Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

CHINESE DOLL FAMILY G155

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 doll family

Families in modern China wear clothing that would be similar to yours. When this family of handmade dolls was produced at the end of the nineteenth century the outfits were very different. Symbols in dress and hairstyle were important in the Empire. They signalled each person's job and importance.

The husband and wife



The husband is a very important court official. His clothing lets everyone know his rank. He is wearing a changshan, a long shirt. On this is a mandarin square with a picture showing his badge of office. It shows a bird called a crane looking towards the sun. The crane symbolises a long life and is a messenger. The sun represents the Emperor, so the badge means the husband is his messenger. Court officials who were given the title 1st class wore this. The hat worn in summer months was made from bamboo and covered with silk chords. It also displays his position. The small red bobble on the top is called a hat knob and the colour was a sign of rank.



Above: A painting of a court official with red hat knob and mandarin square



Left: A selection of decorative hat knobs

Right: A mandarin square



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His wife is elegantly dressed. She wears the husband's badge to show her status. The colourful embroidery on the dress displays the couple's wealth. Do her feet look an unusual shape? For almost 1000 years many Chinese women had their feet bound. This was an incredibly sore process that was outlawed in 1911. Women with small feet were considered beautiful. Bound feet were a sign the family was so rich the women did not need to work. From a young age girls would have their foot growth restricted so they were not larger than four inches (about 10cm). The toes were broken, tucked under the sole and wrapped tightly. The bandages would be taken off and new ones wrapped on tighter and tighter until the arch of the foot broke. Girls would be encouraged to walk long distances so their weight would crush their feet. This tradition could result in cutting off blood flow and toes falling off. Gangrene might set in as blood and foul-smelling pus oozed from wounds.



Above: Small shoes stopped feet growing



Above: A girl with bound feet

The son

Family relationships were very important so children wore outfits influenced by parents. Can you imagine dressing like your Mum and Dad? This boy is wearing a similar style of clothing to the father with a long shirt. Like his mother the clothing has been elaborately decorated. Children wore hair long as a sign of respect to their Mum and Dad. It was said that hair was given by your parents and so should not be cut.



The daughter

This is a young, unmarried girl. Unlike the mother her feet have not been bound. The hair has been grown into a long ponytail at the back. When she was married it would be placed into a bun similar to her Mums'. The robe is folded round the girl and a sash-belt might have once been worn to hold it in place. During the Qing dynasty the fashion was to wear sleeves that covered the hands.



