WESTERN HAN BRONZE MIRRORS RECENTLY DISCOVERED IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN VIET NAM

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ABSTRACT
This is a preliminary report on two Chinese Han mirrors found in excavations by the Centre for Archaeology, Institute of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City. One of the mirrors was found inside a typical Sa Huynh jar burial at the Binh Yen site, where Bui Chi Hoang and Yamagata Mariko, collaborating with the Quang Nam Provincial Museum, carried out excavations from March to April in 1998. The second mirror was found inside a Heger I type bronze drum at the Phu Chanh site, Binh Duong Province in southern Viet Nam, where the Centre for Archaeology led by Pham Duc Manh and the Binh Duong Provincial Museum organized a salvage excavation in January 1999. These are the first Western Han mirrors to have been found in central and southern Viet Nam, although several have been found in Han style tombs in the area of northern Viet Nam which was incorporated into the Jiao Zhi and Jiu Zhen commanderies by the Western Han Emperor Wu Di in 111 BC (Vandermersch 1960). Additionally, in the Mekong Delta, two Han mirror fragments were found at Oc Eo (Malleret 1960:231). However, these are Eastern Han mirrors, later than two mirrors reported here.

THE BINH YEN SITE
The Binh Yen site (150° 40' N, 108° 00' E) is in Que Son District, Quang Nam Province, about 60 km from the river mouth port town of Hoi An (Figure 1). The site is located on a river terrace in the middle reaches of the Thu Bon River (Figure 2) and can be reached by river boat from Que Trung, about 11 km downriver from Binh Yen.

In 1997, Bui Chi Hoang, Yamagata Mariko, Nguyen Thi Hoai Huong and Nguyen Thi Ha made a reconnaissance in the Thu Bon River valley in order to locate Sa Huynh sites

Figure 1: Central and Southern Viet Nam. 1. Binh Yen; 2. Go Dua; 3. Sa Huynh; 4. Doc Chua; 5. Phu Chanh; 6. Giong Ca Vo; Giong Phet; 7. Oc Eo.
in the inland mountainous area. At Binh Yen village they
found some large sites thought to be of the Sa Huynh period.
In 1998, an archaeological team from the Centre for
Archaeology, Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh
City, led by Bui Chi Hoang, together with Yamagata Mariko,
Nguyen Thi Hoai Huong and Nguyen Thi Ha, worked with
the Quang Nam Provincial Museum to excavate at three
locations in the village.

At the third location, in a 5 x 7 m trench desoted H2,
seven jar burials were unearthed (Figure 3). Six of these
exhibit the typical combination of Sa Huynh burials,
containing tall urns with cylindrical bodies and hat-shaped
lids. The other trenches laid around H2 did not yield any
burials.

The mirror was found with burial M7, deeper than the
other burials. Some human bones also remained at the
bottom of M7, although they were not well-preserved.
During the excavation of M7, a circular bronze artifact was
visible between a skull and an iron axe (Figure 4). These
objects were lifted as a block and taken to the Quang Nam
Provincial Museum so that they could be conserved and
carefully separated.

Subsequently, Nguyen Lan Cuong, an anthropologist
from the Institute of Archaeology in Ha Noi, separated the
human bones. The bronze artefact was found to be a Han
mirror (Figure 5). From a preliminary analysis, the person
buried with the mirror in M7 was
a male about 60 years old. Apart
from the mirror and the bones,
the burial goods in M7 were
similar to those in the other
burials; eight iron tools (three
axes, two spearheads, one knife,
one knife with a ring-pommel
and a hatchet), two nephrite
earrings with slits, and beads
made of nephrite, agate, carnelian and
glass (total 81 pieces).

THE BINH YEN MIRROR
(FIGURE 5)
As mentioned above, the mirror
from Binh Yen is the first Han
mirror to be found in a Sa Huynh
jar burial. It is only 6.9 cm in
diameter, 0.1 cm thick, with a rim
0.4 cm high. It is a type of mirror
often simply called ri guang jing,
or “mirror of the sunlight”,
because of the presence of an
eight character inscription f Ian
ri zhi guang, tien xia da ming (see the sunlight and the
whole land is most bright).

