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OBJECTS OF FASCINATION

Encountering Six Dynasties China through Material Culture

By Heather Clydesdale

Material culture—images, built spaces, and objects—can open extraordinary windows into the past. This is especially true when exploring China's Six Dynasties period (220–589 CE). The Six Dynasties was a time of fragmentation. In the south, there was a rapid succession of dynasties while, in the north, invading nomads competed with Chinese in establishing kingdoms and dynasties. Though often remembered as a time of warfare and disruption, material culture shows that it was also a time of cultural exchanges and innovation. Political power in the Chinese heartland was fragmented and ever-changing. In this shifting political landscape, the northwestern frontier stood at the vanguard of new ideas. Here, small tomb paintings from the Hexi (huh-see) Corridor demonstrate how people mixed Chinese and nomadic customs. Mistakes in a wine vessel from nearby Ningxia (nee-ing see-ah) reveal how the introduction of foreign crafts transformed entire industries, and stone funerary structures illustrate in nearly cinematic detail how a foreign culture established itself in China. Objects and images stand ready to give direct testimony about individuals and groups who were not necessarily prominent but whose experiences, perceptions, and interactions shaped history.

Take this small painting on the face of a brick showing two riders, a man and a woman, on horseback (Figure 1). It is not considered a great work of art, per se, and sits among dozens of other paintings on the brick walls of a tomb in the Hexi Corridor. The tomb is one of many in the area dated to the third and fourth centuries, during the earliest part of the Six Dynasties. The artist captured the scene in a few swift brushstrokes and a rudimentary palette of reds and grays. The painting may appear simple, but it reveals significant information about how women on the frontier lived and how people valued cross-cultural exchanges.

The two riders are believed to represent the husband and wife interred in the tomb. The man leads the charge on his galloping gray mount, its hooves lifted and its neck arched proudly. A deer tail, a sign of status, dangles from the man's spear. While the man takes precedence over his wife, she follows close behind astride a spotted horse. The way her horse's front leg nearly interlocks with the hoof of her husband's steed suggests the couple's union.

Looking at the clothing of the two figures tells us not only about fashion but about lifestyles and gender roles. The man wears a short white robe with full sleeves and trousers, an outfit that Chinese officials of Six Dynasties often wore while riding.¹ This, along with the deer tail, means it is likely that the man was a local official. The woman, her hair gathered in a casual bun,



Figure 1. Male and female tomb occupants riding, painting on brick, third-fourth century, Xigoucun M7, Jiuquan, Gansu province, Wei-Jin period (220-317). From Zhao Wucheng, and Ma Jianhua, "Gansu Jiuquan Xigoucun Wei Jin mu fajue baogao," *Wenwu*, no. 7 (1996): 4-38, pl. 3.1.

wears clothing that is not Chinese but is in the style worn by nomadic tribes along the northern and western borders. Her jacket has a rounded collar fringed in red and black fur, and a diagonal lapel crosses her chest. Curved and asymmetrical lines conformed to the shape of animal skins from which nomadic garments were sewn. Rugged leather and animal fur were readily available and well-suited to the harsh winds and fluctuating temperatures in grasslands and mountains.

The woman's attire is tightly tailored. The sleeves are tapered close around her arm and at the cuff, giving her freedom of movement. This is different from Chinese clothes. Made from long bolts of silk, those were flowy and appropriate for sedate activities of village or city life. Like her husband, she wears high leather boots, a nomadic or Western import. The fitted sleeves and high boots made it easier to hunt and ride, pursuits in which nomadic men and women excelled. A second painting from the same tomb shows the woman again, but this time she adopts a Chinese style of dress as she sits and converses with a companion (Figure 2). Her hair is combed in an elaborate style held with ornamental pins, and she wears an elegant silk gown, the hem puddling around her knees and voluminous sleeves cascading around her hands. We do not know if the woman was Chinese or another ethnicity, like the nomadic Xiongnu (see-ohng-new) or Xianbei (see-en-bay), but these two depictions of her, one galloping with ease, the other chatting with animation, reveal something else: they suggest that a woman in the Hexi Corridor could express herself outside the confines of rigid expectations. This is a departure from images of women in earlier epochs, like the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). In those, women were extolled for upholding Confucian virtues like filial devotion and modesty.²

Cross-cultural exchange is a repeated theme in the couple's tomb. Adjacent brick paintings show a retinue of eight mounted soldiers, all wearing helmets and nomadic-style jackets. Inscriptions (written labels) identify some of them by name. One is "Soldier Sun Jing" (soon gying), a Chinese name, while his companion is identified as "Barbarian Soldier Da Nian" (dah nee-an). Seeing a so-called barbarian (which means someone who was not Chinese or had not thoroughly adopted Chinese customs) as part of the military company is not unexpected. In the early Six Dynasties period, rulers and local strongmen depended on mercenary forces recruited from nomadic tribes to the north. But showing him as part of a small retinue accompanying the couple and recognizing him by name shows an unexpected level of inclusion.



