

Large-sized Stone-sculptured Animals of the Eastern Han Period in Sichuan and the Southern Silk Road

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The Tang Dynasty scholar Feng Yan 封演 in his *Fengshi Wenjianji* 封氏闻见记 (*Records of Things Heard and Seen by Mr. Feng*, volume six, under the heading of “sheep and tiger”) states that “since the Qin and Han Dynasties, stone ‘unicorns’ (*qilin*), ‘averters of evil’ (*bixie*), elephants, horses have been lined up in front of royal mausoleums, while stone sheep, tigers, statues of human Figures, and pillars were placed in front of official’s tombs. All these sculptures were used to mark the burials, just like the ceremonial regalia in their lifetime.” The “Treatise on Rituals” of *Songshu* (*Book of Song*, by Shen Yue 沈约) also records that “since the Han Dynasty, people all under the heaven were wasteful in burial – often erected stone chambers, stone animals, steles and so on [in front of the tomb].” Archaeological evidences corroborate above historical records. In recent years, Professor Lin Meicun of Peking University has discussed the artistic sources for the Qin and Han stone sculptures in his *Gudao Xifeng* 2000.

I

However, large-scale funerary stone sculptures were not common during the Western Han Dynasty. The only archaeological evidence we have is 16 stone sculptures in front of the General Huo Qubing’s tomb in the vicinity of Emperor Wudi’s mausoleum. Yet stylistically these sculptures have no direct link with the stone statues of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Both historical catalogues in the studies of bronzes and stones and archaeological discoveries indicate that the Nanyang region in Henan as well as Sichuan is the areas where the tradition of zoo-

morphic sepulchral sculptures started. Similar animal sculptures were excavated in the Jianxi district in Luoyang (Henan) – these animals often have two horns and a long neck, winged and walking. But their dates are still uncertain. Some scholars think they are datable to the Southern and Northern Dynasties, while others stand for the Eastern Han. Some suggested that the Nanyang sculptures could be the source for the later zoomorphic sepulchral sculptures of the Southern Dynasties.

In Sichuan, since the Eastern Han there has been a tradition of large-scale stone human and animal sculptures. In the early twentieth century, the French scholar Victor Segalen briefly listed in his *Mission archéologique en Chine* the stone animal statues in front of stone gate towers and steles that he surveyed in 1914. Since then, more archaeological discoveries, including those of large-scale human statues, have been added to this list. Even more stone sepulchral sculptures in front of Eastern Han tombs were discovered in Sichuan.

In the late 1950s, a winged animal, the so-called “stone sheep,” was discovered in front of an Eastern Han tomb at Shimaba in Lushan (Sichuan). Lin Meicun thinks that this is actually a horned, winged stone horse and should be renamed “unicorn” (*qilin*). The local site name of “Shimaba”, meaning literally “stone horse flatland,” also suggests that a strong image of a stone horse impressed on the local historical memory. Earlier, Professor Ren Naiqiang of Sichuan University surveyed the stone carvings and stone animals in Lushan and discovered at the “Shiyangshang” site near the tomb of

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Wang Hui a pair of stone animals and a stone sheep which he attributed to the Han Dynasty. In addition, he investigated and recorded the stone animals in front of the Fan Min stele of the Han Dynasty and those outside of the Jiang Wei Shrine. The local cultural relics bureau recently established the Lushan Eastern Han Stone Carvings Gallery, and collected and displayed nine large-scale Eastern Han stone animals (including one unfinished). Forming a large-scale stone animal complex (Figures 1 & 2), these nine animals include the one in front of the Fan Min stele, those discovered at “Shiyangshang” near the tomb of Wang Hui, and those found by local archaeologists at Shimaba and other sites. At Ya’an, a neighboring county of Lushan, there also discovered a winged animal in front of the Gao Yi tomb (built in the 14th year of Jian’an Era, 209 CE). Besides these stone sepulchral animals, in Lushan archaeologists discovered more large-scale stone animals associated with other Han Dynasty architectural remains.

II

These large zoomorphic sculptures from Sichuan have attracted scholars’ attention because of their uncommon shapes (such as lions, winged beasts) and their style in sharp contrast to that of the Western Han stone sculptures. There are currently two theories: one posits that these winged Eastern Han stone animals were produced under the foreign influence from the Western Regions, while the other debunks the former theory by arguing that there was no similar example in Central Asia to influence the Chinese, and suggests instead the sources should locate within China, specifically in southern Shaanxi. It further suggests a route of transmission from “Zhouzhi (Shaanxi) via the Qinling Mountain, to Hanzhong (Shaanxi), and then to Lushan.” I do not think these two theories are mutual exclusive. On the one hand,



Figure 1. The Large-sized Stone Animals Displayed in the Lushan Eastern Han Stone Carving Gallery



Figure 2. The Large-sized Stone Animals Displayed in the Lushan Eastern Han Stone Carving Gallery

the route of transmission within China is very likely from southern Shaanxi to Sichuan, as the latter theory posited. But this route is presumably only one of many routes of transmission by which winged beasts were introduced into China from the outside world. Available archaeological evidence so far indicates that there is no winged zoomorphic sculpture earlier than the Eastern Han. On the other hand, in terms of stylistic sources, the Sichuan examples have clear traces of artistic elements from Central and Western Asia. It is very likely that Eastern Han winged animals in southern Shaanxi also came from the same source.

