

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

Yamagata Mariko¹, Pham Duc Manh² and Bui Chi Hoang²

¹Department of Archaeology, University of Tokyo, Japan

²Centre for Archaeology, Institute of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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 111BC (Vandermeersch 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 (15° 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

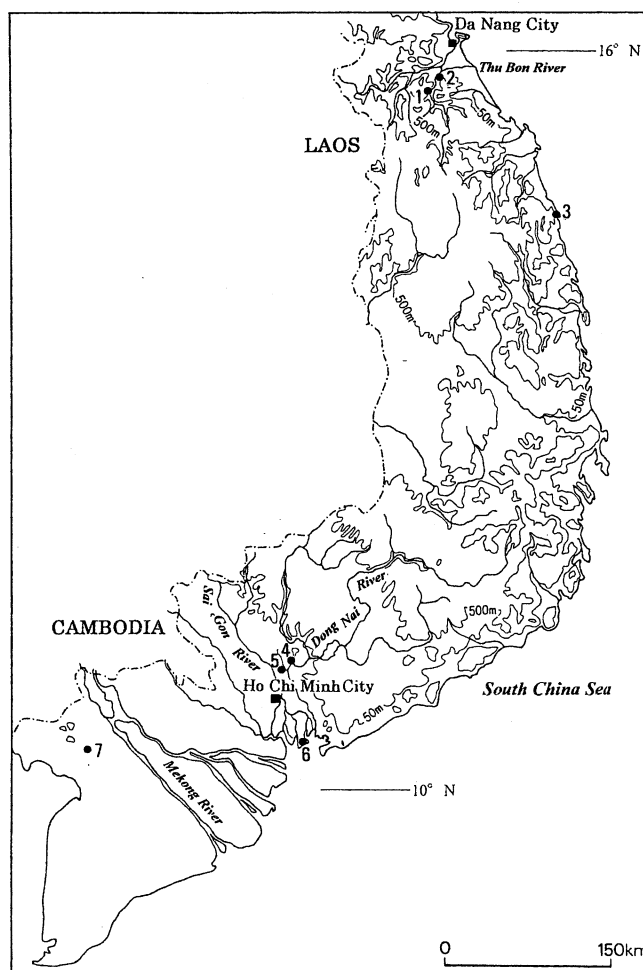


Figure 1: Central and Southern Viet Nam. 1. Binh Yen; 2. Go Dua; 3. Sa Huynh; 4. Doc Chua; 5. Phu Chanh; 6. Giong Ca Vo, Giong Phet; 7. Oc Eo.

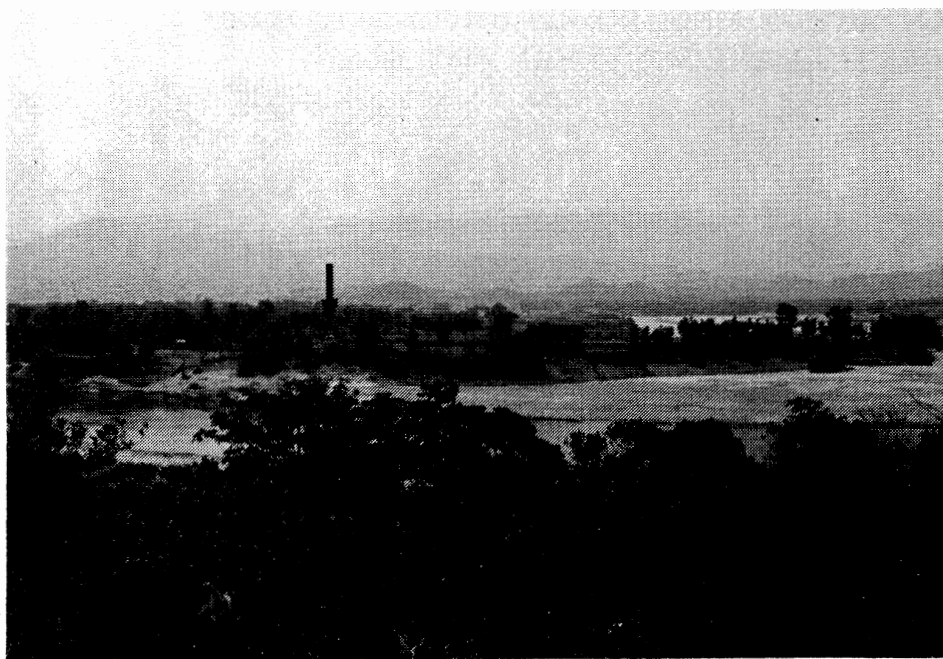


Figure 2: The Binh Yen site viewed from across the Thu Bon River.
Arrow shows the excavation site.

