

## Material Culture

We are recording this segment in the gallery at Asia Society in New York, surrounded by magnificent works of Chinese art, and it seems like a good opportunity to talk a little bit about the material culture of traditional China. Traditional China was not just rich in spiritual qualities. It did not just have a successful, long, and stable political tradition. It was also a wealthy and comfortable society, a society in which it was possible for a very long time in the pre-modern period to live a very good life. Now, let's think a little bit about what life was like in pre-modern China for the ruling class, for farmers, for artisans, and for others. I'm going to focus on the period of later Imperial China because things did change over Chinese history and these generalizations can hold for part of the Imperial period, but not all of it.

### Ruling Class

From about the Song Dynasty onwards (10<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards) members of the ruling class tended to be not great aristocrats, not independently powerful families, but members of moderately wealthy families, who owned land, had country houses, could afford to educate their sons by hiring tutors and training them to take the civil service examinations, and could continue to perpetuate themselves as modestly well-to-do members of the ruling class. This was not an oligarchy; it was not a society ruled by persons of great wealth or great personal power. Rather, it was a reasonably democratic society at the upper levels, in which merit expressed through the examination system and appointments to imperial office were really the criteria of membership in the upper class. Now, it wasn't just a case of being educated and getting a government job - it was also the case that members of this class were expected to be cultivated in a very broad sense. They were not only literate and familiar with literature but they were expected to be able to write poetry and to be able to write a good essay. They were expected to be competent painters, excellent calligraphers—no one with any pretensions to upper class status would get very far without having beautiful brush handwriting. Members of the upper class were expected to cultivate hobbies: gardening, music, collecting antiquarian books, and collecting old bronzes. It hardly mattered, but you were supposed to be an amateur of the arts - someone who is able to express in your own life and in your own personal surroundings the values of the society of which you were part of the ruling class. Now, all of this was sustained by a certain amount of wealth, and that wealth came from land-owning and from agriculture. Most members of the ruling class owned some land, rented it out, and those rents were the basis of the family wealth. It was very little of what you find in later European society, particularly British society, where members of the wealthy, emerging industrial class put their money into industries. There was industry in China; there was at least large-scale production of all sorts of material goods, but people who had money in traditional China tended to use that money to buy land, to become members of the agrarian gentry, and then to train their sons for the exams and for membership in the Imperial bureaucracy.

### Peasants

Some of the tenants on that land, the farmers of China, were paying rent to landowners and absentee landlords. Some of them were independent farmers who owned their own fields and harvested their own crops and paid taxes in the form of grain and silk. (Later the taxes were transmuted to be payable in cash, in copper or silver.) These farmers were in normal times a reasonably prosperous and contented class. Chinese peasantry was not in normal times ground down by poverty, and debt, and the fear of famine. China for most of its history was a society in which it was possible to live the life of a farmer, raise a family, and see one's children grow up to adulthood and start their own families. Although life on the land was limited and farmers tended to be illiterate, and only modestly endowed with material goods, life on was on the whole not too bad. Now there were many times when that was not true - times of famine, times of warfare, and times of dynastic decline. There were dynasties that put too many burdens on the people, too much conscription

for military duty, too much conscription for corvée labor to work on grand public works project such as the Grand Canal or the embankments of the Yellow River, but for most people most of the time, life was not too bad.

## Artisans

China had a large artisan class. People who made things and China in traditional times were remarkable for the range and quality of goods that were produced. We see here, for example, ceramics, which were produced in stupendous quantities in China, particularly from the Tang Dynasty onward. The Tang Dynasty produced not only articles for daily use, but also statuary to be buried in tombs with the dead. As time went on, the stoneware of the Tang Dynasty yielded to the true porcelain of the Song Dynasty, the Ming Dynasty, and the Qing Dynasty - pure white, hard, ringing porcelain that was avidly sought after by people all over the known world at that time. Chinese porcelain was exported by ship through the Indian Ocean, all around South Asia, up through the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the eastern shores of Africa, and into Europe and all around the Mediterranean world. It is remarkable that the kilns of Jingdezhen<sup>1</sup> and other porcelain producing areas in China were exporting their products thousands of miles away. Silk, too, was produced in great quantity in China, not only the plain silk that was woven for tax revenue by farm wives, but very elaborate brocade silk, silk gauze, silk damask that was used domestically in China to clothe the wealthy. It was also exported in tremendous quantities, this time not so much by sea around the South China Sea and into the Indian Ocean, but across the Silk Road, which beginning around 100 BC was China's main line of communication with the land empires of western Asia and the Mediterranean world. Chinese silk went to Iran, went to Arabia, went to the Byzantine Empire, and went all over the Mediterranean. The Europeans didn't know where it came from, but they knew that they wanted more and more of it and they even called China the land of silk. Marco Polo, in the 13th century, went to China in search of the source of silk and to establish a silk trade and to make himself rich through trading in silk and other Chinese products between China and Europe.

## Merchants

In the Confucian hierarchy of things, artisans produced goods; merchants moved them around. Merchants in China had extensive networks of trade domestically in China and by sea all throughout Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean. Colonies of Chinese were established in many, many parts of Asia - in Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, what is now Burma, and all across Southeast Asia. There were resident colonies of Chinese merchants facilitating the trade in rare woods and rhinoceros horn and horn bill ivory from the tropical world, in exchange for Chinese ceramics, and in exchange for Chinese silk.

## Inventions and Interactions with the World

We know that China was a great source of invention, of paper in the Han Dynasty, of printing in the Tang Dynasty, of the maritime compass in the Song Dynasty, of the wheelbarrow, and of the efficient horse harness (so that you can harness a horse to a plow without the horse strangling himself.) All sorts of things from the most practical to the most refined and rarefied were produced in China, invented in China, and exported to the rest of the world. Now, China was by no means isolated from the rest of the world, not only exporting things to other places but bringing in things from outside. The Tang Dynasty, for example, from 618 – 907 CE, was one of the most exuberant periods of xenophilia in China. We think of China sometimes as being xenophobic (fearful and distrustful of foreigners), but China at many points in history was adamantly interested in the new and the exotic. In the Tang Dynasty, new musical instruments came in from the Arabian world and new forms of clothing came in from the Turkish world. Young Chinese women

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<sup>1</sup> A town in Jiangxi Province of great importance in the history of Chinese porcelain; porcelain workshops are still located there.

were playing polo, a Turkish game, as the new vogue in the Chinese capital in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. But China was at many points in history a full participant in the material culture and the intellectual culture of Eurasia as a whole.

Up until at least the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, China was not only the largest and most populous country in the world; it was certainly the richest country in the world. A country in which it was possible to really believe that China was the center of the world, that it possessed, as the Qianlong Emperor<sup>2</sup> told King George III, all things and had no need for “curiosities from the outer barbarians.” The Chinese, unfortunately, became more complacent than they should have in their ability to produce things and their ability to satisfy their own needs, so that when the Western powers did finally arrive on Chinese shores, the Chinese were less curious than would have been good for them about the manufactured goods, the weapons, and the ideas of the West. But for a very long time in the Chinese traditional era, China was really the leader of the world in technology, in production, in wealth, and, I would say, in an understanding of how to live a Confucian life of harmony and hierarchy and a settled and satisfying sense of one’s place in the universe.

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<sup>2</sup> 1711-1799 CE, ruled from 1736-1795. See the Columbia University website <http://www.learn.columbia.edu/nanxuntu/start.html> , part of the Asia for Educators project there, to learn more about the Kangxi and Qianlong Emperors, two of the most important Qing Emperors, via a subsite produced jointly by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Asia for Educators.