

Chapter 2

Charms Decorated with *Liu bo* Patterns from the Han Dynasty

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2.1 Introduction

Commonly known as *gui ju wen* 規矩紋 or the geometric pattern in China and the LTV pattern in Western countries, the decorative pattern is derived from an ancient Chinese board game called *liu bo* 六博 in the Pre-Qin and Han Dynasties. The board game is alternatively called *bo* 博, *lu bo* 陸博, or *liu bu* 六簿. The name *liu bo* is composed of *liu* 六, six, and *bo* 博, sticks. It is perhaps the earliest known board game in China with a complete set of rules and props. It is a gambling game with a unique status in Chinese gambling history; many gambling rules in later ages are still closely related to *liu bo*. The character *bo* 博 later came to be used to refer to different aspects of gambling such as *du bo* 賭博 (gambling), *bo cai* 博彩 (lottery), *bo ming* 搏命 (life fighting), *bo tu* 博徒 (gambler), *bo de* 博得 (win) and so on. As far as we know based on excavated evidence, there are mainly five categories of physical data for *liu bo*, namely, the actual game board, depictions on stones and baked bricks, funerary models, bronze mirrors, and coin charms.

The exact starting date of *liu bo* remains uncertain. Existing written evidence indicates that it came into existence in as early as the Spring and Autumn Period (771–476 BC). In the wake of economic development, *liu bo* became a popular game and also a form of gambling among people in big cities during the Warring States Period (475–221 BC). The fact that it is mentioned in written works such as *The Songs of Chu*,¹ *Intrigues of the Warring States*,² and

Translated by Yu Yao-long 余躍龍.

¹ 《楚辭·招魂》：“崑崙象基，有六博些。分曹並進，道相迫些”。

² 《戰國策·齊策》：“臨淄之中七萬戶...甚富而實，其民無不吹竽鼓瑟，擊築彈琴，鬥雞走犬，六博蹋鞠者”。

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*The Analects of Confucius*³ partly reflects its popularity during this early period in China. Later in the Qin and the Han dynasties, people played *liu bo* across all the classes of society. According to history, a eunuch named Lao Ai 嫪毐 serving in the court of the Qin Empire had a secret adulterous affair with the Queen Mother and was awarded the title of Marquis of Changxin 長信侯. One day, when drinking and playing *liu bo* with high-ranking courtiers, he got drunk and boasted of being the father in name (假父) of the First Emperor only to cause himself publicly torn apart by five carts at the order of the furious emperor.⁴ During the Han Dynasty, Chen Sui 陳遂 from the area of Duling used to play *liu bo* and owed a lot of money to a man named Liu Xun 劉詢, who later became Emperor Xuan of Han 漢宣帝. After he became emperor, Liuxun appointed Chensui as the Chief Prefecture of Taiyuan and proclaimed in the imperial edict that he was appointed to the high position with an ample salary so that he could repay his debt!⁵ According to *The Historical Records*, the fifth king of the Song State, Prince Ming of Song (*mingong* 宋繡公), once went hunting and played *liu bo* with a senior official named Nan Gong-wan 南宮萬. A dispute ensued and Nan Gong-wan crushed the king to death with the game board.⁶ During the reign of Emperor Jing (188–141 BC) of the Han Dynasty, coincidentally, Liubi, the King of Wu, started a revolt against the emperor exactly because of a dispute over *liu bo*: His son went to the capital and had an audience with the Imperial Prince Liu Qi, who later became Emperor Jing. The two drank and played *liu bo* together. Again, a dispute ensued because his son did not abide by the rules and the Imperial Prince crushed him to death with the game board.⁷ These incidents clearly reflect the upper-class aristocrats' obsession with the board game *liu bo*.

