Chinas history is one of the oldest civilizations to still exist, spanning more than 4 centuries of war, politics and art. During this time the constant shifting of people and power led to a radical intermingling of cultures and belief systems. This blending of people was a breeding ground for controversy, but some overarching values such as religion, economics, and status have stood the test of time to be reflected today in these 5 artifacts. A Chinese Zhou Ritual Vessel from western china, made in ~1050 BC (Old World, 01:48), a Painting of the “Silk Princess” from Chinese central Asia, made in the 8th century (The Silk Road, 02:30), Chinese Tang tomb figures, made in ~728 AD (Inside The Palace, 02:08), “The David Vases”, made in 1351 AD (Status Symbols, 02:30), and a Ming Banknote, produced throughout China from 1375 to 1475 AD (The Threshold, 03:20).

The most important value that the ancient Chinese had was, and in many ways still is, religion. Out of the 5 artifacts, this value can most clearly be seen in the Chinese Zhou Ritual Vessel, a food vessel from western china (~1050 BC) (Old World, 01:48). This incredibly crafted bronze bowl was made to hold food or wine as an offering to the dead and the gods (Old World, 06:50). Offering food or alcohol in this way honored the dead, with the belief that their ancestors would protect their dead, in return for this gift (Old World, 07:10). Around the time this artifact was forged, the Zhou were formalizing the idea of “The Mandate of Heaven” (Old World, 10:30), the idea that heaven will sustain a pure and just ruler. This notion transforms the already strong religious values of China into a form of governmental structure (Old World, 11:45).

Some would consider the next most important value in China to be economics, and this can clearly be seen in the story of “The Silk Princess”, beautifully portrayed in this 8th century painting from Chinese central Asia (The Silk Road, 02:30). This story comes from the interconnectivity of the silk road that some could be called “The internet of Antiquity” (The Silk Road, 01:51). The silk road allowed for a vast network of trading goods, technologies and beliefs. However, at this time the technology that produced silk, the fabric that lends the silk road its name, was sequestered behind Chinese walls (The Silk Road, 08:00). This monopoly granting china an immense amount of wealth and power, but it was not to last. The story goes that the “Silk Princess” escaped China to the Kingdom of Khotan with the technology to produce silk, thus ending Chinas control on silk.

The Chinese valued social class and strived to obtain success, and still do. This importance placed on status can be seen in these Chinese Tang earthen wear tomb figures from north west China, made in ~728 AD (Inside the Palace, 02:08). These figures acted much as a sort of ancient obituary for the afterlife, where the intended audience was not the living, but the underworld (Inside the Palace, 05:00). Ceramic figures like these were made for high status tombs in large numbers during this time. they were accompanied by other expensive goods too, such as silk, lacquer, silver and gold in order to make the afterlife as comfortable as possible (Inside the Palace, 08:40).

This fetishization of high status can also be seen in these two vases, known as “The David Vases,” dated 1351 AD (Status Symbols, 02:30). While this type of blue and white Porcelain is common now days, but it was a highly revered novelty for the very rich and powerful at the time (Status Symbols, 02:00). Made under Kubla Khans dynasty after the invasion of the Mongols (Status Symbols, 03:40). Because it was fire hardened, porcelain was shiny, could hold water, and was very tough. Because of this, porcelain was highly valued for its unique properties, and only the wealthy could afford it (Status Symbols, 06:30). Interestingly, the blue and white coloring of todays “China Porcelain” comes from the demand of Muslim buyers of the time, preferring blue and white by tradition (Status Symbols, 07:50).

A great example of how economics was valued in China at a very early stage is this Ming Banknote, produced throughout China from 1375 to 1475 AD (The Threshold, 03:20). The original idea was to make these bank notes as good as the number of copper coins printed on the note (The Threshold, 01:50), and this new paper money was called “flying cash” (The Threshold, 02:20). With no intrinsic value, the value of this cash was held by the stability of the institutions providing them, and the confidence in the current government (The Threshold, 06:20). Unfortunately, this first run of paper money ended in tragedy. With no central bank and a desire to “just print more money”, the Ming Banknote quickly became worthless (The Threshold, 12:00). Once this paper become worthless, it was up to the people to imbue them with value derived from the belief of wither or not a new government will begin to issue bank notes again an devalue them even more (The Threshold, 12:00).

All 5 of these unique Chinese artifacts teach us much about Chinas core values of religion, economics, and status. They give us a glimpse of Chinas storied past and provide a comparison to give us a better understanding of where Chinas current values are derived from.

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