

The Social Function of Painted Pottery Motifs in the Yangshao Culture of Neolithic China

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ABSTRACT

Chinese ceramic art originated in the Neolithic period, with archaeological evidence indicating that primitive ceramics date back approximately 10,000 to 13,000 years. Throughout this long history, research on early ceramics has continued unabated. This study employs a review and analysis of existing literature on painted pottery, combined with image analysis, to examine their social functions across different regions of the Yangshao Culture. Key areas of analysis include the recording of social events, social hierarchy and identity symbols, as well as belief systems and survival-related rituals. The findings reveal that painted pottery served not only as artistic decoration, but also as a medium for documenting historical memory, signaling social status, and conveying spiritual values. However, the study remains limited by its reliance on a small number of representative artifacts and the speculative nature of prehistoric cultural interpretation. Overall, these motifs demonstrate the multifaceted role of ceramics in prehistoric society, highlighting their significance beyond mere functionality and providing a deeper understanding of early Chinese social and cultural practices.

Keywords: Neolithic Period; Yangshao Culture of China; Pottery Patterns; Symbolism and Social Functions.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese ceramic art has a long history, spanning from the Neolithic Age through various dynasties. Its development closely parallels the evolution of ancient Chinese society and reflects the cultural characteristics of each period. The Yangshao Culture (5000–3000 BC), first identified in 1921 in Yangshao village, Mianchi County, Henan Province, is one of the most significant Neolithic cultures in China, particularly renowned for its painted pottery and distinctive decorative patterns. These patterns not only embody aesthetic values but also serve as carriers of social and cultural meaning in early society.

Problem Statement

While a few studies have examined the social functions of Yangshao painted pottery, their scope has been limited. Most research has focused on stylistic, aesthetic, and symbolic aspects, leaving the social roles of these motifs—such as recording public events, indicating social rank and status, expressing beliefs, or ceremonial survival—largely unexplored. Therefore, systematic research is needed to investigate how these decorative motifs functioned within the broader social practices of Neolithic communities. Understanding these functions can provide new insights into the organization, beliefs, and cultural practices of early Chinese society.

Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate the social functions of Yangshao painted pottery decoration through a review of existing literature and image analysis. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Analyze how these motifs reflected historical and communal events;
2. Examine their role in reinforcing social stratification and identity;

3. Explore their connections with belief systems and ritual practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to the Yangshao Culture and Its Painted Pottery

Agricultural production and pottery-making were closely linked in early Neolithic China. Archaeological evidence indicates that primitive ceramics in China date back approximately 10,000 to 13,000 years (Li, 2001). By the middle Neolithic period, pottery production was widespread across the region.

The Yangshao Culture, primarily distributed in the Yellow River basin, belongs to the middle and late Neolithic periods. Other contemporaneous cultures include the Majiayao, Dawenkou, Longshan, and Qijia cultures. Although these cultures differed in geographical distribution and stylistic features, they shared a focus on agriculture, sedentary lifestyles, and related social activities (China Silicate Society, 1982).

The Yangshao Culture was named after Yangshao village in Mianchi County, Henan Province, where it was first discovered in 1921. It was mainly found in Henan, Shaanxi, Shanxi, southern Hebei, and eastern Gansu, with Guanzhong, Jinnan, and western Henan as its center. The excavated sites include Xi'an BanPo in Shaanxi, Jiangzhai in Lintong, Beishouling in Baoji, Lijia Village in Xixiang, Shimeng Village in Din County, Hengjian in Huayin, Quanguo Village in Huaxian, Yuanjun Temple; Ruicheng Dongzhuang Village in Shanxi, Xiyang Village; Miaodigou in Shanxian County in Henan, Sanliqiao in Henan, Wangwan in Luoyang, Lingshan Halt in Zhengzhou, Dahacun in Zhengzhou, Higang in Anyang, and Lower Panwang in Magixian County in Hebei. Radiocarbon dating indicates that the Yangshao Culture existed approximately between 4515 and 2460 BC, spanning roughly two thousand years.

Painted pottery represents one of the most significant achievements of the Yangshao Culture and is considered an early peak in the development of Chinese ceramics. Painted pottery is produced using natural mineral pigments, such as ochre and manganese oxide, applied to polished orange-red ceramic vessels. The vessels are then fired in kilns to create durable patterns in red, black, white, and other colors (Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2002). Firing temperatures typically range from 900°C to 1000°C (China Silicate Society, 1982). The patterns are fixed on the vessel surface after firing and are resistant to wear, reflecting both technical skill and aesthetic sensibility of Neolithic potters.

Classification and Symbolism of Painted Pottery Motifs in the Yangshao Culture

Classification of Painted Pottery Motifs in the Yangshao Culture

Painted pottery of the Yangshao Culture exhibits notable diversity due to differences in time and geographical distribution. It can be classified into several types, including the Banpo, Miaodigou, Majiayao, Shilingxia, Banshan, and MaChang types (Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2002).

