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Earthly Beasts and Heavenly Creatures: Animal Realms in Early Medieval Chinese Tombs and Cave Temples

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Abstract: This analysis of the fabricated worlds in tombs and cave temples of China's Hexi Corridor shows that animals are integral to concepts of earthly and heavenly realms. Changes in animal imagery from the third through sixth centuries connect to the region's social, cultural, and demographic transformations, including an embrace of pastoralism followed by increasing cosmopolitanism with the spread of Buddhism. A profusion of domestic animals in Wei-Jin tombs establish microcosms, while otherworldly creatures on entrances and coffins play supernatural roles. Western Jin tombs emphasize fantastic beasts over familiar ones and fuel the mysticism of this era. A Sixteen Kingdoms tomb represents the synthesis of the celestial and terrestrial, setting the stage for Buddhist cave temples. In these, real-world animals are all but expunged while imaginary beasts adapt easily to the new habitat. The proliferation of human figures in the form of buddhas and bodhisattvas not only crowd out animals but indicates that the introduction of Buddhism ushers in an anthropocentric view of earthly life and paradise.

Keywords: China; Hexi Corridor; tombs; Buddhist caves; cave temples; Wei-Jin; Dingjiazha; Silk Roads; Dunhuang; Jiuquan

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Citation: Clydesdale, Heather. 2023. Earthly Beasts and Heavenly Creatures: Animal Realms in Early Medieval Chinese Tombs and Cave Temples. *Arts* 12: 14. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12010014

Academic Editor: Petya Andreeva

Received: 5 December 2022
Revised: 8 January 2023
Accepted: 9 January 2023
Published: 16 January 2023

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1. Introduction

Animals loom large in the ecosystem of the human imagination. In China's early medieval period, animals play an important role in the fabricated worlds of tombs and temples, where they reflect real-world changes and reveal how people conceived of the cosmos. This essay examines tombs and Buddhist cave temples from the third through sixth centuries in the Hexi Corridor (Hexi Zoulang 河西走廊), an important thoroughfare on the Silk Roads in today's Gansu 甘肃 province (Figure 1). Previous studies on art in this area have touched on animals' secondary roles alongside the principal actors of human subjects, and a few have looked in detail at specific animals. My analysis of animal imagery compares its distribution and stylistic rendering across several sites to illuminate profound changes in the way animals were perceived and connected to culture. From an initial profusion of pastoral animals in third-century tombs to their later displacement by imaginary beasts and multiplying buddhas in sixth-century cave temples, animals in the art of the Hexi Corridor are anything but peripheral. Their presence, transformation, and even absences are intertwined with changes in the region, including cultural exchanges with pastoralists, the infusion of new populations, the advent of Buddhism, and a worldview that was becoming increasingly anthropocentric.

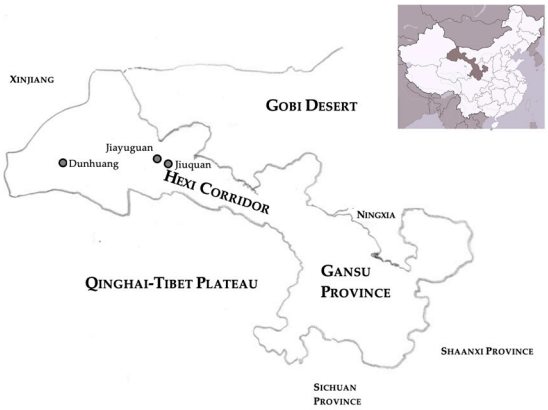

Figure 1. Map of the Hexi Corridor and Gansu Province.

2. Wei-Jin Tombs (Third to Early Fourth Century) Located between Jiuquan and Jiayuguan

Two important groups of tombs are rife with animal imagery, mostly in paintings and, to a lesser extent, in carvings. The Xigoucun 西沟村 and Xincheng 新城 tombs lie between the cities of Jiuquan 酒泉 and Jiayuguan 嘉峪关 in the central Hexi Corridor. They date to the Wei-Jin 魏晋 period (220–317 CE), which followed the fall of the Han 汉 dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and ushered in more than three hundred years of political fragmentation across China. The construction and layout of large-scale tombs is uniform at both sites. All have long, ramped corridors leading to two or three underground chambers. Above the entrance to the front chamber, each tomb has a tall watchtower-like façade made of carved and painted bricks that soars up one face of an airshaft. Archaeologists commonly call this striking element a "screen wall" (*zhaobi* 照壁). The chambers on the other side of the screen wall are likewise made of brick and measure about three meters square (Figure 2). The front chambers, some of which have additional side chambers, have a unique construction of a sunken floor under a *fudou* 覆斗 (overturned dipper) ceiling, so that the space represents the courtyard of a manor under an open sky. The middle chamber, if present, has a raised floor and *fudou* ceiling. In the rear chamber of each tomb, the side walls curve inward to form a barrel-vaulted ceiling, and it is here that the occupants were laid to rest (Zhao and Ma 1996, pp. 4–14; Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, pp. 7–17). Each of these three spaces, the screen wall, front and middle chambers, and rear burial chamber, feature animal imagery that performs distinct functions in the burial.

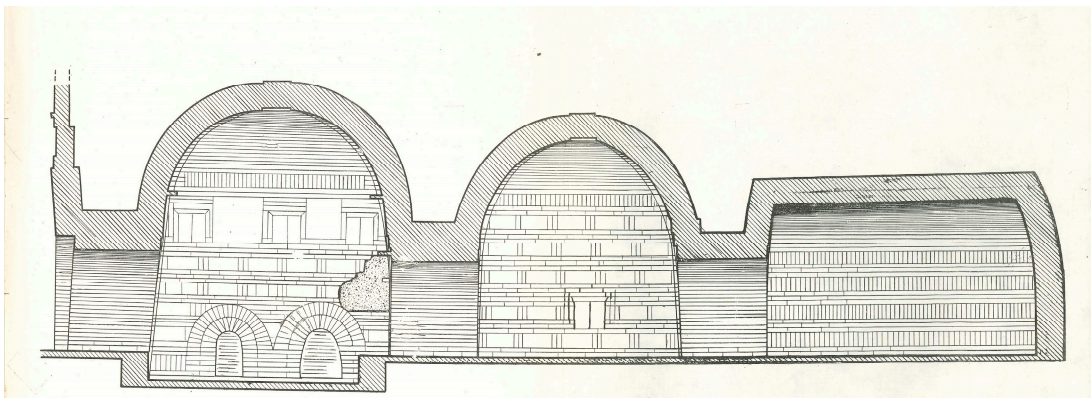

Figure 2. Cross section, Xincheng M3, brick, Wei-Jin period (220–317). (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, Figure 13). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Animals abound in the front chambers, where they define environments, provide food for the deceased, and signify wealth, power, or virtue. They appear in paintings

