Zoomorphism and Sacrificial Religion
in Early China**

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Abstract

Animals and zoomorphic motifs are omnipresent in early Chinese art and material culture. Yet the methodologies underlying the explanation of animal iconography remain subject to much debate. One core problem is the question whether received texts can be usefully adduced to explain the range of symbolic or intended meanings that might be expressed in iconographic representations of animals. This paper seeks to add a small piece to the complex puzzle of how texts can relate to images. It explores the issue through the example of animal sacrifice. While texts are replete with descriptions of animals in the context of sacrifice, the motif of the sacrificial animal kill rarely occurs in the visual vocabulary of early China. The paper explores why that may be the case and offers a number of hypotheses derived from information preserved in the received textual corpus.

Keywords: animals, art, early China, sacrifice, iconography, material culture

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1. Introduction

Historians face a complex task when trying to reconstruct religion in practice in early China. To resurrect complex religious cultures based on fragmentary textual and material evidence necessitates interpretative lacunae. Such gaps in our understanding remain particularly problematic when we come to examine the role of animal iconography. Animals may be “good to think,” as Claude Lévi-Strauss once professed, yet identifying the range of symbolic meanings they generated in the imagination of the early Chinese remains a complex exercise.

While it is difficult to establish with certainty what religious, social or economic values were associated with individual animal species across time and space, it is clear that the animal realm formed a potent part of the religious world in early Chinese society, a world in which they operated as intermediaries with the spirit world, presented themselves as dangerous game to be hunted, and possibly functioned as emblematic representations of clans, lineages or the royal house.\(^1\) It is also clear that certain real and imagined animals (e.g. the dragon, tortoise, horse, or phoenix) appear more significant than others as they are extolled in simile and metaphor in a centuries-long textual tradition or represented as serial motifs in art.

2. Reading Animal Iconography

Scholars remain divided as to how zoomorphic and theriomorphic motifs in early Chinese art and material culture—on Shang and Zhou bronzes, on Warring States and Han murals and artefacts—might reflect the religious world of the craftsmen, recipients, users and observers of these objects. Invariably, the

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prominence of animal iconography is acknowledged, yet, the frames of reference and methodologies that allow us to take the conceptual leap from iconographic representation to religious and ritual practice remain contested and subject to debate.

Most art historians that have touched on the subject accept that zoomorphic imagery was intended to be iconographically meaningful. Some have argued that evolving aesthetic perceptions and technological innovations are the main stimulus behind changing trends in zoomorphic iconography.² The reality most likely lies somewhere in-between. For Lothar von Falkenhausen, to quote one scholar, such at least is the case for early and middle Western Zhou bronzes. He suggests that, “the Western Zhou transformation of the Shang-derived animal décor into ‘pure ornament’ must reflect an attenuation of its original religious meaning, whatever that meaning may have been. Eventually, this meaning was forgotten or became irrelevant to religious practice.”³ There may be other, more practical, factors that may account for the fact that animals “mean” in early Chinese art. The technical skill, material expense and energy required to produce the artefacts they adorn suggest that those who commissioned the production of zoomorphic objects and motifs held informed views on the decoration they wished to impart onto them. Add to this the fact that the animal form itself is a highly elastic medium that lends itself easily to formal adaptations and we might have another reason for the popularity of zoomorphic imagery. In short, to claim that all iconographic creation is symbolically meaningful—and only meaningful in one way—is as problematic as insisting that technological innovation should account for all trends in iconographic creativity. Furthermore, we ought to remain cautious in linking the internal architecture of religious activity directly to a set of zoomorphic artefacts. Each piece or

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representation merits interpretation in its particular setting and needs to be judged against comparable scenes and objects.

But how does one make sense out of zoomorphism beyond its appearance as a feature of technical craft? One way to help advance our understanding is to explore textual accounts and search for information that might match text to object. Can texts help explain the zoomorph and, if so, how reliable or representative are such textual explanations? In what follows I hope to add a small piece to the complex puzzle of how textual and visual representation might relate to one another in early China. I will do so by focusing on the example of animal sacrifice. The use of animals in sacrifice is richly documented in texts. Yet, despite a wealth of information in texts, scenes of sacrificial animal slaughter do not appear to be widespread in early Chinese iconography. This relative absence is noteworthy, or, at least, we are dealing here with a theme that appears to be underplayed in pictorial culture in contrast with its prevalence in texts. Before I proceed, some methodological caveats regarding the role of texts for the study of animal culture merit attention.

3. Animals in Texts

Textual sources can contribute towards reconstructing the mental universe in which animal imagery originated, yet they also pose significant limitations. The most important restriction is their dating. This is especially problematic for our understanding of late-Shang and Western Zhou animal iconography but similar uncertainties apply to the Warring States and early imperial periods. For instance, although valuable information can be gathered from Shang oracle bone inscriptions on the royal hunt, textual references related to the representation of animals in material culture is sporadic at best and it is limited to sources that postdate the artefacts by several centuries. Even in cases that have prompted scholars to thoroughly scan the textual record for information that might elucidate animal imagery, the results have been mixed. For example, to date, many scholars still mine the complex *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing* 山海經) as a makeshift
thesaurus for the identification of all that appears strange in the bestiary of ancient
China. Another case that illustrates how little transmitted texts have improved our
understanding of iconography is the much discussed and enigmatic animal face
or *taotie* 蟲 蟲 depicted as two dragonesque creatures facing one another. Only one
passage, in the third century BCE *Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋, contains a description
that could relate to this omnipresent bronze motif.

