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CLAIMS OF BUDDHIST RELICS IN THE 
EASTERN HAN TOMB MURALS AT HORINGER

Abstract

The Eastern Han mural tomb at Horinger often is said to feature one of the earliest Buddhist themes in China, namely, the relics of the Buddha or a related motif. But the controversial basis for such identification, the tomb’s now-vanished inscription of “shēlì猞猁,” resulted from an unverifiable reading by a local archaeologist working under adverse conditions and an unqualified confirmation by a leading authority in the discipline—neither of whom were specialists in Buddhism. There is nothing in the tomb that justifies connecting it to the Sanskrit term śarīra, a reference to the Buddha’s cremated remains. This essay offers insight into the critical problems that arise when art historical misidentifications are cited in general historical treatments, thus distorting the picture of early Buddhism and its material culture in China.

The introduction of Buddhism from India around the first century CE contributed to one of the most groundbreaking transformations of visual art and religious practice in China. Since Yu Weichao’s 俞偉超 (1933–2003) influential 1980 study, several tombs dating to the Eastern Han 漢 period (25–220) have been said to feature such “Buddhist” themes. Despite a few isolated traits, however, these tombs generally lack a broader Buddhist context. And because the tombs are part of an ancient native tradition of mortuary art, scholars typically have been reluctant to highlight strong Buddhist traits within them. Examples usually were labeled as Buddhist-Chinese hybrids or Chinese adaptations of Buddhist motifs. I believe this caution was justified, and concur in principle with the seminal analysis of such Buddhist-related motifs made by Wu Hung [Hong巫鴻] in 1986.

In this paper, however, I will challenge the Buddhist labeling of a particular motif in an Eastern Han tomb and refute the series of Buddhist-related discussions that labeling has engendered thus far. I will examine the so-called Buddhist relics in the famous multi-chambered mural tomb of Xiaobanshen小板申 M1, Xindianzi 新店子 at Horinger [Helingeer和林格爾] in Hohhot [Huhehaote呼和浩特] (Inner Mongolia) (figs. 1, 2). As I shall demonstrate, reading these relics as Buddhist occurred as a result of methodological infelicities and circular reasoning, shaped largely by deterministic assumptions propagated by the religion’s popularity today and prevailing academic favoritism. More important, a fresh look will help us discern an important methodological problem in the earlier discourses regarding the introduction of Buddhism to Eastern Han China, particularly since unreliable art historical information often compounds the biases of subsequent scholarship. Once this critical issue is clarified, we can come to a better understanding not only about the tomb at Horinger but also, by extension, the art of death in Eastern Han China.
The most enduring controversy over the allegedly Buddhist elements at the Horinger tomb concerns an infamous but now-vanished inscription on the eastern ceiling wall of the antechamber (fig. 2):

Shēlì猞猁.

In the corresponding position at the same height in the adjacent southern ceiling is another controversial label, featuring the “white elephant” (baixiang 白象) (fig. 3). Setting aside the Buddhist claim to this elephant for the time being (see below), what is of primary concern for the present moment is Yu Weichao’s proposition that the shēlì猞猁 inscription on the eastern ceiling was a phonetic exchange for the standard Buddhist shèlì 舍利. However, I doubt that even the original reading of shēlì猞猁 is correct.

Unfortunately, the cartouche (bangti 傍題) was so badly preserved that it disintegrated before photographs could be taken. Given this circumstance, it is not surprising that the official excavation report does not mention the inscription. Yu Weichao instead refers to unpublished private field notes taken by Li Zuozhi 李作智 then of the Museum of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Li is said to have recorded the condition of the antechamber ceiling when it was first discovered:

… In the east[ern ceiling of the antechamber], there is a painting over the tomb entrance of a serpentine animal with the cartouche of qinglong 青龍 [Green Dragon]. Over this Green Dragon, there is a painting of a figure in the cloudy mist (yunwu 雲霧) seated cross-legged (pantui 盤腿) with the cartouche reading “Dong Wang Gong 東王公” [King Father of the East]. In the patch a little below to the north of the King Father of the East, there is a painting of a pan 盤-vessel shaped thing, inside of which there remain “four globular items” (yuanqiuxing de dongxi 圓球形的東西). On its upper right, there is the two-character label reading shēlì猞猁.

Regrettably, none of the items mentioned here survived long enough to be photographed. Therefore, Yu Weichao’s source for this unique Eastern Han inscrip-
tion, with its allegedly Buddhist content, is little more than hearsay. In fact, if one looks closely at the circumstances surrounding the moment the inscription was documented, one finds further reason for concern. Even Yu Weichao was somewhat cautious about the reliability of Li Zuozhi's work, stating, “On the second of August, 1973, Comrade Li Zuozhi made an additional record from memory.”

