5-2c Metals, Salt, and Silk

Agriculture was the foundation of royal authority in China, but as elsewhere, manufacturing and trade played important supporting roles. There was little long-distance overland or oceanic trade during the Bronze Age—those materialized during the Qin (chin) and Han periods (Chapter 13)—but the governments of the Shang and Zhou kings tightly regulated or monopolized the manufacture of certain high-demand rare goods. Trade in these items took place throughout the territories over which their rule extended, and even beyond to the lands and peoples of the north and northwest.

Silk: A Woman's Business.

Throughout history, certain crafts have tended to be gender related. Silk weaving—one of China's most important industries—was women's work, as shown in this Ming-period vase.

Although bronze making had existed for at least 3500 years before 700 B.C.E., until then bronze was still rare enough that, for most practical applications, China retained many Neolithic technologies. Early dynasties like the Shang, the Zhou, and the Qin held sway because they monopolized warfare and public religion. They reached this position by strictly controlling access to the implements of warfare and public ritual—namely weapons (particularly bronze weapons) and ritual objects (see the illustrations of the battle chariot and ceremonial ware). Royal workshops turned out all manner of weaponry, vessels, and statues, and reached an apex of perfection in Shang times. Much of it was produced using the lost method of casting into wax molds, a technique that allowed greater production and more delicacy of form and design than that used in the West, where hammering and forging methods were practiced.

Starting in the sixth century B.C.E., iron came into common use for tools and utensils, as well as for weapons. Iron making produced stronger materials than bronze, but more importantly, once perfected, iron could be produced in far greater quantities than bronze and could be used for tools as well as sacred objects and weapons. The iron plowshare opened up huge areas of northern and central China to agriculture, enabling unprecedented growth—perhaps 400 percent—of both the economy and the population during the Zhou era.

Salt is so basic to modern diets that it is difficult to think of it as a valued commodity—which it was in the ancient world. The high demand for salt made it an obvious target for government control and an important source of revenue for the emperors, who needed the income to support their large armies. There have been estimates that 50 to 80 percent of the emperors' treasuries derived from the salt monopoly. Through China's long run of dynastic rulers, there were periods when the monopoly on salt and metals was relaxed, but so fundamental were these goods to royal authority that these rare exceptions proved the rule.

Yet as central as the place occupied by salt and iron was in its political economy, it is silk that comes to mind when thinking of Imperial China. Woodcarvings of silkworms and weaving apparatus have turned up in excavations of Chinese Neolithic sites, suggesting that the craft had prehistoric beginnings. From its inception it was a craft specifically associated with women: most silk deities were female, for example, and China's queens had the responsibility of successfully enacting state procedures in honor of the goddess of silk weaving. The critical importance of silk weaving is indicated by the fact that it was given ritual honors at the state level. Furthermore, silk itself played a critical role in all public rituals. In conjunction with bronze and jade objects, it was a ubiquitous key element of royal ancestral offerings.

More commonly, of course, silk was prized for its usefulness and beauty. It was an enormously strong, tough fabric that was superior to all others in its ability to hold dyes, so it far outshone all fabrics in popularity wherever it came to the attention of local elites. No Silk Road existed until imperial times (beginning with the First Emperor, Shi Huangdi; see Chapter 13), but by 1000 B.C.E. there already existed some trade with Central Asian nomads to the west. By 500 B.C.E. Central Asian elites were importing silk from China. Developments during the Eastern Zhou period—iron making, a dramatic increase in agricultural production and population, plus the introduction of patterned weaving—no doubt contributed to expanded trade both within China and with the western peoples.

Two Women with a Zither.

Before the invention of paper, very early Chinese painting and printing was done on silk.

Two women with a qin (zither) (ink and colour on silk), Chinese School, Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) / Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, USA / Gift of Charles Lang Freer / Bridgeman Images

Demand for silk also increased noticeably when new uses for it were identified during late Zhou times. Scribes and artists found it to be a useful medium for writing and painting, whereas government officials discovered that it was useful as currency to purchase warhorses from nomadic tribes and to pay them bribes when demanded. Kings collected taxes in the form of silk textiles and paid their officials with it. There was little state control over silk production before 221 B.C.E., but in many respects the steadily rising numbers of useful applications, demand, and trade in silk occurring after 1000 B.C.E. created opportunities that later emperors such as Shi Huangdi or Wudi were quick to use to their advantage.

Chapter 5: Ancient China to 221 B.C.E.: 5-2c Metals, Salt, and Silk
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