

## CHINESE CULTURAL HISTORY – Early Modern Period

(1500-1800 CE)

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### Culture

**Religion.** Whereas Confucianism had dominated the religious landscape in China since the late Tang period (618-807) among the Han ethnicity, Buddhism experienced a minor renaissance during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The Buddhism practiced by the Qing monarchs, however, was not like that of most of the previous periods. Instead, the Manchu followed Tibetan Buddhism, a form of the religion which emphasizes Lamaism. Lamaism is a form of meditative Buddhism that transmits knowledge and religious convention from the teacher (Lama) to student. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed that a series of great Lamas, such as the Dalai Lama or Panchen Lama, are reincarnated bodhisattvas who bring wisdom and knowledge to their students. The Mongols (Yuan Dynasty, 1271-1368) also practiced Tibetan Buddhism, but, like the Qing, did not impose it on the Confucian population. Nonetheless, it was not proscribed. Buddhist practice is often not monotheistic and the Qing monarchs were very willing to lead in corporate, ritual worship at the Temple of Heaven as an element of the civil religion promoted by the crown. Christianity was also evident in China during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and Qing periods. However, the numbers of adherents was very, very small—much smaller than the number of Christians during the Tang and Yuan periods. Still, a number of Roman Catholic Jesuit missionaries made their way to China and provided accounts of life during their stay. These include men such as Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Adam Schall Von Bell (1591-1666). It is estimated that as many as one-hundred thousand Christians may have existed in China in the late Qianlong period (1735-1796).

**The Literary Arts.** In literature during the reign of the Emperor Qianlong, a genre of Chinese fiction writing—the detective story—became popular. Though the Chinese have a long history of reporting on criminal behavior as a way of conveying a morality play, detective stories seemed to have been quite common as a form of popular entertainment as well. One of the most well-known is the *Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee*, a series of three stories of murder and intrigue. The author of this story is unknown. It depicts a man named Judge Dee and is set in the Tang period, although the cases it used for inspiration came from later periods. The extent of the circulation and appeal to the public of this particular work is not well known. However, it serves as an example of an increasingly popular form of literature in the early modern era. Several poets of renown also benefited from the considerable support of the Emperor Qianlong. Examples include Shen Deqian (1673-1769) and Weng Fanggang (1733-1818), contemporaries who had no problem criticizing each other, but who were very influential in the writing of poetry, the collection and critique of anthologies and in teaching.

**Porcelain.** In the late Ming era, porcelain was perhaps the finest expression of artistry in China. Indeed, Ming vases and other items made of porcelain made during the period are still among the most highly valued in the world. Chinese potters and sculptors were well known before the Ming period. But, it is during the Ming period that, for example, round, white plates with blue motifs of Chinese landscapes and other objects painted on them became the norm for export

objects, although white and blue porcelain existed before. The skill and craftsmanship of these artists was unmatched around the world for decades to come and the secrets of Chinese porcelain manufacturing were carefully guarded.

**The Fine Arts.** Other objects of art such as monochrome painting and woodblock printing continued to develop. Some Ming and early Qing era innovations included the expanded use of color. In wood block printing, for example, Chinese artists developed a process whereby color could be added in stages to an image. Multiple copies of a single image, when complete, could have five or six different hues, creating the impression of depth and fullness rarely seen earlier.