
Li Hui

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The book, *Chinese Glass*, will be of interest to all those desiring to gain a deeper insight into the subject of glass in ancient China. Consisting of three independent articles, it supplies some information about the characteristics of the development of ancient glass in China from the Warring States (475-221 BC) and Han (206 BC-220 AD) periods to the Northern Song (1127-1279).

The first part, written by Cecilia Braghin and entitled “Polychrome and Monochrome Glass of the Warring States and Han Period”, is devoted to polychrome glass with stratified eyes and monochrome white glass. She first considers the glass eye beads that are the earliest glass finds in China to date. Investigating their distribution in China and comparing them to the beads found in the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Asia, Braghin concludes that the glass eye beads of the Eastern Zhou were introduced into China from outside via Central Asia. Based on the beads found at Hougudui 侯古堆 in Henan province, she then states that by the late fifth century BC glass eye beads had spread further south to the region of Hubei province, presumably via Henan. Considering the historical context of this period, however, more evidence is needed to prove this assumption.

Some of the beads dating from the middle and late Warring States period were made of glass containing lead and barium oxides. In contrast to the composition of glass made outside China, these are characteristic components of raw materials from China, leading Braghin to point out the possibility that these eye beads were produced locally rather than imported from outside China.

She also notes that these glass eye beads were concentrated in Hunan and Hubei provinces and had a close relationship with the Chu state. She comes to the conclusion that due to this close connection with Chu, the production and use of the glass eye beads also came to an end when Chu was defeated by the Qin armies at the end of the third century BC.
She ascribes the fact of the occurrence and production of the glass eye beads in Chu to local beliefs and practices. She states that it appears that in the middle and late Warring States period Chu society had become particularly concerned with supplying the dead with objects or materials that had a clear reference to light and reflection. As a result, the manufacture of glass developed in Chu in response to these new needs. This is a very unique and novel interpretation.

On the basis of a study of plaques for inlay, Braghin suggests that the highest social elite inhabiting Henan and south-eastern China were likely to have been the ultimate controllers of the materials, labour and technology of glass production. Archaeological evidence, however, indicates that this conclusion may be somewhat premature. We should keep in mind that besides the great number of glass eye beads found in Hunan province, almost 90 percent of glass bi 璧 discs and nearly 80 percent of glass furnishings for swords found from the Warring States period were concentrated in Hunan province. Both style and chemical composition show that they are characteristic of Chinese glass products. In light of the large number of glass finds in Changsha, there is no doubt that Changsha was the centre of glass supply in Hunan, and it also strongly suggests that, rather than this technology being controlled by people in another region, Changsha was the centre of glass manufacture. In his analysis of Chu tombs in Changsha, Gao Zhixi 高志喜 has pointed out that in Changsha most of the glass bi discs came from the tombs of minor shi 士 (members of the low nobility) and commoners.1 The recent excavation report Līyé fājié báogaò 里耶发掘报告 (Report on the Excavation of Liye) also points out that 12 glass bi discs and 8 glass eye beads were found in the Maicha 麦茶 cemetery in Liye, Hunan province, and it is very possible that the tombs containing glass products belonged to commoners.2 Based on the above, it is reasonable to assume that in the middle and late Warring States, along with the mastery of glass manufacture by the Chu people in Changsha, glass in general became cheaper and more popular among shi and commoners and not only among the highest social elite. An additional small point, there is a mistake in figure 1: Changsha city is in the province of Hunan, not Hubei.

Braghin then discusses the relationship between jade and monochrome. The monochrome glass products were produced in imitation of jade ones, offering a cheaper alternative to the people of Chu society who could not afford jade but aspired to own it.

1 Hunan sheng bowuguan 湖南省博物馆 (Hunan Provincial Museum), Hunan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 湖南省文物考古研究所 (Institute of Archaeology of Hunan Province), Changsha Chu mu 长沙楚墓 (The Changsha Chu State Tombs), Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2000, p. 518.
The second article, by An Jiayao 安家瑶, entitled “Glass Vessels and Ornaments of the Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties Periods”, is devoted to Roman, Sasanian and Indian glass in China. An compares the facet-cut glass vessels excavated in Nanjing city in Jiangsu province, the glass vessels found in the tomb of Feng Sufu 冯素佛 in Beipiao 北票 county, Liaoning province, and four glass bowls with applied decoration, unearthed from the cemetery of the Feng clan in Jingxian 景县, Hebei province, to the glass products of the Eastern Mediterranean. She assigns the origin of these glass products to the Roman workshops in the Mediterranean. Sasanian glass vessels have been unearthed in both northern and southern China.

