

## China: Dawn of a Golden Age

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This archaeological exhibition is not only one of the most important exhibitions on Chinese archaeology ever mounted outside China but also is the most ambitious presentation of China's medieval era ever presented to the American public. Like its predecessor "The Great Bronze Age of China" (Metropolitan Museum, 1980), "Dawn" is composed of excavated or unearthed objects loaned directly from China. "Dawn" differs from "Bronze Age" in two significant areas: chronological range and thematic coverage. Chronologically, it shifts to the much later medieval period. Thematically, instead of focusing on a single art form like bronzes, it extends coverage to embrace gold and silver, pottery, china, glass, stone statues and carvings, textiles, murals, gems, coins, and paper manuscripts. The concept for this exhibition originated with Philippe de Montebello, director of the museum, and Wen C. Fong, professor emeritus of Chinese art at Princeton. It took seven years of collaborative work between the Metropolitan and the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of China, as well as the participation of 46 museums in China, for the concept to come to fruition.

The period covered by "Dawn" begins with the last phase of the Eastern Han, the close of which marked the end of the first empire and the emergence of the age of political fragmentation (fig. 1). After a brief period of reunification under the Western Jin from 280 to 311, China proper was subject to incessant invasion by non-Han ethnic groups, notably the Xiongnu and the Xianbei. About a century later, the Tuoba branch of the Xianbei emerged as the dominant group in north China, while the south was ruled by a succession of Han Chinese regimes. In the following age of north-south rivalry, major political,

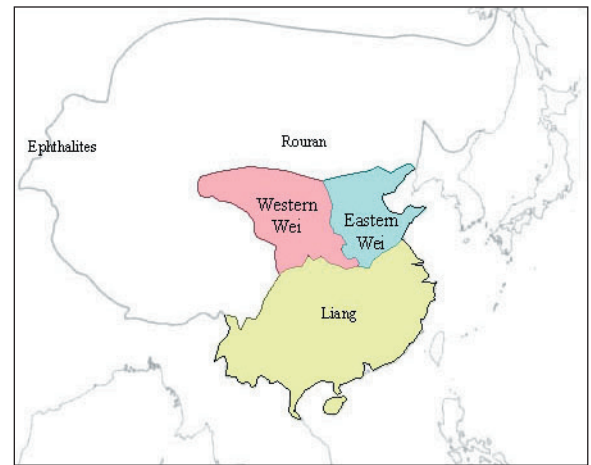


Fig. 1. Map of mid 6th-century China.

economic, and cultural changes took place that forever transformed China. In the north the Xianbei went through an aggressive process of sinification and became amalgamated into mainstream Chinese civilization. In the south the ruling elites, claiming to be the true successors to Han orthodoxy, were well integrated into local society and lost the zeal and drive to reclaim their ancestral land in a north now occupied by the non-Han "barbarians." It took a northern Han Chinese clan, imbued with vitality and supported by people of Han, non-Han, or mixed ethnic and cultural backgrounds, to bring north and south once again together in the age of Sui. With the reestablishment of empire, the pinnacle of medieval Chinese civilization finally arrived in the early eighth century in the following Tang dynasty, which was founded by people of similar cultural and ethnic hybridity.

The 247 items, consisting of more than 300 individual pieces, selected for "Dawn" with

few exceptions fall within the chronological framework of this tumultuous age. To place them in proper historical perspective, “Dawn” groups them into seven sections that roughly follow a chronological order.<sup>1</sup>

The chronological span of Section I, “Late Han, Late Second–Early Third Century,” extends from the last years of the Han into the era of the Cao-Wei dynasty (220–265), the northern power of the Three Kingdoms. The most striking item of the section is the group of bronzes (no. 2; see fig. 2) set up on a long platform facing the entrance of the exhibition hall.<sup>2</sup> It includes 14 horses with riders and three chariots with drivers. Although not life-sized, these realistically executed objects are of impressive stature, with some of the human figures as much as 51 cm in height. The group is selected from a much larger set discovered from an Eastern Han tomb at Leitai, Gansu. Regrettably, the most famous piece from the tomb, dubbed by modern scholars the “Horse That Treads a Flying Swallow,” is not featured in the group.

Another salient feature of this section is its display of a group of gold objects of Eastern Han vintage (nos. 8–12). Ancient China was not a major producer of gold, and gold objects of antiquity have rarely survived. This is especially true of the Han dynasty. The rarity of Eastern Han gold makes the gold objects on display all the more precious. Among those are two miniature chimeras inlaid with gems. Each of them is of complex design, with eyes, horns, and tails enhanced by filigree and covered with minuscule gold granules (no. 11). Although the technique of granulation had been only recently imported from the West, the Chinese goldsmith used it here with great dexterity.

