

The cultural logic of dance and music: Tang dynasty female music-and-dance figurines from Henan

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Abstract. Under the impetus of the ritual–music system and prevailing social customs, dance and music in the Tang dynasty flourished to an unprecedented degree. Against this background, female music-and-dance figurines unearthed in the Henan region emerged as important carriers that combined ritual–customary functions with artistic significance. These figurines not only recreate the dynamic scenes of dance and musical performance but also embody, through their figurative design, the cultural construction of female identity and temperament. Taking the question of "why dance and music" as its central concern, this paper examines the types, forms, and design language of music-and-dance figurines from Henan, exploring how dynamic aesthetic qualities of dance and music are expressed through posture, costume, and accompanying instruments, as well as how the spirit of music and dance is conveyed through facial expression and narrative composition. In doing so, the study reveals a form of female consciousness shaped by the coexistence of ritual discipline and individual expression. These figurines thus serve as a vital medium for understanding the aesthetic sensibilities, institutional logic, and cultural spirit of Tang dynasty society.

Keywords: Henan region, Tang dynasty female music-and-dance figurines, figurative design, dance and music art, female consciousness

1. Introduction

The Tang dynasty marked the apogee of China's feudal society. With political stability and economic prosperity, culture and the arts likewise reached a state of remarkable refinement. Against this backdrop, dance and music underwent a decisive transformation from performances governed primarily by ritual norms to forms centered on aesthetic expression, and a tripartite system integrating "song, music, and dance" gradually took shape [1]. Building upon the Han dynasty tradition of guchui music and the Sui dynasty's systems of the Seven Ensembles and Nine Ensembles, the Tang court incorporated instrumental elements from regions beyond the Central Plains. Through the continuous exchanges facilitated by the Silk Road, the musical system was further expanded, endowing court music and dance with complex structures and stylistic diversity. Court ensembles were large in scale and rich in performance forms, integrating Central Plains traditions with those of multiple ethnic groups and ultimately giving rise to a grand and expansive musical-dance panorama.

As the Eastern Capital, Luoyang functioned not only as a symbol of imperial authority and a cultural hub, but also as a crucial space where systems of professional music and dance intersected with funerary rituals.

Tang aristocrats placed great emphasis on lavish burials, guided by the deeply ingrained belief of "serving the dead as one serves the living". As a result, the system of burial figurines developed to a high degree of sophistication. The large number of female music-and-dance figurines unearthed in the Henan region—particularly in Luoyang—reflects the extension of court music-and-dance forms into mortuary rites, while simultaneously materializing cultural conceptions of female identity, bodily expression, and the spirit of music and dance.

Focusing on female music-and-dance figurines excavated in Henan, this paper takes "why dance and music" as its guiding question. It examines how figurative design constructs the art of music and dance through the interplay of form, costume, and accompanying instruments; how facial expression and scenographic arrangement convey the spirit of performance; and how these elements further reveal underlying dimensions of female consciousness. From this perspective, female music-and-dance figurines are not merely products of the interweaving of Tang funerary customs and musical-dance practices, but also mirror the comprehensive understanding held by High Tang society regarding female roles, performance culture, and the order of the afterlife.

2. Formal characteristics: figurative design of female music-and-dance figurines from Henan

Within the Tang dynasty system of ceramic figurines, female music-and-dance figurines occupy a prominent position. Characterized by stylistic diversity and vivid expression, they epitomize the realist orientation and aesthetic aspirations of Tang sculptural art. As products situated at the intersection of institutional regulation and artistic creation, these figurines not only recreate scenes of actual musical and dance performances but also embody, through their formal language and design strategies, the ritual norms and aesthetic tastes of the period. The rendering of musical performance and dance is particularly refined: hairstyles, costumes, and coloration combine realism with expressive stylization, while the coordinated use of multiple instruments and props not only enlivens the scene but also resonates with artistic expression shaped by Tang social aesthetics and ritual frameworks.

