

Things on the move

Material culture and connectivity in ancient China

Fan ZHANG

Objects move, sometimes across cultural boundaries. They travel as tributes, commodities, and military booties. In this issue's 'China Connections', we explore how things perform as active agents, linking China and its outside world from the Bronze Age to the premodern era. Writing about the transcultural biography of things, essays in this section invite readers to reconsider the connectivity of the ancient world via various routes, including but not limited to the Silk Road. Coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, contributors to this issue demonstrate the potential of material culture studies as an interdisciplinary field that integrates art history, history, and archaeology.

Following chronological order, five essays outline a broad picture of transcultural exchange in the premodern Eurasian continent through the lens of objects. Each essay highlights a particular artifact; these objects are the witnesses, products, and agents of the cross-cultural interaction happening at varied levels and in diverse forms, such as trade, tribute, and pilgrimage. By tracing the movement of things, we interrogate the routes and networks that meshed together cultures in different parts of Eurasia. A diachronic survey shows that

while the early transcultural connections were mainly made via the land routes, later history saw the growing significance of the maritime network. Attention is also paid to the local response to foreign imports by studying how objects from afar were adopted and adapted in the local contexts.

Objects are the embodiment of social relations, and the objects moving across borders are the testimony of social relations at a transcultural scale. Artifacts featured in the following essays were produced during different time periods, in various locations,

and from a wide range of materials, such as glass, stone, porcelain, bronze, and other precious and semi-precious metals. What links them together is their role as a cultural mediator. We hope that, from the perspective of things, our readers can embrace the connectivity of the ancient world, which is no less intricate than that of our current era of globalization.

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Interregional transmissions of bronze mirrors with geometric decorations in early China

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The bronze mirror has long been viewed as a quintessentially 'Chinese' object. However, the earliest mirrors discovered in the Central Plain are likely to have been imported exotica. This article draws attention to the geometric mirrors retrieved from Anyang, the last capital of the Shang dynasty. It argues that the style of the Anyang mirrors originated from the northwest borderland. Recent archaeological discoveries from the Inner Asian frontier further suggest that the early mirrors with geometric designs were embedded in the network of cross-cultural circulations between the Central Plain and its northern and western neighbors during the late second millennium BCE.

Later literary sources, such as the seventh-century fiction *Record of an Ancient Mirror* [*Gujing ji* 古鏡記], often ascribed the invention of the Chinese mirror to the legendary Yellow Emperor in antiquity. However, actual mirrors made of bronze did not emerge in the Central Plain until the Late Shang period during the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE. So far, only six mirrors (fig.1) have been unearthed from three tombs at the Late Shang capital Anyang, from which more than two thousand bronze vessels have been unearthed. Fu Hao, the female general and consort of King Wu Ding (c. r. 1324-1266 BCE), owned four of the six mirrors. The fifth mirror belonged to a low-ranking elite (Dasikongcun Tomb 25), while the last piece was associated with a burial of six human victims (Xibeigang Tomb 1005) accompanying the royal cemetery. Because of their scarcity and random social distribution, these mirrors were hardly status markers, but personal exotic items occasionally acquired from the outer world.

These six Anyang mirrors are decorated with simple and somewhat crude thread relief, in stark contrast to the ornate, multi-layered zoomorphic décor on contemporary bronze vessels. The mirror décor can be classified into two subgroups: one is comprised of concentric

rings, sometimes filled with short lines; the other is divided into quadrants filled with parallel lines. Producing a small, circular disc with thread relief would require only two halved molds, much more straightforward than the sophisticated piece-mold casting technique already mastered by the Shang casters. The stylistic and technical distinctions between the Anyang mirrors and their contemporary bronze vessels suggest that the former were imported from elsewhere.

As archaeological excavations in recent decades reveal, the two subtypes of geometric mirrors that predate the Anyang specimens already emerged in northwest China, including the two mirrors with radial triangles uncovered from the sites of the Late Neolithic Qijia Culture (2300-1700 BCE) in eastern Qinghai (Guinan; fig.2-1) and western Gansu (Linxia) as well as the three antecedents with radiating lines arranged in concentric rings found in Hami, eastern Xinjiang, dated from the nineteenth to the thirteenth centuries BCE (fig.2-2). The early evidence indicates the origin of the geometric mirror style in the northwestern periphery of present-day China.¹

Rather than a direct long-distance movement across an area of several thousand kilometers, the transmission of geometric mirrors from the Inner Asian frontier to Anyang was likely an indirect process (fig.3). Several mirrors with radiating lines arranged in concentric circles, including three chance finds in Qinghai and Gansu and one specimen scientifically excavated from western Shaanxi, indicate the western route. Meanwhile, the steppe route seems equally possible. Archaeologists have reported at least four chance finds of analogous mirrors in the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia. The geometric mirror style traveled further east through southern Liaoning and northern Hebei before finally reaching the Shang territory. The most noticeable are the two mirrors (figs. 2-3, 2-4) recently unearthed from a Late Shang tomb

