

A mantra to the glory of the Virgin Mary ?

Concerning a « divine mirror »

Pr. Jacques GRANGE DES RATTES and
Linxin HE
davidlinxin@hotmail.com



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In his book, "Jesus of Nazareth," his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI lays stress on the "absolute necessity" of using historical methodology in Christian faith: it is essential to biblical faith that it can refer to truly historical events¹. The purpose of the following study is precisely to incite its readers to reconsider the history of Christianity from its very beginnings.

In May 2009, a private collector (Mr. WANG Shi) acquired a bronze mirror (see next page left hand picture) whose inscription would soon become the topic of many Chinese publications. Studied at first by Mr. MA Huanluo, a member of the Xu Zhou Art Museum of Han Stone Engravings, it was afterwards pronounced to be a third century A.D. antique, and, astoundingly, by its inscription, as an homage to the Virgin Mary. Should this assertion be verified, the history of the Christian Church in China would go back four centuries earlier than the arrival of the Nestorians in China (635 A.D.)

The mirror is 13,4 cm. in diameter and has in its center a half-spheric boss, pierced, located on an unengraved circular base. This portion allows the mirror to be held by a ribbon (contrasting with the Roman mirrors of the same period often held by a handle). The ornaments can be separated into five concentric zones: the first zone comprises the principal adornment, to wit four monsters and four teats in low relief, set centrosymmetrically. The second zone holds the inscription and the last three comprise marginal ornamentations in parallel strokes, triangles and waves.

In order to reveal the historical information held in this mirror, we have to answer two questions: firstly, the period to which the mirror belongs (**I**); secondly, the meaning of the inscription (**II**)

I- Dating the mirror according to its artistic style

Thanks to the identification of surrounding objects and to the dating of tombs, the chronology of the styles of mirrors is comparatively well established. The successful study of the mirrors' style is therefore quite decisive.

In fact, historians agree that bronze mirrors appeared in China with the Shang dynasty (roughly during the second millennium B.C.)². Ornamentation was, at this time, very sober or simply inexistent. Later on, the great ages of mirror-making, notably that of the Warring States and of the Han dynasty, bear witness to the distinctive styles of each period. The general tendency, however, into which diversity takes place, helps to differentiate each period. It is therefore necessary to examine in succession the chief ornamentation zone (A), the presence of the inscription (B) and the three marginal adornments (C).

¹ BENOÎT XVI, 2007, p. 11

² KONG - LIU Yiman, 1984, p. 9 and WATSON, 1995, p. 43.

A. The chief ornamentation: the mirror ‘of divine monsters with small bosses’

The mirror's main adornment sets out in relief four identical monsters showing hairs rendered in strokes. This allows us to dismiss the hypothesis of a mirror of the great Spring and Autumn and Warring States, for at that time the general tendency of the thirteen styles identified by Mr. KONG Xiangxing and Mr. LIU Yiman³ is to offer ornamentations in flat lines, linear or cursive, which can look like whirls, flowers, the “T” of the alphabet (or rather the “mountain” character in Chinese), or animals. In other words, the low relief is the most frequent technique. One of those typical styles, the pictorial Henan style identified by William WATSON, mostly uses spirals, triangles or bird feathers⁴. The author does note that “their ornament lacks the mythological or astronomical reference frequent in the Han period⁵”.

On this occasion, the four animals seem to derive from ancient tiger figures (v. the figure of a mirror dating from the Warring States)⁶ and might not be of a religious character. Now, by anticipating the inscription's content, we can state that these four animals belong to the fashion that appeared at the end of the Western Han (beginning of the first century A.D.). Indeed, resorting to “four” representations of deities or divine animals becomes systematic while using the low relief technique⁷. Other particularities strengthen the proximity of our mirror with that period's heritage: the tie with a ribbon totally replaces that of horizontal handles; the use of centrosymmetrical teats becomes the basic arrangement of the main ornamentation⁸.



Would our mirror then date from the end of the Western Han? A keener study of the inscription zone shows that the dating must be even later.

B. The inscription zone: a great light upon a divine matter

We shall study the meaning of the inscription more definitely in the second part. However, without going into subtle interpretations, it is enough to note the divine word in the inscription that will help to reckon the date (particularly the character “Shen” which means “God, godly”).

