

Preface

The traditional arts and crafts of China are unique in the history of material culture, because of the unique geographic location of China and its long tradition of agricultural food production. Since the Han Dynasty and the gradual formation of the Silk Road, the traditional arts and crafts of China were introduced to the Middle East first via Central and Western Asia and then to Europe and beyond. In traditional Chinese philosophy, ancient thinkers started, as early as the first century, to use handicraft skills as metaphors for ways of running a state or looking at life.

The coastline of China is long, but the origin of its civilization, the Central Plains region (comprising the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River), lies deep inland. The three earliest systems of state power in China, the Xia Dynasty, the Shang

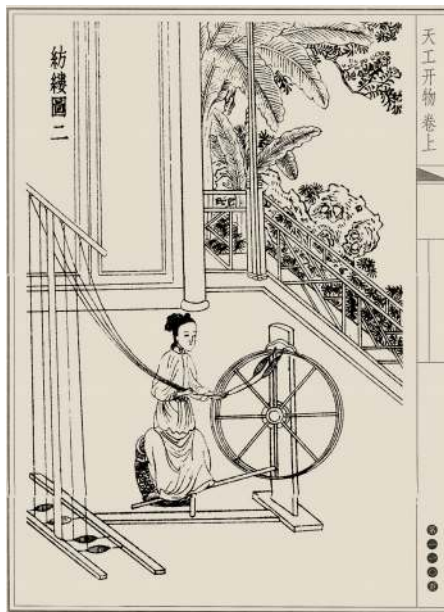


Happy Farmers, a New Year picture from Yangliuqing, depicting a traditional rural scene.



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Dynasty and the Western Zhou Dynasty, all emerged in this landlocked region. For the cultures that emerged on plains as well as in mountain areas, agriculture aided by irrigation was the main means of subsistence. This led to the development of the astronomical calendar, farming tools, and a social system based on the rhythms and culture of traditional farming life. It was this kind of life and the particular style of art in traditional farming society that defined what would become the special features of the traditional arts and crafts of China. The skills and tools that developed were a reflection of the traditional practice of tilling the farm by men and spinning and weaving by women, and the way people's working lives were lived from sunrise to sunset. The original form of all articles and utensils was closely related to their purpose. Every tool should be convenient and simple to use, as appropriate for an agricultural civilization. Even at their most accomplished level, in arts and crafts for court use and for the elite, the idea of practical use and the tradition of simplicity were still maintained. The main decorative style was inspired by nature. Hills, lakes and rivers, animals and plants were the main patterns and ornaments. Outlandish or garish decorations were scarcely seen. The traditional Chinese saying "Finding amusement in things of mere pleasure ruins aspirations" reflects a suspicion of excessive development of skills that had no practical value. The influence of this idea has made functionalism the driving force of Chinese arts and crafts for thousands of years. Nevertheless, it has also brought



Spinning and weaving in *Tiangong Kaiwu* (Exploitation of the Works of Nature).



about a certain conservatism, as social and scientific progress was held back.

The philosophy of the traditional arts and crafts of China can be summed up by the following six ideas:

The first aspect is “respect oneself and be the master of things.” This human-oriented view of material production seems self-evident, yet reflects a difference between China and Europe. After the Industrial Revolution in Britain, mechanized production lowered the costs of production and created the cheapest products, which was widely welcomed as an economic benefit. However, dissatisfaction with machine-made products set in, as they were too uniform and often poorly made, and there remained a preference for handmade items which reflected the maker’s individuality. Additionally, assembly work made workers into part of the machine and denied any pleasure in the work itself. Traditional manual labor, it was believed, could give people a feeling of closeness to the natural materials, of the pleasure of physical touch and of knowing the materials with which they were working. When working in harmony with the rhythm of the agricultural economy, it was thought that the people had a kind of natural pleasure in their rural pursuits. Mechanical production in China was highly developed at an early stage, particularly at what is now recognized as the rudimentary stage of capitalism at the end of the Ming Dynasty. At Songjiang (in the modern-day Jiangsu Province), the cotton-weaving industry was particularly well organised. Quite a few households had five to ten hand looms and even employed workers to operate them, with a clear division of labor between production processes. Nevertheless, this kind of production did not develop into a commercial large-scale industry such as we know today. These seeds of capitalism at the end of the Ming Dynasty did not lead to a great increase in the volume of production, nor cause revolutionary changes in the textile



Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-18655-1 — Chinese Arts and Crafts
Jian Hang, Qiu-hui Guo
Excerpt
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An unadorned, elegant garden to the south of the Yangtze River.



industry like those seen in the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Those cotton-weaving proprietors of the Ming Dynasty, still closely aligned with agriculture, invested their profits back into agricultural production or into the development of their private families, by housebuilding, land purchase, marriages and raising children. While this led to the agricultural economy stagnating, it also reflects how the feudal society of China preferred to enhance and benefit people's lives, rather than develop mechanical production for its own sake.

