
Reviews

The Golden Age of Chinese archaeology

by Bonnie James

“The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology: Celebrated Discoveries from the People’s Republic of China,”

sponsored by Eastman Kodak Company. An exhibit at the National Gallery of Art, Sept. 19, 1999-Jan. 2, 2000.

I fear that we may soon become inferior to the Chinese in all branches of knowledge. I do not say this because I grudge them new light; rather I rejoice. But it is desirable that they in turn teach us those things which are especially in our interest: the greatest use of practical philosophy and a more perfect manner of living, to say nothing now of their other arts. Certainly, the condition of our affairs, slipping as we are into every greater corruption, seems to be such that we need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion, just as we have sent them teachers of revealed theology. And so, I believe that if someone expert, not in the beauty of goddesses, but in the excellence of peoples, were selected as judge, the golden apple would be awarded to the Chinese unless we should win by virtue of one great but superhuman thing, namely, the divine gift of the Christian religion.

—Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), *Novissima Sinica (Recent News from China)*, 1697.

As human civilization embarks on a new millennium—at least by Western reckoning—what better time to step back and begin to appreciate humanity’s longest-existing continuous civilization on the planet, that of China, as Leibniz proposed 300 years ago.

While the People’s Republic of China recently celebrated its 50th anniversary, China has made contributions to world civilization for five millennia. On Sept. 25, Helga Zepp-LaRouche asked:

“Who can doubt the magnificent contributions of Chinese culture to universal history over the last 5,000 years? Again



Figure 1. A jade tortoise, c. 1200 B.C., from the tomb of Fu Hao, at Anyang.

and again, Chinese creative genius has produced treasures in painting, in poetry, in sculpture, and many other areas, which instantly instill love in all to whom they are known.”

“The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology: Celebrated Discoveries from the People’s Republic of China,” sponsored by Eastman Kodak Company, opened at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 24. The exhibition encompasses a wide range of ancient Chinese cultures, with more than 200 works presented, most of which were excavated between the late 1970s and the present, a period considered by many scholars to be the “golden age of Chinese archaeology.” These discoveries, which date from c. 4500 B.C. through the 10th century A.D., show that Chinese civilization and art, unlike what was previously thought, did not originate at a specific time or place, but rather, were the result of many strands that were woven together in a tapestry of varied cultures that flourished all over China.

Evidence of Western influence

China was able to extend a vast cultural outreach, beginning some 4,000 years ago, with the domestication of the horse, which carried the Chinese to the furthest reaches of the empire. At the same time, traces of imported Western culture date as far back as the time of the Xia Dynasty (c. 21st-16th centuries B.C.). These interwoven cultural threads are evident throughout its long history, and can be seen in numerous examples in the National Gallery exhibit.

Now, let’s have a look at the excavations, and what they unearthed. For purposes of this report, we are going to skip over the Neolithic, the earliest period represented in the exhibit, and move right into the Bronze Age, c. 2000-771 B.C.

The two leading achievements of the Bronze Age in China were the development of writing, and the discovery of methods of bronze-casting for weaponry and ritual vessels. The



Figure 2a. A Shi Qiang bronze vessel, late 10th century B.C., from Zhuangbao, Fufeng, Shaanxi province.



Figure 2b. A detail showing the inscription, believed to be the first historical writing in China.

earliest known bronze vessels date to c. 2100-1600 B.C., the first of the Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou), but bronze-casting reached a high point during the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1050 B.C.).

In the 1970s, two discoveries were made at Anyang in Henan Province: One of oracle bones in 1975, and then, in 1976, the richest royal tomb ever found was unearthed at a site known as the tomb of Fu Hao (c. 1200 B.C.), believed to have been a royal consort of the Shang king, Wu Ding.

In addition to many decorative cast bronze vessels, some in animal shapes, are objects apparently enjoyed simply for their beauty or charm. Among them are small hardstone carvings of animals; especially noteworthy, are those of a tortoise (Figure 1) and a turquoise dove, both carved in the round. The tortoise shows the ability of jade artists to utilize features of the natural stone. Here, a dark layer within the stone suggests the tortoise's darker shell, while the body, head, and limbs are carved from a lighter stone.

A Shi Qiang bronze vessel, or *pan* (Figures 2a, 2b), dating from the Middle Western Zhou period, at the end of 10th century B.C., from Shaanxi province, is considered to be the most important find of all Western Zhou (c. 11th century-771 B.C.), because of its inscription, which may be the first historical writing in China: It is a genealogy of the first seven Western Zhou kings and four generations of the Wei family. The inscription also provides evidence for the emergence of poetry in China—at about the same time that Homer was composing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in Greece—as it is stylistically identical to the four-character rhyming line structure of the *Shi jing* (Classic poetry).

A sample:

Accordant with antiquity was the Cultured King!
He first brought harmony to government.
Di on High sent down fine virtue and great security.

