

# Chapter 16

## Condensation of Ritual Symbolism and Visual Culture: From Chinese *Liqi* to Contemporary Art Expressions

Anissa Fung

“*Liqi*” [禮器] are ritual objects taking the form of vessels, printed matter, ornaments or symbolic artifacts. They carry the visual codes of symbolized *li* [禮], which means the proper, respectful way to communicate to the supreme supernatural. In the context of Chinese ritual culture, various *liqi* embedded with symbolic meanings of *li* are perceived as shamanic transmitters in the Chinese rituals to pay tribute to the supernatural at the three levels of heaven, earth, and human ancestors. Regarded as the most important media to communicate ritual meanings to the supernatural, *liqi* reflect the social, cultural and economic scenes at the time of their production. With their significant shape, colour and symbolic decoration, *liqi* are carriers of cultural symbols and iconography. They serve the function of maintaining harmony in the universe, comforting the dead and pleasing the living.

### 16.1 Chinese Ritual Culture

According to Chinese ritual beliefs, the universe is formed of three “layers” of space, namely the “deity heaven” on the top layer, the “human earth” in the middle, and the “nether world” located at the bottom (Gao 1994). Chinese people imagined that there were non-human beings staying in the other two layers of space, and by conducting worship rituals to propitiate the beings in the supernatural world, the human world would be safe and free from disturbance and harm.

The development of Chinese ritual culture can be conceptualized into different progressive periods. In the *Hongshan* [紅山], *Yangshou* [仰韶] and *Liangzhu*

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A. Fung (✉)  
Department of Cultural and Creative Arts,  
The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong, China  
e-mail: afung@ied.edu.hk

[良渚] cultures (5000–2000 BCE) people paid tribute to the cosmos and conducted shamanism practices for the blessing of fertility. In the Shang [商] period (1650–1050 BCE), the royal court used bronzes, such as the famous “Nine Tripod Cauldrons” (*dings*) [鼎],<sup>1</sup> to demonstrate supernatural support for the reign, and strengthen governance and social stability. In the *Qin* [秦], *Han* [漢] and *Tang* [唐] periods (221 BCE–906 CE) people served the dead as if they were alive in order to realize the conception of immortality, and they offered sacrifices as a social custom and traditional practice. These religious-cultural periods were important for the development of art in China. The ritual ideologies at different times provided the social and cultural grounds for the creation and development of ritual artifacts which reinforced ethics education, religious thoughts and mythological fantasies.

## 16.2 Aesthetics of *Liqi*

Offering sacrificial rites or “*li*” to the universe, the supernatural and ancestors was regarded as essential family and community practice in ancient China where only the best objects were used for ritual purposes. *Liqi* in Chinese society are a means to communicate with the heavenly deities, objects of desire for the dead, symbols signifying social status and authority, and perhaps the totemic icons of a family clan. They acted as symbols of the sentimental linkage between the past and the present, and between reality and the imaginary world. Therefore, to understand Chinese cultural art and its aesthetic significance it is necessary to appreciate the social, philosophical and religious significance of *liqi* (ritual objects).

As the most important cultural artifacts, Chinese *liqi* demonstrate a good integration of form, meaning and function. Ritual symbolism in expression is executed through material, shape, and surface decorations on the items. Therefore, reading the symbolic meanings embedded in these features with reference to their historical period, social norms and folk customs of the time enhance our comprehension of them. Another important aspect of the *liqi* is their function in regulating human emotions, for the special signs and symbols provide spiritual comfort to the users and attendants at ritual activities. Although *liqi* have changed their shape, decoration and material under the influence of current art forms, production technology, and religious culture through the years, their conceptual value still plays the most important part in the appreciation of the objects.

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<sup>1</sup>According to legend the Nine Tripod Cauldrons “*ding*” were created following the foundation of the Xia Dynasty (c. 2200 BCE) by Yu the Great, using tribute metal presented by the governors of the Nine Provinces of ancient China. The nine tripod cauldrons symbolized national political power, were used to offer royal ritual sacrifices to the ancestors from heaven and earth. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine\\_Tripod\\_Cauldrons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine_Tripod_Cauldrons)

### 16.3 Material Symbolism in the Burial Jades

When ancient Chinese worshipped natural phenomena, such as animals and plants in quest of power transmission and gaining from the magic of material and object similarity (sympathetic magic and transmission theories) (Poo 1998, p. 52), they chose natural materials such as clay and jade for their ritual objects.

One of the earliest ritual objects used for shamanistic communication with heaven and the earth were jade *bi* [璧] and *zhong* [琮] (Fig. 16.1a, b). The *bi* are round discs symbolizing Chinese perception of the heaven and universe; and the *zhong* is a tubular piece with a circular inner part and a square outer section, usually decorated with a distinctive face design on the four corners, signify the four directional bearings. The *bi* and *zhong* were put together to carry a complementary symbolism in which *bi* was for rendering homage to heaven and *zhong* to earth (Laufer 1974, p. 120).

The special arrangement of burial paraphernalia to be placed with the corpse was an ancient form of *li* [禮] (a planned ritual practice). It was a social norm at the time for jade to perform its special ritual functions and symbolic meanings for the dead and living. The excavation scene of the *Hongshan* Culture [紅山文化] (5000 BCE) showed an example of the practice, where a pair of *bi* (jade disc with round hole in the centre) was placed under the head of the dead body and a pair of jade tortoise held in both his hands. In the setting, the ritual jade tortoise with its Chinese pronunciation “*kui*” [歸] similar to the sound for “return” in pronunciation, taking the animal’s long life as symbols for immortality. Jade was used as a magic spell to bless the early revival of the deceased.

