
Chinese Lacquerware from Noyon uul: Some Problems of Manufacturing and Distribution

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Given the extent of the territories occupied by the Xiongnu beginning in the last centuries BCE, reliably dated material found in their archaeological sites can be of great value for working out problems of chronology for archaeological complexes more broadly in Central Asia and adjacent regions. Reliably dated material in Xiongnu sites includes first of all imports from China. This article will analyze the Chinese lacquered objects from the famous Xiongnu cemetery at Noyon uul (Noin Ula) in Northern Mongolia.

1. The Chinese lacquer eared cup from an unnamed barrow¹

Reading and translation of the inscription

The inscription is incised in clerical script around the slightly-raised foot of the cup [Figs. A-9 – A-12, pp. 33-34]. I follow the reading given by Hong Shi (2005, p. 404) and the translation given by Anthony Barbieri-Low (2001, № 2.49, p. 422), modifying it according to the corrections brought by Hong Shi.

建平五年，蜀郡西工造，乘輿髹 丹²畫木黃耳椀，容一升十六龠，素工尊，髹工褒，上工壽，銅耳黃塗工宗，畫工 []，丹工豐，清工白，造工告造，護工卒史巡，守長克，丞駿，掾豐，守令史嚴主。

Made in the fifth year of the Jianping era [2 BCE] by the Western Workshop of Shu Commandery. An eared cup with a wood core and gilt bronze mounts, painted with designs and lacquered in black and red, fit for use by the emperor. Capacity one *sheng* and sixteen *yue*. Made by: core carver Zun, lacquerer Bao, topcoat-lacquerer Shou, gilder Zong, design-painter [], red-lacquerer Feng,³ the artisan doing the gilding finishing Bai,⁴ and the finisher artisan Gao.⁵ Managed by: Commandery Clerk for Workshop Inspection Xun, Probationary Factory Chief Ke, Assistant Factory Chief Jun, Lacquer Bureau Head Feng, and Probationary Foreman Clerk Yan.⁶

Outside, on the bottom of the cup, lines are incised apparently forming a motif which is no longer legible owing to the fragmentary state of the object. These lines were certainly incised on the cup later on. The only surviving mark which could be a Chinese character and which is partly legible could be 朱 *zhu* written for 铢. I suggest this reading by analogy with the same character incised on the underside of a silver eared cup from Tomb № 1 at Beishantou 北山头, Chaohu 巢湖 city (Anhui). The tomb probably dates from the mid-second century BCE, and the character 朱 on the underside of the silver cup is the last character, giving the weight of the object (Anhui 2007, pp. 107-08 and color Pl. 49).

Decoration of the cup

I shall not comment on the painted décor of the cup which is typical of what Barbieri-Low (2001, pp. 212-34) has defined as the Ornate Shu style created at the Western Workshop in Sichuan sometime between 44 and 20 BCE. It consists, on the eared cups, of eight birds arranged in opposed pairs, each bird facing the other with raised claw. 'The birds are separated by sweeping diagonals and by spiraling curls which spring from the lines and curves of their bodies' (ibid., p. 228). The painted line is thick but the motifs are spaced out.

2. The Chinese lacquer eared cup from Barrow № 6 [Figs. A-1 – A-8, pp. 31-32]

Incised inscription around the foot of the cup⁷

The transcription and translation are by Barbieri-Low following the transcription by Kayamoto and Machida:

建平五年九月，工王潭經，畫工獲，嗇夫武省

Made in the fifth year of the Jianping era [2 BCE] in the ninth month [Sept./Oct.] by master artisan Wang Tanjing and design-painter Huo.⁸ Inspected by: Workshop Overseer Wu.

Painted inscription on the underside

On the underside of the cup are painted in red lacquer the two characters 上林 ('Shanglin') [Fig. A-6]. Shanglin designates the Shanglin

Park, west of the capital Chang'an. The park included Imperial pleasure palaces and government workshops, among them one which made lacquerware.

On this lacquer cup does the inscription mean that the cup was made for use in the palaces of the Shanglin Park? Or does it mean that it was made at the Shanglin workshops? In his dissertation Barbieri-Low seems to hesitate between the two hypotheses.⁹ I do not think that this painted inscription gives the place where the cup was made. If Shanglin indicated the place of manufacture, the two characters would be incised with the date and before the names of the artisans, as it is the case for the bronzes made at the Shanglin workshops, on which 'Shanglin' is engraved at the head of the inscription.

