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(Selective) English summary of

“Han Dynasty Incense Archaeological Discoveries”

(漢代出土薰器具形制)

Talk given by Liu Hai Wang (劉海旺)

(Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology)

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Translation by Joanne Ng

The tradition of incense and aromatics in China

The tradition of incense has been a part of the lives of Chinese people for more than a thousand years. As mentioned in ancient literature, the Chinese have been using aromatic plants in their daily lives since the Yellow Emperor. According to the text *Xiang Cheng*¹ 《香乘》, incense was used by Huangdi 黃帝 to classify the ministers who were working for him.

The different uses of aromatics:

- Insect prevention: According to experimentation conducted in the Zhou Dynasty, aromatics can be used to ward off mosquitos and pests; they also help to improve the air quality and to purify the air indoors.
- Seasoning and ingredients for making alcoholic drinks: aromatics such as curcuma were usually involved in the process of making alcohol. These alcoholic drinks were served in rituals, banquets and other important events. The aromatics were also used as condiments, to season food, to improve taste and provide flavoring.
- Mortuary objects: Aromatics were usually found near the tombs of the rich, the nobility (e.g. the emperor), and warriors. For example, ²Chinese prickly ashes 花椒 were found in abundance in the tomb of Lady Meng Ji 黃君夫人孟姬; Chinese prickly ashes were also found in ten beautiful bronze boxes in the tomb of Lady Ju Yu 句敵夫人; prickly ashes were also placed inside a medical bag in the tomb of Changsha Ma Wang 長沙馬王.
- Epidemic prevention or control: As stated in the book *Bowu Zhi* 《博物志》, the Emperor Wu of Han 漢武帝 was very delighted that envoys from the West had helped control a very serious epidemic disease that was prevailing in Changan 長安. They suggested burning a piece of aromatic to ward off the disease. As a result, the patients in the court recovered. Emperor Wu was delighted with the solution these envoys

¹ *Xiang Cheng* is a text published in 1641, that was a compilation of information pulled from other texts that had to do with the topic of incense.

² Also known as Sichuan pepper or Chinese coriander

provided, and gathered all the patients in the palace and kept burning the incense for more than nine months, the fragrance spreading a hundred miles beyond Chang'an City 長安. Emperor Wu thanked the envoys by giving them valuable and precious presents.

Kinds of aromatics in the Han Dynasty

According to the text *Chuci lisao* 《楚辭·離騷》, there were thirty-four kinds of incense and incense woods in the state of Chu recorded; of these thirty-four, twenty-two are incense, while twelve are incense woods.

As the Han Dynasty saw development and flourishing in both social and economic sectors, the emperor enjoyed great power and wealth. Commerce and trade were vibrant as goods were easily transported to and from different countries due to the construction of the Silk Road 絲綢之路.

In the official historic records of the Han Dynasty, the mentions of aromatics and spices are few and scattered. The names of the aromatics are the only information given in most of the references. Due to the reason that herbaceous plants are difficult to preserve, such plants are rarely discovered in archaeological excavations. According to the excavated incense censers 香爐 and pouches 香囊 from the tomb of Zhangsha Ma Wang 長沙馬王堆一號墓, it is indicated that Chinese pepper 花椒, Tonka 薰草, Lemongrass 香茅, Magnolia 辛夷, Galangal 高良薑 and Gao Ben 藁本 were the common aromatics during the Han Dynasty.

The different types of ware used for aromatics

The main types of receptacles used (throughout the dynasties) for aromatics are censers 熏爐, spherical burners 熏球, pouches 香囊 and pillows 香枕.