Winged lions appeared in the Sichuan stone sepul-

chral sculptures, but lions were not indigenous to China, rather they were introduced into China from the Western Regions in late Han Dynasty. Lin Meicun points out that “the winged lions in front of the Gao Yi tomb at Ya’an (Sichuan), dated to 209 CE, have a clear connection with the Hellenistic art in Central Asia.” Shen Fuwei further argues that the Ya’an lions “have exactly the artistic expression of Parthian art, and simplified the three-tier spread wings such as those of the winged sphinx in front of the Palace of Artaxerxes into two-tier wings.” Indeed we can see some parallels between the winged animals in Central and West Asia and those discovered in Sichuan. For instance, the human-headed winged bulls guarding the palace of Assyrian king Sargon II (722–705 BCE) could be seen as the source for the Eastern Han winged beasts in terms of sculptural style and in particular the ways the wings were fashioned. Furthermore, a group of winged beasts taken from Persian royal architecture, now displayed in the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago, have clear Hellenistic influence. In terms of both style and the ways the multi-tiered wings were fashioned, they shared many common features with the Eastern Han sepulchral sculptures from Sichuan. In addition, we can see similar elements in the winged beast sculptures of ancient Persia collected in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Indian lions and those from Central Asia may be of different specimen, but their common feature of the protruding tongues is reflected in Chinese stone sepulchral lions of both the Eastern Han and the Southern Dynasties. This could provide a new clue for the investigation of their artistic sources. As is well known, lions occupied a special position in Buddhist art. It is quite possible that when Buddhism was introduced to China, this divine beast came along. Since in the Eastern Han period Buddhism and its art had already appeared in Sichuan, there could be a close connection between Buddhism and Sichuan stone lions. Therefore, it is conceivable that the Sichuan zoomorphic sculptures, influenced by foreign cultural elements, were from a broader “Western Regions” if we understand it as referring to Central and West Asia and even South Asia.

In addition to winged lions, there are also stone sculptures of *tianlu* ([bringers of] heavenly blessings) and *bixie* (averters of evil) that became popular in the Eastern Han. They often appeared in pairs, with wings, guarding the palace architectures or tombs. Some scholars

think that these two types of divine animals with clear cultural features of the Western Regions must have been based on the animal prototype there. The paired *tianlu* and *bixie* in Lushan and Ya’an could have also come from the same sources.

Observing from a broader perspective, we can see a large number of other foreign cultural elements in archaeological remains excavated in Sichuan, such as the winged “heavenly horses,” camel carrying drums, barbarian figurines, early Buddhist images and other objects in burials. All these archaeological evidence strongly suggests that the winged sepulchral animals in question are not isolated example. They are the result of the exchange between Chinese and foreign cultures since the establishment of communication with the Western Regions after Emperor Wudi of the Han.

III

The Shu commandery of the Han Dynasty controlled counties including Qingyi, Yandao, Maoniu, and Xi. Present-day Lushan and Ya’an belonged to the Qingyi and Yandao counties in Han time, which is a strategic location in the communication between the Shu commandery and the Linqiong and the Yuexi commandery. According to Professor Ren Naiqiang’s research, there are two paths leading from the Shu commandery to Linqiong in the past: one is from Baizhang, Mingshan, Ya’an, crossing Qionglai Mountain (present-day Daxiangling), arriving at Qiongzuo. Legend has it that Sima Xiangru of the Han Dynasty followed this path to reach the “Southwest Barbarians.” The other is from Huojing and Lushan to exit from the western borders, which is the so-called “Qingyi Path”, opened during the Han Dynasty. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, as the most important and strategic place for controlling the “Southwest Barbarians,” Lushan became the political center in the southwest of the Shu commandery and also the seat for the head of the commandery military forces. It “controlled the Lingguan to pacify the Qiang and the Di in the west, and administered the Qionglai Mountains to guard the Maoniu in the south.” In terms of ethnic relationship, Lushan and Ya’an were the borderland in which Han Chinese and “Southwest Barbarians” mingled and cohabitated. In 97 BCE (the fourth year of the Tianhan Era) after communicating with the “Southwest Barbarians,” Emperor Wudi established two commanderies: “one stationed at Maoniu to administer the barbarians outside the borders, and the other at Qingyi to govern the Chinese.” It is obvious

that there had been a long history of multiethnic cohabitation by that time.

