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Mythological Figures on Bronzeware: Funerary Beliefs and Decorative Expressions in a Western Han Tomb (202 BCE–8 CE) in Bailuyuan, Xi'an, Shaanxi

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Abstract: Between March 2018 and May 2019, the archaeological team of the Xi'an Institute of Cultural Relics Protection and Archaeology excavated a Western Han tomb complex near Bailuyuan. This paper focuses on a bronze *xuan* with human-shaped feet discovered at tomb M21 of the complex, offering a foundation for further comparative analysis. According to the archaeological report, the Bailuyuan tomb complex, to which tomb M21 belongs, is of high status, indicating that the occupant of the main tomb held a rank no lower than a feudal lord, while the occupants of the other tombs were also likely members of the elite class. This tomb complex may belong to the accompanying tombs of the Ba Mausoleum, as it is located less than four kilometers from the mausoleum and the main tomb M1 within the complex yielded jade burial suit fragments and bronze chime bells. The central argument of this paper posits that the unusual human-shaped decoration on this *xuan* provides a new perspective on the significance of human-like imagery in bronzes from this and earlier periods. Such human-shaped decorations serve not only ornamental purposes but also carry symbolic meanings on cultural and religious levels, elevating them beyond mere functionality. Findings of this paper reflect that the unusual imagery in this *xuan* casts new light on the meaning of human-like figures in contemporaneous and even earlier bronzes.

Keywords: Western Han; bronze *xuan*; mythological figures; funerary practices; sacrificial offerings; elite burials



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1. Introduction

The excavation of a Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE) tomb complex near Bailuyuan, conducted by the Xi'an Institute of Cultural Relics Protection and Archaeology from March 2018 to May 2019, uncovered a variety of objects. Among them was a distinctive bronze *xuan* (銅, a small basin-like vessel) featuring human-shaped feet. This paper uses this extraordinary finding as the focal point to provide an in-depth analysis of this particular category of bronze object and its underlying symbolic significance.

While this *xuan* dates to the Western Han, it does not necessarily indicate that other bronzes with similar decorative designs first emerged during this period. In fact, evidence suggests that from at least the middle to late Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE), various wares and stylistic concepts were already present, along with shifts in the functions of bronzewares. Therefore, the central argument of this paper posits that the unusual human-shaped decoration on this *xuan* provides a new perspective on the significance of human-like imagery in bronzes from this and earlier periods. Such human-shaped decorations serve not only ornamental purposes but also carry symbolic meanings on cultural and religious levels, elevating them beyond mere functionality.

Section 2 of this paper offers an in-depth analysis of the bronze *xuan* with human-shaped feet discovered at the Bailuyuan tomb complex, examining the artifact's archaeological context, structural features, and associated cultural implications. Located near

the Ba Mausoleum of Emperor Wen of Han (203 BCE–157 BCE), this tomb complex provides critical insights into elite burial practices and spatial organization, likely serving as a satellite cemetery to the imperial funerary precinct (Zhu and Guo 2020). This section will also explore the possible connection between the inscription on the *xuan* and a prominent family from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). In addition, this section will analyze the unique posture and facial features of human-figure decorations on the *xuan*'s feet, suggesting influences from non-Han cultures. This introduces a layer of symbolic significance that may extend beyond traditional Han burial customs. The section argues that the bronze *xuan*, through its human-shaped feet, functioned as a substitute for living attendants, symbolizing the continuation of the deceased's social privileges in the afterlife. It embodies a blend of Han funerary tradition with foreign elements reflective of cultural interactions and status representation.

Section 3 expands the analysis of the bronze *xuan* excavated from Bailuyuan by examining its human-shaped foot decoration within the broader context of figurative motifs on Han Dynasty bronzes. This section offers comparative study across different time periods and object types. By tracing the evolution of human figure decorations from the Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) to the Han Dynasty, this section highlights their distinctive ritual and symbolic functions. Unlike the previous section's focus on the Bailuyuan *xuan*, this section explores similar motifs across other bronzes, including depictions of foreign 'Hu' individuals and the mythical "Man of Feathers (羽人, *yuren*)".¹ These motifs convey themes of cosmic order and protective guardianship. Consequently, this section situates the Bailuyuan *xuan* within a broader tradition of mortuary bronzes, where exotic and immortal figures converge, presenting an alternative interpretation: the human-shaped feet on the *xuan* may reflect the deceased's social status and cultural aspirations, linking the tomb to an expansive spiritual realm.

Throughout this paper, the main methodology employs a dual-layered comparative approach to situate the Bailuyuan *xuan* within a larger corpus of bronzes from different dynasties. Section 2 draws on detailed archaeological data, object structure, and iconographic features to hypothesize the symbolic function of the *xuan*'s human-shaped feet as possible substitutes for living attendants. Building on this assumption, Section 3 expands the comparative study to include a broader selection of bronzeware, tracing the evolution of human-figure motifs and examining variations across different cultural and temporal contexts. By analyzing these changes, this paper demonstrates how the human-figure motif on bronzes evolved from a mere decorative element to a symbol of the interaction between cultural status, religious protection, and the relationship between Han and non-Han cultural beliefs. This method of cross-referencing objects aims to provide a deeper understanding of the symbolic and ritual roles played by these figures in Han Dynasty funerary practices and highlights the interplay between Han and non-Han elements in bronzeware decoration.

2. A Detailed Analysis of the Bronze *xuan* from the Bailuyuan

2.1. Western Han Tomb Group in Lijia Village, Bailuyuan

The bronze *xuan* was discovered in tomb M21 at the Lijia Village tomb complex, excavated by the Xi'an Institute of Cultural Relics Protection and Archaeology between March 2018 and May 2019 as part of the Bailuyuan Water Ecology Center Project (Zhu and Guo 2020). This complex included 27 tombs, 2 trenches, and 529 artifacts. In March 2019, archaeologists from the State Administration of Cultural Heritage inspected the excavation and designated four medium-to-large tombs (M1–M4) as significant archaeological discoveries (Zhu and Guo 2020). The large tomb chamber of M1 contained over 2200 jade burial suit fragments, seal impressions bearing the title "domestic minister (家丞, *jiacheng*)", and a complete set of musician figurines, bells, and chime stones. These findings suggest that the tomb's occupant held a rank no lower than that of a marquis (Zhu and Guo 2020, p. 1), indicating that the smaller tombs in the complex likely belonged to individuals of elite status. Maps show that the complex is situated merely four kilometers from the Ba Mausoleum

of Emperor Wen of Han. Zhu Lianhua, the lead archaeologist from the Xi'an Institute of Cultural Relics Protection and Archaeology, noted in the excavation report that the tomb complex likely served as satellite tombs accompanying the Ba Mausoleum. These tombs provide valuable insights into the layout of the Ba Mausoleum precinct and the burial practices associated with its satellite tombs (Zhu and Guo 2020).

