ANCIENT CHINESE SILVER AND GOLD: ATTRIBUTION AND DATING

Some isolated discoveries of gold and silver ornaments at Xia/early Shang dynasty sites in the region of Gansu, and the excavation of various gold foil headdress decorations at late Shang sites in Northern Chinese provinces demonstrate that gold and silver were occasionally used in China as early as the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, but no gold or silver vessels or other articles dating from the Shang or Western Zhou dynasties have been discovered.

Although there is ample evidence of gold and silver being used as inlays and mounts to embellish bronze vessels, chariot fittings and tomb furniture in the Eastern Zhou period, archaeological evidence to date indicates that the manufacture of gold and silver vessels and other objects did not develop until the Warring States period and did not flourish until the Western Han dynasty.

Silver and gold vessels and other objects surviving from the Han dynasty are very rare, but a few superb examples are known and the quality of those objects demonstrates the sophistication of the metalworking tradition at that time. The scarcity of silver vessels in the archaeological record of the Han dynasty leads to the conclusion that the use of silver and gold vessels was not widespread, and precious metals were more often used to produce ornaments and status objects such as seals and belthooks.

In the Wei-Jin periods, immediately following the Han, very elaborate head ornaments made in gold foil became an essential element of costume for the elite, and silver head ornaments also survive, but the manufacture of silver and gold vessels and other objects seems to have virtually disappeared in China for three centuries after the fall of the Han dynasty.

The peak period of the art of gold and silver in China was the Tang dynasty, and there is ample evidence that the resurgence of the art was greatly stimulated and heavily influenced by the introduction of foreign silver and gold vessels and objects brought to China by Silk Road traders. The most important and most persistent influence appears to originate in Sasanian Iran. A number of Sasanian silver vessels and quantities of Sasanian silver coinage excavated from Tang dynasty, Northern Wei and other 6th century tombs and hoards excavated in China give strong support to this view. The Sogdians who dominated the Silk Road trade during the Six Dynasties and Tang periods had strong ties to Sasanian Iran – the Central Asian kingdom
of Sogdiana had formerly been a Sasanian province – but as traders they were ready and eager to transport and sell any metalwork which might be sold at a profit in China regardless of its origins. Silver and gold items from various parts of the Mediterranean basin, Central Asia and Mongolia as well as objects produced in Sogdiana could well have been included in their trading inventory.

In our current exhibition of ‘Gold and Silver in Ancient China’, most of the items may be reliably described as made in China, but we have also included a few items which may have been found in China but are neither typically Chinese nor typically Sasanian in form or decoration. Some are pre-Tang objects and others are later Tang or Liao or Song period objects. The tools and methods of determining the age and origins of these objects are limited. Scientific analysis is often helpful in producing evidence to support the fact that an object is ancient or modern, but the scientists seldom can produce evidence of specific dating or the location of production.

Our attributions in the exhibition catalogue are based on empirical evidence, experience, and connoisseurship, used in conjunction with the many museum publications, monographs, and reports in scholarly journals cited in our bibliography and footnotes. In most cases, the attribution is based on comparison with previously published examples in museums or collection or archaeological reports. This method is reliable for most objects, but for some of the more exotic and unusual objects there is very little directly comparable material previously published, making it much more difficult to establish reliable criteria for dating and attribution.

I hope that an open discussion of this topic, with particular focus on some of the more ‘exotic’ items, might provide some useful suggestions and insights for alternative methods, tools and sources of information to assist in attribution and dating.

I will bring a few ancient silver items for first-hand study and I look forward to a good conversation.