Figure 2. Female tomb occupant (probably on the left) and companion, painting on brick, third-fourth century, Xigoucun M7, Jiuquan, Gansu province, Wei-Jin period (220-317). From Zhao Wucheng, and Ma Jianhua, "Gansu Jiuquan Xigoucun Wei Jin mu fajue baogao," pl. 1.1.

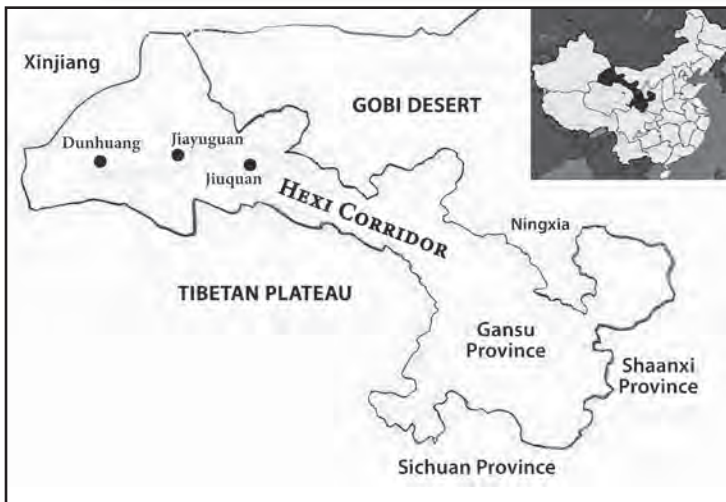


Figure 3: Map of the Hexi Corridor. Modified location map.svg by Uwe Dederig and TUBS, Wikimedia Commons, <https://tinyurl.com/3unr8x3z>.



Photos: Three views along the Hexi Corridor. Source: ©123rf stock photos. Photo by yingwu.

The people who built this tomb clearly wanted to highlight multicultural facets of their world. This could be an anomaly, except that paintings in nearby tombs from the same period frequently depict people from nomadic tribes smiling as they do traditional Chinese activities like tending to fields and practicing sericulture (the production of silk). Alongside them, people with Chinese clothes and hairstyles cheerfully herd sheep, goats, cows, and horses. Such images are surprising because the conventional view was that Chinese civilization was centered on farming, while nomadic tribes to the north were centered on pastoralism.

In China, agriculture provided the impetus for settling the land, the wealth for building cities, and the means to expanding the empire. It was the foundation for the Confucian social structure and its strictly defined roles for men and women. The grassy steppes to the north and mountains to the west, on the other hand, were too arid for farming, and so people there raised animals such as sheep, goats, cows, and horses. Xiongnu, Xianbei, and others rotated their herds from winter to summer grazing lands. Called pastoralism, this defined important aspects of their society, from small tribal political units, portable felt tents (called “yurts” in English) for dwellings, and a nomadic life on the move. Such a lifestyle favored less differentiation in roles for men and women. Women in nomadic societies learned to ride and hunt from an early age and generally had more prominent roles in public life.³ Chinese women of means, on the other hand, were expected to abide mostly in confines of courtyard homes, where they were bound by protocols and responsibilities. Chinese and nomadic cultures were seen as incompatible, which is why, for centuries, Chinese rulers built defensive walls to separate China from its nomadic neighbors.⁴ These modest paintings on brick,

however, break away from such stereotypes. Chinese written records from the early Six Dynasties give the impression that cross-cultural interaction could only take the form of hostilities, invasions, and land grabs. Perhaps this is because the authors focused on events needing government intervention, while amicable interactions were considered unworthy of documentation. This is not to say that the written records are inaccurate, but they are one-sided. Images like these paintings remind us that official histories and personal experiences can diverge in the same way news feeds and social media accounts do today. We should exercise caution in taking images fully at face value. Tomb paintings are grounded in reality but are aspirational in that people strive to present themselves in a favorable light.⁵ From this, we can speculate that shifting between cultures not only happened along the frontier, but that it was valued.

