

THE FAVORITE ANIMAL: THE HORSE AS *MINGQI* IN HAN TOMBS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand the horse's societal roles in Han Dynasty China, especially its prevalence as *mingqi* (mortuary objects) in Han tombs. The Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) was the second imperial dynasty of China. Scientific and philosophical inventions, advances in material culture, and exchanges with surrounding regions witnessed considerable development during this period. The breeding of horses saw a surge during the Han Dynasty, and the Han Chinese expressed their fervor for horses in many aspects of their lives, including burying live horses and horse figures with the deceased in tombs.

The thesis examines the Han dynasty and its social and ideological background. It also uses archaeological evidence and literature texts to study the social functions of the horse in Han China, and the Han Chinese perceptions of the tomb, the afterlife, and *mingqi*. An analysis of a horse *mingqi* figure at the Johnson Museum of Art is also included. The thesis shows that the significance of the horse as a funerary item is closely related to the widespread use of horses in the daily life of the Han dynasty Chinese, from the elites to commoners, specifically in terms of transportation, military defense, and entertainment. Horses also were given mythical and symbolic meanings associated with the concept of the afterlife. These factors made the horse a part of the Chinese *mingqi* tradition and an important element of Chinese art, which explains the prevalence of horse figures in Han tombs.

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Introduction

The horse has played crucial roles in human societies for a long time. Although there have been debates about when and how the horse was domesticated, it is widely accepted that the initial location of horse domestication was the Eurasian Steppe, and currently the earliest clear evidence is at the Copper Age site of Botai in Kazakhstan, ca. 3,500 BCE (Outram et al. 2009). According to Anthony (2007, 200-01), horses were first tamed in the Pontic-Caspian steppes after 4800 BCE—long after other animals such as sheep, goats, pigs and cattle were domesticated—for food. The taming of horses for food and milk was the first stage of horse domestication, and the next stage was for transportation and military usage, followed by later stages involving companionship and recreational usage (Wan 2013, 15-16).

The breeding of horses in China generally followed the stages mentioned above. Transmitted from the Eurasian Steppe to China by the end of the 3rd millennium BCE (Wan 2013, 22), domestic horses have a longer history than that of dynastic China itself.¹ Recent studies show that both modern and ancient horses from China exhibit abundant genetic diversity within matrilineal mitochondrial DNA (Cai et al. 2009). This may suggest that after herds of primal horses had arrived in China, newly domesticated local mares complemented and thus expanded the horse population (Wan 2013, 10). Archaeological sites of horse and chariot burials have been discovered throughout China. As early as the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BCE), horses became important for transporting goods and supplies throughout the country, and for use as a demonstration and exercise of military might (Park 2002, 2-3). Horses served both to pull

¹ The first dynasty of China, according to Chinese tradition, was the Xia, emerging around 2100 BCE. Many historians hold a skeptical view of this early dynasty, seeing it as a mythical period that did not actually exist. The succeeding Shang dynasty, which ruled China from 1600 to 1046 BCE, has not aroused such controversies since its existence has been proven by firm archaeological and epigraphic evidence.

vehicles of the nobles and to pull chariots during wars. These transportation and military functions continued for centuries. Horses also served in leisure and recreational activities, where “dancing horses” delighted emperors in court ceremonies and men and women played polo and hunted from horseback, at least since the Han dynasty (7-8). The social and cultural contexts of ancient China also inspired people to endow horses with unique meanings beyond those mentioned above. Horses were tightly related to religion, mythology, and art in ancient China. Horse figures were widely buried as *mingqi* (mortuary objects) in tombs to aid the deceased in the afterlife, a funeral practice that also forms part of the history of Chinese funeral art.

This thesis seeks to understand the horse’s societal roles in Han Dynasty China, especially its prevalence as *mingqi* in Han tombs. The Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) was the second imperial dynasty of China, which is considered a golden age in Chinese history (Zhou 2003, 34). Scientific and philosophical inventions, advances in material culture, and exchanges with surrounding regions witnessed considerable development during this period. The breeding of horses saw a surge during the Han Dynasty, and the Han Chinese expressed their fervor for horses in many aspects of their lives. This thesis will address what factors made the horse an indispensable part of *mingqi* in Han China tombs. This question is important because it can contribute to the understanding of Han Chinese views of life and death and of Han Chinese perceptions of animal domestication and human-animal relations, especially how animals intersect with ancient Chinese’s religious and mortuary practices. Research on this topic thus helps us understand Han society, as well as human-animal relations in this period.

There has been research on the topic of horses in Han China. Among them, Cunha (1990) says the horse “is the most recurrent animal in the Chinese world, having been present from the dawn of Chinese culture, both on a mythical and symbolic level (3).” Li (1991) attributes the

Han Chinese worship of the horse god to the horse's indispensable roles in military, transportation, and agriculture (58-59). Park (2002) also states that "Throughout China's long and storied past, no animal has impacted its history as greatly as the horse," and suggests this was due to the horse's usefulness to human beings, especially as military, political, economic, or symbolic resources (2-65). Although Park's thesis does not focus specifically on the Han dynasty, I agree with his assessment, and further propose that the significance of the horse as a funerary item is closely related to the widespread use of horses in the daily life of the Han dynasty Chinese, from the elites to commoners, specifically in terms of transportation, military defense, and entertainment. Horses also were given mythical and symbolic meanings associated with the concept of the afterlife. These factors made the horse a part of the Chinese *mingqi* tradition and an important element of Chinese art, which explains the prevalence of horse figures in Han tombs. These claims will be supported by examples of archaeological evidence, literary texts, and artifact analysis.

In the thesis, I will first give a brief introduction to the Han dynasty, and the social and ideological background. Then, I will examine the social functions of the horse in Han China, and investigate the Han Chinese perceptions of the tomb, the afterlife, and *mingqi*. I will also provide an analysis of a horse *mingqi* figure at the Johnson Museum of Art as an example of typical horse *mingqi* figures in Han tombs. These discussions and the assembled evidence will support my proposed statements that horses' significant social roles and their mythical and symbolic meanings associated with Han Chinese religious beliefs and mortuary practices made the horse the deceased's favorite animal to be included in Han tombs.

The Han Dynasty

Imperial China started in 221 BCE when the “First Emperor” of Qin, Qin Shihuangdi, conquered the other six kingdoms of the previous Warring States period (475 – 221 BCE) and established the first unified Chinese imperial state. The Qin empire did not last long. Shortly after the death of Qin Shihuangdi in 210 BCE, the Qin dynasty collapsed into chaos when the son of Qin Shihuangdi was assassinated, in 207 BCE (Sullivan 2008, 66). The following Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), established by the Liu family, proceeded to consolidate and expand the empire. The Han dynasty is separated into two periods: the Western Han (206 BCE – 9 CE) and the Eastern Han (25 – 220 CE). The Han dynasty secured such a significant position in Chinese history that the enduring Han cultural identity has lasted to the present day: the largest ethnic group that consists the majority of Chinese people (more than 90%) is called Han *Zu* (the Han ethnic group) after the Han empire, and the Chinese script is referred to as Han *Zi* (Han characters) (Schaefer 2008, 279).

In terms of its governmental machinery, the Han empire reversed or considerably modified many important political institutions of the previous Qin. For example, it abandoned the heavily centralized Qin model of control over the empire and revived a form of political feudalism, dividing territory and authority into several subservient regions marked by “distinctive products and customs” (Lewis 2007, 15; Wang 1949, 135). The territory of Han China was expanded considerably by a series of military campaigns. The Silk Road was formally established during the Han period, which required solid political, military, and economic support from the Han empire (Zhang 2015, 17-24). Some scholars note that there were two main routes of the Silk Road in ancient China, one overland route passing through the Sogdian Kingdom to the West, and one sea route reaching coastal India in the South (Xiong 2014, 1231). Direct trade

routes were realized between Han and other regions, which helped Han China become the world's largest economy at that time. The well-known Han court historian, Sima Qian, recorded in his monumental historical work *shi ji* 史记 (Records of the Grand Scribe) that “The granaries in all the towns are brimming with reserves, and the coffers are full with treasures and gold, worth trillions... There is so much money that the ropes used to string coins together rot and break, an innumerable amount. The granaries in the capital overflow and the grain goes bad and cannot be eaten” (Clover et al. 2015, 11; Sima 1959, 30.1420). The economic surpluses provided a comfortable environment for the Han Chinese to enjoy an affluent material life as well as pursue a spiritual prosperity.

