The Appearance of a Strange Creature
– the Mural Painting on the Ceiling
of the Bu Qianqiu Tomb from Luoyang

Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik
Department of Asian and African Studies,
Faculty of Arts University of Ljubljana

1. Introduction

The Bu Qianqiu 卜千秋 tomb, excavated in 1976 in Luoyang 洛陽
city, Henan 河南 province, is one of the most famous tombs with pain-
tings dating from the time of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC – 24).
Sinologists, attracted by the paintings, have tried to demonstrate from
very different points of view ideological as well as symbolical tenden-
cies of these grave paintings. Many of them focused their attention on
individual motives, interpreting them on the basis of ancient literary
tradition, thus often overlooking the integrity of the grave picture. As
long as studies focus on the interpretation of the individual motifs, the
unveiling of the formative, sociological and symbolical images in the
iconographic scheme remains fragmentary and as a consequence does
not offer the insight into the iconographical scheme as a whole and thus
does not reveal its original historical significance. An individual picto-
rial motif was always juxtaposed with other motifs creating a logical
image with decorative tendencies. It is necessary to interpret the indi-
vidual motifs in the framework of the entire pictorial scheme. The posi-
tion of a certain motif and its role in linking the architectural structure
with the pictorial scheme is of the utmost significance. While searching
the essential value of the motif, it is also necessary to consider individ-
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ual factors contributing to the diversity of a particular grave scheme and to pay attention not to fall prey to the generalizing tendency.

The present article will consider the entire category of the pictorial grave materials of the Han Dynasty. With different interdisciplinary research methods considering the integrity of the grave scheme and ancient literary tradition, the article will try to decipher a more profound message of the whole grave image and thus offer a reinterpretation of the strange creature on the ceiling of the Bu Qianqiu tomb.

2. Description of the Bu Qianqiu tomb and its mural painting

The Bu Qianqiu tomb (named after the seal with four characters “bu qian qiu yin” 卜千秋印 unearthed at the tomb) was excavated at the west suburb of the Luoyang city in 1976.¹

According to the seal, the owner of the tomb was an official named Bu Qianqiu 卜千秋. The tomb dates from the late period of the Western Han Dynasty, from the period of the Zhaodi 昭帝 and Xuandi 宣帝 emperors (86 BC – 49BC). It comprises a tomb passage, a main chamber (built from specially designed hollow bricks), and left and right side rooms (built from small bricks). There is also an oblong hall between the side rooms and the main chamber. The tomb is oriented towards the east, with the entrance located on the eastern side. The main chamber, oriented west – east, is 4.6 metres long, 2.1 metres wide (from north to south) and 1.86 metre high. The mural paintings are located on the upper part of the rear wall, above the lintel of the tomb gate and on the horizontal part of the ceiling construction (Figure 1).

On the upper part of the rear wall, a creature with a human body and a pig’s head is depicted. With its wide open eyes, large ears, a purple shirt and a red skirt, it vividly dances and brandishes his unclothed arms. On the two hollow bricks below it, there are a white tiger and a...
a bluegreen dragon. There are many interpretations of this mural made by sinologists attracted to this image, though in general it is interpreted as Fangxiangshi 方相氏, who is said to exorcise evil spirits. Above the tomb gate, there is a creature with a human face and a bird’s body stretching its wings, while on the ceiling the heavenly realm with numerous immortal beings is presented (Figure 2).

On the ceiling of the chamber, the following images (composed of twenty pieces of bricks), are presented in the west-east direction (from the rear wall towards the gate): a strange being in the image of a fish or a snake, the sun with a crow, Fuxi 伏羲 with a human face and a snake’s tail, two images – a man riding a snake and a woman on a three-headed bird, which are generally interpreted as the souls of the

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2 For detailed information see Sun Zuoyun 1977, Xiao Bing 1981, Chen Changyuan 1986 and He Xilin 2002.

