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NON-DESTRUCTIVE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE LIDOW FANG HU ON PEDESTAL

Laramie Hickey-Friedman

1. Introduction

From 1998-2001 technical studies were conducted on many of the Chinese bronzes in the permanent collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, including the Lidow fang hu, a Chinese cast-bronze from the Late Eastern Chou period (acc. No. 78.123a,b). The study was initially undertaken to answer curatorial questions regarding the extent of previous restoration campaigns and methods of fabrication. The interest in the examination of this piece was coupled with a larger study of the materials and techniques used for the restoration of Chinese bronzes. Detailed examination and analysis of the heavily restored fang hu brought forward questions regarding its historical interpretation. In consultation with the Curator of Chinese and Korean Art, available information was pooled to gain a cohesive historical understanding of LACMA's Lidow fang hu, and attempt to characterize the restoration methodology.

As part of a larger study of our Chinese bronzes, initially this piece was brought into the lab to resolve questions from the Far East Asian department. The curator, Keith Wilson, wanted to know if the vessel and pedestal were cast integrally and if the pedestal was originally designed to detach from the vessel.

The LACMA fang hu was published on its own merit as an important footed vessel. The Waterbury publication (1952), followed by that of Weber (1967), gave the fang hu a solid provenance based primarily on the design motifs, and their relation to other pieces with similar motifs.

Included is a brief introduction to the Lidow Collection at LACMA and the history of the fang hu, followed by known restoration techniques used on ancient Chinese bronzes, as it relates to this study. The results of examination, which include x-ray radiography and metallography, are also described.

A review of the known history, from curatorial files, publications, and excavation reports was conducted in order to answer the curator's questions, and have a better understanding of this piece. It should be noted that when this piece was donated to LACMA, the current curator did not ask for receipts or documents pertaining to this piece. Hence, some of the object's history is sketchy and it was felt the best way to unfold its past was through a deconstruction process.

2. History

Prior to accession in 1978, the fang hu belonged to Mr. Eric Lidow, a well known collector of ancient Chinese bronzes. A published catalogue (LaPlante 1958) shows the fang hu belonging to Mr. Lidow in 1958. In 1952 this piece was published and the current owner identified as Mr. Scott Tsuchiya, a collector from San Francisco (waterbury 1952). There are no other historical references or publications of this piece other than the excavation records.

According to the published excavation report (Institute of Archaeology, Academia Sinica 1938), the object went to the Academia Sinica in Taiwan in 1937. The archaeologist stayed in China, and wrote his excavation report based entirely on his notes and rubbings.

This object was excavated between December 1935 and sometime in 1937 from the late Chou site of Liulige, near the town of Hui Xian, in the Henan Province [1]. The outbreak of war with the Japanese in 1937 ended official excavations. Excavation records and illustrative rubbings provide evidence that a similar piece (with a different base) exists/ed in Taiwan. Excavation records state that the pedestal (described as the stem of a dou) was found in tomb 75, and the vessel (described as a hu) was found in an adjacent tomb, 76. The excavator identified the remains in tomb 76 as those of a woman, implying that the two tombs were that of husband and wife. The reports do not indicate that the vessel fragments and the pedestal are in any way related (Institute of Archaeology, Academia Sinica 1938).

3. Technical Examination

From a technical standpoint mold lines are clearly visible on the vessel and pedestal, down to the flared base. The mold lines on the vessel do not correspond to the pedestal, and there are no mold marks on the flared base. The incised decoration on the vessel and the pedestal appear to have been made in the model rather than in the mold, typical of ancient Chinese bronze manufacturing techniques (Fig. 1).

A closer look revealed that the vessel was not centered on the pedestal, and there were fills around the join of the vessel to the pedestal. While it was clear from surface magnification and general examination that the object was restored, the extent of restoration was uncertain, prompting x-ray radiography (Fig. 2).

X-Ray radiography confirmed extensive restoration on the vessel and pedestal. The lower section of the vessel appeared to be mostly reconstructed with a wire mesh support and fill material. Additionally interesting detail was apparent on the lower portion of the pedestal. A modern replacement had been added to the base of the stem, attached with a screw. The x-rays also showed two pins inserted in the original part of the stem (Figs. 3 and 4). Interestingly, there was very little evidence of lead metal, as lead solder is a common material found in Chinese bronze

restoration (Gettens 1969).

