

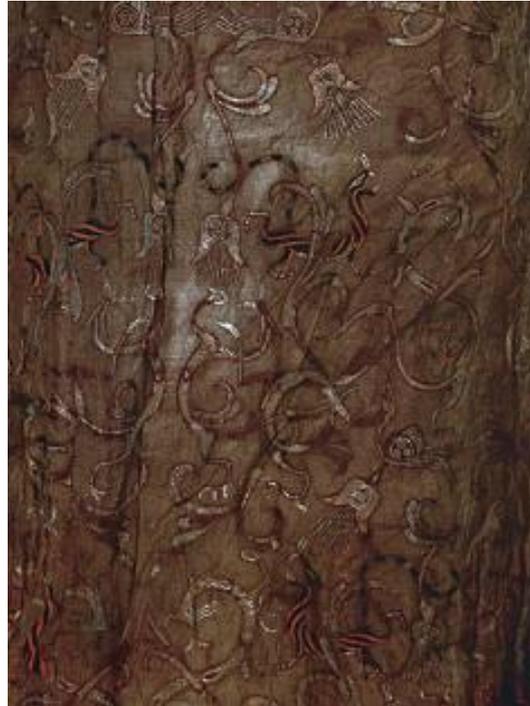
## SILK ON THE CHINESE SILK ROAD DURING THE HAN DYNASTY (206 BC-220 AD)

The source of inspiration for writing this text on silk in the context of the Silk Road was, to a large extent, a lecture delivered by Xia Nai during the Franklin D. Murphy Lectures in April 1981 at the University of Kansas and at Nelson — Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas entitled “Silk and the Silk Road of Han China”, published in 1983 as one of the chapters in *Jade and Silk of Han China* (Xia, 1983). That text is largely based on archaeological findings of the 1970s. Since that time, the Silk Road textiles have been repeatedly studied in the world literature as well as displayed at various exhibitions, an outstanding example of which was a display entitled *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*. It was held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York between 12 December 2004 and 23 January 2005 (Watt, 2004). A variety of exhibits were put on display such as fabrics made in China and elsewhere. Among the publications devoted to this issue we find the fourth volume of *The Artistic Traditions of Non-European Cultures* entitled “Textiles of the Silk Road. Design and Decorative Techniques: From Far East to Europe” (Biedrońska-Słota, Görlich, 2017) recently published (2017) and thus available on the Polish market.

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the importance of silk, how it was used and how it was adorned with various patterns during the Han dynasty, at a time when the *Sichou zhi lu* 丝绸之路, the Silk Road came into being. It was that name that so accurately reflected the value of goods so much desired by people at that time. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 BC) silk was the upshot not only of technological achievements and aesthetic excellence, but also an important element of commercial and political relations between China and other countries and civilizations. It has become the hallmark of a high level of artistic, mercantile and diplomatic culture.

China was the first country in the world to raise silkworms and make silk on large scale. Archaeological findings show the oldest examples of silk date back to the Neolithic period (about 3200-2200 BC.) (Cultural Heritage, 2008, 20). Over the next several hundred years, the level of silk farming and production rose exponentially. In addition to the monochrome tabby made during the Shang dynasty (c. 1750-1100 BC), patterned damask on smoothly woven backdrop and

embroidered silk began to appear (Xia, 1983, 51). During the Warring States period (around 475-221 BC), the production of lustrous and colourful brocade (*jinxiu* 錦繡) continued, an excellent example of which was found by archaeologists in the Zuojiatang tombs near Changsha in Hunan Province and Mashan near Jiangling (Higham, 2004, 323) (Figure 1).



1. Embroidered silk with a dragon, phoenix and tiger pattern, 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, discovered in Tomb No 1 at Mashan near Jiangling. Photo: Kong Lihang/ChinaStock Photo Library: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/silk>

In the days of the Han dynasty, the tradition of silk products was not only maintained but consistently improved. The loop weave was invented and so was the technique of painting or printing on the silk of patterns made with metal dies, an outstanding example of which was uncovered in 1972 in the Mawangdui tombs in Changsha (Wang, 2008, 72-81; Chen, 2008, cat. 41-46). Those textiles belonged to noblemen, hence their excellent quality (Figure 2). Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that during the Han dynasty, silk became accessible almost to everyone. It was used not only as fabric for making clothes, paintings or calligraphy, but also as a means of payment. Farmers used silk to pay taxes and rulers to reward officials for great achievements. On the basis of the length of cloth, the price of a product was calculated. Before long silk became the currency used in trade with foreign countries.



