

# 25

## China

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### 25.1 Introduction

The Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) holds *c.* 6,873 objects from China, of which *c.* 253 are currently defined as ‘archaeological’. As with other parts of the world, the ‘ethnographic’ material includes much of value for historical and material cultural studies, but this is not considered in this chapter. The Museum also holds an unquantified amount of Chinese export ceramics, collected from elsewhere in the world, which are not formally considered here, but are briefly discussed below. The types of ‘archaeological’ objects range from Neolithic ceramics to religious and curio items of the 19th century. There is material from the estate of the Silk Road explorer Sir Aurel Stein, a range of coins, medals and talismans, and a significant collection of ceramics. This chapter reviews the history of the collection (25.2), and then considers four significant elements of the collection – the Stein collection (25.3.1), the numismatic collections (25.3.2), a rubbing of the Nestorian stele (25.3.3), and the Chinese export ceramics (25.3.4) – before drawing brief conclusions about the research potential of the collections (25.4).

### 25.2 History of the Collection

There are *c.* 20 ‘archaeological’ objects in the PRM founding collection, all of which are currently undated. These include 5 carved agate buttons (1884.140.380–385), 5 stone and bronze seals (1884.140.447–448, 1884.140.450, 1884.140.452–453), 7 stone figures of humans and animals (1884.66.15, 1884.68.148, 1884.140.465–469), a bronze zoomorphic vessel (1884.63.89), and 2 coins purchased by Pitt-Rivers at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1878 (1884.99.46 and 1884.99.47). Ten undated carved ivory balls, probably from the Tradescant Collection, were possibly transferred from the Ashmolean Museum in 1886, but it is unclear whether this transfer took place or not (1886.1.95–104). There are 3 carved stone balls purchased from Robert T. Turley in February 1896 (1896.62.106–108).

The PRM Chinese archaeological collections subsequently grew through a series of 20th-century acquisitions. In 1902 8 examples of currency and Daoist talismans were purchased from James Tregaskis (1902.76.1–8). In 1905, 4 bronze mirrors were added (1905.83.5–8). One of these mirrors, with grape and lion ornamentation on the back (1905.83.8), dates from the Tang period (618–906 CE) while the others are of recent date. In 1907, 2 porcelains were donated by E.M. Andrews, complemented by 3 Han-period grave goods in the form of terracotta animal figures (1912.93.1–3 from Alan Herbert Coltart) and a Tang figurine of a harp player (1925.13.2, from L.C.G. Clarke), which built the foundation stock for a quickly growing collection

of ceramics. Next to some smaller donations, in 1933 a group of 10 iron weapons (1933.96.1–10) entered the Museum which were collected by A. S. and S. G. Hewlett near the Great Wall (between 'Peking and Calgan', as stated by the collectors).

In the 1950s the collection grew markedly. The Museum received c. 60 ceramic artefacts in 1956, dating from the Neolithic, early historic, early medieval and medieval periods (1956.10.6–49, 1956.12.8–21, 27–31, 39). These objects were acquired in an exchange with the Borough Museum in Newbury, arranged through Herbert Henery Coghlan (1884–1981). Some of the early ceramics had been obtained in the late 1940s through Chinese archaeologist Zheng Dekun (Cheng Te-kun, 1907–2001), who was then curator of the Museum of the West China Union University in Chengdu, Sichuan province, China. The museum he headed at the famous medical college was the first archaeological museum to be established in China (Graham 1933)

## 25.3 Significant Collections

### 25.3.1 *The Stein Collection*

Most parts of the collection and acquisitions of the famous traveller and explorer of Central Asia, Sir Aurel Stein (1862–1943) (Mirsky 1998) are today held in the British Museum (paintings and small objects), the Victoria and Albert Museum (mainly textiles) and the British Library (Wang 1999; Whitfield 2004). Stein had excavated at Kish with the Museum's curator Tom Penniman (see Chapter 23), and it is perhaps through this link that some 94 objects found their way from Stein's estate into the Museum as a donation in May 1944. They are of significant historic importance.

The Stein collection consists of wood samples (1944.5.9–10) collected between 1901 and 1906 from ancient orchards at the site of the ancient city of Niya, an oasis on the southern Silk Route in the Tarim Basin and the capital of the Shanshan kingdom (Whitfield 1999; 2004). Stein estimated that the trees dated to the 3rd century CE, the time when the site was at its climax, but the fragments may very well be older. These objects hold great potential to contribute to the development of a dendrochronological sequence for the Tarim Basin.