on individual bricks and centered on conventional themes showing life at home and in the region (Figure 3). Apart from these general consistencies, however, the paintings in individual tombs differ in detail, dispersion, style, and presentation, presumably to accurately project the aspirations of the patrons who commissioned the tomb. Not surprisingly, one of the principal themes centers on animals as sustenance. Not only are there scenes of servants staggering under platters of meat, but also ones of animals about to be slaughtered and in various stages of being butchered and cooked. In fact, scenes of butchering and food preparation outnumber those of banqueting. One series of images from the east wall of Xincheng M1 illustrates the process from live animal to food as a goat is led in, killed, and hung by its legs so its blood drains into a pan (Figure 4). In paintings on adjacent bricks, meat hangs from hooks before serving women fry it. The meat in question includes chicken, beef, mutton, and even horse, which is identified by an inscription "*ma*" 马 (horse) beside a row of red slabs suspended from hooks (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, p. 99). This indicates that animal protein was a staple of people's diet, and that it was highly valued. It is a departure from Han-dynasty customs and was probably due to local Chinese people adopting the customs of Xiongnu 匈奴 and other pastoralists, who also lived in the region and appear in tomb paintings (Sterckx 2011, pp. 14–15, 17, 20–21, 26–28; McLaughlin 2020, p. 37). These images of cooking and feasting supply what is known as a "happy home" in the tomb (Wu 2010, pp. 44–45). The emphasis on production over consumption suggests that patrons wanted to establish systems for the ongoing nourishment of the souls of the deceased. That is to say, the paintings not only present food as an end-product, but they set up the means of production from live animals to hot meals so that feasting can be a recurring event.

Figure 3. East wall of front chamber, Xincheng M5, carved and painted brick, Wei-Jin period (220–317). (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, color pl. 1). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Figure 4. Goat being bled, east wall of front chamber, Xincheng M6, painting on brick, Wei-Jin period (220–317), (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, pl. 68.2). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Other animal paintings set the mechanisms of the estates into motion. In the fields, oxen drag plows and harrows while chickens scratch in the yard and try to snatch grain, proving that even the happy home of the afterlife is not without quotidian nuisances (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, pl. 45.2). Although the paintings are somewhat cursory with minimal details, they skillfully encapsulate the character of local creatures, and imbues even humdrum barnyard episodes with a dash of drama. In one scene, a rooster leads four hens (Figure 5). Lifting his claw with an air of grandeur, he inflates his chest and turns his head as if to address the hen directly behind him. She, too, raises her toe, imitating her mate's pomposity, a flex that the birds behind her ignore. Vignettes such as these appear to be grounded in close observations of creatures and a penchant for endowing them with personalities. This stylistic choice is one of several that the artisans could have made and conveys veracity and spirit, rather than merely cataloguing livestock. In this way, the animals echo Han dynasty *mingqi* 明器, so-called "spirit vessels" or burial goods made of earthenware or other materials and representing animals, architectural forms, household goods, and the like to serve the tomb occupants in the afterlife. Animal *mingqi* in particular are often vivid representations that capture the creature's personality in an engaging way, presumably because their presence in the afterlife was valued as part of the larger household or estate ecosystem.

Figure 5. Rooster and hens, west wall of front chamber, Xincheng M3, painting on brick, Wei-Jin period (220–317). (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, pl. 54.3). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Moving beyond the estate, animals help humans navigate the region and reveal particulars about how daily customs and routines were adjusting to broader changes. Three tombs at Xincheng include paintings of large dogs lunging and straining on a leash or standing sentry, often in front of a fortified citadels (Figure 6). The hounds' floppy ears and long-haired coats, rendered through wavy strokes of the brush, indicate that they might be Tibetan mastiffs, one of the oldest breeds of dog and a sign of pastoralists' influence on daily life in the Hexi Corridor (Ren et al. 2017, p. 119). That pastoralism had permeated the local the economy is evident in the number of herding scenes, which compete with and even overshadow those of farming and sericulture. Women, men, boys, or mastiffs oversee herds of goats and cows or, less frequently, one or two camels. The artists capture the multitude and movement of these animals by means of stacking, crowding, and overlapping, artistic techniques that would become commonplace by the sixth century (Figure 7) (Rawson 2001, p. 128). These scenes stand in visual testament to textual records, which state that a mixed economy of agriculture and pastoralism dominated the Hexi Corridor in the third century (Zhao 2009, p. 2). The mingling of grasslands and oasis-fed farmlands in the corridor was ideal for a varied economy and food supply, something that Han dynasty officials recognized. The *Hanshu* 汉书, referring to an ancient name for the region, states:

> West of Wuwei 武威 ... the land is vast, and people are few. The water and grass are suitable for animal husbandry, and livestock in old Liangzhou 凉州 is the most plentiful under heaven.
>
> (Ban 1995, p. 1644.45)

Figure 6. Citadel with guard and dog, east wall of front chamber, Xincheng M5, painting on brick, Wei-Jin period (220–317). (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, pl. 54.2). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Figure 7. Sogdian horse herder, north wall of front chamber, Xincheng M6, painting on brick, Wei-Jin period (220–317). (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, pl. 53.1). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

By the third century, the Hexi Corridor was attracting newcomers, and tomb paintings enlist animals to herald their arrival. In a painting from Xincheng M5, a herd of horses race across a red-bordered brick under the calm purview of what appears to be a Sogdian wrangler, identified by his large nose beneath deep-set eyes, short coat cinched with a belt and with tapered sleeves, and tall boots (Figure 7, above) (Dien 2007, p. 425). Likewise, paintings of horseback riding show the influence of pastoralists, for whom riding was an expression of power, in contrast to the goat herds, which indicated wealth (Barfield 1989, p. 21). Across the front chambers, the tomb occupants hunt and lead cavalries through the region. Their horses, with barrel chests, slender legs, and kicking hooves, extend and amplify the occupants' vigor. The most dynamic such scene unfurls across three walls of Xincheng M3. This composition is unique among the Xigoucun and Xincheng paintings in that it breaks free of the brick-and-mortar grid to achieve an expansive composition. On the south wall, what are probably Chinese tenant-farmers grip shields and halberds as they march, surrounding their mounted general (Xiao 1976, p. 85). In the next scene, the party encamps before setting out again on the east wall. Here, nobles ride spirited mounts that canter onto the north wall, where the tomb occupant not only rides point but is boldly outlined in red (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Military campaign, north wall of front chamber, Xincheng M3, painted brick, Wei-Jin period (220–317). (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, color pl. 2.1). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Images of horseback riding further reveal relaxed gender roles, which are indicative of pastoral cultures (Yu 1967, p. 40). In one series of painted bricks in Xigoucun M7, a husband and wife ride with what is probably their private militia, comprised of another eight mounted soldiers (Jiuquanshi Bowuguan 1998, pp. 71, 81). Among the numerous images of hunting from horseback (with the aid of arrows, spears, or falcons), one from Xincheng M5 is especially intriguing (Figure 9). The horse spreads its legs to the front and back, flying at full gallop, while its rider calmly turns to release a Parthian shot at a fleeing hare. The archer's slim frame and a painted curve along the breast of her jacket suggest that she is female. The influence of pastoral cultures in the region accompanied their growing numbers after the fall of the Han dynasty (Bai 2011; Bai 1990). The Xigoucun and Xincheng tombs include paintings of people representing various ethnicities, as indicated by hair and clothing styles and including Qiang 羌, Di 氐, Xianbei 鲜卑, and Xiongnu, giv-

ing visual form to an observation made in the *Jinshu* 晋书, which stated that "In Guanzhong 关中 (a region encompassing the Hexi Corridor) there are more than a million people. In calculating their numbers, half are Rong 戎 and Di." (Fang 1995, p. 56.1533).