Perhaps as a result of this immense popularity, there were professional *liu bo* players in the Han Dynasty and they were called *bo tu* 博徒, or gambling thugs. *The Book of Later Han* contains a short biography about Xu Sheng-lou, who “gambled when young and cared nothing about his personal conduct”.⁸ *A Doctrine on Salt and Iron* written by Huan Kuan 桓寬 during the Western Han period also mentions

³ 《論語·陽貨》：“子曰：飽食終日，無所用心，難矣哉！不有博奕者乎？爲之，猶賢乎已。”

⁴ 《說苑·正諫篇》：“秦始皇帝太后不謹，幸郎嫪毐，封以爲長信侯，爲生兩子，毒專國事，浸益驕奢，與侍中左右貴臣俱博飲，酒醉爭言而鬥，瞋目大叱曰：‘吾乃皇帝之假父也，羹人子何敢乃與我亢！’所與鬥者走行白皇帝，皇帝大怒，毒懼誅，因作亂，戰咸陽宮。毒敗，始皇乃取毒四肢車裂之，取其兩弟囊撲殺之...”

⁵ 《漢書·遊俠傳》：“陳遵字孟公，杜陵人也。祖父遂，字長子，宣帝微時與有故，相隨博奕，數負進。及宣帝即位，用遂，稍遷至太原太守，乃賜遂璽書曰：‘制詔太原太守：官尊祿厚，可以償博進矣。妻君甯時在旁，知狀。’”

⁶ 《史記·宋微子世家·第八》：“（宋湣公）十一年秋，湣公與南宮萬獵，因博爭行，湣公怒，辱之，曰：‘始吾敬若；今若，讎虜也’。萬有力，病此言，遂以局殺湣公于蒙澤”。

⁷ 《史記·吳王濞列傳》：“孝文時，吳太子入見，得侍皇太子飲博。吳太子師傅皆楚人，輕悍，又素驕，博，爭道，不恭，皇太子引博局提吳太子，殺之”。

⁸ 《後漢書·許升妻傳》：“升，少爲博徒，不理操行。”

that those who played *liu bo* and raced horses were all descendants of the rich.⁹ In his *A Miscellany of the Western Capital*, Ge Hong 葛洪 (AD 284–364) of the Jin Dynasty referred to a man named Xu Bo-cang, who specialised in playing *liu bo* and even composed a rhyming song to teach the secrets of the game to children.¹⁰ He also allegedly wrote *The Book of Liu bo*, which has now been lost but is nonetheless the first monograph on this game popular at the time of the Han Dynasty. Later changes took place regarding props and rules for the game. We now know of two major variants of *liu bo*: *da bo* 大博 the Greater Bo popular in Western Han and before and *xiao bo* 小博 the Lesser Bo popular in Eastern Han and later. The former involved the use of six dices while the latter only two. After the Eastern Han Dynasty, the game changed further during the ensuing Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern Dynasties. Only one dice was used eventually and the game lost favour to other newer and more entertaining games such as *wu mu* 五木, *wo shuo* 握槊 and *shuang lu* 雙陸 (backgammon). During the Southern and Northern Dynasty, the game of *liu bo* was dismissed as lacking in strategy and uninteresting.¹¹ As a result, *liu bo* virtually disappeared after the Sui and the Tang dynasties.

Liu bo was not only a popular form of entertainment but also a popular artistic theme. In addition to unearthed *liu bo* boards and terracotta *liu bo* players, we also see stone carvings (Figs. 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3), baked bricks and bronze mirrors (Fig. 2.4) all showing scenes of *liu bo* playing or decorative patterns found on the game board. A large number of unearthed pictorial bricks dating from the Han Dynasty have scenes of immortals engaged in the game. Ancient records mention immortals playing *liu bo*. According to *Han Fei-zi* 韓非子, King Zhao of the Qin State (325–251 BC) ordered his craftsman to climb Mount Hua with a scale ladder to make a set of *liu bo* chess pieces by using the hearts of pine and cypress trees, the sticks of *liu bo* measuring eight feet in length and the chess pieces measuring eight inches long. There he also had the message carved in stone that King Zhao of Qin once played *liu bo* with heavenly gods on Mount Hua.¹² Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty also purportedly played *liu bo* with immortals.¹³ Cao Zhi 曹植, a famous poet and son of Cao Cao 曹操 during the Three Kingdoms Period once wrote, “The immortals grabbed the six pieces of *liu bo* tokens and started playing on the slopes of Mount Tai”.¹⁴

