

The Form of Thought: An Analysis of Aesthetics and Power Encoding in the Lacquerware of the Wuwangdun Tomb

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Abstract: *In more than 10,000 artifacts unearthed from Tomb No. 1 at the Wuwangdun Site in Huainan, Anhui, there are over 700 lacquerware pieces. Taking the Theory of Material Engagement (MET) as a framework, this paper provided a cognitive archaeology interpretation of the lacquerware collection unearthed from the Wuwangdun Tomb in Huainan, Anhui, a King-level tomb of the Chu State dating to the late Warring States period. The study suggested that these lacquerware pieces were not merely decorative art objects or utilitarian items, but key material vehicles to externalization of cognition, power construction and cultural expression of the elite of the Chu royal court. From the perspective of “material engagement cognition”, this study systematically analyzed how the forms, patterns, colors, and combinations of lacquerware encode abstract ruling ideologies, cosmological concepts, and identity into tangible and practical material forms. The study found that, firstly, by the “embodied design” of lacquerware, ritual norms and power dynamics were inscribed into the user’s bodily experience, thereby achieving the embodied discipline of power; secondly, as an effective “visual cognition technique”, its decorative system shaped collective imaginations regarding the legitimacy of royal authority, soul beliefs, and the cosmic order; the creative process itself is a “enactive cognitive practice” that constantly generates and reinforces specific social orders and ideologies in the dynamic interactions of artisans, materials, tools, and cultural paradigms. Thus, the lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb constituted a sophisticated “technological system of power cognition”, and served as a crucial material means for the Chu royal court to consolidate its rule and foster a sense of identity against the backdrop of the social upheavals of the late Warring States period. This paper aims to provide a novel path of cognitive archaeology to understand the philosophy of creation in the State of Chu, and to offer a Chinese case for research on material culture.*

Keywords: *Theory of Material Engagement; Cognitive Archaeology; Wuwangdun Tomb; Lacquerware of the Chu State; Power Encoding*

1. Introduction: Pursing the Traces of Thought in Materials

As archaeologists carefully lifted the planks of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site in Huainan, Anhui, the material world of the Chu royal court preserved for over two thousand years suddenly came into view. Among the more than 10,000 precious artifacts, over 700 lacquered woodware form the core scenery by virtue of their quantity, variety, and craftsmanship^[1]. The Chu lacquerware was mainly investigated previously from the perspectives of typology, craftsmanship, or art historical styles, yielding fruitful results^[2]. However, a fundamental question remains unanswered: are these objects merely passive vehicles of thought, or are they indispensable participants in the process of forming aesthetic thought of the Chu State?

The “material turn” was the new perspective for the study of lacquerware from Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site. Lambros Malafouris’s “Theory of Material Engagement” (MET) states that, the mind is not confined within the skull, but extends into a dynamic system composed of the body, tools, and the environment; thought “arises” in this system while material serves as the medium to realize, solidify, and transmit thought^[3]. MET fundamentally challenges the mind-body dualism by considering cognition as an “emergent” process in the real-time interaction between humans and the material world, i.e., “thinking with things”. In terms of archaeology, artifacts are no longer merely “symbols” to interpret previous ways of thinking, but rather “traces” of the process thereof, an analysis of the production chain, which can reveal the “mind at work”. In this paper, MET was applied to the study of lacquerware of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site, going beyond focusing on what the phoenix motifs “represent” and instead

investigating how the entire creative process constituted a continuous “cognitive flow”, so as to resolve a core design problem that how to employ the most appropriate material forms to realize and manifest the conceptual framework of the royalty of the Chu State and the social order. Therefore, lacquerware became the ideal lens through which to observe the “form of thought” of the people of the Chu State, that is the material medium in which thought took shape.

2. Body Encoding in Artifacts

MET emphasizes the embodied nature of cognition that physical structure, sensory abilities, and motion experience shape the way we understand the world^[3]. The creative philosophy contained in the lacquerware of the Wuwangdun Tomb was primarily reflected in its ingenious design and guidance regarding the user’s body.

The lacquerware unearthed from Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site is diverse with dimensions by no means arbitrary, but a sophisticated material system designed to indicate identity and distinguish social ranks. For instance, the dimensions of the excavated lacquer ear cups showed distinct ranks with Type A measuring 15-16 cm, Type B measuring 13-14 cm, and Type C measuring 10-11 cm. ($n=42$, $p<0.01$) in diameter^[4]. The cups of different sizes corresponded to guests of varying status at the rigidly hierarchical banquets, and the “sense of volume” by holding manifested the user’s social status at any time. The large ceremonial lacquer table was an important symbol of identity. The lacquer table decorated with painted dragon and phoenix motifs, measuring 133 cm in length and 78 cm in width, was the largest lacquer table in the Warring States period^[1]. Its large surface defined the core area of power, and its low height compels the user to sit on knees, a constrained posture in marked contrast to standing or leaning. The table surface and the kneel-sitting posture together formed a spatial cognition of power showing “venerated-serving” and “center-periphery”^[5]. Hence, the lacquer table proved to be a “body regulator” that shapes power relations.