2.1. Figurative composition and formal logic

The basic typology of Tang dynasty female music-and-dance figurines primarily includes figures engaged in musical performance and dance (see Figure 1), with occasional examples of equestrian musician figurines. Musical performance figures are divided into standing ensembles (*libu ji*) and seated ensembles (*zuobu ji*), whose institutional origins can be traced back to the Sui dynasty and which became progressively established within the Court Music Bureau (*Taiyueshu*) from the early to the High Tang period. Seated ensembles typically perform while sitting on the ground and are associated with delicate silk-and-bamboo music, marked by elegance and restraint. Standing ensembles, by contrast, are dominated by percussion, characterized by orderly formations and a grand, imposing presence. Both types constituted essential components of court audiences and banquets, playing a key role in articulating the ritual–music system.



Figure 1. Music-and-dance figures among polychrome musician figurines unearthed from the Beiyaoan Tang tomb¹

Dance figures display considerable diversity, including soft dances (*ruanwu*), vigorous dances (*jianwu*), and Huxuan dances. Among excavated examples, soft dances are the most common, emphasizing grace and fluidity in form. Vigorous dances feature forceful movements and brisk rhythms and were often associated with celebratory or military contexts. The Huxuan dance, originating in Sogdiana, is distinguished by rapid spinning and stamping movements, conveying a strong sense of exoticism. Grand suites (*daqu*) integrate singing, dance, and instrumental music into composite stage performances. Collectively, these figures not only reproduce the diverse landscape of Tang dance forms but also provide richly layered visual modes for the artistic representation of the female body.

In general, female music-and-dance figurines tend toward small to medium proportions, with heights concentrated between 20 and 40 centimeters, consistent with Tang burial standards. Their bodily proportions emphasize the head and lower body: the head typically accounts for approximately one-fifth to one-third of the total height. The faces are full, the physiques well-proportioned, and the limbs slender. While adhering to the basic features of real-life performers, artisans introduced artistic exaggeration and adjustment to enhance visual impact and aesthetic appeal.

2.2. Hairstyles, costume, and chromatic system

Hairstyles of Tang female music-and-dance figurines are characterized by rounded fullness, with common forms including double-loop buns, forked buns, spiral buns, and high buns. Some figures also wear hoods or caps atop the coiffure, forming a composite structure of "bun with cap". Costumes typically consist of turned-collar, short-sleeved jackets paired with belted long skirts, complemented by flowing silk shawls, creating clearly articulated layers. In terms of makeup, a pale base is often combined with floral forehead ornaments (*huadian*) and blended rouge, supplemented by details such as slanted red marks and yellow forehead paint, highlighting the ornate refinement of female performance figures. Footwear commonly includes upturned-toe shoes and cloud-toe boots, whose gently raised tips and smooth lines combine practicality with decorative elegance.

Although much of the original pigmentation has been lost to time, surviving traces indicate a preference for warm hues, dominated by crimson, dawn red, and pale silk-white, supplemented by contrasting colors such as floral blue and duckhead green (see Figure 2). These chromatic schemes not only enhance visual depth but also reflect the Tang aesthetic pursuit of both richness and harmony.