The Banshan type is typically decorated with floral motifs on the mouth, shoulders, upper abdomen, and other prominent areas of the vessel, including the inner walls of open pots. Geometric patterns, such as broad bands, triangles, diagonal lines, and folds, frequently accompany these floral motifs. Animal representations are also present, exhibiting a strong pictorial quality and aesthetic appeal (Central Academy of Fine Arts, 2002). A representative example is the painted pottery basin featuring a human face and fish motif (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Painted Pottery Basin Featuring a Human Face and Fish Motif (National Museum of China)

Miaodigou-type pottery predominantly features decoration on the upper portion of large-mouthed, small-

bottomed, curved-bellied vessels. Common motifs include animals such as birds, fish, and frogs, alongside botanical patterns such as dots, hooks, leaves, curved triangles, and continuous banded designs (Figure 2). These motifs often combine real and imagined elements, demonstrating both aesthetic sophistication and symbolic complexity.

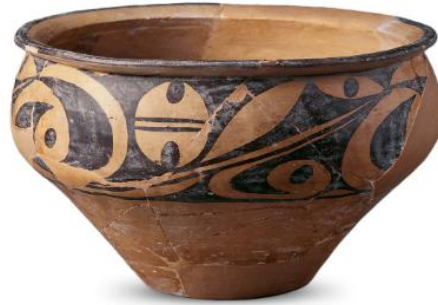


Figure 2. Painted Pottery Basin (National Museum of China)

Majiayao type of painted pottery decorated with large area, pattern with swirl pattern, wave pattern, arc edge triangle pattern mostly, with the composition of dense, cyclonic and changeable characteristics. A notable example is the dancing-pattern basin excavated from the Shangsunjiashai site in Datong County, Qinghai Province (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Dance Pattern Painted Pottery basin (National Museum of China)

Shilingxia-type pottery comprises various vessel forms, including pots, jars, and bottles, adorned with dots, circles, straight lines, arcs, and grid patterns. Animal motifs, especially stylized birds and salamanders, are also observed in finer pieces (Figure 4: Zhang, 2013).



Figure 4. Shilingxia Type Variant Salamander Vase (Museum of Ethnology of China)

BanShan type of colored ceramics more small mouth bulging belly jugs, single ear vase and other shapes, the

shape is stable and generous, popular red and black jagged and swirling patterns, color harmony and warm (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Bisque Painted pottery jar with serrated swirl pattern of the Hanshan type (Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture Museum)

MaChang-type painted pottery resembles the Banshan type in form and decoration. The four-circle layout is common, featuring grid patterns, latticework, zigzags, metric symbols, and stylized human figures (Figure 6).

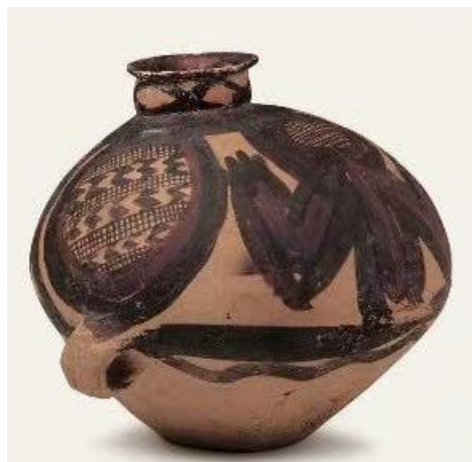


Figure 6. MaChang Type God-Man Pattern Bird-Shaped Painted Pottery Pot (Gansu Provincial Museum)

The above is a representative achievement of the Yangshao culture in China's Neolithic period, which is divided into several major categories of Painted pottery. Yangshao culture according to different regions and time is divided into the above several interrelated and distinctive painted pottery decoration, these painted pottery pattern decoration shows a rich cultural connotation. The whole reflects the evolution of Yangshao culture aesthetic concepts. Painted pottery decoration is not only an important reflection of the social life and aesthetics of the ancestors at that time, but also an important cornerstone for the development of ceramic art in later generations.

Symbolism of Painted Pottery Motifs in the Yangshao Culture

The emergence and refinement of painted pottery demonstrate not only advances in craftsmanship but also the growing capacity of early humans to engage in symbolic thought and cultural expression. An examination of existing artifacts shows that the dynamic use of lines, color combinations, and stylized representations of flora and fauna reflect both creativity and the ability to abstract from nature. Through association and imagination, these motifs conveyed desires, beliefs, and forms of worship, making painted pottery one of the earliest manifestations of symbolic art (Qi, 2010). Although the Neolithic Age predates the invention of writing and interpretations inevitably involve a degree of speculation, the symbolic dimensions of painted pottery remain significant for understanding the worldview of early societies (Gao & Zhang, 2019). Building on this foundation, the following discussion considers three major aspects of symbolic expression in Yangshao painted pottery:

fertility worship, reverence for nature, and tribal totems.

