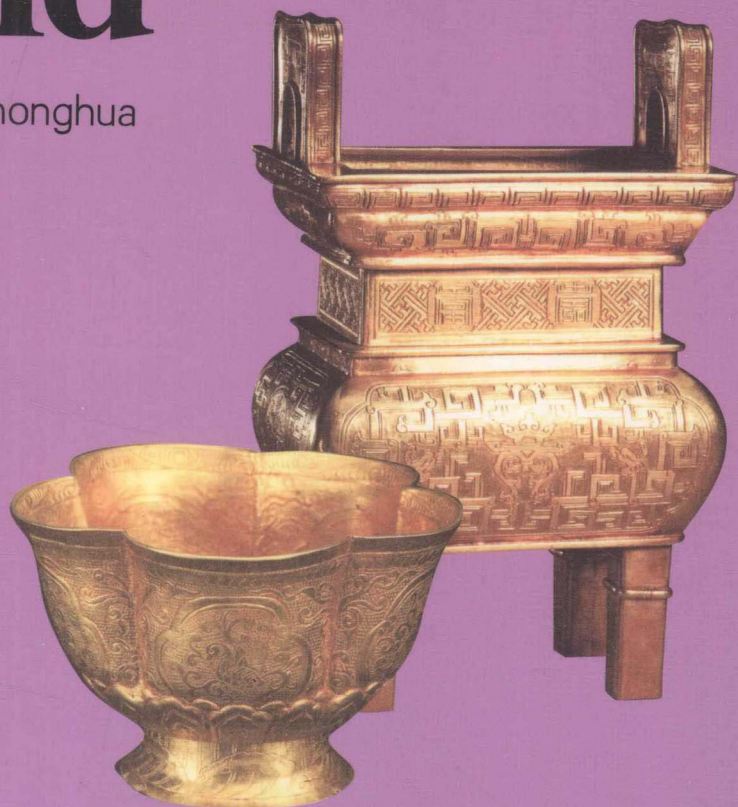


LOOKING EAST

The Story of Gold

By Xiang Zhonghua



Foreign Languages Press



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Preface



The history of gold is as ancient as that of mankind. It ignited the passions of human beings as long ago as 12,000 years, when the eternal search for gold, whether as wealth or ornament, started. Gold has long been a symbol of wealth from the days of the ancient empires to the present, although gold is neither the hardest, most durable or rarest metal. Through its approach to gold, we can sense the nature of a culture. The history of gold reveals its qualities, its interaction with the various peoples of the world, its relations with the times, its unmatched beauty, and its rich and complicated characteristics.

Gold affects human life deeply as an icon. From the very start, the quality of people's life or a culture seems to have been closely linked with the glamour of gold. It could be a symbol of male power, as is the gold scepter unearthed at Sanxingdui (the site of a kingdom which flourished on the Chengdu Plain in the 17th century BC), and the gold seals and monarchs' crowns from China's feudal times. Females also valued gold highly for making ornaments to enhance their beauty.

I





The Story of Gold

Out of this passion emerged gold craftsmen and their art. Gold itself is a touchstone of the permanent dialogue between man and Nature, inseparable from the most colorful and glamorous part of a culture. Stories about gold are prominent in the myths and legends of all peoples. While the owners of gold vessels inevitably pass away, gold continues through the ages, aloof from the world's changes. With its sublime power of demanding worship and as a substance imbued with man's highest artistic impulses, gold has obtained immortality.

From the ancient gold objects unearthed so far, it can be concluded that items made of gold were available as early as the Shang Dynasty (17th-11th centuries BC). But, gilt coating is found on bronze ware from the earlier Erlitou site in Yanshi, Henan Province. Some scholars think that this site belongs to what is thought to have been the Xia Dynasty (ca. 2071-1600 BC), which is referred to in ancient records, but for which there is no archeological evidence, while some hold that the Erlitou culture marks the transition from the Xia Dynasty to the Shang Dynasty. Chinese gold craftsmanship has come down to us in a continuous tradition for thousands of years as a unique artistic genre, with varieties of rare and valuable products.