The Han dynasty continued and also reconstructed ideas and beliefs from the previous periods, and also embraced foreign elements to create much more abundant and diverse philosophical and religious followings, as well as material cultures. Shamans, magicians, and oracles made their ways to the capital, Chang'an. Native ideas such as Confucianism and Daoism found their importance in Han culture, and foreign beliefs such as Buddhism and the myths and legends of the far West were also introduced to Han China (Sullivan 2008, 67-68). The Han rulers revived and reshaped Confucianism, emphasizing rituals for the worship of ancestors. The Daoist idea to pursue immortality was evident in many fancy tomb figures representing immortals, used during the Han period. For its part, Buddhism advocated escaping the endless reincarnation and reaching an eternal paradise. Good omens (*xiangrui*)—auspicious signs from the heaven to validate the dynasty's rule—that include white unicorns, phoenixes, flying horses, red wild geese, stones from the sky, etc. were reported to the throne and regarded as very important (Sullivan 2008, 67). In terms of the worship of gods, the Han Chinese did not hold a monotheistic belief. Rather, there was “faith in a whole hierarchy of beings, any of whom could

be worshiped simultaneously for different purposes (Loewe 1982, 17).” These supernatural beings ranged from holy spirits (*shen*) to the Lords of natural forces, from the gods of occupational skills (such as *Zao shen*, the kitchen god) to the spirits of the dead (*gui*), and from the queen of the earth (*Hou tu*) to the Heaven (*Tian*) (17), the latter being of special importance for the empire, since the emperor was regarded as the Son of Heaven. Overall, the tolerant atmosphere for philosophies, beliefs, and religions during the Han Dynasty contributed to the birth of the Han Chinese idea of the afterlife, which I will discuss in detail in later sections.

The Horse in Daily Life

The horse was widely used in ancient China for meat and milk, medicine, transportation, defense, royal entertainment, sports, and companionship. On a popular level, the horse has been a symbol of speed, perseverance, imagination and youthful energy in Chinese culture (Cunha 1990, 3). It corresponds to the “fire” element and to the Sun (3). It also serves as one of the seven treasures of Buddhism and is the seventh in the Twelve Earthly Branches (3). A horse with excellent physical and intellectual abilities is called a “thousand-li colt”², which is granted human virtues (3).

The ancient Chinese cherished their horses. Horse judging was the most developed among livestock judging practices (Chen 2014, 116). *Han Shu* (the *Book of Han*), a history of the Western Han, recorded 38 chapters of livestock judging, and many horse-judging experts emerged during that period, determining a horse’s quality based on its appearance features (116). Early veterinary practices, likely a combination of shamanic and medicinal healing, relate most

² *Li* is a traditional Chinese unit of distance, today standardized at 500 meters (1,640 feet) (li, n.d. 2011).

frequently to the horse, which suggests that horses were considered a particularly valuable asset during the Han Dynasty (Sterckx 2002, 26). In Han China's northern frontier, the Hexi Corridor, veterinary practices considerably decreased the horse death rate, which promoted the development of animal husbandry in that area (Chen 2014, 117). Horses were also used in ancient Chinese medical practices. Their body parts were valuable medicinal materials, especially those of the white ones. For example, the ancient Chinese believed that the horse's dried and ground heart may help to cure amnesia; that the horse's eyes are good for curing dental cavities; and that the horse-shoes are a remedy for insomnia when hung at the head of the bed (Gomes 1990, 23). The Han Chinese also contributed three significant inventions in equestrian history: the breast strap, the stirrup, and the horse collar, forming an effective harnessing system (Park 2002, 7).

The horse served important roles in Han society. The *Hou Hanshu* 后汉书 (Book of the Later Han), a court treatise covering the history of the Han dynasty from 6 to 189 CE, regarded the horse as “the base of military force“ and “the great tool of the state”, which could be used “to distinguish the noble from the humble during peaceful times, and to serve light and heavy duties during wars” (Li 1991, 58; Fan 1965, 24.840; Wang and Song 2004, 49). During the Han Dynasty, governmental regulations of horses were well established by the ruling class. The Emperors of Han charged special officers with the duty of managing horses. This specific type of officers was called *Tai-pu* 太仆 (Grand Servant), which was among the *jiu qing* 九卿 (Nine Ministers)³ who ranked just below the three highest officials, *san gong* 三公 (Three Lords) in the

³ The Nine Ministers include (1) the *Tai-chang* 太常 (Minister of Ceremonies), (2) the *Guang-lu-xun* 光禄勋 (Supervisor of Attendants), (3) the *Wei-wei* 卫尉 (Commandant of Guards), (4) the *Tai-pu* 太仆 (Grand Servant), (5) the *Ting-wei* 廷尉 (Commandant of Justice), (6) the *Da-hong-lu* 大鸿臚 (Grand Herald), (7) the *Zong-zheng* 宗正 (Director of the Imperial Clan), (8) the *Da-*

Han Dynasty central government (Wang 1949, 150). The Grand Servant in charge of the Emperor's chariots and horses had the responsibility to properly manage the different kinds of chariots, keep track of the number of chariots and horses, as well as which chariots should be used on different occasions (153). The Grand Servant was also responsible for the supervision and management of the government pastures and the warhorses kept there (153).

The bureaucratic control over the treatment of horses during the Han Dynasty was also reflected in the detailed *ma zheng* 马政 “horse policies” promulgated by Han Emperors. *Shi ji* 史记 and *Han shu* 汉书, the monumental history of China compiled during the Han Dynasty, recorded “horse policy” as included in the domestic and foreign policy agenda of the early Han rulers (Sterckx 2002, 65). For example, Emperor Wen of the Western Han period (179 – 157 BCE) decreed that a family could be exempted from military service by handing over a chariot and a horse (Cunha 1990, 8; Wang and Song 2004, 49). Emperor Jing (157 – 141 BCE) expanded government pasture land and forbade horses “over five feet and nine inches with teeth that are not yet smooth” from being exported through custom barriers (Ban 1962, 5.147; Sima 1959, 30.1419; Sterckx 2002, 66; Wang and Song 2004, 49-50). His successor, Emperor Wu (141 – 87 BCE), in 113 BCE issued residential permits to immigrants and encouraged government officials to lend them mares and encourage them to settle in the northern border regions, raising horses (Sima 1959, 30.1438; Sterckx 2002, 66). During the following year, feudal lords and high officials were ordered to supply a certain number of stallions to the central government based on their rank (Sima 1959, 30.1439; Sterckx 2002, 66). These regulations of horse breeding and domestication indicate the significant position horses had in Han society. Han

si-nong 大司农 (Grand Minister of Agriculture), and (9) the *Shao-fu* 少府 (Small Treasurer). See Wang (1949) for detailed discussion.

China eagerly imported and bred horses, which I will discuss in detail later. In the following, among the horse's numerous societal roles, I will focus on their military, transport, and recreational and sportive roles.

The Military Horse

The horse's connection to military force may be traced to the invention of the *ma* 马 “horse” character. This Chinese character is explained as combining aspects of *nu* 努 “fury” and *wu* 武 “martiality”, which is inspired by the horse's military role (Sterckx 2002, 35), something that may date back to its earliest uses. In the Western Han dynasty, to resist the hostile *Xiongnu* (Huns) who dominated the Asian steppe in the north, and to expand imperial territory, Han China sought better horses for its military force (Park 2002, 15; Wang and Song 2004, 50). Such desire to obtain better horses led to a surge of horse breeding during the Han dynasty. A considerable amount of foreign horse breeds was imported, and local horse breeds were improved. By the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, 36 breeding stations containing 300,000 warhorses were in operation on the frontier (Di Cosmo 2002, 232; Wang and Song 2004, 49-50). Horse breeds in the Han dynasty included *Hequ* horse, *Haomen* horse, Mongolian horse, Northeastern horse, *Guoxia* horse, Southwestern Mountainous Area Horse, Central Asian horse (*Wusun* and *Dayuan* horses), and the wild horse (An 2005, 29-33).

The importation of Central Asian horse breeds was closely connected to two historical figures—the emissary Zhang Qian, and Emperor Wu, one of the most important emperors of the Han dynasty. Zhang Qian, a pioneer of Sino-foreign contacts, introduced the “supernatural,” “blood-sweating” horses from the land of Ferghana (modern Turkmenistan) to Emperor Wu of Han (Olsen 1988, 174). The horses “sweating blood” were actually infested by a kind of parasite

called *Parafiliaria multipapillosa* under their skin, which caused a slight bleeding when the animals sweated. The blood oozed through the skin, producing a foamy pink sweat (174). These so-called supernatural horses were greatly cherished by the emperors, and highly prized during the Han dynasty. Later on, in the expedition to the West ordered by Emperor Wu, Zhang Qian also introduced the *Wusun* horses—larger and more refined than earlier Chinese horses—to Han China (Fernald 1959, 24-31; Park 2002, 18).

