

Original Paper

An Exploration of the Cultural Connotations of Grape Patterns in Tang Dynasty Auspicious Beast Mirrors

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Abstract

Grapes, also known as Putaos and Putao, have various species. Grapes were introduced into China during the Han Dynasty from the Western Regions. They are an imported plant brought back by Zhang Qian from the Western Regions and were widely cultivated during the Northern Dynasties, becoming a raw material for winemaking. As decorative motifs, they were also extensively reintroduced. This paper first traces the origins of grape patterns and provides an overview of their development. Based on a review of the historical and cultural background of their emergence, it analyzes in detail the various applications and specific meanings symbolized by grape patterns in the Tang Dynasty; secondly, it studies the style of Tang Dynasty auspicious beast grape mirrors, interpreting the cultural significance behind them; finally, it summarizes the influence of Tang Dynasty auspicious beast grape mirrors on later decorative patterns.

Keywords

grape pattern, auspicious beast grape mirror, Tang mirror

1. Introduction

Research on Tang mirrors is relatively complete at present, but most literature focuses on the classification or styles of Tang mirrors, with only a few scholars exploring Tang mirrors from the perspective of their ornamentation. This paper analyzes the grape pattern to summarize its stylistic features and its evolution and development process, thereby exploring the cultural connotations behind Tang Dynasty auspicious beast grape mirrors. The main research is divided into three parts: the first explores the origins and development of grape patterns; the second analyzes why copper mirrors, as the primary carrier of grape patterns, were so numerous in the Tang Dynasty, to summarize the cultural connotations of grape patterns in Tang mirrors; the third further investigates the grape patterns in Tang Dynasty auspicious beast grape mirrors, aiming to identify different uses of grape patterns in Tang

mirrors.

2. Related Research on Auspicious Beast Grape Patterns

Domestically, there are relatively more discussions about the grape pattern and the mirrors with auspicious animal and grape patterns of the Tang Dynasty compared to foreign countries. However, in general, the quantity is still not large. According to statistics, only 15 documents about the grape pattern were published from 2018 to 2021. The number of Tang Dynasty bronze mirrors related to the auspicious animal and grape pattern mirrors is also small, accounting for only a small part of the auspicious animal and grape pattern mirrors, only more than 130 pieces according to statistics. At present, some of the main collected materials include Zhou Junling's **History of Chinese Image Culture: Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties Volume (Part 2) (Note 1)*. The author mentioned in the article that the grape pattern appeared in China because after Zhang Qian was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Western Regions in the Western Han Dynasty and brought back grapes, China began to grow grapes and make wine, and the grape pattern also began to appear on silk fabrics in the Han Dynasty. The author also mentioned that grape culture further developed in the Tang Dynasty. Grapes and wine were often used as themes by literati and poets in their poems. The author also made a simple classification of the auspicious animal and grape pattern mirrors through the method of comparative analysis. Wan Jian talked about the uses and meanings of the twining grape pattern in his **History of the Decorative Art of Twining Patterns in Ancient China** (Note 2). The author regarded the Tang Dynasty as a flourishing period for the development of the grape pattern. In the Tang Dynasty, the grape pattern developed rapidly and combined with the native auspicious animal pattern and dragon and phoenix pattern. The auspicious animal and grape pattern of the Tang Dynasty is the most typical representative. Similarly, the grape pattern was also applied to styles such as the phoenix mirror. Especially from the reign of Emperor Gaozong to Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty, the grape pattern reached its peak, including sea beast and grape, sea horse and grape, bird and beast and grape, and phoenix and grape patterns. The specific manifestation is that basically all the patterns on Tang Dynasty bronze mirrors are related to the grape pattern. There are auspicious animal and grape pattern mirrors mainly decorated with the grape pattern, and there are also phoenix mirrors with the grape pattern as an embellishment held in the beak of the phoenix. Kong Xiangxing also discussed the classification and chronological division of the auspicious animal and grape pattern mirrors in the article **Types and Chronological Divisions of Sui and Tang Dynasty Bronze Mirrors** (Note 3). Abroad, some scholars have discussed the popular period of the auspicious animal and grape pattern mirrors. In the article **On the Sea Beast and Grape Pattern Mirrors** by Harada Yoshito of Japan, it is believed that the sea beast and grape pattern mirrors "were popular from the end of the Six Dynasties to the early Tang Dynasty until the reign of Emperor Xuanzong. The production of grape pattern mirrors was extremely prosperous around the time of Emperor Xuanzong." (Note 4) At the same time, the auspicious animal and grape pattern mirrors are called "mirrors full of mysteries" and "mirrors that condense the

