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CHINESE INSCRIPTION ON THE LACQUER CUP FROM NOIN ULA MOUND 20 (MONGOLIA)

In 2006, the Russian-Mongolian Expedition found a lacquer cup in burial mound 20 in the Noin Ula Mountains. This article proposes reading and translation of the 46 Chinese characters carved on the bottom of the cup. The inscription has made it possible to date the cup, to identify the workshop where it was restored or improved, and to learn the ranks and names of the officials supervising the work. The cup, a typical artifact of the Han period, was produced at the Kaogong workshop (city of Chang'an) which supplied the Chinese Imperial Court with the lacquer ware.

Keywords: *Han Dynasty, Noin Ula mound 20, lacquer cup, Chinese inscription, Kaogong workshop, Chang'an, Sigong workshop, Shu District, Gongguan workshop, Guanghan District.*

Introduction

In 2006, the Russian-Mongolian Expedition excavated three lacquer cups from the elite Hunnu burial mound in the Suzukteh valley in the Noin Ula Mountains (Polosmak, Bogdanov, Tseveendorj, 2006; Polosmak et al., 2008; Polosmak, Tseveendorj, Bogdanov, 2007). All three cups are of the same flat-bottomed oval shape with two ear-handles. The inscription of 46 Chinese characters is carved in a circle at the bottom part of one of the cups. Pairs of phoenixes and clouds are painted with cinnabar on the outer surface of the cup.

The lacquer cup was found on the bottom of the wooden burial chamber at a depth of 18.35 m. It was lying bottom up with its handles broken off, sitting on the copper disc which was probably a mirror. The oval-shaped base is well preserved. Its maximum diameter is 92.5 mm; the minimum diameter is 51.2 mm; the height is 4 mm. The thickness of the cup's walls averages 4 mm. Since the walls were damaged, it is hardly possible to assess the real height of the object. The cup was restored and subjected to conservation (Fig. 1). The restoration was made by V.G. Simonov (Grabar Art Conservation Centre, Moscow)

and L.P. Kundo (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography SB RAS, Novosibirsk).

Inscriptions on the lacquer ware are an important source of information not only about the place, time, and the manufacturing process, but also about the artisans and officials. The purpose of the present article is to translate the inscription and to assess the date, the cultural attribution, and the function of the cup.

Description of the find

During the Warring States Period (Zhanguo, Qin, and Han), so called *bei* 杯 cups were one of the most commonly used types of lacquer ware in China. These were flat-bottomed cups of an oval shape with a pair of ear-handles. Most researches call them *erbei* 耳杯 meaning 'ear cups'. Characters *pou* (*bei*) 匜 (栝) related to the modern character *bei* 杯, 'cup' are present in inscriptions of the period between the Zhanguo and Eastern Han Dynasty. According to experts, such cups were used for drinking wine. This opinion is also confirmed by the inscriptions *tzyun shin tzyu* 君幸酒, "a lucky wine for you." However,

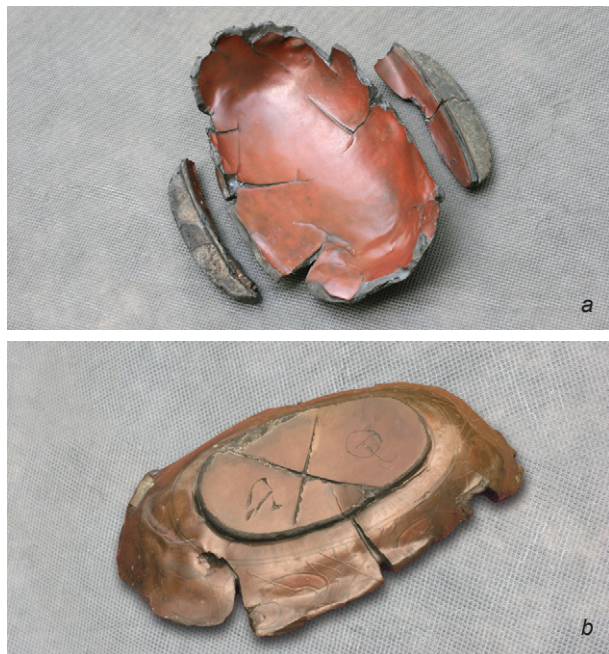


Fig. 1. Lacquer cup from Noin Ula mound 20 before (a) and after (b) restoration.



Fig. 2. Fragment of the “opposing phoenixes” design on the cup from Noin Ula mound 20.

some other cups are inscribed *shin shi bei* 幸食杯, “cups for lucky food” or *tzyun shin shi* 君幸食, “a lucky food for you.” Such cups could be used both for wine and for food (Hong Shi, 2006: 23–25).

The cup from Noin Ula mound 20 is decorated with four pairs of opposing phoenixes and clouds (Fig. 2). Cups with a similar design are typical of Han burials. One cup of this sort was discovered at the Guizhou Province, China (Shihan...). The other one was found at the Tzurumte valley in the Noin Ula Mountains and at present is kept at the State Museum of Mongolian History (L’Asie des steppes..., 2001: 147, fig. 128). Chinese researchers call the design composed of phoenixes and clouds *leifengven*

雷凤纹, “phoenixes and thunder” or *yunfengven* 云凤纹, “clouds and phoenixes.” This motif was used as early as the Zhanguo period. It can also be seen on many artifacts of the Han period. Chinese experts usually call similar cloud patterns *baoyun* 宝云 or *zhuiyun* 瑞云 which can be translated as “precious clouds” or “lucky clouds.” The bird figures are united by clouds forming a linking element of the design. It is possible to say that clouds serve as tails for the phoenixes. They are the luck-wishing auspicious symbols.

