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ORNAMENT, TEXT, AND THE CREATION OF SISHEN MIRRORS IN LATE WESTERN HAN AND XIN CHINA (CA. 50 BCE – 23 CE)

SHI JIE 施傑

Towards the end of the first century BCE, ornamentation of Chinese mirrors shifted fundamentally from a symmetric design of largely repeated motifs to a unidirectional one of non-repetitive animal or human motifs, culminating in the so-called “Four Gods” (sishen 四神) mirrors. Scholars, however, have offered no explanations for this paradigm change. This article, by closely analyzing the ornament in relation to other elements in mirrors of different styles, demonstrates that the introduction of long expository inscriptions with narrative elements into late Western Han bronze mirrors redefined the relationship between the mirror and the viewer/reader, and played an important role in triggering the aforementioned shift in ornament. The author focuses on the changing styles and placements of the ornaments and inscriptions during circa 50 BCE to 23 CE. Finally, this article situates the change of mirror ornament in the historical context of the late Western Han and the Xin dynasties and speculates on its ideological and political causes.

KEYWORDS: Mirror, sishen, narrative, cosmology, Wang Mang

INTRODUCTION

Bronze mirrors, one of the most innovative contributions ancient Chinese artists made to the cultures of the ancient world, have fascinated scholars for over a thousand years.¹ Each mirror consists of two sides, the polished specular side to reflect images, and the back side usually adorned with low-relief decorative patterns. Mirrors appeared in China as early as the Neolithic Age in the Qijia 齊家 culture (ca. 2500 – ca. 1500 BCE) in present-day Gansu province. They furnished Shang 商 (17th c. – 1046 BCE) and Western Zhou 西周 (1046–771 BCE) royal tombs, and spread to lower-ranking elite tombs during the late Eastern Zhou 東周 (771–256 BCE) and Qin 秦 (221–210 BCE) dynasties.² However, despite its early origin, it was not until the Western Han 漢 (206 BCE – 8 CE) that the art of making mirrors reached its first peak. Not only did the number of archaeological discoveries of mirrors explode, but also the artistic quality of molding and casting

¹ Okamura 2011.

² Higuchi 1979, vol. 1, pp. 17–21; Kong – Liu 1984, pp. 11–20.

decisively improved. Mirrors made in this golden age are renowned for their fine metallurgy, high-quality casting, and diversified décor.³

The most significant achievement in previous scholarship was the clarification of chronology.⁴ According to art historical evidence, Western Han mirror ornamentation falls largely into four major stylistic categories: (1) “Zoomorphic Pattern Mirrors” (*panchiwen jing* 蟠螭紋鏡) with dragon arabesques;⁵ (2) “Grass-leaf Pattern Mirrors” (*caoyewen jing* 草葉紋鏡) with floral patterns; (3) “Inscriptional Band Mirrors” (*mingdai jing* 銘帶鏡) with long circular inscriptions; (4) “Four Gods Mirrors” (*sishen jing* 四神鏡) and “Animal Band Mirrors” (*shoudai jing* 獸帶鏡) featuring realistic zoomorphic motifs.⁶ Meanwhile, archaeology has shown that the four categories form consecutive stages of one chronological sequence.⁷ Category One was a continuation of a style in the late Warring States period (475–221 BCE); Category Two emerged in the first quarter of the second century BCE and disappeared towards the end of the century; Category Three made its first appearance about early first century BCE and remained popular through the last quarter of the century; Category Four did not appear until the last quarter of the first century BCE and became dominant in the Xin 新 dynasty (9–23 CE).⁸

Despite the clarification of chronology, a question has remained on the relationship between these apparently consecutive stylistic categories. Were they related or not? If so, what was the impetus behind this stylistic development?

To respond to such questions, this article focuses on the gap between Categories Two and Four in this sequence of changes. Before this fundamental shift, Chinese mirrors in Categories One and Two embraced a design of perfect symmetry. The ornament, despite varying motifs, always maintained bilateral or rotational symmetry

³ Higuchi 1979, vol. 1, pp. 29–81; Kong – Liu 1984, pp. 51–55; He Tangkun 1999, pp. 21–22; Guiver 2000.

⁴ Bulling – Drew 1971–1972; Higuchi 1979, vol. 1, pp. 83–120.

⁵ In Western literature, it was often called Shouzhou 壽州 mirrors. Shouzhou is the name of a place in present-day Anhui province where this type of mirrors was first identified. See Karlgren 1937.

⁶ Okamura 1984. Okamura’s dating is based on previous stylistic, archaeological, and inscriptional scholarship, which largely agrees with one another. Among these three types of evidence, the archaeological evidence has remained the most conclusive. The basic method is that if a mirror was contained in a tomb that can be securely dated by its other contents (ultimately based on dated inscriptions) to a specific period (e.g., Qin dynasty), then the mirror was dated no later than that period. Although theoretically, this method can only determine the *terminus ante quem* of the mirror, which does not rule out the possibility of heirlooms or antiquarianism, repeated such practices at a massive scale can lead to a proximately reliable chronology. Remarkably, the chronology of the mirrors largely matches the chronologies of other types of funerary objects as well as the tomb architecture. This matching forms the basis for scholarly confidence in the correctness of the chronology.

⁷ Zhongguo kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 1959, pp. 160–176.

⁸ We should not misunderstand this change from Category One to Category Four as a “linear and unidirectional evolution.” Art historians, as Max Loehr once famously declared, primarily, if not exclusively, describe the creation rather than continuation of styles or types. This sequence thus describes the introduction of new mirror types. So it is not surprising that some earlier mirror types were used or even made in the later periods. The chronology adopted in this article traces the inception rather than disappearance of different types of mirrors. At the same time, the popularity of these different categories also fits with this chronology, as archaeology has demonstrated.

around the central nipple.⁹ But after this shift, in Category Four the principle of symmetry dissolved. Instead, the ornament emphasized unidirectional movement around the central nipple, such as animals chasing each other.

That the object–subject interaction might have been one of the factors that triggered the change in the mirror design does not necessarily rule out other possible factors involved in the same process. But exploring those factors is not the mission of this article. I am open to future verification or falsification if new evidence appears.

In this article, by analyzing in depth the ornament in relation to other elements in mirrors of different styles, I will demonstrate that the introduction of expository inscriptions that feature narrative elements (later in this text abbreviated as “narrative inscriptions”) into late Western Han bronze mirrors played an important role in triggering the aforementioned paradigm shift in ornament. In doing so, I will make four interrelated arguments one by one: (1) the change in ornament from early Categories One and Two to late Category Four was one from symmetry to directionality; (2) the change in ornament coincided with the introduction of inscription, as demonstrated by transitional Category Three; (3) the new ornament (the *sishen* pattern) in Category Four completely complemented the use of script with the new inscription; (4) the ornament appeared later to follow the established order of the inscription rather than the other way around.

On the basis of these art historical observations, finally, I will suggest that this stylistic shift in ornament was utilized in the political context of late Western Han in the service of establishing the Xin dynasty. More broadly, this study aims to reveal the formative power of text and image in early Chinese art.

I. FROM SYMMETRY TO DIRECTIONALITY: CHANGING MODES OF MIRROR ORNAMENT

Most of the Category One *panchiwen* mirrors are circular, although a few are square (a Warring States legacy). In these mirrors, the ornaments consist of two major layers: (1) the “ground” layer, which generally vanished from mid-Western Han on, composed of minute, almost invisible geometric patterns; (2) the “figure” layer with interlocking geometric and dragon motifs. The “figure” layer is usually made up of repeated ornamental sectors (cast with identical ceramic pattern blocks) organized in rotational symmetry around the center nipple (knob or handle). Because the dragon patterns are abstract and interlocked, there is little sense of movement or indication of where the circular composition begins or ends.

On the Category Two *caoyewen* mirrors, with the disappearance of the “ground layer,” the composition is divided evenly in eight directions, including the four cardinal and the four diagonal directions, and thus forming eight angles of axial symmetry (Fig. 1). Sometimes, the T, L, and V symbols, which might have been related to or derived from the *liubo* 六博 chessboard design, were introduced to frame the major floral or geometric ornaments repeated in the four quarters of the mirror’s

⁹ A shape has bilateral symmetry when one plane divides an organism into roughly mirror image halves. A shape has rotational (or radial) symmetry when it still looks the same after a rotation. See Weyl 2015.

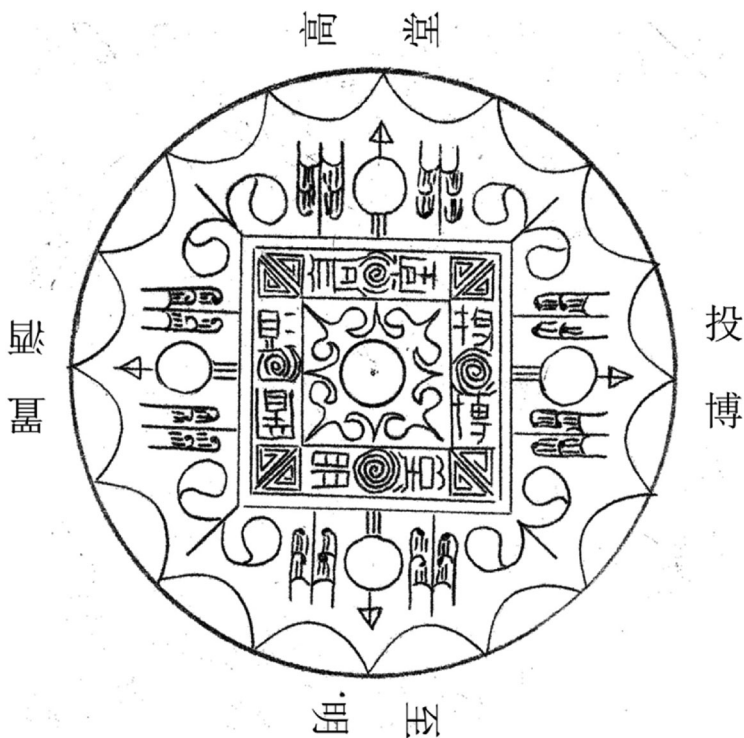


FIG. 1 Early Mirror (Grass-Leaf Mirror), ca. 150–100 BCE. Drawing by author after Wang Ganghuai 王纲怀, *Zhishui ji: Wang Ganghuai tongjing yanjiu lunji (zengdingben)* 止水集——王纲怀铜镜研究论集（增定本） (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2016), p. 27, fig. 6.4.

decorative band.¹⁰ These symbols were distributed only in the cardinal and diagonal directions, thus confirming and reinforcing the symmetry of the major ornaments.¹¹ What is more, as the mirror is rotated 90 degrees, the overall pattern looks the same. The pattern is continuous both clockwise and counterclockwise; there is no starting-point or ending-point. All the ornamental motifs point towards the central nipple, without a sense of circular movement around the center.¹²

¹⁰ For the chessboard symbolism of this particular ornamental motif, which is beyond the scope of this article, see Yang Lien-sheng 1947, pp. 202–206; Loewe 1979; Fu Juyou 1986; Tseng Lan-ying 2004.

¹¹ The TLV symbols occasionally appeared in Category One mirrors. For example, *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo* 1980, vol. 1, p. 262, fig. 178.2.

¹² It may be argued that “a (rotational) symmetrical pattern does not necessarily entail a motionless feeling, at least not in the case of mirror design,” as one of the anonymous reviewers of this article pointed out. However, I must note that rotational symmetry does not necessarily indicate movement or motion. For example, the so-called *xingyun* 星云 (stars and clouds) mirrors that follow the rule of rotational symmetry do not convey a sense of movement. It only means that if one turns the object at certain degrees he or she will get the same pattern. But one can turn the object either clockwise or counterclockwise. The illusion of motion, however, might be evoked by the

However, all above compositional conventions break down in the new styles in Category Four that emerged in the late Western Han. The most notable types include the so-called Four Directional Gods (*sishen*) and Animal Band Mirrors.¹³ On these mirrors, although some geometric elements including the TLV pattern that frames the figural motifs remain symmetrical, the animals are neither repetitive nor symmetrical. They not only face in one direction but also express a sense of movement. The new order is epitomized in the *sishen* mirror, whose circular decorative band is filled with images of the Four Directional Gods, including the Blue Dragon, the Red Bird, the White Tiger, and the Black Warrior (Snake-Tortoise) (Fig. 2a). These gods were guardians of the four sides of the universe, “up to the sky and down to the Yellow Springs.”¹⁴ Replacing previous repetitive and symmetrical ornaments, these gods each were rendered in a unique form.

In place of symmetry now it is movement. Unlike the abstract dragons that remain static in interlocked positions in earlier *panchiwen* mirrors, these new, more realistic animals are clearly engaged in dynamic movement. Anneliese Bulling described the most important change as “the replacement of dragon or other arabesques on TLV and other mirrors by figures of winged animals, strange monsters, or immortals [...] shown in action, some chasing each other or fighting.”¹⁵ In the *sishen* mirror, the dragon stretches its elastic and beautifully curving body, poised in a moment of rushing forward; the bird extends its wings in the act of flying. The space between these animals is filled with numerous clouds and other supernatural creatures, all in the moment of roaming and racing. The Four Gods were arranged in a uniform direction, all facing and advancing counterclockwise.¹⁶ Okamura Hidenori noted the “new design” with non-repeated animals in a “dynamic” (*yakudō* 躍動) and “flowing” (*ryūdō* 流動) arrangement.¹⁷ Rotating the mirror a full 360 degrees, the pattern never looks the same.

hypothetical rotation we conduct in our mind. In contrast, in the Category Four mirrors movement or motion is not hypothetical but empirical, because the animals themselves are physically depicted as moving in a dynamic posture.