The horse breeds imported from abroad greatly improved the local horse population. The appearance, strength, and speed of horses were considerably boosted. During the process of continuous improvement of horse breeds, the Han troops gradually replaced chariots by cavalry, which largely enhanced the army's mobility and power (Cunha 1990, 5-8; Wang 2006, 36; Wang and Song 2004, 50). Han China witnessed triumphs in a series of crucial battles against surrounding states, and several ever-victorious commanders such as Li Guangli, Wei Qing, and Huo Qubing became famous historical figures. After winning a war, an abundance of foreign horses could be obtained as trophies, and would be cross-bred with local horses. Emperor Wu started a war against Dayuan (in today's Ferghana Valley, Central Asia), partly to obtain the so-called blood-sweating horses. General Li Guangli won this war, and ended up bringing a dozen blood-sweating horses as well as more than three thousand other Dayuan horses with him back to the Han court (Sterckx 2002, 114; Wang 2006, 36; Yü 1964, 97). All this contributed to the formidable strength of the armed forces of the Han dynasty, in which military horses served a crucial part.

The Horse in Transportation

In addition to its military function, the horse also served as a means of transportation. Elaborate carriages and horse marching teams were status symbols among the elites during the Han dynasty. Historical texts suggest that there was strict government regulation of carriage size, type, the quantity of horses, and also of the carriage decoration, for each level in the social hierarchy (Wang and Song 2004, 51; Wen 2012, 75; Xue 2011, 102). The *Hou Hanshu* 后汉书 elaborately recorded these regulations. For example, the highest ruler (emperor, or Son of Heaven, *Tianzi*) could own six horses; Dukes (*zhuhou*) could own four; high-level government officials (*dafu*) could own three; scholar-officials (*shi*) could own two; and commoners (*shuren*) could own one (Fan 1965, 29.3644-3653; Wen 2012, 75; Xue 2011, 102). Such regulated use of the horse in transportation had its origins in the rules formulated in the earlier Zhou and the Shang dynasties. During these early dynasties, “when a man was appointed to an official position within the ruler’s government, his rise in political or social status was ritually honored with a royal presentation of a chariot, horse, and garments” (Lu 1993, 835,36). During the Han dynasty, carriage and garments were used to differentiate the noble and the humble, and reflected the changes of social status. For example, the founder and first emperor of the Han dynasty, Emperor Gaozu (256 – 195 BCE), promoted policies to encourage agriculture and restrain commerce. Merchants were prohibited from wearing silk and from owning a carriage (Sima 1959, 30.1418; Wen 2012, 76). However, to revive the economy, the succeeding emperors started to release the constraints on commerce, and merchants began to accumulate wealth and power. During the reign of Emperor Wen and Emperor Jing, it was common that wealthy merchants owned elaborate carriages (Ban 1962, 24 (1).1132; Wen 2012, 76). It was obvious that although the Han ruling class set strict standards for the use of horses as a means of transportation to express the

elites' power, and thus solidify the existing social order, there were also people who disobeyed these regulations and usurp the privileges of their superiors. During the Eastern Han dynasty, carriages tended to be extravagant, promoting a social atmosphere of competitive consumption (Ebrey 1986, 609-610; Wen 2012, 74).

Han horses were also used to transport messages. The Han dynasty maintained roads and established a sophisticated system of imperial highways, with a series of posts, for imperial family members and officials to maintain contact. Horses were stocked there, and the network was also used for long-distance messaging (Park 2002, 21; Wang and Song 2004, 51-52). Hierarchical differences were also evident in this "pony express." Although officials were allowed to use the highways, they were restricted from using the center lane, which was specially reserved for use by members of the royal court (Park 2002, 21). This transportation system ensured the timely imparting of information and of the commands of the Han court throughout the empire. Officials and men of wealth traveled on horseback or in horse-drawn carriages on roads and bridges, which were built and maintained by the government (Ebrey 1986, 614).

Horses and camels were the main transport vehicles on the Silk Road. The Silk Road could be called the "Horse Road", where large amounts of Chinese silk were exchanged with the *Xiongnu* for fine horses and other necessary goods. Han Chinese regarded trading silk for horses as "using the non-essential to trade for the fundamental" (Creel 1965, 666) because silk was already mass-produced in China, while there was still a horse deficiency, so horses were even more highly valued. Such trades had an impact on the relationship between Han China and the nomads in the North. Exchange could be a substitute for war, and it could seem to be a win-win situation where the *Xiongnu* gained required goods to survive harsh winters, and the Han empire acquired good-quality horses for its cavalry to keep the nomads from invading China.

The Horse in Recreation and Sports

Horses also served in leisure and recreational activities. For example, by the end of the Eastern Han dynasty, polo was introduced to China. Six Eastern Han tomb bricks with polo images on them were excavated in Suining, Jiangsu Province, China. One of them clearly depicts a man on horseback driving a ball (fig. 1). Since the Eastern Han tomb paintings often reflect the deceased's earthly life, the six tomb bricks with polo scenes are direct evidence for prevalent polo playing during that period. Moreover, some scholars argue that the horses in the polo images are the improved and idealized “heavenly horses” that the Han Chinese valued the most. This kind of horses only served in the court or in the military, and could not be found among commoners. Polo must have first been a performing sport in court and military, and then spread among common people (Chang and Chen 2012, 97).



Figure 1. Han Tomb Brick with Polo Image (Chang and Chen 2012, p. 96).

Equestrianism was regarded as a skill that the noble Chinese must master. It was among the “Six Arts” that the Confucian school championed,⁴ and five techniques of chariot riding must be learned (Shuai 1990, 21-22). The famous scholar Liu Xiang (刘向) of the Han dynasty commented that the mastery of horses could teach people to respect the existing social order, and to handle various challenging situations (21). Because of the prestige of owning a horse, many activities related to horse riding seemed to be exclusive to the ruling class. Imperial hunting from horseback for sport was held annually by rulers of almost all the dynasties. Those hunting events also carried political and symbolic meanings beyond the pure pleasure of hunting itself.

Horseback performance has a long history in China. The dancing horses were good-quality horses trained to perform at imperial banquets, for amusement. A famous dancing horse, Zi Xing (紫骝), was imported from Dayuan and owned by Prince Cao Zhi of the Three Kingdoms period after the end of the Eastern Han dynasty. The Zi Xing horse could follow commands and dance to the drumbeats (Shuai 1990, 22). The dancing horse reached its peak during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE) when Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (685 – 762 CE) owned a special troupe of 100 horses performing for him (Park 2002, 31). Other horse entertainments such as chariot racing and acrobatics on horseback were part of the elites’ social life during the Han dynasty (Shuai 1990).

The Horse in Burials

In addition to being a significant part of the Han Chinese’s social life, the horse also secured an important position in Chinese philosophy and mythology, and has been a frequent subject in Chinese art, culture, and tradition. The horse was the deceased’s favorite animal to be

⁴ “Six Arts” include ritual, music, archery, chariot-riding, calligraphy, and mathematics.

buried with in tombs, as seems evident both in pre-dynastic chariot and horse burial pits and in the elaborate horse *mingqi* figures in the tombs of imperial-era China. An abundance of horses buried with chariots and horse *mingqi* figures has been excavated from Han tombs. The Han horse *mingqi* are made of different materials and had various dimensions and shapes. It is notable that horse *mingqi* figures appear in Han tombs for people from different social standings, all the way from royal members to ordinary commoners.

To investigate the prevalence of horse *mingqi* in Han tombs, I will first introduce the Han Chinese perceptions of the tomb and the afterlife, as well as the concept of *mingqi*.

The Tomb and the Afterlife

The tomb was of great importance in ancient China. The ancient Chinese paid much attention to the design, construction, and preservation of their tombs. Emperors in various dynasties spent a lot of manpower and material resources on the construction of their tombs; royal members and government officials built lavish tombs with an abundance of grave goods; and even rich commoners were striving to own a nice tomb. This fervor for tombs became a cultural tradition that has lasted into modern times. Tomb-raiding grew to become a new occupation and thrived throughout dynastic China, precisely because of the appealing treasures that were buried with the deceased.