In a basic comprehensive study of the chronology and
periodisation of Han tombs (Zhaog guokexueyuan
Kaoguyanjiusou 1959) the Han tombs around Luoyang are
divided into six sub-periods. The ri guang jing type of mirror
emerged in sub-period II (approximately 74 - 33 BC – the age
of Xuan Di and Yuan Di) and continued into the third sub-
period (Late Western Han and Wang Mang period).

According to Okamura Hidenori of Kyoto University
(Okamura 1984), the ri guang jing type of mirror belongs to
a category called yi ti zi ming dai jing – a mirror with an
inscription of specific styles of letters dating to the 1st
century BC. Okamura subdivides the category into six types,
of which the ri guang jing is type III, which he dates between
70 and 50 BC. The date range is thought to be fairly exact
because there are some Han tombs with type III mirrors
which are firmly dated, or where the person buried has been
identified. Therefore, jar burial M7 at Binh Yen with its mirror
should date from the middle or late 1st century BC.

The yi ti zi ming dai jing mirrors have a huge distribution
(Higuchi 1979; Okamura 1998). In China, they have been
found in Henan, Shanxi, Liaoning, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan,
Sichuan, Guangdong and Yunnan provinces and in Guangxi
autonomous region. Outside China, they have been found
in northern Kyushu, Japan (cf. jar burial No.2 of the Mikumo
Minamishoji site; jar burial No.34 of the Tateiwa Hotta site; jar burial No.10 of the Higashi Odamine site) and in the Korean peninsula (cf. wooden coffin tomb No.38 of the Cho Yang Dong site in Kyong Ju city; the Eur Hyung Dong site in Kyong Sang Buk Do; Han tombs of Lelang commandery distributed in Pyongyang City [Choe Jong Gu 1983; Sekino et al. 1925-1927]). Further afield, they have been found near Tashkent in Uzbekistan, at Tillya-tepe in northern Afghanistan and in some Hsiung tombs in Mongolia (Usuki 1995). In Viet Nam, one ri guang jing mirror, similar to that from Binh Yen, comes from Lang Vac in Nghe An province (Hakari and Imamura 1990), and another was found with the Han burial M13 at Thieu Duong in Thanh Hoa province (Le Trung 1965). However, in the case of Thieu Duong, four of the eight inscription characters are different from those on the Binh Yen mirror.

Additionally, in southern Thailand, one complete Han mirror which probably belongs to the yi ti zi ming dai jing type V, is reported to have been found in Chawang, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province (Srisuchat 1996). This type dates from the very end of the 1st century BC.

This wide distribution of mirrors through Asia took place during the expansion of Han territory in the reign of Wu Di. Subsequently, as the Han Shu describes, maritime trade across the South China Sea began to flourish, as the mirror from southern Thailand attests. The Binh Yen mirror belongs within these historical circumstances. It provides a link between the Sa Huynh culture and the intrusive Han Empire, which had already incorporated the Dong Son territory into its sphere and extended southward to the edge of the Sa Huynh culture. Possibly, the northernmost part of the Sa Huynh sphere was incorporated into Xianglin county, the southern county of the Han commandery of Rinan. Maritime trade would have played a role in bringing the Sa Huynh people into contact with the Han Empire since the Sa Huynh territory had various forest and marine products. The Han
mirror brought into an inland area such as Binh Yen was, no doubt, an exotic object of value in such exchanges. In addition to the Binh Yen mirror, a few Han coins are reported to have been found inside Sa Huynh jar burials at Hau Xa II in Hoi An (Hoang Van Khoan and Lam My Dung 1991; Nguyen Chi Trun and Ho Xuan Tinh 1994).

