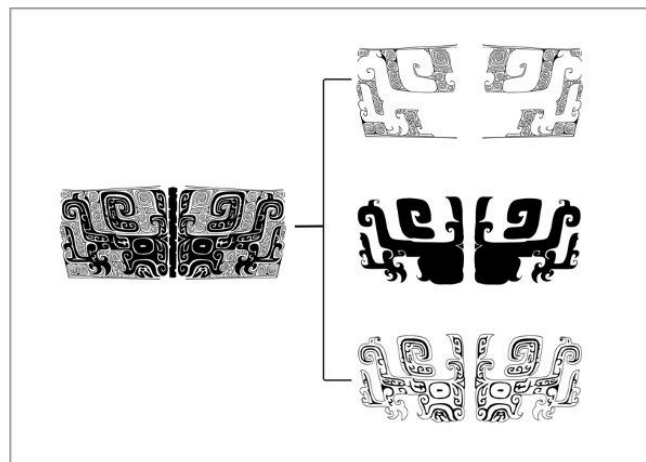


Figure 1. Carving structure of three layers of flowers.
(Picture source: Drawn by the author).

The Application Value of Bronze Patterns

The animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty come with profound cultural heritage and unique aesthetic value, while film & TV series bear the responsibility of cultural dissemination. Design

priorities will be highlighted if the application value of combining the two could be found, so as to create artworks with Chinese characteristics based on Chinese traditional culture.

(1) Enhanced visual aesthetics: Animal patterns are important part of the patterns on bronze ware of Shang and Zhou Dynasties, reflecting unconstrained yet solemn composition and decorative abstract combinations. These animal patterns are variable with diverse shapes and organizational form; They not only help to enhance the visual impact of the image, but also improve the overall artistic beauty.

(2) Furtherance of audience aesthetics: The diverse style of the animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty may better showcase the historical features, character setting and spiritual outlook in film & TV series, closing some of the gaps in artistic styles. The ancient artistic style and craftsmanship so demonstrated may further inspire the audience's interest and love for traditional culture, expanding their aesthetic horizons to further enhance their aesthetic ability and cultural literacy.

Status Quo and Problems of Animal Patterns on Bronze Ware of Shang Dynasty in the Film & TV Styling

Basic Cognitive Survey

To understand the public's cognitive level of animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty and their application in film & TV series, the author conducted a questionnaire survey: the survey was conducted via an online questionnaire, and nearly 200 valid questionnaires were collected. The survey findings show that the majority of respondents (71.9%) had a general understanding of the appearance of animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty, with only 2.61% indicated a very good understanding. Meanwhile, 25.49% of the respondents stated that they know nothing about the animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty. This suggests that the public's understanding of animal patterns on bronze ware of Shang and Zhou dynasties is generally low, i.e. no in-depth knowledge or understanding (as in Figure 2).

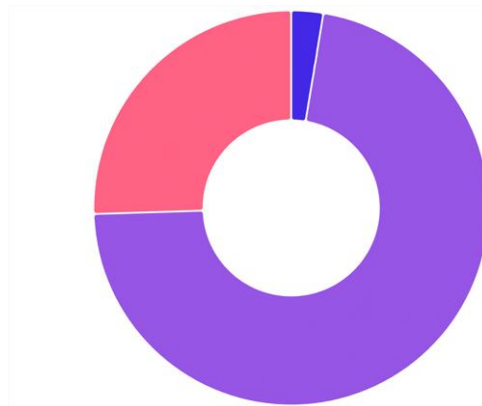


Figure 2. Cognitive survey for the animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty.
(Graph Source: Collated and drawn by the author).

According to a survey on the film & TV styling of the highly anticipated film *Creation of the Gods I* in the past two years, only 11.76% of respondents were familiar with the applied bronze elements of Late Shang Dynasty, and nearly 90% of the audience stated that they were unaware of or unfamiliar with that (as in Figure 3).

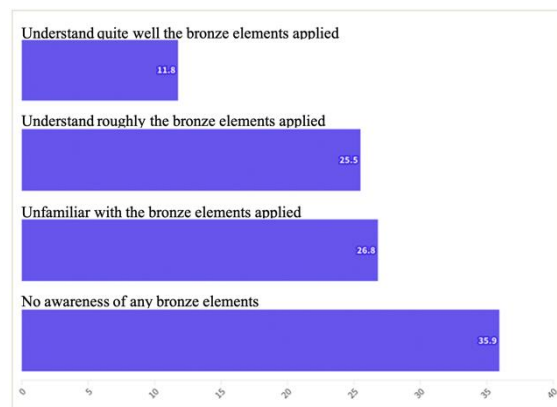


Figure 3. Styling design cognitive survey in *Creation of the Gods I*.
(Graph Source: Collated and drawn by the author)

Based on data analysis, there is lower level of understanding of animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty and their application in film & TV series. There may be two reasons: First is the narrow application scope of animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty; Second is the lack of interpretation and summary of animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty in film & TV series.

Therefore, in order to explore more opportunities in film & TV styling for animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty, it is necessary to analyze and summarize the application methods of such animal patterns.

Find the Root Cause

To find the root cause, this article further analyzes the problems in film & TV styling for animal pattern elements on bronze ware through a questionnaire survey. In considering the widespread dissemination and popularity of media such as movies and TV, the questionnaire is based on popular film & TV series such as *League of Gods*, *Nirvana in Fire*, and *Creation of the Gods I* as the case setting. The questionnaire targeted at about 70% of non-art practitioners and 30% of art practitioners/students, with a total of 130 valid questionnaires sent back. Questionnaire findings show that more than half or 56.9% (the sum of all data in Figure 4) of the root cause as bronze pattern elements are relatively chaotic in costume design, not obvious, with cheap texture, overly abstract, and lack of innovation.