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 denoted 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 *jian*

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 (Zhongguokexueyuan Kaoguanjiesuo 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

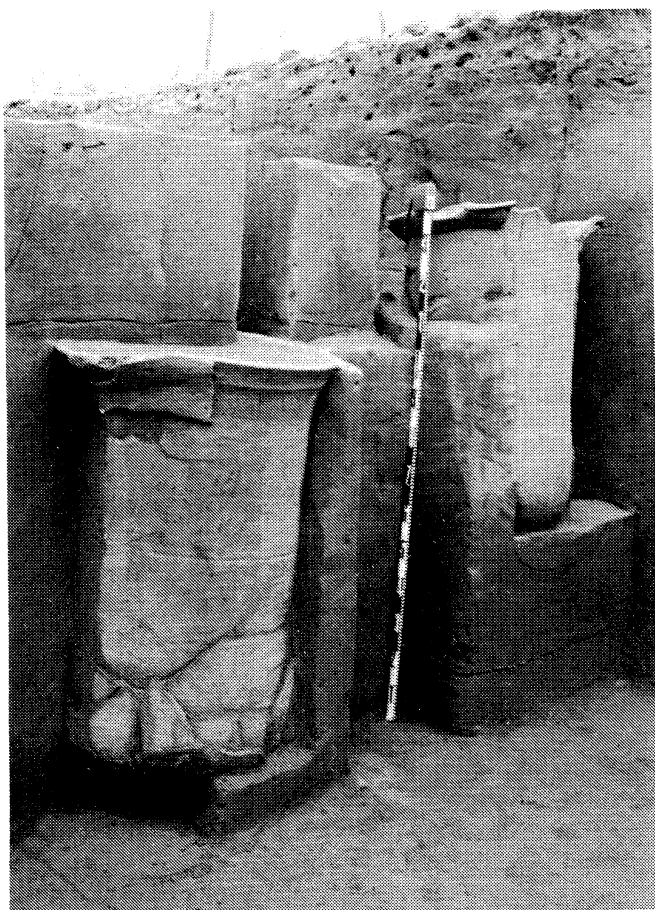


Figure 3: Jar burials at Binh Yen. Left M7; right M6.

Minamishoji site; jar burial No.34 of the Tateiwa Hotta site; jar burial No.10 of the Higashi Odamine site) and in the Korean peninsular (*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*

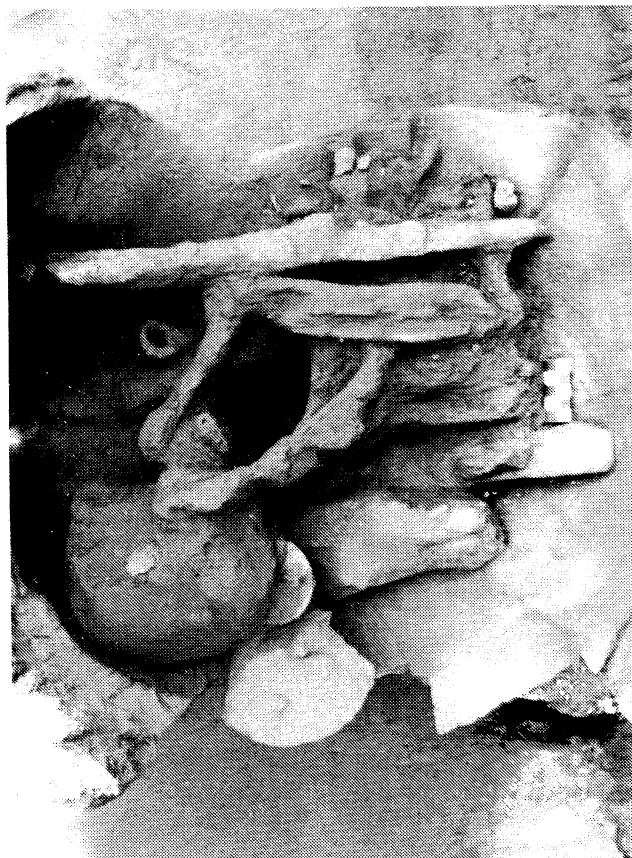


Figure 4: Contents of Jar Burial M7, Binh Yen. The mirror is visible beneath the skull.

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



Figure 5: The Ri Guang Jing from Binh Yen M7.