2. Silk gauze printed with a flame pattern (in gold and silver paste), Western Han Dynasty (206 BC — 25 AD), discovered in Tomb No 1 at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Province. Photo:

<http://www.hnmuseum.com/hnmuseum/eng/collection/collectionContent.jsp?infoId=01370ccf6c1e40288483364269583322>

Silk production was kept strictly secret until a large group of Chinese migrants settled in the Kingdom of Goguryeo (namely Korea) in ca. 200 BC. They ignored the prohibition to betray the secrets of sericulture. The West discovered the secret of silk production in ca. 550 AD, thanks to two Nestorian monks, who offered silkworm eggs hidden in bamboo sticks to the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (Swieykowski, 1906, 30). The loss of the monopoly over silk production had not caused the interest in silk to wane. Although silkworks which imitated Chinese silk began to appear elsewhere, the original product was still upscale and dearly treasured, mainly because of the superior quality of the fabric that only the Chinese knew how to achieve through a complex and continually improved production process.

It was during the Warring States period that the inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom reared a special sort of “ground mulberry” whereby it was easier to collect leaves that not only grew more abundantly, but also were much more nutritious to silkworms (Xia, 1983, 52). Also, the temperature of the room in which silkworms were cultured was carefully controlled (e.g. no leaks were permitted). Silkworms were kept and reared on special bamboo trays, whereas cocoons were unwound and mounted on straw trusses (Xia, 1983, 52). The process of obtaining filaments was not only complex, but excruciating as it consisted in cocoons being unwound by hand after they had been immersed in boiling water. Unfortunately, the boiling water killed the pupae, but that was the only way to avoid the destruction of cocoons by the pupae transforming and splitting open when the moth was fully developed. What’s more, the boiling water helped to dissolve the sericin, a natural protein which cements together silk fibres, which, upon being unwound, would extend up to 1,000 metres in length with a diameter of 0.006 mm to 0.009 mm.

Filaments were then wound by 13-14 or 10-11 to form single threads which were then wound on the spool. The cloth was produced while being woven on a loom which the Chinese improved in the first or the second century AD by introducing a pedal mechanism (Xia, 1983, 54).

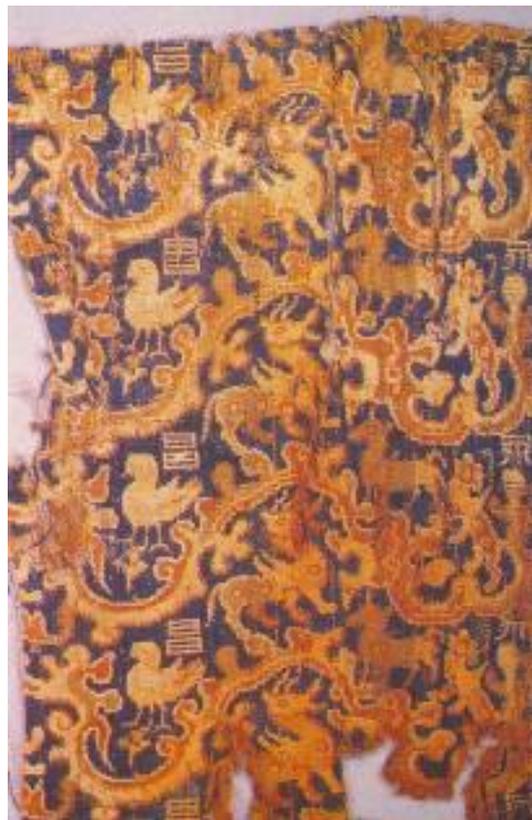
Archaeological research indicates that on the Silk Road three major groups of silk textiles were made at different times: *jin* 錦 dyed woven silk; *taquete*, textile woven in weft-faced compound tabby weave; and *samite*, weft-faced compound twill of golden or silver thread, the examples of which originate from the Tang Dynasty (618-907) (Zhao, 2004, 67). Production of *jin* was one of the peak achievements of the Han period. The main production centres were located in three different places: Chang'an (now Xi'an), the capital city, where the highest quality silks were produced; in the coastal area of Shandong Province, silks were produced exclusively for the imperial court; and in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, where great quantities of silk were created for the use of officials. Silk of this type was traded during the Warring States, and reached the Valley of the river Great Ulagan in the Altai Mountains (now in Russia), where the Pazyryk Culture once flourished, and the Xinjiang Area. In the days of the Han dynasty, *jin* was available from the western part of Mongolia as far as the Mediterranean Sea (Zhao, 2004, 70).

