Orientations

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Four articles in this issue relate to 'The Glory of the Silk Road: Art from Ancient China', which opens at The Dayton Art Institute on 8 February. In addition, Jane Casey introduces some of the objects that will be on view from 16 March in 'Divine Presence: Arts of India and the Himalayas', the inaugural exhibition at Casa Asia in Barcelona, and Jean-Paul Desroches has selected six examples of *huanghuali* furniture from an exhibition of the Lu Ming Shi Collection, opening at the Musée Guimet in Paris on 19 March.

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Cover: Cup
Unearthed in 1970, Hejia village,
southern suburbs of Xi'an
Tang period, late 7th century
Gilt silver
Height 6.6 cm
Shaanxi Lishi Bowuguan

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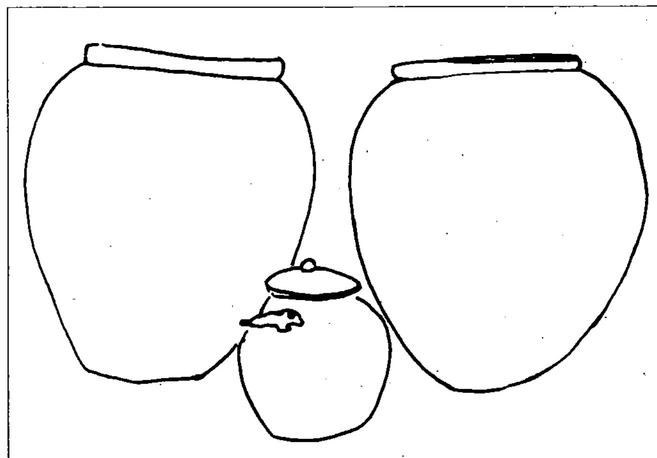
The Hejia Village Hoard: A Snapshot of China's Silk Road Trade

Valerie Hansen

Sometime after 732, someone carefully placed over 1,000 precious items layer by layer into two clay jars, each half a metre high, and into a smaller silver jar with loop handles (Fig. 1). The three containers were then buried about a metre deep into the ground in Chang'an, the capital of the Tang dynasty (618-906) and modern-day Xi'an in Shaanxi province. At the time, Chang'an, was the eastern terminus of the Silk Road, which comprised the various overland routes linking China with Central Asia, India, Iran and points further west. Holding one of the largest hoards ever found in China, the containers lay undisturbed for over 1,000 years until 1970, when archaeologists uncovered them south of Xi'an in Hejia village, for which the hoard is named.

The collection was buried in the Xinghua ward (*fang*), which lay roughly one kilometre southeast of the Western Market, Chang'an's main emporium for imported goods, and three kilometres from the Eastern Market, where domestically produced items were for sale (Fig. 2). Both markets were rectangular, with walls marking off an area one kilometre square. Tang officials strictly regulated these two markets, making sure that the gates closed at sunset and opened at daybreak, and checking to ensure the price of staples did not stray from stipulated levels. The red-light district by the Western Market offered illicit pleasures as well: young examination candidates could spend both their days and their fathers' allowances there.



(Fig. 1) Line drawing of two clay pots and a silver jar with a loop handle
Unearthed in 1970, Hejia village, southern suburbs of Xi'an
Tang period, 8th century
Heights (from left) 64 cm, 25.2 cm and 63.5 cm
Shaanxi Sheng Wenwuju

(Fig. 2) Map of Chang'an by the Qing scholar Wang Senwen
(After *Kaogu*, 1963:11, facing p. 610)

The Western Market was home to the sizeable community of Central Asian merchants in Chang'an. The largest contingent came from the area around Samarkand, in modern-day Uzbekistan. They spoke the lingua franca of the Silk Road, Sogdian, a language related to Middle Persian. Most were adherents of either Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism, both religions of Iranian origin. The Tang capital contained at least six Manichaean and Zoroastrian temples, five of which were located near the Western Market. Excavated documents from Turfan reveal that these Sogdian traders registered their families as legal non-residents so that they could go on business trips, leaving their wives and children in Chang'an.

