

Exotica, Fashion and Immortality: The New Use of Gold in Han Dynasty China (206 BCE–CE 220)

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This article explores the use of gold in the elite tombs of Han dynasty China, the popular use of which originated outside the Chinese cultural milieu, and its integration into the Han portfolio of materials representing people's expectations for the afterlife, such as immortality and well-being. In contrast to jade, which had a long history of use in China, gold was in itself a 'new' element of Chinese culture. This article outlines the introduction of gold objects from Europe and Central Asia via the Eurasian Steppe and borderland of China from around the eighth century BCE. The unprecedented use of gold in the Han-specific jade suits, and the process by which foreign types of zoomorphic motifs were adopted and connected with local motifs, are explored. In light of the political change from multiple competing states before the first unification in Chinese history in the third century BCE, and the development in ideology and concept of an ideal and eternal afterlife, this article explains the reasons and meanings of the new use of gold in Han dynasty China and the composite system of motifs, materials and objects.

Introduction

In many ancient cultures, such as Greece, Rome, and Egypt, gold was highly prized due to its incorruptible nature, and gold objects were regarded as symbols of high status (Bunker 1993, 27; Clark 1986, 50–57). In China, by contrast, there was a cultural tradition of valuing jade as a high-status material for its durability, translucence and tactility throughout all periods of history (Liji, 63.1669–72; Lin 2009, 7–8; Rawson 1995, 13; Wu 1997, 147).¹ Unlike other cultures, gold was incorporated into China and mortuary practice as a new fashion originating from regions to the west (Bunker 1993, 27; Liu 2020; Rawson 1995, 60). The trend for gold as an exotic, foreign material can be traced back to at least the eighth century BCE (Qi 2006, 71–2; Rawson 2017, 378 & 381). During this period, the competing feudal states of the Zhou dynasty had contact with mobile herders to the west and north, who used gold as a symbol of prestige and power. These interactions

stimulated an increasing interest in gold in China (Rawson & Bunker 1990, 293–5).

This article explores the unprecedented manner of using gold in burial assemblages of the elite in the Han dynasty, such as the gold thread to make the Han-period-specific jade suits and depositing gilded or gold objects decorated with motifs of both local and western origins. It argues that gold objects became an integral part of the burial system in the mainstream culture of China for the first time, i.e. they were included in a system of varied decorations, motifs and materials that developed in the Han period as a means to convey good wishes and engender favourable outcomes such as well-being in the afterlife and immortality.² This is informed by the beliefs and symbolism behind the burial practices, and the broader ideological and social context in early imperial China. Local adaptation of foreign techniques is examined to demonstrate how materials from one place may not be entirely adopted when they arrive in another, but are adapted and certain aspects

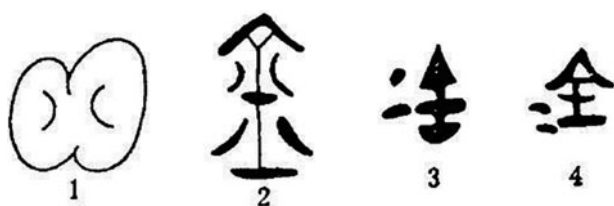


Figure 1. The character for gold (*jin* 金) in early forms of Chinese writing. (1) Oracle bones, Shang dynasty; (2–4) Bronze inscriptions, Western Zhou dynasty. (Reprinted from Qi 1999, 68, with permission.)

transplanted. These processes are illuminated using theories of agency and materiality, which emphasize the mutually informative relationship between materials, technologies and styles, as well as broader contextual trends in art, society and history.

The meaning of ‘gold’ is firstly defined by reference to relevant textual materials. In the Han period, the numbers of written sources that refer to gold and the amount of gold recorded rise hugely, though some should be treated with caution as regards their reliability.³ Secondly, the western origin of the tradition of gold use is traced. Important sites in north, west and south China dating to around the eighth century BCE onwards are mentioned specifically, because they represent distinct regional styles of use and design, which laid the foundation for goldwork in the following period.

There are multiple related researches including general studies on gold in early China (Bunker 1993; Lin 2006; Qi 2006; Rawson & Bunker 1990), specific studies on goldwork techniques and their influence on other materials, like jade (He 2008; Liu 2017; 2020; Qi 1999; 2006; Rawson 1995, 60–74), and more on gold in later dynastic China.⁴ Nevertheless, the transition to new shared practices in gold use in the Han period has, to date, not been sufficiently studied in relation to other burial practices, such as its use in the jade suits, nor to the overall historical and ideological background. This article thus examines the finds mainly from royal tombs of the Han period where a large number of gold objects have been discovered, which provides a realistic range of sources to be studied for the major changes in gold use and reasons behind them.⁵

Definition

In modern English, ‘gold’ refers to a yellow precious metal resistant to tarnishing and corrosion, relatively malleable and ductile, and is used in finance, as well as to make jewellery and ornament (*Oxford English*

Dictionary 2017). This definition indicates the key qualities of gold that probably made it appealing to early people, namely that it is incorruptible and relatively easy to work.

The Chinese character for gold used today is *jin* 金, but it was originally used to denote ‘metal’ in general (Bunker 1993, 28). Inscriptions on Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE) oracle bones and Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) bronzes represent the earliest forms of writing in ancient China, and *jin* is mostly used to refer to bronze or copper (Fig. 1) (Li 1985, 330–6; Qi 1999, 68). It was not until the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BCE) that gold was differentiated from copper, evident in *Guanzi* 管子,⁶ ‘under [the mountain] there is gold ... under [the mountain] there is copper’.⁷ Later, the third-century BCE dictionary *Erya* 爾雅 refers to gold as ‘yellow metal’ (*huang jin* 黃金), while silver is defined as ‘white metal’ (*bai jin* 白金).⁸

That the concept of gold was specified in the Eastern Zhou reflects that more specific attention was being paid to gold, and more discussion is conducted in the following section on relevant archaeological excavation dating to the period. Later, the Han dynasty witnessed an unprecedented abundance of texts on gold, including mining and goldwork techniques, and gold used for trade, imperial benediction and stockpiles.⁹ The overall amount of gold mentioned in Western Han (206 BCE–CE 9) records totals around 2,000,000 *jin* 斤 (445,201 kg).¹⁰ Such numbers attest to exploitation of the many natural gold sources, often allied with silver, within China. Although these texts may not provide a complete picture of gold circulation during early imperial China, and archaeological evidence suggests that it does not, it was likely that gold became an important part of life and afterlife for the imperial family and others of high rank in society.¹¹

