

Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar – China 2013 Project  
“*Shenwu Gaobi: The Foreign as Exotic in Tang China*”  
Rebecca Woodward Wendelken

China’s trade with the West began during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) with the establishment of the Silk Road, a series of trade routes that crossed the vast Eurasian continent and linked China with the Levant and the Roman world.<sup>1</sup> Between the end of the Han Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) trade declined due to conflicts in Central Asia and inside China itself. With the establishment of the Tang Dynasty came a renewal of this trade and with it a fascination for things foreign and exotic.

The Tang capital at Chang’an (modern Xi’an) was the eastern terminus of the Silk Road and therefore was a place where foreigners gathered to sell their goods from the West and to buy merchandise from China for the return trip. Chang’an had two major markets. The Eastern one was for high-end products and was located near the areas where the wealthier residents of Chang’an lived. But it was the Western Market where the bulk of merchants traded and stayed. The Great Mosque in Chang’an and the small tourist market around it are all that remain today of that vibrant entrepôt.

Chang’an was the largest city in the world at that time with a metropolitan area population of nearly two million.<sup>2</sup> This cosmopolitan city embraced the outside world as it did the trade that it represented. The foreign population of Chang’an was mostly male and came from a variety of regions including those to the north and west of China. Song, dance, dress styles (*hufu*), hair styles, makeup, and even foreign games such as polo from the Turkish tribes of Central Asia were adopted by the Tang Chinese.

The foreign traders found in Chang'an were immortalized in works of art such as tomb paintings, but the most lasting memorials are to be found in the pottery figures from Tang tombs. These figures or *ming qi* vary widely from small roughly sketched pieces to large and elaborately modeled works with fine details. They portray individuals and groups who could be seen on a daily basis in the markets of Chang'an. The map below shows some of the silk routes and the peoples who lived along it. These groups include Persians, Turks, Uighurs, Sogdians, Xianbei, Tibetans and others.



Figure 1: Map of Silk Road peoples.

The practice of creating tomb sculptures in China is very ancient. These figures often depicted things the deceased would need in the next world such as houses, animals, servants, etc. The most famous tomb sculptures are those of the Qin Dynasty (226-201 BCE) found around the tomb of Shi Huang Di. Here the first emperor of China who gained power through force provided himself with an entire army, the so-called “terracotta warriors.” These finely crafted figures are believed to have been modeled on the actual members of the emperor’s guard, as can be seen by their highly individualized faces.

The Tang Dynasty tomb figures of foreigners are much smaller than the terracotta warriors and were produced using different techniques. Unlike the warriors, the Tang Dynasty tomb figures were made from different types of clay, usually grey, buff, or white in color, and could be painted after they were fired or covered with lead-based glazes and then fired. It is the latter technique that has received the most attention. The lead-based glazes were splashed

over the unfired figurine in a technique called *sancai* (literally, three colors). The bright green, yellow, brown, blue, and sometimes black glazes would run and drip over the figures in the heat of the kiln resulting in a shiny mottled glaze.



Fig. 2: A *sancai* pottery vessel with three animal feet showing brown, yellow, and green glaze. This example shows the fluidity of the lead glaze which is characteristic of *sancai*.

*Sancai* seems to have developed in China around the same time as the tomb figures of foreigners, i.e. in the Tang Dynasty. From the mid- to late-7<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century this style was very popular and could be found in many areas within China. This technique fell out of favor after the An Lushan rebellion of 755, but continued to be used in some places into the 9<sup>th</sup> century. While the subjects of the figures are undeniably Central Asian or Middle Eastern, the origin of the splashed lead glazing is less clear. One argument is that it mimics splashed glazed wares of Central Asia, despite the fact that splashed lead glazes were not used in Central Asia at that time. Splashed wares are found in the Islamic Near East, but they post-date the technique's use in China. More recent research finds the glaze technique may have originated in China and was copied to the west, rather than vice versa, an example of technical transfer along the trans-Eurasian trade routes.<sup>3</sup>

The tomb sculptures were, for the most part, intended for burials, however the deceased were not the only viewers. The sculptures may have been exhibited to show the status and identity of the dead “during preparation for burial and in the processions that may have accompanied funerals.”<sup>4</sup>

