François Louis

Bronze Mirrors

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A total of twenty-nine bronze mirrors were recovered from various locations at the wrecksite. At the time of discovery most of the mirrors were covered by calcareous sediment (cf. above pp. 105–107). Underneath the calcification, their surfaces had corroded and in many cases had obtained a black patina known among collectors as "black lacquer patina," *heiqigu*.[1] Originally, the mirrors were most likely silver in colour to allow for a highly reflective surface. Because of this bright colour the alloy used for casting bronze mirrors is sometimes referred to as white bronze or speculum. Speculum contains 5 to 15 per cent more tin than bronze of a yellow, brown, or copper tone. During the Tang period, the bronze alloy for mirrors was composed of an average of 69 per cent copper, 25 per cent tin, and 5.3 per cent lead.[2]

The mirrors from the shipwreck offer a wide panorama of shapes and designs popular in Tang China. The following types can be distinguished:

Type	**Quantity**	**Catalogue number (quantity)**
Circular undecorated	3	25a (1), 25c (2)
Square with rounded corners, undecorated	4	37a (1), 37b (3)
Lobed with birds and flowers, *que rao hua zhi jing*	5	30–34
Square with auspicious animals, *ruishou jing*	2	35, 36
Circular with auspicious animals and inscription, *ruishou yuxia jing*	1	24
Circular with floral decoration	4	25b
Circular lion and grapevine, *ruishou putao jing*	6	26 (3), 27 (3)
Lobed *zhenzi feishuang* mirror	2	28, 29
Circular Han mirror with four nipples and four directional animals, *siru sishen jing*	1	23
Circular *Jiangxin* mirror with the Eight Trigrams, the four directional animals, and inscription, *bagua sishen Jiangxin jing*	1	22

1 For a discussion of dark patina on mirrors see Bruce Christman, 'Making the Mirrors', in Chou Juhsi 2000, 101–103. Also compare the piece in the Carter Collection, ibid., 64.

2 Approximately the same quantities were already common during the Han period (206 BC–AD 220), see Kong Xiangxing and Liu Yiman 1984, 177.

With the exception of the Han mirror (no. 23) and the inscribed piece decorated with the Eight Trigrams (no. 22, fig. 1), all of the mirrors represent popular Tang types that were produced commercially and in great quantities. More than a third of the selection consists of simple, undecorated specimens which undoubtedly were the most affordable. There are, however, also quite a number of heavy, so-called lion-and-grapevine mirrors, pieces sumptuously decorated with festive high relief designs that must have catered to the taste of rather affluent customers. The prancing animals on these mirrors are conventionally called lions, but they depict various kinds of fabulous beasts, which most likely were considered auspicious.[3] Similar quadrupeds also appear on mirrors without the lush grapevines. Mirrors decorated with such animals and plants are, like the undecorated mirrors, generic enough in design to be easily appreciated outside of a Chinese cultural context. Indeed considerable numbers of mirrors of the lion-and-grapevine type, the bird-and-flower type, and the auspicious-animal type similar to those of the shipwreck have been discovered at medieval sites outside of China proper. In 1980 Okazaki Takashi published a lengthy list of such mirrors unearthed in Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and even in Iran.[4] The wide international distribution of Tang mirrors demonstrates their popularity abroad and suggests that at least some of the mirrors on board the ship might have been commercial merchandise to be sold abroad.

The Belitung wreck also included examples whose decoration would make them most attractive to people familiar with Chinese culture: the two *zhenzi feishuang* mirrors (nos 28, 29) and the inscribed *Jiangxin* mirror (no. 22). Perhaps these mirrors were the personal accessories of Chinese dignitaries on board, or perhaps they were gifts. A commercial use, however, cannot be excluded.

Many of the mirrors preserve designs which were popular in the seventh and eighth centuries, and some of the pieces were indeed made many decades and even more than a century before the ship sank around the 830s. For instance, the *Jiangxin* mirror (no. 22, fig. 1) discussed more extensively below (pp. 196–198), is dated to 758 ; mirrors with fabulous animals and a poetic inscription (no. 24) occur first in seventh-century contexts; and lion-and-grapevine mirrors (nos 26, 27) were most popular during the late seventh and the eighth century.[5] It was not uncommon for a Chinese mirror to be used by several generations, as tomb finds frequently prove.[6] Very unusual, however, is the continued use of mirrors over many centuries, as suggested by the small mirror, which most likely dates from the first century BC or the first century AD (no. 23).[7] By the time this mirror was taken aboard the ship

3 For a short discussion of some of these auspicious quadrupeds see Soper 1967, 55–66. For a discussion of design variations of this type of mirror see Shih Tsiufeng 1992, 431–446.

