C hina’s Tang dynasty (618-907) tomb mural paintings are rare finds and study of them has grown since the first archaeological discoveries and excavations in the early 1950s. Although thousands of minor Tang graves and about 100 tombs have been discovered, so far only around 60 Tang tombs have been found to contain mural paintings. While many questions are still to be answered, each new discovery contributes to knowledge in this important field.

The importance of tomb mural painting is stressed in the Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China (Revised 2015), which highlights the rapid development stressed in the Tang graves and about 400 tombs have been excavated in China so far near Luoyang, the secondary Tang capital (in Henan Province). As most of the mural paintings are located near the Tang capital cities where the Tang dynasty had its political and cultural base, and can be accurately dated, they also provide visual evidence of important lost but described master works. In the Tang dynasty, mural painting was the major painting form, prevalent in high status buildings such as palaces, government buildings, temples and elite mansions. Information about these no longer extant murals is known through Tang dynasty artistic texts. Although not all mural programs have survived in their entirety, due to collapse, destructive environmental conditions or plunder for example, the known repertoire of painting is extensive, stylistically sophisticated and in subject matter and adept in methods of technical production. Analysis reveals that the murals have parallels with those listed in the 9th century catalogues and it can be speculated that they were either the work of famous artists or strongly influenced by them. Their secular content, style and non-canonical approach makes them an important category of painting distinct from the Tang dynasty Buddhist murals discovered at the dawn of the 20th century at Dunhuang and other sites along the Silk Road. A number of recently excavated Tang tomb mural programs, comparable in date, official rank and therefore mortuary entitlements, reveal new evidence about patronage, aesthetic styles and subject matter. Tombs of two imperial concubines of Emperor Zhongzong (r.688–705–710) – Tang shi and Cui shi Anguo Xiangwang funer – were excavated in 2005 and recently conserved.

While following standard format and the mortuary entitlement system these two mural programs are highly individual, expressing the life interests and achievements of each deceased tomb occupant. Both included a retinue of staff, and lively musical, singing and dancing performances. Li Daojian, a minister of the imperial family, former diplomat, Minister of Rites and Head of Royal Household Affairs, had distinctive murals included in his tomb. His murals perhaps in reference to his diplomatic travels and extremely high status, include a lion from the West on a beautiful fringed carpet, and three African attendants. Attendants carrying a paintbrush and water basin for brush washing indicates Li’s personal interests as a painter. Hui Xiu’s tomb has palanquin bearers transporting large lacquered chests perhaps containing his treasured art collection.

Research undertaken in this project currently points to a centralised entitlement system and set subject matter program for Tang dynasty mural paintings, with the coordinated employment of artists and artistic practices across both the Tang capital cities. The relationship between these practices and works by named masters in the Tang catalogues is being explored. The variations between high status, compliant with the official mural painting entitlement system, need further analysis because of recent tomb discoveries. Analysis of materials and working methods will shed further light on artistic masters and workshops as well as contributing to the conservation of the Tang dynasty tomb mural paintings into the future.

Notes
5. Zhang Yanyuan. c.847. Zhan Xiu. (Record of Famous Paintings of All the Dynasties).