civilizations of the Eurasian continent" by Japanese scholars. Because the auspicious animal and grape pattern mirrors are sometimes called sea beast and grape pattern mirrors and sometimes called sea horse and grape pattern mirrors, which are easily confused, they are thus called "mirrors full of mysteries".

From the collected materials above, it is not difficult to see that there are relatively many discussions on the origin and styles of grape patterns, but there has been no in-depth exploration of the significance behind the grape pattern, nor an investigation into why grape patterns appear so frequently in Tang mirrors and why they were so widely propagated during the Tang Dynasty.

3. The Development of Grape Patterns

As an important foreign motif in ancient Chinese decorative art, the development and evolution of grape patterns profoundly reflect the breadth and depth of Sino-Western cultural exchanges during the medieval period. The evolution of this motif was not a simple linear process, but involved a complex progression from material recognition to cultural acceptance, and then to artistic integration. Its phased characteristics are closely linked to the political landscape, economic connections, and aesthetic trends of each period.

The first stage can be traced back to the Western Han Dynasty. In the third year of Jianyuan (138 BC), Zhang Qian explored the Western Regions, and grapes, as a rare and exotic plant, were introduced into the Central Plains, then called "Putao." During this stage, grapes were mainly regarded as a raw material for winemaking and a rare fruit, and had not yet transformed from a practical crop into an artistic motif for decoration. Historical records often praise their taste, such as in the "Records of the Grand Historian · Biography of Dayuan," which states "Dayuan uses Putao for wine," but there is no clear record of their form being transformed into patterns. This reflects the typical characteristic of early cultural exchanges where material aspects took precedence, and spiritual and artistic integration lagged behind. The cultivation of grapes and the technology of winemaking gradually spread in the later Northern Dynasties, laying the material and cognitive foundation for the subsequent emergence of patterns.

The second stage centers on Northern Wei as a key turning point. With the prosperity of Silk Road trade and the eastward spread of Buddhism, Western Region decorative elements, including grape patterns, began to sporadically appear in Central Plains art. Archaeological evidence shows that early physical examples of grape patterns are mainly found, such as the grape motifs textiles unearthed from the Astana tomb in Turpan, which display a distinct Central Asian Sogdian style. It was not until the mid to late Northern Wei period that this pattern, along with Buddhist cave art (such as certain border decorations in Yungang and Longmen caves) and metalwork techniques, gradually infiltrated the core cultural area of the Central Plains. Notably, the earliest clearly datable example that can serve as a reference for early Central Plains grape patterns is the entwined grape pattern carved on the side of the Stele at Zhen Guan Temple in Shaanxi in 629 AD. This pattern is no longer a direct copy of the original

Western Region prototype; its winding branches and leaf shapes reflect a tendency to merge with native honeysuckle and scroll motifs, with neat lines and rhythmic flow, marking the beginning of its localization and stylization process.

The third stage focuses on the Sui to early Tang period, an important phase of development and transition for grape patterns. This is especially evident in bronze mirrors, a craft art form characteristic of the era. At this time, mirror art was evolving from the popular motifs of divine beasts and geometric patterns that had been prevalent since the Han Dynasty, with new aesthetic tastes beginning to emerge. While divine beast motifs remained mainstream, their compositions had shifted away from the strict symmetry and space-filling of Han mirrors; the divine beasts became more lively and free-spirited, and the back of the mirrors appeared more open and free due to the interwoven plant patterns such as honeysuckle, creeping plants, and grapes. During this period, grape patterns often appeared as auxiliary motifs in mirror decoration, either adorning the area around the knob or entwined among divine beasts. Their shapes were still simple, with small fruit grains and somewhat restrained arrangements. However, it was precisely this "supporting role" that allowed them to be continually experimented with and adjusted within mainstream artistic mediums, gradually adapting to Chinese traditional composition principles and aesthetic psychology. Meanwhile, during early Tang, the empire expanded westward, establishing unprecedented connections with Central Asia and West Asia. Grape cultivation and wine drinking became more popular among the upper classes, undoubtedly promoting the dissemination and acceptance of grape patterns from a social customs perspective.