A sample for metallography was removed from the base to confirm it was a modern replacement. There is a clear frontier of corrosion to the alpha phase, leaving the alpha plus delta eutectoid relatively unharmed. This type of selective corrosion plus large bright red/orange cuprite crystals are indicative of a newer corrosion product. Additionally, lead inclusions in the alloy are mainly intact. It is quite possible that this type of corrosion was formed with a combination of heat and chemical patination. No other samples were removed from the object (Figs. 5 and 6).

4. Comparison

The next step was to compare the fragment rubbing from the archaeologist's report to the LACMA fang hu. A comparison of losses to those exhibited in the rubbing was conducted, but a matching profile on the LACMA piece was not evident. The design elements on both the rubbings and the vessel are very similar. The pedestal showed the same design characteristics as the rubbing. However, the rubbing also had a flared base that is different from the LACMA fang hu. The design elements on the base are a unique puttiesque bird-man figure, and the rubbings have a bird motif (Figs. 7, 8, and 9).

5. Discussion

The examination was able to address the curator's initial questions. It is unlikely that the pedestal and the vessel were cast together. There is no definitive evidence to explain how the pedestal originally joined the vessel, or if it was ever joined. The form of a hu or fang hu on a pedestal, while not common, does exist in both ceramic and bronze vessels. The curator's research suggested that this was a later more creative form concurrent with the Late Chou fanciful animalistic forms. The cover of *Oriental Art* (December 1989) featured a pair of recently excavated fang hu on pedestals. Other publications have also represented this type of vessel in pairs (Pope :449-500; Fang-mei :321). This does give evidence that LACMA's fang hu is perhaps one of a pair, and that the mate (or separated vessel and pedestal) is located at the Academia Sinica.

While the original questions were satisfied, more questions surrounding the fang hu came to the surface. There is no clear evidence besides previous publication that the pedestal and vessel were made to be one object. As only a handful of these forms are known, the majority in China, the authenticity of LACMA's fang hu (or more precisely, its form) was questioned. What was the intent of the restorations? Was it a harmless but ill-conceived joining by the Academia Sinica in Taiwan, or was this a successful attempt by a dealer to make a duplicitous but more valuable fang hu on a pedestal? The larger dilemma for conservation was whether or not to deconstruct the fang hu, and attempt to re-assemble the fragments.

At this point, it is important to clarify that restorations on Chinese bronzes are not unusual. While many pieces are in pristine condition, there are also many that have undergone some alteration. In LACMA's collection alone there are examples where the entire object is reconstructed of fragments or later additions made to the form (Fig. 10).

It is not unusual for the conservation treatment of pastiches to lead to more pieces than originally existed. Often, once the fill materials are removed and the fragments cleaned of excess residue there are no cohesive join or break edges to justify reconstruction. One must truly consider the treatment before proceeding to the point of no return.

6. Conclusion

This deconstruction yielded interesting information regarding both the history and the reconstruction of this fang hu. The publications referenced were useful for establishing precedence for the existence of this form. While later publications show the fang hu in its current state, the archaeological notes and rubbings do not support the joining of the vessel and the pedestal. However, the rubbings suggest a relation to fragments in the Academia Sinica.

Based on manufacturing techniques and visual examination of the corrosion products, the various fragments of the LACMA fang hu are authentic Late Chou Dynasty, with the exception of the flared base. Additionally the vessel and pedestal are not cast integrally. Finally, since there is no clear evidence to suggest a method of joining the two, reversal of the restoration is not warranted at this time.

Acknowledgements

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Additionally these institutions graciously allowed access to their Chinese bronze collections for comparison and examination. Freer Gallery of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts- Boston, Art Institute of Chicago, Cleveland Museum of Art, Fogg Art Museum, British Museum, Rijksmuseum

Endnote

1. During the Late Chou period, the town was under control of the State of Wei, which was

Hickey-Friedman

different from the State of Wei during the Early Chou period. During the Warring states period, the royal capital was located at Louyang, but there was no cohesive government at the time.