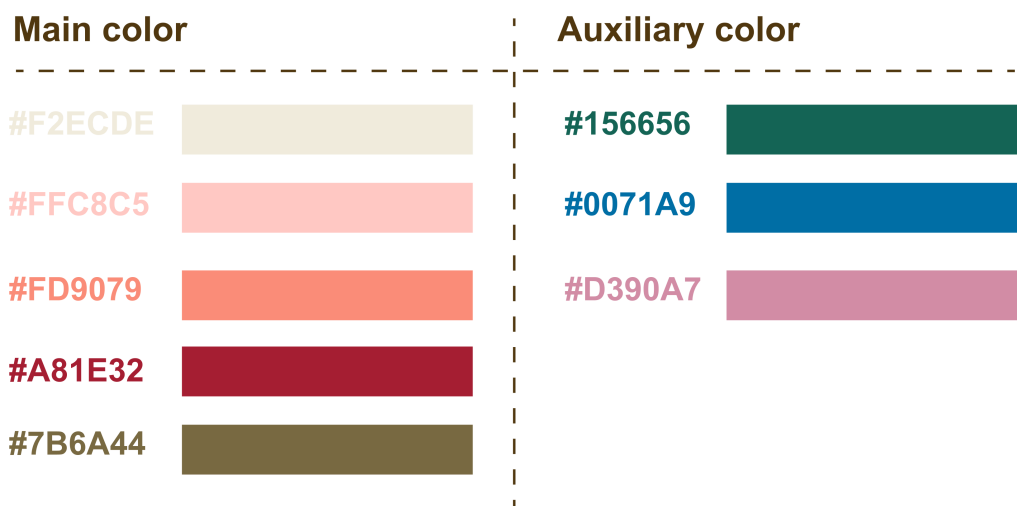


Figure 2. Color spectrum of female music-and-dance figurines²

Compared with ordinary attendant figurines, female music-and-dance figurines exhibit markedly greater refinement in both modeling and polychrome decoration, indicating a higher symbolic status. This distinction reflects their special significance in aristocratic life and conceptions of the afterlife, where they functioned as emblems of the tomb owner's taste, status, and spiritual world.

2.3. Instrumental repertoire and performative function

Dance and music occupied a central position in Tang social life and court ritual. Members of the aristocracy were generally musically literate, and banquets and court audiences were frequently accompanied by song and dance, creating scenes that were at once solemn and aesthetically charged. The Tang music-and-dance system was highly developed, encompassing an inclusive repertoire that ranged from yayue (elegant music) and Huyue (music of foreign origin) to popular and military music. Representative works such as *Breaking the Battle Formation* (Pozhenyue) and *Celebrating Virtue* (Qingshanyue) attest to a high degree of professionalization and cultural integration.

The figurative design of burial music-and-dance figurines closely mirrors this institutional context. By the Tang period, musical practice had moved beyond the pre-Qin reliance on instruments associated primarily with the Han Chinese tradition. Traditional Central Plains instruments such as the sheng, yu, and clappers appear alongside instruments introduced from the Western Regions, including the bili, pipa, konghou, and panpipes, enriching the expressive repertoire of the figurines (see Figure 3). The playing postures and combinations of instruments are highly standardized, indicating that music and dance in the Tang dynasty had already developed into an art form with a complete and systematic performance structure.



Figure 3. Instrumental repertoire and corresponding musician figurines^{3,4}

As burial objects, female music-and-dance figurines not only reproduce musical and dance activities from real life but also serve to extend the tomb owner's worldly pleasures and to signify social status in the afterlife. While adhering to ritual prescriptions, their forms are often endowed—through meticulous carving and aesthetic refinement—with a sense of spiritual delight and artistic value. In this way, they become distinctive materializations of the Tang dynasty's social spirit and cultural order. These formal characteristics not only reflect the interweaving of ritual–music institutions and aesthetic preferences in Tang society, but also lay the foundation for understanding the artistic mechanisms and cultural meanings embedded within them.

3. Mechanisms of representation: the visual translation of the spirit of music and dance

Female music-and-dance figurines of the Tang dynasty unearthed in the Henan region functioned not only as burial objects with ritual and religious significance, but also as projections of the social and cultural psychology of Tang society. Their imagery embodies a "spirit of music and dance" that transcends the material dimension. Here, the "spirit of music and dance" does not refer merely to the outward forms of musical and choreographic performance; rather, it denotes a comprehensive cultural image encompassing rhythmic order, spatial organization, and emotional communication. Rooted in the social order and ritual aesthetics prescribed by the system of rites and music, this spirit also absorbed formal innovations and aesthetic sensibilities arising from Sino-foreign cultural exchange, and was rendered visible through bodily language, schematic construction, and expressive modeling.

