

On the Influence of High-Footed Furniture on the Forms of Porcelain Wine-Pouring Vessels

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Abstract: Wine-pouring vessels are essential utensils in traditional drinking culture, used for containing, serving, and even admiring wine. From the Wei and Jin periods to the Tang Dynasty, the widespread adoption of high-footed furniture significantly altered the postures and customs associated with drinking in China, leading to transformations in the form, size, and decoration of wine-pouring vessels. By examining paintings from the Wei and Jin to the Tang Dynasty, this study explores changes in drinking postures. In conjunction with excavated porcelain wine-pouring vessels, it argues that the use of high-footed furniture objectively reduced the activity space of diners, prompting the miniaturization of wine-pouring vessels and the emergence of structural features such as spouts and handles.

Keywords: Wine Culture; High-footed Furniture; Communal Dining System; Sitting Posture; Porcelain Wine-pouring Vessels.

1. Introduction

The Ming Dynasty scholar Fang Yizhi noted in his work *Tong Ya*: "The names for chairs and tables appear in Tang and Song records." [1] Although modern archaeological findings have proven this record to be incorrect, it does indicate that chairs and tables became widely popular and common during the Tang and Song dynasties. By the early Tang Dynasty, high-footed furniture such as chairs and tables were increasingly prevalent in the households of the imperial nobility and officials. [2] The communal dining system gradually gained popularity, inevitably leading to changes in dining and drinking postures. Among these changes, the evolution of wine vessel products from various Tang ceramic kilns was particularly remarkable. Summarizing the excavation findings of ceramic wine vessels from the Tang period, Li Zhiyan pointed out that before the reign of Emperor Zhongzong, large and cumbersome vessels were common, while small vessels were few. [3] By the time of Emperor Daizong, large vessels gradually decreased, and practical vessels such as bowls, plates, and cups increased, with later forms becoming even more diverse. The design of the form and size of dining and drinking vessels is inextricably linked to changes in the living habits and dining postures of the Chinese people, thus triggering the formal evolution of ceramic dining and drinking vessels and auxiliary wares.

This paper, through the study of tomb murals and literary works, reconstructs the changes in common drinking methods and postural movements in the Tang Dynasty before and after the widespread use of high-footed furniture. Combined with excavated wine-pouring vessels, it explores the influence of high-footed furniture on the forms of porcelain wine-pouring vessels.

2. High-Footed Furniture Impact on Drinking Postures

Before the widespread use of high-footed tables, the food table was the primary furniture for holding dining utensils during meals. Early versions were often made of bronze, but by the Han, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties, wooden tables became more common. These were

constructed from a round or rectangular flat board supported by several short legs. Banquets during the Han Dynasty frequently used long, rectangular food tables, which occupied considerable space and were inconvenient to move during meals. However, their broad surfaces and sturdy structures could support not only small utensils like bowls and ear cups but also larger, heavier vessels such as bronze food tripods.

The tomb occupant figure (Figure 1), [4] from 570 CE (Northern Qi) unearthed in Jinan, Shandong. Depicts the tomb occupant sitting upright on a high-footed chair with a backrest. This confirms that high-footed furniture had entered the purview of the Northern Dynasties ruling class by this period. Although chairs had appeared by then, the main seating furniture remained the *ta*. The *ta* evolved from the bed and was a high-footed piece of furniture used for sitting and brief rest. Fu Qian of the late Eastern Han noted in his *Tong Su Wen*: "A piece three chi five cun is called a *ta*; a single-seater is called a *ping*; one of five chi is called a *chuang* (bed)," highlighting that the difference between a *ta* and a *chuang* lay in their length. From the Northern Dynasties onward, the *ta* began to become the center of indoor activities, serving as a piece of furniture that conveyed publicity and social status. [5]



Figure 1. The tomb occupant figure



Figure 2. The drinking wine figure

From the Northern Dynasties to the mid-Tang Dynasty, numerous images depicting banquets on *ta* appeared. For example, The drinking wine figure of Xu Minxing (Figure 2), [6] (584 CE, Sui Dynasty) in Jiexiang, Shandong (Figure 2), shows the tomb occupant sitting solemnly on a long *ta*, with a tall, long rectangular table placed in front of him. This table features high feet, and the occupant casually rests his right hand on it while raising his left hand, palm supporting a stemmed cup. A high-footed plate, with a tall trumpet-shaped base likely used for holding food or cups, is placed in front of the *ta*. Comparing these two tomb murals reveals that furniture during this period had generally become taller compared to the Han and Jin periods, with seating and food tables gradually evolving towards chairs and tables. This reflects how the living habits of nomadic peoples were gradually influencing the hybrid Hu-Han ruling class of the Northern Dynasties, and that people in the Sui Dynasty were gradually adapting to sitting with legs pendant.



