

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Professor Jue Guo

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Professor Jue Guo, where I ask her: What was everyday life like in Early China? Welcome to Getting Curious, I'm so excited. We have a return guest today who is so fascinating. Welcome back Professor Jue Guo, who is a social and cultural historian of Early China and a professor at Barnard College of Columbia University. Welcome back, Professor Guo. How are you?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:00:35] I'm good, Jonathan. Thank you for having me back.

**JVN** [00:00:38] Your area of expertise is so fascinating to me. Just to give everybody a recap, we had Dr. Guo on a few months ago, and it was really about learning about Early China and my goal, and that was to figure out what was, like, a day in the life of someone who lived in early China. But then I realized that I knew so little about the specifics of, really, the area and the time in which I was talking about we almost kind of didn't get there. And so I do want to just give people a quick little recap though, if, maybe they didn't hear that episode. So, Professor Guo, can you just tell us what time, briefly, what time period we're talking about and what geographic location we're talking about?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:01:19] Absolutely. So last time I think we went, actually, a little beyond what we are going to focus on today. And so, so last time we kind of gave a chronological introduction, particularly to the "before time," the Before Common Era. And today I would like to focus on the first millennium before the Common Era. So we are going from year one back to year 1,000, but BCE. So that's, that's kind of our terminology. And geographically speaking we will be focusing on what we would call today China proper, meaning, if you think about a map of China that, focusing on the south-east part.

So you got Mongolia and Inner Mongolia to the north and then the Xinjiang, unfortunately, that, this is an area that actually has been in the news for quite a lot these days, but that's northwest, and then we've got Tibet. So these areas are not going to be the focus geographically speaking for today's conversation and simply because the time period that we are talking about, those areas were, I think it would be fair to call, they were neighbors, they were nomadic neighbors, highland neighbors to that way, just, just to oversimplify things, a little bit of the so-called the Chinese agrarian society that settled the Chinese, who largely live in village lives and most of them were farmers.

**JVN** [00:03:15] Yes. So we're talking about Early China, which the, the location that we are going to focus on is kind of, like, if you were to think about what's modern day China, it's kind of, like, central, like, east, right?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:03:32] Correct. Yes. Yes.

**JVN** [00:03:33] So then in our first conversation we really talked about, like, overall we set the scene for early China. Today we're, I'm really curious about, like, jobs and what, what a day was like there. But then it's, like, this was, you know, over a 1000 years ago, actually, two, 3,000 years ago. I'm still really bad at the math, nothing's changed since then, since our first conversation. But so we're talking about from 1000 BCE, Before Common Era, up until, like, one. So how do you and your colleagues go about discovering what a day was like back then, or even just a particular historical moment? What are you all working off of?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:04:15] That's such a great question. That's a question historians love because we always need to know what we are working off with. So to put it in simple terms that work, I would say probably, broadly speaking, two types of materials, our so-called, our sources of evidence, and the one large group would be material evidence, so things actually we can still see, you can still touch, well, most of the time you cannot touch them anymore because they are very fragile, or sites you can still visit. So, and everything still exists to today.

We largely go to those sources through archeology, but we also have a very large amount of written sources, meaning that people, particularly the time period that we are going to focus in on today, writing was already a mature technology. Still very few people knew how to write, how to read. But there were, there were writings and increasingly so. So, so we have writings left from, some of them were from the time that we will be talking about, some of them were, you would say, maybe later reflections [of] what people write about an earlier time. I think this obsession with the past certainly were not new. So people were always fascinated with the past.

So we have different, this is why a large part of traditional historians who work with documents need to know the date of your written sources. But these two are the, the broader category that, the sources we work with, and in the past that archeologists, or people, historians who work with material culture tend not to be very familiar with the textual culture and vice versa, because it's very difficult to master both kinds. For instance, the written part, especially, because last time we talked about the writing actually changed quite a lot, and we actually lost the ability to read some of the ancient script. And we need to reconstruct all the knowledge of past scripts.

So do not get, I don't want to get too deep into the, the kind of the specific fields. But just to make it a point that colleagues that we generally identify as historians of Early China, we both need to know the general outlook of our sources, but most of the time the most fruitful work comes out of collaborations because, you know, each of us is specialized in a specific kind, kind of sources, and then we need to ask others and rely on their work to get to the fuller picture as full as possible.

**JVN** [00:07:35] Ah, ok, that's fascinating. So what I hear you saying is, is that some people really are more historians, like, going to the location, trying to deduce, like, if there's writing on the walls or if there is, like, actual artifacts. And then there's other people who really study, like, the written history from the time, like, whatever, like, texts there are from that time. That's right, right?.

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:07:56] Exactly. Yes. So China, in a sense, has particular advantage, that is China has a pretty strong historical tradition, meaning that very early on that Chinese states had a particular, you call it obsession or you, call it-, to fulfill practical needs of the state of the government, that there is very rigorous recording, history recording tradition. So this is the reason that a number of historical, so-called historical texts that China has quite a lot. So working through those historical texts were-, before archeology became a thing, became, that is a very new discipline in China. In fact, Chinese archeology became 100 years old this year; this is a big celebration in Chinese archeology.

