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Lost visual histories. China's Tang dynasty (618-907) tomb mural paintings

Tonia Eckfeld

China's Tang dynasty (618-907) tomb mural paintings are rare finds and study of them has grown since the first archaeological discoveries and excavations in the early 1950s. Although thousands of minor Tang graves and about 400 tombs have been discovered, so far only around 60 Tang tombs have been found to contain mural paintings. While many questions are still to be answered, each new discovery contributes to knowledge in this important field.

The importance of tomb mural painting is stressed in the *Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (Revised 2015)*, which highlights the rapid development context in which these mural paintings exist and the need for sound conservation principles to be applied to preserve their artistic values, materials and technical methods.¹ Consistent with these *Principles*, this Australia-China project is researching mural paintings and archaeological site conservation. Collaborative work involves the University of Melbourne, Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, Henan Provincial Administration of Cultural Heritage, Zhengzhou University and the Australian Synchrotron. Technical study is providing data to increase understanding of the materials, techniques and working methods used by the Tang dynasty tomb painters and their workshops, and in turn to inform contemporary conservation methods.

Inscribed epitaph tablets found in most of the tombs provide exact dates and names and biographies of the deceased tomb occupants (many of whom are also recorded in the Tang official histories). In this way the tomb murals provide visual first-hand records of Tang dynasty history, politics, court life and society. Examples of high status imperial Tang tomb mural painting programs have been visually documented, described and

analysed in numerous archaeological reports in *Wenwu*, *Kaogu*, *Kaogu yu wenwu* and other Chinese journals, *Imperial Tombs in Tang China (618-907)*, *The politics of paradise*,² *The Complete Collection of Murals Unearthed in China (Shaanxi Province)*³ and other recent detailed volumes on individual Tang tombs in Shaanxi and Henan. These have led to the accepted premise that the Tang tomb murals were subject to a strictly regulated system of mortuary entitlement where the subject content and length of a mural program was required to match the status of the deceased tomb occupant. Reserved for extremely high status individuals – members of the Tang imperial family such as princes, princesses and dukes, and exceptionally distinguished civil or military officials such as ministers or generals – about half the Shaanxi tombs with murals were located within the 17 cemetery complexes of the Tang emperors to the north of the Chang'an, the primary Tang dynasty capital (present-day Xi'an in Shaanxi Province), with only six discovered so far near Luoyang, the secondary Tang capital (in Henan Province).

As most of the mural paintings are located near the Tang capital cities where the Tang dynasty had its political and cultural base, and can be accurately dated, they also provide visual evidence of important lost but described master artworks. In the Tang dynasty, mural painting was the major painting form, prevalent in high status buildings such as palaces, government buildings, temples and elite mansions. Information about these no longer extant murals is known through Tang dynasty artistic texts.⁴ Although not all mural programs have survived in their entirety, due to collapse, destructive environmental conditions or plunder for example, the known repertoire of painting is extensive, stylistically sophisticated, vivid in subject matter and adept in methods of technical production. Analysis reveals that



Tonia Eckfeld examining Tang tomb sancai horse and

the murals have parallels with those listed in the 9th century catalogues and it can be speculated that they were either the work of famous artists or strongly influenced by them. Their secular content, style and non-canonical approach makes them an important category of painting distinct from the Tang dynasty Buddhist murals discovered at the dawn of the 20th century at Dunhuang and other sites along the Silk Road.

A number of recently excavated Tang tomb mural programs, comparable in date, official rank and therefore mortuary entitlements, reveal new evidence about patronage, aesthetic styles and subject matter. The tombs of two imperial concubines of Emperor Zhongzong (r.684, 705-710) – Tang shi and Cui shi Anguo Xiang wang furen – were excavated in 2005 and recently conserved. These two tombs were built and painted in 706 near Luoyang, the same year as three imperial tombs at the Qianling mausoleum complex that belonged to Crown Prince Zhanghuai (d.684), Crown Prince Yide (d.701) and Princess Yongtai (d.701). All five had met untimely deaths under the orders of the ruthless female Emperor Wuzhetian (r.690-705) and were accorded grand reburials under her son and successor, Emperor Zhongzong, on his ascent to the throne. Visual observations reveal that all five of the Qianling and Luoyang murals programs have sequences typical of high status Tang tombs. The subject matter is largely conventional – directional animals (dragon and tiger), processions with fine horses, honour guards, palace attendants and entertainers. The mural paintings in the tombs of Zhanghuai and the two concubines tombs have similarities in both the style of painting (especially in the