Extending it above and below,
he joined the ten thousand countries. . . .
Vast and substantial was the Radiant King!
He broadly tamed Chu and Jing;
it was to connect the southern route. . . .
Clear-eyed and bright was Grandfather Xin of the
branch lineage!
Transferring and nurturing sons and grandsons,
he had abundant good fortune and many blessings.
Even horned and redly gleaming,
appropriate were his sacrifices.

2,500-year-old bell-chimes

A bell-chime of 26 bronze bells (Figures 3a, 3b) from the Middle Spring and Autumn Period (c. 550 B.C.) Xichuan, Henan Province, would be contemporaneous with the Greek Classical period in the West, and with Confucius in China.

The 26 bells (*yongzhong*) found in the tomb of Marquis Yi at Leigudun, were arranged on a two-tiered wooden rack; each bell was suspended from two ropes (made of lead, to minimize acoustic interference) connected by a bronze pin through the bell's suspension loop. The bells are tilted toward the player, permitting greater accuracy in striking than in vertically suspended bells; each *yongzhong* can produce two notes, depending on where it is struck. The interval between the two notes usually approximates either a minor or a major third, a phenomenon which results from the bell's pointed oval cross-section (a round cross section would produce a



Figure 3a. A bell-chime of 26 bronze bells, c. 550 B.C., Xichuan, Henan Province; each plays two notes.



Figure 3b. Detail of 3a; the rows of bosses (knobs) on each bell served to dampen the non-harmonic overtones.

single note).

The inscriptions identifying the tones on the bells indicate that the bellcasters were able to determine the pitch in advance. The range extends over five octaves, with up to ten different notes per octave. It is thought that the rows of bosses (knobs) on each bell served to dampen the non-harmonic overtones emitted by the upper part, thus emphasizing the two basic notes.

Text appears on each bell, identifying the individual for whom the bells were made, as Wangsun Gao, the grandson of the Chu king.

The artist's inscription says, in part: "My . . . harmonizing bells . . . are long-vibrating and sonorous, and their fine sound is very loud. With them, sternly, and in a very dignified manner, I reverently serve the king of Chu. . . ."

"Glistening are the harmonizing bells. . . . How blissful and brightly joyous! For ten thousand years without end, forever preserve and strike them."

Early imperial China

The First Emperor united numerous disparate kingdoms in 221 B.C. to create China's first centralized government. The period of the First Emperor, and that of the Han dynasty which followed, created a unified cultural and artistic point of view which often surmounted great distances. Numerous trading routes, including the Silk Road, opened China to the world beyond, and these contacts are manifested in the art and artifacts of the era, which extended until 924 A.D.

According to a famous passage in Sima Qian's (c. 145-86 B.C.) *Shi ji* ("Records of the Historian"), the tomb chamber where the celebrated Terra Cotta Army was found in Lington, Shaanxi Province, was built as a microcosm of the universe, with waterways made of mercury and depictions of celestial constellations and terrestrial topography. This universe extended beyond the tomb of the first Chinese Emperor, Shihuangdi (reign 246-210 B.C.), the construction of which began with his accession to the throne, into an enormous necropolis. Nearly 100 pits were uncovered, containing hundreds of horse skeletons and kneeling terra cotta figures of grooms, where an inscription was found identifying this as the "imperial stables." Two half-size models of chariots, each pulled by a team of four horses and manned by a driver, all rendered in bronze, were most likely intended as transportation for the Emperor in the afterlife.

These sculptures rank with some of the greatest of Western art. They are not only "realistic," life-size portrayals of the human face and form, they represent, to a great extent, *individualized* figures, from their facial characteristics and expression, to the details of clothing and accessories such as belts, boots, armor, hairstyles, and so on, which differentiate each one's functions and rank, as well as personal attributes.

The production of these incredible figures is described in the exhibition catalogue (p. 371): "The production of the figures that compose the army was a large-scale workshop operation that involved standardized, prefabricated compo-



Figure 4a. (left) *Kneeling Archer, from the celebrated Terra Cotta Army of the tomb of the First Emperor, Shihuangdi (c. 220 B.C.); Xiyangcun, Lintong, Shaanxi Province.*
Figure 4b. *Kneeling Archer, rear view.*