¹³ It must be noted, however, that mirrors with repetitive animals arranged in rotational symmetry appeared much earlier in the Warring States period (see Kong – Liu 1984, pp. 66ff.) and were surely not an invention of Western Han. What is new to this period was the so-called “Animal Band” mirrors, featuring non-repeated and non-symmetrical animals. According to the Shaogou 燒溝 chronology, “Animal Band” mirrors were introduced slightly earlier than and remained almost contemporaneous with the “Four Gods” mirrors often featuring the TLV patterns (see *Zhongguo kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo* 1959, Type V, p. 174). The “Animal Band” mirrors might have served as one of the direct inspirations for the “Four Gods” mirrors, which were more rigorously modeled after the Han cosmology. “Animal Band” mirrors, in this sense, initiated or anticipated the fundamental shift that was completed by the TLV “Four Gods” mirrors.

¹⁴ 上入蒼天，下入黃泉。This couplet defines the upper and lower directions of the universe, in addition to the four cardinal directions; see Harper 2004, p. 236. For the astrological meaning of the Four Gods, see Sun – Kistemaker 1997, pp. 113–118; for pictorial representations of the Four Gods in Han period, see Tseng Lan-ying 2011, pp. 236–264.

¹⁵ Bulling 1960, p. 36.

¹⁶ Besides the major animal motifs, some additional creatures filled the blanks between the main directional gods. These minor animals sometimes seem to move in opposite directions. Unlike the Four Directional Gods, these motifs have no specific forms, names, or cosmological meanings.

¹⁷ Okamura 1984, p. 694.

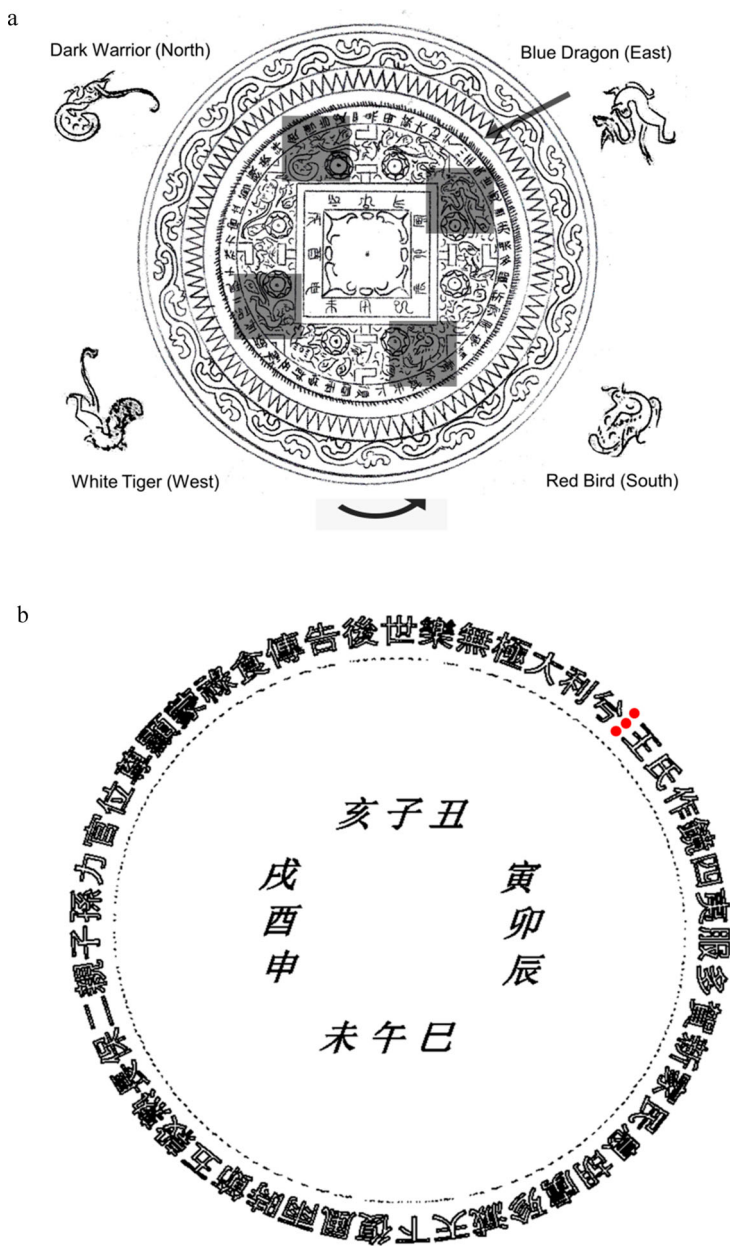


FIG. 2 (a) Four Directional Gods (*shihen*) mirror. Xin dynasty, 9–23 CE. The four gods are marked in grey and their movement is indicated by the rotating arrow; the beginning/ending mark of circular inscription is marked by the straight arrow. Drawing by author after Kuboso Memorial Museum of Arts, Izumi 2012, p. 133 pl. 128. (b) Transcription of inscriptions on the Kubosō mirror; the beginning/ending mark of circular inscription is marked by the red dots. Graph made by author.

The formal gap between these two categories is so significant that the later style could hardly have derived naturally from the early one. Rather, an entirely new design or visual paradigm was created to replace the old one. This fundamental shift was unprecedented in the history of Chinese mirror designing. But why did this change happen?

2. FROM PARALLELISM TO NARRATIVE: CHANGING MODES OF MIRROR INSCRIPTIONS

To detect the cause of the paradigm shift in Han mirror ornament, it is necessary to examine the mirror as a whole, to see if other aspects of the mirror also changed. The most notable simultaneous change between Categories Two and Four occurs in inscriptions, which were not introduced into mirror designs until the early Western Han. Although Bulling noted the use of inscriptions as the most important innovation of Han mirrors,¹⁸ its impact on the change of ornament is yet to be understood.

The change that took place between Categories Two and Four mirrors in inscription is no less profound than the change in ornament. The short, non-narrative text in the earlier period was replaced by the long, narrative text in the later period.

Although text is characterized by an inherent linear structure, moving in one direction from a beginning to an end, artists tended to employ a flexible and open-ended quality that was free of causal logic when text was first introduced onto the back of mirrors in the beginning of the second century BCE. This result was achieved by two means.

Firstly, artists limited the length of the text, as short texts usually produce weaker narrative. Most of the earliest inscriptions on *panchiwen* (Category One) and *caoyewen* (Category Two) mirrors during the early Western Han consist of no more than twelve characters.¹⁹ These characters usually form two four-word or four three-word couplets, which further constitute simple sentences. For example, one inscription is divided into two short lines of four words: “May you have a thousand blessings and a hundred felicities” (*qian lu bai fu* 千祿百福) and “May you obtain the strength of Heaven from above” (*shang de tian li* 上得天力).²⁰

Secondly, artists chose to list parallel wishes that evade logic and narrative.²¹ This strategy works best with shorter texts with fewer than eight words. In the above example, two parallel prayers “May you have a thousand blessings and a hundred felicities” and “May you from above obtain the strength of Heaven” assume no strict causal relationship between them, because it is hard to determine whether the blessings and felicities are the condition for gaining heavenly strength or the

¹⁸ Bulling 1960, p. 20.

¹⁹ In 107 randomly selected such samples, only twenty-four inscriptions (22%) contain more than 12 characters and only six (6%) contain more than 20 characters; see Zhang Dan 2013; Okamura 2009. As one of the anonymous reviewers noted, occasionally some Category Three long inscriptions might appear with the Category Two *caoyewen* patterns. But such hybrid examples should date to the phase of Category Three. A basic principle for dating a tomb with multiple contents in archaeology was that the whole tomb should date no earlier than the latest content it contains. And this principle applies also to the dating of mirrors with multiple elements.

²⁰ Karlgren 1934, p. 20, no. 36.

²¹ Lin Su-ching 1991.

consequence of it. Therefore, this text, arranged in an end-to-end circular composition, could well start with either *qian* or *shang*, for both sequences make good sense.

The level of flexibility, however, varies in different inscriptions. One of the most popular inscriptions in the early period consists of two short sentences, “the light of the sun is reflected” (*jian ri zhi guang* 見日之光) and “the world is very bright” (*tianxia da ming* 天下大明). Assuming reflecting the sunlight as the condition of the world’s brightness, most scholars would begin their reading with the character *jian* 見. However, there is no reason why they cannot read the text reversely as *tianxia da ming, jian ri zhi guang* 天下大明, 見日之光. The argument is twofold. First, “reflecting the sunlight” simply describes the mirror’s specular function, whereas “the world being bright” is an auspicious prayer and praise for the current dynasty; they can be just two parallel, though somewhat related, statements without a causal relationship. Second, even if we assume the causal relationship between the two sentences, given the fact that the text is made of only two short sentences, we can still understand the text as either “because of seeing the sunlight, the world is very bright” or “the world is very bright because of seeing the sunlight” without any difficulty. The latter alternative reading can be regarded as a simplification of *tianxia da ming, [nai] jian ri zhi guang [zhi gu ye.]* 天下大明, [乃] 見日之光 [之故也]. This flexibility, however, does not apply to long inscriptions with stronger and more definite narratives, as I will discuss later.

Because of this ambiguity, different scholars sometimes read one identical inscription in different ways. For example, one text reads: *qiu feng qi, yu zhi bei, jiu bu jian, shi qian xi* 秋風起, 予志悲, 久不見, 侍前稀. Luo Zhenyu’s 羅振玉 (1866–1940) reading begins with *qiu* 秋: “The autumn wind rises; my mind is sad; for long I have not seen you; my serving in your presence is rare [it is but seldom that I wait upon you].”²² But Tomioka Kenzō 富岡謙藏 (1871–1918) starts his reading with *jiu* 久: “For long I have not seen you; my serving in your presence is rare [it is but seldom that I wait upon you]; the autumn wind rises; my mind is sad.”²³

Some ingeniously designed Western Han inscriptions feature even more flexible structures that can match or even rival that of ornament. In one such example, eight characters *zhi jiu gao tang tou bo zhi ming* 置酒高堂投博至明 are organized in an end-to-end mode around the center boss, like most other *caoyewen* mirrors (Fig. 1).²⁴ Because the text joins up end to end, compositionally (though not necessarily grammatically) any character might be taken as the beginning word. The most popular reading among scholars begins with the character *zhi* (to set up): “[I] set up the wine in the lofty hall; [we] threw the gaming pieces until daybreak” 置酒高堂, 投博至明. In this reading, the text is divided evenly into two lines, but the temporal or causal relationship between the two is vague, because it is unclear whether the drinking or the game occurs first. It makes good sense to begin with the character *tou* (to throw) and read the whole text alternatively as “[We] threw the gaming pieces towards the daybreak; [I] set up the wine in the lofty hall” 投博至明, 置酒高堂. However, the text does not end with these two interpretations, but can be read in at least two other ways, one beginning with *zhi* (till): “Towards daybreak [I] set

²² Karlgren 1934, p. 23, no. 70.

²³ Karlgren 1934, p. 23, no. 71.

²⁴ Wang Ganghuai 2016, p. 27, fig. 6–4.

up the wine; in the lofty hall [we] threw gaming pieces” 至明置酒，高堂投博。And another starts with *gao* (lofty): “In the lofty hall [we] threw gaming pieces; until day-break [I] set up the wine” 高堂投博，至明置酒。So like the symmetrical ornament, which can be approached in four or eight directions, the text likewise features a flexible structure with four possible readings without substantial semantic difference between them.

By creating parallel wishes of three or four words, mirror artists were able to fit longer texts onto the mirror without generating narrative. For example, in Mancheng 滿城 Tomb no. 1 in present-day Baoding 保定, Hebei, dated about 113 BCE, archaeologists discovered a *caoyewen* mirror with a longer inscription:

長富貴，[樂]毋事，日有意，常得所喜，宜酒食	May you enjoy noble titles and wealth forever; may you be [happy and] free of trouble; may you every day have delight; may you always have what you enjoy; may you have wine and food. ²⁵
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Because the extended text now consists of five parallel wishes, the artist could no longer fit it neatly into the old quadruple composition but had to artificially cut it into four sections, inevitably disrupting the reading experience (Fig. 3). Such awkward situations might have forced many mirror artists to arrange the text into a circular rather than a square zone around the center nipple to make the best use of space.²⁶ In doing so the anti-narrative nature of the text is even more amplified, because the text is no longer separated into four inscriptional sections (bars) but rather flows in an undivided end-to-end circle, in which each character shares an identical compositional role (see Figs. 2a and 2b), whilst in the old quadruple composition, the characters in the middle of an inscriptional bar are of a different status from those in the beginning and end of the same bar (see Fig. 1). The lengthened circular text, however, remains as a list of short wishes. The loose causal relationship and the circular arrangement allow the reader to start with any wish without hindering understanding: it makes no difference if the reader begins with “may you every day have delight,” “may you always have what you enjoy,” or “may you have wine and food.”