Another problem facing the interpreter is that much of the social, ritual,
and religious context in which objects functioned or pictorial motifs developed
is lost or can only be reconstructed from prescriptive texts. And these sources
propose varying interpretations regarding the shape, size, colour, and decoration
of objects. Furthermore, the philosophy that lies behind certain decorative

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4 The *Shanhaijing*, which dates partly to the Warring States and Qin period, is unique in its genre
and has variously been described as a handbook on prodigies, a gazetteer containing a sacred
geography, or explanatory notes on lost images. I have argued elsewhere that one of its functions
might have been to catalogue animal nomenclature and enable its reader to understand strange
creatures through the performative use of names. See Roel Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon

5 Chen Qiyou 陈奇猷, ed., *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* 吕氏春秋校釋 (Shanghai: Xuelin, 1995), 16.
947 (“Xian shi” 先讖). An early reference to the *taotie* occurs in the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 where it is
identified as one of four evil creatures during the time of the Yellow Emperor. See Yang Bojun
The *Lüshi chunqiu* describes the *taotie* as a bodiless glutton devouring a man. Wang Tao 汪濤
has linked the “two-eyed motif” to a two-eyed graph in Shang oracle bone inscriptions
and argues that it expresses a sense of trepidation, rashness in action, awe and anxiety. See “A
Textual Investigation of the Taotie,” in Roderick Whitfield, ed., *The Problem of Meaning in
記 comments on the meaning of gilded eyes represented on vessels associated with the Zhou. It
notes that among the vessels and meat-stands used in the suburban sacrifice, a yellow-eyed (*huang
mu* 黃目) vase emitting the vapours of fragrant herbs was valued most, yellow corresponding to
the centre in the Five Phase model. “Eyes,” the text continues, “represent the purest brightness
of qi (qi zhi qing ming zhe 氣之清明者).” See Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie 礼記集解* (Beijing:
(30-124 CE) glosses *lei* 樂 as a “turtle-eyed wine goblet.” See Shuowen jiezi zhu 説
文解字注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1983), 6A.46b.
motifs is not easy to interpret. The *Lüshi chunqiu*, to take one example, offers several comments on bronze vessel decoration. In one place it states that “Zhou tripods were engraved with images to illustrate the pervasive nature of the principles of order inherent in the design. Making such principles pervasive is the Way of the gentleman (周鼎著象，為其理之通也。理通，君道也).” Elsewhere in the same text we read that “Zhou bronze tripods are decorated with an insect pattern, wherein the shape is very long but the top and bottom are both curved, in order to symbolize the defects inherent in what is extreme (周鼎有竇，曲狀甚長，上下皆曲，以見極之敗也).” And again elsewhere it is noted that “Zhou tripods were decorated with rats and then trampled upon by horses, because rats are non-Yang. The non-Yang symbolizes the customs of a doomed state (周鼎著鼠，令馬履之，為其不陽也；不陽者，亡國之俗也).” The elastic and highly moralising nature of such comments suggests that a Warring States observer or Han literatus may have been prone to the same degree of speculation as a Song antiquarian or a contemporary observer.

One example of a text that shakes up all expectations for iconographic certitudes is the “Li qi” 禮器 chapter in the *Liji* 禮記. It argues that ceremonies require different types of ritual implements according to the circumstances. Hence, the text claims, in some rituals a multiplicity (*duo* 多) of objects is valued whereas for other occasions paucity (*shao* 少) is a mark of respect. Some rituals emphasize greatness of size (*da* 大), others smallness (*xiao* 小); some require height (*gao* 高), whereas others value lowness (*xia* 下) as in trays and vases without feet. Finally, the text notes, there are rituals in which ornament or “patterning” (*wen* 文) is a hallmark

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of distinction whereas in others the unadorned (su 素) should take precedence. Most importantly, rituals of the highest reverence are said to require no ornament (zhì jìng wù wén 至敬無文). The text concludes that, in the end, the ancient kings looked for proportion in their ceremonies and thus avoided the extreme opposites listed above.\(^9\)

Leaving aside the problem as to precisely which rituals and what exact timeframe this Han text might be referring to, we are told here that decorative and ornamental resourcefulness can have an inverse relationship to ritual gravitas. In the final section of this paper, I will offer a few thoughts on how this proposition of minimal ornament might be relevant in the case of depictions of animal sacrifice.

