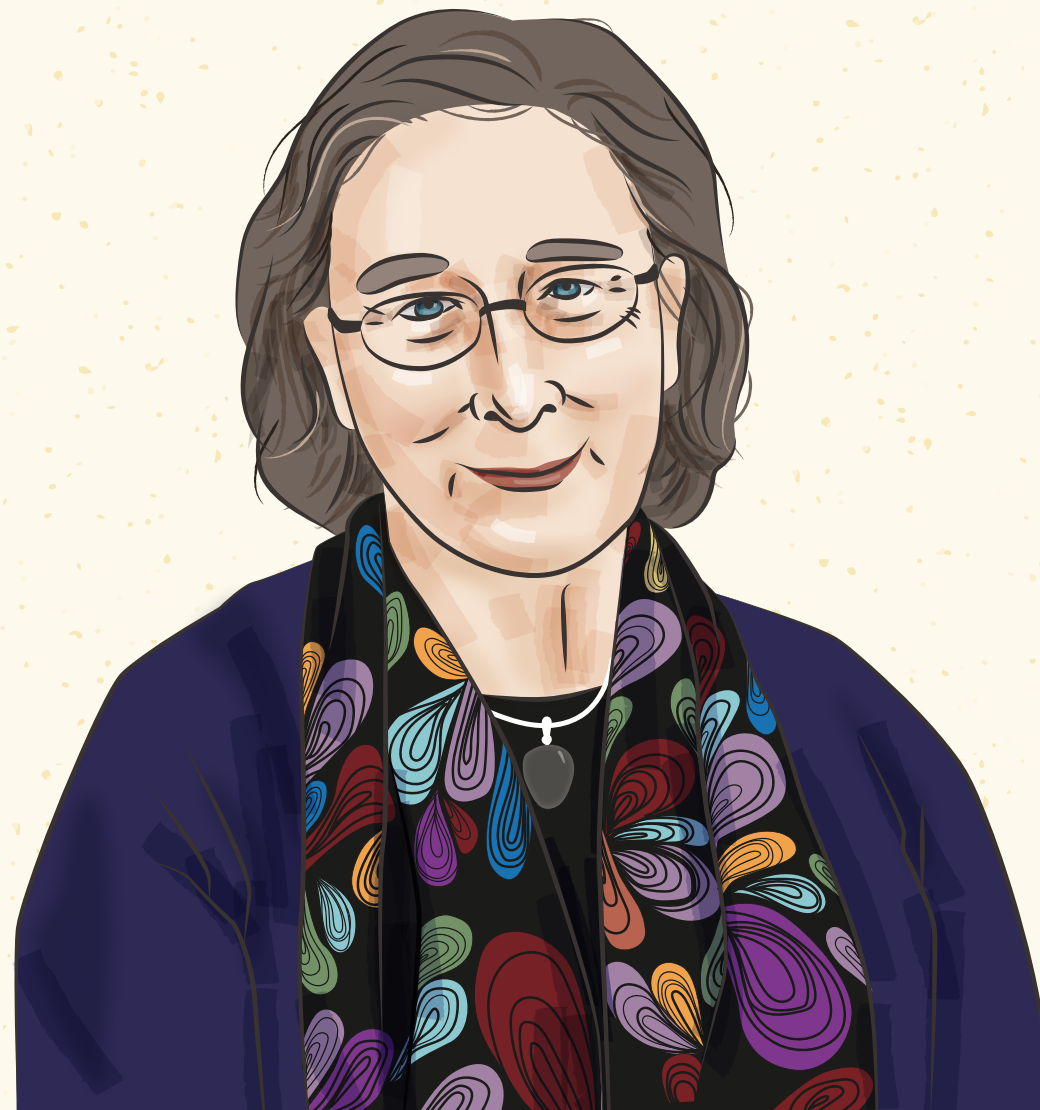


2022 Tang Prize

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Jessica Rawson

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Why Professor Rawson?

