

People

Qin Shi Huangdi

Li Si

Wudi

Sima Qian

Cao family

Taizong

Xuanzang

Wu Zetian

Li Bai

Huizong

Su Shi

Zhu Xi

Kublai Khan

Hongwu

Yongle



◀ Head with green flesh tones, Qin dynasty, terracotta, lacquer, pigment, Museum of Qin Terracotta Warriors and Horses, Lintong.



“He changed the calendar and chose black as the color . . . and chose six as the basic number: seals and official hats measured all six inches, carts six feet” (Sima Qian)

Qin Shi Huangdi

First emperor of China

Period
Qin (221–206 BC)

Reign
247–221 BC (reign of Qin); 221–210 BC (emperor)

Family name
Zhao or Qin

Given name
Zheng

Terms
Small seal script (*xiaozhuan*)

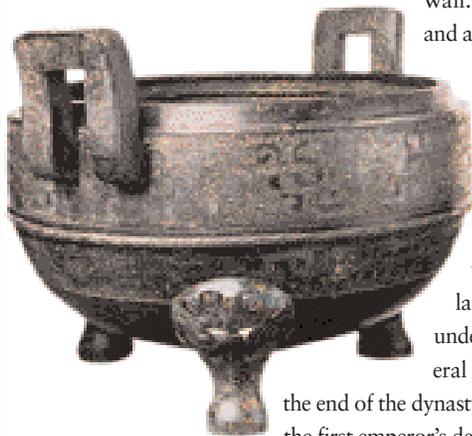
Related entries
Li Si, Mandate of heaven, Controlling water, War, Great Wall, The quest for immortality, Xianyang

In 221 BC, having defeated the six principal contenders for supreme power, the leader of the Qin dynasty assumed the new title of *Shi Huangdi*, “first august emperor,” and laid the basis for an empire whose structure remained intact for more than two thousand years. To increase the central power, the first emperor divided the country into thirty-six administrative units, the governors of which had to report to central authorities and were supported in their tasks by generals in charge of military control. The laws of the individual kingdoms in force until then were replaced by a penal code destined to remain at the base of the Chinese judicial system until the threshold of the 20th century. Coins, weights, and measures, even the width of cart axles were standardized; the writing forms in use were standardized, creating so-called small seal script, making possible the codification of a unitary literary language for the empire. The first emperor undertook massive construction projects, building new roads and canals that eased the movement of people and goods; existing fortresses were strengthened and connected to form a barrier along the northern border, the Great

Wall. Sumptuous palaces and an immense mausoleum

were built to preserve the imperial power for eternity. The enormous strain placed on the people of China to provide the money and labor demanded by these undertakings led to a general insurrection and thus

the end of the dynasty only a few years after the first emperor’s death.



► *Ding tripod, Qin dynasty, from the pit with acrobats near the tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi at Lintong, bronze, 64 cm diam., Chinese History Museum, Beijing.*

Ding tripods are among the most ancient ritual food vases; they were used for meat offerings in the royal tombs of the Shang epoch.

The earliest sources that tell of the Nine Legendary Tripods, cast during the mythical Xia dynasty, date to the 6th–4th centuries BC. The tripods were said to have been handed on from dynasty to dynasty, symbols of the passage of political power and the right to rule.



The historian Sima Qian (mid-2nd century BC) lamented the loss of the Nine Tripods and repeated the legend according to which they had sunk in the Si River near Pencheng 150 years before the unification of the country by the Qin.

During the Han period it was said that Qin Shi Huangdi had sent thousands of men to remove the tripods from the river, but at the critical moment a dragon had bitten through the cables, making them fall back into the waves.

The scene depicts the moment in which the cables broke and the men tumbled back. The image is thus symbolic of heaven’s disapproval of the Qin government and thus legitimizes the Han seizure of power.

▲ *The Emperor Seeks the Tripods, Eastern Han Dynasty, 2nd century AD, rubbing of a stone bas-relief, from the eastern wall of Room 2, Wu Liang Shrine, Shandong.*

As soon as he ascended the throne of Qin, in 246 BC, the first emperor had work begin on his tomb at Mount Li, near the capital of Xianyang. The work continued until 208 BC.



The emperor arranged to have himself surrounded by all the comforts that he would require in the afterlife; the two quadrigas would prove useful for the inspection trips he would take in the other world.

The horse trappings and accessories for the carts are decorated with inlaid gold and silver. Both carts were covered by very thin bronze canopies.

Carts, charioteers, and horses were all painted, increasing the realistic effect of the quadrigas.



The two bronze single-shaft carts, made to a scale of 1:2, are perfectly working models that reproduce the royal carriages down to the smallest detail.

▲ The two quadrigas as they were found, in 1980, in the western area of the mausoleum of the first emperor at Lintong, Shaanxi, Qin dynasty.

▲ One of the quadrigas after its restoration, Museum of Qin Terracotta Warriors and Horses, Lintong.

The three enormous pits of the mausoleum, containing more than seven thousand terracotta soldiers, are famous throughout the world, but few know that the statues were all covered by a natural lacquer that had been applied as an undercoat for the layer of paint made using precious mineral pigments.



When the statues were removed from the moist soil, the layer of lacquer dried out and flaked off the surfaces, remaining stuck to the ground that had held them for more than two millennia.

Only in recent years, and with the use of various chemical methods, has it been possible to reattach the paint to the terracotta. The archers were restored in situ in 1999 using a procedure developed especially for the terracotta army.

▲ Archer, restored and photographed *in situ*, Qin dynasty, Pit 2 of the mausoleum of the first emperor, lacquered and painted terracotta, Museum of Qin Terracotta Warriors and Horses, Lintong.



“In the state of the intelligent ruler there is no literature . . . the law is the only teaching. There are no quoted sayings of the early kings, the magistrates are the only instructors” (Han Fei)

Li Si

Prime minister of Qin
Shi Huangdi

Period
Qin (221–206 BC)

Life
circa 280–208 BC

Terms
Legalism
(*fajia*, liter., “school
of law”)
Book of Lord Shang
(*Shangjunshu*)
The Book of Master
Han Fei
(*Han Feizi*)
Law (*fa*)
Methods (*shu*)

Related entries
Qin Shi Huangdi,
Officials and literati,
Writing, Confucianism

► Measurement unit
with edict of the first
emperor, Qin dynasty,
from Zhuguo,
Zoucheng province,
engraved clay, 20.5 cm
diam., Shandong
Provincial Museum,
Shandong.

The intransigent politics of Qin Shi Huangdi received theoretical support from the Legalist school, represented at court by Prime Minister Li Si. The oldest text related to this movement is the *Book of Lord of Shang*, the creator of which had served the Qin king in the 4th century BC. The author of the principal Legalist work, Han Feizi, was put to death in 233 BC by Li Si, following a court intrigue. In the ideal Legalist state, power is concentrated in the hands of the ruler, who makes use of the “law,” inflexible and equal for everyone with the exception of the ruler himself, and of “methods,” deceptive tactics by which he maintains control of the state, manipulating human instincts. The Legalist state does not recognize cultural differences and does not have room for individual expression. This was also the ideological thinking behind the standardization of weights and measurements and writing. Later Chinese historians credited Li Si for having created the new uniform writing system, but also found fault with him for persecuting literati and for destroying works of literature and history from earlier periods. Following the death of Qin Shi Huangdi, Li Si took part in the plot that brought the second emperor to the throne. Later, he himself fell victim to a plot, shortly before the collapse of the Qin dynasty, which also marked the end of the supremacy of the Legalist school.



Chinese historiography relates that Li Si, promoter of a centralized state, urged the first emperor to silence dissent by means of a drastic measure: the burning of books, an event that took place in 213 BC.

The victims of this pyre of books included not only the chronicles of feudal states but also Confucian classics; only the chronicles of the Qin and scientific texts were spared.

During the years of persecution Fu Sheng had hidden a copy of the Classic of Documents inside the walls of his home, and he spent the rest of his life, well into his nineties, teaching its contents.

Fu Sheng is seated cross-legged on a simple mat; on the low table in front of him are the tools of a man of letters: a pen and an ink stone. On the floor near the mat is the famous book he managed to keep hidden.



According to legend, in 212 BC, the year after the book burning, 460 Confucian scholars were buried alive for having defended their ideas.

▲ *Portrait of Fu Sheng, Tang dynasty, 9th century AD, ink and color on silk, 25.4 x 44.7 cm, Municipal Museum of Art, Osaka.*

“We therefore direct the leaders of provinces and districts to examine officials and private citizens . . . for those able to become our generals, our ministers, our ambassadors” (Han emperor Wudi)

Wudi

Emperor

Period

Western Han
(206 BC–AD 8)

Reign

141–87 BC

Family name

Liu

Given name

Shizong

Posthumous name

Emperor Wu

Terms

Region (*bu*, then *zhou*)

Imperial university
(*taixue*)

The Five Classics
(*Wujing*):

The Book of Changes

(*I Ching*), *Book of Documents* (*Shujing*);

Book of Songs

(*Shijing*); *Record of Rites* (*Liji*); and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*)

Record of Rites (*Liji*); and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*)

Related entries

Qin Shi Huangdi,
Officials and literati,
Confucianism,
Commerce, Chang'an
(Western Han), Mogao

The first emperors of the Han dynasty had a conciliatory attitude toward bordering peoples and lands, most of all the Xiongnu tribes of northern China; Wudi replaced this with an expansionist policy that, over the 54-year course of his reign, fully doubled the size of China. In terms of domestic affairs, Wudi's centralizing policies brought about a gradual decline in the local centers of power and weakened the power of merchants by way of the institution of state monopolies on the minting of coins and the sale of salt, iron, and alcohol. China's administrative units were divided into thirteen "regions," regularly visited by inspectors directly subordinate to the central government. Like his predecessors, Wudi was in constant search of educated and competent officials; governors were instructed to call attention to noteworthy people, who then had to take a national civil-service examination in the capital. In 124 BC the emperor created the imperial university, where chosen candidates were given lessons in the *Five Confucian Classics*. These works, which collected the essence of the traditions of the past, confirmed the validity of the current social order, most especially the imperial institutions. Beginning with Wudi the empire's cultural identity was founded on the principles of Confucianism, safeguarded by the class of officials and literati.