The functional design of artifacts directly encodes specific behavioral patterns. The combination use of a complete set of lacquerware for banquets preset a strict sequence of rituals: taking the pitcher from the wine set, pouring wine into the ear cup with a lacquer spoon, raising the cup to eye level with both hands to make a salute, and then drinking it all. Whether each movement is smooth and conforms to norms was a body measure of whether a person is “well-mannered”. The “programming” of etiquette was verified after the discovery of the lacquered wood pendant set. Although the lacquered wood pendant set was the funerary object, it embodied the cognitive logic of “cultivating the self via materiality”. It is recorded in the *Book of Rites: Yu Zao* that “When a gentleman is in a carriage, he hears the harmonious sound of the phoenix bells; when he walks, his jade pendants tinkle. Thus, thoughts of evil find no way to enter his mind”. One of the functions of a jade pendant is to regulate the wearer’s stride and pace via the rhythmic, pleasant sounds while walking. The excessively fast or hurried paces could cause the jingling of pendant set, thereby affecting grace and dignity. The lacquered wood pendant set unearthed from Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site could no longer produce sound, however, its form embodied and reflected the cognitive logic of “cultivating the self via materiality”. It embodied an ideal gait of elegance, dignity and rhythm, and transformed this posture into a ceremonial performance by the synergy of body and material that can be perceived through the sense of hearing. This is precisely what the MET emphasizes: the mind accomplishes complex cognitive and social tasks through its interaction with material.

The materiality of lacquerware, especially its unique tactile quality, was also involved in transmission of power information. The lacquer film formed by raw lacquer after dozens of processes was as lustrous as jade and as smooth as a mirror, and its tactile quality was in sharp contrast to the roughness of pottery and the cold, austere quality of bronze. The delicate touch of the top-quality lacquerware of the Chu State was a luxurious sensory experience that verified the user’s sense of superiority regarding social status. The rarity of lacquerware which required a thousand cuts over a hundred li to yield a single catty of lacquer, and the production process sustaining several years, enabled the possession of a large collection of exquisite lacquerware a silent declaration of power. The integrated tactile pleasure and resource monopolization constantly reinforced the user’s cognition of status. By virtue of the multifaceted design involving scale, action, and touch, abstract social hierarchies were transformed into movement scripts and sensory experiences that must be learned, adapted to, and performed by the body, i.e., power was internalized as “embodied habits”, thought shaped bodily practices through material forms, and bodily practices, in turn, reinforced the “authenticity” of thought.

3. Images, Narratives, and the Construction of Worldviews

The form of lacquerware was primarily associated with the body's sense of movement and touch, and then its decorative patterns were designed to shape the viewer's visual cognition and mental imagery. The lacquerware motifs of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site served as a proactive "visual cognition technique" that could encode cosmological and spiritual views as well as the ideology of royal authority into visual forms that can be collectively viewed, understood, and remembered by guiding the gaze, structuring narratives, and evoking emotions.

Based on currently published images of artifacts [1], the preliminary statistics of lacquerware motifs of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site were conducted (Sample size: n=63 artifacts with identifiable motifs):

Table 1 Statistical Analysis of Lacquerware Patterns Excavated from the Tomb of King Wu Dun

Motif Type	Frequency	Percentage	Primarily distributed artifacts
Phoenix	47	74.6%	Lacquer table, ear cup, lacquer stem cup, musical instruments
Dragon	31	49.2%	Lacquer table, tomb-guardian beast, lacquered shield
Cloud	42	66.7%	Almost all artifacts (mostly as background motifs)
Geometric	38	60.3%	Rim of the ear cup, edge of the lid
Plant	12	19.0%	Lacquer stem cup, lacquer box
Figure	3	4.8%	Fragments of lacquer painting

Note: Since most artifacts were a combination of multiple decorative motifs, the total percentage exceeded 100%.

According to Table 1, phoenix motifs were often the primary design on large ritual vessels, while dragon motifs frequently appeared with phoenixes showing specific location relationships.