But compared to traditional text-based historical studies, which goes about 3,000 years old that we for the vast majority of the time that most people learn about the past through writings, through writings from the past, through people's various genres, right. From purely tedious historical records to really beautiful poetry, literary pieces and anything in between. But archeology, as I said, about 100 years ago, really brings us to a very, comparatively speaking, very fragmentary type of sources, but nonetheless many of them actually dated to the time period that we are interested in to know more.

And what you just said actually reminds me of that, because you said the writing's on the wall, if we go a little bit into the different types of sources, I would like to add that art historians are also part of scholars of Early China and, their work sometimes goes between kind of people work with material culture versus people work with texts because they are looking at pictorial, visual materials. And sometimes I think that that is a very particular kind of sources as well. And early China, the time period we are talking about we also have quite a lot of that as well. So that's why I wanted to, because you mentioned that.

**JVN** [00:10:56] And didn't, didn't you say, in our first time interviewing you, I think this is one of the most fascinating things because isn't Chinese like the earliest written language?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:11:05] Chinese as a written language, as a script, was actually not as early as that say from, now we would call Middle East (ancient Mesopotamia) or Egypt. But Chinese is continuously used.

**JVN** [00:11:23] Continuous language! Continuous language. Yes! yes, yes, yes.

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:11:27] And also--I know I'm getting into my mode--but I just want to make a distinction between language and writing. So most, for the most part, we can equate them as language is something we speak, is a spoken language, and the writing as a, a material form reflects spoken language, but that doesn't have to be the case. Sometimes you can use a script that doesn't necessarily reflect the written language. A good example, actually, we can use, for instance, in Korean Peninsula, in Japan, that they also borrowed the script of, at least historically in Japan today, still used Chinese characters. They called it Kanji, but their languages are completely different. So, so there, that, this is why that distinction is worth making.

**JVN** [00:12:31] So, yes, I love that. And then I also think it's really fascinating how you think about, you know, to get a more full picture of these histories, it's the written *and* it's the art *and* it's the archeology. So given what we know about Early China so far from what we've learned about, what can we know about like, for instance, what homes would look like in Early China?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:12:54] The time period we are talking about, I think, let me premise that first is: we have very little evidence of, actually, what homes look like in terms of material evidence. And for one reason, one very particular reason, and that is Chinese architecture from very early on tend to be made of timber, meaning they do not survive time very well. So, for instance, if you think about elsewhere, that stone was the main construction material that you can actually have houses from very, very early on, and they can survive until this day.

Unfortunately, Chinese buildings, for one reason or another, that have been using wood as the main construction material for the upper part, meaning that, what we would call house today. So archeologically speaking, what we have, we would say, "This is used to be a house," what we have actually were foundations or these pillar holes. And so coming back to your question about the evolution, or how do we tell that with this kind of a small hut versus this is actually a very spacious mansion or even palace, how do we tell that, right?

So what we need to tell, first of all, is the size of the foundation. That's usually a good sign, right. So, regular houses for a nuclear family, three to five people, then we can see it's

going to be a relatively small footprint, so to speak, of that house. But if you have complexes, we find houses in the period that we are talking about, the early part of that, so the early part of the first millennium BCE, there were large houses, large house complexes that a big house, almost like a big room right now we are looking at, it can go as big as 300 to 400 square meters. It is a pretty big house. And then there are, you know, affiliated, smaller houses and that's, that's what gave us a hint that this must be a very, we would say high-scale house.

And we will use that as inference to think about who were living there, right. So, and the smaller houses, probably 20, 30, 50 below a 100 square meters. And then we also can tell "were these homes" because they were built with timber so they would have pillars. And those big houses tend to sometimes have pillars that still we can see having this hole they left can, can be, for instance, a meter in diameter. So it's a very strong, big pillar. And that helps us to imagine they must use it to support something very elaborate as an upper part, even though none of that survived today.

And then smaller houses sometimes don't even have these pillar holes, they probably just used, or if they have them, they have a very thin kind of just, this, we have to speak a little bit of construction technology that we see, particularly in the northern part that sometimes they put these wooden pillars inside a wall and then just used the, the mud to, to, to kind of plaster the wall. And then once those collapsed, when we excavated them, what we see are those pillar holes and the size of the pillar holes would give us a hint about the kind of people living there.

**JVN** [00:17:11] So do we see, because they were made of wood and timber, do we see like, is there like written descriptions of what houses in this time would look like? And do we have any idea, like, what, like, what was the roof shape? Were they like, what was, like, the shape of them?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:17:29] Great question. So I only spoke about the material remains, which are very little to go with. So, and if you look at Chinese studies of Chinese architecture, they do go back to quite early and they give you illustrations, exactly what the upper part and particularly the roofs and how, how they actually built the house. So what are the sources for that, then indeed, there were, for instance, pictorial evidence that people painted houses, maybe not in a sense as today that way architects does, but more in an artistic way that fulfills other functions, but nonetheless left us evidence.

And then another type of very interesting object that, that China this period toward the latter part, the, the Han Dynasty, that, what we have was people sometimes have ceramic models of houses. And they, yes, actually Metropolitan Museum has a few very interesting

specimen there, and then they buried them with their dead. So that gave us the, kind of the evidence. We cannot fully trust whether or not this was really, you know, "Do they reflect faithfully of the houses looked like or they are some imaginary components?" I also love what you mentioned is, "Were there descriptions about houses that people lived in?" Yes, there were. There were poetries, long poetries to describe, for instance, the Han capitals, how luxurious that these, for instance, palaces were.

