

“Both Form and Spirit”: Aesthetic Observation of the Han-Tang Dynasties’ Terracotta Figurines in Luoyang

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Abstract

The Han-Tang Dynasties’ terracotta figurines in Luoyang, as an outstanding representative of ancient Chinese sculpture art, vividly record the historical trajectory of social life, aesthetic trends, and cultural integration during the medieval period. This article systematically reviews the remains of the Han-Tang Dynasties terracotta figurines unearthed in the Luoyang area. By employing archaeological typology and iconographic analysis methods, and considering the historical and cultural background, it delves into the differences and connections between the two dynasties’ terracotta figurines in terms of aesthetic characteristics, connotations, and aesthetic ideology. Research shows that Han Dynasty terracotta figurines are characterized by their simplicity and expressiveness, using concise lines to convey inner spirit and highlighting the romanticism influenced by Chu culture. In contrast, Tang Dynasty terracotta figurines exhibit a tendency towards realistic and full-bodied forms, reflecting the openness of the Tang Dynasty through the tri-colored glazing technique and secular themes. This paper proposes that Han-Tang Dynasties’ terracotta figurines jointly constructed a Chinese creation aesthetic system that embodies “both spirit and form”. Its creative concept of “expressing spirit through form”, cultural connotation of “utensils carrying the Tao”, and innovative spirit of “diverse integration” provide possibilities for innovation in contemporary object design. Research emphasizes the enlightening value of inheriting the aesthetics of terracotta warriors for contemporary Chinese design in the context of cultural confidence.

Keywords

Luoyang Terracotta Figurines, Han-Tang Dynasties, Object Aesthetics

1. Introduction

Chinese traditional culture has a long history. In the archaeological study of the burial objects in Luoyang, the objects are classified by distinguishing the “type” (horizontal difference) and “style” (vertical sequence), and the stratigraphic dating is combined with the classification. The pottery is a typical research object because of its frequent use and significant morphological changes. Among them, in the Han and Tang Dynasties, there were the largest number of terracotta figurines, which are of great artistic value. For a long time, the academic circles at home and abroad have carried out multi-dimensional research on the Han-Tang Dynasties’ terracotta figurines in Luoyang, and formed a relatively rich academic accumulation.

Firstly, in the field of periodization and archaeological genealogy, the academic community mainly relies on the tomb form, the combination of artifacts and the carbon-14 dating data to establish the chronological framework. Through typological classification and chronological dating of Eastern Han banquet figurines, combined with data from painted bricks and murals, the Eastern Han terracotta figurines in Luoyang can be divided into two periods: the mature phase from the new Mang Dynasty to the mid-to-late Eastern Han, and the declining phase in the late Eastern Han. (Hu, 2002) Comparative analysis of the morphological differences between Western Han Dynasty terracotta figurines from Luoyang and Guanzhong region. (Wang, 1984) According to the analysis of the tomb form and the burial objects, the Tang Dynasty terracotta figurines in Luoyang are divided into four periods: Sui to early Tang, High Tang, Middle Tang and late Tang. (Xu, 1989) The development of Tang tri-colored glazed pottery in Luoyang is synchronous with the rise and fall of the Tang Dynasty, which is the initial period, the prosperous period and the declining period. As a relatively late Tang tri-colored glazed pottery relic from the Luoyang region, the British Museum’s collection includes a tri-colored glazed figurine from the tomb of Liu Tingxun (730 AD, the 18th year of the Kaiyuan era) in its global exhibition project “World History in a Hundred Artifacts” (MacGregor, 2010). This artifact provides a benchmark for the ceramic figurine style during the transition from the High Tang to the Middle Tang periods (Huo, 2017).

Secondly, the research on technology and production system mainly focuses on the raw materials, molding methods and firing process. From the “pottery head and wooden body” combination of Western Han Dynasty terracotta figurines to the double-mold and segmented-mold techniques of Eastern Han Dynasty, the artisans’ precise grasp of human morphology and the maturity of their craftsmanship reached a remarkably high standard (Hu, 2002). Meanwhile, the density of Eastern Han Dynasty terracotta figurines from Luoyang was significantly enhanced through the washing and purification of the clay (Sun, 1991). In addition to the burial objects such as the tri-colored glazed figurines of Liu Tingxun’s tomb described as “bright glaze and perfect shape” (Hobson, 1921), the discovery of tri-colored daily utensils in the Luoyang city ruins and kiln sites (Sun, 2021) further

confirms that the tri-colored production techniques during the Tang Dynasty had reached a remarkably high level.