The artifacts of this section in general display little foreign influence. Indigenous motifs clearly dominate the bronze figures on horseback, the translucent jade objects, the earthenware watchtower, the gold-plated bronze inkstone case, the wooden sculptures of geese, the stele of Cao Quan graced with elegant calligraphy, the textile pieces, and even the gold objects themselves. Only the long-necked glass bottle (no. 13) is an import (from Rome). Although the catalogue suggests

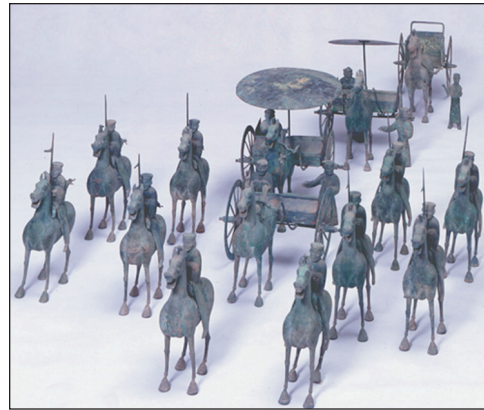


Fig. 2. Bronze chariots and mounted guards. Eastern Han. (Watt 2004, 105).

that the floral pattern of the headgear of the earthenware female attendant holding a platter (no. 21) from the state of Shu in present-day Sichuan possibly shows Indian influence, the proof of this hypothesis still awaits future research and confirmation.

The title of Section II, “The Coming of the Xianbei,” suggests a major thematic departure. The Xianbei were a non-Han nomadic tribal group in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia who later spread to north China. Descending from the Donghu group in Han times, they arose north of China proper, after the breakdown of the Han Empire, and continued their expansion under the Jin and during the chaotic age of the Sixteen Kingdoms.

Overall, the objects of this section are of an exotic flavor that distinguishes them from the artistic styles of China proper. The golden plaques with openwork motifs of steppe animals (nos. 29–32, 35) are reminiscent of Scythian art. One of them, with the inscription *Yiyi jin*, or “Gold of Yiyi” (no. 32; fig. 3),<sup>3</sup> deserves particular mention because of the status of Yiyi and his special relations with the Western Jin. After Luguan, the supreme leader of Tuoba (a branch of the Xianbei), divided the territory under Tuoba control into three areas in a vast tract of land extending west from White Mountain (northeast of Zhangjiakou), to Dai (Datong, Shanxi), to Shengle (south of Hohhot), and beyond, Yiyi (r. 295–305) was named chieftain of the central area, which in-

<sup>1</sup> Item no. 1, a stone chimera, is missing from the exhibition; in its stead is a large photo of the object mounted on the wall.

<sup>2</sup> Item numbers are those recorded in the catalogue (Watt 2004) and on the explanatory panels accompanying the objects in the exhibition.

<sup>3</sup> For the pronunciation of *yi* in *Yiyi*, see Morohashi 1957–1960, 1:393, no. 177. Note that it is rendered “Yituo” in the catalogue.



Fig. 3. Gold plaque with four animals and inscription "Gold of Yiyi" (Yiyi jin). (Watt 2004, 127).

cluded north Shanxi and the region to its north. In this tumultuous age of ethnic unrest, Yiyi is said to have rescued Sima Teng, governor of the Jin province of Bing, from the Xiongnu. Consequently, his younger brother Yilu, who came to power in 307, was created Duke of Dai in 310 by a Jin court desperately seeking alliance with the Xianbei to ward off Xiongnu attacks. That year marked the beginning of Tuoba statehood, the predecessor of the state of Wei, known as Northern Wei in history.<sup>4</sup>

A number of objects are clearly provenanced to the Former Yan (nos. 23–25, 36) and the Northern Yan (nos. 37–41), two of the Sixteen Kingdoms. The founders of the Former Yan (337–370) were the Murong of Xianbei, cognates of the Tuoba. Originally, based in Longcheng (Chaoyang, Liaoning), the Murong moved their capital south to Ye (southwest of Linzhang, Hebei) in 357, in the heartland of the Central Plain. Before its conquest by the Former Qin of Di, the Former Yan dominated present-day Hebei, Shandong, Shanxi, Henan, and Liaoning. The Northern Yan (407–436), as a revived state of Yan, was but a pale shadow of the Former Yan at its height, with significantly reduced holdings (south Liaoning and north Hebei). Although the Northern Yan was founded and ruled by Han Chinese, its culture, as attested by the exhibits in question, clearly shows strong influence of nomadism and elements of central Asia.