**JVN** [00:19:28] What'd they say, what'd they say? What'd they say it looked like in that ancient city?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:19:33] I love this idea about what you, what the life was like in the past, because this really gave us a description of, it's very vivid. It's, you know, you can see that the-, of course, some of the poets, they were trying to please the emperor, they were trying to-, not only showing off their literary talents, so they use extremely exquisite language to describe very mundane things, just a house, right. But you really see through, they describe the colors, they describe the decoration, they describe all kinds of things that can be done in the houses. This, we are speaking about whether it is the king's palace, the emperor's palace, the Imperial household or high elites.

So we have a lot more information, particularly in the written tradition, about that. But I think what they convey is really this very lively image that you can see people were enjoying life, that, that the material, particularly in the Han Dynasty, many of these poetry really as a way to, to speak about the prosperity of the empire and the way they can have a lot of luxury goods today when we say "coming from far away." So if they would provide very detailed, the literary descriptions of those. So put all of these together then indeed, you know, we can piece together that "what would it be like to live in the capital of China, of Han China at the time. And there are-, people try to do that through various ways. Yeah.

**JVN** [00:21:33] So, this is, like, kind of a specific question. But did, were, the house ever two stories? Like were there ever two levels or were they all on one level?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:21:41] It's such a great question, I love that. Because this is, actually, an academic question that-, there were debates about it. There were. And that this actually come from, and you're asked about that, whether there were evolutions and of technical changes, and this also speaks to that aspect that we know actually quite early on. So this millennium, I'm going to that early part of what we know was particularly aristocratic people, kings, they begin to build houses on high platforms. So I think the idea is that, that people thinking of them at the higher level of the social hierarchy, interestingly, they are also occupying the physical space at a higher point.

So they, they, when we're excavating city sites, usually the larger, bigger houses that you find in higher ground. And then not only the ground were higher already and then they make these artificial mounds, and then they build houses, so, so that must be, you know, this is going off a little bit of the imagination, is that means that people can see those big houses, can see where their king was inside the city physically because they are so higher up. But those, since we only have the foundations, we really do not know whether or not they are multiple, multiple stories, but we do know they have a higher platform. But by the time of the end of this millennium, when we talk about the Han dynasty and that's what you can find in Metropolitan Museum, and that is these house models that I speak about that people made in ceramic and then they buried in the tombs, they show as there were multiple stories.

**JVN** [00:23:47] Did they have, did they have stairs in the ceramic things, or, like, ramps, or like in the earlier ones that were on platforms like did they, like, was there ever stairs?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:23:56] I can't, I can't actually think of on top of my head of those house models. But I think from outside you don't see stairs, but given, sometimes in those models they also put little people in it, they have, and so in some of them they were on the top level, so you have to imagine: "How did they get there?" So it's probably inside they must have stairs.

**JVN** [00:24:26] Fun! Because there's art historians, is it safe to assume that people would have had art in their houses? Like, was there, it seems like there's an art culture going on at this time?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:24:39] Yes. Yeah. So so, again, I'm going to speak about the material remains that when we excavated, for instance, of the both Qin and Han Imperial capital, that were supposedly, they were the, the royal complexes, meaning where the emperors lived, there were finds of, now are fragments, of seemingly murals on the, on the wall. So meaning that they have probably painted their wall. And then we have descriptions of, again, these written sources, they describe how they would paint all kinds of things on the wall. And another indirect evidence would be, interestingly, later on when, when the Chinese tombs changed form a little bit, the earlier tombs were sort of just as, well they are big and small pits, but they are really just pits, they do not have space you can walk in.

But later, toward the end of this millennium, in the later Han dynasty, tombs began to change almost like underground house. And so, so you actually have an architectural space, meaning you actually have walls in tombs. And then people began to paint those walls in the tombs. So these, we call them tomb murals, many of our pictorial evidence of, from early period actually coming from tombs. So indeed, it seems that that, that that was

a tradition that people decorated, probably I would say wealthy, well-off or socially privileged people would have both the privilege of probably the means to do so, but certainly it seems to, they do decorate their personal architectural space.

**JVN** [00:26:48] So let's say that, like, I am literally someone from Early China. Picture it. Like, I'm super gay, I'm super queer, I also want to wear, like, tons of heels and skirts and dresses, like, the drapier, the better. I love a bun, like, I am thriving in Early China. And I'm, and I'm a hairdresser. Like, it's literally me, like, I'm a hairdresser who loves dick, excuse my French, but, you know, I can't help but I just had to say it, and I am in one of those dynasties, whichever one you feel like you can paint a more vivid picture of, like, what is my life like? Wait, but also I was a hairstylist to an aristocrat, I wasn't just, like, at the local barber. I'm, like, at like, in fact maybe I'm doing the literal emperor and his wife, like, maybe I'm really all out, like, an aristocratic hairdresser to the stars who's super gay.