Thirdly, in the field of cultural connotation and social function, it mainly focuses on the concept of funeral, social customs and the cultural exchange between China and foreign countries. Han Dynasty terracotta figurines reflect the social ethos of “valuing pleasure and luxury”. Building on the research methodology of Pengshan cliff tomb figurines, the study of social functions of Han Dynasty terracotta figurines in Luoyang has been further deepened by linking clothing to social hierarchy and combining imagery with historical documents. (Zeng, 1999) For instance, the attire of female figurines in Tang Dynasty tombs in Luoyang exhibits distinct stylistic phases: delicate elegance in early Tang, vibrant splendor in high Tang, and graceful refinement in mid-to-late Tang, reflecting the aesthetic evolution of their respective eras (Yu, 2022). With the prosperity of the Silk Road and the convergence of water and land cultures, the Hu people figurines, which were based on the image of the people in the Western Regions, appeared and became popular in the Tang Dynasty (Shang et al., 1992).

Finally, in the field of analysis of artistic style and aesthetic characteristics, the author focuses on the relationship between the modeling characteristics and the spirit of the times. The dynamic modeling of the Eastern Han Dynasty terracotta figurines from Luoyang shares the same compositional style as the contemporaneous portrait bricks, collectively shaping the visual artistry of the Han period (Dong, 2005). Unlike the Han Dynasty’s artistic approach of “emphasizing spiritual resemblance over physical likeness” in terracotta figurines, Tang Dynasty figurines exhibit boldness, grandeur, and exquisite craftsmanship. Particularly, the artistic mastery of Luoyang Tang tri-colored glazed pottery has achieved a “vibrant and dynamic quality”, standing as an outstanding representative of Tang Dynasty ceramic art (Rackham, 1925).

As an outstanding representative of ancient Eastern sculpture art, terracotta figurines are not only an important carrier of Chinese funeral culture but also a three-dimensional “historical archive” recording the social life, aesthetic trends, and cultural integration of the medieval period. The Han-Tang Dynasties were periods of significant development in ancient Chinese society, as well as a flourishing stage for the art of terracotta figurines (Chen, 2010). Luoyang, located in the heartland of the Central Plains, served as the capital of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD) and the eastern capital of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), becoming the political, economic, cultural, and transportation center during the Han and Tang dynasties. The surrounding burial sites have yielded a large number of exquisitely crafted and well-sequenced terracotta figurines. The Luoyang terracotta figurines systematically present the aesthetic shift in Chinese plastic arts from “emphasizing spirit” to “emphasizing form”, and also reflect profound changes in social structure, ethnic relations, and the status of women.

From March to June 2025, the Luoyang Museum hosted the “Han-Tang Dynasties’ Terracotta Figurines from Luoyang” exhibition at the Jiaying Museum, al-

lowing us to closely examine these millennia-old cultural relics and sparking deeper interest in traditional Chinese aesthetics. Therefore, this study focuses on the Han-Tang Dynasties figurines unearthed in Luoyang, systematically examines the archaeological materials, and combines the perspectives of art history, social and cultural history, and design science to deeply explore the differences and connections in the historical and cultural background and aesthetic characteristics of the figurines from the two dynasties. It reveals the cultural connotations of the aesthetics of Han-Tang Dynasties' figurines, providing theoretical support for contemporary object design.

2. The Historical Development of the Han-Tang Dynasties' Terracotta Figurines in Luoyang

2.1. The Evolution of Funeral System and the Function of Terracotta Figurines

From the late Neolithic Age to the Shang Dynasty, and then to the Spring and Autumn Period, the custom of human sacrifice began, prevailed, and finally disappeared (Song, 2012). From Qin and Han to the prosperous Tang Dynasty, the terracotta figurines reached their peak as the substitute for human sacrifice.

Luoyang in the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) inherited the rich cultural traditions of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties (Shi, 2004). The northern Mangshan area was the most concentrated region for Han Dynasty tombs. The terracotta figurines unearthed from these tomb clusters not only revealed the cultural essence of the Han Dynasty but also comprehensively demonstrated the evolution of its burial practices. In the Han Dynasty, figurines were used as “stand-ins for all the slaves and servants of the deceased” (Fu, 1987), creating a fantastical world for the dead in the afterlife (Wu, 2007). The practice of lavish burials was widespread, as described in the Book of the Later Han: “Generosity in funerals was considered virtuous, while frugality was deemed vulgar.” Although Emperor Guangwu Liu Xiu issued the edict of thin burial in the seventh year of Jianwu era (31 AD), the custom of lavish burial was still prevalent in society.