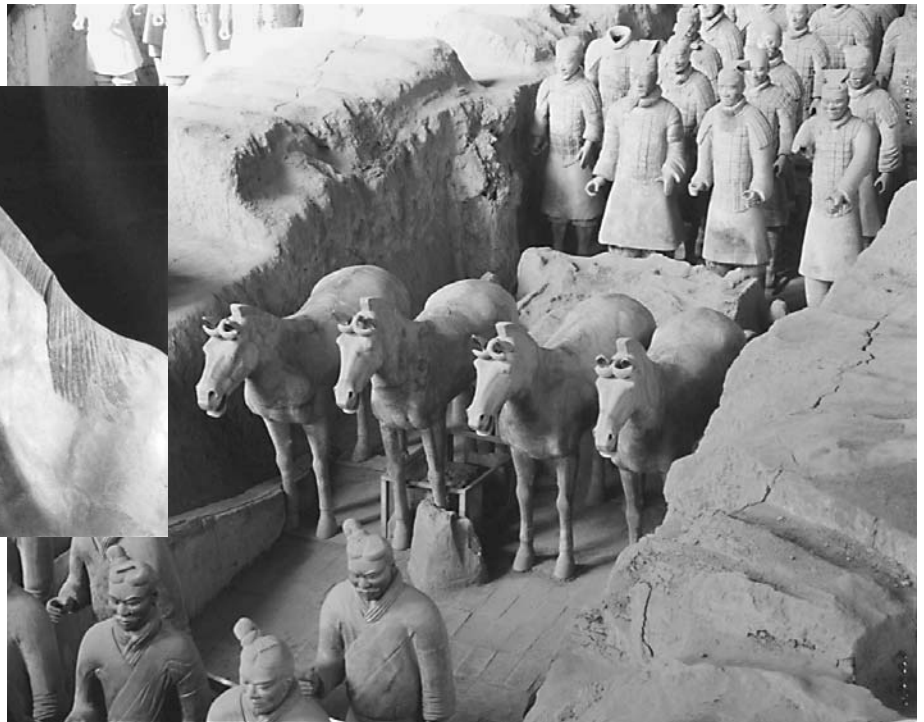


Figure 4c. (Above) *One of the chariot horses.*
Figure 4d. (Right) *A group of four chariot horses, the remains of a chariot behind them, following by ranks of infantry.*



Figure 5. A painted marble relief of musicians, about 2.5 feet high and 4.5 feet long, from the Tomb of Wang Chuzhi at Xiyanchuan, Hebei Province, early 10th century A.D.

nents. The torsos were modeled from the bottom up, using coiled strips of coarse clay. Heads and hands were usually made in composite molds (as were individual elements such as ears) and assembled to form the figure, which was then covered with a fine clay slip; separately cast details (such as belt hooks) were then attached to the slip-coated figure. Armor and physiognomy were detailed by low-relief carving and incised lines. The figures were fired (at temperatures of around 1,000°C) and subsequently painted with pigments suspended in a lacquer base. Only faint traces of the original color remain, but it is clear that the craftsmen sought to reproduce the colors of the armor and garments worn by specific ranks of warriors.”

Among the most astonishingly Western-like sculpture, is the Kneeling Archer (**Figures 4a, 4b**), who poses dramatically on one knee, his torso slightly rotated, his head jauntily elevated and to one side, with a proud expression on his face. His left arm rests on his raised knee, while his right hand would hold the bow, as he waits for a command to shoot. This is sculpture in the round, that is, it can be viewed from any angle of a 360° circumference, like that of Greek sculpture of the 5th century B.C. The details of his coiffure, his attire, including the leather armor, the folds of his sleeve and collar, are presented in an amazingly realistic manner. The catalogue tells us that “there is no precedent in Chinese art for this massive deployment of verisimilitude.”

In another section of the great tomb are the Chariot Horses (**Figures 4c, 4d**): A team of four horses pulled one of the Qin army’s chariots. The horses’ ears point forward, nostrils dilated, mouths partially opened—all indicating animals in an excited state, as they enter into combat. They are figuratively “chomping at the bit” to get into the fray!

The orchestra of Wang Chuzhi

An exquisite painted relief of the Later Liang Dynasty (903-923 A.D.), from the Tomb of Wang Chuahi at Xiyanchuan, Quyang, Hebei Province, shows ladies of the court performing on a variety of musical instruments in a small orchestra (**Figure 5**). According to the catalogue, “Complete orchestras such as this one in Wang Chuzhi’s tomb appear most commonly from the Late Tang to Early Song period, and present evidence of daily life among the aristocracy of the time.”

The orchestra features 12 female musicians, two small dancers, who may be children, dressed in Central Asian costumes, and a male conductor, holding a tasseled baton, who turns to face the viewer, as if to engage us in the performance, as the musicians, engrossed in their musical offering, play on.

The instruments depicted are two horizontal, and two vertical flutes, two drums—one larger than the other—a set of chimes, a pipe harmonica, a harp, a zither, a lute, and a set of clappers.

The Liang, one of the Five Dynasties (907-960 A.D.), which produced this extraordinary orchestra, leads, immediately afterwards, into the Chinese Renaissance under the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.)—the period of the great Cathedral building in Europe. Sung painting was China’s greatest contribution to universal culture, in the development of non-linear perspective (see *Fidelio*, Summer 1997, and Spring 1999).

After the exhibition leaves the National Gallery, it will be on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Feb. 13-May 7, 2000, and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, June 17-Sept. 11, 2000. A fully illustrated catalogue, written by leading scholars of early Chinese art and archaeology, is available through the National Gallery of Art Shops.