As in other dynasties, tombs in Han China were taken seriously and were an important means to distinguish the rich from the poor. The Han population could be broadly divided into officials and non-officials, and the latter, with a large variety of social groups, greatly outnumbered the former (Loewe 1968, 54). Han social distinctions were also created by family relationships, the possession of wealth, the type of occupation, and the recognized status in

society (Ebrey 1986, 631; Loewe 1968, 54). Generally speaking, being born into a prominent family, even the imperial family, meant inheriting its wealth, respect, and natural authority. Royal and rich families accumulated their wealth by investing in land, while wage-earning peasants, foresters, miners, and other laborers worked strenuously in the fields (Ebrey 1986, 617-622). Han society was also marked by distinctions or orders of rank bestowed by imperial edict. Among the 20 orders, the highest was the hereditary “marquis”, and the highest 12 of the 20 orders were bestowed on officials only (Loewe 1968, 57). The higher the order a man received, the greater the privileges he enjoyed. Such privileges were reflected in the use of horses and carriages as mentioned earlier, and in the furnishing of tombs and the inclusion of mortuary objects that will be discussed later.

From the highest ruler, the emperor, to the lowest class, the convicts and slaves, they all cared about their tombs. However, one may easily see the differences, in terms of scale, complexity, and the number of grave goods, of tombs whose owners were from various social standings. The imperial tombs were the entire empire’s major project, which often started in the second year of each emperor’s reign, and had lavish furnishing and a large quantity of precious mortuary objects. Comparatively, tombs of officials and even commoners were much simpler, but still required the family’s investment of time, labor, and wealth, and many stone or brick tombs have survived the centuries (Lewis 2007, 189). Because of the unprecedented extravagance and widespread consumption of luxury goods during the Eastern Han dynasty, the tombs of ordinary officials also steadily increased in size and structural complexity (Ebrey 1986, 611). At the bottom of the social hierarchy, slaves and convicts were part of the labor force who built the tombs for imperial families and rich officials. However, no tomb of Han slaves and

convicts has been discovered. There have been stories about poor ancient Chinese simply wrapping the deceased in a straw mat to be buried, and this type of burials was not durable.

The importance put on tombs by the ancient Chinese could be explained, at least in part, by their belief in the afterlife. As discussed earlier, Han China embraced different philosophical schools and featured a polytheistic system. Among the diverse ideas and beliefs in society, one notable and persistent aspect was the strong sense of life after death. Ancient Chinese believed that the worlds of this life and the afterlife were continuous, and related. They believed that the deceased experiences a miraculous transformation after death – going to a realm that mirrors this physical world. This means that the deceased has mental and physical needs as the living (Zhang 2002, 24), and the interactions between living persons and their ancestors are critical, especially as regards funerary arrangements. This belief has been held for centuries, and it can explain why many Chinese people today still perform funerary rites, observe burial customs, and visit ancestors' tombs. As mentioned earlier, ancestral spirits (*gui*) were worshiped with other deities during the Han Dynasty. The spirit of the dead was called *gui*, an equivalent to the soul of the alive, which could be further split into *hun* and *po* (Liu 2004, 19). Based on traditional texts and excavated tombs, it can be concluded that the Han Chinese believed that humans were made up of three parts: the *xing* (body), the *hun* and the *po* (two parts of the soul). After death, the soul divides into *hun* and *po*, and the deceased's relatives have an obligation to attempt to dissuade the *hun* from leaving the body. After performing this ritual, the body will be considered dead, with the *po* staying with it while the *hun* departs for paradise to continue living like in the deceased's earthly life (Wu 2010, 32; Vainker 1991, 41).

The Han burial system to some extent followed the Zhou style (the use of ceramic ritual vessels imitating the bronze ones used in the Zhou period), the Qin style (such as the layout of

chambers and the format of peripheral structures and furnishings in the Qin dynasty), and the Chu style (such as the inclusion of silk painting and lacquerware that were abundant in Chu tombs) (Liu and Yuan 2007, 75-76; Zhang 2002, 26-27).⁵ The structure and meanings of tombs also witnessed great changes in the Han Dynasty. Before the Han, the dominant type of burials was the casket grave (*guo mu* 椁墓), a tomb with a box-like timber structure (*guo* 椁) buried at the bottom of a vertical shaft, with timber used as an “outer coffin” enclosing one or more “inner coffins” (*guan* 棺) (Huang 1996, 49-54; Wu 2010, 20-21). This can be traced to the single-coffin tombs of Yangshao culture during the Neolithic Period. Although the casket grave witnessed continued refinement, a new major form of Chinese tomb – the chamber grave (*shi mu* 室墓) – emerged during the Han Dynasty, in the second century BCE. Unlike a casket grave, which concealed a *guo* in a vertical pit, a chamber grave was constructed laterally and resembled a house (Huang 1996, 54-56; Lewis 2007, 32; Wu 2010, 24-25). In a modification of the earlier practices, the Han Chinese abandoned the tradition of building tombs as completely insulated spaces, and turned to the chamber tombs with doors and windows and often a sacrificial space alongside a burial space (Wu 2010, 30).⁶ The invention and popularity of the chamber grave was associated with critical changes from the late Eastern Zhou to the Han Dynasty regarding the worship to ancestors, the concept of the soul and the afterlife, as well as the formation of an under-world bureaucracy (30-31).

⁵ Chu was one of the states during the Warring States period. It was also the hometown of Emperor Gaozu, who established the Han empire.

⁶ See Huang 1996 “汉墓形制的变革——试析竖穴式椁墓向横穴式室墓的演变过程 (The Changes of Han Tomb Structures—An Analysis of the Transition from Vertical Casket Grave to Lateral Chamber Grave)” and Wu 2010, *Art of the Yellow Springs*, for detailed discussions of the two major types of tomb structures in ancient China.

First, the center for ancestral worship began to change from the temples of elite lineages to tombs of individuals and nuclear families since the Eastern Zhou (Wu 2010, 31). This shift of ancestral worship from temple to tomb caused the tomb's ritual function and architectural design to change – the sacrificial space in a chamber tomb substituted the symbolism and architectural components of the ancestral temple (31). Second, during the Han Dynasty, the previous idea of the distinct division of the soul as *hun* and *po* became obsolete and was replaced by a new concept of *hun* and *po* forming “a compound that simply means the soul;” and the tomb was “imagined as its dwelling place,” which might be the main reason for the architecturalization of the tomb and its resemblance to contemporary homes (32). Third, the belief in “posthumous immortality” surged during the Han Dynasty, which viewed death not as an obstacle to eternal happiness, but as an opportunity that offered an alternative route to achieve immortality (32). The tomb thus became a place of rebirth and a fantastic immortal paradise where the magical transformation from corpse to the immortal happened. Fourth, unearthed sacrificial texts indicate that the divine system consisting of celestial deities (*tian shen*), terrestrial deities (*di zhi*), and ancestral spirits (*ren gui*) in previous dynasties was enriched to include “subterranean deities” such as *Houtu Dizhu* (Lord of the Earth), *Dizhu* (Master of the Place), and *Xing* (God of Posthumous Journey) (32-33). During the Han Dynasty, an underground bureaucracy was fully formed, and records show various kinds of subterranean officials who govern the netherworld and tombs (Wu 2010, 33; Zhang & Bai 2006, 54-264).

As part of the tomb furnishing, *mingqi* has drew equal attention from the ancient Chinese as the tomb itself. Other categories of tomb furnishings include *shengqi* (“lived” objects) – goods that had originally belonged to the tomb occupant, and *jiqu* (“sacrificial” vessels) – objects

previously used in communal ritual affairs (Wu 1999,729; 2010, 87-88). This thesis will focus on the *mingqi* placed in furnished tombs.

Mingqi

Mingqi (“bright” or “spirit” utensils) are mortuary objects and figurines specifically designed and produced to be buried with the dead for use in the afterlife. *Mingqi* was not determined by medium or form, but was based on ritual function and symbolism (Wu 1999, 733). According to the Eastern Zhou philosopher Xunzi (310-237 BCE), *mingqi* “should resemble (real objects) but not be usable,” which means *mingqi* should “retain the form of practical objects but negate their usefulness” (Lewis 2007, 192; Wu 1999, 730; 2010, 89). This indicates that *mingqi* symbolized the continuation of the deceased’s earthly activities in the afterlife (Wu 1999, 728). Additionally, the fact that grave goods could not be used by the living – a clear separation of the dead from the living – was established during the much earlier Zhou period, and was then strengthened by the Han Chinese perception of the dead as a threat to the living, and maintaining divisions could avoid disorder (Lewis 2007, 194). Thus, *mingqi* were designed, produced, and offered only to the deceased. The concept of *Mingqi* could be applied to any materials and forms, but ceramic ones were the most common during the Han period, which can be classified into two main types: the first consists miniaturized earthenware modeling almost every essential object known in life, such as farm buildings, watchtowers, houses, animals, servants, musicians, etc.; the second type is life-sized earthenware vessels and utensils, which might hold real food or be carved with food patterns, were intended to be used by the deceased as nourishment for the soul (Park 2002, 40-41).