Tomb M21 consists of five sections: a passageway, corridor, air shaft, sealed door, and burial chamber, all aligned at an angle of 300 degrees, with a total length of 21.3 m. Inside the burial chamber, a double coffin within an outer coffin structure contained preliminary identifications of a female body in the northern coffin and a male body in the southern coffin. Burial items were primarily placed at the head of the outer coffin and along the southern side of the southern coffin. These included thirty-seven artifacts, such as ceramic containers, a bronze mirror, an iron lamp, and the *xuan*. The bronze *xuan* features three human-figure decorations on its feet, along with an inscription (Figure 1) (Zhu and Guo 2020).



Figure 1. The bronze *xuan* excavated from Bailuyuan. Image sourced from Zhu and Guo (2020).

This bronze *xuan* exemplifies a unique blend of functional design and artistic decoration. Its body is richly patinated, showcasing dark green and black oxidized residues typical of ancient bronzes. The rim bears an inscription that may indicate the object's origin or purpose. The three feet supporting the container are particularly striking, each sculpted in the shape of a human figure. These figures are depicted in a posture that conveys strength, with bent knees and crossed arms. Their appearance—especially their facial features and clothing—seems to reflect characteristics associated with non-Han cultures. The handle of the *xuan* is adorned with a ring-shaped fitting, which may have facilitated its movement while also serving as an additional decorative element.

2.2. Inscription

The bronze *xuan* excavated from Bailuyuan is clearly engraved with the inscription '襄城家銅容三升重九斤 (*xiang cheng jia tong xuan rong san sheng zhong jiu jin*)' (Figure 2). The phrases '容三升 (*rong san sheng*)' and '重九斤 (*zhong jiu jin*)' refer, respectively, to the internal volume and the weight of the bronze vessel. Scholars Yan Hongbin and Pang Wenlong have both discussed the issue of the internal capacity and weight of Western Han Dynasty bronze *xuan* from the Shaanxi region in their works. Based on the inscriptions they examined on selected *xuan*, it is evident that the internal capacity and weight of Western Han bronze vessels were standardized using *sheng* and *jin* as the units of measurement (Yan 1987, 1991; Pang 1983). Cao Bin discussed bronze *xuan* in detail, noting that the naming

of these vessels can be complicated. He identified six pieces from the tomb of Liu He (located in Guandun Mountain, Guanxi Village, Datangping Township, Xinjian District, Nanchang, Jiangxi Province), the deposed ninth emperor of the Western Han, later known as the Marquis of Haihun, dating to the Western Han period.² The inscriptions on them all indicate a capacity of 4 *sheng* and a weight of 12 or 13 *jin* (as the Western Han measurement of capacity and weight, 4 *sheng* is equivalent to approximately a capacity of 0.8 liters, and 12 or 13 *jin* is equivalent to approximately a weight of 2.5 to 3 kilograms nowadays), which would have been standard for a bronze *xuan* at the tomb of the Marquis of Haihun (Cao 2018, p. 74; Zhongguo 1984, pp. 73–79; Qiu 2011, p. 85). Therefore, it can be speculated that the literal meaning of the inscription of the bronze *xuan* from Bailuyuan suggests that the volume was 2 *sheng* (0.6 liters), while its total weight was 9 *jin* (approximately 2 to 2.25 kilograms). Furthermore, the presence or absence of vertical auricular rings on bronze vessels may be related to their function (Figure 3). Generally, the *xuan* is a vessel used for washing and is typically shaped like a basin. Both the basin and the *xuan* were water vessels used for washing, but the basin had five times the capacity of the *xuan*. Apart from the standardization of form and capacity, the vertical auricular rings on either side of the *xuan* became key features for distinguishing its form and function.

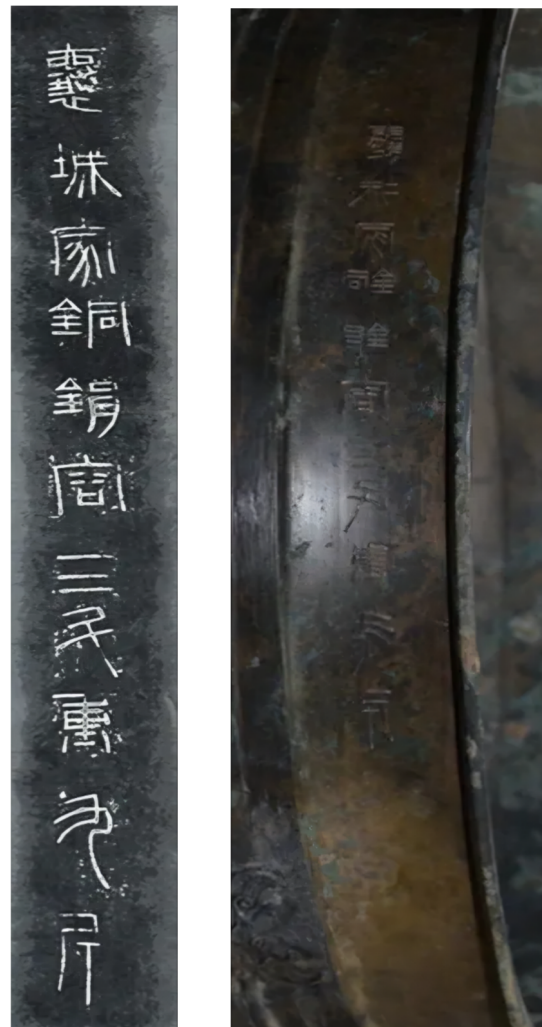


Figure 2. The bronze *xuan* excavated from Bailuyuan is clearly engraved with the inscription ‘襄城家銅鍤容三升重九斤’ (*xiang cheng jia tong xuan rong san sheng zhong jiu jin*). Image sourced from Zhu and Guo (2020).

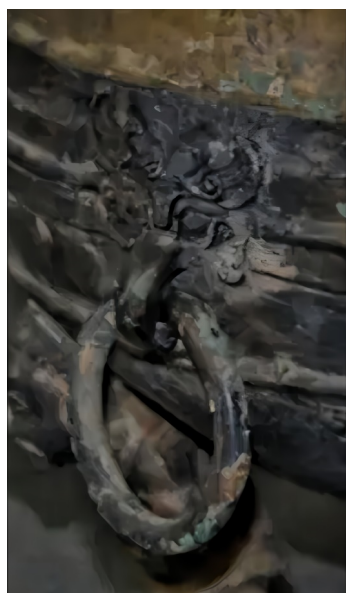


Figure 3. The presence or absence of vertical auricular rings in bronzewares may be related to the function of the bronze vessel. Image sourced from [Zhu and Guo \(2020\)](#).