It thus appears that the inscription that led Yu Weichao to wax eloquent about Buddhist relics was based on nothing more than a local archaeologist's memory. Moreover, the inscription was located fairly high above eye level in a dark tomb chamber (see figs. 1, 2). This casts serious doubt on the reliability of Li's initial reading, quite apart from the difficulties involved in Yu's Buddhist gloss.

Furthermore, the Buddha's “relics” (or sacred post-cremation remains) is only one of many meanings for shēlì 舍利, the graph Yu Weichao assumed was behind the vanished allograph shēlì猞猁, translating śarīra. As Jonathan A. Silk shows, the early stratum of Buddhist translation in China conveyed the ambivalence inherent in the Indic term. Silk pays particular attention to Lokakṣema’s [Zhi Loujiachen支婁迦讖] vocabulary in the Daoxing banruo jing道行般若經 (T224), which states:

佛語釋提桓因：不用身舍利，從薩芸若中得佛。怛薩阿竭為出般若波羅蜜中。如是，拘翼，薩芸若身，從般若波羅蜜中出。怛薩阿竭，阿羅呵，三耶三佛薩芸若身，從般若波羅蜜中出，我作佛身，從薩芸若得作佛身，從薩芸若生我般泥洹後舍利，供養如故。

The Buddha spoke to Śakra Devānām Indra: “It is not through the bodily-body, but rather from omniscience (ṣarvajñatā), that one becomes a Buddha. The Tathāgata emerges from within the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā). Just so, Kausika [viz. Indra], the body of omniscience emerges from within the Perfection of Wisdom. The Tathāgata, Arhat, Samyaksambuddha has an omniscience body. When that omniscience body is born, I create a buddha-body. I am able to create a buddha-body from omniscience. After my parinirvāna, my relics will be worshipped.

This plain Prajñā School rhetoric shows that the word shēlì 舍利 in Eastern Han Buddhism carried two meanings: the living physical body (shen-sheli身舍利) and
the post-cremation relics (shèlì 舍利). Those who advocate the notion that there are Buddhist relics at Horinger have looked for shèlì exclusively in the latter sense of the term, believing that they can identify the "ball-shaped objects on a plate" as relics. But they implicitly suggest the former meaning as they do not explain why one should exclude that broader possibility.

More reliable than this questionable inscription, though, is the tomb itself and its comparison with the totality of second-century Eastern Han (multi-chambered) tombs. Such an archaeological approach very quickly reveals that the Green Dragon and the King Father of the East on the eastern wall were extremely common tomb iconography at the time (fig. 4). Why would the "alien" motif of the shēlì 猞猁—whether or not it stood for the Buddhist shèlì 舍利—irrupt into this otherwise conventional scene? One possible option, which would be compatible with the general nature of Eastern Han tomb iconography and also partially vindicate Li’s reading, would be to assume that the inscription referred to a lynx (shēlì 猞猁) or a similar type of animal that typically populated the exalted landscape of early imperial China.

Considering the deteriorated condition of the murals and the difficult situation that caused for archaeologists, it is possible that Li Zuozhi was looking at an animal but failed to acknowledge it as such. What if the painted thing in question were an auspicious "roebuck" (zhuāngzi 麈子), as seen in the contemporary tombs of Suoyaocun 所藥村 M1 at Wangdu 望都, Baoding 保定 (Hebei), or Dahuting 打虎亭 M1 in Mi Xian 密縣 (Henan) (figs. 6, 7)? In this regard, the “four globular items” on a plate could have been a damaged representation (limbs?) of the type of animal that often accompanied the King Father and his consort, the Queen Mother of the West (fig. 5). But even if we concede that Li read the canine (quān 犬/犭) radical in both characters correctly, the phonetic elements constituting the remainder of the two characters might not necessarily have yielded a reading of shēlì 猞猁 lynx. The inscription might have been, for instance, hùlí 狐狸 (fox), an attrac-
tive possibility given that the fox, especially its nine-tailed subtype, is frequently a member of the Queen Mother’s entourage. Or what if those globes were meant to represent the elixir of immortality on a plate? Though mere speculation, at least these alternatives do not stray from standard Eastern Han visual grammar for a tomb space.

In fact, a reading of shèlì 猞猁 as an auspicious animal is not altogether out of the question. A fantastic beast of a very similar name was known in Eastern Han: the hánlì 含利 monster, mentioned by Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139) in his Xijing fu 西京賦 (Western Capital rhapsody):

含利颬颬，化為仙車，騐駕四鹿，芝蓋九葩.

The hánlì, mouth gaping, changed into a sylph’s chariot, which was harnessed to a four-deer team and carried a nine-petal mushroom canopy.

