

Social Functions and Cultural Connotations of Chinese Winged Beast Images—A Case Study on the Traceability of Winged Beast Images in the Chunqiu Pavilion Relief of Guandi Temple in Zhoukou

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Abstract: This paper starts with the relief winged beast images in the Guandi Temple in Zhoukou, a Qing Dynasty architecture in China. Firstly, the content and characteristics of the images are analyzed, and it is speculated that this image may have two origins: one is the absorption and development of other regional cultures, and the other is the traditional Chinese mythical beasts images. Secondly, several possible references for the existence of this relief winged beast have been verified. Based on its design and the geographical considerations of the Zhoukou area, it is believed that the winged beast image of the Chunqiu Pavilion in the Guandi Temple in Zhoukou may have originated from the image of the local Chinese mythical creature "Longque". Finally, through the study of the development of Chinese religious culture, the author concludes that Chinese winged beast images may have inherited both foreign and local models. However, regardless of the type, the connotation of Chinese winged beast images has homogeneity and ambiguity. Most winged beast images that appear in China have the function of dispelling disasters, warding off evil, and praying for good fortune.

1. Introduction

The Guandi Temple is located on Anfuqiang Street, Chuanhui District, Zhoukou City, Henan Province, adjacent to the Shaying River to the south. It was first built in the 32nd year of the Kangxi reign of the Qing Dynasty (1693 AD) and has undergone multiple expansions. It is a guild hall building funded by merchants from Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces, also known as the "Shanshan Guild Hall". It is one of the few surviving Qing Dynasty buildings with the characteristic of "temple hall integration". The Chunqiu Pavilion in the second courtyard of the Guandi Temple was built in the fifth year of the Jiaqing reign of the Qing Dynasty (1800 AD) and is located at the deepest part of the overall architectural layout. It has a width of seven bays and a depth of five bays, with a

double eaved gable roof covered in blue glazed tiles, making it the highest standard building in the Guandi Temple in Zhoukou. The columns in the Chunqiu Pavilion have square plinths. The south side contains a total of eight columns. Each plinth has four images on it, and the winged beast relief discussed in this paper is located among them.

2. Overview of Wing Beasts in the Spring and Autumn Pavilions of Zhoukou Guandi Temple

The images on the plinths of the Chunqiu Pavilion in the Guandi Temple in Zhoukou contain a large number of auspicious beasts and flowers, which are used for decoration or have symbolic meanings, such as “kylin looking at the sun”, “rhinoceros looking at the moon”, “enfeoffment as a marquis on horseback”, and “like a tiger who has got wings”. There is no controversy over such subjects. Although several images have distinctive artistic styles, they are relatively common and have nothing unusual to study. Only one image of a winged beast is relatively novel and worthy of in-depth research.



Sourced from the author's self-photography.

Figure 1: Winged Beast in Chunqiu Pavilion

This image is located on the north side of the first plinth from the west of the southern columns(Figure 1), with shallow relief carving of stacked mountain stones, showing the distance and occlusion relationship of the stones, with a certain perspective and hierarchy. Upright mythical beast, bird headed beast body, beak to head ratio close to 1:1, long neck with mane, body with double wings, wings branching out into three branches, wings with fishbone like skeleton inside. The body of the mythical beast resembles a lion's body, with curly hair behind the knees, powerful limbs, bird claws on the feet, and a long tail curled up in an inverted "C" shape. The mythical beast spat out a cloud like substance from its beak, resembling a spewing flame or possibly symbolizing its vocalization. There are two possible evolutionary paths for this winged beast image: one is the absorption and development of foreign cultures, and the other is the local culture.

3. Traceability of winged beasts

3.1. Exchanges between China and other regions

The cultural exchange and integration between China and foreign countries in the Qing Dynasty were already quite profound. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the export porcelain was famous overseas, and the Qing Dynasty's foreign trade was flourishing. During the Qing Dynasty, Zhoukou was a commercial hub in Henan Province and one of the most culturally integrated cities in the Central Plains region. It was inevitable for external cultures to merge and develop here. There are two major possibilities for the external origin of this winged beast. One is that the image of this mythical beast is derived from the image of the mythical beast Griffin in the Eurasian civilization Figure 2(1). At the latest, the Griffin pattern was introduced to China through the northern grassland ethnic route during the Eastern Zhou period. ^[1]Griffin's artistic expression is characterized by an eagle head and lion body, wings, and a tail like a rolled grass, which strongly overlaps with the winged beast in this image; The other is derived from the image of the golden winged bird in Buddhism and Hinduism Figure 2(2). The golden winged bird is regarded as the king of all birds in Buddhism and Hinduism, capable of catching snakes and dragons, with colorful wings, eagle head, bird claws, and human body. It is the mount of Vishnu's eighth incarnation, the Black Sky. ^[2]

