

# The Origin and Evolution of the Paired Animals on Chinese Swords: From Indication of Wealth to Royal Power as a Result of Sino-West Asian Cultural Exchange

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## Introduction

April 4, 2023 was a memorable day for the international arms and armor collection. An auction of a sword named *Baoteng* (寶騰) (Figure 1) attributed to Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799 CE)—one of the most eminent rulers of ancient China was held in Hong Kong by Sotheby's and attracted the attention of global collectors. Starting at 4,500,000 HKD, the price quickly broke the line of 16,000,000 HKD. Finally, a competition took place between two collectors boosting the price to 46,040,000 HKD (7,700,000 USD). This final bid established a new world record in both Chinese artifacts and global arms and armor collecting markets.

However, despite the high price, the detailed analysis of this exquisite sword was surprisingly scarce. The most comprehensive description of the Baoteng sword was



Figure 1. *Baoteng*, eighteenth Century, China, Sotheby's Hongkong, (<https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2008/legacies-of-imperial-power-treasures-from-the-imperial-collection-hk0294/lot.2204.html>)

provided by Huangfu Jiang 皇甫江 who experienced the entire process of this auction. In his monograph *Sword of China*「中國刀劍」, Huangfu described the basic dimensions, materials, and motifs of this



Figure 2. Handguard of Baoteng

sword: It is 95 centimeters in length, and the blade was lavishly inlaid with gold, silver, and bronze inscription.

The handle was carved from a single piece of Jade, and the fittings were made of gold-plated iron with dragon motif reliefs.<sup>1</sup> Among the fittings, the handguard was the most paramount one because its noticeable size, and it protected the user's hand from being cut.

The most explicit feature of the handguard was a circular disc shape with a pair of confronted dragons in the center (Figure 2). The popularity of the paired animal designs in similar compositions found on many high-class Chinese swords indicates that the choice of this motif was intentional. Besides the Baoteng, a sword

identified by Gong Jian to be late Ming

<sup>1</sup> Jiang, Huangfu. *Sword of China* (Ji nan shi: Ming tian chu ban she, 2007), 134.

or early Qing period (late seventeenth century) (Figure 3) and a high-class late eighteenth century Chinese sword collected by Huangfu Jiang also exhibited a similar design in their handguards (Figure 4). The previous one had a beaded rim, and the rim of the latter one was simpler, which is closer to *Baoteng*.

Although Huangfu was amazed by the “marvelous designs and meticulous



Figure 3. Late Ming or early Qing dynasty handguard, seventeenth century, China, extracted from Gong Jian, *The History of Chinese Sword*, pp 384

techniques” 構思奇妙, 工藝精湛<sup>2</sup> exhibited by the sword, the study of the origin and the symbolic meaning of the paired animal motifs on the handguard was missed both by Huangfu and other researchers. The paired animal motif was not the only motif that was associated with royal power, nor the only motif that occurred on high-class Chinese swords, however, considering its popularity and diversity, its

<sup>2</sup> Huangfu, *Sword of*, 135.

importance was self-evident and should not be ignored.

To reveal the origins and meanings of the



Figure 4. Handguard with confronted dragons, eighteenth century, China, Huangfu Jiang's private collection.

paired animal motif on Chinese swords, this paper traces the history of the first authentic paired animal motif on Chinese swords in the seventh century and traces its correlation to the imported Persian textiles with paired animal roundel patterns as a result of the Chinese exotic fashion that began in the sixth/seventh century. Next, the paper reveals the continuous existence of the same type of textile preserved by the Liao and Jin dynasties after the fall of Tang and kept being produced in multiple areas in West and Central Asia. After that, it explains how the paired animal motif became the symbol of royal power by introducing the Mongolic Yuan Dynasty's royal patronage of the textiles with paired animals. Furthermore, it addresses that during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the paired animal motif was solidified as a symbol of royal

power: a legacy established by the Yuan Dynasty's earlier endorsement of paired animal textiles, which explains their emergence on high-class swords.

This paper argues that the design and composition of the paired animal motifs on Chinese swords imitated Persian style textile designs. The adoption of paired animal motifs on Chinese swords reflects the impact of Persian and other West Asian aesthetics under the popularity of exotic fashion, and since the Yuan Dynasty, its symbolic meaning switched from the appreciation of foreign culture and representation of wealth to the emblem of royal power.

### **Specious Paired Animals on Chinese Weapons**

Before we discuss paired animals, it is



Figure 5. Fuhao yue, thirteenth century BCE, 39.5x 37.5cm, Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

important to distinguish the specious paired animals that emerged in the early phases of Chinese weapons from the authentic ones.

Specious paired animals as a decorative motif on Chinese weapons appeared as early as the Shang 商 Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE);



Figure 6, *Zun* with Dragon and Tiger Patterns, Shang dynasty, China, National Museum of China ([https://www.chnmuseum.cn/zp/zpml/kgfjp/202108/t20210806\\_250987.shtml](https://www.chnmuseum.cn/zp/zpml/kgfjp/202108/t20210806_250987.shtml))

however, none of the animals were arranged in an authentic paired composition. During this period, some polearms such as *Yue* 鉞 — axe-like weapons sometimes contained patterns of dragons, tigers, and frogs, and some images depicting predator activities began to emerge on the surface of the weapons.<sup>3</sup> These images usually exhibit two lateral animal bodies facing each other with the prey positioned between the heads, as shown by the *Fuhao Yue* 妇好鉞 found in Henan Province, China (Figure 5).