Generally the inscription painted on lacquerware of the Western Han period gives the name (or the title) of the owner of the object, or it gives the palace department where the piece was used, for example the 大官 (Daguan, for 太官 Taiguan), 'the Food Department.' When the name of the artisan who has made the object is given, the name is printed in the shape of a seal. On a lacquer platter (*pan*) from Tomb N°1 at Sanyangdun 三羊墩, Yancheng, Jiangsu province, the two characters 大官 are painted in the center of the bottom, inside and outside. On the underside, near the rim, are painted, also in clerical script, the two characters 上林, Shanglin (Jiangsu 1964, pp. 393-402 and Fig. 7). The style used for writing the graphs 上林 is quite equivalent to the one of the Noyon uul cup. As Hong Shi notes (2006a, p. 335), it is probable that the Sanyangdun platter belonged to the Food Department of one of the Shanglin Palaces. I think the same is true of the cup from Barrow N° 6 at Noyon uul and that 'Shanglin' indicates the palace to which the cup belonged.

Place of manufacture

If so, in what workshop this cup was made? The incised inscription does not mention a place of manufacture. The text organization of the inscription is different from the one incised on the lacquers made at the Imperial Tribute Workshop (Gonggong 供工) and at the Imperial Workshop (Kaogong 考工) both in Chang'an. The inscription shows also a division of work much less important than in the government workshops of Shu and Guanghan in Sichuan. On the Noyon uul cup are mentioned only two

artisans, one, a certain Wang Tanjing, in charge of all the work except for the painted décor, the other one, Huo, the painter of the décor. The only official mentioned is the overseer in charge of the inspection.

The painted decoration of the cup shows the classical theme of opposed birds, diagonals and spirals, but using thin lines instead of the rather thick lines in relief used by the Sichuan workshops. A bird has been sketchily incised on the bronze mount as an echo of the birds painted on the cup. The style of the décor painted on the cup from Barrow N° 6 seems to follow that used at the two Chang'an workshops, the Kaogong and the Gonggong. It is similar, for instance, to the design of one of the eared cups from Tomb N° 62 at Mozuizi 磨嘴子, Wuwei county, Gansu province.¹⁰ The incised inscription on the Mozuizi cup gives the date of manufacture, 8 BCE, and the place, the Kaogong Workshop. The inscription specifies also that the cup was 'fit for use by the emperor.'

In the present state of our knowledge I think we can imagine that private workshops imitated the lacquerware produced in the government factories and that some of their products were bought to be used in the imperial palaces side by side with objects from the official workshops. The cup from Noyon uul Barrow N° 6 could be such a private production.

3. Fragment of a Chinese lacquer toilet box from Barrow N° 24/12

The fragment (ca. 4 x 4 cm) is one of several from a toilet box with a bronze mount around the rim [Figs. A-13, A-14].¹¹ The decoration of the fragment is composed of two quadrupeds proceeding to the left and above them of birds flying in the same direction. Gold foil inlays still adhere to some parts of the motifs. The technique, called *pingtuo* 平脱, consists in inlaying the motif with foils of gold or silver cut out following the design. The foils are pasted with lacquer on the object and then covered by several layers of lacquer; after drying, the object is polished until the gold or silver motif reappears. This refined and expensive kind of lacquerware associated gold and/or silver inlays with volutes delicately painted or incised on the background. It was a special product of private workshops of the Jiangsu-Anhui region¹² during the first century BCE, especially during the last part of that century. Lacquers decorated in that style, mainly toilet boxes, have been found in

many princely and upper-class tombs of the region and less frequently of other southern regions.¹³ These *pingtuo* lacquer boxes are never inscribed with a date, the name of the workshop, the names of the artisans or of the managing staff. When they bear an inscription, it consists in a short mention, painted in red lacquer, giving the name of the owner of the object.

In a few tombs, such as the tomb of the wife of Liu Qing 劉慶, Noble of Quanling 泉陵侯 at Yaoziling 鷓子嶺, Yongzhou 永州 in Hunan province, one finds side-by-side lacquers of different provenances (Hunan 2001, pp. 45-62). The tomb dates from the last years of the Western Han and contains, among other grave goods, twelve lacquers. Six of them, all for the table, were made in government workshops, four in the Guanghan, one in the Gonggong and one in the Kaogong; among them, five were 'fit for use by the emperor'; these six pieces are dated between 16 BCE and 2 BCE.¹⁴ Five pieces were either in very bad condition or without décor, or simply painted with clouds. The last lacquerware, a goblet, was decorated with *pingtuo* motifs in the same style as the box from Barrow N° 24/12. This cohabitation in the same tomb and in equal quantity of lacquerwares made for the palace in government workshops and some made in private workshops, probably in the region between Jiangsu and Hunan, is very interesting. It shows how the lacquer tableware of a noble family at the end of the Western Han was composed: some pieces had been received as gifts (either directly or through intermediaries) from the imperial palace, some pieces were of local provenance. The matching of a container and a cover of different dates for the goblet from the Gonggong workshop reveals how highly these lacquerwares were prized.

