

# Steppe and the Silk Roads, China's Interactions with its Neighbours

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Lecture series delivered by Professor Jessica Rawson  
4-9 May 2015

DAME JESSICA RAWSON, Professor of Chinese Art and Archaeology at University of Oxford delivered a series of lectures in Leiden and Amsterdam, from 4-9 May 2015, entitled 'Steppe and the Silk Roads, China's Interactions with its Neighbours'. The series was initiated and organized by the Leiden University research cluster Asian Modernities and Traditions. The last lecture in Amsterdam at the Rijksmuseum was co-organized by the International Institute for Asian Studies and the Friends of Asian Arts Association. The lectures were part of the new initiative on Central Asia at Leiden University, funded by Asian Modernities and Traditions.

## Professor Jessica Rawson

Professor Rawson currently holds a five year (2011-2016) Leverhulme Trust grant at Oxford University on *China and Inner Asia, 1000-200 BC: Interactions that Changed China*. Before moving to Oxford in 1994, she worked at the British Museum, where she became Deputy Keeper of the Department of Oriental Antiquities in 1976 and Keeper of the Department in 1987. Jessica Rawson was the Warden of Merton College, Oxford from 1994 until her retirement in 2010. She was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2002 for services to oriental studies.

The research interests of Professor Rawson involve perceptions of beauty and changing beliefs in Chinese society from 1500 BC to AD 1000. She also focuses on the archaeology of China and Inner Asia, on early Chinese material culture as indication for religious concepts and beliefs, and on the development and function of ornament in all parts of Eurasia. Currently, Professor Rawson works on interactions between central China and Inner Asia in the Zhou (c. 1045-221 BC), Qin (221-210 BC) and Han (206 BC-AD 220) periods; on the structure and contents of Chinese tombs; and on exoticism in the Han to Tang periods (200 BC-AD 900).

Professor Rawson has organized numerous exhibitions in London at the British Museum and at the Royal Academy: *Chinese Jade from the Neolithic to the Qing and Mysteries of Ancient China*; *China: The Three Emperors 1662-1795; Treasures of Ancient Chinese, Bronze and Jades from Shanghai*. She also made major contributions to exhibitions of the Qin dynasty Terracotta Warriors at the British Museum, 2006-2007 and at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities at Stockholm, 2010. In addition to catalogues of these exhibitions, her books include studies of Chinese bronzes and jades: *Western Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections* (1990), *Treasures from Shanghai: ancient Chinese bronzes and jades* (2009), *Chinese Jade, from the Neolithic to the Qing* (1995), and discussions of Chinese ornament and design, *Chinese Ornament, the Lotus and the Dragon* (1984). Together with Evelyn Rawski, Jessica Rawson edited the volume *China: The Three Emperors, 1662-1795* (2005).

## Steppe and the Silk Roads, China's Interactions with its Neighbours

In the Leiden lecture series, Professor Rawson talked about the ways in which China's art and culture were transformed through contacts across the steppe and along the Silk Roads. She pointed out that China was immensely enriched and not impoverished through the cultural interactions with the arc, a broad area of desert, highland and mountains between central China, the steppe, and Tibet. She highlighted the importance of the relationship between ancient China and its mobile and semi-sedentary neighbours in the steppe and semi-desert landscapes which surround the Central Plain.

According to Professor Rawson, the interaction with the border peoples was inevitable and created huge political and military upheavals. Warfare, trade and religious proselytization changed China, bringing with them metallurgy, the chariot, sculpture and stone. But the ancient Chinese reinvented these outside contributions in new ways. They made magnificent bronze vessels for offerings, but few fine bronze weapons; they worked on a huge scale in creating chariots as ritual gifts from the king. And the same massive scale was employed for the production of the Terracotta Warriors. Full-sized sculpture in stone and bronze only took off with the introduction of Buddhism across Central Asia from the fourth century AD. The success of Buddhism was dependent on the foreign rulers of north China. Indeed, even with the reunification of China under the Tang in the seventh century, the imperial house maintained close relations with their neighbours, the Turkish

peoples of the steppe, and created a hybrid culture drawn from native Chinese and foreign traditions. As the northern peoples became all the more powerful and overwhelmed China in later centuries, Chinese inventions travelled west, above all guns and gunpowder, porcelain and paper.