However, although this type of image was symmetrically balanced and included two animal bodies, it was not a set of paired

animals because it is in fact a technique that depicts the complete image of a single animal in a flat surface by putting the left and right side of the animal body symmetrically around the central axis—in this case, the prey. The same technique and pattern appeared in many Shang Dynasty bronze wares: for instance, the *Zun* (wine container) with Dragon and Tiger Patterns 龍虎紋尊 in which two tiger bodies share a single head, indicates the two bodies are two sides of one tiger (Figure 6).<sup>4</sup>

### **The Debut of Authentic Paired Animals in Chinese Weapons and Their Relationship with Persian Artifacts**

The occurrence of authentic paired animals on Chinese swords was most frequently seen on the ring-shaped pommel with paired animal heads (mainly dragons). It appeared no earlier than the sixth or seventh century CE, during the late Northern-Dynasties into the early Tang Dynasty. Although the ring-shaped pommel had been a native feature of Chinese swords since the Han 漢 Dynasty,<sup>5</sup> none of these early

<sup>3</sup>Wang Hongli, *A History of Chinese Epigraphy* (East China Normal University Press), 2016, 288.

<sup>4</sup>“Bronze Zun with Dragon and Tiger Pattern.” National Museum of China. Accessed December 14, 2023.

<sup>5</sup>206 BC-220 AD

examples contained paired animals.<sup>6</sup> According to the preserved examples, swords with this type of paired animal pommel were usually matched with the scabbard fittings made by Persian techniques and of the silver sheet (a common material used by many imported Persian metalworks). The



Figure 7. Chinese Sword with paired dragon pommel, ninth century, China, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/23352>)

combination of shared techniques and materials indicates a strong relationship between Persian artifacts and Chinese swords with paired animal ring-shaped pommels.

One of the earliest Chinese swords with a paired-animal pommel was preserved in the New York Metropolitan Museum. This sword was excavated from the early seventh-century Sui Dynasty tomb in Luoyang, China with its blade, hand guard, ring-shaped pommel, and scabbard fittings retaining their original appearances (Figure 7). The pommel of this sword reveals the form of early paired animals in Chinese

<sup>6</sup> Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani, *Arms and Armor from Iran: The Bronze Age to the End of the Qajar period*, (Tübingen: Legat, 2006), 32.

weapons (Figure 8). The ring-shaped pommel portrays two dragon heads encircled and facing each other with their mandibles

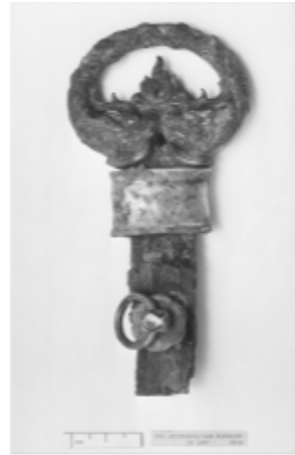


Figure 8. Pommel, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/23352>)

confronted. The heads are meticulously shaped with the eyes, jaws, fins, and horns clearly distinguishable. The bodies of the two dragons are abstracted into a line coiled around the pommel, suggesting that the heads are meant to be the focus of the ornamentation. Between the heads, there is the shape of a flame surrounding a pearl chased by the dragons. A ring-shaped pommel with a similar composition but with a relatively more detailed connective ring was excavated at the site of the Tang Dynasty's Daming Palace (Figure 9). Although examples found in China are comparatively rare, the same type of paired dragon pommels categorized by Japanese archaeologist Goto Shuichi 後藤 守一 as "Double Dragons

Pattern” 双竜式, were excavated from the



Figure 9. Pommel with paired dragons, Tang dynasty, extracted from Gong Jian *The history of Chinese Sword*, pp 268.

Korean Peninsula to Japan.<sup>7</sup> Goto claimed that these pommels are “continental influenced,”<sup>8</sup> that is, tracing their origins to China and indicating their popularity throughout the region.

However, I am arguing that China is not the actual origin of this design: These fittings manifest material and technical similarities with Persian metalware that were imported to China during the sixth century, all but proving a powerful Persian influence during this era. The extensive use of silver sheets using the technique of hammering a thin layer of heated silver onto the surface of this sword exhibits a strong Persian influence that was not found on earlier Chinese swords. The two P-shaped attachments on this sword for

<sup>7</sup> Junji Honma and Satō Kanzan, *Shinpen Nihontō Kōza* (Tōkyō: Yūzankaku, 1997), 16.

<sup>8</sup> Honma and Kanzan, *Shinpen*, 20.

suspension are made of wood forms covered with silver sheets and attached to a segment of a long and rowed silver sheet that wraps a large portion of the scabbard. The fitting at the end of the scabbard is in the shape of a long silver tube with a blank surface. These three massive scabbard fittings cover about 50% of the area of the scabbard, and are produced by a careful hammering technique (Chi: 錘撲)--a technique



Figure 10. Plate: the king Yazdgard I, slaying a stag, 399–420 AD, Iran, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/326007>)

frequently applied by Persian craftsmen to flatten the metal into sheets and create patterns on the surface of a metal sheet by causing ductile deformation.<sup>9</sup>

The extensive use of the techniques of

<sup>9</sup> Han Jianwu, “The Techniques and Workshop of the Hejiacun’s Gold and Silverware,” in *Selected Treasures from Hejiacun Tang Hoard*, ed. Daxin He (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 2003), 25

metal sheet hammering and wood covered with metal plating began in the sixth century in China, but these techniques were already common, even sophisticated, among the imported Sassanid Persian (224-651 CE) metalworks, a culture who had been doing this for hundreds of years. For example, a second century Persian silver plate made by hammering illustrates the early stages of this technique (Figure 10). It was in archeological research of the Tang Dynasty period that a large quantity of imported Sassanid hammered metalware started to be discovered. For instance, the excavation of the Famen Temple 法門寺 and He's family village



Figure 11. Hammered silver plate, Tang dynasty, China, extracted from Han, Jianwu *Selected Treasures from Hejiacun Tang Hoard*, pp 141.