Such a flexible text with loosely bound and interchangeable parts finds its possible prototype in a set of forty inscribed coins excavated from Mancheng Tomb no. 2 (dated late 2nd c. BCE), also in present-day Baoding, Hebei, usually named “Wagers for Palace Entertainment” (*gongzhong xingle qian* 宮中行樂錢). Twenty of these coins are numbered on one side from one to twenty, and the other twenty are each inscribed with three or four characters to form an auspicious prayer similar to the Mancheng mirror inscriptions. Because each coin stands alone, perhaps they were used as wine wagers. As a whole, the prayers contain no fixed sequence and are free to be assembled into various passages.²⁷

²⁵ Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 1980, vol. 1, p. 81.

²⁶ Okamura 2009, pp. 33–35.

²⁷ Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 1980, vol. 1, pp. 271–272. The reconstruction was suggested by Guo Moruo 郭沫若; see Lu Zhaoyi 2005, pp. 161–162. For a recent discussion of the coin inscriptions, see Shi Jie 2020, pp. 85–88, 203–207.

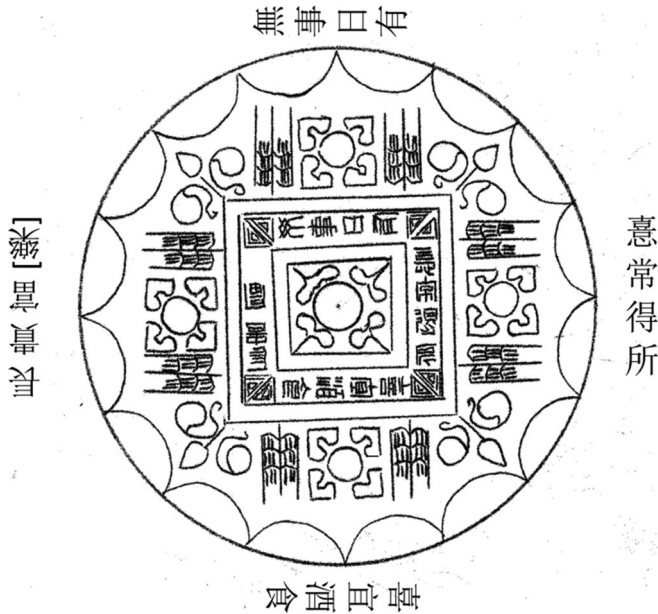


FIG. 3 Grass-leaf Mirror from Mancheng Tomb no. 1, Baoding, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. Drawing by author after Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中国社会科学院考古研究所, *Mancheng Han mu fajue baogao* 满城汉墓发掘报告, p. 81, fig. 54.

聖主佐	May the sage ruler be assisted.
得佳士	May wise officials be found.
常毋苛	May there be no harsh penalties.
驕次已	May arrogance and self-indulgence cease
府庫實	May warehouses and barns be full.
五穀成	May the five grains grow to maturity.
金錢施	May gold and money be granted.
珠玉行	May pearls and jades circulate.
貴富壽	May nobility, riches, and long-life be had.
壽毋病	May there be long-life without sickness.
萬民番	May ten-thousand people prosper. ²⁸
天下安	May the world remain at peace.
起行酒	May [you] rise up and have a drink.
樂無憂	May [you] have joy without worry.
飲酒歌	May you drink and sing.
飲其右	Let the one on your right drink. ²⁹
自飲止	Stop drinking yourself.
樂乃始	Let music begin.
畏妻鄙	May the spousal branches be awe-inspiring!
壽夫王母	May the royal mother live long!

²⁸ Qiu Xigui reads it as *pi* 匹, see Qiu Xigui 1981.

²⁹ The excavation report transcribes it as *yin qi jia* 飲其加, but Qiu Xigui suggests that the last character should be *you* 右; see Qiu Xigui 1981.

A reader cannot jump to the middle of a regular text without ruining comprehension, but in the Mancheng text the reader can start with any wish. The lack of narrative order in such early mirror inscriptions does not contradict but resists the inherent linear logic of text, which demands an uncompromisingly unidirectional reading from a definite beginning to a fixed end.

However, such qualities completely disappeared in Category Four mirrors, in which the text exhibits the opposite tendency: it is much longer, it begins and ends with certain words, and it features an explicit narrative.

In terms of length, the text is usually made of twenty to fifty characters. Occasionally the inscription can reach as long as fifty-six characters, that is, more than three times longer than the regular Category One and Two mirror inscriptions.³⁰ I will focus on one group of Category Four mirrors, characterized by a nearly identical long inscription beginning with the phrase “the Wang family has made the mirror and the Four Barbarians have submitted” (*Wangshi zuojing* 王氏作鏡). The name “Wangshi” made its first appearance in mirror inscriptions during the Xin period and continued being used in the Eastern Han period. Whereas during the Eastern Han, as Anthony Barbieri-Low has correctly noted, the label *Wangshi* (Wang family) was only one of the many competing family workshops (such as *Cai* and *Zhang*) at the time,³¹ in Xin-period mirrors, the “Wang” family workshop was still unique, and thus refers more likely to Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE – 23 CE), who became the regent in 6 and took over the imperial throne from the last emperor of the Western Han in 9 CE.³² Made for this powerful usurper and ruler, this group of mirrors boasts arguably the most rigorous and least variable design among all inscribed Category Four mirrors, making it an ideal sample for this study.³³

In one of these examples, now in the collection of Kubosō Memorial Museum of Arts, Izumi, Japan, the text has fifty-two words (Fig. 2b):

The Wang family has made the mirror; the barbarians of the four directions have submitted; great congratulations to the New Dynasty [Xin]; the people have got rest; the Hu slaves (i.e., tribes of the North) are destroyed and exterminated; the world was exempt [from forced labor];³⁴ wind and rain are timely and temperate, the five kinds of grain ripen; may you long preserve your two parents; may your sons and

³⁰ See Chūgoku kokyō no kenkyūhan 2009, pp. 139–209.

³¹ Barbieri-Low 2007, pp. 149–150.

³² He Shiji 1944; Wang Ganghuai 2016, pp. 91–94. Wang Ganghuai holds the same opinion and dates these mirrors between 6 and 15 CE; see Wang Ganghuai 2016, 94.

³³ So far, over a dozen of such *Wangshi zuojing* mirrors have been published. Kubosō Memorial Museum of Arts, Izumi 2012, p. 133 pl. 128; Wang Ganghuai 2004, p. 130; He Lin 2008, pp. 44–45, pl. 14; Wang Ganghuai 2011, pls. 49, 50; Chen Peifen 1987, pl. 41; Lüshun bowuguan 1997, p. 47; Xin Guangjie 2001, vol. 1, pp. 74, 76, pls. 58, 60; Huang Jun 1990, pl. 58; Wang Ganghuai 2016, pp. 78–80, fig. 18; Shandong sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2009, p. 322, pl. 188–2; Munsterberg 1951, p. 43. For a discussion, see Wang Ganghuai 2016, pp. 55–94.

³⁴ Some scholars including B. Karlgren and K.E. Brashier translated *tianxia fu* as “the world is stored.” See Karlgren 1934, p. 61, no. 194; Brashier 2012, vol. 2, pp. 100–119. I agree that the interpretation of *fu* 復 as “restoring” might make better sense in Eastern Han or post-Eastern Han inscriptions, but would prefer translating *fu* as “exemption” in this and other late Western Han or Xin inscriptions, because historically China (“the world”) did not shatter or fall into the hands of the barbarians until the end of the Xin dynasty. Moreover, there are examples of

grandsons be strong; may your official position be august and illustrious; may you receive emoluments and food; may you hand it down and thereby inform later generations; may you have joy without limit; may you have great profit!³⁵

The dating of this mirror can be clinched by the special writing of *si* (Four) in the inscription.³⁶ Rather than being written as 四 as it was in the Western Han and Eastern Han, it is configured as 𠄎, which was unique to the Xin-period orthography used exclusively between 10 and 23 CE according to the dated excavated official documents from present-day Juyan 居延, Gansu province.³⁷

With an increased length, the text decisively shifts its position. While early short inscriptions usually surround the center nipple at a “low orbit,” to accommodate this length, the artist moved the text farther from the center closer to the rim of the mirror, where the circumference of the circular inscriptional band reaches the maximum.

What is more, the text was given a fixed beginning and an end. Unlike earlier inscriptions always connecting end to end around the center with no specified beginning, this text is marked with three dots in a row right before the word *wang* 王 clearly indicating to the reader its first word, and the word *xi* 兮 (alas!), an exclamation with a grammatical role of concluding a sentence (see Fig. 2b).³⁸

The greatest difference lies in the content. If the earlier inscriptions resist linear narrative, the new inscription amplifies it. In the above example, the text tells a story: it begins with the production of the mirror in the imperial workshop and then proceeds to the idealized social reality. Even the description of the social reality follows a reasonable sequence: first the empire’s external enemies are destroyed. This victory leads to a series of good results. Because peace is made, people are sent back home from obligatory government services (*fu* 復); after

tianxia fu 天下復 or *fu tianxia* 復天下 in transmitted texts to mean labor exemption. For example, Fang Xuanling 1974, j. 3, p. 51: “Exempting the world from paying land taxes, labor services, and trading taxes for one year.” 復天下租賦及關市之稅一年。

³⁵ 王氏作鏡四夷服，多賀新家[人]民息。胡虜殄滅天下復，風雨時節五穀熟。長保二親子孫力，官位尊顯蒙祿食。傳告後世樂無極，大利兮！ Sofukawa 2014, p. 2. English translation mine, based on Karlgren 1934, p. 38, no. 123.

³⁶ To corroborate this dating, an almost identical inscription was similarly dated by the same criterion to the Xin period; see Chūgoku kokyō no kenkyūhan 2009, p. 204, no. 454.

³⁷ Mori 1963, pp. 257–266. For a recent review, see Jiao Tianran 2016, p. 103. The character 四 was used till 10 CE (the second year of the Xin dynasty) and was restored after the fall of the Xin dynasty in 23 CE.

³⁸ One of the anonymous reviewers noted an early Western Han mirror including a fish-shaped mark separating the first and last words of the inscription (see Qiu Longsheng 2005, p. 8), but that fish-shaped mark is fundamentally different from the dots in the late Western Han bronze mirrors. I do not think the two fish can be regarded as markers of the beginning of the text. They are more likely ornaments to fill in the blank space. My argument is twofold. First, without the fish the reader can still easily locate the beginning and the end of the text, whereas the two/three dots symbols were of a different nature. Second, the practice of using the dots to mark the beginning or ending of a text can be traced back to the Warring States bronze inscriptions (an example can be found in King Cuo’s tomb of the Zhongshan 中山 kingdom in Hebei; see Hebei sheng wenwu yanjiusuo 1996, vol. 1, pp. 124–125). It seems this dotted marker was not used in mirrors until late Western Han period.

coming back home to take care of their fields, the weather is harmonious; because of the good weather, the crops grow well, which in turn bring forth a provident harvest. Supplied with more food, people are able to support their parents and have more children. Finally, people's high positions and salaries will be passed onto the later generations. In short, the narrative begins with the present and ends with the future.

It is clear that between Categories Two and Four, the change of ornament from symmetry to directionality coincided with the change of inscription from parallelism to narrative. The two changes are common in their simultaneous transition from non-linearity to linearity, and from static repetition to dynamic movement.

3. SYNCHRONIZING ORNAMENT TO TEXT AND ITS COSMOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM

The two parallel changes in ornament and inscription are by no means mere coincidence but closely connected. In fact, in Category Four mirrors, ornament and text are more or less interdependent as a unified design. The evidence could be best found in the unique rotational nature of the new ornament. Whereas the old designs remained static and representational, the new ornament in both *shoudai* and *sishen* (Category Four) mirrors almost always features a group of animals chasing each other in the unidirectional, counterclockwise movement around the center nipple, while the inscriptions almost always advance in the opposite, clockwise direction. In this arrangement, reading the text would require the reader to manually rotate the mirror in the opposite direction, thereby animating the animals in a counterclockwise movement.

This synchrony between the circular movements of the text and the ornament, common in all Category Four mirrors, activated a special cosmological symbolism in the *sishen* type of mirrors.

This symbolism is most obvious in the zoomorphic motifs. The *sishen* mirrors, unlike other Category Four mirrors, are defined by the Four Directional Gods that dominate the ornamental composition. Each of the gods occupies a cardinal direction in a rather fixed pattern: the north god is in the upper quarter, the south spirit in the lower quarter, the west god on the left and the east spirit on the right (Table 1).

This distribution of the four directions accords with the directional system on the earth, and therefore can be called "earthly directional pattern" (*ditu* 地圖).³⁹ It is the mirror image of the "heavenly directional pattern" (*tiantu* 天圖), in which West and East exchange their positions while the rest of the system remains unchanged. If the "earthly pattern" represents what someone might see when he or she is looking down from above at the earth, the "heavenly pattern" sums up the opposite experience, with this person lying down and looking at the sky from below.

To reinforce the earthly metaphor of the mirror, artists sometimes added a further inscription of twelve earthly branches around the four sides of an inner square

³⁹ Li Ling 2000, pp. 270–284.

TABLE 1
CARDITIONAL DIRECTIONS ON EARTH

North	
West	East
South	

TABLE 2
POSITIONS OF TWELVE EARTHLY BRANCHES

Hai Zi Chou	
Xu	Yin
You	Mao
Shen	Chen
Wei Wu Si	

situated between the central nipple and the decorative band (Fig. 2). In Chinese cosmology, each earthly branch (*dizhi* 地支) is associated with a specific direction: *hai* 亥, *zi* 子 and *chou* 丑 appear in the north, *yin* 寅, *mao* 卯, and *chen* 辰, in the east, *wei* 未, *wu* 戊, and *si* 巳, in the south, and finally, *shen* 申, *you* 酉, and *xu* 戌, in the west (Table 2).