The Tang Dynasty was not the first in China to depict foreigners in its art work, but during the Tang the “physical markers of non-Han identity [were] relatively more complex than in earlier periods” and the artisans “seized on a range of physical features and accoutrements as characteristic of the non-Han.”<sup>5</sup> This focus on physical appearance is closely connected to the popularity of the Chinese practice of physiognomy (*xiang*), or the analysis of someone’s character from their physical features. Marc Abramson notes that the use of physiognomy to determine one’s social status is “a common feature of elite societies whose social and political power is bound up within a highly aestheticized court environment and exclusivist codes of cultural distinctiveness.”<sup>6</sup> This definitely describes the Tang Dynasty.

The Han, or people who are ethnically Chinese, are also subjects of the tomb sculptures. Depictions of Han Chinese show a relaxed, yet formal posture, even in informal settings.



Fig. 3: Woman with a dog.

This figure of a Han woman in a mottled dress of *sancai* shows “ideal physical deportment, as an important aspect of *li*,” a central aspect in Confucian thought that “can be translated as ritual, ... etiquette, propriety, and politeness.”<sup>7</sup> Her facial features are finely modeled and she exhibits a serene expression. Her stance is graceful even though her pose is informal. She is

completely Chinese and within the concept of *li*, although *li* is more often applied to men than women.



Fig. 4: Woman with a parrot.

Figure 4 is also a Han female, and like the depiction in Figure 3, her pose is informal. Despite that she is graceful and serene. However this lady has embraced foreign fashion completely and is wearing the Kuchan *hufu*, a coat that overlaps in the front to protect the wearer from the fierce Central Asian winds, along with boots and a headwrap. This is not only foreign dress, it is foreign male dress worn by fashionable females for the first part of the Tang period. This echoes their involvement in such male pursuits as horseback riding, hunting, and playing polo.

There are very few pottery figures of foreign women. In those that exist women more closely resemble the Han than do the figures of men. The Central Asian musicians in figure 5 could be taken for Han Chinese, but their location, placed on the back of a Bactrian camel, marks them as foreigners.



Fig. 5: Central Asian musicians on a Batrian camel.

The central standing figure is a female, but the sex of her beardless companions is unclear. They could be females in male dress or they could be young boys. Regardless, their eyes are only slightly more prominent than those of the Han women above and their noses are only slightly more pronounced. This may be because the sculptors were less familiar with women from the West or because they saw Western men as more different from the Han Chinese than were the Western women.



Fig. 6: Chinese male holding the reins of a horse. Tang Dynasty.

Figure 6 is a Chinese male serving as a groom for a horse. His robe is closed at the throat, exposing no skin. His stance is straight forward and although his hands are raised to hold the horse's reins he does not appear tense. He seems to exude the ritual, etiquette, propriety, and politeness required of a Chinese man.

The foreign male is depicted quite differently. They often have contorted bodies “whether gyrating as part of a performance, hunched under a burden, or poised in a posture of menace or control.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the fine features of the Han figures, the non-Han are exaggerated. They often have bulging eyes with large pupils that seem to stare at the viewer.



Fig. 7: Detail of a foreigner hunting with a cat. The first year of the Dazhu Reign, Tang Dynasty (701). Excavated from Princess Yontai's tomb (Qianxian County).

Their mouths are large and are often open as though they were shouting or grimacing, frequently showing their teeth. In addition, they exhibit the famous *shenwu gaobi*, the deep eyes and big noses associated with foreigners. One Tang poet described a foreign woman as having “eyes deeper than the Xiang and Yangtze rivers, a nose higher than the Hua and Yue mountains,” although the pottery figures of the period do not show this.<sup>9</sup> Non-Han hair is often curly and, unlike Han hair, it can be black, brown, yellow or red. Poetry often describes it as foul-smelling, a result of the use of animal fat or vegetable products as hair treatments.<sup>10</sup> But for the men, perhaps the most distinguishing feature is the beard. Curly and thick, it sticks out from the chin as though it had been waxed or stiffened with some sort of pomade. It often has sharp edges and deep valleys, the exact opposite of wispy, thin Han beards. Figure 8 shows this jutting and sharp edged beard along with a prominent moustache, nose and brow ridge. Like the female in Figure 4 he wears a *hufu* but he also exposes his chest, another barbarian trait that is definitely against the concept of *li*. Notice that while the face and clothing are finely

modeled, the hand is treated rather roughly. This difference is seen in many of the figures and demonstrates that it was the face and clothing that were remarkable about these foreigners. It is unclear whether the jutting piece just below his moustache is a lower lip or his tongue. Either one would clearly violate *li* as would his slightly twisted, active figure which is opposed to the composed and dignified figures associated with *li*.