As discussed earlier, the Han Chinese adopted diverse religions and philosophical ideas. They had a strong sense that there was life after death. This belief led to furnished tombs with *mingqi* modeling daily essentials for the dead, as well as stellar maps and funerary banners in tombs to guide the soul to heaven. It seems the tomb had multiple roles—as household or as cosmos. The living constructed tombs on the model of houses and offered *mingqi* to provide everything necessary for the deceased to live happily in their world. There were also images of the celestial plane, deities, immortals and magical creatures, which suggest that the tomb magically included the entire world and became a paradise of immortals (Lewis 2007, 195). The tomb thus became a magic place where the heavenly paradise and the earthly world coexist, and where the living could communicate with their departed ancestors and offer goods to maintain the soul's existence in heaven.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the belief in life after death began in China in as early as the Neolithic period (Park 2002, 36), and burying mortuary objects with the dead emerged from a long tradition of burial sacrifice in China. This can be traced to prehistoric times, when such grave goods included dogs, pigs, and objects like ceramic pots and stone tools (Liu 2004, 20; Wu 2010, 87; Zhang 2002, 25, 28). In the Bronze age, human beings as well as live animals (often horses with chariots) were sacrificed in the richly furnished tombs of kings and nobles, and bronze ritual vessels were the main type of grave goods (Zhang 2002, 26, 28). In the early empires of Qin and Han, lacquerware and bronze vessels were gradually replaced by ceramic *mingqi*, and ceramic human figures (*yong*) and animal figures came to substitute for the human and animal sacrifices of the Bronze age (Wu 1999, 733-734; Zhang 2002, 27). Ceramic vessels and figures made specifically to be included in tombs were first produced and came into general use in the Warring States period before imperial China (Wu 1999, 728). The human and

animal figures were often miniaturized, and came to be known as *mingqi* (“spirit articles”) (728, 739).

I will provide two illustrative cases of buried *mingqi* in early dynastic China. In the Shang dynasty tomb of Lady Hao, a large quantity of bronze vessels, jade pieces, and daily essentials was found when the tomb was excavated (Sullivan 2008, 33). The most notable example of burying objects to aid the deceased’s afterlife is the Terracotta Army accompanying the burial of Qin Shihuangdi, which perfectly indicates the idea that the deceased needs possessions that have no difference with or even exceed those owned in the earthly life. Qin Shihuangdi, the powerful “first emperor” who created the Qin Dynasty, had more than seven thousand figures of men and chariots with horses buried in pits near his mausoleum. Since Qin Shihuangdi’s actual tomb has remained unopened, it may contain other forms of *mingqi*. The soldiers, horses, and chariots of the Terracotta Army were placed in formation, as if to protect the emperor. Most soldier figures were life-sized and made of a low-fired earthenware, depicted elaborately with details of their hairstyles, varying facial expressions, and standardized armors (Vainker 1991, 40). There was also a set of two bronze chariots with horses and drivers excavated, which were about 50% of the life-size and stored at the Museum of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses of Qin Shihuangdi (Wenbao Website 文保网). Qin Shihuangdi was famous for his authority and severity, so it was not surprising that he wanted to continue owning a strong army in such a large scale to protect him and maintain his power in the afterlife.

Han *Mingqi*

During the Han Dynasty, in addition to the fully evolved ideas of ancestral worship, the soul, the posthumous immortality, and the underground bureaucracy in the divine system, the

attitudes towards the dead also changed. The ghosts of those who died violent deaths (*gui*) were believed to haunt the living rather than become ancestors, emphasizing the need to feed, pacify, and remember them, and secure them a “place” to live (Lai 2015, 45). This belief, along with the traditional idea of life after death, resulted in a considerable increase in the use of *mingqi* during the Han dynasty. Additionally, the Han dynasty turned back to *Li* (ritual) of the Zhou period, which highlighted the importance of keeping social orders by performing rituals. Confucianism became the dominant ideology, emphasizing benevolence and filial piety (Liu 2004, 20).

Therefore, Han society regarded funerary ritual and tomb furnishing as a measure of filial piety, which promoted luxurious burials and elaborate *mingqi* (20). The use of *mingqi* was originally exclusive to noble families during the Western Han (206– ca. 100 BC). However, by the Eastern Han period (25 – 220 AD), the practice of including rich tomb furnishings and placing of *mingqi* in the tombs had spread to commoners able to afford it (Sullivan 2008, 77). Tombs began to contain models or pictures of the instruments of producing prosperity, such as diversified agricultural estate (Ebrey 1986, 622). *Mingqi* became a reflection of not only what the deceased owned in the earthly life, but also what the deceased wanted to own in the afterlife. That is, the quality and quantity of *mingqi* were closely associated to the deceased’s social status in the earthly life, but there also existed *mingqi* modeling those objects from a higher social hierarchy that were not owned by the deceased in the worldly life.

Mingqi buried during the Han dynasty were quite abundant, and increased in quantity and diversity over time. In the early Han dynasty, tomb figures represented martial power; in the middle Han, servant and entertainer figures represented the imperial families’ daily life; and in the late Han, humble tombs containing *mingqi* modeling mundane objects reflected the daily lives of ordinary people (Vainker 1991, 40). It was the first time that *mingqi* were also found in

medium and small sized tombs, indicating burying *mingqi* in tombs was accepted by a wide range of social classes (Zhang 2002, 29). Ceramic vessels during the Han Dynasty were mass-produced nationwide by stated-controlled workshops. Molds aided in the production of identical vessels, and less attention was on individual items while a greater effort was put into methods of manufacture (Jia 2012, 13; Vainker 1991, 40-41). Other *mingqi* types such as *yong* and animal figures also achieved large-scale production. From the Han *mingqi*, we can gain an invaluable insight into many aspects of the ancient Chinese's daily lives during the Han dynasty, such as the hairstyles, the clothes, and the food.

There are many precious *mingqi* excavated from Han tombs. Near the site of the ancient Western Han capital, today's Xi'an, more than two thousand ceramic figures and horses resembling Qin Shihuangdi's terracotta army were excavated (Vainker 1991, 40). This may indicate that the early Western Han continued the tradition of burying human figures (*yong*) and animal sculptures from the previous Qin period. The Weishan terracotta army, which consists hundreds of foot-tall terracotta warriors with horses and chariots, were discovered in four burial pits at a Han dynasty nobleman's tomb complex three hundred miles south of Beijing (Lobell 2003, 36). It is important because the terracotta army is organized in a pattern of cavalymen followed by chariots and infantrymen, which provides the first archaeological evidence for a typical Han dynasty battle formation (38). Another example is the *Tianyi* (flying garment) found in the tomb of Marquise of Dai in Mawangdui, Hunan province (fig. 2-3). It shows beings of the underworld, the world of men, and the heaven. The relatives of the deceased were kneeling around, and the deceased was depicted rising from *shi* (corpse) to *jiu* (the body in its eternal home), living happily in the afterlife. The concept of life after death and the ritual performed after the death of the deceased are obvious here. Foreign contacts during the Han dynasty also

had reflections on *mingqi*. For example, the extensive cemetery at Hepu on the south coast of Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region contains elaborate tombs with exotic luxury materials such as semi-precious beads from India and ceramics from the Parthian empire (Xiong 2014, 1229-1241). Another example of foreign influence on *mingqi* is the “coin-tree” found in a grave in Sichuan province, which has bronze coins forming its tree-shaped body and an auspicious Phoenix standing on the top. Its pottery stand is decorated with a frieze of elephants, which is a clear indication of influence from South Asia (fig. 4).



Figure 2. *Tianyi* (Flying Garment) (Sullivan 2008, p. 88).



Figure 3. Detail of the *Tianyi* (Flying Garment) (Sullivan 2008, p. 88).



Figure 4. Money Tree (Sullivan 2008, p. 79).