In the *sishen* mirror, the distribution of earthly branches, as indicated by the inscriptions, corresponds exactly with that of the Four Directional Gods. The earthly branches in the north match the location of the northern god Dark Warrior, those in the east, the eastern god Blue Dragon; those in the south, the southern god Red Bird; those in the west, the western god White Tiger. It is

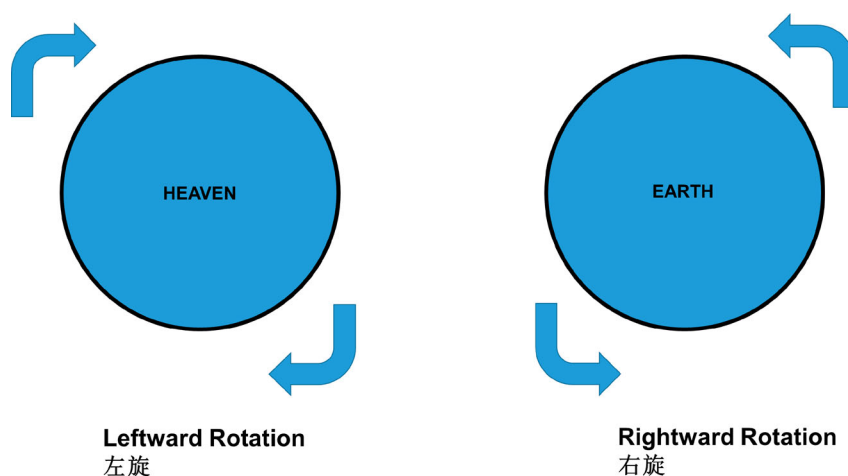


FIG. 4: Two Modes of Rotation in Han Chinese Cosmology. Graph made by author.

clear that the *sishen* mirror was designed to reflect the sacred geography of the earth.⁴⁰

What further clinches the earth symbolism is the fact that the two rotate in the exactly opposite directions, just as Han cosmology prescribed. In Western Han writings on cosmology, heaven and earth both follow circular orbits. While the heaven rotates clockwise (*zuoxuan* 左旋: leftward rotation), the earth rotates counterclockwise (*youxuan* 右旋: rightward rotation) (Fig. 4).⁴¹ Although the inscribed text advances clockwise in the direction of heaven and the Great Dipper, reading it would require the reader to manually rotate the mirror in the opposite direction, thereby animating the Four Directional Gods in a counterclockwise – earthly – movement.⁴²

This more accurate imitation of the earth was based on a traditional notion that mirrors symbolized the earth. The existence of a few square mirrors from the late Eastern Zhou to the early Western Han attests to the fact that mirrors could be modeled on the plan of the earth.⁴³ The basic topography of the mirror, with a protruding circular nipple dominating the center of a flat surface, resembles the vertical section of the earth, which is high in the center but flat in the four directions.

⁴⁰ For early Chinese sacred geography, see Henderson 1984, pp. 59–88; Dorofeeva-Lichtmann 2003.

⁴¹ Although nobody could feel the movement of the earth, Han cosmologists argued that since heaven and earth were mirror reflections of each other, heaven's clockwise movement revealed the transcendental fact that the earth moved in the opposite direction. 天左旋，地右轉。See Yasui 1971–1992, vol. 4a, p. 35.

⁴² The dynamic “earthly directional pattern,” it must be noted, was not unique to *sishen* mirrors, but was inherent in the late Western Han popular experience of the world, as was expressed in Western Han divination boards, or *shipan* 式盤. Michael Loewe, among other scholars, has recognized the similarity between the mirror and the divination board not only in form but also in religious function; see Loewe 1979, p. 81. For studies of divination boards, see Harper 1978–1979; Yan Dunjie 1985. For the concept of *shi*, see Kalinowski 2012–2013.

⁴³ For square mirrors, the earliest accounts can be found in Umehara 1936, pp. 35–37.

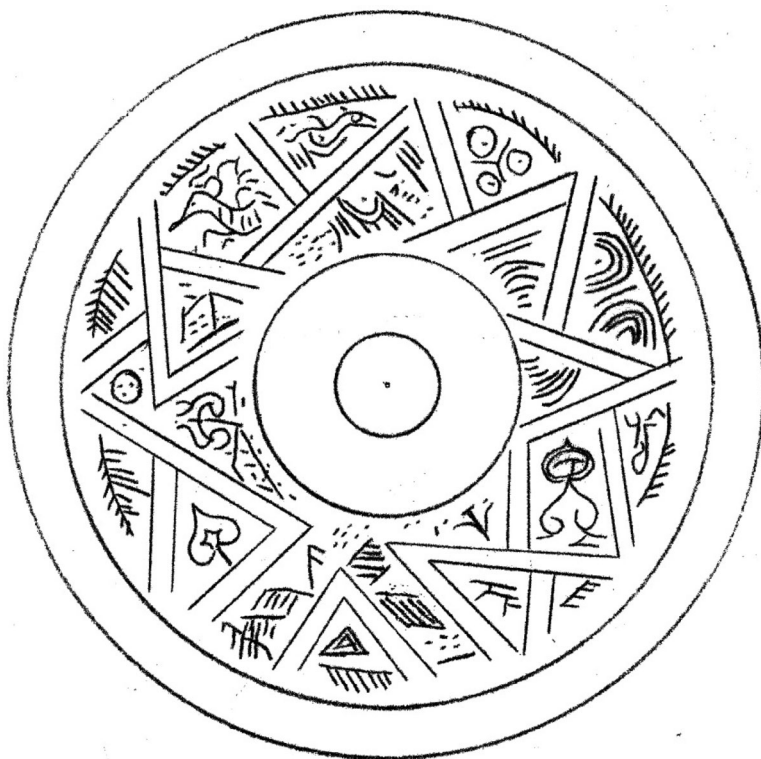


FIG. 5: Chu mirror with mountain-shaped ornament, from a tomb at Majiaping, Hunan, ca. 3rd c. BCE. Drawing by author after Kong Xiangxing 孔祥星 and Liu Yiman 刘一曼, *Zhongguo tongjing tudian* 中国铜镜图典 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1992), 163.

Okamura maintained that the so-called Grass-leaf (*caoye*) ornamental motif represented plants,⁴⁴ and Sofukawa Hiroshi has argued that the Four-leaf motif symbolized the cosmic pillars that stand between heaven and the earth.⁴⁵ Evidence supporting this theory comes from a bronze mirror excavated at Majiaping 馬家坪 Tomb no. 2 in present-day Bingzhou 郴州, Hunan province.⁴⁶ On the back of the mirror is a composition of a series of mutually overlapping triangular shapes, dotted by various plants and birds or animals (Fig. 5). The geometric forms resemble not only the writing of mountain (*shan* 山) in oracle bone script and early bronze inscriptions, but also the images of mountains in Han murals and on mold-impressed bricks (Figs. 6a, 6b).⁴⁷ Some scholars have associated a special T-shaped form with the graphical imagery of mountains in the so-called “Mirrors decorated with mountain-like graphic forms” (*shanziwen jing* 山字紋鏡) popular

⁴⁴ Okamura 1984, p. 672.

⁴⁵ Sofukawa 2014, pp. 17–20.

⁴⁶ Zhang Zhongyi 1961.

⁴⁷ For representation of mountains in early Chinese art including the mirror, see Munakata 1991, pp. 3–34.

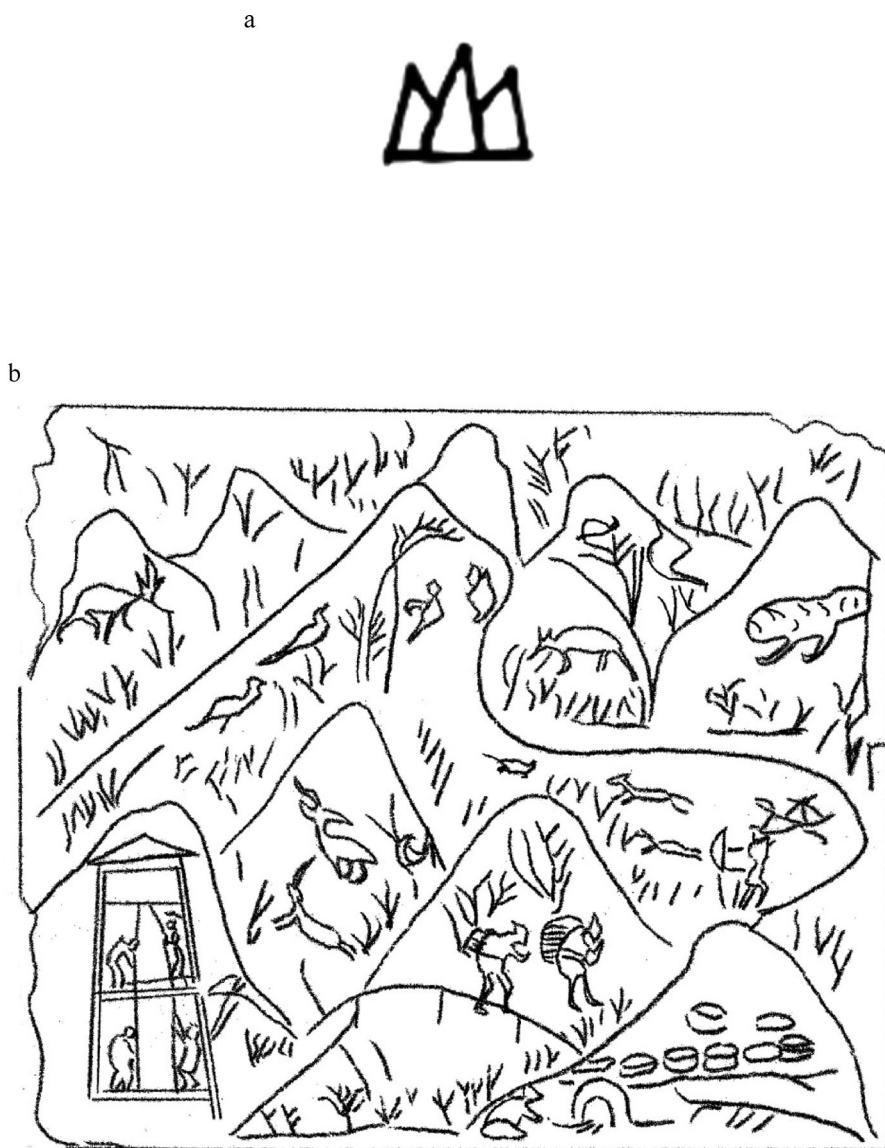


FIG. 6 (a) Oracle Bone Writing for *shan* (Mountain), 12th c. BCE. Drawing after Guo Moruo 郭沫若, *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978–1982), no. 5431. (b) Image of mountains on stamped tomb tile, Chengdu, Sichuan, 2nd c. CE. Drawing by author after Zhongguo huaxiangzhuan quanji bianji weiyuanhui 中國畫像磚全集編輯委員會, *Zhongguo huaxiangzhuan quanji* 中國畫像磚全集 (Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2006), Vol. 1, Sichuan, pl. 110.

in south China during the late Warring States (Fig. 7).⁴⁸ Sofukawa in recent years discovered the presence of similar plants dotted between such mountain-shaped forms in some Chu mirrors, reinforcing this interpretation.⁴⁹ A number of inscriptions made on Eastern Han mirrors bluntly state: “I have made the bright mirror, in seclusion I have refined the three hard ones (metals); suitably I have depicted the ten-thousand regions ...”⁵⁰

Here it is worth noting that some scholars have argued that the round bronze mirror symbolized Heaven in the Han.⁵¹ One of the arguments was that the shape of the Han-dynasty mirrors was almost always circular like heaven instead of square like earth. It is hard to know why Chinese mirrors have been predominantly circular since the Neolithic Age (Greek handled mirrors were also circular). It is the square mirrors that emerged in the late Eastern Zhou to early Western Han period that were the real anomaly. The earth symbolism was probably not born with the circular design but later injected into it perhaps during the late Eastern Zhou period. For example, the TLV symbols were more organically integral to a square chessboard, which appears almost truncated or deformed to become a circular mirror. This metamorphosis suggests that the TLV symbols were borrowed and fit into the circular mirror plan. Although the earth symbolism is more dominant in the *sishen* mirrors, it does not necessarily contradict the heaven symbolism, because heaven and earth are the two interdependent sides of a coin (cosmos) and are mirror images of each other. As the earth symbolism turned dominant, the heaven symbolism, as the mirror image of the former, remained recessive.

One might ask if the earth symbolism had already been established in earlier symmetrically ornamented mirrors, why was it necessary for late Western Han artists to invent an entirely new non-symmetrical ornament just to repeat the same idea? Compared with the old design, the new design is a more accurate simulation, because it represents the earth as a spatiotemporal being, which not only extends in space but also in time.

The strictest synchrony between ornament and text in animating a correlative model of the earth can be found in the *Wangshi zuojing* group of mirrors, in which the two elements share not only the same spatial pattern but also the same temporal pattern (see Figs. 2a, 7, 8). During the Western Han period, time was believed to be correlated with space, as the earth was constantly revolving through the year.⁵² Each of the four directions corresponds to a season (including three months) of the year. The east, spring (*yin*, *mao*, *chen*); the south, summer (*si*, *wu*, *wei*); the west, fall (*shen*, *you*, *xu*); the north, winter (*hai*, *zi*, *chou*). This regulation explains why each of the Four Gods is usually situated in the right half of each quarter of the mirror, which marks the beginning month of the related season. For example, the Blue Dragon is located in the position that corresponds exactly to *yin*, the first month of the spring (see Fig. 2a).