The Western Market offered a haven not just for well-off Silk Road merchants and their families but also for metalworkers who

specialized in making gold and silver vessels. These craftsmen brought to China some of the world's most advanced techniques for working gold and silver, developed in Samarkand and Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sassanian empire (224-651), near modern-day Baghdad. Many came as refugees during the expansion of the Islamic caliphate, which conquered Ctesiphon in 651 and Samarkand in 712, swelling the non-Chinese community in many Tang cities. A trickle of gold and silver plates from the Iranian world made their way to China before the founding of the Tang dynasty, but Iranian-style gold and silver vessels became enormously popular during the Tang because of the belief that drinking from them brought good health and long life.

Apart from the 255 stunning gold and silver items in the collection, the hoard also contains silver ingots, medicines, carved minerals, gems and a most unusual coin collection. The following chart indicating the list of goods is based on the excavation report:

We have no way of knowing if less durable items like textiles or books, which have since perished, were buried at Hejia village. Nor do we know the owner's identity, though the article by Qi Dongfang in this issue opens up several interesting lines of investigation. Some of the most striking items from Hejia village are included in 'The Glory of the Silk Road: Art from Ancient China', an exhibition which opens at the Dayton Art Institute on 8 February. From June 2003, part of the Hejia village collection will also be on display at the Sackler Museum in Beijing.

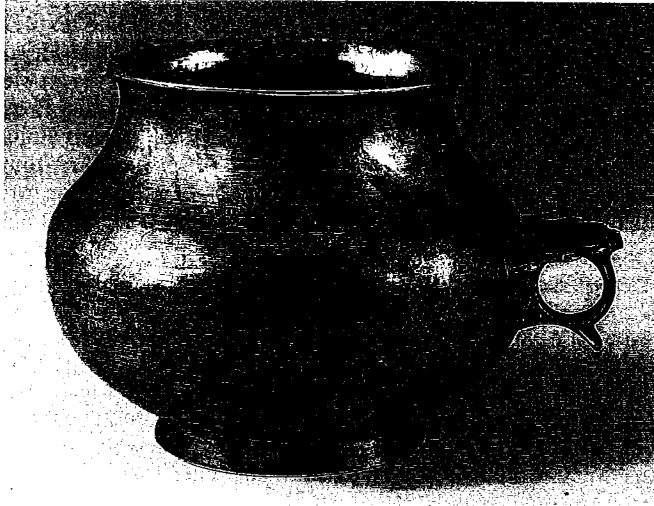
This collection in many ways confirms what the Silk Road was and what it was not. It was a route along which people, art, religion and culture moved – not a conveyor of trade goods by the ton. Few Silk Road artefacts in this collection (or in similar collections in China and around the world) are items that can be proven to have travelled the vast expanse between China and the West. Although the designs and motifs of the Hejia village hoard display influences that could only have come by way of

Hejiacun Village Find Chart

Gold		Silver		Coins	
3	eating vessels	55	bowls	1	knife of '*Jimo*' from the kingdom of Qi
5	drinking cups	53	plates	1	shovel-shaped coin of Spring and Autumn Period
3	gold medicine containers	6	platters	4	early Han dynasty coins
2	washing basins	12	drinking cups	11	coins from the reign of Wang Mang
10	hair pins	46	medicine containers	2	Six Dynasties coins
2	armlets	12	washing basins	1	'*Gaochang jili*' coin from Turfan (5th/6th century)
12	miniature dragons	1	lamp head (?)	1	Byzantine solidus of Heraclius (r. 610-640)
1	comb base	4	jugs	1	Sassanian drachm of Khusrau II (r. 590-628)
4388	grams gold foil	1	incense burner	5	Japanese silver coins with the legend '*Wado kaichin*' (708-15)
126	grams of gold dust	1	spherical censer	421	silver (including some bronze?) Tang dynasty coins with the legend '*Kaiyuan tongbao*'
		1	box		
		23	fasteners	30	gold '*Kaiyuan tongbao*' coins
		1	vessel with a spout		