Conclusion: the problem of distribution

The case of Yaoziling Tomb N° 2 leads us to ask two questions. First, why have so few imperial lacquers of this period been found in China? Second, how were the imperial lacquer pieces found on sites outside China brought there?

The quantity of lacquerware used at the imperial palace was enormous. The inscription incised on the underside of a lacquer platter found at Lelang mentions that this platter was received by the 'Food Department' (Daguan) of the Changle 常樂 Palace on the first year of the

Shijianguo Era (9 CE) and that it was N° 1,454 in a set of 3000 lacquer platters.¹⁵

We know that the lacquer tableware used at the palace could also be used as gifts in certain circumstances. As Barbieri-Low reminds us (2001, p. 261), 'gift-giving was a firmly established function of the imperial establishment.' This being so, one might assume that a good many of these imperial lacquers would be found on the territory of Han China. However, such is not the case. I have made a quick count from the tables given by Hong Shi.¹⁶ Fifty-three inscribed lacquers made for the palace in the Shu, Guanghan, Kaogong and Gonggong Workshops are so far extant for the period between 85 BCE and 71 CE. Of this total of 53 lacquers, 36 have been excavated from tombs in the Lelang commandery (Kor. Nangnang, in present day North Korea), one comes from Noyon uul, and only 16 were found in eight tombs in China proper. These figures are not exhaustive except for China proper (as of 2005). The number must be augmented for Noyon uul, Tsaram (Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 2007) and other Xiongnu graves and is certainly too low for Lelang. As a matter of fact the number of pieces coming from Lelang would be still more numerous if Hong Shi had taken into account the pieces from all Japanese museums and private collections and from the recent excavations in North Korea.¹⁷ Even with these limitations, the result is striking. The richest finds of Chinese imperial-use lacquers from government workshops does not come from China but from tombs in the Lelang commandery.

The fact that so few tombs in China proper contain lacquerware from the government workshops for the period 85 BCE - CE 71 is revealing. The occupants of some of these eight tombs are nobles — for example, the lady in Tomb N° 104 of Baonüdu (Wenwu 1991/10: 39-61) and the one in Tomb N° 2 of Yaoziling (Hunan 2001, pp. 45-62), both in the south — and they could have received these lacquers as relatives (or through relatives) of the imperial family. The other tombs' occupants have until now been considered to be minor provincial officials from outlying regions (for example, those in Tomb N°s 13, 15 and 17 at Qingzhen, in Guizhou province).¹⁸ I have already suggested (Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 2001, pp. 473-484) that the lacquerware from Qingzhen as well as the pieces from Lelang¹⁹ were mainly given by the

Chinese court to local 'barbarian' chieftains and not to Han officials. If the Han court had given inscribed lacquerware 'fit for imperial use' to local Han officials, how then explain that fewer than five pieces have been found to date, when we know that hundreds or even thousands of tombs of officials have been excavated in China for the same period? Of course it is not impossible to find in the tomb of a Han official stationed in a faraway and not completely pacified region an imperial-use lacquer, but it does not mean that the piece was intended for him.

In the same way it is difficult to conceive that this category of lacquerware made in government workshops between 85 BCE and 71 CE was available on the market. If it were so, many more items would be found in Chinese tombs of the period.

The finds of lavish imperial objects in the Xiongnu barrows can be easily explained as part of the redistribution practice by the Han court of luxury production made for its use. These prestigious gifts were made as part of an alliance, in response to an act of allegiance or in exchange for token tribute. At the same time it does not mean that a lacquerware inscribed 2 BCE was brought back to Xiongnu territory during the *shanyu's* visit of 1 BCE, and it does not mean either that a lacquer vessel marked 'Shanglin' and dated 2 BCE was made especially for that visit, as François Louis suggests (2006-07, p. 51). Things, alas, are often more complex, and, incidentally, we have no proof that Barrow N° 6 at Noyon uul is the grave of Shanyu Wuzhuliuruoti.

What is certain, on the other hand, is that, in order to increase his grip on the steppe, the Xiongnu *shanyu* was politically obliged to distribute among his nobility the wealth he had obtained from the Chang'an court (Louis 2006-07, p. 51). Last but not least, it is also interesting to find in the Xiongnu graves inlaid lacquerware from private workshops situated in the Jiangsu-Anhui region and supplying the Chinese aristocracy.

As new archaeological work is done in China proper and outside China in the sphere of Han influence we will be better able to understand the way lacquerware from government and private workshops circulated, including imitations of high quality products, a field we have no means to explore at the moment.