(Hejiacun) 何家村 uncovered abundant hammered silver and gold metalworks that similar to the previous Sassanid example, these metalwares were believed to be

imported from Persia and Persian-influenced Sogdiana (Figure 11).

It is important to note that the time of the occurrence of the paired animals on Chinese swords corresponds to the beginning of the large-scale importation of Persian metalworks. The clear match of the Chinese paired animal pommel and the Persian style fittings, plus the homogeneity in the manufacturing techniques further indicates that the Persian influence was likely the major source that generated the motif of paired animals in Chinese swords. The mechanism that transported this influence was the prosperous international trade between China and Persia during the Tang Dynasty.

### **International Trade, Exotic Taste, and the Sogdians' Introduction of the Persian Paired Animal Motifs during the Fifth and Sixth Centuries**

These Persian influences that the sword in the Metropolitan Museum exhibited are the result of the flourishing international material exchanges from the early to the mid-Tang Dynasty (seventh–eighth century CE), and the Sogdian merchants who held a vital role as both the transmitter and modifier of this cultural communication. Accompanied by the

introduction of Persian techniques and choice of materials, some principles, elements, and visual characteristics of Persian art also clearly made their way to China. One of the most notable elements is this tradition of pairing animals manifested through the textiles with paired animal roundels that were imported with metalware. The prevalence of Persian textiles with paired animal roundels fulfilled the exotic taste in the aristocratic circles, thus promoting the first emergence of paired animals on ring-shaped pommels of the Tang Dynasty swords.

The prosperous international market was based on a stabilized society and a highly developed economy. At the beginning of the seventh century CE, “the new-born Tang dynasty overthrew the Sui dynasty and subjugated the neighboring threats such as the Turks in the Northwest, and the kingdoms of Koguryo and Paekche in the Korean peninsula.”<sup>10</sup> The peaceful environments around the frontiers in that era encouraged foreign merchants and goods to flow into China safely in large quantities, and the garrison towns along the borders became

the channels for importation. The stable social environment of the time ensured the economic development and strong purchasing power of the Tang Chinese people. The developing economy reversely facilitated the functional taxation system which provided the country with avenues to maintain its governance, thus attracting more people to participate in commercial activities.<sup>11</sup>

The mass inflow of foreign goods helped beneficiaries of this trade culture to accumulate wealth and cultivate exotic tastes among all social strata. The military commander (都督) of Guangzhou (a vital southern port for import trade) was described by Omi no Mifune 淡海三船 in *The Eastern Voyage of the Great Monk of Tang* 「唐大和尚東征傳」 as a figure “who carries six yaktails (symbols for army commandership), with an army for each yaktail, and who in his majesty and dignity is not to be distinguished from the Son of Heaven that is, the emperor himself.” 都督執六纛，一纛一軍，威嚴不異天子。<sup>12</sup> This military commander’s immense power, in spite of his

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<sup>10</sup> Edward H Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, 7.

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<sup>11</sup> Schafer, *The Golden*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Omi no Mifune, *The Eastern Voyage of the Great Monk of Tang 779*. In *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics*, ed. Edward H Schafer, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 15.



posting in a city far from the capital, reflects the prominent position of international trade in the Tang economy, and people's respect for individuals who possessed the imported cargo. In addition, after receiving reports about and being fascinated by the imported luxuries to be found in Guangzhou, the emperor Xuan Zong 玄宗 appointed specific officials to “watch jealously over the condition of foreign trade.”<sup>13</sup>

In terms of daily circumstances, exotic costumes and living styles became fashions (Figure 12). A Tang dynasty courtly poem



Figure 12. Left: A sculpture of a Chinese person with foreign style costume, Tang dynasty, China, National Museum of China; Right: A sculpture of a foreigner, Tang dynasty, China, Matsuoka Museum of Art

verse by Lady Xu describes these fascinations with the exotic: “明朝臘日出官家, 回鶻衣裝回鶻馬。” (When I go out of the palace tomorrow... I will put on Uyghur costumes and ride a Uyghur horse). The Persian style “tight sleeves and fitted bodices” was popular

<sup>13</sup> Schafer, *The Golden*, 7.

among women, and the famous Tang poet Bai Juyi 白居易 used two Turkic-style tents in his courtyard to entertain his guests.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, this fanatic exotic preference led to a high demand for foreign goods. Among all, the Persian textiles which were the materials in costume-making must be addressed because the daily used costumes made of these textiles were a direct illustration of exotic favor in daily occasions. These textiles were primarily transported by the Sogdian merchants from Persia to China.

The Sogdians originated in present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; more specifically the area between the Amu Darya River and the Sry Darya Rivers is known as the Sogdiana.<sup>15</sup> Although most of the Sogdian towns were constructed in the fertile valleys which were suitable for agriculture, the majority of the Sogdians took the occupation of merchants who traveled across the Eurasian continent. Because of their active mobility, they were recorded by their neighboring cultures. The first record describing the Sogdians was by the sixth century BCE Achaemenid Persians,<sup>16</sup> and the earliest account about the Sogdians' presence in China was a fourth century CE Sogdian merchant's letter found by Marc Aurel Stein in

<sup>14</sup> Schafer, *The Golden*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Etienne Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders*, 2.

