

GATEKEEPERS TO THE OTHER WORLD: HUMAN-FACED CREATURES AS TOMB PROTECTORS IN THE NORTHERN WEI

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ABSTRACT

In the late fifth century, a peculiar type of guardian beast figurine appeared inside the tomb chambers in the Datong vicinity, dated to the Northern Wei Pingcheng period. Found within the tombs of Sima Jinlong (484) and Yanbei shiyuan M2 (late fifth century), this specific type of hybrid creature has been given the term *renmian zhenmushou* in their respective tomb reports. Archaeologists made a note of pointing out that the two clearly originated from the same tradition of craftsmanship, and that the discovery of these two hybrid creatures in the funerary sets was a peculiar finding that later had a lasting impact on human-faced guardian beasts that was carried on throughout the Northern dynasties and into the Sui and Tang periods.

Keywords: human-faced creature, Northern Wei, Pingcheng, tomb figurine, tomb protector

1. INTRODUCTION

The debut of human-faced guardian beast figures found in tomb chambers of the Northern Wei (386-534 CE) marks one aspect in which mythical amalgamations of foreign belief systems was accepted by, and appealed to, medieval Chinese funerary tradition. The notion of human-faced animal figures in hybrid form had long existed in the traditional Chinese imagination, as depicted in detail in *Shanhai jing* 山海经, but endowing this figure the function of a protector to a sacred liminal space was, in my view, born out of mythological amalgamations that took place in northern China in the fifth century.¹ Much scholarly work has been done on the typology of these human-faced bestial figures of the Northern Dynasties period, but so far, questions as to what possible sources gave impetus to this form and how the choice of combining a human face to a feline mammalian torso might have impacted the meaning and function of such a guardian creature in the Chinese context remain unanswered.

¹ Human-faced birds will not be a part of this discussion.

In the preface to Donald MacKenzie's *The Migration of Symbols and their Relations to Beliefs and Customs*, he points out that since existing textual and archaeological findings all suggest that the funerary and other ritual practices of the ancients were undoubtedly linked to belief systems regarding the fate of mankind, it would be hard to imagine that the crafts and designs created by the ancients were objects of art for the sake of art, without any symbolic meaning.^[1] With this in mind, this paper attempts to place the Northern Wei human-faced tomb guardian beasts in a wider context of the human-faced guardian creature tradition, and to explore what possible significance the human face might bear in the function attributed to these otherworldly creatures for such a choice to be made in Northern Wei tombs. The choice of affixing a human face to a feline mammalian torso ultimately became the vanguard to a new funerary guardian beast tradition that was to be carried on throughout the Northern dynasties and into the Sui and Tang periods. It might even be said that the popularity of this specific hybrid pairing derived from the duality of human and animal features. If the apotropaic function of the traditional guardian beasts stemmed from using beastliness to ward off evil, the efficacy of the new human-faced hybrid creature derived from the divinity of precisely such a duality, as a human mind harnessed the physicality of the beast.

2. *Renmian zhenmushou* OF THE NORTHERN WEI

Renmian zhenmushou 人面镇墓兽 (human-faced tomb guardian beasts) first appeared in a Chinese funerary figurine set in the early Northern Wei, one each, within the tombs of Sima Jinlong 司马金龙 (484) and Yanbei shiyuan 雁北师院 M2 (late fifth century),² both located in the Datong vicinity. This specific type of hybrid creature in both tombs has been given the term *renmian zhenmushou* in their respective tomb reports. Archaeologists have made a note of pointing out that the two clearly originated from the same tradition of craftsmanship, and that the discovery of these two hybrid creatures in the funerary sets was a peculiar finding.^[2] Why such a peculiar and specific type anthropomorphic creature debuted in Pingcheng period (398-494 CE) brick chamber tombs is the question that motivated this paper.