Could I have, I know that's a lot, it's a lot. Maybe I'm just an aristocratic hairdresser and we leave my sexuality out of it, 'cause I don't know if that, like, if that translates. But what would, like, what, what would I have done? I think I know my house would have been probably a little smaller because I definitely wouldn't have been married to a lady. I would have tried to have avoided it and done, like, a bunch of hair. So maybe I would have had a smaller house. There was, would I have been on a platform because I did the king's hair?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:28:10] Yeah, that's actually, I think what you just kind of put into this super interesting hypothetical, which I actually think, clearly, there wouldn't be an identical copy of you, but I think this, this collection of identities and traits would actually, would be viable in early China. So we can actually try to imagine what your identical twin's life would be-, look like. And I think to begin with, I wanted to say that even though we have a very little sources to begin with, I think homosexuality is actually quite common. We, we, again, as I said, we don't have direct references, but we have indirect references. So, so this is actually not uncommon.

And this was also, to a certain extent, that I think the kind of more judgmental part of that in China also came a little bit late, when the, particularly New Confucianism, that is kind of the second version of the early Confucianism when it gets really focusing on regulating the society strictly according to one set of what they think would be kind of the proper versus improper. But in the Han Dynasty that we are talking about and then early on, we have really very little evidence so I think I'm going to speak about the Han Dynasty. We do know that, in fact particularly among aristocrats and maybe this is because we have more sources about them, there were poetries more clearly written for, for, for really expressing emotional attachments, emotion, just beautiful poetry. And we can, we would think about whether today we would call you the queer or, you know, they are talking about



homosexual love. So, so, I just wanted to say that was not something uncommon even in ancient times.

And then, now go back to, if we imagine, a hairdresser, a person who will be working for aristocrats or even the emperors and empresses. I would imagine that this person would, would be living in-, together with the royal family. So, so you probably and we, this is something that we don't have direct evidence for, but indirectly we can infer that because we know the royal family has a large number of servants that, that work for them. And we know the royal complexes are really large enough to include most people to work on site, so to speak. And, and we also need to think about the kind of social relationship that, we are talking about, slavery society, so, so we know very little about where their servants came from. Later, sometimes we know that there were, that there were transactional, for instance, you can buy your servants, male servants, female servants. But in terms of the royal family, we know very little about where they acquired all of these people serving them.

**JVN** [00:32:03] So, if I was a royal hairdresser, like, I wouldn't necessarily, like, have aristocratic parents, like, I could have been, like, a commoner or something?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:32:12] That's right. I think that as a commoner or, since, you know, we are talking about hereditary slavery, that could be just for generational, initially, a house, a family, how did they get into slavery, you know, that, that scenario can be very complex. But I think then for general, we do know that people's status tend not to change very much, not dramatically. So we speak a lot of professions, a lot of kinds of jobs actually almost inherently hereditary from the highest level, socially prestige jobs to the lowest. So we would think that the most manual labor jobs tend to be hereditary, meaning that, you, your family has been doing this for generations.

So I don't think, you know, this is such a good question; we actually don't know a lot about what people did to their hair and how did they do that in ancient, in Early China, even though we know they clearly cared about their hair. We know, we have, we know both men and women have long hairs so they actually need, definitely, to do something with their hair and we have so much evidence to say there's a lot of hair accessories, even extensions, we find that in tombs, and combs, all kinds of combs and hair pins, so, made of, varies from bones to jade to ivory, yeah, and gold. So, so clearly hair was a very big part of people's, kind of, caring of their appearance. But we know so little, or I think maybe it's just we haven't looked about who are doing that. Clearly these aristocrats or the emperors were not doing that themselves. That, that part probably we can be certain. But there must be people actually specializing in taking care of the appearances of these people they work for.

**JVN** [00:34:38] Do we have any, like, written stories of, like, hair, like, what if I was working for like a family? Is there an aristocratic family, is there a hairstylist and, like, their village got taken over by, like, a different dynasty or, like, what if the family I worked for, like, what if they all died or something, like, do I have to go find another family to work for? Like, is there any, like, do any, like, Early Chinese hairdressers, like, was there an Early Chinese Sally Hershberger or something, like, that, like, anyone wrote about?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:35:09] Not that I'm aware of. But you know my, I cannot claim I know every source, especially, I think if I were going to look for those, I probably going to look for kind of the anecdotal side of historical records, even literary works, where they would go into daily life in more details and official history tend to be focusing on affairs of the state, right. Going back to your question, I think it's, here who you work for is actually going to matter, because interestingly, if you work for emperor and then this was the last emperor of the dynasty, given what we know about Han Dynasty and the-, how power transitions happened, that involves usually a lot of violence, so mostly the last emperor of a dynasty tends not to survive the, the demise of the empire.

So, and a lot of times the capitals got sacked, palaces got burned, and I would imagine people got killed. So, so, there is a higher chance if you actually work for the emperor, and if this happened to be the last emperor during these kind of dangerous times, then there's probably a physical threat. So, so but for instance, if you were not working for a high, noble, high aristocrat, but more of, kind of, just a professional middle-level hairdresser, then dynastic changes actually have very little impact directly on both your physical safety or your livelihood.

And this is true, I think, for the vast majority of the people in ancient times, these political dynastic changes tend not to affect the vast majority of people, meaning that if the emperor changed, if the dynasty changed, people carry on with their lives. So, so in that sense, that that, yeah, you probably, you probably are going to work for the same family if they survived, right. So or, you, yeah you can certainly to, to serve other people but it's really during times of power transition, particularly dynastic changes, it is really at the highest level would, would really live and die with the dynasty, so to speak.