Wuwei 武威 a city in the northwest of China, indicating early Sogdian commercial activity in this area.<sup>17</sup> Some scholars, such as Rong Xinjiang and Zhang Zhiqing believe that the Nine Clans of *Zhaowu* 昭武九姓, which resided in places like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Sutrushana, were recorded in later Chinese history chronicles as the polities of Sogdians.<sup>18</sup>

Based on long-term management, the Sogdians successfully constructed their own trading network between Samarkand and Chang'an 長安, the capital city of the Tang dynasty.<sup>19</sup> The Sogdians traveled and transported their goods in the form of caravans composed of anywhere from a few dozen to hundreds of people. The leaders of these organized caravans were called *s'rt'p'w* in the Sogdian language and were translated into Chinese as *Sabao* 薩保. During the Northern Dynasties, and later the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the *Sabao* became a title of official granted by the government to the leaders of the Sogdian communities within the Tang territory.<sup>20</sup> As a result, some elite

Sogdians retained their multivalent identities as both merchant and regional officials which allowed them to build connections with the Sui and Tang ruling class and wealthy customers, thus promoting the transmission of luxury Persian textiles and other goods.

The Persians and Sogdians reproduced Persian-style textiles, and these occupied a prominent position among the Sogdians' trading goods. Around the fifth and sixth centuries, these imported lavish and intricate fabrics were treasured by the Chinese court and reproduced in the imperially commissioned workshops under the supervision of Sogdian craftsmen.<sup>21</sup> The production of silk originated in China, but in the third century, Persia started its own silk manufacture which was eventually exported back to China by the Sogdian merchants<sup>22</sup> in the fifth and sixth centuries—the same period when the paired animal ring-shaped pommel started to appear.

Some Sogdian clans maintained a tight relationship with the royal family, and the He Chou 何稠 family was one of the most notable. He Chou's Uncle He Tuo 何妥

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<sup>17</sup> Rong, Xinjiang, "From Samarkand to Chang'an: The Immigration and Settlements." Essay, in *From Samarkand to Chang'an: Cultural Traces of Sogdians in China*, (Beijing: National Library of China Publishing House, 2004), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Rong, "From Samarkand," 7.

<sup>19</sup> Rong, "From Samarkand," 5.

<sup>20</sup> Rong, "From Samarkand," 7.

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<sup>21</sup> Han, *The Techniques*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Lin, Meicun, "The He Chou Family and the Spreading of Sogdian Craftworks to China," in *Sogdians in China: New Evidence in Archaeological Finds and Unearthed Texts 1*, (Beijing: Science Press, 2016), 230.

according to the *Chronicles of the Northern Dynasties*「北史」was a Sogdian merchant who served in the court of Prince Wuling 梁武陵王 (508-553 BCE) of the Liang dynasty: “He Tuo.....came from western countries 西域 ...and went to Sichuan for commercial activities. When he served the Prince Wuling of Liang, he was commissioned to manufacture goldware and textiles.” 何妥 西域人也.....通商入蜀, 事梁武陵王紀, 主知金帛.<sup>23</sup> The Biography of Prince Wuling states, “During his 17 years of rule in Sichuan, the communication (from Sichuan) to Ziling was unobstructed . . . thus the wealth accumulated.” 在蜀十七年, 西通資陵.....故能殖其財用.<sup>24</sup> Ziling 資陵 was believed to be the city of Zereng in modern eastern Iran, which suggests that during the sixth century, the silk trading route was already established.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, due to his identity as a foreigner, the textiles manufactured by He Tuo would also be in Persian styles. The royal fondness for Persian textiles was also testified by He Chou’s own experience in the Sui Dynasty a few decades later than his uncle. *The Chronicle of Sui*「隋書」notes that He Chou “had viewed lots of ancient

illustrations and was very familiar with the antiques. On one occasion, Persia submitted golden damask robes as tribute, and its patterns were exquisite. The emperor ordered He Chou to imitate the damasks. When Chou completed his work, the final products even surpassed the original in quality so the Emperor was pleased.” 稠博覽古圖, 多識舊物. 波斯嘗獻金錦棉袍, 組織殊麗. 上命稠為之, 稠錦既成, 逾所獻者, 上甚悅.<sup>26</sup> The experiences of the He family merchants make clear that the importation of Persian textiles was pervasive from the fifth to sixth centuries, and their popularity in China was further extended by local imitations.

The popularity of Persian textiles consequently facilitated the transmission of Persian motifs. The Persian paired animals—a common motif in Persian arts—and its way of visual composition became familiar to Chinese consumers through textiles depicting paired animal pearled roundels.

The paired animal motifs existed in Persia before the Sassanid dynasty, and this tradition was preserved as a typical element of Persian art. Archaeological evidence shows that paired animals such as lion and ibex had

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<sup>23</sup> Lin, “He Chou,” 231.

<sup>24</sup> Lin, “He Chou,” 231.

<sup>25</sup> Lin, “He Chou,” 231.

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<sup>26</sup> Lin, “He Chou,” 230.

appeared in Persian products for many centuries. Several short iron swords excavated in modern-day Luristan, Iran, dating back to the eleventh century BCE contain pairs of crouching lions facing each other in their pommels.<sup>27</sup> Another example is a golden short sword preserved in the National Museum of Iran in Tehran dated back to 500 BCE, the Achaemenid period. In this sword, the pommel displays a pair of identical lion heads, and the handguard is formed by a pair of ibex heads (Figure 13).<sup>28</sup>

The tradition of paired animals continues to manifest via the paired animal pearl roundels on textiles. Many of these textile fragments were discovered in Iran, Samarkand, and Xinjiang along the land route from Persia to China, showing that this motif was popular in vast areas from West to East Asia around



Figure 13. Golden Sword from Achaemenid Period, Fifth century BCE, Iran, extracted from Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani *Arms and Armor from Iran*, pp 406.

the sixth century.<sup>29</sup>

The paired animal pearl roundels were designed in the following composition: to begin with, the roundel is largely circular, but oblong and olive-shaped examples are also common. The rim of the roundel is decorated with a band composed of a string of circles representing the pearls. In the middle of the roundels is a pair of laterally confronted animals, such as winged horses, rams, ducks, and deer.

