The formation of artistic identities in the context of intercultural dialogue between China and the World

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The history of Chinese art has been written profusely through a wide range of different perspectives in recent decades. Some art historians have focused their attention on the various segments of the timeline of Chinese art, whilst others have been specifically driven to a typological study of ceramics, jades, ritual bronzes, painting, sculpture, textiles, decorative arts or any other kind of art form produced in China during a single period or spanning the historical development and range of artistic sophistication of this typology. Furthermore, art historians have also examined the history of Chinese arts according to specific subject matter, discussing the arts in the court, burial art, religious arts and temple architecture, the exchange between China and the West, the arts along the Silk Road, just to mention a few examples.

Many scholars have paid attention to the artistic exchange between China and other cultures along the trade routes over land or by seagoing ships. However, a comprehensive study of the formation of artistic identities in the context of intercultural dialogue between China and the World; one that examines the repercussion of cultural exchange in artistic production throughout time and place has yet to be undertaken.

The shaping of Chinese cultural and artistic identity is the result of transfer of knowledge and accumulating culture growth not only within the vast territory that China is today, but also throughout the regions of its influence around the world.

More than 10,000 years ago a constellation of Neolithic cultures started to grow in different areas of the vast territory that became the Chinese empire under the rule of the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi. The majority of these Neolithic cultures developed their own techniques to produce ceramics, each one distinguished by the materials they used, the shape of the ritual and utilitarian objects, and the painted or incised decoration style of the surface. Some of these Neolithic cultures are also known by the production of jade ritual objects and ornaments frequently found in elite tombs, demonstrating the relationship that existed between technical virtuosity in the use of rare materials and artistic sophistication applied for making ritual and ceremonial objects. (Chang, 1999; Tang, 2007)

Extracted from the veins of high mountains and in riverbeds that stretched immense distances, jade would certainly hold a symbolic value in the context of funerary practices or eventually other ceremonial rites during the Neolithic. The increasing desire for obtaining rare and exquisite materials and then to artistically shape them in the form of real animals and imaginary creatures imbedded of spiritual meaning was one of the main reasons for man to cross long distances and establish trade routes and exchange knowledge with other cultures.

The transfer of knowledge along trade routes, which determined the continuity and merging of funerary and ritual practices, artistic techniques and the meanings of iconography, between Neolithic cultures spread in different
regions was the utmost step forward to the birth of the cultural institutions of Chinese civilization confirmed later by the unification of the empire. The appropriation of extraneous decorative elements, the use of rare and exotic materials, and the renovation of artistic techniques and styles became significant symbols of power associated to the growth of political authority during the Late Neolithic period, the Shang and the Zhou dynasties, and the Warring States Period. (Chang, 1981)

Archaeological findings show not only that many bronze ritual vessels, weapons and ornamental objects found in Shang sites in Erlitou, Erligang and Anyang are in fact sophisticated reproductions of ceramic or jade shapes and iconographic motifs very common during the Neolithic period, but also demonstrate evidences of cultural exchanges with remote areas in the west and south regions beyond the boundaries of the Shang and the Zhou. (Allan, 2007, p. 461–496; Rawson, 1999, p. 352–449)

The growth of political authority in China, particularly during the Warring States Period, strengthened the need for sophisticated weaponry and powerful alliances with the nomad peoples from Central Asia. Consequently, the improvement of metallurgy production through the introduction of new techniques to cast bronze ritual objects and weaponry became one of the main motivations for cultural exchange between China and Central Asia. Around 475 BCE Chinese artists started moulding bronze on a large scale by means of the lost wax technique, especially for small objects and ritual vessels to furnish the tombs of the most important figures of royalty and aristocracy, as they meant to represent the authority, status, and prosperity of their owner.

Besides the adoption of the lost wax technique, Chinese bronze objects were now also lavishly decorated with gold, silver, or copper inlays, sometimes combining more than one of these precious metals. The objects were cast with recesses open on the surface according to the intended decoration, which were subsequently filled with gold, silver, copper, and sometimes with stone, giving an effect of chromatic contrast and of natural embellishment and enrichment of the object. The knowledge about these techniques and the artistic innovation regarding the shape of some of the objects which have made survived to our time, derived from intercultural exchange with Central Asian peoples. Bronze objects inlaid with gold, silver, and copper were very common in Egypt and Persia, having given birth to a long tradition across the Iranian plateau. In addition to the implementation of new materials and techniques, new shapes also emerged, especially the hu wine flask, which closely followed the pear-shaped models with high and cylindrical necks, very common in Achaemenid Persia and in some areas of the Eastern Mediterranean. (Liu, 2010)

Although growth of political authority led to the rise of five major feudal states during the late Warring States Period, regional styles maintained a
well-defined artistic identity, especially in the southern region of the State of Chu, where the production of black and red painted wood lacquered objects, sometimes decorated with paintings of the realms of Heaven and Earth are some of the finest examples that have been unearthed from tombs, like the one of the Marquis Yi, located in Hubei Province and dated around 430 BCE.

After the unification of China, under the sovereignty of the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, a political shift occurred which might have had consequences leading to the decline of the role that bronze objects had in ritual practices. However, recent scientific examination of a group of bronze objects from the mausoleum of Qin Shi Huangdi revealed exceptional technological characteristics rarely seen in bronze objects from earlier periods, but very similar to the features observed on Greek bronze sculptures cast by using the lost wax technique. Moreover, archaeological evidences and written sources suggest that Qin Shi Huangdi might have been inspired by Hellenistic life-size sculptures to conceive the idea for the giant bronze sculptures and the installation of thousands of terracotta figures for his tomb. (Nickel, 2013; p. 413–447) However, above all it was in the forceful unification of the feudal states that a new national consciousness was imposed upon China’s varying regional cultures, expanding its influence not only over its vast empire but also over beyond its boundaries. (Hearn and Fong, 1973/1974, p. 254)