The two human-faced guardian beasts share several common physical features: bowed head, tucked chin, fish-scale pattern painted on the torso, rectangular holes punctured on the neck and back, hoof-shaped feet, and finally, fixed to a bottom board piece also made of clay. Both are made of gray clay pottery; body and head made by a two-piece mold, with limbs and tail made separately. The different parts were refined after the pieces were put together, fired in the kiln

² Though Yanbei shiyuan M2 does not contain an epitaph for a precise dating of this tomb, in the styling and technique in the making of the specific type of human-faced guardian beasts, it shares many similarities with Yanbei shiyuan M5 (477). In tomb structure and techniques applied in the making of the tomb figurines, they are close to that of Sima Jinlong (484). This gives us a good ball park as to the dating of Yanbei shiyuan M2, somewhere in the late fifth century.

then finally painted in color. The most significant difference between these two human-faced guardian beasts is the body position that the creatures were given in their creation. The one found in Yanbei shiyuan M2 stands tall on four limbs, paired as a set with a guardian beast that kneels on its hind legs. The latter is given the torso of a tiger, with rounded eyes and a gaping mouth. Incidentally, the other belonging to Sima Jinlong exists not as a set, but as an individual piece of guardian figure keeling on its hind legs without the companionship of a guardian beast. In a way, the concept embodied in the figurine pair of guardian beast and guardian soldier set that became a fixed major mortuary category since the Western Jin 西晋 was condensed into this new creation of a human-faced guardian beast form in the Northern Wei Pingcheng period.^[3] However, in the Pingcheng period, we see that the guardian pair had yet to be standardized, appearing as a singular piece of guardian beast or as a pair of two, one human-faced and the other bestial-faced, indicating a formative period when the notion of a human-faced guardian beast was first introduced into the mortuary set.^[4] After the relocation of the capital to Luoyang in 494 CE, the mortuary guardian figurine set became standardized always in pairs of two guardian beasts, one human-faced and the other bestial-faced.^[5]

The *renmian zhenmushou* of Yanbei shiyuan M2 is 40 cm in length, 33.9 cm at its highest point, and was found located on the east side of the entrance to the tomb chamber (fig. 1).^[6] The human head wears a black rounded hat, with thin brows and thin eyes, high nose and big ears, slightly parted lips, and cheeks colored in rouge. The archaeological report determines the body of the creature to be a horse's torso with legs of a tiger, standing tall on four limbs, fixed to a base board that is 21.3 cm long and 0.3 cm thick. Fish-scale pattern outlined in thin black lines cover most of the body, overlaid with a strong red shading. The tail of the creature is bent backward, and the end of the tail is split in two, curled on the back of the creature's torso. According to the report, the creature's neck and back has four rectangular shaped holes that are each 2.2-2.6 cm long and 0.4-0.6 cm wide. Archaeologists hypothesize that the holes were intended for installing *zonglie* 鬃鬣, long hair on the neck of an animal, such as a horse's mane. Though the report does not go into such detail, the lack of the actual *zonglie* on the clay figurine most likely suggests that they were likely to have been made of organic materials which have long deteriorated.



Fig. 1: *Renmian zhenmushou* of Yanbei shiyuan M2.

After Liu Junxi 刘俊喜, *Datong Yanbei shiyuan BeiWei muqun*大同雁北师院北魏墓群, Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2008, p. 165.

The *renmian zhenmushou* inside the tomb of Sima Jinlong is 34 cm tall, with a base board that is 29.3 cm long (fig. 2).^[7] On its hind legs in a kneeling position, the human face of the clay figure is painted in white powder, with white scale-like patterns on the torso. Rectangular holes are also punctured on the neck and back of this figurine, and while the one in Yanbei shiyuan M2 has four holes, this human-faced guardian beast has five. Again, the report puts forth the hypothesis that it was intended for an installation in the representation of the creature's *zonglie*. On top of its head is a protruding piece which the archaeological report does not define. However, in his thesis examining the guardian beast figure in the Northern dynasties, Yue Gairong describes the protruding piece as a horn in the shape of a hair knot.^[8] Whether or not the protruding bit on top of the creature's head is indeed a horn, a hair knot, or something else, is another question that I would like to put forth and explore later in this paper within the context of mythical creatures with human face and animal body in the Chinese imagination.



Fig. 2: *Renmian zhenmushou* of Sima Jinlong tomb

After Shanxi sheng Datong shi bowuguan 山西省大同市博物馆 and Shanxi sheng wenwu gongzuo weiyuanhui 山西省文物工作委员会, “Shanxi Datong Shijiazhai BeiWei Sima Jinlong mu” 山西大同石家寨北魏司马金龙墓, *Wenwu* 文物, 1972(3), p. 24.