The location of birds on a cup corresponds to the Chinese ideas about space. We can identify several motives such as a pair of opposing phoenixes and pairs of phoenixes in a circle (four sides of the world) according to *wu-shin* 五行, the five-element system. The circular composition is related to an understanding of the space as a five-element model of the world: four sides of the world and its centre. In our opinion, the image of an opposing pair of phoenixes reflects both the dual perception of the world and the space perception according to the *yin-yang* system 阴阳. During the Han Dynasty period, a variant of the composition “a pair of phoenixes and clouds” existed: a pair of phoenixes and an object between them. On the Noin Ula cup, crossed lines are located between the phoenixes. V.V. Yevsyukov considers such compositions as images of birds (animals) staying by the World Tree (1988: 48).

The phoenix was an imperial symbol during the Han Dynasty. In the Lin Xuang novel *An Unauthorized Biography of the Flying Swallow Zhao*, the Emperor himself is named ‘Phoenix’: “The Han Dynasty symbols are fire and virtue, therefore the Emperor himself is the Red Dragon or the Red Phoenix” (Purpurnaya yashma..., 1980: 37) In the written sources, character *feng* 凤, ‘phoenix’ started to be used with the meaning of ‘Empress’ or ‘a woman related to the Emperor’. The objects which belonged to the Empress or concubines were necessarily decorated with phoenixes, or the names of the objects included the word ‘phoenix’.

In addition, the phoenix was considered to be an entrance keeper for the Country of the Immortal. In *Chuci*, the literary source of the southern canon, Qu Yuan went on a Yu voyage on four dragons and phoenixes. The same motif could be traced in Song Iu’s final part of the *Jiu Bian* cycle: “An opulent luxury of the Purple Bird to the right and curvaceous rings of the Turquoise Snake to the left.” M.E. Kravtsova hypothesizes that the Yu voyage is not the traveling of a live person, but of the soul of a deceased (1994: 142, 171). For this reason, perhaps, the cups with such a design were put into graves.

This variety of interpretations is not incidental: the phoenix – the head of all birds – combines the images of many birds. This mixture results in the overlap of meanings. The phoenix image can concurrently symbolize an entrance keeper to the Country of the Immortal and

the Emperor or the Empress. In the Han period, the phoenix finally became a state symbol. That is why its images can be found on the objects made for the Imperial Court. As it was mentioned above, the cup from mound 20 was decorated not only with a design but also with an inscription. Most of the Han lacquer ware does not have inscriptions. If the object was made at the Imperial workshops or was manufactured for the Imperial Court, it should have a special stamp or inscription.

Sources and research methods

Translation of an inscription implies the development of a translation hypothesis, language code interpretation, and verification of the translation.

While developing the translation hypothesis, we used published materials from several sources. Amongst archaeological sources were lacquer ware from China, Mongolia, and Korea (Lolang District) and other inscribed objects. The written sources include *Han Shu* (“Book of Han History”) and *Hou Han Shu* (“Book of Later Han History”); Chinese language explanatory dictionaries *Kangxi zidian* (2006), *Wenbai duizhou “Shouwen juizi” ishu* (2000), and *Qihai* (1999). S. Umehara, a Japanese researcher, was the first who collected, analyzed, and published information on the inscribed Chinese lacquer ware. His book *Shina kandai kinemei shikki zusetu*, published in 1943, is a bibliographic rarity, so unfortunately we were not able to refer to it. However, some of his ideas concerning lacquer ware are presented in the other Umehara’s work titled *Mouko Noin Ura hakken ibutsu* (1960). Two inscriptions on cups from the Noin Ula burial mounds are listed. S. Umehara commented that the inscriptions involve information on names and ranks of the officials supervising production and names of artisans who made the ware. S. Umehara also noted that cups with similar inscriptions were found in the Lolang District (Ibid.: 30, 31). The Chinese researcher Hong Shi continued studies of the inscriptions on lacquer objects (2005, 2006). He compiled a summary table of lacquer objects with inscriptions. Yet a considerable part of this table and workshop descriptions are based on S. Umehara’s materials. M. Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens studied the inscription on a wooden lacquer box from the Xiongnu elite barrow in the Tsaraam cemetery (excavations of S.S. Minyayev). Her translation is based on the studies of S. Umehara and Hong Shi (Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens, 2007: 56–58; 2008: 71–74).

According to *Treatise on the Earth Patterns of Hanshu*, during the Han period, the management of lacquer production was concentrated in eight districts or *tsjun* 郡: Shu 蜀; Guanghan 广汉; Henei 河内 (modern Henan Province); Henan 河南; Inshu 颍书; Nanyang 南阳 (modern Henan Province); Jinan 济南; and Taishan 泰

山. Amongst these districts, the most famous were Shu and Guanghan at Chengdu in the modern Sichuan Province (Hong Shi, 2006: 170, 174). They were considered to be the centers of lacquer ware production. The workshop at the Guanghan District was named *Gongguan* and the workshop at the Shu District was called *Sigong* 西工. “During the Han Dynasty, in the capital there were three workshops manufacturing goods exclusively for the needs of the Emperor’s family. *Kaogong-shi** produced furniture” (Eliseeff V., Eliseeff D., 2007: 179). *Han Shu* states that initially the workshop had the *Kaogongshi* 考工室 name. Under the rule of Emperor Wudi in the 1st year of the Taichu era (104 BC), the workshop was renamed as the *Kaogong* 考工. Bronze ware, weapons, parts of chariots, etc. were cast and lacquer ware was produced at this workshop. The total amount of manufactured objects exceeded the production rate of the Imperial workshops, but the number of lacquer ware products was sufficiently smaller. If the products were designated for the Imperial Court, the characters *chengyui* 乘輿 meaning ‘Emperor’s carriage’ or allegorically ‘Emperor’ were written at the very beginning of an inscription (Hong Shi, 2006: 190, 191, 193). The *Kaogong* workshop was a capital city based enterprise. During the Western Han Dynasty, the city of Chang’an was a capital, therefore we can assume that the *Kaogong* workshop was located there.