Han Horse *Mingqi*

The horse was the deceased's favorite animal to be buried with in Han tombs. As discussed earlier, Han social distinctions were marked by different orders. On the top of the social hierarchy was the imperial family, followed by the feudal lords and high officials (Dukes and Marquises) bestowed by the emperor. The class lower was the general nobles, and then commoners. As mentioned earlier, the tombs of people from different social standings varied in terms of scale, complexity, and furnishing. It is also evident in archaeological findings that the Han Chinese from different social hierarchies buried with them different grave goods. However, among animal remains and figures, the horse appeared in the tombs of almost all social classes (as for the lowest classes, we lack evidence), serving various functions. I will explain in detail using statistics gathered by Hui Deng.

According to Deng (2015, 59), Han tombs could be generally classified as the Emperors and Empresses' mausoleums, the feudal lords' (Dukes and Marquises) tombs, and the general nobles' and commoners' tombs. Among the 11 Emperors and Empresses' mausoleums of the Western Han period, five were excavated with animal remains in the outer burial pits, and the horse was the only animal that appeared in all the five excavated mausoleums. Generally, the most prevalent animals in the five mausoleums were the horse, the sheep, and the dog, which were among the "six livestock" cherished by the ancient Chinese (59).⁷ The horse was the most prevalent, and was buried with other livestock here as a domesticated animal serving in an agricultural setting. Additionally, the imperial members also buried with them remains and figures of exotic animals such as pandas, elephants and rhinoceros to demonstrate their ability to

⁷ The "six livestock" includes the horse, the cattle, the sheep, the chicken, the dog, and the pig. The horse was ranked the first of the six livestock (Wang and Song 2004, 49).

keep such rare and precious animals for leisure and recreation, as well as their high social status. Eighty adult male “blood-sweating” heavenly horses from Ferghana were discovered in the only two excavated outer burial pits at the Maoling Mausoleum (the mausoleum of Emperor Wu of Han), and the horse was also the only animal discovered at Maoling by far (59). The horse served both as a recreational animal and as a symbol of status here. Another category of mortuary objects in the Emperors and Empresses’ mausoleums was horses — both live horses, and *mingqi* figures — buried with chariots, such as those excavated at the Yangling Mausoleum (the mausoleum of Emperor Jing of Han and his empress) (64). The horse’s military and transport functions was evident here. According to Deng, the animal remains and figures in Emperors and Empresses’ mausoleums expressed the tomb owners’ personal preferences, because the buried exotic animals were the imperial family’s property before they were sacrificed (59).

During the Han Dynasty, feudal lords were the top rank of the twenty orders bestowed by the emperor. Their tombs followed the emperors’ mausoleums in terms of style and structure, and animals were buried in distinct areas based on their functions (Deng 2015, 59). Deng argues animals buried in feudal lords and high officials’ tombs generally served as tomb guardians, as guards of honor, as daily companions, and as food (59). In the excavation reports of 32 Dukes and Marquises’ tombs, the horse was noted in almost all of these tombs. Chariots with horse remains and horse figures were the most significant element of all buried objects, both in the outer burial pits and in the chambers, and these chariots and horses varied in terms of material and scale.⁸ Ceramic, bronze, and wooden horse figures were found in chariot pits or with other

⁸ See the appendix charts on page 65-67 in Deng 2015 “考古材料所见之汉墓动物随葬 (Animals Buried in Han Dynasty Tombs, as Seen in Archaeological Materials).”

animals. A good example of large-scale chariot and horse outer burial pits is the Weishan terracotta army discovered at a Han nobleman's tomb discussed earlier.⁹ Although the feudal lords' tombs did not contain as many exotic foreign animals as the emperors and empresses' mausoleums did, animal remains and figures buried there were still abundant. The horse served as a guardian, a means of transportation, a symbol of status, and a daily companion. Since the horse with the chariot was the most prevalent type, the horse's roles as tomb guardian and as guard of honor seem to be the most significant, which expresses the tomb owner's prestigious social status.

General nobles and commoners were the largest social groups of Han society. Their tombs could not compete with those of the imperial family and of Dukes and Marquises in terms of scale, complexity, and furnishing. However, a large quantity of general nobles' and commoners' tombs survived with abundant animal remains and figures excavated. These small and medium sized tombs contained obviously different types of animal remains. The most prevalent animal remains were the chicken, the dog, and the pig, which were also the most common domestic animals owned by general officials and commoners in the earthly life (Deng 2015, 60). This means that people from this social hierarchy might have lacked the economic and political power to bury with them prestigious animals such as horse or cattle. However, it is interesting to note that ceramic, bronze, and wooden horse figures were found in general officials and commoners' tombs.¹⁰ Producing such horse figures must have been less costly than burying real horses. The inclusion of horse figures in general nobles' and commoners' tombs also

⁹ See page 24 for detailed discussions of the Weishan terracotta army.

¹⁰ See the appendix chart on page 68 in Deng 2015 “考古材料所见之汉墓动物随葬 (Animals Buried in Han Dynasty Tombs, as Seen in Archaeological Materials)” and excavation reports listed in the bibliography.

demonstrates that the horse was considered a prestigious animal, and the Han Chinese were so fond of the horse that even though they might not have owned a horse in the worldly life, they strived to bring with them horse figures that could aid them in the afterlife.

Generally speaking, during the Han dynasty, animal sacrifices were gradually replaced by animal *mingqi* figures in various materials, and the types of buried animals also varied in different geographical areas in Han China and in the tombs of people from different social standings (Deng 2015, 60-62). Despite of the changes in geographic areas and in the tomb owners' social classes, the horse was always an indispensable part of prestigious grave goods in Han tombs. Horse *mingqi* figures not only beat other animals in quantity as discussed above, but also had better quality. Models of mundane livestock were often miniaturized ceramic wares affordable to commoners (fig. 5-6). However, these ceramic figures were small in scale (approx. 20 cm in length) and were lack of elaborate details. Comparably, some horse *mingqi* figures were made in precious materials and in larger scales, for example, the lacquered horse figure excavated at the Laoguanshan Cemetery of the Han Dynasty in Chengdu (fig. 7), which measures 78 cm in length and height, and 20 cm in width (Chengdu Municipal Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Jingzhou Conservation Center 2015, 69). Another example of prestigious horse *mingqi* figure is the jade horse housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (fig. 8). The horse's prestigious position in quantity and in quality among Han animal *mingqi* figures is likely to have been associated with the horse's symbolic and mythical meanings endowed by the Han Chinese.



Figure 5. Pig, Dog, Goat, Chicken, and Duck Ceramic Miniaturized Figures (Guangxi Institute of Cultural Relics Protection and Archaeology and Guigang Museum 2014).



Figure 6. Dog and Chicken Ceramic Miniaturized Figures (Department of Archaeology, Sichuan University, Et Al. 2014).



Figure 7. Lacquered Horse Figurine (Chengdu Municipal Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology and Jingzhou Conservation Center 2015, p. 70).



Figure 8. Head and Shoulders of a Horse (Victoria and Albert Museum Website).

The Mysterious Horse

The horse, playing significant roles in daily practices of the Han Chinese, had good reasons to be included as *mingqi* in Chinese burial traditions. The horse *mingqi* figures' wider spread than other contemporary domestic animal figures in Han tombs requires additional explanations for their popularity. I propose that one explanation is the horse's depictions as a supernatural and auspicious creature in traditional Chinese beliefs. As early as in the Shang Dynasty (1766-1046 BCE), horse images appeared on oracle bones to tell the future (Burruss 1999, viii; Shaughnessy 1988, 213-221). From the Shang dynasty to the Han dynasty, sacrificial horses, often with chariots, were found in tombs of the elites. Throughout Chinese history, the horse continued to be a significant element linked to Chinese mythology, religion, legends, ritual, and folklore. Several versions of mythical horse representations that were evident during the Han dynasty will be introduced here.