Historical background

Gold from outsiders: the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties

Over the third to first millennia BCE the societies of central China were constantly influenced by the metallurgical traditions of mobile pastoralists from across the steppe (Anthony 2007, 371–457; Di Cosmo 2002, 56–87; Frachetti 2012; Rawson 2017). Trade and contact between the dynasties and these groups have been acknowledged (Bunker 1993; Keightley 2012, 174–93; Li 2006, 141–92). Since these groups on the borders were also in contact with Eurasian Steppe people, the dynasties were introduced to objects and technologies through

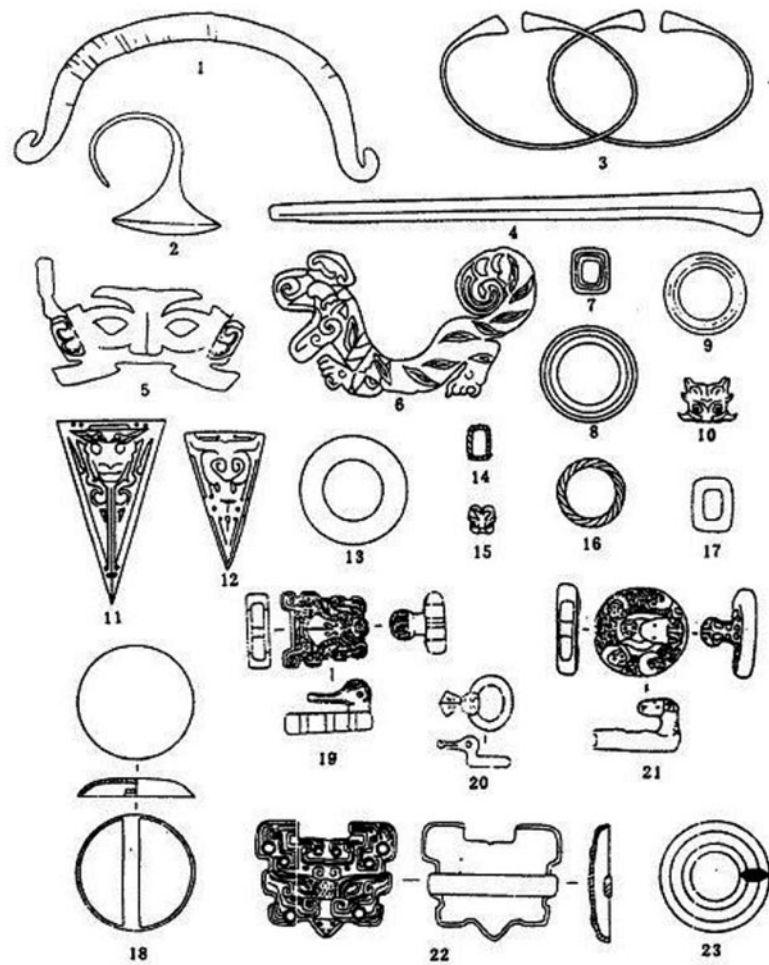


Figure 2. Gold objects dated to the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Shang dynasty: (1) ornament, Shanxi Province; (2–4) ornaments, Beijing; (5) and (6) human-head and tiger ornaments, Sichuan Province. Western Zhou dynasty: (7–11) belt ornaments, Henan Province; (12–17) belt ornaments, Shanxi Province. Eastern Zhou dynasty: (18–23) objects, Shaanxi Province. (Reprinted from Qi 1999, 70, with permission.)

them, including chariots for warfare, metallurgy and gold foil.¹² The earliest archaeologically attested production and use of gold within modern China borders—but outside the territory of the central Chinese dynasties—can be dated to the late second millennium BCE (Gong 1997, 353–60): (1) gold jewellery and ornaments of Siberian styles in the Hebei–Liaoning region (c. 2000–1500 BCE) in the northeast (Bunker 1993, 30–31; Renn 2012, 112–16); (2) gold ornaments of southern Siberian style in Shanxi and Gansu provinces (c. 1600–1046 BCE) in the northwest (Lin 1986, 241–8; Wong 2019, 84–123); (3) gold human masks with hollow eyes and raised noses from pits at the peculiar site of Sanxingdui 三星堆 (c. 1200 BCE) in Sichuan Province in the southwest (Sage 1992; Zhao 2004) (Figs 2 & 3).

In the Western Zhou, most examples of gold have been excavated from parts of Zhou territory formerly under Shang rule and in peripheral areas (Huang 1996, 143–4). These areas extend northwest

into the Ordos and Liaoning and south into Sichuan, where pastoralists were prevalent (Bunker 1993, 27). Gold was widely used among such groups as decoration on weapons and utensils and adornments for people and horses, which reflect contacts with south Siberia and the Central Asian steppes (Honeychurch 2015, 157–8; Zhu 1984, 14). Gold was the main object to display status, and was made into artefacts for the dead (Li 2011, 19 & 27; So *et al.* 1995, 62), practices that are not evident in the Shang and Zhou, where bronze and jade were most heavily used.

Intensified contacts: gold in the Eastern Zhou dynasty

The Eastern Zhou dynasty was a time when gold-work developed quickly. The former constituent states of the Western Zhou were no longer united by a central authority, and the competition between them and cultural contacts with outside groups resulted in various types of gold objects or items decorated with gold.



Figure 3. Some major sites in the pre-Han and Han dynasties in and outside modern China. (Drawing: Shengyu Wang.)

The pre-dynastic Qin 秦 State (770–221 BCE), located around the earlier Zhou heartland in Shaanxi, eastern Gansu and southern Ningxia provinces, partially laid the foundation for the increase in gold use after its unification of the Warring States (Warring States period of the Eastern Zhou, c. 480–221 BCE) in 221 BCE. Extensive discoveries of openwork, zoomorphic designs, buckles and belt hooks show strong similarities to examples in Scytho-Siberian groups in southern Siberia (Wong 2019, 82–3). Cast gold, a technique similar to granulation, was found,¹³ of which the earliest examples were discovered in Guo 虢 State (c. 1000–655 BCE), at Sanmenxia 三門峽 in Henan Province.¹⁴ The earliest metal belt ornaments on the Central Plain were also found there, a fashion traced back to the second millennium BCE in Western Asia (Moorey 1967).