Figure 9. Female hunter on horseback, north wall of front chamber, Xincheng M5, painting on brick, Wei-Jin period (220–317). (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, pl. 79.1). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Looking at the Xigoucun and Xincheng tombs, it is apparent that people living in the Jiuquan area during in Wei-Jin not only adopted pastoralism, including customs of meat-eating, herding and roles for women, but also viewed animals as integral to their lives and vision of cosmic harmony. Yet any traces of "animal style" art of the Xiongnu and Xianbei are absent in the paintings and other objects found in these tombs. This includes stylistic references to animal style's predator–prey symbiosis, contorted creatures, mix of naturalism and abstracted geometric design, and self-framed images with a distinctive use of negative space. Instead, the paintings cleave closely to Han dynasty precedents, whether in the form of paintings or images in relief on bricks.

Speaking broadly, the themes in these tomb paintings also align with Han dynasty mortuary art to include farming, hunting, banqueting, and entertainment, along with processions such as the one in Figure 8. Such themes provide comfort, repose, and enjoyment for the tomb occupants in the afterlife. They also project or elevate social status and personal virtue by showing the tomb occupant as presiding over a domain in which the forces of *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳 exist in perfect balance. Two important distinctions between these third- and early-fourth-century tomb paintings and their Han dynasty counterparts should be noted, however. First, heavenly themes and auspicious omens are absent, though I will explain below how such imagery appears elsewhere in these tombs. Second, also missing are scenes of filial piety and depictions of virtuous rulers, which were a common feature of late Han dynasty tombs of local elites (Powers 1991, pp. 31–34). In this respect, the Xigoucun and Xincheng tombs diverge even from their most similar Han dynasty counterpart, the late-second-century-CE tomb at Helinge'er 和林格尔 in Inner Mongolia. This large tomb with six chambers also has paintings of meat preparation and the pasturing of animals, along with processions of cavalry and chariots (Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 2007, pp. 101, 104, 68–72; Nei Menggu Wenwu Gongzuodui 1974, pp. 10–11). At Helinge'er, however, entire sections of the tomb are devoted to typical Chinese scenes of filial piety, Confucian disciples, and exemplary women (Nei Menggu Wenwu Gongzuodui 1974, p. 112). The absence of such imagery at Xigoucun and Xincheng suggests that people in the third-century Hexi Corridor eschewed Confucian exemplars and anthropocentric ideologies that were prominent in the Han dynasty.[1] Instead, the nature of power and virtue had been decoupled from Confucian beliefs to embrace multiculturalism and blend pastoral and agricultural customs.

Animals in the tombs also define spaces, whether the estate, farm, pastures, or region, a widespread tactic in Chinese art, where "animals . . . amount to a taxonomy of topography," in the words of Eugene Wang (E. Y. Wang 2016, p. viii). Yet the orderly amalgamation and juxtaposition of the animals also imply prosperity and harmony, paying tribute to the virtue and bureaucratic capabilities of the tomb occupant (Sterckx 2002, pp. 47–49). Perhaps the artisans sought to capture the essence and character of creatures in their brushstrokes so that they would come to life in the subterranean world of the tomb. Rather than merely constituting a clinical inventory, the animals create a boisterous microcosm for the deceased in the afterlife. Non-worldly animals appear only in one tomb, Xigoucun M5, where two tiger heads leer on the east wall and a green-dragon-red-tiger duo occupies the north wall. The former seems to be an architectural detail. As for the latter, its high position on the wall, with the dragon to the east and tiger to the west, makes it likely that these are directional animals, even though the tiger's coloring departs from a conventional white. Apart from these outliers, however, otherworldly beasts are confined to the screen wall at the entrance to the chambers and coffins in the burial chambers.

As explained above, the screen wall is a carved and painted brick facade on one face of an airshaft (Figure 10). These climb between eight and twelve meters high to nearly reach the surface above (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, pp. 5–11; Zhao and Ma 1996, pp. 7–9). Certain aspects of the design mimic brackets, columns, and verandahs, so that the structure resembles a *que* 阙 watchtower. Painted and carved guardians, directional animals, magical creatures, and hybrids, however, endow the screen wall with spiritual significance (Han 2011). Additionally, every screen wall at Xigoucun and Xincheng has a miniature brick door near the bottom. All of these, save one, are flanked by a chicken-headed and ox-headed guardian. These hybrids can be seen in Han dynasty pictorial stones found in eastern China, where they act as occasional attendants to the Queen Mother of the West. Their presence implies that the screen wall is a conduit to a celestial realm, though not necessarily the paradise reigned over by the Queen Mother of the West (Clydesdale 2019, pp. 298–99). Instead, the absence of the deity emphasizes the dual status of the hybrid attendants as denizens of the celestial and terrestrial worlds (Ho 2016, p. 103).

The magical and protective qualities conferred by these animals are echoed in paintings on one complete wood coffin and two lids retrieved from the rear chambers of two separate tombs (Figure 11) (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, pp. 18, 23). The celestial couple Nü Wa 女娲 and Fu Xi 伏羲, representing *yin* and *yang*, respectively, decorate two of the lids (Abe 2002, pp. 112–13). Both have human heads and torsos, but instead of legs, they have snake tails that reach from their bodies on opposite ends of the coffin, across swirling clouds of the heavens, to comingle in the center (Zhao and Ma 2005, pp. 66–68). Despite their legendary origins as creators of the universe, Nü Wa and Fu Xi are depicted only in mortuary art, where they guard the boundary separating the worldly and otherworldly (Lewis 2006, pp. 125–26). The other coffin lid features another power couple, the Queen Mother of the West (*Xi Wang Mu* 西王母), a Daoist deity who rose to cult status in the Han dynasty, and her partner, the King Father of the East (*Dong Wang Gong* 东王公). They represent west and east as well as *yin* and *yang* (H. Wu 1989, pp. 110–11). Like Nü Wa and Fu Xi, the Queen Mother of the West can be considered a hybrid—for, according to the *Shanhaijing* 山海经, she has a leopard's tail, tiger teeth, and a good howl (Wang 2003, p. 35). The pairs of deities on the coffin lids embody the cosmic dance between yin and yang and offer protection and even immortality to the deceased (H. Wu 1989, pp. 116–17, 123). The beauty of these images stands out even more in the otherwise spare rear chambers, where the only decorations are simple paintings on the back walls depicting sundry artifacts associated with wealth or status. The correlations between the hybrids on the screen walls and coffins reveal that the supernatural phenomena depicted in the extremities of the tomb bookend the idealized but terrestrial environs that animals populate in the main chambers.