The fourth stage, the prosperous Tang Dynasty period, saw the peak development of grape patterns, reaching complete artistic maturity. The most notable feature of this period was the rise and popularity of the "auspicious beast grape mirror" (also called "sea beast grape mirror"). These bronze mirrors perfectly elevated the pattern theme, with grape motifs transforming from auxiliary border decorations into one of the core themes, alongside images of auspicious beasts, phoenixes, bees, and butterflies, forming a fantastical scene full of exotic charm and lively rhythm. The back decoration is full and layered, intricate yet orderly. The large, round grapes with distinct grains, and the twisting, entwined branches and leaves, are full of vitality. Auspicious beasts and birds play among the vines, creating an idyllic scene of auspiciousness and joy. The form of the grape pattern also became thoroughly localized, with the abundant, rounded, and continuous imagery aligning with the Tang society's aesthetic of richness, opulence, and prosperity, thus symbolizing "many children," "abundance," and "auspiciousness." This successful artistic transformation allowed the grape pattern to transcend craft and art, appearing widely in gold and silverware, silk, stone carvings, murals, and even architectural decoration, becoming one of the visual symbols of the Tang Empire's open, inclusive, and vibrant era spirit.

In summary, the evolution of the grape pattern clearly reveals a classic path of localization of foreign cultural elements. It began with material introduction during the Western Han, experienced initial attempts and integration in Buddhist art and decorative crafts from the Northern Dynasties to early

Tang, and ultimately, in the prosperous Tang cultural soil and open era, transformed from exotic motifs to Chinese auspicious patterns. Its increasingly rich forms, more dynamic compositions, and more auspicious meanings all resonate with the Tang Dynasty's national strength, deepening Sino-foreign exchanges, and shifting aesthetic tastes. Therefore, the history of the grape pattern's development is not only an evolution of the pattern itself but also a mirror reflecting how medieval China absorbed and transformed foreign cultural achievements to create a new artistic style.

From the available collected data, one confirmed point is: the grape pattern evolved from fruit grapes, and the round and plump grapes perfectly satisfy the Tang Dynasty's preference for rich and voluptuous styles. It is also because of the grapes' fullness that they were regarded by the Tang people as a symbol of "auspiciousness," which can explain why the grape pattern was so widely spread during the Tang Dynasty; additionally, in the mid to late Tang period, plant motifs and auspicious flower patterns gradually became the mainstream of Tang mirror decoration, making the grape pattern more easily used on Tang mirrors.

4. The Popularity of the Grape Pattern

The widespread popularity of the grape pattern in the Tang Dynasty was not accidental, but embedded with profound social and cultural reasons, material changes, and aesthetic shifts. Its ability to break through the early limitations of being merely an edge or auxiliary pattern and become a core decorative theme on bronze mirrors, gold and silver ware, textiles, stone carvings, and even murals, especially after the flourishing Tang period, must be analyzed within the specific historical context of the Tang Dynasty from multiple perspectives.

Firstly, the visual characteristics of the grape shape itself highly align with the aesthetic tastes that flourished during the prosperous Tang period. In Tang society, especially during the Kaiyuan and Tianbao years, under the backdrop of national strength, material abundance, and unprecedented cultural confidence, a fashion emphasizing voluptuous, full, rich, and intricate beauty was formed. This aesthetic permeated all aspects of social life, from the delicate skin and even flesh of court ladies, to the rounded forms of Tang tri-colored figurines, and to the "arched eyebrows and full cheeks" in paintings, all exuding a celebration of vitality and sensory pleasure. Decorating objects with the grape pattern directly conveys psychological hints of abundance, reproduction, and joy, satisfying the contemporary pursuit of "rich and voluptuous" beauty.