Figure 3. The tomb occupant figure

Portrait of the Tomb Occupant and Spouse [7] (671 CE, Tang Dynasty) in Liqian, Shaanxi (Figure 3), depicting a couple sitting opposite each other, shows them kneeling on a square high *ta*. Compared with the scene from Xu Minxing's tomb, this indicates that from the Sui to the early Tang Dynasty, kneeling and sitting with legs pendant largely coexisted. The banquet scene depicted in the mural from the

mid-Tang Dynasty Wei family tomb in Xi'an, Shaanxi (Figure 4), [8] illustrates that the dining custom had shifted to a communal style. A long table, its height level with the surrounding long couches, stands at the center of the feast. Guests are seated comfortably on long benches, either cross-legged or with legs pendant. These benches, equipped with four legs and standing approximately calf-high for an adult, are nearly identical in form to modern long benches. The Tang Palace Banquet (Figure 5), housed in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, portrays late Tang court ladies gathering to enjoy tea and wine. Nine ladies are shown sitting with legs pendant on square stools with four legs.

By this period, the table height was slightly above the abdominal level of an adult, and the forms of both tables and stools were indistinguishable from modern designs. Furthermore, in the Night Banquet of Han Xizai by the Five Dynasties artist Gu Hongzhong, officials are frequently depicted seated on square chairs with backs. These examples indicate that high-footed furniture had gained widespread acceptance by the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods, replacing mats and low tables on a large scale and integrating into daily life. Consequently, sitting with legs pendant formally superseded kneeling as the primary posture for rest, dining, and drinking among Chinese people.



Figure 4. The Banquet Scene



Figure 5. The Tang Palace Banquet

3. The Formal Evolution of Ceramic Wine-Pouring Vessels

When drinking, people primarily pivot from the shoulder, elbow, and wrist joints to adjust the position of the arm and hand, which then cooperate with the fingers to pick up and use the wine vessels. The posture for drinking while kneeling was significantly different from modern practices. The surface holding the wine vessels was low, requiring larger movements to access them, which was not only physically taxing but also lacked elegance. Particularly in the banquets

of nobles and officials, where etiquette had to be observed, the range of motion for the shoulder and elbow joints was restricted. Consequently, wine-pouring vessels differed considerably before and after the widespread use of high-footed furniture.



Figure 6. the Celadon-glazed pot



Figure 7. the Celadon Glazed Ewer



Figure 8. Painting of Court Ladies



Figure 9. The Nan Kiln celadon handled jar



Figure 10. The Nan Kiln celadon necked ewer



Figure 11. The Nan Kiln celadon long-necked ewer

Based on tomb excavations, ceramic wine pots were already being produced in Zhejiang by at least the Eastern Han Dynasty. These early products imitated traditional bronze wine pots. For instance, a celadon-glazed pot from the Eastern Han Dynasty in the collection of the Palace Museum (Figure 6) has a straight mouth, full shoulders, a straight neck, and a flat base. With a height ranging from 25-40 cm, this was a common form for wine pots at the time.

After the *ta* replaced mats as the primary seating, wine containers like bottles and pots were often placed on the floor in front of the *ta*, with attendants specifically tasked with pouring wine for those seated on it. To prevent wear, ceramic pots and bottles mostly featured flat bases. These vessels had deep, wide bodies. To pour from them, a servant had to grasp the neck from above, lift it, support the lower part of the body with the other hand, slowly raise it, align the mouth with the drinker's vessel, and then tilt the pot to pour the wine.

However, when filled with liquid, these pots were heavy and difficult to handle with controlled movement.

To address these shortcomings, wine pots with loop handles were developed during the Jin Dynasty. These handles were typically attached at the rim of the dish-shaped mouth and connected to the shoulder of the vessel. Pots with handles from this period often featured molded reliefs of animal heads on the shoulder opposite the handle. For example, the Celadon Glazed Ewer with Ram-Head Decoration from the Eastern Jin Dynasty in the Palace Museum (Figure 7) has a ram's head molded in its shoulder. These reliefs were purely decorative, serving no functional purpose, and besides rams, images included oxen, dogs, chickens, and others. After the appearance of the handle, the vessel could be lifted simply by curling the fingers into the palm, making retrieval and pouring much more convenient. Concurrently, the height of ceramic pots decreased compared to the Eastern Han, typically ranging from 20.0 to 30.0 cm. These wine pots often had dish-shaped mouths with diameters of 10.0 to 15.0 cm and straight mouth rims, which often caused drips after pouring.