Minerals and Glass				Medicines	
1	agate cup with gold bull head	1	white agate horse harness	1	block of yellow lead (litharge)
1	agate wine cup	34	white jade belt decorations	15	types of mineral powder, all in inscribed containers, including stalactite and gold.
1	agate mortar	7	sapphires		
1	jade pestle	2	rubies		
1	white jade wine cup	6	green agates		
1	block of jade	1	topaz		
1	crystal cup	2	white jade bracelets with gold decorations		
1	glass bowl	3	pieces of coral		
9	ceremonial hip belts	10	pieces of amber		

(Based on information in the preliminary site report published as 'Xi'an nanjiao Hejiacun faxian Tangdai jiaozang wenwu', *Wenwu* 1972:.1, pp. 30-42)



(Fig. 3) Cup with handle
Unearthed in 1970, Hejia village, southern suburbs of Xi'an
Tang period/Sogdiana, late 7th/early 8th century
Silver
Height 9.5 cm, diameter 7 cm

the Silk Road, the majority of items were made domestically from local materials. This article will examine the quantity and relative size of different items in the hoard in order to suggest a rough index of the goods with the greatest intrinsic worth in Tang society. As the hoard was unearthed during the Cultural Revolution and never published in its entirety, a detailed examination of the collection will have to rely on miscellaneous archaeological reports and exhibition catalogues.

The hoard contains 38 gold items, some as small as a hairpin or a miniature dragon, and 216 silver items, which tend to be larger. The silver objects include 45 plain bowls, ranging in diameter from 11 to 23.7 centimetres, and 51 plates, with diameters from 12.3 to 18.1 centimetres, whose very quantity argues against their having too high a value. There are 55 silver bowls but only 3 gold ones, a clear indication that silver was more readily available.

These items testify to the extraordinary variety of gold and silver vessels in use during the Tang dynasty. Some, like a jar-shaped silver cup with a footring, have a highly polished silver surface but are unadorned (Fig. 3). Others are decorated with extraordinarily elaborate and sophisticated motifs, almost all originating in the Iranian world.

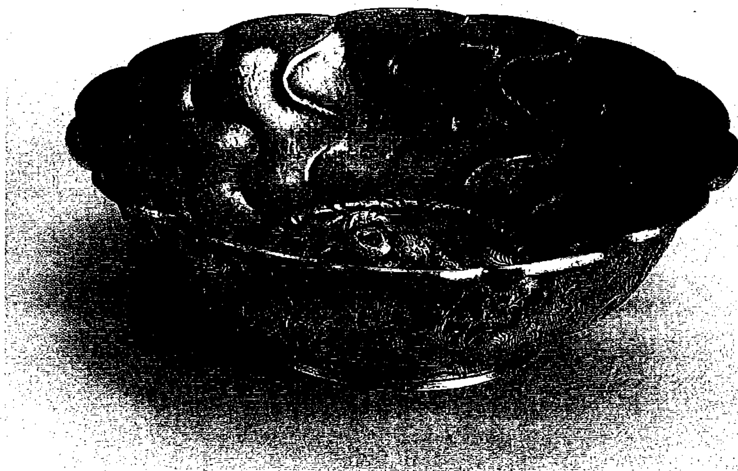
Scholars of Tang gold and silver (Qi Dongfang foremost among them) trace an evolution from vessel types manufactured in the Iranian world to later, more hybrid types produced within the Chinese empire to suit prevailing tastes, such as the bowl with fourteen fluted lobes in Figure 4. The style of its base is Sassanian, but the use of ducks is typically Chinese. Seventh century vessels tend to have eight or more lobes, while later vessels from the ninth century may have only four or five. Accordingly we may conclude that this is one of the earliest silver vessels in the hoard to have been made in China. The fluted lobes each portray different animals – rabbits, birds, rams, deer – surrounded by floral motifs, while the interior base shows a sea creature flanked by two ducks. When filled with liquid, the playful creature and ducks would have looked as though they were romping in the waves.