All five Northern Yan items on display come from the tomb of Feng Sufu, the brother of Feng Ba, the second sovereign of the Northern Yan and its true founder. One of them is

a recumbent animal in bronze with its mouth open (no. 39). The catalogue labels it "vessel in the shape of an animal" without attempting to explain its utility. In the exhibition the Chinese label for it is *huzi*, which should have been translated as "chamber pot" (Morohashi, v. 9, 1049). Another item is a metal container (no. 40) with bronze body and iron lid, which the catalogue, translating the Chinese term *guo* ("wok"), calls a "cauldron." Considering the small size of this piece (16.5 cm in height), *guo* is probably more appropriately rendered "pot" than "cauldron."

Section III, "Early Northern Wei Dynasty," is a heterogeneous mix of objects of varying qualities. Some of the earthenware animals and human figures are rough-hewn, and their pose and gesture are awkward (nos. 46–50). We see more mature craftsmanship in the realistically shaped human contours of the pigmented earthenware figurines from Datong, in north Shanxi (for example, nos. 51–52). A group of seven earthenware figures (no. 53) of the same provenance captures a moment of an acrobatic show in action more than 1,500 years ago. As is noted in the catalogue, acrobatic performances were a longstanding tradition. But the overall appearance of this group suggests something more. The round-neck cut and tight-fitting sleeves of their costumes point to a non-Han style. The prominent noses and deep-set eyes of the performers not only mark them off from other figures from the same locale (nos. 51–52), but also give them a definitely Caucasian look. It is highly probable that these figures represent acrobats who hailed from the West, perhaps Transoxiana.

The most striking objects of this section are a group of bronze and silver vessels (nos. 58–64), all unearthed in Datong, northeast of which was Pingcheng, the capital of the Northern Wei until 493. The floral patterns, the general shape, and motifs of the three stem cups (nos. 58–60; see fig. 4) suggest their indebtedness to Hellenistic and Roman traditions. The eight-lobed silver bowl (no. 61) is Sasanian in its overall form, but its sea-monster (*makara*) motif suggests association with Gupta style. On the exterior of the bowl is a Bactrian inscription, which may point to Afghanistan as its place of origin. Of the three silver vessels, the plate with a hunting scene (no. 62) is unmistakably Sasanian. The two bowls with acanthus foliage and medallion portraits (nos. 63–64) are

<sup>4</sup> *Jin shu* 62.1681; *Bei shi* 1.4.



Fig. 4. Gilt bronze stem cup with figures and grapevine. (Watt 2004, 149).

Sasanian in form, but in their style they show influences from other sources.

In sharp contrast to these and other foreign or foreign-influenced objects (for example, the glasswares [nos. 65–68] and the Buddhist statues [nos. 74–78]) is a section of a screen from the tomb of Sima Jinlong. Of lacquered wood, the screen is painted with a series of morality tales in separate registers against a red background. Each register has a number of colophons identifying the main characters of the tale or providing short narratives about them. In terms of form, style, dominant motif, pictorial composition, and the medium and content of the painting, this work is quintessentially Chinese, with no trace of foreign or non-Han influence. The catalogue even suggests, on the basis of comparison with the *Admonitions of the Governess to the Court Ladies* (*Nü shi zhen tu*), attributed to Gu Kaizhi (ca. 345–ca. 406), that Sima's screen was influenced by painting from the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420). However, the tradition of painting morality tales goes back a long way and actually predates the Eastern Jin. The Western Jin had its share of famous painters of morality tales, including Wei Xie, Xun Xu (*zi* Gongzeng) and Wang Yi (*zi* Shijiang). Gu Kaizhi himself was an admirer of Wei Xie's work. Wang Yi, after crossing the Yangzi, mentored Sima Shao or Mingdi (r. 322–325), a great painter in his own right. The occupant of the tomb in question, Sima Jinlong, was from the same Sima house of Jin royalty; he and the people around him probably had access to the same northern tradition which was transmitted locally.<sup>5</sup>

