

Third Through the Tenth Centuries: Fragmentation and Reunification Under the Sui and Tang Dynasties

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[From the Online Exhibit, "From Heaven and Earth: Chinese Jade in Context:"]

Table of Contents

Fragmentation and Reunification under the Sui and Tang Dynasties.....	2
Cosmopolitanism, Technical Proficiency, and Exuberance	2
Decline and Continuity in the Use of Jade	3
Ceramics for Burial and for Use.....	3
Bronze Imagery and Aesthetics.....	5
SUGGESTED FURTHER READING	6
Chinese History and Culture	6
Arts of the Tang Dynasty.....	6
Tang Dynasty Jades	7
Tang Dynasty Metalwork.....	7
Buddhist Sculpture	7
NOTES	7

Fragmentation and Reunification under the Sui and Tang Dynasties

During the four hundred years following the collapse of the Han and its vast empire in the early third century CE, a fragmented China witnessed the rise of a succession of lesser dynasties and nomadic invaders. These upheavals and changes clearly disrupted the indigenous cultural life of the people.¹ Fortunately, the artistic process continued as foreign styles were imported and assimilated to form a distinctly Chinese aesthetic.² Following the centuries of disunity and with courts weakened by corruption and unbridled luxury, China saw, once again, an impressively vigorous attempt at reunification, a movement already underway when the founder of the Sui dynasty (589-618) took power in 581.³ The accession of the succeeding Tang dynasty (619-906) in 618 marked the return of an empire comparable in strength to that of the Han.⁴

The early efficacy of the Tang dynasty was a direct reflection of the improved systems of transportation, communication, and administration instituted by the Sui during the twenty-nine years of their reign.⁵ With the aid of a powerful military system, Tang rulers were able to extend Chinese control and influence to areas as distant as Bukhara and Samarkand, both part of the modern Central Asian country of Uzbekistan. The peace and stability achieved under Tang control allowed traffic to flourish once more along the ancient "Silk Route" as it had under the Han dynasty.⁶ Foreign trade was expanded to a point never before reached. With a seemingly endless stream of camel caravans crossing the highroads of Central Asia, Chinese goods became readily available in the trading emporia of the Near and Middle East. Industrious Arab merchants, using the southern route across the Indian Ocean, also established a thriving exchange in the south China region of modern Canton.⁷

Cosmopolitanism, Technical Proficiency, and Exuberance

In the seventh and eighth centuries, the Tang capital of Chang'an (modern Xi'an) was the greatest city in the world and the arts, like the population itself, were marked by cosmopolitanism, technical proficiency, and exuberance.⁸ The Tang court was greatly enriched with foreign goods, fashion, and ideas. Buddhism, which had been heavily patronized by the Northern Wei dynasty (386-535), continued as a dominant, popular and intellectual force during the Sui and Tang eras.⁹ Many artistic traditions of the period were dramatically altered by Buddhist stylistic and iconographic elements, some with greater lasting influence than others. Stylistic preferences for music, art, and textiles from Persia and from South and Central Asia transformed the course of aesthetic development and raised accompanying expectations to a new level. The cosmopolitan taste of the Tang aristocracy is reflected the production of new types of objects and textiles. It is also

reflected in decorative elements and subject matter and in the manners of depiction. In the words of Edmund Capon, "There is color and vivacity to Tang art which transcends the traditional qualities of reserve and formalism, without ever denying them or the great traditions of earlier Chinese art."¹⁰ Not only was it a period of grand eloquence and accomplishment for China, at the same time, beginning with the Sui and continuing with Tang, China extended its cultural influence over broad areas of east Asia, which were to form, until modern times, a region dominated by Chinese civilization.¹¹