The impact of Iranian design on Chinese taste is also visible in a small gold three-footed bowl with a handle, used to warm liquids like medicine and wine (Fig. 5). Nine sections on the exterior show lions and ribbon-carrying birds, both auspicious symbols in Iranian art. On the interior base stand a pair of lions surrounded by a pearl border, a motif in Iranian art that first appeared on plates, wall paintings and textiles in the sixth century (Fig. 5a). Similar bowls in other collections are almost always made out of silver.

An octagonal silver cup shows how beautifully craftsmen in China could integrate Iranian motifs (Fig. 6). The cup's shape and handle reflect the influence of Sogdian vessel types. The top of the handle juxtaposes two faces with distinctively Western eyes and noses, and the cup's eight faces showcase dancers and musicians, each clearly non-Chinese. Every one of the eight faces, as well as the cup's rim, is edged with a characteristic Sogdian pearl border.

A second octagonal cup artfully combines several Sogdian features: an eight-lobed shape, a pearl-border trim, and an elaborate thumb ring (Figs 7 and 7a). The exterior alternates scenes of hunters on horseback – a staple of Sassanian art – with domestic scenes of Chinese women playing musical instruments, looking in a mirror, playing with children and dancing. Clearly its maker was moved by the same impulse to show the larger world that underlay contemporary wall paintings from the Sogdian homeland of Samarkand, where archaeologists have excavated a complete room of paintings in a nobleman's house at Afrosiab (see Marshak, figs 5 and 6). A juxtaposition of scenes similar to that on the cup may be seen in one of the paintings where the Chinese emperor is shown engaged in hunting as well as a Chinese princess with her ladies-in-waiting.

The hoard also includes sixteen pieces of raw metal that provide valuable information about silver production during the Tang period. Four silver ingots were incised with text identifying them as tax silver from Jian'an and Huaiji sub-prefectures (both in Guangdong province) that had been paid in 732, the nineteenth year of the Kaiyuan reign (713-41).

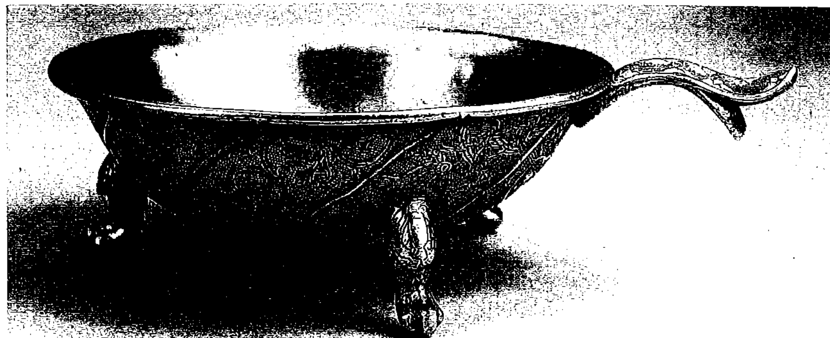


(Fig. 4) Bowl
Unearthed in 1970, Hejia village, southern suburbs of Xi'an
Tang period, 7th century
Silver with traces of gilding
Height 3.2 cm, diameter 11 cm