To elucidate the generative logic of the music-and-dance spirit as manifested in Tang female music-and-dance figurines from Henan, this paper conceptualizes its representational mechanisms on three interrelated levels: the shaping of rhythm and cadence, the construction of space and scene, and the transmission of emotion and spirit. These correspond respectively to the formal design of bodily movement, the spatial treatment of overall composition, and the detailed modeling of facial expression. Together, they constitute a visual pathway through which the spirit of music and dance is translated into figurative design (see Figure 4).

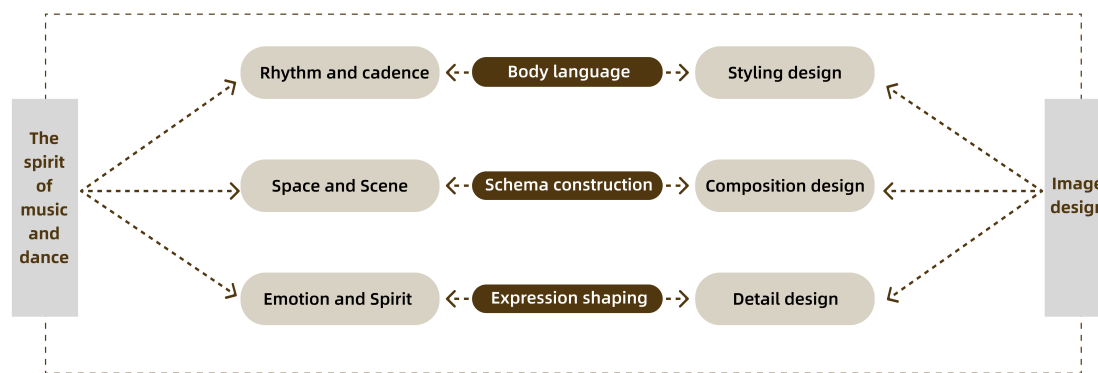


Figure 4. Mechanisms transforming the spirit of music and dance into figurative design²

3.1. Methods for shaping rhythm and cadence

Rhythm and cadence form the core of the spirit of music and dance. They exist not only on the auditory level of melodic lines and percussive beats, but are also translated into the bodily language of music-and-dance figurines. Rudolf Arnheim notes in *Art and Visual Perception* that "in dance and theatrical performance, the artist, the medium employed, and the artwork created all merge into the same physical entity—the human body" [2]. Although the female music-and-dance figurines unearthed in Henan are static ceramic sculptures, the curvature of their limbs and the transitions of their postures are imbued with implicit rhythmic cues, reflecting the rises, falls, and beats characteristic of Tang dance and music. Murals, stone carvings, and music-and-dance figurines excavated from Tang tombs provide particularly vivid evidence of contemporary performance scenes. The construction of tomb chambers and the selection of burial objects to a certain extent mirror the tomb owner's aesthetic preferences and spiritual pursuits, and the music-and-dance imagery often reproduces the dance movements admired by the deceased during their lifetime [3]. From this perspective, the rhythmic quality embodied in music-and-dance figurines can be understood as a symbolic projection of the tomb owner's lived experience and aesthetic consciousness.

The use of S-shaped dynamic curves constitutes the primary means of shaping rhythmic sensation. The "S-shaped curve" refers to "a smooth S-like flow formed by the natural arcs of the head, hands, chest, waist, hips, legs, and feet", unifying the entire range of dance postures into an aesthetically coherent linear form—also known as the "three-bend" (*san dao wan*) configuration [4]. Tang dance was deeply influenced by foreign dance forms such as the Huxuan and Zhezhi dances, and the twisting, tilting, and back-arching movements of the dancers' bodies are highly condensed in figurines as continuous curvilinear momentum. Ceramic sculpture and painting alike achieve a high degree of verisimilitude in restoring actual performance scenes. Through a comparison between ceramic female dance figurines and dancers depicted in tomb murals (see Figure 5), one can observe how the inclined torso and laterally shifted center of gravity generate a continuous S-shaped curve extending from the neck to the hem of the skirt. Visually, this design disrupts static rigidity and creates a sense of rhythm and cadence in motion.