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Notes

1. The cup, in the collection of the National Museum of Mongolian History, Ulaanbaatar, Inv. N° A-242, has been published several times. See Umehara 1943, N° 16, Pl. 13.2; Umehara 1960, pp. 28-34, Pl. 61; Kayamoto and Machida 1974, N° 21; Barbieri-Low 2001, N° 2.49, p. 422.

2. The graph on the inscription is 丹 with, on the left, the water radical, which is, according

to Hong Shi, equivalent to 丹.

3. Hong Shi thinks that the *dangong* is the artisan who coats the inside of the cup with red cinnabar lacquer. The red cinnabar was the most expensive color and, by the way, the most precious one. About the reading of the *dan* graph, see Hong 2005, pp. 386-87. Barbieri-Low (2001, pp. 306-312) reads 澗 *zhou*. Zhu Dexi and Qiu Xigui (1980, pp. 68-70) already read 丹 with the water radical on the left; for them this graph was equivalent to 彤 *tong* (red lacquer) and read *tong* during the Han. In any case, *dan* as well as *tong* refers to 'red lacquer.' In a recent article, Sun Ji (2004, pp. 52-53) reads also 丹 with the water radical on the left and reaches the same conclusion.

4. According to Hong Shi (2005, p. 387), *qinggong* is linked with the gilding of the bronze elements of the lacquerware, because when the inscriptions do not mention 黄耳, 黄钗 or 黄塗工, there is no mention of 清工. Therefore he thinks that *qinggong* is a finishing work which consists in eliminating and cleaning the surplus of gilding on the bronze mounts.

5. According to Hong Shi (2005, p. 388), 造工 *zaogong* means here the last operations on the object, that is polishing, engraving of the inscription and cleaning. Barbieri-Low (2001, p. 315), as well as other specialists, translates 造工 by 'master artisan.' What is clear is that the *zaogong* is done by the artisan at the head of the team and that, in other cases, *zaogong* refers simply to the master artisan.

6. For a study of this 'premodern assembly line' as he rightly calls it, see Barbieri-Low 2007, pp. 76-83.

7. The cup, in the collection of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Inv. N° MR-2301, has been published in Umehara 1943, N° 15, Pl. 13.1; Umehara 1960, pp. 28-34, Fig. 15, Pls. 59-60; Kayamoto and Machida 1974, N° 20; Barbieri-Low 2001, N° 2.48, p. 421.

8. Barbieri-Low 2001, p. 421, writes 'Hu.'

9. On p. 125, n. 64, he adopts the first solution; on p. 145, n. 104, and p. 352 he

seems to privilege the second one.

10. Wuwei 1972, Figs. 9 and 29. Tomb N° 62 dates from the Wang Mang period.

11. The fragments from the box are in the State Hermitage Museum, Inv. N° KP-14150.

12. Maybe especially in the Sishui 泗水 and Guangling 廣陵 kingdoms.

13. See for Jiangsu province: *Kaogu* 1963/6: 287-90; *Wenwu* 1988/2: 19-43; *Wenwu* 2007/7: 39-60; for Anhui: *Kaogu* 1979/4: 320-29; *Wenwu* 1993/9: 1-31; for Hunan: *Kaogu* 2001/4: 45-62; *Wenwu* 2007/12: 21-41; for Guangxi: *Kaogu* 1972/5: 20-30. See also *Zhongguo* 1996.

14. The dated pieces include: a goblet, 16 BCE; its cover, 8 BCE; two eared cups, 10 BCE; another one, 9 BCE; one *zun*, 8 BCE; one platter, 2 BCE.

15. 常樂, 大官, 始建国元年正月受, 第千四百五十四, 至三千. See Umehara 1943, Pl. 35.

16. Hong 2005, pp. 404-08. For useful tables and a bibliography of Warring States and Han period lacquerware discovered in China, see Hong 2006b, pp. 226-71.

17. For the Korean excavations, see Takaku 1993, pp. 33-77; Wang, 2007.

18. See *Kaogu xuebao* 1959/1: 85-103. The three cups with legible inscriptions in these three tombs are dated 3 CE and 'fit for use by the emperor.'

19. After having excavated a large number of tombs, rich and poor, the Korean archaeologists have concluded that the majority of the deceased in the Lelang tombs were local people and not, as it had been thought since the earlier Japanese studies, Han colonists or officials. If they are right, it means that the Chinese luxury objects found in these tombs, such as the lacquerware from the government workshops, were not all of them in the possession of Han high officials, but that some of them at least could have been diplomatic presents given to local chieftains. On this point, see Son 1980.