In 138 BC the Han emperor Wudi sent Zhang Qian with a hundred men on an embassy to the Yuezhi, located in ancient Bactria in Central Asia, to make an alliance with them against the powerful Xiongnu nomads.

General Zhang Qian was captured by the Xiongnu, and ten years passed before he succeeded in escaping and reaching the Yuezhi, only to find they had no intention of becoming involved in a war with the Xiongnu.

The mission failed in its objective but was of fundamental importance to the Chinese government, which as a result obtained its first eye-witness account of the populations of the "western lands."



Zhang Qian, having dismounted his horse, kneels before the horseback emperor; between them, near the center of the scene, is an inscription that explains the subject.

The painting implies that the true goal of the mission was religious, but not until the middle of the 1st century AD, meaning almost two hundred years after the mission, do Chinese historical sources begin speaking of any Buddhist involvement.

◀ Boar (?), Western Han dynasty, 2nd century BC, stone, 163 cm long, tomb of General Huo Qubing, Xi'an.

▲ *Han Emperor Wudi Sends Zhang Qian to the Western Regions*, Tang dynasty, circa AD 705–713, painting on the northern wall of Cave 323 at Mogao, Dunhuang, Gansu.



“I have brought together the scattered fragments of ancient lore . . . I studied the events of history and set them down in significant order” (Sima Qian)

Sima Qian

Dian was one of the kingdoms located in the southwestern regions of the empire that maintained their independence until the ascent of Wudi to the throne of Han.

Despite influence from the surrounding populations as well as from the distant Han empire, the Dian had developed an autonomous and highly developed use of bronze.

Along with various types of weapons used most of all in hunting and in wars against neighboring peoples, agricultural tools have been found along with containers, musical instruments, and buckles.

This kind of wide-horned bovine with its muscular neck area often appears in the iconography of Dian art and is related to religious practices not yet understood.

The container was made to hold the Dian unit of exchange, money-cowries. At the center of the lid is a gilt rider mounted on a small platform.

The ritual, musical, and warlike traditions of the Dian are known today through the decorations modeled on containers; the separate elements were cast using the “lost-wax” technique and were then soldered to the surface.



▲ Container for money-cowries, Han dynasty, circa 150–50 BC, from Tomb 10 at Shizhaishan, Jinning, partially gilt bronze, 50 cm high, Yunnan Provincial Museum, Kunming.

The Records of the Grand Historian by Sima Qian relate the outlines of the historical and cultural events of the ancients and do so in a realistic and straightforward language often enlivened by dialog. The period covered begins with the semimythical days of the Yellow Emperor and ends at the period when the book was compiled, the reign of the Han emperor Wudi. Sima Qian’s father handed on to him his post as court astronomer-astrologer and also began collecting the material relating to the past that Sima Qian concluded by way of careful research in the imperial archives as well as a long journey to track down witnesses. The work contributed to the further consolidation of Confucian thought as the basis of political and social order since it presented the historical evolution from the ethical and moral point of view of contemporary ideology, which saw, for example, the succession of dynasties as the inevitable result of the absence of “virtue” with the consequent loss of the right to govern. The structure and style of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, a result of the private initiative of one official, became exemplary for the official historiography of all later dynasties: after every dynastic change, the new government took upon itself the compilation of a history of the preceding dynasty with the aim of learning from the past but also of legitimizing the present.



◀ Portrait of *Sima Qian*, Ming dynasty, 17th century, ink and color on silk, sine loco.

Historian
 Period
 Western Han
 (206 BC–AD 8)
 Life
 circa 140–90 BC
 Terms
Records of the Grand Historian
(Shiji)
 Virtue (*ren*)

Related entries
 Wudi, Signs from the heavens, Mandate of heaven, Officials and literati, Confucianism

Sima Qian was aware of the importance of his work to historiography. Although he had to suffer the penalty of castration for having interceded on behalf of a general who had fallen into disgrace, he kept working to bring his work to completion.

The stories, myths, and legends evoked by Sima Qian became the source of inspiration for innumerable artists and artisans.



Sima Qian's work is divided in five sections (annals, chronological tables, treatises, genealogies of noble families, biographies) in turn divided in 130 chapters. This arrangement was followed by later historians.

Sima Qian created some of the ideological premises that have dominated Chinese historiography to today, first among them the idea of the cultural and political unity of China from its very beginning.

▲ Reverse of a mirror decorated with historiated scenes, Western Han dynasty, bronze, 18.6 cm diam., Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.



"Here is the wine! So let us sing, because life is as short as the morning dew, and the past is so very sad" (Cao Cao)

Cao family

Around the end of the Western Han period the central government passed into the hands of the court eunuchs, while various military leaders vied for domination of the empire's peripheral zones. In AD 196, General Cao Cao, who controlled vast areas of central-northern China, forced the Han emperor Xiandi to relocate the capital to Xuchang (Henan) and then assumed all power himself. In AD 200 Cao Cao defeated the soldiers of his principal rival, but his attempts to advance south of the Yangtze River to again unite the country under a single ruler were foiled, and he met final failure in AD 208, when his army was defeated by the combined forces of his two major opponents, the future founders of the kingdoms of Shu (AD 221) and Wu (AD 229). When he died, in AD 220, his son Cao Pi assumed the title of emperor of the Wei dynasty, thus formally ending the four hundred years of Han rule. Cao Cao and his sons Cao Pi and Cao Zhi were among the most highly regarded poets of the period, grouped together stylistically under the name of the last dynastic era of the Han, Jian'an (AD 196–220). The poetic art of the Jian'an style is expressed in verses of five characters that reflect the passage from earlier poetry based on popular songs to the learned poetry of the literati. It is poetry that often laments the precarious nature of life and exalts wine for its ability to provide moments of illusory joy.



◀ Square table with scene of Cao Cao (see page 22), Ming dynasty, 15th–16th century, lacquered wood with mother-of-pearl inserts, 52 cm high, Lee Family Collection, Tokyo.

Family of politicians and poets

Period
End of the Eastern Han (AD 9–220), beginning of the Three Kingdoms period (AD 220–265)

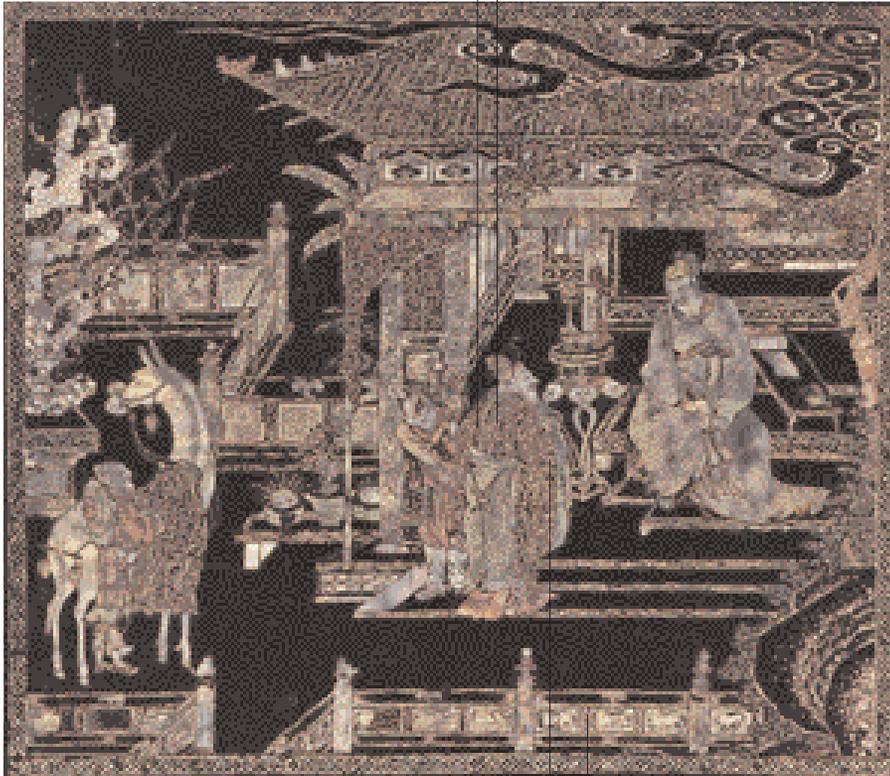
Dates
Cao Cao: AD 155–220,
Cao Pi: AD 187–226,
Cao Zhi: AD 192–232

Terms
Jian'an style (*Jian'an fenggu*)

Related entries
Poetry, Novels, Theater, Luoyang

During the period of disorder following the fall of the Han dynasty, powerful men quickly rose to power in various regions of China and struggled to reunite the country, battling their rivals in large fratricidal battles.

Warrior and strategist but also poet and reformer, the figure of Cao Cao has fascinated Chinese historians and literati, most of all beginning in the Song epoch.