The Shu and Guanghan Districts, as well as the *Gongguan*, *Sigong*, and *Kaogong* workshops are not only mentioned in the written sources but are also included in the inscriptions on the lacquer ware. The *Gonggong* workshop 供工 is mentioned in inscriptions as well. Some researchers suppose that this is the name of a raw material supplier, while some others think that it is a different character spelling of the *Kaogong* workshop. Since the structure of inscriptions on the lacquer ware from the *Gonggong* and *Kaogong* workshops is identical, we can assume that the *Gonggong* is a separate workshop related to the *shaofu* 少府 administration (Ibid.: 191). During the Han period, the combination of characters *shaofu* was used in the meaning “Keeper of the Emperor’s garments and valuables or Chamberlain” (Bolshoi kitaisko-russkii slovar (Hereafter, BKRS), 1984, vol. 3: 356). In the comments to *Shiji* it is written that *shaofu* meant “tax office” and/or “head of the tax office of the imperial court.” The *shaofu* rank was established during the Qin Dynasty. The *shaofu* was one of the highest ranking officials during the Qin and Han eras (Vyatkin, Taskina, 1975, vol. 2: 366, 446, 572).

M. Loewe writes that, apart from private enterprises, in the 1st and 2nd centuries, there existed at least three workshops financed by the government. Some goods were exported, which is evidenced by a wine glass. The year of manufacture, 55 and the Kuang Han

**Kaogongshi* in a different spelling.

workshop* located in the place of modern Chengdu, are indicated on this glass. Based on the inscription, it is possible to make a list of artisans responsible for different processes, such as primer, lacquer coating, gilding, painting, engraving or polishing. Inscriptions on the objects produced at state factories are equally informative since the names of supervising officials were written in them (Loewe, 2005: 208–209).

M.V. Vorobyev noted that some lacquer objects bear inscriptions with information about the place and time of manufacture. These usually were the Imperial workshops at the Shu and Guanghan Districts in Sichuan Province (1997: 294). According to C.P. Fitzgerald, more than 200 lacquer objects were unearthed in Laklang (Lolang) burials. Most of them are painted. Many objects are inscribed and dated back to the period between 85 and 53 BC. According to the inscriptions, the objects were manufactured in China, west of Sichuan, not far from Chengdu (Fitzgerald, 1985). Eight lacquer objects (casket *he*, plate *pan*, and *erbei* cups) from the archaeological site Sogamni in the Lolang Province, also bear an inscription, “The 4th year of the Yuanshi era” (Hanguk...).

Thus based on the available sources, we can construct the translation hypothesis. We suppose that inscriptions on the Han lacquer ware should bear information concerning the place (district, workshop), time (the Emperor’s reign motto), and manufacturing process, as well as names of the artisans who took part in a particular process, and names and ranks of the supervising officials. It should be found out whether the inscriptions are similar on all types of ware or if the inscription structure depends on the workshop.

Methods of translation

Comparison of inscriptions on different types of Han lacquer ware makes it possible to distinguish two kinds of structures. The structure of the first kind is typical of *Sigong* and *Gongguan* workshops at the Shu and Guanghan Districts of the Sichuan Province including:

1. The reign motto normally accompanied by the year, comprised of four signs and ends with the character *nyan* 年 meaning ‘year’.
2. Names of the district and the workshop. The characters *tszao* 造 meaning ‘to manufacture’ or *gong* 工 ‘to work’ stand at the end.
3. Three characters *shu* 髹, ‘to cover with a lacquer layer’; *シ*月**, ‘to inscribe’; and *hua* 畫 ‘to draw an ornament’.
4. Information on how the object was produced.
5. The volume of the object.

*Probably, it is the previously mentioned *Guanghan* workshop.

**A character of unknown pronunciation.

6. The name of the object.

7. The list of normally eight manufacturing stages with the names of the artisans. The character *tszao* 造 meaning ‘to manufacture’ stands at the end.

8. The list of ranks and surnames of five supervising officials in the descending order of importance.

The typical scheme looks as follows*:

□□□年+□郡□□髹シ月畫□□... +容□升□□龠(籥), 素工 (surname of the artisan), 髹工□ (surname of the artisan), 上工□ (surname of the artisan), 黄涂工□ (surname of the artisan), 畫工□ (surname of the artisan), シ月工□ (surname of the artisan), 清工□ (surname of the artisan), 造工□ (surname of the artisan), 造, 护工卒史□ (surname of the official), 長□ (surname of the official), 丞□ (surname of the official), 掾□ (surname of the official), 令史□ (surname of the official) 主.

The second kind of inscription structure is typical of the capital workshops *Kaogong* and *Gongong* in Chang’an city. These inscriptions are shorter than those of the first kind and include the following elements:

1. Information that the object was destined for the Imperial Court; characters *chengyui* 乘輿, ‘Emperor’s carriage’ or allegorically ‘Emperor’.