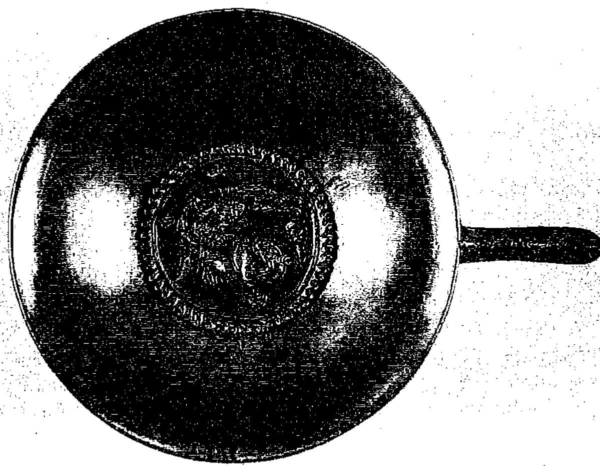
The inscriptions on the ingots also gave their exact weights and the names of the officials who verified the weights. The *zuyongdiao* system of the Tang required people to pay their taxes in grain (*zu*), corvée labour (*yong*) and cloth (*diao*), but certain localities could substitute other goods, such as these ingots, to fulfill their tax obligations.

In contrast to the four ingots, which retain the shape in which local officials forwarded them to Chang'an, the presence of twelve large lumps of silver show that Tang government officials melted down the silver they received to make larger pieces, some weighing as much as eight kilograms. These lumps of unworked silver bear characters in black ink giving the name of the government storehouse where they were held ('Dongshiku', the Eastern Market Storehouse), their weight and the name of the official who weighed them. Many of the silver plates and bowls in the hoard also have ink markings, with their weight, an indication that they, too, were kept in a storehouse where officials recorded their weight.

The Hejia village hoard contains tax silver at three stages of its life-cycle: in ingots submitted by the locality, in larger lumps made from the ingots, and in final finished form as silver vessels. As all four tax ingots are dated 732, we know that the hoard must have been buried at that time or later, but probably not too much later, since tax ingots were melted down into larger lumps after their receipt.



(Fig. 5) Three-footed bowl with handle
Unearthed in 1970, Hejia village, southern suburbs of Xi'an
Tang period, late 7th/early 8th century
Gold
Height 3.4 cm, diameter 9.2 cm



(Fig. 5a) Interior of the bowl in Figure 5

The presence of fifteen different types of powdered drugs indicates the importance of medicine for the hoard's owner. Silver containers bear labels giving the weight and grade of the medicine; for example, '*shangshang ru*' ('stalactite of upper-upper grade') or '*cishang ru*' ('stalactite of medium-upper grade'). The hoard held over two kilograms of three different grades of stalactite powder, the result of soaking stalactites in water to produce a powder whose main ingredient was calcium carbonate. Crediting stalactite with both soothing the nerves and imparting energy, Tang medical books recommend a daily dose of some forty grams for courses of 100 or 200 days. In addition, the owner buried 126 grams of gold dust, also valued for its medicinal purposes, as well as a block of litharge, an oxide of lead used in skin medicines to heal lesions, blemishes and wounds.

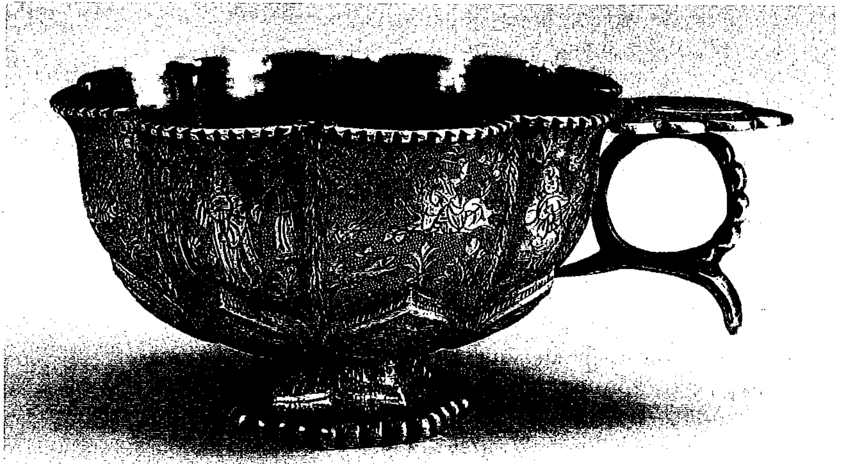
(Fig. 6) Cup
Unearthed in 1970, Hejia village, southern suburbs of Xi'an
Tang period, late 7th century
Gilt silver
Height 6.6 cm