According to the Shi ji 史记 (Records of the Grand Historian), written by Sima Qian circa 91 BCE, the First Emperor desperately sought the elixir of eternal life during the last years of his life. In 219 BCE, Xu Fu was sent to explore the eastern seas with the task of finding herbs of immortality in the Penglai Mountain, but he never returned from his last exploratory voyage in 210 BCE. Although the “Legend of Xu Fu” claims that he arrived in Japan and contributed to stimulate the development of Japanese culture through the transmission of Chinese knowledge, the fact is that Jomon culture, which encompasses a great span of time during the Neolithic period in Japan, declined dramatically in the 3rd century BCE and remarkable technological developments were only achieved during the Yayoi Period (300 BCE–300 CE). Suddenly, the rise of a new culture in Japan introduced new techniques in metallurgy based in the use of bronze and iron to cast weapons, mirrors, tools, and ritual implements such as bells (dotaku), which shows similarities with Chinese bronze objects. Along with the metallurgy innovations which present the possibility of contact between China and Japan during late Qin and early Han dynasties, Yayoi pottery was produced and decorated on a potter’s wheel presenting a smooth and less porous surface, which contrasts with Jomon ceramic tradition. (Ford, 1987, p. 1–56)

The geographical boundaries of the Chinese empire established by the Qin emperor and maintained during the Han dynasty comprise more or less the same political territory of China today. During the reign of Emperor Wudi (r.
141–87 BCE), the Chinese empire became one of the most powerful nations of the ancient world known today by its military campaigns and the richness of its culture. The influence of Chinese culture spanned from Kyrgyzstan, in Central Asia, to Korea and Japan, in East Asia, and to northern Vietnam in Southeast Asia. (Yu Ying-shih, p. 377–462; Milleker et alli., 2000, p. 146–191)

During the first years of his reign, Emperor Wudi had to manage the military tensions against the Xiongnu in the Northern Steppes. Therefore, in 139–138 BCE the emperor sent a diplomatic embassy lead by the general Zhang Qian to establish an alliance with the Yuezhi in Central Asia, known in Greek sources as the conquerors of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom. (Millward, 2007, p. 15; Milleker et alli., 2000, p. 146–191) Early contacts with Central Asian peoples had a major impact not only in the military success of the Han, with the benefit of the celebrated tian ma 天馬 (heavenly horses) brought from Ferghana, but also contributed to a global cultural and artistic exchange, spanning from the Mediterranean to East and Southeast Asia. The establishment of the Silk Road by the end of the 2nd century BCE increased significantly the flow of commodities, the transmission of knowledge, and the dissemination of beliefs that shaped the arts in China, in the Indian Sub-continent, in Persia, in the Eastern Mediterranean, in Arabia, and in Southeast Asia.

The long history of the diplomatic relations between the Han and the Xiongnu flips between war and cultural exchange. Emperor Wudi sent several ambassadors to present tributes to the Xiongnu, probably offering some of the most exquisite bronzes, ceramics, and silks made in China. In fact, Xiongnu tombs dating between the 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE found in north-central Mongolia, were lavishly furnished with Chinese lacquers, lacquered Chinese chariots, bronze mirrors, and silk brocades. (Milleker et alli., 2000, p. 146–191)

In China, the representation of mythical "heavenly horses" became an highly appreciated feature in burial art during the Han dynasty, designed and fashioned over painted wood coffins or sculptured in earthenware and bronze small figures. The physical qualities of the horses brought from Central Asia acquired mythical virtues capable of turning the horseman into an immortal and taking him to the Kunlun Mountain, inhabited by the Queen Mother of the West, Xi Wangmu. The representation of nomadic peoples and also the adaption of Scythian-style designs are a very common feature in Han jades and tomb painted earthenware, remaining as luxurious commodities and as a symbol of health and political power. In the mausoleum of the second king of the Nanyue, Zhao Mo (r. 137–122 BCE), Guangzhou Province, were found more than 1,000 objects, among which a rare jade burial suit, the king's golden seal together with silver objects imported from Persia and a rare jade libration cup in the shape of a rhinoceros horn (Wu, 2007). Such libration cups, commonly
known as rhytons or takuk in Persia, spread throughout Asia Minor and extended their influence to China during the Han dynasty.

The trade routes throughout the south and southeastern region of the Chinese empire were ensured by wealthy non-Han states, interested in acquiring silk, bamboo and other rare commodities. The Dian culture who lived around the Lake Dian in the Northern region of the Yunnan Province had a sophisticated and unique bronze casting technique. The bronze working of the Dian people is particularly known for the large bronze drums covered with a lid decorated with oxen and tigers. Other ornamental and ritual implements could suggest the influence of Scythian-style iconography and design. Interestingly, by the end of the 1st century BCE, the Dian people were defeated by the Han and incorporated in the Chinese empire, turning into a privileged connection for artistic exchange between China and Vietnam. (Milleker et alli, 2000, p. 146–191) The Don Son culture developed in northern Vietnam during the 1st century BCE, Hong Bang dynasty, is well known for its bronze casting techniques. The influence of the Don Son culture spread to other parts of Southeast Asia along the Mekong River in Cambodia and Thailand. The Don Son are mostly known for casting of the Don Son bronze drums found not only in Vietnam but across Southeast Asia, including in Java and Bali. (Bellwood, 1993, p. 121–126; Milleker et alli, 2000, p. 146–191)

As to the cultural exchange with the West, the Hou Han shu 后汉书 (Book of the Later Han), compiled by Fan Ye in the 5th century, and the Wei lue 魏略 (Brief Account of Wei), compiled by Yu Huan between 239 and 265, contain valuable information about the Sino-Roman trade during the Han dynasty. Both these sources provide details about the lifestyle in Daqin 大秦 (Roman Empire), mentioning that the walls of the houses in Rome were covered with opaque glass, the pillars were made of crystal and the king's residence was made of coral. (Hoppäl, 2011, p. 263–305) The relevance of these descriptions demonstrates the interest that the Chinese had in Roman glassware, which was a fine a rare product frequently found in archaeological sites of the Parthian and the Kushan Empires, but also in China. (Ebre, 1999, p. 70) Moreover, the twelfth section of Wei lue provides an extensive description and a list of the "products of Daqin" which reveals the importance of the Sino-Roman trade during that period, which included products from Egypt and the Kushan Empire. (Hill, 2004)

During the 1st and the 2nd centuries the influence of Buddhist art grew significantly in China and the first evidences of its imagery is found in rock carvings at Gongwangshan, Jingsu Province. The growing influence of Buddhism in Central Asia strengthened the cultural exchange between China, India, and the Indo-Iranian peoples from Central Asia, such as the Sogdians, the Tocharians, the Bactrians, the Parthians and Kushans. (Wu, 1986, p. 263–303) Religious syncretism between Buddhism, the Taoist Schools of Immortality, and Confucian
morality facilitated the transmission of Buddhist beliefs in China during the Han dynasty. Eastern Han tombs, like the Mahao tomb located in Maohaowan, Sichuan Province, are richly decorated with stone carvings combining Buddhist and Chinese traditional imagery. The reason why earlier images of the Buddha were found in Eastern Han tombs is because this foreign deity, who belonged to the Western Realm and had the power to achieve immortality, represented the hope that individual deceased had to attain immortality after their death. (Wu, 1986, p. 263–303) Therefore, during the 1st and the 2nd centuries images of the Buddha were represented among historical scenes depicting ancient emperors, the sages and filial sons, and images of the immortals like Dong Wanggong and Xi Wuangmu. This juxtaposition of the immortal and Buddhist elements demonstrates that the foreign deity had the same spiritual value and function that had Dong Wanggong and Xi Wuangmu.