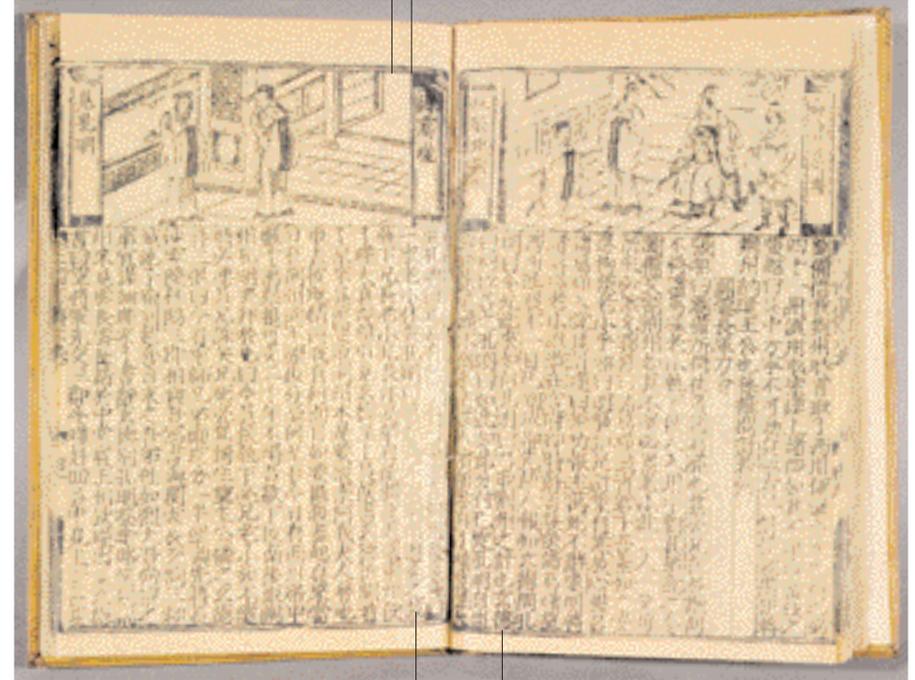
The scene depicts Cao Cao, standing, offering defeated general Guan Yu a splendid horse, a famous sorrel horse, and brocaded clothing.

The balustrade with stone pillars marks off the edge of the stone terrace that served as the base for timber constructions.

▲ Top of the square table, Ming dynasty, 15th–16th century, lacquered wood with inserts in mother-of-pearl, 52 cm high, Lee Family Collection, Tokyo.

Cao Cao is one of the leading characters in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, attributed to the man of letters Luo Guanzhong, and is also among the traditional characters in the musical theater and opera of Beijing.

Historiography describes Cao Cao as a brilliant strategist, but the novel—and even more the theatrical productions—present him as a cruel and suspicious tyrant, a personification of evil.



This incomplete example, today preserved in Spain, is the only known version of this edition. The version on which Western translations are based dates to the early Qing period.

The novel, which tells of the period of wars that followed the fall of the Han dynasty in AD 220, reaches epic proportions; many historical figures are endowed with supernatural powers.

▲ Double page from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Ming dynasty, Ye Fengchun edition, 1548, Real Biblioteca del Escorial, Madrid.



“Dynasties have always waxed and waned, but what deed of the kings of old could compare with the emperor of Tang returning to life?” (Journey to the West)

Taizong

Emperor
Period
 Tang (AD 618–907)

Reign
 AD 626–649

Family name
 Li

Given name
 Shimin

Temple name
 Taizong

Posthumous name
 Emperor Wen

Terms
 Historiography Office (*shiguan*)
 Equal-field system (*juntian*)

Related entries
 Xuanzang, Wu Zetian, Officials and literati, Education and exams, Confucianism, Commerce, Chang’an (Tang)

► Vase with dragon-shape handles, Tang dynasty, 7th century AD, glazed terracotta, 55 cm high, Shaanxi History Museum, Xi’an.



Although he ascended the throne with a coup d’état, forcing his father, former military commander under the short Sui dynasty and then founder of the Tang dynasty, to abdicate in his favor, the second Tang emperor, Taizong, is described by Confucian historiography as one of China’s most excellent rulers. A learned man with a pragmatic approach to matters of general interest, Taizong was open to criticism and new ideas. He strengthened the organization of the national exam system, and having understood the value of history as a tool of moral education and political legitimization, he set up a historiography office charged with writing down histories of preceding dynasties and making records of current events. China’s growing economy was boosted by agrarian and fiscal reforms that favored the well being of the common people and permitted the large-scale expansion of the empire. With the help of the military, Taizong extended Chinese domination to the areas of today’s Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang; diplomatic contact with bordering foreign powers as well as with distant lands contributed to China’s fame as the most highly evolved and cosmopolitan power in the ancient world.

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Taizong’s cosmopolitan policies are also revealed by such measures as his official recognition, in AD 642, of the music from Central Asia. At Chang’an, ten orchestras were granted permission to perform.



The bearded man is playing the pipa, a stringed instrument originally from the Near East, while the woman holds a small drum to strike with a stick or by hand.

The two musicians, perhaps found in the same tomb, are dressed in the style of the Kucha oasis, with narrow-sleeved, tight-fitting clothes and ample skirts that spread out around the kneeling figures.

▲ Pair of musicians, Tang dynasty, first half 7th century AD, glazed terracotta, 17 cm high, Musée Guimet, Paris.

The six horses were originally located in the northern area of the tomb of Emperor Taizong at Zhaoling, in the area of Chang'an.



The subjects are carved with a dynamic realism that displays both the details of the saddles and the muscles of the horses in movement.



The horses have fascinating names, such as Purple of the Misty Dew; their manes are woven to form the so-called "three flowers" (sanhua), indicating they belong to the imperial stables.



In 1914, a group of smugglers broke the reliefs while attempting to take them to the United States. Two of the six sculptures are today in Philadelphia, the others were taken to a museum in Xi'an.

General Qiu Xinggong is depicted withdrawing an arrow from the chest of an imperial horse, wounded in battle.



In AD 636 the emperor asked the famous painter Yan Liben to paint the six horses he had ridden during the military campaigns that had preceded his ascent to the throne. These portraits served as the models for the stone sculptures.



▲ The six war horses of the emperor Taizong, copies from the Song epoch (AD 973) of originals dating to the Tang dynasty (circa AD 636–645), stone bas-reliefs, each circa 170 x 220 cm, Forest of Stone Tablets Museum, Xi'an, and University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia.

In AD 641 Emperor Taizong received an emissary from the first king of Tibet, sent to escort Princess Wencheng to Tibet.

The princess married the king of Tibet, following the "matrimonial diplomacy" tradition of the Chinese emperors. The union proved very happy, but other Chinese brides were consumed by nostalgia for home in the cold tents of their nomadic husbands.

Emperor Taizong, depicted larger than his retainers, sits on a sedan chair carried by six women; other women hold large fans and a parasol.



▲ Yan Liben (attrib.), *The Emperor Receives the Tibetan Ambassador* (painted section), Tang dynasty, 7th century AD, horizontal scroll, ink and color on silk, 38.5 x 129 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

Ambassador Ludongzan, depicted with two members of his retinue, wears a long brocade cloak and bears a letter from the king.

The attribution of an ancient work of art to any one artist is almost always uncertain, given the habit of artists of reproducing famous paintings to closely study their details and understand their essence.

Most of the figures are depicted with subtle but homogeneous features; the leading figures in the work are given strikingly individual features, while the faces and clothes of the others are not differentiated.



“He is about to leave the emperor to set off for the West, with constant faith and awareness of the Great Emptiness” (Journey to the West)

Xuanzang

Buddhist monk

Period
Tang (AD 618–907)

Life
AD 602–664

Lay name
Chen Yi

Terms
Records of the Western Regions (Xiyuji)
Journey to the West (Xiyouji)

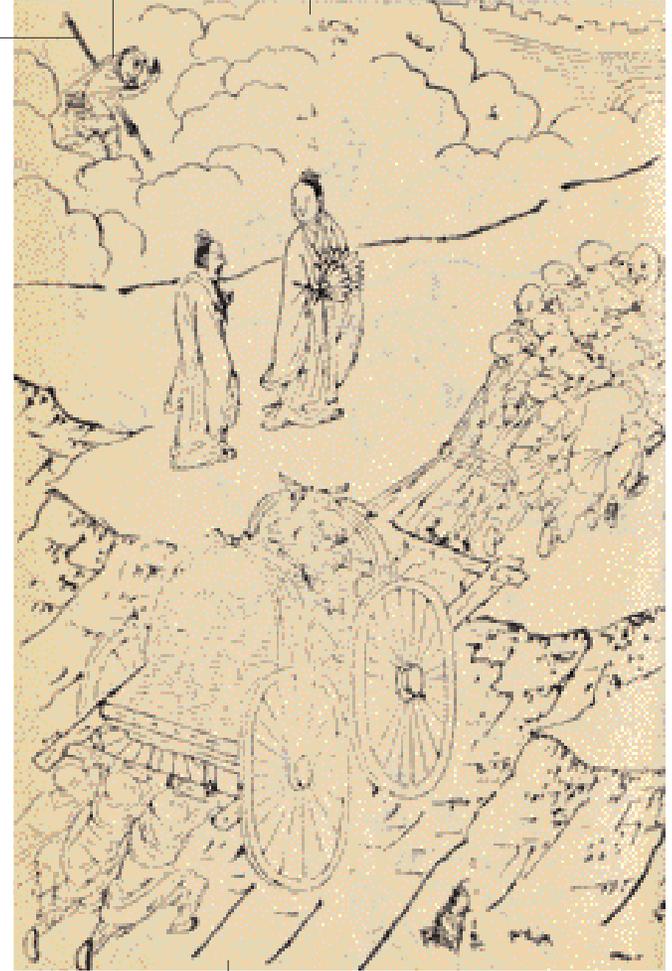
Related entries
Qin Shi Huangdi, Officials and literati, Confucianism, Commerce, Chang’an (Western Han), Images of the Buddha

While basing his government on the norms of Confucianism, Emperor Taizong personally preferred the Daoist school and permitted the expression of other religions. In consideration of the great social importance of the Buddhist faith in China, a large temple was built in the capital of Chang’an dedicated to the memory of the emperor’s mother. When the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang returned to the capital in AD 645, after a 16-year trip to India, he was offered a position at court. When the monk declined the position, the ruler suggested he write his *Record of the Western Regions* (completed in AD 646), which relates primarily the history, customs, products, geography, and climate of the countries he had visited. Xuanzang had chosen the land route across the Gobi Desert and the mountains of Tianshan and Pamir and had found support from such powerful rulers as the king of Turfan and the great khan of the Western Turks, at the time on friendly terms with the Chinese emperor. He had spent years in India studying the most important centers of Buddhist knowledge and devotion. Xuanzang brought to China 657 works from the Buddhist canon, and with the support of Taizong, who put the temple dedicated to his mother as his disposal, he undertook the translation of 75 of these sacred texts, an activity that occupied him until the end of his life.