In Section IV, “The Western Regions and the Way Thither,” we witness a shift of geographical focus to an area that often fell outside Chinese dominance, the “Western Regions,” or Xiyu. Narrowly defined, it encompassed the area east of the Pamirs and west of Yumen Pass in west Gansu. In a broader sense, it refers to all areas west of China in premodern times, including central Asia, west Asia, east Europe and the subcontinent. The objects in this section fall naturally into two groups, Chinese and foreign. Of the Chinese items (nos. 80–89), three are of Eastern Han vintage (nos. 80–82), and one dates back to Cao-Wei and Western Jin times (no. 83). The latter consists of three gold seals, unearthed in Xihe, southwest of Tianshui, in southeast Gansu. These seals of office were issued to local Di and Qiang tribal chieftains by the Central Plain court as proofs of investiture. Archaeology proves that the practice of granting investiture through issuance of gold seals by the central court to non-Han or foreign leaders goes back to the Han dynasty. The seal of the “prince of Dian,” unearthed in Yunnan, and the seal of the king of the Wa-Na state of Han, discovered in Fukuoka, Japan, provide the critical evidence. Both of them have a coiled serpent as their finial design; on the Gansu seals the finial depicts a recumbent sheep. The latter motif probably reflects the predominant pastoral lifestyle of the peoples who used them (the Di and Qiang).

It is interesting to note that the largest number of the Chinese objects in this section are personal paraphernalia of Former Liang times (317–376). They include a paper scroll carrying part of the Buddhist scripture *Dharmapāta sūtra* (no. 87), a tree-shaped lamp model in wood (no. 88), a jade ram (no. 98), a writing brush (no. 85), a bronze seal-clay container inlaid with gold (no. 84), and three wooden tablets (no. 86). The last three items also functioned as Han administrative tools. The cultural dominance of the Han Chinese reflected in these objects can be explained by the fact that, although the Former Liang was one of the Sixteen Kingdoms that carved up north China in the wake of the fall of the Western Jin, it was founded and ruled by the Zhang house, of Han descent. As an independent state, the Former Liang continued the cultural practices and customs of Han Chinese.

<sup>5</sup> On Wei Xie, Xun Xu, Gu Kaizhi, and Jin Mingdi, see *Lidai minghuai ji* 5; on Wang Yi, see *Lidai minghua ji* 2.

The bulk of the section, however, comprises foreign objects (nos. 90–103). Their places of discovery are scattered over a wide geographical area, from Jingyuan, in east Gansu, to Datong, north of Xining in Qinghai, to Ili, in northwest Xinjiang. Their dates span a long stretch of time, from around the second or first century B.C. (nos. 100–101) to the sixth or seventh century A.D. (no. 96). Some of the objects are imports from far beyond the Chinese realm: the Dionysus plate in silver (no. 90) from the Roman Orient, the silver bowl with ostrich motif (no. 91) from Sasanian Persia, and the silver plate with tiger motif (no. 187) from Sogdiana. Although it is more difficult to pinpoint the provenances of the remaining foreign objects, they show a strong association with the West. Whether the gold jar inlaid with rubies (no. 94), gold cup inlaid with agate (no. 95), glass goblet with appliqué decorations (no. 96), trihandled earthenware amphora (no. 97), earthenware rhyton (no. 98), schist tray with a drinking scene (no. 99), silver ewer with a floral frieze (no. 100), or textiles featuring the centaur, acanthus patterns, or a nude goddess (nos. 101–103), the objects have prominent Hellenistic, Roman, and/or Persian characteristics.

Section V, “South China, Third–Sixth Century,” deals with a region that regarded itself as the preserver and guardian of Han civilization. Geographically, it was roughly equal to the lower and middle Yangzi valleys south of the Huai. With the Wu area as its center, this part of China remained strongly indigenous in its culture. When they lost the Central Plain, residents of the north—rich and poor, royal and common, professional and elite—migrated south en masse. A total of five dynasties were based in the capital Jiankang (Nanjing), which had served as the capital of Wu during the earlier era of the Three Kingdoms. Thus the name “Six Dynasties” is used to refer to the entire age of the third to the sixth centuries, implying that in this period the south was the legitimate center of Chinese civilization. While the “Six Dynasties” designation is convenient, it is not without its problems. It feeds into the traditional bias in favor of the south’s claim to legitimacy and omits an important, albeit short-lived, dynastic power at the center—the

Western Jin (265–316). Although the exhibition does not necessarily subscribe to the idea of southern legitimacy, it fails to include artifacts of the same period found in north China. All the pieces labeled “Western Jin” are from the south.

A unique development of the south in the Six Dynasties period was the maturation of porcelain making. One extraordinary example is the piece in the shape of a human figure riding an animal (no. 105). The human figure wearing a tall hat, which may have served as a stand for something else, has facial features reminiscent of a foreigner from the West. His clothing and the body of the animal are decorated with tiny circles. Here the craftsman may have attempted to reproduce the effect of ring matting, a technique often used on gold and silver.