Luoyang is the most important area of the Tang Dynasty tombs. By the Tang Dynasty, the regulations for burial practices had become more stringent. Although the Tang Liudian explicitly stipulated “there were ninety items for officials of the third rank or higher, sixty for those of the fifth rank or higher, and forty for those of the ninth rank or higher”, the practice of lavish burials had led to widespread overstepping of these boundaries, becoming a common social norm at the time. In the 29th year of Kaiyuan era (741 AD), Emperor Xuanzong of Tang decreed a reduction in the number of funerary objects and mandated that they “be made entirely of plain tiles”. (Guo, 2019) Yet the extravagant burial practices had already become a social norm. The function of the terracotta figurines in the Tang Dynasty has expanded from the simple protection of the underworld to the full imitation of secular life, reflecting the deepening of the funeral concept of “treating the dead as the living”.

2.2. Silk Road and the Fusion of Multiple Cultures

As one of the eastern starting points of the Silk Road, Luoyang emerged as a bustling international metropolis during the Han-Tang dynasties, attracting merchants from various regions. Following Zhang Qian's pioneering mission to the Western Regions in the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC-8 AD), artistic influences from Central and Western Asia began to permeate the creation of terracotta figurines. In March 1993, a group of figurines depicting musical performances and acrobatics was unearthed from the Han Dynasty tomb (IM528) at Luoyang Miao Nan New Village (Cui, 1996). Among them, the inverted acrobatic figurine (**Figure 1**) features a high bun hairstyle, tight-fitting clothing, and hands resting on the rim of a lid, maintaining an inverted posture. The exaggerated dynamic range of the figure clearly incorporates characteristics of the acrobatic performances from the Western Regions (Li & Sima, 1994).



Figure 1. Luoyang Museum collects the inverted acrobatic figurine.

The multicultural integration of the Silk Road reached its peak in the Tang Dynasty. The camel figurine and the Hu figurine appear in the terracotta figurines, which are not only the artistic projection of the prosperous Tang Dynasty, but also the three-dimensional witness of the civilization fusion in the Eurasian continent in the medieval period. The tri-colored glazed camel and the camel-tethering figurine (**Figure 2**) in the Tang Dynasty tomb of Guanlin in Luoyang in 1962, the camel figurine with its head raised and tail swung in the sound of neighing, the camel-tethering figurine with its arms bent in the position of holding the reins to pull the camel, vividly recreated the scene of the Silk Road caravan (Xiang, 2025). In addition, against the background of the pluralistic fusion, the details of the pottery costumes also changed obviously; the silk robe from the Indian Buddhist statues was popular among the female figurines. In January 2009, archaeologists unearthed four silk-clothed female figurines (**Figure 3**) in a small Tang Dynasty tomb (C7M5657) south of Guanlin Avenue in Luoyang. These figurines, primarily coated in yellowish-brown glaze, were depicted with upright postures, low-pitched hair, full faces, straight noses, and small mouths. They wore narrow-sleeved robes

with crossed collars, half-sleeved outer garments, and draped shawls over their shoulders. This discovery provides further evidence of the flourishing material and cultural exchanges between Eurasia during that period.



Figure 2. Henan Museum collects the tri-colored camel and the camel-tethering figurine.



Figure 3. Luoyang Museum collects the silk-clothed female figurine.

2.3. Taoism Aesthetics and the Secularization Turn

The Taoist concept of celestial realms during the Han-Tang dynasties profoundly influenced the aesthetic expression of terracotta figurines. Han dynasty figurines predominantly depicted ascension themes and divine creatures, such as the Azure Bird and winged beasts before the Queen Mother of the West's throne, all derived from Taoist mythology (Xue, 2016). While Tang dynasty figurines shifted toward secular themes, their color schemes still reflected Taoist cosmology: the green glaze of Tang tri-colored glazed pottery symbolized natural vitality, cobalt blue represented the celestial realm, and ochre yellow signified the earth. The abstract patterns formed by glaze flow subtly echoed the philosophical principle of “Dao follows nature” (Lan & Yan, 2024). From the ascension imagery of the Eastern Han to the secular charm of the Tang, the evolution of figurine aesthetics mirrored the waxing and waning of religious devotion and worldly pleasures.

3. Comparison of Han-Tang Dynasties' Terracotta Figurines in Luoyang

3.1. Differences in Thematic Orientation

Firstly, from the perspective of constructed social strata, Han Dynasty terracotta figurines primarily depict the power hierarchy and ritual systems. In the Han Dynasty tombs in Luoyang, there are not only the terracotta warriors representing

the military forces of powerful landlords, but also the lively and vivid terracotta figures of musicians, dancers and entertainers, which are only used as accessories of the aristocracy's life. Comparatively, the Tang Dynasty terracotta figurines are panoramic, except for the palace maids, civil officials and military guards; even the dwarf figurines, Kunlun slaves, Hu figurines and other common people have become the objects of artistic expression, which reflects the unprecedented social inclusiveness. The 1986 excavation at Mengjin, Luoyang, revealed a "short, stocky, curly-haired, bearded, bare-chested and bare-bellied" Hu dwarf figurine (**Figure 4**), which vividly demonstrates how Hu figurines symbolized flourishing Sino-Western cultural exchange during that period (Shang & Li, 2013).