Decline and Continuity in the Use of Jade

The prominence of jade in China appears to have declined from the third through the tenth centuries.¹² Changes in fashion and sporadic access to supplies of the stone caused by internal political disruptions as well as by the shifts in the Central Asian trading economy during the centuries of conflict contributed to this change. (Jade Image Index - animals; Jade Image Index - personal) Notwithstanding the quantitative reversal, the fashioning of archer's rings, belt plaques, garment hooks, hair ornaments, and jewelry was continued as part of an uninterrupted legacy from the Neolithic period.¹³ Interest continued also in fashioning amuletic and decorative figures of creatures both real and mythological, many functioning as small replicas of larger works in bronze, ceramics, and stone. The dating of jade objects, which is always problematic, has been especially challenging for the Tang period, due to the influence of foreign aesthetics. (Jade Image Index - animals) Comparisons with stone and ceramics sculptures and various types of metalwork from the period have served as effective tools while others from this period have been dated by reference to archaeological finds.¹⁴ Among the more notable archaeological discoveries of recent years are a number of beautifully carved pieces that include those in which jade was used with gold, a combination symbolic of purity and wealth.¹⁵ For men, belt plaques and garment hooks of jade were used as insignia of rank in addition to serving as important items of personal adornment. For women, hair ornaments of jade in the form of multiple hairpins and combs had become the cherished components of a lady's wardrobe.¹⁶

Ceramics for Burial and for Use

Although written records and references to artistic endeavors and luxury goods are many, the number of artistic works remaining from the Tang era is relatively few, particularly from the extensive workshops of the widely celebrated court artisans and artists. Fortunately, burial traditions of the type first identified by the monumental sepulcher of Qin Shi Huangdi toward the end of the third century BCE were continued throughout the Tang dynastic era. Notwithstanding the notable differences in the types of implements and objects found in later internments, continued attempts to recreate the earthly environment

for the deceased show that the ideas associated with life after death remained a consistent factor in the Chinese value system.¹⁷ The contents of the tombs ~ wall paintings, Buddhist monuments, ceramic models created for burial ("spirit articles" or mingqi), and items for personal use~ are, in many instances, both beautiful and of salient value in providing unique insights into an artistically brilliant period in Chinese history. In both style and subject matter, ceramic models of animals, retinues of servants, ladies-in-waiting, and military escorts, as well as protective creatures and deities of varying sizes reflect a wish to be well served and accompanied in the next life in a manner consistent with the cosmopolitan expectations of Tang aristocracy. (Ceramic Image Index)

With the elaboration and changes in burial customs during this period, large numbers of ceramic figurines were required. In answer to these needs, potters produced mold-made sculptures in great quantities. Typically, these works were made of low-fired, fine-grained, white clay. Some were ornamented with clear or pale yellow-green glazes, others with polychrome glazes, the bold splashed coloration named san cai (three-colored), after their appearance. Iron and copper and sometimes cobalt were used in the san cai glazes, providing a wide palette ranging from yellow to browns and greens and occasionally blues.¹⁸ Others, designed for ornamentation with mineral pigments subsequent to firing, were left unglazed. Typically, the unglazed clay of these figurines, has a pink cast, the result of an oxidizing firing. (Camel)

The influence of Buddhism at this time is seen in earthenware figurines created specifically for the afterlife, as craftsmen adapted the new forms to Chinese conventions in sculpture.²⁰ Sets of guardian figures, composed of creatures both real and fantastic, heavenly kings, and courtiers, were placed as flanking pairs near the entrance way to aristocratic and royal Tang tombs. Their positions within the tomb, as well as the protective functions and concepts associated with them, suggest that they may have had some relationship to the ritual aspects of burial.²¹

Drawing inspiration from traditional and Central Asian Buddhist prototypes found in temples and monuments, pairs of heavenly king (tianwang) tomb-guardian figures emerged during the Northern Wei dynasty and soon became popular, proliferating during Tang dynasty. Thought to be related to the Indian lokapalas (world protectors; regents of the directions or quarters of the world), which had come to be viewed as protectors of Buddhist temples, they are attired in military garb and stand or trample on figures of evil spirited adversaries.²² Paired, but not identical, they are typically adorned with helmets, ornate suits of armor, and high boots, a mode of dress consistent with their bulging eyes, and menacing scowls. Notwithstanding expectations for mortuary guardian sculptures (Heavenly king), in most works of this type from the Tang era, these heavenly kings (Heavenly king) appear more whimsical and fantastic than serious or grim.²³