Figure 5. Comparison of dancer movements in ceramic female dance figurines and tomb murals^{2,4,5}

In addition, the rhythmic treatment of weight distribution and points of support further enhances visual cadence. Dance figurines often adopt poses in which one leg is slightly bent while the other is extended, with the upper body coordinated through outstretched arms and flowing sleeves, generating tension between movement and stillness. Artisans deliberately exaggerated arm length and the amplitude of sleeve movement, pushing these elements beyond natural human proportions to produce a visual effect in which rhythm is amplified and cadence prolonged (see Figure 5). This approach not only resonates with the Tang aesthetic ideal of fullness and expansiveness, but also allows the rhythm of music and dance to be sustained and fixed through bodily expression.

3.2. Mechanisms for constructing space and scene

In the Tang dynasty, music-and-dance performance was not an isolated act of solo expression, but a comprehensive performative activity situated within a specific spatial context. Music-and-dance figurines placed in tombs reproduce this scenographic and ritual atmosphere through compositional strategies and spatial arrangement. The notion of "scenic narrative" in tomb contexts refers to the integrated presentation of a group of figurines and auxiliary objects within a unified spatial framework. These figurines were typically reduced to a consistent scale [5], thereby forming complete ensembles and stage-like compositions of music and dance. Whether presented as individual figures or as grouped displays, music-and-dance figurines unearthed in the Henan region construct performative schemata through deliberate spatial treatment.

In the compositional design of single figurines, implicit scenic suggestion serves as a key strategy. The direction of a dancer's gaze, the orientation of gestures, and the flow of the skirt often subtly indicate the figure's relationship to the stage space and to the performance formation as a whole (see Figure 6). Although each figurine exists as an independent sculptural unit, such directional modeling enables viewers to imagine its positional role within a larger musical-dance ensemble.

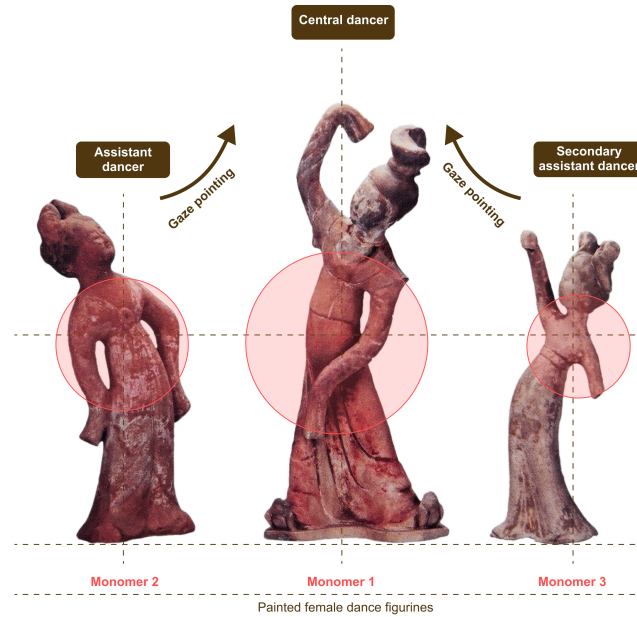


Figure 6. Directional relationships within the implied stage space^{1,2}

Grouped figurines, by contrast, reinforce scenographic effect through rhythmically organized compositional arrangements. Varied postures intersect and overlap, with layered depth articulated through front-back progression, allowing the ensemble to maintain overall harmony while preserving individual dynamism. Orderly spacing and visual interaction between musicians and dancers reflect actual performance practices in Tang banquets and sacrificial rites. Particularly noteworthy is the mixed arrangement of female and male musicians discovered in the Tang tomb of the Cen family in Mengjin, which highlights differentiated spatial positioning based on gender and status (see Figure 7). Such schematic constructions emphasize the relationship between performance and spectatorship, transforming the tomb space into a "miniature stage" that reenacts music-and-dance rituals and conveys a cultural ethos of order and harmony.

