

# A Discussion of Bathing and Washing Vessels and Related Issues Based on Bronze Inscriptions and Texts on Ch'u Bamboo Slips: Beginning with Inscriptions on Water Vessels from Ch'u Burials at Hsia-ssu, Hsi-ch'uan

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Bathing and washing one's hands and face to keep clean are indispensable activities in the daily lives of human beings. Yet it has been difficult to trace the history of these common activities, especially for ancient times, for which source materials are even more scarce.

In recent decades, the vigorous growth of Chinese archaeology has brought to light many underground source materials, and the excavation reports from these sites contain much detail. Therefore, some clues concerning the position of water vessels in ancient burials can be gradually elucidated. Bronze toilet articles often have inscriptions on them to express a degree of solemnity. These inscriptions inadvertently shed some light on the history of early Chinese life. Based primarily on these bronze inscriptions, but supplemented by Ch'u bamboo slips, books and archaeological materials, this article discusses ancient Chinese toiletry vessels and the issues they raise for the historian.

There are seven sections in the article:

## **I. Introduction: Explanation of the source materials and the historical periods analyzed in this article**

Compared to wine vessels and food vessels, water vessels were not mainstream bronze vessels during the Shang and Chou dynasties. In terms of burials, the Shang generally placed particular emphasis on wine vessels; early Western Chou prized food vessels; and water vessels gradually gained importance only in the late Western Chou. Water vessels are especially abundant in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States burials of the middle and lower Yangtze River Valley.

Because the content of bronze inscriptions evolved in this broader era, inscriptions from the late Western Chou and the Spring and Autumn period provide more relevant information. Thus, our discussions primarily focus on this period of history.

## II. The bronze bathing and washing vessels from the Ch'u tombs at Hsia-ssu, Hsi-ch'uan

The Hsia-ssu, Hsi-ch'uan 淅川下寺 cemetery was situated in Ch'u territory during the middle to late Spring and Autumn period. The dates of these burials are clear; the artifacts unearthed from these burials are numerous; the types of washing and bathing vessels are complete and contain inscriptions, and finally, their placement at the time of burial was unusually ordered. This facilitates the classification, nomenclature, and analysis of the original usage of these vessels. Among these bathing utensils at Hsi-ch'uan, the *p'an* 盤-shallow basin, *i* 匜-ladle and *chien* 鑑-basin are the same as their traditional Central Plains counterparts. However, the small-mouth *ting* 鼎-cauldron and the bathing *fou* 缶-urn are of the types found in sites in the middle and lower Yangtze River Valley, having spread there from their original center in the State of Ch'u.

This article notes that the washing and bathing vessels unearthed from the Hsia-ssu, Hsi-ch'uan burials always include a *p'an* 盤-shallow basin and an *i*-ladle; a bathing urn was also essential, while a *ho* 盥-ewer and a *tou* 斗-jar were not. Only large-scale aristocratic tombs contain *chien* 鑑-basins, *p'en* 盆-basins and small-mouth *ting* 鼎-cauldron. In all burials, the toilet articles were concentrated together and neatly arranged: The ladle was placed in the *p'an* 盤-shallow basin, the bathing urn was beside the shallow basin, the *fou* 缶-jar placed next to the urn, and the small-mouth cauldron was immediately beside the urn. The *ho* 盥-ewer was always found together with the water vessels and not among the wine vessels, and, therefore, its function as a water vessel in these burials is clear and certain. The small-mouth *ting* 鼎-cauldron is a toilet article unique to the Yangtze River Valley during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and was placed at the side of the bathing urn in the burials. The small-mouth, pottery cauldron unearthed from the Kingdom of Ch'u burial at Pao-shan 包山 has soot at its base, indicating that it was used to heat bathing water. The 'tou-jar' is always placed by the side of the bathing urn, and should be considered a related accessory.

## III. The washing and bathing vessels among the bronzes

Washing and bathing utensils include containers for drawing water, holding (or storing) water, pouring water, collecting used water, heating water and for dipping up

water. As accompanying sacrificial objects, these articles often appear in a set in the burials.

