Sealing Clays in the University of Chicago Library

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The Far Eastern collections of the University of Chicago Library possess eleven seal inscriptions impressed on ten pieces of clay dating before and at the beginning of the Christian era. The collection was acquired from a private collector in Paris during my trip to Europe in 1968 and displayed at the Exhibition of Far Eastern Resources of the University Library in 1973. These artifacts have attracted great attention among scholars because they are not only the oldest documents in the University Library but also very rare among library or museum collections in the United States.

Documents in ancient China were written on bamboo and wooden tablets before paper was extensively used in the 3rd century A.D. For certification of authenticity and confidentiality, they were bound with a string and impressed with a seal on a piece of sticky clay attached to the documents during transportation. For a large quantity, they could also be put in a bag folded on both ends with an opening at the center, which was sealed with a board in the same manner. When the tablets decayed, the sealing clays survived underground. They were first discovered in 1822 in Szechuan and subsequently in Shensi, Honan, Shantung, and elsewhere. A few thousand pieces of these are mostly kept in public and private collections in China and only very few are in Western countries. Since they bear names of official titles and places, many of which are not recorded in literature, the inscriptions are valuable for the study of geography and government as well as documentary systems of ancient China.

The eleven inscriptions, illustrations of which are appended to this article, are deciphered and verified with what is or what is not recorded in the chapters on Geography (lit chih 地理志) and Administrative Offices (pai kuan kung ch'ing piao 百官公卿表) of the History of the Han Dynasty (Han shu 漢書), as follows:

1. (a) **Ho-yang ch'eng yin 何陽丞印** [Assistant Prefect of Ho-yang seal] and (b) **Tu-shui ch'eng yin 湖水丞印** [Assistant Director of Waters seal]. Two seals impressed on one piece of clay were used on documents presented jointly by two concerned offices. Ho-yang (modern Ho-yang, Shensi) on the northern bank of the Ho-yang River was one of the thirteen satellite cities of the Capital in the Han dynasty. Tu-shui was an office in charge of hydraulic affairs together with such functional departments as foundry, mining, forestry, and fruit plantations. Two seals on one piece of clay is extremely rare.

2. **Kuang-ssu-ling yin 幟祀令印** [Prefect of the Office of Court Ceremonies seal]. From the Ch'in and throughout the Han dynasty, the chief official in charge of state sacrifices was called **Fung-ch'ang 封禪**, **T'ai-ch'ang 太常**, or **T'ai-ssu-ling 太祝令**; but the title on this clay is not found in the official History of the Han Dynasty. Also, this clay, with its inscriptions in mirror image and carved in intaglio, unlike the other pieces of clay, is perhaps a matrix for casting metal seals. In any case, this piece is extremely rare.

3. **Ch'u ch'eng-hsiang yin 秦丞相印** [Prime Minister of Ch'u seal]. The office of **ch'eng-hsiang** was established by the first Emperor of Han for the feudal lords, but it was abolished by Emperor Ching in 152 B.C. after the suppression of a rebellion by seven of these lords, including the Lord of Ch'u. This being so, this piece should be dated prior to the time this office was abolished.
4. **Nei-shih 内史** [Administrator of the Capital]. This office for administering the Capital, equivalent to the Mayor of the Capital in the modern world, was established in the Chou dynasty but its duties were divided into two offices, Left and Right, under Emperor Ching in 155 B.C. Since this piece has only two characters and doesn’t mention Left or Right, it must be dated before the year in which that division took place.

5. **Ch’ang-hsin chan-shih 長信詹事** [Superintendent of the Ch’ang-hsin Palace]. This palace was where the Queen-mother lived. The office in charge of the Ch’ang-hsin Palace was changed to **Ch’ang-hsin shao-fu 長信少府** in 144 B.C.; this clay, therefore, should be dated before that year.

6. **Ch‘i-shih ch‘eng yin 居里丞印** [Assistant for the Convict Barracks seal]. The name of this office, which had charge of prisoners, was changed to Pao-kung 保宫 in 104 B.C. when the country was under the reign of Emperor Wu. Thus, this piece must be dated before that time.

7. **Ju-ying ch‘eng yin 女(汝)丞印** [Assistant Prefect of Ju-ying District seal]. Ju-ying is located on the north bank of Ju-ying River in Hu-yang, Anhui Province.

8. **Wu-fang ch‘eng yin 烏房丞印** [Assistant to the Chancellor of Wu-fang State seal]. Wu-fang was the place where the brother of the King of the Wu Kingdom was feudalized by the Ch’u State. The ancient site of Wu-fang is located in modern Sui-p’ing, Honan Province.

9. **Ch‘ang-i hou yin 昌邑侯印** [Captain of the Ch‘ang-i State seal]. This was a district established in the Ch‘in dynasty and called Shan-yang 山陽 under the Han. It was changed to the Kingdom of Ch‘ang-i in 97 B.C. Therefore, this piece should be dated after the year when its statehood was established. The ancient site of Ch‘ang-i is located forty miles northwest of modern Chin-hsiang hsiien, Shantung province.

10. **Yen-tao ch‘iu-yuan 嚴道園** [Orange Plantation of the Yen-tao District]. This is an administrative office in charge of the orange growing operation from which tributes were sent to the imperial court, as recorded in the chapter on Geography in the *History of the Han Dynasty*. Yen-tao, modern Yung-ching hsien in Ssuchuan Province, has been famous from very ancient times for growing oranges.

The inscriptions described above from the Chicago collection represent the names of six geographical locations (Nos. 1a, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10), eight central and local administrative offices (Nos. 1b, 2-10), and three particular locations such as the imperial palace (No. 5), the prison barracks (No. 6), and the orange plantation (No. 10). Four of these date to the Western Han (206 B.C.-9 A.D.) and others belong to either the Western or Eastern Han (25-220). Except for three (Nos. 1a, 6, 10), which are also found in certain collections in China, all other inscriptions are not listed in any of the published catalogues or reproductions. Especially rare are both the piece with two seals impressed jointly on the one clay (No. 1a-b) and the piece with negative inscriptions carved in intaglio (No. 2) which we suppose might be a matrix for casting seals.
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邵陽丞印·都水丞印

慶紀令印
楚丞相印
內史

長信房事
居室丞印
女陰丞印

吳詹丞印
昌邑候印
嚴道侯印