The plain weave widely used in weaving silk in the Han period was of two kinds. One formed a textile which consisted of almost the same amount of warp and weft (typically about 50 to 59 threads per centimeter), and the other formed a textile with more warp threads (typically about 60 to 89 warp threads and 30 up to 45 weft threads per centimeter) (Xia, 1983, 55). Such tight-knit weaves of dyed threads formed beautiful patterns. From the early Han epoch to the mid-4th century, they were replete with small geometric motifs, patterns of animals or clouds. The latter, representations of animals or less or more stylized clouds, were related to the Taoist concept of immortality. Clouds, as Zhao Feng writes in "The Evolution of Textiles along the Silk Road" were associated with the heavenly realm inhabited by snakes, tigers, monkeys, lions, birds and various other creatures (Zhao, 2004, 67). It was a motif much used in the decoration of *jin* which appeared in two forms. The first was represented as fork-shaped or shaped like ears of grain somewhat discontinuous. The second type was hill-shaped with hill-like undulations. This latter form was represented by two types according to the arrangement, i.e. it consisted of small separated units, or a continuous design spreading across the width of the fabric (which sometimes appeared repetitious or symmetrical). The cloud motif during the Han period was further stylized and was also influenced by the western style. It was shown, for example, in the whorl-shaped arched structures enframing auspicious creatures (Zhao, 2004, 68-69).

Many *jin* fabrics received specific names in the weaving workshop such as: *deng gao* 登高 (climbing), *ming guang* 明光 (shining/brightness), *bo shan* 博山 (mountain Bo), *zhu yu* 朱萸

(dogwood), *jiao long* 交龍 (polysemous dragon), *pu tao* 葡萄 (grape), *ban wen* 斑文 (spotted dragon), *feng huang* 鳳凰 (Phoenix) and *zhu que* 朱雀 (Vermilion bird) which originated from the motifs appearing on the textiles or inscriptions woven into them.

A representative type of *ming guang* is the textile (1st-3rd century AD) found in Tomb 2 in Gutai (Luolan, Xinjiang Province) (Figure 3), on which, apart from the repeated pattern of clouds and animals, there is also an inscription woven with the Chinese characters 長壽明光 *chang shou ming guang* (longevity and brightness) (Zhao 2004a, 118 (cat. No 19)). The word *ming guang* was not accidental because it has a reference to a specific place, and more specifically, to Emperor Wudi (140-87 BC) from the Han dynasty, during whose reign the Ming Guang Palace was built. According to Zhao Feng, these types of inscriptions, composed in a variety of ways, such as: 長樂明光 *chang le ming guang* (eternal happiness and brightness)<sup>1</sup>, or 長樂大明光 *chang le da ming guang* (eternal immense happiness and brightness)<sup>2</sup> were meant to commemorate one of China's most powerful rulers who once housed the Ming Guang Palace (Zhao, 2004a, 119).



3. Textile fragment with *ming guang* characters, 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, discovered in Tomb No 2 at Gutai, Luolan, Xinjiang Province. Photo: [http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Loulan\\_Kingdom](http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Loulan_Kingdom)

<sup>1</sup> This is an inscription from the textile also found in Tomb 2 in Gutai near Minfeng in Xinjiang Province.

<sup>2</sup> This is an inscription from the textile found at Niya near Loulan in the area of Xinjiang Province.