Jade, with its durability and extraordinary colour and texture, symbolized the unattainable, and represented power and wealth to the ancient Chinese. Jade also served as an opportunity to parade the owner’s wealth or power as it signified the

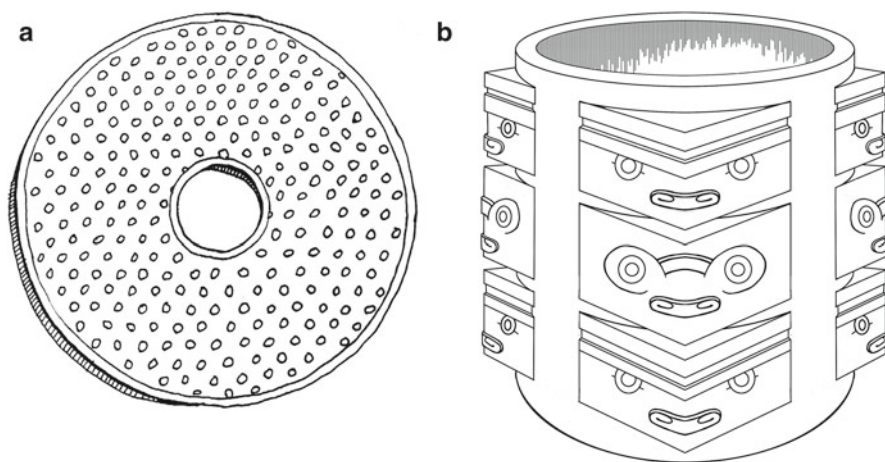


Fig. 16.1 (a, b) Drawings of jade “*bi*” [璧] and “*zhong*” [琮]

ability of the owner to afford and control a huge amount of human energy in the carving and polishing process (Wu 1995).

As jade was considered sacred material, the concept of “transmission of material properties” was applied in the ritual and funerary practices. Ancient Chinese believed that jade possessed the property of the body from decay. The deep longing for immortality and hope for resurrection was evident in the symbolic uses of jade. For example, the burial ornaments from the *Han* [漢] period show peoples’ belief in the revival of the corpse. In the later religion of Taoism, people believed that jade was the food of spirits and able to secure immortality. Among the personal amulets worn by the corpse, those placed on the tongue were most important and were frequently mentioned in the ancient texts. The amulets for the tongue are basically geometrical, mostly carved into the form of a cicada. The cicada shaped tongue amulet acted as an emblem for resurrection. Another popular kind of amulet is the fish-shaped eye-covers as fish were believed never to close their eyes and hence became a symbol of watchfulness. Among various amulets, circular discs were placed on the umbilici of the corpse and tubular plugs for all “passages” to the body (Laufer 1974, pp. 301–305). In the late Western *Zhou* [周] period, jade plaques were sewn on face coverings to ensure better protection of the corpse. In the *Han* [漢] dynasty, this kind of covering eventually developed into jade burial suits<sup>2</sup> that covered the entire body to keep it for eternity.

## 16.4 Symbolic Interpretation of Reality in Ritual Pottery

Chinese passion for, and sentimental attachment to, the land and soil is emphasized in the ritual burial practices. The Chinese word 「葬」 “bury” means “homing the dead body in the soil underneath the plants” (Fung 2012, p. 174), and the ancient verb for dead was “*kui*” [歸] which means “returned home” (symbolically “returned to the mother of universe”). These common conceptions provided the cultural and philosophical ground for Chinese nature worship of land as maternal. For instance,

Clay was used to make containers for dead children. People expected that the dead child in his “pottery home” would be reborn again through the close contact of the burial pot with the soil where it received blessings from the *Dimu* [地母] (the mother goddess of the land). The pot was a symbolic form of the womb of the *Dimu* where the dead child returned to its origin (Lu 2001).

The Chinese character for “*li*” [禮] (ritual ceremony), with the part on the left 「示」 indicates ritual offer, the top part on the right 「曲」 means bending the body with the hands put together to show politeness and inferiority, and the bottom part 「豆」 is an ancient name for a food container (Gao 1960, p. 388). So the parts of the

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<sup>2</sup>Jade burial suit is a ceremonial suit made of pieces of jade in which royal members in Han Dynasty China were buried. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jade\\_burial\\_suit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jade_burial_suit)

word, “*li*” (ceremony) suggest the scene of a Chinese ritual. And the word has emphasized the importance of “a pot of food” to offer at a ritual ceremony.

In addition to their common function as containers, the surface decoration on the ancient *Yangshao* [仰韶] period Chinese burial pottery used to contain distinctive ritual symbols (Jiang 2001). Early Chinese people represented their concerns and expectations about fertility, good harvests and rich fishing with stylized ritual motifs of human faces, fish, frogs and geometrical patterns painted on the pottery in colored clay slips.<sup>3</sup> Breast-legged food and wine vessels with the features of a pregnant female emphasized ritual aspirations for fertility. These provide examples of ancient Chinese using symbolic images to execute shamanism (Poo 1998).