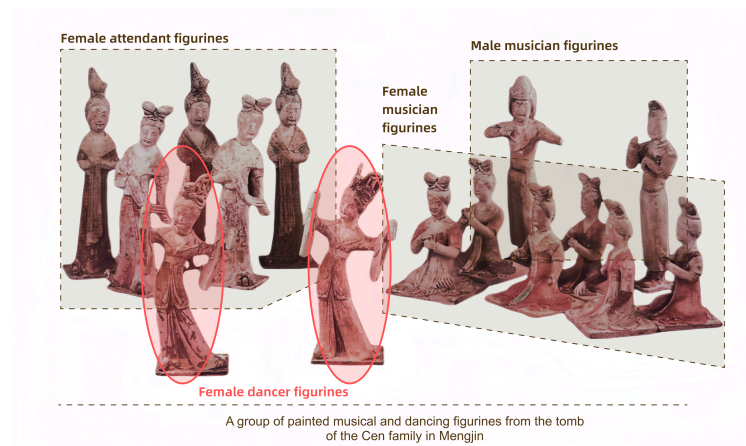


Figure 7. Construction of music-and-dance space^{1,2}

3.3. Expressions of emotion and spirit

Beyond rhythmic articulation and scenographic composition, the spirit of music and dance is further conveyed through the facial expressions of female figurines. As Wu Hung has observed, "In theatrical art, a 'role' refers to a character in a play and constitutes a key component of the performance. In visual art, the term 'role' denotes a distinctive figure within a large composition—defined by its function, expression, and the narrative or symbolic context to which it belongs" [6]. The facial expressions of Tang female music-and-dance figurines constitute precisely the core of this "role-based" mode of representation.

Archaeological evidence indicates that female music-and-dance figurines from the early Tang period tend toward reserved and dignified expressions, with lowered brows and eyes and straight-set lips, conveying a sense of quiet restraint. By contrast, figurines from the High Tang period more often display open and joyful expressions, with curved brows, smiling eyes, and gently upturned lips that suggest mirth and correspond to the expansive and expressive dance postures of the time. This shift reflects the openness and self-confidence of High Tang cultural life, while also implying an enhanced subjectivity of female figures within music-and-dance contexts. The female figurine is no longer merely a "performer", but becomes an embodied symbol of the spirit of music and dance itself.

The design of facial expressions in these figurines is not individualized realism, but rather a system of standardized emotional signs. Female music-and-dance figurines commonly present a "smiling countenance", characterized by rounded facial features and a serene demeanor—often described as an "auspicious and harmonious expression" (see Figure 8). This expression symbolizes the festive and conciliatory atmosphere conveyed by music-and-dance performance, and also resonates with Tang aesthetic ideals that valued fullness, composure, and elegance. Through such codified smiles, static ceramic figures are able to communicate positive affect, becoming emblematic of the spiritual ethos of Tang society.

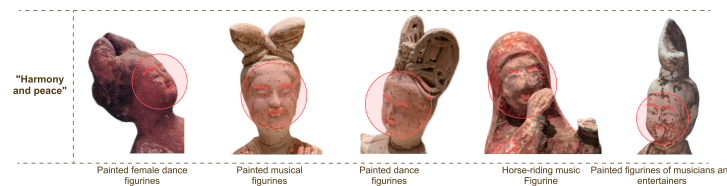


Figure 8. Depiction of the "auspicious and harmonious" expression^{1,3,6,7}

In sum, the representational mechanisms of Tang dynasty female music-and-dance figurines from the Henan region do not rely on singular formal modeling. Rather, through the dynamization of rhythm and cadence, the narrativization of spatial scenes, and the symbolization of emotional and spiritual states, the "spirit of music and dance" is translated into visual form. This integrated mechanism not only endows the figurines with artistic expression that transcends their status as mere objects, but also provides a new analytical perspective for understanding the aesthetic values and cultural psychology of Tang society.

