

# Tang Sancai: Colors of a Golden Age

Art, Trade, and the Afterlife in  
the Tang Dynasty (618–907).

Sancai (三彩), literally "three colors," is the signature ceramic style of a China that was open, wealthy, and confidently cosmopolitan.

# The World's Center



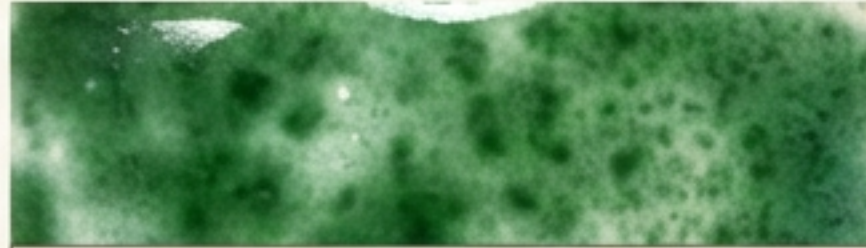
Persia/Sogdiana

In the 8th century, Chang'an was the most populous city on Earth, home to 2 million residents.

Chang'an (Xi'an)

- **Population:** Empire grew to 80 million.
- **The Hub:** Envoys from Japan, Korea, India; merchants from Persia/Arabia.
- **The Vibe:** Unprecedented stability, wealth, and openness.

# Defining Sancai (The Three Colors)



Copper Oxide → Green



Iron Oxide → Amber



White Slip → Cream

**Rare Addition:**  
Cobalt (Blue) –  
Expensive, high  
status.

## Process:

Earthenware body → White Slip → Lead Glaze → Fired at approx. 800°C.  
The lead glaze is fluid, creating the signature 'dappled' effect.

# The Masterpiece: Phoenix-Headed Ewer

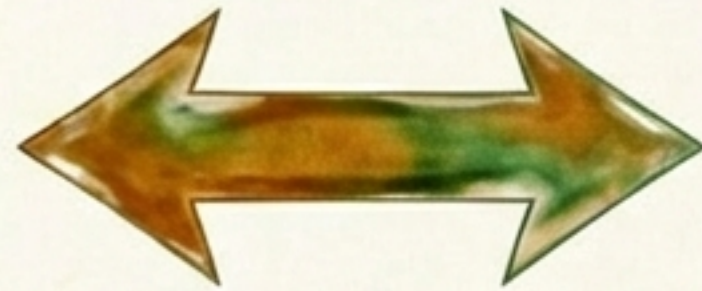


**Date:** First half of 8th century

**Origin:** Tang Dynasty China

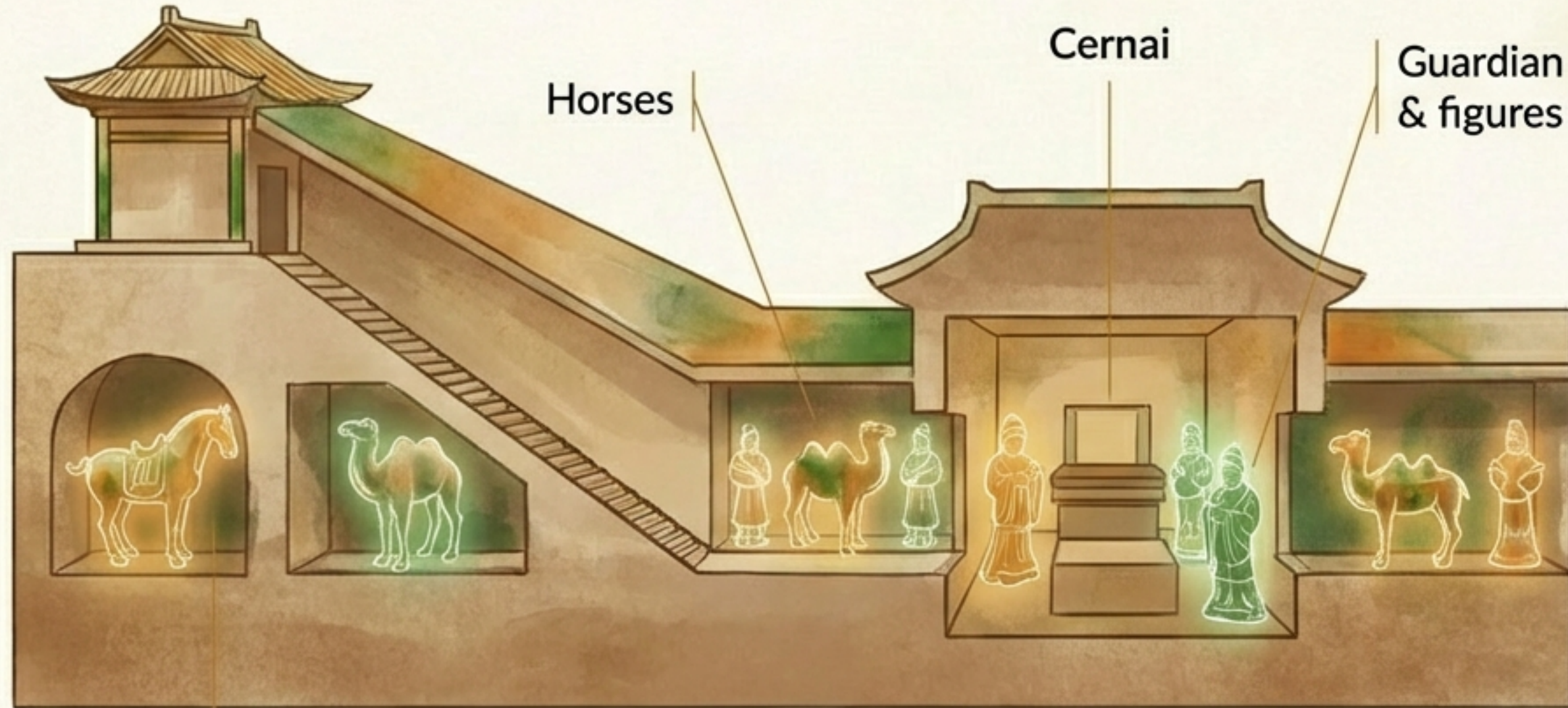
**Medium:** Earthenware with molded decoration and Sancai glaze