The size of the pearls varies, and on some occasions, the circles in the decorative band could be placed above several other layers of bands in shapes, such as zigzag, radioactive lines, and strings composed of semicircles. Although some of these textile fragments were locally made in China, motifs on them, such as camels and foreign merchants associated with the trading activities indicate that these fragments are the result of foreign influence.<sup>30</sup>

A child's coat that was preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art showed the

<sup>29</sup> Kageyama Etsuko, "Use and Production of the Silks in Sogdiana." *Bulletin of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 45, no. 1 (2002): 39.

<sup>30</sup> Chen, Yanshu, "Zandaniji in Liao, Jin Silks," in *Sogdian in China: New Evidence in Archaeological Finds and Unearthed Texts*, (Beijing: Science Press, 2016), 82.

<sup>27</sup> Khorasani, *Arms and*, 385-390.

<sup>28</sup> Khorasani, *Arms and*, 407.

typical format of the paired animal roundel (Figure 14). It dates to around the eighth century CE during the early Tang Dynasty. The roundels on this coat are in the shape of a circle. The rim of the roundels is enclosed by a decorative band containing small



Figure 14. Child's Coat with Ducks in Pearl Medallions, Tang dynasty, China, Cleveland Museum of Art (<https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1996.2.1>).

pearl-like circles that are arranged around the central part. The visual focus of the roundel is set off by the grand size of two identical and opposing ducks, a motif found first in Persia and later in China.<sup>31</sup> The duck occupies most of the space in the roundel. They stand on a tree-like plant, facing each other, and each duck is pictured nipping at one end of a string of jewelry.

Another roundel in the New York Metropolitan Museum illustrates a relatively atypical form of the paired animal pearl roundels (Figure 15). It has been dated back to somewhere between the seventh and ninth



Figure 15. Textile with Horned Animals in a Pearl Roundel, Tang dynasty, China, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39598>)

centuries, and was discovered in Xinjiang, China. In comparison, this roundel was designed in an oblong shape. Instead of only one layer, the decorative band with pearls in this roundel contains three layers: the one on the base is black and with a smooth rim; the second layer is white and with a rim composed of semi-circles; the final layer on the top is a band decorated with pearls, but in fewer numbers. In the center, the paired animals are horned animals instead of ducks. The depiction of horned animals was not a native convention, but it was commonly seen in Sassanid and Sogdian arts. Although the level of complexity and some details varied, the composition of both roundels was identical.

The two examples above reflect the

<sup>31</sup> Etsuko, "Use and Production," 40.

exotic appearance of the Persian-style paired animal roundels. From the seventh through the ninth centuries, native Chinese motifs were often incorporated into the Persian-style roundels, the most noticeable being paired dragons, the mythical animals that also appear in Tang dynasty



Figure 16. Textile with Pearl Roundels with Dragons, Tang dynasty, China, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/40108>)

paired-animal ring-shaped pommels discussed previously. A textile fragment in the New York Metropolitan Museum illustrates the Chinese modification of Persian fabrication (Figure 16). This paired-dragon roundel was from the aforementioned period and was designed under the same compositional framework. The only two differences were the animal type and the incorporation of two circles of decorative bands instead of one.

The pearl paired-animal roundels

are similar to the contemporary paired animal ring shaped pommels in terms of composition. They were both designed in circular or circle like shapes, with confronted animals in the center. In addition, the shape of the ring pommels is geometrically similar to the roundels, which makes it natural for the craftsmen to incorporate the design element into the ring-shaped pommel. Although the roundels in the textiles usually depict the whole body of the animals while the heads are emphasized on the pommels, the coiled bodies of the dragons around the pommel imply the designer's intention to represent the entity of the dragon.

One possible explanation for the simplified bodies was the limitation of space in the pommel. The roundels on the textiles were many times bigger than the ring-shaped pommels. For example, based on data provided by the New York Metropolitan Museum, the dimensions of the textile fragment were about 25.4 cm x 49.4 cm, and because the roundel occupied almost the entire space of this fragment, the sizes of the roundel is approximately 20 cm x 30 cm. By using the same method of measurement, that is, the dimensions of the paired-dragons roundel were around the same size relative to the total dimensions of the pommel as the

animal is on the textile the diameter of the pommel was around 5 cm. thus dramatically smaller than the textile roundels, so it provided the craftsmen with much less space to work with. Consequently, we can certainly attribute the emergence of the paired animals in the sixth and seventh-century Chinese weapons to Persian influence. Firstly, the paired animal motif was a Persian artistic tradition that appeared earlier in that region than in China. Secondly, the sword with paired animal pommels often exhibited strong Persian influence that was manifested through the manufacturing techniques and material choice of its fittings. Thirdly, the first emergence of the paired animal in Chinese weapons paralleled the beginning of the large-scale importation of Sassanian Persian artifacts like metalware and textiles with paired-animal motifs, and the ensuing popularity of Persian culture in China. Finally, the preference for Persian culture generated a demand for Persian textiles among the wealthy nobility in China. Such demand facilitated the introduction of the paired-animal motifs in these social circles, so it was natural for the nobility to choose to add a motif that was popular in Persian-style textiles and favor the domestic production of Persian-influenced swords to emphasize their social status.

### **The Temporary Disappearance of Paired Animals in Chinese Swords; the Continuity of Paired Animals Roundels in Central Asia, and their Reemergence in China on the Tenth Century Liao Dynasty Zandaniji Textiles**

Starting in 755 CE, the prosperity and stability of the Tang Dynasty were devastated by *the Rebellion of An Lushan and Shi Siming* 安史之亂, and the empire never fully recovered before its collapse in 907 CE. The heavy loss of farmlands and the agricultural labor force, the national tendency toward regional autonomy, and the barriers set up against the northern trade route with the West by the Tibetans and Uyghurs resulted in a sharp decline in the central tax revenue and civil purchasing capability.<sup>32</sup> These factors collectively forced the government to encourage an ethic of thrift and austerity, which led to the temporary disappearance of luxuries like the textile paired-animal roundels and paired-animal ring-shaped pommels in Chinese swords.