The Horse: Animal with a Soul

Among the earliest religious beliefs in ancient China was the belief that animals, like humans, possessed souls. Horses and other "higher" animals were believed to be the link between the heavenly and the earthly realms, and possess powers to influence occurrences on earth (Burruss 1999, 6). Fantasy hybrid animals, the combinations of both real and fantasy creatures such as horses, dragons, or phoenixes, were believed as supernatural beings controlling natural forces, thus needed to be appeased by sacrifices (7). Such a concept is evident in ancient Chinese arts. For example, the *taotie* motif of a mysterious creature's face can be found on many ritual vessels from the Shang and the Zhou dynasties; and the Warring States period mythical animal bronze figures with bird's wings, fish's tails, and tiger's heads were excavated from a

royal tomb of the state of Zhongshan in Hebei Province (fig. 9). The “dragon horse” (*longma* 龙马) worshiped as the horse god during the Han dynasty was a hybrid creature of horse and dragon (Li 1991, 56-57; Shi 2015, 440; Sterckx 1996, 47). Interestingly, the heavenly or sacred horse was often tied with the dragon. The horse was even regarded as being more potent than the dragon at first, then was confused with the dragon and finally substituted by the dragon (Cunha 1990, 3). This type of horses was believed to traverse the earthly and heavenly realms and match the spiritual powers of the dragon (Sterckx 2002, 184).



Figure 9. Mythical Animals (Sullivan 2008, p. 49).

Horses Bearing Immortals to Heaven

The idea of immortality, highly emphasized by Daoism, was a prevalent belief held by the ancient Chinese. Some believed that to achieve immortality, the *po* part of the soul and the corpse needed to be preserved while the *hun* took an arduous journey to an imagined cosmic destination in the northwest of the universe (the Northwest) (Lai 2015, 161). The horse played an

important role in this process. It would carry the deceased's soul to the Northwest. Such horses can be seen on the flying garment at Mawangdui (fig. 2-3), on which two immortals are riding mysterious horses with heads of dragons to the heavenly paradise. In the Eastern Han Chulan tombs in Suxian, Anhui province, images of chariots carrying deities or deified ancestors were discovered (fig. 10). Among the chariots, the one driven by four horses (according to our earlier discussion, four horses may indicate the rider is just one level below the emperor and two levels above those carried by two horses) is clearly privileged, with a special beast among the horses carrying it. This slim and legless beast with antler-like horns and willow-leaf-shaped ears could be interpreted as a dragon (Shi 2015, 438). Here, the supernatural dragon and the heavenly horses worked together for the deceased to ride upon into the heavenly realm, which indicates the Chinese ancestors' double role as both heavenly and earthly, both live and dead, and both natural and supernatural (440). Similarly, the horse's connection with the dragon, along with the "blood-sweating" heavenly horses' mysterious origin also made the horse a both natural and supernatural creature, which was ideal for the ancient Chinese to assign it with the role as the vehicle of the journey to heaven.



Figure 10. Stone Slab with "Dragon Chariots," Chulan Tomb 2 (Shi 2015, p. 442).

Other Mysterious Horses

Apart from the powerful supernatural horse controlling natural forces, and the heavenly horse bearing the deceased to the Northwest of the immortals, the ancient Chinese also assigned

other kinds of symbolic significance to the horse. The flying horse was regarded as an auspicious sign (*xiangrui*) during the Han dynasty.¹¹ The bronze figure of a flying horse poised on a bird with wings outstretched was a good example (fig. 11). Excavated from a Western Han tomb in Gansu province, the horse figure has a strong sense of motion, as if it is flying. The depiction of the flying horse as light-footed, well-proportioned, capable of soaring like the wind, may indicate its origin as an improved cross-bred of the trophy horses acquired from the *Xiongnu* and the highly valued “heavenly horses” from Western Regions (Cunha 1990, 4).

The horse also served as guardian figures, protecting tombs. Large horse figures were placed on the processional ways to tombs, and those figures were believed to come to life at night, and might even assume human forms (Christie 1983, 122). It seems that the myths and depictions of the horse have always been powerful, positive, and auspicious, never malevolent. It might be because horses provide much aid to human, and they never do harm to the human society.



Figure 11. Flying Horse Poised on a Bird with Wings Outstretched (Sullivan 2008, p. 80).

¹¹ See page 5 and Wu’s 1984 article “A Sanpan Shan Chariot Ornament and the *Xiangrui* Design in Western Han Art” for detailed discussions of auspicious signs (*xiangrui*) in the Han Dynasty.

The horse was depicted in myths as a supernatural, powerful, protective, and auspicious being, which was adored and cherished by the Han Chinese. Each level of the social hierarchy wanted to include horse figures in their tombs to protect and carry them into immortality. Moreover, the horse also has special meanings for the ruling class—it lurks as a metaphor for imperial authority. The heavenly horses gained from the far western Ferghana area by Emperor Wu not only demonstrated Han military strength, but also bore symbolical and religious significance as a symbolic affirmation of Emperor Wu’s all-encompassing virtue and power (Sterckx 2002, 184). The factors above made the horse a necessary element in Han China’s religious and mortuary practices. Next, I will use a case study of a Han Dynasty horse figure at the Johnson Museum of Art in Ithaca, New York, as an example of typical horse *mingqi* figures in Han tombs.

Artifact Analysis

The horse figure at the Johnson Museum of Art (fig. 12) is on display at the Visible Storage Gallery, inventory number of 2006.041.002. The figure was made and buried in Sichuan province, Southwestern China, during the Han Dynasty. It is the bequest of Lee C. Lee, Professor Emerita of Human Development in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University, and it might have been acquired by Professor Lee in Hong Kong in the early 1990’s (personal communication with Liz Emrich, Curatorial Assistant for Asian Art at the Johnson Museum of Art, March 28, 2017). The sculpture is relatively large, at 96 centimeters (37.8 inches) tall standing almost to one’s waist. There might have been original color pigments covering the unglazed clay body, but no traces of that can be seen now. The horse is in a static standing position, except for the slight lift of its right front hoof, giving a sense of motion as if it is alive.

The torso of the horse is full and rounded, obviously well fed, showing its strength. The horse's head is held erect facing forward, and the neck rises from its broad chest with bulging muscles. Its mane is short and rigid, following the flattened S-curve of the neck. The horse's ears are alert. Its eyes are round and staring, with protuberant eyeballs. The horse also has flaring nostrils, seeming to snort. Its cheeks are prominent and stylized, and its open mouth reveals the carefully aligned teeth. The legs are carved with sharply angled fetlocks (joints located on the lower part of the legs), terminating in disproportionately large hooves. The hooves are seemingly done intentionally to serve as a solid base for the object, especially considering the bulkiness of the horse body. The tail is thrown back in an arch and decoratively groomed, indicating that the horse is well cared for. There is no clear evidence for a saddle. However, there are six round plaques on the horse's head—three on the forehead and three on the muzzle—that are linked by two rows of carved lines. These round plaques and carved lines indicate a bridle and imitate its bronze plaques and leather straps used at that period.



Figure 12. Han Dynasty Horse Figure at the Johnson Museum of Art (author's photo).

Materials and Methods in the Production of the Han Dynasty Horse Figure

The Han Dynasty witnessed the heyday of pottery art with diverse types, large numbers, various materials and superb craftsmanship, and is “generally recognized as the most important period in the Chinese history of sculpture” (Jia 2012, 12). During the Han dynasty, gray pottery was more extensively utilized than red pottery, black pottery, gray pottery with a sandy body, or red pottery with a sandy body (Wu 2001, 39). The horse figure at the Johnson Museum of Art is made of gray clay. The diverse classifications of pottery were made possible by varying the proportion of coarse sand, the content of iron oxide, and the temperature at which the wares were fired (Valenstein 1989, 41-45). As for methods of decoration, a wide range of techniques was used in the Han dynasty, such as incising, stamping, relief-molding, painting with pigments, and adorning with vermilion (Park 2002, 45-46). Lead glazing was also among the most important technical innovations, and there were different types of glazed wares that imitated the more precious bronze and lacquer wares (Jia 2012, 14-15). However, abundant earthenware *mingqi* excavated from Han tombs were undecorated or painted with impermanent, unfired pigments (Valenstein 1989, 45). This horse figure at the Johnson Museum of Art was likely to have been cast from a clay mold and then hand modeled. Its tail might have been separately made and attached to the rump. Since no color can be observed, the original pigments might have faded away over time. The relatively large scale of the figure, the stylized and powerful depiction of the horse, and the elaborate details of the bridle all illustrate the sophistication of pottery-making achieved in the Han dynasty.