Following the Yellow Turban Rebellion, the fall of the Han dynasty caused a noteworthy migration of people to the remote boundaries of the empire. The influence of Han funerary art and mural painting became more prominent in the West regions, which was later adopted and combined with Buddhist art and Central Asian elements during the Three Kingdoms Period, particularly in the tombs found in Gansu Province, one of the major trading posts along the Silk Road. Simultaneously, during the nearly 400 years of division, between the fall of the Han and the Sui reunification of the empire, the peoples beyond the boundaries in the north and the west found a great opportunity to spread their influence in Dunhuang, Luoyang and Chang’an (modern-day Xi’an).

Although Buddhism had already been introduced in China during the Han dynasty, it was only after the fall of the Han that its influence in China blossomed into an unprecedented scale, triggering a butterfly effect in the spread of Buddhism to other regions across Asia since the 4th century. The rich imagery of Buddhist temples, decorated with painted walls, stone sculpture, scroll paintings, and altars furnished with gold reliquaries, lavishly embellished with precious stones, bronze statues and ritual paraphernalia, contributed significantly to a growing demand for precious objects from distant lands as well as the conflation between the arts and techniques from different traditions.

In the collections of the Asian Art Museum a Seated Buddha statue has an inscription on the back that is equivalent to the year 338. On the basis of what we currently know, this gilded bronze statue is the earliest dated Buddha sculpture from China, demonstrating the influence of the Jie, a Indo-Iranian people from Central Asia who established the Later Zhao State in northern China during the first half of the 4th century. Fotudeng was a Buddhist monk and advisor of the Jie commanders, who came to Luoyang in 310 where he was actively devoted to the spread of Buddhism. In his teachings, the Buddhist monk transmitted new methods of meditation that relied on the use of Buddha imagery
to reinforce the state of "mindfulness". Buddhist monks like Fotudeng were deeply involved in many activities of the Later Zhao court. Fotudeng was one of the most influential Buddhist monks allowed to establish numerous Buddhist monasteries and temples. (Lewis, 2009, p. 104) Many of these monasteries had small gilded bronze sculptures of Buddha similar to the one in the collections of the Asian Art Museum and the one unearthed in the area of Xi'an and belongs today to the Institute of Cultural Proprieties Protection and Archaeology. (Leidy, 2010, p. 8) The iconic features of these sculptures, representing the seated Buddha in meditation, just wearing a shawl, indicates his spiritual detachment of the earthly things and a state of mindfulness that the devotees should pursue through meditation. The abovementioned statues follow the models imported probably from Gandhara to China at an early date. (Sullivan, 1999, p. 105) One of these models is a gilded statue of the Seated Buddha dated from late Eastern Han and said to be found in Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, now at the Sackler Museum, Harvard University. (Rhie, 1999; Whitfield, 2005, p. 87–98) The sculpture doesn’t have any feature that could be considered as Chinese. The āryā आर्या in the centre of Buddha’s forehead, the long and pointed moustache, the design of the shawl, the uṣṇīṣa उष्णीष, and the pura-ghāta पूर्णघात sided by two lions modelled in relief in the plinth are all traditional features of Buddhist art in Gandhara, Mathura, and Amaravati.

By the end of the 4th century the Toba Wei, a Turkish tribe from the north, strengthened its influence over China and established the Northern Wei dynasty, which ruled until 535. The Northern Wei introduced many foreign ideas and Buddhism became firmly established as the state religion, with a strong impact in the regions surrounding the capital, first in Pingcheng (modern-day Datong) and later in Luoyang. Benefiting of royal patronage from the Northern Wei dynasty, the Yungang Grottoes became one of the most prominent centres of Buddhist influence in China since the 2nd half of the 5th century. The Yungang caves represent the unique style of the Northern Wei art, distinguished by the combination of Buddhist iconography and symbols with the mainstream artistic traditions from Central Asia and China. In 493 the Northern Wei moved their capital to Luoyang contributing significantly to the spread of Buddhist art in Central China. The Buddhist caves in Longmen remain as an outstanding remark of the notoriety that Buddhism had during the Six Dynasties Period. The royal house and many lay benefactors founded thousands of temples for public worship of images, revealing a significant shift in the relationship between the sacred place and the devotees. Yang Xuanzhi’s Luoyang Qielanji 洛阳伽蓝记 (Record of the Buddhist Temples of Luoyang), written in 547, describes many miracles related with image-worship demonstrating the strong influence that Buddhist imagery had over the society to secure welfare, health and a superior rebirth of deceased relatives. (Lewis, 2009, p.
Ordinary people made strong efforts to get money to cover a statue with gold leaf, to commission a sculpture or to support the construction of a new temple cave, explaining the reason for the remaining of tens of thousands of sculptures and the fast growing of Buddhist art in China.

By the same period, the Northern Liang dominated the Northwest region of China, establishing its capital in Guzang (modern-day Wuwei), in Gansu Province. The patronage of the Northern Liang contributed to the growth of Buddhism, particularly in Dunhuang.

