

China and the West: Pith Paintings at the National Library of Australia

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**A Chinese wedding banquet [Bib ID 7084772]**

The National Library houses the most extensive collection of Chinese pith paintings in Australia. By December 2016 it held 323 pictures, which were contained in albums, unbound sets on a common theme or as single pieces. While a few were received many years ago, most are recent acquisitions. They have been collected to complement and illustrate the Library's considerable resources on 19th century China and its interaction with the West. A few of the Library's pith paintings featured in its recent exhibition organised in partnership with the National Library of China, *Celestial Empire: Life in China 1644-1912*.

A number of other Australian institutions also house Chinese pith paintings. They include the State Library of New South Wales, the State Library of Queensland, Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection of Sydney Living Museums, the University of Melbourne Library, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Australian National Maritime Museum, the Powerhouse Museum, and the Gold Museum in Ballarat.

In the early 19th century the West was fascinated by China, but access to the country was severely restricted. From 1757 to 1842 Canton (Guangzhou) on the Pearl River in South China was the only port open to Western traders. As commerce boomed, more and more foreign merchants and sailors came to Canton. They were only permitted to trade there for about six months of the year and all had to

withdraw to the Portuguese settlement of Macau for the rest of the time. The main products the traders sought were silk [Bib ID [6610509](#)], porcelain [Bib ID [7253707](#)] and in particular tea [Bib ID [6614119](#)]. Western demand for tea soared after 1800.

The influx of visitors created a market for small, portable and inexpensive mementos of China which they could take home for themselves, their families and friends. Canton-based artists had long been producing art works designed solely for foreigners. Painted on canvas, European or Chinese paper, or media such as glass and ivory, only wealthy sea captains and merchants could afford them.

Something less costly was required for the ordinary visitor. The Canton artists turned to a local product which was cheap and plentiful, a small evergreen tree called *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, known in Chinese as *tongcao*, which grew in southern China and on the island of Taiwan. The white pith of this tree had long been used to make artificial flowers, and for Chinese medicine.



Concubine, from Court figures in Qing dynasty China and Chinese gods. Studio of Sunqua [Bib ID [7253403](#)]

Unlike paper which is manufactured from wood or other fibres, the pith was cut directly from the inner spongy cellular tissue of the *Tetrapanax*. The trees were usually harvested when still young, while they contained a solid core of pith. Harvested branches or stems were cut into short lengths, which were soaked to make the pith easier to extract. This was achieved by stripping off the bark or forcing the pith

out with a wooden or metal implement. The pith was then carefully cut into thin sheets ready for painting.

The oldest known Chinese watercolours painted on pith date from the mid-1820s. Australians took an early interest in them. On 25 April 1829 the Sydney Gazette was advertising pith paintings for sale under the heading New China Goods. On 11 October 1884 the Melbourne newspaper, The Argus, reported on a recent visit to a studio in Canton which produced pith paintings. The article commented on the watercolours' "skillful treatment of subject and brilliancy of colour."

The small, brightly coloured paintings were not created by a single artist but by a studio employing a number of artisans, who completed different parts of the work. These craftsmen painted with gouache, meaning watercolours with an added white pigment. This was applied thickly onto the soft, translucent surface of the pith, producing a raised effect. The close similarity of some of the pictures results from mass-production techniques. Templates were widely used to provide the outlines of figures, which could then be coloured. Chinese watercolours on pith have sometimes been called rice paper paintings in English. This is misleading as they have nothing to do with rice and the pith is not manufactured like paper.



Emperor, from Court figures in Qing dynasty China [Bib ID 7249993]

Some studios or workshops were directed by established artists such as Guan Lianchang, commonly called Tingqua (1809-1870+), the portrait and still life painter [see Bib ID [6094771](#)] and Sunqua, [Bib ID

[6614115](#) known for his oil paintings of ships and port scenes. Both men were active in Canton between 1830 and 1870. Pith watercolours produced by their studios are represented in the Library's collection. Once completed each pith painting was placed on Chinese or Western paper as backing, the pith edges were bound with Chinese silk ribbon or coloured paper and the pages were then bound between album covers most commonly in groups of twelve. Each album usually covered a single subject, for example costumes, boats or trades.