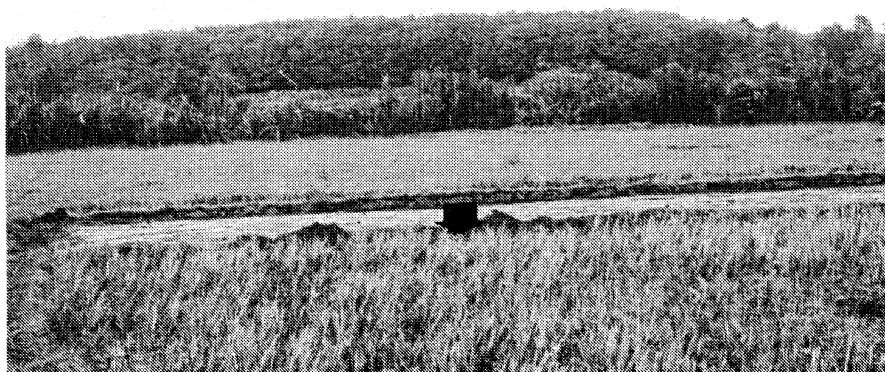


Figure 6: The Phu Chanh site: Arrow shows location of Phu Chanh II drum discovery.

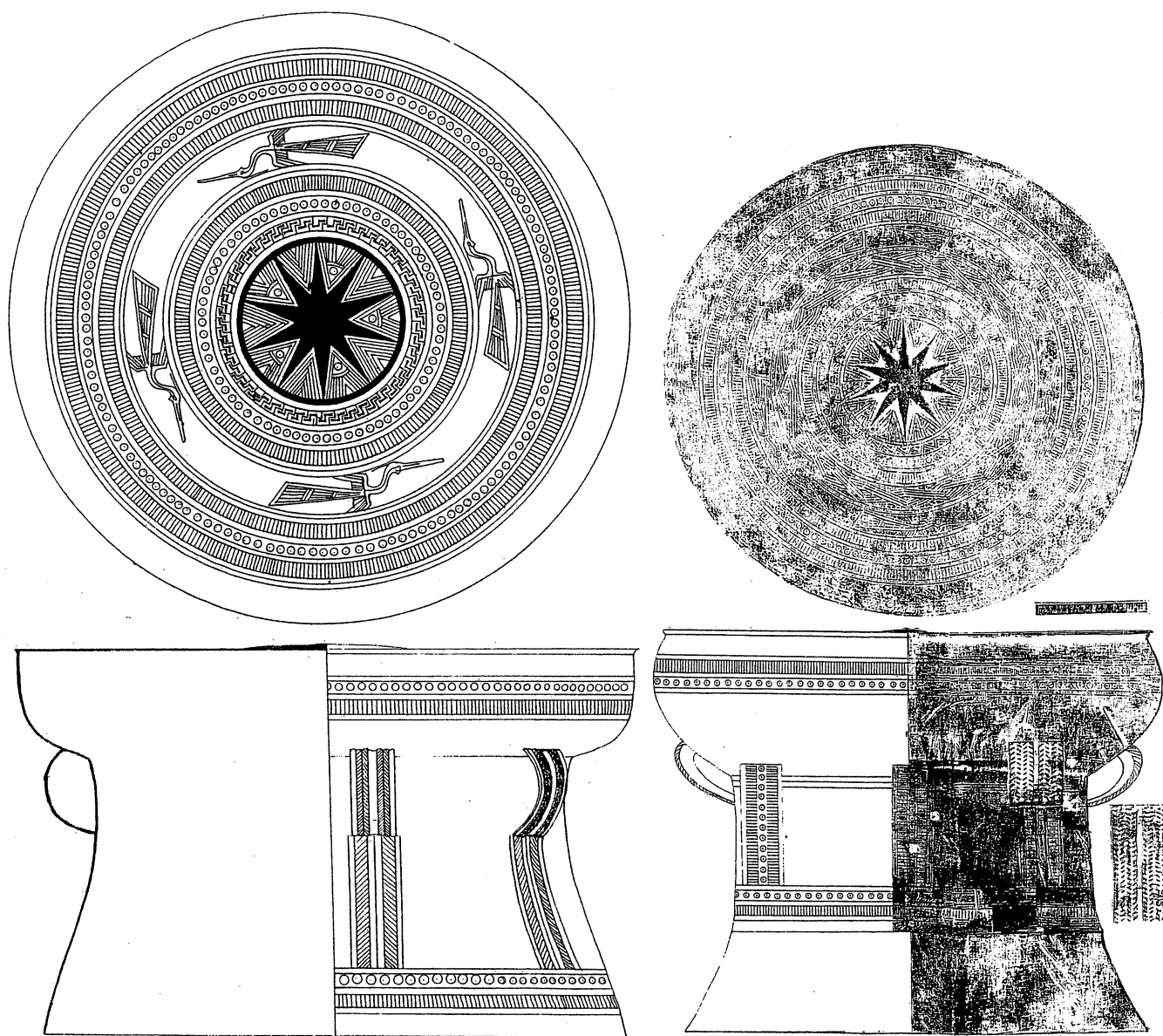


Figure 7: Heger I type bronze drums found at the Phu Chanh site. Left Phu Chanh I, height 39 cm; right Phu Chan II, height 40 cm.

