

A NEW VISION OF CLASSICAL CHINA

Recent archaeological excavations now shed new light on an ancient civilization

by John H. Douglas

"Let the past serve the present," Mao Tse-tung has said, and certainly no country on earth has a more fertile past on which to draw or a keener awareness of its historical roots than present-day China. Now the people of the United States have a unique opportunity to share that cultural vision through an exhibition of archaeological treasures discovered since the founding of the People's Republic of China. The exhibition opened Dec. 13 and runs through March 30 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

The exhibits range from a scrap of burnt bone some hundreds of thousands of years old, which demonstrates that Peking Man used fire, to the 13th- and 14th-century opulence of intricately decorated porcelains and fastidious metalwork that greeted Marco Polo. All discovered within the last 25 years, the objects cast light into some of the dark recesses of an ancient and often enigmatic civilization, while bringing to the Western public a view of lost beauty of inestimable artistic value.

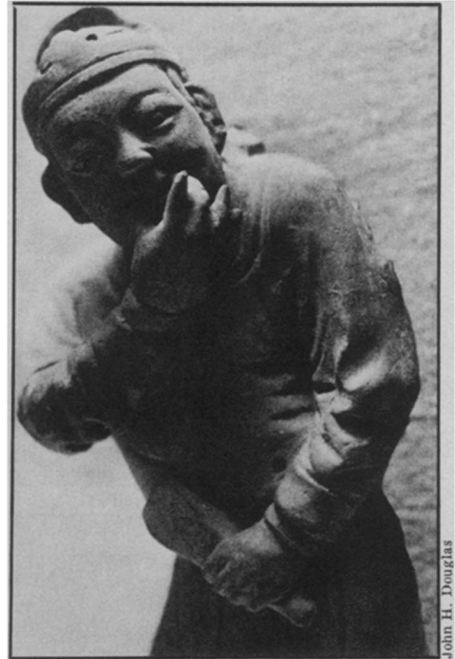
Even millennia before recorded history, Oriental and Western experiences had diverged. Blessed with geography and climate that permits intensive, two-crop-a-year agriculture, Neolithic inhabitants of East Asia became sedentary farmers while most Europeans and West Asians were still nomadic. Exhibited pottery shows that by 4000 B.C. a "Painted Pottery Culture" had grown up around the Wei River of Northern China, with kilns that could reach 1,000 degrees C. The decorative marks and signs are connected with the start of writing, and shiny polished surfaces presage the later search for glazes. By 2000 B.C. a "Black Pottery Culture" along the Yellow River was using potter's wheels to produce delicate, glossy black cups and vases with walls only a half millimeter thick, to-

(Left) Tang Dynasty Buddhist "temple guardian." (Right) Bronze knocker from Warring States Period. (Below) Jade burial suit, sewn with gold thread, of 2nd century B.C. princess.

gether with sturdier, three-legged kettles for heating liquids directly in a fire.

Impenetrable mountains to the south and west and a great desert to the north isolated the developing culture from the more mobile civilizations of the West, so that when a great Bronze Age flowered during the "Shang Culture" of the second millennium B.C., its products were distinct from any produced elsewhere. The unique earlier cooking vessels with three hollow legs now reappear in bronze, with ferocious animal masks on the sides, which become more abstract and stylistic as time goes on. Most of those on display had some ceremonial use and one rare vessel bearing realistic human faces may have been used in the sacrifice of slaves, a common practice at the time. Another ceremonial device displayed is an "oracle bone"—the shoulder blade of an ox upon which questions were written before the bone was heated to see how it would crack, the direction of the cracks providing an answer to the question. Some 5,000 writing characters have been found on these ancient bones, and they provide a dramatic demonstration of the continuity of Chinese civilization, for though they represent the oldest written language yet discovered in China, nearly half the ideographs are clearly recognizable as forerunners of modern characters. It is as if a modern English schoolboy could make out half the inscriptions of his Druid ancestors.