In general, those categorizing bronze vessels classify the *p'an*-shallow basin, the *i*-ladle, the *chien*-basin, as well as the *yu* 盂-, *pen* 盆-, and *tien* 簋-basins as water-holding vessels, while the *zhu*-ladle and *wan*-bowl are classified as water-dipping vessels. However, based on a careful analysis of the adjectives that sometimes occur before the names for these vessels, the author believes that the *p'an*-shallow basin, the *yu*-basin, and the *ting*-cauldron might also be used for other purposes. In addition, the *hu* 壺-flask, which traditionally was classified as a wine vessel, could also be used as a toiletry utensil. Therefore, the identification of a specific water vessel must be based on the careful analysis of bronze inscriptions, as well as the other vessels that appeared together with the vessel, or its relative position in the burial, and the characteristics of the form of the vessel.

Based primarily upon bronze inscriptions, this section of the article describes and classifies the water vessels, according to their functions, into the following categories:

1. Water-drawing or water-pouring toilet articles: Mainly the *hu*-flask.
2. Water-holding vessels: Mainly the *chien*-basin, the *yu*-basin, the *p'en*-basin and the bathing urn.
3. Water-pouring and water-collecting vessels: Mainly the *p'an*-shallow basin and *hu*-flask set, the *p'an*-shallow basin and *ho*-ewer set, and the *p'an*-shallow basin and *i*-ladle set.
4. Water-heating vessels: Mainly the *ho*-ewer and the hot water cauldron.
5. Water-dipping vessels: Mainly the *tou*-jar.

#### IV. The relationship between entombed water vessels and the status of the burial occupant

According to the notion that “the Shang Dynasty emphasized wine vessels while the Western Chou Dynasty emphasized food vessels,” water vessels became an important component of sacrificial objects in the mid-Western Chou and reached their peak in the late Western Chou. In particular, the *p'an*-shallow basin and *i*-ladle set became a fixed style in the Western Chou, and continued well into the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. In order to explore the relationship between the entombed water vessels and the

status of the burial occupant, this section used the excavation reports of seven cemeteries that manifested unusual characteristics: a) the No. 1400 large tomb of Hsi-pei-kang 西北岡 at Hou-chia-chuang 侯家莊; b) the Kingdom of Yu cemetery at Pao-chi 寶雞; c) the Kingdom of Kuo 虢 cemetery at Shang-ts'un-ling 上村嶺; d) the cemetery at Shang-ma 上馬; e) the tomb of the Marquis Yi of Tseng 曾侯乙 in Sui County 隨縣; f) the Ch'u tomb at Mt. Yu-t'ai 雨台山, Chiang-ling 江陵; and g) the Eastern Chou burial at Chiu-tien 九店 Chiang-ling.

In general, burial occupants with high social status used bronze toilet articles as sacrificial burial objects. Lower aristocrats, such as the *shih* and *tai-fu*, used a set of copper and a set of pottery water vessels, or a set of pottery water vessels made to resemble copper vessels, as sacrificial burial objects. Commoners used pottery *yu*-basins and *hu*-flasks (or *p'en*-basins and *kuan*-jars) as sacrificial burial objects. The poor did not use anything. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, lower-level aristocrats added pottery bathing urns and hot water cauldrons to their sacrificial burial water vessels. Higher status aristocrats added bathing urns and hot water cauldrons made of bronze. However, the custom of adding bathing vessels to the other water vessels as sacrificial burial objects occurred only in the Yangtze River Valley. It cannot be found in burials in the Yellow River Valley or in other regions of China. This relationship between the sacrificial burial washing and bathing vessels and the socio-economic status of the burial occupants reflects an orderly class society.

#### **V. Those who commission and those who use water vessels, including a discussion of the significance of the large quantity of water vessels among the gift vessels in these burials**

Generally speaking, bronze wine and food vessels were used in ceremonies at ancestral temples, while water vessels had more practical purposes. Makers of water vessels made most of their vessels for personal use or as gifts. Such gift vessels were often commissioned by fathers for daughters, while the next most common were husbands' gifts to their wives.