Secondly, grape patterns in the Tang Dynasty were endowed with and reinforced rich auspicious meanings and cultural symbols, completing the elevation from natural form to cultural icon. The "round and plump" shape naturally evokes multiple positive connotations. First, it symbolizes "many children and good fortune." The grape clusters with numerous seeds easily suggest prosperity for descendants and family, aligning with the traditional Chinese emphasis on reproduction in patriarchal society. Second, it symbolizes "wealth and longevity." The long, winding vines imply "endurance" and "continuity"; the abundant fruit also signifies accumulated wealth. In the Tang society's pursuit of

worldly pleasures and desire for eternal blessings, these meanings were highly attractive. Third, it is regarded as a symbol of "auspicious response." Tang cultural thought was diverse and inclusive, with prevalent ideas of good omens. As a foreign delicacy, grapes' introduction was seen as a sign of a strong dynasty and the arrival of barbarians in submission. Especially when grape patterns are paired with auspicious beasts like lions, phoenixes, and celestial horses, or with auspicious birds such as peacocks and butterflies, forming "auspicious beast grape patterns" or "phoenix bird grape patterns," the scene transcends simple natural imagery to become a fantastical symbol of peace and prosperity. When such patterns are carved on bronze mirrors—objects associated with reflection, warding off evil, and Taoist immortality—they greatly emphasize their functional role in "reflecting auspiciousness" and "praying for blessings."

Furthermore, the overall shift in decorative themes in arts and crafts during the mid to late Tang Dynasty provided a direct stylistic context and platform for the flourishing of grape patterns. From early to early prosperous Tang, decorative objects like bronze mirrors had already incorporated plant motifs, but traditional themes such as divine beasts, the Four Spirits, and the Twelve Zodiac Signs still occupied a significant proportion, and compositions had not fully abandoned symmetry and partitioning inherited from previous eras. In the prosperous Tang, as social customs became more open and romantic, artistic expression sought stronger secular and natural vitality, leading to a noticeable change in decorative themes. Floral and bird motifs, especially "auspicious flower patterns," gradually became mainstream. This shift reflected a more conscious appreciation and depiction of natural beauty, also indicating that decorative art was becoming more integrated into daily life and aesthetic enjoyment. Grape patterns, as elegant, auspicious, and exotic plant motifs, fittingly integrated into this trend of "floralization" and "naturalization." They could serve as independent motifs (such as entwined grape patterns), showcasing their own aesthetic, or be combined flexibly with various animals to form lively composite patterns (such as variants of the magpie circling flower branches mirror or direct sea beast grape mirrors), greatly enriching the layers and artistic conception of decoration. Due to their extensibility, fruit adornment, and compositional adaptability, grape patterns became ideal elements for achieving these artistic effects. They could freely fill space, connect different objects, and make the entire mirror back decoration cohesive and vibrant.

Additionally, it is important to note the increasing prominence of grapes and wine in Tang society, especially among the upper classes. As contact with the Western Regions continued to deepen during the Tang, grape cultivation and wine-making techniques further spread, and drinking wine became an elegant fashion among the court and aristocracy. Historical records mention that Emperor Taizong even introduced Western Region mare's milk grapes and personally supervised their fermentation. This material affinity made grape motifs psychologically more familiar and approachable to people, and as decorative patterns, they were more easily accepted and loved.

In summary, the widespread popularity and highly artistic nature of grape patterns in the Tang Dynasty is a historical phenomenon resulting from multiple factors. It is both an externalization of the aesthetic

choices of the era and a carrier of auspicious culture; it benefits from the evolution of decorative themes and reflects social changes. Its aesthetic form satisfies contemporary visual preferences, its symbolic meaning responds to societal psychological needs, and its practical application aligns with artistic stylistic trends. Therefore, grape patterns transcend their status as mere botanical motifs, becoming an important cultural symbol and artistic theme that embodies the spirit of the prosperous Tang era, leaving a brilliant and unique mark in the history of Chinese decorative art.

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Notes

- Note 1. Zhou Junling (Ed.). *History of Chinese Image Culture: Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties* (Vol. II). China Photography Press, December 2019.
- Note 2. Wan, Jian. *A History of the Decorative Art of Interlocking Branches in Ancient China*. Wuhan University Press, March 2019.
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Note 4. Harada, Y. J. On the Sea-Beast Grape Mirrors. Tokyo: Tōkō Shoin, 1920.