Due to a lack of additional textual evidence, this paper makes a few tentative assumptions regarding the characters ‘襄城家 (*xiang cheng jia*)’. Based on the archaeological report, the tomb complexes in Bailuyuan belong to the Western Han period, so ‘Xiang cheng jia’ likely refers to a family or workshop associated with Xiangcheng during that time ([Zhu and Guo 2020](#)). The *Comments of a Recluse* (潜夫论, *Qianfulun*) records a lineage, stating: “... During Emperor Jing’s reign, Xin’s son, Tuidang, and grandson, Chi, came to surrender, and the Han Emperor bestowed the title of Marquis of Gonggao upon Tuidang and the title of Marquis of Xiangcheng upon Chi ... Xin’s other descendants remained among the Xiongnu”.³ This content suggests that Chi, who held the title of Marquis of Xiangcheng, was a member of a prominent family with connections to Xiangcheng ([Wang 2008](#), p. 135).⁴

The *Records of the Grand Historian* (史記, *Shiji*) provide further detail: “... In the fourteenth year of Emperor Xiaowen’s reign, Tuidang and Ying led their followers to surrender to the Han Dynasty. The Han government granted Tuidang the title of Marquis of Gonggao and Ying the title of Marquis of Xiangcheng” ([Wang 1977](#), p. 130).⁵ This passage emphasizes the importance of the Xiangcheng title within the Han lineage. The *Yearly Table of Marquises between the Reigns of Emperor Hui and Emperor Jing* (惠景間侯者年表, *Huijing jian houzhe nianbiao*) further notes: “Xiangcheng: Appointed as Marquis after surrendering as a Xiongnu state chancellor, he was the son of the Crown Prince of King Xin of Han, and was granted authority over 1432 households” ([Sima 1959](#), pp. 984, 1006).⁶ Together, these records indicate a close association between the title of Marquis of Xiangcheng and the family of the Han lineage.

The aforementioned records connect deeply between ‘Xiang cheng jia’ and members of the Han lineage, particularly those related to the Xiongnu—this term might refer to a Han family related to the Marquis of Xiangcheng. However, the archaeological report did not provide accurate evidence that tomb occupants were descendants of the Han family. Although the inscription on the bronze *xuan* provides some information, it does not show the tomb occupant’s identity as a descendant of the Marquis of Xiangcheng or the Han family.

There is a possibility that tomb occupants were not direct members of the Han family but rather individuals of significant social status who maintained symbolic or familial connections to the Han family. This bronze *xuan*, likely a gift from the Han family to commemorate the deceased, serves as both a symbol of acknowledgment and a memorial marker. The human-shaped design and inscription of the *xuan* signify the assertion of identity, the

preservation of alliances, and the communication of shared values among distinguished Han and non-Han families.

2.3. Exotic Characters: Bronze Feet Decorated with Human Figures

As can be seen from the available image data, the human-shaped decorations on the bronzes do not appear to be Han Chinese in origin. Their postures and forms also differ from other excavated objects with humanoid ornamentation that were intended for ritual or service purposes. This paper proposes that the human figures represent certain non-Han culture and may have some funerary significance specific to that culture. Some scholars highlight the religious significance of foreign figures in early Chinese funerary practices, noting that their presence in tombs often reflected attempts to gain protection from extra-human powers in the afterlife. This could explain why these non-Han figures appear on burial objects, symbolizing spiritual guardianship or a connection to the exotic realms beyond the Han Empire (Poo 2008, pp. 271–72).

On the other hand, the non-Han burial traditions often included human sacrifice, a practice believed to have roots in primitive religious beliefs (Reinhart 2015). Dictated by the concept of the immortality of the soul, the ancients believed that after death, people continued to exist in another world (Jacobsen 1976, pp. 14–15). In life, emperors and aristocrats were surrounded by concubines and servants, and they imagined that they would maintain the same luxury and lust in the afterlife. As a result, they took their wives, concubines, servants, favorites, and close associates to the grave, where these individuals were believed to continue their service (Sima 1959, p. 2892).⁷

However, since the Bailuyuan tomb complex belonged to the Western Han aristocracy, it is unlikely that the non-Han burial traditions—especially the human sacrifice—were fully adopted at that time. Human sacrifice was not a common feature of the burial customs of the Western Han Dynasty. In the histories of various civilizations, similar burial systems were adopted as societies progressed, reflecting the stage of their social development (Poo 2008, pp. 193–268). Based on the analysis in previous sections, the bronze *xuan* discussed in this paper likely belonged to a Han family. While it may have been influenced by non-Han cultures, it primarily followed Han burial customs when offering burial gifts, especially when the tomb owner was of a Han lineage. This paper proposes that the human-shaped foot beneath the bronze *xuan* served as a substitute for a human sacrifice. Such practice is familiar within ancient Chinese funerary culture, just like how the terracotta figures functioned as stand-ins for living attendants, allowing the deceased to continue a prestige life in the imaginary underworld (Poo 2008, pp. 220–21). Considering the tomb owner's aristocratic associations, the idea here is evident: to carry on the real-life privileges in the afterlife. Therefore, the humanoid foot on the bronze *xuan* was likely designed to fulfill a similar symbolic role, serving as a substitute for the tomb owner's living attendants.

The facial features of the human figure on the bronze *xuan* are particularly striking, resembling the 'cutting face' (鑿面, *limian*) custom associated with the non-Han culture. Studies on non-Han imagery of the Han Dynasty have frequently focused on the tattoos found on non-Han people's faces. Through the efforts of scholars, such as Xing Yitian, Gao Xianyin, Zheng Yan, and Huo Wei, clear identification criteria for non-Han figures have been established. These scholars' work has provided benchmarks for further discussions on this topic, aiding future scholars with an essential basis for discriminating between non-Han and the Han (Gao 1996, pp. 316–21; Zheng 1999, pp. 133–50; Xing 2000, pp. 15–99).⁸

During the Han Dynasty, the Hu people consisted of nomadic tribes active in the northern regions, specifically in areas corresponding to today's Xinjiang and the east and south of Lake Balkhash, extending even further into Central Asia (Zheng 2013, p. 126). From the Han Dynasty onwards, this term encompassed all non-Han groups that diverged from the Han, and that were not under the control of the Han Empire (Di Cosmo 2004, p. 2). In some cases, pictorial stones have inscriptions that identify the people depicted in the picture, such as 'King Hu' (胡王, *huwang*), 'General Hu' (胡將軍, *hujiangjun*), and 'The Door of Hu Nu' (胡奴門, *hunumen*), which help pinpoint who the Hu, that is, the non-Han,

people were (Figure 4). While textual records provide the primary basis, iconographic comparisons further highlight differences in the figures, allowing for a clearer distinction between Hu and other non-Han representations.