4 Okazaki Takashi 1980, 136–149. According to some interpretations the lion-and-grapevine mirror unearthed in Iran is purportedly a local copy of a Tang original, cf. Kong Xiangxing and Liu Yiman 1984, 182.

5 Xu Diankui 1994, 305–308, 339–340.

6 For an introductory discussion of the phenomenon of long-time use of mirrors see Chou Ju-hsi 2000, 10–12.

7 For comparable pieces of the Han period see ibid., 40–41.

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it was clearly an antique, or at least looked like one. One wonders, whether it was appreciated as such, or whether it was sent abroad precisely because there was little appreciation for it in Tang China. Was it perhaps considered unfashionable? Was it considered unlucky, sold to a foreign merchant to be bartered off on a distant market, where shoppers would know nothing about the long history of the piece? Or was it on the contrary considered a lucky portent to protect its owner from the hazards of an overseas journey?

The most unusual mirror discovered on the shipwreck is the so-called *Jiangxin* mirror (no. 22, fig. 1). It was specially cast to celebrate the Winter Solstice of the year 758. No comparable piece appears to be known. The inscription prominently records that this mirror was 'made on the twenty-ninth day of the eleventh month of the first year *wuxu* of the Qianyuan reign of Tang [23 December 758] in Yangzhou at the heart of the Yangzi River [from bronze which was] smelted a hundred times'. Mirrors from Yangzhou made at the heart of the Yangzi are celebrated in Tang literature as the finest and most exclusive specimens of their kind.

The beautiful and prosperous city of Yangzhou, 'the jewel of China in the eighth century', was the great trading port in the Tang empire. Located at the centre of the main inland trade routes at the junction of the Yangzi River and the Grand Canal, Yangzhou was a major centre of manufacture and commerce, famous for its silk, sugar refining, boat building, excellent cabinetwork, and refined metalwork, bronze mirrors in particular.[8] Textual records mention that since the Sui dynasty, Yangzhou mirrors had regularly been sent to the court as tribute.[9] The *Taiping guangji* even preserves a story which mentions a gigantic mirror, 107 cm in diameter and decorated with a dragon, that was offered to the emperor on 29 June 744, ten days after the festival of the Double Fifth.[10] It was, as the text states, one of the celebrated *Jiangxin* mirrors cast 'at the heart of the Yangzi'. A poem by Bo Juyi (772–846) explains that the famed foundry, which produced these mirrors during the festival of the Double Fifth, was actually located on ships.[11] After being cast, the mirrors were polished with powdered abrasives and rinsed with river water. Apparently, popular opinion considered the Yangzi water itself to be essential for giving the Yangzhou mirrors their immaculate sheen.[12]

According to its inscription, the mirror found on the shipwreck in Belitung was cast not during the festival of the Double Fifth in summer, but in winter. The date in the inscription indicates that the casting coincided with the celebration of Winter Solstice, although that festival is not explicitly mentioned. The Japanese monk Ennin stayed in Yangzhou in 839 and describes the Winter Solstice Festival as one of the major Tang

8 Schafer 1963, 17–18. The population of Yangzhou around 760 totaled over 450,000.

9 Zhou Xin and Zhou Changyuan 1979, 53.

10 Ibid., 53, quoting from the *Yiwen lu* of the *Taiping guangji*.

11 'Bailian mirrors – casting them is an extraordinary custom… they are cast in boats on the waves at the River's heart, at noon of the fifth day of the fifth month. Their luster, polished from jade dust and gold paste, glistens like the clear water of an autumn pool…'; cf. Zhu Jincheng 1988, 1: 204–205.

12 Zhao Ming and Hong Hai 1997, 20, quoting Feng Mengzhen's (1548–1595) *Kuaixuetang manlu*.

Fig. 1 Bronze *Jiangxin* mirror (no. 22) from the Belitung wreck (Drawing: Z. Kotitsa).