In the late eighth century, the Emperor *Dai* of Tang 唐代宗 (761-779 CE) enacted the *Edict of Forbidding the Production of Strange and Intricate Textiles* 「禁斷織造淫巧詔」,

<sup>32</sup> Rong, Xinjiang, *The Study of the History of Guiyijun* (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2015), 148-149.

announced the illegality of the production of the Persian style paired animal textiles. The edict states that “I (the Emperor) believe it is appropriate to maintain self-restraint to luxury and to educate the subjects by the morality of thriftiness... Now the army and civilian life have not recovered. If we over-appreciate the intricate and meticulous techniques, it will damage the foundation of the empire.” 朕思以恭儉克己，惇樸化人。今師旅未戢，黎元不康，豈使淫巧之工，更虧常制。 Based on this premise, the edict regulated that “the fabricated crouching dragons, paired phoenix, *qilin* (麒麟, a mythical creature), lions, wing horses, *bixie* (辟邪 a mythical creature) . . . and other patterns and characters should be forbidden. Anyone disobeying this law should be reported to the Emperor.” 所織蟠龍對鳳，麒麟獅子，天馬辟邪.....及諸織造差樣文字等，亦宜禁斷.....如違犯，具狀奏聞。<sup>33</sup>

Archaeological evidence suggests that the paired animal pearl roundel disappeared during the eighth century CE, accompanied by the disappearance of the paired-animal

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<sup>33</sup> Li, Yu. Edict of Forbidding the Production of Strange and Intricate Textiles, in *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics*, ed. Edward H Schafer, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985,) 197.

ring-shaped pommels on Chinese swords.<sup>34</sup> Although the paired-animal pommel was not forbidden in the edict, when the Persian-style textile with paired animals was no longer able to represent a symbol of status, the same motifs on other material media would also be abandoned by the noble classes.

The austerity policy did not save the Tang. Following the collapse of the Tang Dynasty were 72 years of turmoil and fragmentation until the reunification of China by the Song 宋 Dynasty in 979 CE. However, during this period, the Khitans in northern China became a force that could not be ignored, and they eventually established the Liao 遼 Dynasty which extended its southern border as far south as the area around modern-day Beijing. The confrontation between the Liao and Song dynasties formed and this North-South confrontation remained the dominant political situation until the Mongol Yuan Dynasty took power in the twelfth century CE.

Between the Tang’s prohibition of luxury textiles in the eighth century CE and the establishment of the Liao Dynasty in the tenth century, according to Yuka Kadoi, the paired animal pearl-roundels continued to be

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<sup>34</sup> Chen, “Zandaniji in,” 53.



produced in areas outside of China such as Buhara, and Samanid-ruled Iran and Transoxiana after the collapse of the Sassanid dynasty. The most vital category was the Zandaniji textiles that were produced around Bukhara.<sup>35</sup> As Kadoi describes, the “paired animal motif was a typical feature of Zandaniji textiles, recalling Sassanian conventions,” and textiles being produced in the Samanid Dynasty “adopted confronted animal patterns and roundels.”<sup>36</sup>

Chen Yanshu noted that the Zandaniji textile was imported to the Liao Dynasty as a high-quality fabrication recorded in Chinese texts as *Zantanning* 讚嘆寧.<sup>37</sup> The first account about the Zandaniji or Zantanning was from the *Compilation of Negotiations with the North during Three Generations* 「三朝北盟會編」 about a conference between the ambassadors of the Song and Jin 金 (1115-1234 CE, the Jurchen dynasty (which replaced the Khitan Liao) in 1126 CE. This document noted that the Jin’s General Wanyan Zonghan 完顏宗翰 sent “30 *pi* (匹 A quantifier of textiles) of Zantanning as a gift to Li Ruoshui 李若水 (the chief ambassador

of the Song).” 讚嘆寧三十匹上正使侍郎.<sup>38</sup>

During this period, the Jin dynasty was newly established, so it might not yet be able to produce this luxury textile on its own. Therefore, those Zandaniji or Zantanning were most likely spoils of war taken from the Liao during the Jin’s occupation of Northern China. In the battle to capture the Liao capital Zhongjing 中京 in 1122 CE, historical records illustrate that the Jin forces “took all the jewelry, gold, silvers, textiles, and furs accumulated by the Liao dynasty in two hundred years.” 保大二年(1122), 再下中京, 遼二百年所積珠玉, 金銀, 匹帛, 皮毛之類..... 盡為金人所掠.<sup>39</sup>

The Liao’s collection of foreign textiles was the result of the extensive communication between China and West Asia. Islamic glassware was found in Liao Dynasty tombs, and the ruler of Bukhara—the Kara Khitan Dynasty—maintained marriages with the Liao. Therefore, it was normal for the Zandaniji which was produced in Bukhara to appear in Northern China during the Liao and later Jin Dynasties.<sup>40</sup> Archaeological evidence also suggests the correlation between the paired animal roundels from the Liao textiles and

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<sup>35</sup> Yuka, Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie: The Art of Mongol Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>36</sup> Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> Chen, “Zandaniji in,” 54.

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<sup>38</sup> Chen, “Zandaniji in,” 54.

<sup>39</sup> Chen, “Zandaniji in,” 56.