**JVN** [00:38:18] So between 1000 BCE and then, like, Common Era, like, like, what would, like a, just like a Tuesday morning for, like, a Qin king and his family been? Like, was there Tuesday? Did they have weeks like that?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:38:34] That's a great question. Technically speaking, not exactly the Tuesday we would think about. So Chinese calendar is, it's based on, it is a solar-lunar

calendar. So today, when we talk about Lunar New Year, we are not exactly, the Chinese calendar or most, part of East Asia using the lunar calendar, it's not exactly a lunar calendar. It is a combination of solar and lunar. And in China, the particular, so how do they count time? So the day is about the same, how do you divide the day into, now we divide it into 24 hours. That was different. There were different ways.

But sort of a day has 24 hours, I think that's probably still true because we still observed the time, you know the sun coming out and then sun sinking down. So, so that part is the same. But how do they count in a sense as our week, which now, days, we call them our seven days, that's where it differs. The Chinese calendar has a sixty-day cycle. So, so, we have sort of a seven day, right, and then 30 days, because 30 days is still the solar movement.

But Chinese calendar has this, this lunar calendar, we called it eventually, I think today we're actually more accurately what's called an agricultural calendar, because that's, a lot of them corresponds to seasonal changes. It's very important for the farmers to know the time, but they want to know the time mostly for understanding the field and understanding when to plant seeds and when to harvest. So 60 days a cycle and within the 60 days, what would be the next unit is actually related to the moon. So when we talk about a month in English, in Chinese it's called a yuè and yuè means both month and the moon. And that is, the month is actually based on the, you observed the moon, so you have the full moon, you'll have the half moon, you have the new moon. And all of those are markers of time within the 60 days.

**JVN** [00:41:07] So what would, like, a waxing moon, waxing crescent moon day be like for Qin king and his family, like in just a typical peace time. like, eh hh yeah that word that you said that I couldn't remember how to say it.

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:41:24] Yeah, that's, so I think the point here is to imagine what a king's life, daily life was like. And I would think I think, I think a Qin king probably was an early riser, that this, this particular region that they, they really, because they, environmentally speaking, were not as-, for instance, the coastal area, the coastal area they probably have a much more relaxing life because the environment was rich enough to support, you know, a really broad base of, of economy. And so, but the west, when we speak of Qin, that's northwest that's already bordering the Tibetan plateau and the, the highland, the Loess plateau.

There, environmentally speaking, was a little bit tough, so that requires people work really hard. And I think Qin really interestingly had that reputation of being, of being tough. They eventually unified China. One of the theories was about "this is a very hard-working and

tough group of people." And they also mixed with nomads further north, north and west with them. So I would imagine the king probably also got up quite early and they, when they began to think about, to, to really try to envision that, "How I can go further east, how I can begin to unify the realm, how I'm going to strengthen ourselves."

Qin had later a very famous reform and famous strategist and talked about to, to become a stronger country, become a stronger state, you need to do two things: one is to enrich the state, the other is to strengthen the army. So, and the enrich the state part, they really focused on agriculture. And so, so I think taking it together, I would think the emperor, the king would have to set up an example to, to, like, the ministers of his subjects to work harder than the king would also need to to exemplify what, kind of, the collective goal was.

But beyond that, it's really difficult to imagine what a typical day would be. I would say probably more than kind of just getting up, get ready for the day. There must be, for instance, depending on the day that-, say, if it's the first day of the, the month, you're really there's a lot of rituals affiliated with the season and particularly for the king, that not only you are the head of the state, but you are also the head of your lineage. So you have obligations both to people, but also to your ancestors. So you need to fulfill both obligations.

And to the ancestors, a lot of times that involves making sacrifices, going to provide the ancestral or even periodically report to your ancestor that what you have done and continue to receive blessing from them. So, so, so I would imagine that you know possibly those obligations would figure into a king's stay, a king's schedule as well. Then possibly this is also the time states has a lot of diplomatic relations as well. Sometimes we know there are envoys are being sent from the other king and the king had to receive those envoys. Not so different from today that the president needs to receive dignitaries from the other states. So, so I think that in that sense, you can imagine it's probably going to be a busy day as well.

**JVN** [00:46:56] So you've got diplomatic things. What about, like, for, like, what, would they have set, like, trade rules and, like, had to do, like, like, say like what's allowed to sell, what's not allowed to sell, like?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:46:10] Absolutely, yeah. So I think probably from the second half of the first millennium BCE, we started to have documents and indications of indeed the state would like to, to, to both develop what we would call a market economy, right, people, when you have surpluses then from the agricultural production, then people would like to be able to do something with it. And they would trade, they would sell on market and we do know market was, was already in place. But it is in this time and particularly getting into

the empire, that they really, the state really began to have an interest in regulating the market and in fact the state would become a player of the market.

So there are, the state would regulate price and would also regulate, just as you said, what are allowed to be traded, what are not allowed to be traded. For instance, the state has an interest to not let the citizens have access to, in today's term we would say that with national security that today you don't want regular citizens to have access to nuclear weapons. And when we kind of translate that back to ancient time, then you do not want your citizens, your subjects have the liberty to make weapons and to make nuclear weapons, and, because that can potentially be a threat to the state or to the, to the emperor, right.