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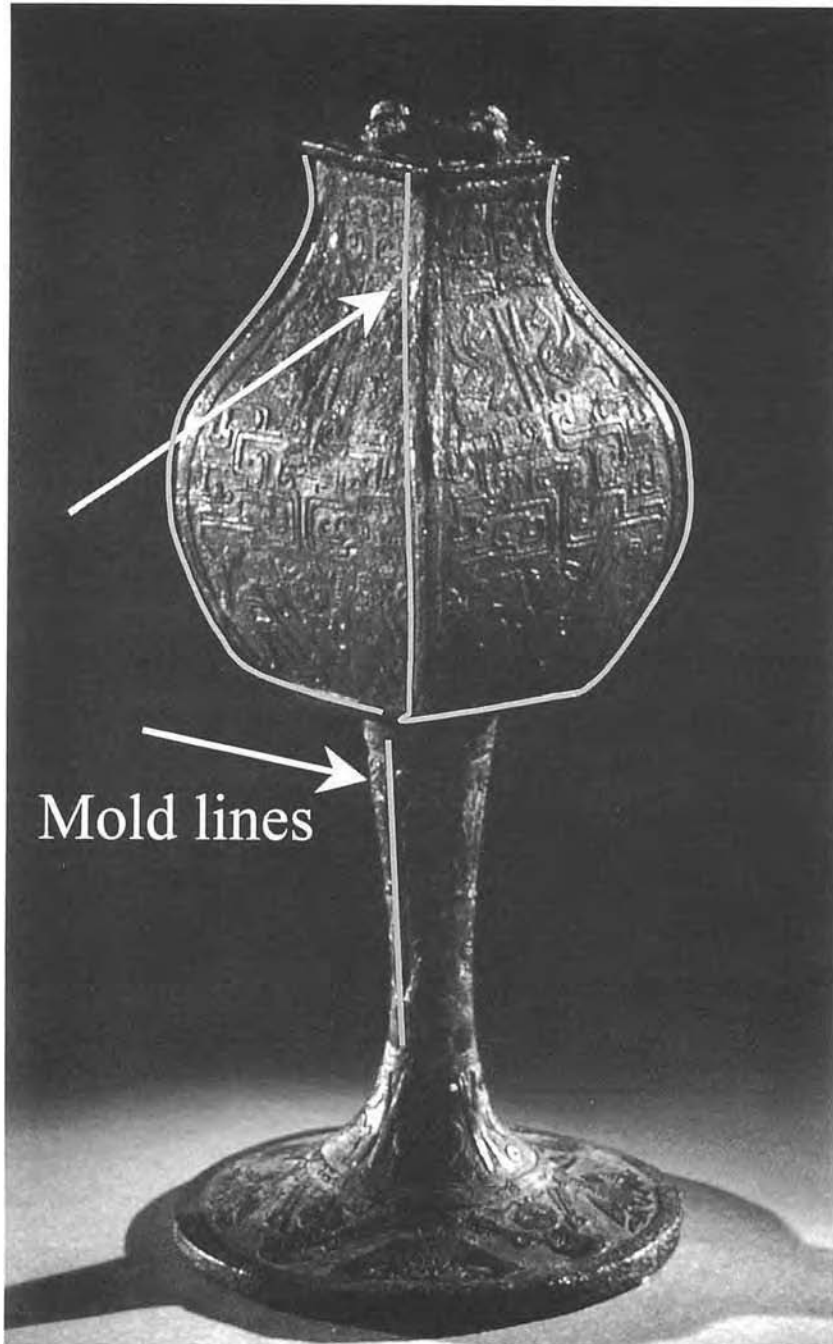


Figure 1. Mold lines highlighted on vessel and pedestal.



Figure 2. Detail of restoration at the base of the vessel.