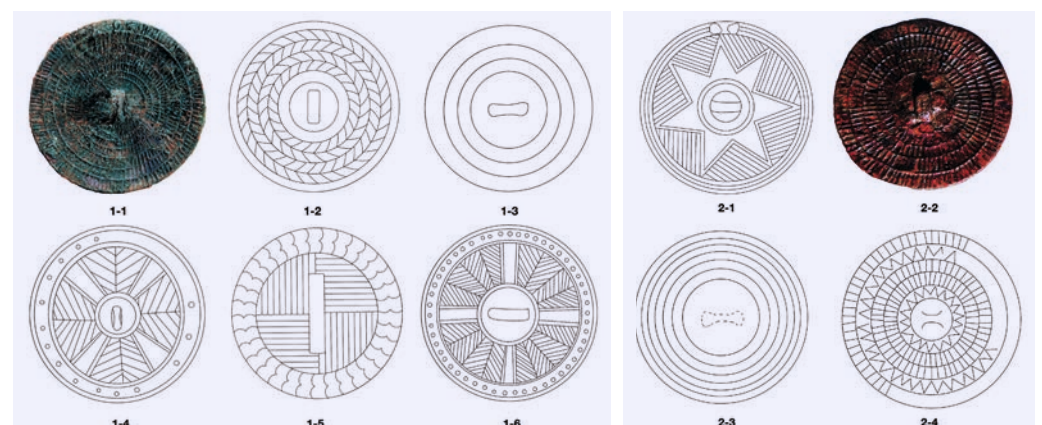


Fig. 1 (above left) 1-1, 1-2, 1-4, 1-6: Mirrors from YinXu tomb 5, Anyang, Henan, ca. 13th-12th centuries BCE. After Li Jaang. 2011. 'Long-Distance Interactions as Reflected in the Earliest Chinese Bronze Mirrors', in von Falkenhausen, L. & Brashier K. E. (eds) *The Lloyd Cotsen Study Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors, Volume II, Studies*. Los Angeles: Cotsen Occasional Press, UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, pp.40-41.

Fig. 1-5: Mirror from Houjiazhuang tomb 1005, Anyang, ca. 13th-12th centuries BCE. After Kong Xiangxing & Liu Yiman. 1992. *Zhongguo gudai tongjing* 中國古代銅鏡. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, p.14.

Fig. 1-3: Mirror from Dasikong tomb 25, Anyang, ca. 13th-12th centuries BCE. After *Zhongguo shehuikexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo Anyang gongzuodui*. 1989. '1986 nian Anyang Dasikongcun nandi de liangzuo Yinmu' 1986年安陽大司空村南地的兩座殷墓, *Kaogu* 7:596. Tracings by Doris Yixuan Tang.

Fig. 2 (above right) 2-1: Mirror from Gamatai tomb 25, Guinan, Qinghai, 2300-1700 BCE. After *Zhongguo qingtongqi quanji bianji weiyuanhui* (ed.) 1998. *Zhongguo qingtongqi quanji: di juan 16* 中國青銅器全集: 第16卷. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, p.1. fig. 2-2: Mirror from Hami, Xinjiang, 19th-13th centuries BCE. After *Hami bowuguan* (ed.) 2013. *Hami wenwu jingcui* 哈密

文物精粹. Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, p.89. fig. 2-3, 2-4: Mirrors from Houqianyi tomb 4, Luanxian, Hebei, 13th-11th centuries BCE. After *Houqianyi yizhi kaogu fajue baogao ji Jidong diqu kaoguxue wenhua yanjiu*, p.40. Tracings by Doris Yixuan Tang.

Fig. 3 (below): Geographic distribution of mirrors with geometric patterns in early China. Courtesy of Yanlong Guo.



(Houqianyi Tomb 4) in Luanxian, Hebei,² whose owner, a local male elite, had direct access to bronze objects from both the Shang and the northern frontier. The geometric mirrors were embedded in the network of cross-cultural circulations between the Central Plain and its northern and western neighbors during the late second millennium BCE, even though they remained occasional and failed to stimulate Shang artisans to cast their own mirrors.

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Notes

- 1 Some scholars have proposed that this type of mirror may have originated in Southern Siberia or Central Asia during the late third millennium BCE. For example, Juliano, A. 1985. 'Possible Origins of The Chinese Mirror', *Notes in the History of Art* 4.2/3:36-45. But none of the early mirrors found in the two regions exhibit the geometric patterns.
- 2 Zhang Wenrui and Zhai Liangfu. 2016. *Houqianyi yizhi kaogu fajue baogao ji Jidong diqu kaoguxue wenhua yanjiu* 後遷義遺址考古發掘報告及冀東地區考古學文化研究. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, pp.175-177.



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