So we know, for instance, in the Han Dynasty, that metal or particularly iron that was regulated was a huge problem for the state, for not only the iron tools was the most cutting-edge technology of the time, but also because iron was also used to, to, to make-- and copper as well--to use to make coinage. So the state also has interest in, to control the economy so there isn't these super inflation, which also happened in Han Dynasty later on as well, when that went out of control, when private citizens began to make money, counterfeit money. So the state definitely have a huge economic interest and play a huge role in the state economy and the market economy as well.

**JVN** [00:49:02] So the Qin Dynasty was more like, you know, scrappy, they ended up reunifying everyone. I would imagine that maybe that king wouldn't be like, were they known to be, like, you know not getting all the pampering. They were like maybe having a hairdresser on their place because they were more like, "We get it done, we got to, like, get it together." Or is that not accurate or do they still, like, pamper themselves too?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:49:24] Yeah, I think it is, I think at the beginning, clearly, because they came from this almost a remote, particularly from today's point of view, that the remote area and supposedly, you know, had, has less developed technology, even though in terms of war-making technology, they were highly developed. They were really, they are close to where, you know, the, where horse riders and chariots come from. So that's why, they were militarily extremely savvy. But in terms of, for instance, how to enjoy life, that's probably less so. And we can tell from their material culture they tend to lean to the modest side.

However, we do know the first emperor had probably the most luxurious you can imagine of a mausoleum built for himself; that's, that's, that's the Terracotta Army, right. When he built this entire underground palace town for himself that took about 10 years to build. So he, he actually started out very early on and, and based on the limited excavation we've had now, it's, it's just extremely luxurious so that you can imagine almost anything would

be, would be considered as luxurious, as rare, he has a huge quality of that, he took that to the afterlife with him. So, so, again, the caveat is whether or not underground burial, what, when people think about when I die, how I wanted to be buried, was that a reflection, or to what extent that, that was a reflection of the actual life?

But I think in this case, it's probably reasonable to say he's actual life probably wasn't too far off from the luxury he was, at least he was capable of enjoying, whether or not that was the case, we do not know. Interestingly, we know very, very little about the first emperor. But later the Han Dynasty, because Han Dynasty has more emperors, we know more about them, there were emperors who were living in extremely lavish lifestyle, really enjoying goods coming from afar and from just, you know, the empire, the empire was big enough. And those emperors a lot of times would be criticized by historians, court historians of the time sometimes, but mostly later historians, as these emperors who were not focusing on governing, or being a good emperor, but too indulgent.

**JVN** [00:52:33] Who was, like, one of the most indulgent emperors from the Han Dynasty time?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:52:39] There's actually one example, I don't know if he would have been the most indulgent, but he certainly was the most interesting one. Also because we just recently found his tomb and his life story was intriguing. Technically, he was the ninth emperor of the Han Dynasty, but he was on the throne only for twenty seven days.

**JVN** [00:53:05] Oh.

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:53:06] So, he-, and then he was deposed and then he was demoted. The next emperor was very suspicious of him, so kind of put him almost in a way like a house arrest, really monitoring him and then later relocated to a very remote corner of the Empire. So, so kind of the next emperor was also--this was during a time that the succession was very fraught, so to speak--so, so, the next emperor was not solely legitimate, so to speak, that he was not a direct descendant.

This whole thing started out that the emperor who died, didn't have a son, didn't have an heir. And so the next emperor has to be selected by the regent, by the powerful generals of the time, from the other lineages. And this particular one, his name was Liu He, and he was selected at seventeen years old as the next emperor. So he was called upon. He lived in the east, quite, actually, quite a good life. And then he was kind of getting involved in these palace intrigue, these political struggles as a seventeen-year-old. And then he got called upon to the capital and being made the emperor. And then twenty seven days later, he was deposed.

And the, the, the reason I brought him up was because the official reason of his-, he was deposed was because--this is written in the Han dynasty official history--was the accusation of him being extremely indulgent, that he was materially indulgent, he was morally decadent, he was not fit, who was not a fit to be emperor. Of course, the actual situation was probably much more complicated than that. So his story. But the interesting thing was his story did in the end when he was deposed, deposed. So he was deposed or was sent back home first and then was relocated to a very remote corner. And then he lived until thirty-four. So he lived, actually, he still died relatively young. But for the rest of his life, he lived as a kind of under high suspicion of, of the royal court.

But then when he died, because we find his tomb, actually, just back in 2015, his burial was really, really luxurious. Way beyond his later status, so Han Dynasty, particularly the higher society, actually has these what we call the sumptuary rules, meaning that what you can use has to be corresponding to your status. So if you are a local king, you are allowed to use a certain set of things. But if you are the emperor, then you can use the highest level. And if you are neither, then you are not supposed to use a lot of things. But his burial really bears a lot of markers of his because he has so many different identities. He was once emperor. Yes, very, very short lived. But he was also a local king, he inherited that from his father. And then later he was this minor noble of the offshoot of the royal family. So his tomb really exhibited the many different identities he assumed in life.

But going back now to your original question that, that he clearly was blamed on his luxury lifestyle, I think we can safely assume he still lived a pretty luxury, indulgent lifestyle. Whether or not to the extent the accusation of him being, for instance, really just day and a night enjoying these, these entertainment from beautiful women, the palace women, dancers, performers, and not caring about being the Emperor and governing, then that part we do not know because clearly the historical records had, had a political motive to portraying him in such a negative light.