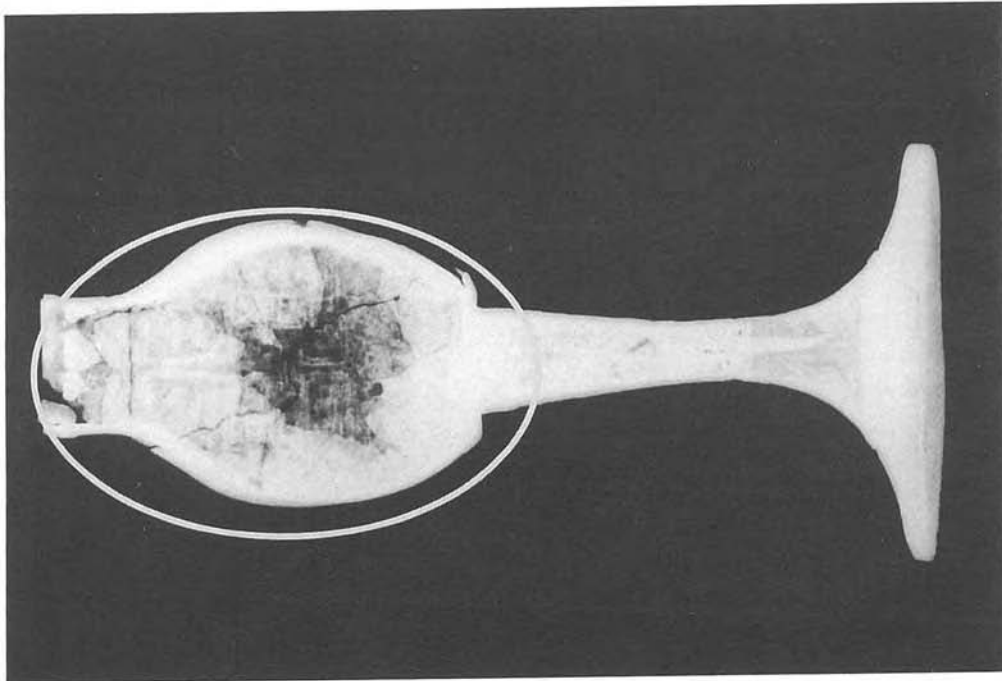


Figure 3. X-ray radiography of the vessel. The circled area indicates the lower section of the vessel that is mostly reconstructed with wire mesh support and fill material.

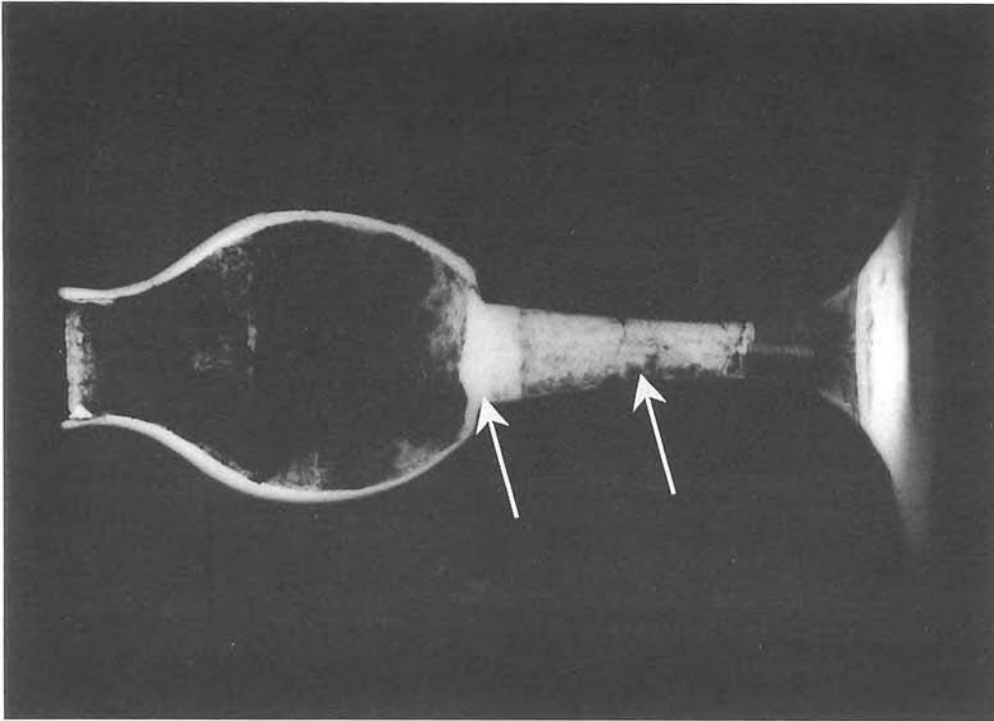


Figure 4. X-ray radiography of the stem. The top arrow shows the area of unusual density at the join between the vessel and stem. The bottom arrow indicates two pins inserted in the original part of the stem.