Fertility Worship through Painted Motifs

Fertility worship was among the most pervasive symbolic functions of Yangshao painted pottery. Frog and fish motifs are particularly prominent, reflecting symbolic associations with reproduction and abundance (Zhang, 2013). In Chinese matrilineal clan society, the frog motif—often referred to as the “toadstool pattern”—emerged as a key visual emblem of fertility and renewal (Liu, 1987). Archaeological discoveries reveal that these motifs frequently adorned ritual vessels, reinforcing their connection to reproductive worship and the continuity of life. Xu (1989) further argues that nearly all major, widely distributed decorative motifs of this period functioned as schematic symbols of fertility. Representative examples include a faience jar decorated with frog motifs (Figure 7) and a human-faced fish bowl (Figure 8), both of which underscore the integration of reproductive symbolism into everyday and ceremonial contexts.



Figure 7. Majiayao Culture Faience Pot with Frog Patterns (the Palace Museum)



Figure 8. Human Faced Fish Decoration Bowl (National Museum of China)

Natural Worship and Cosmological Beliefs

Motifs such as bird patterns, wave lines, sawtooth designs, and floral decorations frequently appear on pottery excavated from the Yangshao culture. The prevalence of these naturalistic patterns reflects the ancestors' close observation and imitation of the surrounding environment, which was fundamental to their survival. At the same time, these motifs also embody reverence for, and expectations of, the power of nature. This phenomenon resonates with traditional artistic heritage both in China and abroad. For example, the symbolic craft traditions of the Penan people, particularly the production process of keleput, demonstrate how ancestral communities transformed the observation of natural forms into symbolic artistic expressions (Ramli, Said, & Arshad, 2019). In this sense, natural patterns not only reveal the community's adaptation to its environment but also embody spiritual sustenance and cultural values, underscoring the deep interconnection between art, survival, nature, and cosmology.

As noted by Lü Jiaqi (2024), the swirl motif is one of the most representative patterns of Majiayao painted pottery (Figure 9), and it originates from the ancestors' worship of water. While water was essential for human livelihood, natural disasters such as floods often destroyed houses and farmland, creating vulnerability and hardship. Painting the swirling river-water motifs on pottery thus symbolized reverence for water and respect for the forces of nature among the people living in the upper reaches of the Yellow River.



Figure 9. Majiayao swirl-pattern painted pottery jar (China Nationalities Museum)

In addition, Lü Jiaqi (2024) highlights the frequent appearance of grid and lattice motifs on Majiayao-type painted pottery (Figure 10), which are speculated to symbolize farmland, fishing nets, and woven textiles. With the development of agricultural civilization, these patterns may be understood as symbolic expressions of land worship and the expectation of harvests from nature.



Figure 10. Painted Pottery Pot with Diamond-Shaped Sawtooth Pattern (Shenzhen Museum)

Symbolizing Tribal Totems

Li Zehou argues in *The Course of Beauty* that the geometric patterns on Banpo-type painted pottery evolved from fish motifs, which possibly served as the totemic symbol of the Banpo clan. Professor Zhang Yalin, in *History of Chinese Ceramic Design*, also cited examples of such totemic symbols, including a Banpo-type painted pottery basin excavated with human face and fish motifs (Figure 11). The fine red clay basin is polished inside and out, with a symmetrical arrangement of a black-painted human face and fish motifs. The human face is rounded, with a triangular hair bun resembling a fishtail, a towering black-painted forehead, and a sickle-shaped curve on one side. The squinting eyes form a straight line, while small fish surround the ears and two fishtails appear beside the mouth, suggesting a symbolic fusion of “human within fish” or “fish within human.” Since fish symbolized strong reproductive ability, in the Neolithic period—when productivity was low, population scarce, and fertility limited—this imagery reflected people’s desire for reproduction. Thus, the integration of fish tails and human heads in decorative design symbolized the worship of fertility and vitality.



Figure 11. Painted Pottery Basin with Human Face and Fish Motif, Banpo Type (National Museum of China)

Meanwhile, Zhang also noted that the painted pottery decorations of the Miaodigou type, another branch of the Yangshao culture, more closely resemble plant motifs such as petals and leaves (Figure 12). Common foliage patterns of the Miaodigou type include ovals flanked by two lines, sometimes with a dot in the center or at both ends of the line. These motifs could be arranged individually or combined with other patterns to form new designs. As the Miaodigou type corresponds to the so-called “Huangdi culture,” which spread widely across regions centered on Huashan, it is inferred that the Miaodigou remains belonged to people who formed the core of the early Chinese race. The use of floral motifs as totems further suggests that Huashan was a central region inhabited by these early communities.