But this is no less untangled a problem, especially because this reading of hánlì in the severely corrupt Xijing fu has the exact variant reading of shèlì 舍利. To make matters worse, the latter reading of shèlì stands against hánlì in Cai Zhi’s 蔡質 Hanguan dianzhi yishi xuanyong 漢官典職儀式選用 (Han officials’ administrative ceremonials selected for use), a now-lost but roughly contemporary text to Xijing fu. Of course, we may not be completely assured that Zhang and Cai were both speaking about an identical beast; the graphic similarity between the two words (hánlì 含利 and shèlì 舍利) may be a mere coincidence. But in any case, both Eastern Han authors refer to hánlì/shèlì only to evoke some menagerie of felicities, typical of early imperial iconography, not in a Buddhist context of any kind. Moreover, even if shèlì in both texts is a superior reading of hánlì—although I consider that the opposite is more likely the case, on the principle of lectio difficilior potior, and that shèlì reflects some post-Han, Buddhist-savvy scribal topos—it is still a considerable leap of the imagination to posit a Buddhist-specific etymology for shèlì in Eastern Han belles lettres. In fact, disyllabic words are often transcriptions of foreign words. Accordingly, one might speculate that the animal name(s) used by Zhang and Cai may be of Indic origin and may have taken on a certain zoological character in Eastern Han China different from the
original. For instance, there is a bird in Sanskrit vocabulary called śārī/śārika.29 If so, Yu Weichao was not entirely scrupulous to assert only “the relics” but not allow any possibilities regarding such an exotic bird, the hánli monster, and so forth. But according to the contemporary parlance of Zhang Heng and Cai Zhi, it seems more logical to view the purported inscription, if it ever existed in the Horinger murals, as a local, epigraphic variant of hánli rather than a skewed reference to Buddhist relics, as it were.30 Indeed, I would hypercorrect Li Zuozhi’s field recollection of shēlì猞猁 to *hánli𤞻猁.

One may wonder, moreover, whether Yu Weichao’s emendation of the at least conceivable shēlì猞猁 (beast) to shèlì舍利 ([Buddhist] relics) was culturally justifiable in the first place. It is true that the cremated corporeal remains of the Buddha, one of several meanings for the Sanskrit śarīra, often were depicted as globular items in Indian narrative art (fig. 8). As Jonathan Silk’s superb philological study has shown, the Chinese transcription of śarīra as shèlì舍利 would have been available in theory after Lokakṣema circulated his Buddhist translations, which occurred around the same time as the construction of the Horinger tomb around 180–90 CE.31 Thus, the issue here is not artistic or philological but sociocultural, and the question is whether the ideological issues involving the Buddhist shèlì舍利—a term that could variously refer to the body, the corpse, or the cremated remains of the Buddha—would have been known to an Eastern Han audience in the peripheral northern steppe frontier.32

For such a sociocultural or anthropological inquiry, the tale of the Giao Chỉ交趾–born Sogdian immigrant Kang Senghui’s康僧會 (died 280) first mission to the court of Sun Quan孫權 (reigned 222–52) at Jianye建業 is useful, as it throws light on the early sociocultural acceptance of Buddhist relics in China well after the construction of the Horinger tomb.33 In contrary to Yu Weichao’s unqualified acceptance of the allure of Buddhist relics, the narrative of Kang Senghui’s missionary effort in South China makes it clear that the relics were neither welcomed nor treated with respect, as it is said that the emperor initially felt he’d been “exaggerated to and deceived by” (kuadan誇誕) the missionary (fig. 9). I assume that this nonchalant response typified the sociocultural attitude in early Buddhist China. If this is true, it is exceedingly unlikely that the Horinger muralist was enthusiastic enough about relics to depict them, especially given the tomb’s exceptionally early
date and the absence of archaeological parallels. As a matter of fact, no later Chinese tomb murals feature a motif of relics, not even those associated with known Buddhist sympathizers. Buddhist relics probably were very far from the minds of the Horinger tomb painter and his patrons.

Whether or not the term shēlì猞猁 appears in the inscription at all, it seems highly unlikely that the relics of a deceased person, whether the Buddha or a Buddhist saint, would have been displayed in such a fashion in an Eastern Han context. One has to be sensitive to the psychological effects that relics likely carried in society at that time. Wu Hung asserts, “We could infer that the white elephant and the relics of the Buddha also embody the meaning of xiàngrú 祥瑞 (auspicious omen).” But this ignores the possibility that the early Chinese had an aversion toward relics. The idea that the occupant of the Horinger tomb would have put the refuse of a burned corpse (i.e., relics) into an otherwise felicitous landscape populated by auspicious symbols counters everything we know about the psychological underpinnings of Eastern Han iconography. Even if someone at Horinger knew about Buddhist relics, such a person would not necessarily have connected them with xiàngrú. After all, the main theme of the murals, at least grosso modo, is the hope for postmortem immortality and comfort. The visual representation of dead bodies or associated by-products is incompatible with such notions, even if the dead body in question belonged to a little-understood and thus powerfully charismatic foreign deity. Arguably, decorating the tomb of one’s ancestors with the ball-shaped remnants of a “barbarian” dead god on a platter would have been conceived as highly unfilial—the breaking of a visual taboo in the Chinese mortuary space, no matter how popular the Buddhist cult of relics may have been. No similar representation of such a macabre theme has been attested anywhere else in Han art (fig. 10). Was the occupant of the Horinger tomb so exceptional in his love of relics? On the contrary, we have literary evidence to demonstrate that an intellectual of a much later date did not consider relics as xiàngrú. For example, Han Yu's 韓愈 (768–824) anti-Buddhist memorial (819 CE) to Emperor Xianzong憲宗 (reigned 805–20) denouncing the notorious bone relics at Famensi法門寺 (Dharma Gate Monastery) in Fengxiang 凰翔, Baoji 寶雞 (Shaanxi) may well be an example of such an aversion.
In light of all the problems mentioned above, it seems more probable that Yu Weichao and Wu Hung erred, and there were no relics in Horinger.