2. Three characters *shu* 髹, ‘to cover with a lacquer layer’; *シ*月**, ‘to inscribe’; *hua* 畫 ‘to draw an ornament’.

3. Information on how the object was produced.

4. The name of the object.

5. The volume of the object.

6. The reign motto normally accompanied by the year. This part of the inscription consists of four signs and the character *nyan* 年, ‘year’, is the last one.

7. The name of the workshop. Unlike the first structure, the second one consists of surnames of two artisans only: the one who manufactured (restored) the object and the one who did the inscription (or red decoration pattern).

8. The list of ranks and surnames of officials supervising the production process. The characters *chzhu* 主, ‘master’, ‘head of ...’ and *chen* 臣, ‘official’, ‘dignitary’, are written in the end.

9. The list of ranks and surnames of officials controlling the production process. The character *sheng* 省 is used at the end while the character *chzhu* 主, ‘master’, is not used so often. The officials are listed in an ascending order of importance.

The character scheme looks as follows:

乘輿髹シ月畫□□... +容□升□□龠□ □□□年+□工工造(繕)シ月工□ (surname of the artisan), 佐臣□ (surname of the official), 齋夫臣□ (surname of the official), 掾臣□ (surname of the official) 主(臣), 右丞臣□ (surname of the official), 令臣(surname of the official) 省(主).

*□ indicates changing characters.

**A character of unknown pronunciation.

It should be noted that, when new ranks were established or when the rank status was changed, appropriate corrections were made in the inscriptions. The new rank name was added or the listing order was improved. The latter can be used for determining the date of an incomplete (damaged) inscription.

The inscription on the cup from Noin Ula mound 20 is almost complete; it is damaged in only one spot. The characters on the macro photograph are clearly seen and easy to read, with one exception of the character on the damaged area. Considering the inscription structure and the context and features of this character, with its inclined to the left stroke and horizontal and vertical strokes, we can restore it as the *nyan* 年, ‘year’ character.

The cup’s inscription is of the second type and looks as follows (Fig. 3):

乘輿髹シ月畫木黄耳一升十六籥倍元延四年考工二[工]通繕シ月工憲守佐臣文 番夫臣勳掾臣文臣右丞臣光令臣譚省.

Comments on the characters and translation

According to the Chinese-Russian Dictionary (BKRS, 1984, vol. 3: 783), the characters 乘輿 (乘輿) *chengyui* mean ‘the Emperor’s carriage’ or allegorically ‘the Emperor’. This is a direct indication that the cup was manufactured at the Imperial workshops. Lee Syue