Gold was used as currency in the form of coins and bronze shell money (*bei* 貝) covered with gold (Huang 1996, 145; Li 2017). Key sources of gold have been discovered in another powerful state, Chu 楚 (1030–223 BCE), in southern China, where the largest amount of gold for currency was used by then.¹⁵ This, together with gold vessels, bronzes enhanced with gold inlay, and traces of incense—prevalent in Central and Western Asia—discovered such as in the tomb of the Marquis Yi 乙 (c. 475–433 BCE) of a smaller allied state of Chu, Zeng 曾 (c. early Western Zhou–mid Warring States period) in Suizhou 隨州, Hubei Province, indicates the

contact with groups to the north and west (Hubei Provincial Museum 1989, vol. 1, 245–51; Rawson 2006, 75).

The earliest metallurgical technologies for working gold also developed at the time (Lawton 1982, 21; Li 1985, 167 & 357–8; Liu 2020). In Shanxi Province, moulds for gold sword handles with Central or Western Asian-style motifs were found in the Houma 侯馬 Foundries of the Jin 晉 State (1033–349 BCE), which served as a market that extended to Qin territory and sites over northern China, another centre for metalworking.¹⁶ Influence from Arzhan (c. ninth–sixth centuries BCE) in the Tuva Republic and the Minusinsk Basin, etc., can be detected there (Chen & Wang 2012, 29–31) and later in the Western Han, represented by the decorated gold dagger from a royal tomb at Mancheng 滿城, Hebei Province (Fig. 4) (Rawson 2017, 383).

The outline shows contact between Eastern Zhou states and pastoralists to their north and west, as well as peoples further west in Central Asia and north in the Altai Mountains and southern Siberia. Intensified contacts with outsiders and improved techniques led exotic gold items to become highly prized in the Han Empire. With unity achieved, a window of opportunity was further created for the exotic material and new artefacts to be used to retain a long-standing social order, ideological tradition, and burial and ritual culture.



Figure 4. *Decorated gold daggers from Mancheng in Hebei Province, China, the steppe, and Central Asia: (a) Chertomlyk (late fourth century BCE); (b) Solokha (early fourth century BCE); (c) Kul'-Oba (fourth century BCE); (d) Kelermes (mid-late seventh century BCE); (e) Filippovka (fifth-fourth centuries BCE); (f) Tagisken (sixth-fifth centuries BCE); (g) Tiliya Tepe (first century BCE-CE first century); (h) Issyk (fourth-third centuries BCE); (i) Berel' (fourth-third centuries BCE); (j) Arzhan II (sixth-fifth centuries BCE); (k) Majiayuan (fourth-third centuries BCE); (l) Mancheng (second century BCE). (Drawing: Jessica Rawson and Peter Hommel, with permission.)*

New uses of gold in the Han dynasty

The use of objects, motifs and metalworking techniques from distant regions and cultures has been a common way for society's upper echelons to express social and military power across history (Helms 1988; Liu 2017, 1589), for such rarities demonstrate financial ability and privilege to have access to exotic objects, or power granted by the sovereign and the court to be in contact with other peoples. In the Han Empire, there was an unprecedented increase in the use of gold and related foreign designs (Qi 1999, 79). The foundation of the Empire and its expansion into Central Asia probably prompted the influx of foreign goldwork (Liu 2013, 81-6). This section examines some of the typical new uses of gold by then, mainly the gold thread used to sew the jade plaques of jade suits and the gold ornamental pieces and gilded objects composed of local and foreign motifs and techniques. The number, quality and types of luxury goldwork increased compared to the pre-Han period.¹⁷ This article proposes that such frequency of gold use and the new types indicate that gold was not merely a status symbol. More specifically, during this period, gold—like jade—became a symbol of intangible immortality and well-being within the Chinese belief system as reflected in the

burial context, which was developed in accordance with the ideology and the political situation.

Gold thread in jade suits

The most extraordinary artefacts that were specific to China, and also to the Han period, are the jade suits, usually composed of thousands of plaques in various shapes to encase the deceased (Fig. 5) (Gu 1996, 137; Liu 2011). Nearly 20 complete or fragmentary suits were sewn with gold or gilded thread (full list in Liu 2011, 39-40; Wang 2008, 8-14). Emma Bunker proposed (1993, 46) that the merging of the two incorruptible materials, jade and gold, perhaps served to preserve the physical body of the deceased. She is one of very few scholars who have paid attention to the gold used in the jade suits, but has not developed this idea further. This article examines the gold thread in more detail and explores the questions of why gold or gilded thread was used in the suits, and in what sense the use of this material with an exotic association became included in the burial and cosmological system of the Han period.

One of the best-preserved jade suits belongs to Liu Sheng 劉勝 (d. 113 BCE), King Jing 靖 of Zhongshan 中山, which was excavated from Mancheng, Hebei (Fig. 3). The gold threads sewing jade plaques measured 4-5 cm long each, and the



Figure 5. The jade suit from the tomb of Liu Sheng, Mancheng. (Reprinted from Hebei 1980, vol. 2, colour pls. 19 & 20, with permission.)

thicknesses varied from 0.08 to 0.5 mm (Fig. 5) (Hebei 1980, vol. 1, 98 & 354–6). The manufacturing method for the thread was to cut gold sheet (0.1–0.2 mm thick) into strips (1–2 mm wide); some of the strips were then twisted into wires (Hebei 1980, vol. 1, 389). Such techniques of gold or silver wire can be traced to the filigree technique of Mesopotamia and Egypt around 2700 BCE, which appears in Asia from around 2000 BCE (Liu 2017, 1594; Ogden 1982, 11–15). The earliest example found in China dates to the fourth century BCE in Hebei Province (Qiao 2004; Xi'an Northwest University 2016, 15–31), though the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng contained 426 springs shaped from gold wire, the exact function of which is still unclear (Hubei Provincial Museum 1989, vol. 1, 451). The overall lack of technical precedents for gold wire prior to the fourth century BCE suggests that the technique was introduced to the former Zhou states by outsiders, though manufacture in the Han period became highly technical and delicate.