The composition of the lacquerware patterns of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site was highly distinctive in a strong sense of dynamism and vitality. The center of the lacquer table decorated with dragon-phoenix motifs was painted with two large phoenixes arranged in a diagonal symmetrical pattern, with their heads held high and wings spread, exuding a sense of soaring momentum; beneath the phoenixes were several winding dragon motifs. The entire composition was imbued with a sense of direction and dynamic tension. The viewing gaze was first drawn to the striking form of the central phoenix, and then guided along the twist of its neck toward the diagonal, following the meandering curves of the dragon motifs into the cloud patterns at the bottom, and finally "wandering" in the dense clouds. This sense of visual fluidity was analyzed to a material representation of the Chu people's dynamic cosmological view that all creations exist in perpetual motion, transformation, and mutual influence, and the soul after death must undergo a journey of ascension before it can return to the Way of Heaven [6]. The dynamic patterns of lacquerware motifs created a "visual pathway" for the viewer's imagination, to guide the mind to experience on a cognitive level and internalize a "flowing model of the universe". In other words, these motifs were not merely delicate patterns, but also "cognitive maps" for the Chu people to understand how the world works.

The frequent and standardized phoenix motifs played a role of "visual keywords" by continuously reinforce the core cultural narrative in repeated visual exposure. The prominence of phoenix motifs was deeply associated with the Chu people's tradition of revering the phoenix. According to the *Hereditary House of Chu* in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, Zhu Rong, the ancestor of the Chu people, served as the Minister of Fire for Emperor Ku, and he was often depicted as the phoenix in the legendary of the Chu State. The phoenix thus became a symbol of the ancestral founder of the Chu clan and the God of Fire, and the ultimate embodiment of the sanctity and legitimacy of the royal lineage. The systematical distribution of phoenix motifs in the lacquerware of the Chu royal court was equivalent to spreading "visual genealogy" and "declaration of divine mandate" in every corner of daily life. In compositions of both phoenix and dragon motifs, the phoenix was typically located in the central or upper position, creating a visual pattern of exalted phoenix and subordinated dragon, which can be interpreted as a visual statement in Chu culture emphasizing its unique status in its interaction with the culture of the Central Plains [6].

Color is a powerful visual element that may directly affect the human limbic system and evoke deep emotions and cultural memories. During the Warring States period, the typical color feature of lacquerware was a combination of black and red as the dominant tone [7]. The lacquerware of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site was filled with the classic color palette dominated by black and red, creating a strong dramatic effect by the striking contrast of cinnabar red against deep black. Red was closely

associated with blood, flames, vitality, and Zhu Rong, the God of Fire, and could evoke psychological effects of progress, warning, and sacredness, inspiring awe and a sense of belonging. By contrast, black symbolized the earth, the nether world, and the vast, mysterious cosmos, producing a sense of solemnity and eternity. When the nobles of the Chu State were surrounded by red-black color patterns during important ceremonies such as sacrifices and banquets, their emotions were deeply stirred, and their identities became closely intertwined with the collective glory of the Chu royal court. Color was by no means merely an aesthetic embellishment, but rather served as a direct cognitive medium for constructing cultural identity and reinforcing ruling authority.

The motifs on the lacquerware of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site successfully created an all-inclusive “visual world”, which was both an interpretation of the universe and a justification of royalty, and particularly, a call to a sense of collective belonging. It allowed viewers to “see” thought and unconsciously accept the order embodied in thought in the process.

4. Processes, Convergence, and the Expansion of Cognitive Boundaries

One of the core viewpoints of MET is the enactive nature of cognition, a process of continuously creating new meaning in the real-time interaction between the agent and the environment [3]. The production of lacquerware of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site was not a linear process of simply copying predetermined “blueprints” onto the material, but rather an enactive practice where artisans, materials, tools, technical traditions, and cultural concepts engaged in a continuing dialogue and mutually shaped one another.

“Thoughts in the Hand”: a cognitive dialogue between artisans and materials. The production process of lacquerware involving selecting timber, preparing the base (sculpting, laminating, and drying lacquer), and refining raw lacquer, applying layer upon layer of lacquer, and drying and polishing, was faced with uncertainty and technical challenges at every step [2]. The artisans’ wisdom was evidenced by the ongoing dialogue with the properties of the materials. By virtue of analyses of tree species, lacquer materials, microscopic examination, and sulfur isotopes, the lacquer used in the lacquerware excavated from Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site has been identified as Chinese Lacquer [8]. The viscosity of Chinese Lacquer determined the speed and strength of the brushstrokes. The smooth, rounded, and elastic lines on the lacquerware of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site were the unique brush technique developed by artisans in long-term practice and deep adaption to the characteristics of the lacquer, becoming embodied knowledge solidified over time. To prevent thin wooden-cored lacquer from warping and cracking, craftsmen in the Chu State developed a technique of layered lamination, shaping the lacquer by applying layers of lacquer paste and hemp cloth to a mold. The X-ray imaging showed [8], the coarse fabric (fabric density of approximately 8×8 threads/cm²) in the base layer of the laminated lacquerware excavated from Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site provided structural strength, while the fine fabric (14×14 threads/cm²) in the surface layer ensured a smooth surface. This innovation was not the product of some genius’s imagination, but a solution jointly developed in the mutual inspiration of the craftsman’s intent and the properties of the materials, such as the tensile strength of hemp fibers and the adhesive properties of lacquer paste, to address the problem of how to produce artifacts both lightweight and robust. Thought gradually took shape in the touch, conflict, and compromise between the fingertips and the material, and the entire production process was a cognitive enactive action involving both artisans and materials [9].