The use of silver containers as storage vessels for various medicines indicates that silver was not especially rare, an impression supported by the large number of silver implements in the Hejia village hoard. What, then, was genuinely scarce during the eighth century? The collection contains far fewer items carved from minerals: jade sections for seven belts, a white jade cup, a jade pestle and an agate mortar, agate harness ornaments, an agate wine vessel, and most unusually, a rhyton-shaped cup made of agate with a golden nose (see fig. 8 in Qi Dongfang's article). The owner may have possessed fewer items made of jade and agate because they were scarcer than gold and silver, but we must allow for individual taste, too – perhaps he simply did not appreciate them.

Rock crystal, prized for its translucence, must have commanded a high price. The hoard contains a single item made of this material. The cup, which stands only 2.5 centimetres high, has eight lobes that are so thin they verge on the translucent (Fig. 8). Unlike gold and silver, rock crystal had to be carved with the greatest of care, as a single error could shatter the vessel. Official Tang histories mention crystal cups given by the ruler of Samarkand to the Tang emperor, but there is no way of

knowing whether or not this cup was such an example.

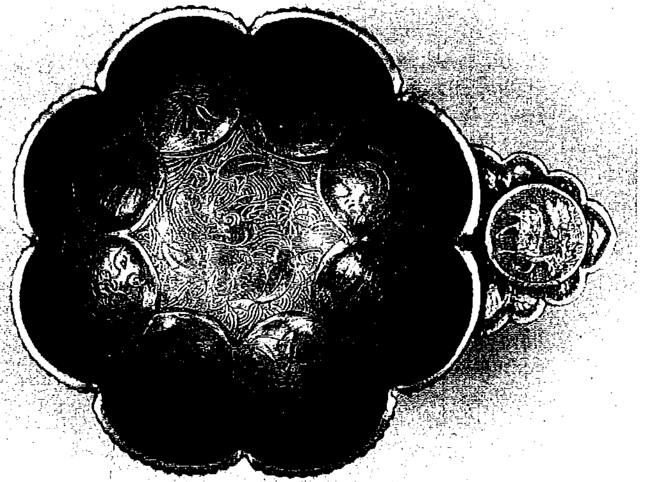
Rock crystal is a naturally occurring form of quartz, free of imperfections and as clear as glass. Its main constituent is silica, the major ingredient in glass. In the past, many Chinese confused naturally occurring crystal with man-made glass, both of which they prized for their translucence. Today people do actually make high-grade glass by melting pure rock crystal, but the process requires a temperature in excess of 1,700°C. Historically, glassmakers used a combination of sand, limestone and sodium carbonate, which melted at a more manageable temperature. Only one glass vessel was found in the hoard: a bowl which was most likely imported. While the earliest opaque glass beads made in China date to the first millennium BCE, translucent glass proved much more difficult to make. Consequently, clear glass was one of the most sought-after items travelling from the Middle East along overland trade routes into China.



(Fig. 7) Cup
Unearthed in 1970 in Hejia village, southern suburbs of Xi'an
Tang period, early 8th century
Gilt silver
Height 5.1 cm, diameter 9.1 cm

The smallest items in the hoard, and possibly those with the greatest intrinsic value, were sixteen gemstones placed in a gilt silver container: seven sapphires, two rubies, one topaz and six agates (Fig. 9). The topaz, at 119 grams, was the largest and one of the rubies, at 2.5 grams, the smallest. None of these stones could be mined within the Tang empire. In addition to other sources, Sri Lanka and Burma provided sapphires, rubies and topazes, while India was famous for its green agates. These precious stones, then, are among the very few items in the hoard that were imported.

