

# Provisions for the afterlife

冥器  
mingqi  
utensils for the  
spirits of the dead

女佣  
nuyong  
female attendant

鎮墓獸  
zhenmu shou  
guardian spirit

In ancient China, funerary figurines were placed in tombs as substitutes of real people intended to serve a deceased ruler in the afterlife. Animals and even humans were once sacrificed and buried in the tombs of great rulers of the Shang dynasty (16th–11th century BC). This ritual was eventually abandoned by the Western Han 西漢 dynasty (206 BC–AD 24). Humans, animals, precious and utilitarian objects were replaced with ceramic replicas. Utensils for the spirits of the dead (*mingqi* 冥器) were produced especially for burial.

This lifelike female figurine (fig. a) was once buried in a tomb. It was made as a substitute for a living attendant destined to serve the deceased in the afterlife. Although once painted with bright colours after firing, only the white slip remains. In its lifelikeness, the figurine resembles the life-size entombed warriors guarding the tomb of Qin Shihuangdi, the first Emperor of China (r. 221–209 BC).

This extraordinary creature (fig. b) with a human face is a composite created from the potent attributes of different animals: a bird's wings, an elephant's ears, a lion's body, and legs and hoofs of a deer or horse. The bulging chest and energetic face summon power surging upward in the twisting, flame-like horn with sceptre-like blade behind. The wings, torso and stand are lead glazed in mottled bright green, amber and cream colours, the amber glaze dripping in spontaneous streaks down the legs. The head was once painted in pigments.

This figurine also represents *Tubo*, the earth spirit or lord of the underworld, who is endowed with the power to ward off demons and evil spirits, and is thus entrusted with guarding the body of the deceased and his tomb. Ironically, it is also believed his role is to keep the deceased person from getting out of the tomb to make trouble for the living.

This guardian figure and four other three-colour glazed figurines of the Tang dynasty 唐朝 (AD 618–906) were acquired from Captain W. F. Collins, who sent them from Peking (Beijing 北京) in 1926. According to Collins, they were part of a set of funerary figurines unearthed from a grave in Mangshan, a mountain about three miles north of Luoyang, Henan province. Tang three-colour wares were first discovered at Mangshan in 1905 when Han (206 BC–221 AD) and Tang (618–906 AD) tombs were disturbed by the building of a railway connecting Kaifeng and Luoyang.

(fig. a)  
CHINESE  
*Female attendant* 女佣  
Western Han 西漢 dynasty,  
206 BC – AD 24, Henan 河南  
province, North China  
earthenware 陶器, pigments  
54.3 x 14.9 x 11.7 cm  
Felton Bequest, 1947 (583-D4)

(fig. b)  
CHINESE  
*Guardian spirit* 鎮墓獸  
Tang 唐朝 dynasty AD 700–750  
Henan 河南 province, North China  
earthenware 陶器, pigments  
(*Sancai* ware)  
74.4 x 23.4 x 19.5 cm  
Felton Bequest, 1926 (2784-D3)



(fig. a)



(fig. b)

