

A. BULLING

THE MEANING OF CHINA'S
MOST ANCIENT ART



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AN INTERPRETATION OF POTTERY PATTERNS
FROM KANSU (MA CH'ANG AND PAN-SHAN) AND
THEIR DEVELOPMENT IN THE SHANG, CHOU
AND HAN PERIODS

BY

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Bobbins and whorl-circles are, however, not the only indications of threading and weaving plays on bronze vessels of the Shang and early Chou period. The vertical flanges or ridges dividing the vessels into panels (Pl. IV) are decorated with notches, hooks or incisions, some of which resemble reel-stands similar to those still in use in present day China for spooling cotton threads. These flanges may be imitations of reel-stands or other implements for spinning, weaving or threading. Apparently the small lines between the large hooks were meant to copy incisions through which the threads could run or to which they could be fixed. The Shang, the early Chou people and the early inhabitants of the mountainous regions of Kansu seem to have included spinning, reeling and weaving plays in their ritual performances. However, the patterns used by the Ma ch'ang and Pan shan people show that they had mechanical devices simpler than those of the Shang and early Chou peoples.

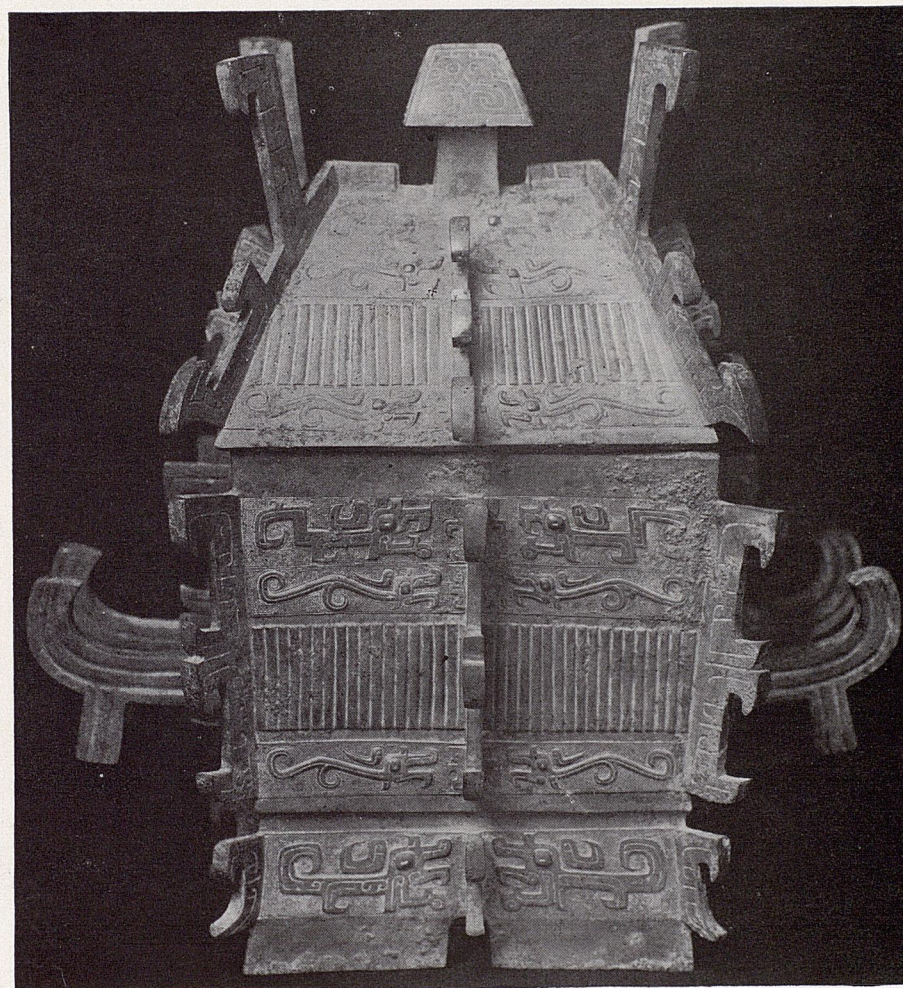
The existence of mechanical devices symbolizing movements of the sky is supported by Chinese literary evidence. According to the *Shu-ching*¹ the legendary Emperor Shun examined the *hsüan-chi yü-hêng* 璿璣玉衡, which Legge translates as the "gem-adorned turning sphere and the transverse tube of jade" and reduced to a harmonious order (the movements of) the Seven Directors². According to some commentators the Seven Directors were the seven stars of the Dipper, while others believed that they were the seven planets. In any case the instrument in question was connected with constellations and movements of the sky [though there is nothing in the text which supports the suggestion that it was an instrument used for astronomical observation³]. The meaning of the *hsüan-chi yü-hêng* has been widely discussed by Chinese and Western scholars. *Hsüan* 璿 stands here for 旋 'to rotate' and *chi* 璣 for *chi* 機 meaning

Their seething strife
Heaving and weaving
The changes of life.
At the whirring loom of Time unawed
I work the living mantle of God.

¹ *Op. cit.*, *Canon of Shun*, Legge, p. 38 ff.

² Karlgren, *Book of Documents*, *op. cit.*, translates: "He examined the sün-stone apparatus and the jade traverse, and thereby (adjusted) verified the (movements) of the Seven Directors". (sun, moon and planets).

³ Michel, *op. cit.*



Bronze vessel (I.). (Late Shang or early Chou period)