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.

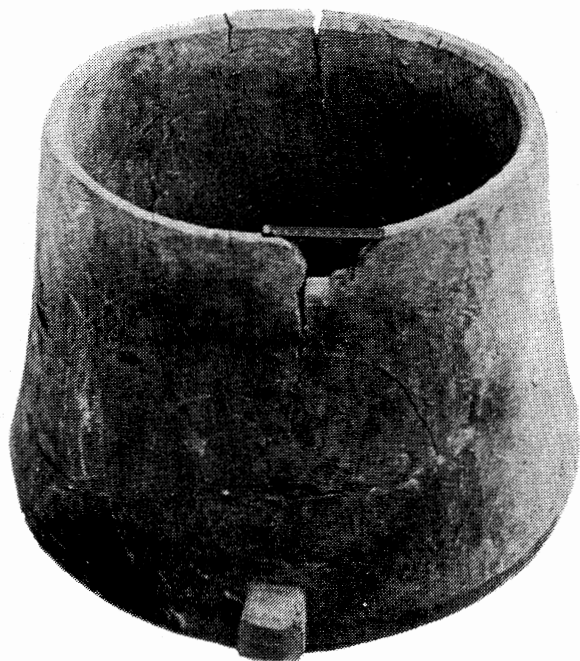


Figure 8: Wooden container in which the Phu Chanh II drum was placed, height 67 cm.



Figure 9: The Si Ru Hui Long Wen Jing from Phu Chanh II.

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 Viet Nam.

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 Viet Nam 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 Viet Nam, 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 Viet Nam 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 Diem *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 Viet Nam come from Gia Lai – Cong Tum, 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 Rinan commanderies which covered much of the Dong Son cultural region. It is still unclear whether Xianglin county of the Rinan 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 vitalised. 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors sincerely thank the Quang Nam and the Binh Duong Provincial Museums for their collaboration and support; Mr. Yoshikai Masato (University of Tokyo) and Mr. Morishita Shoji (Kyoto University) for helping the authors to collect publications and information about Han mirrors; and Ian Glover for helping with the English and giving various suggestions to the authors.

REFERENCES

- Choe Jong Gu. 1983. The preliminary report and the results of the excavations of Choyang-Dong site, Kyongju, in ancient Korea. *Cultura Antiqua* 35-8:1-17 (Japanese Translation).
- Dang Van Thang and Vu Quoc Hien. 1997. Excavation at Giong Ca Vo site, Can Gio district, Ho Chi Minh City. *Journal of Southeast Asian Archaeology* 17:30-44.
- Dang Van Thang, Vu Quoc Hien, Nguyen Thi Hau, Ngo The Phong, Nguyen Kim Dung and Nguyen Lan Cuong. 1998. *Khao co hoc tien su va so su Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh* [Prehistoric and Protohistoric Archaeology of Ho Chi Minh City]. Ho Chi Minh City: Nha Xuat Ban Tre Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh (in Vietnamese).
- Dao Linh Con and Nguyen Duy Ty. 1993. *Dia Diem Khao Co Hoc Doc Chua* [Doc Chua Archaeological site]. Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi (in Vietnamese).
- Glover, I.C. 1990. *Early Trade Between India and South-east Asia*. Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, *Occasional Papers* No.16, University of Hull.
- Hakari Hiromitsu and Imamura Keiji. 1990. Recent development in Vietnamese Archaeology. *Journal of Southeast Asian Archaeology* 10:79-82 (in Japanese).
- Higuchi Takayasu. 1979. *Kokyo (Ancient Mirrors)*. Tokyo: Shincho-sha (in Japanese).
- Hoang Van Khoan and Lam My Dung. 1991. Nhung dong tien co o dat Hoi An va cac giai doan lich su cua no [Ancient coins from Hoi An and their historical periods]. In *Do Thi Co Hoi An* [The Ancient city of Hoi An], pp. 107-11. Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi (in Vietnamese).
- Le Xuan Diem, Pham Quang Son, Bui Chi Hoang. 1991. *Khao Co Dong Nai* [Archaeology of Dong Nai]. Dong Nai: Nha Xuat Ban Dong Nai (in Vietnamese).
- Le Trung. 1965. Nhung ngoi mo tang thoi thuoc Han o Thieu Duong [Burials of the period belonging to Han in Thieu Duong]. *Mot so bao cao ve khao co hoc Viet Nam*: 277-328 (in Vietnamese).