Much of the first millennium B.C. was spent in fighting among the large principalities that then made up China, and to some extent, the arts visibly suffered. Finely textured, hard-glazed "protoporcelains" of the Shang gave way to more hastily created pottery, designed for utilitarian purposes; but metal craftsmen were highly valued for their skill in making weapons, and their techniques quickly developed a remarkable sophistication. Exhibits from one particularly disruptive era, called the "Warring States Period" (475-221 B.C.), include a giant bronze knocker, which probably once adorned a palace

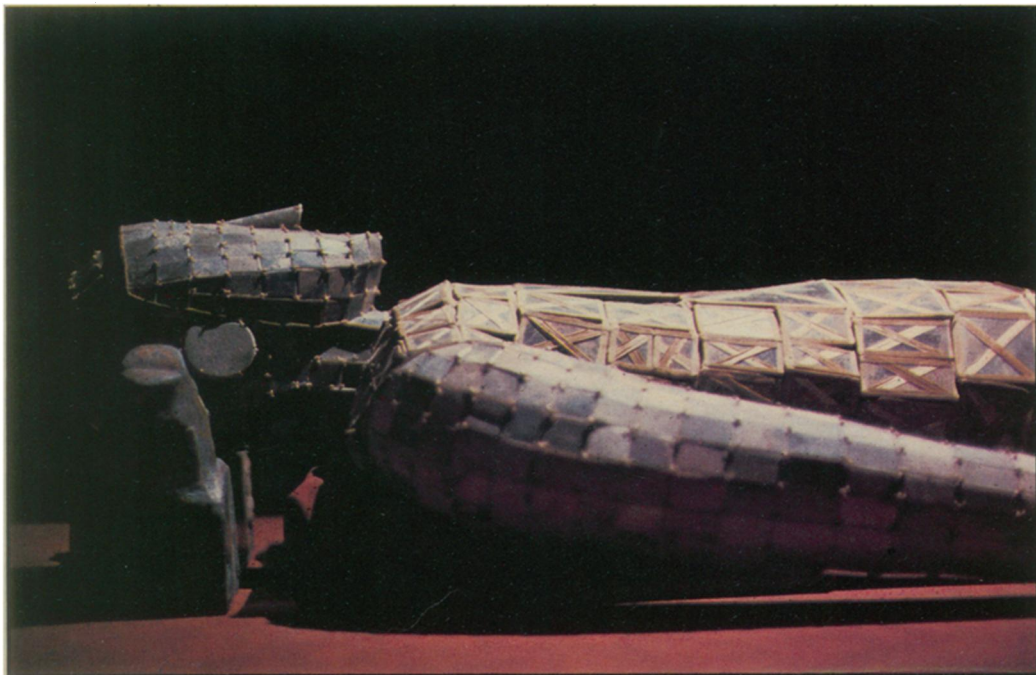


Whistling actor from the 14th century.

door. It could only have been made using an advanced technique known as the "lost wax" method of casting. Also shown are molds for casting iron axes and sickles—some 17 centuries before the technique was used in the West (where only forging, not casting, of iron had been accomplished). Development of iron swords and invention of the first crossbow during this period only exacerbated the constant warfare.

Finally, at the end of the second century B.C., Chin Shih Huang, king of one of the warring states, emerged as the first emperor of a unified China and quickly set about getting things organized. He linked up old fortifications to form the famous Great Wall, built a network of roads and standardized the writing and measuring systems. On display is one of his standard measuring cups, bearing the imperial edict that order must be brought in the matter of weights and measures and "all other systems which are in confusion." The Chin Dynasty fell immediately upon the death of its founder, but the foundations had been laid for the first of the two "Golden Ages" of Chinese history: the Han Dynasty that straddles four centuries around the time of Christ.

Through military power and efficient administration, the Han emperors ruled





Bronze vessel used in ancient rituals.



Wild boar attacked by two tigers.



