

Problems of the Triangular-rimmed Bronze Mirrors with Divinity and Animal Design

Unearthed from Japan

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Key Words: triangular-rimmed bronze mirrors with divinity and animal design imported mirrors imitation mirrors

About 500 triangular-rimmed bronze mirrors with divinity and animal design have been unearthed in Japan up to the present. Of them approximately 350 are called “imported mirrors” and believed to have been introduced from China as the Wei Dynasty emperor’s grants to the queen Himiko of the Ymadai State in Japan in the third century, or the Three Kingdoms period of China. All the rest, about 150, are called “imitation mirrors” and taken to have been copied in Japan by native craftsmen after imported Chinese mirrors.

I

Since 1981, I have published nearly 20 treatises to expound my idea that the so-called imported triangular-rimmed bronze mirrors with divinity and animal design, in fact, were made by Chinese craftsmen of the Wu State in the Three Kingdoms period after they settled in Japan (Figure 1). My arguments can be abbreviated as follows:

1. Although the so-called imported triangular-rimmed bronze mirrors with divinity and animal design are similar in shape and decoration to contemporary Chinese mirrors, they show distinct difference from the latter, especially the design named “pine cone-shape” has no counterpart on any Chinese mirrors.

2. Apart from the “pine cone-shape” design, the components of the decoration are largely in common with those on Chinese mirrors, and well-written inscriptions in Chinese characters show that the mirror makers bore Chinese surnames, so the mirrors can be affirmed to have been made in Japan

by Chinese artisans.

3. A few mirror inscriptions contain the phrases “using bronze” and “going to the region east of the sea,” which indicate that the mirrors were made by Chinese who had migrated eastward across the sea and had settled in Japan.

4. The design in the inner zone of the mirrors under discussion is similar to that of Chinese divinity and animal design mirrors, while the pattern in the outer zone and the shape of the rim resemble those of Chinese pictorial mirrors. It is notable that the two classes of Chinese mirrors made around AD 3rd century can both be ascertained to be products of the Wu State in South China.

5. In the then Wu State of South China, a popular practice was to decorate objects with Buddhist images, which is reflected also on some of the mirrors.



Figure 1. A so-called “imported triangular-rimmed mirror with divinity and animal design” (unearthed from the tumulus in Okayama city, Japan)



Figure 2. Inscriptions on the Jingchu third year (right) and Zhengshi first year (left) dated mirrors

rors in question, while in the Wei State of the Yellow River valley, there was no such mirror pattern. In the decoration of some triangular-rimmed mirrors unearthed in Japan, the divinity design has been replaced by Buddhist images. These suggest again that they were made in Japan by Wu artisans rather than by Wei craftsmen.

II

The date "Jingchu third year" (AD 239) in the inscription of the mirror from the Kanbara Shrine tumulus in Shimane Prefecture, Japan, and the "Zhengshi first year" (AD 240) in the inscriptions of the mirrors from the Shibazaki tumulus in Gunma Prefecture, Morio tumulus in Hyogo Prefecture and Takeshima tumulus in Yamaguchi Prefecture roughly coincide with the date when the queen of the Yamadai State in Japan sent the mission headed by Nanshoumai to Luoyang, the capital of the Wei Dynasty, as recorded in the "Biography of the Dongyi," a chapter of the "Book of the Wei" in the *Records of the Three Kingdoms*. Therefore,

Japanese scholars believe this information to be a reliable evidence for the assertion that the triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design were granted by the Wei emperor.

Nevertheless, the contents of the inscriptions on the above-mentioned four dated mirrors show that these objects were made by Wu craftsmen after they migrated eastward and settled in Japan. The inscription on the Jingchu third year dated mirror says that Chen made the mirror that year and that he himself was originally a skilled artisan in Jing and then went into exile in the strange land. The inscription on the Zhengshi first year dated mirrors tell us that Chen made the mirrors that year and that he himself was originally a skilled artisan in Zhou and then fled from his homeland (Figure 2). As my study shows, "Jing" is a place name, corresponds to the present-day Zhenjiang City in Jiangsu Province, and was once the location of the capital of the Wu State; and "Zhou" means Yangzhou and was the main territory of the Wu State, whose dominion comprised the south of present-day Jiangsu and Anhui and the total of Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Fujian, with the seat located in Jianye, i.e. present-day Nanjing City in Jiangsu Province. Thus it can be ascertained judging from the contents of the inscriptions that those triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design were made in Japan by the Wu artisan who had settled in the east land. As it was the first time that the Yamadai State had sent its envoys to the Wei Dynasty of China to establish friendship between them, the artisan Chen recorded clearly the dates "Jingchu third year" and "Zhengshi first year," so as to memorize the event.

III

In October 1986, a mirror with coiled dragon design was unearthed from Tomb No.15 of the Hiromine tomb cluster in Kyoto Prefecture, Japan. It is the exact twin of the coiled dragon design mirror in the collection of the Tatsuma Archaeological Archives in Nishinomiya, Hyogo Prefecture, as either bears an inscription recording that the mirror was made by Chen in the Jingchu fourth year. Judging from the diction and writing style of the inscriptions, the two coiled dragon design mirrors and the above-discussed four triangular-rimmed divinity and animal design mirrors with the date "Jingchu third year" or "Zhengshi first year" were

all made by the artisan Chen.