The monkey Sun Wukong is the second main character in the novel: the playful and irreverent monkey had been chosen by the Buddha to protect the monk during his trip.

Xuanzang’s trip inspired the man of letters Wu Cheng’en (1500?–1582) to write the novel Journey to the West, a bestseller that still fascinates the world’s readers.

Named “Stableboy of the Heavenly Stables” by the Buddha, the monkey is still honored as the patron divinity of horses. Sun Wukong, the “monkey king,” has also become part of traditional Chinese theater and delights audiences with his ingenuity and his agile acrobatics.



▲ Illustration for the novel *Journey to the West* (Xiyouji), Li Zhuowu xiansheng piping Xiyouji edition, Ming dynasty, early 17th century, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

In the novel Xuanzang is the reincarnation of a disciple of the Buddha who is escorted on his long trip by three notorious monsters with supernatural powers and features that are part animal and part human.

► *The Healing of Horse Diseases by the Stableboy of the Heavenly Stables, the Monkey Sun Wukong, 20th century, New Year’s woodblock print (Nianhua) produced at Fengxiang, Shaanxi.*



The monk travels on a cloud accompanied by a tiger and a small meditating Buddha seated on another cloud. The striding figure expresses vigor and dynamism.



The pilgrim's features are almost caricatural to indicate his foreign provenance; thick lips over square teeth, a large nose, and thick eyebrows.

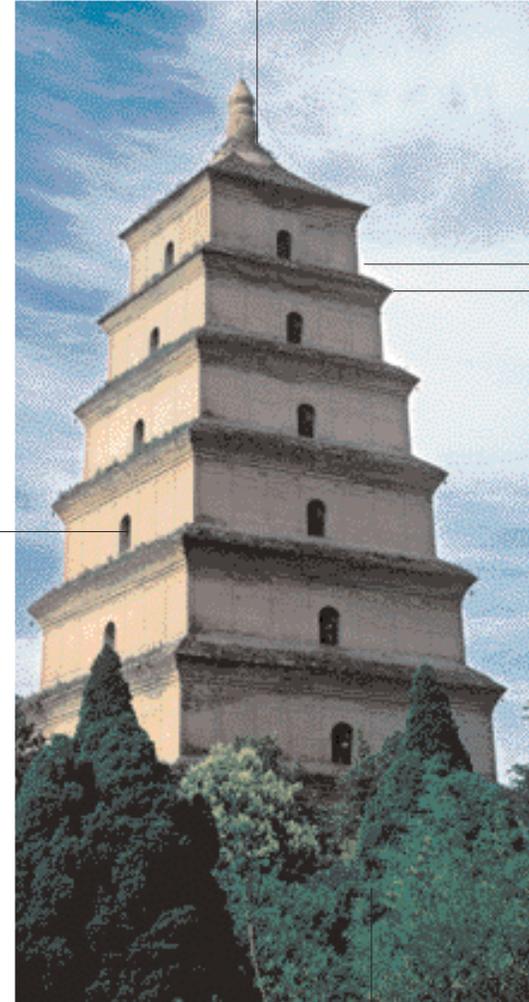
In his left hand he holds a flyswatter, while his right rests on a walking stick.

▲ *Itinerant Monk* (detail), end Tang dynasty, 9th century, from Dunhuang, Gansu, ink and color on paper, 49.6 x 29.4 cm, Musée Guimet, Paris.

A small perfume holder hanging from a chain fixed to a stick swings over a stack of written scrolls, apparently sacred texts of the Buddhist canon that the monk carries like a backpack.

Xuanzang was not the first Chinese pilgrim on the Silk Route: the monk Faxian reached India during his long trip, from 399 to 413, followed in 518 by the monk Huiheng.

The texts brought by Xuanzang were preserved in this pagoda, built by the successor of Taizong.



The pagoda is part of a complex dedicated to the ruler's mother called the Temple of Great Goodwill (Da Ci'en Si).

The pagoda rises from its square base, narrowing upward floor by floor. The building has been destroyed and rebuilt several times, with two floors being added to the original five.

Inside, a winding wooden staircase leads to the seventh floor. Beginning at a small central space of each floor, four narrow passages lead the visitor to door windows, which open on the four sides of the construction.

▲ The Big Wild Goose Pagoda (*Dayanta*), Tang dynasty, circa AD 652, brick, 64 m high, Xi'an, Shaanxi.

The stone architraves over the ground-floor doors are decorated with motifs of Buddhist inspiration, which legend attributes to the famous painter Yan Liben.

"If a wife does not serve her husband, the proper relationship between man and woman and the natural order of things are neglected and destroyed" (Ban Zhao)

Wu Zetian

Wife of Emperor Gaozong, empress

Period
Tang (AD 618–907)

Reign
AD 690–705

Family name
Wu

Proper name
Mei, later Zhao

Posthumous name
Empress Zetian

Terms
Great Cloud Sutra
(*Dayunjing*)

Related entries
Taizong, Officials and literati, Education and exams, Confucianism, Buddhism, Women, Commerce

► The Sacred Way (*shendao*) that leads to the tomb of Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu Zetian, Tang dynasty, AD 684–706, Qianling, Shaanxi.

Formerly a concubine of the emperor Taizong, Wu Zetian managed to rise to the rank of principal wife of his successor, Gaozong, who fell ill in 660 and handed over to her the reins of government. At Gaozong's death, in 683, Wu Zetian accepted the formal nomination of her son Zhongzong, but at his first sign of autonomy she replaced him with another son. In 690 she began a new dynasty, the Zhou, and took the throne. The only woman in Chinese history to assume sovereignty, Wu Zetian was later treated harshly by Confucian historians for having deserted the traditional role of a woman. A better reason for such condemnation was the cruelty with which she imposed her will, a cruelty that did not stop even when dealing with her own family members. Her reign did have positive aspects: Wu Zetian favored the ascent of a new elite by promoting the system of national exams and transferring the capital to Luoyang, thus distancing the court from the direct influence of the ancient northwestern clans. Chinese Buddhism experienced its period of greatest prosperity during her reign. Temples were built throughout the country dedicated to the *Great Cloud Sutra*, which contains a prophecy concerning the reincarnation of a goddess in the form of a universal sovereign. In 705 the empress fell ill and was forced to abdicate and the Tang dynasty was revived.



Two twin stele were erected opposite the southern entrance of the combined tomb of Gaozong and Wu Zetian: one bears 8,000 characters celebrating the emperor's deeds; the other, dedicated to the empress, bears no writing.

The top of the stele is decorated symmetrically with dragons carved in high relief.

The two stele mark the end of the Sacred Way, which leads to the sepulchral tumulus and is flanked by many large human and zoomorphic figures carved fully round.



Why did the empress leave vacant the space usually dedicated to the glorification of the ruler? Various possible explanations have been advanced.

Perhaps she believed her merits could be judged only by future generations, and in fact during the 10th–11th centuries thirteen epitaphs were inscribed on the stele, although with the passage of time they have almost disappeared.

▲ Stele without writing, Tang dynasty, AD 684–706, stone, 630 x 210 x 149 cm, Qianling, Shaanxi.

Princess Li Yongtai was a granddaughter of the empress Wu Zetian and favorite daughter of the unfortunate emperor Zhongzong, deposed by his own mother.

A pair of mandarin ducks symbolize the conjugal harmony between Princess Yongtai and her husband, Wu Yanji, buried in the adjacent tomb.



On the eastern side of the exterior face of the sarcophagus, which is engraved inside and out with scenes depicting the private life of the princess, two servants are presented watching over an interior door as though it were Yongtai's bed chamber.

The princess died in AD 701 at Luoyang, at only 17, and was buried definitively in 706, a year after the death of her grandmother—who, according to certain sources, was responsible for the princess's premature death.

▲ Two servants in front of a door with two knockers, Tang dynasty AD 706, detail of the engravings on the sarcophagus of Li Yongtai, Qianling, Shaanxi.

"I sat drinking and did not notice the dusk until falling petals filled the folds of my dress. Drunken, I rose; I walked toward the moonlit stream" (Li Bai)



Li Bai

The poems of one of the greatest poets of Chinese literature are fresh and spontaneous, full of wonder and infantile playfulness, of love for life and for wine. Li Bai, who was fascinated by Daoism, speaks with the moon and meets with mountains, using all the traditional poetic genres, but giving preference to the ancient style, which involves fewer restrictions in terms of the length of verses, rhythm, and the parallelism of words. His poems are often retrospective and express nostalgia for the glorious past and melancholy over the flow of time, but there are also the pleasures of idleness and inebriety. Parting with friends, traveling, and being far from home are themes that Li Bai shared with many poet-officials of the period who were forced to perform their duties in far-off locales. Li Bai, however, traveled as a matter of choice and never took the national exam in order to obtain a position. Such was his fame that he was summoned by the emperor Xuanzong (reigned AD 712–756) to the Hanlin Painting Academy at Chang'an, but the position proved brief. Exiled because of his presumed involvement in the great An Lushan rebellion, which shook the Tang empire at the middle of the 8th century, Li Bai was pardoned several years before his death. Legend has it that while out boating, and drunk, he met his death by drowning, falling overboard in the attempt to embrace the moon's reflection on the water.