4. Cultural implications: music-and-dance figurines and female consciousness in the Tang dynasty

Female music-and-dance figurines of the Tang dynasty are not merely representations of musical and choreographic forms; they also serve as projected carriers of female consciousness within a broader social and cultural context. As the core region of the Eastern Capital Luoyang, Henan has yielded a large number and wide variety of female music-and-dance figurines. Their forms reveal both standardized artistic conventions

and deeper structures of social gender and cultural identity. Through these figurines, one can discern the multiple roles assumed by women in Tang dynasty musical performance, social ritual, and cultural exchange.

Although the female figures depicted in Tang music-and-dance figurines convey an atmosphere of exuberant and joyful performance, their underlying aesthetic logic continues to privilege "gentleness" as the idealized feminine quality. This tendency is deeply rooted in traditional gender ideology. As early as the pre-Qin period, a cultural system had taken shape in which softness and compliance were regarded as ideal feminine virtues. Admonitions for Women (Nüjie), the earliest didactic text specifically addressing normative female behavior, emphasizes "humility and weakness" at its outset, establishing a gendered distinction in moral character and temperament—masculinity valuing strength and firmness, femininity valuing gentleness and obedience [7]. Such ideas not only shaped women's social roles at the institutional level in the Tang dynasty, but also became subtly internalized as part of women's own self-consciousness.

4.1. Positioning of female identity in music-and-dance performance

Tang society was structurally complex, and the roles assumed by women were marked by pronounced stratification. Female figurines unearthed in the Henan region encompass a wide range of identities, including noblewomen, attendants, servants, and professional performers, reflecting the diversity of women's social status (see Figure 9). Most music-and-dance figurines are understood to represent performers affiliated with the jiaofang (imperial music academy) or with private household troupes. According to *The New Book of Tang*, vol. 22, "Rites and Music XII": "At the height of the Tang, all musicians and sound performers, including the sons of households attached to the Court of Imperial Sacrifices and the Drum and Wind Bureau, were assigned rotational service at court and collectively referred to as 'sound performers', numbering in the tens of thousands" [8]. Furthermore, in the second year of the Kaiyuan reign (714), large numbers of musicians and singers were transferred from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices to form the Left and Right Outer Jiaofang in the twin capitals of Chang'an and Luoyang, specializing in popular music and dance [9].



Figure 9. Comparison of female figurine identities^{1,2,6,8}

Performers affiliated with the jiaofang occupied a low social position and were bound by the hereditary music-register system. Once registered, their professional status and skills were passed down through generations, with little possibility of social mobility. Legal regulations also restricted their marital options: while performers attached to the Court of Imperial Sacrifices could, in theory, marry commoners, those of

lower-status music households were required to "marry within their registered category", effectively confining marriage to the same occupational group. Such institutional constraints enforced hereditary transmission of the performing profession.

This institutionalized identity was both instrumental and symbolic. Instrumentally, women served ritual and banqueting functions through music and dance; symbolically, they functioned as visual signifiers of the tomb owner's social status and cultural taste. Consequently, female music-and-dance figurines do not merely depict dance movements; through visual differentiation, they articulate the multiple role positions assigned to women under the Tang system of rites and music—simultaneously artistic performers and socially coded figures within an institutional framework.

4.2. Subjectivity and objectification in the music-and-dance milieu

Within the *jiaofang* system, female performers occupied a marginalized social position, yet the figurines fashioned in their image convey confidence and composure. As Wen Huifen has observed, "the long-suppressed desire of women to pursue beauty and novelty was, for the first time, fully satisfied in the Tang dynasty; women began to strongly seek their own feminine beauty and entered an aesthetic realm centered on the female form" [10]. The postures of the figurines reveal neither humiliation nor servility; instead, they communicate a celebration of vitality and an aspiration toward a beautiful life, suggesting a form of emotional self-expression available to Tang female performers within the performative sphere.