An, moreover, states that in the Wei (220-265), Jin (265-420) and Northern (386-581) and Southern Dynasties (420-589) the largest group of imported rare and valuable glass artefacts was confined to the upper strata of society. In addition, only seven glass objects of Chinese origin, made by the glassblowing technique, have been found in China during this period. An claims that the glassblowing technique was introduced into China as a result of the migration of non-Chinese glass craftsman to China in the fifth century AD.

As for Indian glass, over 150,000 beads, mostly glass examples, were found in Yongning 永宁 temple in Luoyang, Henan province. An ascribes them to the “Indo-Pacific” type of glass beads. She further points out that they may have been brought to China by Indian workers.

Based on glass finds in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in north-western China, An tends to hold the opinion that these exotic glass objects from the Mediterranean, West Asia and India reached China via Central Asia and eventually through the regions of Xinjiang.

We should not overlook the fact that in the period of the Wei, Jin as well as in the Northern and Southern Dynasties China had contact with the outside world not only through the long-existing northern routes. According to the information supplied by An, the exotic glass objects were distributed from Liaoning province in northeast China to Jiangsu province in eastern China. The evidence does seems to suggest other possibilities of routes for the importation of glass, however.

Peter Francis Jr. has done substantial research on Indo-Pacific beads. In his study he maintains that Indo-pacific beads had a wide distribution in Southeast Asia. The site of Oc-Eo in Vietnam, for instance, was a centre of Indo-pacific bead production. In China, thousands of this type of glass bead dating back to the Western Han (206 BC-8 AD) and Eastern Han (25-220 AD) dynasties were found in the provinces Guangdong, Guangxi and probably also in Hunan. These finds confirm the existence of contact between China and Southeast Asia. It is obvious that the chemical composition plays an important role in the study of glass provenance. Unfortunately, An does not supply details of the composition

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of the analyzed glass beads found in Yongning temple. In short, considering the existence of the contact between Southeast Asia and many exotic glass finds in southeast China, the conclusion that the introduction of all the exotic glass into China was via Central Asia through the region of Xinjiang seems unconvincing.

The third part, entitled “Luxury or Necessity: Glassware in Sarira Relic Pagodas of the Tang and Northern Song Periods” by Shen Hsueh-man 沈雪曼, is devoted to glassware from the site of Buddhist Sarira relic deposits. More than 70 sites of Buddhist Sarira relic deposits dating from the Tang (618-907) to the Northern Song (960-1126) periods have been excavated in China. Shen notes that 26 of these 70 deposits contained glass. She divides these glass objects into two groups. The first consists of those made as precious gifts to the relic (hence to the Buddha). The objects of this group are relatively large in size and often bear rich decoration. The second is comprised of small and plain glass vessels that were used as reliquaries to contain the Buddhist Sarira relics.

The glassware was used as a necessary part of a set of reliquaries in China instead of the rock crystal used in India. Based on a philological study, Shen argues that this change is likely to have resulted from a linguistic confusion that occurred in the process of translating Sanskrit terms into Chinese. The Sanskrit word sphātika, meaning rock crystal or quartz, was translated into Chinese as either boli 玻璃 or shuijing 水晶 in an early Chinese Buddhist text. However, in the Chinese language, the two synonymous terms boli and shuijing could refer to either rock crystal or transparent glass. Probably, within this context, the Indian sphātika reliquary was misinterpreted by Chinese Buddhists as being a glass reliquary. As a result, glassware became a necessity as a Buddhist Sarira relic. In the Song dynasty, glass was gradually pushed out of the realm of luxury, and as demand for it increased, so the supply of glassware became abundant. Due to this unique association of glass with Buddhism, however, glass still played an important part in Buddhist activities and was indispensable also in later Buddhist contexts.

As mentioned above, Shen throws light on the reason why glass had such a close relationship with Buddhism and became a necessary element in the Buddhist Sarira relics. This is very significant for the study of the characteristics of the development and history of glass in China. However, she does not give any information about other sites of Buddhist Sarira relic deposits that lack glassware, nor any explanation for this phenomenon. After all, they do account for about 62 percent of all the sites of Buddhist Sarira relic deposits.

In short, this book offers an important study of glass in China from the Warring States and Han to the Northern Song, highlighting some of the special characteristics of glass development during this period.