## 16.5 Frozen-Episodes of Real Life Experiences in the Tombs

Chinese people believed that the termination of earthly life marked the beginning of a continuous existence in the other world. Ancient Chinese saw death as the separation of the body “*po*” [魄] and the soul “*hun*” [魂], which passed through purgatory and were eventually reincarnated (Burkhardt 1966).

This belief flourished in the *Han* [漢] period (202 BCE–220 CE) and was most evident in Han funerary practices (Li 2004). People put luxury burial objects, collectively called “*mingqi*” [明器], in underground tombs for the *po* spirit of their ancestor. They also erected shrines to house the ancestor’s *hun* soul which soared into the sky. The wish to provide the dead with the best funerary services was strengthened by the obligations of filial piety in Confucian ethics (Giles 1998). Thus, in the *Han* tombs, pictures and stone murals were produced depicting the daily life and popular cultural events experienced by the deceased before they died,<sup>4</sup> and clay was used to produce model replicas of the real life objects<sup>5</sup> to accommodate the various needs of the dead.

The conception of “dead-as-alive” inspired the ritual objects of the *Tang* [唐] (618–906 CE) period. Craftsmen made fashionable clay burial goods with three-colour glazes called *San-cai*<sup>6</sup> [三彩]. In the design of burial objects they incorporated

<sup>3</sup>For more about the painted ritual motifs and patterns on the Prehistoric *Yangshou* pottery, see Li et al. (2010, pp. 49–89); also see <https://www.google.com/search?q=yangshao+pottery>

<sup>4</sup>For more about Han tombs pictures and murals, see Wu (1995, Chapter 4—Voices of Funerary Monuments, pp. 189–250); also see Li (2004, Chapter 4—Murals in the Royal Palace and Tombs, pp. 282–304); and <https://www.google.com/search?q=Han+tomb+murals>

<sup>5</sup>The clay model replicas of the real life objects found in the *Qin* and *Han* periods. See Li et al. (2010, pp. 138–153).

<sup>6</sup>*San-cai* means three-colours (green, orange and blue) low-fired glazed pottery and figurines predominant during the Tang dynasty (618–911CE). See Li et al. (2010, pp. 249–263); also Sullivan (2008, pp. 153–161); and <https://www.google.com/search?q=sancai>

images of religious elements from India<sup>7</sup> and Persia. The Tang's three-colour ritual artifacts, in their reflection of the life and daily visual experiences of wealthy people, demonstrate a realistic presentation of Tang visual culture.

## 16.6 Replicas for the Mirror World

Traditional burial paraphernalia eventually faded out and were replaced by paper items. Nowadays, the effectiveness of ritual objects is demonstrated by the visual impact they create in the process of the rites rather than by being buried with the dead body. The paper funerary products are now important to Chinese, who continue to practice ritual culture and customs in a symbolic way with something representational.

Being made as replicas of real life objects for the “mirror world”, the paper ritual objects range from large scale paper constructions of apartments, banners, figurines, to small paper imitations of daily objects and accessories.<sup>8</sup> These are shown at funerals and sacrificial activities. The items are meant to satisfy the human's materialistic egos and ritual fantasies. Also, burning of the ritual items creates a visual metaphor for the release and satisfaction of mourners and witnesses. The process of burning the funerary objects so that they turn into ashes and smoke to accompany the soul to travel up to Heaven is designed to help the mourning group accept death. As the fire dies out and smoke clears away in the wind, the ritual act creates a symbolic end to the sorrow and inauspiciousness of death (Fung 2003).

## 16.7 Crystallization of Ritual Ideology into Cultural Motifs

Social changes, ritual practices and the development of handicraft industries in China and nearby countries shaped the continuous evolution of the material, shape and decoration of *liqi*. Nowadays, *liqi* can be distinguished from normal daily objects by the ritual icons and symbolic images on the items. The continuous transformation of ritual items influenced by the folklore and ritual ideology is seen in the change from realistic to symbolic, from complex to basic, and from representational to metaphoric.

Symbolic meanings of ritual icons can be classified in three categories: (i) signs of power and authority (to pay tribute to the Heavenly gods who govern nature), (ii) symbols for redemption and reincarnation (using sutras to call for help of the Buddha and *Guanyin* [觀音], the Goddess of Mercy), and (iii) auspicious signs for good wishes.

<sup>7</sup>Buddhist and lotus flower are significant religious icons from India. They are popular motifs found on ritual pottery in the Tang and Sung times and also on contemporary paper ritual objects.

<sup>8</sup>Paper ritual objects in Hong Kong are made to imitate daily objects and accessories for offering to the dead ancestor. See<紙紮>, 維基百科, <http://zh.wikipedia.org>

### 16.7.1 *Signs for Power and Authority*

Signs that best represent power and authority are the dragon, the *taotei* [饕餮]<sup>9</sup> animal face, the King of the underworld, and the four directional ritual animals.<sup>10</sup> The dragon motif is most widely used to signify and communicate with the supreme power of the supernatural. Dragon is used to represent the royal kingdom in China and the highest authority. So, it applies only to ritual items for senior gods.

In Hong Kong, images of the four ritual animals are still in use on ritual papers designed to safe-guard living and dead ancestors. They are prominent historical figures. For instance, the image of the Chinese First Emperor in the *Qin* [秦] Dynasty (221–207 BCE) is printed on the ritual “Hell Bank” notes with dragons standing for the central government’s authority in the Underworld, as a president’s or king’s portrait printed on earthly paper notes.

