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.

The Hejia Village Hoard: A Snapshot of China's Silk Road Trade
The Burial Location and Dating of the Hejia Village Treasures
Three Textiles from Turfan
The Illustrative Sequence on An Jia's Screen: A Depiction of the Daily Life of a Sabao
'Divine Presence' at Casa Asia in Barcelona
'Ming, the Golden Age of Chinese Furniture' at the Musée Guimet
Blanc de Chine at the China Institute Gallery
Announcements
Leisurely Pursuits of Orientations Readers
Book Reviews
Report from Paris
Japanese Art Dealers Association
Gallery News
The European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht
An Art Fair in Hong Kong

Valerie Hansen
Qi Dongfang
Zhao Feng
Rong Xinjiang
Jane Casey
Jean-Paul Desroches
Willow Chang
Jessica Harrison-Hall
Stacey Pierson
Hvée Lie Bëhaut

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

Valerie Hansen

Sometimes 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.

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:

**Hejia Village Find Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gold</th>
<th>Silver</th>
<th>Coins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eating vessels</td>
<td>55 bowls</td>
<td>1 knife of ‘Jinwo’ from the kingdom of Qi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drinking cups</td>
<td>53 plates</td>
<td>1 shovel-shaped coin of Spring and Autumn Period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gold medicine containers</td>
<td>6 platters</td>
<td>4 early Han dynasty coins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>washing basins</td>
<td>12 drinking cups</td>
<td>11 coins from the reign of Wang Mang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hair pins</td>
<td>46 medicine containers</td>
<td>2 Six Dyansties coins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>armlets</td>
<td>12 washing basins</td>
<td>1 ‘Gaochang jili’ coin from Turfan (5th-6th century)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miniature dragons</td>
<td>1 lamp head (?)</td>
<td>1 Byzantine solidus of Heraclius (r. 610-640)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comb base</td>
<td>4 jugs</td>
<td>1 Sassanian drachm of Khusraw II (r. 590-628)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4588 grams gold foil</td>
<td>1 incense burner</td>
<td>5 Japanese silver coins with the legend ‘Windo kaichin’ (708-15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>126 grams of gold dust</td>
<td>1 spherical censer</td>
<td>421 silver (including some bronze?) Tang dynasty coins with the legend ‘Kaiyuan tongbao’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 box</td>
<td>23 fasteners</td>
<td>30 gold ‘Kaiyuan tongbao’ coins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 vessel with a spout</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Minerals and Glass**

| 1 agate cup with gold bull head | 1 white agate horse harness |
| 1 agate wine cup                | 34 white jade belt decorations |
| 1 jade 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 |

**Medicines**

| 1 block of yellow lead (litharge) |
| 15 types of mineral powder, all in inscribed containers, including stalactite and gold. |

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
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 undamaged (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 Chinese princesses 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).
The inscriptions on the ingots also gave their exact weights and the names of the officials who verified the weights. The \textit{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: ingots submitted by the locality, in larger lumps made from the ingots, and in 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 Kyoto Bunka Hakubutsukan in 1994 (see Kyoto 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. Modeled 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.
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 typicity: 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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Selected bibliography


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