What captures the zeitgeist of this age are the rubbings of a pair of stamped brick murals featuring the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (no. 113). In the mid third century, seven free-wheeling scholars often gathered in a bamboo grove near the home of Ji Kang, one of the seven, in Shanyang (seat: southeast of Jiaozuo, Henan), which was then in Henei commandery. Rejecting Confucianism, these nonconformist scholars embraced Daoism and engaged in “pure conversation,” which evolved into an escapist intellectual movement. Although later the loss of the Luoyang and the fall of the Western Jin were blamed on pure conversation, its main advocates, the Seven Sages, remained popular in iconography in the Southern Dynasties, as is testified by the contents of these stamped brick murals.<sup>6</sup> Accompanying no. 113 is the image of Ji Kang, leading member of the seven, on stamped bricks. These, however, come from a different site of the same period.

Somewhat variant in theme and technique from the stamped brick murals are a group of six bricks with pigmented impressed images (no. 121). They were selected from a large number of pictorial bricks unearthed from a tomb in Dengxian, Henan. Four of these depict the lives and activities of *buqu*, bound servants who performed military duty and served as laborers under their master. One brick features the paragon of filial piety Guo Ju, and

<sup>6</sup> An eighth figure, the ancient recluse Rong Qiqi, appears on one mural, probably for symmetrical effect.

one narrates the tale of a Daoist transcendent (an “immortal”) who summons a phoenix by playing the musical instrument *sheng*.

In the catalogue Dengxian (Deng County, now known as Dengzhoushi) is identified as part of a prefecture under the southern regimes. In reality, the situation is much more complex. In the period of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the area was fought over by various regimes of both north and south. Known as Rangxian since Western Han times, it succumbed to Xiongnu attacks in 311, only to be recovered by the Eastern Jin in 338. Annexed by the Former Qin under Fu Jian (r. 357–385), it was then taken over by Yao Xing (r. 394–416) of the Later Qin before it was retaken by the Eastern Jin. After it was lost to Xiaowendi of the Northern Wei (r. 470–499), it became the seat of Jing prefecture in the Taihe reign (477–499). From then on, the area essentially remained in the hands of the northerners.<sup>7</sup>

Among these brick images there is an intriguing phenomenon left unexplained in the catalogue. In no. 114 and no. 121(e), the Chinese characters are embossed in reverse; could this have any particular symbolic or functional significance in the context of southern iconography?<sup>8</sup>

Seven VI, “Luoyang and After: Sixth Century in the North” focuses on the Yellow River valley with the Central Plain at its core. Here the Luoyang in question was the capital of the Northern Wei, a city built anew from 493/4 on the ruins of its Western Jin predecessor, east of present-day Luoyang. While the Northern Wei continued to dominate the north from Luoyang, it split into east and west halves, or Eastern and Western Wei, in 534/5, with the Eastern Wei based in the Central Plain and the Western Wei in Guanzhong, where lay the great Han city Chang’an (Xi’an, Shaanxi). In the course of the sixth century, the Eastern Wei was to evolve into Northern Qi, and the Western Wei into the Northern Zhou, which became the unifier of the north under Wudi. Meanwhile, to their north was the Rouran (Ruru or Ruanruan) empire in Inner and

Outer Mongolia and Siberia, and to the west of Rouran were the Ephthalites (White Huns).

In this section objects from both the eastern and western parts of the realm are displayed, along with two items from the northwest outside the realm. The first two items (nos. 129–130) are parts of terracotta statues from the Yongning Monastery. As the greatest Buddhist monastery of the Northern Wei, it was located in the inner city of Luoyang. Built by Empress Dowager Ling (née Hu) in 516, the monastery was best known for its nine-story pagoda, destroyed in a conflagration in 534.<sup>9</sup> Both nos. 129 and 130 were found at the site of the pagoda.