### 16.7.2 *Symbols for Immortality, Redemption and Reincarnation*

The image of a cicada indicates good reincarnation and a tortoise is a symbol for long life. Birds, closely linked with the sun in Chinese legends, are regarded in funerary rituals as guides for the soul of the deceased. Similarly, the image of a crane flying to the west suggests that death is “undertaking an eternal voyage”. In contemporary ritual practice, the motif of a rooster symbolizes *yang* (light and positive vitality). It is seen as driving away *yin* (darkness and inauspicious experiences) in order to maintain good balance in life.

Buddhist doctrines, religious pictures and sutras express concrete concepts of immortality and reincarnation. Images such as the high mountains of *Kunlun* [崑崙山] (the sacred mountain situated in the west) represent the paradise of immortals. The Buddha, the lotus flower, the *Bodai* tree [菩提樹] (where the Buddha meditated and attained his ultimate spiritual enlightenment), and the supreme goddess Queen Mother of the west are all important ritual motifs in relation to the pursuit of immortality. There are also the Buddhist Confession Sutras for release of guilt and earthly links for the deceased, the Reincarnation Sutra to provide blessings from Buddha, and the Heart Sutra to comfort the soul of the deceased and lead it to the stage of enlightenment.

<sup>9</sup>For more about the *taotei* [饕餮] animal face pattern on bronzes and ritual wares, see <饕餮紋圖案> at <http://www.e6ds.cn/ts/zhishi/0018.html>, and also <https://www.google.com/search?q=taotie>

<sup>10</sup>The green dragon and white tiger, together with the red peacock and blacksnake and tortoise, form the Chinese “Four Ritual Animals”; see Li et al. (2010, p. 130), also Murowchick (1994, p. 64).

### 16.7.3 *Auspicious Signs and Icons*

Chinese people like to use words, animals and plants as icons for good wishes. The three attributes of a good life, respectively “*Fu*” [福] (good fortune) substantial satisfaction in all aspects of life; “*Lu*” [祿] (prosperity) promotion in rank, wealth and influence; and “*Shou*” [壽] (longevity) for health and long-living, are essential in all ritual matters. These three words, as the most world-known motifs, are sometimes seen in their formal Chinese character format, and on many occasions stylized into graphic symbols to cater for different decorative purposes. In order to have “blessings” well managed and fairly distributed in the hands of deserving people, Chinese have created three different immortals namely “*Fu*”, “*Lu*” and “*Shou*”<sup>11</sup> for governing the three essentials in life.

Complementing the good words are the lucky animal icons, bat, fish, deer, and horse and plants and fruits of good wishes, such as gourds and pomegranates for fertility, pine trees, cypresses and peaches for longevity, *lingzhi* [靈芝] fungi for immortality and peony flowers for wealth. Images of these auspicious icons are frequently found in the collection of paper ritual objects. Besides the auspicious words, icons of money or symbols of wealth appear most frequently on ritual objects.

## 16.8 The Age of Non-material, Non-form and Non-ritualism

Within the knowledge and understanding of the contemporary Chinese, many religious icons have lost their identity and have become merely decorative motifs. For example, the “W” patterns developed from the shape of a swimming frog, which once indicated the ancient quest for female fertility, and the diamond shape motifs originally developed from the side profile of the fish, represented the mating of couples. Animal faces, swirling clouds, patterns of water and waves historically used in bronze vessels,<sup>12</sup> have now become ornamental artifacts used for ritual and non-ritual purposes.

The evolution of concepts and symbolic presentation beyond material and form of ritual icons can be seen in common social concerns such as fertility, prosperity, and commemoration for the deceased. In the ancient fertility ritual practice, for example, the realistic presentation of androgynous relief figures and significant

<sup>11</sup> *Fu, Lu, Shou* is the concept of Good Fortune (*Fu*), Prosperity (*Lu*), and Longevity (*Shou*). The term is commonly used in Chinese culture to denote the three attributes of a good life. Statues of these three gods are found in Chinese home and many Chinese-owned shops for auspicious blessings. See <https://www.google.com/search?q=fu,+lu+shou>

<sup>12</sup> For more about ornamental patterns on bronzes. See Hubei Provincial Museum (1994). Also see Li (2004, Chapter 2-Bronze art in the Xia, Shang and Zhou periods, pp. 101–206); Wu (1995, pp. 45–75); and <青銅器造型>, 雕塑藝術, 中國收藏網, 2009年04月19日。 <http://www.e6ds.cn/ts/zhishi/0018.html>



display of reproduction organs on ritual vessels<sup>13</sup> were later being symbolized into oval patterns on the *Yangshao* pots. Similarly, fertility icons expressing the shape of fish, lotus, moths, etc. are engraved in the Chinese paper-cut art for newly married couples. In the paper-cut, image of the lotus flower represents the female reproductive organ, whereas the appearance of a fish in the composition signifies the male's role in the mating process.

Another example is the change in the representation of wealth. It was previously presented on ancient ritual pot as painted shells, but, in the tombs of *Han* [漢] dynasty, it became a “money tree”<sup>14</sup> produced in bronze to accompany the dead. Nowadays, the ritual money sacrifice is represented by the paper replica of a “Hell Bank credit card”.