This realization gives a nuanced glimpse into changes in the Hexi Corridor in the Six Dynasties. The Hexi Corridor is a string of fertile oases squeezed between the Gobi Desert to the north and east, and the Tibetan Plateau to the west and south (Figure 3). Easily defended, it was a strategic area. It also acted as a cultural bridge linking China to Central Asia and beyond to India and the Mediterranean. During the mighty Han Dynasty, which lasted for four centuries, the Chinese drove their enemy, the Xiongnu, out of the Hexi Corridor and sent farmer-soldiers to settle the land. They built forts, defensive walls (the western end of the Great Wall is outside the same city where these paintings were found), and irrigation systems. When the Han Dynasty fell in the third century, the Hexi Corridor was initially spared a descent into conflict and deprivation. Tomb images show us how local elites leveraged the infrastructure left by the Han Dynasty and used a



Figure 4: Ewer with mythological scenes, silver with gilt decoration, from ancient Bactria (present-day Afghanistan), fifth-sixth century, found in the tomb of Li Xian (sixth century) in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, China. Copyright and collection of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Guyuan Museum. From Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China*, no. 31. Reproduction courtesy of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Guyuan Museum. Excavation report: *Wenwu*, no. 11 (1985): 1-20.

First of all, ewers are not common in China. The shape was prevalent in Ancient Greece and Rome, and later became popular in the Sasanian Empire (224–651) around present-day Iran. Though its proportions mimic Sasanian counterparts, other details indicate that this piece was manufactured elsewhere. The parallel concave lines around the neck and foot, a pattern called “fluting,” derives from ancient Greek designs. The miniature human head on the top of the handle looks Hellenistic, with prominent facial features and short hair peeking out from under the helmet.⁷ The rows of bead-like silver balls encircling the neck and foot derive from the “pearl roundel,” a Sasanian motif that enjoyed broad appeal across Central Asia.

The ewer is made of silver and gilt (gold powder that is melted to form a thin coating). Silver and gold were not traditionally prized in China.⁸ (Instead, value was placed on bronze, which was used to make ritual vessels, and jade, which had subtle qualities that aligned with Confucian values.) Here, the gold on the background draws our attention to the figures that parade around the belly of the vessel.

Altogether, there are six figures arranged as three pairs, each with a man and woman facing one another. Someone who knows Greek mythology might figure out that the ewer tells the story of the Trojan War, beginning with the Judgment of Paris, when the Trojan prince, Paris, had to select the winner in a beauty contest among the goddesses. On the left of the ewer, he bestows the prize, a golden apple, on the goddess of love, Aphrodite. Except here, he holds two apples. The picture-story has other mistakes, too. The figure on the right is probably Menelaus, the husband of Paris’s lover, Helen, reclaiming her after the war. With one hand, he reaches for his wife. With the other, he clasps a circular Greek shield by the rim—not from its back, as a soldier would. The craftsperson who made the ewer did not seem to understand or care about the details of the famous story or the basic mechanisms of weaponry.

Looking at other decorations raises suspicions about the ewer’s origins. It seems glamorous at first glance, but details such as the triangles above the figures look uneven. The head on the handle is there so that someone can push their thumb against it as they tip the vessel to pour out wine. Aesthetically, however, it floats without meaning, while the handle melts inexplicably into two camel heads where it attaches to the top and bottom of the belly. Even the figures crowd together, and their bodies are awkward and paunchy.

The mistakes and hodgepodge motifs have led scholars to conclude that the ewer was probably made in the fifth or sixth century in Bactria, a region in what today is Afghanistan.⁹ Alexander the Great invaded the region in the fourth century BCE and left a legacy of Hellenistic influence. The fact that this ewer was found in a tomb in northwest China as part of a hoard of valuable goods from afar suggests there was a strong market for exotica in the Six Dynasties. The craftsperson who created the ewer did not need to be mindful of details because it was bound for a trade caravan heading east, where its value would be in its novelty and admirers would not mind its defects.

This ewer and Li’s taste for exotica indicate growing enthusiasm for silver and gold objects in the Six Dynasties, along with interest in learning metalworking techniques from Central and South Asia.¹⁰ These included the use of gilt, granulation (using rows of teeny golden balls as decoration), and repoussé (hammering out a design from the inside of a vessel). The widespread discovery of such objects from Six Dynasties China raises other questions: How did these objects get there? Who brought them from Central Asia to Chinese markets? And who taught Chinese artisans foreign metalworking techniques so that they could replicate such works?