Professor Rawson teaches us how to pay attention to objects and their settings, how people have attempted to give these objects meaning and how cultures have used these objects to order the world they live in.

Helped the West understand Chinese culture through art

Unearthed stories of early contact by investigating Chinese and Eurasian visual systems and deciphering meanings (values, beliefs, and traditions) that transcend time, place, and culture.

Illuminated early exchange between the East and West through visual systems

Discovered the trajectory of cultural interactions and exchanges across Eurasia to show the nuances and multidirectional nature of exchange between the East and West.



Why is a glass used as a glass? The Language of Objects

Why is red wine served in a Bordeaux or Burgundy glass?

- ▶ Each culture has a language of objects that helps us understand the objects in our daily lives.
- ▶ Within this language, conventions dictating how to design and use objects make up what Professor Rawson calls **visual systems**.
- ▶ These systems determine the patterns and combinations of material, form, and decoration used. Cups, jewelry, bronze and porcelain, for example, all have their own visual systems.

Visual systems are **embedded in our lives** and cover conventions and ideas about society, belief systems and more. They are unique to each society and time period, and also influence how we see and interpret. Only those brought up in or educated in a specific society can easily navigate them.

Professor Rawson explores visual systems to illuminate how languages of objects shape the way cultures read objects. Her breakthroughs have provided **new evidence for early contact and exchange**.

Ancient Tombs: Small Clues Lead to Big Findings

In the Lord of Rui's tomb (8th century BC), a **gold belt** and **carnelian beads** were excavated.

- ▶ During that period, gold and carnelian were rare in China, but were used to make accessories in the Western steppes.



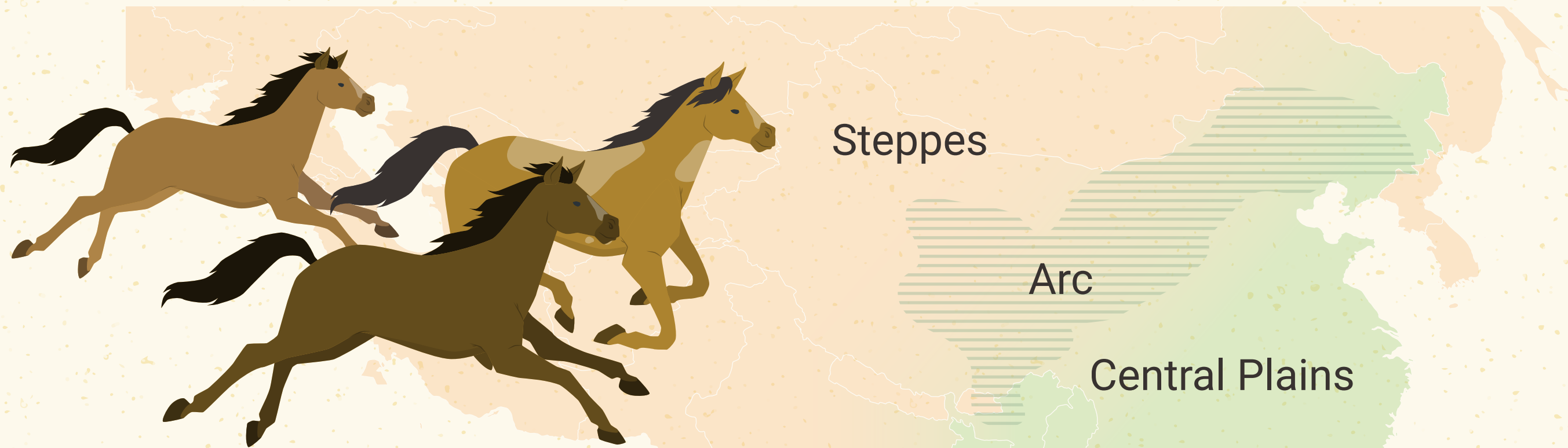
In other Western Zhou tombs, two types of **cheek-pieces** were found—a rectangular bronze one and a rod-shaped antler version.