On the other hand, during the 4th century the increasing influence of Buddhism in China reached the ancient kingdom of Koguryo, the Korean Peninsula and later continued to Japan. Koguryo tombs in Jilin Province, China, present a rare programme of wall paintings with a combination of Buddhist motifs, classical Greek deities, and elements of Chinese cosmology usually depicted in Han tombs. It can be seen that the transmission of Buddhist art in East Asia followed the migrations resulting from the Northern invasions after the fall of the Eastern Han dynasty, as the Koguryo tombs in Ji’an present many features identical to the ones found in Luoyang and Dunhuang. (Pak, 1990, p. 177–190; Rhie, 2002, p. 201) One of the many interesting features of the mural painting in the Koguryo tombs found in Ji’an is the hypothetical representation of the Greek god Atlas Ἀτλάς, the primordial Titan who held up the celestial sphere. Interestingly, the design and pose of the Atlas in the Koguryo tombs denotes a strong resemblance with the ones carved in Buddhist temples in Haqcha, a Greco-Buddhist archaeological site in actual Afghanistan. Besides demonstrating the reverberation of Greco-Buddhist art in East Asia it also let us conclude that the conflation of the Buddhist nature-spirit Yaksha यक्ष with the Greek god Atlas occurred because both are bearers of things and have essentially the same function. While the Yaksha has to hold the tree roots and the soil to protect the realm of Pātāla पाताल, the lower regions of the universe, the Atlas was condemned by Zeus to stand at the Western part of Earth and hold Uranus Οὐρανός in his shoulders, which, accordingly with Greek mythology, was the personification of the sky or the heaven. Interestingly, the Koguryo tombs demonstrate the continuity and assimilation of different artistic traditions, from China and transmitted throughout China, resulting from intercultural dialogue.

Although the period of disunity was strongly marked by political turbulence and warfare, the trading along the Silk Road continued vigorously throughout the centuries, as did strong influence of Buddhism in China. During this time, the Sassanian Empire established land and sea trade routes to China contributing to a significant exchange of luxury commodities and diplomatic gifts, such and textiles and metalwares produced in the imperial workshops of the Sassanian Empire. The winged-lion, symbol of the kingship and power was
one of the dominant motifs along with the depiction of horsemen hunting lions and rams loomed on silk imported from China. Sassanian weavers possibly borrow their silk production techniques from the Syrians, presenting a conflation of Eastern and Western techniques and motifs, which was suitable for the trade market in the Mediterranean (Egypt, Byzantium, Spain) and in East Asia (China and Japan). Consequently, the raw silk was initially imported from China and processed in the Sassanian workshops so that the amalgamation of different styles, the combination of Western, Central Asian, Islamic, Indian and Eastern Asian motifs dyed in Chinese silk and weaved with gold thread brocades was then re-exported to China and Japan as well as to the Mediterranean. (Feltham, 2010, p. 1–51; Mohammadi, 2012, p. 155–250)

After almost 400 hundred years of division the Sui dynasty reunited northern and southern China. Buddhism was spread throughout the empire and maintained as a state religion. The influence of the Buddhist arts in Dunhuang, Yangang and Longmen in the north was then combined with the literati and burial traditions that remained in the south during the period of division. Although in the Buddhist tradition the bodies of the deceased were cremated, during the late period of the Six Dynasties and along the Sui dynasty, the mingqi (spirit objects) recovered their significance in burial rituals and were often decorated with Buddhist motifs. Some of these examples are the tomb guardians zhenmushou and the Lokapalas, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations of Buddhist deities considered to be “guardians of the world”, which were usually placed in pairs at the entrance of the tomb.

After the unification of China under the Sui, the Chinese empire became one of the prosperous nations between the 7th and the early 10th centuries under the rule of the Tang dynasty. The Tang capital in Chang’an was the heart of the trading routes from India, Persia, Arabia, Syria, Korea, and Japan. During the early 7th century Emperor Taizong subdued the nomadic peoples in the North and Northwest, reassuming control over the overland trading routes and spreading the influence of Chinese culture reaching Korea and Japan to the East, and inner Central Asia to the West. The multicultural environment of the Tang capital is reflected in the assimilation of different artistic influences, which China came in contact with. Tang ceramics had significantly improved and made widespread the use of glaze and the opulent decoration of sancai (three colours) that incorporated the green or brownish-yellow lead-glaze, and the manganese or blue cobalt glaze, to become one of the remarkable features of Tang ceramics. New shapes were also introduced mirroring the cultural heterogeneity of the Silk Road and the Tang quest for exotic products from the West. Along with earthenware figurines in the shape of camels, horses, emissaries, musicians, performing troupes, and dancers that recreated the trading and cultural environment of the Tang capital, the phoenix-headed ewer, the
rython-type cup, the polo player, and the amphora-shaped containers demonstrated the typological amplitude of the Tang’s ceramic production.

Among the wide range of ceramic objects developed during the Tang dynasty, the depiction of foreigners riding horses or camels, carrying exotic objects, and presenting their tributes to the Chinese emperor became a special genre in Tang painting. The caricature of foreigners, highlighted by long noses, protuberant chins, strange costumes, and acrobatic moves was, along with the elegant representation of court ladies, one of the most valuable and inventive features of Tang painting.

Many of these objects circulated significantly along the Silk Road reaching far distances beyond the political boundaries of the Tang Empire. In Japan, the Shōsō-in 正倉院 repository remains as the largest single collection of artefacts that circulated along the Silk Road. The Shōsō-in is a treasury house that belongs to the Tōdai-ji 东大寺, a Buddhist temple complex built in Nara during the first decades of the 8th century, under the patronage of Shōmu Emperor. (Ryoichi Hayashi, 1975) The temple repository contains nearly ten thousand objects mainly from the personal collection of Shōmu Emperor and donated by his wife after he died in 756. The collection features objects from a wide area, including Southeast Asia, Iran, Near East, and most of them from China demonstrating the significant impact of the Maritime Silk Road, which connected China, India, the Persian Gulf, Thailand, Vietnam, Korea and Japan.

In 1998, a local fisherman found a shipwreck near the island of Belitung between Sumatra and Borneo. The cargo consisted almost entirely of Chinese ceramics produced in the Changsha kilns, as well as several examples of sancai, some rare specimens of unglazed blue and white porcelains, several pieces from the Yue kilns, and various examples of white porcelains from the Ding kilns. Archaeologists have been arguing that this vessel loaded almost exclusively of Tang dynasty ceramics was an Arabian or an Indian ship that sunk in the Indonesian archipelago in the 9th century. (Flecker, 2001, p. 335–354) The discovery of this shipwreck demonstrates the deep influence of Chinese art across Asia, not only through the transmission of its aesthetic models, but also as an extension of the Silk Road to East and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, recent archaeological findings show the involvement of the Arabs in the flow of knowledge, beliefs and artefacts that had a major role in the intercultural and artistic exchange throughout Asia, bounding nations across the seas.