Figure 4. A pictorial stone with the script ‘The Door of Hu Nu (胡奴門, *hunumen*)’ excavated at Yangji, Fangcheng County, Henan Province. Image sourced from Wang (2010, p. 58).

Images of non-Han people with facial tattoos existed as early as the pre-Qin period. One example is the axe and hook halberd from the Western Zhou period, excavated at Baichaopo in Lingtai, Gansu Province (Figure 5). The figure on this object, with thick eyebrows, large eyes, curly hair, and a rounded cheek, has been interpreted by some scholars as reflecting features of the Western peoples (Lin 1989, pp. 71–73; Kawamata 2006, pp. 31–34). The practice of tattooing in China has been documented in historical texts since the pre-Qin period. In addition to the Eastern non-Han peoples’ tattoos, tattooing was also prevalent among the Yue people in southeastern China (Sima 1959, p. 115).⁹ Scholarly research suggests that tattoos could serve various purposes: to signify race, gender, social class, bravery, marital status, religious beliefs, body adornment, facial make-up, medical treatment, or as marks of punishment, identification, or intimidation. (Yoshioka 1994, pp. 60–65).

However, the meaning of facial tattoos in non-Han culture was likely distinct from their significance in the Central Plains during the Han Dynasty. In the Central Plains, facial tattoos were primarily used as a form of punishment, a practice that can probably be traced back to the Shang Dynasty (Song 2004, pp. 189–98). Tattooing as punishment in ancient China may have originated as a rejection of foreign customs (Jones 1987, pp. 139–55). According to *The Records of the Grand Historian* (史記, *Shiji*): “The Han envoy Wang Wu and others pried into the Xiongnu. Under the Xiongnu’s law, the Han envoys could not enter the yurt unless they removed their official seals and had their faces tattooed with ink. Wang Wu, a native of northern regions, was familiar with Hu customs, so he tattooed his face and entered the royal yurt” (Ban and Yan 1962, p. 3772).¹⁰ In this record, the Han envoy Wang Wu, due to his obedience to Xiongnu (non-Han) customs, was permitted to enter the royal yurt to meet with the Xiongnu leader Chanyu, which exemplifies the significance of having one’s face tattooed, both as a Xiongnu custom and as a diplomatic etiquette

(Xing 2000, p. 22). This record reveals that the reason why Xiongnu demanded that Han envoys have their faces tattooed was to declare that unless they respected and obeyed the ‘Xiongnu custom’, they would not be eligible to enter the yurt to meet with Chanyu. This was a gesture to symbolize the Xiongnu’s cultural subjectivity and emphasize their high political stance, as a demonstration of pride in their own culture.

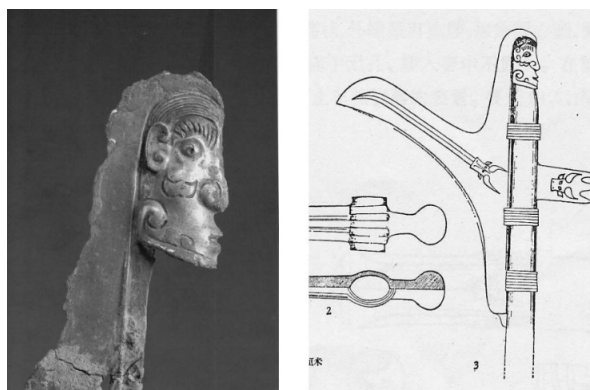


Figure 5. The axe and hook halberd from the Western Zhou, excavated at Baichaopo in Lingtai, Gansu province. Images sourced from Gansu (1977, p. 115, and Figure 2, plate 13).

During the reign of Emperor Wen of Han, the eunuchs who married into the Xiongnu tribes advised Chanyu to maintain his cultural identity, uphold his cultural traditions, and avoid diminishing the status of his people by accepting gifts from the Han Dynasty, such as silk satins (Sima 1959, p. 2899). This indicates that the Xiongnu’s insistence on tattooing Han envoys’ faces was not an imitation of the Han punishment customs—where criminals or slaves were tattooed—but rather an assertion of cultural pride and confidence. This may also explain why the non-Han figures depicted on the excavated bronze *xuan*, instead of adopting servile postures, stand upright with their arms crossed, expressing a sense of cultural pride to a certain extent.

In addition to cultural significance, facial tattoos or scars also played a role in non-Han funerary customs, where mourners would cut their faces with a knife until they bled in order to express grief. Later, facial cuts were adopted to express extreme sorrow on occasions of remonstrance and farewell. This practice is recorded in the “Biography of Geng Bing (耿秉传, *Gengbing zhuan*)” in the *History of Later Han* (後漢書, *Houhanshu*). Geng Bing was a famous general of the mid-Eastern Han Dynasty who fought on the northwestern frontier. Upon his death in the third year of Emperor Yongyuan’s reign, it is written: “When the Xiongnu heard of Bing’s death, the entire nation wailed and wept in mourning, and some even cut their faces until they bled” (Fan 2012, p. 718).¹¹

Therefore, this indicates that the human-shaped foot decoration on the bronze *xuan* may serve as a symbolic substitute for the human sacrifice, and that the facial tattoos or scars on these figures could represent mourning for the deceased, if they had been presented as gifts from a family influenced by non-Han (Xiongnu, as well as Hu) culture.

3. An Analysis of Figurative Decorative Elements on Han Dynasty Bronzeware

Animal and human figures appear regularly as decorative motifs in Han bronzes. There is a close link between different types of decorations, including human figures, diverse landscapes, and animal elements, making them inseparable in scholarly discussions. Muchou Poo highlights that such decoration, particularly the representation of figures, is rooted in the broader religious context of early Chinese society, where visual motifs were deeply connected to beliefs about personal welfare and immortality (Poo 2007, pp. 62–68).

