

The Search for Immortality: Tomb Treasures of Han China

5 May to 11 November 2012 | The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Curated by Dr James Lin

In partnership with China's State Administration for Cultural Heritage, Art Exhibitions China, Xuzhou Museum and the Museum of the Mausoleum of the Nanyue King

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In the first exhibition of its kind, the Fitzwilliam Museum will relate the story of the quest for immortality and struggle for imperial legitimacy in ancient China's Han Dynasty. **The Search for Immortality: Tomb Treasures of Han China** will feature over 350 treasures in jade, gold, silver, bronze and ceramics in the most important exhibition of ancient royal treasures ever to travel outside China.

The Han Dynasty established the basis for unified rule of China up to the present day. To maintain this hard-won empire the Han emperors had to engage in a constant struggle for power and legitimacy, with contests that took place on symbolic battlefields as much as on real ones. While written accounts provide an outline of these events, it is through the stunning archaeological discoveries of recent decades that the full drama and spectacle of this critical episode in Chinese history has been brought to life.

Dr Timothy Potts, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, commented: "It is impossible to overstate the importance of the Han Dynasty in the formation of a Chinese national culture and identity. At the time of the ancient Romans, the Han emperors were the first to unify a large part of the regions we now know as China under a sustained empire, which they ruled virtually unchallenged for 400 years. The Han Dynasty gave its name to the Chinese language, its script and the vast majority of the Chinese people. It was arguably the defining period of China's history and the point of genesis for the China of today. The spectacular objects in this exhibition bring to Cambridge the finest treasures from the tombs of the Han royal family, the superb goldwork, jades and other exquisitely crafted offerings the kings chose to be buried with on their journey to the afterlife. For their artistry, refinement and pure beauty they rival anything from the ancient world."



Jade ornament with an animal mask, unearthed at Xianggangshan 1983 Nanyue Wang Museum



Pottery official, unearthed at Yanguishan sacrificial pit 2005 Xuzhou Museum



Gold belt plaque, excavated from Shizishan, Xuzhou Xuzhou Museum



Jade coffin, unearthed at Shizishan 1994-1995 Xuzhou Museum



Jade dragon pendant, unearthed at Shizishan site 1994-1995 Xuzhou Museum

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This pioneering exhibition will compare the spectacular tombs of two rival power factions: the Han imperial family in the northern ‘cradle’ of Chinese history, and the Kingdom of Nanyue in the south, whose capital in modern-day Guangzhou formed the gateway to the rich trade routes of the China Sea and Indian Ocean. Objects from these tombs have never before been displayed together as a single exhibition. Through the exhibition it is revealed how, in both life and in death, Empire and Kingdom played a diplomatic game of cat and mouse, one to assert its supremacy, the other to preserve its autonomy.

Protected by clay guardians and surrounded by jade and gold, the monarchs’ tombs were palaces fit for immortals. Each tomb was a symbol of power and majesty, designed to ensure that its owner continued to enjoy in the afterlife the same comforts and privileges afforded to them in life. In showing these two tombs together, *The Search for Immortality* sheds new light on a critical period of China’s early history. The exhibition will only be seen in Cambridge.

Curator of the exhibition, Dr James Lin, commented: “It is immensely exciting that we are able to compare these unique discoveries from two rival kingdoms for the first time in Cambridge, as the archaeology allows us to tell a story that textual evidence simply does not reveal. It is known from written records that the first Han Emperor and the first King of Nanyue vied with each other for power and legitimacy in southern China; this exhibition shows how the struggle to be known as ‘emperor’ in the southern borderlands continued into the second generation of the Nanyue kingdom, an episode mostly passed over in the historical chronicles. Through a direct comparison of the tomb treasures from the Han imperial family with those of the second king of Nanyue, Zhao Mo, the exhibition shows how the latter’s funerary splendour continued to be styled on that of the Han heartland, often reaching the same level of exquisite artistry. This provides a new perspective on the Han period and how the imperial family continued to exert its influence, through both arms and art, to maintain control of their vast empire.”

The most powerful empire of the ancient world

Founded in 206 BC, the Han Dynasty followed the collapse and disintegration of the Qin Empire, which had been established only fifteen years earlier by China’s First Emperor, Qinshihuangdi. Except for a brief interruption in 9-25 AD, the Han emperors were to rule much of China for the next 400 years until 220 AD.

Contemporaneous with the late republic and early Roman Empire, the Han is considered the ‘classical’ period of Chinese history and, at the time of the birth of Christ, was as great in population and power as the Romans. It saw the emergence of cultural values, ideologies and institutions which have remained central to Chinese identity ever since. During this period Confucianism, with its emphasis on loyalty to family and to the Emperor, was first adopted as the official ideology. It was also then that rigorous state examinations for selecting civil servants on the basis of merit rather than hereditary status were first introduced. In China today ‘Han’ is often used interchangeably with ‘Chinese’: the language is referred to as the Han language – *Hanyu*, Chinese script as Han writing – *Hanzi*, and over 90% of Chinese nationals regard themselves as Han Chinese.

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- *Hanren.*

Rival kings

Zhao Tuo, a former commander in the army of the First Emperor, established the independent state of Nanyue in 204 BC. Its capital Panyu is modern-day Guangzhou (Canton) and was then, as now, a busy commercial port and an eastern terminus of the ancient maritime Silk Route.

