China’s art and culture have often been recognised as separate and distinct from those of much of the rest of Eurasia, and this difference is an essential foundation for the lectures. The peoples of early China used fine jades and elaborate ceramics as status symbols and took up bronze much later than their steppe neighbours and the states of Western Asia. There was little or no significant sculpture in bronze or stone until the creation of the Terracotta Warriors by the First Emperor in the third century BC. And while stone was used for tombs from the Han dynasty in the second century BC, few if any palaces or mansions were built in stone above ground until the seventeenth century AD.

Contact with the steppe and Central Asia through warfare, trade and religious proselytization changed China, bringing with them metallurgy, the chariot, sculpture and stone. But the ancient Chinese adopted these outside contributions in new ways. They made magnificent bronze vessels for offerings to their ancestors, but few fine bronze weapons; they worked on a huge scale in creating chariots as ritual gifts from the king. And the same massive scale was employed for the production of the Terracotta Warriors. Full-sized sculpture in stone and bronze only took off with the introduction of Buddhism across Central Asia from the fourth century AD. And the success of Buddhism was dependent on the foreign rulers of north China. Indeed, even with the reunification of China under the Tang in the seventh century, the imperial house maintained close relations with their neighbours, the Turkish peoples of the steppe, and created a hybrid culture drawn from native Chinese and foreign traditions.

China was never isolated and never as firmly separated from its neighbours as the traditional histories suggest. Interaction with the border peoples was inevitable and created huge political and military upheavals. At the same time, China’s material culture was enriched and dramatically changed by foreign contact. As the northern peoples became all the more powerful and overwhelmed China in later centuries, Chinese’s inventions travelled west, above all guns and gunpowder, porcelain and paper, expanding Warfare, Beauty and Belief in Central and Western Asia and in Europe.