⁴⁸ Kazuchika 1953, pp. 72–76; Umehara 1935, pp. 17–20.

⁴⁹ Sofukawa 2014, pp. 18–19. Beasts are also found in some such mirrors; see Kong – Liu 1997, p. 48.

⁵⁰ I strictly follow Bernard Karlgren’s translations. See Karlgren 1934, p. 52.

⁵¹ E.g., Tseng Lan-ying 2004.

⁵² The best illustration of this idea is the Bright Hall (*mingtang* 明堂), whose form is correlated with the Monthly Ordnances (*yueling* 月令); see Tseng Lan-ying 2011, p. 79, fig. 1.40.



FIG. 7: Shanziwen mirror, 3rd c. BCE. Source: Umehara Sueji 梅原末治, *Kan izen no kokyō no kenkyū* 漢以前の古鏡の研究 (Kyoto: Tōhō bunka gakuin Kyōto kenkyūjo, 1936), pl. 11.1.

In different calendrical systems, a year begins in different months. For example, in the Xia 夏 calendar, it starts at *yin*; in the Yin 殷 calendar, it starts at *chou*; in the Zhou 周 calendar, the year starts at *zi*. These three calendars were most influential. In all the three systems, however, a year always kicks off in the northeast direction between *zi* and *mao*, or, between winter (Dark Warrior) and spring (Blue Dragon) when the positive *yang* 陽 force was on the rise.⁵³

In all the mirrors from the *Wangshi zuojing* group, including the Kubosō mirror, and a large percentage of other *sishen* mirrors, the first word of the inscription following the initiation mark appears precisely between *chou* and *yin* at the northeast corner of the mirror,⁵⁴ i.e. the position of the first month in the Yin and Zhou calendars. In

⁵³ The same circulatory pattern went back to the Chu silk manuscript in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. See Li Ling 1985, p. 30.

⁵⁴ The only exception that I know is a mirror from Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas, in which the first character *wang* begins at the place of *mao* 卯. See Mirror with TLV patterns and Four Direction Animals, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, <http://art.nelson-atkins.org/objects/2130/mirror-with-tlv-patterns-and-four-direction-animals?ctx=ff30961f-8990-4020-918f-dc9632ee2a52&idx=33>

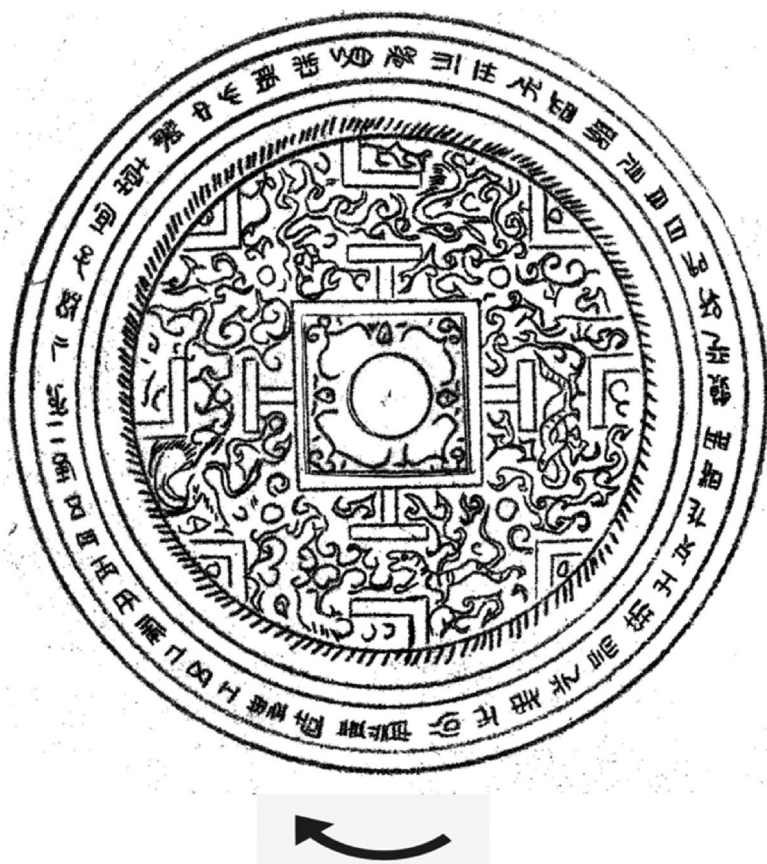


FIG. 8: Four Directional Gods (*sishen*) Mirror with Inverted Oriented Text and Pictorial Pattern, from Wunüzhong Tomb no. 267, Luoyang, 15 BCE. The rotating arrow shows the direction of the four gods, which is opposite of the direction of the text. Drawing by author after *Wenwu* 1996/7, p. 52, fig. 27.

some others the text begins at *zi*, as the Xia calendar prescribes.⁵⁵ This accurate synchronism between text and ornament must have been a deliberate design.

The strict requirement for synchronism between text and image sometimes resulted in atypical variations. One mirror excavated from Wunüzhong 五女塚 Tomb no. 267 at Luoyang 洛陽 carries an inscription dating from 15 BCE (Fig. 8).⁵⁶ The text, located along the periphery, orbits the center from end to end, but in the reversed counterclockwise direction, with all the characters left-right reversed. To read the characters, the user must rotate the mirror clockwise, that is, in the direction of the heavenly movement. Accordingly, this “mistake” was balanced by another “mistake” in the

⁵⁵ According to my incomplete statistics based on published Han- and Xin-period mirrors, within a pool of eighty *sishen* mirror inscriptions, forty-nine (61%) of them (including the Kubosō example) begin in the first quarter (northeast). This percentage may even be higher among the Xin-period mirrors. It seems that *zi*, *chou*, and *yin* are the most popular positions to begin an inscription.

⁵⁶ Luoyang shi di'er wenwu gongzuodui 1996.

ornament. The motifs of the Four Gods in the inner zone of the mirror were arranged in the reversed direction as well. The animals fall into the heavenly directional pattern, thus simulating the directions of heaven rather than earth. As a result, the mirror was made into an image of heaven, entirely reversing the regular practice. Nevertheless, the general cosmological meaning remains the same, because the movement of heaven reflects that of earth.

The shared quadruple structure between the ornament and the text further reinforces the correlation. The Four Directional Gods divide the mirror into four equal quarters, as does the inscription. It has been noted that the standard inscription for *sishen* mirrors consists of fifty-six words, divided into four couplets of seven-word lines.⁵⁷ What is more, the seven-word lines can be equated to the seven lunar lodges that occupied each direction in the universe. It seems more than a coincidence that text and ornament share the same quadruple structure, even though they do not completely overlap due to the text beginning in the north-east rather than at a cardinal direction (Fig. 2a).

In sum, in Category Four mirrors, the correlation between inscription and ornament, which culminated in the strict synchrony in the *Wangshi zuojing* type of *sishen* mirrors, the ornament not only closely matches but also follows the text in direction and movement.

4. TEXT/DISOURSE OVER ORNAMENT/FIGURE

But are we sure that it was the text that impacted the ornament, rather than the other way around? The answer is affirmative. As I will show in this section, prior to the appearance of the dynamic, unidirectional ornament in Category Four mirrors, inscriptions of substantial length and strong narrative as seen in the Kubosō *sishen* mirror had already been fully established in transitional Category Three mirrors, which often bear traditional symmetrical ornament. This new group of mirrors, conventionally known as “Inscription Band Mirrors” (*mingdai jing* 銘帶鏡), includes “Clear and White Mirrors” (*qingbai jing* 清白鏡), “Bronze Flowers Mirrors” (*tonghua jing* 銅華鏡), and “Double-Circled Inscription Mirrors” (*chongquan mingwen jing* 重圈銘文鏡).⁵⁸

In Category Three mirrors, while the symmetrical ornament dominant in Categories One and Two mirrors remains unchanged, the inscription underwent a fundamental transformation.

A good example can be found in a late Western Han bronze mirror discovered in Fannancun 範南村 Tomb no. 135 in present-day Xi'an 西安, Shaanxi province (Fig. 9).⁵⁹ In this mirror, the ornament forms a perfectly symmetrical structure, with a circle of recurrent raised curves surrounding the so-called “cogged and spiked wheel” pattern, a raised ring-shaped circular platform supporting a group of twelve smaller identical nipples around the central bulging round handle.⁶⁰ The viewer can set his or her eyes on any sector of the ornament to initiate a circular viewing across the surface of the mirror. Whilst the inscription can be read in

⁵⁷ Wang Ganghuai 2016, p.72. For the relationship between the seven-word inscription and later seven-word poetry, see Li Li 2002; Li Xueqin 2008; Qian Zhixi 2009.

⁵⁸ Okamura 1984.

⁵⁹ Cheng – Han 2002, p. 121.

⁶⁰ Bulling 1960, p. 28.

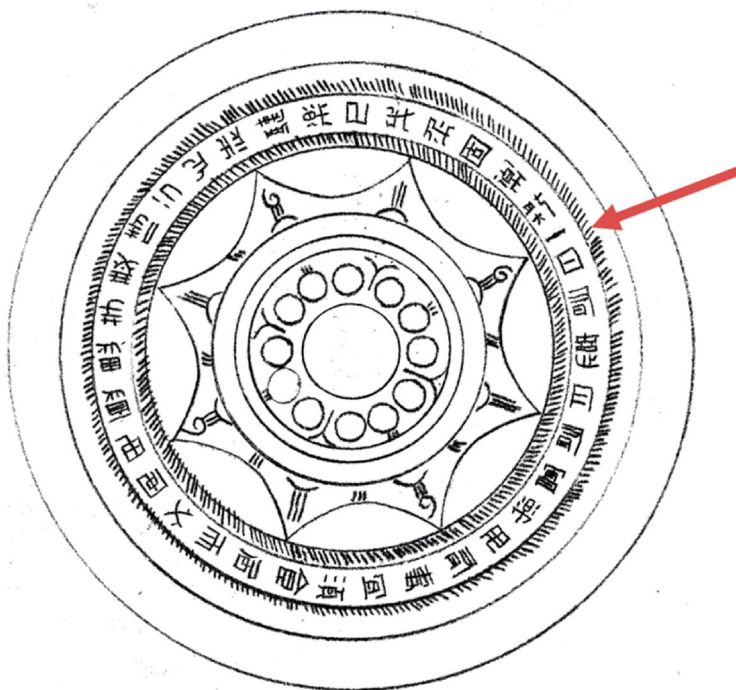


FIG. 9: Inscription Band Mirror from Fannancun Tomb, 1st c. BCE. The beginning/ending mark of circular inscription is marked by the straight arrow. Drawing by author after Cheng Linquan 程林泉 and Han Guohe 韩国河, *Chang'an Han jing* 长安汉镜 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 2002), p. 122, fig. 33.

multiple ways, the ornament, which remains symmetrical in eight directions, can be viewed from eight different angles. In both cases, the viewer was given the freedom of rotating the object and choosing where to start.

Meanwhile, the text on the Fannancun mirror displays transitional characteristics that bridge the gap between the earlier non-narrative “wish-list” type and the later full-fledged narrative type. Made of a group of six triple syllabic and four quadruple syllabic lines, this rhymed prose reads:

日有意，月有富，樂毋有事，宜酒食，
居而必安無憂患，竽瑟侍兮，心志驩，
樂已哉乎，固常然

May you every day have delight; may you every month have wealth; may you enjoy being free from disasters; may you have wine and food; in your living may you be sure of tranquility; may you be free from sorrow and anxiety; may flutes and lutes attend you; may your heart and mind rejoice; may your happiness endure; may this remain constant.⁶¹

On the one hand, like the previous types of inscriptions, the text structurally is still largely a list of parallel wishful prayers without a definite sequence. In this list of wishes, no one wish is a condition or result of another and all of them are logically

⁶¹ My translation is based on Karlgren 1934, p. 24, nos. 79, 82.

parallel to each other. So a reader can break into the text and start with any one wish and end with any other one. With an increased length, the content of the text appears to be an elaborated version of the Mancheng inscription.

On the other hand, the Fannancun text differs from its earlier counterparts in its increased length. Comprising 34 characters, it is almost twice as long as its Mancheng precedent, and therefore had to be arranged near the rim of the mirror, which has the greatest circumference.

But the most significant breakaway from Categories One and Two inscriptions is an explicit effort to mark a clear beginning and ending in the text. Despite its kinship to its shorter Mancheng counterpart, the Fannancun inscription (conventionally called the *riyouxi* 日有熹 inscription) is also essentially different with the wish “May this remain constant” (*gu chang ran* 固常然), which appears to be a general concluding remark for all the other more concrete wishes. What supports this theory is a visual detail in the Fannancun mirror, a short horizontal mark that was inserted right after the word *ran* to indicate the end of reading (Fig. 9). This mark is functionally identical with the row of dots in the aforementioned Kubosō mirror.