The development of bronzes parallels the evolution of decorative elements in human figures, which have taken on different characteristics during various times. Although the number and variety of human figure motifs are far fewer than those of animal motifs, they

often exhibit more distinctive features that reflect their specific cultural and historical context. The emergence of decorative elements in the form of human figures as independent subjects, separate from animals and other motifs, marked a distinct trend during the Western Zhou period, with depictions of actual characters, such as slaves, as central to the human form. Jessica Rawson noted that such representations were not merely decorative but served ritual and symbolic purposes, reflecting broader societal hierarchies and practices, particularly during the Zhou and Han periods (Rawson 1987, p. 73). The highly three-dimensional human figures in bronzes appear to simulate real life for the deceased (Yu 2008, pp. 1–19).¹² A representative example of a decorative humanoid element is the small square cauldron from the No. 1 Western Zhou bronze collection at Zhuangbai Village, Fu Feng, Shaanxi Province (Shaanxi 1978, p. 1), in which a human figure subjected to legal punishment is depicted. This small bronze cauldron features two small doors on the front of its lower body that can be opened and closed, and a plain animal knob on the left side. More importantly, an image of a gatekeeper who has lost his left leg due to punishment is depicted on the right side of the small door (Figure 6). Executed figures can also be found on the feet of some bronze vessels, where nude figures kneel while carrying heavy loads above them. According to Rawson, the representation of these figures, particularly in contexts of punishment or servitude, reflects the ritual role of such objects, which were not only symbols of power but also metaphors for cosmic and social order (Rawson 2013). These figures exhibit physical characteristics that differ from those of ordinary people, suggesting that they may have been partially enslaved and in an extremely lowly social status as a result of punishment. However, this argument has yet to be proven in the case of the bronze *xuan* excavated from Bailuyuan. The postures and states of the figures in the foot section of the bronze *xuan* are different from those of the tormented slaves and the attendants; rather, they adopt a posture that conveys strength. Ordinary servants, depicted in other similar bronze decorations of mundane life, are the more common subjects. Their laboring duties are usually illustrated in the wares as lifting or supporting. For instance, the bronze figures flanking the bell-frame found in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng in Sui County, Hubei Province, appear to be warriors holding up the bell-frame beams with their heads or hands, and with swords on their belts (Figure 7). This suggests that figures representing waiters, servants, or criminals did not exhaust the primary roles or types of the decorated human forms.



Figure 6. The small square cauldron (with a detailed part) from the No. 1 Western Zhou bronze collection at Zhuangbai Village, Fu Feng, Shaanxi Province. Image sourced from Xu (2012, p. 61).

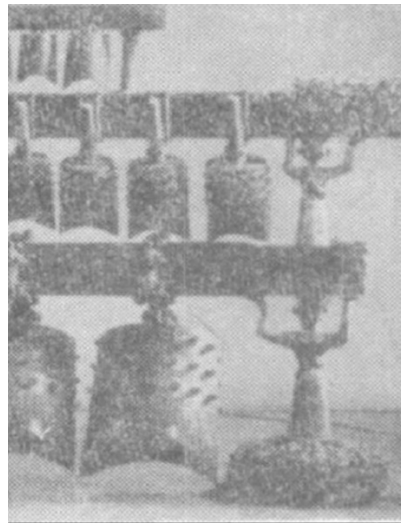


Figure 7. The bronze figures on side of the bell-frame, found in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng in Sui County, Hubei Province. Image sourced from [Suixian \(1979, p. 16\)](#).

Some bronze lanterns from the Warring States period also feature figurative decoration. The depiction of the figures is extraordinarily detailed and lively. As Poo points out in his analysis of daily life in ancient China, such intricate depictions of servants and slaves reflect broader social values and religious beliefs of the time, including the belief in the protective power of these figures ([Poo 2008](#), pp. 220–21).

For example, the formation of the male servant in a bronze lantern from the Zhongshan in Pingshan, Hebei Province, featuring visible hair, jewel-encrusted eyes, and neatly dressed garments, fully reflects the high level of casting skill ([Figure 8](#)). The popularity of servant figures persisted into the Han Dynasty, as evidenced by the famous Changxin lantern found in Han Tomb No. 2 in Mancheng, Hebei Province ([Figure 9](#)). Such lanterns not only served practical purposes but also carried deeper symbolic meanings, as they were often associated with immortality and the afterlife. An examination of these objects revealed that the widespread introduction of exotic and immortal figures was a distinctive feature of figurative decoration in Han Dynasty bronzes.



Figure 8. Silver-headed figurine and bronze lantern excavated from the tombs of the Zhongshan State in Pingshan, Hebei. Image sourced from [Zhang et al. \(1979, Figure 2, Plate Section, p. 1\)](#).



Figure 9. Gilt-bronze figurine and lantern excavated from the tombs of the Zhongshan State in Ping-shan, Hebei. The lantern, currently housed in the Henan Museum, was featured in the museum's 2021 special exhibition. Image sourced from the [Henan Museum \(2021\)](#) online collection.

3.1. Non-Han Characters

An inscription on the wall of the Danghu lantern plate from Tomb No. 1 in Mancheng, Hebei Province, reads: “禦當戶錠一，第然於 (Yu danghu dian yi, di ran yu)” ([Zhou and Chen 2010](#), p. 53). The inscription ‘當戶 (danghu)’ likely refers to the name of a Hu official ([Zhou and Chen 2010](#), p. 53). While the scholarly community remains undecided upon the precise meaning of the inscription, it is evident that the figure depicted on the object belongs to a Hu tribe. The man is dressed in a short, straight-breasted tunic with his left shoulder bare, and the back of the tunic is tied in a long tail. Such attire indicates a non-Han origin (Figure 10).



Figure 10. The Danghu lantern plate from Tomb No. 1 in Mancheng, Hebei Province. Image sourced from the [Heibei Museum \(n.d.\)](#) online collection and [Zhou and Chen \(2010, p. 54\)](#).

Non-Han figures typically possess distinctive visual characteristics, such as braided hair, deep-set eyes, high noses with whiskers, prominent cheekbones, curly hair, and exposed upper bodies. Jessica Rawson highlighted that such foreign elements in decorative motifs, especially on bronzes, played a significant role in ritualistic contexts and represented the fascination with exoticism and otherness in early Chinese art ([Rawson 1999](#)).