The subject matter selected for other types of tomb sculptures provide a heightened awareness of the secular values and cosmopolitan characteristic of this vibrant era. The depiction of women wearing imported clothing and of foreign men together with their

horses and camel trains formed a unique genre.²⁴ The political and economic circumstances, which altered so dramatically the course of Chinese history during the Tang era, are clearly reflected in the popularity of tomb images of travelers and merchants with their Bactrian camels from distant Western lands. As the overland journey along the Silk Road from the West was arduous, Bactrian camels, (Camel) particularly adaptable and dependable creatures, became a valued mode of transportation. Able to travel 30 miles a day with cargo of 500 pounds, they tolerated thirst and were adept at locating local water supplies and avoiding the hazards of shifting sands.²⁵ Frequently, the ceramic models of these reliable creatures demonstrate, not only an acute observation of the subject, but a sense of humor, as conveyed in the skillful modeling, attention to detail, and use of color, providing further insight into the international characteristics of the period.

In solving Buddhist architectural requirements in China, brick had been selected as a substitute for the stone that characterized the South Asian temple complexes and stupas (pagodas), which had served as their ultimate prototypes.²⁶ In addition to the guardian figures, Buddhist structures of carved stone or carved and molded brick were often included in tombs as religious elements in mortuary recreations of the world. (Ceramic Image Index)

Most of the Chinese ceramics industry, however, was devoted to manufacturing functional wares for daily life. As in the past, many of the skillful and innovative techniques of the Tang era were based on improvements to older prototypes. Others advances were related directly to demands that could not be met for goods in other materials.²⁷ For example, silver shapes were copied in white porcelain and jade vessels copied in green-glazed wares. (Molded dish, Shallow bowl) Although the residences of the socially elite were filled with luxury goods from emporia in the West, there remained, among those valued foreign imports, a number of highly esteemed Chinese products. Especially admired were the pristine white porcelains of north China known as Xing ware. Delicate and sometimes translucent, the most prized examples were those inspired by Persian silver and glass of the Sassanian period.²⁸ These technological advances and stylistic innovations in porcelain production served as the foundation for the subtle traditions that were continued in the ninth century and throughout the Song dynasty (960-1279).²⁹ Also altering the course of the Chinese ceramics industry were discoveries made through experimentations with Yue wares as potters achieved a green-glaze tone that resembled jade.³⁰

Bronze Imagery and Aesthetics

As with works in other media, many works in metal reveal characteristics of the international culture of the time. Buddhism enjoyed imperial patronage under the Tang. Thus, a number of major Buddhist images were cast in bronze. Through these bronze

images and images in other materials, the history of Chinese Buddhism can be traced as successions of new teachings and iconographic types were introduced and assimilated. Unfortunately, all of the bronze works of monumental scale have been destroyed, due in large part to temple fires and to persecutions of the Buddhist tradition, although some sense of their stylistic characteristics can be gained from extant Japanese examples that reflect Tang aesthetics.³¹

Other types of Tang-period metal work were also enriched by new non-Buddhist influences, many inspired by goods imported from western Asia, especially Persia.³² With thousands of examples extant and a history dating back to approximately the sixth century BCE, it is clear that Chinese mirrors retained their importance throughout the Tang period.³³ Earlier motifs were continued along with newly introduced subject matter that included animal, bird and floral patterns modeled after those found on imported Sassanian period (c. CE 224 - c. 640) objects. For many examples of the period, neither the meaning of the ornamentation nor the contexts in which they were used can be ascertained (Mirror with lion and grapevine, Mirror with angular pattern).

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Chinese History and Culture

* John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman *China: A New History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 72-87.

* W. Scott Morton, in his work *China: Its History and Culture* (New York, London: McGraw-Hill, 1995), provides a concise and insightful, general introduction to the history and culture of China.

* Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Perspectives on the Tang* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973).

* John E. Vollmer, E. J. Keall, and E. Nagai-Berthrong, *Silk Roads ~ China Ships* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1983), 45-82.

Arts of the Tang Dynasty

* Su Bai, "Origins and Trends in the Depiction of Human Figures in China of the Fifth and Sixth Centuries," in Howard Rogers with Naomi Richard and Sylvia Moss, eds., *China 5,000 Years: Innovation and Transformation in the Arts* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1998), 132-143.