In addition to this example at Horinger, murals at other Eastern Han tombs have been associated with Buddhist relics. For example, the ceiling on the middle chamber of Dahuting M2 often is said to feature relics on a plate. But I doubt this, because the claim is based on the suspicious case at Horinger, an example of circular reasoning. Given the research I have outlined above, we should raise questions about the validity of such claims.

Because of this, I want to return to Eastern Han society as a basis for reconsidering the existence of early Buddhist elements. Eastern Han society was not mired in Buddhist-related mysticism or a Buddhist-hybrid religion. Thus, anyone who argues that a tomb mural has a Buddhist context should explain how the tomb was socially connected to actual Buddhist communities. Any tenuous claims should lose their appeal and should be abandoned for the time being. This is exactly the approach I propose for the Horinger tomb. By reconstructing the way in which modern scholarship became saddled with so-called Buddhist relics at Horinger, I have attempted to show the tenuousness of such claims. Li Zuozhi made the initial mistake and was prudent enough not to publish it. But then the notion that he'd virtually discarded was given wide currency by Yu Weichao in his pursuit of early Buddhist traces in China. We have seen Yu's speculation that the now-vanished shèlì 猛利 inscription was actually the Buddhist shèlì 舍利; this was unverified conjecture. There is no verifiable Eastern Han archaeological evidence for this. Regrettably, Yu's claim now has taken on a life of its own and is widely accepted in Western Buddhological circles.

Erik Zürcher (1928–2008) reintroduced the allegedly Buddhist iconography in the Horinger mural to the West. He mistakenly rendered Yu Weichao's (or rather Li Zuozhi's) shèlì 猛利 as shèlì 舍利, 44 This caused a serious problem, for it set a precedent for adducing invalid archaeological data to strengthen the scant historiographic sources for Buddhism in Eastern Han China. When validated by such a famous sinologist as Zürcher, unreliable art historical information compounds the anachronistic biases of other scholars and becomes the basis for all sorts of further
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claims of Buddhist relics in the Eastern Han tomb murals at Horinger

speculations. This has affected the study of Eastern Han Buddhism and the Buddhist art of that period, if there even was such a thing. Bad art history drives out good historiography.

Having identified the methodological infelicities involved in the reading of shēlǐ 獅獅, let us turn to another Buddhist controversy in the Horinger tomb. On the southern ceiling mentioned above (in fact, at an equivalent height as the claimed shēlǐ 獵獅 inscription on the eastern side), there is a mural of a white elephant with an accompanying label (figs. 1 to 3). To demonstrate the elephant’s Buddhist connection, Wu Hung compares it to a well-known depiction of fanciful elephants from Tengzhou 滕州, Zaozhuang 柚莊 (Shandong), calling them “six tusked” and noting that the “six-tusked elephant, which in Indian Buddhism stood for one of the Buddha’s former incarnations, is depicted here driven as an object of tribute, a xiàngruǐ, which represented Heaven’s approval of the Chinese emperor’s rule” (fig. 11). Regarding those transformed elephants of Tengzhou, Wu Hung essentially is embellishing the earlier views of both Lao Gan 劳幹 (1907–2003) and Yu Weichao, but there are problems with these assertions as a whole. First, it is uncertain whether the animal on the rubbing of the Tengzhou stone carvings really had six tusks. I am skeptical; only three tusks are shown, as each elephant is represented in profile. Since Lao Gan’s initial conjecture that there were six, both Yu Weichao and Wu Hung have blithely duplicated that number. In fact, one of the two front tusks of the leading elephant appears to come from behind the trunk. Might there actually be four tusks? There are indeed two four-tusked elephants carved in the contemporary stone reliefs at Longyangdianzhen 龍陽店鎮, also in Tengzhou (fig. 12). Second, even if there were six, and a six-tusked elephant stood for the Buddha’s incarnation in India, one doubts whether such an iconographic concept

was available in China, especially as early as the mid-first century CE, the date of the Tengzhou carvings and some one hundred years before any Buddhist text with reference to such elephants likely was translated into Chinese (see below).\textsuperscript{47} Third, the fantastic menagerie or procession of auspicious animals—with or without elephants, white-skinned or not—was one of the most widespread features in Eastern Han tombs all across China.\textsuperscript{48}