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seasonal celebrations of the year. He recounts that the festivities lasted for three days and consisted mainly of social gatherings over fine meals and offering good wishes to everyone. Monks and laymen, 'officials of high and low rank and the common people all offer one another congratulations when they meet'.[13]

The cosmological decoration on the mirror is in ideal correspondence to the celebration of a new beginning associated with the Winter Solstice. This solstice marks the beginning of a new solar year, the pivotal time when days begin to grow longer and nights become shorter again. It was considered the time when the cosmological principle of *yin* had reached its maximum growth and began its decline, being replaced by the reborn *yang*.[14] The circle of the Eight Trigrams, ancient divinatory symbols of the universe, makes reference to this cosmic cycle of *yin* and *yang*.[15] The four trigrams whose lines add up to an odd number form the *yang* group; the other four trigrams, the sum of whose lines yields an even number, form the *yin* group. While the trigrams visualize the cycles of the universe in abstract figures, the four animals can be understood as representational symbols of the world's cardinal directions. This group is identified as the Four Spirits, *sishen*: the Azure Dragon of the East, the Vermilion Bird of the South, the White Tiger of the West, and the Dark Warrior of the North, which is represented here as a turtle without the snake which often forms a part of the image as well.[16]

The inscription describes the mirror as having been smelted a hundred times, *bailian*, a superlative feature of the famed *Jiangxin* mirrors. In Tang textual sources, such refined mirrors are generally described as products for the emperor, who would distribute these rarefied treasures as gifts among his nobility and his administration.[17] Although it is not perfectly clear who ordered the casting of the mirror found on the shipwreck, the quality, the festive occasion, and the renowned place of manufacture mentioned in the inscription indicate that the government was involved in its production.[18]

Tang mirrors which commemorate the date and place of manufacture in their inscriptions are exceedingly rare and all the more so if the year they were cast is historically memorable. The first year of the Qianyuan reign can be considered

13 Reischauer 1955, 58–59. Ennin describes the winter solstice festivities again a year later, when he stayed in the capital, ibid., 295.

14 On the significance of the winter solstice in early Chinese culture see Bodde 1975, 165–186.

15 Fung Yu-lan 1952, vol. 2, 102–106.

16 As specified in the *Tianwenxun* chapter of the *Huainan zi*, written around 120 BC. Cf. Diény 1987, 219.

17 Kong Xiangxing and Liu Yiman 1984, 178.

18 There is of course the possibility that the inscription was part of a scheme of later commercial bronze casters to deceive buyers with a famous name. But since there is no way of determining the authenticity of the mirror's provenance other than by its inscription, we will have to interpret the inscription at face value.

such a year. It was the year the Tang dynasty was able to recover from the disastrous rebellion initiated in December 755 by An Lushan, one of the emperor's trusted generals. The rebellion marked the tragic end of one of the most splendid reigns in Chinese history. After over four decades of rule, emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756) was forced to flee into exile and abdicate, while the two capitals fell into the hands of the rebels. Only in November 757, under the leadership of the new emperor Suzong (r. 756–762), were the imperial forces finally able to recover the capitals and establish temporary sovereignty.[19] 'Supernal Prime', *qianyuan*, the new reign name Suzong proclaimed in 758 after restoring the Tang dynasty, programmatically celebrates the idea of a new beginning. To further proclaim that the imperial court was back in control, many administrative names were also changed that year, including that of the city of Yangzhou. The city had been known by the name Yangzhou since 626, but in 742 it had been renamed Guangling. In 758 its name officially reverted to Yangzhou again.[20] Quite possibly there is a connection between the prominent display of the name Yangzhou in the mirror's inscription and the official restitution of the city's traditional name.

Despite proclamations of a new beginning under imperial control, the political situation of the Tang empire at the end of the year 758 was far from relaxed. Wars raged in the northern and northwestern provinces, and the court would be unable to fully quench the internal rebellions and insurrections for decades to come.[21] In 760 the rebel forces even managed to briefly retake the eastern capital Luoyang, and during the same year Yangzhou itself was the scene of historic bloodshed. Tian Shengong (d. 776), one of the rebel military commanders, ordered his troops to loot the city and massacre several thousand Arab and Persian merchants who resided there.[22] Symptomatic of the court's shaky political situation, the Qianyuan reign lasted only two years. In June 760 a new era, 'Highest Prime', *shangyuan*, was proclaimed, which again would last just two years.

19 For a summary of the events see Twitchett 1979, 453–486.

20 Shi Ding and Shen Zhihua 1994, 610.

21 Twitchett 1979, 564–571.

22 Schafer 1963, 18; *Jiu Tangshu*, 124: 3532.