During the reign of Taizong Emperor a Christian missionary from the Church of the East arrived in 635 in Chang’an to establish a diocese in China. Accordingly, a stele was erected in 781 as a Daqin jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei大秦景教流行中国碑 (Memorial of the Propagation in China of the Luminous Religion from Daqin), a syriac-speaker called Alopen, who probably came from the Rashidun Caliphate, was accepted to stay at the Tang court. Alopen and the
other missionaries of the Church of the East brought sacred books and images that were immediately translated and reproduced, introducing Christian iconography that was then combined and juxtaposed with Buddhist and Chinese elements. The missionaries of the Church of the East benefited from Tāizōng’s religious tolerance and were allowed to build a monastery in the capital.

After the death of Tāizōng, his successor, Gaozōng Emperor authorized the construction of monasteries in other cities of the Empire. (Saeki, 1951) Nevertheless, the Christians as well as the Buddhists faced persecution during the reign of Wuzōng Emperor, causing a decline of its influence in the imperial court and the spread to remote areas, namely in Dunhuang, Xinjiang, Uyghur, and the Tarim Basin where a local Chinese clergy resisted until the collapse of the Tang dynasty. (Parry, 2006, p. 321–339)

On the basis of what we currently know, there isn’t any information or description of the images brought to China by Alopen. However, the Xi’an stele, a scroll painting found in Dunhuang dated from the 10th century, and some mural paintings could provide some clues about the art of the Church of the East in China. The upper part of the Xi’an stele presents a combination and juxtaposition of Christian, Buddhist and Chinese traditional elements. A cross is placed over a lotus flower, which is sided by other two floral elements. On the top of the cross there is a flaming pearl and two dragons on the sides holding the pearl on their front paws. The juxtaposition of elements from different religious beliefs consists in a form of visual religious syncretism, which can also occur with the replacement of one element for another. One example is a fragment of a scroll painting depicting a standing male figure which has some features typical of bodhisattva images, like the three-quarter view, the hand gesture abhaya-mudrā, and the clothes. However, the figure has a halo, wears a cross in his headdress and another one on his necklace, and is holding a staff in his left hand, which suggests being rather a Christian figure instead of a bodhisattva. Because the figure is represented with these iconographic features, scholars have been identifying as a Christian figure. However, I would argue that this painting is not a representation of a Christian figure but rather of Jesus Christ himself.

A closer examination of this painting in contrast with other similar paintings of bodhisattvas from the same period, which might have been used as models, provide clear evidences for the identification of this figure as being Jesus Christ. Among the Buddhist paintings found in Dunhuang caves some depict the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara presenting the same features typical of a bodhisattva image that the Christian figure presents. Following the pictorial tradition of Buddhist art, in these paintings, Avalokiteśvara wears a crown bearing a small statue of the Amitabha Buddha, as a reference to the emanation of Avalokiteśvara from a single tear drop shed from the Amitabha Buddha’s
right eye. The bodhisattva is also usually represented with his right hand in the mudra of giving souls and holding a staff with a banner in his left hand. Finally, Avalokiteśvara is often represented with a pearl necklace as a symbol of his compassion, availability to the devout, and also as a symbol of śarīra शरीर, one of the Buddhist relics used to give blessings.

The cross in the headdress of the Christian figure is a replacement of the small statue of the Amitabha Buddha in the crown of Avalokiteśvara. In the same way, the cross on necklace is the Christian correspondence to the śarīra which literally means “body” and is associated with the dharmakāya धर्म काय, the unmanifested aspect of the Buddha. Similarly, the cross is the Christian symbol of the suffering and compassion of Jesus Christ during his earthly life, and also of his triumph over the everlasting cycle of death. The use of the staff is also a common feature of both Jesus Christ and Avalokiteśvara. In byzantine art, the resurrection of Jesus Christ often represents Christ holding a staff in his left hand while making a blessing gesture with his right hand.

While the Xi’an stele presents a conflation and juxtaposition of symbols to demonstrate the syncretism between Christianity, Buddhism and Taoism, the Dunhuang painting of Jesus Christ takes a representation of Avalokiteśvara as a model and replaces the traditional iconography that immediately identifies the bodhisattva by the symbols that are associated to Jesus Christ. By doing this, the artist is putting both figures at the same level of importance, which leads us to the conclusion that Jesus Christ is represented in this painting and not just an ordinary Christian.

After the fall of the Tang dynasty, China faced a time of political disorder between 907 and 960, when general Zhao Kuangyin (known as Emperor Taizu) of the Later Zhou founded the Northern Song dynasty and reunified the Chinese Empire in the following twenty years.

Emperor Taizu initiated several reformations in Chinese bureaucracy, promoting the development of communications within the Empire and re-establishing the trade routes with India, Egypt, and the Kara-Khanid Khanate from Central Asia.

Artistic exchange between China and the Turko-Persian peoples in Central Asia was strengthened by the military alliances against the Khitans of the Liao dynasty, in the northeast, and the Tanguts of the Western Xia, in the northwest boundaries of the Song Empire. During the second half of the 10th century Iranian delegations were sent to the Song court to acquaint themselves about Chinese art and science and probably to invite Chinese artists to come to Iran. In the one hand, many examples of Islamic ceramics arrived in China during the first half of the 10th century, which were then used as models for reproductions made of various types of porcelain. Chinese porcelains inspired on Islamic models were very popular not only as a valuable and exotic product made for the Song court, but also as in the context of the export market of the
Chinese porcelains during the late 10th and 11th centuries. The export spread of Chinese ceramics reached as far as the East coast of Africa, India, the Kingdom of Goryeo (Korea), Japan, and particularly in Southeast Asia, as shown by the several shipwrecks found in Indonesia and Malaysia. An example of the Song influence in East Asia is the Goryeo celadon porcelain, which was the main type of ceramics produced in Korea during the Goryeo dynasty. Although the use of raw materials and inadequate firing technology was applied, celadon wares from the Goryeo dynasty are usually elegant, delicately incised and present a lush green glaze and a smooth surface. Remarkably, Korean potters did not just limit themselves to copy the models, the techniques and the styles of Chinese celadon, but also reinvented new shapes and developed their unique style. Artistic exchange between the Song and the Goryeo was not limited to the production of ceramics, but included any kind of precious and exquisite objects such as lacquer, and *Chan* 禪 Buddhist painting, which also had a significant influence in Japan during the Kamakura Period.