There were overall four ways of sewing and knotting the thread for plaques of different shapes in different parts of the suit (Fig. 6) (Hebei 1980, vol. 1, 355). As has been proposed by some scholars, the jade suits are likely to have imitated iron armour for protecting the body (Lin 2003; Lu 1989, 65). The plaques were made in the shape of squares, rectangles, triangles and half-moons, etc., to avoid gaps or spaces, which shows that the deceased's whole body was supposed to be enclosed.¹⁸ It can therefore be assumed that all jade plaques were intended to be tied to one another firmly, similar to the iron plaques of armour tied with rough linen rope (Fig. 7).¹⁹

Not all jade suits discovered to date, however, were sewn with gold thread. Silver, (gilded) bronze and silk thread were also used. Silver, together with gold, is mentioned as having been used for constructing palaces for the immortals in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji, 28.383). The *Book of the Later Han*, on the other hand, dictated regulations of burial practice in the Western Han:

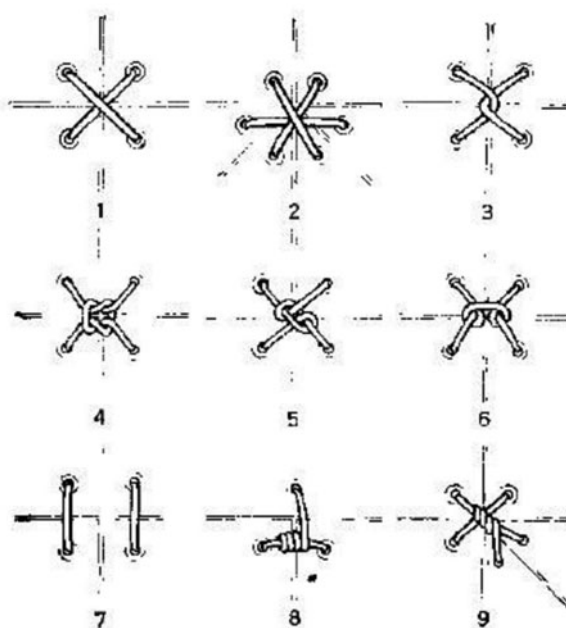


Figure 6. Different knots used for the gold thread on the jade suit of Liu Sheng. (1–2) cross; (3–6) hitch; (7) circuit; (8) & (9) wrapped knots. (Reprinted from Hebei 1980, vol. 1, 356, fig. 233, with permission.)

When an emperor died, ... jade was used to make clothes in the shape of armour, the jade was sewn together with gold as the thread ... [to make] a [jade] suit ... when feudal vassals, nobles, newly appointed consorts, and princesses died, ... jade suits with silver thread [were made]; sister-princesses and grand consorts [used] bronze thread.²⁰

It is noteworthy that this text on Western Han practice was written in the Eastern Han, and no related Western Han records have been found, nor have imperial tombs been excavated to confirm this description. Among the Western Han suits from royal tombs that were discovered with thread still preserved, more than half used gold or gilded thread (Liu 2011, 40–41; Wang 2008, 8–14). Those which used silver, bronze or silk were mostly for women, noblemen, unidentified occupants, or produced in early Western Han, and far predate the above description of regulations (*Hou hanshu*, 3152–6; Lu 1989, 65; Wang 2017). The *Book of the Later Han* records that the corpses in jade suits in the imperial tombs were 'all like living people' (*Hou hanshu*, 41.487–90). This seems to describe an ideal state of body preservation as opposed to the actual, as no human body has yet been found preserved completely in the suits. However, the

written records indicate that the preservation of a physical body was engendered and desired. Additionally, the suits are also called 'jade case' (*yuxia* 玉匣) in historical sources (*Hou hanshu*, 41; Shi 1972, 48; Sun 2014, 253–4), which suggests that the design to contain and preserve the body may have been important. To understand such burial practice further, and whether the selection of gold was merely due to its tarnish-resistant feature and representation of prestige without other symbolism or mechanism of agency in the realm of burial ritual and ideology, views towards death, afterlife and the idea of immortality (*xian* 仙) must be examined.

The concept of immortality

In the Zhou dynasty, prayers for blessings to the ancestors or Heaven were inscribed on bronze vessels in Central China, and *shou* 壽 was by far the most popular character used, meaning longevity, i.e. prolonging human life (Creel 1937, 333; Kern 2008). After the eighth century BCE, however, the specific idea of immortality began to appear, as reflected in inscriptions that refer to 'no death' (*wusi* 毋死) and 'impeding old age' (*nanlao* 難老) (Yü 1964–65, 87). Scholars' opinions vary as to where the idea of physical immortality originated, but one thing has been widely acknowledged: the concept denoted the process of leaving this world to become immortal in the afterlife, as opposed to living forever in the human world.²¹

The search for immortality and a drug to prevent death reached its peak in the reigns of the first emperor Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇 (r. 221–210 BCE) and the Han emperor Wudi 武帝. Textually, the idea of 'no death' developed into an imagined, far-away 'no death land' (*busi guo* 不死國), where the 'no death people' (*busi min* 不死民) lived (*Shanhaijing*, 6.145–53, 14.204–12 & 15.213–20; *Shiji*, 28.983, 989–90 & 992). After the unification, numerous 'immortalists' or 'necromancers' (*fangshi* 方士) convinced Qin Shi Huang that immortality could be realised by taking 'drugs of no death' (*busi zhi yao* 不死之藥) under certain circumstances (*Shiji*, 6.129–31). In the Western Han, immortalists from the coastal region of Qi 齊, a large part of what is now Shandong Province, flocked to the court in Chang'an 長安 to offer the emperor their services in seeking the drugs at sea (*Shiji*, 12.288; Watson 1971, vol. 2, 25–6) (Fig. 3). One of the most famous of these was Li Shaojun 李少君 (fl. c. second century BCE), who told Wudi that the legendary Yellow Emperor had achieved the state of no death after meeting immortals on the isle of Penglai 蓬萊 off