From the examples I have given so far one need of course not infer that texts are entirely unreliable tools for the interpretation of animal iconography. Many texts, even those that significantly postdate objects, offer a repository of opinion and lore that has been transmitted alongside or separately from material and pictorial representation. Even if they shed little or no contemporaneous light on the intended meaning of objects and motifs, they can assist us in reconstructing the cultural context in which they originated and help generate an approximate picture. Again let us take the case of a decorated bronze vessel. Here the interpreter could relegate zoomorphic inspiration simply to iconographic invention, or one could attempt to attribute these motifs to cosmological symbolism or religious practices, the details of which may escape our present understanding. One could hypothesize that artists designed zoomorphic vessels in function of the sacrificial contents they were intended to hold, a question put forward by Chang Kwang-chih 張光直 in the late 1970s:

Was there any attempt to decorate the vessels with images of some of the animals whose meat was to fill them? On the surface the answer may be an easy no, for mythological animals are obviously not foodstuffs, and the animals that decorate the Shang and Zhou bronzes were certainly mythological. But mythological animals were almost always based on actual animals, the most commonly

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represented being cattle, sheep, and tigers. They were probably all food animals, and so were probably the other less frequently represented animals such as deer, elephants, rhinoceroses, and goats. Birds were among the predominant decorative motifs. Although their species are difficult to determine, there is no question that birds of many kinds were a major food item. Thus the question is not one easy to dispose of without much additional research.  

Whether or not sacrificial food and alcohol offerings inside bronze vessels were meant to transmit vessel inscriptions to the spirit world—an idea that has recently been challenged—there is no reason why a link between décor and utility in the case of animal motifs should be excluded. Yet such a relationship cannot be inferred as a rule applicable in each case. Other ideas may have inspired the choice of the animal form, such as the notion, again suggested by Chang, that offering animals in bronze vessels was a concrete means of achieving quasi-shamanic contact.

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11 The argument against food offerings functioning as vehicles to transmit written messages to the spirit world is set out by Olivier Venture in “L’écriture et la communication avec les esprits en Chine ancienne,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 74 (2004): 41-43. Conversely others have argued that, in the case of inscribed late-Shang and Zhou bronze vessels, decoration on the outside of an inscribed ritual vessel was secondary to the inside space of the vessel. Maria Khayutina notes that since communication with the spirits happened by means of sacrificial food inside the vessel: “its internal space was functionally more valuable. The evolution of the external decoration of vessels from the highly elaborated Shang-style vessels towards standardisation and simplification through the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods supposes the decrease of the functional abilities of their external surface in favour of the inner space.” See “Studying the Private Sphere of the Ancient Chinese Nobility through the Inscriptions on Bronze Ritual Vessels,” in Bonnie S. McDougall and Anders Hansson, eds., *Chinese Concepts of Privacy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002), p. 92.

12 For references to zoomorphic vessels see Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, ed., *Zhouli zhengyi 周禮正義* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1987), 38.1514 (“Si zun yi 司尊彝”); Sun Xidan, *Liji jijie*, 31.851 (“Ming tang wei 盥醊耳”). Rudimentary drawings of some of these vessels appear in the *Li shu 禮書* by the Song scholar Chen Xiangdao 陳祥道 (fl. 1053-1093). The drawings there suggest mostly animal motifs carved on the surface rather than vases and vessels shaped in the form of animals. See *Li shu* (*Siku quanshu zhenben wu ji 四庫全書珍本五集*) edition; Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1974), 95.1b, 2a, 3b, 4a, 4b, 5a; and 96.2a; 97.4a.
with the other world. Possessing bronzes with zoomorphic decorations in this context may have been a sign of ritual agency, or politico-religious authority.

Other theories have been on offer attempting to explain the attention to zoomorphism in early China. A number of Chinese scholars continue to claim that zoomorphism has to be linked to archaic and totemic animal worship. Yet although some animal species were certainly used in an emblematic way, zoolatry, i.e., the organized worship of animal spirits, did not occupy a dominant role in pre-imperial or early imperial religion. Other contexts that involve more or less ritualised forms of animal slaughter are documented. One notable one is that of the organised hunt, an activity which—from the Shang royal hunt through to the hunting expeditions in Han imperial parks—could function both as a ritual, a military exercise or a simple pastime.

Husbandry and agriculture likewise brought the animal world within the bounds of human society. Agricultural scenes and animal imagery in Han funerary art suggest not only that the deceased continued to require nourishment in the afterlife but also that, as during their lifetime, the onus may have been upon the dead to continue raising provisions to sustain themselves in the hereafter and offer sacrifice.

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in that other world. Han murals with images of fish-ponds and hunting scenes and scores of clay animal figurines that accompany the dead in their tombs confirm that animals had gained the status of a symbolic commodity worthy of transfer to the realm of the spirits. Finally, in trying to interpret the zoomorph, one should take into account that geographic and external influences also helped shape animal representation over time. From the establishment of the early empires onwards, increasing contacts with the nomadic economies and steppe cultures of Central Asia through conflict or diplomatic missions exposed inhabitants of the central Hua-Xia 華夏 region to an exotic fauna that influenced formal imagination both in art and in textual accounts.