These traits serve as primary criteria for identifying certain figures as non-Han people, as seen in the bronze lanterns found in Boxing County, Shandong Province, Tomb No. 2 of Xingyi, Guizhou Province, and Luoyang Railway Station, all of which exhibit one or more of these features (Figure 11). Bronze figures with prominent cheekbones, plump cheeks, large eyes, pointed faces, straight noses, and pointed hats have been excavated from various sites, including Tomb No. 5 of the Western Han Dynasty in Yima, Henan Province, Tomb No. 1 of the Western Han Dynasty in the eastern suburbs of Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, Tomb No. 1 of Dayunshan in Yuzhu, Jiangsu Province, and Tomb No. 1 of the Marquis of Haixiao in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province (Figure 12). In comparison to the human-shaped foot of the bronze *xuan* excavated from Bailuyuan, the figure displays braided hair, distinctive facial features, and what appears to be a scar or tattoo on the face, further distinguishing it from the Han individuals. Notably, the postures of these figures contrast with that of other bronzewares featuring human decorations from the same period. The figures do not adopt a visually subservient stance; instead, their hands are crossed, and their bodies are upright, as if they were merely standing beneath the bronze *xuan* rather than serving to support the object (Figure 13).



Figure 11. Some bronze lanterns found in Boxing County, Shandong, Tomb No. 2 of Xingyi, Guizhou, and Luoyang Railway Station, all of which have one or more of the features shown. From left to right: images were sourced from [Boxing \(1987, p. 187\)](#), [Guizhou \(1979, plate 6\)](#), and [Luoyang \(2004, p. 55\)](#).



Figure 12. Bronze figures with prominent cheekbones, plump cheeks, large eyes, pointed faces, straight noses, and pointed hats, excavated from various Western Han Dynasty tombs. From top to bottom, left to right: images were sourced from [Jiangxi \(1976, plate 6\)](#), [Luoyang \(1995, p. 23\)](#), [Nanjing \(2013, p. 68\)](#), [Jiangxi \(2016, p. 88\)](#), and [Nanjing \(2011, museum online collection\)](#).

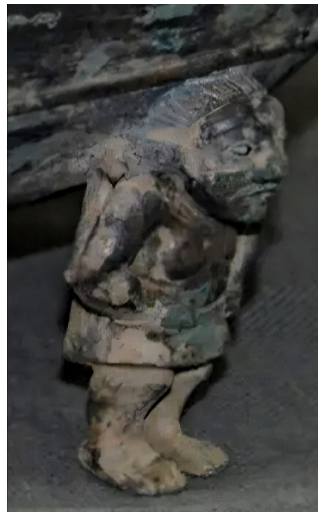


Figure 13. Human-figure decoration beneath the bronze *xuan* from Bailuyuan. Image sourced from [Zhu and Guo \(2020\)](#).

3.2. Immortal Characters

In Han Dynasty bronzes, immortal figures are mainly represented by the ‘Man of Feathers’, characterized by wings on their shoulders, feathers on their legs, and large ears on their head ([He 2010](#), p. 46). A notable example is a lotus flower lantern from the Deydier Collection in London, England, where a winged, feathered man with large ears sits on its knees while holding a plate in both hands. In the center of the plate is a lotus flower, flanked by two dragons with their heads pointing upwards ([Figure 14](#)). Each dragon holds a lotus in its mouth, and together with the central lotus head, they form a three-branched lantern with three lantern trays. Another bronze ‘Man of Feathers’, found in the northern suburbs of Xi’an, Shaanxi Province, is also depicted sitting on bended knees. This figure has a long face, a pointed nose, raised cheekbones and eyebrow bones, large erect ears, and a tapered bun on the back of its head, and is dressed in a waist-length tunic ([Figure 15](#)). This paper speculates that the feathered man serves as a pedestal, suggested by its forward-stretched hands with rounded vertical holes, the small apertures between its knees, and its kneeling posture, which collectively give the impression that it is supporting an object.



Figure 14. The lotus flower lantern in the Deydier Collection, London, England. Image sourced from [Li \(1995, plate 16\)](#).

The feathered man also appears frequently on some bronze lamps and bronze Boshan burners from the Eastern Han Dynasty. The bases of these vessels were often decorated

with mountain-shaped spikes and scenes of hovering deities, beasts, or men (Ogata 2022, pp. 66–68). Feathered human figures or other strange beings are seated on the spikes, forming unique combinations not commonly seen in other areas or time periods. Typically, the feathered man is shown with hands on his waist, wings on his shoulders, feathered tails on his legs, long eyebrows, a high nose, a wide mouth, and a long beard. They are often depicted sitting on their knees, with their hair tied back at the neck. Rawson emphasizes that such representations in Han bronzes were closely tied to ritual functions, with the exotic or celestial beings often serving to symbolically support or elevate the sacred nature of the vessel (Rawson 1987, p. 7). The ‘Man of Odd’ (异人, *yiren*) and the ‘Man of Feathers’ share similar facial features and body postures, though the former lacks wings, making them resemble a figure like Hercules (Figure 16). Wu Hung notes that such figures were not merely decorative but had cosmological significance, playing a role in the depiction of the celestial and immortal realms within tombs, linking the deceased to a broader cosmic order (Wu 2015, pp. 172–73).

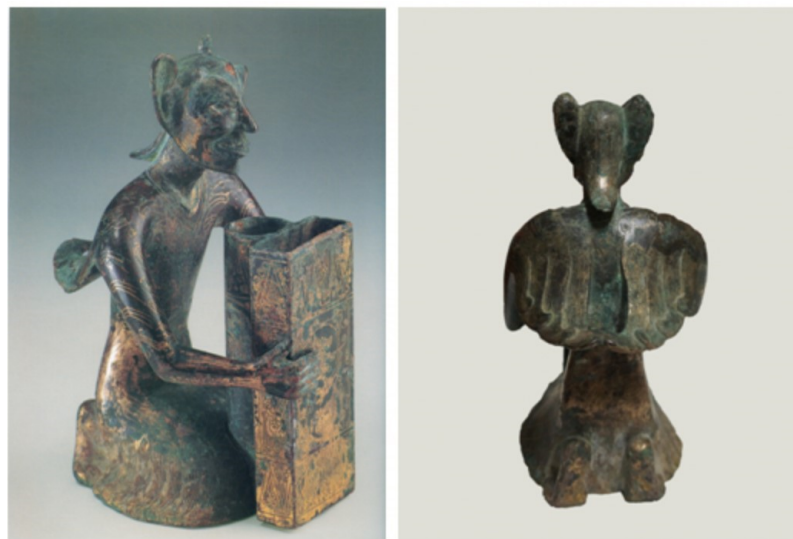


Figure 15. The bronze ‘Man of Feathers’ found in the northern suburbs of Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. Image sourced from Xi’an (1966, Figure 4, plate, Section 2, p. 7).



Figure 16. The ‘Man of Feathers’ figure is also concentrated on some bronze lamps and bronze Boshan burners from the Eastern Han Dynasty. Image sourced from Li (1983, p. 69).