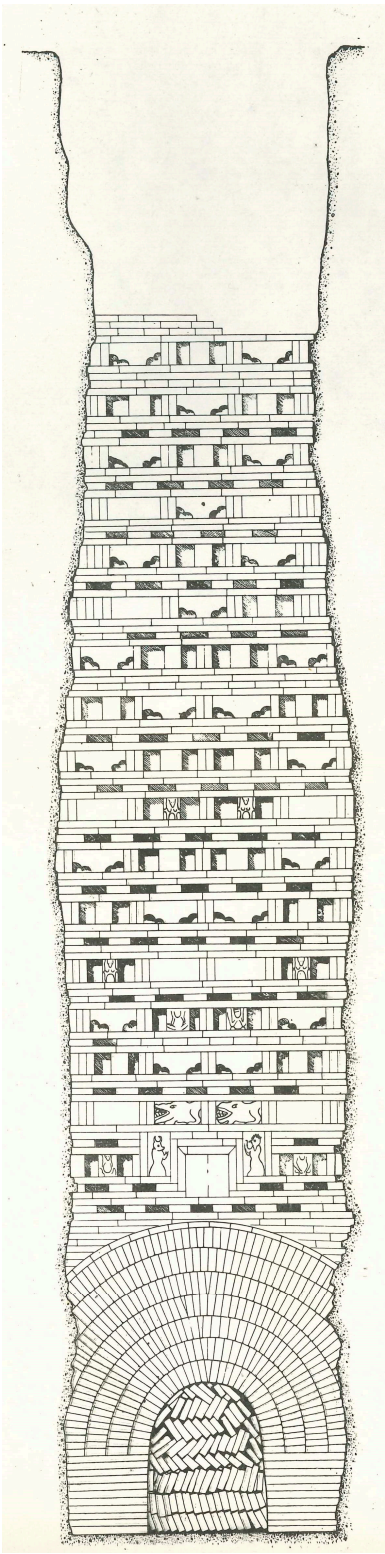

Figure 10. Screen wall Xincheng M7, carved and painted brick, Wei-Jin period (220–317). (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, Figure 10). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Whether painted or sculptural, mortuary imagery was thought to be activated after the tomb was sealed (Rawson 2001, pp. 128–29). The real-world animals in the chambers and the magical and mythological ones on the screen wall and coffins not only identify each area as earthly or divine but enable them to benefit the deceased. The architectural

engineering of each space, layout of the decorative program, degree of embellishment, and even the relative size of the images, demonstrates that the earthly and divine carry equal importance within the burial program in these third- and early-fourth-century tombs near Jiuquan and Jiayuguan. This is not the case, however, with another set of tombs at Dunhuang 敦煌, an important oasis city along the Silk Roads, located four hundred kilometers to the northwest and at the western edge of the Hexi Corridor.

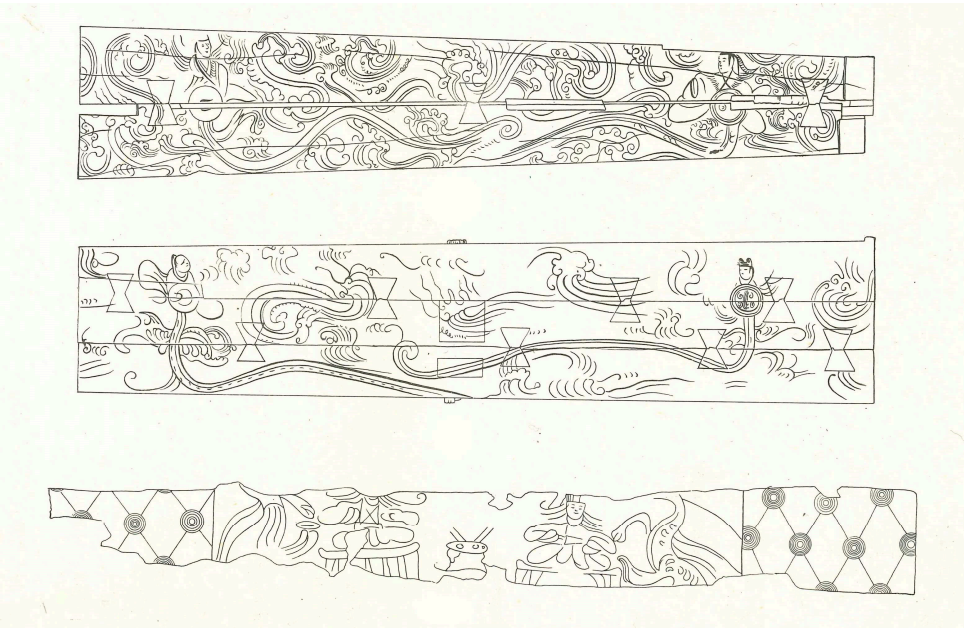

Figure 11. Drawing of coffin lids with Fuxi and Nüwa from Xincheng M1 and the Queen Mother of the West and King Father of the East, from Xincheng M6 incised wood with lacquer, Wei-Jin period (220–317). (Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, Figure 19). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

3. Western Jin Tombs (Late Third to Early Fourth Century) near Dunhuang

About ten kilometers outside of Dunhuang, the Foyemiaowan 佛爷庙湾 site has burials dating from the Han through Tang 唐 (618–907) dynasties (Sun and Ma 1974, p. 11). Among these are a set of large-scale chambered tombs with brick paintings dated to the Western Jin 晋 dynasty (265–317). While in many ways comparable to those at Xigoucun and Xincheng in the central Hexi Corridor, they emphasize different aspects of structure and decoration to further divulge the escalating importance of fantastical animals in the burial.

M37, M39, and M133, the best-preserved Foyemiaowan tombs, are uniform in architectural design and painting. All three have a long passage leading underground to a tall screen wall. As at Xigoucun and Xincheng, these rise above the entrance to the tomb chambers. M37 and M39 are single-chambered tombs with small chambers or niches on both sides. The front chamber of M133 has two such niches and one side chamber. It also has a separate rear chamber. Coffins holding the remains of a female and male occupant were found in the main chambers of M37 and M39 and the rear chamber of M133 (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1998, pp. 11–35). In all three tombs, the length of the ramps (between twenty and twenty-three meters), height of the screen walls (between seven and eight meters), and size of the front chambers (about three meters square) fall within the range of those at Xigoucun and Xincheng (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1998, pp. 119–20). The most conspicuous difference is that the Foyemiaowan chambers have few paintings and minimal decor, while the screen walls are rich and colorful. Looking at how animal imagery manifests in these two spaces amplifies their divergent functions and shows that concepts of the cosmos had shifted to favor the marvelous and celestial.

In the main chamber of each tomb, paintings of estates and related activities are few and mainly found on the west wall where they cluster in small groups flanking the door and floating on the otherwise unadorned brick surface (Figure 12). One or two brick paintings above depict an attic warehouse, while those below spotlight ordinary activities: sifting grain, dining, a mother playing with a child. Animals appear only twice. In one scene, an ox rests next to a *yaoche* 轺车, an open two-wheeled cart used for high officials (Dien 2007, pp. 371–72), while in another, a pair of wild chickens flounce across the brick (Figure 13). Additionally, some protruding bricks have tiger or lion faces painted on them. These seem to be an architectural element, rather than animal depictions, per se. Miniature paintings of rams positioned high up and centered on several walls of M37 and M39 are probably lucky symbols (see Figure 12, above). Compared to the animal kingdoms that suffuse microcosms in the Xigoucun and Xincheng tombs, the paintings in the chambers at Foyemiaowan make shorthand references to isolated aspects of life.