Textiles of this type were popular among the customers, because — as records dated about 350 AD show — during Emperor Zhao-Shi Hu’s reign (reigning 335-49), the imperial silk workshops were established which made two kinds of *ming guang* (Zhao 2004b, 119). They were *da ming guang* 大明光 — namely the large one and *xiao ming guang* 小明光, the small *ming guang*.

During the Han Dynasty there were also *jin* textiles with more original inscriptions that were not categorized. Examples of this include a silk arm protector dating back to the 1st-3rd century AD (Figure 4) found in Tomb 8 in Niya, Minfeng, Xinjiang Province (Zhao 2004, 68, 61). It is a very complex weave textile which represents the highest quality *jin*. The inscription on it says: *wu xing chuang fang zhong guo* 五星出東方利中國 meaning: the Five Planets all appear in the east — a highly auspicious sign. These five planets are Mars, Saturn, Venus, Mercury and Jupiter, related to the theory of the Five Elements (namely fire, earth, metal, water and wood) and consequently, to the Five Directions: west, north, east, south and centre. Therefore, in order to produce *jin*, five colours were used: red, yellow, white, blue and green as they correspond to the theory of the Five Elements. The silk arm protector is a case in point.



4. Arm protector, 1<sup>st</sup>– 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, found in Tomb No 8 at Niva, Minfeng, Xinjiang Province” Photo: *Orientalis*, vol. 29, no 4, April 1998, <https://www.orientations.com.hk/backissue/volume-29-number-4/>

Another textile (1st-3rd century AD), representing a face cover (Figure 5) excavated in Tomb 3 at Niya is an example of *zhu yu* because of the repeated pattern of the dogwood (Zhao, 2004b, 119)). This is a particularly interesting pattern among the patterns widely shown on *jin*: animals and clouds. A long time ago, in China, there was a custom to wear sprigs of dogwood while climbing hills during the Zhongyang festival 重陽節, held on the ninth day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar. The twigs of the dogwood were supposed to ward off evil spirits; hence, it was supposed that the pattern of three-lobed leaves of the red dogwood flower was adopted on textiles for its auspicious connotations (Zhao, 2004b, 119. Cf. Wang 2008, 163).



5. Funerary face cover, 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, discovered in Tomb No 3 at Niya. Photo:

[http://inoues.net/museum2/sigaraki\\_miho5.html](http://inoues.net/museum2/sigaraki_miho5.html)

*Jin*, undoubtedly greatly admired in various regions of the world, became highly desirable and was therefore widely imitated by weaving workshops on the Silk Road in West Asia, Central Asia, and northwestern China. Archaeological research indicates that several types of such imitation can be specified. The first type represents a ribbon format (extremely narrow silk) between 1.5 and 3 cm in width and approx. 50+cm in length. It normally displayed animal motifs (a running dragon with an elongated body) or some geometric designs. Textiles such as this were woven between the third and the fourth centuries in Yingpan in Xinjiang (Zhao, 2004, 70-71).

The *taquete* weave structure (Fig. 6) played a more important role in the development of textile cultural exchange on the Silk Road than the ribbons mentioned above. The earliest textiles (datable to the 3rd century) were wool or silk fibres, but were mostly yarn. As archaeological finds show, they were made both in the Niya and Yingpan areas of Xinjiang, as well as in Bactria and Gandhara (Zhao, 2004, 71 (Figures 66, 67)). Those from the Hellenistic areas

of Central Asia were woven with clearly western-style patterns, while other textiles have patterns with a stronger eastern style. This influence of western patterns is particularly manifest in the figures of humans and animals displayed on the Roman-style patterns.



6. Fragment of *taquete* wool textile, 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century AD, found in Loulan. Photo:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-silk-road-finds-map-1/>

Shortly after wool *taquete* made its appearance in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, silk *taquete*, with geometric patterns, also appeared in the Western world. The piece of silk *taquete* of this kind, warp-faced compound tabby, was found in 1933 at Dura-Europos, Syria (Fig. 64), while other examples were found in northwestern China, mainly in Xinjiang and in the Gansu Corridor.

