

# THE CHINESE INSCRIPTION ON THE LACQUERWARE UNEARTHED FROM TOMB 20, GOL MOD I SITE, MONGOLIA

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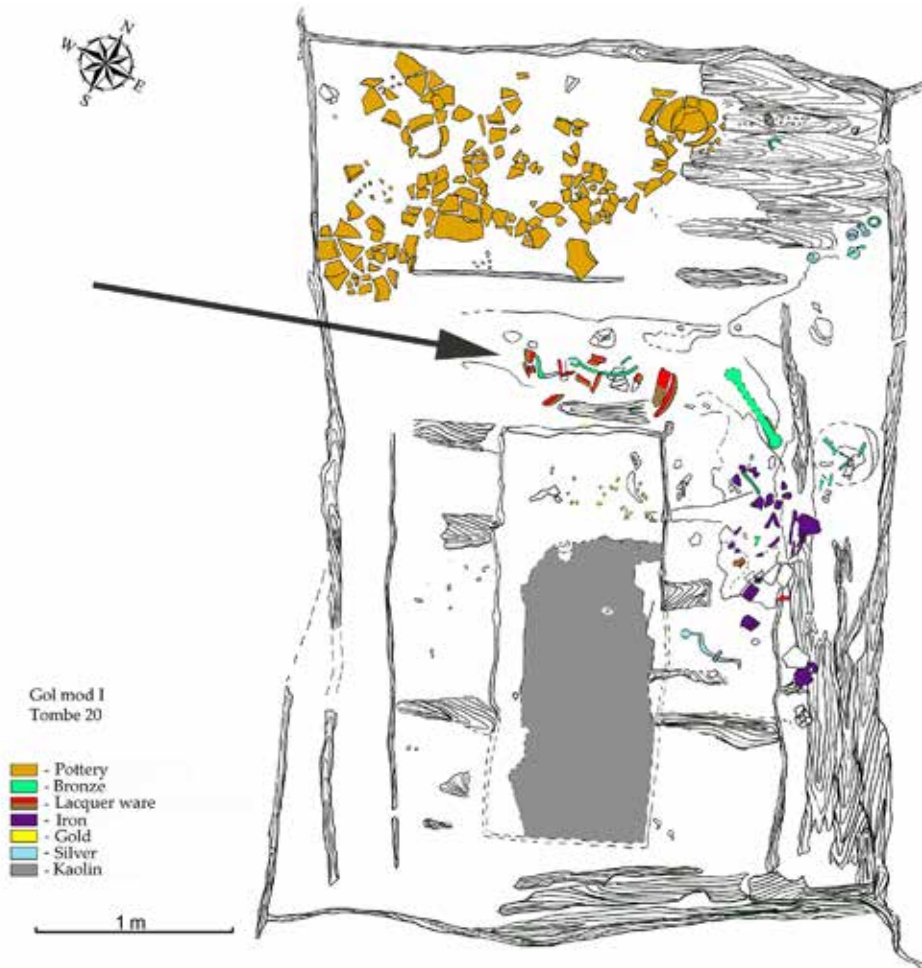
*Nara, Japan*

The Mongolian-French joint archaeological expedition carried out excavation at the Gol Mod I site in Central Mongolia (Khairkhan sum, Arkhangai aimag) from 2000 to 2010. The Gol mod I site is a mortuary complex of the Xiongnu elite located in a valley on the northern side of the mountains. The

site was discovered by Mongolian archaeologist Ts. Dorzhsüren who excavated 26 small circular (satellite) burials in 1956–1957 (Dorzhsüren 1958). Between 2000 and 2010, the Mongolian-French joint archaeological expedition excavated three elite tombs and fifteen satellite burials. Since 2014, a Mongolian-Monaco

joint expedition has started to work at the Gol Mod I site. The topographic study of this site registered 483 Xiongnu tombs; 214 (44.3%) of these were aristocratic tombs with entrance passage and the other 269 were satellite and circle shaped burials [Yeruul-Erdene 2014]. Burial 20 is one of the largest and was completely excavated between 2001 and 2004–2005 [Yeruul-Erdene and Gantulga 2008]. The excavation uncovered a good many artefacts and provided new knowledge of burial structure. This article reports on a Chinese inscription carved on lacquerware found in the tomb.<sup>1</sup>

The lacquerware was found in the space between the outer structure and coffin, near the short side of the coffin [Fig. 1]. The ware was



*Fig. 1. Plan of Tomb No. 20 at Gol Mod I, showing location of finds, the arrow indicating the remains of the lacquerware and its rim.*