3. HYBRID CREATURES IN THE CHINESE MYTHICAL TRADITION

A discussion of Chinese hybrid creatures cannot take place without looking into *Shanhai jing* 山海经 (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*) for an understanding of the Chinese mythical imagination. As a compendium on ancient geography and mythology, versions of which have existed since the 4th century BCE, *Shanhai jing* contains literary depictions of several mythical creatures in hybrid form that have commonly been referenced by scholars as prototypes that later developed into the human-faced tomb guardian beasts that began to appear in mortuary sets in the fifth century.

First and foremost is the primordial depiction of *Xiwangmu* 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West) as a divine creature with hybrid physical attributes who resides in the Kunlun Mountains. This divine being is described several times in the passages of *Shanhai jing*. In one, *Xiwangmu* is said to appear in human form, with a leopard's tail and teeth of a tiger.^[9] In another, *Xiwangmu* has the face of a human and torso of a tiger, covered in white spotted fur and consisting of a white tail.^[10] Despite subtle differences in the literary depictions, what remains consistent is that the primordial representation of *Xiwangmu* was a divine creature with hybrid physical attributes and a fierce bestial temperament. However, it is only later in the Han tombs where *Xiwangmu*'s bestial nature diminished in a process of selective abbreviation, ultimately depicting the divine being as a regal matronly figure that we are now so accustomed to seeing, often seated on the back of divine animals.

Also in *Shanhai jing* are two guardian creatures of the Kunlun Mountain that are of interest to this paper – *kaimingshou* 开明兽 (Enlightened Beast) and *luwu* 陆吾 (also known as *jianwu* 肩吾, Beast Responsible for Resistance). In its literary depictions, *kaimingshou* is said to have the body of a tiger and nine-heads with human faces.^[11] It stands on top of the Kunlun Mountain, facing east, guarding the mountain where the divine beings reside. It is said that the Kunlun Mountain has nine gates on each side, and the gates are each guarded by a *kaimingshou*. In a way, we can treat *kaimingshou* as the “gatekeeper” to the Kunlun Mountain, and each of its nine heads is designated to guarding one of the nine gates. Another hybrid creature associated with the “caretaking” of the Kunlun Mountain is the *luwu*, which has the body of a tiger with nine tails, human face, and tiger claws. As depicted in the *Shanhai jing*, the mountains of Kunlun are the earthly residence of the Heavenly Emperor, where the divine creature *luwu* was put in charge to manage the imperial park.^[12] Here, the shared traits of the body of a tiger and the number nine make us wonder if *kaimingshou* and *luwu* derived from the same prototype, a divine creature guarding the realms of the Kunlun Mountain that has the ability to split itself into nine parts when needed in order to guard the nine gates on each side of the mountain, as dictated in the Chinese mythological imagination.

The roles of *kaimingshou* and *luwu* as “gatekeeper” and “caretaker” as depicted in *Shanhai jing* present the two literary hybrid creatures of divine capabilities as the most prominent prototypes for the human-faced guardian beasts of the funerary tradition. One of the main reasons why the *renmian zhenmushou* clay figurines are often attributed to these two specific mythical creatures is most likely due to their roles as protectors of the Kunlun Mountain, an attributed most desired in a funerary space intended as home to the tomb occupants in life after death. However, the fact that both *kaimingshou* and *luwu* are defined by their ability to physically split into nine parts makes it questionable why this feature had not been continued into the funerary tradition with the clay figurines. Certainly, the case could be made that the need for divisibility was so that the

divine guardian creature could attend to the nine gates on each side of the Kunlun Mountain, and since the tomb chambers only have one entrance, this feature was negligible. Putting a specific name to these hybrid images that appeared in the Northern Wei funerary repertoire is not what this paper is trying to attempt, but simply to explore the significance of hybrid creatures, especially those with human traits, in the Chinese mythical imagination. As such, I would like to put forward another hybrid creature from *Shanhai jing* that appears to be, in my view, another likely candidate that had contributed to the features that gave birth to the *renmian zhenmushou* figural representation in the Northern Wei funerary tradition ----- *mafu*.

