

A PAIR OF CHINESE GRAVE URNS

A Recent Gift to the Oriental Section of the Museum

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The Chinese collection of the University Museum has recently been enriched, and enlivened, by a pair of southern Chinese grave urns, the gift of Charles L. Reese. The extravagantly decorated vessels come from Kiangsi and were collected by the donor's father in 1936.



The body of the urns is of buff clay covered with a thin, slightly crackled glaze that appears nearly colorless but has a clear blue-green tint where it collects in the crevices. This type pottery is called *ying ch'ing*.

The vessels are made in two sections, an ovoid pot to which is joined a tall, ridged neck. Each has a beehive shaped cover surmounted by a bird. The long neck is decorated with motifs separately modeled or molded. The vessels are a pair, matched but not identical.

A: 79-15-1. 23 inches high. Curling completely around the neck is a vigorous, horned dragon. Above one loop is a disk motif, possibly representing the flaming pearl. Below the dragon is a tortoise, and next to it a snake. Circling the base of the neck, standing on the fluted rim of the pot section are twelve standing, long-robed figures, each holding a baton. A small, kneeling figure is squeezed into the middle of the row.

B: 79-15-2. 22½ inches high. It also is encircled by a dragon, but one with round ears, a cow-like face, and a very engaging smile. It also has the pearl motif, a squatting cock, a quadruped, and a small prostrating figure. Around the rim of the pot section are the same twelve figures as on urn A.

Brief notices of urns of this type were published in the early part of the century; a pair was shown in the famous Berlin Exhibition of 1929, and they are not unknown in the collections of major museums today. However, the number of fine examples is very small, and reference studies almost non-existent. Apart from the wish to thank our donor, the lack of research material has led us to compile a

few facts, observations and comments with the hope that some intrepid graduate student will defy safety and take up the subject of Sung grave urns.

A dating to the Sung Dynasty (A.D. 960-1279) is one of the few established facts for the urns. The Chinese archaeology journal, *Wen Wu* (#6, 1976) reports that in 1973 a stone slab tomb was uncovered in the Ch'uan-kou district of Kiangsi. In the burial chamber were two very fine quality, incised *ying ch'ing* bowls, two plain *ying ch'ing* bowls, a pair of urns (similar to ours), and an inscribed pillar giving the name of the deceased and a date comparable to A.D. 1201. Incidentally, this notice was the only report on grave urns in all three Chinese archaeology journals for the last seven years.

As all similar urns for which any provenience is noted give a Kiangsi origin, we can probably assume as a second fact that the distribution of this type is limited in area. (Grave urns as a species, related but not at all similar in style, have a wider geographical and time span.)

Because of their decorative motifs, the third premise is that the urns belong to the Taoist persuasion rather than the Buddhist, and this leads us into an iconographical and ecclesiastical maze.

Taoism is not easy to explain, and can not possibly be clear to those of non-mystic bent as the credo states that the Tao (Way) you see is *not* the Tao; the Name you give it is *not* the Name.

Historically, Taoism took form around the 3rd century B.C. as an ethical philosophy of non-effort, or of letting life and death happen as they do in nature. Its founder is supposed to be Lao Tzu (The Old One), a character more shadowy than Homer, but to whom are credited the cryptic verses of the *Tao Tê Ching*. The creed goes through three stages: first, as the philosophy mentioned above; second, beginning in the Han period (202 B.C.-A.D. 220), as magic or shamanistic practices having the goal of prolonging life; and finally, after the 6th century, a religion with a spiritual hierarchy.

However, it did not have an established body of rules and literature as Buddhism did; sects in various parts of China developed their own interpretation of the Way, choosing their own divine figures from a large pantheon and creating different rituals and ceremonies.

One of the few beliefs that seem to have been fairly general is that of the Three Governors or Emperors of Heaven, Earth and Water. Maspero discusses a 6th

century ceremony in which ill and ailing persons write petitions in triplicate, one to be deposited on a mountain, one put into the ground, and one cast into water. The ritual also demanded that the petitioners prostrate themselves, touching the earth with the forehead, and later drink from jars of water that had been blessed.

Alfred Salmony mentioned this ceremony in his analysis of a curious T'ang bronze on which the Three Governors are represented by a bird, a snake and a fish. On our urns, the fish is replaced by a different water creature, the tortoise. On each of our urns is a small prostrating figure. Each of the twelve standing figures holds either a Taoist baton or what Maspero calls a "scroll of Heavenly instructions."

In 1126 the Jurchen Tartars invaded the Imperial Sung capital, captured the Emperor, Hui-tsung, and most of his court. The survivors, including a young prince, fled south to Hangkow. In 1142 they signed a treaty giving up the northern territory, and by paying tribute were allowed to rebuild their court in peace. Hangkow became the center of the urbane, civilized world, a haven for artists, poets and scholars. Craftsmen came too, and as ceramics were not now available from the north, they set up new kilns and expanded the production of the established ones, several of which were in Kiangsi almost directly across the river from Hangkow.

Although the best of the southern *ying ch'ing* ware is of superb quality it was never considered as Imperial porcelain and was not even mentioned by ancient authors. After the court moved south, *ying ch'ing* seems to have lost much of its local market and to have become an export ware, mainly for Southeast Asia.

Taoism, too, underwent a period of decline as Neo-Confucianism became the predominant philosophy. Unlike the Taoists, adherents to this reasonable social and moral code did not seek immortality or fear death. Taoism, of course, never completely disappeared but the more esoteric rituals were eliminated. By the time of the 1201 tomb, the production of the strange, exuberant Kiangsi burial urns must have been coming to an end as the sophisticated taste of the Sung court dominated the arts and influenced social and religious practices.

The University Museum is privileged that a perfect example from this brief chapter in the long history of Chinese civilization has been added to its collections.

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