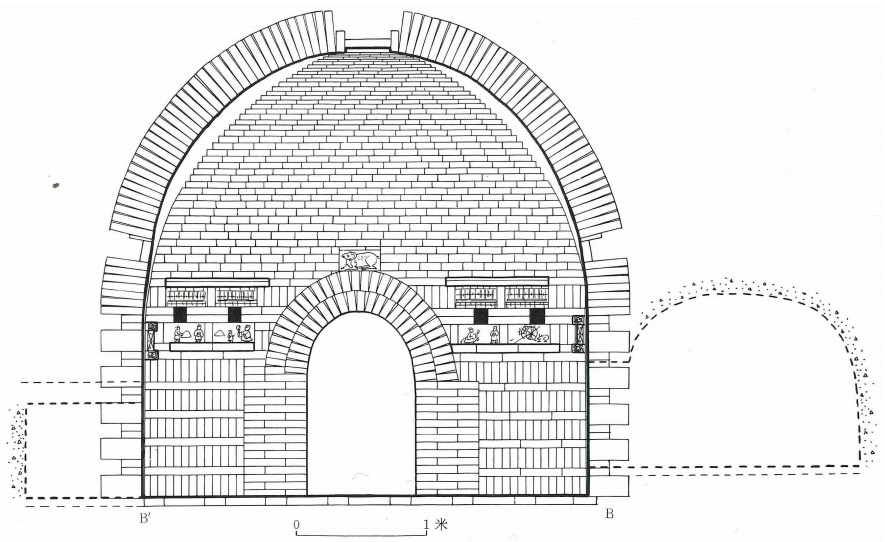

Figure 12. West wall of Foyemiaowan M39, brick, Western Jin period (265–317). (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1998, Figure 6). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Figure 13. Two wild chickens, west wall of Foyemiaowan M39, painting on brick, Western Jin period (265–317). (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1998, pl. 60.1). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

This conclusion is tempered somewhat, however, by media other than painting. In M133, the small chamber to the south housed straw cows and troughs, so it represents a barn, while ceramic vessels as well as bronze cooking knives and forks stock the larger side chamber, making it a kitchen (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1998, pp. 33, 39). Nevertheless, the treatment of animal imagery in the chambers of Foyemiaowan tombs do not approach the animated quality of their counterparts at Xigoucun and Xincheng. Perhaps this is because the chambers at Foyemiaowan have a different focal point, namely a spirit seat, which is an altar for the souls of the deceased to receive offerings. At Foyemiaowan, this takes the form of a painted curtained canopy within a niche or behind a platform (Wu 2010, pp. 68–70). For animals, their smaller quantity, depleted variety, and sedate portrayal at Foyemiaowan do not mean that they were not important to the economy at Dunhuang, but they do imply that they were not deemed central to happiness, wealth, or status in the afterlife.

The screen walls at Foyemiaowan, however, are another matter. M37, M39, and M133 all have well-preserved and elaborate screen walls, and these team with the finned, the feathered, and the furry, as well as the scaled and the thick-skinned. Like the screen walls at Xigoucun and Xincheng, they are home to imaginary creatures, but the Foyemiaowan screen walls follow an alternate design (Figure 14). At the bottom of all the screen walls, a bear-like creature serves as a column. The beast has pendulous breasts draped over a bulbous stomach and grips the capital in its paws (Figure 15). (Incidentally, this same creature inhabits the screen walls at Xigoucun and Xincheng, but not in a central or consistent position (Jiuquanshi Bowuguan 1998, p. 149; Gansusheng Bowuguan et al. 1985, p. 10 and pl. 3.1)). On either side, slender columns support a large *dougong* 斗拱 bracket, a typical element in Chinese architecture, which is flanked by either a dragon-tiger pair (directional animals), two tigers (indicating the west), or two birds. Near the top of the column and between the brackets is a bonbon-shaped motif that looks like the *sheng* headdress worn by the Queen Mother of the West (Sun 2012, p. 32). Like the chicken- and ox-headed figures at the bottom of the screen walls at Xigoucun and Xincheng, this is an oblique, rather than explicit, reference to the deity. Above the column is a painting of a guardian raising a mountain range over his head. His long stride and fierce pose call to mind images of Chiyou 蚩尤, the storm deity who is accompanied, as this figure is, by a pair of birds (Bush 2016, pp. 68–71). Apart from the additional human figures in M133 (who, incidentally, are Boya 伯牙, playing the *qin* 琴 and Ziqi 子期 listening appreciatively) the elements described above are largely consistent across the Foyemiaowan screen walls, which indicates that they have a special significance (Wang 2008).