Tartar groom common in Tang Dynasty



Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, Kuanyin. Yuan Dynasty porcelain.

an empire greater in wealth, population and geographical expanse than that of their contemporaries in Rome, and in a great burst of creative energy, China produced such diverse achievements as the invention of paper (a thousand

years before Europe), water-powered mills, a government-wide civil service system based on competitive examinations that has still to be matched in the West, and the use of coal to smelt iron. A trade route was established as far west as Persia, along which passed the silk brocades of China (several are on display) in return for glass from Rome, horses from Central Asia, and perhaps most important of all, grape wine. (Previously, Chinese wine had been a black stuff made from millet, and so enthusiastic was one emperor over the new substance that he ordered vast conquests to get at the vineyards. Wrote a contemporary, Li Chi: "Each year we bury in the desert bones unnumbered, yet we only watch for grape vines coming into China.")

The opulence of the period is evident from the exhibits, which include a solid jade funeral suit, sewn together with gold thread. (Jade was thought to preserve the body after death.) As gold became more important in decoration, Han craftsmen developed the technique of "fire gilding," in which an amalgam of gold and mercury was painted on bronze, and the mercury vaporized. Bronze sculpture also became more realistic, as shown most vividly by the "flying horse" (see cover) that has become the exhibition's most popular attraction. These sinewy, long-legged "celestial" horses had been imported from what is now Russian Turkestan. Of particular archaeological importance is the exhibit of Han period bronzes from the neighboring kingdom of Tien, a barbarian client state of China whose art displays an unusual vigor. In one piece, a very realistic boar writhes under attack by two tigers, whose claws gouge into his rough skin.

Like Rome, the Han Dynasty could not survive its own surfeit: Population outstripped resources, a privileged few concentrated the wealth while tax burdens on the masses grew intolerably, and an army of mercenaries divided its loyalty among competing warlords. Eventually the system was too weakened to defend itself against two great external challenges—barbarian attacks from the north and the sweep of a religion from the west, Buddhism. During the chaotic three centuries that followed, called the "Six Dynasties" period, Buddhist demand for sacred images produced a new generation of sculpture, and pottery craftsmen continued to experiment with new glazes and forms; but another flowering of art and technology had to await an era of stability. Again this came through military reunification of the country under a brief, but powerful Sui Dynasty, followed by the second "Golden Age," the Tang Dynasty (seventh through ninth centuries A.D.).

This eruption of energetic creativity was even more cosmopolitan than the first. Trade routes to the West were reopened and the capital city of Changan reportedly had thousands of foreign residents. New status symbols among the wealthy were bearded Tartar grooms whose fierce countenances and exaggerated noses became a favorite subject of Tang sculptors. The era saw invention of gunpowder, block printing and the first freely circulated paper money (then, as now, the temptation to print more money than one could redeem proved too much to resist). Potters developed techniques for using three or more colors in their glazes, and the method found its most imaginative use in the grotesque Buddhist images of temple guardians. The tombs of two Tang Dynasty princes were unearthed only two years ago and the exhibited paintings and figurines from these sites vividly portray courtly life of the times.

Deterioration of the Tang Dynasty and a short period of disunity called the "Five Dynasties" era did little to retard the development of the industrial arts and incidentally gave rise to some of the finest poetry ever produced, as exiled scholars roamed the mountains lamenting: "How within this world, within this grain of dust, can there be room for the passions of men?" In the succeeding Sung Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) the art of pottery reached a dual point of perfection: "Lungchuan ware," a thick-glazed celadon that was often modeled in green to mimic ancient bronze or jade works, and "Ting ware," a true porcelain—hard, translucent, pure white and producing a ringing sound when tapped.

Unlike Europe, when the barbarian hordes finally succeeded in overrunning China, they did not destroy the culture they found, though in some ways it froze in time and became less innovative. The exhibition ends with China as Marco Polo found it during the Mongol Yuan Dynasty of the 13th and 14th centuries A.D. Some old themes are raised to new heights, as in the stately figure of the Buddhist deity Kuanyin, the Goddess of Mercy. A new technique is introduced, the "underglazing" of blue decorations that produced the famous "china" that was soon to be traded throughout Europe and colonies of a New World. And with the Mongols came a new emphasis on the lively arts, witnessed by the sprightly figures of actors and dancers shown. A new China was emerging, and despite later bouts of xenophobia, it would never be completely isolated again. What the present exhibition provides is the best opportunity most Westerners have ever had of glimpsing the older, classical China—a view both awesome and intimately touching. □