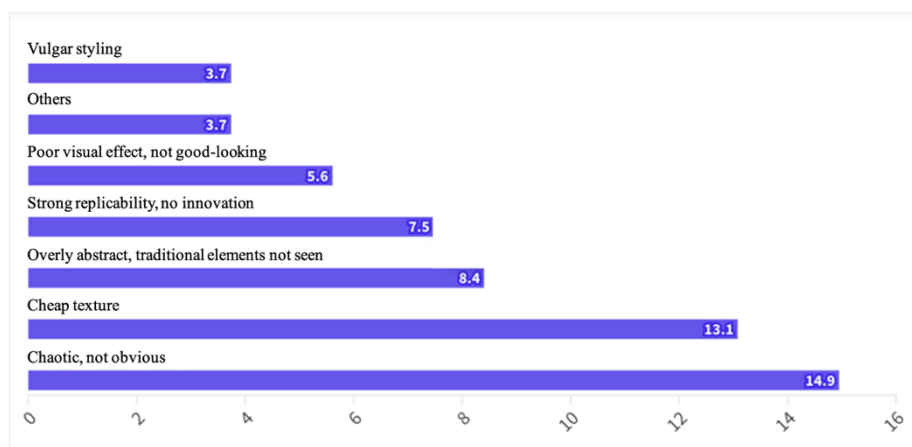


Figure 4. Application evaluation in film & TV styling of animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty.
(Graph Source: Collated and drawn by the author)

In film & TV series, the design reproduction of bronze elements is somewhat difficult and problematic. For instance, the blurring of the theme or visual focus makes it difficult for the audience to capture the core information of the design, with a unified design style missing; Alternatively, in some individual cases, the animal patterns on bronze ware are mixed with other cultural elements, lacking a sense of hierarchy or logical connection, and seemingly disorganized; Moreover, the cheap texture is one of the most commonly criticized problems concerned with film & TV styling. Texture is related to material selection and post-processing. Improper material selection or insufficient post-processing often leads to a significant reduction in the historical weight brought by the animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty; Meanwhile, overly abstract may also cause the expression of traditional patterns too avant-garde or conceptualized, resulting in significant deviations from the audience's traditional cognition or aesthetic consciousness, making it difficult for the audience to understand and accept.

Outlook for the Design and Research of Animal Patterns on Bronze Ware of Late Shang Dynasty

Whether it is a bold use and abstract recombination of decorative patterns, or a clever setting and personification of their deep meanings, they are all innovative transformations in the design for the animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty. To effectively address the above issues, an outlook for design and research is made here.

Decomposition and Simplification

Decomposition and simplification are often based on the aesthetic foundation of designers, presenting new postures in a form that is more suitable for the requirements of costume or aesthetics per spiritual connotation of patterns. It is the most common way in film & TV styling. However, it is worth noting that excessive deviation from the original pattern is prone to “uncategorized” creations. Therefore, it is necessary to preserve the representative characteristics of the pattern itself, and in addition, either retain the original complex layers or simplify according to specific requirements, so as to make the decorative pattern consistent with the overall rhythm of the design.

Material Conversion

The animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty were attached to the bronze objects to produce a hard, heavy, and rough artistic style. The transformation of materials is often used in film & TV styling to change the feeling that patterns bring to the audience: hard materials such as leather armor, bronze, jade, etc. can preserve the majestic image of animal patterns on bronze vessels; And using digital printing, embroidery, rubbing and other techniques on soft fabrics can convey a delicate and elegant charm. Also, attention should be paid to post-treatment processes such as decolorization, aging, and sandblasting in the application of materials, so that the overall shape is full of authenticity and vitality, and to prevent the occurrence of visual mismatches such as “plastic feeling”.

Color replacement

Clothing fabrics and styles reflect social status and identity, while color is a direct expression of emotions (Shi, 2012). Rather than simply using the green color that appears after the oxidation of bronze ware, there

should be a greater tendency to replace different colors to express deeper meanings in film & TV styling. For example, the combination of colors such as iron gold, black, silver, and animal face patterns on armor reflects a sense of intimidation. The combination of blue-green and dragon patterns, fish patterns, turtle patterns, and other patterns extends the meaning of being born by water. Colors and animal images complement each other, and better express the cultural value contained in the patterns.

Personification

The animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty are themselves based on animals (Zhang, Wang, & Zhang, 2015), showcasing the ancient ancestors' worship of nature. Personification may integrate, exaggerate and transform human psychology, personality, words and actions with the characteristics of animal patterns, and also arouse the audience's love for natural creatures, induce audience empathy, and express character emotions and feelings. But in design, we should not be confined to the color and shape of the cultural relics themselves. We should differentiate ourselves from existing design methods and seek more innovative design techniques.

Summary of Phased Design Application

Through the above collation, it could be seen that many innovative design methods exist in current film & TV works. However, due to the influence of supernatural themes, the design styles expected to be transformed are complex, and there are also phenomena such as design similarity or stereotype. Based on the above research, here is a summary of the phased design application:

(1) The animal patterns on bronze ware of Late Shang Dynasty carry along distinct time imprints in terms of shape, theme, and symbolism. While pursuing modernization of patterns, we should find a balance between innovation and historicity, cater to public aesthetics, and avoid exaggeration.

(2) Attach great importance to the cultural connotation of patterns in design, and develop them towards more creative symbolic meanings, so that patterns can become invisible narrators in stories, information and carriers.

(3) The styling serves the character, and while using pattern design, it is necessary to make the form fit the character's state, making the character more vivid and three-dimensional.

(4) We should pay attention to building a more innovative aesthetic system for film & TV art with its unique historical style, strong enjoyable spirit and vivid pattern design.

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