In Central Asia, one of the most prominent Persian poets of the Samanid Empire, Mohammad Rudaki, was commissioned by Prince Nasr bin Ahmad in 920 to translate into Persian the Arabic version of an Indian collection of animal fables entitled *Pahcatantra* पहचातांतः (The Fables of Bidpai). In addition to the Persian translation of the *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, Prince Nasr bin Ahmad also commissioned Chinese painters to illustrate the book, which might have contributed to the influence of Chinese landscape painting and flower-and-bird paintings over the Islamic pictorial tradition. (Arnold, 1965, p. 52–71; Raby, 1991, p. 16–31) Several contemporary accounts provide an idea of the familiarity Persians had with Chinese painting, saying that they “can represent a man with a such fidelity to nature as to make him seem to be breathing; and not content with this, the painter can represent a man as laughing, and even all varieties of laughing, each in its own peculiar way”. (Arnold, 1965, p. 66) In the 12th century Iran, Hellenistic and Chinese painters were esteemed for their artistic skills and often compared in rivalry. (Arnold, 1965, p. 66–68)

Nevertheless, the influence of China in Islamic arts increased significantly after the Mongol invasions during the 13th century. The expansion of the Mongol Empire, spanning from Eastern Europe and covering the major regions of Central, East and Southeast Asia, resulted in the establishment of a world trade system under the Mongols. The trade and commerce increased significantly not only between Europe and Asia, but also within Asia, encompassing the maritime routes in the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and the East coast of Africa. (Shagdar, 2000, p. 288–293)

Mongol conquerors appointed Chinese artists to travel along the empire and establish workshops in the most important cities. A Chinese monk who travelled through Central Asia to Persia between 1221 and 1224 arrived in Sarmqand,
where he saw several “Chinese workmen living everywhere” (Arnold, 1965, p. 68) However, the cultural and artistic legacy of the Mongol empire is not limited to the migration of Chinese artists to Central Asia, but to the massive movement of craftsmen over the entire empire, particularly during the reigns of Ögödei (r. 1229–1241) and Möngke (r. 1251–1259). (Watt, 2002, p. 65)

Mongol textiles and metalwork present a combination of elements of design and techniques endemic in the arts of China, Iran, Manchuria and Inner Mongolia (Liao and Jin dynasties). As an example, the dragons and birds, which are very common animals represented in the arts of China, in Mongolian art they are designed with twisted and entangled bodies, which is a feature endemic to the artistic traditions in Central and North Asia.

After the death of Möngke Khan in 1259 the Mongol Empire gradually collapsed into almost independent khanates until 1264, when Kublai Khan defeated his brother Ariq Böke and became the Great Khan. However, facing the political crises on the western part of the Mongol Empire, Kublai Khan concentrated himself on the governance of China and Mongolia, trusting in Chinese officials as imperial advisors and concentrating craftsmen in Dadu (Beijing). In 1271, Kublai Khan established the Yuan dynasty and finally defeated the Southern Song dynasty in 1279, becoming the first non-Chinese Emperor of China. Nevertheless, the high appreciation that Kublai Khan had for Chinese culture lead to a sinicization of the Yuan dynasty, intertwining the cultural and artistic traditions of the Han with the Mongol and Central Asian visual culture. Horses, hawks and falcons, rams and deer, hunting expeditions, and scenes of palace life are some of the themes very popular during the Yuan dynasty, demonstrating the conflation of Chinese and Mongol elements in the representation of the horse as a main subject, in the application of vivid colours, and in the combination of painting and calligraphy, which was a common feature both in China and Central Asia. Simultaneously, the amalgamation of different cultural backgrounds bound by the Yuan Emperors resulted in the development of an eclectic style in the arts under the Mongol rule, which reflected the multi-ethnic pluralism, the refined craftsmanship of the artisans, as well as the influence of Tibetan Buddhist art, introduced in China during the reign of Kublai Khan.

Moreover, the environment of religious tolerance that marked the reign of Kublai Khan stimulated the revival of the Church of the East as many of the court women of the khans had already embraced Christianity on the steppes of Central Asia. In the 2nd half of the 13th century, when Franciscan missionaries and Marco Polo crossed Central Asia and arrived in China, benefiting from the trading routes and cultural exchange established by the Pax Mongolica, they were impressed by the large number of Christians and churches they saw. (Arnold, 1999, p. 31–53) On the other hand, the maritime ports in the cities
of Quanzhou and Guangzhou are an example of the multi-religious environment in South China, particularly noted by the religious iconography of the Church of the East, but also by the vivid influence of Islamic culture, since the maritime trade routes were controlled by the Muslims spreading Chinese commodities across Asia, particularly to the Persian Gulf, India, and Southeast Asia. (Xie Bizhen, 2006, p. 273)

Along with the finest silk tapestries and the precious metals from North China, as well as the exquisite ceramics, metalwork and lacquers imported from the Central Plains, Islamic art was particularly permeable to the influence of Chinese painting. It incorporated new ways to represent landscapes with artificial rocks and oblique traces in the terrain, which created a sense of depth and space, while it also borrowed the traditional cloud pattern common in Chinese Buddhist paintings, the twisted and knotted threes, and the representation of certain animals influenced by the animal painting tradition of the Song dynasty. (Grabar, 2000, p. 43) Furthermore, Muslim artists not only embraced the structural elements of Chinese landscape painting, but also adopted the pictorial composition of continuous space, particularly noticed in Ilkhanid miniature painting which flourished in Maragha, Tabriz, and Baghdad during the 13th and the 14th centuries. (Watt, 2002, p. 71–73; Komaroff, 2002, p. 169–195)

Even after the fall of the Yuan dynasty and the political rupture between China and West Asian khanates, cultural exchange and diplomatic relations were maintained, particularly between Ming China and the recently established Timurid dynasty, founded by Timur after he gained control over the Chagatai Khanate, Ilkhanate, and the Golden Horde during the last decades of the 14th century. The renowned schools of painting in Herât, Sarmaqand and Tabriz patronized by Timurid kings were strongly influenced by Chinese landscape painting, the floral and animal motifs, and by the calligraphic brush stroke of Ming painters. Timurid kings sent several diplomatic envoys to China in the early 15th century. Among the ambassadors sent from Herât to the Chinese court were also painters, who received instructions to make a visual record of all things they found interested in. (Arnold, 1965, p. 69)