3 The painting on the ceiling is 4.51 metres long and 0.32 metre wide.
deceased, buried in the tomb. They are on their journey towards the eternity and would like to reach the immortal kingdom, which is further clearly symbolized by the Xiwangmu 西王母 (the Queen Mother of the West), who appears from behind the wave-like clouds. Furthermore, Xiwangmu is also clearly indicated by other motifs (such as a toad, a jade hare and a fox with nine tails), which are easily recognized attributes, in literary tradition often associated with a drug of immortality or the immortal western paradise of the Xiwangmu. These attributes contribute to a quite reliable identification of the person between the clouds. Furthermore, there is a white tiger, a red bird, two strange creatures, two bluegreen dragons, a winged person, the moon with a toad, Nüwa 女娲 and auspicious clouds. Between these motifs there are patterns of various clouds. The ceiling is decorated with scenes depicting the heavenly realm, composed of cosmological phenomena and various immortal beings (such as different deities, spirits, demons, animals), and thus reflects the aspiration to attain immortality and the soul’s aspiration to depart to the heavenly realm. This kind of iconographical

\[4\] The appearance of this personage is by some scholars identified as Xiwangmu herself (compare Chen 1986), while some scholars think of her as not being Xiwangmu herself, but only an envoy of Xiwangmu, who arrived to accompany both of the souls (compare Sun 1977).
motif is widespread in the tombs of that period, especially in the late period of the Western Han Dynasty, during the intermezzo of Wang Mang’s 王莽 regime, and in the early period of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 – 220).

The following part of the article will try to offer a reinterpretation of the two strange creatures portrayed on the ceiling between the red bird and the bluegreen dragon in the framework of the entire iconographical scheme and other relevant factors.

3. Strange creature – Sun Zuoyun’s interpretation

On the bricks with numbers 11, 12 and 13 there are two strange winged creatures with a long tail, a deer’s or panther’s body and

Figure 3: The front image of the strange creature, bricks number 12 and 13 (from: Huang 1996: 70).
a deer’s head. The front image in the elegant leap forward is slightly larger than the lower one, which has in contrast to the front image a big horn on its head (Figure 3 and 4).

Sun Zuoyun 孫作雲 characterized these creatures as the animal xiao-oyang 小羊 (owl-sheep), which combines an owl’s and a sheep’s characteristics (Sun 1977: 129). His identification is mostly based on the literary sources describing the image of the animal, and on the role that xiaooyang played in the motifs depicting the act of entering into the heavenly kingdom. In his opinion, all the other animals (the bluegreen dragon, the white tiger and the red bird) present divine creatures who protect the human soul on its journey towards the heaven, so it is very likely that this image as well is closely linked with the same motif. In the literary tradition we find records about xiaooyang leading the soul into the heavenly kingdom. According to Sun’s opinion, the image surely enough corresponds to the literary description of the animal. Except for a few scholars, such as Chen Changyuan 陳昌遠 (Chen 1986: 140), who rejects Sun Zuoyun’s identification, but does not offer an al-
ternative solution, or He Xilin 賀西林 (He 2002: 32-33), who interprets
the image as a kind of a wind deity, termed feilian 飛廉, the academic
circle of scholars mostly agrees with his identification. However, a re-
view of literary sources and of the painting reveals the following ques-
tions:

- The question of the accordance or discrepancy between the depic-
tion of the animal and the literary sources: according to Sun’s opin-
ion, the body of both the animals is reminiscent of a sheep, while
the head of the lower creature reminds him of a human head showing
the teeth and smiling. In literary sources, xiaoyang 小羊 is identical to
a kind of a wild animal, termed feifei 獬豸, which resembles a bac-
boon (Sun 1977: 129). In the Shanhaijing 山海經 (Classic of Moun-
tains and Seas), it is described as a creature with a human head, long
lips, a black body and a tail.5 In other sources, the linkage with
human beings is even more clearly demonstrated, namely, it is said
to have a human body, to wear his hair down and that he likes to
walk upright on two legs like human beings (Chen 1986: 140).
Records of this kind by no means suit the image on the ceiling, since
it does not seem to have either human head or human body. Besides,
its body is full of dots and on the back we can clearly see its wings.
It is also clear that he moves on all four, which is again opposed to
the records saying that he likes to walk upright (Chen 1986: 140).
Another Chinese scholar, He Xilin, presents a more solid solution,
claiming that the image represents a kind of a wind deity or a divine
animal, termed feilian 飛廉 (飛廉) (He 2002: 32-33). In the literary
sources we can again read of feilian accompanying the soul to the
heaven and thus preparing the way for the soul. Furthermore, the
painted image is much more in accordance with the literary descrip-
tion of the feilian than with the description of the animal xiaoyang.
Namely, the literature describes feilian as a creature with a deer’s
body, a snake’s tail and a bird’s head with a horn on it (Hanshu,
Although this identification much more corresponds to the literary tradition, the next question of the creature with a horn and another one without it, exposed already by Chen Changyuan (Chen 1986: 140), still remains unexplained.