In music-and-dance settings, women often occupy a visually central position: dancers in front, instrumentalists following, and male musicians positioned further back. Such arrangements appear to depart from the ritual hierarchy of "men as principal, women as subordinate", granting women a degree of apparent independence. However, this subjectivity is fundamentally ambivalent. On the one hand, it derives from women's mastery, transmission, and embodiment of musical-dance artistry, manifesting as confidence in movement and posture. On the other hand, it represents a passive composure rooted in acquiescence to rigid social stratification. The artisans who captured this dual temperament in sculpting female figurines were themselves members of lower social strata, whose lived experience of subordination as "those who serve" shaped their modes of representation. As such, the objectification of female music-and-dance figurines operates on multiple levels: they are objects of aristocratic viewing, and simultaneously representational objects produced through the creative labor of craftsmen.

The subjectivity and objectification embodied in female music-and-dance figurines thus coexist. These figures articulate a form of subjectivity through posture, expression, and cultural symbolism, while also embodying women's objectified status as figures to be gazed upon and consumed within ritual and entertainment contexts. This duality reflects the complexity of female consciousness in the Tang dynasty. Female imagery emerges as a visual outcome of gendered cultural tensions and reveals a deeper social-psychological structure: while women were endowed as "aesthetic objects" with diversified forms and sensuous postures, their subjective consciousness remained in a nascent stage, insufficient to challenge the prevailing patriarchal discourse. From the visual presentation of ceramic figurines to discursive constructions in textual narratives, women persistently occupy positions in which meaning is assigned to them by others, moving within—but rarely transcending—the boundaries of roles defined and regulated by the cultural system.

5. Conclusion

Female music-and-dance figurines of the Tang dynasty unearthed in the Henan region are both products of the burial system and microcosms of Tang social culture. Through figurative design, they solidify what is otherwise ephemeral—dance movements, musical sounds, and performative atmosphere—into static forms, allowing the rhythm and bearing of music and dance to persist within the funerary space. The shaping of dance postures, the arrangement of costume and hairstyle, the modeling of facial expression, and the configuration of musical instruments together construct a performative field imbued with narrative significance. When confronted with these figurines, viewers can not only intuitively perceive the aesthetic qualities of music and dance, but also apprehend the ritual symbolism and spiritual meanings they embody.

At the level of female representation, music-and-dance figurines present a dual dimension of institutional discipline and autonomous expression. On the one hand, as "objects of the gaze" within ritual order, they assume standardized social roles; on the other hand, through expansive dance movements and confident expressions, they reveal a distinct sense of subjectivity and vitality. This visual symbolism—simultaneously contradictory and unified—enables female music-and-dance figurines to transcend a purely ancillary funerary function, transforming them into cultural carriers in which art, aesthetics, and female consciousness intersect in High Tang society.

Accordingly, the response offered by Henan's music-and-dance figurines to the question of "why dance and music" lies not only in the reproduction of choreographic postures, but more fundamentally in the convergence of artistic expression, spiritual significance, and social consciousness embedded within their figurative design. They demonstrate how Tang society preserved music and dance through visual symbols, how aesthetic and ritual functions were extended within funerary contexts, and how the construction of female imagery reflected a social understanding in which institutional constraint and subjective expression coexisted. In this sense, music-and-dance figurines become a crucial medium for understanding the cultural logic of Tang society, revealing the profound interplay between artistic expression and social consciousness during the High Tang period.

Notes

¹Material source: Henan Museum. *Echoes of Chinese Antiquity: Ancient Musical Artifacts from the Central Plains*. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 2010.

²Image source: created by the author.

³Figure/Table source: created by the author.

⁴Material source: The Palace Museum.

⁵Material source: <http://xhslink.com/n/AdyXOS22t7u>

⁶Material source: Luoyang Museum.

⁷Material source: <https://weibo.com/7422921281/N63hv5oD3>

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