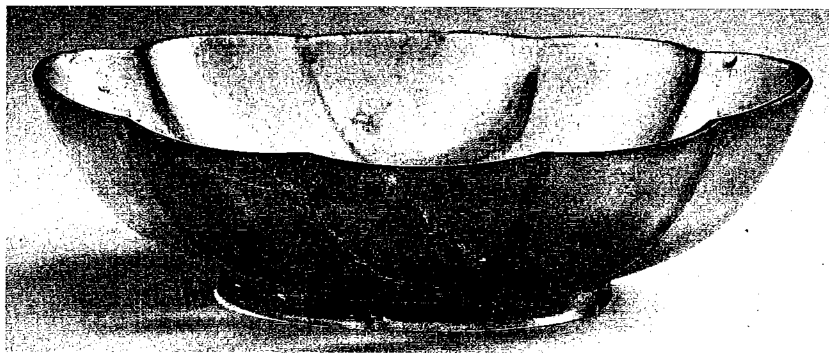
The collection of 478 coins is most puzzling because they are not from the same time period. If they had been minted at the same time, we could imagine that the owner was trying to protect his ready cash from robbers or plundering soldiers. But the group includes both contemporary and ancient, non-Chinese and Chinese coins. Two pieces of money shaped respectively like a shovel and a knife are of great antiquity. They mark the first form of coinage in China, dating from *circa* 500 BCE. Fifteen coins date from the Han period (206 BCE-CE 220), of which eleven are from Wang Mang's short-lived reign (9-23). Two Chinese coins are from the Six Dynasties period of disunity (317-589). These suggest that the owner was a connoisseur and collector of rare coins, interested in more than simply hoarding cash.



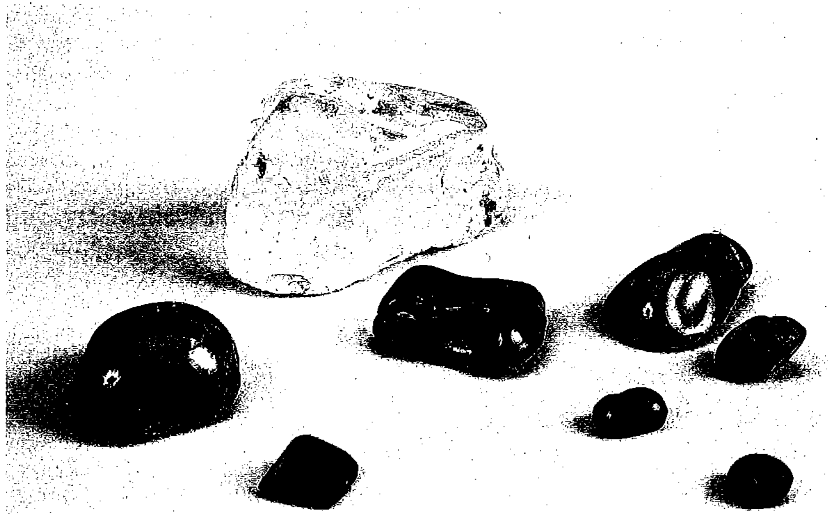
(Fig. 7a) Interior of cup in Figure 7

There are also over 400 Tang coins with the legend '*Kaiyuan tongbao*' ('currency of the Kaiyuan reign'). The original report lists 421 silver and thirty gold coins, but some of the coins have been subsequently identified as bronze. Eighteen bronze coins were on show at 'Chang'an: The Capital of the Tang Dynasty', an exhibition held at the Kyōto Bunka Hakubutsukan in 1994 (see Kyōto Bunka Hakubutsukan, cat. no. 40). Having the characteristic shape of Chinese coins, circular with a square hole, they represent the typical coinage of the eighth century. Similar examples have been found all over East and Southeast Asia, the legacy of sea trade among the Tang and its neighbours. The silver and gold versions, by contrast, were collector's items. Modelled on the bronze version, these display coins were favours given by the emperor to his courtiers at parties, one of which we know was held in 713 (*Jiu Tangshu*, Zhonghua shuju edition, Beijing, 1975, *juan* 8, p. 171).

