Two Funeral Urns from Loochoo

Author(s): Basil Hall Chamberlain

Source: *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 24 (1895), pp. 58-59

Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2842481>

Accessed: 11/06/2014 12:38

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

TWO FUNERAL URNS *from* LOOCHOO. By BASIL HALL
CHAMBERLAIN

THE Loochooans—closely allied to the Japanese by race and language, closely bound to China by the ties of education—respect their ancestors to a degree surpassed by no other Oriental people. It were scarcely too much to say that in Loochoo, if the living dwell in hovels, the dead dwell in palaces, so imposing are the vaults, of which each family, even the very poorest, possesses one. The roofs of these burial-vaults may be seen from a considerable distance at sea, on account of the dazzlingly white plaster that distinguishes them from the surrounding vegetation. On the occasion of a death, the corpse is conveyed to the family vault in solemn procession, a Buddhist priest leading the way, hired mourners following with bitter wails, and the kinsmen of the dead bringing up the rear. The religious rites duly concluded, the body is left shut up for two years. Then, when decomposition is far advanced, the family again assemble for the purpose of washing the bones and depositing them in their final resting-place, an earthenware urn, which, being filled in this manner, is lifted on to one of the numerous shelves that run round the interior of the vault. The name of the dead, and the date are inscribed in Chinese characters on the front of the urn in a space left free for that purpose.

The specimens of Loochooan funeral urns in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, illustrate the kinds used respectively by the rich and by the poor. The prices are \$1.20, or at 2s. 9d. to the silver dollar, about 3s. 4d. of English money for the former; 30 cents, say 1s., for the latter. Both come from the hamlet of Tsuboya (Tsubuya, in local Loochooan pronunciation), a suburb of Nafa, the chief port of Loochoo, whence all the southern portion of the island at least is supplied. I was informed that the urns used to hold the bones of kings cost \$25; but these I was not able to see. It will be noticed that the plan of the more elaborate of the two urns is that of a temple; furthermore that Buddhist influence manifests itself in the lotus flower adorning the front, and in the demons' heads planted at every available corner, their function being to ward off—as on homœopathic principles—all malign influences. The fish at the top corners are a favourite ornament in Japan as well as in Loochoo. The poorer sort of urn similarly shows Buddhist influence in the lotuses scratched on its surface. This, and the presence of the

priest at the funeral, are instances of the ceremonial survival of institutions otherwise gone out of mode; for Buddhism is practically extinct in Loochoo as a religion and rule of life. Confucianism killed it.

For further details I may be permitted to refer to a paper which I am preparing for the Asiatic Society of Japan, and which will contain the result of a month's sojourn in Great Loochoo during the spring of the present year, and of the study of all the principal Japanese works bearing on the subject.

Loochoo may by some, who know it only as a cluster of tiny dots on the map of the Pacific, be supposed to be as barbarous as most of the archipelagos scattered over the ocean. So far is this from being the case that the Loochooans are one of the most civilised peoples of the world, possessing an ancient history, a system of farming which would put European agriculturists to shame, and a skill in diplomacy which, till a few years ago, preserved the national independence from the encroachments both of China and of Japan. Since 1874, however, they have become subjects of the Japanese Empire, though still preserving their own language and most of their ancestral customs, including that of the disposal of the dead in funeral urns as here described. It is asserted by some that at a very early date the Loochooans practised water burial, but that this custom was gradually abandoned because the streams were polluted thereby. Of this statement however, I was unable to obtain any confirmation.