The legacy of Chinese influence on Timurid painting was then transmitted to the Safavid dynasty, which adopted most of the Timurid cultural traditions such as the arts of miniature painting, book-binding, architecture, calligraphy and poetry. The founder of the Safavid dynasty, Shâh Ismâʿîl, nominated Kamâl ud-Din Behzâd, who also had been patronized by the Timurid kings when he lived in Herât, to lead the imperial workshops in Tabriz. His paintings reveal the influence of Chinese painting, particularly in the design of twisted mountains, in the geometric composition of the scene, and in the oblique segments of space to give a sense of depth, which are also observed in the paintings of other Safavid court painters, such as Mir Sayyid ‘Ali e ‘Abd al-Samad.
Interestingly, these two painters were dismissed by Shah Tahmāsb, who had become more orthodox in his perspective of pictorial representation, and were then invited by Humayun to work in the Mughal court, after his return to Kabul and the recapture of Delhi in 1550. Although the Safavid painters had a major role in the spread of Chinese style of painting in Mughal India, there are evidences of direct contact between the Ming and the Mughals during the reign of Akbar. In 1595, the Portuguese Jesuit Bento de Goes was part of the second Jesuit delegation invited to come to the Mughal court to participate in religious discussions at the Idābat Khāna (House of Worship). When he left Goa he was instructed to go to the Cathay (China), demonstrating that there was a connection between India and China. In addition, one of the palace dwellings at Fatehpur Sikri has an inscription saying that there “is an object of envy for the highest heaven and the picture gallery of China. It is a lofty mansion: May it receive eternal approbation in everyone’s eyes”. (Beach, 1987, p. 35) At last, mentioning the artistic skills of the Mughal court painter, Daswanth, Abu’l Fazl said “his paintings were not behind those of Bihzad and the painters of China”, demonstrating the acquaintance Mughals had of Chinese painting and the recognition of the artistic legacy of the Safavid painters. (Beach, 1987, p. 35)

Besides the relevance of artistic exchange between China and other cultures along the centuries, scholars have been examining the global impact of the cultural encounters between China and Europe after the opening of the Atlantic trading routes accomplished by the Portuguese. Following to the settlement of the Portuguese in Macau in 1554, Chinese commodities became a valuable product in the framework of a global trade connecting Europe, Asia, and South America. Chinese porcelains, furniture, lacquers, textiles, embroideries, ivory carvings, as well as painting and calligraphy became a way for European royal houses and rich merchants to demonstrate their noble character and worldview perspective over the “theatre of the world”. During the 16th century, the Portuguese firstly had the monopoly of trade in Canton and other Chinese port cities, but the British, the Dutch, the Danish, and the French East Indian Companies ensured direct trade with China in the 17th century. The taste for Chinese and other oriental rare products motivated the gathering of such objects in kunststamern, which lead to the foundation of the first European museums. In addition, along the 17th to the 19th century, the influence of Chinese visual culture gave birth to the incorporation of Chinese elements in European decorative arts, known as Chinoiserie. (Impey, 1977) The conflation of Chinese motifs in European Baroque and Rococo art was particularly noticed in France, in Great Britain, in the Low Countries, in Portugal and Spain, but also in Brazil and New Spain (Mexico). Some examples of the influence of Chinese art in European decorative arts are the tin-glazed pottery from Delft, which adopted Ming dynasty blue and white decoration, the Meissen
porcelain that imitates the Qing dynasty 五彩 to depict galant scenes and Chinese motifs, Thomas Chippendale’s tea tables, china cabinets lavishly decorated with Chinese motifs, the British landscape gardening with Chinese pavilions and pagodas, and the decorative wallpapers and wooden panels that furnished European palaces.

On the other hand, in 1601 the Jesuits were finally allowed to deliver the gifts allegedly brought from Europe for the Ming Emperor Wanli. The content and nature of the memorial that Ricci heads to the highest dignitary of the Chinese Empire reveals the interest that the Chinese had by exotic commodities sent from the West, as well as their curiosity in the scientific knowledge introduced in China by the Jesuits. The memorial also demonstrates the role sacred images had as a visual translation of the Christian texts translated into Chinese, in this particular case, a (illustrated?) copy of the Lord’s Prayer.

Pictorial representation of the biblical narratives had a major role in the transmission of Christianity, used, as suggested in The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, as a reference to the reflection on the word. However, the response of Chinese to European religious images was always more positive to their scientific and technical features, such as linear perspective, the optical illusion given by trompe-l’œil, the chiaroscuro, and the realism of portrait painting, rather than having any interest in the religious content that the images represented. Therefore, European painters like Giovanni Gherardini and Matteo Ripa worked for the Chinese court, introducing the elements of linear perspective to Chinese artists and commissioned to paint Chinese motifs instead of Christian imagery. (Ripa, 1855, p. 54–55) In his memories, Matteo Ripa tells that in 1712 he received an imperial order to copy Chinese landscape paintings. Ripa wrote, “I recommended my efforts to the direction of God, and began what I have never before undertaken”. (Ripa 1855, p. 66–72) The emperor was so satisfied with the results that he immediately ordered him to make more eight copies.

These two painters were followed by the famous Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit painter who worked in the court of Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, having a key role in the birth of the sino-western style that influenced many Chinese painters of the Qing court, such as Jiao Bingzhen who influenced other Chinese court painters. (Wang, 2007; Lopes, 2013, p. 52–74) The extant paintings by European painters serving at the Qing court demonstrate that western art and its techniques captivated the attention of the Qing emperors and were appreciated for their exotic and rare features, showing that they were appreciated in much the same way Chinese porcelains and other rare objects from China were esteemed in Europe. Similarly, the Qing emperors used the unique features of western art in the legitimacy of their political authority, through the painting of auspicious symbols, the portraiture of Qing
Emperors as sovereigns of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Empire, the realistic representation of the dramatic conquests in boundaries of the Empire, and as a visual record of the tributes sent by regional landlords to the Chinese Emperor, demonstrating the myriad of things that existed within the immensity of the Chinese territory. (Lopes, 2009, p. 26–33; 2013, p. 52–74)

In the early 19th century the European attitude towards non-Western civilisations had a significant impact in European art, which fabricated a utopic and romantic image of the “Eastern cultures” and of the European colonial empires. The contrast of Orientalism in reference to European culture was vividly enriched by the images that objects from China and other Asian regions helped to create. Among the tea, the silk and the porcelains brought from China to Europe, the “China Trade” paintings present China itself as a pictorial motif, as well as the Westernization of Canton marked by the presence of trading nations flags and ships. Besides the cityscapes of Chinese trading ports, which display a window to the provenance of the objects and allow an instant relationship between the object and its place of origin, “China Trade” paintings depicting the process of production of tea, silk, and porcelain, providing a visual documentary about the Chinese products consumed and appreciated in Europe.