- Censer 熏爐: the main kind of vessel for burning incense. There is no definite proof of when the first incense censer was produced. However, according to archaeological information, the Chinese started making pottery censers about four thousand years ago. In 1983, a bamboo-pattern pottery censer was found in the Liangzhu (a Neolithic culture of Changjiang delta c 3400-2250 BC) tomb site of Shanghai Qingpu Fuquan Shan 上海青浦福泉山良渚大墓. It is the earliest censer to be excavated in China.
- Fragrance sphere/ball 熏球: *Xun qiu* were used to for fragrance and used to sterilize bedding and clothes. It consists of a spherical outer metal shell, and inner half shaped like a bowl, to hold the aromatics. The inner bowl hangs in the middle of the sphere; with clever mechanics to allow it to maintain a constant horizontal level to prevent the spilling of aromatics, no matter how the sphere is the handled. The sphere could be worn on the person. The earliest book that mentions the spherical censer is *Meiren Fu* 《美人賦》 which was written by Sima Xiang Ru 西漢司馬相如 in the Western Han Dynasty, although there have been no *xun qiu* excavated from the Han Dynasty. The earliest *xun qiu* was discovered in a Tang Dynasty tomb. The design of *xun qiu* was not an artistic masterpiece, but also a great invention from the perspective of structural mechanics.
- Incense pouch 香囊: Also called a sachet 香包 in the past. The ancient Chinese started carrying incense pouches since the Western Zhou Dynasty. To show respect, young people at that time had to wear incense pouches whenever they greeted their parents and the elders. Four incense pouches were excavated in tomb No.1 of Zhangsha Ma Wang 長沙馬王堆一號墓.
- Incense pillow 香枕: an incense pillow was excavated in tomb No. 1 of Zhangsha Ma Wang 長沙馬王堆一號墓, height 12cm; length 45cm, width 10.5cm. Inside the pillow, it was full of sai peilan 塞佩蘭, an aromatic Chinese medicine. It smells spicy and sweet; it

improves appetite and makes people feel better in the hot weather. Incense pillows help to prevent foul smells, to sterilize, reduce humidity and improve sleep quality.

Studies done on Han Dynasty censers

Though incense censers were once popular in the Han Dynasty, there are few existing written records about censers. Due to the development of archaeology and a greater quantity of incense utensils excavated from the second half of the last century, and from this century, scholars have started focusing on the studies of censers. Yet, the amount of research on incense in the field of archaeology still remains as a small quantity proportionally, when compared to other areas of study.

There are four types of research:

- Overview of censers from the Han Dynasty: The book *Handai wuzhi wenhua ziliao tushuo* 《漢代物質文化資料圖說》 written by Sun Ji 孫機, published in 2011, illustrates the types and the uses of incense utensils from the Han Dynasty. The paper *Chunqiu zhanguo qinhan xun lu zong lun* 《春秋戰國秦漢熏爐綜論》 written by Fu Ju You 傅舉有 talks about the inventions and the development of censers from the Spring and Autumn Period up until the Han Dynasty; last but not least, the paper *Liang song xianglu yuanliu* 《兩宋香爐源流》 written by Yang Zhi Shui 揚之水 discusses the culture and history of incense censers of the Song period based on poetic and relics perspectives, with reference to the Han Dynasty as a source of origin and development.
- Regional research on censers of the Han Dynasty: Research on censers from Guangzhou, Chongqing and Shandong have been undertaken. The primary works are *Guangzhou han mu* 《廣州漢墓》, *Hepu handai wenwu tan* 《合浦漢代文物談》, *Chongqing ku qu handai bo shan lu de chubu kaocha* 《重慶庫區漢代博山爐的初步考察》, *Shandong diqu handai bo shan lu yanjiu* 《山東地區漢代博山爐研究》.

- The research on craft patterns of bronze incense censers in Han Dynasty: The making of bronze incense censers was sophisticated and the craft patterns were made uniquely. Zhang Hu 張虎 expresses his appreciation for the workmanship and artistic value of ancient censers in his book *Qian tan jin guo dai jinshu xun lu gongyi zhimei* 《淺談中國代金屬熏爐的工藝之美》; Jiangtingyu 蔣廷瑜 also presents his research in his paper *Handai xi eke huawen tongqi yanjiu* 《漢代蟹刻花紋銅器研究》.
- The integrated researches about incense censers in Han Dynasty: there are a few integrated research on incense censers of the Han Dynasty. Yangbo 楊波 published a research titled *Handai xun lu yanjiu* 《漢代熏爐研究》 in 2014. The paper analyzes the excavated incense censers of the Han Dynasty and summarizes its patterns and development in order to reflect the social history and culture of the period.

The spread of censers in the Han Dynasty and social contexts

The habit of burning incense was in practice since the Warring State Period, and it was widespread in the Han Dynasty. Especially when the Silk Road was opened, different kinds of aromatics could be delivered to China. Besides their traditional uses, incense were also used in events such as banquets and other celebrations activities. Burning incense was an integral part of the lives of the Chinese people. As incense related-activities spread widely in the upper class in China, there was a great improvement in the design of censers. The incense utensils also reflected people's social status and lifestyle tastes. Therefore, the designs of incense utensils changed from simple to more intricate. According to archaeological information, the use of censers had spread to many parts of the country by the Han Dynasty.

The widespread use of incense related also to China's rich religious background, as religious beliefs of the time placed great emphasis on the idea of immortality 仙道思想. The citizens followed the emperor's religion and believed that incense made people immortal.