It is mentioned in an annotation of *The Songs of Chu* 楚辭注 that *liu bo* got its name from the casting of six dices and moving six chess pieces. As a game,

⁹ 《鹽鐵論·授時》：“博戲馳逐之徒，皆富人子弟。”

¹⁰ 《西京雜記》：“許博昌，安陵人也、善陸博，賓客好之，常與居處。其術曰：‘方畔揭道張，張畔捐道方；張究屈玄高，高玄屈究張。’三輔兒童皆誦之。”

¹¹ 《顏氏家訓·雜藝》：“數術短淺，不足可玩。”

¹² 《韓非子·外儲說左上》：“秦昭王令工施鉤梯而上華山，以松柏之心爲博，箭長八尺，棋長八寸，而勒之曰：昭王嘗與天神博於此矣。”

¹³ 《風俗通義·正失》：“武帝與仙人對博，棋沒石中。”

¹⁴ 曹植《仙人篇》：“仙人攬六箸，對博泰山隅。”



Fig. 2.1 A stone carving of *liu bo* playing

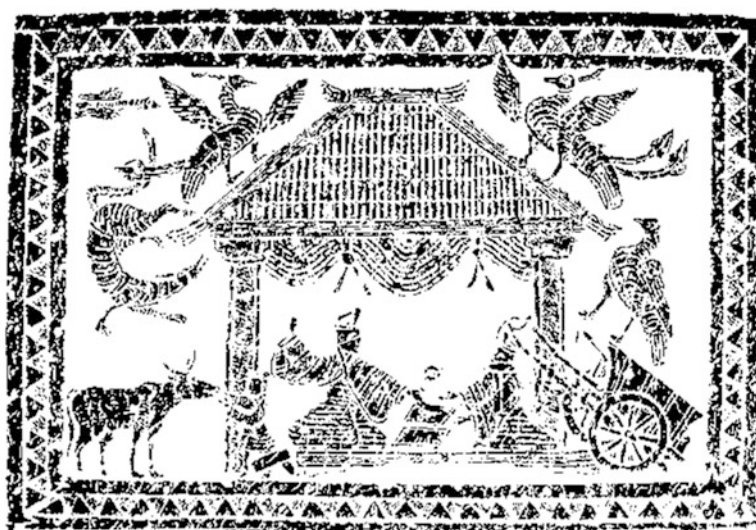


Fig. 2.2 A stone carving of *liu bo* playing

A complete set of *liu bo* contains a board, six black and six white game (chess) pieces, dices. The Lesser Bo requires to record players' winnings and losses. Figure 2.5 is a specimen excavated from Mawangdui 馬王堆 in Hunan Province in 1973, sporting one 18-sided wooden dice, 12 chess pieces in black and white, 42 wooden tokens, and an additional 20 pieces. The square board is also named *ju* 橘

Fig. 2.3 A stone carving of *liu bo* playing



and most of the existent specimens are made from wooden boards. Exemplified by Fig. 2.6, it is divided into an inner district and an outer district. The inner district is a smallish square, each of the four walls flanked by a T-shaped design on the outside. The outer district is in the form of a large square, each of the four walls flanked by an L-shaped pattern on the inside. The four corners of the outer district are all marked by a V-shaped pattern, thus forming four smaller squares. The L, T, V patterns found on the board regulate the paths for the moving of the game pieces. Figure 2.7 is a more elaborated stone board excavated in 1974–1976 from Tomb 3 at Pingxiang, Hubei Province. This specimen is even older, dating to the Warring States Period.

