

This lesson uses the Princeton University Art Museum's retinue of tomb figures from early sixth-century China to explore the role of international trade in the movement of goods and ideas, as well as its influence on the arts.

**Intended age group:** Grades 5–8

**Length of lesson:** 50–70 minutes

**Required materials:** Digital images of tomb retinue and individual objects; map of Asia in the sixth century with international trade routes marked

### Lesson

1. Project an image of the tomb retinue for the entire class to see. Ask the students to look quietly for one to two minutes. (2 minutes)
2. Facilitate a group conversation about what the students saw. *See below for more on facilitating object-based learning.* (10 minutes)

#### Some questions you can ask:

- a. What do you think is happening here? What makes you say that?
  - b. Can you identify individual figures? (Some examples might be soldiers, musicians, animals.)
  - c. What do you think these objects are made of?
  - d. How big do you think they are?
3. Summarize the main points of the group conversation. Ask the students, "Based on what you see and what you discussed, can you hypothesize what the original use or location of these objects might have been?" Remind the students to support their claims based on what they see. (5 minutes)

4. Explain to the students that these objects were found in the tomb of a person who died and was buried in China during the sixth century A.D. This person lived during what is called the Northern Wei (pronounced "way") dynasty (386–535 A.D.). The Northern Wei people were also known as the Tuoba Xianbei. Although they were not ethnically Chinese, they adopted many Chinese customs and even the Chinese language. They believed that part of a person's spirit remained in the tomb after death. That part of the spirit was provided with things the person would have enjoyed in life, such as food, as well as companions to serve, protect, and entertain the spirit. (2 minutes)
5. Show a map of the region and tell the students that these objects were excavated (dug up) in 1948 from a tomb in Luoyang Fu, Henan Province, China. Ask them to look at the map and identify the city and region. (2 minutes)
6. Point out the travel routes marked on the map. Explain that in the first century B.C., people in East Asia began to travel along land-based routes in order to trade with people in Central Asia, the Middle East, and, eventually, Europe. They traded silk textiles,

ceramics, herbs, jade, and other luxury goods for horses and other items, like agricultural products, gold, and ivory. Trade happened in stages—no one person traveled the entire route. As people from different cultures met, they also exchanged ideas and beliefs—for example, Buddhist missionaries spread their ideas along these routes, too. (2 minutes)

7. Project an image of the five focus objects (see below for more information on each). Ask the group to think individually about the following questions and write down their answers. (5 minutes)
  - a. Look closely at the figures. What are they wearing?
  - b. What is each person or animal doing? Are they holding anything?
  - c. What do these details tell you about who these figures might be?
  - d. What might each object tell us about the culture in which it was made and how trade might have influenced that culture?
8. Pair and share: Ask the students to turn to a neighbor and share their answers to the questions. (5 minutes)

9. Have the class reconvene as a group. Ask the students to share their findings with the class. Answer any questions that they have and fill in any gaps. (12 minutes)

OR

7. Divide the class into five small groups. Assign each group one of the five focus objects. Give them fifteen minutes to answer the following questions:
  - a. Look closely at the figures. What are they wearing?
  - b. What is each person or animal doing? Are they holding anything?
  - c. What do these details tell you about who these figures might be?
  - d. What might each object tell us about the culture in which it was made and how trade might have influenced that culture?
8. Bring everyone together again and have one person from each group share their answers with the class. (25 minutes)

## What is it?

This group of objects, known as a tomb retinue, was reportedly excavated from a tomb in Luoyang Fu in Henan Province, northern China, in 1948. It was probably made in this region during the early sixth century. The function of this tomb retinue was to protect and serve the spirit of the deceased in the afterlife. It includes people and animals to carry out those functions: soldiers to protect; court officials, attendants, and musicians to serve and entertain; camels bearing luxury goods; dogs, pigs, sheep, geese, and chickens for food; and an ox pulling a cart (perhaps to transport the deceased). The ceramic figures were made in molds, and details were added by hand, by incising (carving) or painting them. The use of molds suggests that the process of making a large group of figures was standardized in order to speed production. Some parts were made separately, such as the heads of some of the figures and the saddles and loads on the camels.

## Who made it?

The artisans who made this group of objects lived in China during a time known as the Period of Disunity (220–589 A.D.). The ruling dynasty, known as the Northern Wei, were nomadic tribespeople who had taken control of northern China after a period of unrest following the disintegration of the Han dynasty. Although the Tuoba were ethnically separate from the Han (Chinese) people, they adopted many of their customs, including their dress, religious practices, artistic culture, bureaucratic organization, language, and even names.

The land that the Tuoba ruled included land routes that connected East Asia with Central

Asia—routes that we now call the Silk Road. The Silk Road was not a single road but a series of routes that were traveled by merchants, who exchanged Chinese silk and other luxury goods for Central Asian horses, for example, and by religious missionaries who brought Buddhism to the East from Central and Southeast Asia.