The opening of the “Southern Route of Silk Road” is closely connected with the control of the southwest borders in the Han Empire. The aforementioned Fan Min stele, the Mr. Yang stele, the images and inscription on Wang Hui’s sarcophagus, and these large-scale zoomorphic sepulchral sculptures, all suggest the high cultural achievements of the local Chinese elite and the deep influence of Chinese culture in this multiethnic southwest borderland. Furthermore, since the Qiang and Di, the Maoni, and the “South Barbarian” were all nomadic tribes that have high mobility, in the process of cultural communication between them and the Han people, various cultural elements were able to be spread faster and wider.

It is worth noting that winged stone animals similar to those found in Lushan and Ya’an are also discovered in the further south such as the Yuexi commandery of the Han Dynasty. For example, a stone pillar dated to 181 CE (the fourth year of Emperor Lingdi’s Guanghe Era of Eastern Han) and a stone tablet with relief of divine animals were discovered at Haogu Township, Zhaojue county, Liangshan Prefecture. The tablet, made out of red sandstone, contains a “unicorn” (*qilin*) and a “phoenix” (*fenghuang*) in low bas-relief, and is now housed in the Zhaojue County library. The phoenix is damaged, but the unicorn is in perfect condition. The unicorn has a horn, four hooves, a long tail, and long wings from the shoulders. It is analogous to the winged animals from Lushan and Ya’an in terms of how the wings were fashioned – they all have thick and strong feathered wings with smooth lines, similar to those of the winged beasts from Central and West Asia. Except for the long horn and the feathered wings, this Zhaojue animal has the characteristics of a horse – a horse head, four legs, and four hooves. Thus it could be called “Heavenly Horse” (Figure 3). This type of “Heavenly Horse” images appears often in Eastern Han stone carvings from Sichuan. They can be classified into three types: the first type is the “Heavenly Horse” images on stone gate towers of the Han Dynasty, the second those on stone or brick reliefs, and the last those on cliff tombs (Figure 4). I think these “Heavenly Horse” images, along with those aforementioned *tianlu*, *bixie*, and lions, all came from the Western Regions. Its paired wings and large body fit the image of “divine dragon” in Han legends. It corroborates the descriptions in his-

toric literature that Heavenly Horse and divine dragon could carry a person to climb the Kunlun Mountain, to enter the Heavenly Gate, and finally to ascend the paradise. Therefore, the image of the winged Heavenly Horse resulted from the cultural communication between China and the West. We have firm evidence to demonstrate that these winged horses are indeed “Heavenly Horse” because in the recently discovered winged horse image on a stone gate tower in Dengjiatuo, Zhongxian, Chongqing Municipality there is an inscription identifying the image as “Heavenly Horse (Figure 5).” Lo-



Figure 3. The Winged Divine Animal on the Stone Relief Unearthed from Haogu Township, Zhaojue County, Sichuan



Figure 4. The Image of Tianma (Heavenly Horse) on an Eastern Han Sarcophagus Unearthed in Xinjin County, Sichuan



Figure 5. The Image and Inscription of Tianma (Heavenly Horse) on the Stone Gate Tower in Dengjiatuo, Zhongxian County, Chongqing

cated at the right side of the square stone *dou*-block on the left tower, this image depicts a standing horse with raised head. The winged body of the horse is decorated with whirling cloud pattern. Above the horseback is a label with two Chinese characters in clerical style “*tianma*”(heavenly horse), opposite of which on the left side is an image of “*tianlu*” (heavenly blessings).

Historic records indicate that during the Han and the Six Dynasties in southwest there were many local “Heavenly Horse Shrines” that were dedicated to the worship of the Heavenly Horse. Such were the cases under the headings of “Huiwu 会无 County” and “Jiangyuan 江原 County” in the “Shuzhi” chapter in *Huayang guozhi* 华阳国志 (Records of the States to the South of Mount Hua). Jiangyuan County was established in the Han Dynasty and continued later. It constitutes

present-day Chongzhou City and the southwest of the Min River in Guanxian County. Huiwu County was under the Yuexi commandery, and is present-day Huili County. Tanglang was under the Qianwei commandery during the Han Dynasty. The last two counties both are to the south of Qiongzhou. The appearance of “Heavenly Horse Shrines” in these areas suggests that the “Heavenly Horse” worship popular since the Han Dynasty spread from the Han people dominated southern Shaanxi and Shu commandery to the regions of the “Southwest Barbarians” as recorded in Sima Qian’s *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian). The distribution and spread of such winged divine animals as “Heavenly Horse,” “[Bringers of] heavenly blessings,” “Averters of evil,” and lions in the Sichuan region may suggest the direction of the “Southern Route of Silk Road.”

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