To validate Wu Hung’s statement at least partially, it is possible to emend whether a “white-skinned elephant” (\textit{baixiang}) rather than a “six tusked” one often was regarded as \textit{xiangrui} around the mid-first century CE. But Yu Weichao’s assumption—and Wu Hung’s tacit acceptance of it—that the Tengzhou elephants were “white” is unverifiable; we are unable to see any color on the black-ink rubbing (see fig. 11).\textsuperscript{49} Fortunately, a group of Eastern Han tombs with stone carvings featuring traces of pigment were excavated at Dabaodang 大保当 in Shenmu 神木, Yulin 榆林 (Shaanxi) in 1996.\textsuperscript{50} A door crossbeam from one of the tombs (M24) is decorated with the typical early imperial menagerie motif and an adorable, and yet untransformed, elephant in the center, an architectural context perhaps similar to that of the Tengzhou carvings (fig. 13). The Dabaodang elephant retains a reddish tint around the head, especially on some parts of the lips, eye, earlobe, and trunk. So was it originally pink in color?\textsuperscript{51} Should we describe the Tengzho elephants as being \textit{pink-skinned} instead?

Also, when reviewing Wu Hung’s classical sources to find an explicit definition of the (six-tusked or albino) elephant as a \textit{xiangrui}, one finds such references mainly in Shen Yue’s 沈約 (441–513) \textit{Furui zhi} 符瑞志, appended to the \textit{Song shu} 宋書.\textsuperscript{52} This individual text from the Southern Liang 梁 (502–87) dynasty undoubtedly was exposed to the Buddhist environment, so Wu Hung’s use of it might be anachronistic. As a consequence, it is hard to disprove that Shen Yue’s ideas about auspicious elephants were connected to Buddhism due to centuries of cultural conflation. And this does not explain the Eastern Han representations.\textsuperscript{53}

Moreover, Wu Hung’s abrupt morphological rendering of the Horinger inscription (\textit{shēlǐ} 猞猁) as \textit{shèlǐ} 舍利—to strengthen his argument for the Buddhist identification of the elephant in the same tomb chamber—presents its own difficulties.\textsuperscript{54} As we have seen, even the transcription (via Yu Weichao) of \textit{shēlǐ} 猞猁 by Li Zuozhi has problems; that it is freely interchangeable with \textit{shèlǐ} 舍利 is even more dubious. Now the Buddhist connection to Horinger’s white elephant is likely as tenuous as that of the claimed inscription of the relics.

Finally, another point needs to be addressed about the actual religious identity of the Eastern Han (white or six-tusked) elephant. I have elsewhere demonstrated that white elephants were not yet Buddhist symbols in the first century CE, and that such things as “Buddhist elephants” in Eastern Han murals are improbable, thanks
Mahout and elephant with a reddish tint around the head. Section of a door-crossbeam, 26 cm (h). From Dabaodang M24 at Shenmu in Yulin (Shaanxi). Now in the collection of the Shaanxi Institute of Archaeology. After Shanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo et al., Shenmu Dabaodang (Beijing: Kexue, 2001), color pl. 23-1

Strange beasts wildly capered about, and the great bird proudly strutted in.
A white elephant marched along nursing its calf, its trunk dropping and undulating.

The main problem here concerns the semantic vagueness of yun 孕, which David R. Knechtges translates as “to nurse.”\textsuperscript{57} This translation seems unproblematic.\textsuperscript{58} For example, Xue Zong’s 薛綜 (died 243) commentary paraphrases:\textsuperscript{59}

大白象, 從東來, 當觀前, 行且乳.
The great white elephant came from the East. When it reached the front of the belvedere,\textsuperscript{60} it marched while nursing [its calf].

The fact that Xue Zong lived only a century after Zhang Heng does not guarantee that this commentator from the Eastern Wu 吳 (229–80) was historically exact. Nevertheless, he might have caught his predecessor’s implication in a manner that we might easily miss today. In this respect, it is remarkable that the use of yun 孕 for “nursing” mirrors Xu Shen’s 許慎 (circa 55–149) curious dictionary entry on the elephant (xiang 象) graph.\textsuperscript{61} As I pointed out elsewhere, his major concern was with elephantine zoology, especially with the rebreeding interval of three years (sannian 三年一乳), and he permitted the semantic range of ru 乳 to overlap with chan 產, which was also shareable with yun 孕.\textsuperscript{62} This theme of the great nursing elephant continued to be current in the time of the compilation of the Song shu by Shen Yue, who stated:\textsuperscript{63}

巨象行乳.
The great elephant marched along, nursing [its calf].

to preestablished early imperial traditions and the socially marginalized Buddhist position in China (fig. 12).\textsuperscript{56} Nevertheless, there is one further nuance to this idea, involving once again the fantastic animals in Zhang Heng’s Xijing fu:\textsuperscript{56}
Even in the sixth century, this nursing elephant did not appear in a concrete Buddhist environment but within the familiar landscape of auspicious omens. These occurrences of the same elephantine theme in the works of Xu Shen, Zhang Heng, Xue Zong, Shen Yue, and others clearly suggests that the “nurturing (or reproducing) elephant” was a common trope of long standing that went back to the second century or even earlier (fig. 14). We must remember that the elephantine habitat that Xu Shen alluded to was the exotic locale of Nan Yue 南越. The birth of an infant elephant on Han Chinese soil likely was regarded as extremely auspicious.