In 1844 an American visitor to Canton, Osmond Tiffany, described what was for sale from the workshops. "In every artist's studio are to be found the paintings on what is called rice paper [i.e. pith]. This is very delicate and brittle, and nothing can exceed the splendour of the colours employed in representing the trades, occupations, life ceremonies, religions, etc., of the Chinese, which all appear in perfect truth in these productions... [They] may be obtained for a very reasonable sum, in boxes or bound up in books. They cost, for the usual class of excellence, from one to two dollars a dozen... Or you may order a set comprising the emperor and empress, and the chief mandarins, and court ladies, in the most significant attire, and finished like miniatures, for eight dollars." [Tiffany's diary quoted in Crossman, pp.200-201].



Red-crowned cranes, from Rice Drawings scrapbook album [Bib ID 7289817]

As Tiffany indicates, the pith paintings dealt with many aspects of Chinese life which appealed to foreigners. They have been called the picture postcards of their day. Some of the best depicted the

court and costumes of the Manchu emperors and their senior officials. The Manchus ruled China as the Qing dynasty from 1644 to 1911. The National Library holds several beautiful albums showing gorgeously dressed emperors [Bib ID [7249993](#)], empresses [Bib ID [7250049](#)] and high officials [Bib ID [7250052](#)].

Unlike many of the watercolours whose origins we do not know, two of these albums came from the studios of the famous artists, Tingqua [see Bib ID [6094771](#)] and Sunqua, both mentioned above. Sunqua's studio label is attached to a volume showing emperors, empresses and Chinese gods [see Bib ID [6614115](#)]. A two volume set on the life and costumes of China's rulers [Bib ID [2508932](#)] is signed by its early owner, S.W. Steedman. The Rev. Samuel Watson Steedman was an Anglican minister, who was in Canton in 1849 and was appointed colonial chaplain in Hong Kong in 1852. Later these volumes were presented to the National Library by Gertrude F (Jean) Williams, a lover of Chinese art, who lived in Japan for many years with her Australian husband Harold S. Williams, donor to the Library of a major collection about Japan and the West. A similar group of paintings [Bib ID [1084376](#)] is part of the Simon Collection on East Asia, acquired by the Library in stages between 1970 and 1982. Professor Walter Simon (1893-1981) wrote extensively on the Chinese, Manchu and Tibetan languages. Another set of 12 paintings [Bib ID [6857256](#)] showing an emperor, empress and senior officials with their wives, which quite unusually includes titles of rank in Chinese and English printed under each image, has been signed by an L? Saddler.



Scene from Chinese drama, from Album of Chinese theatrical scenes [Bib ID [7285733](#)]

It is not only pith paintings about imperial or official life for which we have details of provenance. An album depicting the various stages of tea production from preparing the ground for planting tea bushes to tasting the finished product [Bib ID [6614119](#)] may possibly come from the studio of the prominent Canton artist Youqua. Active between 1840 and 1870, he was highly regarded for his port scenes, landscapes and still life paintings. Youqua had studios in Canton and Hong Kong creating pith paintings. Sometimes an early owner has inscribed an album, as in the examples from Steedman and Saddler above. A collection of theatrical scenes showing military figures from China's past [Bib ID [6574402](#)] has been signed J.S. Brown "Frogmore."

In 2016 the Library acquired a magnificent leather bound scrapbook album with a title label which reads "Rice Drawings" [Bib ID [7252084](#)]. It is filled with Chinese pith paintings of birds, flowers, women and boats as well as European engravings. The Chinese paintings in this album are among the most striking and beautiful in the collection, and include a lady with a shuttlecock [Bib ID [7290115](#)], red-crowned cranes [Bib ID [7289817](#)] and a warship [Bib ID [7290010](#)]. This scrapbook contains the bookplate of the Reverend William Tew, a Protestant minister in County Kildare, Ireland in the late 18th and early 19th century. Opposite the bookplate is written neatly the name Hester Tew and the date January 6, 1840. Hester was probably William Tew's daughter or niece. Also in 2016 Dr Anna Gray, former Head of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia, donated a set of pith paintings [Bib ID [7253371](#)] on various forms of gambling in China.

The Library houses an album of pith paintings devoted to Chinese ships and boats [Bib ID [6485019](#)]. Canton with its many waterways and islands was a hive of boating activity. Boats were major forms of transportation, and would have been very familiar to foreign visitors. Although the execution is naïve and the boats and human figures out of proportion, the brightly coloured album is historically valuable in displaying a range of 19th century Chinese watercraft. There is an ocean-going sailing ship [Bib ID [7250278](#)] distinguished by the large eyes painted on each side of the bows, and believed to ward off disaster on the high seas. A dragon boat [Bib ID [7250215](#)], brightly adorned with flags, drum and gong, would have been involved in racing during the dragon boat festival on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. The duck boat [Bib ID [7250366](#)] was used to rear and transport ducks, which were let out to feed along the riverside during the day and returned to sleep in the boat at night. Many Australians will recall from their childhoods Margaret Flack's "The Story about Ping", the adventures of a duck from a Chinese duck boat.