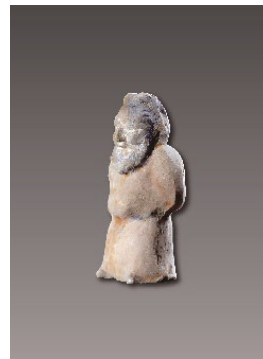


Figure 4. Luoyang Museum collects the Hu dwarf figurine.

Secondly, from the perspective of the expression of female image, the expression of the Han Dynasty female figurines is solemn, reflecting the ethical constraints of "the woman's appearance is pure and quiet". As exemplified by the painted female figurine (**Figure 5**) excavated from the tomb (M69) of Lady Cen in Mengjin, Luoyang in September 1991, the dance figurine retains the Han Dynasty characteristic of "upturned sleeves and bent waist", maintaining the same sculptural language that conveys dignified elegance. However, the inverted collar design of her attire likely reflects the influence of the Hu clothing trend at the time, demonstrating the Tang Dynasty's diverse and inclusive aesthetic sensibilities (Wang, 2024). observes that from the Han to Tang dynasties, female figurines evolved from ritual symbols into living representations, reflecting the loosening of traditional gender norms.



Figure 5. Luoyang Museum collects terracotta painted female dance figurines.

Thirdly, in terms of aesthetic expression of power, Han Dynasty terracotta figurines emphasized symbolic imagery, pursuing inner vitality and grace while advocating soft beauty. They aimed to convey vivid expressions with dynamic movement, directly expressing artistic essence like Han Dynasty paintings and murals. By contrast, Tang Dynasty terracotta figurines distinctly embodied “a power-oriented, expressive culture” (Tan, 2003). Across various terracotta forms—whether human or animal figures—Tang Dynasty works focused on showcasing robust, full-bodied health. Particularly noteworthy were the newly created Heavenly King figurines, modeled after Buddhist Dharmapala deities. These figurines, with fierce expressions, held ritual instruments and trampled demons, radiating immense power. The tri-colored Heavenly King figurine (Figure 6) transferred from Luoyang Cultural and Educational Bureau to Luoyang Museum is a warrior figure with extremely exaggerated modeling, which is used to suppress evil spirits.



Figure 6. The Luoyang Museum collects terracotta tri-colored Heavenly King figurine.

3.2. Evolution of Modeling Language

On one hand, from the perspective of spatial processing, Han Dynasty terracotta figurines predominantly featured frontal compositions, emphasizing symmetry and stability. These figures were typically depicted standing upright or seated with parallel gazes, conveying a sense of solemn ritual. In contrast, Tang Dynasty terracotta figurines became more three-dimensional and dynamic, pioneering multi-perspective sculpting techniques. Examples include the tri-colored horse figurine with a twisted neck and hooves soaring into the air, the Hu figurine with vigorous rotational dance poses, and the S-shaped standing lady figurine that achieved dynamic balance through weight shifts. This application of multidimensional spatial perspectives reflects the Tang artisans’ exceptional mastery in capturing fleeting human movements.

On the other hand, in terms of structural proportions, Han Dynasty terracotta figurines emphasized the expression of imagery, that is, the artistic technique of outlining the outline, skillfully to reproduce the inner spirit of the figure (Li, 2007). In 1972, the Seven-Disc Dance figurine (Figure 7) excavated from the Eastern Han Dynasty tomb (M55) in Qilihe Village, Jiangxi District, Luoyang (Yu, 1975), depicts a female dancer with twin buns. She wears a round-necked, slim-waisted, long-sleeved dance robe paired with wide-leg trousers. Leaning forward,

her left hand holds the sleeve at her chin while the right hand drapes beneath her abdomen. Her right leg pushes off the ground, and her left foot extends into a bow stance, poised to leap. The figurine's minimalist attire and simplified features reflect a naive yet ancient artistic style (Shang, 1997).



Figure 7. The Luoyang Museum collects the seven-disc dance figurine.