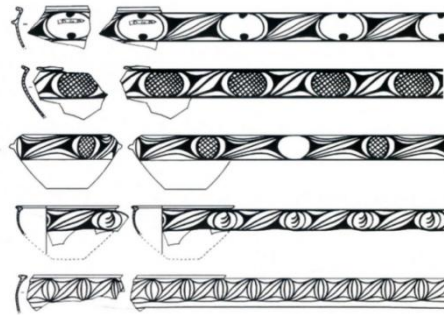


Figure 12. Decorative Patterns of Painted Pottery, Miaodigou Type (from Zhang Yalin, *History of Chinese Ceramic Design*, p. 27).

Existing Studies on the Social Function of Painted Pottery in the Yangshao Culture

A review of existing scholarship shows that research on Yangshao painted pottery has primarily concentrated on several dimensions: typological classification of pottery, functional analysis of vessel forms, material characteristics of pottery clay, decorative and aesthetic evaluation of patterns, structural analysis of motifs, the reappropriation of traditional patterns in modern design, and their historical or cultural significance. These studies have provided valuable insights into the technological achievements and artistic expressions of the Yangshao Culture.

While some works have touched upon symbolic interpretations of painted motifs, such analyses have generally remained within aesthetic or decorative frameworks. Very few investigations have systematically examined how such motifs functioned as active social agents—for instance, in recording communal events, reinforcing social stratification and identity, or facilitating ritual practices. Moreover, the majority of studies focus on isolated motifs or case-specific interpretations, without integrating them into a broader understanding of Neolithic social practices.

The symbolic dimension of painted pottery should be regarded as integral to its social functionality, since symbolism itself reflects not only aesthetic expression but also the spiritual beliefs, social structures, and subsistence needs of Neolithic communities. As noted in Zhang Yalin’s *History of Chinese Ceramic Design* and a range of scattered journal articles, symbolic readings have been attempted, but they remain fragmented and insufficiently connected to the social and cultural contexts of Yangshao communities.

Therefore, although some attention has been given to the symbolic meanings of Yangshao painted pottery motifs, systematic research on their social functions remains scarce. This study seeks to fill this gap by comprehensively analyzing the social functionality of painted pottery motifs, emphasizing their roles in documenting social practices, sustaining collective memory, and shaping cultural identity in early Chinese society.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research method, combining visual image analysis and literature analysis, to explore the social functions and significance of painted pottery patterns in Yangshao culture.

Image Analysis Method

In order to study the social functions of painted pottery motifs during the Yangshao Culture, representative cultural relics were selected for this research, such as the stork-and-stone-axe figure pottery jar and the dancing-

figure painted pottery basin. The selection of these artifacts follows specific criteria: (1) they are frequently cited in archaeological and art historical literature, (2) they display clear and well-preserved motifs with distinctive cultural significance, and (3) they have been widely recognized by scholars as representative examples of Yangshao painted pottery. These features ensure that the selected images are not only visually significant but also academically validated, aligning with the scope of this study on the social functions of motifs. Therefore, a case study approach is also adopted as an auxiliary method to substantiate the research conclusions with specific examples.

The analysis is structured into three dimensions:

Formal Analysis of Pictorial Content: Examines the visual and compositional features of the motifs. This dimension focuses on the visual and compositional features of the motifs, including the arrangement of figures, symmetry, proportion, and stylistic conventions. By examining these formal qualities, the study identifies how the Yangshao artisans organized visual elements to convey meaning. This step establishes a foundation for understanding the motifs beyond their aesthetic appearance and situates them within broader artistic traditions.

Symbolic Analysis: The symbolic analysis seeks to interpret the embedded meanings within the motifs. This involves exploring possible representations of authority, cosmological beliefs, ritual practices, or collective identities. For example, certain animal or human figures may symbolize fertility, protection, or ritual power. Through this approach, the study attempts to reveal the intangible cultural and ideological values that the motifs were intended to communicate.

Socio-cultural context analysis: The socio-cultural dimension situates the motifs within the broader historical and cultural framework of the Yangshao period. It examines how the designs reflect social organization, communal rituals, and the belief systems of the community. This analysis highlights how the painted motifs not only served decorative purposes but also embodied collective worldviews and ideological expressions of the Yangshao people.

Literature Analysis

The literature analysis aims to synthesize existing research on Yangshao painted pottery decoration, with a particular focus on the interpretation of painted pottery motifs by historians and scholars. The sources examined in this study include archaeological excavation reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, and monographs such as *The History of Chinese Ceramic Design* and *A Brief History of Chinese Art*.

The selection of literature followed three main criteria: (1) academic relevance to Yangshao painted pottery, (2) credibility and scholarly authority of the publication, and (3) direct discussion of painted pottery motifs. Priority was given to excavation reports and works by established scholars in ceramic studies and art history. These choices ensure that the literature reflects both current academic consensus and long-standing scholarly debates, thereby providing a reliable foundation for exploring the social functions of Yangshao motifs.

This study applies thematic analysis to categorize the different interpretations of motifs presented in the selected works. In addition, a comparative analysis was conducted to identify research gaps—particularly regarding the social functions of motifs beyond their decorative and aesthetic dimensions.