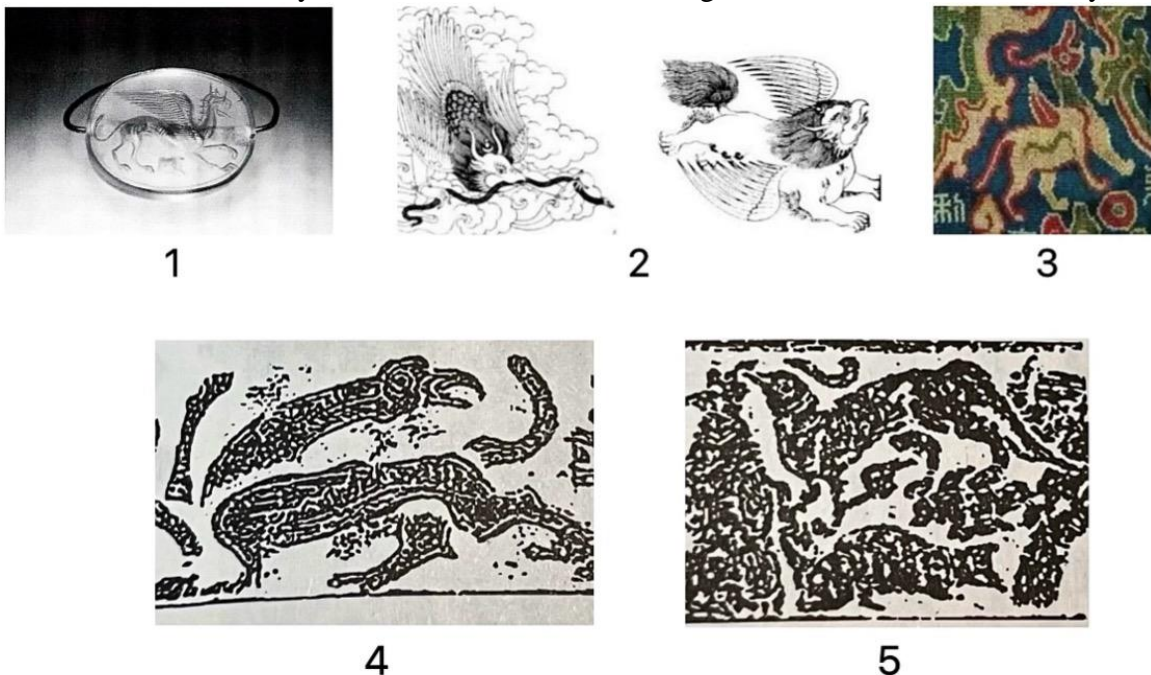


Figure 2(1) Emitash Museum Griffin, derived from Liu Zao's "Flying Griffin"; Figure 2(2) Golden winged bird, derived from Sun Yi's "Analysis of Bird Patterns in Tang and Song Weaving and Embroidery Products"; Figure 2(3) partial brocade "five stars originated form the east" winged beast, sourced from Yi Degang and Qian Yi's "The Spread of Griffin Patterns in China", Silk, 2023; Figure 2(4) Longque, Late Eastern Han Dynasty, portrait stone from Yinan, Shandong, sourced from Pan Pan's "Research on Han Dynasty mythical Beast Images"; Figure 2(5)Longque, Eastern Han Dynasty, the mountain wall of the ancestral hall in Pangkou Village, Lujing Township, Xuzhou, originated from Pan Pan's "Research on the Images of mythical Beasts in the Han Dynasty".

Figure 2: Winged Beasts

3.2. Traditional Chinese winged animal image

The development of native winged beasts in China is profound and complex, mostly popular during the Han Dynasty. There is an image of a native winged beast in the brocade "five stars originated from the east" Figure 2(3), but currently no research has indicated the specific source of its image. In addition, Mr. Wu Hong once studied the inscriptions on the portrait stones of the first year of Yuanjia in Cangshan. Through written records, he speculated that the inscriptions corresponded to the image on the back of the front room horizontal banner. Among them, there is an image of a winged beast with a bird head, animal body, long neck, and four legs, which should be the "Longque" referred to in the inscription. This kind of bird headed beast with a beast body is mainly found on stone portraits from the late Eastern Han Dynasty in the Jiangsu-Shandong-Henan-Anhui Region Figure 2(4), Figure 2(5). These bird headed beasts with two wings are likely to be the "Longque" mentioned in the inscriptions on the Cangshan portrait stones, which can dispel disasters.^[3]

The exotic winged beasts and the native winged beasts in China have strong similarities in certain characteristics, but it is not difficult to see that the two have different morphological features, and the possibility of homology is low. They should both have their own independent evolutionary paths. The origin of this beast image is quite diverse. Based on its design and the geographical considerations, the author believes that the winged beast image in Chunqiu Pavilion is most likely a development and transformation of the image of the Chinese local winged beast "Longque", and an extension and inheritance of the development context of the local winged beast.

4. Conclusion

The image of winged beasts mostly originated from religion. The development of religion in China had become relatively homogeneous by the Qing Dynasty, and the Buddhist scholar Mouzi's "Theory of Reasoning and Confusion" during the Wei-jin South-north Dynasty had already proposed the consistency of Confucianism and Buddhism.^[4] The convergence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism deepened continuously with the change of dynasties. Buddhism, as a foreign religion, had already achieved localization as early as the Tang and Song dynasties, and the religious concept of "using the outside for the inside" was no longer a precedent. The winged beast images in Chunqiu Pavilion, even if borrowed from other cultural winged animal images, have similarities and ambiguities in their core connotations. Their functions are similar to those of the Chinese native winged beasts, the "Longque", which is used to ward off disasters, ward off evil, and pray for good fortune.

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