Other parts of the Stein estate include – next to further samples such as pottery sherds – his visiting card (kept in the PRM Related Documents Files) reportedly of the years 1930/31, an ordinary tea set (1944.5.1; 2 cups with lids, white porcelain with orange decoration) used on his travels, and a little bag marked as 'Souvenir' (1944.5.6). The bag contains scrapings of wood with some Chinese characters on them. Apparently some scribe shaved a layer off the surface of a text written on wood slips to re-use the wood, a common practice in Central Asia where little wood was available. Stein, who was unable to read Chinese himself, still recognized the importance of these remains of the shaving process. Today such scrapings can still be re-assembled and provide important historic and literary sources. In this way, the 'souvenir' bag urgently needs conservation and scholarly attention.

### 25.3.2 *Numismatic Collection*

China was one of the first cultures in the world to use coinage. Coins were usually cast. Only in modern times were they minted. Beginning in the Shang Dynasty (16th–11th centuries BCE), Cowrie shells and bronze and gold cowrie-shaped coins were in use. Throughout the following Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), various types of knife-, horseshoe- and spade-shaped bronze coins became widespread. During the later Warring States period, a round coin with a square hole in the centre was introduced for the first time, a shape which remained standard for coins in China

Figure 25.1 Examples of Chinese money from the PRM collections, including knife money from the Warring States period (PRM Accession Number 1902.76.1–2), an early spade-shaped coin with the inscription 'Anyang', the name of a city in northern Henan province (PRM Accession Number 1902.76.3), and an early issue of *ban liang* (PRM Accession Number 1902.76.4), the first unified currency of the Chinese empire in the late 2nd century BCE.



until modern times. It was called and inscribed *ban liang*, literally meaning 'half an ounce' (Zhu Huo 1984).

Coins basically had the value of the weight of the material they were made of. Nominal and material values were identical. Throughout the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), with a few exceptions, a single coin nomination was used. This was a smaller edition of the Warring States period *ban liang*, which was circulated for most of the 2nd century BCE, and from 118 BCE the main currency was a standardized *wuzhu* coin, literally 'five small ounces'. Next to *wuzhu* coins, silver and gold bars, as well as rolls of silk, served as currency (Yang Shih-chao 1995).

Such standardized coins with a single nominal value remained widespread until the end of the 6th century CE. Larger values could be reached by joining many coins together, mainly by tying them with a string. In later times, one hundred, two hundred or even more coins were skillfully tied together in the shape of swords or other objects, thus giving the coins a symbolic value next to their nominal value.

There are *c.* 37 Chinese coins, including (Figure 25.1) an example of knife-shaped money mentioned above, dating from the Warring States period (1902.76.1–2), as well as an early spade-shaped coin with the inscription 'Anyang', which is the name of a city in northern Henan province where it was probably cast (1902.76.3), next to 2 more tool-shaped examples of the same period (1902.76.1–2 and 1952.10.010). There is also one example of an early issue of *banliang*, which is in especially good condition (1902.76.4). One coin in the collection, donated by Henry Balfour in 1896, illustrates the ambitious currency legislation of the usurper Wang Mang (*c.* 9–23 CE) (1896.29.44). In four currency reforms during his brief reign period, Wang Mang issued dozens of coins with nominations different from their material value (Huang Qiquan 2001). In his time, such separation of values did not gain the trust of the public. The hasty reforms thus led to economic chaos and social unrest, which finally resulted in his downfall. The empire returned to the traditional system described above. Several later coins show drillings on their surface indicating that they were used as amulets rather than currency as it has been popular in more recent times (1991.38.27–31).

### 25.3.3 *A Rubbing of the Nestorian Stele*

The collections include a rubbing (1897.9.1) donated in 1897 by Arthur Gostick Shorrock (1861–1945), a Baptist missionary who was active in China for 40 years (Shorrock 1926; Stanley 1992: 564). The rubbing copies one of the most famous stone stelae in China, the ‘Nestorian Stele’ now in the Stone Forest Museum in Xian. Its inscription recorded the work of Nestorian missionaries who came to the Chinese court during the Tang Dynasty. It outlines Nestorian theology and describes the history of Nestorianism in China. The stele is dated to 781 CE. It was re-discovered by Jesuit missionaries in 1625 and became a document of the highest significance and the focus of an extended scholarly debate (Moule 1930; Saeki 1951).