In the twenty-first century, the ancestor-worship services provided on the internet have challenged to traditional Chinese ritual culture and social customs related to ancestor worship.<sup>15</sup> This has brought discussion on the meaning and ethical value of traditional cultural rituals; or furthermore, and questioned the value of traditional rituals. People wonder whether web-worship is a proper “*li*” to our ancestors and the supernatural. In the virtual world, people and objects continue their “existence” in non-existing reality. Thus, the value of Chinese rituals practised for the benefits of an “afterlife”, and *li to* commemorate an eternal departure of someone is being challenged by media technology. It is possible that the shift in traditional ritual practices from physical to virtual form will lead to the generation of trendy ritual artifacts and new ways of thinking about their value.

## 16.9 Inspirations for Contemporary Creative Arts

For centuries, the mystery about immortals and the existence of an afterlife have provided room for argument and fantasies. Doubts and queries about the “*hun*” and “*po*”, the existence of supernatural deities and afterlife conditions have become rich conceptual resources for artistic imagination and creation. Many Chinese artists have been inspired by ritual artifacts, Chinese cultural customs, and the shape and symbolic meaning of these objects.

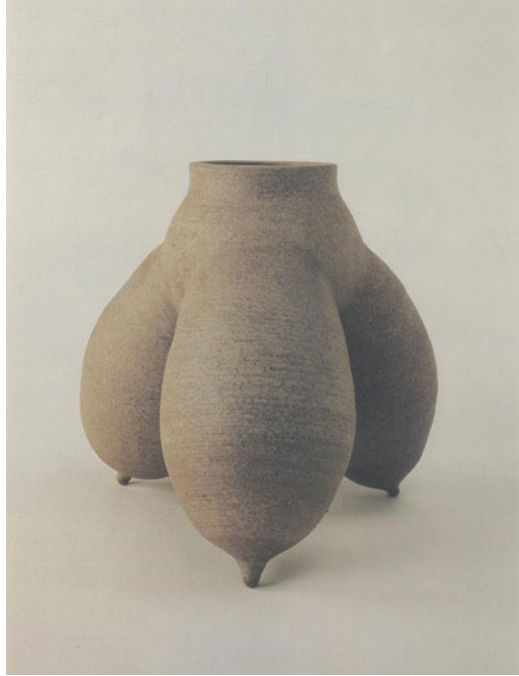
One example is the ceramic pot titled “*Li*” (1984) (Fig. 16.2) by Tsui Yun Chung [徐潤中] (Hong Kong Museum of Art 1984). Tsui has created a pot with three breast legs, an aesthetic interpretation of the three-breast-legged vessel produced in the

<sup>13</sup> Example of pottery with androgynous relief figures of Majiayao culture [馬家窑文化], archived in National Museum of China, Qinghai Province; also Li (2010, p. 68); and Li (2004, p. 39).

<sup>14</sup> The concept of the “money tree” is derived at the latest from the Han Dynasty. Cast-bronze money trees are a conspicuous feature of Han tombs in Sichuan. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Money\\_tree](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Money_tree)

<sup>15</sup> For more about on-line ancestor worship practices, see <http://www.zwbk.org/MyLemmaShow.aspx?zh=zh-tw&lid=136605>

**Fig. 16.2** Photo of artwork  
“*Li*” (1984) by Tsui Yun  
Chung



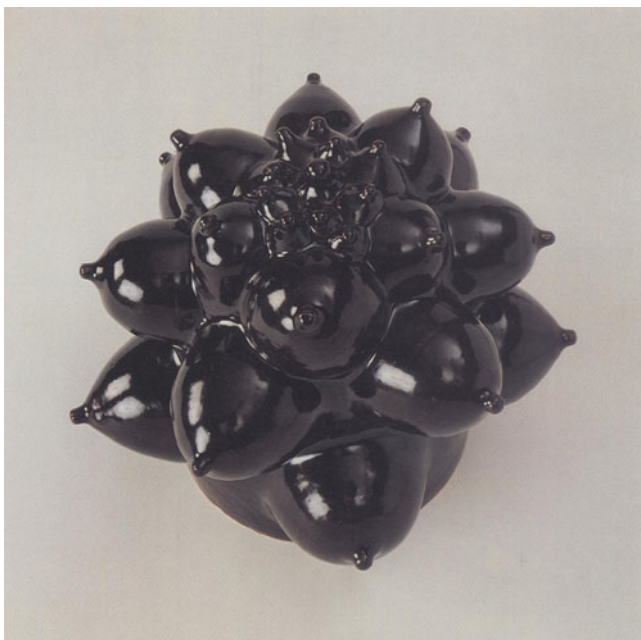
*Yangshou* period.<sup>16</sup> Another piece of work produced in the same period showed his further development of the breast-leg motif into a clustered form of breasts entitled “*Fruit*” (Fig. 16.3).

Another example of using ritual objects is Wong Lai Ching [黃麗貞] Fiona’s art work titled “*Not Intended to be a Particular Kind*” (1999) (Fig. 16.4), a white clay vest constructed by joining square porcelain pieces with thin metal wire. Her “*Terra Cotta Jacket on Stand*” (2001) (Fig. 16.5) that showed a terra cotta clay jacket recalls the design and significance of a Western *Han* [漢] jade suit.<sup>2</sup> Wong has succeeded in developing her artwork using clay jackets constructed in a similar way.<sup>17</sup>

Artist Li Wei Han [李惠嫻] Rosanna’s robust ceramic figurines imbued with contemporary cultural and symbolic meanings are announcing her interest and perception of the social livelihood and current events such as “*Yuanyang Cafe*” (2009–2012) (Fig. 16.6) and “*Fans of Elvis*” (2012) (Fig. 16.7), which through a light-hearted approach, depict the daily life and leisure activities of ordinary

<sup>16</sup>The three-breast-legged vessel “*li*” [鬲] produced in the *Yangshou* period was for cooking food with a fire set underneath. See Wu (1995, pp. 46–47).