Comparison with Other Han Dynasty Horse *Mingqi* Figures

The Han Horse *mingqi* figure at the Johnson Museum of Art seems to be a typical piece of *mingqi* during the Han period. Many similar horse figures have been excavated, with or without pigments. However, they are all slightly different from each other, in scales, shapes, or colors. Even though pottery *mingqi* vessels achieved mass production, and ceramic figures were also produced in large scale during the Han dynasty, considering its scale and quality, this horse figure at the Johnson Museum of Art is a well-made piece requiring individual modeling. A similar pottery horse *mingqi* figure was excavated from a Han tomb at the Zhulangbu site, Laizhou City (fig. 13). The horse measures 70.5 cm tall, 65 cm long, and 23 cm wide, slightly smaller in scale than the horse figure at the Johnson Museum of Art. It also has similar shape and decorations to the horse analyzed earlier. However, this horse is covered with a layer of white coating that has partly fell off. Red pigments are also traceable on its head. The inclusion of this horse figure in tombs indicates the prestigious status of the tomb owner (Yantai Municipal Museum 2009, 64). Therefore, the horse *mingqi* figure at the Johnson Museum of Art must have also been excavated from a nobleman's tomb. Ceramic horse *mingqi* figures were sometimes created with riders on their backs. For example, for figure 14, the shapes of the horses resemble the horse figure discussed previously. The red and white unfired pigments on the riders and the saddles can be clearly seen. It is notable that there are also horse figures in different materials excavated from Han tombs. Examples include the bronze flying horse (fig. 11), the lacquered horse (fig. 7), and the jade horse (fig. 8) discussed earlier.



Figure 13. Han Dynasty Horse Figure with White Coating (Yantai Municipal Museum 2009, p. 61).



Figure 14. Equestrian Figures at the Johnson Museum of Art (Johnson Museum of Art Website).

When placed into tombs as *mingqi*, certain functions of the horse were emphasized over others. For the Han horse figure at the Johnson Museum of Art discussed above, it seems that the most important may have been the horse's military function. These horse figures were often placed with soldier figures, indicating that the deceased must have wanted such military forces to protect him or her in the afterlife. Some other horse figures, such as the bronze flying horse discussed earlier, also emphasized the horse's function in transportation—more specifically, transporting the deceased into heaven.

The Horse after the Han Dynasty

The horse remained an indispensable subject of Chinese funeral art in the following dynasties. The *sancai* or “three-color” ware horse in the Tang dynasty is a good example. The Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE) continued the realistic depiction of human and animal figures following the Qin and the Han dynasties while adopting foreign influences in pottery-making. Central Asian figures, camels, and other exotic designs appeared in the works of Chinese artisans. High-fired white wares, green wares, and black wares were sophisticatedly crafted during the Tang period, but the most recognizable would be the lead-glazed *sancai* or “three-color” wares. Using high-quality kaolin clay as the body material, *sancai* wares were fired at a high temperature of around 1000 °C and then had a second firing at a lower temperature of around 900 °C (Wu 2001, 98). Other than the original cream glaze, the “three colors” were achieved by adding metal oxides to a lead glaze — copper oxides for green and iron oxides for amber or brown (Vainker 1991, 76). Some *sancai* wares also have a blue color, which is the result of cobalt, a very rare and expensive material. The Tang *sancai* horse was often hollow, molded into separate parts and then assembled (80).

In today's China, the horse population exceeds 11,000,000, which is one-sixth of that in the world and includes more than 26 distinct breeds (Park 2002, 11). While the horse may not be used widely for transportation and defense in modern China, it remains deeply entrenched in Chinese art and culture. Today's Chinese still celebrate the Chinese Zodiac Year of the Horse (2014 was a Horse Year), and the horse is still regarded as an auspicious and positive animal. Additionally, the horse is often contained in Chinese idioms with good meanings, for example, "ma dao cheng gong" (success immediately upon the horse's arrival 马到成功) and "long ma jing shen" (vigor of the dragon and horse 龙马精神). Modern artists, such as Xu Beihong, successfully paint horses in new forms and give them new meanings. The horse, having abundant art pieces and cultural relics depicting it, greatly influenced ancient China and will keep a critical position in the Chinese society.

Conclusions

The discussion above suggests that horses played an important role in Han dynasty Chinese's daily life. They also bore mythical and symbolic meanings associated with the concept of the afterlife. Horses were a part of the Chinese *mingqi* tradition and an important element in Chinese art. These factors explain the prevalence of horses in Han tombs and made the horse the deceased's favorite animal.

Although there have been many scholars researching on the topic of horses in Han China, few of them have systematically collected and thoroughly examined horse *mingqi* data from all available excavation reports. Since the quantity of excavation reports of Han tombs in China is huge, such work requires a large amount of time and effort. However, it would contribute to a full picture of animal *mingqi* usage in Han China, and thus help us better understand Han society.

This thesis strives to use available evidence to examine the prevalence of horse *mingqi* in Han tombs. I want to emphasize here that the horse was considered a prestigious and useful animal in multiple aspects of the Han society, which made it beat other animals to become the deceased's favorite *mingqi*. As discussed earlier, horse remains (often with chariots) only appeared in the tombs of kings and nobles. Although horse *mingqi* figures were found in the tombs of those from various social standings during the Han dynasty, they could still be differentiated in terms of quantity and quality. Many horse figures in the imperial and noble tombs were made of precious materials such as bronze, lacquer, and jade. They were also large in scale and were elaborately made using sophisticated techniques. The quantity of horse figures was also large, such as the terracotta armies discovered in emperors' and feudal lords' tombs. Horse figures were also found in medium and small sized tombs, but were often made of pottery and small in scale. The horse's more prestigious position than other animals is obvious. The Reports of excavations in various regions of China show that there were also other animals buried in the Han dynasty tombs.¹² However, such animal figures could not compete with the horse in quality and quantity. For example, the figures of common livestock in the Han dynasty, such as chicken, oxen, sheep, pig, goat, and duck, were discovered in Han tombs (fig. 5-6). They were typically found buried together, often with clay granary or house models. This indicates those animals were included in tombs as daily essentials, specifically as food sources or agricultural tools, for the deceased to use in the afterlife. Their roles in agriculture and animal husbandry were emphasized here. The horse was often absent in these assemblages of animals because it was regarded as more privileged. Additionally, the horse was too expensive to be raised by peasant farmers for

¹² See excavation reports listed in the Bibliography.

agricultural usage—a single horse could consume as much grain as an ordinary family of six (Park 2002, 21).

The only animal among those mentioned above that seemed to have a higher status was the ox. The ox and the horse were once ordered by the First Emperor, Qin Shihuangdi, to be raised, and the God of Oxen was worshiped along with the God of Horses for centuries (Cunha 1990, 3-4). The reason might be the ox was useful in agriculture and transportation. As a private property, the ox was often owned by rich landlords rather than ordinary peasants, but was not as tightly related to the elite class as the horse. As a substitute of the unaffordable horses, oxen were widely used in Chinese agriculture. When there was a shortage of horses, oxen were also used to pull chariots or carts. Sima Qian recorded that early in the Western Han period when the economy was barely recovering from defeating the Qin state, “The emperor did not have a chariot pulled by horses of the same color; the generals and ministers sometimes used ox carts.” (Sima 1959, 30.1417; Lu 1993, 834) Carts pulled by oxen were obviously of lower status than chariots driven by horses (Lu 1993, 834).

Compared to the ox, the horse was utilized in more prestigious fields in Han society. It was the only animal and an important element in Han military. The military function of horses was emphasized by those horse *mingqi* figures buried with soldier figures, forming a terracotta army in Han tombs.¹³ The horse was expected to protect the tomb owner in the afterlife. The horse’s roles in transportation and as a status symbol for distinguishing the noble from the humble were significant in Han Chinese’s daily life,¹⁴ and its function in transportation was also tied to the Han religious beliefs and mythology—the horse could carry the deceased to heaven.

¹³ See page 24 for Han Dynasty terracotta army examples.

¹⁴ See page 10-12 for detailed discussions of the horse in transportation.

The horse was granted the abilities of a dragon, and became a necessary element in the process of ascending to the immortal world. It is also important to note that the horse's foreign origin might be one explanation for its mysterious depictions. Most Chinese horses are slim and brownish-yellow, and could not compare to European and American horses in terms of physical ability and elegance (Gomes 1990, 21). Therefore, the Han empire made great efforts to import and breed foreign horses. Those "blood-sweating" heavenly horses from Ferghana were even regarded as supernatural, and were buried in the tombs of Han noblemen with other exotic animal figures such as elephants and rhinoceros as a symbol of status. This ties the horse with the elite class, and gives it a prestigious position among all animals. The horse, although not as rare as an elephant or a rhinoceros, played important roles in military, transportation, and recreation. It also bore mythical and symbolic meanings associated with the afterlife. These factors made the horse a special and superior creature in the Han Chinese's minds, and the deceased's favorite animal as *mingqi* in tombs.

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