As the "Book of the Wei" in the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* says, the Wei emperor Mingdi died on the lunar New Year's Day, Jingchu third year, and his son succeeded to the throne at once as the "junior emperor," while the date mark "Jingchu third year" continued to be used according to the usual practice that the reign title was changed in the next year. In the 12th moon of that year, an edict of the Wei Dynasty to all the country announced that a moon would be added to the Jingchu third year after its 12th moon and called "later 12th moon" with the purpose to change the date of Emperor Mingdi's death from the 1st day of the 1st moon to the 1st day of the 12th moon and to solve the conflict between the dynastic celebration at the lunar New Year's Day and the obsequies at the date of the Emperor's death. Thus the Jingchu third year came to have 13 moons from the 1st to the "later 12th moon." The first moon of the first year of the new reign Zhengshi did not come until that "later 12th moon" past. These two moons were directly connected, and there was no so-called "Jingchu fourth year." This suggests that, as living in Japan far away from his motherland and having got no news whatsoever about her, including the change of reign-title in the Wei Dynasty of China, the artisan Chen used the date "Jingchu fourth year" in the inscription of the coiled-dragon mirror he made after his inscribing "Jingchu third year" to date his triangular-rimmed mirror with divinity and animal design. Only when the envoy Nanshoumai and others had returned to the Yamadai State from China did he find his mistake in dating the mirror he had made, so he made the "Zhengshi first year" dated triangular-rimmed divinity and animal design mirror to remedy it. It is very important that the date marks and the contents of the inscriptions on the "Jingchu third year" and "Zhengshi first year" inscribed triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design and the "Jingchu fourth year" inscribed mirror with coiled-dragon design not only cannot verify them to have been Wei mirrors of China, but strengthen the proof of my theory that those mirrors were made by Wu artisans in Japan.

IV

The imitation triangular-rimmed mirrors with

divinity and animal design are often poor in bronze material and casting craftsmanship, awkward and puerile in design and largely without inscription in characters, so Japanese scholars unanimously believe them to have been made in Japan by native craftsmen (Figure 3). Recently some researcher maintains that they are introduced from China as the so-called "imported triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design," but his arguments are farfetched, weak and simply untenable, and have hardly encountered support in Japan. Chronologically, the so-called "imported" triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design were made earlier than imitation ones, which has become scholars' common understanding.

In the last decade or so, a number of Japanese scholars have emphatically expounded the close relationship of continuation and the lack of separability between the two categories of mirrors. As early as 15 years ago, i.e. in 1984, I pointed out at an international symposium held in Japan that the evolution from "imported" triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design to imitation ones was gradual and continuous. As the latter are unanimously affirmed to have been made in Japan itself, the former, of course, must have been made also in Japan.

In my opinion, Chinese artisans who had migrated eastward from the Wu territory and settled in Japan, at first shouldered the major work of making triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design, while native craftsmen in Japan func-



Figure 3. "Imitation triangular-rimmed mirror with divinity and animal design" (unearthed from a tumulus in Shiga Prefecture)

tioned only as their assistants. As the mirrors they made are fine and exquisite, Japanese scholars mistake these products for imported from China. Later, owing to a series of causes such as the oldening or death of the Wu artisans and their descendants, Japanese mirror-makers were changed from assistants into major mirror-workers, and their products could not help but be made poor in quality. These are just the so-called imitation triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design. According to the above idea, I would like to rename them "inheritedly-made triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design," while "imported" ones should be called triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design with the word "imported" simply deleted.

V

From the later Northern Song period in the 12th century to the late Qing Dynasty in the 19-20 centuries, Chinese books on the study of inscriptions on ancient bronzes and stone tablets recorded various ancient bronze mirrors, but no triangular-rimmed ones with divinity and animal design. In contrast to this, as early as the initial stage of the 20th century, this type of mirror discovered in Japan was already great in number and exceeded other types. In recent decades, China and Japan have carried out extensive archaeological surveys and excavations. In Japan, triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design have unceasingly unearthed from tumuli in different areas, and

the total has reached as great as about 500. On the contrary, in China, whether in the north or in the south, although numbers and varieties of ancient bronze mirrors have brought to light in different areas, this type of mirror has not been seen even in one piece. In the Wei-Jin period of the 3rd century, China established and administered Lelang and Daifang prefectures in the Korean Peninsula, so Chinese bronze mirrors have discovered in a large number in both DPRK and ROK, but among them there are also no triangular-rimmed mirrors with divinity and animal design. It is noticeable that since a time long ago, up to the present day, this type of mirror has been unearthed only in Japan. How could its producing area be not in Japan but in China? It is an extremely clear matter, and there is no need to go into further explanation.

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Note: The original paper was published in *Archaeology* 《考古》 2000.1: 78-88, 2 figures, 1 chart, 1 page of plate, signed by Wang Zhongshu 王仲殊. The English version is abridged in Chinese by Wang Zhongshu 王仲殊 and translated by Mo Runxian 莫润先.