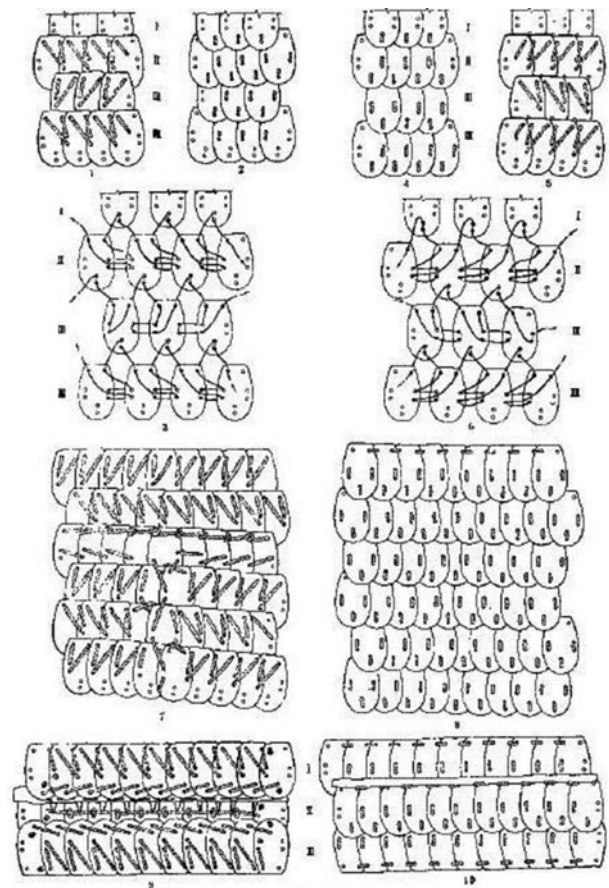


Figure 7. Different ways of securing the plaques on the iron armour from the tomb of Liu Sheng. (Reprinted from Hebei 1980, vol. 1, 361, fig. 235, with permission.)

Shandong and performing the sacrifice to Heaven (*feng* 封) and Earth (*shan* 禘) (*Shiji*, 28.996–7 & 1002; Watson 1971, vol. 2, 3–52):

Offering sacrifices to the stove [god] allows one to transform cinnabar into gold. Making the gold into vessels for drinking and eating then increases the length of one's life. With long life, one can meet the immortals of Penglai. On seeing them, one makes the *Feng* and *Shan* sacrifices to achieve deathlessness, just as the Yellow Emperor did.²²

Furthermore, another relationship existed between the resurgence in interest in immortality in Wudi's reign and the contemporary political situation. A more comprehensive, or 'greedier', concept of immortality flourished to denote both worldly and otherworldly eternal life. As a result of Zhang Qian's 張騫 (164–113 BCE) expedition in the late second century BCE to the western regions, geographical knowledge of the lands west of the Han Empire increased and, as the imperial quest for immortality

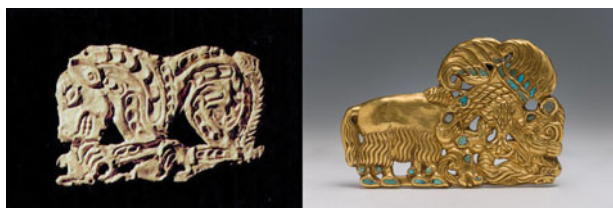


Figure 8. (Left) One of a set of gold belt plaques with a combat scene between an ungulate and a feline from Liuping 劉坪, Gansu Province. Fourth–third centuries BCE. (Reprinted from Li & Nan 2003, 11, with permission). (Right) Belt buckle with a combat scene between a yak, a tiger, and a raptor from south Siberia. Fifth–fourth centuries BCE. Gold and turquoise. (Siberian collection of Peter I. Russia, Siberia. © The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph: Vladimir Terebenin.)

grew larger in scope, more attentions were directed westward (Yü 1964–65, 97–8). Wudi expressed his desire to ascend Kunlun 崑崙 Mountain in the west to meet the immortals.²³ The opening-up of the west to Han trade may have occurred partially because Wudi coveted Ferghana horses that could run fast over long distances, from what is today Uzbekistan, believing that these so-called ‘heavenly horses’ (*tian ma* 天馬) acted as media of communication between the human world and the immortals (Liu 2020) and possessing them would finally bring immortality (Rawson 1999, 19). The search for immortality in the imperial court probably impacted high officials and even the common people, as such quests began to be a recurring theme in tomb ornaments such as the hoof-shaped gold miniature symbols of heavenly horses (Liu 2020; Wei 2017). These objects and the association of gold with immortality evident in texts including the use of gold food vessels and the performance of appropriate rituals (*Hanshu*, 25.1215–6; Liu 2020, 190) help us to understand better the selection of the costly material for jade suits. Like the durable jade and its metaphorical function of bringing immortality (Rawson 1995; Sun 2014, 243–63), the mechanism of agency of gold shifted from long-lasting anti-tarnishing physicality in this world to the realm of funerary ritual, to bestow immortality. Similarly, for gilt-bronze- or silver-threaded suits, besides arousing prestige within the framework of the regulation for people of different ranks, it was likely that the materiality of gold-like metals were responsive to and indicative of the will or expectation of the agents, i.e. the deceased, to generate a similar cosmic link to immortality. Furthermore, the quest for immortality was not

merely otherworldly as described in pre-Han literature.²⁴ Rather, the transplantation of worldly pleasures, enjoyments and fashion, etc., were craved, as represented by the rise to Heaven of Liu An 劉安 (179–122 BCE), Prince of Huainan, with his whole household, dogs, even cockerels (*Shiji*, 6.134 & 12.284), and also by other gold use in Han burials described in the discussion below.

Adapted zoomorphic motifs and the enriched afterlife

There was a dominant trend for adopting and adapting foreign motifs on foreign luxuries in the Han period. This section proposes that zoomorphic motifs, usually in three-dimensional renderings and represented dynamically in motion, were regarded as powerful and protective spiritual creatures that could concentrate power, benefits and exotica as fashion in the afterlife. Motifs of animals and mythical creatures, along with ways of combining them, were introduced from regions to the west of China and used on various objects and ornaments. Like jade and bronze, gold had increasing ritual and social importance, and therefore it can be considered a catalyst that engendered new forms of imagery and object types (Rawson 1995, 30). The visual and material-cultural variety were influenced and constructed by the social and ideological approach towards a better afterlife.