The material used for making incense censers

The material for making incense censers were mainly pottery, bronze and iron, due to these materials being refractory (able to retain its physical shape when subjected to high temperatures).

Red pottery were most popularly used for making incense censers, followed by grey pottery. Some censers are of their original material color, while some are colored. Most of the pottery incense censers were used for funerary purposes; therefore the quality was coarser.

Censers could also be made of porcelain; there is not much research on this. They were usually discovered in the South, and it is difficult to find them in the North.

Bronze censers were popular among the upper class. The Emperor always sent sophisticated censers as a gift to his ministers.

Aside from pottery and bronze, according to the ancient literature, the court also used pure gold and silver to make censers. However, no gold and silver incense censers have yet been found.

The types and designs of censers

The early stage of censer designs were mostly *dou* shaped (豆形), *gui* shaped (簋形) and *ding* shaped (鼎形). Such designs were influenced by the earlier Qin period. They body of the vessel was usually shallow, with a plain cover.

- *Dou* shape: An example of this type of censer was excavated in a Western Han Dynasty tomb in Shandong (山東臨淄西漢齊王墓陪葬坑). It was made of gold; the censer was designed elegantly with smooth shapes and lines. The cover was decorated with two fighting dragons. There are many irregular holes engraved on the cover. The censer has handles at the two sides.

- *Gui* shape: A censer of this shape was excavated from a Western Han Dynasty tomb in Jiangsu (江蘇盱眙大雲山西漢江都王陵北區陪葬墓 M12, M17). A flying bird sits at the top of the cover, symbolic of spirituality and movement.
- *Ding* shape: A censer of this shape, with three beast feet stepping on birds was excavated from Hebei (河北滿城中山靖王劉勝墓). The design is sophisticated.
- *Fang* shape (方形): Besides the round shape of many censers, there were also square-shaped censers. A *fang* shaped censer excavated from Guangzhou xiang gang 廣州象崗 was created with four unconnected cubic boxes, with a square cover. Such a design is rarely seen in the Han Dynasty.

Up until the appearance of the boshanlu censers 博山爐, dragons and rivers were the common motifs used to decorate censer covers in the early stage of Han Dynasty. Boshanlu censers can be considered the style that is most representative of censers of the Han Dynasty. The design of Boshanlu were of a sacred mountain; ancient belief held that three sacred mountains, Penglai 蓬萊, Fangzhang 方丈 and Ying Zhou 瀛洲, where humans could live eternally, were located in the middle of the East China Sea. In fact, the Boshan design was not limited to censers; the design was also applied to pottery pots, vases and cups. It reflected the significance of the idea of immortality in the religious and thought system of the people.

The designs of Han Dynasty censers are exquisite. Some are made of gold and some are made of silver gold. Clouds and dragons are the main decorations for the majority of these censers. There are three more unique decorations as follows:

- Vermilion Bird and Duck 朱雀和鴨形
- *Bainiao Chaofeng* 百鳥朝鳳, literally translated as “all birds looking up to the phoenix”
- Boshan mountainous landscape with trees 錯山博山

The design of Boshanlu had the *dou* shape as its basis³. This foundational design was then developed and changed as seen in the different variations of this design. Some boshanlu have humans and beasts as the shape of the stem. Examples of different stems are as below:

- Strong dragon rider with upper part of the body naked 騎龍力士裸露上身
- Immortal bird stepping on tortoise 仙鳥踏龜
- Feet of tripod vessel in bird shape 鼎足的三支鳥形柱

Censers were used indoors, and as the height of the beds of the wealthy became higher, the stems of the censers also increased in length.

Overview of the development of censer design

Censers with a ring foot shape 圈足形 were popular in the early stage of the Western Han Dynasty; in the middle period of the Western Han Dynasty, the design of Boshan-style censers and censers that rested on a circular dish 承盤型 appeared to be in vogue. At the later stage of the Western Han Dynasty, censers with ring foot shape became less favorable, and Boshanlu 博山爐 was popular, spreading widely in the country.

From the middle to the later period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the types and basic decorations of incense censer remained unchanged; they were mostly made with a circular dish under the incense censer. There were a few three-legged incense censers produced from the early to later stage of Eastern Han Dynasty.

In general, the designs of censers that rested on a circular dish and the Boshanlu 博山爐 were the main styles until the later stage of Eastern Han Dynasty.

³ *Dou* shape refers to a general design of a vessel with a stemmed circular foot on top of which is placed a bowl or plat. The Chinese ideogram *dou* 豆 was created in the shape of this utensil.