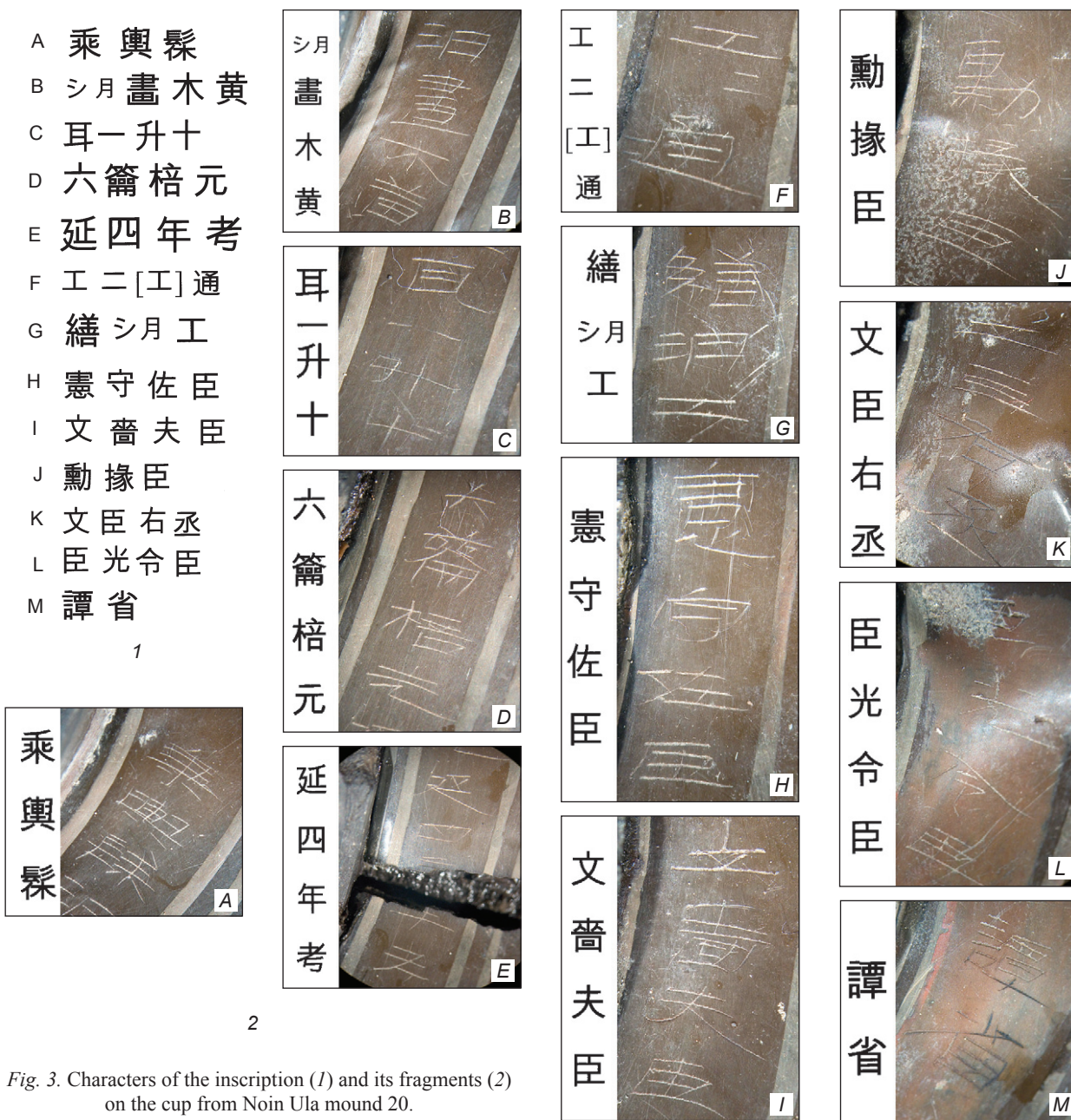


Fig. 3. Characters of the inscription (1) and its fragments (2) on the cup from Noin Ula mound 20.

Qing, recalling the opinion of Chen Chji, stated that in the Han era, officials used a combination of characters *chengyui* referring to the Emperor himself or about the ware designated to the Emperor. However, it is not clear why the objects of such designation were found in the region which used to be on the periphery of the Empire. Perhaps officials were awarded with objects containing this inscription or the local administration was selling surplus goods from the workshops (Lee Sue Qing, 1998: 72). According to Hong Shi, many lacquer objects bear two characters – 乘輿 *chengyui*. Cai Yong, in his records of the Han era *Duduan* wrote that chariots, horses, garments, and all belongings of the Son of the Sky were called *chengyui*. Therefore, all objects inscribed with these two characters were supplied to the Imperial Court (Hong Shi, 2006: 174).

There are several similar options to write the character *shu* 髹 (休). In *Shouwen*, 漆 *tsi* means ‘lacquer’. In the Qin and Han periods, this character could be used both as a noun ‘lacquer’ and as a verb ‘to coat with lacquer’ (Lee Sue Qing, 1998: 72). According to *Kangxi* and *Quihai*, the character *shu* 髹 was used for black and red lacquer ware with a predominant red. *Han Shu* recorded that such ware was produced for the Imperial Court (Kangxi zidian, 2006: 1623; Quihai, 1999: 1914). Hong Shi mentions a different interpretation of this character from the *Shouwen* dictionary, such as “*shu* means sap of the tree which could be used for coating objects.” He also notes that in Yang’s comments about *Han Shu*, objects coated with lacquer are called *shu*. Perhaps *shu* means ‘the primary lacquer coating or coating with a lacquer foundation’. Unlike the *tsi* 漆 ‘coating with lacquer’, *shu* indicated that the lacquer layer was very thin (2006: 178–180).

Reading of the 𠂇月 character is unknown. The researchers interpret and correspond this character to different modern signs, in particular with the 彤, 丹, 𠂇丹. It is believed that in the past, this character was necessarily written with the grapheme 𠂇 ‘side water’. According to most researchers, this is the character *diao* 雕, which can be translated as ‘to carve patterns’. Nowadays, scholars do not share a consensus of opinion on the interpretation of its meaning. Some of them are convinced that the character 𠂇月 means ‘to inscribe’, while others suppose that the meaning is ‘to put away for drying a cup just coated with lacquer’ (Lee Sue Qing, 1998: 72). Hong Shi suggests several other interpretations related to lacquer ware production for this character. The first option is polishing of the object after the decoration pattern was painted on it. The second option is a drying process in a dark place. The third option is a polishing of the object till it shines. After the ware was inscribed or painted, the artisan also polished it to a shine. The fourth option was a coating with red cinnabar, while the fifth was a polishing while manufacturing. However, Hong Shi, comparing all characters, comes

to the conclusion that all objects are inscribed with the character 𠂇丹 which is closely related to the character *dan* 丹, ‘cinnabar’, ‘cinnabarinic’, ‘red’. According to Hong Shi, the combination 𠂇丹工 means a process of coating with red lacquer. It is worth noting that the ware with inscriptions without this character do not have the red lacquer layer. Cinnabar was an expensive dye so most likely it was used only for ware designated for the Imperial Court which was inscribed with the *chengyui* characters (2006: 181–183, 185).

The character *hua* 畫(画) means ‘to paint’, ‘picture’ or ‘drawing’ (BKRS, 1983, vol. 2: 47). During the Han period, it meant ‘to insert an ornament’ so the meaning of this character remained virtually the same. Objects bearing this character are not ornamented (Hong Shi, 2006: 184).

Thus three characters – *shu*, □ character with unknown reading nowadays, and *hua* 髹𠂇丹畫 – written together refer to three different processes, such as the primary lacquer coating or coating with a lacquer foundation, the insertion of the inscription or coating with red lacquer, and drawing a pattern. In addition, this combination indicates the sequence of these processes.

The character *mu* 木 means ‘wood’ or ‘wooden’. The lacquer ware was made mostly of papier-mâché and wood (Burial No. 2..., 2001: 61–62). The character *mu* or ‘wood’ in the inscription indicates that the cup had a wooden foundation.

The characters *huang er* 黄耳 or ‘yellow ears’ mean gilding (Lee Sue Qing, 1998: 73). These characters are present in the inscriptions of the objects (cups in particular) with ear-shaped inserted handles made of gilded bronze (Hong Shi, 2006: 185, 186).

