

From wooden attendants to terracotta warriors

The 'terracotta army' of the First Emperor of Qin (reg. 246/221–210 BCE) is the most famous group of representations of human and animals made in order to accompany a dead person in the afterlife. The emperor's burial complex can be better understood by looking back at the earlier roots of the Chinese *tomb figurines* tradition.

Maria Khayutina



CONFUCIUS (551-479 BCE), the paramount thinker of the Chinese antiquity, was sceptical about any 'modernist' trends. He regarded the early days of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1045-256 BCE) as the 'golden age', but complained about the moral decline taking place during his own lifetime. When people in his home dukedom of Lu started to make tomb figurines (*yong*), he found this inappropriate. Confucius' statement represents the earliest reference to this custom in Chinese written sources. Until the beginning of the 21st century, archaeological theory seemed to confirm that this custom emerged during the 6th-5th centuries BCE.¹ Recent excavations, however, have revealed that it existed much earlier already.

Tomb excavations

In 2006-2007 archaeologists excavated the cemetery of the Rui dukedom in Liangdaicun near Hancheng city (Shaanxi Province). The rulers of Rui were related by common ancestry to the kings of the Zhou dynasty. Most of them were buried according to the funerary rules promulgated by the Zhou kings across early China. But one richly equipped tomb dating from the late 9th or early 8th century BCE, and supposedly occupied by one ruler of Rui, greatly surprised the excavators: inside the burial pit, four wooden figurines from ca. 70 to 100 cm tall stood in the corners of the step 'second-level' platform surrounding the coffin of the deceased.² They had outstanding ears, flat round faces with high eyebrows, narrow eyes and high noses. Their faces, necks and hands were painted with ochre, imitating skin. Although the colours have faded, it can still be distinguished that their robes were originally red, whereas their hair, collars and belts were once black. Holes were carved into their rectangular upper bodies in order to attach movable arms. The angled arms of the taller figurines ended with clenched hands in which gaps were left in order to insert objects (Fig. 1). Wheels of dismantled chariots lying near the figurines reveal their function as charioteers, who had held the reins in their hands. The smaller figurines stretched their arms out straight, with palms turned upwards, ready to carry something. They may be identified as attendants. The lower parts of the figurines represent long robes, into which separately carved feet were inserted. Their flat shoes were decorated with upwardly curled thin toes – up to 10 cm in length. This kind of footwear is not evident anywhere in early China; hence, the figurines might represent foreigners.

Fig. 1 (left):
Wooden charioteer.
Courtesy of Zhang Tianen, excavations' director.

Fig. 2 (centre):
Terracotta figurine.
Photo: Christine Moor, Bernisches Historisches Museum.

Fig. 3 (right):
Bronze head.
Photo: Christine Moor, Bernisches Historisches Museum.

One year after the discovery of the Liangdaicun tomb figurines, archaeologists excavated a cemetery from the Western Zhou period (ca. 1045-771 BCE) at Dahekou village near Yicheng in Shanxi Province – about 140 km from Liangdaicun on the other side of the Yellow river. The largest tomb with many ritual bronzes, some of which carry inscriptions, belonged to the Lord of Ba. In this tomb, dated late 11th-10th centuries BCE, two 70 cm tall human figurines made of wood, lacquered and painted red, stood with outstretched arms on lacquered wooden turtles, on the eastern side of the second-level platform.³ Deeply carved eye orbits and high nasal bones can still be distinguished on their faces. The Ba state was never mentioned in Chinese historical sources. Although, in general, the people buried in the Dahekou cemetery practised rituals similar to those of other early Chinese states, some of their customs, e.g., burying the dead with flexed legs or carving niches in the walls of tombs for placing funerary goods, show that they retained some features of a different cultural tradition. The Ba state was possibly founded by inhabitants of Shanxi who lived there before the arrival of the Zhou colonists in the 11th century BCE, or by migrants from somewhere else. An inscription on one bronze vessel from the tomb of the Lord of Ba is evidence that he received presents from the Duke of Rui. This means that both states communicated with each other during the 11th-10th centuries BCE. The ruling lineage of Rui might have learned the custom of making tomb figurines from Ba, or both Ba and Rui perhaps borrowed it from another common source. From where and when this tradition took its origin cannot be answered today and should become the subject of further investigations. Nevertheless, the find at Dahekou proves that tomb figurines were used in China five centuries before Confucius' time.

