

Chinese Tomb Guardians

Demystifying the colourful pairs of protective burial figures

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

The main burial chamber of First Emperor Qin Shih Huang-Ti's tomb (located east of the modern city of Xi'an) has not yet been opened, but when it is, there will undoubtedly be a few guardians inside.

Tomb guardians, as burial objects (*míngqì* 冥器) for the elite, are found in Chinese tombs beginning in the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE). They generally consisted of three pairs of figures: beefy male guardians with exaggerated features (usually brandishing weapons and crushing dwarves), fierce mythological beasts and civil officials.

The role of the beefy guardians (*fāngxiāng*) was to keep evil spirits at bay. Some scholars believe these passageway protectors – with their scary faces and gestures – evolved from ancient mask-wearing shamans who performed rituals of exorcism to create a safe environment for the deceased. (These could also be the origin of the two guardian door gods found today on Chinese New Year posters. They are usually identified as two famous Tang Dynasty generals, but in truth, we simply don't know. There is much confusion between these guardians and both the Hindu *lokapala* – the 'Guardian of the Directions' – and the Buddhist *lokapala* – the 'Four Guardian Kings' of Buddhism.)

The pair of mythological monsters known as 'earth spirits' or *zhèn mǔ shòu* (镇墓兽) are squatting beasts characterised by horns, hooves and bulging eyes. Their role was to hunt and hold down evil spirits. One of the pair usually has the face of a beast, the other is semi-human. The last two figures, the benign civil officials, hold wooden tablets displaying their court credentials. The reason they are included in the tombs is still unclear.

All three pairs of tomb guardians were positioned at a tomb's entrance, inside the long underground passageway leading to the primary burial chamber, or in the corners of the tomb's main chamber.

Luckily, most tomb robbers were uninterested in mortuary statuary and either ignored them or toppled them in their

rush for the real treasure – gold, jewellery and antique bronzes – therefore many of these pieces still exist. All the major museums seem to have at least one pair. The ancient Chinese would shudder to see collectors today displaying these tomb figurines as decorative items in their homes.

While the earliest tomb figurines were unglazed, later pieces were often coated with the low-fire polychrome lead glazes. These were developed in China around the time of the Han (260 BCE – 220 CE), and then further refined during the Tang period when they became known as *sāncǎi* (三彩) or 'three-coloured' glazes. Rather than apply the glazes directly onto the natural clay bodies (as was done during the Han period), Tang artisans first applied a white base coat (known as a 'slip') to provide a neutral-coloured base that would bring out the glazes' bright hues. The various colours (numbering many more than three) were the result of the metallic oxides used: iron for the ambers and browns, copper for shades of green, and cobalt (introduced in the eighth century) for the blues.

One of the reasons we find this distinctive glaze primarily on mortuary wares was its use of lead, a very poisonous substance that can be activated by even the mildest of acidic substances (like lemon juice). Lead helped fuse together the components of the glaze

into a smooth, glass-like protective coat that was beautiful, but toxic in the kitchen. So while we also find large trays and vases with these colourful glazes, most were mortuary pottery destined for tomb use only.



A pair of Earth Spirits Tomb Guardians from the Asian Civilisations Museum's Tang Dynasty ceramic collection

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