Limitations

This study recognizes a number of limitations:

Limited written records: Writing did not appear in the Yangshao period, so it is difficult to fully verify the meaning of pottery patterns, so our current way of thinking to speculate on the interpretation, then it is likely that there will be over-interpretation of the subjective phenomenon.

Sample limitation: Although the selected artifacts are representative, they may not cover the full diversity of Yangshao painted pottery.

RESULTS

Yangshao painted pottery represents an early stage in the development of Chinese ceramic art. Beyond its technical and artistic achievements, these vessels bear motifs that reflect the social life and cultural values of their time. The designs are not merely decorative; they functioned as records of communal activities, markers of social identity, and expressions of belief and ritual.

Although previous studies have examined the forms, techniques, and aesthetic features of Yangshao pottery, the social functions of its motifs have not been systematically explored. This chapter therefore focuses on the analysis of painted motifs in order to reveal their significance in recording social events, representing

stratification and identity, and expressing religious beliefs and aspirations for survival.

Social Function Analysis of Color Pottery Patterns

In this section, the social functions of painted pottery patterns in Yangshao culture period will be explored through image analysis and document analysis.

Recording Social Events

The Miaodigou-type stork-stone axe painted pottery jar (or painted pottery urn) (Figure 13), unearthed in Yan Village, Linru, Henan Province, is an important artifact of the Neolithic Yangshao culture. The jar measures 47 cm in height with a mouth diameter of 32.7 cm. Its painted motifs are primarily divided into two main elements: the right side depicts a vertical stone axe with a wooden handle, while the left side features a stork holding a fish in its beak. The stone axe is outlined in ink and filled with white, with horizontal lines and dotted patterns at the junction of the axe and handle, suggesting a firm connection. The end of the handle forms a square projection resembling the head of a sword, and the central grip is covered with dense diagonal lines and a black cross, emphasizing both functionality and symbolic significance.



Figure 13. Stork Stone Axe Figure in Painted Pottery Jar (National Museum of China)

The stork is painted entirely in white, with its eyes delineated in ink. Its robust body, slender neck, and raised head make it visually prominent, while its beak tightly grasps the slightly rigid fish, whose gills, fins, and eyes are all outlined in ink (Zhang & Cao, n.d.). The stone axe stands upright with the blade facing outward, its visual weight comparable to that of the stork. In the overall composition, the stork and stone axe dominate the scene, whereas the fish appears smaller, reflecting a sense of hierarchy and narrative emphasis. The relative positioning of the stork facing the upright stone axe, combined with their spatial prominence, suggests a ritualistic and symbolic interaction, while also indicating the motif's function as a visual record of significant social events, including clan authority and conflicts.

Previous studies have interpreted this motif as a record of historical events. Yan Wenming (1981) argued that the stork and fish represent totems of opposing clans, with the stone axe symbolizing the authority of the victorious clan, suggesting that the scene depicts the heroic leader of the stork clan defeating the fish clan. Qiu Donglian (1994) further supported this view, proposing that between 4000 and 3500 BC, the jar reflects the life-and-death struggles among clans under the Yellow Emperor Tribal Alliance, with the stone axe serving as a unifying emblem for the allied clans.

Alternative interpretations also exist. Niu Jipu (1985) suggested that the bird in the motif is a heron rather than a stork, emphasizing the ritualistic and symbolic interaction between the stone axe and the bird. He argued that during the Neolithic period, the stone axe, as both a production and combat tool, was vital to survival and therefore revered. The depiction of the stork facing the stone axe while holding a fish may symbolize a ceremonial offering to the axe spirit, intended to ensure clan prosperity, safety, and fertility.

Although these counterarguments highlight the motif's symbolic and ritual aspects, the composition, spatial emphasis, and historical context collectively support the interpretation that the stork-fish-stone axe motif primarily records significant social events, particularly clan conflicts and the display of authority (Table 1). This understanding aligns with the broader perspective of Yangshao painted pottery as a medium for preserving communal memory. Consequently, the motif functions not only as an aesthetic or symbolic object but also as a "pictorial record" of prehistoric society, conveying important information regarding social organization, tribal

identity, and historical events.