◀ Lid of a box, Yuan dynasty, black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inserts, 27.3 x 22.2 cm, Lee Family Collection, Tokyo.

Poet
Period
Tang (AD 618–907)
Life
AD 701–762
Family name
Li
Proper name
Bai, also pronounced Po
Nickname (Zi)
Taibai or Taipo
Terms
Ancient-style poetry (<i>guti shi</i>)
Related entries
Officials and literati, Poetry, Landscape painting, Chang'an (Tang)

Two maid servants are busy heating the wine, made of grains and always served warm.

Li Bai's fondness for wine was the subject of many legends. The state of drunkenness was not deplored in China, being considered instead one of the ways to stimulate the free flow of creativity.

Du Fu, another great poet of the period, claimed that one cup of wine was enough for Li Bai to write one hundred poems.



The emperor, although relaxed, sits composedly on a stool in the inner court of the palace; the poet, without his outer clothes, is sprawled across a nearby bench.

Only once did Li Bai and Du Fu actually meet, but Du Fu, a poet of dramatically realistic works with an innovative form, was profoundly struck by the encounter.

▲ Attributed in the past to Du Dashou, *The Poet Li Bai Drinking with the Emperor Minghuang*, Ming dynasty, early 15th century, horizontal scroll, ink and color on silk, 29.6 x 83 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Julia Bradford Huntington James Fund, Boston.

The painter Liang Kai, a highly esteemed academy master during the period of the Northern Song, specialized in the depiction of figures, landscapes, and Buddhist and Daoist subjects. At the height of his fame he retired to private life.

The head is defined with a few simple lines that give a concise but at the same time magical image of the great poet.



The seal has never been deciphered, but there is no question that it was composed using the square Mongolian script created by the Tibetan monk Phags-pa circa 1269.

Free from official obligations, Liang Kai adhered to the Chan Buddhist sect, better known by its Japanese name, Zen, and developed a spare but also generous pictorial style. The portrait of Li Bai belongs to the Zen phase of the painter's work.

The robe the poet wears, which covers him head to foot, is created with a quick gesture using diluted ink; shading at the collar and along the bottom give it profundity and volume.

▲ Liang Kai, *Li Bai Reciting His Poems*, Southern Song dynasty, early 13th century, ink on paper, 81.1 x 30.5 cm, National Museum, Tokyo.



Huizong

“Last night the spring wind entered my room again. I cannot bear to remember the bright moon of my lost kingdom, the marble steps and carved balustrades” (Li Yu)

Huizong, passionate connoisseur of the arts and himself a talented artist, gave new impulse to China's traditional artistic disciplines as well as to artisan creations. He took personal care of the wares made in porcelain kilns and founded a famous painting academy in the capital of Bianliang, today's Kaifeng. Under his rule the scholastic system was improved as was the structure of the national exams, but he also found time for new subjects, such as archaeological research and the encyclopedic collection of scientific and historical information. In truth, the business of state was neglected, and the court was not aware of the danger looming in the new state of Jin, founded by the Nüzhen nomads to the north of China. The Jin pressed on the Liao, a dynasty formed by the Khitans, another nomadic people that occupied large areas in northern China. In the hope of finally driving the Khitans out of Chinese territory, the Southern Song dynasty allied itself with the Jin. The undertaking succeeded despite the poor military contribution of the Song, but the Nüzhen then invaded China, conquering the capital in 1127. Huizong, who had abdicated in 1126, was deported along with his successor and lived out the last eight years of his life in prison, reduced to the status of an ordinary man.

Emperor and artist

Period
Northern Song
(AD 960–1127)

Reign
AD 1100–1126

Family name
Zhao

Given name
Ji

Temple name
Huizong

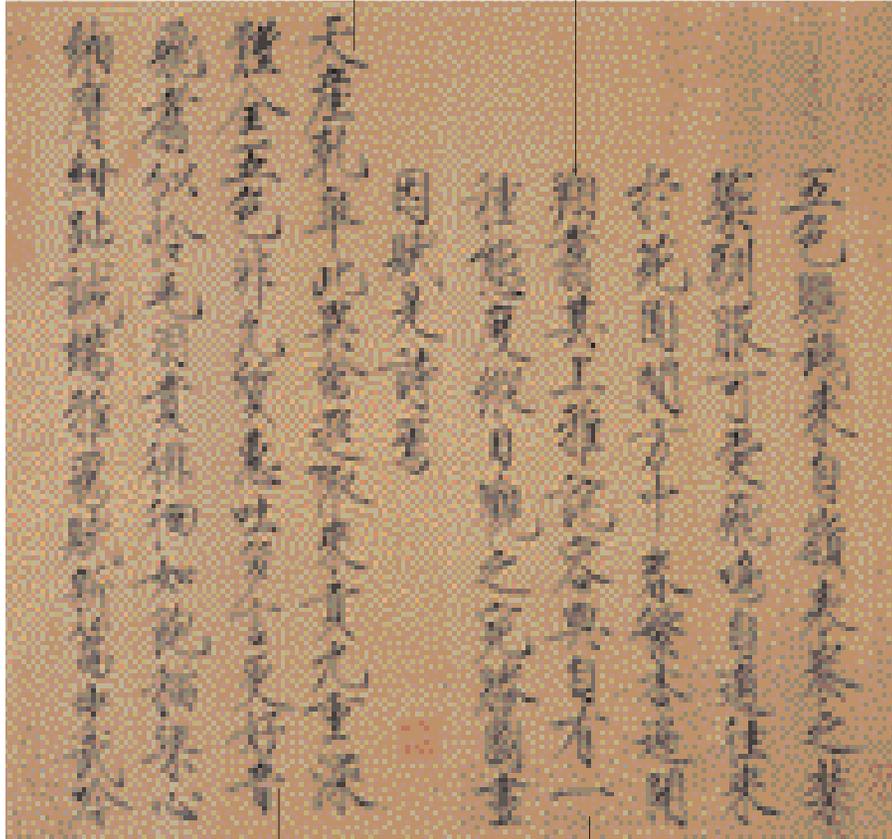
Related entries
Zhu Xi, Calligraphy,
Landscape painting,
Collectors of
antiquities, Barbarian
dynasties, Kaifeng



◀ Emperor Huizong, *Five-colored Parakeet on a Blossoming Apricot Tree*, painted section, Northern Song dynasty, late 11th–early 12th century, ink and color on silk, 52 x 125 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The emperor's elegant and refined taste is best expressed in his personal calligraphic style, known as "slender gold" (shoujin).

The characters are composed of sharply defined and vigorous strokes, making them appear engraved rather than brushed on the absorbent paper.



The structure and proportions are perfectly balanced, and despite their markedly personal style the characters are easily legible.

The emperor's paintings are equally lucid and precise, but also so detailed they seem static, lacking the dynamic touch that characterizes his calligraphy.

▲ Emperor Huizong, *Five-colored Parakeet*, calligraphic section, Northern Song dynasty, late 11th–early 12th century, ink and color on silk, 52 x 125 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The emperor took a personal interest in the painting academy he founded, sometimes instructing and correcting the painters and often suggesting themes to work on, including auspicious events, such as this work.

The white wings of the cranes stand out luminously against the blue background without need of further definition. The emperor adopted the "boneless" (mogu) style of painting, which did without the classic black outlines given figures.



The unusual angle of the painting reflects the emperor's respect for the private life of all citizens. He once severely criticized a painter who had depicted scenes of daily life inside homes for having invaded privacy.

Huizong wanted to commemorate two propitious events that had happened in the capital of Kaifeng: the appearance of an auspicious cloud (white edged in red) that enclosed the palaces of the capital, and the flight of a flock of cranes across a clear sky.

▲ Huizong, *Auspicious Cranes*, painted section, Northern Song dynasty, late 11th–early 12th century, ink and color on silk, 51 x 138 cm, Provincial Museum, Liaoning.

Wares from the kilns of Ru were reserved for the imperial court and were created only for about twenty years under the vigilance of Emperor Huizong. With the fall of the capital production ended.

A stupendous gray-blue glaze covers the entire body of the vase, including the edges and the bottom. To avoid damaging the surfaces during firing in the kilns, these ceramics were placed atop tiny spurs called "sesame seeds."



Huizong, an avid collector of ancient bronze vases, introduced the production of ceramics in archaic shapes, such as this tripod, made to imitate a prototype dating to the Han dynasty.

The thick network of craquelures was meant to favor comparison with the veining of jade while also giving the vase a more antique appearance.

▲ Tripod vase, Northern Song dynasty, product of the Ru kilns, Henan, glazed ceramic, 12.9 cm high, Palace Museum, Beijing.

