Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

CHINESE DOLL G153

China has a long history. Ruled by emperors for thousands of years it was one of the great ancient civilisations. Many inventions that we take for granted such as gunpowder, fireworks, kites and paper came from China.





China is a huge country, similar in size to the United States of America. It also has the largest population in the world. Most people live in the big eastern cities of Beijing and Shanghai.

Chinese costume doll

The Chinese doll with handmade silk clothing was produced in about 1900. Its age has left the costume looking worn and the dress has faded at the front. Once this doll would have been dressed in a very colourful tunic. Despite the very pale yellow front the back shows green, pink and purple thread which were the original colours. Delicate textiles fade if too much light is shone directly onto them. Reading Museum has a large, woollen tapestry. To prevent the colours from fading it has to be stored in a room with very dim lighting.





China was the first country to discover how to spin and weave silk. China has been colouring silk textiles for over 5,000 years. The cocoons of silkworms are carefully unwound to make long threads like spider webs. You can see a picture of them on the left. Spinning the threads together make them thicker and they can then be woven to form the silk. Producing beautifully coloured silk was very difficult and so it became an expensive fabric. For a long time it was only available in China and their merchants would trade it around the world. So much was sold that the route from China to Europe was known as the 'silk road'.



Above: Spinning the silk on a wheel

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Above: The doll is from the Fujian province (in red).

The doll is wearing a costume from the Qing dynasty, the name given to a group of Chinese emperors that ruled from 1644-1911. It represents a woman from the Fujian province of China. They traditionally wore full-length trousers and a tunic that came down to about the knee. The tunic's design has flowers and butterflies on it. Images were very important on Chinese costumes. Flowers on a woman's tunic mean beauty, grace, good health and youth. The butterfly, on the top right of the tunic, is a sign that the wearer is happily married.

Dress could tell a great deal about the wearer's importance. The dragon symbolised the emperor and would appear on court robes. To be allowed to wear the image of the dragon with four claws indicated that person was extremely valued by the emperor. Colours were also a sign of each official's rank and job. In the modern army, badges determine rank. In China the colour and image did this.



Above: An emperor's robe with dragon images



Above: A statue of Confucious

An influential philosopher called Confucious believed clothing identified persons of virtue. His writings encouraged people to do what was morally right and formed the basis of a set of exams. Only men were allowed to take these tests that judged their understanding of Confucious' ideas. The results could decide the man's role at court. They were so important that the exam existed in China for over 1000 years.