Mafu 马腹 is another literary imagination derived from *Shanhai jing*, which has the face of a human and the body of a tiger; it makes the sound of a crying baby, and it devours humans. According to the literary descriptions, *mafu* roams in the realms where the Yi River, having originated in the Manqu Mountain, flows into the Luo River.^[13] When read in juxtaposition against the *Shuijing zhu* 水经注, a compendium on the waterways written by the Northern Wei geography Li Daoyuan 酈道元, we are given a more accurate account of how the Yi River meanders through the region: The Yi River flows out of the Manqu Mountain located to the west of Luyang county of the Nanyang commandery; the river then bends northeast to the south of Luoyang county, and then flows north into the Luo River. From this geographical account, we can place the “birthplace” of the mythical construct of *mafu* in the vicinity of the Nanyang commandery, because it consists of the Yi River basin before it merges into the Luo River.^[14] Incidentally, it is also at Nanyang where we come to find a significant number of Han dynasty pictorial stone slabs that contain images of a specific type of human-faced tiger that seems to correspond to the literary depiction of *mafu*. Most interestingly, these particular creatures appear to bear a physical attribute that befits the peculiarity that we find on the Northern Wei human-faced tomb guardian creatures.

On a pictorial brick found in the Western Han tomb of Tanghe dianchang 唐河电厂 in Nanyang, Henan province, we see a depiction of three creatures (fig. 3). To the left are two deer, and the creature to the right is a divine beast with human face and the body of a tiger. Scholars have determined this to be a visual representation of the *mafu* in *Shanhai jing*. This creature has its head raised high, eyes wide open, tiger patterned stripes, and its tail raised in the air. But the most distinguishing aspect is what seems to be a Han dynasty *pingshang ze* 平上帻 (fig. 4) or *pingjin ze* 平巾帻 (fig. 5) sitting on top of its head. *Ze* was originally a piece of cloth used to wrap up one’s hair, to be placed underneath the *guan* 冠 cap, but later it developed into a casual soft hat in the form of *pingshang ze*. *Pingjin ze* is just a variation in the late Eastern Han when the back of the soft hat is raised. Han dynasty soldiers of the lowest ranks without a military *guan* cap wore these soft hats instead. Similarly, in another piece of pictorial stone found at the

Huagongbu Erjiaochang 化工部二胶厂 site in Nanyang, the human-faced tiger has its hair brushed upward, with mane on both sides (fig. 6). Though without any form of accessory on its head, the hairstyle is very similar to the type of hairdo called *maotou* 旄头, which suggests an unkempt hairstyle that is brushed back and pulled upward, worn by unadorned Han soldiers to intimidate their opponents (fig. 7). Finally, in Huming 湖明 county in Tanghe, Henan province, a stone tomb door panel dated to the Xin dynasty 新朝 (9-23 AD) between the Western and Eastern Han has, carved in relief, another depiction of *mafu* (fig. 8). In this image, the human head is amalgamated into the tiger torso at its chest, and the body is depicted with tiger spots. The head of the creature is held up high, and what appears to be a bare hair knot sits on top of its head, tied up and backward in the shape of a *luji* 露髻 (fig. 9).



Fig. 3: Three creatures depicted on a pictorial relief brick found in the Western Han tomb of Tanghe dianchang 唐河电厂 in Nanyang, Henan province. The one on the right is identified to be *mafu*. Author's photo.

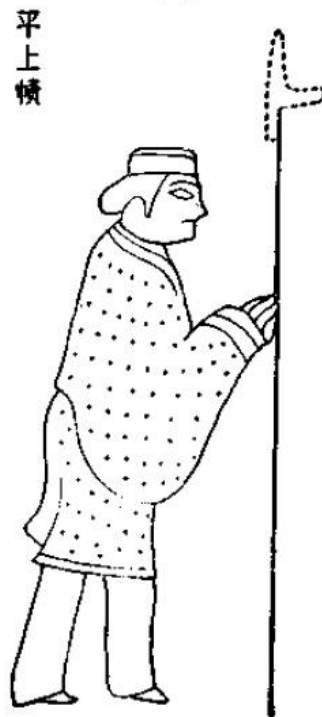


Fig. 4: Han dynasty *pingshang ze*

After Sun Ji 孙机, *Han dai wuzhi wenhua ziliao tushuo* 汉代物质文化资料图说, 1991, p. 231, fig. 57-11.



Fig. 5: Han dynasty *pingjin ze*

After Sun Ji, *Han dai wuzhi wenhua ziliao tushuo*, p. 231, fig. 57-12.