Figure 8: Painted pottery figure of a foreigner. The second year of Xianqing Reign, Tang Dynasty (657). Excavated from Zhang Shiqiu's tomb, Liqun County.

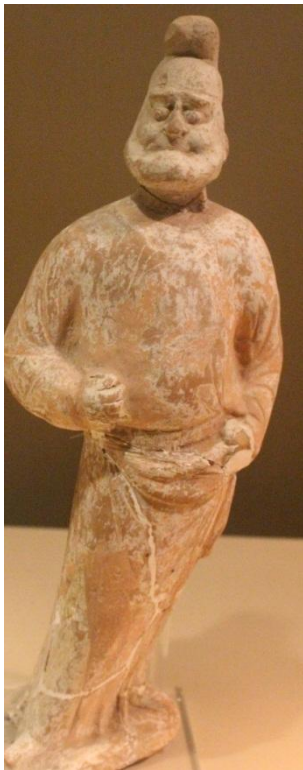


Fig. 9: Painted pottery figure of a foreign civil officer. The first year of Lide reign, Tang Dynasty (664). Excavated from Zheng Rentai's tomb, Liqun County.



Figure 9 shows a foreign civil officer who, although beardless, has a very prominent chin which juts out nearly as far as do the beards found on other figures. He is also shown with a large nose and bulging eyes although he wears a Chinese robe. This man has a paunch and that, combined with the hairless face, signals to us that this is a figure was probably a eunuch.



Fig. 10: Tri-colored Kuchan (Qiuci) figure. Tang Dynasty (618-907). Excavated from the suburbs of Xi'an City.

The tomb figures are often so detailed that the ethnicity of those depicted can be determined. Most of the foreigners wear the *hufu*, which seems to have been the garment of choice for traders along the Silk Road, as were the thick knee length felt boots that most wear. However their ethnicity can be determined by their varied hairstyles and hats, as well as their physiognomy. Figure 10 shows a Kuchan from Central Asia. His hair is light colored and held back by a headband. Like the foreign civil servant in Figure 9 he is beardless and has prominent jowls. The flabby face and lack of facial hair tells us he may also be a eunuch. Note that his chin is accentuated to show his foreignness, despite his not having a beard. He also has a prominent nose and brow ridge and his eyes are blue and staring. His fists are clenched and arms show movement.



Fig. 11. This Tibetan groom was found with his horse. From a Tang Dynasty tomb, western suburbs of Xi'an City.

Figure 11 shows a Tibetan groom. He is dressed similarly to the Kuchan but his high cheek bones and distinctive hairstyle are marks of his ethnicity. His hands, which are rather crudely modeled compared to the face, are clenched into fists and his body is twisted as though he were caught in the middle of a movement.

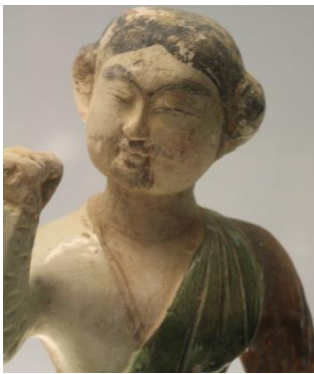


Fig. 12: A polychrome glazed pottery figurine of a Tibetan man leading a camel. Tang dynasty.

Figure 12 is also identified as a Tibetan in the museum signage. While he sports thin facial hair his eyebrows are very thick. His hair drawn into buns on both sides of his head is certainly Tibetan in style, but the wispy moustache and beard point to a man of mixed ancestry. He is a camel groom, a position which makes it unlikely that he is Han Chinese.



Fig. 13: Second year of Xianqing Reign, Tang Dynasty (657). Excavated from Zhang Shiqiu's tomb, Liquan County.