To mitigate dripping, Northern Dynasties potters changed the circular pot mouth to a beak-like shape. Some of these pots had lids molded into chicken heads, hence the name chicken-head pot. Painting of Court Ladies from 673 CE (Tang Dynasty) in Fuping, Shaanxi (Figure 8), [9] depicting a maid preparing for a banquet (detail), shows her holding a chicken-head pot. As high-footed furniture like chairs and tables were not yet widespread in this early Tang period, this form represents the mature state of wine-pouring vessels during the era of kneeling dining.

After the mid-Tang Dynasty, handled pots gradually became smaller in volume. A hollow tube was added on the shoulder opposite the handle, serving as a spout. This evolved into the handled pot with a spout, which became the most commonly used vessel for serving tea and wine in subsequent periods. After the popularization of high-footed furniture, to ensure that the feet could touch the ground when sitting with legs pendant, the height of stools and chairs was designed to be slightly lower than the knee level of an adult. If wine vessels were still placed on the ground, their height would need to be increased accordingly for ease of access, inevitably leading to a further increase in the vessel's volume. This, in turn, would make handling and pouring more inconvenient. Therefore, with the widespread use of tables and chairs, it became more practical to place wine vessels directly on the table surface.

As the surface for holding dining and drinking utensils was elevated, wine-pouring vessels were arranged alongside food containers on the table. Consequently, the method of handling wine-pouring vessels shifted from being lifted from above to being grasped horizontally. To save table space, the size of bottles and pots rapidly decreased after tables and chairs became commonplace.

Furthermore, if wine were poured from the mouth at the top of the vessel, it would require rotating the pouring vessel by 90 degrees. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, when individual dining was predominant, diners occupied more space and were generally assisted by attendants, making the size of wine-pouring vessels less of a concern. However, with the popularization of tables and chairs, the dining system gradually shifted to communal meals. This reduced the personal space available for each diner, brought people closer together, and increased the frequency and intimacy of

interaction. As a result, the motions for pouring wine needed to be more restrained, inevitably leading to a reduction in the size of wine-pouring vessels.

The Nan Kiln and Lantian Kiln in Jingdezhen were producing porcelain at least by the mid-Tang Dynasty. Their products included a range of wine-pouring vessels, which effectively reflect the impact of high-footed furniture's popularization on such utensils. The Nan Kiln celadon handled jar (Figure 9) represents a form inherited since the Neolithic period. Most Jingdezhen products of this type feature a dish-shaped mouth, with the mouth diameter similar to the base diameter, generally measuring between 7.0 and 10.0 cm. These double-loop-handled jars stand 20.0–25.0 cm tall, with a maximum body diameter of 10.0–15.0 cm. Given that the average adult hand, including fingers, is approximately 18.0 cm long, [10] such jars could be held and poured single-handedly. Their compact size also meant they occupied minimal space when tilted, making them commonly used wine vessels during this period.

The Nan Kiln celadon short-necked ewer (Figures 10) and the Nan Kiln celadon long-necked ewer (Figures 11) [11] were among the more common ewer forms of the time. The animal-head reliefs found on handled pots of the Northern and Southern Dynasties were replaced by thick, short spouts on these ewers. This spout design allowed for a fast pouring speed and a thick stream of liquid. If there was a significant height difference between the ewer and the drinking vessel, the impact of the liquid column against the vessel wall was strong and prone to splashing. This characteristic suggests they likely held lower-quality wine and that their intended users were ordinary commoners.

Due to limitations in firing technology, although the Tang Dynasty Nan Kiln also produced some ewers with long, curved spouts, their numbers were limited. It was not until the Five Dynasties period that the Lantian Kiln began gradual mass production of long-spouted ewers.

4. Conclusion

With the gradual popularization of high-footed furniture and the communal dining system, the Tang Dynasty nobility and officials, in their pursuit of a superior dining experience, inevitably sought more comfortable postures. This demand prompted artisans to design furniture, dining utensils, and related auxiliary vessels that were more convenient to use. The transition from low platforms to tables raised the surface holding food, and the shift from kneeling to sitting with legs pendant objectively reduced the range of motion available for

the diner's shoulder, elbow, and wrist joints.

To facilitate drinking while also ensuring elegant movement and convenient social interaction during banquets, the forms of wine-pouring vessels underwent significant changes. Firstly, the overall size of the vessels gradually decreased. Secondly, as the placement surface was elevated, the vessel bases evolved—from flat bottoms, to "jade bi" style bases, and finally to ring feet—primarily to ensure stability and enhance aesthetic appeal. The function of the pot's mouth for filling the vessel was largely transferred to the short spout, with the mouth itself retaining its role for adding wine. Simultaneously, handles designed for convenient holding and pouring became common features.

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