Interestingly, Wu Hung’s translation for Zhang Heng’s line is “the white elephant brings about conception” (baixiang xing yun 白象行孕). This transitive use of xing/hang 行 seems unacceptable. Moreover, even if we agreed with the rendering of yun as “conception,” it still would be absurd to assume that the elephant could bring it about. Wu Hung implies that Zhang is alluding to Queen Māyā’s conception of the Buddha. At this point, the problem is no longer merely linguistic, but part of the mutually supporting tangle of arguments concerning “Buddhist” iconography—arguments that I have shown lack a solid basis. Wu Hung states:

This idea was not a part of traditional Chinese thought.... [T]he idea that [Zhang Heng] expresses about "the white elephant bringing about conception" must have originated in Buddhist legends.

As I have just demonstrated, the motif of nurturing elephants was prevalent in Eastern Han literature. Information about the triennial breeding cycle of elephants had circulated in China well before Zhang Heng, and extensive literary and archaeological evidence confirms that elephants were known in China long before Han times (see fig. 14). No hidden Buddhist allusion can be detected between the lines of Zhang Heng’s rhapsody. In fact, the parallel between the great bird and the white elephant as seen in Zhang’s rhapsody is exactly what is attested in the Horinger murals (fig. 3). For this reason, we can rule out Buddhist conjectures concerning the Horinger tomb.

In addition, the textual basis for Wu Hung’s notion that the “Buddhist elephant brings about conception” does not date to Zhang Heng’s lifetime. In fact, Wu refers to Yu Weichao for the narrative of Māyā’s conception through the avatar of the white elephant, and Yu’s locus classicus, the Xiuxing benqi jing 修行本起經 (T184), is no longer accepted as an Eastern Han text, although traditionally it has been attributed to Kang Mengxiang 康孟祥 [var. "祥] (active late second century). But even if we wanted to advocate an early third-century date for this Buddhist biography, that date is also too late, postdating Zhang Heng’s
rhapsody by a century. In fact, Zhang Heng’s work long predates any extant Buddhist translation into Chinese. It therefore seems ill-advised to insist that there was an established Buddhist tradition by 100 CE that could have exerted any iconography-changing (or paradigm-shifting) influence over a mainstream Chinese writer such as Zhang Heng.

Is it possible that the concept of the Buddhist elephant was transmitted orally during the Eastern Han period and was not documented in any way? Such an idea is pertinent to any art historical study of Buddhist iconography. Indeed, oral transmission was closely related not only to literary tradition but also to visual conventions. We must always consider the possibility that a certain visual iconography was based on oral transmission, or vice versa, without (or before) being passed onto literary texts. But if an intangible oral tradition is the only basis for the theories of Yu Weichao and Wu Hung, why frame them with such “arduous” textual and historical research? Since that research is questionable and only muddies the waters, it might have been preferable to investigate possible early Buddhist and Indian connections in early imperial Chinese art. However, such an argument would fail to convince many scholars. I, for one, question whether Buddhist oral tradition accounts for observable phenomena better explained by the rich, preexisting traditions of auspicious (white-skinned or six-tusked) elephants, which were well-established in literary and artistic realms at least a couple of centuries before the spread of Buddhism in China. Of course, Buddhism existed in India well before the founding of the Chinese empire, and India might have been the ultimate origin of all the elephants depicted in early imperial China. Nevertheless, when the first Buddhist translators began to circulate their initial works for a Chinese audience, these putative Indian elephants already would have been naturalized—after four centuries or so—as thoroughly Chinese auspicious imagery. Moreover, our current state of scholarship does not facilitate the search for archaeological evidence for the transmission of Indian elephant motifs in pre-Qin China.

Thus I believe the Eastern Han elephants were ramifications of a demonstratively earlier tradition that was not particularly propelled by the social intrusion of Buddhism into China. Not a single scholar has convincingly proved that those elephants had a Buddhist origin. Despite this discouraging conclusion about the social status of Eastern Han Buddhism, however, the preceding analysis conveys one invaluable lesson about the study of early Chinese art: the co-relationship between auspicious symbols and their colorful or directional orientation. For instance, Wu Hung claims that “white elephants as a xiangrui from the West was already a popular concept among the Chinese of the second century B.C.” But this claim, however valid it is in its own context, must be balanced against Xue
Zong’s conceptualization that the “great white elephant came from the East” (\textit{da bai xiang cong dong lai 大白象從東來}). That is to say, whether they came from the West or the East, elephants must have been regarded as auspicious in second-century China. More generally, the color-direction coordinate (what I call the chromato-directional correlation) of a symbol does not necessarily indicate its historical origin.