4. Animals and Sacrifice

It is with animal sacrifice that we arrive at an interesting juncture in our search

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17 An unparalleled find of painted pottery animal figurines was recovered in the early 1990s from the mausoleum of Han emperor Jingdi 景帝 (r. 157-141 BCE) at Yangling 陽陵 (Shaanxi). It mainly consists of domestic animals such as chickens, roosters, dogs, pigs, goats, sheep, horses and oxen. The figurines were lined up in rows and flocks by species. See Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo 陝西省考古研究所, ed., Han Yangling 漢陽陵 (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 2001), pp. 10-12, 24-25, 51-59, 154.

to understand animal motifs and the relationship between text and image. For my purpose, I define sacrifice in its minimal sense as a process that involves the slaughter, preparation, and offering up of an animal in a ritualized setting. Indeed one of the most frequently documented contexts in which animals appear in early Chinese texts is that of sacrificial religion. Sacrifice, the Li Ji maintains, fulfilled the multiple function of suppling in prayer, offering thanks to the spirits and keeping them at bay. 19 In origin the presentation of sacrificial offerings—ji 祭 [tsiad]—implied the offering of meat. 20 If texts are to be believed, the killing and cooking of animal victims was a common sight around altars, temples, shrines, tombs and building sites. Texts offer meticulous accounts of how carefully selected and ritually cleansed animal victims are prepared for slaughter, offered up to the spirit world, and consumed by ritual participants in banquets. 21 In the works associated with the Warring States masters of philosophy the fate of sacrificial animals is evoked in metaphors and moral arguments. The Zhuangzi 莊子 compares the predicament of being fed and bred in luxury to the fate of a pig ending up on the sacrificial stands. Elsewhere it is stated that serving in office is equivalent to being offered up in sacrifice. 22 There is the well-known story in the Mencius that stages a seemingly

19 Sun Xidan, Li Ji jing, 25.713 (“Jiao te sheng”).
20 The etymology of the graph ji has been explained as a pictograph representing meat being held by the hands. See Chen Nianfu 陈年福, Jiagu wen dongci ci hui yanjiu 甲骨文動詞詞匯研究 (Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe, 2001), p. 130 no. 087; Lei Hanqing 雷漢卿, Shuowen ‘shi bu’ zi yu shenling jisi kao 說文示部字與神靈祭祀考 (Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe, 2000), p. 91 ff.; and Zhou Qingquan 周清泉, Wenzi kaogu 文字考古 (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin, 2003), vol. 1, p. 292 ff. Sacrificial terminology varied from region to region. Xu Shen notes that ji sacrifice among people in Wu 吳 was known as kui 饊 (a graph that contains the “food” and “ghost” signifies and also functions as a homophonic variant for 饊 “to present offerings”). See Shuowen jiezi zhu, 5B.15a.
compassionate king cancelling the slaughter of a bull for the blood consecration of a bell because he had seen the animal alive and shivering, ...only to replace it with a sheep in the end. And similar comparisons and analogies occur elsewhere:

The ox reserved for the suburban sacrifices is nourished and fed for an entire year before being bedecked with patterned embroidery and led into the ancestral temple hall where the chief priest takes his belled knife to lay open its hair. At that moment, even if it wanted to carry heavy loads while mounting steep slopes, it could not get its wish.

Oxen were important sacrificial victims prior to their use in draft ploughing in Chunqiu times. With the advent of ox-drawn ploughing and the expansion of agriculture, their status and value increased significantly and by late Warring States and early imperial times they ranked as the most prestigious sacrificial victim.

Yet, virtually any animal could be turned into sacrificial meat. Shang oracle bones record offerings of domestic animals including pigs, sheep, and dogs and the Shang language includes a specialized vocabulary including several graphs to denote victim animals of a specified colour as well as methods of ritual slaughter (burning, drowning, splitting, cleaving, etc.). These sacrificial techniques appear

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to change little over time. Hence for instance the Warring States divination records excavated at Baoshan 包山 (Hubei; burial dated ca. 316 BCE) list horses, water buffalo, pigs, rams, ewes and white dogs as victims. They contain detailed terminology for specific victim animals within the main animal groups (e.g. gelded pigs, piglets, sows, etc.), specify a hierarchy of offerings depending on the spirit addressed, and include various instructions on how to offer up the victim (in its entirety, cut up, dried, together with alcoholic ale, etc.).

Dogs and chickens figure prominently in exorcisms, sacrifices to the roadside (which involved crushing or breaking the bones and limbs of the victim, and offering the partitioned carcass to the four directions), in sacrifices to buildings and gates, and in rituals requiring blood consecrations.