Fig. 6: A Han pictorial stone relief found at the Huagongbu Erjiaochang 化工部二胶厂 site in Nanyang, the human-faced tiger has its hair brushed upward, with mane on both sides, identified to be *mafu*.

After Liu Xinghuai 刘兴怀 and Shan Xiushan 闪修山 (eds.), *Nanyang Han dai mumen hua yishu* 南阳汉代墓门画艺术, Shanghai: Baijia chubanshe, 1989, p. 23, fig. 13.



Fig. 7: *maotou* hairstyle, worn by unadorned Han soldiers to intimidate their opponents.

After Sun Ji, *Han dai wuzhi wenhua ziliao tushuo*, p. 235, fig. 58-5.



Fig. 8: A Han pictorial stone relief tomb door panel dated to the Xin dynasty between the Western and Eastern Han, found in Huming county in Tanghe, Henan province. The top figure is identified to be a *mafu*.

After Liu Xinghuai and Shan Xiushan (edts.), *Nanyang Han dai mumen hua yishu*, p. 71, fig. 80.



Fig. 9: Bare Hair-knot known as *luji*.

After Sun Ji, *Han dai wuzhi wenhua ziliao tushuo*, p. 231, fig. 57-1.

From these, we notice an emphasis on the hairdo or head accessory applied on the human-faced animal body creatures in the Han images, possibly to reinforce the notion that it is indeed representing a human head and not a head of an animal, therefore the need for different hairdo and accessories. Here, the protruding piece that has been described by their respective reports as a black rounded cap and a horn in the shape of a hair-knot on the tomb guardian creatures of Yanbei shiyuan M2 and Sima Jinlong could have been made to represent some sort of a cap, as the protruding pieces are rounded in circumference but with a flat top, and they seem to sit just above the tip of the manes of the creatures.

I believe that the artisans who first worked on the Northern Wei human-faced tomb guardian creatures carried on this visual practice of using hairdo and head accessory to reinforce the idea that they are depicting a creature with a human head and, indeed, one with human mentality. Here, we are confronted by such an understanding of the Chinese mythical world. That the amalgamation of a human head to a four-legged mammalian beast indicates the harnessing of bestial nature at the command of the divine, using beastliness to repel off evilness. As such, it is natural that these hybrid creatures came to assume the function of a “protector” of a realm, and in the process of mortuary developments, several features developed that may confound the viewer as they appear to have digressed from the traditional Chinese visual imagination. However, I believe that we could find several outside sources of stimulus in the late fifth century that could have triggered these developments.

4. HUMAN OVER BEAST

Though compared to *kaimingshou* and *luwu*, *mafu* was never given the role of gate-keeper or caretaker in the literary depictions of *Shanhai jing*. Far from it, *mafu* was actually a monster in hybrid form that makes an eerie sound like the cries of a baby and devours human beings. However, I believe that in the Northern Wei mortuary set, the efficacy of the new human-faced hybrid creatures derived not so much from the divinity suggested in such supernatural creatures, but the ability of the human psyche to harness the physicality of the beast.

I believe that the motif known as *shenhui* 神徽 (divine emblem), which appeared on the jade vessels derived from the Liangzhu Neolithic settlement (3400-2250 BC) in the Yangtze River Delta of China, best demonstrates the tug of war between the divine and the demonic within one entity. The relief and line carving pattern on the Fanshan M12 jade *cong* 琮 is most complex and most complete, depicting a man wearing feathered-headress riding on the back of a round-eyed beast in the act of subduing it (fig. 10). On the *cong*, both the head of the rider and the face of the beast were carved in low relief raised above the vessel surface, whereas the arms of the rider and the limbs of the beast were done in line carving below the vessel surface. As such, we see that the artisan intended to highlight the facial features of the two entities. What is of most interest to me is that the *shenhui* motif was depicted in its most complete form during the early mid-Liangzhu period, after which, depending on the jade vessel types, the motif image underwent two forms of simplification. On vessel types such as the *cong*, *shenhui* was simplified to emphasizing the divine being with a tendency of erasing the bestial face altogether. On vessel types such as the *huang* 璜, the bestial face was made more prominent so as to overpower the image of the divine being. Clearly, the intent behind the creation of such a motif is a visual construct that embodies the notion that beastliness could be subdued and employed by divinity.



