LONGEVITY LIKE METAL AND STONE: THE ROLE OF THE MIRROR IN HAN BURIALS

BY

K.E. BRASHIER
Harvard University

When debating the significance of jade objects unearthed in early Chinese burials, most scholars look beyond the object's shape to also probe the ritual meaning of its medium - the jade itself. The classics have invested jade with many virtues such as 'smoothness like benevolence' and 'durability like intelligence', and when archaeology yields jade suits, jade disks or jade tubes, scholars rightly take this physical material into account.

Yet while there exist many theories as to the presence of mirrors in Han burials, to my knowledge none regards the significance of the mirror's metallic medium. Like jade, metal was a benchmark of longevity, the trait most desired in considerations of the afterlife.

At least as early as the Ming Dynasty, scholars have regarded the number of mirrors recovered from early tombs as noteworthy. The scholar Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛 (fl. 1592–1607) in his Wu zazu 五雜俎 considered their great number unusual:

今山東，河南，關中掘地得古塚，常獲鏡無數，它器物不及也。

In the regions east of the mountains, south of the Yellow River and within the passes, whenever the earth is excavated and an ancient grave is found, one obtains innumerable mirrors, more than other vessels and goods.2

Modern archaeology confirms that numerous early burials, especially from the Han Dynasty, include bronze mirrors. According to Noel Barnard and Sato Tamotsu’s 1975 metallurgical study of al-

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1 For example, see "Pingyi" 聲義 in the Li ji; Sun Xidan 孫希旦, Li ji jijie 梁記集解, Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 1973, p. 1337 (Shisan jing zhushu 三十三經注疏 63.9a–11a). The author wishes to thank Professor Michael Loewe for helping him to revise an earlier version of his text.

most 440 excavations, only 130 pre-Han mirrors had been discovered by then, compared to 1,165 Han mirrors. These were found at 79 Western Han sites and 93 Eastern Han sites.\(^3\) This increase is more conspicuous because other bronze objects such as ritual vessels had declined in number.

The following article will first review four explanations of the mirror's role in the grave, each of which assigns the mirror with a functional use. It will then explore the hypothesis that the mirror, or more specifically the mirror's metal, served as the benchmark of perpetuation that was desired in the grave. In conclusion, it will attempt to place the bronze mirror in the context of mortuary ritual.

I. Previous scholarship

The mirror's role in the burial has been interpreted in at least four different ways: 1.) to illuminate the tomb, 2.) to ward off inauspicious influences, 3.) to accompany the dead as it did in life, and 4.) to convey the soul into the land of immortals.

The first of these interpretations was already put forward in the Sung Dynasty. Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–1308) in his *Guixin zai xi ji* 戚辛雜議續集 wrote:

> 今世有大殯而用鏡懸之棺蓋，以照尸者，往往謂取光明破暗之義。按漢書霍光傳，光之喪，賜東園溫明。服虔曰：東園處此器，以鏡置其中，以懸尸上。然則其來尚矣。

When the current generation carries out the greater dressing, they suspend a mirror from the coffin lid in order to illuminate the corpse. It is frequently said that this is meant to take radiant brightness and smash the darkness.

According to Huo Guang's biography in the *Han shu*, among Guang's funerary gifts from the emperor there was a wenrìng from the Dongyuan Office. Fu Qian says, "The Dongyuan Office positions this vessel, taking a mirror and putting it inside [the vessel] in order to suspend it over the corpse." If this be the case, then this practice is long-standing.\(^4\)

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