The group of characters *yi sheng shilyu yu* 一升十六簋(龠) denominates a volume measure of one *sheng* and sixteen *yue*. The *sheng* 升 is a volume measure for liquids and bulk materials and it equals 1.4 liters. The *yue* 簋(龠) is a measure quantity of 1200 grains of millet which makes 0.01 *sheng* (BKRS, 1983, vol. 2: 979; 1984, vol. 3: 240). According to *Showeng*, one *sheng* equals 10 *yue*. There is also a comment that one *sheng* could be equal to 10 *ge*. In the past, units of volume measurement could be different, i.e. one *sheng* could consist of 10 or 20 *yue* (Wenbai duizhou..., 2000: 1347). In the Han period, one *sheng* was equal to 10 *ge* and 1 *ge* consisted of 2 *yue* or 200 ml (Zhongguo...). The historical notes *Shi Ji* comment that *sheng* is an ancient volume measure for liquids and bulk materials. In the Zhanguo and Han periods, it was equal to 340 g (Vyatkin R.V., Vyatkin A.R., Karpetyants, 2002, vol. 8: 503). Judging by the inscription on the Noin Ula cup, its volume was approximately 360 ml. Most likely it was its real volume, but due to damaged walls the volume cannot be determined precisely.

The character *pou* 楮(栝, 杯) means ‘wooden ware’ or ‘cup’ (Hong Shi, 2006: 24).

The group of characters *Yuan synyan* 元延四年 is a motto of the reign of the 4th year of Yuan. It corresponds to 9 BC. The period of reign under this motto was from 12 to 9 BC (BKRS, 1983, vol. 1: 159).

The characters *kaogong* 考工 are interpreted as ‘supervisor’ or ‘chief inspector of craftwork’, the rank at the Imperial Revenue Office during the Han period (Ibid., 1984, vol. 3: 499). This was the name of an official’s rank at the Imperial Court during the Eastern Han Dynasty. According to the chapter “Officials” of *Hou Han Shu*, *kaogong* is an official of the Imperial Court supervising different kinds of work. Besides, *Kaogong* is also the name of the workshop mainly producing armaments. The workshop was subordinated to the *shaofu* 少府 office. During the Western Han Dynasty, officials with *hou* 侯 rank also ran private workshops or storages (Quihai, 1999: 1469).

The character consisting of two horizontal strokes (二) follows the group of characters 考工 in the inscription on the cup. Similar to other inscriptions and according to the Chinese grammar rules, it is the second character *gong* 工, ‘work’, ‘to work’.

The character *shan* 繕 (繕) means ‘to make a copy, to mend, to repair, to improve’ (BKRS, 1983, vol. 2: 466). In *Showeng*, this character is translated as ‘to mend’, ‘to darn clothing’, ‘to repair’, ‘to restore’ (Wenbai duizhou..., 2000: 1228). Proceeding from the meaning of the *shan* character, we may conjecture that the cup was either repaired in the workshop, or it was inscribed there, since we found names of supervisors and only two artisans on it; no names of the other artisans are written. According to the summary table by Hong Shi, only a cup from the Yaoziling burial is inscribed with the character *shan* (2006: 165). Hence, the combination *gong Tung shan* [工]通繕 can be translated as “restored by an artisan named Tung.”

Unlike the objects with the first type inscriptions, the inscription on the Noin Ula cup has only two names of the artisans: the first person restored it and the second one made an inscription or painted the red pattern. This fact does not mean that the lacquer ware production stages were reduced. According to Hong Shi, it just means that the workshop where this cup was manufactured did not have such a strict division of labor as the workshops in the Guanghan and Shu Districts. Perhaps the Noin Ula cup’s workshop was behind the Guanghan and Shu Districts workshops in the production rate and quality of ware. However the style and patterns on the ware of all three workshops are similar; pairs of red phoenixes are normally depicted on them. The *Kaogong* workshop ware imitates the Imperial workshop goods (Hong Shi, 2006: 193, 194).

A list of responsible persons follows the group of characters [工]通繕. It should be noted that all ranks are not military, but civilian. In the Han era, in the lists of

officials, the ranks of *tszaoguan* 佐官, *cheng* 丞, *yuan* 掾, *sefu* 番夫, etc. were indicated after the head of the district *ling* 令. In the inscriptions on the ware from the *Kaogong* workshop, ranks of officials are listed in a descending order, while on the goods from the Imperial workshops *Sigong* and *Gongguan*, the ranks are written in an ascending sequence. The delineation of ranks themselves was different: perhaps the rank status was changing or the writing order was not strictly fixed. There is one more distinction between the ware of the *Kaogong* workshop and the goods from the Guanhan and Shu Districts: the character *cheng* 臣 meaning ‘official’ was written after the name of the rank (Ibid.: 175, 191, 192).

In the inscription on the Noin Ula cup, the official’s ranks are listed as follows:

佐臣—番夫臣—掾臣—右丞臣—令臣。

The character *tszo* 佐 means ‘assistant’, ‘official’, ‘the youngest’, ‘the lowest’ (BKRS, 1983, vol. 2: 76). This rank was the lowest one and as a rule *tszo* was an assistant to *sefu* (Hong Shi, 2006: 175). On the cup from mound 20, the character *show* 守 (‘to be in charge temporarily’, ‘to represent’) stands in front of the character *tszo*. This indicates that in the Zhanguo period, as well as in the Qin and Han eras, there existed a system of the possible temporary change of an official or taking care of his duties by his representative (Ibid.: 176). Most likely, these were temporary duties. This character is a part of the group *tzashow* 假守 which means ‘to bear a rank temporarily’. An official could take temporary leave, e.g., for the mourning period on his parents. In such a case, the combination *showtszo* 守佐 is translated as ‘vice-assistant of the supervisor’ or ‘representative of the supervisor’s assistant’.