Figure 13 was identified in a film shown at the Terracotta Warriors Exhibit as a Hun. He is an obvious foreigner with his large nose, heavy eyebrows, and curly beard. His hat, however, is more Persian than Hun, so it is more probable that he is a Persian.

Compare Figures 13 and 14. Figure 14 has a pale handle-bar moustache. Unfortunately his beard is hidden by his instrument, a form of pan pipes. His hair is covered by a hood, a type of headwear more usually associated with the Huns.



Fig. 14: Musician on horseback. Tang Dynasty. Excavated from a Tang Dynasty tomb, Liquan County.

Other ethnic markers frequently seen are high, pointed hats which mark their wearers as Sogdians from the region between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers near the Aral Sea. (Fig. 15)



Fig. 15: Camel rider with a pointed hat.

Turks wear their hair braided in multiple braids, although these are sometimes gathered into a bun in the back and are difficult to see unless one has access to the rear of the figure.

Nudity or partial nudity “violated the norms of *li* and prior to the introduction of Buddhism was largely absent from Chinese conceptions of self.”<sup>11</sup> There are no completely nude figures found in the mortuary art of the Tang, but some foreign figures are depicted unclothed or partially clothed from the waist up. These are often labeled as horsemen or grooms. Figure 16 exhibits all the characteristics of a barbarian -- eyes, nose, mouth, and stiff beard. He is heavily muscled and his clenched fists probably originally held string or thread “reins” or perhaps a weapon of some sort.



Fig. 16: Painted pottery foreign horse rider. First year of Dazhu Reign, Tang Dynasty (701). Excavated from Princess Yongtai’s tomb, Qianxian County.

Other figures routinely shown with exposed upper torsos are the so-called “Kunlun” slaves from South and Southeast Asia, described by one observer as having “frizzy hair and black bodies.” (93) Figure 17 shows one such Kunlun slave. Although it appears light today, it shows evidence of having been painted a darker color originally. Notice he wears a sarong tucked between his legs and into the back at his waist to form pants. He also wears a large neck ring and an ankle bracelet. His hair is remarkably curly and reminds one of the tightly spiraled curls found on statues of the Buddha from the same period. The red shawl or string over his right shoulder may represent the cords worn by Hindus of the Brahmin caste.



Figure 17: Figure of a Kunlun Slave. Tang Dynasty



Fig. 18: White pottery figure with a water bottle. Tang Dynasty

Other figures are less readily identifiable. Figure 18 shows a kneeling individual who is holding a wine or water-skin. The figure is definitely foreign as shown by its prominent eyebrow ridges and nose but unlike most of the other figures, the gender of this one is difficult to determine. While this could be a eunuch, the elaborate hairstyle resembling corn-rows, the forehead decoration and jewelry, the clothing which appears to have ruffles or pleats at the end of the short sleeves, and the especially long thin fingers, indicate that this foreigner is probably a female. Compare the treatment of the hands to those of the foreign men shown above. Women were sometimes used by foreign merchants or business owners to lure men into their establishments.

That Western houri with features like a flower –  
She stands by the wine-warmer and laughs with the breath of spring  
Laughs with the breath of spring  
Dances in a dress of gauze!  
“Will you be going somewhere, milord, now, before you are drunk?”<sup>12</sup>

The distinctive nose in Figure 18 points to someone from the Middle East.

Not everyone was enamored with the foreigners. Tang poetry and other writings show a definite disdain for the foreign ways and the foreigners themselves who had found a way into Chinese society. One Tang poet complained that:

Ever since the Western horsemen began raising smut and dust,  
Fur and fleece, rank and rancid have filled Hsien and Lo.  
Women make themselves Western matrons by the study of Western makeup;  
Entertainers present Western tunes, in their devotion to Western music.  
Yuan Chen, Tang poet<sup>13</sup>

Yuan Chen seems to bemoan the fact that foreign ideas and ideals were infiltrating Chinese society, much as people in any society complain about changes, especially those coming from outside their own culture. The examination of these tomb sculptures from the

Tang Dynasty allows us to better understand and picture the exciting Eurasian trade route that is known as the Silk Road. But even more, they show us the interests and concerns of the Tang Chinese as they embraced or were repelled by foreigners and foreign customs.