It was noted by researchers that, the lacquerware motifs of Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site, while inheriting the romantic and fantastical style of Chu culture, exhibited characteristics “increasingly geometric and stylized, with a diminished sense of mystery and an enhanced sense of order” [1], which was possibly influenced by the increasingly dominant Qin culture. From the perspective of enactive cognition, this stylistic evolution served as material traces of adaptive adjustments in cognitive paradigms. Specifically, the unrestrained freedom of the Chu art in the early stage corresponded to a mode of cognition that emphasized intuition, imagination, and dynamic balance; whereas, the growing trend toward geometric and symmetrical reflected a cognitive tendency of highlighting classification, control, stability, and clearly defined boundaries. Faced with an external world dominated by the State of Qin where military merit, the rule of law, and the efficiency of centralized authority dominated, the ruling class of the Chu State may have subconsciously sought to counter the threat of “disorder” in the real world by a material form of “order,” thereby restoring a sense of control in cognition. The stylistic evolution of motifs was like geological formation to record the collective psychology adapting to changes in the external environment.

It is worth noting that the artifacts unearthed from Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site included objects

not conforming to the typical Chu cultural style, such as fragments of lacquerware bearing Qin-style inscriptions (e.g., terms like “Year 26” and “Master Craftsman”) and metal components characteristic of Northern Steppe culture style ^[10]. The incorporation of these “foreign objects” in the highest-ranking tombs of the Chu royal court held profoundly cognitive significance. According to MET, our cognition of the world depends on the “Cognitive Niche” in the physical interaction, and the replacement or addition of elements therein would directly alter our cognitive experience and worldview. By including foreign artifacts into the final resting place, King Kaolie of Chu performed a proactive practice of expanding cognitive boundaries to integrate material symbols of the “other” into the order framework (funerary rites) of the “self”, integrate the geographical imagery and complex political relationships of the vast external world, such as the marriages, wars, and trade between Qin and Chu, at the cognitive level, and transform them into tangible, controllable, and displayable material objects in the tomb. These artifacts became new landmarks on their cognitive maps, marking the scope of the Chu State’s power and influence, and reflecting the efforts of the late Chu elite to construct a more inclusive cognitive model of the “world”. The selection of creating and using objects was thus sublimated to a political-cognitive act that reshapes the understanding of the world.

5. Conclusions

The systematic analysis of the lacquerware from Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site covering bodily discipline, visual encoding, and enactive practice clearly showed that, these material treasures, which represented the pinnacle of craftsmanship in the late Warring States period, were in essence a system of “power cognitive technique” both ingeniously designed and highly effective. The ultimate goal was to shape and solidify, at both the individual and societal levels, a mode of cognition, emotional structure, and worldview that were in line with the interests of the Chu royal authority.

The lacquerware from Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site vividly depicted the crucial role of material objects in shaping cognition and thought throughout the course of human civilization, particularly in eras when affordable writing materials were not yet widespread or when society faced major transformations. Thoughts must be given forms to be effectively shared, passed down, and put into practice, such as bodily postures, visual images, and the shapes of objects. Relying on the finest lacquer techniques of the time, the royal court of Chu and its artisans transformed a complex system of political and theological thought into a tangible, perceptible, and functional material reality, enabling it to transcend time and space.

Looking back from the end of the Warring States period, this magnificent material cognitive system not only represented the pinnacle of Chu culture’s romantic imagination and exceptional techniques, but may also imply the subtle cultural resilience in the face of an irresistible historical tide—the unification by Qin. The Chu State fell decades later, however, the deep cultural framework of the Chu culture did not disappear. The “form of thought” embodied in the lacquerware from the Wuwangdun Tomb, including a preference for a dynamic cosmos, a pursuit of the tension between red and black, and a passion for the mythical narratives of the phoenix, have been deeply integrated, in various forms, into the material culture and spiritual world of the subsequent Han Dynasty and even the entire unified Chinese empire, marking a magnificent and distinctive symbol in our shared cultural heritage. Thoughts are intangible, yet the materials bear their traces; power is abstract, yet it takes shape through instruments. The lacquerware from Tomb No. 1 at Wuwangdun Site proves to be a constant reminder of the dialogue between “form” and “thought” that has shaped and evolved together over thousands of years.

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