

Western Asian dancing boy

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V&A Museum number: C.827-1936

Gallery location: China, Room 44, The T.T. Tsui Gallery, case 16

Purchased with Art Fund support, the Vallentin Bequest, Sir Percival David and the Universities China Committee

This 25.8 cm high, lively terracotta figure is made of white clay covered by colourful pigments¹. It is one among the typical foreigner figures made in Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). Burial goods including animal and human figures were popular in Tang dynasty and they are usually earthenware fired at below 1050 °C. The red and green pigments were then put on the surface of the fired clay without having any glaze on the top or being further fired, which was called “cold painted”². The figure was probably made in mould and finished by hand, which is shown by the evident figure prints of the craftsmen on some patterns of the hair (Fig.1 Left 4).

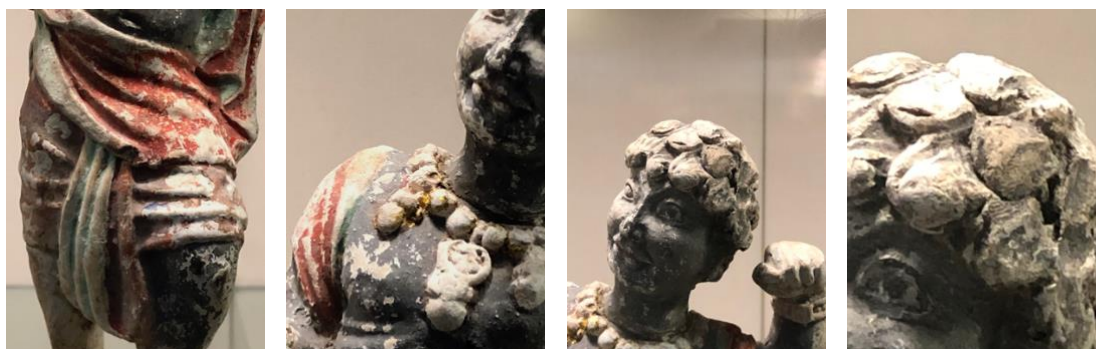


Figure 1 Detailed photos of the object: (Left 1): dress; (Left 2) necklace; (Left 3): head; (Left 4) hair

Tomb figures represent the daily life and cosmopolitan cultures³. This object was most likely made in North-West China around the capital Chang'an, during high Tang period (650-800 AD). That was when silk roads and sea trades flourished and foreigners from different origins came to China⁴. This boy is dark-skinned and has wavy hair, big eyes and large nose. He is dressed in “a red green robe wrapped around his hips and a long scarf draped over his shoulders and hips and criss-crossed in back, his necklace, bangles and anklets are gilded with traces of gold pigments” (Fig. 1 Left 2). Similar figures are found in various museums (Fig. 2). Where does this group of people come from and what did they do in China?



Figure 2 Similar items from museums in the UK and USA: (Left 1) V&A Museum London, museum number C.84-1929, Gallery location – Ceramics, Room 137, The Curtain Foundation Gallery, case B, shelf 22; (Left 2) MET New York, Accession Number:1981.470.1, gift of Dr. and Mrs. John C. Weber in 1981³; (Left 3) MET New York, Accession Number 14.85, gift of Edgar Worch in 1914⁶; (Left 4) British Museum Hotung Gallery⁷

Both V&A museum and British museum describe such figures as dancers from Western/Central Asia, judging by the gestures to be “whirling dance”⁷. These people who have ill identified origins are broadly recognised as “Kunlun”⁸. They are believed to come from either South-East Asia, probably islands of Malay or Indonesia through sea trade, or East Africans brought into China by Arab merchants along silk roads⁹. In fact, Kunluns are those

who have darker skin than Han Chinese, thus “black skin and woolly hair” are their identities regardless of origins¹⁰.

Kunlun figures, comparing with other Tang foreigner figures, are rarer. There are only a dozen examples from various museums and private collections. Judging by the styles, there seems to be two groups among them. One described earlier appears to be dancer of certain kind (Fig. 2 and 3). They can also be musicians reported in ancient Chinese books, who played “the instruments were all dark-skinned Kunluns wearing dark red cotton clothes ... draped over their knees, going around their shoulders and tied under their armpits... with rings and bracelets made of gold and gems and wore golden crowns and earrings”¹¹.