Paper rubbings were an early means of multiplying and disseminating texts and drawings engraved in stone. A rubbing was made by pressing and hammering wet paper onto the surface and into the cavities of a stele, and then blackening the protruding surface area by rubbing it with a piece of cloth soaked in ink. Because stelae and inscriptions easily get damaged during the process of repeated rubbing, earlier rubbings often preserve words or phrases that were destroyed on the stone later on. As the rubbing donated by Shorrock was made before 1897, it constitutes an important document for research.<sup>1</sup>

### 25.3.4 *Chinese Export Ceramics*

The PRM holds significant collections of Chinese export ceramics found in the Middle East, Malaysia, and East Africa. These are discussed in the relevant regional chapters (see Chapters 8, 21 and 26). The influence of Chinese porcelain on Islamic ceramics has been widely discussed by scholars (e.g. Crowe 1975; Medley 1972). Chinese workshops were world leaders in the production of vessels and glazes for most of the period between the 5th and the 15th centuries CE. From as early as the 8th century CE, specialized workshops – mainly in southern China – produced glazed ceramics for export, in shapes and colours adapted to foreign taste. Ships loaded with these trade goods reached South-east Asia (di Crocco 1996), India, the Persian Gulf, and even the east coast of Africa (Cheng Te-k'un 1984: 90–3). Many objects were passed on further west. Craftsmen in many cities (not least in Europe) attempted to copy the bowls and vases as they were admired for their elegant shapes and colours, the smoothness of their surface, as well as the quality of their body material that was lighter and thinner than that of ceramic objects produced elsewhere. To give one example, the sherds collected in Samarra (1957.5.2–8), a major urban centre in Iraq, date from the 9th century and give evidence for the earliest phase of this international exchange in design. The date of the sherds appears to be based simply on the assumption that the whole horizon rose during the time it served as capital of the Caliphate (836–882 CE). Some scholars suggested a later date for the finds of early Chinese ceramics in Samarra. One point that has often been overlooked is that Sancai ceramics, as found in Samarra, with a three-coloured glaze in yellow, brown and green (and sometimes blue), were popular in China only until the eighth century, a fact that would point towards an earlier date of the trade of ceramics between the Chinese and the Islamic worlds.

## 25.4 Potential for Future Research

The majority of the archaeological objects in the Chinese collection of the PRM were not actively acquired by the Museum, but donated by various individuals. In several

<sup>1</sup> In the West, other early examples are held in the National Museums of Scotland (no. A.1886.599, taken before 1886), one in the Harvard Fine Arts Library, Special Collections; (no C-51, taken around 1900), and one in the Vatican, which is possibly the oldest one in the group (*Barb. or. 151, fasc. 2d orient 20 HG.01*).

cases the objects were part of larger collections that were not singularly focused on China. As a result, the collection is in some parts fragmentary, but it gives a good and important insight into collecting practices since the 1880s.

In considering the potential for future research, the PRM collection has a number of strengths. The objects of the Stein estate are of particular interest. While the institutions which house the bulk of his finds in Central Asia gave his scholarship and collecting activity exemplary attention, less is known about the personal living circumstances of the explorer during his expeditions (for some insight see Hopkirk 1980). The PRM collections may be used to provide better insight on more personal aspects of the life of this famous scholar. This might be done in cooperation with the British Museum, the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum and other collections where comparable items may have been preserved.

The wood samples, carefully collected by Stein in Niya and other places in the Tarim basin, were intended to pave the way for scientific examination. With the advanced technological examination methods at hand today, especially dendrochronology, one would hope that the samples could be used for this purpose, especially as today the cultural heritage legislation of the PRC prevents the export of such samples.

The text scrapings in the 'Souvenir' bag from the estate of Aurel Stein call for immediate scholarly attention. It should be possible to reconstruct the original text (even if in a fragmentary way), which may also turn out to be a document of importance. The *International Dunhuang Project* at the British Library<sup>2</sup> has a long experience with handling and treatment of such texts and the material in the Pitt Rivers can contribute to the growing body of information about Stein's collections.

Export ceramics as evidence for early trade contacts have long been a focus of collecting activities of the Museum. One would hope that this important part of the collection could be used for further research. In particular, the Chinese sherds collected by Tanner in Tanzania deserve attention, as the Chinese influence on East Africa is still largely under-represented in research (see Chapter 8). The ceramics from Samarra might be investigated along the lines suggested above. It should be possible to date more precisely the fragments by comparing them to results of recent excavations in China (Wood 1999). Such an investigation might add an interesting detail to research in this field. In more general terms, the much wider question of the impact of Chinese ceramics on design in Eurasia and Africa has not received sufficient attention yet. One might envision a project investigating the flow of design elements along the terrestrial and maritime Silk Roads, based on the material stored in Pitt Rivers Museum, but including other major collections in the UK, such as the Ashmolean Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The main significance of the collection and its major potential for future research, however, lies in its own history. The PRM's Chinese collection is a document of the development of British and Western interest in China over the last 130 years. It would be useful to investigate the how the donors and collectors that stand behind the assembly of Chinese archaeological objects came to be interested in this particular field, and what drove their curiosity and scientific interests. Future research should investigate the Museum's Chinese archaeological collection as a part of the modern intellectual history of Britain.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://idp.bl.uk/>

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