LACQUER CRAFTSMANSHIP IN THE QIN AND CHU KINGDOMS: TWO CONTRASTING TRADITIONS (LATE 4TH TO LATE 3RD CENTURY BC)

BY

ALAIN THOTE
(Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes 4ème Section
(Sciences historiques et philologiques) Paris, France)

Abstract
This article deals with the lacquer traditions of the late Warring States period as seen in the Qin and Chu kingdoms and in relation to recent discoveries from Sichuan. Qin lacquer working techniques and style are different from those of Chu, which are evidenced by hundreds of objects. By contrast, due to poor conditions of preservation, Qin lacquer craftsmanship can only be known through very few objects, some of which show a strong influence from nomadic art. During the late fourth and early third century BC, Sichuan appears to have been a key region in the development of the lacquer art of Qin. Several Qin lacquers have marks either stamped on the core before the application of lacquer or incised with a needle on the lacquer surface. They confirm that the lacquer workshops operated under the control of the state administration. Until the destruction of the Chu capital in 278 BC, the Chu lacquer tradition in the Jiangling area had a more diverse range of shapes than Qin. However, the techniques used to make the cores were less sophisticated than in Qin, except in the case of luxury objects. Only a small number of Chu lacquer pieces have marks. At the same time, the comparisons show that both traditions exerted a mutual influence on each other to some extent until the early third century BC. Thereafter, Qin seems to have dominated the production of lacquer, even in the area that was in earlier times the core of the Chu kingdom, in present-day Hubei and Hunan. Most of the lacquers found in Changsha tombs of the third century BC that have been traditionally considered as Chu products were in fact produced in workshops working in a Qin cultural environment. Keywords: Lacquer, craftsmanship, Sichuan, Hubei, Changsha, Qin, Chu, Warring States period.

Introduction
The imperial Sichuan 四川 factories were extremely well known within and beyond the Chinese empire during the later part of the Western Han
Many lacquer pieces produced at the official workshops (gongguan 工官) of the Shu 蜀 and Guanghan 廣漢 commanderies have been discovered in a few sites spread all over China, from Guizhou 貴州 to Jiangsu 江蘇, and even in Korea, testifying to a wide distribution of their products. In fact, the origin of the lacquer pieces excavated on those sites could be easily identified because the long inscriptions they bear record their provenance and provide precise dates of manufacture. These factories were created around the middle of the second century BC based on earlier Han local workshops (Yu and Li 1975; Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens 1990: 525–527). But the latter had their own roots in the lacquer traditions of the kingdom of Qin 秦. Not only were the Han workshops organized on the model of earlier Qin workshops, but they also made use of lacquer techniques that had been invented in Sichuan at least two centuries earlier. Even the style of their own products betrays earlier Qin artistic traditions. In fact, the 316 BC conquest of Shu in central Sichuan had allowed the kingdom of Qin to take immediate advantage of the natural resources of Sichuan (Sage 1992: 83–156; Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens 2001: 39–40). Soon after the conquest, Qin created lacquer workshops or, more probably, took control of local lacquer production.

The states of Ba 巴 and Shu, as well as the westernmost regions of Sichuan, already had lacquer traditions when Qin invaded the Chengdu Plain. This is documented by a few objects found in tombs from early sites located near Chengdu and in the upper Minjiang 岷江 valley.

---

1 This paper was originally presented at the symposium entitled “Treasures from a Lost Civilization: Ancient Chinese Art from Sichuan,” organized by the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, 3–4 August, 2001. I wish to express my deep gratitude to Mimi Gardner Gates, Illesley Ball Nordstrom Director, Seattle Art Museum, and Jay Xu, Foster Foundation Curator of Chinese Art, Seattle Art Museum, for their invitation to participate in the symposium, as well as Michèle Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens, Philip K. Hu and Peter J. Lu for their valuable comments, and to Lothar von Falkenhausen and Robert E. Murrowich for their editorial suggestions.

2 To the famous site of Lelang 樂浪 in Korea, where a large number of lacquers from the Sichuan official factories were found in the early twentieth century (Umehara Sueji 1943), can be added a few other examples, such as Tombs 13, 15 and 17 at Qingzhou 青州 (lacquer earcups from the Shu and Guanghan commanderies) (Guizhou 1959: 99–100 and pl IV); Yaoziling 鴛子嶺 Tombs 2 and 3 in Yongzhou 永州市, Hunan (one basin, three earcups, and a few containers of the zun 樽 and zhi 觳 types) (Hunan 2001 : 52–56 and fig. 18 p. 56, fig. 19–20 p. 57, fig. 21 p. 58, fig. 22 p. 59, pl. VI.2, pl. VI.4, pl. VII, pl. VIII.1–3); and Hanjiang Yaozhuang 邗江姚莊 Tomb 102 in Jiangsu (a ke 楠 wine container, and probably one basin and some earcups) (Jiangsu 2000: 61 and p. 61 fig. 20.1). Recently a fragment from a lacquerware of exceptional quality was discovered in a tomb of the Western Han to Eastern Han period at Yuejin on 青白江區, Chengdu 成都 (Chengdu 1999: 35, and p. 36 fig. 40). Comparison with the lacquers from Lelang suggests that this piece was also probably produced by the Sichuan official factories.

3 These are for example Shifang Chengguan 什邡城關 Tomb 33, dated to the second