Animal blood occupied a central role. Several passages in ritual texts suggest that blood was conceived as the essence of the victim. A description of a temple consecration preserved in the Li ji concludes by stating that “consecrating a dwelling by means of blood is the way whereby one communicates with the spiritual luminescences (xin wu zhe jiaoshen mei zhi dao ye 動屋者交神明之道也 ).” Animal blood was used in rituals to seal covenants, to consecrate and propitiate

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28 Sima Qian 司馬遷, Shi ji 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 5.184, 14.573, 28.1360; Yili zhushi 儀禮注疏 (Shisanjing zhushi edition, Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1982), 24.4b (“Bin li” 黨禮); Shuowen jiezi zhu, 14A. 51b; Sun Yirang, ed., Zhouli zhengyi, 33.1328 (Da zongbo 大宗伯); Shang shu da zhuanyu 向書大傳 (Congshu jicheng edition), 7.71.

29 Sun Xidan, Li ji jijie, 42.1123 (“Za ji, xia” 雜記, 下). For an account of this ritual, see Sterckx, The Animal and the Daemon, pp. 76-77.

30 Susan Weld, “The Covenant Texts from Houma and Wenxian,” in Edward L. Shaughnessy, ed., New Sources of Early Chinese History: An Introduction to the Reading of Inscriptions and
ritual objects such as vessels, bells, drums and music stands as well as buildings, construction sites and temples. During important sacrifices, animal organs and parts thereof were to be offered up in various forms of preparation or in sequential stages to address specific spirits: raw or cooked, intact or cut into parts, roasted or boiled.

Sacrificial meat itself could serve to affirm political relationships. In pre-imperial times overlords distributed sacrificial meats among their feudal lords who would pass on a share to their respective subjects and, in turn, receive meat offerings from their followers. Meats were also distributed prior to military campaigns. These ritualised gifts of meat could consist of boiled, roasted or raw meats. According to some commentators, they were held in a shell of a large bivalve. The political importance of sharing out sacrificial meats is well attested. Confucius is alleged to have partaken services with his native state of Lu 鲁 because he deemed it improper not to be offered a share of the meats following a sacrifice.

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31 Technical terms for blood consecrations include xin 血 and er 血 (the latter mainly using the blood of birds). See e.g. Guoyu 國語 (Shanghai: Guji, 1978), 4.181 (“Lu yu, shang” 鲁語, 上); Sun Yirang, ed., Zhouli zhengyi, 37.1506 (“Chang ren” 常人). Yang Bojun comments that for consecration rituals the blood of pigs, goats or chickens was preferred. See Chuqiu Zuoquan zhu, 1258 (Zhao 昭 4). For further references see Lei Hanqing, Shuowen ‘shì bu’ zi yu shenling jìsì kao, pp. 104-106.

32 Sun Xidan, Lìjí jìjí, 24.663-664 (“Lì qí”).

33 Yang Bojun, Chuqiu Zuoquan zhu, 271 (Min 春 2), 326 (Xi 孝 9), 427 (Xi 24), 1378 (Zhao 趙 16); Chuqiu zhu, 1593 (Ding 定 14); Guoyu, 11.402 (“Jin yu 靖語 5”); Sun Yirang, ed., Zhouli zhengyi, 34.1363 (“Da zong bo”), 71.2949 (“Da xing ren” 大行人).

34 Jiao Xun, ed., Mengzi zhengyi, 24.834 (6B.6). See also Xiang Zonglu 向宗魯, ed., Shuoyuan jiaozheng 録苑校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1987), 17.415 (“Za yan” 虞言). Allegedly, sacrificial meats were the only gift from friends Confucius would acknowledge with a bow. See Yang
consumption may also have carried significance as a marker of kin or hierarchy. The Qin legal code, for instance, stipulates that a wife and children “eating meat” (shi rou 食肉) with a guilty husband would be subjected to the same punishment.\textsuperscript{35}

Records are too scanty to establish how frequently within the annual cycle elites obtained shares of sacrificial meat during private and public ceremonies.\textsuperscript{36} Yet the repeated recommendation throughout Warring States texts that meat and ale were to be reserved for the exceptionally worthy or the elderly suggests that as a nutritional commodity meat was precious. Ritual precept prohibited offerings destined for sacrifice to be used for secular consumption. Mencius, for instance, is highly disapproving of an incident in which oxen and sheep that had been presented as gifts were used as food while sacrificial duties were neglected.\textsuperscript{37}

While it remains difficult to assess how much of an economic burden the demands for sacrificial animals imposed on local communities or the state economy, it is clear that a great deal of human and material resources were needed to sustain the demand.\textsuperscript{38} Specialized officials dealing with the practical arrangements surrounding sacrifice such as the breeding and preparation of victims belong to