In addition to silk with woven patterns, embroidered, and printed patterns or painted pigments were also created during the time of the Han dynasty. The embroidering had to be created by hand as it could not be produced by machine. That made those textiles not only more expensive, but more original. Some of these types of silk were found at Niya and Lop Nor in Xinjiang, Noin-ula in Mongolia, Palmyra in Syria, Huai-an in Jiangsu Province, Wuwei in Gansu, Mancheng in Hebei and Mawangdui in Hunan Province (Xia, 1983, 63). The latter, which were uncovered in Tomb 1, and belonged to a noblewoman, Lady Dai (who died in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), remained quite well preserved.

Particularly beautiful is the delicate brown damask cloth with woven repeated patterns of diamonds and embroidered with a *xinqi* 信期 pattern (Figure 7), i.e. decorated with motifs of floating clouds, flower and grass coils, and long-tailed birds (Chen 2008, 158. Cf. Xia, 1983, 74

(fig. 58)). It is one of 19 exquisite embroidered textiles found in Tomb 1 at Mawangdui. It represents (much as the other two) an independent piece of damask which measures 54 cm (length) /40 cm (width). The embroidered pattern obtained through red, dark green, and golden threads dyed in natural pigments (including cinnabar) is an example of great artistry, which was difficult to create at that time, or even today.



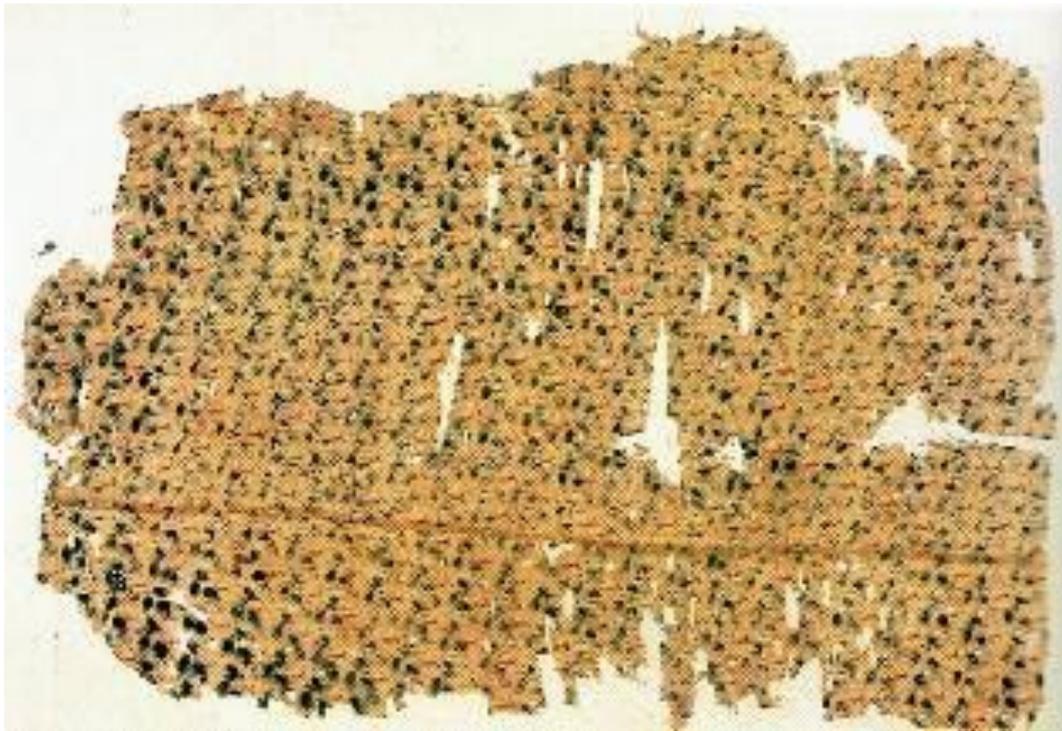
7. Embroidered silk fabric with a *xinqi* pattern, Western Han Dynasty (206 BC — 25 AD), discovered in Tomb No 1 at Mawangdui: Photo: Chen, Jianming, 2008, p. 158.