## Monday 4 May, Leiden: Warfare, Beauty and Belief, Bridging Eurasia

The opening lecture by Professor Rawson took place at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. In this talk she introduced her overarching ideas and showed how she applies them in different periods to illustrate the ways in which central China was forced to interact, especially with the northern neighbours. This interaction resulted in the creation of new technologies, artefacts and ideas, which China then changed and adapted within the Chinese cultural framework.

Professor Rawson introduced the term arc – a wide territory surrounding the Central Plains to the north and west that shared many characteristics of the steppe; the arc was quite closely linked to Siberia. Based on recent archaeological excavations she discussed the role of the arc by mapping artefacts across Eurasia. In these discussions, she also stressed the importance of the horse as a unifying feature of the steppe and of armour, an element that was also brought from the steppe. Professor Rawson pointed out that China has the largest number of chariot burials in the world. According to her, the chariots had been also introduced from the steppe regions. Further, she focused on the craftsmanship of jade, largely used in burial rituals, and on the ritualizing of weaponry.

## Wednesday 6 May, Leiden: The Lure of Iron and Gold, Interactions with the Steppe in the First Millennium BC.

The second lecture by Professor Rawson took place in the Small Auditorium at the Academy Building. In this talk she concentrated on the impact of military interactions across Eurasia. As riding on horseback changed the structure of the lives and warfare of the mobile peoples in Eurasia, all settled states, including central China, were forced to adapt to these challenges and change their own methods of warfare, affecting society as a whole.

## Friday 8 May, Leiden: Sculpture and Stone in the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220)

The last lecture in Leiden was also held in the main Academy Building. Professor Rawson drew comparisons between the usage of sculpture in the west and across Eurasia. Although sculpture and stone are major features of Western Asian city culture, the early Chinese did not make use of either. Following the innovations of the First Emperor and the creation of the Terracotta Warriors, which owed their inspiration to both Western Asia and different steppe peoples, the Han emperors adopted both the sculpture and stone, primarily in burial contexts. Professor Rawson argues that stone armour, fitting mostly representatives of the highest rank, can only be understood in its relation to death rituals. These innovations then filtered down to lower levels of the elite, but again in the context of tombs.

## Saturday 9 May, Amsterdam: Tents, Tombs and Horse Trade, the Tang (AD 618-906) and the Turks

The last lecture took place at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The Tang period is renowned for its glittering court and the so-called Silk Road, bringing many merchants and foreign goods to the capital, Chang'an. The talk illustrated the very fine artefacts of this period in a much wider context. The Tang were embattled with several Turkish empires, at that period occupying large areas of the steppe. The Chinese were forced to purchase horses to engage with these mounted warriors, and they paid for the horses, coming from the steppe, in silk. This silk drove the silk trade, mainly in the hands of an Iranian people, the Sogdians. Today we have much



Above:  
Detail Hall of the Ambassadors, Afrasiab. 7th-century Sogdian murals, discovered in 1965 in Samarkand (photo by author).

Below:  
Camel with rider, earthenware, Tang Dynasty.

evidence from archaeological excavations of the lives of the Sogdians who settled in China in the sixth to eighth century. Professor Rawson presented the fascinating scenes of these merchants and officials documented in carvings on their coffins buried within the confines of Tang China. The Tang period, renowned for its art and poetry, is now much better known, according to Rawson, and even more colourful for the multiple engagements that we now know the court had with its neighbours.

Elena Paskaleva is a post-doctoral researcher working on Central Asian architecture and material culture. She is the coordinator of the Central Asia initiative at Leiden University (elpask@gmail.com).