As a matter of fact, inscriptions on mirrors appear only at the time of the Han's era⁹, and the inscription zone (often circular as in the case of this mirror) disappears at the

³ KONG - LIU, 1984, p. 24.

⁴ WATSON, 1995, p. 43.

⁵ *Idem.*

⁶ KONG - LIU Yiman, 1984, p. 75.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 108-109.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

beginning of the Tang's (i.e. beginning of the seventh century A.D.), except, of course, when archaism is sought for. Now, when the inscriptions first appeared, they often reflected thoughts for an intimate, wishes for wealth, happiness and prosperity, etc. From the middle of the Later Han period, inscriptions of a religious nature appear in formulas called "Shang Fang". At the same time, more and more inscriptions carry the name of the craftsman or the date of the crafting. Of course, the singularity of the one studied here is very far from those typical formulas, but its link with the deity puts it back into this great context, that is, rather after the middle of the Later Han era. What is more, it must be noted that a series of mirrors from the beginning to the middle of the third century A.D. often have in second position the following words: "I make a clear mirror¹⁰", a wording that should also be a component of our inscription. It is in fact a derivation of the "Shang Fang" formulas identified by scholars as a specific branch. Our mirror, therefore, is also set in a comparatively narrow period.

At the same time, the clearness of the inscription can also narrow the dating of it. The inscription zone having disappeared at the time of the early Tangs, does it mean that the crafting of this mirror can be set at any time between the end of the Hans and the beginning of the Tangs? In fact, this period, comprising the Three Kingdoms and the Jins, shows a decline in the crafting of mirrors. Stylish innovations were few, mirrors with sacred monsters predominated and there was a break through of buddhistic figures in the ornamentations¹¹. The renewal doesn't occur until the Sui dynasty, and the lack of clarity in the inscriptions of the former period has been regretted¹². The craftsmen seem to have been negligent and made it difficult to find a clear character. The handsome and regular characters most probably crafted thanks to the lost wax technique make it necessary to set our mirror before this period. Consequently, a rather narrow period between the end of the Later Hans and the start of the Three Kingdoms seems to be retained since the marginal ornamentations also strengthen this hypothesis.

C. The marginal ornamentations: typical Han geometric figures

The original mirrors most often lack marginal adornments, it is only since the Hans that this taste for refinement has prevailed. Mr. KONG and Mr. LIU note an increasing use of marginal adornments, often triangular or in double waves, to accompany the four central godlike figures (whether monsters or deities). Our mirror has inherited this tradition, setting three marginal ornamentations: horizontal strokes, triangles and double waves. We can then assert the existence of great maturity in mirror-crafting with four divine monsters. A dating for the end of the Later Hans is therefore more than credible.

The coming of St. Thomas in China, if it be attested, would not be far from the crafting of this mirror. Could it hold a memento of this event? The meaning of the inscription is now to be elucidated.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 122-123.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹² LUO Zhenyu, 《镜话》(About mirrors), 1933: "然文字漫易, 求一字字明晰者不可得也", quoted by KONG - LIU, 1984, p. 122

II. The meaning of the inscription on the investigated mirror

The writing's style is principally sigillative, the writing in use during the Qin dynasty. It is influenced, in places, by the style of the scribes which came in use during the Han era; this generality also helps for our mirror-dating. Thanks to the great quality of this inscription the identification of the characters holds few problems. There remains a number of difficulties due to the punctuation (A) and the various interpretations relative to the ambiguity of several forms of words (B).

A. The first step of the transcription: textual analysis

This part's object is to fix the meaning of each character while at the same time establishing a first reading order.

One can at first see very clearly the aforementioned formula: "crafting a mirror" (Zuo4¹³, Jing4). What remains singular in the mirror's epithet is the "Shen2" which can mean either "God" or "Divine". Certain particulars of ancient Chinese, made known through etymological research, allow other possible meanings for these characters¹⁴ :

Firstly, the same ancient character may show several meanings that later periods distinguish by their script. To wit, "Zuo4" can here mean "doing, crafting" as well as "suddenly, recently" (and the enunciation is "Zha4"); "Shen" is "divine" (Shen2) as well as "to express, to speak" (Shen1) or even "lightning, electricity" ("Dian4"). The first shape does indicate a lightning in the sky.