Real or imaginary animals depicted in conflict with each other or with humans appear during the Eastern Zhou. Mostly from north or western China, where the inhabitants had different identities to those in Central China, the zoomorphic motifs are acknowledged as having been taken from Western and Central Asian examples (Fig. 8) (see ‘Historical background’, above). In the Han dynasty, the overall number of such works uncovered from archaeological sites and recorded in texts increases exponentially (*Hanshu*, 3871–932; Li 2014, 87; Qi 1999, 81–2; Yang 2018). Zoomorphic motifs are seen in the forms of relief and openwork on belt and weapon fittings and numerous tiny ornaments in Han royal tombs. Representative examples are gold plaques from the tomb of the King of Chu at Shizishan 獅子山 (c. 154 BCE) (Fig. 9), the King of Jiangdu 江都 at Xuyi 盱眙, Jiangsu Province (d. c. 128 BCE), and the King of Zhongshan at Mancheng (Li 2014; Lin 2012, 188–9 & 294–5; Shizishan 1998, 17 & 29). The plaques display creatures such as wolves or felines attacking other animals, a theme popular in southern Siberian metal ornament.²⁵ From Han rhapsodies (*fu* 賦) and historical records, it is known that these beasts, engrossingly, were associated with good omens²⁶—believed to herald the arrival of good

fortune in political and historical context (Loewe 1994).²⁷ In the Han period, more of these motifs on plaques or belt ornaments were replaced with traditional local motifs, such as dragons and tortoises, the directional mythical creatures with cosmological significance (Liji, 3.81; Ni 1999; Zou & Wei 1998),²⁸ as demonstrated on plaques excavated from Tomb no. 9 at Dayunshan 大雲山 at Xuyi, and from the King of Nanyue 南越 (d. 122 BCE) in Guangzhou 廣州, Guangdong Province (Fig. 10) (Guangzhou 1991, vol. 1, 65–6; Li 2012, 88–9; Liu 2017, 1599). Cosmic motifs including cloud and constellations were intertwined with the localized creatures (Guo 2020; Wu 2010, 50–51 & 253). The unprecedented development and increase in gold use reflect the interactions between the Han Empire and their neighbours, mainly the Xiongnu (Rawson 2012, 35), as well as a cultural trend for adapting and including a variety of artefacts, materials and motifs into the ornament repertoire and the rising concern with good omens, which had an origin and historical background of studying the skies, celestial indications and correlating human affairs with invisible spirits, gods and Heaven since the Shang and Zhou (Graham 1986; Lippiello 2001; Rawson 2000). Not only did patterns, motifs and meanings change over time; so did the materials on which they were depicted. The growing fascination with gold influenced designs of jade and lacquer (Rawson 1995, 61). Materials thus serve as a contact point between people and the physical world for expressions of ideology and ideas actively to be created and abstract beliefs formed and even brought into being (Dobres & Robb 2000, 12; Rawson 2007).

Tiny gold ornamental pieces are another common find. A few Warring States precedents clearly indicate their western origin (Zuo 2020), but their widespread use on Han fabrics provides an essentially new difference in the fashion for personal adornment, which also had ritual function on certain occasions (Liu 2017, 1591 & 1597–8). Typical examples are from Shizishan, Mancheng and the tomb of Liu Fei 劉非 (169–127 BCE), King Yi 易 of Jiangdu at Xuyi, including gold appliqué thin sheets embossed with confronting ram's heads; buttons decorated with filigree, granules and enamel; and roundels with tubular sockets (Fig. 11) (Liu 2017, 1592). Besides exhibiting status, taste and wealth of the deceased, they were probably buried to continue the ornamental and ceremonial function in the after-life. Added to this was the concept that gold was associated with immortality; therefore they guaranteed the intended well-being, ritual tradition and fashion in the funeral complex to be continued and

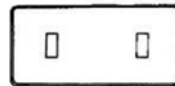
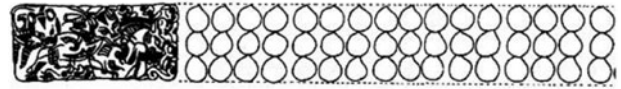


Figure 9. A pair of gold belt plaques, each depicting a wolf and a bear attacking a horse-like animal. The tomb of the King of Chu, Shizishan. (Reprinted from Zou & Wei 1998, 38–9, with permission.)

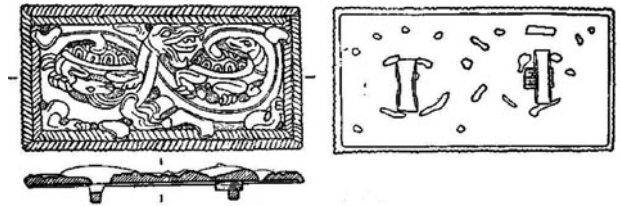


Figure 10. Gilded bronze belt plaque with the decoration of two tortoises and a dragon from the tomb of King of Nanyue. (Reprinted from Guangzhou 1991, vol. 1, 166, with permission.)

eternal.²⁹ The fascination with gold as a material and the related motifs depicted grew, became adapted and enriched in burial practice as well as in the visualization and materialization of good expectations and ideological concepts of Han China.

Conclusion

A Western Han folk song laments: 'No one is made of gold or stone, [so] how can one escape death?' (Birrell 1988, 75; Guo 1979, 547; Wu 2010, 138) Gold, according to contemporary beliefs, was everlasting. The Han dynasty witnessed increase and development in uses of gold not seen before, improved techniques in gold working and increased adaptation of foreign motifs. These developments were motivated by the need to display the power of the Han Empire and the pursuit of immortality both in this world and in the burial context. Gold was first used to enhance objects in the Shang and Zhou dynasties in the



Figure 11. (a) Gold ornaments with rams' heads, Shizishan (Reprinted from Xuzhou Museum 2011, 284); (b) appliqué, roundels and buttons, Dayunshan (Reprinted from Nanjing Museum 2013, 294–302); (c) appliqué, Mancheng (Reprinted from Zuo 2020, 60); (d) possible ways of wearing the gold ornaments in the Han period (Reprinted from Zuo 2020, 65). (All with permission.)

forms of foil and inlay, which, as acknowledged, was regarded mainly as another symbol of status and wealth. In early imperial China, however, emperors became interested in achieving immortality. Court-employed alchemists suggested that gold, with its incorruptible properties, could facilitate immortality if made into special medicines to be ingested, or vessels. By examining some royal tombs where gold objects have been found, it is proposed in this article that there were several significant new uses of gold in the Han period: gold or gilded thread used for jade suits; and ornamental pieces and objects with zoomorphic motifs from the west and of Chinese origins that may have had cosmological significance.