<sup>17</sup>For more about the works of Wong Lai Ching Fiona, see <http://www.grottofneart.com/Hyphenation/Wong.html>



**Fig. 16.3** Photo of artwork "*Fruit*" (1984) by Tsui Yun Chung

**Fig. 16.4** Photo of artwork  
"*Not Intended to be a  
Particular Kind*" (1999)  
by Wong Lai Ching Fiona





**Fig. 16.5** Photo of artwork “Clay Jacket on Stand” (2001) by Wong Lai Ching Fiona

**Fig. 16.6** Photo of artwork  
“Yuanyang Cafe”  
(2009–2012) by Li Wei  
Han Rosanna





**Fig. 16.7** Photo of artwork “*Fans of Elvis*” (2012) by Li Wei Han Rosanna

Hong Kong citizens.<sup>18</sup> Li’s fat ladies and plump guys were originally inspired by the *Han* [漢] and *Tang* [唐] clay burial figurines<sup>19</sup> which depicted popular culture to please the dead in the tombs.

Mainland China artist, Lu Sheng Zhong [呂勝中] drew on his memories of the soul-calling exercise in ancient villages where the peasants use paper dolls to call back the souls of those who were very ill. So, he produced his red paper-cut dolls (Fig. 16.8) named “souls” that reflect traditional Chinese beliefs in the existence of the soul and their ritual characteristics, and his “soul-calling rituals” performances and installation projects (Lu 1998). Lu’s presentation of the souls and the soul-calling rituals are symbolic, and the artifacts he created were based on Chinese folk-art activities. His work shows a “reincarnation” of Chinese artifacts.

My own work, “*Ritual Vessel*” (2007) (Fig. 16.9), is made in white porcelain to re-interpreted contemporary ritual paper products. It shows the look of a crinkled and distorted ritual paper vessel when burnt by fire in the process of a sacrifice offering. On this paper-look artwork, weighted as light as paper, I covered the piece with traditional ritual icons to express people’s common wishes for auspicious outcomes. The attempt to explore paper products has inspired my work on a recent piece, “*Handle with Care!*” (2010) (Fig. 16.10), a full tea service in stoneware clay aimed to provide a new conception of corrugated paper products.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For more about the works of Li Wei Han Rosanna, see [http://www.grottofineart.com/RosannaLi/RosannaLi01\\_.htm](http://www.grottofineart.com/RosannaLi/RosannaLi01_.htm)

<sup>19</sup> For more about *Han* [漢] and *Tang* [唐] clay burial figurines, see Li et al. (2010, pp. 142–153).

<sup>20</sup> Artwork “*Handle with Care!*” is archived in the Flagstaff Tea Wares Museum, the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

**Fig. 16.8** Photo of paper-cut doll used as icon to represent the “soul”



**Fig. 16.9** Photo of artwork “*Ritual Vessel*” (2007) by Fung Siu Han Anissa

## 16.10 Learning Art Through Ritual Objects and Visual Culture

Ritual artifacts bear witness to Chinese ritual beliefs from the time of ancient civilizations. They provide clues for understanding culture as well as the stimulations for contemporary creative art development. In the archaeological and anthropological literature and references, the Chinese *liqi* can be studied from the perspectives of their form and decorations, the embedded meaning and representations in social contexts, and also the physical functions in relation to the process in religious ceremonies. All these visual and conceptual elements provide rich inspirations and ideas for artists and students in the search for new expressions in art.



**Fig. 16.10** Photo of artwork “Handle with Care!” (2010) by Fung Siu Han Anissa

### ***16.10.1 Iconographic Stimuli for Religious Imagination and Fantasies***

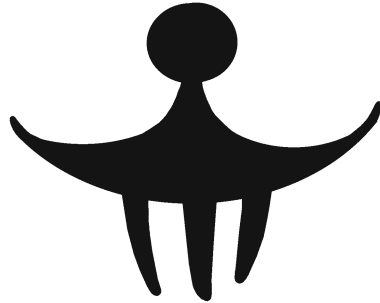
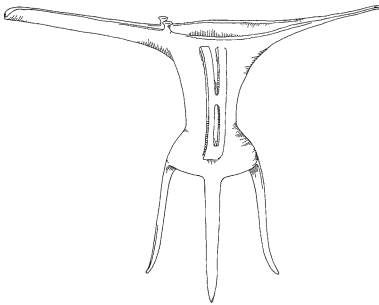
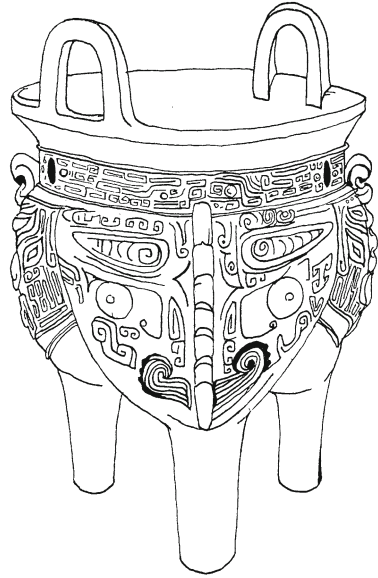
Chinese passion for land and nature, and the idea of attaining universal harmony in men, nature and social systems gave birth to the creation of a hierarchy (Shelton 1996, p. 41) of celestial deities. The legends and myths of ancient Chinese<sup>21</sup> include hybrids of men and animals, and the belief in reincarnation and purgatory (Burkhardt 1966) and are rich resources to stimulate religious imagination and fantasy.

