

**Artisans in Early Imperial China** / Anthony J. Barbieri-Low.--Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, February 2008.--400 p.: ill.--ISBN: 978-0-295-98713-2 (cl., alk. paper): \$60.00.



In this study, author Antony J. Barbieri-Low, assistant professor of early Chinese history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, addresses two research questions that are usually neglected and overlooked in discussions about the cultural remains of early imperial China: who were the men and women who produced these objects and what was their place in society? Consulting a wide range of sources, including inscriptions regarding weight, workshop name, and intended use often found on objects of that time; excavated texts from tombs, especially recently discovered legal texts; and historic textual sources, he offers some answers.

Following a lengthy introduction, in which he outlines his research approach and the limitations of the available materials, Barbieri-Low examines the life of artisans, from a variety of perspectives, during the Qin and Han dynasties. He analyses the position of artisans in society, including their social and occupational mobility and level of literacy; the working conditions of artisans in their workshops, including their training and modes of production; the marketing and sale of products in China, by the artisans themselves or through intermediaries, and some of the surprisingly modern-sounding marketing techniques such as rhyming jingles or knockoffs of royal products; the relationship between artisans and the imperial palace, with a focus on the material culture of the imperial palace and special palace workshops, at which artisans created objects for imperial use; and the role of conscript labor, prison labor camps, and slave labor in early imperial China.

Barbieri-Low's study is unique in attempting to provide a complete view of artisans during that period. Some artisans, such as the lacquer worker Woman Ao, are treated in depth and come to life; in other instances the reviewer wished that the author had provided more detail on a specific topic, especially where the text seems to indicate that the lack of depth was not due to the limitations of the source materials.

The book is somewhat sparingly illustrated in black-and-white and color images. These images support the text but their size and quality sometimes make it hard for the reader to see what is described in the text. Copious endnotes, an extensive bibliography, index, and Chinese character glossary take up one third of the volume and make this an good starting point for further study.

This book is recommended for larger Asian studies collections, especially those with a focus on art and/or social conditions in China.

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