Fig. 2.4 A bronze mirror of *liu bo* game board patterns



Fig. 2.5 A complete *liu bo* set, measuring 45 cm × 45 cm × 17 cm, excavated at Mawangdui, Hunan Province, in 1973



Interestingly, the *liu bo* game board pattern is also found on bronze coin charms. Figure 2.8 is one such specimen. It is inscribed *da quan wu shi* 大泉五十 or Big Cash Worth of 50 on the obverse, therefore dating it to as early as the Wang Mang (王莽) reign at the end of the Western Han period. Its reverse shows unmistakably the path patterns found on a *liu bo* game board. A remarkable feature of this coin is the fact that the obverse has four raised feet. As indicated in Fig. 2.9, if the coin is

Fig. 2.6 The game board of the *liu bo* set excavated at Mawangdui, Hunan Province, in 1973



Fig. 2.7 A stone *liu bo* game board dating from the Warring States Period, excavated from Tomb 3 at Pingxiang, Hubei Province, in 1974–1976



place flat with the reverse facing upwards, we would see a proper game board in front of our eyes!

The chess pieces are commonly made from wood, bone or ivory. Each player would have six, distinguished from each other through different colours, often black and white. Each set of six would have a larger piece, known as *xiao* 梟, or an eagle, representing a leader high in status or brave at war. The other five identical pieces are known as *san* 散, literally meaning *scattered* or *unorganized*, referring to *san zhu* 散卒, foot soldiers. The military system during the Warring States Period is



Fig. 2.8 A bronze coin charm inscribed with *da quan wu shi* on the obverse and a *liu bo* game board on the reverse



Fig. 2.9 The same bronze coin charm placed flat with the reverse facing upwards



Fig. 2.10 A coin charm similar to Fig. 2.8 with 12 chess pieces on the reverse

such that each platoon would have five foot soldiers and one platoon leader, a total of six. From this, it is highly probable that *liu bo* is a game originated from war fighting. Figure 2.10 is another specimen of a coin charm, which, like Fig. 2.8, is similarly inscribed *da quan wu shi* on the obverse and the familiar *liu bo* board



Fig. 2.11 A coin charm showing *liu bo* pieces in different positions

pattern on the reverse. Differently, however, it has 12 additional dots on the reverse, representing the six chess pieces on each opponent side, ready for a game to start.

The dice is called *zhu* 箸, also known as *tou zi* (投子 or 骰子) after the Tang Dynasty. According to what we now know, the dice has two different forms. One is the *zhu*, also called *jian* 箭 or arrow, which is semi-cylindrical in shape and therefore has two different sides when cast. The Major Bo uses six such dices, which produce different combinations when cast and the player moves the chess pieces accordingly. The other kind of dice is called *qiong*, written differently as 瓊 if made from jade or 茛 if made from wood, depending on its material. The *qiong* is very close to our dice nowadays. According to *Yan shi jia xun* 顏氏家訓, the *qiong* is mostly used in the Lesser Bo.¹⁵

Greater Bo was mostly played during and before the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 24). This game requires a board, chess pieces and the *zhu* or the dice. The objective is to kill the *xiao* or the platoon leader. The two layers move their chess pieces depending on the casting of the dice in turns. Good throws are called *gui cai* 貴采 a *noble win*, which allows for multiple moves. Other throws are called *za cai* 雜采 a *mixed win*, which allows for only a single move or no move at all. Through moving the chess pieces, the opponents attempt to encircle each other, taking out foot soldiers and the leader wherever possible. *Han fei-zi* 韓非子, an ancient work written during the Warring States Period, states that *liu bo* gamers prize their *xiao* or platoon leader and the winner must slay the opponent's *xiao*.¹⁶ As far as this is concerned, the *liu bo* game is pretty much similar to the Chinese chess, which is still commonly played. Figure 2.11 is another coin charm inscribed with *Da quan wu shi*. Its obverse shows chess pieces in different positions across the board. Figure 2.12 shows a terracotta model of two players engaged in the *liu bo* game,

¹⁵ 《顏氏家訓》：“古者大博則六箸，小博則二瓊。”