The accompanying dead

Did the Rui state play some role in the transmission of the tomb figurines' tradition to the state of Qin? Duke Mu of Qin (659-621 BCE) conquered the Rui state in 640 BCE, but it is not known whether he had a chance to learn about Rui's burial customs. The Qin practised the custom of killing attendants of their dead rulers and placing them in their tombs as 'accompanying dead' (*ren xun*). From 677 to 384 BCE Qin dukes resided in their capital Yongcheng (at present-day Fengxiang in Shaanxi) and were buried in the Nanzhuhui necropolis near

this city. One of these huge tombs, occupied by Duke Jing of Qin (reg. 576-537 BCE), excavated in the 1980s, included 188 bodies of the 'accompanying dead' and human victims (*ren sheng*). During a survey, archaeologists found two human figurines about 22 cm tall made of stone, near another ducal tomb. Possibly, tomb robbers had considered them useless and had thrown them away (most tombs at this necropolis have been robbed many times). This find suggests that Qin rulers started to use tomb figurines while continuing to kill real humans (this brutal custom was abolished only in 384 BCE). Stone could be chosen as a durable alternative for wood, but carving stone was time consuming and the results were very modest: the figurines from Nanzhuhui are, with their angular chests and without arms, more abstract than their wooden predecessors from Liangdaicun.

If the Qin artisans were not very successful at working stone, they developed excellent skills in modelling clay. In 2005-2006 archaeologists investigated a large pottery workshop dating to the 5th-4th centuries BCE, near the Doufucun village, within the precincts of the ancient Qin capital Yongcheng. Among other things, they found two damaged human figurines of 6.5 and 9.2 cm tall (Fig. 2), which are currently on display in the exhibition 'Qin – the eternal emperor and his terracotta warriors', at the Bernisches Historisches Museum in Bern, Switzerland. The exhibition outlines the history and culture of the Qin state and offers some insights into the early Chinese tomb figurine tradition. Since the figurines from Doufucun were found in a workshop, it is not known what they were made for. However, during the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, figurines of humans often appeared in tombs in various Chinese states.⁴ It is conceivable that these two figurines were designed as tomb figurines too. Although they may appear 'primitive' at first glance, they were made with great attention to detail. One figurine wears a flat hat bound under the chin. It grasps its left arm with its right hand – the meaning of this posture is unclear. Its convex underside could have been designed to provide stability to the figurine after inserting it into the earth inside the tomb. Another figurine outstretches its arms as if it once held something. The wide-open oval eyes with long eyelashes and a prominent nose may identify it as a foreigner.



Other noteworthy terracotta figurines were found in 1995 in a 4th-3rd century BCE tomb in the Taerpo cemetery near Xianyang in Shaanxi Province, where the last Qin capital of the same name was located from 350 to 207 BCE. These are the earliest representations of cavalymen in China discovered up to this day. One of this pair can now be seen at the exhibition in Bern (Fig. 4). A small, ca. 23 cm tall, figurine represents a man sitting on a settled horse. He stretches out his left hand, whereas his right hand points downwards. Holes pierced through both his fists suggest that he originally held the reins of his horse in one hand and a weapon in the other. The rider wears a short jacket, trousers and boots—elements of the typical outfit of the inhabitants of the Central Asian steppes. Trousers were first introduced in the early Chinese state of Zhao during the late 4th century BCE, as the Chinese started to learn horse riding from their nomadic neighbours. The state of Qin should have adopted the nomadic clothes about the same time. But the figurine from Taerpo also has some other features that may point to its foreign identity: a hood-like headgear with a flat wide crown framing his face and a high, pointed nose.⁵ A bronze head with a tiara-like headgear, excavated in 1982 in the ruins of a bronze workshop in Xianyang, possibly also represents a foreigner (Fig. 3). A plug under its neck allowed the head to be inserted into the now missing body that was made separately and perhaps of a different material. Whether or not this figurine was made for a tomb cannot be determined because of its indistinct archaeological context.