### ***16.10.2 Integration of Ritual Analogies and Function***

Chinese *liqi* have demonstrated a synthesis of shape and form to satisfy function and ritual aspirations. For instance, the three strong legs on the bronze food vessel *ding* [鼎] (Fig. 16.11) allowed space for setting a fire underneath for cooking; the elegant three-legged bronze *jue* [爵] (Fig. 16.12) (Sullivan 2008, p. 16) is an echo of the image of the 3-legged sacred bird in the prehistoric time as popular motif on ritual pottery. An integration of the ancient fish *nei* [鯢] (salamander) image (Fig. 16.13) with the feature of snake and flying ability of bird, the Chinese created the dragon icon with decoration on different kinds of vessels.

<sup>21</sup> *Shan-hai-jing* [山海經] (Classic of Mountains and Seas) is one of the most important sources of the myth and religion of ancient China. See Poo (1998, pp. 92–96).

**Fig. 16.11** Illustration of a bronze food vessel *ding* [鼎]



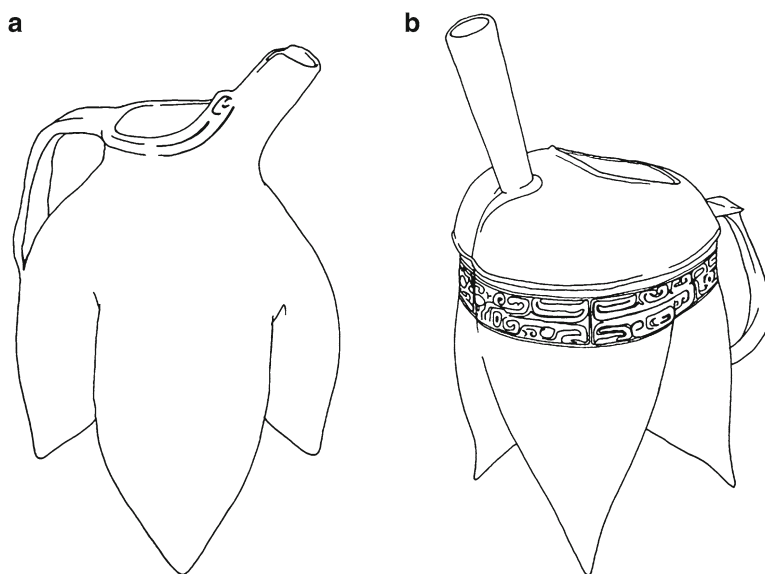
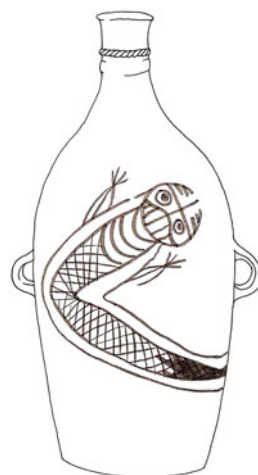
**Fig. 16.12** Illustration of a three-legged bronze *jue* [爵]

### 16.10.3 Cross-Fertilization of Artifacts

The form and decorations of *liqi* also showed the cross-fertilization of artifacts under the influence of local and exotic art and craft products. For example, some shapes and patterns on the *Shang* [商] ritual bronzes were developed from the *Yangshou* [仰韶] ritual pottery (Fig. 16.14a, b), and the clay pottery in the *Shang* [商] period copied the stylized patterns on the bronzes vessels (Fig. 16.15a, b). Similarly, the thick embossed relief patterns on Islamic silver wares appeared on *Tang* [唐]



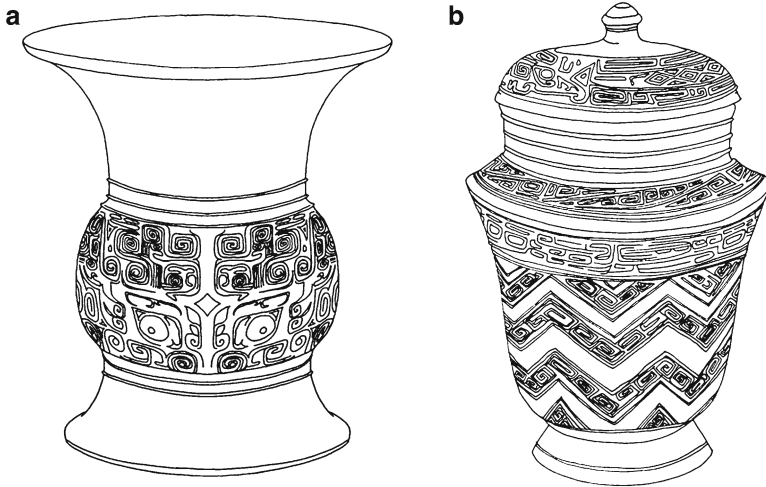
**Fig. 16.13** Illustration of a pre-historic pot with painting of an ancient fish *nei* [鲧]



**Fig. 16.14** Illustration of (a) a Pre-historic container “*he*” [盃] in clay and (b) a bronze “*he*” produced in *Shang* Dynasty

ceramic *sancai* (three-colour-glazes) wine jugs, and the French cloisonné decorations for metal ornaments were used on *Ming* [明] cloisonné style altar vases<sup>22</sup> (Li et al. 2010) (Fig. 16.15).