To conclude, the Eastern Han murals at Horinger do not provide any grounds for a Buddhist reading. The inscription likely was misread by a local archaeologist working in a darkened tomb, and in any case, nothing justifies its identification with the Buddhist term \textit{sarira}. Unfortunately, such art historical misidentifications have distorted our picture of early Chinese Buddhism. Now, however, there is an opportunity for a fresh scrutiny of early Buddhist art in China.

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NOTES

AUTHOR’S NOTE: I developed an earlier version of this paper, “Cremation Traces Among Auspicious Omens? Issues on the Introduction of Buddhist Arts of Death to China,” as part of my dissertation, “The Genesis of Image Worship: Epigraphic Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2011), 171–90, and read it at the 2012 annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies. I thank Melia Belli for including me on the panel on the Arts of Death in Asia and her suggestions thereafter. I also acknowledge Lothar von Falkenhausen, Jonathan A. Silk, Adam D. Smith, Lai Guolong 来國龍, Eric M. Greene, W. South Coblin, Albert E. Dien, Stuart Sargent, Paul Harrison, Rhi Juhyung 李柱亨, and Nam Tongsin 南東信, who shared their wisdom throughout the various stages of the manuscript.


3 Wu Hung, “Buddhist Elements.”

4 See Nei Menggu Zizhiqiu Bowuguan Wenwu Gongzuodui 奈曼自治區博物館文物工作隊, Helinge'er Hanmu bihua Henggel'er 漢格爾漢墓壁畫 (Compilation of the murals of the Eastern Han tomb at Horinger) (Beijing: Wenwu, 1978); Gai Shanlin 盖山林, Helinge'er Hanmu bihua (Hohhot: Nei Menggu Renmin, 1978); Chen Yongzhi 陳永志 and Kuroda Akira 黑田彰 eds., Helinge'er Hanmu bihua Xiaozi zhuan tu jihua 和林格爾漢墓壁畫孝子傳圖輯錄 (Compilation of the filial sons’ cycle in the murals of the Han tomb at Horinger) (Beijing: Wenwu, 2009).

5 Yu Weichao, ”Dong Han,” 68–72. Chen Yongzhi et al., Helinge'er, 80, 169.

6 The latter graph is, however, not unambiguously xiang 象, though such a reading seems plausible given that the graph occurs next to the painting of the white elephant itself. For example, Gai Shanlin (Helinge'er, 7, 74, 82–83) offered yang 養 instead, while conceding that it might still stand for “elephant.” On purely graphical grounds, something similar to chun 春 or quan 券 is also feasible. According to Yu Weichao (”Dong Han,” 69), the preliminary reading of the excavation team was indeed quan. Nei Menggu Zizhiqiu Bowuguan, Helinge'er, 34, introduced yet another epigraphic possibility to this elephant glyph, which looks like the quan but with its dao 刀 component replaced with gen 艮, thus similar to juan 卷 or Gai’s yang. See Minku Kim, “The Genesis of Image Worship: Epigraphic Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 2011), 156–71.

7 Yu Weichao, ”Dong Han,” 68–72. The abbreviation EMC stands for Early Middle Chinese, the system of reconstructed sound proposed by Edwin G. Pulleyblank, Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1991), 278, 188–90. Unfortunately, neither shē 猇 nor lì 猟 was given in Xu
Nei Menggu Bowuguan, Yu Weichao, "Dong Han, " 68.

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Logical argument as overly conjectural. " require us to discount the entire Buddho-really existed at all, would in any case inscription has been lost, if in fact it ever Additionally, the fact that the original whose QYS transcription one uses. reading within that system, regardless of there is in fact no viable way to assign it a any Qieyun System lexica,切韻 antiquity. 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31 Silk, Body Language, 53.


25 Although Cai Zhi’s text in its entirety has been lost, its reference to 舍利/含利 is, for instance, quoted in a commentary to Fan 尋安帝記 5 (q.v. Xiaoan Di 纉安帝) 205: “The beast of 舍利 comes from the western direction” (舍利之獸從西方來). Bodde, Festivals, 152ff., is determined to alternate this reading of 舍利 舍利 consistently with 含利 含利 even when he cites Sun Xingyuan’s 孫星衍 (1753–1781) reconstructed collection of the Hanguan dianzhi yishi xuyang, where the variant reading of 含利 含利 is not prima facie recognized.

26 For such themes, see inter alia Leslie V. Wallace, “Chasing the Beyond: Depictions of Hunting in Eastern Han Dynasty Tomb Reliefs (25–220 CE) from Shannxi and Shanzhong” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Pittsburgh, 2010).