This section uses the inscribed water vessels from the mid-Western Chou to the late Spring and Autumn period (excluding those clearly marked for special usage, such as the

*xiu* plate 羞盤, *si* plate 飢盤, and sacrificial vessels for ancestral temples) for a statistical study in order to find out the relationship between those who commissioned and those who used these toiletry vessels. Results show that the vast majority of those commissioning the vessels were men: 91% of the total (65% of the vessels were for themselves, 24% for daughters, 10% for wives). Women's ability to cast the vessels was quite low: only 9% of the makers were women (76% of the vessels were for themselves, 24% for daughters). This phenomenon reflects early Chinese society where men were at the center of power and wealth. Women owned toiletry vessels mainly as items of their dowries and a few as gifts from their husbands after marriage. During the Spring and Autumn period, it was the fashion of the feudal kingdoms to use marriages to maintain political relationships, and toiletry utensils were the main articles in dowries. Based on these bronze inscriptions, the author points out that one of the reasons for the large number of gift items among the water vessels was the expectation that wives, who were responsible for sustaining political marriages, would be able to frequently use such toiletry articles to maintain their appearance, and thereby sustain the relationship with their husbands' relatives with a beautiful countenance. The use of toiletry vessels as part of such a wife's dowry reflects society's demand on a woman's appearance.

## VI. Discussion of several ancient characters related to toiletry activities and artifacts

### A. Characters for face-washing and their variations

In this sub-section, the author lists 4 characters found in historical documents, 1 oracle bone character, 8 bronze inscription characters, 5 regional usages (the southern regions during the Spring and Autumn period), and 1 Ch'u bamboo slip character. She also points out which of these are associative compounds, which are simplified associative compounds, which are picto-phonetic characters, and which are phonetic loan characters.

### B. Characters for hand-washing and their variations

Here the author lists 3 characters from historical documents, 1 bronze inscription character, 4 regional usages (the Ch'u system, as well as Hsu and Lu bronze inscription characters), and 1 Ch'u bamboo slip character.

C. Special regional characters used for the *i*-ladle in the southern regions during the Spring and Autumn period

Four Kingdom of Ch'u bronze inscription characters, 1 Ch'u bamboo slip character, 1 Kingdom of Ts'ai bronze inscription character, and 2 Kingdom of Wu bronze inscription characters are discussed in this subsection. Based upon the evidence found in the inscriptions on the Wang Tzu Shen ladle, newly purchased by the National Palace Museum, and supplemented by characters seen in Ch'u bamboo slip texts, the author believes that all these characters have 'yu' as their initial consonant and are phonetically close, regional variations of the character 'i'.

D. Other names for the 'fou-urn' water vessel and the distinction between 'bathing fou 浴缶-urn' and 'egg fou 卵缶-urn'

This subsection analyzes (and corrects) the various other names for the water vessel 'fou-urn,' including terms found in Ch'u bamboo slips. The author points out that the 'bathing fou 浴缶-urn' often formed a set of washing and bathing vessels together with the small-mouth hot water cauldron, whereas the 'egg fou-urn' appearing in the bronze inscriptions and the Ch'u bamboo slips should be the wine vessel, and often formed a set together with the food vessel *chien*-basin.

## VII. Conclusion

The author re-interprets the washing and bathing process recorded in the Yu Tsao 玉藻 chapter in the *Li Chi* 禮記, in accordance with the conclusions reached in this article. She also uses the story of "Ch'ung Erh 重耳 marries Huai Ying 懷嬴" to illustrate the significance of 'the ceremony of hand-washing,' which should not be restricted to a mere demand for cleanliness. Aside from the practical demands of daily life, the excessive ritual concerning the washing and bathing process, as well as the placement of toiletry vessels in the burials, shows that 'cleanliness' was not only a demand of daily life, but also an essential activity at the level of the ritual or religious.

**Keywords:** washing of hands and face, cleansing, water vessels, dowry vessels, epigraphic material