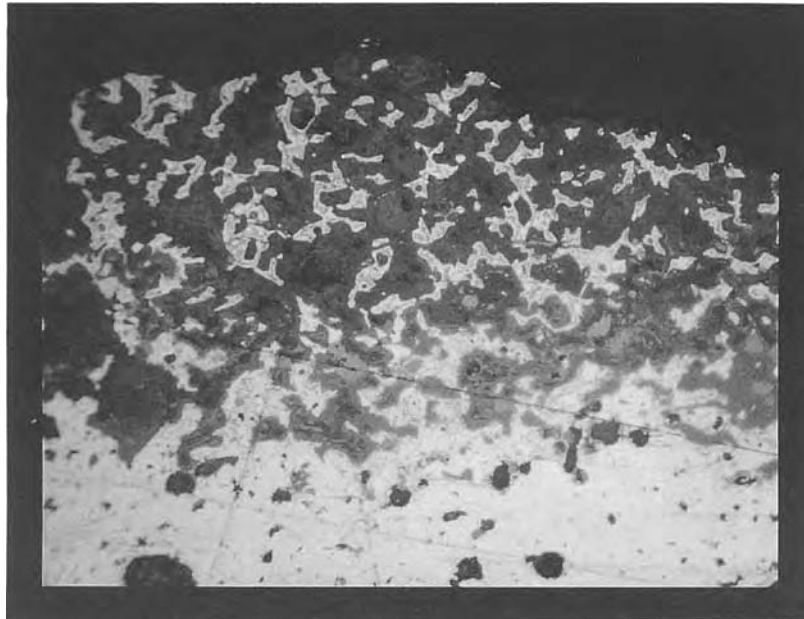


Figure 5. Metallography sample, bright field. The corrosion layer, identified by dark voids, appears at the top of the image. This is where the copper-rich alpha phase was attacked. There are dark globules of lead within the matrix which would not be expected in a metallographic sample of an ancient bronze.

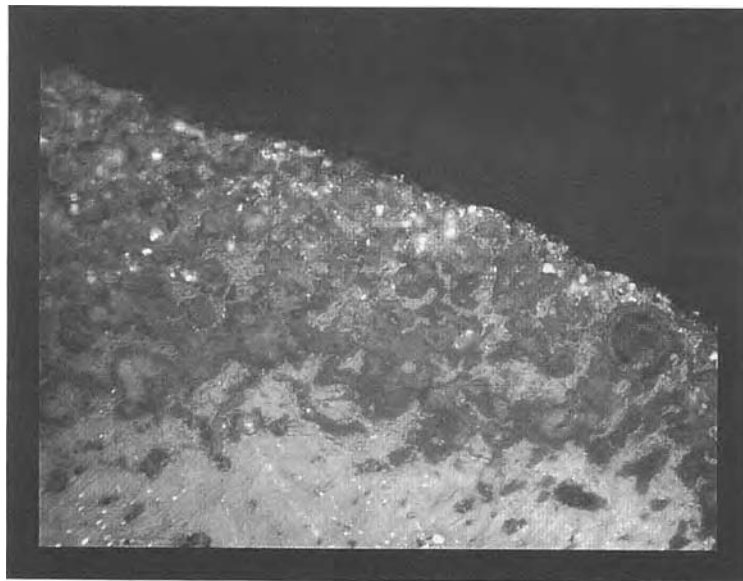


Figure 6. Metallography sample, dark field. The corrosion layer appears at the top of the image. There is a top layer of carbonates (green in the original photograph) and a frontier layer of cuprite (red/orange in the original photograph) beneath.