Two pigmented earthenware pieces (nos. 132–133) come from the tomb of the Ruru princess Linhe, in Cixian, Hebei, in the eastern part of the realm. One piece represents an elderly official, the other a camel. Both are aesthetically appealing. Of far greater interest is the tomb occupant herself. The ethnic group to which she belonged, Ruru, is better known as the Rouran, who were distantly related to the Avars in Europe. Rouran was the overlord of north Asia until around the mid sixth century, when it was destroyed by the Turkic Tujue. As the daughter of the Rouran *qaghan* (the “khan” or sovereign of a steppe power) Aguina, Linhe was married off to Gao Huan to cement a strategic alliance between Wei and Rouran. After Gao Huan’s death, his son Gao Cheng (Wenxiang), following a leviratic tradition, took his place. The Gao family was thrust into prominence thanks to its most illustrious member, Gao Huan, who grew up in a frontier town in the north. Of Han ethnic origin, he became acculturated into the dominant Xianbei culture there, or “xianbeinized,” to use a term coined by Chen Yinke, before he conquered the Central Plain, the heartland of the Han Chinese. The state he created, Eastern Wei–Northern Qi, was dominated by a Xianbei and xianbeinized aristocracy, even though the majority of their subjects were Han Chinese.<sup>10</sup> The murals found in Princess Linhe’s tomb contain images of people wearing both

<sup>7</sup> *Yuanhe junxian tuzhi* 21.532; *Dushi fangyu jiyao* 51. Liang Wudi’s attempt to retake it in 521 failed miserably.

<sup>8</sup> For a preliminary discussion of reversed writing, see Wu Hung 1995, 260–1.

<sup>9</sup> *Luoyang qielan ji* 1.1, 1.12. In the catalogue (p. 233), 419 is entered as the founding date of the monastery, which is a typographical error.

<sup>10</sup> On Princess Linhe; see *Bei shi* 14.517–8; Zhou Weizhou 1983, 130–1. On the term “to xianbeinize,” see Chen Yinke 1995, 327ff.

Han and non-Han costumes, which probably reflects the ethnic reality of the times. It is unfortunate that no part of the murals or their reproduction is included in the exhibition.

The most intriguing tomb represented in this section is perhaps that of Wudi of Northern Zhou and his wife, Empress Ashina. As the most ambitious sovereign of his times, he united north China by conquering the Northern Qi to the east in 577, laying the groundwork for the eventual reunification of China under the Sui. Favorably inclined toward Daoism, he orchestrated one of the four major proscription campaigns against Buddhism in history. His wife was the daughter of the formidable Muhan qaghan of Tujue, the overlord of Mongolia and the inheritor to an empire that had just subjugated Rouran, the home state of Princess Linhe. The marriage between Wudi and Ashina was obviously a strategic alliance, for Wudi needed Tujue support in crushing the Northern Qi.<sup>11</sup> Considering the momentous story that lies behind Wudi and his wife, the objects on display are a bit of a letdown: they consist of a number of bronze belt fittings, ornaments, and a set of belt buckles featuring palmette and animal motifs (no. 161). The tomb had been rifled and stripped of most of its contents before its recent excavation. But some key objects have survived, including a number of jades, numerous earthenware figures, two epigraphic stones, and a gold seal for Ashina in her last year as Empress Dowager Tianyuan. Had they been included in the exhibition, these objects would have shed much light on the lives of the tomb occupants.

The only Daoist item on display in this section is the 527 stele of unconfirmed provenance (no. 172). Unlike earlier works of Daoist iconography, where Daoist icons were often accompanied by Buddhist ones, this stele features exclusively Daoist images. Buddhist influence is clearly present, however, in the costumes and hand gestures of the two main figures. The one on the left is accompanied by an inscription that identifies him as the Jade Emperor, but the one on the right, almost an identical copy, does not have an inscription. He is identified by scholars as Laozi.

The exhibition ends with Section VII, "Arts of the Sui and Early Tang Dynasties, 581–755." The timeframe of this section is one of the longest in the show. Characterized by the

rule of a revived imperial government, China throughout this period stayed essentially united. The rationale for ending the exhibition at the year 755 is apparently grounded in the perception that the cataclysmic An Lushan rebellion (755–763) not only tore the Tang empire asunder, but also conveniently cut the Tang dynasty chronologically in halves (hence the term "Early Tang"). Here a minor issue arises concerning nomenclature. In literary and art historical convention, the Tang dynasty is divided into four phases, with "Early Tang" referring to the period leading to the beginning of the eighth century. The period thereafter (Xuanzong's reign) until the An Lushan rebellion is referred to as "High Tang" (*sheng Tang*). To use "Early Tang" to denote the entire pre-755 period seems to imply that a High Tang period had yet to arrive. This is probably caused by the ambiguity of the Chinese title of the exhibition, *Zouxiang sheng Tang* ("Moving toward the High Tang"), which gives the impression that the High Tang phase falls in the post-755 period.