* May Holdsworth's *Women of the Tang Dynasty* (Kowloon: Pacific Century Publishers Ltd., 1995) includes numerous details of court fashions and accessories.

* Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, in her work *Court Art of the Tang* (Lanham, New York and London: University Press of America, 1996), focuses largely on recently unearthed, dated objects.

* The Silk Road: Treasures of Tang China (Singapore: The Empress Place. 1991) is a catalogue for an exhibition of two hundred artifacts from fifteen provincial museums in China.

* William Watson, *The Arts of China to AD 900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

Tang Dynasty Jades

* René-Yvon Lefebvre d'Argencé, *Chinese Jades in the Avery Brundage Collection* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1977), 60-85.

* James C. Y. Watt, *Chinese Jades from Han to Ch'ing* (New York: The Asia Society in association with John Weatherhill, Inc., 1980).

Tang Dynasty Metalwork

* Rebecca Ridolfo's *Gold and Silver Treasures of the Tang* (Kowloon: Pacific Century Publishers Ltd.) is a small catalogue of an exhibition held at the Shaanxi History Museum in 1995-1996. It includes 55 color photographs with detailed captions.

* Christian Deydier, *Chinese Bronzes* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1980), 136-182.

Buddhist Sculpture

* Helmut Brinker, "Transfiguring Divinities: Buddhist Sculpture in China," in Howard Rogers with Naomi Richard and Sylvia Moss, eds., *China 5,000 Years: Innovation and Transformation in the Arts* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1998), 144-158, catalogue figs. 147-176.

* *Chinese Buddhist Sculpture from the Wei through the T'ang Dynasties* (Taipei: National Palace Museum of History, 1983).

* Hugo Munsterberger, *Chinese Buddhist Bronzes* (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1967). This older publication, which includes one hundred and thirty plates, remains very useful.

NOTES

1. Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China* (London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 3:24.

2. Edmund Capon, *Art and Archaeology in China* (Melbourne and Sydney: Macmillan Company of Australia, 1977), 118-20. For scholarly and readable essays on the painting and sculpture of the Tang dynasty, see Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1974), 143-202. The characteristics of these developments are especially notable in the formation of a Chinese Buddhist Style. For comparative purposes, see also the two images in the Metropolitan Museum

collection discussed by Maxwell Hearn and Wen Fong in "The Arts of Ancient China," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 32 (1973-1974), 2:34-5, cf. figs. 55, 56.

3. It is not surprising that historians have compared favorably the historical role of the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE) with that of Sui dynasty (CE 589-618). See John King Fairbank, *China: A New History*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 47-8; Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, 3:4-7.

4. John King Fairbank, *China: A New History*, 77. In the words of Denis Twitchett, it was the Sui and the Tang that "finally established the idea of the integrity of China as the territory of a single unified empire." They also established a Chinese zone of military and political influence as well as a sphere of independent states dominated by Chinese culture. See Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, 3:7-8. For a lucid and insightful introduction to the history and culture of these periods (and other periods as well), see W. Scott Morton, *China: Its History and Culture* (New York, London: McGraw-Hill, 1995) 81-97.

5. John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 78.

6. See Howard J. Wechsler, "T'ai-tsung (reign 626-49) the Consolidator," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, 224-228; René Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: a History of Central Asia* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 101-103.

7. John E. Vollmer, E. J. Keall, and E. Nagai-Berthrong, *Silk Roads ~ China Ships* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1983), 65-82.

8. Edmund Capon, *Art and Archaeology in China*, 131. For source books of personal and legal records and anthropological documents that are frequently used as a supplementary texts in Chinese history courses, see Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization: A Source Book* (New York, London: The Free Press, 1993), 87-136. Wm. Theodore de Bary, et al., compilers, *Sources of the Chinese Tradition*, 2 volumes (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1960).

9. The fifth to the ninth centuries are considered the great age for Buddhism in China. During this period, Confucianism was largely left in eclipse while Buddhist doctrines as well as Buddhist art had a profound impact on the Chinese arts and culture. Among the new sects that arose in China to meet specifically Chinese needs is the sect known as Chan in Chinese and Zen in Japanese. See John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 73-76.