Table 1. Sources and Interpretations of the Stork–Stone Axe Painted Pottery Motif

Source Type	Example / Reference	Key Interpretation	Reflected Theme
Artifact (Image)	Miaodigou-type stork–stone axe painted pottery jar, unearthed at Yan Village (Figure 13)	Composition emphasizes ritual interaction and hierarchy; stork and axe as dominant elements	Visual record of social events; clan authority
Literature	Yan Wenming (1981)	Stork vs. fish = opposing clan totems; stone axe = victorious clan authority	Clan conflict; tribal memory
Literature	Qiu Donglian (1994)	Scene reflects Yellow Emperor Tribal Alliance struggles; axe as unifying emblem	Clan alliance; historical record
Literature	Niu Jipu (1985)	Bird is a heron; motif = ceremonial offering to axe spirit for prosperity	Ritual symbolism; survival and fertility

Social Stratification and Status Symbols

According to the 1959 investigation brief later published by the Luoyang Excavation Team of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Sciences (1961), some large Neolithic painted pottery jars may have been used as burial containers, or “urns,” for storing human bones. This type of funerary objects, commonly known as “Yichuan jar”, has been found in many archaeological surveys in the six western counties of Henan Province. In the same type of pottery jar unearthed at the Yan Village site in Henan Province, researchers found that the stork stone axe figure pottery jar also belongs to the urn coffin burial set, indicating that this type of painted pottery not only has the daily function, but also carries a specific funerary cultural significance. Adult secondary burials using pottery jar as a burial tool is one of the typical burial customs of Yangshao culture in Yilo-Zhengzhou area.

From the content of the painted pottery pattern, the pattern is not just a mere decoration, but may record historical events and the deeds of tribal heroes. According to the previous analysis of the stork stone axe picture pottery jar (Figure 13), the picture may be to commemorate the heroic performance of a tribal leader. The stone axe in the picture symbolizes power, while the fish held by the stork represents the defeated rival tribe. Therefore, combined with the burial background of this pottery jar, it can be speculated that the owner of this urn is most likely a heroic chief at that time, and its painted pottery pattern not only shows the aesthetic value, but also has the function of social stratification and status symbol. From an anthropological perspective, mortuary practices are not merely the disposal of the dead, but also act as a social arena where power, identity, and hierarchy are reproduced and legitimized (Parker Pearson, 1999). In this sense, Yangshao urn burials functioned as performative acts of reinforcing social status within the community.

While the urn burials of the Yangshao culture demonstrate emerging markers of social stratification, similar phenomena were also observed in other Neolithic cultures, such as Longshan. Elite burials from Longshan sites often contained fine black pottery and jade objects, serving as indicators of hierarchical differentiation (Liu, 1999). This comparative perspective suggests that the use of material culture to symbolize power and status was not unique to Yangshao society but part of a broader trajectory of social complexity in prehistoric China (Table 2).

Table 2. Interpretations of Social Stratification and Status Symbols in Yangshao and Comparative Contexts

Source Material	Key Evidence/Observation	Key Interpretation	Reflected Theme
Luoyang Excavation Team (1961)	Large painted pottery jars (“Yichuan jar”) used for secondary burials	Jars functioned as burial containers, indicating ritual use	Funerary customs as markers of social practice
Painted pottery jar with stork–stone axe motif	Symbolic imagery (stone axe = power; stork =	Commemoration of heroic chief; authority	Material culture reflects leadership and social

Source Material	Key Evidence/Observation	Key Interpretation	Reflected Theme
(Yan Village, Henan)	victor; fish = defeated rival)	symbolized through burial objects	hierarchy
Parker Pearson, M(1999)	Anthropological theory of burial	Mortuary practices reproduce and legitimize hierarchy	Burial as performative arena of social stratification
Liu (1999) on Longshan culture	Elite burials with black pottery and jade objects	Clear markers of hierarchical differentiation in Neolithic China	Comparative evidence: stratification not unique to Yangshao, but part of broader trend

Faith and Prayer for Survival

As mentioned in the previous literature review, many patterns of the Yangshao culture period are symbolic, such as the frog pattern and the fish pattern, which symbolize prosperity, and the bird pattern and the water pattern, which reflect the worship of nature. Behind these symbolisms, it is essentially the Yangshao ancestors' attempt to express their religious beliefs and prayers for survival through tattoos.

In this section, two artifacts of the same type are selected for analysis, namely, the dancing pattern painted pottery basin excavated in Shangsunjiazhai, Datong County, Qinghai (Figure 14) and the dancing pattern painted pottery basin excavated in Zongri Site, Tongde County, Qinghai (Figure 15).



Figure 14. Dance-patterned Painted Pottery Basin Excavated in Shangsunjiazhai, Datong County, Qinghai (National Museum of China)

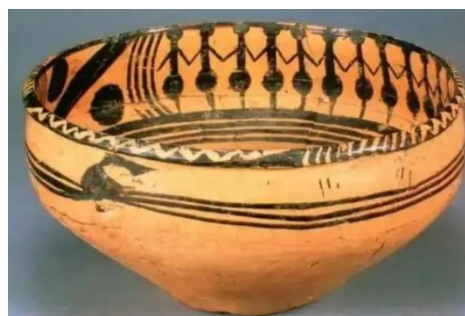


Figure 15. Dance-Patterned Painted Pottery Basin Excavated at the Zongri Site, Tongde County, Qinghai (Qinghai Provincial Museum)