By contrast, Tang Dynasty figurines adopted a more realistic proportion, with muscle contours that adhered to human anatomy. The voluptuous figures of female figurines from the High Tang period maintained structural harmony, exemplified by the contrast between the full cheeks and slender wrists of the colored painted terracotta female attendant figurine (Figure 8) excavated from Huayuan Village in Longmen Town, achieving balance through deliberate exaggeration.



Figure 8. The Luoyang Museum collects the colored painted terracotta female attendant figurine.

3.3. Innovation of Process Technology

Firstly, from the clay used, Han Dynasty terracotta figurines were predominantly gray local clay, characterized by fine texture but limited plasticity. After firing, the bodies often appeared loose, typically displaying grayish-white or pale yellow hues. By the Tang Dynasty, the clay composition underwent significant refinement, with white kaolin becoming the standard material. This high-purity clay produced dense bodies that effectively reduced gas bubbles and cracks during firing, creating an ideal surface for glaze application. This development demonstrates

that the kiln technology in Luoyang had reached unprecedented sophistication during the Tang period.

Secondly, from the firing process of the body, Han Dynasty terracotta figurines were typically painted or glazed (e.g., green-glazed) directly after shaping, fired at approximately 800°C (Liu, 2006). Their bodies were not very hard, produced a dull sound when struck, and were prone to water absorption, fading, and peeling. In contrast, the Tang tri-colored glazed pottery was first fired at around 1100°C to harden the body, then glazed with low-temperature lead glaze and fired at about 900°C. Copper oxide, iron oxide, and cobalt oxide were used as colorants (Yu, 2020). The final body was not only denser and harder than Han Dynasty pieces with stronger corrosion resistance, but also had a crystalline glaze surface. The glaze colors naturally flowed and blended during firing, creating a “the tri-colored glazed potter with blue, priceless” artistic effect.

Thirdly, in terms of production techniques, Han Dynasty terracotta figurines were primarily molded with localized sculpting, resulting in high efficiency and uniformity but limited diversity. As craftsmanship advanced, the Tang Dynasty mastered the segmented molding technique, where heads, bodies, and arms were separately crafted and then assembled, enabling more varied poses. For larger figurines, segmented molding was employed—armor and battle skirts of Heavenly King figurines were molded separately and then bonded, with details enhanced through carving and collage. These techniques demonstrate the Tang Dynasty’s perfect integration of production efficiency and artistic expression in terracotta figurine production.

4. Aesthetic Characteristics of the Han-Tang Dynasties’ Terracotta Figurines in Luoyang

4.1. Han Dynasty Terracotta Figurines: The Resonance of the Chu Style in Its Simple and Expressive Style

Firstly, in terms of artistic expression, the terracotta figurines of the Western Han Dynasty in Luoyang formed a unique freehand style by summarizing lines and compressing volume (Xiao, 2009). For example, the “three pottery acrobats standing upside down on Zun vessel” (Figure 9) from the Eastern Han (25-220 AD) period, excavated from Qilihe in Luoyang’s Jianxi District in 1972: three figures stand upside down on a round jar, with two supporting it by holding the rim and the third performing acrobatic movements mid-air. Through an oblique axis and unstable triangular composition, the artisans captured fleeting motion in clay, achieving both physical authenticity and transcendence of reality. This technique of expression “the form departing from the outward appearance of the object” prioritized conveying spirit over meticulous detail.

Secondly, in terms of fashion presentation, the garments epitomize the Eastern aesthetic of “line-based form creation”. The female figurine (Figure 10) of the Western Han Dynasty excavated from Lizhuang Village, Huimeng Town, Mengjin District, Luoyang City, with Several Wraps of Collar Forming Dynamic Wrinkles,

wears a double-bun hairstyle, wide sleeves hanging low, and a deep robe trailing on the ground—representing the early Han-style right-side three-layered robe. The clean lines accentuate the figure’s slender and graceful silhouette, vividly demonstrating the application of the Han sculptural “bone method brushwork” in three-dimensional modeling. Additionally, the sleeves retain traces of vermilion-painted edges and cloud-patterned incised lines, while the sculpted sparse and dense lines convey fluidity, showcasing the artisans’ meticulous observation and exceptional craftsmanship (Wang, 2024).



Figure 9. The Luoyang Museum collects the three pottery acrobats standing upside down on Zun vessel figurines.



Figure 10. The Luoyang Museum collects the painted female figurine.

Thirdly, in terms of painting technique, the Han Dynasty painting mainly used mineral pigments for flat coating, with the color tone that is ancient and heavy. The Western Han Dynasty tomb unearthed in February 2021 along the Mengjin Hui Meng section of the Yellow River in Luoyang yielded terracotta figurines of court ladies, each exuding the grace of Han Dynasty beauties. These elegant figures (Figure 11) still bear traces of vibrant polychrome paintings in orange-red, pale yellow, and deep red hues (Zhi, 2021). Moreover, the pottery is exquisitely crafted. This coloring method is different from the gorgeous glaze color of the Tang Dynasty, and it pays more attention to the symbolism and the sense of ceremony of the color, which is simple and mysterious.



