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## A CHINESE BRONZE MIRROR OF THE HAN DYNASTY

Chinese bronze mirrors have heretofore been conspicuous by their absence from the collections of the Art Institute,—a regrettable fact as they are beautiful examples of the bronze-founders' craft, and often the work of highly trained artists. The recent addition of a Han bronze mirror to the Buckingham collection is, consequently, doubly welcome.

Mirrors seem first to have become popular in China during the Han dynasty (B.C. 206–220 A.D.) and were probably first imported from the west before that time. The Greeks used circular bronze mirrors with decorated backs, sometimes engraved, sometimes in high relief, of a size very similar to those used later in China, so it is not at all improbable that the first mirrors filtered into China from the Greek cities of Asia Minor. Crude Scythian mirrors are also known. Most of the important work on mirrors has been done by Chinese and Japanese scholars who have published many illustrated volumes on the subject. An illustration from one of these books, the *Chin Shih So*<sup>1</sup> of a mirror similar to ours is shown herewith. The earlier mirrors were probably plain circular discs with a pierced boss in the center of the back, through which a thong or tasselled cord was passed to serve as a handle. If there were any decoration it was incised and of a geometrical nature. The early mirrors

are all geometrical in type, depending upon a raised or incised line for their decoration rather than modeled relief. High relief and delicate modeling became increasingly popular as time went on, till, in the T'ang Dynasty (618–906 A.D.) all other types of decoration had been practically eliminated.

The bronze of which mirrors were made was always white in color like silver, although the backs were often gilded, and sometimes, though rarely, painted with colored lacquers. The mirrors vary in size from two inches or so to over ten inches in diameter, but most Han mirrors would seem to average around five inches. Our mirror is eight and one-eighth inches in diameter. The raised rim is over one-fourth of an inch thick, while the ground on which the figures appear is very thin.

In many ways this mirror may be considered typical. It has several concentric geometrical borders about the outer edge. Frequently an inscription appears inside these borders, but in this case there is only a plain band. Four small bosses dividing the four quarters of the heavens stud the

surface at equal intervals and each is closely surrounded by a circle of raised points. Midway between two of these bosses on opposite sides sit two personages in stiffly majestic attitudes. Beside the head of one appear the characters Wang Kung, an abbreviation for Tung Wang Kung, the King of the East. His headdress is different from that of the fig-



CHINESE BRONZE MIRROR, HAN (B.C. 206–220 A.D.).  
THE LUCY MAUD BUCKINGHAM COLLECTION

<sup>1</sup>Feng Yün-p'eng and Feng Yün-yüan, *Chin Shih So*, 1821, section Chin (Metal), Chap. 6., Pl. 70.

ure opposite him, who, though unlabelled, is easily identified as Hsi Wang Mu, the Queen of the West. She it was who dwelt in the Kunlung mountains, and in her garden grew the tree which bore the peaches of longevity. These two immortals were favorite subjects for representation during the Han Dynasty.<sup>2</sup>

Chavannes translates an inscription of the Han Dynasty as follows: "The head of the Chang family had a mirror made which is large and without fault; the silver and tin from which it was cast are pure and brilliant. Thereon were represented celestial guardians receiving each other turn by turn as the Father King of the Orient, and the Mother Queen of the West."

Our mirror, then, seems to be exactly the type that is here described, though the only celestial guardians that appear are the two last mentioned.

In the alternate spaces between the four bosses appear covered carriages drawn by four horses represented one above the other in an Egyptian-like perspective. They are practically the same as the Peking carts of today, and evidently as springless. They belong, of course, to the king and queen, and the horses are properly dashing and spirited. On either side of the seated deities are two dancing figures, the lower two kneeling in front of the standing ones. They are so conventionalized as to be not easily distinguishable. The bodies are like slender bamboo columns. The features are summarily indicated but the sweep of the sleeves and the general attitudes make the figures

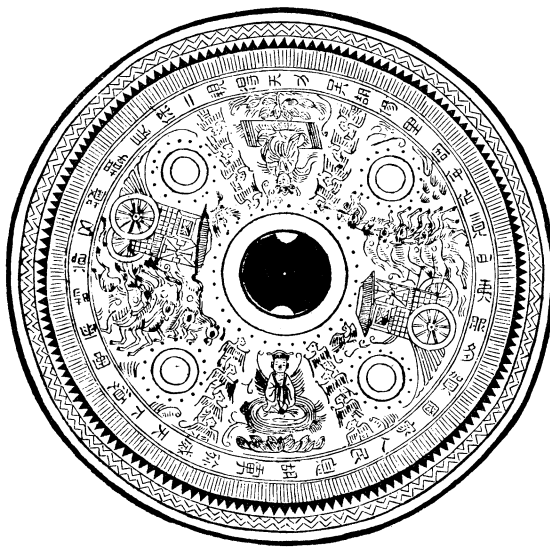
<sup>2</sup>Chavannes, *Mission Archéologique dans la Chine Septentrionale*, 1913. Vol. I, pps. 123-4.

unmistakable. The craftsmen of the period seem to have a great love for a surface produced by parallel scorings. It is this treatment, used indiscriminately on the roofs of the carts, the flanks of the horses and the costumes of the dancers, that make attribution at times difficult. On many mirrors of this period the general impression is a meaningless tangle of confused parallel scorings. Our mirror has not this disorderly appearance although there are a few restful places on its surface. To the Chinese craftsmen's "horror vacui" may possibly be attributed two small birds and a number of curved lines in parts that would otherwise have been uninteresting spaces. The birds are of a type that is often found on quite dissimilar Han mirrors, and they survive practically unchanged in Japan today as the *chi-dori* motif.

The Buckingham mirror has survived the centuries in splendid condition with the single exception of a crack which has been skillfully repaired without in any way damaging the surface. Its color is a deep yellowish brown changing to green and black in places, and showing some silver glints. It has not the sensuous appeal of pure beauty which some of the T'ang mirrors

possess, but it is a very dignified, well-executed design, worthy of its place in the Lucy Maud Buckingham Collection of Bronzes. CHARLES FABENS KELLEY.

*Note:* Due to its unique importance the Buckingham Collection of Bronzes has recently been installed in a separate gallery, H8, where the pieces are now shown to full advantage.



DRAWING FROM A SIMILAR MIRROR IN "CHIN SHI SO"