- The question of the horns: if both creatures on the ceiling are interpreted as xiaoyang or feilian, how come that one of them has a big horn on its head and the other one is depicted without it?
- The question of the role of leading the soul into the heavenly kingdom: the other animals surrounding these two creatures, are interpreted by Sun Zuoyun as a bluegreen dragon, a red bird and a white tiger. They protect and escort a human soul on its journey towards the heaven. He concludes that this strange being should also be closely linked with that same motif. As we said, in the literary tradition we do find records about xiaoyang leading the soul into the heavenly kingdom, however, these records about his role could not present satisfactory evidence, since in literature this role is ascribed to many divine beings, which has already been clearly demonstrated by He Xilin’s identification of the creature as feilian. In literature, the role of escorting the soul is likewise attributed to feilian, besides, the depicted image much more corresponds to the literary description of feilian than to the description of xiaoyang.
- The question of the four divine animals: the bluegreen dragon, the red bird, the white tiger and the black warrior (black tortoise). As it has already been mentioned, the other animals are interpreted by Sun Zuoyun as a dragon, a bird and a tiger, which together with a black tortoise protect and regulate the four cosmic directions, eliminate evil and destroy the baleful influence and thus protect and escort human souls on their journey towards the heaven. While the tiger, the bird and the dragon are clearly interpreted as the white tiger (which symbolizes the west), the red bird (the south) and the bluegreen dragon (the east) – as the three divine animals from among the four animals, he never mentions the fourth animal, which would symbolize the north (winter) and thus complement the scale of fours. The question is: where is the fourth animal?
4. An alternative solution – the divine animal of the north region

It is necessary to search for the appropriate answer in the integral composition of the ceiling painting, which beside the soul’s entrance into the heaven clearly presents the four cosmically-divine animals. Between the sun and the moon there are four animals, among which the white tiger, the red bird and the blue-green dragon are clearly distinguished. In addition, to protect the soul on the journey to eternity, they simultaneously indicate the four directions and thus provide the soul with the accurate orientation map, so that the soul could not lose its way on its journey. As far as the dragon symbolizes the eastern, the bird the southern and the tiger the western deity, it is most likely that the fourth animal symbolizes the northern deity. Therefore, the strange creature on the ceiling could present neither xiaoyang nor feilian, but could only present the deity of the north palace, and thus complete the chart of the four directions. The northern palace is generally symbolized and protected by the black warrior, a tortoise with a snake, which is clearly confirmed not only by literary sources but also by material evidence. But the creature depicted in this tomb does not present the image of a tortoise, which can usually be observed in grave paintings from other tombs of the Han Dynasty. In this place it should be mentioned that before the appearance of the northern deity in the image of the black tortoise, this deity appears as a kind of a unicorn, termed qilin, whose appearance originates from a deer’s image.  

The painted decorations of the lacquered box (excavated in the tomb of Zenghouyi from the Hubei province), dating from 433 BC, clearly demonstrate this phenomenon – the appearance of the northern deity in the image of qilin (Figure 5). On the cover around the dou character, representing the beidou 北斗 (northern

6 Literary sources as well as material evidence clearly demonstrate the early image of the northern deity in the form of a deer. This is clearly illustrated by Feng Sha in his work entitled Zhongguo tianwen kaoguxue 中國天文考古學 (A Chinese Archeoastronomy) (Feng 2001: 315-319). He also interprets the two strange creatures from the Bu Qianqiu tomb as Chinese unicorns qi and lin, but gives no further explanation (Feng 2001: 317). Based on his findings, the author will try to illuminate and give further explanations.)
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Figure 5: The scheme of a lacquered box from the tomb of Zenghouyi 郑侯乙 (from: Feng 2001: 277).