Fig. 2. The lacquerware fragments. On the left is most of Piece 1 (the first character not shown); on the right all of Piece 2. Note that the two pieces as shown here are not in the same scale.

broken into many pieces, only two of which (here referred to as Piece 1 and Piece 2) have a Chinese inscription [Fig. 2]. The Chinese character inscription was carved on the undersurface of the rim. The inscription is not conserved completely; the beginning of the sentence and some characters between Piece 1 and 2 are lost. Fig. 3 (next page) shows the individual characters and our identifications. In the analysis which follows, we identify each character as "Piece No.\_-Character No.\_"; the symbol □ marks where there is an indecipherable character; and square brackets [ ] mark a most probable character.

In our reading then, the inscription is:

Piece 1: [紵]黃釳尺五寸旋永始  
元年 [供] 工=[武]造護臣  
[敬]□□

Piece 2: 掾臣[昌]主右丞臣□守  
令臣並省

From 1-1 to 1-7: This part of the sentence specifies the technical characteristics of this ware.

紵 *zhu*: *Zhu* is a cloth of hemp. In this case, it is supposed that lost upper character of *zhu* will be 夾 *jia*. *Zhujia* means pasting cloth on the wooden core of the ware. *Zhujia* is a technique to enhance its strength.

黃 *huang* 釳 *kou*: *Huang* is yellow, and *kou* means cover. *Huangkou* indicates that the rim of the ware was encased in gold (in fact, the metal is a gilded bronze). The bronze object found near the lacquerware has to be its rim [Fig. 1].

尺 *chi* 五 *wu* 寸 *cun*: This sentence expresses the size of the ware. *Chi* and *cun* are oriental linear measuring units (on a decimal scale), and a character before the unit is the number. The character



Fig. 3. The individual characters and their identifications. The numbering by piece and character is that used in our discussion of the inscription.

one has been omitted, but *wu* is five. We know the size (diameter) of this ware is 15 *cun*, i.e., 34.5 cm (1 *chi* is equal to 23 cm in the Western Han era).

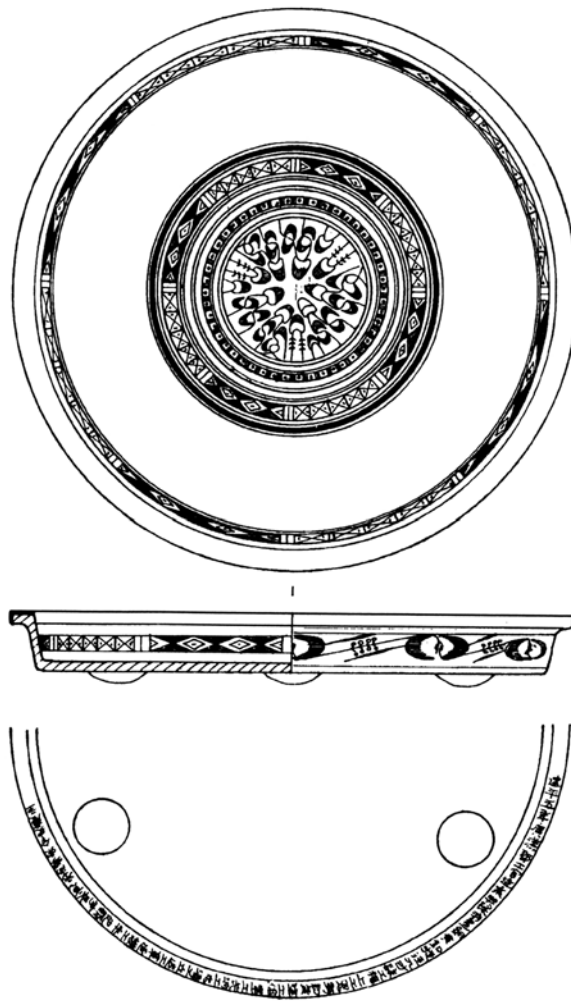
旋 *xuan*: *Xuan* is a kind of ware. There are two such known objects identified by their inscriptions as *xuan*, a round tray with feet. One of them was unearthed from Yaoziling Tomb No. 2, made at the West factory of *Shu* in 2 BCE. Yaoziling's ware resembles that of Gol Mod in its pattern painted in red [Fig. 4].

From 1-8 to 1-11: This part indicates the date of manufacture.

永 *yong* 始 *shi* 元 *yuan* 年 *nian*: The Western Han, the first year of the *yongshi* era is 16 BCE.