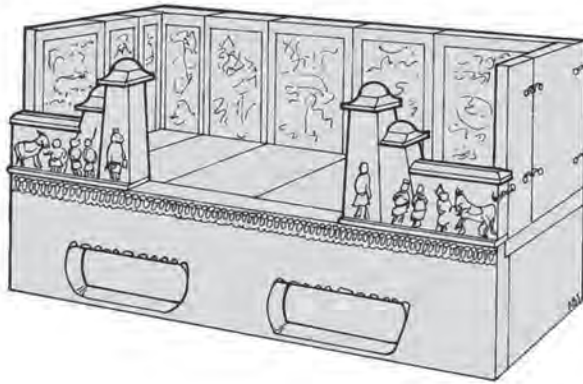
Many people were engaged in long-distance trade, but no one dominated the Eurasian networks like the Sogdians, an Indo-Iranian people from Sogdiana in present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Sogdiana was not a country but a collection of city-states. Militarily, Sogdiana was weak and subject to neighboring empires. But the Sogdians were exceptionally adept at languages and diplomacy. They negotiated treaties and brokered deals between great powers like the Byzantine Empire, the Turks (nomads who controlled the

multicultural approach to navigate changes brought by incoming waves of refugees from China, nomads from the north, and newcomers, like Sogdians, from regions to the west.⁶

Later in the Six Dynasties, from the fifth to sixth centuries, the Hexi Corridor and larger northwest frontier endured increasing conflict as nomadic tribes and Chinese warlords founded competing dynasties and kingdoms. But objects from this time show that the appeal of cultural interaction did not wane. Chinese people fervently embraced foreign goods, materials, and motifs. Material culture tells us about complex trade routes, interactions, and a growing taste for the exotic.

With a dazzling montage of motifs and designs, this pitcher is a case in point (Figure 4). A vessel of this shape, with a spout, narrow neck, full body, and curved handle, is called a “ewer.” This one was excavated from the tomb of Li Xian (lee see-an), who lived in the sixth century. Li was a Chinese official who had served as the governor of Dunhuang (dune-who-ahng) in the far west of the Hexi Corridor, though he was buried in neighboring Ningxia (nee-ing-see-ah). While valuable goods were routinely buried in Chinese tombs, this ewer is particularly curious.

Asia in World History: Comparisons, Connections, and Conflicts (Part 1)



Photos of the relief carvings and drawing of the funerary couch. China, Northern Dynasties, Sui period. Late sixth to early seventh centuries. White marble with pigments and gold. Source: The Miho Museum website at <https://tinyurl.com/8b3v3xjk>.



Figure 5 Panel from the Miho Funerary Couch, carved and painted stone, fifth-sixth century. Miho Museum, Shigaraki, Japan. Photo courtesy of the Miho Museum.

north part of Central Asia in the sixth and seventh centuries), and China's Tang Dynasty (618–907). The Sogdians also accumulated immense wealth trading horses and silks among these powers.¹¹

Commerce occupied a high place in Sogdian society. According to Chinese records, the Sogdians started learning to read as small children and then studied business.¹² In pursuing trade, they organized expansive networks and founded communities far from home, including in China. These communities could be found along the frontier at places, like Dunhuang, and in China's interior, like the capital cities of Luoyang (lew-oh-yang) and Chang'an.

From the middle of the Six Dynasties to the middle of the Tang Dynasty (from the fourth through eighth centuries), the Sogdians were a visible and vibrant part of Chinese cities. Their communities each had a headman called a *sabao* (sah-bow). Their cultural practices amazed and delighted people. Sogdian dances, such as the Sogdian whirl and the Sogdian bounce, were the rage throughout China, and one can see them pictured in numerous artworks and immortalized in poems. Most Sogdians practiced Zoroastrianism, worshipping Ahura Mazda, the sun god. They considered fire sacred, and Chinese citizens would gather at local Sogdian temples to witness the fire jumping performances that accompanied Sogdian New Year celebrations.

The Sogdians in China introduced new technologies, participated in politics, and spread new ideas. Many Sogdians were master artisans and introduced advanced techniques in metalwork, bridge building, glassblowing, and textile weaving, which influenced and revitalized Chinese crafts and industries.¹³ Sogdians even served in the highest levels of Chinese government and ap-

plied their linguistic skills to the translation of significant Buddhist texts into Chinese.

And then, in the eighth century, Sogdians and their language all but disappeared from China and Sogdiana. In China, a Sogdian-Turk named An Lushan (an-lew-shan), a high-ranking general in the Tang army and a favorite of the emperor, led a rebellion and invaded Chang'an. The emperor fled for his life, and it took the Tang more than a decade to reclaim the capital. When they did, they initiated a pogrom against Sogdians. Many Sogdians were killed, and others disguised or hid their ethnicity. In the same century, Sogdiana was conquered by invading Islamic armies. The Sogdian language, once spoken across Central Asia, fell silent, and the Sogdians, once prevalent in China, dropped out of view.