Fig. 10: The relief and line carving pattern on the Fanshan M12 jade *cong* from the Liangzhu site depicts a man wearing feathered-headdress riding on the back of a round-eyed beast in the act of subduing it.

After Zhejiang province Cultural Bureau official website: <http://www.zjww.gov.cn/news/2014-01-06/823553388.shtml>

Indeed, some of the most famous guardian figures in global mythical traditions share this same notion of warding off evil with harnessed beastliness. When we think of the sculptural tradition of human-faced bestial forms in a global context, the sphinx (human head and lion body) is inevitably the first image that comes to mind, mostly because of the world-renowned Great Sphinx of Giza standing on the west bank of the Nile in Giza, Egypt. It is the oldest known monumental sculpture in Egypt, and is commonly believed to have been built in the Old Kingdom during the reign of the Pharaoh Khafre (c. 2558 – 2532 BCE). Most likely a representation of the Egyptian pharaoh, the Great Sphinx of Giza embodies the pharaoh in the form of a lion smiting its enemy. However, why the sphinx sculpture was built and for what purpose is still subject to debate. In fact, it was only given the name “sphinx” by the historians and geographers of Greece who wrote extensively about Egyptian culture, that the Greek name *sphinx* was applied to this form of sculpture even before the time that Alexander the Great occupied Egypt. In the Greek legend “Oedipus and the Sphinx”, it is a mythical beast with a

lion's body, a woman's head, wings of an eagle and a malevolent temperament who guarded the gateway between birth/death and immortality. In the Greek mythical tradition, the sphinx would devour anyone who failed to answer her riddle. The ferocious and malevolent strength displayed by the sphinx, both literally in Greek mythologies and visually in the Egyptian tradition, made it a suitable guardian figure considered to have apotropaic magic.

Another tradition of human-headed animal sculptures, one that differed from the Egyptian sphinx, appeared in ancient Mesopotamia as a human-headed winged or wingless bull or lion motif, known as lamassu, or shedu. The lamassu were said to have existed in the Assyrian understanding of having its origins in the supernatural realm of demons, rather than deities. Despite such demonic origins, they were developed into apotropaic figures that warded off evil. Monumental sculptures of the lamassu were particularly common in the Neo-Assyrian Empire (c. 883 – 612 BCE) when the lamassu guarded the entrances to temples and city gates, typically placed in pairs of two, such as in Khorsabad and Nineveh. The sculptures were created with much ingenuity, as “double aspect” figures in high relief or stand-alone sculptures. From the front view the lamassu appear to stand, and from the side, it appears to be walking. To achieve this, the lamassu, in some versions, has five legs, which is apparent when viewed obliquely. This type of divine being lasted into the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550 – 330 BCE), appearing in palaces of the Achaemenid kings. We can still see them at the Gate of All Nations, also known as the Gate of Xerxes, in Persepolis. There, a pair of massive bulls stand in high relief as the capitals of the columns that lead into the western entrance.

Lamassus do not only appear as architectural sculptures on a colossal scale. Pieces of gold plaque found in Ziwiye hoard of Iran, dated to around seventh century BC, also contain this visual motif. The plaques are perforated around the edge, possibly once attached to a garment or to the shroud of a Persian Prince. The gold plaque, currently in the collection Metropolitan Museum in New York, USA, originally consisted of seven horizontal registers decorated in repoussé and chasing; two were separated and are now in the collection of the Archaeological Museum in Tehran, Iran.³ Each horizontal register contains six divine creatures and animals, three on each side of the central axis made up of the Tree of Life. Within a set, the lamassu leads the group at the front of the row, followed by other hybrid animals, all facing inward marching toward the Tree of Life. This archaeological finding indicates that the lamassu as an apotropaic figure did not only exist as colossal sculptures guarding temples and city gates, but was also

³ 见于《大都会博物馆美术全集·

埃及和古代近东》，1991年台湾麦克有限公司出版。收藏于伊朗德黑兰考古学博物馆的金饰片见于 Riman Ghirshman: *Persia From the Origins to Alexander the Great*. Printed in France 1964 [R.

格希施曼《波斯，从原始时代到亚历山大大帝》，1964，法国出版]

efficacious as an apotropaic motif to be worn by the elite as a personal item in life and/or in death.