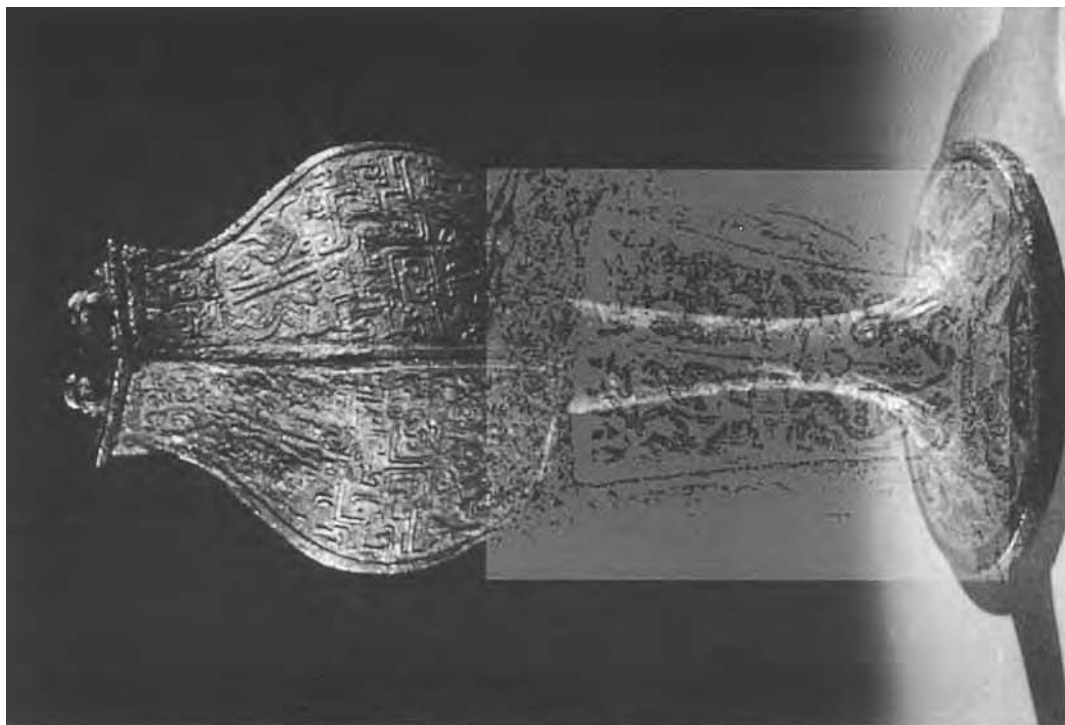


Figure 8. Overlay of the rubbing on the LACMA fang hu.

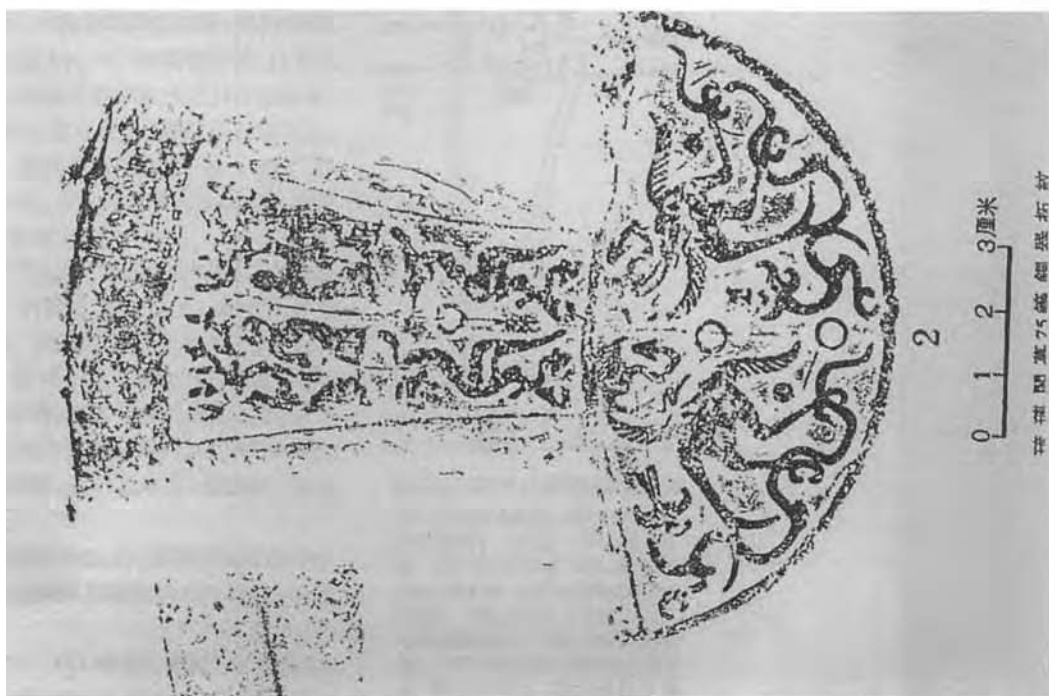


Figure 7. Archaeological rubbing of the stem (Academica Sinica 1938)



Figure 9. Archaeological rubbing of the vessel (Institute of Archaeology, Academia Sinica 1938).

