

# Major Vessel Types by Use

Vessel Use	Food									Wine									Water
Vessel Type	ding	fang ding	li	xian or yan	gui	yu	dou	fu	jue	jia	he	gu	zun	lei	hu	you (type 1)	you (type 2)	fang yi	pan
<b>Development Stage</b>																			
Pottery Prototype																			
Early Shang (approx 1600–1400 BCE)																			
Late Shang (approx 1400–1050 BCE)																			
Western Zhou (approx 1050–771 BCE)																			
Eastern Zhou (approx 770–256 BCE)																			

**PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE FROM THE GALLERY**

# Shang Ceremony

What was a ceremony at the Shang court like? David Keightley in his *Sources of Shang History* provides a wonderful description of what such a ceremony might have entailed.

“Filtering through the portal of the ancestral temple, the sunlight wakens the eyes of the monster mask, bulging with life on the garish bronze tripod. At the center of the temple stands the king, at the center of the four quarters, the center of the Shang world. Ripening millet glimpsed through the doorway shows his harvest rituals have found favor. Bronze cauldrons with their cooked meat offerings invite the presence of his ancestors, their bodies buried deep and safely across the river, but their spirits, some benevolent, some not, still reigning over the royal house and the king’s person. One is angry, for the king’s jaw ached all night, is aching now, on the eve of his departure to follow Zhi Guo on campaign against the Bafang.

“Five turtle shells lie on the rammed earth altar. The plastrons [undershells of the turtles] have been polished like jade, but are scarred on their inner side with rows of oval hollows, some already blackened by fire. Into one of the unburned hollows, on the right side of the shell, the diviner Chue is thrusting a brand of flaming thorn. As he does so, he cries aloud, ‘The sick tooth is not due to Father Jia.’ Fanned by an assistant to keep the glowing tip intensely hot, the stick flames against the surface of the shell. Smoke rises. The seconds slowly pass. The stench of scorched bone mingles with the aroma of millet wine scattered in libation. And then, with a sharp, clear, puk-like sound, the turtle, most silent of creatures, speaks. A *bu* [卜]-shaped crack has formed in the hollow where the plastron was scorched. Once again the brand is

thrust, now into a matching hollow on the left side of the shell: ‘It is due to Father Jia.’ More time passes . . . another crack forms in response. Moving to the next plastron, Chue repeats the charges: ‘It is not due to Father Jia.’ Puk. ‘It is due to Father Jia.’ He rams the brand into the hollows and cracks the second turtle shell, then the third, then the fourth.

“The diviners consult. The congregation of kinsmen strains to catch their words, for the curse of a dead father may, in the king’s eyes, be the work of a living son. Chue rubs wood ash from the fire into the new set of cracks and scrutinizes them once more. But the shell has given no indication. The charge must be divined again. Two more cracks are made in each of the five plastrons . . . and again there is no sign.

“In such an atmosphere and in such ways, in a routine that must have consumed tens of thousands of hours during the Shang historical period, the Shang kings and their diviners sought to know and fix the future. As the ceremony ends, the diviners hand the five plastrons to scribes, who begin the task of carving into the shell’s smooth front a record of the charges proposed and the results observed.”\*

\*Excerpt from David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).



Shang-dynasty ritual wine vessel (*he*), approx. 1300–1050 BCE.



Shang-dynasty ritual wine vessel (*jue*), approx. 1300–1050 BCE.



Shang-dynasty ritual food vessel (*ding*), 1250–1050 BCE.



Shang-dynasty ritual water vessel (*pan*), approx. 1300–1050 BCE.

# An Important Discovery Remains Mysterious

The discovery of this rhinoceros-shaped bronze was an important event in the history of modern Chinese archaeology. In 1843, the vessel was found in a cache of seven bronzes buried in Shandong province, homeland of the great philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE). The set of seven was immediately published by the local government in the country annals, but was not illustrated. The rhino remained in the possession of Confucius's descendants for several generations.

These seven works were finally identified by historians in the 1980s, 140 years after their discovery. While two are still unaccounted for, the other five are scattered among collections in the United States, China, and Japan. Historians continue to debate certain questions surrounding the rhino, such as which of the kings among the late Shang rulers made the vessel, the exact identity of its recipient Xiaochen (Lesser Minister) Yu, and what specific role he played to deserve the rhino. Ongoing archaeological excavations may unravel some of these mysteries.



Temple and cemetery of Confucius in Qufu, Shandong province, where the bronze rhinoceros vessel was kept until the twentieth century.  
*Kanegen, Flickr.*

# Inscribed with a Story

A twenty-seven-character inscription cast on the bottom of the rhinoceros's interior provides firsthand information about society in the late Shang, which was centered in what is now the city of Anyang in central China. The inscription tells us that an unnamed king of the Shang state was drawn into a military campaign against a region called Renfang. According to one of the interpretations, during his inspection of Kui temple, the king was pleased with the good service he received from Lesser Minister Yu. As a result, the king awarded Yu with local cowry shells, a type of ancient currency.

The inscription employs the main form of Shang calligraphy, known as bronze script. In this inscription, the style of the script is fully developed, expressing in written form a formal structure based on philosophical principles of the time.



View of the inscription inside the vessel.

# Surviving Rhinos

Only two bronze rhinoceroses are known to have survived from ancient China. (Similar bronze animals are shown on the wall projection.) The fantasy of the sacred rhinoceros continued in China for more than two thousand years. Artisans continued to make rhino-formed ritual vessels. Many were crafted with features like those of a deer or horse, but were still recorded in historical documents as a “rhinoceros vessel” or simply a mythical creature. The rhino shown at right from the early Western Han period (approx. 206–200 BCE) is a rare example of a vessel crafted true to the animal’s features.



The only known surviving bronze rhinoceros from the Shang dynasty.

小臣觶尊 商晚期 青銅 1843年  
山東壽張縣梁山出土  
**Ritual vessel in the shape of a rhinoceros**

Probably 1100–1050 BCE  
China; unearthed in Liangshan,  
Shandong province  
Shang dynasty  
(approx. 1600–1050 BCE)  
Bronze  
*The Avery Brundage Collection,*  
B60B1+



A later bronze in the shape of a rhinoceros.

錯金銀雲紋犀尊 西漢 青銅  
1963年陝西興平縣出土  
**Ritual vessel in the shape of a rhinoceros**

China  
Western (Former) Han period  
(206 BCE–9 CE)  
Bronze with inlays of gold and silver  
*National Museum of China,*  
*Beijing*  
(Photo from *Zhongguo meishu quanji*, 1986.)

# Rhinoceroses in Ancient China

Can you imagine what rhinoceroses that lived three thousand years ago looked like? The vessel on display in this gallery depicts a two-horned Sumatran rhino that existed in ancient China and can also be found in a wide area of Southeast Asia. The fact that rhinoceroses lived in ancient China was confirmed in 1949, based on scientific analyses of the rhinoceros bones excavated in central China in the city of Anyang, where an archaeological site has yielded remains dating to the Shang dynasty (approx. 1600–1050 BCE).

Early Chinese texts carved on ox bones and turtle shells used in divination during the Shang dynasty, known as oracle bones, mention rhinoceros hunts. Evidently capturing rhinoceroses and sacrificing them during rituals was a significant state event during the Bronze Age (approx. 2000–500 BCE). To successfully complete the king's commission of this bronze sculpture, the craftsmen may have been shown an actual rhinoceros for study.



Cup made from rhinoceros horn during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), an object that was sought after by the elites. *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B65M23