Finally, I would like to turn to look at Zoroastrianism because it later served as one of the major channels of visual and conceptual transfer for western belief systems to be introduced into the Chinese sphere. Zoroastrianism enters recorded history in the mid-5th century BCE. Herodotus' *The Histories* (completed c. 440 BCE) includes a description of Greater Iranian society with what may be recognizably Zoroastrian features, including exposure of the dead. It was during the Achaemenid Empire when the Persian rulers began to follow the teachings of Zarathustra, the prophet who founded Zoroastrianism. Though scholars still cannot agree on precisely when Zoroastrianism became state religion of Achaemenid Persia, we know that the name of Ahura Mazda, the deity of wisdom of Zarathustra's hymns, began to show up in the inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings, the earliest known appearance is the Behistun inscriptions authored by Darius I (c.550 – 486 BCE).⁴ One of the primary symbols of Zoroastrianism is fire. Fire plays an important role in the Zoroastrian religion, as it did in the old Iranian religion before it, and many of the depictions of the Achaemenid kings show them worshipping before an altar of fire, which is a central part of the Zoroastrianism religion.

In the subsequent Sassanid period (224 – 651 CE), after having defeated the Parthians, Zoroastrianism was again reinstated as state religion as the founder of the empire Ardashir I (r. 226 – 240) fostered a revival of ancient Persian culture. Zoroastrianism became wide-spread in Central Asia, and it began to play a very important role in the cultural communication between China and Persia. Known to the Chinese as *xian* 祆⁵, a composite of the two graphs *tian* 天 (heaven) and *shen* 神 (deity), Zoroastrianism had most likely entered into China through two channels. In the north, according to *Wei shu* 魏书 (Book of Wei), Persia and the Northern Wei officially established relations in the year 455; in the south, the state of Liang 梁 officially established relations with Persia in the year 530. During the Northern Wei, there were altogether ten Persian delegations dispatched to northern China, five to Pingcheng and five to Luoyang, after the relocation of the capital. While the Persians who traveled to China at this time in the fifth century during the early Northern Wei had yet to leave behind much for us to take reference from, the Sogdians who came to China in the capacity of merchants served as agents/middlemen for cultural transfer between China and as far west as the Byzantine empire.

The Persian diplomats and Sogdian merchants who traveled to China in the fifth century were believers of Zoroastrianism. Through Zoroastrianism, Persian visual culture was transferred into

⁴ Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 1.103. Also, Avram R. Shannon, "The Achaemenid Kings and the Worship of Ahura Mazda: Proto-Zoroastrianism in the Persian Empire", *Studia Antiqua* 5.2 (2007): 79-85.

⁵ See Albert Dien on the terminology.

the Chinese mortuary sphere, mostly exhibited in line carving on stone couch beds and epitaphs. Of these different types of medium, epitaphs contain the most variety of mythical creatures derived from the Zoroastrianism mythical world. A good example is the epitaph belonging to Lady Yuan 元, wife of Feng Yong 冯邕, dated to 522 CE. Though no evidence exists to suggest that the lamassu, as a type of protector figure, had made its way into the plethora of divine creatures in the Zoroastrian belief, the mythical creatures found on epitaphs and stone couch beds of the Sogdian burials share several common features: monster-faced, human torso, eagle claws, burning flames on arms and shoulders.

As such, I would like to advance the notion that hybrid creatures consisting of animal and human features had indeed long been encoded into the ancient Egyptian and Western Asian visual culture. It was very likely that such a sculptural practice, or even, predilection, carried on strongly into medieval northern China, where indigenous familiarity with monster figures in hybrid form provided fertile ground for a new form of mortuary guardian beast with human head and animal torso to be developed in the Northern Wei and to be accepted by the Chinese consciousness.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, when looking at the debut of human-faced tomb guardian creatures, we are confronted by such an understanding of the Chinese mythical world, that the apotropaic agency of the Northern Wei *renmian zhenmushou* derived precisely from the ability of the human face to reign in the malevolent nature of the beast's physicality to ward off evilness, preventing harmful elements from entering into the tomb chamber. One can also say that the apparently sudden appearance of such a hybrid guardian creature type in the Chinese funerary tradition, as these human-faced divine beasts stepped out of pictorial stone carvings into three-dimensional sculptural figures in the Pingcheng tomb settings, demonstrates a convergence of indigenous mythical imaginations with foreign conceptual forms.

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