These two pieces of painted pottery belong to the Yangshao culture period of the Majiayao culture, painted content for the circle dance combination of dance scenes. Dance pattern painted pottery basin excavated in Datong County, Qinghai Sun Jia Zhai (Figure 14), painted in the inner mouth of the painted pottery basin with three groups of dance patterns, each group of five people, hand in hand around the mouth of the basin to form the shape of a song. The head of the dancers is decorated with a braid of hair, and the tail is decorated with an upturned ornament, and the whole is rich in a sense of rhythm and rhyme. The dance-patterned painted pottery

basin unearthed from the Zongri site in Tongde County, Qinghai (Figure 15), is particularly remarkable. On the inner wall of the basin are two groups of dance images—one depicting 11 figures and the other 13—together presenting 24 dancers, the largest number ever found on a single piece of Yangshao painted pottery with dance motifs. In the scene, the dancers wear round, ball-shaped skirts and hold hands in a circle, with some standing with legs closed and others slightly apart, creating a vivid sense of movement throughout the composition (Zhang & Xu, 2022).

There are different interpretations in the academic community about the specific meaning of the dance pattern. According to Tang Chi (1979), the painted pottery pots with dance motifs unearthed at Shangsunjiazhai in Datong, Qinghai, reproduce vivid scenes of clan members hunting wild animals in groups, and this kind of hunting dance may have played a role in ceremonial activities and reflected the high development of the art of painted pottery in the Majiayao culture (Tang, 1979). Zhang Yalin (2022) pointed out in *The History of Chinese Ceramic Design* that dance in primitive societies was not only entertaining, but also played a more important role in witchcraft rituals and courtship. The painted pottery pots with dance motifs unearthed in Datong, Qinghai, may represent the dance scene of male courtship in clan life, reflecting the worship of reproduction in matrilineal clan societies as well as the good wishes for the prosperity and strength of the clans.

Although scholars have different interpretations of the specific meaning of the dance pattern, whether it is for fertility worship, hunting rituals, or prayers for a good agricultural harvest, the essence of the dance pattern of such groups reflects the belief system and survival aspirations of the Yangshao ancestors. Through the collective expression of dance, they attempted to communicate with nature, to send the expectation of tribal prosperity, clan prosperity. These ceremonial activities not only show the importance of religious beliefs in primitive society, but also reveals the function of dance as witchcraft rituals, carrying multiple meanings such as exorcism, praying for luck and celebrating the harvest. Therefore, the images of painted pottery pots with dance motifs are not only artistic expressions, but also symbols of prehistoric society's beliefs and prayers for survival, carrying certain social functions (Table 3).

Table 3. Interpretations of Dance Motifs in Yangshao Painted Pottery (Majiayao Phase)

Source/Artefact	Key Evidence/Description	Key Interpretation	Reflected Theme
Painted pottery basin, Shangsunjiazhai (Datong, Qinghai)	Three groups of dancers (5 per group), hand-in-hand circle	Tang Chi (1979): hunting ritual scenes linked to ceremonial activities	Dance as ritual expression of collective survival strategies
Painted pottery basin, Zongri Site (Tongde, Qinghai)	Two groups of dancers (11 + 13 = 24 figures), largest known dance motif	Zhang Yalin (2022): courtship dance, fertility worship, clan prosperity	Dance as symbolic expression of reproduction and continuity
General academic discourse	Anthropological theory of burial	Dance scenes as multipurpose ritual practices	Religious belief and survival prayer embedded in daily/ritual life

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

This study examines the social functions of painted pottery decoration in the Yangshao Culture, focusing on three key aspects: recording social events, social stratification and identity symbols, and religious beliefs and prayers for survival.

First, painted pottery decoration is not only a form of artistic expression, but also a medium for recording social events and significant activities. Taking the famous pottery jar with stork, fish and stone axe as an example, as a decorative motif on a burial vessel, the combination of storks, fish and axes may reflect a tribal conflict or a heroic deed. These motifs not only preserve historical memory, but also have important archaeological value, showing the ancient society's perception of power and conquest.

Secondly, the use of painted pottery as urns shows the connection between pottery and social hierarchy. In the pattern of the Stork Stone Axe Figure Pottery Urn, the axe symbolizes authority, suggesting that the owner of the potteries may have a high social status. This suggests that pottery not only has practical functions, but also

carries status symbols, becoming an important medium for distinguishing classes and displaying prestige in the society at that time.

Finally, many pottery patterns of Yangshao culture contain religious beliefs and prayers for survival. Frog and fish motifs symbolize fertility and reproduction, while the dancing images on the painted pottery of the Majiayao culture may be related to sacrificial rituals, expressing prayers for the prosperity of the community and a good harvest. The recurring dance motifs suggest that such rituals occupied an important place in social life, both as an expression of spirituality and as a means of strengthening the cohesion of the community.