Figure 6: The scheme of a bronze mirror from the tomb of Guoguo 虢国 (From: Feng 2001: 314).
dou, Big Dipper), which with prolonged lines indicates the four main mansions, are registered the names of all twenty-eight lunar mansions (called xiù 宿 in Chinese). The cover is further decorated with the dragon and tiger, symbolizing the eastern and western palace, while on the north part of the box two unicorns around the wei xiù 危宿 (lunar mansion wei) are depicted. This clearly confirms the original appearance of the northern deity, which bears more resemblance to a Chinese unicorn or deer than a tortoise.

The four divine animals, arranged in accordance with the four directions, on the bronze mirror from the Guoguo 虢国 tomb, even more clearly present the primary image of the northern deity (Figure 6). The four animals on the mirror, dating from the eighth century BC, are depicted on the four sides. Thus in opposition to the southern bird, there is a Chinese unicorn qilin depicted on the northern side of the mirror. Another evidence from a later period – the late period of the Eastern Han Dynasty – likewise confirms the presence of the northern deity in the image of qilin. The four divine animals are distinctly depicted on the brocade from the Xinjiang 新疆 province. Among them, the animal with wings, a horn on its head and a deer’s body clearly presents the Chinese unicorn qilin (Figure 7).

In addition to material evidence, the literary sources are likewise very interesting since they clearly present the image of qilin. A kind of an ancient dictionary from the Western Han Dynasty Erya 禹雅 (Your Correctness) describes qilin as a creature of a river deer’s body with a tail, which is similar to the tail of an ox, and with a horn on its head (Erya in Shisanjing zhushu 十三經注疏: 265). Shuowen 説文, the first Chinese dictionary of characters, arranged by radicals, shows similar explanation:

麒，仁獸也。麋身，牛尾，一角。
Qi is renshou.7 It has the body of an elk, an ox’s tail and a horn.8 (Shuowen: 202)

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7 In ancient tradition renshou denotes a Chinese unicorn, called qilin.
8 This and all other translations in this article were made by the author herself.
Lin is qi of female gender (Shuowen: 202).

The commentator Zhang Ji 張揖 presents the following comment on the quotation in the work of Hanshu, where qilin is mentioned:

雄曰麒, 雌曰麟, 其狀麤身牛尾.
The male is called qi, the female is called lin. It has the body of an elk and an ox’s tail (Hanshu: 2557).

Guo Pu 郭璞 (276 – 324), a learned man from the end of the third and beginning of the fourth century, gives further comment:

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Qi is like lin, but without the horn (Hanshu: 2557).

These records reveal a male and a female image of the unicorn, manifested in the word of qilin. Qi is thus the appearance of the male with a deer’s body, an ox’s tail and a horn, while lin is his partner of the opposite sex. While the Shuowen dictionary clearly presents that qi is the one with a horn on its head, the commentator Guo Pu puts the horn on the head of the qi’s opposite partner lin. However, let us put aside the issue on who actually has a horn on its head; the records clearly demonstrate that one of both has a horn, while the other is without it. A comparison of those records with the painted image on the ceiling of the Bu Qianqiu tomb reveals that the two strange creatures represent two unicorns, qi and lin, one of which evidently has a horn on its head. (compare Feng 2001: 315-319). Their body is also very similar to the body of a deer, while the tail reminds us of a tail of an ox. With regard to previous demonstrations, showing that in the early art the unicorn often appears in the juxtaposition with the other three divine animals, symbolizing the eastern, southern and western palace, accordingly this creature on the ceiling of the tomb in the company of those animals could only represent the unicorn qilin, who symbolizes and presents the deity of the northern palace. Furthermore, to support the above mentioned statement, it is necessary to search for and demonstrate the role of those four animals in the grave paintings.