**JVN** [00:58:06] So with, like, the dancers and performers and the palace women and stuff, were they almost, like, who were the people that were monitoring an emperor to be, like, too indulgent or not? And, like, were some of those people used as, like, pawns to try to get the emperor people in trouble. And also, like, I think about it more specifically, what would have happened to like the dancers if an emperor had been seen to be too indulgent. And maybe it was, like, these dancers, the performers that were seen to be, like, the issue, would they ever be, like, punished or removed?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [00:58:42] Absolutely. Yeah. So I think that when we think about these really high stakes situations, most of the people involved, that on one hand you enjoy the

privilege when things were good--and bad when things went badly. People who, in closer proximity to power, tended to also fall very badly. So speaking of a dancer, I think it is kind of interesting to mention another example, almost a legendary example was Emperor Cheng of Han. He reigned from year eighteen to seven, so it's actually not a very long reign. And this, this was common during the later part of the Han that emperors become, become more frequent to have these successions. In any case, so Emperor Cheng had an empress, used to be a dancer. So her name was Zhao Feiyan and it doesn't matter--so, her family name was Zhao but Feiyan literally means 'flying swallow.'

And the reason, whether or not that was her real name, we actually do not know. Likely not. But the reason she had that name unknown historically in that name was because she was a fantastic dancer and she [was] also extremely light. So this clearly is a legend. So reportedly she was so light she could dance on the palm of a person. So she was a very skilled dancer. And she actually, I think, probably is fair to say she belongs to the kind of the servant class because the emperor actually spotted her in, in a performance elsewhere. And then he was really attracted to her. And she was clearly also a very beautiful woman.

And so she actually, eventually, being made the emper-, empress. So, so this is a kind of a rare case, I would say, that this kind of social status changes. But in terms of other dancers, performers that we do know, this was a big part of court life, that playing all sorts of musical instruments and dancers and those serving of the aristocrat in banquets in even sometimes in these ritual performances, festivals, and we'd know very little about the individual was except in these exceptional cases.

**JVN** [01:01:44] I was wondering about, like, upward economic mobility and thinking that that probably didn't happen if so many jobs were hereditarily passed down. So that's interesting that we came across an example of it happening. So I know that earlier you said that, like, there's indirect examples of homosexuality. So from, like, from one of these dynasties, would there have, just-, when you say indirect, like, would there have been, like, a poem written by, like, an emperor or maybe about, like, a male dancer and his court that's, like, not talking about explicit sexual things. And it's, like, "that's not how bros talk about each other." So they must, there must have been something going on, sort of a thing?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [01:02:20] Right. And in fact, even in, in standard history, what would be recorded were, what would be the term I think people use? I think probably what would-, I think, the standard term would be dandies. So, so actually some of the emperors would have male companions. And that's actually an open secret, if you will. I don't, I don't even think that's a secret, that's clearly what pervaded. So, and sometimes, we also, I don't think, I cannot think of an example of lesbians, let's say empresses, who have female



companions, but the male aristocrat and particularly emperors, we do know that there were recordings about their relationships with other men.

**JVN** [01:03:24] I mean, I hate how this, like, gay patriarchy seeps into, like, queer stuff. This is now like, the second ancient time, where, like, ancient lesbians that I know of, did not get their due and you know that there was some cute ancient lesbian maybe, like, catching the glance of another lady and they were just like, "Oooh, oooh, let's meet in the back behind the platform and make out." I'm sure that that had to have happened at least once. But I have like 10 more questions and we, I have to keep asking them.

So what about, like, because I think you mentioned this time or last time, like, more, like, nomadic people, which makes me think about, like, traveling. And that also makes me think about, like, what if you were born as, like, let's say, like, a craftsperson, but then you, like, fucked up your local king's statue, like he paid you to commission it and you fucked it up. You made his wife look like a nightmare. And you turn around and you're like, "I'm going to face local ruin." Could you, like, get on a horse or, like, some other means of travel and, like, get to another town and, like, maybe try to change your identity, like not get caught. Like, is there any stories of anyone doing something like that and getting caught or, like, you know, identity things from this time?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [01:04:45] Absolutely. So I think of what we know from, for instance, legal cases and legal code. So there are legal stipulations about the particularly, what would be called in technical terms 'bonded servants.' So basically slaves. So slaves do run away, and then the, the slave owners--and then some of them were actually, they were, they would be called 'official slaves.' They work for the state. They work for local government. They work for all levels of government. And then they would try to catch them. Right. They would try to recover that. They actually have disputes about the slaves as well as some slaves to run away and then being sheltered by another person. And there, there were lawsuits between the two.

**JVN** [01:05:44] OK, so now this is kind of, like, a bumper of a question to end up on, but I feel like I need to ask it because it's something that I never realized. I never realized that, like, having enslaved people in Early China was, like, was a thing. So was that, like, because if you were part of a dynasty or if you're in a city that got conquered by a different city, that had a different situation going on, would they just do it? So was it racially-based slavery? Was it, like, was it, like, a geographic base? Was that religious? Like, what? And we literally don't have that much time left. But I just feel like I have to ask that question because it's something I didn't realize.