Complete garments were found among the embroidered silk textiles uncovered at Mawangdui. One — lined and also insulated with silk (Figure 8) — is distinguished by embellishments such as the *changshou* 長壽繡 or “longevity” (Chen 2008, 166-167 (cat. no 48)). It is an embroidered composition which consisting of repeated patterns of “floating clouds” of a shape similar to *ruyi* 如意, or “sceptre” or talisman, among which a trained eye would be able to make out the Phoenix and dogwood which are considered auspicious symbols. This undoubtedly complex embroidery, created with the use of red, gold, brown and green threads, associated with a beautiful cut of the garment, is an example of a specific *haute couture* found at that time at the courts of the Chinese aristocracy.



8. Embroidered silk garment with a *changshou* pattern, Western Han Dynasty (206 BC — 25 AD), discovered in Tomb No 1 at Mawangdui. Photo: *Chen, Jianming*; 2008, p. 166.

The tomb of Lady Dai also provides us with information on the oldest silk textiles, both printed and painted. Among the true masterpieces of this kind was a tassel of gauze strips (Figure 9) with overstylized patterns of creepers that appear as individual motifs of lightly elongated diamonds filled with painted petals, spines and leaves of flowers (Chen 2008, 156-157 (cat. no 42)). The printed patterns were probably made with metal dies, and the motifs painted in green, black and red were painted with a paintbrush. The colours and motifs are still preserved.



9. Gauze fragment with printed and painted pattern, Western Han Dynasty (206 BC — 25 AD), discovered in Tomb no 1 at Mawangdui, Photo: *Chen, Jianming*, 2008, p. 156.

Some of the textiles found in the tomb of Lady Dai at Mawangdui are examples of plain weave, weft-warp openwork, gauze (*luo* 羅). Making patterned gauze was a very complex process. Weaving was done using a loom equipped with additional (one or two) handles needed to twist the warp yarn. There were two types of thread twisting. One was used to create a backdrop with large clearances and the other — to form a surface with a smaller pattern (Xia, 1983, 55). Gauzy dresses were also uncovered in other tombs on the Silk Road, namely in Mancheng (in Hebei Province), in Mojuzi in Wuwei (in Gansu Province) and in Minfeng (in Xinjinag Province). The best example, however, is preserved at Mawangdui, and it is a 49 gram silk gauze dress, without colour or lining. (Figure 10) (Wang, 2008, 75). It is the lightest and thinnest fabric of this kind in the world. It represents the highest level of sericulture and fabric production. In specialist terminology, it is referred to as “wings of the cicada” or a “floating cloud” (Wang, 2008, 74). This gauzy dress could be used as a cover for clothes in order to produce a “mist effect”, or to be used as a mourning dress, or sexy lingerie...



10. Plain silk-gauze gown, Western Han Dynasty (206 BC — 25 AD), found in Tomb No 1 at Mawangdui. Photo: <http://www.hnmuseum.com/hnmuseum/eng/collection/collectionContent.jsp?infoId=012ff6ce8a8c402884832fe349e703af>

Changsha, a nearby city where those gorgeous silk robes were found, was away from the main trade route extending over 7,000 kilometers from Changan (now Xi'an) to Antioch in the West. It was one of many cities, like Jianling (in Hubei Province), Xianyang (in Henan Province), Yanggao (in Shanxi Province), Zhalai Nur (in Inner Mongolia), or Shibe (in Siberia), to which silk products travelled along the so-called branches of the Silk Road (superbly illustrated on a map in Xia, 1983, 76). There must have been plenty of such side-strands in different periods of time. That silk was transported to Rome via Syria, subdued in 64 AD, best demonstrates the influence silk exerted on the ancient Romans who were ready to pay for it with gold (Xia, 1983, 77).

Nonetheless, that fascination with Chinese silk was not only based on the achievements of Chinese culture, but also on the enrichment of that culture. In many cases Chinese weavers made variations in their patterns due to the influence from Central and Western Asia. They introduced (mainly in the later Tang era) the western twill weave technique, which produced a more glossy fabric effect, and developed wax-resist dyeing and tie-dyeing techniques. It was the development of the Silk Road that made it possible to make changes to Chinese textiles, which, on the one hand, responded to the requirements of the Western market and, on the other hand, offered new trends to the Chinese. That centuries-long tradition, having its roots in the Han dynasty, has been a fine example of the development of a material culture that responds not only to the consumer needs, but is also an enrichment to the artistically, intellectually, technologically and spiritually different regions of the world.

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**Illustrations:**

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