From 1-12 to 1-16: This part identifies the production factory and artisan.

Fig. 4. *Xuan* unearthed in Yaoziling Tomb No. 2 with inscription dated 2 BCE.



After: Human ICA and Yongzhou ZOPA 2001

供 *gong* 工 *gong*: *Gonggong*, the Imperial Workshop, is the name of a factory belonging to the central government which made many kinds of articles for the central government and royal court. This workshop was located in the palace of the Han dynasty at Chang'an (Xi'an), Shanxi province, China.

武 *wu* 造 *zao*: 武 is a repetition mark referring to the previous character; so this is also *gong*, and it means "artisan". *Zao* is a verb meaning "produced." Inscriptions on products of central factories do not identify all the artisans involved in making an object; so this artisan *Wu* will be a representative craftsman.

From 1-17 to 2-13: This part records those responsible for quality control. Products of central factories were checked by officials, recorded in ascending order from the lowest to the highest in rank, those positions or functions being:

for the lower, production management stage: 護 *hu* (inspector) → 佐 *zuo* (assistant clerk) → 嗇夫 *sefu* (workshop overseer) → 令史 *lingshi* (head secretary) → 掾 *yuan* (executive officer)

for the upper, final inspection stage: 右丞 *youcheng* (deputy director of the right) → 令 *ling* (director)

Each person is recorded by this formula: "(his function) + (臣 *chen* ["your servant"]) + (name)". Following the last name in the list for each stage is a verb, either 主 *zhu* (supervised/managed) for the lower stage officials directly managing the production or 省 *xing* (inspected) for the upper stage officials responsible for inspection of the finished product. If the character 守 *shou* is added before the position title, it means the post is a temporary one which the given officer fills in addition to his regular duty.

So this sentence can read:

The Inspector your servant *Jing* 敬, ... the Assistant Clerk your servant *Chang* 昌 supervised. The Deputy Director of the Right your servant [name] and Provisional Director your servant *Bing* 並 inspected.

This inscription has a gap in middle, but we can suppose that the missing part identified a lower stage official in a position between *zuo* and *lingshi*.

## Conclusion

Through the reading of inscription, we knew this *xuan* tray was made in the *Gonggong* imperial workshop in 16 BCE. This is important as it is only the fifth absolutely dated object excavated from Xiongnu elite tombs in Mongolia and Transbaikalia.<sup>2</sup> Of course the date can be only a *terminus post quem* for the tomb but

we can at least hypothesize regarding the circumstances in which the lacquered tray arrived in Mongolia. In 53 BCE the Xiongnu had agreed to a new kind of relationship with the Han Dynasty, at least in formal terms accepting the status of tributaries, in return for which the Han then frequently sent "gifts" to the Xiongnu ruler *Chanyu* 单于, often of substantial value. The date of 16 BCE falls in the Xiongnu reign of *Souxie* 搜諧若鞮单于 (20–12 BCE), who was succeeded by *Cheya* 車牙若鞮单于 (12–8 BCE). Since the lacquer *xuan* tray was made in the imperial workshop and thus was not an item that would normally have been available through simple commercial transactions, we might assume it formed part of the "tribute" gifts sent by the Han to Mongolia in one of the indicated reigns.

## About the authors

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## Notes

1. The first report was written by Mönkhbayar and Yeruul-Erdene [2011]. Here we correct the preliminary reading.

2. Other lacquerware found in Xiongnu tombs include cups from Noyon Uul (The Hermitage Museum, Inv. № MR-2301 and National Museum of Mongolian History, Inv. № A-242), analyzed by Louis 2006-2007 and Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens 2009; from Noyon Uul Tomb № 20, analyzed by Chistiakova 2009 and Polos’mak et al. 2011; Tsaram № 7 (Transbaikalia), analyzed by Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens 2007. The reading of the inscription from Noyon Uul Tomb № 20 offered by Chistiakova 2009 and Polos’mak et al. 2011 is not entirely accurate. This ware was made in the Kaogong central factory; so the order of inspectors must be same as Gonggong central factory. Following the listing of the lower-level inspectors should be the verb *zhu* 主 (supervised/managed). The inscription reads:

乘輿，髹 涓 畫木黃耳一升十六籥楮，元延四年，考工 = 通繕，涓工憲，守佐臣文，嗇夫臣黜，掾臣文主，右丞臣光，令臣譚省。

For more information about the Han dynasty’s lacquer production, see Wang 1982 and Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens 1982.