The characters *sefu* 番夫 mean ‘supervisor’, the lowest official rank up to the 5th century AD (BKRS, 1983, vol. 2: 670). During the Qin and Han Dynasties, this was a low rank provincial official who was dealing with civil affairs and taxation (Quihai, 1999: 1443). This official was a responsible person at *tszofu* 作府, the administration of works (Hong Shi, 2006: 175).

The character *yuan* 掾 means ‘a low level official’, ‘an assistant’ or ‘a clerk’ (BKRS, 1984, vol. 3: 844). This rank was established in 82 BC during the Western Han Dynasty at workshops of the Inchan District. The new rank reflected a stricter control on the workshops (Hong Shi, 2006: 175). According to *Showen*, *yuan* means ‘assistant’ or ‘left assistant’ (Wenbai duizhou, 2000: 1122).

The character *chzhu* 主, meaning ‘management’, ‘the work governance’, follows the rank character *yuan* in the inscription scheme (Hong Shi, 2006: 192). It is the last character in the list of supervising officials. However, in the inscription on the cup from mound 20, the character *cheng* 臣 was used. Most likely it happened because this cup was not made but restored at the *Kaogong* workshop.

The character *cheng* 丞 means ‘assistant of the institution or district head’ (BKRS, 1983, vol. 2: 50). During the Han Dynasty, *cheng* was an assistant of the district head (Qihai, 1999: 206). In the inscriptions on the ware from the *Kaogong* workshop, we can find the rank of *yucheng* 右丞, ‘right assistant’ or ‘the right hand assistant’. According to similar inscriptions, there were ranks of *zocheng* 左丞, ‘left assistant’, and *yucheng* 右丞, ‘right assistant’ controlling each other at the *Kaogong* and *Gonggong* workshops. In the comments to *Hou Han Shu*, it is written that the positions of *yucheng* and *zocheng* were established at the workshops one of each (Hong Shi, 2006: 190, 192). During the Han Dynasty, *yucheng* was an official who received petitions and extended money and grain loans (BKRS, 1983, vol. 2: 429). According to *Qihai*, *yucheng* is the name of an official rank and it is also written there that according to *Shangshu*, the ranks *yucheng* and *zocheng* existed during the Eastern Han Dynasty (Qihai, 1999: 2067, 2301).

The character *ling* 令 means ‘head of administrative office’, ‘secretary’ normally of the district level (Ibid.: 754).

The character *sheng* 省 means ‘province’ or ‘provincial centre’ (Ibid.: 627). Since on the Noin Ula cup the names of low rank officials only are listed, and at the end of the list there is the character *sheng* ‘region’ or ‘province’, but not the character *chzhu* (‘main’), it can be concluded that the cup was made not at the main (Imperial) workshop. The two big *Sigong* and *Gongguan* workshops at the Shu and Guanhan Districts respectively are known. They were located at Chengdu (modern Sichuan Province). As Hong Shi noted, the character *sheng* in the inscription could mean ‘controlling production’. It is believed that only officials whose rank did not exceed the rank of *yuan* managed the production, while the officials of higher ranks, e.g., *ling* and *yucheng*, controlled it (Hong Shi, 2006: 192, 193). In addition, judging by the compressed inscription, the cup was made at the workshop subordinated to the *shaofu* (Burial No. 2..., 2001: 61–62).

It is worth noting that the inscriptions of a similar structure can be encountered not only on the *erbei* cups, but on some other lacquer objects: for example, on the *tsuzong* 樽 cup from burial No. 2 at Yongzhou in Hunan Province (Ibid.: 55), on the *pan* 盘 plates from Yaochzuan burial 102 and from Shiyanli burial 201 (Hong Shi, 2006: 165, 168). The inscriptions on those finds differ only in the reign mottos and in the names of artisans and officials.

Relying on our analysis, we can translate the inscription on the cup from Noin Ula mound 20 as follows: “[For] the Imperial Court [produced] *bei*-cup, covered with lacquer, with inscription and ornament. [Foundation] wood, with yellow ears. Volume one *sheng* and 16 *yue*. In the 4th year of the Yuanyan at workshop *Kaogong* [artisan] Tong restored. Inscription made (or inserted red lacquer pattern) [artisan] Xi’an. Headed by the deputy

[supervisor’s assistant] *tszocheng* Weng, [supervisor] *sefu* Xun. Controlled by [assistant] *yuan* Weng, [right assistant of district head] *yucheng* Guan, [head of district administrative office] *ling* Tan.”

Cup with a similar inscription was found in burial mound 62 of the Han burial ground Motzuitzu, located near the city of Quilianshan on the Zamuhe River, 15 km southwest of Wuwei in the Gansu Province (Ibid.: 165). Unlike the Noin Ula cup, it was manufactured (not restored) at the *Kaogong* workshop, since the character *tszao* ‘to manufacture’ is present in the inscription. The Motzuitzu cup also has a motto of a different reign and names of artisans and officials:

乘輿髹丹畫木黃耳一升十六籥楮 绥和元年 考工
工并造 丹工丰 护臣彭 佐臣伊 齋夫臣孝 守右丞臣
忠守令臣丰省

“[For] the Imperial Court [produced] *bei*-cup, covered with lacquer, with inscription and ornament. [Foundation] of wood, with yellow ears. Volume one *sheng* and 16 *yue*. In the 1st year of the Suyhe at workshop *Kaogong* [artisan] Bin manufactured. Inscription made (or inserted red lacquer pattern) [artisan] Feng. Supervised by [scribe] *hu* Peng, [supervisor’s assistant] *tszocheng* Yi, [supervisor] *sefu* Hsiao. Controlled by representative of [right assistant of the district head] *yucheng* Zhong, representative of [head of the district administration office] *ling* Feng.”