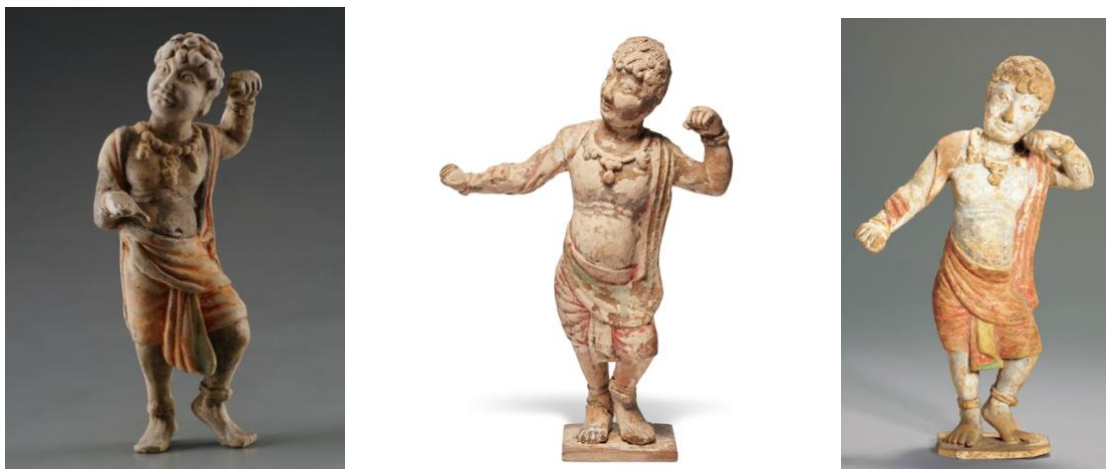


Figure 3 Other similar items: (Left 1) excavated from a Tang tomb in Guo Village Changwu, Shaanxi Province, currently housed in the Changwu Museum¹²; (Left 2) Christie's, Lot 8 Sale 16318, 5-12 December 2018, New York¹³; (Left 3) Christie's, Lot 14 Sale 9822, 16 October 2001, New York⁴

The other group has a different gesture and dress, apparently serving a different duty (Fig. 4). In general, Kunluns were traded to China as slaves¹⁴, who are called Kunlunnu with “nu” meaning slave in Chinese. The gestures suggest that they are holding something. They have the robe across the upper body and loose sarong like shorts. Unlike the dancer, they do not have any jewellery. They are believed to be good sailors having magic power in water, so it could be a long wooden pole they are holding, showing a rowing scene¹⁴.



Figure 4 The other style of foreigner figures: (Left 1) found at Zheng Rentai's tomb, currently housed in the Shaanxi History Museum¹⁵; (Left 2) Shaanxi History Museum¹⁴; (Left 3) British Museum Hotung Gallery, museum number 1936,1012.288, acquired from George Eumorfopoulos in 1936¹⁶;

Some other scholars often compare the terracotta figures with Buddhism paintings, where Kunluns tend to lead a lion or an elephant that Manjusri was riding¹⁴ (Fig. 5). They are considered tamers to control lion or other beasts¹⁷. This is further supported by a Tang dynasty carved limestone mocked door showing a curly hair male figure next to lokapalas with some other Buddhism motives (Fig. 6). Some other Kunlun figures show that they could simply be house servants/attendants⁹ (Fig. 7).



Figure 5 Mural painting of Kunlunnus in Dunhuang, Mogao Caves, Gansu Province¹⁸



Figure 6 Tang dynasty carved limestone mocked door, height 52.1, in display at Priestley & Ferraro Chinese Art, London

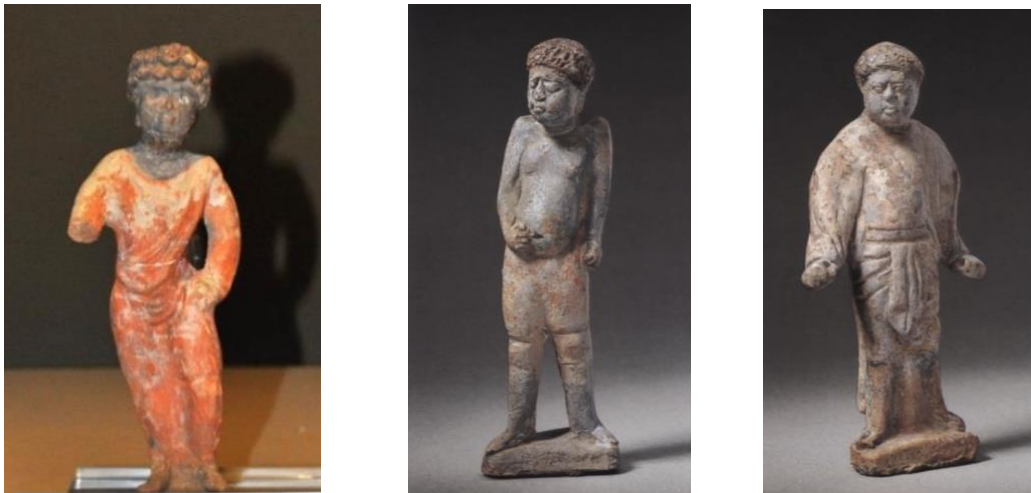


Figure 7 Various Kunlunnu (Left 1) excavated from Dizhangwan, housed in the Shaanxi History Museum¹⁴; (Left 2,3) excavated from the tomb of Pei Tai, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, 1954, currently housed in the Shaanxi History Museum 1948^{9,19}

The discovery of Kunlun figures help unveil the picture of globalisation and culture impacts in Tang dynasty, which had stretched across continents.

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