

Things Chinese: Antiques, Crafts, Collectibles

BY RONALD KNAPP

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Reviewed by Carol Stepanchuk



Defining culture through a collection of objects is a challenging task. How are history, aesthetics, technology, and belief systems revealed in a sampling of material artifacts? How many and what objects are required to tell such a story? In a handsomely designed compendium of things Chinese, cultural geographer Ronald G. Knapp has selected and explained sixty items that together exhibit a distinct sense of “Chineseness.” Illustrated through the exquisite photography of Michael Freeman, this art digest reads like a tour through a Chinese handicrafts emporium. Ranging from everyday to elite treasures, from the practical to the ingenious, objects are grouped into six categories: household furnishings, arts and crafts, personal possessions, eating and drinking, games and amusements, and religious icons and paraphernalia.

Along with entries for wedding baskets and wine bottles, jade artifacts, calligraphy brushes, cricket cages, and joss sticks, there are histories for newer collectibles, such as Mao memorabilia, and those that touch on diverse communities, for example, the silver jewelry of ethnic minorities.

One of the most striking aspects in all categories is the texture and materiality of the creative impulse—the hands-on appeal. For over three millennia in China, jade, pottery, silk, metal, and stone have been continuously fashioned into a range of consumer products. This book presents the tradition of mass (factory) production and the dynamics of a consumer society. The reader learns the where and how of making, using, and buying.

We learn about craftsmanship through the demanding techniques to heat and excise bamboo and the multiple steps required for crafting lustrous lacquer ware. We discover the nature of portability—chairs, pillows, and lightweight daybeds that can be moved to accommodate varying needs and comfort levels of their users. Entire categories of objects (such as pipe stems and snuff bottles) can furthermore be fashioned out of a plethora of substances—cloisonné, jade, porcelain, glass, ivory, and so on. The aesthetic impulse is underscored in the blending of texture, color, and, when extended to culinary art, flavor. As objects are meant to be handled, the

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nature of movement is also described in the action of unrolling scrolls, whisking tea into a froth, manipulating shadow puppets, or shaking a tube of bamboo fortune sticks for divination.

Knapp provides details about archaeological excavations that explain the early origins of technique and production and frequently unveils the auspicious symbolism and rebuses that pervade Chinese decorative arts. He highlights regional diversity, modern innovations, and change. Each entry is accompanied by the Chinese name in simplified characters, along with its pronunciation and, together with the etymological detail embedded in the description, is an invaluable language reference. The only items lacking are a chronological table of dynasties, a geographical map, and an explanation to the nuances of *pinyin* romanization.

This is a rich contribution for newcomers to Asian studies and for introductory classes, but even those well-acclimated to Chinese culture will inevitably find helpful information. *Things Chinese* is the type of easy-to-use, approachable book that, being object-based, is especially well-suited to contextualize stories and narratives in literature and humanities classes. Readers can also debate in what ways the selected categories best encapsulate the entries. Do opera masks and puppets really belong in games and amusements—what about a category focusing on festival and theater? Could there be other groups or genres that work better? What entries are not included? Knapp’s foreword and bibliography provide references to other scholars and publishers who have grappled with sorting and counting Chinese artifacts.

For broader pedagogical purposes, educators might pair *Things Chinese* with *Ten Thousand Things* by Lothar Ledderose, a historical look at how production has shaped the fabric of Chinese society. *Chinese Stuff* (China International Press), part of a larger series, is another companion book that offers a more sassy interpretation of China’s cultural highlights. But perhaps best of all is using this book as a stepping stone to Knapp’s other works on architecture and monuments (*Chinese Houses*, *Chinese Bridges*, and the indispensable *Chinese Living Houses*) where homes, gates, and bridges—the material arts—can be looked at as “living symbols that reveal the aspirations and changing conditions of those who created them.”¹ ■

NOTE

1. Zhu Qichan’s inaugural address for the Society for Research in Ronald G. Knapp, “Chinese Architecture,” *China’s Living Houses* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 1.

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