## What can it tell us about the culture that made it?

The tomb retinue can tell us what was important for the culture in which it was made. The soldiers and horsemen speak to the military strength of the Tuoba people. The camels and their bearded grooms refer to trade between East and Central Asia. Luxury goods are alluded to through the silk skeins carried by the camels and the fine costumes worn by the court attendants. The importance of music is established by the many musicians included in the retinue (although many of the musical instruments, which would have been made separately, are now lost).

Differences between the Tuoba and foreigners are evoked in facial characteristics (the foreign figures often have exaggerated facial features, while the Tuoba figures have dreamy expressions that were considered more elegant), hairstyles (the beards and curly hair on the camels' grooms suggest that they are from Central Asia), and attire (a soldier wears the hat of a Sogdian from Central Asia, while the musicians wear Chinese dress). The influx of Buddhism is reflected in the artistic style of these figures; for example, the dreamy facial expressions of the court attendants are similar to expressions on Buddhist sculpture from Gandhara (an ancient kingdom in present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan).

## Chinese, Period of Disunity, 220–589 A.D., Figures from tomb retinue, early 6th century



### Kneeling musician.

Gray earthenware with red and white slip paint, 12 x 6.9 x 7.8 cm. Gift of J. Lionberger Davis, Class of 1900 (y1950-76)

Music was an important aspect of court life during the Northern Wei dynasty, and the tomb retinue includes several musicians. They wear

Chinese-style robes with long skirts rather than the short tunics and wide pants worn by the Tuoba people. The Tuoba people adopted many Chinese customs, including dress, language, and even names.



### Soldier.

Gray earthenware with cream-colored slip, red paint, 20 x 7.8 x 6.7 cm. Gift of J. Lionberger Davis, Class of 1900 (y1950-113)

The soldier's steeply peaked hat indicates that he is a Sogdian from Sogdiana—an ancient Central Asian country in parts of present-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The trade routes of the Silk Road went through Sogdiana.



### Crouching camel.

Gray earthenware with cream-colored slip, red and pink paint, 12.5 x 25.2 x 10.6 cm. Gift of J. Lionberger Davis, Class of 1900 (y1950-92)

There are two types of camels: one-humped (Arabian) and two-humped (Bactrian). Both types were used as pack animals along the trade routes of the Silk Road. Camels are hardier than horses—they can carry more and need less water, and Bactrian camels, which once roamed wild across Asia, were better suited to the cold temperatures. This Bactrian camel carries items the traveler would need during his journey, including a saddle, tent poles (which made a shelter with the felt saddle blanket), flasks, and dead animals (for food), as well as items to be traded, like the skeins of silk wedged in above the tent poles.



### Foreigner.

Gray earthenware with cream-colored slip, 15.2 x 4.3 x 5 cm. Gift of J. Lionberger Davis, Class of 1900 (y1950-111)

This figure might represent a groom for one of the two camels included in the retinue. His curly hair and beard indicate that he is from Central Asia, not East

Asia. Central Asians were known for their skill in taming camels.



**Horseman holding reins.** Gray earthenware with cream-colored slip, red paint, 25.5 x 22 x 8.6 cm. Gift of J. Lionberger Davis, Class of 1900 (y1950-102)

Horses were prized in the nomadic cultures of East and Central Asia, and the earliest traders along the Silk Road traded luxury goods for horses. A horse both facilitated military strength and was a symbol of the ability to tame that strength in the service of the emperor.

### Facilitating Object-Based Learning

The goal of object-based learning is that students find their own paths to answers through close looking and discussion. Begin by giving the students a minute or two to look silently at the projected image. Silence can sometimes be uncomfortable for both the teacher and the

students, but resist the urge to speak before the time has elapsed. This allows the students to look closely and find details that they might not have noticed with just a cursory glance. When the time is up, ask, “What do you think is going on here?” or “Tell me what you see.”

They should answer your questions based on what they see, using visual evidence to support their ideas. As their guide, your job is to ask them open-ended questions—that is, questions that do not have a yes or no answer or an A or B answer. For example, ask, “What do you think is happening here?” instead of “Is this person playing an instrument?” or “Is this a camel or a horse?”

Rather than giving students the answers outright, help guide them to a better understanding by asking clarifying questions or by making connections between students’ observations. For example, if a student says that she thinks the objects are made out of wood, ask, “What do you see that makes you say that?” Ask her to point to specific elements of what she sees that make her think that they might be wood. If one student thinks that an animal is a horse and another student thinks that it is a camel, ask the students to point to elements that might support one hypothesis versus the other—for example, what might a camel have that a horse would not? You can provide additional information to fill in the gaps at the end of the conversation, but aim to have the students uncover as much as they can from their own observations first.