# A Mirror to the West



Tang potters replicated expensive silver imports from Sogdiana (modern Uzbekistan) using cheaper, colorful clay. The “archer on horseback” motif is Central Asian, not **traditionally Chinese**.

# Status in the Afterlife



## The Rules

**Rank:** Number/size of figures regulated by social rank.

**Function:** Replacements for human/animal sacrifices of ancient history.

**Mingqi:** Spirit goods manufactured specifically for the tomb to serve, entertain, and protect the soul.

# Fashion & Freedom



Heart-shaped hat.

**Hairstyle:** High topknot, fashionable in the 8th century.

**Attire:** Short-sleeved jacket and green trousers.

**Pose:** Riding astride, indicating the elevated status and freedom of Tang women.

Faces are unglazed and painted directly on fired clay to allow for delicate expressions



# The Heavenly Horses

Tang emperors sought 'sweating blood' horses from Ferghana and Arab stock. They were symbols of military power and diplomatic wealth.

Vital for cavalry against Turkic nomads and for the game of Polo.

Amber and cream glazes splashed to mimic a dappled coat.



# Life at Play

A society that valued entertainment, imported sports, and foreign music.

- Polo: A Persian sport played by emperors and court women.



Music: Ensembles played foreign instruments like oboes and lacquered drums.

- The 'Other': Figures often depict Sogdians and Turks with distinct features serving as grooms or merchants.



# The Mystery of the Luohans

Unlike mass-produced tomb figures, these are life-size, individual works of high art. Likely dating to the Liao or Jin Dynasties (10th–13th century), they represent the technical evolution of Sancai.

Luohan (Arhat): A disciple of Buddha who has achieved enlightenment.



# Portrait of the Soul

**Psychological Depth:**  
A blend of idealization  
and intense realism.



**Engineering:**  
Constructed with internal  
iron rods to support  
the weight during firing.

**Scale:** Life-size (approx. 50 inches / 127 cm).

Likely displayed in a "Luohan Hall" in a temple, arranged on rock-like bases suggesting mountain retreats.