<sup>22</sup>For more about *Ming* Dynasty cloisonné style altar vases, see Li (2010, pp. 456–457); also see <http://baike.baidu.com/view/5789763.htm>



**Fig. 16.15** Illustration of (a) a Shang bronze “zun” [樽] and (b) a clay “zun” adopt the bronze decoration

#### ***16.10.4 Transmigration of Cultural Artifacts***

An understanding of ritual images, metaphors, analogies in the context of cultural practices and *liqi* may lead to the reinterpretation of tradition icons in new artistic or cultural contexts. For example, symbolism and metaphoric meanings can be expressed through graphic presentation, 3-dimensional art, media art or performance art. Contemporary art-based research and research-based art-creation both emphasize the academic and literary exploration of artifacts in relation to context of their culture. Such research not only enhances the artists’ personal perception of the subject, but also enriches newly created forms and artifacts in both content and meaning. For example, in contemporary art appropriations and juxtaposition of old and new icons are commonly used to provide heritage and cultural links.

#### ***16.10.5 Ritual Activities as Visual Culture***

Visual arts, including the cultural arts, popular arts and contemporary fine arts, are an increasingly important part of the larger visual culture that surrounds and shapes our daily lives. The emphasis on visual culture in art education refers to expanding the visual art forms and content through addressing the issues of imagery and artifacts to enhance comprehension of the meaning of visual narratives, the power of image representation and the formation of cultural identities in the creative productions (Freedman and Stuhr 2004).

The cultural items and ritual activities in Hong Kong are rich resources of visual culture with stories, historical connections, and philosophical ideologies embedded in them. Examples are the Cheung Chau Jiao Festival [長洲太平清醮],<sup>23</sup> the Tai O dragon boat water parade [端午龍舟遊涌],<sup>24</sup> the Tai Hang fire dragon dance [大坑舞火龍]<sup>25</sup> and the Yu Lan Ghost Festival [盂蘭勝會].<sup>26</sup> These four events possess unique characteristics and cultural value. Despite the modern urbanized culture of Hong Kong, social and ritual customs have been passed on from generation to generation and attract people in local communities. The cultural significance of these four local events has been globally recognized by their being inscribed on the third national list of intangible cultural heritage.<sup>27</sup>

## 16.11 Conclusion

Ritual artifacts and activities are a part of visual culture that is accessible to all people and relevant to their lives. Through the study of *liqi* and relevant narratives, people can experience traditional Chinese culture and society. Art researchers and practitioners can acquire an understanding and knowledge of Chinese culture and tradition, as well as how Chinese objects, materials and symbols are important to Chinese people socially, culturally, spiritually and historically. In doing this they can inform their practice.

In current school curricula art educators emphasize the appreciation of artifacts in their situated context. They believe ritual objects should be connected to their cultural values so that the learners will become more familiar with objects and the aesthetics in their cultural contexts.

The exploration of ritual issues can also be applied to the study of contemporary artifacts that extend the meaning of the traditional icons and go beyond their traditional ritual functions to stimulate responses and evoking further thought about the themes of existence, death, and immortality.

<sup>23</sup>“*Cheung Chau Jiao Festival*” 長洲太平清醮 traditionally called “Tai Ping Qing Jiao”, meaning: “the Purest Sacrifice celebrated for Great Peace”. See <http://www.cheungchauhk.com/cheung-chau-history/brief-history-cheung-chau-bun-festival>

<sup>24</sup>“*Tai O dragon boat water parade*” 《端午龍舟遊涌》 is a religious activity with more than 100 years of history, was held on Monday in Tai O, Lantau Island of Hong Kong to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival. This regatta commemorated the death of Qu Yuan an honest minister who is said to have committed suicide by drowning himself in a river. See <http://www.chinavoc.com/festivals/Dragonboat.htm>

<sup>25</sup>“*Tai Hang fire dragon dance*” 《大坑舞火龍》. See <http://taihangfiredragon.hk/about.htm>

<sup>26</sup>“*Yu Lan Ghost Festival*” 《盂蘭勝會》 on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month is Hungry Ghost Festival as well as Zhongyuan Festival, Yu Lan Pen festival and ShiHu. It is a Chinese custom of commemorating their ancestors and became popular in many Chinese regions. See <http://www.chinavoc.com/festivals/ghost.htm>

<sup>27</sup>For more about the items of intangible cultural heritage in Hong Kong, see <http://www.discoverhongkong.com/ca/see-do/culture-heritage/index.jsp>

In this chapter, significant Chinese ritual object *liqi* have been introduced to raise interest in cultural art, and especially to enhance understanding of the meaning and symbolism related to cultural and religious concerns. However, cultural fusion and localization of foreign cultures is increasingly evident in Hong Kong. Chinese cultural products are likely to be “modernized”, and renovated through adding contemporary elements and adopting exotic ideologies. Nevertheless, reviewing one’s own culture in parallel with reaching out to other cultures for growth and new development is a global trend. In this way we can open new landscapes in art and culture.

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