5. The symbolical role of the four divine animals in the grave paintings

The four divine animals, known in the Chinese literature as si xiang 四象 (the four images), si ling 四靈 (the four spirits) or si shen 四神 (the four deities) are the most common art motifs in the grave art of the Han Dynasty. Their role is not only to escort and protect the soul on its way towards immortality; they have a much more profound meaning, which is reflected in the cosmological scheme of the correlative cosmology of yin-yang wuxing 陰陽五行.
A thorough analysis and survey of the interior of the tombs with paintings of the Han Dynasty reveal that mural scenes not only represented an aspiration for embellishment, but also had a much more profound meaning: together with the construction of the grave chamber and other artistic burial objects they represented the entire cosmos — thus the soul would be able to attain immortality in the ever changing but never ending cosmos. The analysis of grave paintings has shown that the core component of the grave paintings concept is represented by a correlative cosmology of *yin-yang wuxing*, by means of which they tried to explain the existence and alteration of the entire cosmos, the birth, the old age, the sickness and death of every individual, the changes in the ruling houses and the development of the social progress. If they succeeded in establishing a foundation of the cosmic framework with the aid of the architectural design of grave chambers (in the form of a round ceiling raising over the square form of the chamber), then they represented the activity of the entire cosmos by means of an iconographic compositional scheme, which represented the constant interlacement of the two cosmic forces (*yin-yang*), manifested in the circulation of the five dynamically interacting cosmic phases, through which all substances in nature proceed. With the sun, the moon, the Fuxi and Nüwa, the Xiwangmu and Dongwanggong, and with the interlacement of the two beings of different gender, they symbolized the two principles of *yin* and *yang*; with the four animals (dragon, bird, tiger, tortoise) they demonstrated the four directions and the four seasons; and with the five palaces, their assistants and animals, they symbolized the cycle of the five phases. The purpose of representing the cosmic principles was to place the deceased soul into the eternal context of cosmic space and time.

By presenting the four animal deities, they tried to create the space and time perception of the cosmic presence in the grave structure. Their role in the cosmological scheme of *yin-yang* and five phase theory as the space and time pointer is clearly demonstrated in the third chapter of the *Huainanzi*. The four symbolical images are presented as four among five divine animals, each guarding its own palace and contributing to the creative circulation of the five phases. In the cosmological meaning, the blugreen dragon symbolizes the eastern palace, the
peak of the spring season and the beginning of the growth of the cosmic force *yang*. The red bird takes over the assignment in the south by aiding the southern deities to coordinate and supervise the phase of fire, the climax of summer activities and the *yang* force. The white tiger continues this function on the western side, and is closely linked with the progressive withering, autummal activities and the beginning of the growth of the *yin* force. At the uttermost point of the *yin* force in the north, at the peak of the winter season, there is the black tortoise to guard the northern palace and assist the northern deities. The geographical work *Sanfu huangtu* (The yellow chart of the three regions) also clearly indicates their role as guards or some kind of regulators of the four directions:

The bluegreen dragon, the white tiger, the red bird and the black warrior are the four spirits of the heaven to regulate the four directions (Wang 1995: 38).

The linkage of the four animals with the four cosmic directions is clearly demonstrated in the grave murals of the Han Dynasty too, since there they generally occupy the position contributed to them by the literary sources. Thus the dragon usually stays on the eastern, the tiger on the western, the bird on the southern and the tortoise on the northern side of the tomb. Their position, which is in accordance with the entire architectural structure and pictorial composition, became a relevant source of iconographical information and symbolical roles. In the same sense they provide the deceased soul with the accurate orientation, place it into an eternal context of cosmic space and time, and by that facilitate its journey toward the afterlife and enable the soul to acquire the eternal place in the artificially designed cosmos. The proper arrangement of the four deities enables the harmonious equilibrium of cosmic space and by that the harmonious interlacement of the two cosmic