In addition to the discussed cup, two similar inscribed lacquer cups were discovered in “royal” Hunnu burials in the Noin Ula Mountains. One of them, found by P.K. Kozlov in 1924–1925 in mound 6 is currently housed in the State Hermitage (St. Petersburg). S. Umehara read and translated the inscription on it (1960: 30):

建平五年九月 工王潭经 画工获荻 天武省

S. Umehara did not give the full translation of this inscription, but explained that the motto of the Jiangping reign coincides with the end of the reign of Emperor Aidi from the Early (Western) Han Dynasty. The researcher stressed that the 5th year of the Jiangping actually did not exist, since the reign under this motto lasted four years only (Ibid.: 30). In fact, the reign under the Jiangping motto coincides with 6–3 BC. After this (2–1 BC), the reign started under the Yuanshou motto (BKRS, 1983, vol. 1: 158–159). S. Umehara suggested considering the 5th year of the Jiangping period as the 1st year of the Yuanshou era and to date it as the 2nd year BC (1960). When Hong Shi examined dates on the lacquer ware of “the 5th year of the Jiangping”, he agreed with Umehara’s opinion and dated them to the 2nd year BC (2006: 167).

We suggest the following translation of the inscription: “In the 5th year of the Jiangping, in the 9th month, artisan Wang Tangjin made the job, artisan Hohu made the drawing, Tyangwu controlled.”

A.N. Bernstam made the translation of the inscription from Noin Ula mound 6 before S. Umehara: “September of the 5th year of the Tsyang Ping; maker Wang Tang

Chin, painter Huo, maker Yi, supreme control Bian-Wu.” Bernstam also claims that the date “the 5th year of the Jiangping” corresponds to the 2nd year BC (1937: 955). However, he did not quote the inscription itself.

Comparison of the inscription translations revealed distinctions in the reading of characters by different researchers. It is important to mention that the structure of this inscription does not coincide with the structures discussed in the present article. At the moment, it does not have any analogues, therefore it is difficult to identify at which workshop and for whom the cup from Noin Ula mound 6 was manufactured. Our translation was made on the basis of S. Umehara’s translation, which in our opinion is not cited in full or is distorted.

In 1927, A.D. Simukov found one more cup in a big burial mound located in the Suzukteh valley in the Noin Ula Mountains. In 2008, we examined this cup and made a copy of the preserved characters of its inscription (Fig. 4). The inscription can be attributed to the first structural type and looks as follows*:

建平五年蜀郡西工乘輿髹シ月畫木黃耳榕容一升
十六籥 素工尊 髹工哀 上工壽 銅耳黃塗工宗 畫□□
□□□ □工白 造工夫造 护工卒史巡守長克丞駿掾豐
守令史严主

According to the first type structure, the characters designating the manufacturing processes and artisans follow the character ‘drawing’. We cannot reconstruct only two characters for the names of the artisans. Restored according to the scheme, the inscription is as follows:

建平五年蜀郡西工乘輿髹シ月畫木黃耳榕容一升
十六籥 素工尊 髹工哀 上工壽 銅耳黃塗工宗 畫工
□シ月工□清工白 造工夫造 护工卒史巡守長克丞駿
掾豐守令史严主

“In the 5th year of the Jiangping, in the Sigong workshop at the Shu District, [for] the Imperial Court [manufactured] *bei* cup. Coated with lacquer, with inscription and ornament. [Foundation] of wood with yellow ears. Volume 1 sheng and 16 yue. Foundation made [artisan] Tsung. Coated with lacquer foundation [artisan] Pou, secondary lacquer coating [artisan] Shou, inserted yellow ears and coated with [gilding] [artisan] Tsun, made a drawing □. Made an inscription (or painted red lacquer ornament) [artisan] □. Washed lacquer ware [artisan] Bai, controlled the workshop Fu. Supervised by [scribe] *tszushi* Xun, representative [district head] *chzhan* Ke, [assistant of the district head] *cheng* Jun, [assistant] *yuang* Lee, representative [head of the administration office] *lingshi* Yang.”

As for the inscriptions in general, in our opinion, during the Han period, they were universal and served as certain tags for the recording of produced goods. The main information on the tags consisted of the following information listed without inscription order: reign motto

*□ is used instead of the missing characters.



Fig. 4. Fragments of the lacquer cup from the State Museum of Mongolian History.

(manufacturing date) + workshop or place of manufacture + characteristics of the object (volume, size, weight, capacity, etc.) + manufacturers + controllers. We believe that the discussed schemes of characters will make it possible to translate inscriptions on other Han artifacts.

Conclusions

At present, three inscribed cups excavated from the elite Hunnu burial mounds in the Noin Ula Mountains are known. All of them were apparently parts of a regular tribute the Imperial Court paid to the Hunnu (Hong Shi, 2006: 219). They were certainly manufactured in different workshops. The cup from mound 20 was restored (improved) at the *Kaogong* workshop, which was subordinated to *shaofu* and located in the capital city of Chang’an. The cup excavated by A.D. Simukov was produced at the *Sigong* workshop in the Shu District. All cups are similar in shape and design with representations of phoenixes and dated to the same time – the Western Han period.

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