# Discovery & Dispersal

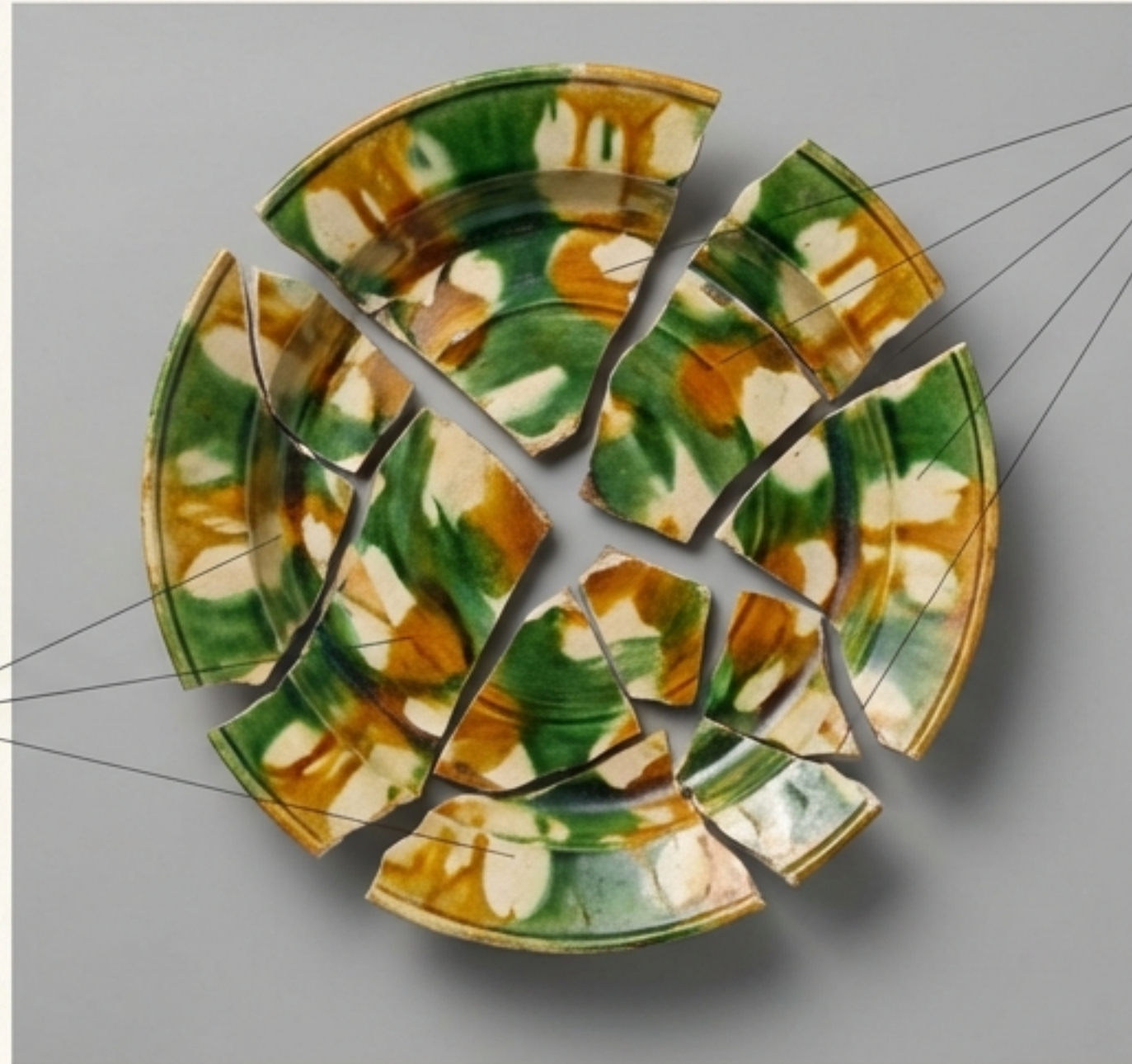
**1912:** German sinologist Friedrich Perzynski "discovers" the figures in Yixian caves. They were smuggled out, often broken and reassembled.

**Current Status:**  
Only about 10 distinct figures survive globally.



# The Crash (755 AD)

The An Lushan Rebellion (755) devastated the aristocracy and economy. Production of elaborate tomb figures halted.



**The Shift:** Imperial tastes moved away from colorful 'barbarian' lead glazes toward monochrome high-fired wares and proto-porcelain.

# Global Echoes



Tang Sancai  
(Cobalt introduced)



Japan  
(Nara Three-Color)



Middle East  
(Islamic Pottery)



Ming Dynasty  
(Blue & White)

The Belitung Shipwreck (63,000 pieces) proves massive export scale.

The use of Cobalt in Sancai was the precursor to the Blue-and-White porcelain that would later dominate the world.

# The Legacy of the Three Colors



Phoenix Ewer (Trade)



Horse Rider (Life/Society)



Luohan (Spirit)

**Tang Sancai** is the physical evidence of a "Golden Age"—a time when China was the open, cosmopolitan crossroads of the world.

"From the dust of the tomb to the museums of the world, these glazes still shine with the energy of the Tang."