The only motivation for an artist to insert a marker in a circular text was to break the endless cycle and direct the reader to the unique starting-point. Although the artist left no written record to justify this practice, one can assume that as the text becomes longer around the rim of the mirror, the difficulty for the eye to identify the intended or preferred first word increases. In the aforementioned *caoyewen* mirror with eight characters and four different readings, the chance for the eye to catch one successful reading is 50%. In the Fannancun mirror, however, with as many as thirty-four characters and only one preferred reading, the likelihood of spotting the first word decreases substantially to less than 3%. As the text becomes longer, the chance gets ever slimmer.

Therefore the horizontal mark was inserted to guide the viewer. With one preferred reading, all other possible readings were demoted. The insertion indicates that the narrative nature of text was activated, even though this narrative is still implicit, compared with the Kubosō Four Directional Gods (*sishen*) mirror inscription. The temporal or causal relationship between the lines remained unclear.

But this implicit narrative, still bearing traces of earlier inscriptions, turned explicit in some later Category Three mirrors. In a late Western Han *tonghua* 銅華 mirror excavated from a Xin tomb at Yaozhuang 姚莊 in present-day Yangzhou 揚州, Jiangsu, the inscribed text, initiated similarly by a row of two dots, tells a story of making and using the mirror (Fig. 10):

澌治銅華清而明，以之為鏡因宜文章，
延年益壽而去不羊(祥)，與天無極而日
月之光，樂央未。

I refine and work the flower (essence) of the copper, which is pure and bright; from them I make a mirror; then I apply a decoration; may you have extended years and increased longevity; may [the mirror] eliminate the evils; may you be as unlimited as Heaven; may [the mirror] be like the light of the sun and the moon; may you have constant joy without end.⁶²

⁶² Kong – Liu 1997, p. 235. Translation based on Karlgren 1934, p. 23, no. 72. For the excavation report of another very similar mirror, see Yangzhou bowuguan 2000.

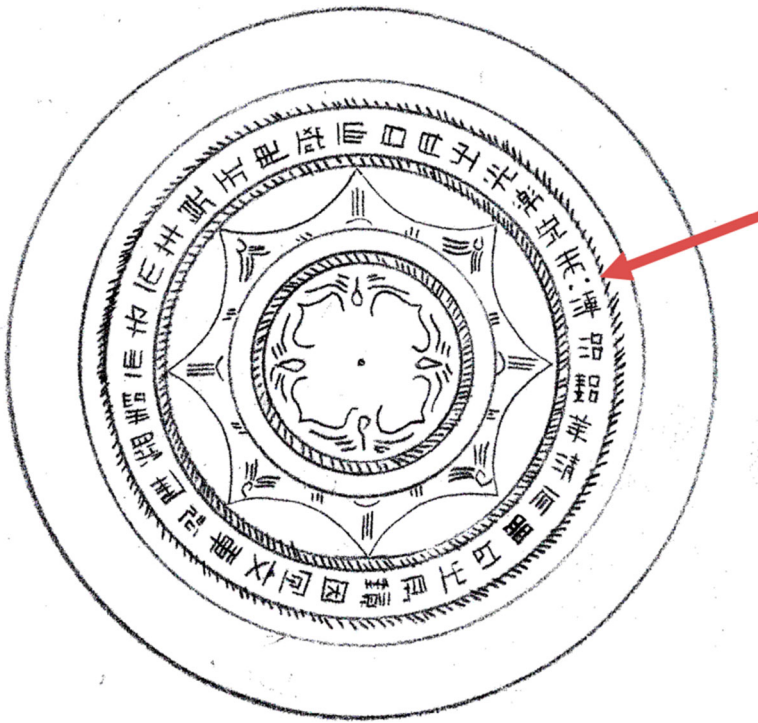


FIG. 10: Tonghua mirror, from a tomb near Yangzhou, late 1st c. BCE or early 1st c. CE. The beginning/ending mark of circular inscription is marked by the straight arrow. Drawing by author after Kong Xiangxing 孔祥星 and Liu Yiman 刘一曼, *Zhongguo tongjing tudian* 中国铜镜图典 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1992), 236.

Unlike the externally directed Fannancun text, internal temporality here dominates the text: first the raw materials were prepared, then the mirror was cast and ornaments added, and only after this was an auspicious prayer made. Unlike the earlier shorter inscriptions, which encourage multiple readings, this text offers little room for alternative interpretations. All narrative ambiguity has been eliminated to assure the order of the text is indisputable. The contents of the rhymed poems or prose, generic as they are, are strictly regulated by internal linearity and causality, which differentiates text fundamentally from ornament that celebrates circularity and multiplicity of perspectives. In this way the new texts, particularly those consisting of the seven-word lines, ushered in a new order that disrupted the old one, which adhered to the tradition-abiding, symmetrical ornament. This text, slightly shorter as it is, combines all major features of the Kubosō inscription, with a longer text, a clear narrative initiated with the beginning mark, and the clockwise direction.⁶³

At the same time, the ornament of this *tonghua* mirror, like those of the Fannancun and many other earlier mirrors, remains strictly symmetrical in multiple directions. The circular decorated area is divided by a raised ring around the center disc into inner and outer zones. The outer zone is divided by eight arcs into eight

⁶³ Only occasionally do we find exceptions. One *tonghua* mirror inscription that runs counter-clockwise can be found in Wang Ganghuai 2016, p. 45.

equal sectors, filled with repetitive geometric motifs. The inner zone surrounds the center nipple (knob or handle) with four identical petal-like sectors, each decorated with three small circular bosses. The outer zone is symmetrical in eight directions, and the inner zone, in four directions. In this sense, the design of the mirror is not significantly different from that of the earlier *caoyewen* mirrors.

Hence it is clear that in Category Three mirrors the inscription had already experienced a fundamental shift from symmetry to narrative while the ornament was still symmetrical.⁶⁴ This observation suggests that the change of text might have initiated the overall breakaway from symmetry in the mirror design and prompted the change of ornament.

5. THE EMBODIED EXPERIENCE OF MIRRORS

But why did the ornament have to follow suit after the change of inscription? What mechanism caused this to happen? I will argue, below, that it was the unified embodied experience of the viewer/reader of the mirror that propelled the designer to revise the order of ornament and make it match that of the text. Two factors played a role in jointly shaping this viewing experience: (1) the mutual embedment of text and ornament in an indivisible composition on the back of the mirror, and (2) the fundamental difference between text and ornament in the inherent way of seeing.

Text and ornament on the back of a mirror share a small, flat decorative surface. Scientists have discovered that when one of them becomes the visual focus, the other remains visible to the peripheral vision. As Jerome Y. Lettvin aptly describes:

When I look at something, it is as if a pointer extends from my eye to an object. The “pointer” is my gaze, and what it touches I see most clearly. Things are less distinct as they lie farther away from my gaze. It is not as if these things go out of focus – but rather it’s as if somehow they lose the quality of “form.” Oddly, even when form is lost I can still notice movement even though I may not be able to distinguish exactly what is moving.⁶⁵

Experiments have shown that the human visual field consists of the center vision within the fovea, a cone-shaped depression in the central retina measuring 1.5 mm in diameter, and peripheral vision adjacent to it.⁶⁶ Whereas in the fovea the visual acuity reaches its peak, it declines in the peripheral area surrounding the fovea. In inscribed bronze mirrors, inscription and ornament are customarily situated around one another (that is, in each other’s periphery) within a small area about 10–20 cm in diameter. Because the viewer usually looks at the mirror at a close range while holding it in one hand, one cannot see the ornament

⁶⁴ Some evidence suggests that the *tonghua* inscription was occasionally married with the *sishen* ornament in the late Western Han period, demonstrating the coherence of the new inscription with the new ornament, as I have argued; see Wang Ganghuai 2016, p. 45, Table 10, nos. 2, 3, and 4. Interestingly, the same marriage also existed between the *riyouxi* inscription and the *sishen* ornament; see Wang Ganghuai 2016, p. 45, Table 10, nos. 5, 6, and 7.

⁶⁵ Lettvin 1976. For a more thorough introduction to peripheral vision, see Strasburger – Rentschler – Jüttner 2011.

⁶⁶ Buser – Imbert 1992, p. 20.

without simultaneously seeing the inscription, and vice versa. When two things are always seen together in proximity, they are easily experienced as one single unity.

In the symmetrical composition of *caoyewen* mirrors, inscriptions are usually located in a square inner zone consisting of four rectangular bands enclosed by an outer zone filled with geometric plant patterns. The reader would have four possible choices to begin his or her reading. Once the first character has been located, readers had to adjust the mirror in their hands to position the first character properly, to move their eyes down to the second character on one side of the inscribed square, finish the first line of two characters, and turn the mirror 90 degrees clockwise or counterclockwise to continue reading until the last character. Although the overall understanding of the text does not change significantly as the reading begins with different characters, the relative freedom for the reader to choose where the text should start echoes the freedom for the viewer to decide where to plunge into the symmetrical ornament.

As the ornament surrounded the center nipple and assumed no definite direction, one would be free to view the mirror in the clockwise or counterclockwise manner. When this practice became the habitual way of approaching the mirror, it regulated the body's interaction with any elements in the mirror, including the later introduced inscription. Two observations support the formative impact of the text on the ornament: first, be they short or long, inscriptions always followed a circular path around the center nipple; second, early inscriptions could circle the center nipple either clockwise or counterclockwise.⁶⁷

Arranging the text in a circular manner should not be taken for granted. Theoretically, if one is asked to put a long inscription on the back of a mirror at will, the possibilities are almost unlimited. The text can be deployed horizontally, vertically, or circularly. In fact, most inscriptions in early Chinese bronzes did not follow the circular composition. In the Western Zhou period when Chinese artists for the first time faced the problem of placing a long text on the surface of round vessels, they almost always chose to organize the text into equally tall and evenly spaced vertical columns, which began on the right and moved column by column to the left, as if writing on a wooden tablet.⁶⁸ This principle finds its best examples on the lids of *hu* 壺 or *gui* 簋 vessels. Despite the circular shape of the lid, the inscription was almost always divided into vertical columns.⁶⁹ Only in the Eastern Zhou dynasty did bronze inscriptions occasionally appear in end-to-end circular formats.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Liang Shangchun was the first to note the issue of varying rotational direction of the mirror inscriptions. For example, two *caoyewen* mirrors shared almost the same ornament but differed only in the orientation of the inscription: one clockwise and one counterclockwise. See [Liang Shangchun 1940–1942](#), v. 2, p. 15, pl. 22 (counter-clockwise), and v. 2, p. 16, pl. 23 (clockwise).

⁶⁸ For the tradition of Chinese manuscripts and books, see [Tsien Tsuen-Hsuei 2004](#).

⁶⁹ For examples, see [Wu Zhenfeng 2012](#), vol. 22.

⁷⁰ During the early Spring and Autumn Period (771–475 BCE) Chinese artists sometimes organized a text on the bronze vessels in an end-to-end circular way. This practice might have first occurred as early as the mid-Western Zhou on the upper face of the everted lips of *li* 鬲 vessels, which formed a narrow circular platform for writing. (For a few examples, see [Wu Zhenfeng 2012](#), vol. 6, pp. 235, 237, 238). Even when the text ended up in an end-to-end circle, there was still freedom for it to run either clockwise or counter-clockwise. And this end-to-end circular pattern occasionally appeared in other types of bronze vessels. For example, in a bronze *pan* 盤 made by Fanjun Bo Long 番君伯龍 dating from the early Spring and Autumn period, the inscription cast in the interior of the vessel was ordered in a clockwise circular composition; see [Zheng – Zhang](#)

Against this tradition of columnar arrangement, the exclusive circular way of arranging inscription on the back of the mirror was unusual. I argue when they first introduced text to decorate mirrors, Western Han artists designed and placed the text to prevent it from contradicting and disrupting established habits of seeing the object, because symmetrical ornaments had monopolized the attention of viewers for hundreds of years. Based on Lettvin's observation, as both ornament and inscription are falling in the same visual field, when one's gaze traces the ornament in a circular movement, either forward or backward, the viewer's peripheral vision will catch a less sharp image of the inscription moving synchronically in the same way, which exactly matches how the early inscriptions look. This suggests that the viewer's perception of the ornament inevitably connects to his or her perception of the inscription, which was more or less reminiscent of an ornament, without beginning or end, devoid of linear narrative.

But text is text, no matter how it might be presented as aesthetically pleasing ornament. Once introduced onto the mirror, the text kept its temporal nature, which even under repression remained latent, waiting to be awakened. One popular early inscription in Categories One and Two mirrors consists of two four-word lines: "When you see the light of the sun, the world is very bright" 見日之光, 天下大明.⁷¹ In a text as simple as this, a causal logic is implicit, no matter which line is the cause and which line is the effect. The reader had to locate the first character before a smooth reading was possible. As text intervened into the way people interacted with the mirror, its inherent narrative order transformed the previous viewer into a viewer as reader, and turned the exclusive experience of viewing into a fused experience of viewing and reading. The discursive nature of text, which prescribes a linear, unidirectional way of reading, essentially contradicts the figural nature of ornament, which tends to be symmetrical and multidirectional.⁷² Whereas the textual order, which must either submit to or subvert the ornamental order, remained docile in its earlier form of short, non-narrative inscriptions, it eventually broke away from the mode of ornamentation in the later form of long, literary narratives and redefined the way in which mirrors should be handled and experienced, and led to a paradigmatic shift in décor from symmetrical to non-symmetrical.