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\item Bojun, ed., \textit{Lunyu yi zhu 論語譯注} (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2000), p. 107 (10.23). Clearly the ritual gift economy superseded the relative economic value of secular gift giving.
\item According to Vincent Rosivach, a typical fourth-century Athenian would have had access to meat distributed after public sacrifices on up to forty-five occasions during the year (that is, on average every eight or nine days). See \textit{The System of Public Sacrifice in Fourth-Century Athens} (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), pp. 64-67.
\item Jiao Xun, ed., \textit{Mengzi zhengyi} 12.431 (3B.5).
\item For a detailed discussion of the economics of sacrifice see Roel Sterckx, “The Economics of Religion in Warring States and Early Imperial China,” in John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski, eds., \textit{Early Chinese Religion. Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC-220 AD)} (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2009), pp. 839-880. The clearest illustration of the impact sacrificial obligation might have had on officialdom can be found in the task descriptions preserved in the \textit{Zhouli 周禮}. For a summary, see Roel Sterckx, \textit{Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 137-143.
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the earliest examples of bureaucratic office in China. Oracle bone inscriptions record, among others, dog wardens, animal keepers, and horse supervisors. Bronze inscriptions mention cowherds and sacrificial stewards. By imperial times, the professionalization of officials dealing with sacrificial animals was acknowledged as a hallmark of the idealised bureaucratic state and their activities were included in the ritual calendar or “monthly ordinances” (yue ling 月令). Not all animal victims were supplied by offices of state. Some were requisitioned through taxation or levied through tributary missions by foreign subjects or vassals. Records mention the existence of a “victim tax” (xi fu 犧賦). Fields and pasture lands could be confiscated to supply animals and grains for sacrificial purposes. Although sacrificial animals were not to be sold at the market together with common animals, there is evidence that goods required for sacrifices and funerals could be purchased on credit. The requirement to supply animals for sacrifice may have been a harsh burden on some communities. One account dating to the mid-first century CE illustrates that the requisitioning of sacrificial victims by local officials could hold communities ransom. It relates how shamans instilled fear among their community by warning them that eating sacrificial ox meat would cause death from disease with sufferers uttering moaning sounds before they died. The incident led the Han court

39 Zuo Yandong 左嶽東, Xian Qin zhiguan biao 先秦職官表 (Beijing: Shangwu, 1994), nos. 19, 25, 37. For details on these officials and the criteria involved in the selection of animal victims see Sterckx, The Animal and the Daemon in Early China, pp. 47-50, 58-61, 76-78. For a reconstruction of their activities over the course of the ritual year see Sterckx, “The Economics of Religion,” pp. 845-851. Zhou Xiaolu 周曉隆 has made the interesting observation that some animal and plant motifs on Qin eave tiles might depict natural scenes described in the “Xia xiao zheng” 小夏 and received versions of the “monthly ordinances.” These include mating tigers that appear as interlocking creatures on tiles as well as more abstract motifs such as “hawks turning into pigeons.” See “Qin dong zhi wu wen yang wadang de yizhong shidu” 秦動植物紋樣瓦當的一種試讀, Kaogu yu wenwu 考古與文物 2004.2: 43-48.

40 Sun Xidan, Liji jijie, 5.116 (“Qu li, xia” 曲禮, 下).

41 Sun Yirang, ed., Zhouli zhengyi, 28.1097 (“Quan fu” 覓府); Sun Xidan, Liji jijie, 14.374 (“Wang zhi” 王制); Kongzi jiayu 孔子家語 (Sibu beiyao edition, Taipei: Taiwan Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 7.6a (“Xing zheng” 刑政).
to dispatch a new governor to the region to suppress the cults, ban the unwarranted butchering of cattle and put a halt to the exploits of the local shamans.42

5. Pictorial Absence?

Given the rich documentary record on animal sacrifice sketched out above and an archaeological record that includes zoomorphic bronze vessels and physical animal remains, it is noteworthy that scenes of animal slaughter in a sacrificial context barely figure in currently transmitted iconography. Unlike the rich corpus of vase paintings and votive reliefs in ancient Greece, where various stages in the sacrificial procedure (pre-kill, the killing, the post-kill) are illustrated in detail, early Chinese visual culture appears to reserve little space for representations of animal sacrifice.43 To be sure Warring States and Han murals contain a good number of kitchen and banqueting scenes. They depict menials at work slaughtering and preparing meats while dead animals or parts of the carcass hang down from racks, holders or stands near them. We find scenes of butchers wielding knives, kitchen stewards roasting and boiling meat on skewers or in cauldrons, and servants leading animals to the place of slaughter. Similarly, scenes are preserved that depict animals during the stages that might precede slaughter either in bucolic settings or in representations of hunts.44 Yet although texts are replete with records of ancestors or spirits being feasted with sacrificial offerings before living descendants and ritual participants are hosted in a banquet, scenes that depict the actual sacrificial slaughter or offering of animals in a sacrificial setting—in close-up or as leitmotiv—are rare.

