

# Scrolling Through Chinese History

HONG KONG—This city is better known for its commercial life than its artistic one. But if Hong Kongers can get themselves out of their offices and into the local art museum, they may find a surprising kinship with the thriving economy of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Thanks to the rare exhibition here of one of China's most famous scrolls, the commercial life of that era has been brought back to life in bustling and vivid detail.

The 15-foot scroll, "Along the River During the Qingming Festival," is part of an exhibit of Chinese masterpieces from Beijing's Palace Museum to mark the 10th anniversary of Hong Kong's return to China. Although almost every Chinese student learns about this 12th-century treasure in secondary school, the scroll has been publicly exhibited only twice since it was painted nearly 1,000 years ago.

Painted in ink on silk by scholar Zhang Zeduan, the scroll depicts the city of Kaifeng in immaculate detail. At that time Kaifeng was one of the world's largest cities, with a population of over one million. In the scroll, more than 800 human figures—ranging from monks to businessmen—trade, pray, drink tea, and otherwise go about their daily lives. It is the most comprehensive known portrait of life during that era.

Most Song Dynasty paintings focused on idealized landscapes, but Zhang used his craft instead to focus on Kaifeng's economy. The scroll's portrayal of business-

men and street peddlers was highly unusual in formal art at the time, as was the depiction of business establishments such as wines stores and pharmacies.

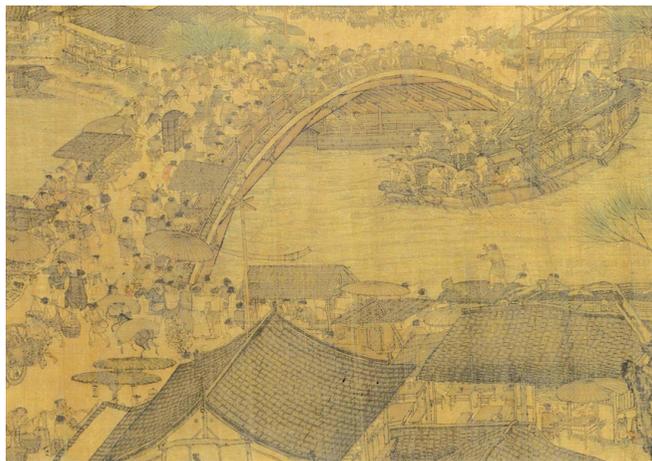
This may be in part due to his unusual background. Comments by later owners of the scroll suggest that although Zhang was most likely raised as a scholar—which would have included basic training in classical texts, calligraphy and painting—his real skill was in architectural painting. He likely supported himself by painting boats, moats and buildings, employing a realistic multidimensional style unknown to European painters at that time.

While Zhang draws upon traditional Chinese landscape painting by including elements such as mountains, water and trees, people and technology are the true focus of his work. Designed to be viewed from right to left, the painting moves from the countryside toward the center of the capital, where people of all classes go about their daily life. It's likely spring, around the time of the Qingming festival, which takes place 105 days after the winter solstice—a time to sweep graves and honor one's ancestors.

Zhang wields his brushwork with masterful strokes, depicting

each figure in near-photorealistic details. His strokes—some as fine as a single strand of hair—outline water, roots and grass with remarkable depth and subtly.

Song technology is on display in Zhang's detailed depictions of bridges and of the 28 boats that travel down the Bian River in the center of the piece. River travel



A glimpse into the heart of the Song Dynasty capital, Kaifeng.

was one of the primary means of transportation during the Song Dynasty, during which China boasted one of the world's largest navies, while Europe's fleets had yet to cross the Atlantic. The scroll shows some of the technology of the era—for example, masts that could fold down, enabling large boats to pass under a bridge. The Song Dynasty also saw the creation of the pound-lock system, which permitted the manipulation of water levels in

separate parts of the canal. Other inventions include the pending compass needle used by sailors to navigate ocean travel and watertight bulkhead compartments in a ship's body, ensuring the ship could stay afloat even if the hull suffered damage.

\* \* \*

But the Qingming scroll is famous for more than its beauty: Like the Mona Lisa, it has a long and complicated history. It survived transfers between more than 13 different hands—from public officials to emperors to private collectors—and is one of the few surviving scrolls from the imperial collection. It also remained intact during the tumultuous end of the Northern Song Dynasty, and was taken to Jin territory following the invasion of the capital.

It was there, around 1186, that scholar Zhang Zhu wrote the first colophon—a written account of the history of the scroll. It's from this first colophon that scholars know any information about the painter and title of the piece; the original signature and name have disappeared.

Throughout the next 800 years, the scroll was owned by emperors and scholars, businessmen and government officials—many of whom wrote their own

colophons on the painting. The painting survived a number of subsequent wars, and was several times at the center of intrigue; one man plotted to murder the current owner in order to steal it. It was almost lost permanently in the late 1940s, when former Emperor Pu Yi fled the Forbidden City with the scroll and a number of other priceless treasures, only to be intercepted. The Northeastern People's Bank kept it safe from the Cultural Revolution at a time when many priceless works of art were burned and destroyed.

Many of the former collectors wrote long, detailed accounts explaining and interpreting the painting. Despite these primary documents, scholars know surprisingly little about the masterpiece, which continues to be the subject of vigorous debate. There's even some debate regarding the true name of the painting, with some claiming that "Qingming" simply refers to peace and order—another translation of the term—and not the festival.

Regardless of its exact origins, the scroll remains a fascinating glimpse into the heart of the Song Dynasty, and a window onto an era when China truly was the center of the world—as the country's Chinese name, "middle kingdom," implies. Today, as China considers another "peaceful rise," such historical parallels are all the more relevant.

*Ms. Politzer is a Robert L. Bartley fellow at The Wall Street Journal Asia.*

Hong Kong Museum of Art