¹⁶ 《韓非子》：“博者貴梟，勝者必殺梟。”

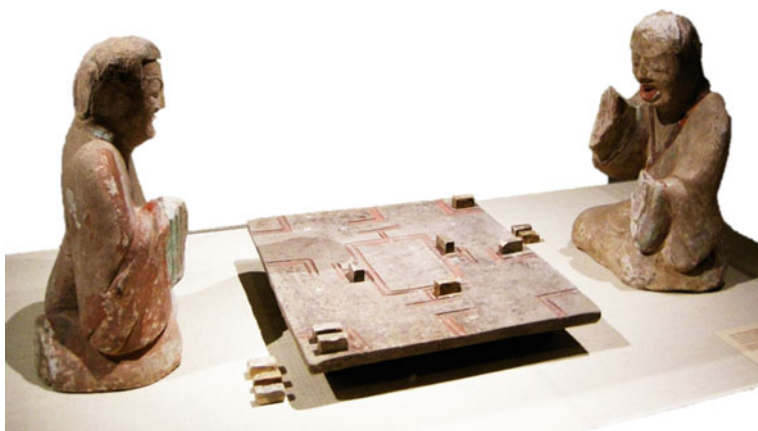


Fig. 2.12 A terracotta model showing chess pieces in different positions



Fig. 2.13 A coin charm showing board path patten in clockwise rotation

chess pieces visible in different strategic positions on the board. This model is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

While studying the *liu bo* game, I found that the paths on the game board are usually turned counterclockwise. On coin charms, however, some show a clockwise rotation, such as Figs. 2.13 and 2.14 in my collection. There are two possible explanations for this phenomenon. The first concerns an error in the making of the mould, which produces a mirror image on the coin charm. The second explanation comes from the possibility that these coin charms were made for eventual use in the tomb and the alteration was deliberately made for some marked difference from the real game.

The Minor Bo started to be popular during the Eastern Han Dynasty. It has a markedly different board pattern, comprising twelve horizontal lines with a river



Fig. 2.14 A coin charm showing the *liu bo* game board pattern in clockwise rotation

(*shui* 水) between the two opponents, quite similar to *chu he han jie* 楚河漢界 the Chu River and the Han Boundary found on our contemporary Chinese chess board. Two different types of chess pieces were used. One included the six rectangular chess pieces but, unlike those used in the Greater Bo, these chess pieces were of the same size and any of the six could become a *xiao* or the platoon leader. The second type included *yu* 魚 fish, which is typically round in shape, one for each player. At the start of the game, the two chess pieces would be positioned on the twelve horizontal lines and the two fish would be placed in the river. The chess piece could be moved according to the throw of the dice and the one first to the destination would be erected upright and became a *xiao* or platoon leader. The *xiao* would then be able to get into the river to catch the fish, each time winning two tokens. A player won the game if he got all the six tokens from his opponent. We thus see that the Greater Bo and the Lesser Bo demonstrate considerable differences. The former aimed at killing the *xiao* or the platoon leader. The latter aimed at winning more tokens. A most significant similarity between the two versions is the use of the dice to determine the number of moves. Ban Gu 班固 in the Eastern Han Dynasty once commented that *liu bo* was determined by dice throwing without much in particular to do with tactic skills.¹⁷ In 1972, a green-glazed pottery set of *liu bo* playing figurines was excavated from a tomb at Lingbao in Henan Province dated to the Eastern Han Dynasty (Figs. 2.15 and 2.16). Two players are seated on a mat facing each other. Between them, there is a rectangular tray with six sticks lined up on the one side and a *liu bo* board on the other. Six chess pieces can be seen on either side of the board with two round “fish” pieces in the middle. This ceramic model is completely in accordance with the descriptions found in *Gu bo jing* 古博經 the Book of Ancient Bo. I have not come across any coin charm related to the Lesser Bo so far.