The second idea is “to attain practical use and to benefit man,” emphasising that crafts' main purpose was utility and people's livelihood. During the Qianlong Reign (1736–1795) of the Qing Dynasty, when Western missionaries or diplomatic envoys of various countries came to China, most of the gifts they presented to the emperor were playthings, such as automated clocks. These were examples of Western inventions not solely made for practical use or for economic benefit. In contrast, objects manufactured in ancient China always laid stress on functional uses. Guan Zhong (c. 725–645 BC), a thinker of the Spring and Autumn Period, praised wise craftsmen in ancient times who always followed the rule of not wasting their wisdom to make playthings that were of no use to people. Mozi (c. 468–376 BC), a thinker in the Warring States Period, also believed in “doing



Changxin Palace Lamp of the Western Han Dynasty, 48 cm high (Cultural Relics Research Institute, Hebei Province).



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what is beneficial to people and not doing what is not beneficial to people.” Today their views may seem over-simplified, but at the time they were of great significance and throughout Chinese history handicrafts were limited to producing such items as were necessary for practical purposes and beneficial to the work of the people.

The third traditional Chinese idea about arts and crafts is “to give full play to the actual shape of raw materials by careful examination.” It stresses the relationship between arts and crafts on the one hand and skills and materials on the other. For instance, when making furniture, skilful carpenters knew how to make use of the characteristics and grain direction of timber to create the shapes they wanted; when making ink stones, good artisans knew how to make use of the innate quality of a particular piece of stone to shape it perfectly; and when carving jade, the best artisans knew how to give full play to the “coincidental natural colors” on a piece of jade. These are only small examples of how handicraft articles were made in accordance with the unique qualities of the natural materials used. The traditional arts and crafts of China paid great attention to materials and technical conditions and designed articles in line with functional requirements. When talking about how to design a landscape in his *Xian Qing Ou Ji* (*Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling*), Li Yu (1610–1680, a famous man of letters at the turn of the Ming and Qing Dynasties) said the essential thing in landscaping was overall harmony. Living in a mostly agricultural society, the Chinese never made any object that was external to that society and all handicraft articles reflected this way of life. The gilded bronze lamp of the Changxin Palace from the Western Han Dynasty is one of the outstanding examples of Chinese traditional handicrafts. Its ingenious design filters smoke by making use of sealed water, discharges the smoke with a flue and adjusts the light with a rotating structure.





Folk pillow showing a fish with a tiger's head.

The fourth idea is “to follow nature with ingenuity.” Inspiration should be drawn from the natural world so as to maintain harmony between man and nature. The term “to follow nature” has often been considered to apply most to painting. In fact, it has also had an immense influence on the traditional arts and crafts of China. In ancient China, its expression was particularly evident in items such as the various lamps and lanterns of the Han Dynasty, the saw invented by master artisan Lu Ban (c. 507–c. 444 BC) and the competition of flying kites between Lu Ban and Mozi. The inspiration for all this was drawn from nature. In addition, the wooden ox and gliding horse invented by Zhuge Liang (181–234), mentioned in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, for transporting army provisions along the narrow valleys of Sichuan Province were also designed by combining machinery and shapes taken from nature. There were many similar examples in ancient times. Even some instruments for astronomical observation, such as the seismograph invented by Zhang Heng (78–139), a Chinese scientist of the Eastern Han Dynasty, were made by imitating or referring to shapes from nature. *Xiu Shi Lu (Lacquer in Ancient China)*, a monograph about lacquer handicraft written in the Ming Dynasty, put forward explicitly the idea of “following nature in an ingenious way.”



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During the Qianlong Reign many luxury goods were made of porcelain in animal shapes. Folk utensils were also made in animal shapes, such as fish-shaped plates, incense bags, cake molds, gate locks and so on. The shapes of animals not only have functional significance but are also unique symbols of Chinese folk culture.

The fifth idea is “to convey truth with skills”: skills were considered to contain ideological elements and attention should be paid to both ideas and things so that day-to-day functionality and technical labor are aligned with higher ideals, doctrines and theories. As early as the pre-Qin Dynasty, this concept was formed largely under the influence of Taoism. Confucianism held the similar view, “to convey truth in writings.” Though the relationship between theory and practice was often unresolved in Chinese intellectual history’ and the tendency to look down on practice and favor theory was widespread, theory has never been more important than practice in the daily life of ordinary people.

The sixth idea, from Confucianism, is “to balance outward grace and solid worth,” that is, the unification of content and form in nature should drive the unification of function and decoration in handicraft articles. This interplay between function and decoration has stopped Chinese art from being solely functional or formalist. Balancing outward grace and solid worth extends beyond objects to a way of life, code of conduct and the relationship between man-made articles and man.

These six key ideas are what might be termed the “wisdom” of the traditional Chinese arts and crafts, as written by imperial nobles or scholars. However, folk wisdom related to the purpose and development of handicrafts is richer, full of an independent symbolism expressed in objects as well as pithy sayings (often in rhyme), legends and stories. Though some over-elaborate, excessive tastes arose during some periods in history, the traditional arts and crafts of China, expressed temperance and restraint in combination with real aesthetic quality and style.