**PROF. JUE GUO** [01:06:24] Yeah, I think this is, this is a very, very complicated question. And we know very little about ancient slavery. We do know it existed, and it actually is practiced quite a lot. And there were episodes, for instance, during the two Han transitions, there were this very brief period called the Wang Mang. Kind of, he established the Qin Dynasty. One of the things he wanted to do was actually to, so to speak, to abolish slavery, basically to and you no longer are able to buy and sell slaves. But he didn't succeed.

But I think overall, what we know, it's probably less race-based, just given the, what we would call today, the racial composition are very different in, in that part of China, in that part of East Asia. We do know, for instance, on the Silk Road that the slave trade was a very flourished trade. But I think what, "Where does the slave come from?" and what I would say probably would be: I think sometimes the slavery, the reason it wasn't well known in in in the in the case of China was its terminology was it was very different. So it's always translated as servants instead of slaves or because there's a whole cluster of terms.

And I think this is, historians were hesitating at least early on using "slave" because we do not know the nature of their status. But, but certainly that seems to indicate that, for instance, the familial relationship, for instance, economic transactions. So so all of these hallmark of slavery, I think were there. But the study of ancient slavery in China these days is actually still, I would say, still pretty preliminary. And I think at the one monograph we have about slavery in China, probably dated back--I could be wrong about the date but--1940s? But afterwards, just, ancient China, there wasn't much of a study.

But afterwards, for instance, in medieval times, there were a lot. We know more about the Silk Road, when the Arabs came through the boats on land, but also through the sea than we know the Arabs were actually really a very big intermediary in terms of slave trade in Eurasia. But in ancient China, unfortunately, we know very little to begin to, I think, looking at a group of people that would be slaves, but begin to think of their lives in those terms. This is also quite new, interesting, actually. My husband is teaching a course of slavery in ancient China, so I probably should have asked him.

**JVN** [01:09:02] Well, we should do a follow up episode with him! That would be really fascinating.

**PROF. JUE GUO** [01:10:09] So, but I think what that indicates was the actual physical mobility, probably not as far as, like, these days, you can run to another continent, but you can certainly run to another district, to another county. And there are procedures to pursue these running away people or just generally speaking, I think the mobility is still very limited. But there are, certain kinds of people would have broader mobility, for

instance, soldiers. So we do know that the empire is huge. And so at the borders, particularly the northwest border, where there are threats from the nomadic empire and there are these garrison towns, and you need to basically draft soldiers to put them into those garrison towns to defend the border.

And we know from documents that they, they still tend to be drafted around in surrounding provinces but some of them actually come from far away. And sometimes we know there are travels, there are these relocation of the forces, if you will, moving the soldiers that sometimes can be over a thousand kilometers. It's very expensive to do so, so it doesn't happen very often. But it did happen. And then travellers, I think most frequent travelers in, let's say, in the Han Dynasty, were officials. So many officials would go on business trips and the, the bureaucracy is diligent enough, you actually have to keep a diary of your travels. So we have those records to indicate that, how far people traveled, but it's a very specific group of people.

**JVN** [01:12:15] Did people from Early China, like, ever travel so far as, like, Egypt or, like, the Middle East, and then they come back and, like, tell the people in Early China about it? Like, what's the farthest anyone ever traveled and then came back and told the people about it?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [01:12:29] So we do have one extremely famous example of it, but not as far to Egypt. But I think probably as far as we would call Central Asia today, and this was actually, his name was Zhang Qian. So this was a very famous event. This was during the Han Dynasty when the empire was in the face of expansion. So this has been called 'The Great Han Expansion.' And under Emperor Wu, Emperor Wu was an earlier Han emperor, was a very capable but also extremely ambitious emperor. So he really would like to expand particularly northwest-wards into what would be today, let's say, Xinjiang, and then Central Asia. So he actually sent this, this official named Zhang Qian.

And his journey was very famous because at first he, he actually was caught on the road because this is sort of into hostile territories. Some of these little states, the smaller states, oasis states have a better relationship with Han, but most of them were hostile. And, and this trip, so, you know, to be honest, this is espionage, right? You send an envoy to try and scout, basically. And so he was caught and he ended up being held hostage for over 10 years. Reportedly, he actually got married locally, but he always wanted to finish his mission. So he sought for opportunities to run away. And he eventually succeeded.

And he didn't turn back coming back home, he actually went on. And so it took him really, a really long time to, to kind of finish the task he, his emperor gave him. And then he came back, he actually reported what was the situation like in the Western regions. And that

helped Han a lot, quite a lot. And that also has been he was credited as the one who actually opened it up with the so-called Silk Road.

**JVN** [01:14:49] Professor Guo, I feel like I learned so much more. I feel so grateful for you. You are fascinating and I thank you so much for sharing your time with us and your expertise. We have to have you back. There's so much about Early China that we still have to learn about. How could you ever teach us everything in, like, two hours now?

**PROF. JUE GUO** [01:15:10] Indeed, that will be very, very challenging. But I also wanted to thank you be, just being curious about early China. That is something that I think I've already said that before. It doesn't happen very often. And I'm so happy to have this opportunity to reach out to more people and to, to learn about Early China, which I'm obsessive about it, but I'm so happy to see to, to have really interest from the broader audience.

**JVN** [01:15:41] Well, this will not be our last episode, Professor Guo. I'm so grateful for you, again. Thank you so much. And thanks for coming on Getting Curious.

**PROF. JUE GUO** [01:15:47] Thank you.

**JVN** [01:09:32] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was Professor Jue Guo.

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