In addition to the album containing 12 pictures of boats, the Library holds the "Rice Drawings" scrapbook described already [Bib ID [7252084](#)] which among other pith paintings includes four striking images of Chinese vessels. The handwritten date in this scrapbook, January 6, 1840, strongly suggests that the images are quite early ones. The boats are depicted in much finer detail and the colouring is more subtle than in Bib ID [6485019](#). The latter is almost certainly from a later period, when the artistic quality of pith paintings being produced was generally lower than in the early years.

Criminal justice in China was among the most popular subjects for pith paintings. Foreign visitors were fascinated by a legal system where the accused was not represented and judicial torture was common. There was a macabre interest in the harsh interrogation methods used to extract confessions, such as the finger press, face slapping and suspension by ropes, as well as punishments ranging from beating with bamboo or being forced to wear a wooden yoke (cangue) up to execution by strangulation,

beheading or for the most heinous crimes, slicing. The Library currently houses four albums of pith paintings about criminal justice in 19th century China [Bib ID [2508879](#); [5514335](#); [6005086](#); [6487846](#)].

Many of the pith paintings held by the Library cover aspects of everyday Chinese economic and social life. Though generally less sophisticated than the albums on emperors and high officials, they are historically important in bringing to life street traders [Bib ID [2510774](#)], flower sellers [Bib ID [7251861](#)], musicians and entertainers [Bib ID [5783555](#)], religious figures [Bib ID [5832356](#)], workers in the silk [Bib ID [6610509](#)] and tea industries [Bib ID [6614119](#)], an outdoor barber [Bib ID [7251859](#)], a fisherman [Bib ID [7252690](#)], a wood cutter [Bib ID [6438684](#)] and numerous other occupations. Social events include a wedding banquet [Bib ID [7084772](#)] and theatrical performances [Bib ID [6437829](#)].



Warship, from Rice Drawings scrapbook album [Bib ID 7290010]

Pith painting flourished between the 1820s and 1860s. In 1835 there were believed to be some 30 shops selling pictures near the foreign quarter of Canton. After China's defeat in the First Opium War (1839-1842) she was forced to cede Hong Kong to Britain and open up more ports to foreign trade. Canton, the main centre of pith painting, lost its special position. Photography reached Hong Kong by 1846 and spread across China. Over time photographs and picture postcards replaced pith watercolours as the preferred small mementos of a trip to China. Some painting workshops became photographic studios. Nevertheless, pith painting continued into the 20th century. As outlined above, watercolours from the

early period are usually of a higher artistic standard than those from the later years of the 19th century and the 20th century.

Fragile, delicate pith paintings require careful preservation. As they age the sheets of pith become brittle. They are easily damaged by handling and turning the pages of the albums. Providing users with digital versions of the paintings protects the originals.

In 2015 the Library launched a public appeal to support preservation, digitisation and enhanced access to its Chinese pith painting collection. The generous response has allowed all its watercolours to be digitised and made accessible to scholars and readers across Australia and internationally. Preservation staff carefully repaired a number of damaged paintings and albums. The project has also included full cataloguing of the paintings, with historical and other explanatory details added. The catalogue records link to digitised images of each picture on Trove. A printed Annotated Guide: the Chinese Pith Painting Collection Held by the National Library of Australia has been produced for readers. It contains information from the catalogue, colour images of all the paintings, a detailed introduction to the collection, as well as a bibliography listing major English and Chinese language books and articles on Chinese pith painting. The guide will be added to the Library's website. A short explanatory video "Caring for the Library's Chinese pith paintings" has been prepared and is now on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3v6lIV_CeGI.

There is considerable interest in Chinese pith painting in Europe and North America, where there are major collections in libraries, museums and galleries. In the past these watercolours were regarded in China as only intended for foreigners and not a true part of the Chinese artistic tradition. That attitude has now changed. Chinese collectors are highly active in the market, so that prices have increased in recent years. With the completion of this project the National Library of Australia's rich holdings will now also become better known around the world including in China, the subject of these fascinating works of art.

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