Then there is the borrowing of same-sounding characters to replace one with the other. For instance, the "Jing" by itself means "end, to finish, entirely". But it may replace the "Jing4" which means "mirror". Such inscriptions are not a rarity. Holding on, for the time being, to the interpretation of "crafting a divine mirror", a not uncommon form of words at the time, seems warrantable.

Thus far, we know that this form of words is often set at the beginning of the inscription (in the "Shang Fang" style), or in second place if the name of the craftsman or the year of crafting is mentionned. It isn't the case here, for neither the year nor the distinctive "Shi4" indicating the name, are present. Other groups of the inscription can then be identified.

The next group also has three characters : "Zun1 Yi1 Di4" whose respective meanings are "to respect/venerate", "one/single" and "sovereign/emperor". Admittedly, the identification of "Yi1" isn't plain sailing. However, it can be explained by a stylistic arrangement comparable to the dealing of "Di4"¹⁵. The meaning should then be "to venerate an only God", a meaning that resolutely runs counter to the polytheist local beliefs.

¹³ The number that is present here indicates the intonation of the character according to the "Pinyin".

¹⁴ For a critical explanation of the evolution of Chinese characters, see YIN, 1998, especially the preface.

¹⁵ We also rely on two concordant readings, respectively from Mr. MA Huanluo and two specialists at Academia Sinica.

The next group is clearer : “De2” - “virtuous/saintly” is an epithet that qualifies “Mu3”-”Mother” ; “Mu4” is the transitive verb “to look” and its object is “Ren2Zi3” which means “son of man”. This choice of words seems interesting: though the grammatical construction is common in ancient Chinese¹⁶, the saying ”son of man” is not frequent. But it calls to mind the name Jesus often applies to himself in the Gospel¹⁷ and which not only goes back to Jesus' own time but always carries a number of Christological connotations. It often goes with such powers as the forgiveness of sins, sufferings to come and apocalyptic vision¹⁸. At any rate, this utterance, in the New Testament, refers to the very person of Jesus, and it could also be the meaning of this formula in the mirror. One must not forget that “to look” can signify the potent import of “to witness”. If Jesus himself is the “faithful witness” (Ap I, 15), every Christian, including the Mother of God, is called upon to become a “martyr”, that is, a witness of Christ.

The following group also causes some hesitations: “Zhi” means “will, determination, goal” or “to note, to mark”. The following character can be read as “Zhon” which means “heavy, important” or as “Chong2” which means “to double, to repeat”. The next one, “Xu1” is quite small compared to the others; it seems to be an adjunct inserted before the casting of the mirror to better define the meaning of the sentence. In any case, this word is an auxiliary meaning “must, to have to”. The last character of this analysis is “Yu4” with the meaning of “to educate, to raise” or “to grow”. One hypothesis could be to read: “The goal is important and one must educate”.

This textual analysis thus helps us to identify five groups in the inscription:

1. from “Zuo4” to “Jing4”, first reading “The crafting of a divine mirror”;
2. from “Zun1” to Di4”, first reading “To venerate the only God” ;
3. from “De2” to “Zi3”, first reading “The virtuous mother looks at the Son of man”;
4. from You3” to “He4”, first reading “there is a shining jade/a resplendent King”;
5. from “Zhi4” to “Yu4”, first reading “the goal is important, one has to educate”

Now they must be linked one to the other in all possible ways.

B. The various possible coherencies of the inscription

The various translations of groups 1 and 5 can offer several different readings.

As to group 1, instead of reading “to craft a divine mirror”, professor J.GRANGE notes that Zuo4 can be understood as well without the key, i.e. “Zha 4”, meaning “recently”, “Shen” without the key as “to let it be known, to inform a superior in

¹⁶ For similar expressions prior to the date used to manufacture the mirror, Cf. 《战国策·赵策》。（觸詒说赵太后篇）：“岂人主之子孙必不善哉”·五蠹《韩非子《韩非子》：“而人主兼礼之”。 Pour for later expressions, see 杜甫，《自京赴奉先县咏怀五百字》：“所愧为人父”。

¹⁷ For the first time, Mt. 8:20: “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”.

¹⁸ LACOSTE, 2007, p. 567 sq. and Theological dictionary of the New Testament, Eerdmans publishing company, Michigan, vol. 8, p. 400-477

writing”, and “Jing” without the key as “to accomplish, entirely”. The meaning would then be: ”the writings/prophecies have just been fulfilled” which is near enough to the Apostles’ message.