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9 Literary sources generally present the black tortoise as *xuan wu* (black warrior), whose image is clearly defined by literature as well as iconographical sources as a tortoise around which a snake often intertwines.
forces of \textit{yin} and \textit{yang} in the circle of the five phases (\textit{xing}), once again defined by divine symbols in the form of the four animals. The spatial orientation of the grave interiors is thus distinctly defined by the four animals, which simultaneously protect the tomb and its owner from evil spirits, bring good fortune and in a visual form manifest the aspiration for the harmonious circulation in cosmic space and by that the aspiration for manifestation of its own being in an immortal form. Their function of guarding the tombs and expelling evil spirits is further clearly reflected in their position: they are generally depicted above the separate entrance or alongside the tomb gate. Furthermore, the images of the four animals in the iconographical composition often emerge between the motifs of entering into the heaven kingdom as part of the accompanying team, leading the soul into the paradise, which is also clearly presented in the ceiling painting of the Bu Qianqiu tomb. The two souls in the painting, riding divine animals on their journey towards the Queen Mother of the West, are accompanied by the procession of the tiger, bird, dragon and a kind of a strange creature with a long tail, which we have interpreted above as a unicorn. The rest of the iconographical composition in the Bu Qianqiu tomb likewise clearly represents the creation of the cosmic space by the aid of the correlative cosmology \textit{yin-yang wuxing}. On the one side, there is depicted Fuxi and the sun with a crow – the representatives of the \textit{yang} force, while on the other side there is Nüwa with the moon and a toad – the representatives of the cosmic force \textit{yin}. Between them there are portrayed the four divine animals, who create a space and time connotation of the cosmos, equip the soul with the exact map of the four directions and escort and protect it on its way to immortality. The four deities would thus bring longevity and happiness. The motif of the soul’s departure and its journey itself is even clearly demonstrated by two deceased persons, who in the attendance of those animals ride on a snake and a three-headed bird towards the west paradise of Xiwangmu, who in expectation of their arrival appears from behind the clouds.
6. Conclusion

If after considering the interpretations made by Sun Zuoyun and by some other scholars, individual questions still arise, the identification of the strange creature as the deity of the northern palace in the image of the unicorn *qilin* provides the answers to those questions. The depicted image entirely suits the appearance of the *qilin*, recorded in the literary sources of that time, and by that the question of the horn is solved and the scale of the four cosmic animals completed. These four animals are the most common iconographical pattern in the grave art of the Han Dynasty, applied to symbolize the four directions and the four seasons. Furthermore, along with other iconographical motifs acting as symbols of the two complementary forces and five phases, they manifest the operation of the whole cosmos. With the interpretation of the integrity of the iconographical scheme of the Bu Qianqiu tomb as well as of the other tombs with paintings from that period, the question of the role of leading the soul into the heavenly kingdom got its more comprehensive connotation too. The role of the four divine animals (in addition to leading and protecting the soul on its journey) is providing the soul with the correct map and orientation and thus placing it into the harmonious equilibrium of the cosmic cycle. By placing the deceased soul into the eternal context of the cosmic scheme, the human aspiration for rebirth and attaining immortality in the cosmic cycle of perpetual changes could finally be achieved.

In accordance with all the above-mentioned facts it can be concluded that the strange creature on the ceiling of the Bu Qianqiu tomb could only be the Chinese unicorn *qilin*, which before the appearance of the black tortoise presents the deity of the northern palace.
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The Appearance of a Strange Creature – the Mural Painting on the Ceiling of the Bu Qianqiu Tomb from Luoyang

Summary

The present article offers a reinterpretation of a strange creature (animal) portrayed in the cosmologically designed composition of the heavenly realm, depicted on the ceiling of the Bu Qianqiu 卜千秋 tomb from the Western Han Dynasty. Except for a few of its members, the academic circle of scholars mostly agrees with the identification of this strange creature as the animal xi-aoyang 鷹羊 (owl – sheep), stated by Sun Zuoyun 孫作雲. This article indicates arguments against this interpretation and offers an alternative one, based on the analysis of the tomb design iconography as a whole, on the occurrence of the relevant motives in other grave paintings from the same period and on the ancient literary tradition, which all place the strange creature in connection with other animals in the symbolic role of the cosmic space and time.