Arguably the most extraordinary item of the section is the marble sarcophagus of a Sui official of possible Central Asian (Sogdian) descent, Yu Hong, who died in 592 (no. 175). Decorated with carved reliefs and paintings on both its interior and exterior, the chest is composed of 12 slabs in addition to the roof pieces. The occupant began his official career under the Northern Qi and became *jianjiao sabao fu* (acting director of the Office of Zoroastrian Affairs) in Northern Zhou times. Initially *sabao* was an official post in charge of Zoroastrians. Later, its function included supervising *hu*, "barbarians," that is, foreigners from west and central Asia. Among the rich imagery on the sarcophagus, of special interest is the symbol of Zoroastrianism, the fire altar, flanked by two celestial Zoroastrian priests, half-men and half-birds. This graphically reconfirms Yu Hong's connections with the religion from Persia, which was to enjoy moderate success in its rather exclusive community in Tang China before it suffered a destructive blow under Wuzong.

According to the catalogue, Yu served under the Sui as governor of Bingzhou. However, his epitaph does not lend support to that assertion. Instead, it mentions his appointment to the position of *yitong sansi* ("equal in rank

<sup>11</sup> *Zhou shu* 9.143–5; *Zhou shu* 5; Grousset 1970, 80–3.



Fig. 5. Grooms and horses. Ink and color on silk. Tang dynasty, early eighth century. (Watt 2004, 284).

to the Three Dukes”) and to *zuo zhangnei* (“left aide-de-camp”) in charge of the Bing section. The Bing area, roughly corresponding to present-day Shanxi, was considered a key strategic area of the Sui. Apart from the very beginning of Sui, it was placed under the direct control of the imperial princes—Yang Guang (later Sui Yangdi), Yang Jun, and Yang Liang—who governed it in the capacity of commanders of the Bingzhou superior command (*da zongguan*). Although the *da zongguan* purported to be a military post, in reality it was in charge of both military and civilian affairs. I am not aware of a coexisting civilian governorship that took charge of the entire Bingzhou territory. The *yitong sansi*, on the other hand, was one of the highest prestige titles without functional power. As for the *zhangnei* (aide-de-camp), there are no records of the rank or precise function of the office in the traditional sources. Contextual information seems to suggest that the *zhangnei* was a high-ranking military aide.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For an English version of the archaeological report, see Zhang Qingjie et al. 2002, 258–68. On the epitaph, see Zhang Qingjie 2001, 145–76. On Bingzhou in Sui, see *Sui shu* 30.854.

Tang painting is represented by no. 177 (see fig. 5), which features what remains of six elegant screen paintings in color on silk and paper. The primary subject is horses and their grooms. Dating back to the early eighth century, these paintings, even in their present fragmented condition, are highly valuable, considering the high perishability of Tang silk and paper paintings. Thanks to the arid climate of Turfan, where they were unearthed, the paintings on display managed to survive underground for about 13 centuries. An area on the north route of the Silk Road, Turfan had often stayed outside the orbit of the government in the Central Plain since the fall of the Western Jin, even though the residents there were mostly Chinese speakers of Han descent. The state of Gaochang there was not annexed by the center until 640.

The most resplendent piece of the section is the gold necklace from the tomb of Li Jingxun, inlaid with pearls, lapis lazuli, and bloodstone gems (no. 187; see fig. 6). With a mixture of Greco-Roman and Sasanian elements, this necklace was probably imported along the Silk Road from Iran or west central Asia. The occupant of the tomb died in 608 at the age of eight and was buried together with more than 230 furnishings in an elaborately decorated sarcophagus. As a young child without any official rank, she was afforded an exceptionally extravagant burial because of her royal connections: her maternal grandmother, Yang Lihua, was the elder sister of the reigning emperor, Yangdi, and her maternal grandfather was Yuwen Yun or Xuandi (r. 578–579) of the Northern Zhou dynasty. Some modern scholars even refer to her as a princess. That designation, however, is inappropriate. The title “princess” was granted to paternal female descendants of the sovereign, his female siblings, or other close female relatives who bore the same royal surname. When a palace lady was married off as a princess to a non-Han chieftain, she would first be made an honorary or make-believe daughter of the sovereign. The tomb occupant, as a Li, was a member of neither the Northern Zhou royal house of Yuwen nor the Sui royal house of Yang.