The Han-specific jade suits could only be afforded by society's highest ranks. Texts indicate that only in the Eastern Han did a more regulated system governing the use of jade suits appear, and gold thread was restricted to the imperial family. Before that, no evident regulations limited the manufacture or use of jade suits, and gold thread has been discovered in various royal tombs. It has been argued in previous scholarship that the suits were protective, like armour in life, and that bodily encasing was incredibly important. The durable jade and gold were symbolic of eternity, and the composite suits were believed to secure a firm layer around the body and thus a safe and immortal afterlife. These suits specifically made for burials had ritual and ideological significance in themselves; therefore it is unlikely that gold or gold-like materials were selected for the thread unconsciously, or only for showing status; otherwise the treasured bronze or silk could have been more heavily used to link the

many jade plaques. The shift in burial practice, including the appearance of gold-threaded jade suits, was a reflection of social and ideological development that cannot be overlooked. The above-mentioned assumption, however, is based on current excavations, when no imperial tombs have been explored and many royal tombs looted.

Gold, from the very beginning of its known use in pre-Han tombs, was considered ornamental and imbued with exotic characteristics, as it was an influence from places west of the Central Plain and the Eurasian Steppe. In the Han dynasty, more western motifs were combined with local themes and ideas to form new designs. Exotic goldwork, such as buckles, was taken into the afterlife for continuous enjoyment; meanwhile as argued here, to channel the intentions and beliefs of the period, i.e. reinforce immortality and auspiciousness. Similar objects were not totally unavailable in pre-Han discoveries, but the unified Han Empire adopted a hugely increased number of exotic objects and used them by localizing related motifs to expand the repertoire of art and the expression of social beliefs. The depositions are examined in a more comprehensive and contextual manner in this article for a fuller understanding of the development in material culture and the overall course of history. An eternal, luxurious and trendy afterlife was evidently the aim, as suggested by the gold ornaments and other common finds decorated with gold (e.g. incense burners, vessels and medicinal objects: He 2008), which due to space limitations are not discussed here.

Though initially a material popular among outside groups, gold was eventually adopted,

transplanted, highly prized and integrated into the existing complex of motifs and objects, which collectively served to emphasize an immortal and happy afterlife in Han period China. By contrast with the preceding era, this period represents the first time that such a large number of foreign material, motifs and objects were included in the burial and ideological system in unified or centralized China. Focusing on the material agency of gold provides a markedly different perspective of changes in archaeology and history—by compounding materials, forms and technologies, tastes and styles, and the belief system that emphasized correlation and good outcomes, namely immortality, fashion and general well-being in an eternal afterlife, the rule of the mutual shaping of human beings and material culture is illustrated.

Notes

1. The *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) is a collection of texts on social etiquette and ceremonial rites of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), believed to have been composed first in the late Zhou and early Han periods, then by scholars Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE), Dai De 戴德 (*fl.* c. 43–33 BCE) and Dai Sheng 戴聖 (*fl.* c. 74–48 BCE). ‘China’ in this article refers to the geographical extent of the modern Peoples’ Republic of China; the territory of the Han imperial dynasty established in 206 BCE is specified by ‘the Han Empire’.
2. A shift in thought has been acknowledged to have taken place in the Han period, which was a shared correlative cosmology, and therefore a belief that the representation of certain images or objects would invoke the appearance of the related spirits or good outcomes: e.g. the portrayal of gods, deities, and divine beings in the Ganquan 甘泉 Palace and on objects was believed to make communication possible between them and Emperor Wu 武 of Han (r. 141–87 BCE) (*Shiji*, 12; Ge 2014, 188–90; Wu 1984).
3. The gold found in archaeological contexts does not match the thousands of kilogrammes recorded in texts as having been used. However, there are increasing new categories of gold objects discovered in Han tombs, as discussed throughout this article. Few related discoveries have been found in Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) tombs (Qi 1999, 75; see also Liu R. 2016).
4. The Tang dynasty (CE 618–907) has been acknowledged as a golden age for goldwork in China (Katō 2006; Qi 2006). There is also more archaeological evidence for the mining of gold since Tang (Golas 1999; Ran 2008, 102).
5. The Han Empire was divided into commanderies (*jun* 郡), controlled by the central government, and semi-autonomous regional kingdoms (*guo* 國), ruled by members of the royal family. The first emperor of Han, Gaozu 高祖 (r. 202–195 BCE), divided the populous areas of eastern China and the Yangtze Valley into 10 kingdoms (*Hanshu*, 14.393–4; Rawson 1999, 20). The *Book of Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) was predominantly written by Ban Gu 班固 (CE 32–92) and completed by Ban Zhao 班昭 (CE 45–120) during the Eastern Han (CE 25–220), with contributions by their father Ban Biao 班彪 (CE 3–54).
6. *Guanzi* is an overview text of different schools of thoughts in the Zhou dynasty and is attributed to philosopher-statesman Guan Zhong 管仲 (c. 725–645 BCE). The text was collected and annotated by Liu Xiang and probably extended by other Han period scholars (Zhang 2018, ch. 1, part 5).
7. ‘Methods for exploiting the earth’ (*Dishu* 地數): if cinabar lies near the surface, gold may be found below. If magnetite lies near the surface, copper may be found below (*Guanzi*, 23.1355; Rickett 1985, 423).
8. ‘Explaining utensils, tools, weapons, clothing, and their uses’ (*Shiqi* 釋器, in *Erya*, 6.371). It should be noted that the earliest written records were dated to Eastern Zhou, but distinction might be made earlier. *Erya* (comp. c. 480 BCE– CE first century) was the oldest surviving Chinese dictionary.
9. *Hanshu*, 99.4039–98; *Shiji*, 8.214 & 218, 10.256 & 264, 12.285 & 288–9; *Yantie lun*, vol. 1. *Debates on Salt and Iron* (*Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論) by Huan Kuan 桓寬 (*fl.* c. first century BCE) is an important text on Western Han economy and politics, which also mentions mining and use of gold (Bunker 1993, 29; Qi 1999, 80–81).
10. The jin is a Han dynasty unit of weight. 1 jin was equal to approximately 222.6005 g. The estimate of gold provided here may include reused gold (*Hanshu*, 99.4039–98; Qi 1999, 82).
11. It has been briefly mentioned that the Han period was when the status of gold became high (Liu 2020; Qi 2006, 71–2; Wei 2017).
12. The gold foil found in central China has not been discovered archaeologically at contemporary sites in Liaoning, Hebei or Shanxi provinces (Bunker 1993, 32; Li 2011, 22–3).
13. Granulation can be traced to ancient Western Asia, where it was used as early as the third millennium BCE. It probably entered China via the sea trade during the first and second centuries CE. (Keightley 1983, 250; Liu 2017, 1593–4; Xiong & Laing 1991, 163–73).
14. Such practices can be traced to fashions in Western Asia around the second millennium BCE as a result of contact with the eastern Eurasian steppe and the Altai mountains (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 1959, 23, figs. 16–7 & pl. XXIII: 8–9; Lawton 1982, 93; Liu 2017, 1596; Moorey 1967, 83–99).
15. The ancient Chu area covers parts of present-day Hunan, Anhui, Henan, Hubei, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Chongqing and Shandong provinces. For gold discovery, e.g. 5187.25 g was discovered in Shou 壽 County, Huainan 淮南, Anhui Province (Bunker 1993, 29–34; Tu 1980; Yao 1982). *Annals of*