Evidence about the Sogdians' influence has only surfaced over the past hundred or so years. In 1907, the Hungarian-British archaeologist and scholar Aurel Stein discovered a mailbag containing eight letters in an abandoned watchtower outside Dunhuang. Scholars were astounded to find that the writing was Sogdian, a language no one had seen or heard for centuries. Through great effort, the letters were translated, and for decades they were the only surviving examples of the language. In the 1930s, a trove of nearly 100 documents dated to the eighth century was discovered in the ruins of a fortress in Tajikistan. These written records have interesting details about Sogdian culture and historical events, but recent discoveries of material culture are



A Tang Dynasty Chinese ceramic statuette of a Sogdian merchant riding on a Bactrian camel. Chinese Tang Dynasty (618–907). Source: Shanghai Museum, <https://tinyurl.com/b853zw35>.

fleshing out the story of the Sogdians in Central Asia and China.

Excavations in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have unearthed the remains of a Sogdian city, including opulent houses. However, relatively little remains in the Sogdian homelands, where a wet climate and acidic soil disintegrated relics of the past. In northwest China, where an arid climate has preserved buried artifacts, there is more evidence to show us how the Sogdians integrated various cultures into their own.¹⁴

One important such artifact is the Miho funerary couch, a marble structure made of decorative panels with intricate carvings highlighted with paint and gilt. The various panels show the deceased in life and after death. He receives Turks in his yurt in one. In another, he and his wife sit in a Chinese-style pavilion as they enjoy a banquet and performances featuring the Sogdian whirl. The panels culminate with the deceased's ascent to paradise (Figure 5). We see him under an umbrella, a sign of protection and status, as he rides toward a heavenly scene. Awaiting him is a Mesopotamian goddess, Nana, her arms multiplied and fanned out like an Indian deity. Below her, two graceful women strum instruments. With swaying torsos, fluttering scarves, and musical instruments, they look like *apsaras* (ahp-sair-ahs), or cloud spirits, seen in Chinese Buddhist sculptures and paintings. This shows that the Sogdians worshipped numerous gods, not just Ahura Mazda. They integrated different religions and belief systems as they made their way through life and in death.¹⁵

We are not entirely sure why the Sogdians used a funerary couch in their burials, but scholars think such structures were a way to satisfy both Sogdian and Chinese ideas about how to deal with bodies after death. The Sogdians considered the earth sacred and avoided polluting it by burying the corpse. In their homeland, bodies were exposed and consumed by animals. The bones were then carefully gathered in a special box called an ossuary, which was then placed in a mausoleum. It was impossible to practice this custom in China, which had long traditions of purifying and preserving the corpse and giving it an elaborate burial. And so, the Sogdians in China built underground tombs and may have placed the bodies on these stone couches.¹⁶

Conclusion

Understanding history through material culture can be both fascinating and painstaking. Whims of weather, climate, past warfare, and disasters determine what survives. And chance dictates what is excavated today.¹⁷ Material culture comes to us in fragments. The historian's job is that of a puzzle master. They must analyze the bits and try to align them with other pieces to identify anomalies and recognize patterns. In times of chaos, such as the Six Dynasties, material culture can eclipse written documents in importance. It can also reveal the modest origins of historical trends. For instance, cross-cultural displays in the early Six Dynasties grow into exoticism in the late Six Dynasties. This eventually blossoms into a full-blown embrace of internationalism in the Tang Dynasty.

Material culture shows that history is not solely made by outstanding individuals and art does not have to be great or beautiful to be informative. Modest tomb paintings, mistake-laden metalwork, and carved funerary couches tell us about the transmission not just of images and objects, but of ideas, beliefs, and technologies. It gives nuanced views of the past and accounts for the perspectives of people that did not write about history, but who nonetheless experienced and shaped it. ■

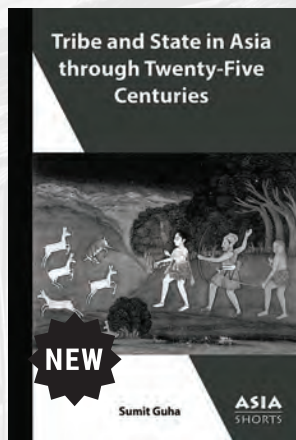
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HEATHER CLYDESDALE is an Assistant Professor of Art History at Santa Clara University. She writes about cultural exchanges along China's northwestern frontier during the early Six Dynasties period. She is also developing research on how East Asian philosophies and artistic practices can promote sustainability today. Her course topics include the Silk Roads, how art shaped modern China, narrative art in Japan, and how design connects people to nature in China, Korea, and Japan. Before completing her PhD at Columbia University, she wrote articles and developed K–12 multimedia projects for the Asia Society in New York and the East–West Center in Honolulu.

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