- Malleret, L. 1960. *L'Archéologie du delta du Mekong*. Tome 2. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Nguyen Chi Trung and Ho Xuan Tinh. 1994. Khu mo tang Hau Xa II [Burial field of Hau Xa II]. Unpublished paper presented at Hoi Thao Khoa Hoc ve Van hoa Sa Huynh o Hoi An [The scientific forum on Sa Huynh Culture in Hoi An] (in Vietnamese).
- Nguyen Duy Ty and Duong Van Truyen. 1985. Di tích Lai Son (Kieng Giang) [The Lai Son site, Kien Giang province]. *Nhung Phat Hien Moi ve Khao Co Hoc nam* 1984, pp. 138-40 (in Vietnamese).
- Okamura Hidenori 1984. Zenkankyo no yousiki to hennen [Typology and chronology of the Western Han mirrors]. *Shirin* 67(5):1-42 (in Japanese).
- Okamura Hidenori 1998. Shin Kan teikoku no taigai kosyo to sono bijutsu [The external relationships and the arts of Qin and Han Empires]. *Sekai Bijutsu Daizenshu*, Vol.2 Qin and Han, pp. 323-8. Tokyo: Shogakkan (in Japanese).
- Parmentier, H. 1928. Vestiges mégalithiques à Xuan Loc. *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* XXVIII:479-85.
- Pham Duc Manh. 1985. Qua dong Long Giao [Bronze halberds from Long Giao]. *Khao Co Hoc* (1):37-68 (in Vietnamese).
- Pham Duc Manh. 1996a. Proto-history and pre-history of the Eastern part of Nam Bo – past and modern perceptions. *Vietnamese Studies Special issue* No. 2:63-119.
- Pham Duc Manh. 1996b. *Di Tich Khao Co Hoc Bung Bac* [Bung Bac archaeological site]. Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi (in Vietnamese).
- Pham Duc Manh. 1998. Trong Dong Phu Chanh [Phu Chanh Bronze Drum]. *Mot So Van De Khao Co Hoc Mien Nam Viet Nam*, pp. 159-72. Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi (in Vietnamese).
- Pham Huy Thong, Pham Minh Huyen, Nguyen Van Hao and Lai Van Toi. 1990. *Dong Son Drums in Viet Nam*. Ha Noi: Viet Nam Social Sciences Publishing House.
- Pham Minh Huyen, Nguyen Van Huyen and Trinh Sinh. 1987. *Trong Dong Dong Son* [Dong Son Bronze Drums]. Ha Noi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi (in Vietnamese).
- Sekino Tadashi, Yatsui Seiichi, Kuriyama Shunichi, Oba Tsunekichi, Ogawa Keikichi and Nomori Takeshi. 1925-1927. *Archaeological Researches on Ancient Lolang District*. Special Report of the Service of Antiquities Vol. IV.
- Srisuchat, A. 1996. Merchants, merchandise, markets: archaeological evidences in Thailand concerning maritime trade interaction between Thailand and other countries before the 16th Century AD. In A. Srisuchat (ed.), *Ancient Trades and Cultural Contacts in Southeast Asia*, pp. 237-66. Bangkok: The Office of the National Culture Commission.
- Usuki Isao. 1995. *Mongolu no Kyodo bo* [Hsiung-nu Tombs in Mongolia]. Kyoto: Bunkazai Ronso II, Dohosha, pp. 773-93 (in Japanese).
- Vandermeersch, L. 1960. *Les miroirs de bronze du Musée de Hanoi*. Paris: Publications de L'École française d'Extrême-Orient XLVI.
- Yokokura Masayuki. 1993. Dong Son to Sa Huynh [Dong Son and Sa Huynh]. *Southeast Asia, History and Culture* 22:152-72 (in Japanese).
- Zadneprovsky, Yu.A. and E.I. Lubo-Lesnitchenko. 1995. Han Type Mirrors in Ferghana Valley. *Cultura Antiqua* 47(5):18-30 (Japanese Translation).
- Zhongguokexueyuan Kaoguanjiesuo (ed.). 1959. *Luoyang Shaogou Han Mu*. Beijing: Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Sciences (in Chinese).