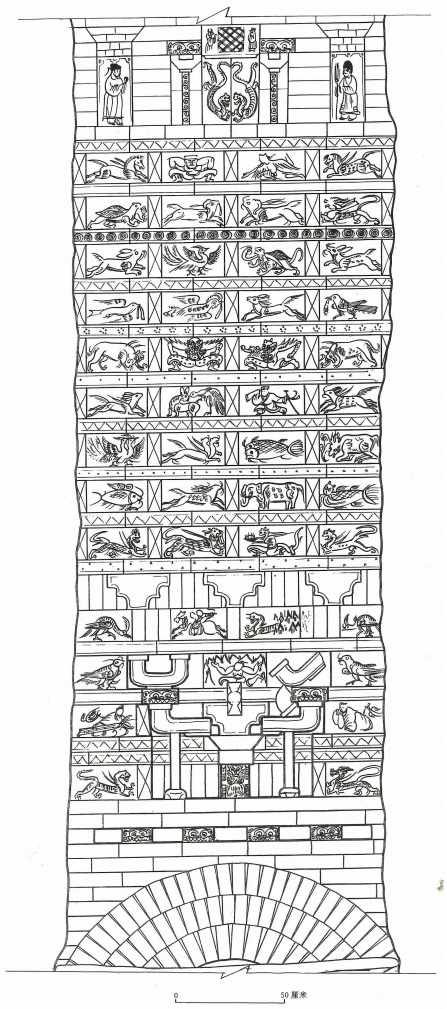

Figure 14. Screen wall, Foyemiaowan M133, carved and painted brick, Western Jin period (265–317). (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1998, Figure 23). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Figure 15. Bear, screen wall, Foyemiaowan M133, carved and painted brick, Western Jin period (265–317). (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1998, pl. 70.3). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Higher up, a latticed framework encloses a limited number of legendary humans slotted in among fantastic beasts. Humanoid and human figures are fewer in number than those in the screen walls at Xigoucun and Xincheng, however (Sun 2012, pp. 30–31). One such figure is local hero Li Guang 李广, who rides a galloping horse and turns to shoot his prey, an illusory tiger. Mostly, however, motley beasts dominate the structure. Some are monster mashups that have roamed the Chinese imagination from time immemorial. In M133, the row of bricks above the column houses two *bixie* 辟邪, one *qilin* 麒麟, and a *shoufu* 受福, whose name means "receiving blessings." The *bixie*, whose name means "averting evil," have attenuated bodies covered in feathers or scales. Sword-like wings spring from their shoulders, and two short horns top their feline faces. The *qilin* has a more robust body, also covered in feathers or scales, short wings, a three-forked tail, a single horn, and a flat face with bulging eyes (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1998, pp. 65–70).[2] While the creatures above were members of a mythological pantheon, others on the screen walls are common animals (horses, rabbits, fish, sheep) made magical through the addition of wings or multiple heads, ears, and appendages. Still others are invasive species, so to speak, and arrived from the west. The white elephant migrated in with Buddhism, which was gaining traction in the region, and here can be seen, at least in part, in a Buddhist context and not just as a lucky figure (Dai 2011, pp. 60, 65, 67). Its presence on the screen walls complements the painted lotus flowers in the ceiling caissons that cap the chambers of M39 and M37, though the latter may carry more general connotations of prestige or Daoist harmony (Sun 2008, pp. 26–27; Zheng 2002, pp. 167–68). Whatever the origin of the creatures on these screen walls, it seems that the artists or patrons prized the extraordinary and the fanciful. This aligns with craze for strange creatures, which were interpreted as portents and omens, during this period (Campany 1996, p. 7).

The upper areas of most Foyemiaowan screen walls have suffered damage, except for M133, and its pristine state reveals something quite interesting. At the very top, two human guardians stand on either side of a tiny doorway painted with two writhing white tigers. Above this, and so minute as to be imperceptible to a person standing below, are an ox-headed and a chicken-headed attendant—doppelgangers to those at the bottom of screen walls at Xigoucun and Xincheng. Their presence, along with the painted tigers on the doors, indicates that they guard a portal to a western paradise. However, since the Queen Mother of the West herself is again absent, we are left to wonder whether they signal a new concept of paradise or the afterlife (Clydesdale 2019, p. 301).

Standing back to examine the screen wall, it is rampant with animals. They assume fierce poses, arching backs, planting feet, and kicking heels to awe the viewer. At the same time, the display of nature's force and mystery is tempered by a strict grid that isolates each creature, as if confining them in cages on a circus train. This is a variation within a "cataloguing style" to use Wu Hung's term, which is seen in auspicious omen imagery in the Wu Liang 武梁 shine, dated 151 CE, and the Helinge'er tomb (H. Wu 1989, p. 77). The many undulating spines create a dynamic but orderly pulse. Creatures on the left confront those on the right, establishing equilibrium if not perfect symmetry. The visual manifestation is reminiscent of literary techniques used in *fu* 赋 rhapsodic poems of the Han dynasty, where repetition, variety, and quantity dazzle and overwhelm the reader, even as the rhythm asserts the dominance of the poet or reader. (Cai 2018, pp. 50, 54–56). In the same way, the Foyemiaowan screen walls ultimately pay homage to the virtue of the tomb occupants, for whom the potent magic of these animals is harnessed (Sterckx 2002, pp. 233–37). On the screen walls, the capricious and terrifying powers of the cosmos are collocated into a pageant that could protect the souls of the occupants in their journey to the small portal at the top.

4. A Sixteen-Kingdoms-Period Tomb (Late Fourth to Mid-Fifth Century) at Jiuquan

The differences in the depiction and arrangement of animals in the central versus western Hexi Corridor could result from regional tastes and beliefs or show changes from one time period to another. However, one painted tomb from the central Hexi Corridor

epitomizes an interesting synthesis between the two approaches and is a precursor to the presence and treatment of animal imagery in the later Mogao 莫高 cave temples near Dunhuang. The tomb is named Dingjiazha M5 for the Jiuquan neighborhood in which it is located. It probably dates from the late fourth to mid-fifth century during the Sixteen Kingdoms (Shiliuguo 十六国) period (304–439), though some suggest it dates to the early fourth century (R. Wu 1989, pp. 11–17; Wei 2011). The first thing to note about the tomb is that it has a short screen wall, rising only three meters from the floor. The bricks are uncarved and stacked in a simple pattern that does not present the large brick-face as a surface for paintings. Paint traces remain, but the original decoration was rudimentary (Zheng 2002, p. 158). Entering the front chamber, real-world animals populate estates and farms on the walls, while heavenly creatures cavort across a unified composition on the ceilings (Figure 16). This scheme is made possible by plaster applied over the brick walls, the upper panels of which converge around a caisson in the center. Like the nearby tombs at Xigoucun and Xincheng, the front chamber at Dingjiazha has a sunken floor with a platform at one end. The rear burial chamber likewise lies beyond and has a vaulted ceiling and minimal decoration. Looking at the room, it is as through the otherworldly creatures on the screen walls at Foyemiaowan and (to a lesser extent) Xigoucun and Xincheng have stampeded onto the vaulted canopy of the Dingjiazha front chamber.

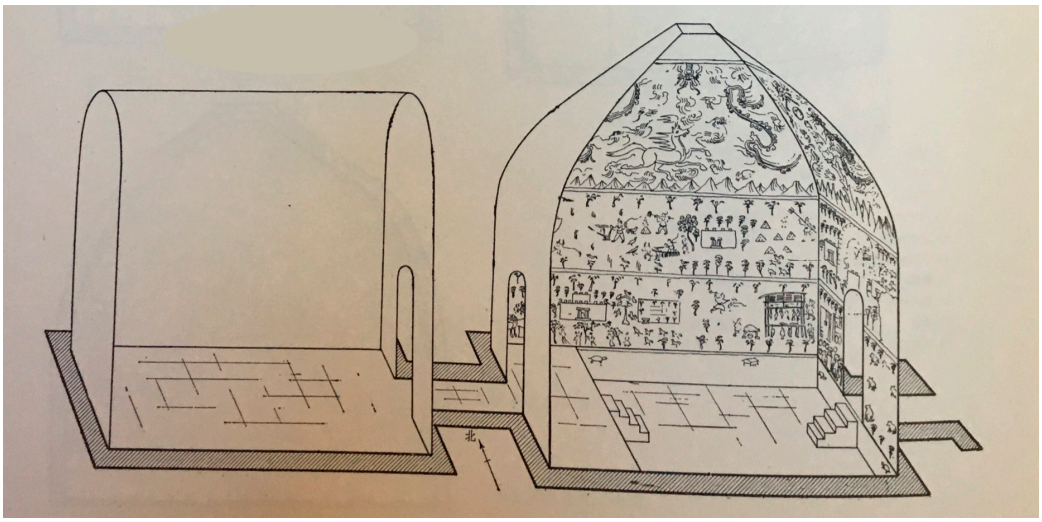

Figure 16. Schematic drawing of Dingjiazha M5 with view of north walls, Later Liang to Northern Liang dynasties (386–441). (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 1989, Figure 8). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