Among the gold objects of this section is a tablet found at Mt. Song, a unique Daoist artifact (no. 190). On it is inscribed a petition of the reigning female sovereign, Wu Zetian,



to transcendentals of the Middle Marchmount (Mt. Song, one of the five sacred mountains of premodern China) to delete her name from the book of sinners. This acknowledgement of sin is reminiscent of a self-condemning mechanism known as *zuiji zhao* ("edict that blames oneself").<sup>13</sup> However, this gold tablet is also different. Unlike a *zuiji zhao*, which was a public statement, the tablet was a private communication transmitted through a Daoist to the gods. Contacting the divine by reverentially casting a precious object had been a longstanding tradition, especially in Daoism. One of the most common practices was *toulong* ("casting the dragon"), in which the ritualist threw a gold dragon or an inscribed gold tablet into a body of water to conjure up the dragon. It was often accompanied by the most renowned Daoist ritual *jiao* ("cosmodrama"), intended to bring transcendentals down to earth. On a number of occasions Wu Zetian requested her Daoist proxies to conduct these rituals. In 692 she sent a Daoist master to the iconic landmarks such as the Five Marchmounts and the Four Rivers to perform the *toulong* rite.<sup>14</sup> In 700, the same year when the gold tablet on display was cast, the abbot of the Daoist Qingyuan Abbey in Luoyang conducted *jiao* for Wu Zetian.<sup>15</sup> Although Wu is known as a steadfast supporter and pious believer of Buddhism, this gold tablet provides material evidence of her eclectic view of religion in general and of Daoism in particular.

In Sui-Tang times the technique of making earthenware figures came into its own. The Tang period is especially famous for its glazed earthenware known as *sancai*, or "tri-color," for the three dominant colors of these objects. An exemplary *sancai* piece is no. 200, from the tomb of Xianyu Tinghui, in the form of a camel with musicians and entertainers performing on its back. With their long noses and full beards, two of them must represent foreigners, probably Sogdians, from the Western Regions. The workmanship, realism, and attention to detail are unmatched. Less artistically rendered but of much more interest is a pair of earthenware figures (no. 204), labeled in Chinese as "Afri-



Fig. 6. Necklace from Li Jingxung's tomb. Gold inlaid with pearl and stone. Sui dynasty. (Watt 2004, 294).

cans." Their curly hair, dark pigmentation, and facial features suggest a possible African connection. In Tang times dark-skinned foreigners known as "Kunlun slaves" were sold into rich households to perform domestic service. The two figures of no. 200 should represent them.<sup>16</sup>

The lead curator, James C. Y. Watt, and his American and Chinese collaborators have done a marvelous job of mounting this impressive large-scale exhibition centered on China. The accompanying catalogue<sup>17</sup> is not only a pleasure to read but also an essential reader

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the one issued by Yizong of Tang (*Quan Tang wen* 84.2–4).

<sup>14</sup> *Tangwen xushi* 9.9.

<sup>15</sup> On Wu Zetian and *toulong* and *jiao*, see Qing Xitai 1976, 2:71–2.

<sup>16</sup> Kunlun refers to the Malay Peninsula where there lived dark-skinned Negritos, hence the name "Kunlun slaves." In spite of the name, however, the Kunlun slaves of Tang times seem to have come from Africa. See Zhang Xinglang 1977–1979, 2:18–23; Xiong 1990. For a fictionalized Tang record of a Kunlun slave, see *Taiping guangji* 194.1452–4.

<sup>17</sup> See Watt 2004.

on Six Dynasties arts for experts and interested laymen. Especially informative are the six essays by the editor and five leading experts in different fields of Chinese art and archaeology: Boris I. Marshak, An Jiayao, Zhao Feng, Su Bai, and Angela F. Howard. The topics they cover range from the general art history of the period to metalwork, glassware, textiles, and Buddhist iconography.

As a historian who used to dabble in archaeology, I have my share of gripes about the exhibition. My major concern is its choice of objects. If this exhibition purports to educate the American public about China's past, it may end up creating a skewed impression simply because of the overwhelming presence of not only foreign-influenced objects but also of non-Chinese imports. The uninitiated may come away with the notion that this exhibition, with its rich array of Sasanian, Sogdian, Scythian, and Roman art objects is representational of Chinese art in the third through the eighth centuries. I suspect in their well-intentioned effort to present the most precious pieces, the organizers lost sight of the central theme of the exhibition—Chinese art as embodied by archaeologically excavated artifacts. A greater balance between the quotidian and the exotic, domestic and foreign, would have been achieved if some of the most significant but hardly glamorous finds of archaeology in recent decades were systematically covered, including those from such world-class cities as Northern Wei Luoyang, Sui-Tang Chang'an, and Sui-Tang Luoyang.

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