From the descriptions above, it is clear that the visual characteristics of the Hu people and the feathered figures in Han Dynasty bronzes overlap significantly. This overlap, as Wu Hung discussed, demonstrates the fluid boundaries between depictions of immortals and foreigners, where the exotic features of ‘Hu’ served as templates for crafting figures that occupied the celestial and immortal realms in Han imagination (Wu 2015, pp. 108–26). The two models, in spite of different identities, share many physical traits. The primary difference between them is the absence of wings on the Hu people. This resemblance is also evident in many Han Dynasty images, such as the classic image of a Man of Feathers feeding a phoenix on the first level of a portrait stone by Zhang Yizhi of Jining, Shandong Province. In this image, the Man of Feathers, shown on the right side of the picture, with a high nose and deep-set eyes, is followed by two similarly featured men without wings. These men, wearing pointed hats, are kneeling on their knees and holding medicine in both hands (Figure 17).



Figure 17. The classic image of a Man of Feathers feeding a phoenix on the first level of a portrait stone by Zhang Yizhi of Jining, Shandong Province. Image sourced from Yu (2000, plate 11).

As opposed to the Han people, the peculiar appearance of the non-Han people inspired the Han artisans to use them as models for creating ‘ideal immortals’. Such representations of foreigners in Chinese art, particularly in tombs, were not only aesthetic choices but also reflected a deeper religious and cultural understanding of the afterlife, where Hu or other non-Han peoples could be seen as intermediaries between the human world and the divine (Poo 2022). It is plausible that the human figures on the *xuan* from Bailuyuan, with their distinct facial features, were inspired by non-Han attributes. This implies that these figures may represent mysterious beings imbued with symbolic meanings related to burial and the underworld, resonating with themes of protection and auspiciousness. Since the Man of Feathers had no direct real-world counterpart, the Hu or non-Han people from the West served as the most suitable templates for immortal figures. It is even possible that the non-Han people were sometimes depicted directly in the fairy realm, living alongside the Man of Feathers as a part of the immortal world, as shown in the Jining Nanzhang portrait stone, where non-Han figures appear as attendants to the Man of Feathers.

The Han Dynasty’s preference for the stylistic motif of exotic figures in bronzes carries political significance. These foreign elements not only reflected Han China’s fascination with the ‘other’ but also served as symbols of auspiciousness and cosmic order, particularly in burial contexts (Rawson 1999; Rawson 2005). Thus, figures resembling non-Han people in these contexts, such as the potential Hu-like forms on the Bailuyuan *xuan*, could fulfill a dual role as both protectors of the tomb and symbolic guides for the deceased into the afterlife. This alignment with the cosmic order of the underworld underscores the fluidity between real and imagined identities, linking these figures to broader ideals of protection and the pursuit of an ideal world. The non-Han people’s figures, originating from the distant West, had already begun to enter the celestial system, becoming part of the fairy

realms. Together with animals, they seemed to signify auspiciousness, a function that was further amplified by their ability to harness animal representations.

4. Conclusions

The burial and funeral customs of the Han aristocracy were in a state of constant evolution. In general, funeral practices were largely shaped by productivity levels, as well as the economic and social development of the time. As these areas progressed, changes in funerary concepts and burial customs became inevitable. Funerals, serving as the final rites performed by the living to bid farewell and pay respects to the deceased, were influenced not only by economic factors, but also by the funeral customs and religious beliefs of neighboring ethnic groups.

This paper presented an initial study of the bronze *xuan* from Bailuyuan within a unique funerary context, examining its human-shaped decoration as a reflection of the complex cross-cultural interactions during the Western Han period. The object's stylistic features and burial environment provide essential insights into the funerary customs of the Han aristocracy and their integration of indigenous and external influences. In the funeral practices of that time, there was a strong emphasis on blessing the living, bidding farewell to the deceased, and fulfilling the deceased's wishes. These practices aimed to secure blessings from the souls of the dead for future generations. Therefore, this paper proposed that the *xuan*, by incorporating iconographic elements from both Han and Hu traditions, went beyond mere functionality or decoration—it embodied the deceased's social identity and cultural values, serving as a symbol of protection and status in the afterlife.

The study of the *xuan* within the larger tomb complex revealed relationships among the objects, the site, and the tomb occupants. Both the archaeological report and my research suggest that the Bailuyuan tomb group, likely serving as an aristocratic burial site, included objects linked to the royal family in order to associate the tomb owners with the elite class of the time. The *xuan* thus reflects both the status of the tomb occupants and the cultural aspirations tied to their funeral practices. The inscription, which may indicate that it was a gift or belonged to an aristocratic lineage, further connects the object to the funerary and social hierarchies of the Han period.

In addition, this paper argued that the *xuan* serves a dual purpose in both life and death—its function extends beyond basic funerary or decorative use. As an item likely used in daily life and then buried with the deceased, the *xuan* represents the transformation of practical objects into symbols of protection and power within the tomb. This shift highlights how burial goods in Han culture were intertwined with the responsibility of preserving the deceased's social privileges in the afterlife, blending everyday items with the spiritual demands of funerary practices.

Ultimately, the *xuan* exemplifies the intersection of functional utility, mystical significance, and cultural representation within Han funerary contexts. This research aimed to enhance the understanding of how burial objects reflected social and cultural interactions by analyzing this piece within the broader context of Han bronzeware, shedding light on the changing beliefs regarding life and death that defined Han society's response to both Han and non-Han influences.