Of the 478 coins listed in the report, six came from abroad: a silver drachm of Khusrau II (r.



(Fig. 8) Cup
Unearthed in 1970, Hejia village, southern suburbs of Xi'an
Tang period/Sogdiana, 7th/early 8th century
Rock crystal
Height 2.5 cm, width 9.6 cm



(Fig. 9) 2 sapphires, 2 rubies, 1 topaz, and 3 agates
Unearthed in 1970, Hejia village, southern suburbs of Xi'an
Tang period (618-906)

590-628) from Sassanian Iran and five silver coins from Japan dated to the Wado era (708-15). None of these coins are particularly unusual. Before the year 700, Sassanian silver coins served as an alternative currency, particularly in Xinjiang, where archaeologists have found several thousand to date. A display coin minted by the independent kingdom of Gaochang, which governed the oasis of Turfan before it fell to the Tang in 640, definitely came from Xinjiang. Its presence has prompted François Thierry and Cécile Morrisson, two French scholars who have studied the coins, to propose that the owner may have bought the coins from Gansu or Xinjiang (Thierry and Morrison, p. 129, note 21).

A seventh foreign coin, a gold solidus from the reign of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (r. 610-40), turns out on closer inspection to be an imitation. When minted, Byzantine coins were round with no holes, like other European coins. Byzantine coins excavated in China often have two holes punched into opposite edges so that they could be sewn onto clothing, or a single hole on the top for use as a pendant. Several were placed in tombs, possibly because they were thought to protect the dead on their way to the underworld. Copies of Byzantine originals made by Tang dynasty goldsmiths have been found more frequently in Xinjiang than genuine examples, evidence that Chinese demand for the talismans outstripped the supply of original coins from Byzantium.

Hoards like this frustrate the efforts of economic historians to determine the circulation of coins in Tang China because the owner's criteria for selection are unknown. (Imagine a coin collector today collecting only Susan B. Anthony silver dollars and ignoring the ordinary coins in daily use.) The Hejia village coin collection is unique in its historical scope. It may indeed have been held by mint officials, which would make sense given the presence of tax ingots and storehouse silver in the same hoard.

What can we conclude about the Silk Road trade on the basis of this brief survey of the Hejia village hoard? It clearly represents the top end of the Tang dynasty economy, a realm in which silver vessels numbered in the hundreds and gold in the tens. Few items in the hoard came from outside China: the gems and the foreign coins, and perhaps a handful of the gold and silver vessels.

Aesthetically, Iranian motifs familiar to us from Sassanian silver plates and Sogdian wall paintings are exhibited throughout the collection. The dominance of Iranian motifs on the gold and silver vessels suggests that the most active section of the Silk Road between 600 and 755 linked Chang'an with Samarkand and had major stopping places at Dunhuang, Turfan and Kashgar. The hoard was found near the Western Market of Chang'an, home to one of the largest Iranian refugee communities, so one has to wrestle with the problem of typicality: is the Hejia village hoard representative of Tang taste? When we consider other artefacts from the same period, the answer is a resounding yes!

The Hejia village hoard provides a valuable insight into the Silk Road: even at its peak, high overland transport costs and risks associated with long-distance trade restricted the number of goods, including lightweight luxury items, travelling on these routes. The true significance of the Silk Road lay not in the quantity of trade goods camels carried on their backs but rather in the flow of refugees from the Iranian world who brought their languages, religions, technical skills and artistic traditions with them to Chang'an and all the major cities of China.

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'The Glory of the Silk Road: Art from Ancient China' will be on view at The Dayton Art Institute until 11 May, and at The Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis from 7 June to 3 August. A catalogue with essays by the author, Li Jian, Angela Sheng, Katherine R. Tsiang and Wang Binghua accompanies the show.

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