THE PHU CHANH SITE

The Phu Chanh site (110° 02' N, 106° 43' E) is located on the Cai River, a tributary of the Dong Nai River in Tan Uyen district, Binh Duong province (Figure 1, No. 5; Figure 6). It is situated about 30 km northeast of Ho Chi Minh city and about 12 km northeast of the Doc Chua site, the bronze age settlement which is famous for its rich burial finds including bronze halberds, a bronze statue resembling a dog chasing a fox, and casting moulds, among many other items (Dao Linh Con and Nguyen Duy Ty 1993).

Characteristic of the Phu Chanh site are the remains of pile houses like those at the Bung Bac site in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province (Pham Duc Manh 1996b). In Phu Chanh, a typical Heger I drum was accidentally found in 1995 by a farmer during ploughing. According to the published report by Pham Duc Manh (1998), the drum (termed Phu Chanh I) has a tympanum 57 cm in diameter and is 39 cm high (Figure 7).

Interestingly, about half of a wooden hollow pail-like artefact was found with the drum, although it is difficult to identify what it was. The radiocarbon date for a sample from this wooden artefact, run by the Centre for Atomic Nucleus in Ho Chi Minh City, is 2100±40 BP.

In February 1999, people who were looking for buried metal artefacts located another bronze drum in Phu Chanh (Figure 7). The new drum (termed Phu Chanh II) was found only 50 m away from the location of Phu Chanh I. Informed by the local people of this discovery, the Binh Duong Provincial Museum, led by Pham Duc Manh, hurried to the site. They found that some parts of the drum had been taken away but fortunately most remained. A salvage excavation was carried out immediately.

The Phu Chanh drum II, also belongs to the Heger I type. It has a tympanum 47 cm in diameter and its height is 40 cm. The decoration on the tympanum of Phu Chanh II is slightly different from that on Phu Chanh I. The drum was placed inside an elaborately carved, hollow
wooden container with two handles (Figure 8). The tympanum of the drum seems to have served as a lid for the wooden container, which is 67 cm in height and 53-55 cm in diameter. Pham Duc Manh currently thinks that this was a "drum burial", a phenomenon rarely seen in Viet Nam. However, the Lai Son drum, discovered on Hon Nghe island, Kien Giang Province in the Gulf of Thailand (between Phu Quoc Island and Rach Gia City), also contained a bronze spearhead, two bronze axes, two pieces of a bronze casting mould, some iron fragments, one sherd of pottery and some pieces of human bone. This is thought to have contained a secondary burial. (Nguyen Duy Ty and Duong Van Truyen 1985).

The mirror found in Phu Chanh drum II is 10.6 cm in diameter, 0.1-0.2 cm thick and has a rim which projects 0.5 cm. Deliberately broken into four pieces on burial, it was placed inside the drum, together with a bronze axe similar to one from the Doc Chua site, a wooden sword 70 cm long; another wooden rod shaped like an antler, broken pottery, and remains of rice, betel nut and gourd.
THE PHU CHANH MIRROR (FIGURE 9)

This type of mirror type is usually called *si ru hui long wen jing* – a mirror decorated with a snake and dragon design, with four bosses in the inner zone. The category *si ru hui long wen jing* dates from around the start of the Christian Era, that is from the very end of the Western Han period (Okamura 1984). The distribution of *si ru hui long wen jing* mirrors is also very broad, extending from Japan and the Korean Peninsula, through China (Henan, Shandong, Shanxi, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Hunan and Hubei provinces), Mongolia, west to Uzbekistan (Zadneprovsky, Yu and Lubo-Lesnitchenko 1995) and south to Phu Chanh in Vietnam.

The fact that a Dong Son drum and a Han mirror, symbolic artefacts of two different cultures, were buried together in such a remote place with respect to their origins is extremely intriguing. Although northern Vietnam was incorporated into the Han Empire, the indigenous Dong Son culture still prospered during the 1st century BC and Heger I drums travelled beyond Dong Son territory to central and southern Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. In the case of the Han mirror from Phu Chanh, it was probably brought in by the exchange system which also distributed the Dong Son drums, Sa Huynh earrings and Indian beads (Yokokura 1993).

