

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Square lidded ritual wine container (*fangyi*)



China, purportedly unearthed in Henan province, Luoyang

Early Western Zhou dynasty, ca. 1000–975 BCE

Bronze

13 7/8 x 9 3/4 x 9 3/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1930.54a-b

Describe

This bronze container, made to hold wine, is called a *fangyi* in Chinese (*fang* means square and *yi* means vessel). It looks like a house: rectangular with a roof-shaped lid topped by a roof-shaped knob. Vertical ridges at the center and corners of each side reinforce this architectural character and add to its visual appeal. Each side has a *taotie*, a frontal animal-like mask, executed in multiple planes of relief. Besides the eyes, horns, snout, and jaws, the *taotie* mask also has a split animal-like body with a foot and tail shown in profile on either side of the mask. Narrow bands with paired birds or split serpents with tiger heads appear below and above this *taotie* motif. The lid has a nearly identical *taotie* design but inverted, like a mirror-image. Made more than three thousand years ago, the surface of the bronze is not the shiny silvery color it used to be. Instead, the whole surface is covered in areas of greens, blues, and reds as a result of corrosion, similar to the way a penny is shiny when it is new but becomes duller over time. Bronze is an alloy consisting primarily of copper with the addition of tin and sometimes other metals such as aluminum or zinc.



Analyze

Despite the beauty of its form and decoration, this vessel is most famous for its lengthy inscription of 187 characters. The text is one of the longest from the early Zhou period, around the eleventh to tenth centuries BCE. It is repeated inside the vessel and on the lid. The characters possess the decorative style of calligraphy. It is likely that the text was first written with a brush and then transferred to the clay model used to make this bronze. According to the inscription, the vessel commemorates three days of administrative meetings and ritual ceremonies held in the capital during the reign of Zhao, the fourth king of Zhou. The owner of the vessel was deeply involved in these ceremonies.

Interpret

Shang dynasty bronzes preserve one of the earliest forms of Chinese writing in their simple, highly pictographic inscriptions. In the succeeding Zhou dynasty, written characters became more standardized and bronze inscriptions lengthened. They often commemorated an event in which the person commissioning the bronze was involved, as seen in this *fangyi*. Thus, besides their artistic and ritual values, Shang and Zhou bronzes are often carriers of important cultural and historical information critical for us to rebuild the history of ancient China.

Inquire

- What is bronze? What metals does it consist of? What is an alloy?
- How were bronze vessels created in ancient China? What were the steps of the bronze-making process?
- Take a close look at all sides of this vessel. How many *taotie* can you find? Why do you think the craftsman designed creatures and *taotie* on the outside of the vessel?
- Looking at this vessel, what would you imagine an inscription on the inside would say? Write your own commemorative inscription for this object.
- What are some ways we commemorate historic events today?

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1930.54a-b/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