Figure 11. The Luoyang Museum collects the painted female figurine.

4.2. Tang Dynasty Terracotta Figurines: The Prosperous Realism

In the early Tang Dynasty (618-712 AD), inheriting the style of the Northern Dynasties, the burial figurines are elegant and graceful. In September 1991, a certain number of female terracotta figurines were excavated in the west of Xishantou village, Songzhuang town, Mengjin county. Among them, the single-knife hair bun female figurine (**Figure 12(A)**) excavated from Tomb (LMM69) features a symmetrical head, slender waist, and delicate facial features—“slender eyes with willow-like eyebrows, a slightly parted cherry mouth”. She wears a narrow-sleeved shirt over a half-sleeved silk robe, a purple-red long skirt, and high-heeled Ruyi shoes. The high bun female figurine (**Figure 12(B)**) excavated from Tomb (LMM64) features a simple bun hairstyle, vermilion lips, a small mouth, and a slightly downward tilt of the head. Her hands are clasped and crossed across her chest, with a plump figure and a slightly protruding belly. She wears plain clothing, including a long skirt (Fan, 2020). Overall, the early Tang Dynasty terracotta figurines feature well-defined layers of clothing, with long skirts displaying natural pleats and high-pitched hair buns. Their fresh and natural appearance reflects the common people’s preference for simplicity and frugality during the Sui to early Tang periods (Mou, 2022).



Figure 12. The Mengjin County Cultural Relics Bureau collects the single-knife hair bun female figurine (A) and the high bun female figurine (B).

During the High Tang period (713-765 AD), Luoyang's Tang tri-colored glazed pottery reached its zenith, renowned for both exquisite craftsmanship and versatile applications (Sun, 2021). In January 2009, the Luoyang Cultural Relics and Archaeology Research Institute discovered a Tang Dynasty tomb (M5657) on the south side of Guanlin Avenue in Luoyang. The warrior figurine (Figure 13), with its imposing features—thick eyebrows, large eyes, helmeted head, bright armor, and round-toed boots—was primarily glazed in brown and green, interspersed with white, green, and brown glazes. Its overall appearance exuded a majestic and formidable presence.



Figure 13. The Luoyang Museum collects the warrior figurine.

In Gualin tri-colored tomb, the female figurines (Figure 14) exhibit a full-bodied “spindle-shaped” physique, with rounded heads, narrow shoulders, and waists concealed beneath voluminous skirts, leaving only the tips of their shoes exposed. Their facial features are well-defined, featuring a straight nose bridge, plump cheeks, and smiling lips that convey a poised and confident demeanor. Influenced by foreign artistic traditions, their garments feature dense yet orderly folds, emphasizing expressive intent. The delicate gauze drapery creates graceful postures (Zhang & Yu, 2014)—open-chested high-waisted skirts and short robes with wide sleeves became fashionable. The folds are achieved through a combination of appliqué and carving techniques, with the lightweight fabric clinging to the body to highlight the soft texture of silk. It is worth emphasizing that the “three-color glaze” exhibits dazzling and varied hues (Fan et al., 2020). The yellow-glazed robe paired with the green-glazed sash, and the white-glazed long skirt adorned with blue-glazed spots, all demonstrate the “kiln change” effect achieved through the molten flow of glaze materials.

During the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty (766-907 AD), the shift of political power significantly influenced the style and craftsmanship of pottery figurines (Wang, 1984). Amid social unrest, production techniques became increasingly simplified, leading to a noticeable decline in the quality of these figurines, with their forms becoming more bulky and lifeless. As evidenced by the two Tang Dynasty tombs (HM588, HM598) excavated in October 2006 at Luoyang's Hongshan Industrial

Park, (Sima et al., 2011) the female figurine (HM598:6) (**Figure 15(A)**) not only exhibits postural imbalance and lacks the robust beauty characteristic of the High Tang period, but also features simplified facial features with a vacant expression. Its hairstyle transitions from a high bun to loose styles like the “falling horse” or “noisy sweeping” buns, symbolizing the decline of aristocratic elegance. Furthermore, the tomb-guardian beast figurine (HM588:31) (**Figure 15(B)**) lacks dynamic force in its top corner, with rough-brushed mane detailing, resulting in insufficient overall majesty and intimidation. It can be concluded that the Tang tri-colored glazed pottery has basically disappeared, and the painted pottery figures are gray and dark, which marks the end of an artistic golden age.