The Dong Nai River basin is the only region in southern Vietnam where the process of cultural development from the late Neolithic to the Iron Age has been verified. The Dong Nai Culture occupies this development (Le Xuan Dien *et al.* 1991; Pham Duc Manh 1996a), in which the stone chamber of the Hang Gon site (Parmentier 1928) and more than sixteen bronze halberds discovered in Long Giao (Pham Duc Manh 1985) illustrate the concentration of power in this region that took place in the first millennium BC. In addition, the Giong Ca Vo and Giong Phet sites are located in the river estuary (Dang Van Thang and Vu Quoc Hien 1997, Dang Van Thang *et al.* 1998). The two sites must have been contemporary with the Sa Huynh culture and obviously had close contact with it.

The Dong Nai River was no doubt an important route to the interior in antiquity, and that may be the reason why the Han mirror and several Dong Son drums were brought into this region. In December 1999 another Heger I drum was found at Phu Chanh. Three drums have also been found in Binh Duong, Binh Phuoc and Ba Ria – Vung Tau provinces, while the four other drums from southern Vietnam come from Gia Lai – Cong Tam, Phu Yen, Nha Trang and Kien Giang provinces (Pham Minh Huyen *et al.* 1987, Pham Huy Thong *et al.* 1990).
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION
The ri guang jing mirror from Binh Yen dates from the middle or late 1st century BC, whereas the si ru hui long wen jing mirror from Phu Chanh is slightly later in date. The archaeological significance of these finds is, firstly, that they are found in the contexts of the Sa Huynh Culture of central Viet Nam and the Dong Nai Culture of southern Viet Nam. Those regions probably were free from the direct political control of the Han Empire. As discussed above, the Han tended to expand to the south through the Jiaozhi, Jiuzhen and Rianan commanderies which covered much of the Dong Son cultural region. It is still unclear whether Xianglin county of the Rianan commandery extended over Hai Van pass into the Thu Bon River valley.

Secondly, both mirrors were discovered in fairly good archaeological contexts. In the Binh Yen site, the mirror was placed underneath a human skull in typical jar burial of the Sa Huynh culture. In Phu Chanh, a Heger I drum was found inside a wooden container, and the drum itself contained the mirror and other finds. These finds demonstrate the complex relationships between Chinese Han, Dong Son, Sa Huynh and the so-called Dong Nai cultures in that period. The coasts of Viet Nam also participated in the exchange systems linking India, Southeast Asia and China (Glover 1990, Yokokura 1993).

Thirdly, as described above, both the ri guang jing and si ru hui long wen jing mirror types have extensive distributions throughout eastern and central Asia. After the expeditions of Han Wu Di and his generals, the Han realm was extended and east-west trade was greatly revitalised. Under such historical contexts, the two mirrors found at Binh Yen and Phu Chanh must have moved to the south.

Thus the two mirrors from Binh Yen and Phu Chanh have proposed multiple problems. The authors believe that the further investigation and analysis would help to resolve some of problems relating to the emergence of the first kingdoms in this region — Linyi and Funan.

POSTSCRIPT
In August 1999, subsequent to drafting this article, another Western Han mirror was discovered in a Sa Huynh jar burial in Go Dua, Duy Xuyen District in Quang Nam province (Figure 2). The Go Dua site is located in the middle reaches of the Thu Bon River and the Binh Yen site is only about 23 km upriver from here. Archaeologists Nguyen Chieu and Lam My Dung from Ha Noi National University, working with staff from the Duy Xuyen Culture and Information Office, uncovered six jar burials in their 4 x 4 m trench. The mirror is very well preserved, 11 cm in diameter, of the type generally called shou dai jing because of the two dragons and two tigers rendered in the inner zone. The shou dai jing mirror type is dated to the late 1st century BC or the beginning of the 1st century AD, slightly later than the ri guang jing but almost the same date as the si ru hui long wen jing. These Han mirrors from Binh Yen and Go Dua demonstrate the importance of the Thu Bon River Valley during the final stage of the Sa Huynh Culture.

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