

In Good Taste: Food and Feasting in Chinese Art

Feasts and the rituals of food have played an important role in the cultures of China from the ancient period to the present day. In Bronze Age China (2nd and 1st millennium BCE), elites directed tremendous resources toward the production of elaborate vessels for food and drink, that served feasts for the living and rituals for the afterlife. Throughout the imperial period, dining practices continued to have a profound impact on artistic traditions in a range of mediums, both in the creation of accoutrements for banquets and as subject matter in pictorial art. This interdisciplinary panel focuses on feasting in China, examining the multifaceted ways in which food and banqueting shaped the visual cultures of societies in China and the Chinese diaspora. Speakers will address the material culture of feasting and its connections to the afterlife, the history of cuisine, and food in contemporary film.

The Art of the Feast

Zoe S. Kwok, Princeton University Art Museum

Feasting was an important social and ritual activity in China from the Bronze Age through the imperial period and retains a strong cultural significance to this day. Feasts commemorated major life events, served as political theater, and satisfied religious obligations. These occasions, in turn, were critical in upholding and reordering the hierarchies—familial, religious, and political—around which society was organized. Feasts were also deeply interwoven with the production of art, serving as a critical venue for the display of visual and performing arts. This talk examines the interconnected relationship between feasts and the production of art in early China through the Tang period and will introduce the exhibition *The Eternal Feast: Banqueting in Chinese Art from the 10th to the 14th Century*.

Feasting at the Threshold

Jeehee Hong, McGill University

In traditional China, as in many other cultures, the corpse was understood as a natural entity whose uncertain ontological status could be normalized through ritualization. As a result, *feeding* the deceased in the broad context of funerary process took on different forms. While actual food was placed in

Tang Center for East Asian Art
Department of Art & Archaeology
McCormick Hall
Princeton University
Princeton, NJ 08544-1018

tel: (609) 258-3795
fax: (609) 258-0103
email: tangctr@princeton.edu
web: tang.princeton.edu

burial spaces, visual representations of comestibles commonly adorned surfaces of tomb walls and coffins by the second century CE. Offering practices continued to develop into the middle period and were enriched by increasingly influential Buddhist burial practices. All the while, new social elites contributed to the making of innovative imagery of feasting in funerary monuments.

This paper delves into some of the remarkable visualization of feasting in tombs during the middle period. On the one hand, the deceased's enjoyment of food as multi-sensorial experience—including visual, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory senses— was staged through the crafting and placement of simulated objects; such an effort challenged the classical definition of the spirit article (*mingqi*), as supposedly inedible things became virtually “edible.” On the other hand, the process of preparing and presenting the food in pictorial representations emerged as a performative site where the environs of the *living* were, paradoxically, emphasized at the unprecedentedly tangible level.

Otherworldly Wine Cups of the Tang Dynasty

François Louis

Tang tombs have yielded numerous funerary clay cups of strange and outlandish design. These are the result of potters attempting to evoke cups made of precious materials that were used by the Tang elite in actual feasts. The most intriguing of these were rhytons, horn-shaped vessels with an animal-shaped spout that challenged drinkers to catch a fine stream of wine with their mouth. Popular in ancient Persia, Greece, and Rome as well as in medieval Central Asia, such vessels were exotic rarities in Tang China. Only one example is known to have survived in China. Made of agate, it was discovered in the eighth-century treasure hoard of Hejiacun in Xi'an. The presentation will contextualize this celebrated vessel not only with funerary replicas, but also with feasting scenes depicted in sixth- and seventh-century tombs.

Serving the Empire: Food and the Qing Imperial Project

Joanna Waley-Cohen, New York University (Shanghai)

The Qianlong Emperor, who was fond of using a single means to achieve multiple purposes, used food both as a way to try to take possession of Chinese elite life and as a way to make manifest the expansion of the empire, which he regarded as the crowning achievement of his reign (1736-95). Whether it was the most delicate spring waters, the finest foodstuffs, or the most skilled cooks, and whether deployed for his own immediate benefit, at banquets celebrating imperial successes, or just for selected distribution to favored individuals, in this way he could demonstrate his superior access and taste, and in effect to claim ownership of the world of gastronomy, in the broad sense of the informed pursuit of gourmet pleasures. At the same time, he was able to draw attention to the relationship of the Qing imperial project and cultural change.

Wedding Banquets: The Invitation and Coercion of Belonging

Anne Anlin Cheng, Princeton University

This talk draws from a reading of Ang Lee's film *The Wedding Banquet* as jumping off point for thinking about the tradition of the Chinese wedding banquet as a particularly charged site of (familial, sexual, and national) belonging and unbelonging for the contemporary Taiwanese diaspora.

Panel Discussion
Saturday, 19 October 2019
2:00 pm to 4:00 pm
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