Figure 14. The Luoyang Museum collects the tri-colored glazed female figurine.

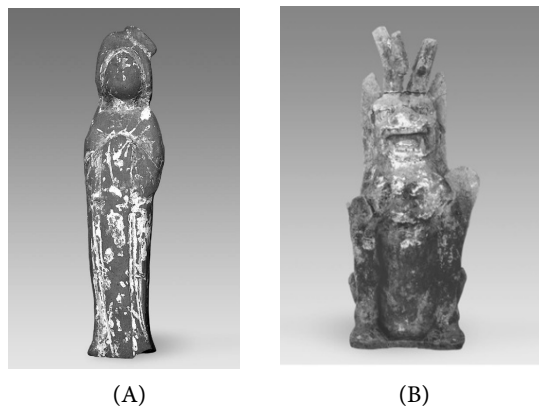


Figure 15. The Luoyang Museum collects the female figurine (A) and the tomb-guardian beast figurine (B).

4.3. Two Generations of Terracotta Figurines: Similarity in Sculpture Art

The art of terracotta figurines is not isolated, but interpenetrates and coexists with other art forms such as painting and sculpture in the same period.

Firstly, it reflects the aesthetics of daily life. The Han-Tang dynasties' terracotta figurines are often arranged to mimic the real-life scenes of their deceased owners, vividly capturing the era's distinctive style and characteristics. While Han Dynasty figurines emphasize free-spirited romanticism, Tang Dynasty figurines focus on

meticulous observation and realistic portrayal of daily life. Yet, through their varied hairstyles, dynamic postures, and expressive features, these artifacts transport viewers across millennia, allowing them to appreciate the beauty of life during the Han and Tang periods.

Secondly, the influence of painting art. The coloring techniques and modeling concepts of terracotta figurines were profoundly influenced by popular painting. For instance, silk painting art, another product of Han Dynasty funeral culture, reached its peak during the Han period. Inspired by its heavy, powerful brushstrokes and bold, rich color schemes, female dance figurines in the Han Dynasty began experimenting with “orchid-leaf line” techniques to depict graceful postures, while male figurines predominantly used iron-line techniques to portray robust strength. The modeling of these figurines radiated boundless vitality and dynamism. Another example is the “sparse style” pioneered by Wu Daozi in the Tang Dynasty, which created the visual effect of “skyward fluttering robes and wind sweeping across walls”. (Zhang, 2013). This “Wu-style flowing lines” aesthetic quietly transformed into the dynamic, flowing drapery of the figurines. This interplay between two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms embodies the Tang artistic philosophy of “integrating sculpture and painting”.

Thirdly, it is the inspiration from Buddhist sculpture. Buddhism was introduced to China during the Han Dynasty, and its sculptural artistic concepts merged with funeral culture, promoting innovation in the craftsmanship and themes of terracotta figurines. For example, Han Dynasty terracotta figurines began to emphasize the expression of human expressions and movements in their modeling, and this pursuit of “spiritual charm” resonated with the transcendent artistic conception emphasized in Buddhist art, injecting new elements into the artistic expressiveness of the figurines. The aesthetic concepts of Buddhist art influenced the shaping of female terracotta figurines in the Tang Dynasty. For example, the serene smile of the Vairocana Buddha at Fengxian Temple was simplified into the stylized smile of female figurines; the “three-bend posture” of Bodhisattva statues evolved into the graceful movements of dance figurines. These dialogues between religious and secular art reflect the secularization of aesthetic tastes in the Tang Dynasty.

5. Aesthetic Inspiration of the Han-Tang Dynasties’ Terracotta Figurines in Luoyang

5.1. Integrating Spiritual Materialization into Artistic Expression

The Han-Tang Dynasties’ terracotta figurines contain a complete system of cosmic symbols. The idea of “round heaven and square earth” in Han Dynasty is embodied in the arrangement of the terracotta figurines. The top of the tomb is painted with the sun, moon and stars, and the four walls are decorated with the four divine figurines (the Azure Dragon, the White Tiger, the Vermilion Bird and the Black Tortoise). The tomb passage is lined with the armed figurines, which symbolize the order of the earth, forming a miniature model of the universe. The