A central figure dominates each ceiling panel. The west panel is opposite the door and immediately visible when one enters the chamber. Here, in the prime spot, the Queen Mother of the West hovers on the pinnacle of Mt. Kunlun 昆仑 (Figure 17). Opposite her and above the door leading out of the tomb is the King Father of the East. Together they create a west–east axis of *yin* and *yang*. On the south wall, a heavenly deer (*tianlu* 天鹿) accompanies a winged woman, probably an immortal (Wu 2013). A heavenly horse gallops through the clouds and across the north wall, its flame-like mane flickering in the wind (Figure 18). Above each panel, a dragon head dangles from the edge of the caisson and onto each ceiling panel. The dragons stretch their jaws and emit magical vapors that swirl around to frame the main figures of the Queen Mother of the West, King Father of the East, deer with winged immortal, and the heavenly horse. Smaller secondary creatures help identify each main figure. A nine-tailed fox, three-legged crow and toad in the moon encircle the Queen Mother of the West, while a raven in the sun floats above the King Father of the East. Below, mountain peaks form a border between the wall and ceiling, and the celestial and terrestrial worlds they represent. As at Foyemiaowan, painted borders further

instill order in the ethereal scene, though here, the heavenly harmony cascades down to the worldly domain on the walls.

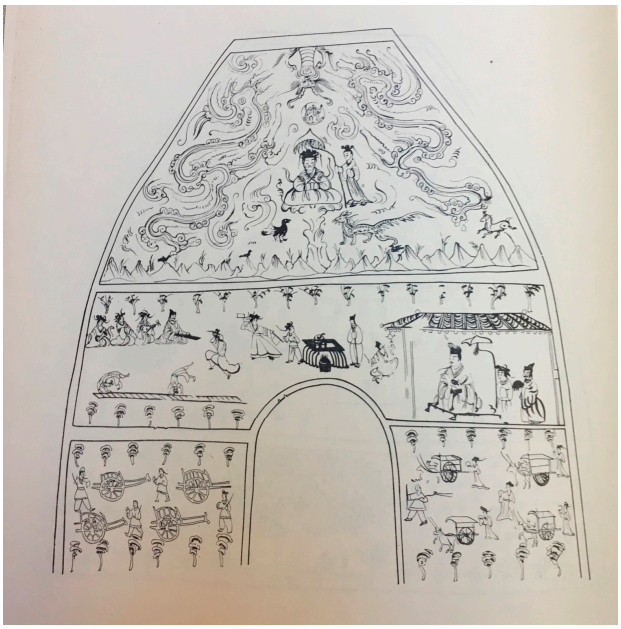

Figure 17. Schematic drawing of west wall, Dingjiazha M5, Later Liang to Northern Liang dynasties (386–441). (Gansusheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo, Figure 19). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

Figure 18. Heavenly horse, Dingjiazha M5 north ceiling slope of front chamber, wall painting, Later Liang to Northern Liang dynasty (386–441). (Jiuquanshi Bowuguan 1998, p. 105). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

The four walls are each divided into an upper and lower register. The tomb occupant perches in the most visible location on the west wall, directly below the Queen Mother of the West, where he sits under a canopy and watches a performance of acrobats and musicians. In the register below, attendants wait next to empty carts and women mill amid *ziping* 辎軿 carriages, signifying the arrival of tribute gifts and guests paying their respects. The top registers on the other walls have familiar scenes in which oxen plow fields and chickens advance on farmers stacking grain. The bottom registers of the north and east walls likewise have scenes of butchering, hanging meat, kitchens, and herding.

The south wall has an unusual spectacle of a nude woman making an offering to a tree, thought to be She 社, the local land god (Zheng 1995, p. 46). Apart from a curious simian-like creature in the tree, whose meaning is a mystery, all the animals (and the farmers for that matter) have counterparts in the Xigoucun and Xincheng tombs, though their numbers are reduced. A final layer, below the two registers of wall painting, hugs the area adjacent to the floor. Here, four painted tortoises (and a little house, visible in Figure 15, above) appear across three walls, symbolizing the earth (R. Wu 1989, p. 7). From the turtles near the base, through the fields and festivities enjoyed by humans and augmented by animals, to the celestial extravaganza on the ceiling, which seems to revolve around the axis of the lotus in the caisson, the chamber creates an axis mundi.

While the tombs at Xigoucun, Xincheng, and Foyemiaowan relegated the heavenly and earthly to the separate zones of the screen walls and front chambers, the Dingjiazha tomb combines them into a unified realm in the front chamber. This allows divine creatures to roam free in their natural habitat. Heaven is not invisible and only narrowly accessible; it reigns over the terrestrial world and is intimately cojoined with it. The prominence of the Queen Mother of the West and her consort adds to this effect. Apart from her appearance on the coffin found in the burial chamber of the Xincheng tomb discussed above, this deity is not depicted at either Xigoucun or Foyemiaowan. Only peripheral attendants (the chicken- and ox-headed figures) or oblique symbols (the shape of her *sheng* headdress) are shown. At Dingjiazha, she makes a full comeback to reign over the celestial and terrestrial domains. Although the animals on the walls still reflect the blending of pastoral and agricultural economies and, to a lesser extent, lifestyles in the Hexi Corridor, their diminished presence indicates that traditional Chinese beliefs were regaining prominence in burials.

5. Fifth- and Sixth-Century Buddhist Caves at Dunhuang

This was not, however, the case outside of tombs. By the fifth century, Buddhism was thriving in the Hexi Corridor and especially around Jiuquan, where the ruler of the Northern Liang 凉 dynasty, Juqu Mengxun 沮渠蒙逊 (r. 401–433), sponsored the translation of sutras and the construction of cave temples (Soper 1958, pp. 141–43). In the ensuing decades, construction efforts and devotion were channeled towards Buddhist cave temples, which drew on the structure and decorative programs of tombs (Steinhardt 2001, pp. 188–91). Art in cave temples illustrates that as Buddhism expanded its reach, the role of animal imagery changed as well. Fantastic animals adapted to and thrived in the new milieu, but Buddhist doctrine endangered the depiction of real animals.

The largest and best-preserved complex of cave temples is at Mogao 莫高, seventeen kilometers outside of Dunhuang. The design and construction of the caves are indebted to earlier tombs, as is evident in the similarities of ceilings and the two-chambered or two-part format that accommodated separate modes of worship (Steinhardt 2001, pp. 180–81, 190). In the early promulgation of Buddhism in China, animals in art served as vehicles for divinities and as actors in stories (Sørensen 2016, pp. 137–38), and this is evident at Dunhuang. A horse conveys Siddhārtha Gautama in the Great Departure, seen on the south wall of Cave 275, built in the Northern Liang dynasty. In Cave 254, dating to the late fifth century in the Northern Wei 魏 (386–534) dynasty, animals play the parts (literally, in the form of hybrid demons) of Mara's army, intent on blocking Siddhārtha Gautama's grasp of enlightenment that will transform him into Buddha Shakyamuni (Li 2011, pl. 33). The most common animals in early caves are those associated with Jātaka, tales about Buddha Shakyamuni's past lives. In a rendition of the Tiger Jātaka in Cave 254, the Buddha-in-a-prior-life pitches himself from a cliff so that a hungry tigress and her starving cubs might feast on his body. The fact that the sacrifice is for an animal, not for a human mother and her children, underscores the Buddha's extreme compassion. The story is one of many Jātaka. Through them, devotees retrace, experience, and absorb the Buddha's past lives and slow ascent to human form and, finally, enlightenment.