It is estimated that gold constitutes a mere billionth of the contents of the earth's crust, and it is likely that the earliest findings of it were specks or tiny lumps come upon by chance in stream beds. The technique of pan-washing river sand to obtain gold then emerged.

A rare metal, gold warms people with its charming shine and it is naturally linked with such fine expressions as nobility, hope and eternity. Gold products symbolize man's long and continuous history. And the wisdom, cultural genetic code, artistic sensibilities and technological skill it displays represent the most beautiful and timeless part of human history.

Panning for gold has been practiced throughout China's history to the present day, representing the arduous and complicated formation of the history of its people. Placer gold is obtained only after the sand is pan-washed again and again, just like a person's growth or the process of the formation of a culture. Traditional Chinese culture has undergone a similar long and arduous process. Ancient gold mines and streams where gold was panned remind us of the wells and flows of history.

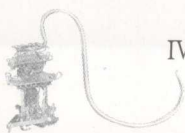
The glitter of gold burnishes the whole of human history.

III





■ Gold cup inlaid with gems, Qing Dynasty



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Chapter 1

Where Does Gold Come From?

Gold does not exist in large ore bodies in Nature, but in small amounts embedded in other materials.

It can be divided into pure gold and alloy gold (or K gold), according to the percentage of gold content. "Pure gold" jewelry actually has a content of more than 99 percent, even up to 99.99 percent. So, it is also called 99 gold or pure gold. K gold jewelry consists of a gold alloy, together with such materials as silver and bronze, and is marked with a letter K.

001

Where Does
Gold Come From?



■ Gold panning site



China, One of the Earliest Countries Mining Gold

Concentrated locations of gold exist, and they are mined by the usual extractive methods. Placer gold is washed downstream to a riverbed from deposits.

Experienced gold miners say that even when only 10 g or so of gold can be extracted from a ton of mineral ore, or a few tenths of a g of gold can be extracted from a cubic meter of sands, it is still worth exploiting. Mineral ores vary in size and depth, and it could be a few years or dozens of years at the most before the deposit is exhausted.

China was one of the first places in the world to extract and use gold. According to the *Guanzi*, a book compiled by Liu Xiang during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-25 AD), the area now roughly comprising Hubei and Hunan provinces in southern China was famous for gold production along the Ruhe and Hanshui rivers. This region was ruled by the

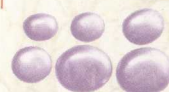
■ Ancient gold seals of China





003

Where Does
Gold Come From?



■ A laced gold box cover with dragon design for a jade container, Ming Dynasty, found in the Ding Mausoleum, Beijing

State of Chu, which flourished during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) of the Zhou Dynasty (11th century-256 BC). In its heyday, Chu covered an area of some one million sq km and had a population of one quarter of the whole of that of China.

It was in the State of Chu too that gold currency (in bullions) was first issued in China. Usually pressed with two characters *ying yuan* or *chen yuan* (both *ying* and *chen*



■ Gold bracelets, Ming Dynasty

were place names, and the character *yuan* is thought to be an ancient weight unit.) As proved by archeological discoveries, the currency's wide circulation covered such places as Hefei, Lujiang, Guangde, Liu'an, Funan, Shouxian, Chaoxian and Linqun in Anhui Province, Xi'an and Xianyang in Shaanxi Province, Nanjing, Jiangyin, Peixian, Danyang and Jiangning of Jiangsu Province. *Ying yuan* gold bullions usually weighed 280 g with 10-20 marks and the biggest one found so far weighs 610 g and has 54 marks.

Before the Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 BC), the Chinese character *jin*, meaning "gold," meant not only gold, but also silver and, more often, bronze. The ancient book *Records of the Historian* tells us: "Long ago, gold had three categories—yellow, white and red." These colors can