In 196 BC Emperor Gaozu, founder of the Han Dynasty, sent an envoy demanding that Nanyue founding king, Zhao Tuo, submit to his authority. Zhao Tuo agreed and Nanyue was granted formal status as a vassal state of the Han Empire. Yet only a year later, having gained the allegiance of two neighbouring states, Zhao Tuo declared himself Emperor. After two years of conflict, Zhao Tuo once more 'submitted' to the Han ruler, though both he and his successors continued to style themselves 'Emperor' at home, using the lesser title of 'King' only in their dealings with the Han court.

The exhibition compares the tomb of Zhao Mo, Zhao Tuo's grandson and successor from the Southern Nanyue kingdom, with the astonishing finds from three of the major northern Han tombs of the kings of Chu, a branch of the imperial family that had been granted this kingdom by the emperor. This is the first time such a comparison of the splendour and treasures of these two sets of rival tombs has been made.

Tomb treasures

The exhibition will reflect the layout of the funerary goods within the tombs, giving a sense of what it would have been like to walk through one of these tombs for the first time: being met by tomb guardians, progressing into the principal chambers with pottery servants, musical instruments and other treasures, and finally coming upon the inner sanctum with the burials of the kings themselves.

Highlights include:

- two jade burial armour suits belonging to the rival rulers, painstakingly made from thousands of plaques of jade, sewn together with gold or silk thread
- lavish burial furnishings in jade thought to ward off demons or to serve the emperor in the afterlife, such as a jade cup to catch the morning dew that ensured immortality
- spectacular objects in gold, including imperial seals and exotically decorated belt buckles
- pottery soldiers and bronze weapons
- pottery dancers, musicians and servants
- unusual artefacts including a toilet and an early ginger grater.

The Search for Immortality: Tomb Treasures of Han China has been made possible through the generous permission of China's State Administration for Cultural Heritage, Art Exhibitions China, Xuzhou Museum and the Museum of the Mausoleum of the Nanyue Kings. The exhibition is part of the London 2012 Festival, a spectacular 12-week nationwide celebration from 21 June to 9 September 2012, bringing together leading artists from across the world with the very best from the UK.

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Xuzhou Museum, situated in Jiangsu Province (north of Shanghai)

Built in 1959, the museum is based on the site of the temporary imperial palace of Emperor Qianlong, built for his inspection tour of the South of the Yangtze River in 1757. The Museum displays include: pottery, bronze and jade artefacts, stone and bone objects ranging from the Neolithic Age to the Qin Dynasty (221BC-206BC); bronzes, celadons, jade articles, gold and silver vessels of Han Dynasty (206 BC-220); and over 140 articles in porcelain and metal from the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280) to the Qing Dynasty. It has the only Han jade exhibition room in China and hundreds of terracotta figures. Located to the north of the Museum are three tombs of the regional Han nobility, from which numerous burial objects were excavated.

Museum of the Mausoleum of the Nanyue Kings

The Western Han Dynasty Nanyue King Mausoleum Museum occupies an area of 14,000 square metres and, at its centre, is the tomb of Zhao Mo, the grandson of Zhao Tuo, founding father of Nanyue Kingdom (203 BC-111 BC). The kingdom was a vassal state in southern China during the Western Han Dynasty. The tomb is the largest known colour-painted stone tomb in Southern China and was buried 20 metres below the Xianggang Hill and has seven chambers. Discovered in June 1983, it is considered one of the top five archaeological finds in China in recent years.

About the Cultural Olympiad and London 2012 Festival

The London 2012 Cultural Olympiad is the largest cultural celebration in the history of the modern Olympic and Paralympic Movements. Spread over four years, it is designed to give everyone in the UK a chance to be part of London 2012 and inspire creativity across all forms of culture, especially among young people. The culmination of the Cultural Olympiad will be the London 2012 Festival, a spectacular 12-week nationwide celebration bringing together leading artists from across the world with the very best from the UK, from Midsummers Day on 21 June and running until the final day of the Paralympic Games on 9 September 2012. The London 2012 Festival will celebrate the huge range, quality and accessibility of the UK's world-class culture including dance, music, theatre, the visual arts, fashion, film and digital innovation, giving the opportunity for people across the UK to celebrate the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Principal funders of the Cultural Olympiad and London 2012 Festival are Arts Council England, Legacy Trust UK and the Olympic Lottery Distributor. BP and BT are Premier Partners of the Cultural Olympiad and the London 2012 Festival.

For more details on the programme and to sign up for information visit

www.london2012.com/festival

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FACT SHEET

- Exhibition title: The Search for Immortality: Tomb Treasures of Han China
- Dates: 5 May to 11 November 2012
- Location: The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB
www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk | Telephone. +44 (0)1223 332900
- Admission: FREE
- Opening hours: Tuesday to Saturday: 10.00 to 17.00
Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 to 17.00
Closed: Mondays, and Good Friday
- Permanent collection: Founded in 1816 the Fitzwilliam is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge, with collections exploring world history and art from antiquity to the present day. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, masterpiece paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century and outstanding collections of ceramics, coins, and Asian arts.
- Welcoming over 400,000 visitors a year, the Fitzwilliam presents a wide ranging public programme of major exhibitions, events and education activities, and is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation.
- For all press enquiries relating to the permanent collection, please contact: Lucy Theobald at the Fitzwilliam Museum
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