27 In contrast, Bodde, Festivals, 155, views that 含利 含利 “has a more Chinese ring to it” and is the “Sinification” of 舍利 舍利.


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42 Zürcher, “Han Buddhism.”


47 Lao Gan dates the Tengzhou carving to the reign of Zhang Di 章帝 (75–88 CE); Wu Hung accepts this. The legendary *Six-tusked zhang jing 四十二章經* may or may not date to that time, but that is beside the point, because this purportedly early text lacks any reference to elephants. See Henri Maspero, “Le songe et l’ambassade de l’empereur Ming,” *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* 10 (1910), 95–130; Tokiwa Daisu 常盤大定, “Kan Mei kyūhōsetsu no kenkyū 河面求法蓮的研究” (Study on the story of Han Ming Di’s Buddhist mission), *Tōyō gakuhō* 東洋学報 10 (1920), 25–41; Liang Qichao 梁啓超, “Fojiao zhi chu shuru 佛教之初次入境”,...

A few local scholars have stated that the elephant is white-skinned, for the rest of its body seems to have a whitish hue. See Wang Weilin 王維林, “Shaanxi Shenmu Dabaodang Han caihui huaxiangshi,” Shannxi dafu huaxiangshi 報, 190 (1972.3), 69–74.


54 For example, Wang Li, 213, q.v., gives a single definition of huaitai 賀胎: to be pregnant. On the other hand, Bodde (Festivals in Classical China, 160, n. 83) suggests ying 孕 (EMC jiajni) in place of yun 孕 (EMC jiuji) and translates: “A white elephant moves grandly” (italics are mine). See Pulleyblank, Lexicon, 375, 390. Nevertheless, this alternative seems superfluous in this context.

55 Translation adapted from Knechtges, Artibus Asiae, 1 vol. 1, 232.

56 For this particular belvedere, Xue Zong might have alluded to the famous elephant-viewing point of Guanxiang-yuan 觀象觀 in Emperor Wu Di’s 武帝, 141–87 BCE) Shanglinyuan 上林苑. See Sunfu huautou 蘇福畫圖; Song Minqiu 宋敏求, Chang’an zhi 長安志, 4, 7.
“象：长鼻牙，南越大獸，三年一乳” (The elephant; with a long nose and tusks; is a large animal from/of Nan Yue; bearing single young once every three years [translation is mine]), Shuowen jiezi, 9B: 45r (6102). Kim, “The Genesis of Image Worship,” 137ff.

See Kim, “Return of the Elephants.”

Song shu 19, Zhi 9, Yue 獄 1, 546 (“魏 舊諜江左，猶有夏育扛鼎，巨象行乳，神 龜振舞，背負靈岳，桂樹白雪，畫地成川之樂焉”). An almost-verbatim parallel is found in Fang Xuanling’s 房玄齡 (579–648) Jin shu 晋書 23, Zhi 13, Yue 下, 718 (“魏晉訖江左，猶有夏育扛鼎，巨象行乳，神龜振舞，背負靈嶽，桂樹白雪，畫地成川之樂焉”), cited by Zürcher, “Han Buddhism,” 161, n. 12. Zürcher mistakenly renders this twice-attested juxiang 巨象 as baixiang 白象, taking it as evidence that confirms Yu Weichao’s Buddhist reading of the iconography at Horinger.


Zürcher, “Han Buddhism,” 160, favors Wu Hung’s translation, which he slightly modifies to “the white elephant effecting pregnancy,” over Knechtges’ translation, which I consider superior.


As a matter of fact, Zhang Heng’s Xijing fu might be not completely devoid of Buddhist rapport or Indic terminology. For instance, many scholars agree that its reference to sangmen 桑門 would be an early transliteration of śramana. See E. Zürcher, The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China, 3rd rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 29; Knechtges, Wen xuan, vol. 1, 236; E. Pulleyblank, “Stages in the transcription of Indian Words in Chinese from Han to Tang,” Veröffentlichungen der Societas Uralo-Altaica 16 (1989), 78. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the other images in Zhang’s rhapsody should be interpreted as Buddhist elements.

Wu Hung, “Buddhist Elements,” 272. See Nattier, A Guide, 108. Recently, Deeg, “Why is the Buddha,” esp. 108, 114, has investigated the Chinese inclusion of the bodhisattva as the rider of the elephant in connection with linguistic issues, subscribing to the so-called Gândhâri hypothesis of early Chinese Buddhist translations. But Deeg’s dating of the Xiuxing benqi jing to the Eastern Han may be anachronistic, and this has led to a circular argument regarding the “Buddhist” iconography of the Horinger tomb.


Wu Hung, “Buddhist Elements,” 272. But Wu Hung’s basis for this impression, i.e., Emperor Wu Di’s xiang zai yu, bai ji xi 象 載瑜, 白集西 was likely not about the white elephant at all but rather about an elephant carriage or howdah (xiangzai 象 載). See Kim, “The Genesis of Image Worship,” 135ff.