"But do you understand the nature of water and of the moon?—he asked—The first of them flows without ever ending, the other now waxes, now wanes, without ever increasing or diminishing" (Su Shi)



Su Shi

Su Shi lived during the reigns of five of the Northern Song emperors, and his public career, characterized by a series of highs and lows, reflected the transitory fortunes of the two principal opposing political trends that alternated in the rule of the country. A Confucian man of letters drawn to Buddhism and Daoism, Su Shi, best known in the West by his pseudonym, Su Dongpo, was a poet, calligrapher, painter, art critic, and essayist. He and his fellow artists, struck by the simplicity of the ancient works of art just then being discovered during the first archaeological excavations and inspired by neo-Confucian ideas, promoted a new theory of artistic creation, seen as a means for the spontaneous expression of human nature. The "imprint of the heart" left on the page expresses the essence of the person through the means of personal expression even though conditioned by taste and modesty. In that way art approaches the Universal Principal that exists beyond the concrete depiction of objects. Calligraphy, particularly in the loose but legible running-hand cursive style, and painting in ink were the expressive genres most agreeable to this concept and beginning in the Song period were considered superior to other genres. The literary production of Su Shi, a brilliant and candid man, is formally perfect but without prejudice and never dogmatic. He was one of the promoters of the free style in prose, and certain of his works have inspired later generations of artists.

Man of letters

Period
Northern Song
(AD 960–1127)

Life
AD 1037–1101

Family name
Su

Given name
Shi

Pseudonym
Su Dongpo

Terms
Imprint of the heart
(*xinyin*)
Universal Principal (*li*)
Running hand
(*xingshu*)

Related entries
Huizong, Zhu Xi,
Education and exams,
Poetry, Calligraphy,
Landscape painting



◀ Su Shi, *Poetry in the Ancient Style of Li Bai*, written in running-hand cursive, Northern Song dynasty, dated to 1093, ink on paper, 34.0 x 111.1 cm, Municipal Museum of Art, Osaka.

Carved from a single piece, Su Shi's inkstone has a slight hollow in the front part where the ink stick was rubbed.

Two characters, dong jing ("eastern source"), engraved on the raised edge, refer to the famous man of letters, who chose "Eastern Slope" (Dongpo) as his nom de plume.



A few drops of water are poured onto the stone with grindings from an inkstick, and ink collects in the hollow rear of the stone, enclosed by a raised border.

An inscription on the front side highlighted in gold leaf repeats words from Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty, thus supporting the presumed provenance of the stone.

The inkstone was a very personal object and a fundamental tool to the Chinese literati, and its usefulness counted as much as the simple elegance of its shape.



▲ Inkstone of Su Shi, shown top and bottom, Northern Song dynasty, 11th century, black stone, 11.4 x 7.9 x 3.3 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Several calligraphic works by Su Shi have survived, but of his paintings in black ink there is only this one black-and-white photograph; all trace of the work was lost several decades ago.

The rock and tree seem to have been made in a single circular gesture from left to right, ending in the short lines that suggest dried branches. The effect is dynamic and at the same time balanced.



The moment of inspiration distinguished painter-literati from painter-artisans, a distinction created by Su Shi that became fundamental to the history of Chinese painting in later dynasties.

Su Shi wrote, "In the moment in which you take brush in hand, staring fixedly, what you wish to paint will appear before your eyes, and you must get up in a hurry to pursue it."

The composition does not seem copied from life and corresponds instead to a mental image created by the artist, who had studied and memorized forms to create an ideal image.

▲ Su Shi, *Old Pine and Rock*, Northern Song dynasty, second half 11th century, ink on paper, *sine loco*.

“Knowledge and action always require each other, like eyes and legs. Without legs, the eyes cannot walk; without eyes, the legs cannot see” (Zhu Xi)

Zhu Xi

Philosopher

Period

Northern Song (AD 960–1127)

Life

AD 1030–1100

Terms

School of universal principles (*lixue*)

Neo-Confucianism (*daoxue*)

Universal principle (*li*)

Vital force (*qi*)

Five relationships (*wulun*)

Four Books of

Confucianism (*Sishu*):

Analects (*Lunyu*)

Mencius (*Mengzi*), and

two chapters of the

Liji (*Record of Rites*)

entitled *The Doctrine*

of the Mean (Zhong

Yong) and *The Great*

Learning (Daxue)

Related entries

Huizong, Su Shi,

Confucianism, The

five relations

► Liu Minshu, *Portrait of Three Literati: Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi*, Yuan dynasty, 13th–14th century, ink and color on silk, 122.2 x 68.6 cm, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

During the Song period, Confucian teaching was thoroughly reexamined because, unlike both Buddhism and Daoism, its moral and ethical teaching could not respond to metaphysical questions and it did not include a cosmology. Zhu Xi offered a synthetic arrangement of the “school of universal principles” of the so-called neo-Confucians: beginning with the scrupulous analysis of Confucian texts, he identified the origin of all things in the “universal principle,” which was manifested in “vital force” and which in turn permeates everything, making possible the birth, evolution, and destruction of things through an alternation of yin and yang. The universal principle is reflected in humans as an innate moral principle, while the quality of vital force determines social role. Since all humans are endowed with the moral principle, wisdom is not restricted to an elect few but is instead the concrete goal of every-



one. Education and the cultivation of the self take place through the process of socialization based on the obligations made clear in the “five relationships” and through the “investigation of things,” which is the study of objects and concrete events. At first opposed, Zhu Xi’s concepts were soon reevaluated and the *Four Confucian Books* he had chosen from among the classic texts and had written commentaries on, were included in the program of national examinations beginning in the Yuan dynasty.

As a result of the affirmation of neo-Confucianism, a trend began in the Song period of representing the “universal principle” by way of intimate and simple subjects.

An excellent sense of observation, united with the careful execution of details, distinguished the painters who specialized in the depiction of flowers and insects.

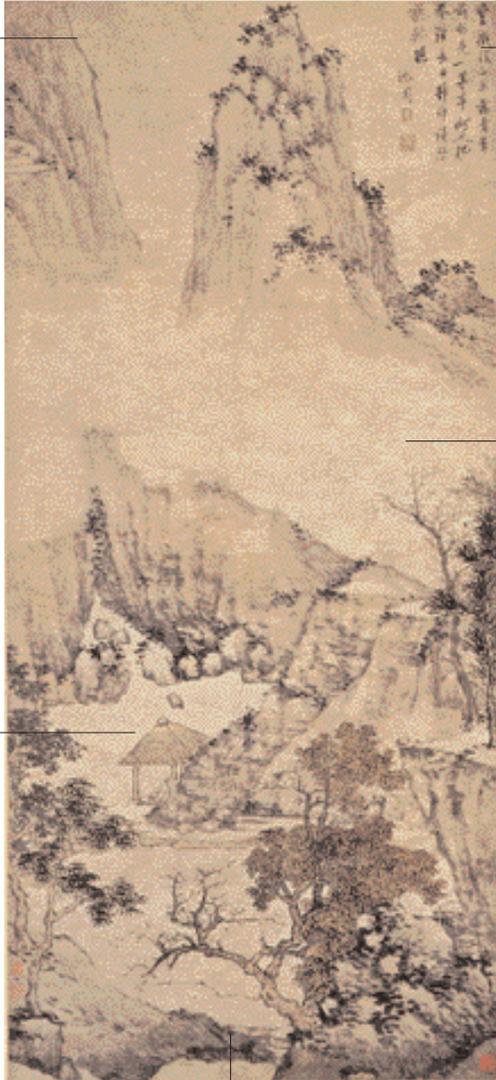


The bamboo, outlined in black and painted in rich tonalities of green, creates a diagonal, accentuated by the wash at upper right.

A second diagonal is created between the grasshopper and the dragonfly. The center of the painting, the virtual meeting point, does not attract attention, instead drawn first to the attractive colors of the bamboo and then led to the study of the insects.

▲ Wu Bing, *Bamboo and Insects*, Southern Song dynasty, circa 1190–1194, album leaf, ink and color on silk, 24.2 x 27 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art.

In his maturity, Shen Zhou, one of the “four masters of the Ming dynasty,” developed an expressive style in which he composed paintings with abstract calligraphic effects.



During the Ming period, a new neo-Confucian theory broke with the concept of the “investigation of things” of the Song period to turn to meditative introspection intended to cultivate the self and thus achieve wisdom: the Dao.

The clouds—the area left white above the foreground landscape—lighten the entire composition and give height and depth to the mountains.

An isolated pavilion invites meditation in a setting of wild beauty.

In terms of painting, the neo-Confucianism of the Ming was expressed by way of the subjective evocation of motifs, which thus replaced the minute description of details.

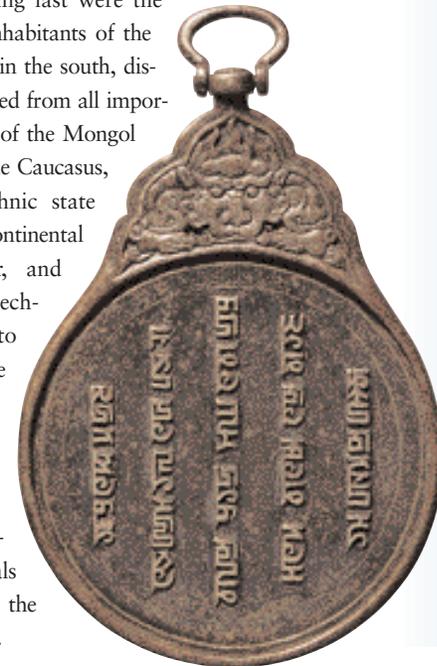
▲ Shen Zhou, *Clouds among Mountains and a Stream*, Ming dynasty, early 16th century, ink and color on paper, 148 x 68.2 cm, Museum of Art, Hong Kong.