- ▶ The rectangular cheek-piece is standard Shang form; the narrow rod-shaped form was used in the steppe.
- ▶ Rod-shaped versions in bronze were also found in Zhou tombs.



To most, these beads and harness may be insignificant. But for Professor Rawson, they show **previously unknown connections between Bronze Age China and other regions.**

Horse Trade Ushers in a New Era of Exchange Between the East and West



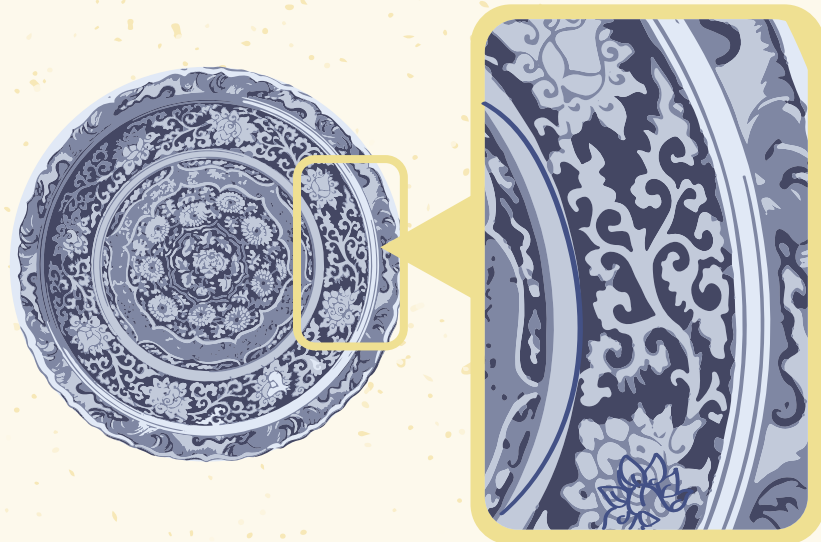
Before cars, horses were not only beasts of burden in early societies. They were also used in war, in hunting and as a means of transport.

Yet, climate conditions are key for horse breeding. The cold and dry conditions of the western steppes are suitable while the hot and wet conditions of the Great Plains are not. This led to the **silk trade to buy horses through intermediaries from the Loess Plateau (Arc area)**. Professor Rawson's work on the introduction of steppe horses has led to **new ideas on the origins of the Silk Road**.

The Story Behind a Strange Lotus Leaf

Acanthus

When Professor Rawson came across a **strange leaf for the lotus** on porcelains, she wondered why it did not resemble the real leaf. Probing deeper, she traced this leaf back to the popular **acanthus scroll**.



The acanthus is an ornament commonly found in **classical Greek architecture**.



Similar foliage scrolls permeate our surroundings today.



Architectural Styles: From the West to the East Through Buddhism

- ▶ Through the spread of Buddhism, the **visual systems** of the West and the East **interacted to create new fusions**.
- ▶ Classical architectural styles of the Mediterranean were brought to West Asia through conquest and then integrated with Buddhism. Along the Silk Road, both religion and architecture spread to China, manifesting in the form of **Buddhist cave grottos**.
- ▶ This new style featured **stone structures** and the incorporation of statuettes into architectural settings known as **framing**. No comparable system existed in China before the arrival of Buddhism.



12 Labours of Hercules
in classical style
(160-190 AD)



Figures in architectural frames
in the Yungang grottos
(Northern Wei dynasty, late 5th
century AD)

(Source: *Chinese Ornaments: the Lotus and the Dragon*)

The History of Exchange Through Mute Objects

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- Professor Rawson's vast visual learning has **opened up a new dimension in the field of Chinese art and archaeology**, deepening our understanding of cultural exchange between Chinese and Eurasian civilizations.
- Her contributions show that besides the **written word**, there is a language of objects, a **visual learning**, that is equally important in the field of Sinology.