¹⁷班固 《弈旨》：“博懸於投，不專在行。”

Fig. 2.15 A green-glazed pottery set of *liu bo* game excavated at Lingbao, Henan Province, in 1972, now in the collection of Henan Museum



The *liu bo* board pattern is also frequently found on bronze mirrors dated to late Western Han and Eastern Han Dynasties. While they all use *liu bo* as the major decorative pattern, they can be additionally classified according to other thematic elements such as the four directional creatures,¹⁸ birds and animals, geometric patterns and simplified *liu bo* patterns. Floral motifs and character inscriptions are also commonly found on such objects. Consider Fig. 2.16 in the collection of Henan Museum. It is richly inscribed with eight poetic lines comprising a total of 56 characters. The sixth line reads, “the *liu bo* game pattern is inscribed to suppress bad luck” (*ke lou bo ju qu bu xiang* 刻娄博局去不羊), suggesting that the *liu bo* pattern also possesses some evil suppressing power.¹⁹

Similarly, a number of the coin charms in my collection also contain lucky inscriptions in addition to the *liu bo* pattern. One such example can be found in Fig. 2.17, which is additionally inscribed *da yi zi sun shou bi wang mu* 大宜子孫壽比王母 or *protection to sons and grandsons and longevity comparable to that of the Queen Mother* on the obverse and *le wu shi yi jiu shi* 樂无事宜酒食 or *happy to have nothing to do and suited for drink and food* on the reverse. To enhance its amuletic power, the coin is further decorated with stars, constellations, and a belt hook, symbols of heavenly protection, official honour and good luck. Figure 2.18 is similar; in addition to a standard coin inscription of *da quan wu shi* on the obverse and lucky inscriptions reading *da yi zi sun* 大宜子孫 or *great protection to sons*

¹⁸They include the Blue Dragon (*qing long* 青龍) guarding the East, the White Tiger (*bai hu* 白虎) guarding the West, the Vermilion Bird (*zhu que* 朱雀) guarding the South, and the Tortoise, with a snake coiled around its body, known as the Black Warrior (*xuan wu* 玄武), guarding the North. See also Chapter Six by Alex Fang.

¹⁹“新有善銅出丹陽，和以銀錫清且明。左龍右虎掌四彭，朱爵玄武順陰陽。八子九孫治中央，刻婁(婁)博局去不羊(祥)。家常大富宜君王，千秋萬歲樂未央”。



Fig. 2.16 A bronze mirror with the *liu bo* pattern in the collection of Henan Museum



Fig. 2.17 A *liu bo* coin charm with lucky inscriptions

and grandsons and *ri li* 日利 or *daily profit* on the reverse, it is lavishly decorated with fish for abundance, belt hooks for official rank and honour and stellar constellations for heavenly protection.

Coin charms with a *liu bo* board pattern could be dated to late Western Han Dynasty. Published rubbings include one in Fig. 2.19, which is inscribed with *Zhao xuan wu zhu* 昭宣五祝 on the obverse and *yi zi sun tuo shen shang* 宜子孙脱身易 or *protections to son and grandson and against bodily illnesses* on the reverse. Another piece, represented here in Fig. 2.20, is a *Wu zhu* coin with the *liu bo* pattern on the back. Its calligraphy and the dragon and the tiger on the obverse are reminiscent of a style that can be dated to early Eastern Han Dynasty. After all, coin