As to group 5, the “Zhi” may have been thought to indicate the act of marking and the actor to be “Chong Xu Yu”. This, however, isn't much in conformity to the chinese habit of placing the verb after the subject, as well as, logically, “Zhi” could be put into group 4 which then would read “there is a jade that marks (this) shiningly” ? This would be an inducement to think that the three following characters form a name, if not “Zhong” would be out of all groups and would have no meaning. It would be much too imprudent to forget a name to be inscribed, for which reason it is preferable to refuse to consider them as the name of a person. Mr. MA, the first to study this mirror, translates it as “he who wants to believe in God”, “must” “ be born” “anew”. But it is equally difficult to separate “re-born” in chinese by an auxiliary, “must”. There are two ways of settling the problem: either to consider that our first translation is the right one ; or else, to consider that the “Xu” adds precision to “Zhong”, in other words, that it would be “it is important to educate”, that is “one must educate”. In this way, the link between “shining” and “mark” is retained.

We then have several possible translations.

If one reads “to craft a divine mirror”, this sentence certainly stands as the starting point of the reading and we would then have: ”Craft the divine mirror, worship the only God, virtuous Mother look upon the son of man, there is a shining jade, the goal is important, one must educate.”

If one reads “the scriptures are accomplished”, one can think that the reading begins either at the axis of the hole or in the perpendicular axis. It would then be “De” that is the starting point. It would then be: “Virtuous Mother look at the son of man, there is a shining jade, the important mission is to educate him and embody God, to worship (or: we worship) the only God.” Or, if one keeps to the same order of the groups: ”The scriptures have just been accomplished; Blessed be the only God; virtuous Mother be witness to the Son of man; you have received the shining King ; to educate him was your onerous mission.” In all cases, the gospel message becomes limpid with a particular emphasis on the “virtuous mother” and her mission.

III. Conclusion: a homage to the Virgin Mary?

At the end of this analysis, one can assert the regularity of the mirror's artistic nature and the singularity of the inscription's contents. It shows indisputable links with the Christian message, by its reference to the only God, to the Nativity and to the very formula of the "son of man". If this inscription cannot, on its own merit, prove the presence of Christianity in China at the end of the Latter Han era, it is however an unique and powerful proof in the corroboration with other researches that have been maturing for a number of years. One is the study of the stone engravings on the Han's tombstones; and another is the work on St. Thomas, in particular based on literary sources and other archeological sites.

Last, but not least, the fact that the mirror was discovered in Xu Zhou – the appanage of Prince Ying, he who commissioned the Kong Wang Shan frieze. What is more, this very same locality was the place tens of thousands where were massacred at the time of the great persecution of 69-71, according to the life of emperor Mingdi in the *Hou Han Shu*¹⁹.

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¹⁹ For information (Primary Sources) :

Hou Han Shu, vol. 1, p. 117 (dans la vie de Mingdi) : « Durant la treizième année, le dixième mois, il y eut une éclipse de soleil. Le onzième mois, le roi de Chu se révolta : l'empereur le détrôna et supprima le titre de sa capitale. On envoya Ying à Jinxian. Les personnes impliquées dans le complot et qui trouvèrent la mort se comptèrent par milliers. L'officier « si tu » fut privé de sa fonction et se suicida. La quatorzième année, le prince Ying se suicida. »

Hou Han Shu, vol. 12, p. 1430 (dans la vie du prince Ying) : « Ensuite, l'empereur nomma Yen Guang¹⁹ comme juge vice roi Zhe Jian. Ainsi, dans l'affaire de Chu, il y avait de nombreux procès en cours depuis des années. Les juges firent des rapprochements entre les accusés. Les proches de Ying, ceux qui habitaient la capitale impériale et les habitants du pays de Chu s'accusaient mutuellement. Il en résulta des milliers de morts et exilés. »

Hou Han Ji, Histoire de Mingdi : Après le récit de la vie de Ying, on trouve l'histoire de son procès : c'est aussi l'histoire d'un juge juste : Han Lang (ou Jian Lang) qui a risqué sa vie pour faire comprendre à Ming Di qu'il y avait beaucoup d'injustices et de fausses accusations contre des personnes innocentes. Il faut prendre du temps pour diriger l'enquête)

Appendix :



This translation, made by a team of Chinese people living in France and guided by Jacques Grange des Rattes, PhD, has been recognized by :

- professor Shiu Wentang, of the Academia sinica, Taipei, Taiwan ;
- professor Jean Charbonnier, priest of the society of foreign missions of Paris, PhD, France.