Fig. 19: Porcelain head of a foreign man. Tang Dynasty

---

<sup>1</sup> Very small quantities of silk and other Chinese products had arrived in the West before the Han Dynasty, but it was at this time that a more consistent and continuous trade developed.

<sup>2</sup> n.a. "Exoticism in Tang (618-907). <http://www.silkroad.com/art/tang.shtml>. Accessed 8/20/13.

<sup>3</sup> Rawson, Jessica. "Inside Out: Creating the Exotic within Early Tang Dynasty China in the Seventh and Eighth centuries". *World Art* 2(1), 27. DOI:10.1080/21500894.2012.662171. Accessed 9/10/13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

<sup>5</sup> Marc S. Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China*. (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 84.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>12</sup> Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics*. (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1963), 28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. Hsien and Lo are the two Tang capitals of Chang'an and Luoyang.

All photographs used in this paper were taken by the author during the 2013 Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar Abroad – China. Figures 2 and 3 are from the collection of the Beijing Center for Chinese Studies, Beijing. Figures 1, 4-8, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18 were taken at the Shaanxi

---

History Museum in Xi'an. Figures 3, 9, 10, and 17 were taken at the Shanghai Museum, Shanghai.

### Bibliography

- Abramson, Marc S., *Ethnic Identity in Tang China*. Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Bowie, Theodore, et al. *East-West in Art: Patterns of Cultural and Aesthetic Relationships*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1966.
- Cort, Louise Allison, Massumeh Farhad, and Ann C. Gunter. *Asian Traditions in Clay: The Hauge Gifts*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2000.
- Elisseeff, Vadime, ed. *The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce*. New York NY: Berghahn Books, 2000.
- Foltz, Richard C. *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*. New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Juliano, Annette L. and Judith A. Lerner. *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China—Gansu and Ningxia, 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York NY: Harry N. Abrams, 2002.
- Karetzky, Patricia Eichenbaum. *Arts of the Tang Court*. London: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Knauer, Elfriede Regina. *The Camel's Load in Life and Death: Iconography and Ideology of Chinese Pottery Figurines from Han to Tang and Their Relevance to Trade along the Silk Routes*. Zürich, Switzerland: Akanthus, 1998.
- Krahl, Regina, John Guy, J. Keith Wilson, and Julian Raby, eds. *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2011.
- Li, Xiaobing. *Zhongguo Xiyu Minzu Fushi Yanjiu: A Study on the Costume and Adornment of the Nationalities of in the Western Regions of China*. Urumchi, Xingjian Province, China: Xinjiang Press, 1995. Missing publisher's name and location.
- Liu, Xinru. *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges AD 1-600*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Prodan, Mario. *The Art of the T'ang Potter*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1960.
- n.a. *Along the Ancient Silk Routes: Central Asian Art from the West Berlin State Museums*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982.
- n.a. *Historical Relics Unearthed in New China*. Peking (Beijing) PRC: Foreign Languages Press, 1972.
- n.a. *Mt. Tianshan, Ancient Roads, The Meeting of East and West: The Extraordinary Cultural Relics from the Silk Road in Xinjiang*. Urumqi, Xinjiang Province, PRC: 2002.
- n.a. "Exoticism in Tang (618-907). <http://www.silkroad.com/art/tang.shtml>. Accessed 8/20/13.
- National Palace Museum. *Fushi Pian: Zhongguo Wuqian Nian Wenwu Jikan*. English title: *Chinese Costumes, Part I: Prehistoric-T'ang Dynasty*. Beijing: n.d.



- 
- Rastelli, Sabrina. *China at the Court of the Emperors: Unknown Masterpieces from Han Tradition to Tang Elegance (25-907)*. Florence, Italy: Skira, 2008.
- Rawson, Jessica. "Inside Out: Creating the Exotic within Early Tang Dynasty China in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries". *World Art* 2(1), 25-45.  
DOI:10.1080/21500894.2012.662171. Accessed 9/10/13.
- Schafer, Edward H. *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1963.
- Simkin, C.G.F. *The Traditional Trade of Asia*. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- So, Jenny F. and Emma C. Bunker. *Traders and Raiders on China's Northern Frontier*. Seattle WA: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1995.
- Watt, James C.Y. , et al. *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004.
- Zhou, Xun and Gao Chunming. *5000 Years of Chinese Costumes*. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1994.