In suggesting that the sacrificial scene is not a predominant topos in Warring

44 For examples grouped by theme see Xia Henglian 夏亨廉 et al., eds., Handai nongye huaxiang zhuanshi 漢代農業畫像磚石 (Beijing: Zhongguo nongye chubanshe, 1996), pp. 63-132.
States and Han iconography, I do of course not claim that the subject is entirely visually absent. Significant in this regard is a set of motifs combining hunting, sacrificial and culinary activity engraved on bronze ladles, trays and utensils, mostly of mid-Warring States provenance. A well-preserved bronze ladle discovered in 1998 in a private collection in Luoyang contains the hitherto best example of such a scene.\footnote{My account is based on a drawing reproduced in Xu Chanfei 徐巘菲 and Yao Zhiyuan 姚智遠, “Qianshi Luoyang xin huo Zhangguo tong yi shang de kewen tu’an” 〈淺揮洛陽新獲戰國銅匜上的刻紋圖案〉, Zhongyuan wenwu 中原文物 2007.1: 64-68.} Beneath the mouth of the ladle, which is decorated with a fish and four hunters wielding bow and arrow, it shows what may be a sacrificial scene underneath what appears to be a roof of an ancestral temple on top of which are perched two auspicious birds. Inside the temple two human figures, one seated on a stool, are holding a goblet in their hand facing one empty and one full vessel. Xu Chanfei 徐巘菲 and Yao Zhiyuan 姚智遠 speculate that these could represent the invocator and the impersonator described in ritual texts. On both sides of the temple stand what could be five assistants to the two central figures offering sacrifice inside, three of which appear to be leaning on a T-shaped staff. The latter, Xu and Yao suggest, could represent the so-called bi 畋, a fork- or bow-shaped stick made of wood and used to help the host pick up the sacrificial meats or draw out and indicate the place where ritual implements and offerings should be positioned, or where participants should stand.\footnote{Sun Xidan, Liji jijie, 40.1065 (“Za ji”).} Outside the temple six assistants surround two cauldrons in which offerings are cooking while they hold knives to kill or dissect offerings.\footnote{Similar scenes depicting the cooking or lay-out of sacrificial offerings inside or near a temple can be found on fragments of V-shaped Eastern Zhou bronze ladles elsewhere. See Shanxi sheng wenwu guanli weiyuanhui 山西省文物管理委員會, “Shanxi Changzhi shi Fenshuiling gu mu de qingli” 〈山西長治市分水嶺古墓的清理〉, Kaogu xuebao 考古學報 1957.1: 109 (fig. 2, ladle in tomb 12); Ye Xiaoyan 叶小燕, “Dong Zhou kewen tongqi” 〈東周刻紋銅器〉, Kaogu 考古 1983.2: 159 (fig. 2; Changsha); Wu Shanjing 吴善靜, “Jiangsu Liuhe xian Heren Dong Zhou mu” 〈江蘇六合縣仁東周墓〉, Kaogu 考古 1977.5: 300 (fig. 6); Jiangsu sheng wenwu guanli weiyuanhui and Nanjing bowuyuan 江蘇省文物管理委員會, 南京博物院, “Jiangsu Liuhe Chengqiao Dong Zhou mu” 〈江蘇六合程橋東周墓〉, Kaogu 考古 1965.3: 114 (fig. 13).} A further scene
shows three figures slaughtering a sacrificial victim, possibly a deer. The register opposite shows people bringing a tethered deer, birds and a dog to the temple. The ladle further includes a depiction of an archery target. Shooting ceremonies were often conducted along with a sacrifice.48

Engraved bronze ladle. Drawing. Mid-Warring States period.


48 Other examples of the archery target motif occur on a bronze ladle excavated from an Eastern Zhou tomb in Shanxi; see Li Youcheng 李有成, “Dingxiang xian Zhonghuo cun Dong Zhou mu fajue baogao” 定襄县中缓村东周墓发掘简报, Wenwu 文物 1997.5: 15 (fig. 21); and on fragments of a compass found in a Warring States tomb in Jiangsu. See Huaiyin shi bowuguan 淮阴市博物馆, “Huaiyin Gaozhuang Zhanguo mu” 淮阴高庄战国墓, Kaogu xuebao 考古学报 1988.2: 199 (fig. 12).
Here then we have what appears to be a sequence depicting preparations outside the
temple as well as the actual offering in the temple. It would be difficult to interpret
this scene as anything else but a narrative on sacrifice. It is clearly distinct from
kitchen and banquet scenes and the central figures in the temple appear to be doing
more than simply sharing a meal. Nevertheless the portrayals of slaughter and the
victims themselves remain generic and it is the sequence as a whole that suggests a
sacrificial scene. The fact that this and several cognate scenes appear on ladles and
trays, that is, implements used in sacrifice, also poses questions as to how visible
they were meant to be and whether they can be compared to scenes on murals.

Examples such as the Luoyang ladle do not explain the relative paucity
of depictions of animal sacrifice in the iconography of early China against its
prevalence in textual sources. A question that arises then is whether texts may help
explain why this might be the case. Although textual sources leave many questions
unanswered, a number of themes that transpire in the textual record could offer some
tentative explanations as to why scenes depicting animal sacrifice are relatively
scarce. I would offer four hypotheses.

First, the ritual canon indicates that sacrifice and banqueting were often part
of one and the same sequence. Following the presentation of offerings to spirits or
ancestors participants would join in a sacrificial banquet where the remainders of
the offerings would be consumed and/or distributed among participants. 49 It may
therefore be possible that kitchen and banqueting scenes were conceived of as
belonging to the same visual vocabulary as the sacrificial feast since they were part
of one and the same sequence.