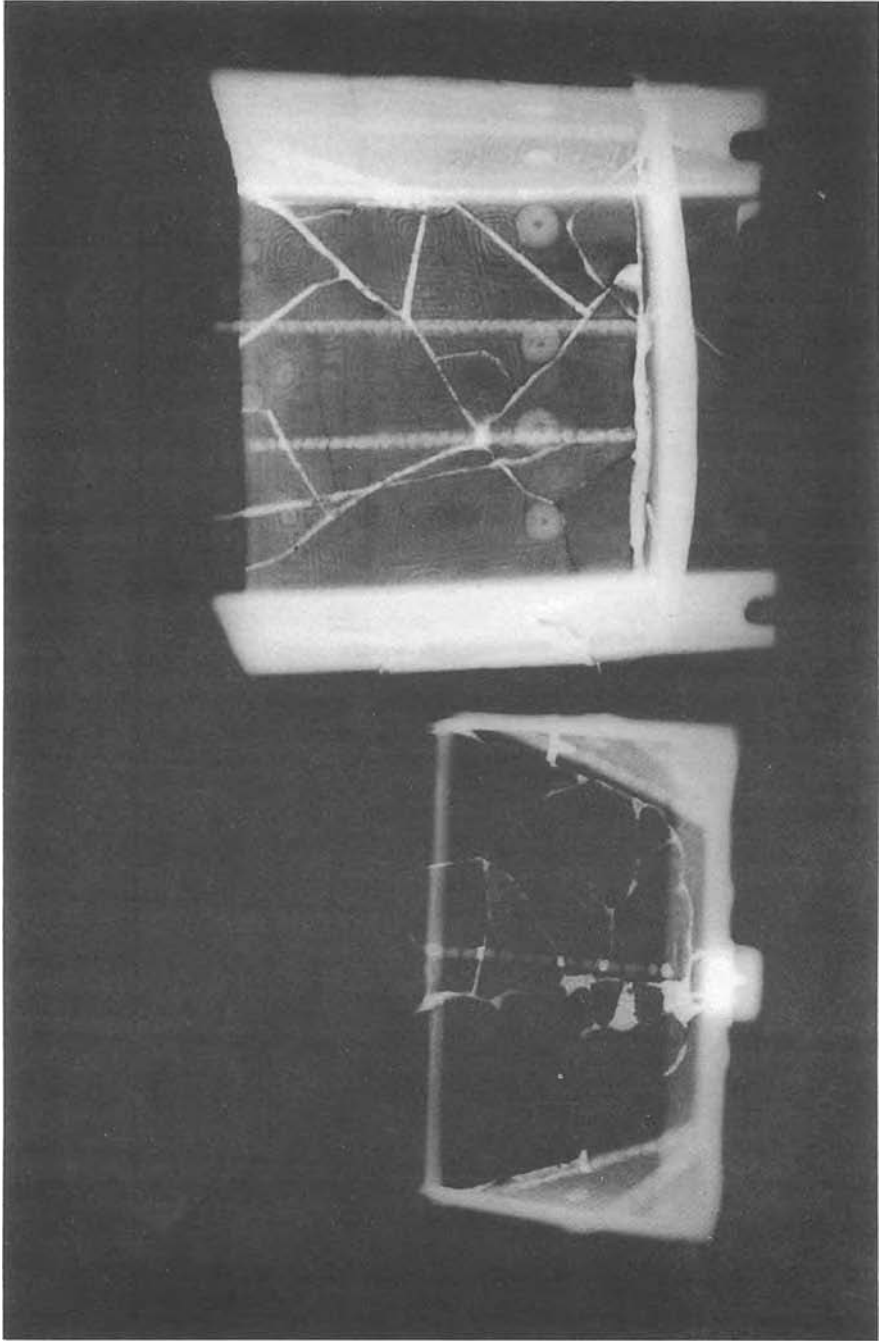


Figure 10. X-ray radiography of a reconstructed fang yi.
(Los Angeles Count Museum of Art, acc. no. AC.1998.251.35a,b)