In this Buddhist context, animals are not vital to the cosmic order, nor are they even signs of wealth or power. Whereas in the tombs at Xincheng and Xigoucun, animals es-

tablished harmony and broadcast human virtue, in the Buddhist caves, animal herds are absent, as are images of making food and meat. There are three reasons for this. First, Buddhist doctrine prohibits the killing of animals for food, and even raising animals was considered impure (Gernet 1995, pp. 70, 72, 79, 95–96). Second, Buddhism brought with it urbanization, cosmopolitanism, and agricultural development (Zürcher 2013b, pp. 366, 373–75). Third, as will be discussed below, the cave temples recreate Buddhist paradises. The Buddhist cosmos relegated animals to a separate and lower realm, which meant they were unwelcome in paradise (Elverskog 2020, p. 87).

By the mid-sixth century, real animals were all but banished from cave imagery, and even the protective zones of Jātaka tales were dwindling. As Buddhist beliefs and practices changed, art became increasingly anthropocentric. This is evident in Cave 285, which was constructed in the mid-sixth century during the Western Wei 魏 dynasty (535–537). Here, phalanxes of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and donors blanket the walls (Figure 19). Jātaka give way to stories such as the Five Hundred Robbers, which stretches across the top section of the cave's south wall. In this tale, a king's officers capture a band of robbers and blind them before setting them loose in the wilderness. A bodhisattva takes pity on the helpless men, restores their sight, and persuades them to follow the Dharma. Whereas animals in Jātaka represent the arduous journey to buddhahood through countless cycles of death and rebirth, the human protagonists in the story of the Five Hundred Robbers underscore the transformation of Buddhism in the fifth and sixth centuries, wherein the gradual accumulation of merit was eclipsed by the allure of sudden salvation, which was available even to those with heavy karmic burdens (Zürcher 2013a, pp. 166–68).

Figure 19. Buddhas and bodhisattvas, north side of east wall, Mogao cave 285, Western Wei dynasty (535–56). (Li 2011, pl. 139). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

This change also necessitated further elevation of the human figure. Image worship was central to Buddhist practices of the time, with rituals depending on communion with buddhas or bodhisattvas in human form (Greene 2018, pp. 455–56, 463). Not only did patrons earn merit by sponsoring the fabrication of icons, but the sculpted or painted image acted as a vessel for the embodiment of the Buddha or bodhisattva itself, so that the image came alive (E. Y. Wang 2014, pp. 407–8; M. C. Wang 2016, pp. 22–27). Even the multiplication of images was salient to achieving enlightenment (Shen 2019, pp. 73–79). The materialization of buddhas or bodhisattvas ultimately creates a paradise within the cave (Karetzky 1992, pp. 104–5). Looking at the art in Cave 285, the design embraces multiple styles and disparate subject matter, probably due to differing tastes among its many donors (Hiyama 2022, pp. 257, 261–63). The structure and dynamic composition on the ceiling, however, bears a strong resemblance to the painted ceilings in the front chamber of the Dingjiazha tomb. It too attracts marvelous creatures and deities, including Fu Xi and Nü Wa, who leap towards one another from either side of a floating jewel near the top of the panel (Hiyama 2022, p. 266). They have spouted legs and their long, reptilian tails wave behind them like banners. Even the figures' long lines and attenuated forms echo the painting style on the Xincheng coffin lids (Figure 20). One must look closely to spot real animals on the walls of the cave. Here and there, in the untamed wilderness, foxes, deer, or wolves dart or skulk among peaks. Even these scarce creatures are being methodically stalked by archers, giving the impression that they will soon be expunged altogether.

Figure 20. Fuxi and Nüwa, east slope of Mogao cave 285, Western Wei dynasty (535–56). (Li 2011, pl. 143). ©Wenwu Press. This figure published with permission of Wenwu Press and cannot be used or copied without their permission.

6. Conclusions

The significant presence of herd and other local animals in Wei-Jin tombs between Jiuquan and Jiayuguan reveals a changing economy and cultural blending between Chinese and pastoral peoples in the third century. They also indicate that people believed that humans and animals alike contributed to cosmic harmony. Animals' functions, as markers of wealth and vehicles for power, are different from the supernatural import of hybrid creatures on the screen walls and coffins in these same tombs, which derive from Han dynasty precedents. In the western end of the Hexi Corridor, Western Jin tombs from the late third

and early fourth centuries prioritize magical screen walls, which are decorated with all manner of fanciful creatures. In the late-fourth- to early-fifth-century tomb at Dingjiazha, meanwhile, animals herald a reassertion of Chinese mythology and cosmology, even as Buddhism spreads. In fifth- and sixth-century cave temples outside of Dunhuang, earthly animals are on the run, crowded out by multiplying Buddhas and bodhisattvas and magical creatures that inhabit Buddhist paradises. These changes in art heralded profound social transformations that were precipitated by the fall of the Han dynasty and the arrival and spread of Buddhist doctrine from the third through sixth centuries.

When the Han dynasty fell, local magnate families quickly steered the Hexi Corridor from a system of military-farming colonies to an independent region by leveraging the agricultural infrastructure built by the Han and augmenting it with animal husbandry, sericulture, and trade (Liu 2009, pp. 40–41; Li 2006, pp. 87–88). Even as other parts of China descended into famine and warfare, the Hexi Corridor attained a measure of stability and prosperity (Liu 2009, pp. 87–89). This, along with the region's vast resources, beckoned to refugees fleeing the upheavals in the Chinese heartland. It is difficult to calculate population figures for the Hexi Corridor alone, but it is estimated that from the Western Jin to the beginning of the Northern Wei dynasty, the population of the broader swath of northwest China swelled from 3.27 million to 5.6 million (Li and Zhu 2012, pp. 117–18). This population increase was accompanied by an expansion of agriculture and promotion of cosmopolitanism that were integral to the spread of Buddhist doctrine and belief (Elverskog 2020, pp. 84–107). The abundance of real animals in art of the third century, and their subsequent flight and eventual displacement by magical creatures, is particularly meaningful considering such historical developments. Whether through presence, transformation, or absence, animal imagery is layered with meaning and connected to human society, beliefs, and imagination.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the guest editor of this issue, the anonymous reviewers, the *Arts* editors, and Wenwu Press, for their guidance, suggestions, and help.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 One exception is a series of paintings that show an official presiding over a legal case found in a Western Jin tomb at Gaozhagou 高闸沟, Jiuquan. (Jiuquanshi Bowuguan 1998, pp. 19–20). These are on view at the Jiuquan Museum.

2 These creatures take various forms on the screen walls and can be cataloged into subtypes. For more on the morphing attributes of these animals, see (Bush 2016, pp. 76–88).

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