A second reason behind the scarcity of sacrificial scenes might be found in
the ideology itself underlying the use of animals as offerings. As I have discussed
elsewhere, ritual texts tend to emphasize that offering an animal implies “de-

49 For a discussion as to how this applies to the distribution of meat see Gilles Boileau, “Conferring
737-772.
animalising” it, in other words, transforming a creature from animal into edible, or turning a creature with a bodily morphology into an amorphous substance of fragrance and flavour. The ritual canon describes in detail how sacrificial animals are to be selected and prepared. The slaughter itself however receives less attention and the bulk of the instructions are devoted to what happens after the kill: the division of the carcass, the preparation of the offerings, and the ways in which sacrificial spoils ought to be distributed. One could therefore imagine that descriptions of ritual preparations as recorded in texts would easily translate visually into what to the contemporary observer appear as mere kitchen or banqueting scenes.

Third, there is another narrative that runs through Warring States and Han texts and that may be significant, namely, the idea that the morally accomplished gentleman or sage should stay away from the place where animals are killed. Sacrifice may well be presented as an expression of reverence, but several anecdotes and moralising tales also insist that a virtuous gentleman does not deal with animals “as animals,” that is, as life victims. Likewise, the kitchen or abattoir is not a space where a gentleman or ruler should dwell. Zhuangzi, most famously, perverts this taboo in his story of Cook Ding 庞丁 when he has a prince discovering the deep truth about self-cultivation through a conversation with a butcher-cook in the kitchen. The story can be read as a detailed account of butchery, but ultimately it is a philosophical reflection on spontaneity and technique. Zhuangzi’s choice of subject and setting may even be a veiled criticism of the idea that the morally accomplished person should shy away from the slaughterhouse. Yet this moral reticence of being personally involved in the sacrificial kill could suggest that depictions of sacrificial

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slaughter were not palatable to elites. It may explain why we have few transmitted examples and why in examples such as the Luoyang ladle the actors are unidentified.

Fourth and finally, we should not overlook the concept of the ideal sacrificial offering itself. Above I quoted a maxim in the *Li ji* claiming that the highest form of reverence requires little or no ornament. This idea is a version of a trope that is repeated across a number of philosophical texts in Warring States and early imperial China: the sage as a hidden agent blocking off his senses to communicate with the deepest elements of the cosmos; or the general contention that the spirit world responds to human activity through media that are incompatible with the senses of ordinary mortals. The ritual canon suggests that offerings are sanctified not so much because they have been slaughtered and prepared according to ritual precept but because they invite consumption. Only the consummate offering, the offering that establishes sensory contact with the spirits turns the victim animal into a numinous gift. Hence, the most efficient offerings for communication with the spirit world are identified as those that are insipid, bland, colourless, formless and amorph. Therefore it is possible that it is the cauldron, and not the animal victim itself, that is intended as the final and core moment in the visual sequence. It is not the lavishly decorated ox paraded in front of the altar, but the sacrificial stew (geng 羹) that marks the ultimate transition from animal to edible and that invites harmony amongst celebrants and spirits. It is in the stew—a harmoniously mixed soup

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containing all ingredients, flavours and fragrances in the world—that the animal is literally and metaphorically boiled down into a substance no longer recognisable as zoomorph. And so, perhaps, the ultimate sacrificial offering in early China was meant to escape or indeed transcend iconographic representation.

6. Epilogue

It is not until we uncover more evidence of sacrificial scenes in visual culture or when our visual literacy of animal culture has reached a stage in which it can benefit from a more critical scholarly apparatus, that the hypotheses I have offered above can be fully tested or corroborated. If texts can help inspire our reading of animal iconography, they can only do so tentatively. Texts show that the animal world in ancient China provided a source of inspiration for the expression of fundamental cosmological, religious and social values.\(^{54}\) Whether one opts to resort to legend, lore and mythology to explain the “animal form,” seeks recourse to texts in order to interpret décor, or relies on murals and artefacts to substantiate the interpretation of texts, much more work is needed to advance our visual literacy of the role of animals in early Chinese art and material culture for it to be cogently linked to descriptions of hunting, ritual sacrifice, culinary economics, diet and agriculture in texts.

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古代中國的動物形象與祭祀

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摘要

動物和獸形主題是古代中國藝術與物質文化中隨處可見的要素，但關於如何解釋動物圖像學，在方法論上仍存在許多爭議。一個核心問題是：傳世文獻是否能有效地引以為據，充分解釋動物圖像中呈現的象徵與隱含意義呢？文獻記載與圖像資料的關係甚為複雜，透過祭祀與動物犧牲的例子，本文試圖為此課題別進一解。儘管在祭祀的脈絡中，文獻中充斥著關於動物的敘述；在古代中國的視覺材料裡，卻罕見宰殺動物以供祭祀的圖像主題。本文探索此現象的可能成因，並以傳世文獻中保留的訊息為基礎，提出若干假說。

關鍵詞：動物、藝術、古代中國、祭祀、圖像學、物質文化

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