Changes and Milestones of the Chinese Mirror Distribution System in the Japanese Islands

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Chinese mirrors are cultural objects that were continuously shipped to the Japanese Islands from the latter half of the Mid-Yayoi period through the first half of the Early Kofun period. The transition from the mirror distribution system centered on northern Kyushu in the Yayoi period to the one centered on the Kinki region in the Kofun period provides a significant viewpoint for investigating the process to establish society in the Kofun period, when a government system covering the whole Japanese Islands appeared. This paper evaluates changes in the distribution system of Chinese mirrors in the Japanese Islands.

This article analyzes the distribution system centered on northern Kyushu based on two indicators: accumulation and form. Mass graves with burial goods continued to be built from the time of the inflow of third-generation Han mirrors to the time of the inflow of fifth-generation Han mirrors, namely from the latter half of the Mid-Yayoi period to the latter half of the Late-Yayoi period. The article argues that throughout those periods, when there were mass graves with burial goods that can be considered as distribution centers, the distribution system had worked. Moreover, the paper investigates the form of mirrors phase by phase to confirm the sequence of third-generation Han mirrors. The result discovers that in the beginning of the Late-Yayoi period, when fourth-generation Han mirrors were shipped to Japan, the form of imported mirrors changed significantly. The article uses this event as a foothold to examine, from the viewpoint of the Chinese world, the mirrors imported to the Japanese Islands from the latter half of the Mid-Yayoi period to the latter half of the Late-Yayoi period. The influx of Han mirrors at that time is often described as stable. The article, however, points out that it was not delivered coherently, citing the stagnation in the late first century B.C. as an example.

With regard to the distribution system centered on the Kinki region, the paper reviews arguments about when it was established, suggests that a comparative study of the allocation of sixth- and seventh-generation Han mirrors among communities can provide a perspective, and analyzes respective communities after classifying the area into four communities: the Seto Inland Sea coast, the Japan Sea coast, the Kinki region, and east of the Kinki region. The analysis result reveals that during the influx of sixth- and seventh-generation Han mirrors, a network was expanding from northern Kyushu throughout the Kanto region, centered on the Seto Inland Sea coast. Since prominent distributers is
unlikely to have existed there, this study indicates that there was a situation of “divided possession” that also later led to the “coexistence” of Queen Himiko.

During the inflow of sixth- and seventh-generation Han mirrors, the distribution system in northern Kyushu ended while a wide connection throughout the Japanese Islands was established centered on the Seto Inland Sea network. This study reconfirms that the change of the distribution system that had been established in the date of Shonai-type pottery, in the second century, marked a milestone that was also related to changes in trade routes in the Japanese Islands.

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