As viewers of mirrors became more and more used to the reading of texts, their habit of approaching and seeing the object began to change. In Category Three mirrors, inscriptions became so popular that they formed not only an indispensable decoration but sometimes also, in the case of "Double-Circled Inscription Mirrors" (*chongquan mingwen jing* 重圈銘文鏡), the sole decoration on the mirror, which

1979, p. 92, fig. 8. In a tomb from the later Spring and Autumn period in present-day Dantu 丹徒, Jiangsu province, whilst the inscriptions made on other bronzes follow the traditional column-by-column pattern, an unusual inscription cast in the lid of a *fou* vessel runs clockwise in three concentric circles, beginning in the center and ending on the periphery; see *Jiangsu sheng Dantu kao-gudui* 1988, p. 24. A more recent example came from the well-known Marquis Yi of Zeng's (Zeng *hou* 曾侯乙) tomb, dating from the early fifth century BCE. While in the lid of a bronze *gui* vessel the inscription forms a clockwise circle, on the interior face of another *pan* vessel, the inscription creates a counter-clockwise circle. See *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo* 1989, vol. 1, p. 209.

⁷¹ Karlgren 1934, p. 22, no. 59.

⁷² For the general relationship between discourse and figure, see Bryson 1981, p. 5.

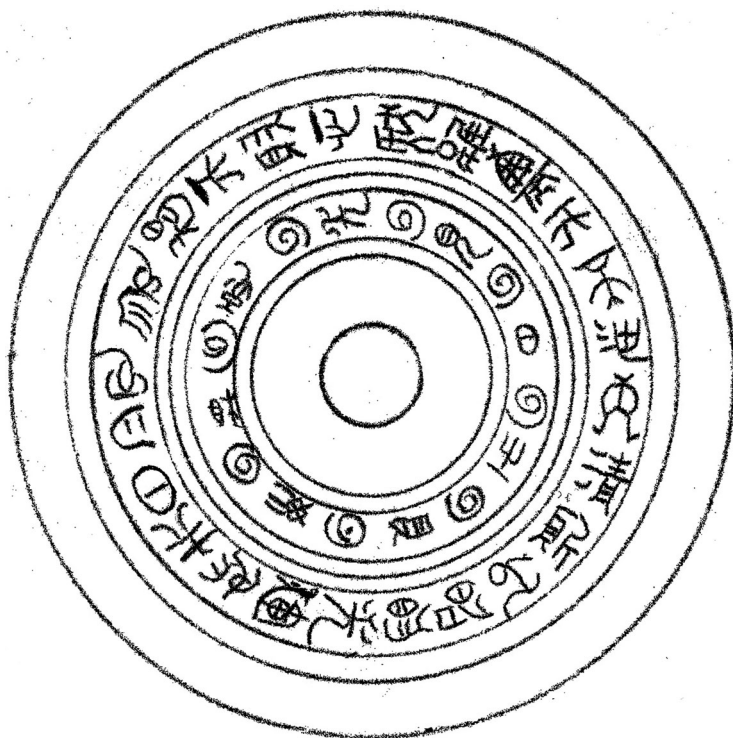


FIG. 11: Double-Circled Inscription Mirror, from a tomb near Xi'an, 1st c. BCE. Drawing by author after Cheng Linquan 程林泉 and Han Guohe 韩国河, *Chang'an Han jing* 长安汉镜 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 2002), p. 125, fig. 35.

features two concentric inscription zones each filled with a long text (Fig. 11). The combined length of the two texts might reach an impressive total of seventy-two words.⁷³ Facing such mirrors, the viewer could do little but read and read.⁷⁴ In other words, reading now became the dominant mode of interaction between the subject and the object. Enhanced familiarity with the text would inevitably reshape the embodied habit of seeing and approaching the object.

⁷³ Wang Ganghuai noted the longest inscription contained seventy-eight characters, see Wang Ganghuai 2016, p. 37.

⁷⁴ K.E. Brashier's recent discussion on the meaningfulness of mirror inscriptions suggests that errors frequently occur in mirror inscriptions (see Brashier 2012). Here the key is the nature of these "errors" and that of mirrors with these "erroneous" inscriptions. We cannot deny the fact that not all inscriptions were meant to be unreadable and meaningless, because we have so many readable and even well composed texts in mostly high-quality mirrors. With this fact, we have to distinguish between two things: a model and a reduced, distorted or adapted imitation. We can say there might have been an intention embedded in the rigorous design in the former but we cannot be sure about the latter, in which it is only the market value that mattered. The potential buyer varied. Customers had the right to choose what to buy. Literate people might choose differently from illiterate people. Some might be willing to pay more than others did. (After all, a mirror was made primarily for viewing one's face.) I don't consider all these different commodities as equal samples. The social dimension is utterly important. In this article, I chose to study only the models.

As shown in the Fannancun, Yaozhuang and eventually the Kubosō *sishen* mirrors, the way in which the viewer/reader interacted with the mirror was renewed: unidirectional, continuous, non-repetitive, and constantly moving forward from a fixed beginning to a fixed end. What is more, the text was almost always oriented clockwise and seldom in the opposite direction.⁷⁵ This new orientation necessitated a different physical approach. As characters evenly distribute along the rim of the circular object and each character turns its left side to the center nipple, in order to follow the text the reader must first locate the beginning of the text and then adjust the mirror to the right position so that the first character stands upright in the eye of the reader. This would be the character's optimal "readable" state. To continue reading, the reader must slowly rotate the mirror counterclockwise to enable the next character below the first one to move up to the proper upright position and become optimally legible. The revolving process would continue till the last character is read. Eventually the mirror will have completed a full 360-degree rotation.

So what was the relationship between the unidirectional, circular way of handling the mirror shaped by the reading of the inscription and the subsequent popularity of the new ornament with animals (in *sishen* mirrors, the major directional animals) chasing one another in the same unidirectional, circular way? Although Han-period artists left no textual accounts behind on their intention, it is not too hard to answer this question based on the Gestalt principle of past experiences: elements tend to be perceived according to an observer's past experience.⁷⁶ Once the new habit of seeing the mirror, established by the drill of reading narrative inscriptions, became the norm, it demanded other elements in the mirror to follow suit. The old symmetrical ornament no longer fit in; it appeared indifferent to the new narrative order, pointless, irrelevant, if not disruptive. A new ornament should redeem the lost consistency and unity in the viewers' embodied experience of mirrors. It should match the text in all respects from beginning to end. The consequent *sishen* ornament was a perfect response to the challenge and an ingenious solution to the contradiction, for it not only fulfilled the requirement for dynamic linearity but also introduced the familiar cosmological motif to the mirror.

⁷⁵ The only exceptions I know can be found in Wang Ganghuai 2016, pp. 38–39.

⁷⁶ According to Max Wertheimer, "Another Factor is that of past experience or habit. Its principle is that if *AB* and *C* but not *BC* have become habitual (or "associated") there is then a tendency for *ABC* to appear as *AB/C*. Unlike the other principles with which we have been dealing, it is characteristic of this one that the *contents* *A*, *B*, *C* are assumed to be independent of the constellation in which they appear. Their arrangement is on principle determined merely by extrinsic circumstances (e.g. drill)." See Wertheimer 1999, pp. 71–88. Kurt Gottschaldt phrased it as "In usage, however, 'experience' as a psychical factor usually has the following meaning. Former experiences with arrangement *A* of a certain stimulus complex, *S*, leave behind a disposition favoring the apprehension of *A* upon a repetition of *S*." See Gottschaldt 1999, p. 109. However, in the orthodox view, this principle of past experience is weaker than other principles of Gestalt.

6. THE IMPERIAL AGENCY AND THE POLITICIZED FATE OF THE STYLE

Still, one last important question remains: who was responsible for the new design in the mirrors? Han-period mirror inscriptions mentioned three agents: the workshop, the master, and the sage.

Firstly, because of the technical sophistication, Western Han mirrors were usually produced within organized workshops. From the late Western Han or Xin period, more and more mirror inscriptions started with the phrase “The Supreme Workshop made this mirror” (*shangfang zuojing* 尚方作鏡), directly stating the fact that these mirrors were products of the imperial workshop or their local imitations as marketing strategies.⁷⁷ Anthony Barbieri-Low explained how artisans in imperial workshops were selected, trained, organized, and overseen by a government bureau called “Small Treasury” (*shaofu* 少府).⁷⁸ Finished works were sent to the imperial house or used as imperial gifts.

Secondly, in the centralized imperial workshop, bronze mirrors were mass-produced from a small number of standard models, which were crafted by certain masters. In 2013 Chinese archaeologists, for the first time, unearthed a Han-period mirror foundry operated during the early second century BCE near present-day Linzi 臨淄, Shandong.⁷⁹ In this site, the excavators uncovered fragments of clay molds, which were taken from prefabricated hand-carved models of *caoyewen* mirrors.⁸⁰ Although artisans used these molds only once before smashing them to reveal the cast object, they could have duplicated them from the same model. Bai Yunxiang noted that several *caoyewen* mirrors shared the same size and ornamentation and believed they probably derived from a standard model.⁸¹

Although it is almost impossible to know whether the Linzi workshop was a local branch of the imperial *shangfang* workshop, this discovery, however, proves that multiple mirror molds were taken from one standard model, which was probably (and in the light of the *shangfang* inscription, very likely) derived from the hand of a skillful mirror master serving in the imperial “Supreme Workshop” who commanded superior artistic skills and mathematic knowledge necessary for making such complex and sophisticated designs.

The presence and role of these mirror masters in the workshop are testified by several inscriptions on Category Four mirrors that date approximately from the beginning of the Common Era.⁸² For example, one inscription reads:

⁷⁷ For mirror inscriptions with *shangfang*, see *Chūgoku kokyō no kenkyūhan* 2009, nos. 446, 449, 451, and 452. This phrase was most popular in the early Eastern Han period. For the role of imperial workshop (*shangfang*) in Han government, see Loewe 2006, pp. 155–156; Barbieri-Low 2007, pp. 149–150.

⁷⁸ Barbieri-Low 2007, pp. 67–115.

⁷⁹ *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo – Shandong sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo – Linzi qu wenwuju* 2014. Prior to this discovery, in 2003 Chinese archaeologists identified two foundry sites for casting mirrors in Linzi and conducted a series of studies on them; see *Zhongguo Shandong sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo – Riben Nailiang xianli Jiangyuan kaoguxue yanjiusuo* 2007.

⁸⁰ Bai – Zhang 2005, p. 79.

⁸¹ Bai Yunxiang 1999.

⁸² For other mirror inscriptions with “gong,” “shi,” or “jiang,” see *Chūgoku kokyō no kenkyūhan* 2009, nos. 442, 445, 446, 448, and 449.

尚方御[竟]（鏡）大毋傷，名師作之出
雒陽，刻□□□□[文]章，左龍[右]虎去
不羊(祥)，朱鳥[玄][武]主四旁、子孫
蕃昌。

The *shangfang* imperial workshop used this mirror, which is large and without damage. A famous master crafted it which came out from Luoyang. It is carved [missing four characters] ... with decoration and patterns. The left Dragon and the right Tiger ward off the evils. The Vermilion Bird and the Dark Warrior dominate the four directions. May the sons and grandsons flourish and prosper!⁸³

The inscription claims that the famous master not only “crafted” (*zuo* 作) but also “carved” (*ke* 刻) the mirror. Because bronze mirrors are cast objects, the famous master must have worked on a wooden or clay model, which were used to take molds of for reproduction. Although the title of mirror masters *shi* did not appear in the mirror inscription until the later Western Han period, their principal role in designing and redesigning the ornamentation might have had an older origin, and this role became more pronounced in later Han and post-Han mirror inscriptions.⁸⁴ Designing a bronze mirror in the Han period would have involved extensive use of such drawing instruments as the compass and square as well as mathematics and cartography.⁸⁵ For such types as the *sishen* mirror, the master must have possessed accurate knowledge of Han cosmology.

Thirdly, the ultimate mastermind of the mirror was claimed to be the sage ruler of the world. A mirror inscription from the late first century BCE lent the mirror a metaphysical significance:

聖人之作鏡兮，取氣於五行。生於道康
兮，咸有文章。光象日月，其質清剛。
以視玉容兮，辟去不羊。中國大寧，
子孫益昌。黃長元吉，有紀剛。

It is the sages who made mirrors. [They] extracted breaths (materials) from the Five Elements. [These mirrors] were born on the peaceful Way, all bearing ornaments and patterns. Its light resembles the sun and the moon; its material is clear and hard. It is used to look at the jade appearance and ward off the evils. The Central Kingdom is in great peace; sons and grandsons are abundantly prosperous. [The divination says] “The Yellow lower-garment and great good fortune”; may there be discipline and regulation.⁸⁶

Whereas in conventional inscriptions, mirrors were described as being made by imperial workshops (such as *Hanjia* 漢家, *Wangshi* 王氏, or *Xinjia* 新家) or by the masters, in this text they were attributed to the sages, the models for all rulers. While conventional inscriptions mention bronze (*tong* 銅) as the raw material, this text claims the cosmic breath (*qi* 氣) originated from the Five Elements constitutes the actual materiality of the object. More importantly, unlike conventional inscriptions in which mirrors were cast in real historical environments, in this text reality is replaced by the abstract “peaceful Way” (*dao kang* 道康). Ornament is

⁸³ Umeha 1925, p. 105.

⁸⁴ Wang Zhongshu 1986.

⁸⁵ Dong – Guo 2003.