10. Edmund Capon, *Art and Archaeology in China*, 133-35. Interestingly, much of the evidence for these trends is found in the Shosoin, a storehouse of court furnishings and accoutrements belonging to the Todaiji, a Buddhist temple in Nara, Japan. It represents the collection of Emperor Shomu and was presented to the temple in memory of and for the salvation of Shomu by his widow in 756 CE. See Sherman Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey and New York: Prentice-Hall and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1982), 265, 271-26.

11. Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, 33, 168. For a general perspective on the politics and institutions of the Tang era, which is still considered by many to have been China's greatest age, see part one of the work by Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1973), 1-43.

12. James C. Y. Watt, *Chinese Jades from Han to Ch'ing* (New York: The Asia Society in association with John Weatherhill, Inc., 1980), 16.

13. Jessica Rawson, "Jades and Bronzes for Ritual," in Jessica Rawson, ed., *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art*, 51.
14. The dating of jades can be extremely controversial. He Li suggests that one piece might be dated to five different periods when examined by five different scholars. See He Li, "Jade: Asian Art Museum Reopens Chinese Jade Gallery," *Treasures 2:3* (Winter 1999), 3. René-Yvon Lefebvre d'Argencé, *Chinese Jades in the Avery Brundage Collection* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1977), 7; James C. Y. Watt, *Chinese Jades from Han to Ch'ing*, 17.
15. A pair of white jade bracelets mounted in gold from the village of Hejia are excellent examples. See *Tomb Treasures from China: The Buried Art of Ancient Xi'an* (Fort Worth and San Francisco: Kimbell Art Museum and Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1994), 77, fig. 60.
16. See Jane Portal, "Decorative Arts for Display," Jessica Rawson, ed., *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1996), 200.
17. Jessica Rawson, ed., *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1996), 22.
18. Mary Tregear, *Chinese Ceramics in the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford, England: Ashmolean Museum, 1987), 13-15.
19. Mary Tregear, *Chinese Ceramics in the Ashmolean Museum*, 11.
20. See Michael R. Cunningham, Stanislaw J. Czuma, Anne E. Wardwell and J. Keith Wilson, *Masterworks of Asian Art* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art in association with Thames and Hudson, 1998), 38.
21. Jessica Rawson, "Sculpture for Tombs and Temples," in Jessica Rawson, ed., *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1996), 143-145.
22. *Tomb Treasures from China*, 68.
23. Maxwell Hearn and Wen Fong in "The Arts of Ancient China," 2:45-47, fig. 78.
24. May Holdsworth, *Women of the Tang Dynasty* (Kowloon: Pacific Century Publishers Ltd., 1995), 4-5 passim.
25. *Tomb Treasures from China*, 42..
26. René-Yvon Lefebvre d'Argencé, ed., *Chinese, Korean and Japanese Sculpture in The Avery Brundage Collection* (San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1974), cf. figs. 119-126. William Watson, *Art of Dynastic China* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), 223. The earliest surviving example seems to be the pagoda in Henan, consecrated in CE 523.
27. Shelagh Vainker, "Ceramics for Use," in Jessica Rawson, ed., *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art*, 218.
28. Mary Tregear, *Chinese Ceramics in the Ashmolean Museum*, 13-15; Sherman Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*, 286.
29. Shelagh Vainker suggests that some of the seventh-century Xing wares are so hard, thin-bodied and fired at such a high temperature, that they are considered by many to be the world's earliest porcelains. Shelagh

Vainker, "Ceramics for Use," in Jessica Rawson, ed., *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art*, 215.
Sherman Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*, 286.

30. William Watson, *Art of Dynastic China*, 334. The term celadon is a European term used for a wide range of high-fire, green-glazed wares. The color is achieved by the use of iron oxides in the glaze formula within a reducing atmosphere. In relation to Chinese ceramics, the term is applied to Yue, Yaozhou, and Longquan wares. For general information concerning the Yue celadons of south China, see Sherman Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*, 286.

31. Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China*, 144.

32. Michael R. Cunningham, Stanislaw J. Czuma, Anne E. Wardwell and J. Keith Wilson, *Masterworks of Asian Art* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art in association with Thames and Hudson, 1998), 42.

33. Sherman Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*, 46.