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Notes

- ¹ The term *Hu* (胡) was a broad designation for ancient non-Han peoples, generally referring to populations beyond the Central Plains, particularly to the north and west of China. The Hu people were often associated with horse-riding or mounted nomadic lifestyles. See Psarras (1999, p. 6), Hill (2009), and Di Cosmo (1999, pp. 951–52). During the pre-Qin period (prior to 221 BCE), the term Hu began to be used specifically for the Xiongnu, who inhabited areas to the north of China. See Xu (2017, pp. 32–46). Various theories exist regarding the origin of the term ‘Hu’: it may have originated from the ancestors of the Turkic-speaking Xiongnu, who, according to Chinese historical records, referred to themselves as Hu. The *Book of Han*, in the section “Account of the Xiongnu (漢書·匈奴傳, *Han shu: Xiongnu zhuan*)” records: “The Chanyu sent a letter to Han, saying: ‘To the south lies the great Han, and to the north the mighty Hu. The Hu are the favored sons of heaven’ (單于遺漢書雲: ‘南有大漢, 北有強胡。胡者, 天之驕子也’)”. See Ban and Yan (1962, p. 3780). See Xu (2017, pp. 32–46). Here, the mention of ‘the great Han’ alongside ‘the Hu’ indicates that the Xiongnu referred to themselves as ‘Hu’. Both ‘Xiongnu’ and ‘Hu’ were not derogatory terms used by the Han people for this nomadic group, but rather their own self-designations. See Xu (2000, pp. 67–69) and Zhao (2004, p. 65). In its broader sense of this paper, the term Hu generally encompassed various northern non-Han groups and the diverse peoples of the Western regions, as perceived by ancient Chinese.
Men of Feathers, or ‘Yuren’, are flying immortals in ancient Chinese mythology, distinct from other immortals by their wings. *The Songs of Chu* (楚辭, *Chu ci*), in ‘The Far Journey (遠遊, *yuanyou*)’, describes, ‘There are feathered beings on Danqiu, dwelling in the old land of the undying (仍羽人於丹丘兮, 留不死之舊鄉)’. As the name suggests, these beings are those who either have feathers on their bodies or wear feathered garments, enabling them to fly. They first appear in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經, *Shan hai jing*), where they are referred to as ‘Feathered People (羽民, *yumin*)’. In Daoism, practitioners are called ‘Feathered Scholars (羽士, *yushi*)’, and attaining immortality is described as ‘feathered transformation and ascension (羽化飛升, *yuhua feisheng*)’. The *xian* (仙) are depicted as feathered, sprite-like figures, or as beings with dragon or snake tails, closely connected to the animal world. This variation in form reveals that early tomb art did not follow a single source or unified iconography in representing the *xian*. See He (2010, pp. 165–75), Hong (1983, p. 276), Kirkova (2016, p. 94), and Wallace (2001, pp. 73–101).
- ² The tomb of Liu He (located in Guandun Mountain, Guanxi Village, Datangping Township, Xinjian District, Nanchang, Jiangxi Province), the deposed ninth emperor of the Western Han, later known as the Marquis of Haihun, dating to the Western Han period. See Yang (2019), Zhang (2019), and Jiangxi (2017).
- ³ The *Xiongnu* (匈奴) were a confederation of nomadic tribes who, according to ancient Chinese records, occupied the eastern Eurasian Steppe from the 3rd century BCE to the late 1st century CE. See Di Cosmo (2004, p. 186). The Western Han historian, Sima Qian, provided one of the earliest detailed accounts of the Xiongnu in an ‘arrayed account (列傳, *liezhuan*)’ within his *Records of the Grand Historian* (c. 100 BCE). See Sima (1959). While the Xiongnu were sometimes distinguished from other nomadic groups, such as the Hu people, see Bunker (2002, pp. 27–28), Chinese sources often used ‘Hu’ as a general term for nomadic peoples, including the Xiongnu. See Pulleyblank (1994, pp. 518–20) and Di Cosmo (2004, p. 129). Sima Qian himself was inconsistent in the chapter ‘Hereditary House of Zhao (趙世家, *Zhaoshijia*)’: he identified the Donghu as the true Hu people, see Sima (1959, pp. 1805–6), but in other passages, he categorized the Xiongnu as Hu as well. See Sima (1959, pp. 2885–88) and Pulleyblank (1994, pp. 518–20).
- ⁴ The original text version of the relevant recorded classical Chinese text is “晉穆侯生桓叔,桓叔生韓萬,傅晉大夫,十世而為韓武侯,五世而為韓惠王,五世而亡國。襄王之孽孫信,俗人謂之韓信都……高祖以信為韓王孫,以信為韓王,後徙王代,為蠻夷所攻,自降之……漢遣柴將軍擊之,斬信於參合,信妻子亡入蠻夷中……至景帝,信子頽當及孫赤來降,漢封頽當為弓高侯,赤為襄城侯。……信子孫餘留蠻夷中”。 See Wang (2008, p. 135).
- ⁵ The original text version of the relevant recorded classical Chinese text is “信之入匈奴,與太子俱; 及至積當城,生子,因名曰積當。韓太子亦生子,命曰嬰。至孝文十四年,積當及嬰率其眾降漢。漢封積當為弓高侯,嬰為襄城侯”。 See Wang (1977, pp. 109–22).
- ⁶ The original text version of the relevant recorded classical Chinese text is “襄成。以蠻夷相國降侯,故韓王信太子之子,侯千四百三十二戶”。 See Sima (1959, pp. 984, 1006).
- ⁷ The original text version of the relevant recorded classical Chinese text is “蠻夷人送死,有棺槨、金銀、衣裳,而無封樹、喪服;近幸臣妾從死者,多至數千百人……” See Sima (1959, p. 2892), and also Wang and Sheng (2013, p. 28).
- ⁸ Some scholars generally believe that depictions of the Hu people in Han Dynasty visual sources exhibit several distinctive features: (1) they are typically shown wearing pointed hats and tight-fitting trousers, attire associated with early Inner Asian nomadic groups, (2) their physical appearance includes dark eyes, prominent noses, high cheekbones, and beards, and (3) their hair is often depicted as sparse or tied in knots. These characteristics emphasize the cultural and ethnic distinctions between the Hu and the Han populations. See Gao (1996, pp. 316–21), Zheng (1999, pp. 133–50), and Xing (2000, pp. 15–99).
- ⁹ The original text version of the relevant recorded classical Chinese text is “古公有長子曰太伯,次曰虞仲。太姜生少子季曆,季曆娶太任,皆賢婦人,生昌,有聖瑞。古公曰:「我世當有興者,其在昌乎?」長子太伯、虞仲知古公欲立季曆以傳昌,乃二人亡如荊蠻,文身斷發,以讓季曆”。 See Sima (1959, p. 115).
- ¹⁰ The original text version of the relevant recorded classical Chinese text is “漢使王烏等窺匈奴。匈奴法,漢使非去節而以墨黥其面者不得入穹廬。王烏,北地人,習胡俗,黥面,得入穹廬”。 See Ban and Yan (1962, p. 3772).

- 11 The original text version of the relevant recorded classical Chinese text is “匈奴聞乘卒，舉國號哭，或至餐面流血”。See Fan (2012, p. 718).
- 12 Decorative elements in bronze where the whole is made in the form of a figure, bird, or beast, or where the three legs and decorative part of the lid are also made in this form—they resemble free-standing bronze sculptures and are most characteristic of the stylistic art. The images are all realistic simulations of the objects observed by the craftsmen. In other words, the most profound change in bronze art at this time was the descent from the heavenly to the earthly world. See Yu (2008, pp. 1–19).

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