⁸⁶ Zhongguo kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 1957, p. 116.

also elevated to a conceptual level as the word “pattern” (*wenzhang* 文章) formed one of the most fundamental theoretical pillars in Confucian ethics and political philosophy.⁸⁷

Sages not only crafted the mirror but also set an example for others to properly use the mirror. The author of the *Wenzi* 文子 (Master Wen) carefully chose the word “mirror” to describe the art of rulership of the Three Augusts and the Five Thearchs (*sanhuang wudi* 三皇五帝) as “to mirror the feelings of the ten thousand things.”⁸⁸ The phrase “ten thousand things” (*wanwu* 萬物) was interchangeable with the word “Way” (*Dao*) on other occasions.⁸⁹

Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE – 18 CE), one of the leading Confucians during the late Western Han, dedicated a eulogy to Wang Mang. Yang compared Wang with the sages:

He holds the pure and clear Way and uses it as a mirror to reflect the four seas. He listens to winds and customs; he views broadly and absorbs extensively. He consults heaven and befriends the earth; he incorporates divinity and brilliance in himself.⁹⁰

If we interpret “the pure and clear Way” as a metaphor of the mirror,⁹¹ the image of Wang Mang in the cited passage is highly graphical. The usurper holds a mirror to reflect the four seas like a sage or the Thearch (*di* 帝) surveying the lower territories. Similarly, the text and ornament allowed ordinary persons to imitate the sage or the deity in manipulating a mirror, which was ornamented with the “ten thousand regions” (*wanjiang* 萬疆) guarded by the Four Directional Gods. These flattering words must have delighted the users of the mirrors.

With the imperial workshop being its ultimate place of birth and the sage ruler defined as the true maker and user of the mirror, in the dramatically shifting landscape of power in the imperial court of late Western Han to the Xin period, historians have good reason to wonder whether the paradigmatic shift of the mirror’s design from symmetrical to unidirectional compositions might have any ideological and political implications.

The popularity of symmetrical design in early Western Han mirrors coincided with the dominance of Huang–Lao 黃老 ideology, which emphasized the constancy of the Way. The school of Huang–Lao advocated a political philosophy that combined the thoughts of The Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝) and Laozi 老子 and was influential in early Western Han imperial court.⁹² According to this school, the Way (*Dao* 道) gave shape to ten thousand things and remains shapeless and

⁸⁷ Powers 2006.

⁸⁸ Wang Liqi 2000, p. 239.

⁸⁹ Fei Zhengang 1994, p. 372.

⁹⁰ 執粹清之道，鏡照四海，聽聆風俗，博覽廣包，參天貳地，兼并神明。Zheng Wen 2000, p. 229.

⁹¹ Besides *Dao*, which was related to the mirror, *cuiqing* 粹清 was a popular quality of the bronze mirror in Han inscriptions. The text reads: 清泯 (otherwise written as 精煉) 銅華以為鏡、洁精白而事君、煉治銅華得其菁。See Karlgren 1934, p. 24, nos. 77, 78; Chūgoku kokyō no kenkyūhan 2009, pp. 160–161, nos. 250, 301.

⁹² For an introduction to the Huang–Lao ideology, see Tu Wei-ming 1979; Csikszentmihalyi 1994.

motionless from the beginning to the end.⁹³ Moreover, the Way was directionless and utterly symmetrical and uniform.⁹⁴ The *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Master of Huainan) elaborated on this view by maintaining that the Way was not only directionless but also atemporal, with no past or present, beginning or ending.⁹⁵ The Huang–Lao discourse on the Way is conceptually similar to the symmetrical ornamentation introduced onto early bronze mirrors during the late Warring States and early Western Han, characterized by such abstract, static, and directionless patterns as seen in the Grass-Leaf mirrors.

The appearance of dynamic patterns as seen in *sishen* mirrors coincided with the ascension of Confucianism in the imperial ideology during the late Western Han.⁹⁶ Western Han Confucians boldly intervened in the imperial politics in the name of heaven.⁹⁷ Okamura even suggested the possible Confucian impact on the new designs of the mirrors in late Western Han.⁹⁸ The undifferentiated, almost anarchical picture presented by the Huang–Lao ideology starkly contradicts the rigidly differentiated Confucian society in which everything was assigned a right position (*wei* 位) in space and time.⁹⁹ The *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites) claimed that “every mat have its upper and lower end; every chariot have its right side and left; walkers follow one another, and those who stand observe a certain order—such were the right rules of antiquity.”¹⁰⁰ More importantly, the Confucian discourse on the Way, usually associated with the rotation of heaven and earth, highlights ceaseless change and movement. The heavenly Way (*tiandao* 天道) is manifest through the alternation of different seasons,¹⁰¹ and also through omens – such as the Four Directional Animals – believed to convey messages of heaven. Confucian scholars turned the discourse on heavenly Way into a weapon to criticize the misconducts of the Han emperors.¹⁰²

Inspired by Okamura, I contend that the new design of the *sishen* mirror that reflects the cosmological movement was eventually used by Wang Mang to justify his usurpation of the imperial throne. During the late Western Han, the united heaven and earth became the highest authority in the religious discourse.¹⁰³ Wang Mang took advantage of the discourse of dynamic change and movement to convince people that the old dynasty had lost the mandate of heaven and passed its phase, and his establishment of the “New” (Xin) dynasty was inevitable.¹⁰⁴ This attempt was manifest in the new mirror inscriptions, which became explicitly politicized, under the rule of Wang Mang, first as regent and later as emperor. Many

⁹³ The text reads: 夫道者，陶冶万物，終始無形，寂然不動。 Wang Liqi 2000, p. 338.

⁹⁴ The text reads: 所謂道者，無前無後，無左無右，萬物玄同，無是無非。 Wang Liqi 2000, p. 338.

⁹⁵ The text reads: 無古無今，無始無終，未有天地而生天地，至深微廣大矣。 Major 2010, p. 666.

⁹⁶ Pi Xirui 1959, p. 101.

⁹⁷ Wang Shuming 1984, 43.

⁹⁸ Okamura 1984.

⁹⁹ Lin Li-chen 1995.

¹⁰⁰ Legge 1962, vol. 1, p. 276.

¹⁰¹ Watson 1968, p. 248.

¹⁰² Bielenstein 1950.

¹⁰³ In 31 BCE, Emperor Cheng participated in the new rituals of heavenly and earthly cult in the suburbs of the imperial capital; Loewe 1974, pp. 154–193.

¹⁰⁴ Bielenstein 1986.

inscriptions began with this auspicious sentence: “Han has good copper, which comes from Danyang” 漢有善銅出丹陽.¹⁰⁵ After Wang Mang’s establishment of the Xin dynasty, which succeeded the Han, the inscription transformed to “Xin has good copper, which comes from Danyang” 新有善銅出丹陽.¹⁰⁶ Wang Mang went even further to introduce new political messages in the repertoire of inscriptions.¹⁰⁷ One of these reads: “The New Dynasty (Xin) has erected a Piyong and built a Mingtang; may you be illustrious among promoted scholars and take place among princes and kings ...”¹⁰⁸ Piyong 辟雍 and Mingtang 明堂, translated as “Bi-disk-shaped Pont” and “Bright Hall” (or “Luminous Hall”), were legendary ritual buildings lost since the ancient times of the sages and were regarded as the symbol of ideal kingship.¹⁰⁹ Because of this political symbolism, Wang Mang rebuilt the Mingtang to legitimize his claim to the emperorship and the founding of a new dynasty. During the 1950s, Chinese archaeologists conducted excavation on a site in the southern suburb of the Western Han capital Chang’an, identified as Wang Mang’s Bright Hall.¹¹⁰ Recording and extolling their successful construction, such texts clearly functioned as a political propaganda for the new regime, which claimed to restore lost Confucian values.

Although it seems less likely that Wang Mang directly dictated the new style of the *sishen* or other Category Four mirrors, he or his supporters took advantage of and exploited the implicit ideological scenario of the unidirectional rather than symmetrical order in the design of such mirrors to serve the Xin dynasty.

CONCLUSION

Within the space of a hundred years, the ornament on Western Han bronze mirrors changed from stationary symmetry without beginning or end to unidirectional movement from point to point. The interaction between inscription and ornament prompted this paradigmatic shift. Before the introduction of inscriptions, the symmetrical design of the mirror entirely dominated the user/viewer’s experience and visual habit. This experience and habit was so powerful that in early Western Han, when inscriptions were first introduced onto mirrors, they were often subject to the rule of symmetry. But once the role of text was established, its inherent linear, anti-symmetrical nature began to awake, as viewers became accustomed to reading and demanded more. With the appearance of longer and more narrative inscriptions, the practice of reading, which assumed a radically different way of seeing, challenged the previous experience and habit of interacting with the mirror, which was based on the practice of viewing ornamentation. The tension between text and ornament resulted in a strange paradox in some later “Inscription Band Mirrors,” in which the ornament remained totally symmetrical and the text

¹⁰⁵ Karlgren 1934, p. 30; Chūgoku kokyō no kenkyūhan 2009, pp. 193–197, nos. 438–445.

¹⁰⁶ Chūgoku kokyō no kenkyūhan 2009, p. 198, no. 446.

¹⁰⁷ For a detailed survey of the political mirror inscriptions made in the Wang Mang era, see Okamura 2009, pp. 46–48.

¹⁰⁸ Karlgren 1934, p. 109.

¹⁰⁹ For Mingtang, see Soothill 1951, pp. 22–51; Henderson 1984, pp. 59–87; Pankenier 2013, pp. 317–350.

¹¹⁰ Tang Jinyu 1959. An abridged version is reprinted in Huang Zhanyue 2003, pp. 197–207. For an English introduction, see Cheng T’e-Kun 1978, pp. 560–563.

became unidirectional and linear. In this state, the subject's experience of the mirror was split. But this split was short-lived. To redeem a harmonious unity, the designer creatively introduced a unidirectional and dynamic *sishen* diagram that replaced the traditional symmetrical and stationary pattern and that matched the text. It could be argued that the power relation was reversed, as the ornament was made subject to the text. Thus the design tension ended with the victory of the text. However, by retaining the TLV patterns in the margins of the mirror, survivals of the early symmetrical ornament, the old order lingered on, albeit in a latent form.

What we have observed in Chinese bronze mirrors is a case of the history of interaction between text and image over time. It is clear that text and image could coexist in one object and imitate each other, but this coexistence in such a small intimate space subject to one small visual field proves to be transitory, and sooner or later one had to succumb to the other, because the viewing eyes would intuitively (according to the Gestalt principle) demand the viewer/reader to choose between the unidirectional and symmetrical orders, which inherently contradict each other.

The tension between the two different ways of seeing was not only aesthetic but also, albeit implicitly, ideological. The open, flexible, and static order embodied by the symmetrical ornament in earlier mirrors corresponds with the thought often attributed to the Huang–Lao school, which insisted that the Way (Dao) was directionless and endless. The closed, defined, and dynamic order encompassing the non-symmetrical ornament of the *sishen* mirrors accords with the idea usually associated with the Confucians, who asserted that the Way of Heaven always revolved following an orbit.

But aesthetics and ideology do not explain why eventually in this battle for dominance the unidirectional order of text won. It seems the intervention of politics played a critical role. During the late Western Han, Confucians tried to seize the discursive power in the imperial court. The Confucians based their authority on the Way of Heaven, which always moves, though circularly, from one specific point in a certain direction to the next specific point. For Wang Mang to supplant the Western Han dynasty with his own house, the Way of Heaven offered the best model: the heavenly mandate was constantly changing and now it was his turn to take over, just as summer naturally supersedes spring when the time comes.¹¹¹

The case of bronze mirrors in Western Han and Xin dynasties sheds new light on the fundamental art historical question raised in the beginning of this study: what force drives style to change over time? The transformation in the way of crafting objects was directly triggered by the way in which objects (here mirrors) physically interacted with their subjects (here the mirror masters) and resulted in an embodied history of style. In this interaction, the object was not entirely passive but also active in shaping and reshaping the subject's approach to the object (here unidirectional and circular viewing). Moreover, because the subject lived not in a social vacuum but in a concrete historical context, the political environment of the subject (here Confucianism and Wang Mang's replacement of the Han) reacted upon the

¹¹¹ Like all theorizations of stylistic change, this study does not deny individual exceptions which might apparently conflict the general picture of how the mirror ornament and inscription varied over time. However, this article chooses to focus on the general picture not because the exceptions can be dismissed but because they are worthwhile topics of separate case studies.

subject and exploited the newly created style by turning it into a political instrument. This was the fate of the style.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

西漢末年至新莽時期的裝飾、銘文及「四神」銅鏡的誕生

公元前一世紀末，中國銅鏡的裝飾發生了根本變化，從基本上以重複圖案為主的對稱設計轉變為單向的且非重複的動物或人形圖案，最終產生了所謂的「四神」銅鏡。然而，學者們沒有為這種形式變化提供任何解釋。通過仔細分析不同風格的鏡子上的裝飾與其他元素的關係，本文論證在西漢晚期的銅鏡中引入帶有敘事元素的長段說明性銘文重新界定了銅鏡和觀者/讀者之間的關係，並對觸發上述裝飾風格的轉變起到了重要作用。在論證中，作者詳細分析了約公元前50年至公元23年間各類銅鏡裝飾和銘文的樣式和位置變化。最後，本文將鏡面裝飾風格的變化置於西漢末年和新莽時期的歷史背景中進行分析，並推測其思想和政治緣由。

關鍵詞：銅鏡、「四神」、敘事、宇宙論、王莽

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