“He is a man of good stature . . . His limbs are well fleshed and modeled in due proportion. His complexion is fair and ruddy like a rose, the eyes black and handsome” (Marco Polo)

Kublai Khan

Although he declared himself a promoter of Mongolian politics, Kublai Khan became inserted in the tradition of Chinese civilization, assuming the Chinese dynastic name Yuan (“origin”) in 1271 for his empire, at the time not yet entirely conquered. To avoid being absorbed by the numerically superior Chinese, the Mongols divided the population in four categories kept apart by impassible social barriers: the Mongols paid no taxes and occupied key hereditary positions in the government; their Central Asian allies also enjoyed fiscal privileges and were used in the administration as subordinates or as tax collectors, when they were not involved in commerce. The third category was composed of the inhabitants of northern China—Chinese, Nüzhen, Khitans—and coming last were the “southerners,” the Chinese inhabitants of the territory of the Song dynasty in the south, discriminated against and excluded from all important positions. The extension of the Mongol domination, from China to the Caucasus, and Kublai Khan’s multiethnic state organization facilitated intercontinental exchanges: firearms, paper, and hydraulic and metallurgic techniques traveled all the way to Europe. Mongol inexperience in the field of rural politics, however, led to impoverishment, and after Kublai’s death there were revolts of the peasant population, forced to abandon their fields to build canals and palaces and subjected to the payment of increasing tributes.



◀ Mongol passport (*paizi*), Yuan dynasty, 13th century, iron with silver inlay, 18.1 cm high, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Emperor
 Period
 Yuan (1271–1368)
 Reign
 1271–1294
 Family name
 Borjigin
 Given name
 Kublai
 Temple name
 Shizu
 Related entries
 Barbarian dynasties,
 Theater, Beijing

The genre of portraiture of the imperial family began taking shape during the Song period and was continued during the Mongol domination, reflecting the identity of the foreigners, made clear in their facial features and clothing.



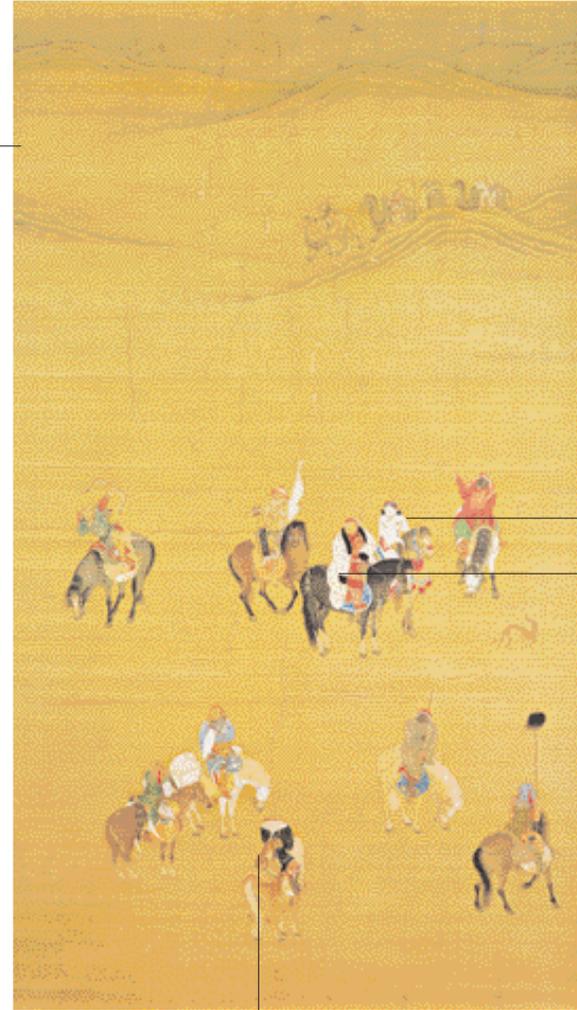
The imperial family was careful to maintain Mongol habits and customs, in part because they were deeply tied to them and in part to avoid being seen as having betrayed their culture in the eyes of the Mongol aristocracy.

The portraits of the Mongol emperors were held in state temples dedicated to Lamaism, which had become the official religion of the Mongols in 1253.

It seems the emperor truly loved his consort—which did not prevent him from frequenting concubines—and that her death threw him into a state of grave depression.

▲ Portrait of the Empress Zhabi, Consort of Shizu (Kublai Khan), Yuan dynasty, 13th century, album leaf, ink and color on silk, 61.5 x 48 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Beginning in the 10th century the representation of the life and customs of nomadic peoples became a common pictorial genre. Among that genre's favorite subjects were hunting and horseback sports, pastimes the Chinese had abandoned after the 8th century.



Perhaps the painter intended to emphasize the emperor's Mongolian origin. The subject of the painting itself must have seemed strange to the Chinese, but in addition there is the presence of a woman along with men of clearly foreign extraction.

The painter emphasizes the emperor's regality in every detail but presents him busy in an informal activity in a wild setting, thus breaking with the schemes of royal portraiture known until then.

A hunting dog, a feline crouching behind a rider, and a falcon resting on the hand of a rider accompany the men during their hunt.

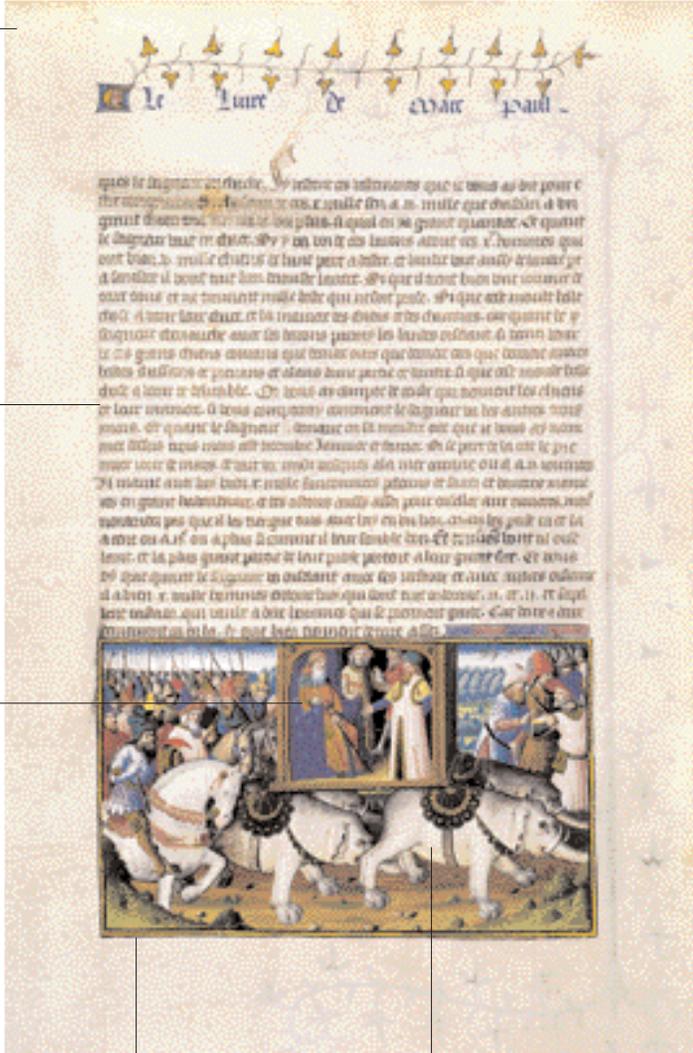
▲ Liu Guandao, *Kublai Khan Hunting*, Southern Song dynasty, dated 1200, vertical scroll, ink and color on silk, 182.9 x 104.1 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

In 1298, held prisoner of war in Genoa, the Venetian Marco Polo dictated a report of his trip to the Orient and the seventeen years spent at the court of Kublai Khan to fellow prisoner, a Pisan named Rustichello.

Polo's description of the splendors of the court and the wealth of the cities seemed so incredible to 14th-century European readers that they took it for pure invention.

The Mongol khan was described with great respect: the Venetian emphasized not only the magnificence of the ruler, surrounded by splendid comforts, but gave admiring descriptions of his cosmopolitanism and his efficient administration.

▲ Workshop of the Boucicaut Master, Kublai Khan in a Sedan Chair Carried by Elephants and His Followers on Horseback, 1412, page with miniature from the *Livre des Merveilles du Monde* by Marco Polo, 14th century, Folio 42, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.



In his role of foreign merchant, Marco Polo found himself in a privileged position compared to the native Chinese, who were the victims of the hierarchy of Mongolian society.

The figures and settings of the Mongol court were of a style completely unknown to the 14th-century European artist, who had certainly never seen an elephant and who gave the Mongols classical European features.



“We have been chosen by our people to occupy the imperial throne of China in the dynastic name of the ‘Great Luminosity’” (Hongwu)

Hongwu

Son of poverty-stricken peasants, a Buddhist monk, then leader one of the many secret societies that rose in rebellion at the end of the Yuan dynasty, this future ruler triumphed over the various factions struggling for power then forced the Mongols to withdraw to the interior of Mongolia. Known by the dynasty-era name of Hongwu, the emperor improved the lot of the poor masses with the hereditary division of the population into farmers, soldiers, and artisans. The farmers were grouped in small autonomous administrative units, responsible for their own census and the collection of taxes. The soldiers were given allotments of previously untilled land so they could provide for their own sustenance. The artisans worked in the imperial factories or were at least obliged to perform temporary services. Most of the tax revenue came from the pockets of the merchants, looked upon as parasites. Hongwu, forced to depend on councilors from the literati class, but highly distrustful of them, eliminated all hereditary roles and strengthened the Confucian system of national exams. The heads of ministries and other high offices had to report directly to the emperor, to the detriment of the imperial chancellery. This dangerous concentration of power led, under his successors, to the growing power of the eunuchs.