An underground world

Against the historical and cultural background sketched above, the terracotta figures from the burial complex of the First Emperor of Qin can be understood as both staying within and reinterpreting an already long existing tradition. The earliest find in the tomb of the Lord of Ba indicates that the custom of making tomb figurines possibly had a foreign origin. The find in the tomb of the Rui dukedom shows that ruling lineages of some Chinese states used tomb figurines at least three centuries before the time of Confucius.

Both in Ba and Rui states, furnishing tombs with figurines represented a special privilege of the ruler. However, even in these states not all rulers were buried with tomb figurines. It could be that they hesitated over the appropriateness of the custom. The find in the Nanzhihui necropolis indicates that Qin dukes also occasionally used tomb figurines. The find in the pottery workshop of the Qin capital Yongcheng demonstrates a tendency towards the democratization of this custom, since the small, simple figurines could have been designated for a rather modest tomb. The find in the Taerpo tomb, occupied by a better situated commoner, confirms that this custom was not exclusively used by the highest elites. Why tomb figurines often represented foreigners, remains unclear. Either this was related to the considerations of prestige, or this was a way to make tomb figures not resemble 'real people' from the personal surroundings of the dead. In fact, the imitation of real people was an element that Confucius explicitly wanted to avoid.

As the First Emperor of Qin was looking for new means to display his authority in the real life and in the afterlife, he looked back at a long local tradition of tomb figurines. Great reformer as he was, he launched new forms of the tradition that suited the aims of his imperial enterprise. He was probably the first Chinese ruler who detached sculpture from the burial practice. After the conquest of the six neighbouring states in 221 BCE he used the bronze weapons of the defeated armies to cast twelve huge statues and put them in his Xianyang palaces. Notably, these statues represented foreigners. Possibly, by these means the emperor aimed to display his next goal—the conquest of the rest of the world. At the same time, the First Emperor of Qin designed an underground world populated with every kind of terracotta substitute of his real subjects. These included an army, arranged in military formations in three huge pits and counting up to 8000 figures of warriors and horses. Other pits with terracotta and bronze figurines within his giant tomb complex can be interpreted as a terracotta administrative office, a circus, and even as a leisure area with an artificial lake and a musical band. The terracotta people who accompanied the emperor into the afterlife



Fig. 4 (left):
Terracotta rider.
Courtesy of
Xianyang Museum.

Fig. 5 (right):
Terracotta archer.
Courtesy of
Terracotta Army
Museum.

do not manifest any deliberately emphasized foreign facial features, headgears or costumes. Instead, all faces were individualized by combining a limited number of elements typical for the Chinese in various ways, so as to resemble real Qin people (Fig. 5).

Qin—the eternal emperor and his terracotta warriors

Ten original terracotta statues from the tomb complex of the First Emperor of Qin can be seen at the Bernisches Historisches Museum until 17 November 2013. These include six warriors of different ranks and types and a settled cavalry horse, as well as a civil official, an acrobat and a musician. The exhibition also allows the visitors to appreciate the impact of the First Emperor of Qin on the later Chinese tomb culture, with the example of two large groups of tomb figurines from imperial burial complexes of the Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE). The accompanying publication includes nine thematic chapters written by historians, archaeologists and conservators and a large number of images, charts and maps. It covers all of the topics dealt with in the exhibition and expands upon them.⁶

**Maria Khayutina, Exhibition curator,
Bernisches Historisches Museum
(information and tickets: www.qin.ch)**

Notes

- 1 Wu Hong, 'On Tomb Figurines: The Beginning of a Visual Tradition', in Wu Hong & Katherine R. Tsang (eds.) 2005. *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 13-47.
- 2 Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiuyuan, et al. 2010. *Liangdaicun Rui guo mudi: 2007 niandu fajue baogao*, Peking: Wenwu
- 3 Shanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo Dahekou mudi lianhe kaogudui, 'Shanxi Yicheng xian Dahekou Xi Zhou mudi' 山西翼城县大河口西周墓地, *Kaogu* 2011, 7:9-18
- 4 Wu Hong, 2005
- 5 Zhao Bin, 'Xianyang Taerpo Zhanguo chutu qimayong zushu bian' 赵斌, 咸阳塔儿坡战国秦墓出土 骑马俑族属考辨, *Kaogu yu wenwu*, 2002, 4:40-44.
- 6 Khayutina, M. (ed.) 2013. *Qin—the eternal emperor and his terracotta warriors*, Zürich: NZZ Libro