Transposition in modern Chinese characters :

	: 作	zuo4		: 神	shen2		: 镜	jing4
	: 尊	zun1		: 一	Yi1		: 帝	di4
	: 德	de2		: 母	mu3		: 目	mu4
				: 人	ren2			
				: 子	zi3			
	: 有	you3		: 玉	yu4		: 赫	he4
	: 志	zhi4		: 重	zhong4		: 须	xu1
				: 育	yu4			

The number indicates the tones for the pronunciation : there are four tones in Chinese language, and they must be indicated ; otherwise, the translation may be false.

In classic times, the sentences in poetic texts usually had three characters : so the 5th sentence, which has 5 characters, is strange : the normal rhythm of the sentence is changed, because there is an unusual expression : 人字 (*the son of man*), a term which surprised the historians of the Academia sinica, of Taipei, who said that this expression did not come from Chinese culture, but from another culture.

Ligne 1



乍 : zha4 : 1) Suddenly, abruptly, in an unexpected manner.
2) For the first time.
3) **Recently**. Has just been made.



神 : shen2 : 1) Celestial spirits, saints ; divinities.
2) The supreme Spirit : **God**.
3) **Superior living principle**.
4) **Vitality** ; energy.
5) **Prodigious** ; marvellous ; supernaturel ; miraculous.

申 : shen1 : 1) speak, tell ; make known, demonstrate, show.
2) **Inform a superior by writing things**.



竟 : jing4 : Term, end ; **accomplish**, fulfil ; finally, entirely.

乍申竟 : recently – the word / the scriptures –
accomplished / fulfilled

« The scriptures have been recently fulfilled » ...

Ligne 2



尊 : zun1 : Respect, honour, **venerate**.



一 : yi1 : One, unique, only.



帝 : di4 : Emperor, **divinity**, Heaven.

尊一帝 : Venerate / Worship - Only - God.

Ligne 3



德 : de2 : **Virtue ; benevolent, good.**



母 : mu3 : 1) **Mother.**
2) Madam, lady.
3) Female.
4) Source, origin.



目 : mu4 : To watch, **but also to testify of what has been seen.**



人 : ren2 : **Man.**



子 : zi3 : **Son** (The order of the words in Chinese is like in English, for example : John's father).

**德母目人子 : Virtuous - Mother – watches /
testify – Son of man.**

Ligne 4



有 : You3 : **To have.**



玉 : yu : Jade.

王 : wang : **King :**



赫 : he4 : **Brilliant**, lightning red, flashing.

有王赫 To have - King – brilliant.

During the 7th century (Tang dynasty), Christianity will be called in China : “the religion of light.”



志 : zhi4 : 1) **Intention** ; design ; **will** ; resolution ; aim ; to tend to an aim.

2) Affection ; **aspiration** of the soul ; ambition ; ideal.



重 : zhong4 : 1) To wait, a moment, to delay, to be late, to stop, to cease, to require.

2) **To must ; or : heavy, grave, important.**

重 : chong2 : Other pronunciation of the same character : - to double, to repeat, to redouble, once more.
Ou : many, a lot of.



须 : xu1 : **It is necessary : to must ; duty.**



育 : yu4 : 1) **To bear** ; to give birth ; to generate ; to produce.
2) **To educate ; to nourish ; to instruct ; to form.**

毓 : yu4 : Yu, a family name !

志重须育 : will - heavy/grave - must - educate.
Or : other possibility : made by Zhong Yu (name of the author).



How can we begin the translation :

There is a hole, where the people could put a band, or hold the mirror : we can begin following the axis of this hole.

Anyway, the text should have been read as a 'mantra', which was repeated. And there is only one direction which has a sense in Chinese : from left to right.

Translation :

Recently, the scriptures have been fulfilled.

Blessed be the only God !

The virtuous mother testifies about the Son of man.

She received the King of light.

To educate him / to form him was her grave duty.