Overall, these findings highlight the fact that Yangshao Culture pottery patterns not only have decorative functions, but also carry rich social meanings, reflecting the historical memory, class identity and spiritual beliefs of prehistoric societies.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study are of great significance to the understanding of the social structure and cultural system of the Yangshao culture, as well as providing a new perspective on the history of ceramic art.

First, it deepens the understanding of the social structure of Yangshao culture. By analyzing the social function of painted pottery decoration, it can be presumed that Yangshao culture has formed a certain degree of social stratification. For example, the stork stone axe figure pottery jar may symbolize the identity of a tribal leader or hero, while the dance pattern painted pottery basin suggests the importance of ritual activities in the life of the community. This shows that painted pottery is not only a practical vessel, but also a visual expression of identity and social power system that can be carried out from the representation of patterns.

Secondly, it reveals the belief system and spiritual world of Yangshao culture. The symbolic patterns on the painted pottery, such as frog pattern, fish pattern, bird pattern, swirl pattern, dance pattern, etc., are not only decorative, but also reflect the belief activities of the ancestors on nature worship, fertility and reproduction, and praying for a good harvest. The appearance of these motifs indicates that some rituals (such as witchcraft) had a certain status in the society at that time. Through these motifs, we can get a glimpse of the spiritual beliefs of Yangshao ancestors and how they expressed their reverence for life and nature through art forms.

Finally, it provides a new perspective on the history of ceramic art. This study emphasizes that painted pottery is not only the result of technical and aesthetic development, but also a symbolic carrier of prehistoric society and culture. While the traditional history of ceramic art often focuses on the evolution of pottery-making techniques and the aesthetic innovation of patterns, this study cuts in from the perspective of social functions, revealing the multiple roles of pottery as a tool for cultural dissemination and social identity. This perspective not only helps to deepen the understanding of painted pottery of Yangshao culture, but also provides a new entry point for the study of the functionality of traditional Chinese ceramics.

Beyond the specific findings, this study also engages with broader theoretical debates in symbolism, material culture, and prehistoric communication. First, the use of painted pottery to record social events demonstrates that prehistoric symbols could function as historical narratives, aligning with theories of symbolism that emphasize the role of visual motifs as carriers of collective memory in non-literate societies. Secondly, the association between painted pottery and social hierarchy reflects the perspective of material culture studies, which view objects not as passive tools but as active agents in the reproduction of power relations and social stratification. Finally, the religious and ritual meanings embedded in motifs such as frogs, fish, and dance scenes highlight the role of artifacts as a form of prehistoric communication, through which communities expressed cosmological beliefs, mediated with nature, and reinforced collective cohesion. Taken together, these findings suggest that Yangshao painted pottery was not only an artistic or utilitarian product, but also a vital symbolic medium that shaped and transmitted the social, political, and spiritual life of prehistoric communities.

In summary, this study not only deepens the understanding of the social structure and cultural system of Yangshao culture, but also broadens the research dimension of ceramic art history.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on the social functions of painted pottery decoration in the Yangshao Culture, and although it provides some academic insights, there are still some limitations that need to be further supplemented and expanded by future research.

First, the limitations of the samples of artifacts from the Yangshao Culture period may affect the comprehensiveness of the study. This study mainly analyzes several representative Yangshao Culture painted pottery pieces, such as the stork stone axe figure pottery jar and the dance pattern painted pottery basin, and so on. However, the Yangshao Culture sites are widely distributed, and the pottery styles and decorations may vary greatly from region to region, so it is difficult to comprehensively present the diversity of painted pottery

decorations in the whole Yangshao Culture system based on the limited samples alone. Therefore, future studies may expand the range of artifact samples and comprehensively analyze the painted pottery excavated from different sites in order to establish a more systematic comparative framework.

Second, there is still uncertainty in the interpretation of the prehistoric cultural context. Due to the lack of written records in the prehistoric period, researchers' interpretations of the meanings of pottery decorations mainly rely on archaeological and anthropological theoretical speculations. Although this study has referred to the views of several scholars, there may be differences in the interpretation of the same decoration by different researchers. Therefore, future research may combine ethnographic and cross-cultural comparative studies to further speculate on the symbolic meanings of Yangshao Culture painted pottery ornamentation by conducting comparative analyses of the same type of artistic and ritual culture.

Finally, the potential of interdisciplinary research deserves further exploration. Future studies can continue to combine archaeology, anthropology, and sociology to explore the interaction between prehistoric art and the development of human society, thus deepening the understanding of the social functions of prehistoric art.

In summary, although this study provides some insights into the social functions of Yangshao Culture painted pottery, it is still limited by the scope of the samples, the research methodology, and the contextual interpretation. Future research can further reveal the rich connotations of Yangshao culture painted pottery and its important role in prehistoric society by expanding the sample of artifacts, introducing scientific and technological analysis methods, combining ethnographic studies, and conducting interdisciplinary explorations.

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

Conflict of interest: No declaration required. **Financing:** No reporting required. **Peer review:** Double anonymous peer review.