Tang Dynasty inherited and developed this tradition, the circular arrangement of the twelve zodiac figurines symbolizes the cycle of time, and the “human face and beast body” and “lion face and winged beast” of the tomb guardian beasts integrate the concept of the Buddhist “Eight Classes of Celestial Dragons” as the guardian deities, reflecting the integration of the pluralistic religious cosmology. In a sense, the “writing the spirit with the form” of Han Dynasty terracotta figurines and the “equal emphasis on form and spirit” of Tang Dynasty together constructed the imagery expression system of Chinese design. The idea of the object is not only practical, but also aesthetic interest, aesthetic inspiration, aesthetic relations, etc. (Hang, 2016). So, the wisdom of creation embodied in the Han-Tang dynasties’ terracotta figurines provides an aesthetic paradigm of “both form and spirit” and an important ideological resource of the humanistic spirit of “the vessel bearing the way” for contemporary design. Therefore, in the era of “Grand Design”, under the construction of AI large language models, the animated work “Ne Zha: The Demon Child’s Rebellion” and the game product “Black Myth: Wukong” were born, creating the globally acclaimed “New Design” miracle of China.

5.2. Integrating the Aesthetics of the Times into Artistic Expression

The evolution of female representations in Han-Tang dynasties’ terracotta figurines reveals the transformation of societal aesthetic standards. From the Chu-style “slender waist” of the Han dynasty to the Tang dynasty’s “plump and graceful physique”, this shift precisely reflects an aesthetic psychology of health and confidence. In Tang Dynasty, the economic prosperity integrated nomadic cultural elements, where voluptuous figures became symbols of social status, affirming women’s agency. Notably, the “fullness” depicted in female figurines denotes not pathological obesity, but a muscular, upright physique that embodies the heroic spirit of Tang aristocratic women, fully reflecting their “harmonious balance with society and nature” (Han, 2025). In addition, from the incised line patterns of Han Dynasty terracotta figurines to the flowing glaze texture of Tang Dynasty tri-colored pottery, they not only reflect the aesthetic choices of the Han and Tang Dynasties but also fully demonstrate the relationship between tomb art and culture, as expressed in the saying: “If one could understand the ‘context’ of an artifact, it would no longer be completely silent.” (Ian & Scott, 2005) Therefore, it is necessary to draw on the inner visual, etiquette, religion and other cultural contexts formed by traditional art to express the beauty of the times as a whole.

5.3. Integrating Identity into Artistic Expression

The development of the terracotta figurines has experienced a complicated process of identity. From the Han people as the main body, to the Tang Dynasty Hu people figurines often shaped as “the obedient other” or carrying camels and heavy loads, or dancing with treasures, the characteristics of thick beards, deep eyes, high nose and curly hair are faithfully represented, but the posture is mostly

in a submissive state, reflecting the imagination of the Central Plains to “harmonize the distant people”. In contrast, the official figurine with the tall hat and broad belt and the warrior figurine with the bright armor express the visual symbol of the Chinese civilization. In the aesthetic exploration of “self/other” juxtaposition, it not only records the deepening of the ethnic communication in Han-Tang dynasties, but also implies the consciousness of identity fusion. For “it is not the individual’s emotions, consciousness, thoughts, or will—these essential forces—that create beauty, but rather the collective social and historical practice of humanity, this essential force, that creates beauty” (Li, 1999). This demonstrates that only through humanity’s practical transformation of nature can we truly appreciate it (Yu, 2007). So, in the aesthetic practice, we should grasp the human being itself, and the relationship with nature, society and spirit, integrate the identity into the artistic creation, and enrich the aesthetic construction in a diversified way.

6. Conclusion

The Han-Tang dynasties’ terracotta figurines in Luoyang form a three-dimensional aesthetic history, whose stylistic evolution reflects the transformation of Chinese society from a “faith-centered” to a “human-centered” model. The Han dynasty terracotta figurines infuse the romantic passion of Chu culture into their simple and rustic forms, constructing a visual bridge to the fairyland through the rhythm of lines and the symbolism of space; the Tang dynasty terracotta figurines embrace secular life with realistic techniques, declaring the arrival of a confident era with their plump forms, splendid glazes, and open postures. Although the aesthetic orientations of the two generations of terracotta figurines differ significantly, they share the thinking method of “observing objects to derive images” and the value pursuit of “carrying the Way through vessels”.

In the context of globalization, the study of Han-Tang dynasties’ terracotta figurines not only holds historical significance but also contains ideological resources that can promote contemporary design innovation. Its “spirit and form in harmony” modeling principles, “inclusive attitude of diverse coexistence”, and “ecological wisdom of material beauty and craftsmanship” provide important references for constructing China’s indigenous design language. Future design practices should delve deeper into the spiritual core of traditional aesthetic creation, achieving creative transformation in terms of form, craftsmanship, and ethics, so that the terracotta figurine art, which has been dormant for a thousand years, can be revitalized in modern life.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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