Fig. 2.18 A *liu bo* coin charm with lucky inscriptions

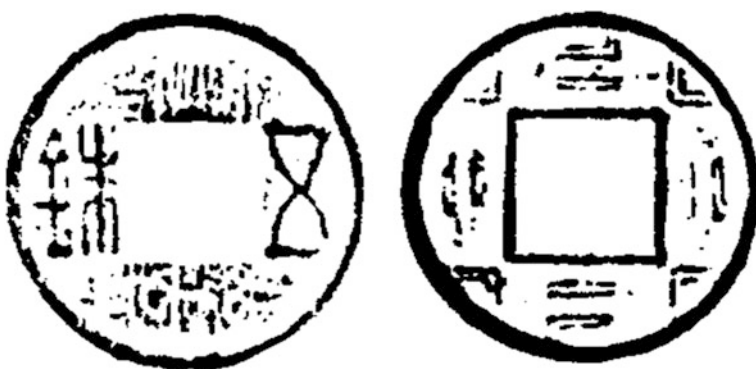


Fig. 2.19 A *liu bo* coin charm with lucky inscriptions

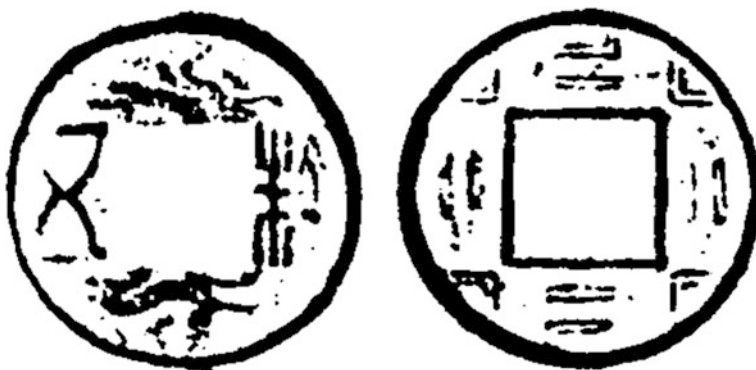


Fig. 2.20 A *liu bo* coin charm with dragon and tiger



Fig. 2.21 A *liu bo* coin charm with lucky inscriptions



Fig. 2.22 A *liu bo* coin charm with lucky inscriptions

charms from the Western Han period are extremely rare and pieces with a *liu bo* pattern are even rarer. The fact that they are commonly dated to the juncture between the Western and the Eastern Han Dynasties suggests the possibility that they might have to do with the divination practices popular during the reign of Wang Mang, which also receives evidence from the bronze mirrors with a *liu bo* pattern at roughly the same time. Coin charms from this period are mostly inscribed with *Da quan wu shi*, a standard inscription on coins first issued by Wang Mang in AD 7. Occasionally, the coin inscriptions are replaced with lucky expressions on some variants such as Fig. 2.21, where the original coin inscription is replaced with *da le wei yang* 大樂未央 or *everlasting happiness*, and Fig. 2.22, which is now inscribed with *da wu zi zi* 大毋子子 with an uncertain meaning. Other variants include one type of a pendant style, Fig. 2.23, which has a loop on top demonstrating an obvious function of hanging about the body. This particular piece is



Fig. 2.23 A *liu bo* coin charm with lucky inscriptions



Fig. 2.24 A *liu bo* coin charm with the coin inscription *Da quan wu shi*

inscribed *yi guan zhi* 宜官秩 or *suited for official rank* and decorated on the two sides with a belt hook and a cutting knife, expressing a desire for official status and promotion.

Occasionally, we see coin charms with simplified or variant *liu bo* patterns. See Figs. 2.24, 2.25 and 2.26 in my collection. These were probably issued during the Wang Mang reign and the simplified patterns perhaps only serve a decorative function.

Figure 2.27 is a coin charm with variant *liu bo* pattern dating to the Eastern Han Dynasty. The obverse is decorated with stellar constellations in addition to a standard *Wu zhu* coin inscription. After the Eastern Han Dynasty, the *liu bo* pattern ceased to appear on coins. This is perhaps firstly because of the official restriction on the practice of divination and secondly because of other more popular games



Fig. 2.25 A *liu bo* coin charm with the coin inscription *Da quan wu shi*



Fig. 2.26 A *liu bo* coin charm with the coin inscription *Da quan wu shi*



Fig. 2.27 A *liu bo* coin charm with the coin inscription *Wu zhu*

such as *chu pu* 樗蒲, *wu mu* 五木 and *shuang lu* 雙陸, which were newer, simpler and yet more exciting to play.

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