<sup>40</sup> Chen, “Zandaniji in,” 57.

the Zandaniji in Central Asia, and in this period, another type of roundels with other motifs such as Arabic inscriptions and floral



Figure 17. Paired sheep roundels with Arabic Inscription, twelfth-thirteenth century, China, extracted from Chen Yanshu "Zandaniji in Liao, Jin Silks." in *Sogdian in China: New Evidence in Archaeological Finds and Unearthed Texts*, pp. 64.

patterns instead of the pearls also appeared in the decorative band of the paired animal roundels. For example, the Liao period paired duck roundels and the paired sheep roundels found in Xinjiang had floral designs and Arabic inscriptions respectively (Figure 17). Simultaneously, the traditional paired animal pearl roundels co-existed with the new types, and their composition was basically identical.

However, based on contemporary archaeological evidence, it is hard to determine whether the Liao or the Jin Dynasties incorporated the paired animal motifs into their decorative swords. First, the number of swords that can be attributed to the Liao and the Jin dynasties is too few, and almost all of the ones we have discovered did

not preserve decoration at all. One possibility is that these swords were issued to low-ranking soldiers, so they were undecorated; another explanation is that the Liao and Jin Dynasties did not exhibit the same interest in West Asian decoration and technique. The decrease in foreign fetish during the Jin Dynasty might be illustrated in this change of styles of the Liao and Jin Dynasty gold and silver wares. Zhang Jiangming's analysis reveals that starting in the tenth century, the Liao gold and silver products show that Tang and West Asian influence gradually decreased until the dynasty's eventual replacement by the Song styles during the late Liao period, and during the subsequent Jin dynasty, the gold and silverware also exhibited a strong Song influence.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Mongol Yuan Royal Sponsorship of the Zandaniji Textiles, and the Encore of Paired Animal Motifs on Ming and Qing Swords.**

During the Mongol Yuan Dynasty 元 (1279-1368 CE), the Zandaniji along with other West Asian artifacts regained their popularity in China through the royal

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<sup>41</sup> Jingming Zhang, *Ancient Gold and Silver Wares from the Prairie of China* (Beijing: Wenwu, 2005), 223-230.

sponsorship by the Yuan Emperors, announcing the preface of the encore of the paired-animal motifs that appear on the following Ming 明 (1368-1644 CE) and Qing 清 (1636-1912 CE) dynasties swords.

In 1234 CE, the Mongols ended the rule of the Jin dynasty in northern China, and they conquered the Song dynasty in the south in 1279 BCE. During the conquest of China, the Mongols encountered the Zandaniji collected by the Jin court. In 1256, Hulegu, the grandson of Genghis Khan, conquered Iran and established the Ilkhanate (1256-1335). It was the first and only time that the same empire would rule Iran and China.

The unified vast area under the so-called “Pax Mongolia” made intercultural communication convenient through military and commercial means. Genghis Khan set up post stations and hotels for merchants along common trade routes connecting each part of the empire. Apart from the importation of goods, craftsmen also migrated both voluntarily and involuntarily to China to produce foreign-style artifacts for the Mongol Khan. Thomas T. Allsen notes that textile workers from Syria, Persia, and Iraq appeared in China as a consequence of

personnel exchanges during this period.<sup>42</sup>

In the Yuan Dynasty, the production of the Zandaniji was institutionalized by the government. The *History of the Yuan Dynasty* 「元史」 mentioned that the Yuan Emperors set up a specific department called “The Department of the Sadalaqi Production” 撒答刺欺提舉司 charged with the production of the “Sadalaqi”—the Yuan Dynasty translation of Zadaniji textiles.<sup>43</sup> The royal sponsorship implies that the Zandaniji were connected to the dynasty’s sense of imperial power and identity. In other words, the paired animal



Figure 18. Roundel with paired lion, thirteenth century, Central Asia, Cleveland Museum of Art (<https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1989.50>)

roundels became the symbol of royal power. During the Yuan Dynasty, the Zandaniji with the traditional pearled decorative band was

<sup>42</sup> Thomas T Allsen, *Conquest and culture in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 6.

<sup>43</sup> Chen, “Zandaniji in,” 53.

manufactured simultaneously with the paired animal roundels with a simpler bolded line designed band as shown by the example from the Cleveland Museum of Art (Figure 18). Both types were popular among the ruling class.

The succeeding Ming and Qing dynasties inherited much of the Mongol culture, especially in terms of the costumes. Zhang Zhiyun 張志雲 noted that although the first Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 disliked the “Barbaric customs” (胡俗) (referring to the Mongolic conventions), and ordered the subjects to readopt the Chinese style costumes, the reality of the Ming costumes was “Chinese-Mongolic hybridization”(華夷交融).<sup>44</sup> The designs of the regulated official's garments during Zhu Yuanzhang's rule were almost identical to the Yuan Dynasty.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 19. Depiction of Emperor Xuanzong (Zhu Zhanji) wearing Mongol style hat, Ming dynasty, the Palace Museum (<https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/228988.html>)

Besides the officials, the costumes of the Emperor also exhibited Mongol influence. For example, the figure of Emperor Xuanzong of Ming (1399-1435) depicted in the painting *The Panting Scroll of Entertainments of Emperor Xuanzong* 「明宣宗行樂圖」 was wearing a Mongol-style hat called *Zhanmao* 氈帽 (Figure 19) that was very similar to the depiction of Mongols in the *Great Mongol Shanama* which was produced during the fourteenth century (Figure 20). Based on the continuation of the Mongolian culture, it was natural that the Ming court also adopted textiles with paired animal designs.



Figure 20. Mongol male depicted in the Great Mongol Shahnama, fourteenth century, Iran, Asia

In addition, the Ming dynasty prohibited the civilians from using animal patterns,<sup>46</sup> so the royal associated personnel institutionally monopolized the use of these patterns, thus the exhibition of the paired animal motifs especially paired dragons on costumes indicated owners' distinguished social status. A Ming Dynasty robe that was once given by the emperor to a descendant of

<sup>44</sup> Zhiyun Zhang, *Costume Culture of the Ming Dynasty* (Wuhan: Hu bei ren min chu ban she, 2009) 75.