- the Warring States (Zhanguo ce 戰國策)*, composed in the Western Han, is one of the fundamental sources for studying the Warring States history: see the chapter on Chu, *Zhanguo ce*, 16.555–6; *Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shanhaijing 山海經)* is a collection of heterogeneous texts dated to around the third century BCE. Its exploration of so-called mythological places and the universe was probably not purely novel and could be a tool for understanding the known world, including potential sources of gold (*Shanhaijing*, 1.1–15; Rawson 1999, 23).
16. Weapon ornaments similar to Houma pieces have been excavated at Qin (Bunker 1993, 34; Peking University 1994; 1995; Tian & Lei 1993, 4).
 17. Other development in gold use in Han tombs, mostly royal tombs, cannot be fully covered here. For related research, e.g. gold decorations on metal objects like incense burners, and medical equipment like acupuncture needles, see Laufer (1962, 174–211); Rawson (2006); Shao (2016, 52–61); Yang (2004).
 18. Other scholars supporting this opinion include Xia (1983) and Chuang (2018). Some mentioned that these suits were aids to achieving immortality besides reflecting status, and that the *bi*-disc usually set at the top of the head was probably for the soul to rise to the immortal realm (Erickson 2012; Gu 1996, 135–40). For other critical examinations of the protective function of the suits, see Brown (2002); Miller (2020, 163–5).
 19. Some iron or fabric thread was used at the intersections of the suits, probably not fully visible from the surface, and served to make the encasing firmer (Hebei 1980, vol. 1, 351–3 & 366–9).
 20. *Hou hanshu*, 3152–6. *The Book of the Later Han (Hou hanshu 後漢書)* was written by Fan Ye 范曄 (CE 398–445).
 21. For discussions on the origin of the idea of physical immortality, see Wen (1956); Xu (1935); Yü (1964–65; 2009).
 22. *Shiji*, 12.285. On hearing this, the Emperor made offerings to the stove (thus worshipped the gods) and sent immortalists to the sea to search for Penglai.
 23. *Hanshu*, 25 (upper), 1220. There is not enough evidence or record indicating that Wudi intended to join the immortals, but may only have wanted to meet them (Rawson 1999, 19).
 24. One of the earliest descriptions of the otherworldliness of immortality may be the first chapter in *Zhuangzi* 莊子, attributed to Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (369–286 BCE), School of the Dao (*Zhuangzi*, 1.75–83). It is unknown when the concept first appeared, but the consensus of opinion amongst modern scholars dates its rise late in the fourth century BCE (Kirkova 2016, 24; Seidel 1987, 223–32; Yü 1964–65, 91).
 25. Feline motifs were probably introduced to China from Iran, as suggested by materials from burials at Pazyryk (fifth–third centuries BCE) (Liu 2017, 1596; Rawson 2002, 28). For animals in combat, see Kost (2014); Rawson (2017).
 26. See, for instance, *Rhapsody on the Imperial Park (Shanglin fu 上林賦)* by poet Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BCE) (English translation available in Knechtges 1987, 73–113). See also *Shiji*, 123.2594 & 2603; *Hanshu*, 12.206; Paludan (1991, 15–27); Rawson (2000, 26); Wu (1989, 73–107).
 27. A relatively complete list of auspicious omens and signs in pre-Han and Han texts is collected in ‘Section on omens and portents’ (*Xiangrui bu* 祥瑞部), in *Classified Collection Based on the Classics and Other Literature (Yiwen leiju 藝文類聚)*, vols. 98 & 99). The collection was compiled in the seventh century as a source book for establishing literary authenticity (Kaderas 1998, 57; Lippello 2001).
 28. For detailed discussion of the cosmological, astrological and ideological significance of mythical creatures including the dragon, phoenix and tortoise, etc., and their auspicious connotations and symbolic meanings, see Pan (2019); Rawson (1984).
 29. Another new form of gold object was the hoof-shaped miniatures of heavenly horses as mentioned in the section ‘The concept of immortality’, of which dozens were discovered in 2015–16 in the tomb of Marquis Haihun 海昏 (92–59 BCE) in Nanchang 南昌, Jiangxi Province. For details, see Liu (2020); Wei (2017); Yang & Xu (2016).

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Professor Dame Jessica Rawson, the editor and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

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