These images of China aroused the interest of European bourgeoisie seduced by the unique stories and lifestyle in China. Since the 18th century, European monarchs and rich noblemen aimed to portray themselves dressing in Chinese garments or posing together with oriental objects from their private collections. On the other hand, European painters, such as George Chinnery, Thomas and William Daniell, and Auguste Borget travelled to China and captured the vibrancy of daily life and the colourful views of Canton and Macau. These sketches of China and the Chinese by 19th century European painters represent the artistic encounter between the European trends of Naturalism and the realistic representation of life in China. The European style of portrait and landscape painting had a strong influence in the work of Chinese painters, such as the Cantonese Lam Qua and the Macanese Marciano Antônio Baptista, both disciples of George Chinery. While Lam Qua became known for the European style portraits producing series of medical portraits of patients with physical malformations under treatment with the American physician Peter Parker, Marciano Antônio Baptista became a greater landscapist, representing the harbours of Macau, Hong Kong and Canton, the scenery gardens of the respected Chinese merchant Hou Qua, as well as the buildings and the daily life of Chinese people on the streets.

Finally, during the 2nd half of the 19th century, the Qing dynasty faced internal rebellions and external pressure from the British Empire, France, Germany, Russia and Japan, which contributed to the weakness of the imperial power of the Qing and to the decline of cultural and artistic exchange. The first
Sino-Japanese War, in 1894 and 1895, and mass civil disorder that was continuously growing in the early years of the 20th century lead to the fall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republican system in China with Sun Yat-sen as provisional head of the Government.

The history of the artistic exchanges between China and other cultures is far from being concluded and it continues along the 20th and 21st centuries. This paper does not have the purpose to resume in thirty pages the history of artistic interactions and the transmission of artistic culture that can only be achieved in thirty volumes. Nevertheless, by the few examples mentioned superficially in this paper, that merely illustrate the global impact that cultural encounters with China had not only in Chinese arts but also in the artistic traditions of other civilizations, we can reach some conclusions.

The formation of artistic identity lies upon cultural institutions established not only by political and religious authority, but also by the process of an “artistic volition” (kunstwollen) determined by social and historical contingencies (Riegl, 2004), namely the knowledge that one culture has on another one and the prospect of cultural appropriation to innovate or construct something new, unique, and rare, which we can designate as artistic sophistication. However, the meaning of this “artistic volition” was also interpreted as a “metempirical subject – an immanent sense within an artistic phenomenon”, which means that the formative will of art is grasped within a system of concepts that goes beyond the historical and epistemological contexts. (Panofsky, 1981, p. 17–33; Panofsky, 2008, p. 43–71) This apparent dichotomy between artistic activity and historical activity traced by Erwin Panofsky in his critique on the concept of kunstwollen it is rather a complementary perspective on the continuous change observed in artistic creativity throughout time and space, going far beyond the output of a period or a culture.

While intercultural dialogue between China and other cultures throughout time and space provided the historical context for the transfer of artistic knowledge and mutual appropriation of extraneous elements, the inherent meaning embedded in works of art that represent fundamental concepts facilitated the recognition of universal principles that shape artistic creativity. However, in the process of artistic exchange there is a tendency to privilege the superficiality of the work of art, cherished for its rare material qualities, for its unique visual and physical features that could be beneficial for social status and to reaffirm political or spiritual authority. Thus, the artistic volition that motivated an individual artist to represent a Buddha, a hunting scene, or to portray his patron in his unique style embodied with his personal concepts is normally muted in the process of artistic exchange. In the context of a global artistic phenomenon the individuality of artistic creativity shaped by the immanent
ideas of an artist is normally diluted in the mainstream of new artistic trends imposed by the historical context.

Nevertheless, in the process of artistic transfer, the universal laws that represent the cross-cultural nature of human consciousness in the form of schemas, archetypes, and symbols are normally recognized, transferred and adapted from one culture to another culture. These belong to the realm of non-material abstract forms or ideas, which are the fundamental characteristics of a thing. For instance, in Chinese painting, a pictorial composition of bamboo stalks with leaves is not a representation of a flowering perennial evergreen plant, it is rather a visual expression of the virtues that Chinese gentlemen should reflect when observing a painting of bamboo. As the physical qualities of the bamboo are resistant, upright, bending against the wind, rain and storm, men should appreciate the bamboo and cultivate their courage and endurance when facing misfortune.

On the other hand, accordingly with Michel Foucault (1966, p. 11), a specific historical and epistemological environment manifests itself in depth in "Les codes fondamentaux d'une culture – ceux qui régissent son langage, ses schémas perceptifs, ses échanges, ses techniques, ses valeurs, la hiérarchie de ses pratiques – fixent d'entrée de jeu pour chaque homme les ordres empiriques auxquels il aura affaire et dans lesquels il se retrouvera." This means that in the aftermath of "original images" manifested by schemas, archetypes, and symbols, there is a formative knowledge that conceives dynamic images shaped by the fundamental codes of a culture, this is, its language, its values, its beliefs, and its traditions. This phenomenon explains the heterogeneous nature of Buddhist art, which has specific features according to the artistic and cultural traditions in India, Tibet, China, Korea or Japan. Another example is in the juxtaposition of different images that are conceived according to the cultural pattern, but in their idea they represent exactly the same concept, like the cross and the lotus, which are completely different in their likeness although they both provide the concept of the non-physical manifestation of God.

As such, we may also conclude that artistic exchange has been generally motivated by convenience of forms and content, by the value of rare materials and unseen features that contributed to the elevation of social status and assertion of political or spiritual power. Furthermore, the history of artistic interactions between China and other cultures also demonstrates the agency of art in the redefinition of a culture, whether it could be by establishing a new system of religion or by the dissemination of new political and cultural ideas.

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1 "The fundamental codes of a culture – those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices – establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home."
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