<sup>45</sup> Zhang, *Costume Culture*, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Zhang, *Costume Culture*, 84.



Figure 21. Paired dragon motif on a Ming dynasty robe given by the emperor to the descendents of Confucius, Shandong Museum, extracted from Jian Lu *The Dignified and Elegant Beauty of Details---Talking from a Woman's Robe of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1984)*, pp 81.



Figure 22. Confronted dragons on the Emperor's robe, Qing dynasty, China, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/69066>).

Confucius has a pair of confronted dragons (Figure 21), and this design was preserved in the design of the Qing Dynasty costumes of emperors (Figure 22) and nobles.

In an early eighteenth-century robe of a noble female, the paired animal roundels still existed (Figure 23), which was chronologically close to the sword *Baoteng*. In this example, the lines that composed the dragon were geometrized, and the figure of the dragons was more abstract than the dragons in the earlier roundels. The detailed depiction of the dragons' scales and lively

jaws was replaced by smooth and simpler cloud-like shapes. The same design was also manifested in a Qing Dynasty sword of a high-ranking official collected by Huangfu Jiang (Figure 24). The handguard of this sword also illustrates a pair of geometrized dragons similar to figure 23 both figuratively and compositionally.

The swords in the Qing dynasty served as a component of ritual costumes. *The Pictorial Illustration of the Ritual Vessel* 「皇朝禮器圖式」 offers strict regulation of different patterns of swords that the Emperor, imperial family, and officials of each rank should wear on several ceremonial occasions, indicating that swords were important ritually and



Figure 23. Paired Dragon Roundel, early eighteenth century, China, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (<https://fristartmuseum.org/exhibition/weaving-splendor-asian-textiles/>)

tightly associated with textiles.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, same as the robes made of textiles, the swords also became an emblem of royal

<sup>47</sup> Huangfu, *Sword of*, 119.

power, so it was normal for swords to adopt the motifs in textile designs. The naturally rounded disc-shaped handguard that was popular in the Qing dynasty was a perfect medium for the imitation of roundels.

Based on the connection between royal power and the paired animals during the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was safe to conclude that the re-emergence of the paired animals especially dragons on the Ming and Qing Dynasties' sword guards was the illustration of royal power, a tradition derived from the linkage between the Yuan Dynasty period paired animal textiles and the royal patronage. The designs of this type of handguard were the imitations of the paired animal roundels decorated with either the pearl-contained band or simple bolded band on textiles.

By comparing the handguard of the beaded rim handguard mentioned in the introduction section with the earlier paired horned-animal roundels in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 25), we can see the similarity between these two artifacts in terms of composition. The beaded rim of the handguard was the three-dimensional representation of the pearls on the textile, and the paired dragon reflected the same composition of the two confronted horned animals in the roundel. Similarly, the

handguard of the sword Baoteng imitated the



Figure 25 Beaded border handguard with the paired horned animal pearl roundel

design of the paired animal roundels with a simple decorative band (Figure 26). The rim



Figure 26. Handguard of *Baoteng* and the paired lion roundel

of the handguard was not emphasized with decorations, which was the same as Figures 18 and 23.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of the paired animals on Chinese swords from the 6th century to the Qing Dynasty endured a number of different stages, and its meaning evolved from the manifestation of the owner's wealth and taste to a symbol and indication of royal power.

The design of the early paired animal motifs on Chinese swords was the imitation

of the Persian-originated paired animal roundels on textiles, which were imported due to the favor of exotic artifacts during the sixth century. After banishment in the eighth century China, the paired animal motifs temporarily disappeared from Chinese textiles and swords, but this type of textile continued to be produced in Persia and some Central Asian regions such as Bukhara until the thirteenth century. The Mongol conquest of Western Asia incorporated the production center of textiles with paired animal designs into the territory of the Mongol Empire during the thirteenth century, and its production was patronized and institutionalized by the royal court, which linked it with the royal power. The Ming and Qing Dynasties adopted the Mongol legacy which applied the paired animal motif on the handguards to manifest a symbol of royal power, especially on ritual occasions, thus resulting in the reemergence of the paired animal motifs on Chinese swords especially exhibited by the designs of the handguards.

The paired animal handguards of the swords mentioned in the introduction were, therefore, symbols of royal power and the high social status of their owner, and a cultural legacy initiated in the sixth century and

institutionalized in the thirteenth century. In terms of the sword of *Baoteng*, the emergence of the paired dragon was the imitation of the simplified textiles with paired animal roundels that were produced during the Yuan Dynasty and preserved in the Qing Dynasty as a symbol of royal power. The saber with beaded rim imitated earlier paired animal pearl roundels, but its symbolic meaning was identical to the *Baoteng*.

In speaking of the significance, this motif preserved its popularity from one dynasty to another, illustrating the continuity of foreign especially West Asian influence on Chinese aesthetic culture. Its transmission to China suggested the vast scale of material exchange between West Asia and China from the sixth century to the Yuan Dynasty, and the localization of artifacts with this motif in terms of production and design reflected the enduring exotic fashion. Besides, the institutionalization of the production of textiles with paired animals, and its role as a royal power indicator emphasized its evolution from civilian use to ruling class monopolization in a political sense. In other words, after the Yuan Dynasty, the paired animals on Chinese swords expressed strong political overtones.

It is also notable that the shape and size of the fittings restricted the presence of the paired animal motifs on Chinese swords. The comparatively small fittings before the Ming Dynasty such as the ring-shaped pommel forced the craftsmen

to simplify the paired animals or cancel them. In contrast, the large disc-shaped handguard enabled the craftsman to implement the complete design of the paired animals that were similar to the roundels on the textiles.



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