Emperor
Period
Ming (1368–1644)
Reign
1368–1398
Family name
Zhu
Given name
Xingzong, later
Yuanzhang
Temple name
Taizu
Posthumous name
Gao
Era name
Hongwu
Terms
Luminosity (<i>ming</i>)
Vast military (<i>Hongwu</i>)
Related entries
Eunuchs, Officials and literati, Ceramics, Technology and industries, Nanking, Beijing

◀Portrait of the Emperor Hongwu, Ming dynasty, end 14th century, vertical scroll, ink and color on silk, 268.8 x 163.8 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Hongwu's tomb complex, built between 1381 and 1383, is near Nanjing, the city that he chose, as first emperor of the Ming dynasty, as his capital.

Geomancers identified a spot in the Purple Mountains (Zhongshan) as the ideal location to erect the tomb. The site was then occupied by the Ling Gu monastery, founded in the 6th century, but the emperor had it relocated to the north.

This enormous stele is enclosed within the walls of a pavilion that long ago lost its original timber roof; it marks the beginning of the Sacred Way that leads to the tomb complex.



The stele was erected by Hongwu's son, the emperor Yongle, three years after his illicit appropriation of the throne, and it commemorates the deeds and virtues of his father.

The turtle is the animal of the north, symbol of long life and constancy. The turtles that support imperial commemorative steles often have dragon-shaped heads.

▲ Commemorative stele to the emperor Hongwu, Ming dynasty, 1405, stone, 8.8 m high, Xiaoling tomb complex, Sifangcheng, Nanjing.

Wang Meng was one of the many literati who suffered harsh punishments following the installation of the Ming: imprisoned for having looked at paintings together with another man later condemned for treason, he himself died in prison.

Last of the "Four great masters of the Yuan dynasty," Wang Meng made liberal use of stylistic elements and techniques from the entire history of Chinese landscape painting to develop his own expressive style, admired and imitated by later painters.

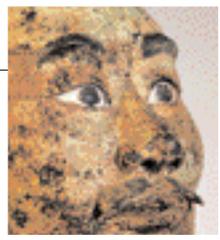
The human presence is limited to small huts located on the edges of the composition.



The paintings made after the foundation of the dynasty in 1368 are dense, almost obsessive in their tendency to completely cram the surface, whereas this landscape is given luminosity and breadth by its few empty spaces.

The famous critic Dong Qichang (1555–1636) said of this painting, "Master Wang's brushstrokes are strong enough to lift a tripod; for five hundred years there has been no one like him."

► Wang Meng, *The Qingbian Mountains*, Ming dynasty, dated 1366, ink on paper, 141 x 42 cm, Shanghai Museum.



Yongle

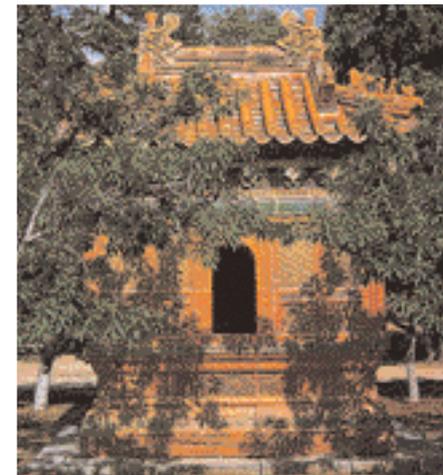
Over the course of the Yuan dynasty, the Jingdezhen kilns, located in southern China, developed a porcelain with a transparent underglaze painted decoration that profoundly influenced ceramic production.

The underglaze technique involved a first firing at high temperature, after which the "bisque" was decorated and covered by a transparent glaze and fired a second time at lower temperature.



"Let commerce flourish on our frontiers and foreigners from distant lands be welcome among us" (Yongle)

Like some of the greatest Chinese rulers, Yongle usurped the throne from the legitimate successor, Hongwu's grandson, and succeeded in legitimizing his seizure of power with a farsighted government and large-scale territorial expansion. To more adequately protect the northern borders, he moved the capital northward from Nanjing to the former capital of the Mongols, which now took the name Beijing ("northern capital") After the multi-ethnic governments of the Yuan, the Ming dynasty, with its home-grown roots, was strongly Sino-centric, in some cases resulting in political xenophobia. Emperor Yongle, curious and tolerant in terms of religion, was able to transform nationalism into a productive attitude. Under his rule six great maritime expeditions were carried out that took Chinese emissaries as far as the eastern coast of Africa, demonstrating China's high level of technology as well as the intense diplomatic and mercantile activity of China at that time. The *Yongle Encyclopedia*, compiled by more than three thousand literati in four years of research and collected in 22,877 books, was to contain all the scientific knowledge of the time as well as the text of every book written in China. The manuscript, completed in 1408, was lost; fragments of a 16th-century copy are all that remain today.



The copper-red decoration is typical of the Hongwu period. Its production required great skill since the tonalities and the quality of the color depended on constant atmospheric conditions during the firing in the kiln.

The inside of the bowl is decorated with peony flowers, while the outside is painted with chrysanthemums. Both motifs often appear often in the repertory of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

▲ Bowl, Ming dynasty, Hongwu reign, 1368–1398, porcelain with copper-red underglaze decoration, 15.6 cm high, 40 cm diam., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Emperor
 Period
 Ming (1368–1644)
 Reign
 1402–1424
 Family name
 Zhu
 Proper name
 Di
 Temple name
 Chengzu
 Posthumous name
 Taizong
 Name at the time
 Yongle
 Terms
 Perpetual happiness
 (*yongle*)
Yongle Encyclopedia
 (*Yongle Dadian*)
 Northern capital
 (Beijing)

Related entries
 Eunuchs, Officials and literati, Ceramics, Technology and industries, Nanjing, Beijing
 ◀ Sacrificial oven (for burnt offerings) at the tomb of Emperor Yongle, Ming dynasty, 1409–1472, glazed terracotta, wood, bricks, Changling, Beijing.

It is not known when the Central Asian technique of cloisonné was introduced to China, but the oldest examples known today date to the early 15th century.

The technique of cloisonné consists in the creation of decorative designs on a metal vessel by soldering copper or bronze wires to it and filling the areas with a colored-glass paste that is then melted when the vessel is fired at a temperature of about 800°C.



Lotus flowers in red, blue, yellow, and white stand out against a background of deep turquoise, surrounded by volutes of green leaves.

Initially condemned as vulgar and showy, cloisonné wares were highly appreciated in the second half of the Ming dynasty as well as during the Qing.

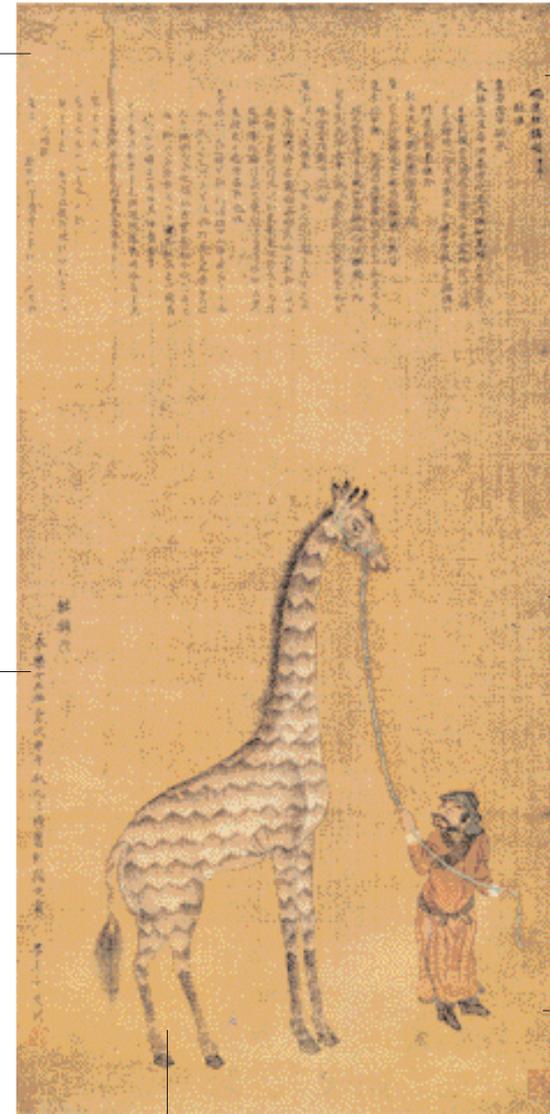
The metallic wire of this plate has been gilded along the scalloped edges, on the two inner circles, and along the entire base.

▲ Dish with scalloped rim, Ming dynasty, early 15th century, cloisonné, 15.2 cm diam., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Between 1414 and 1433 the Muslim eunuch Zheng He (1371–1435), nominated admiral of the Chinese fleet by the emperor Yongle, led seven large-scale naval expeditions, reaching India and Persia and going as far as Africa.

Despite the diplomatic and commercial successes obtained by the fleet, the most modern of its time, the costly trips were criticized after the death of Yongle and were ultimately suspended after the final 1433 expedition, in which the elderly admiral died.

▲ Tribute Giraffe with Attendant, Ming dynasty, dated 1414, vertical scroll, ink and color on silk, 171.5 x 53.3 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Zheng He returned from his first expedition with two giraffes, highly prized by the Chinese because they were associated with the unicorn, a mythical animal that signaled the presence of a wise and benevolent ruler.

At least sixty-two transoceanic ships, each more than 400 feet long with holds large enough for 1,500 tons, accompanied by more than one hundred smaller ships, carried crews numbering more than 30,000.

Emperor Yongle clearly intended to use this enormous fleet to make clear the glory and power of the new China, which had freed itself from foreign rule only a few years earlier

For the first time direct official contacts were made between the Chinese court and several African countries, which sent ambassadors and precious gifts to Beijing.