

# *A Glimpse into Antlered Tomb-Guardian Beasts against the Background of Chu Culture*

Shiyun Wang

*Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, Xi'an, 710065, Shaanxi Province, China*

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**Abstract:** Sorcery flourished in the state of Chu, and the Chu people accordingly held it in high regard; the tomb-guardian beast, as a distinctively Chu funerary object of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, developed chiefly across three phases, its formal features shifting in step with the times, evolving from an early, unadorned structure consisting merely of a head-and-body section joined to a base, through a period in which craftsmanship grew increasingly refined and ornamentation increasingly elaborate, before finally returning once more to a simplified mode of presentation. Among these, the tomb-guardian beast adorned with "antlers" represents a feature unique to the Chu region, and this essay seeks to offer a brief account, in three parts, of the origins, causes, and underlying connotations of the antlered tomb-guardian beast during its period of greatest flourishing, thereby glimpsing the exclusive cultural symbolism that the ancients invested in the antlered tomb-guardian beast through the practice of "concealing ritual propriety within vessels."

## 1. Introduction

The head of the tomb-guardian beast presents a form that is neither fully human nor fully bestial, while the antlers—fashioned from the genuine horns of the sika or elaphure—are inserted atop the creature's skull, mortise holes having been reserved in advance for this purpose, their branches unfurling outward and extending in an ordered, staggered array; the innate numinous quality that the object thereby possesses might be said to accord seamlessly with the social and cultural context of the state of Chu. As a lacquered wooden funerary object typical of Chu-style burials during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, its development unfolded across three phases in total: the middle-to-late Spring and Autumn period through the early Warring States period constitutes the early phase; the middle Warring States period constitutes the middle phase; and the late Warring States period constitutes the late phase, the whole span lasting roughly four hundred years and standing as an artistic symbol unique to Chu culture. Among these phases, the antlered tomb-guardian beast flourished during the middle Warring States period, which likewise represents the most prosperous stage in the development of the tomb-guardian beast as a whole. As for what specific meaning the object might carry, scholarly opinion remains divided, and this essay accordingly attempts, with respect to this funerary artifact, to offer a straightforward account of the range of values it may possibly signify.

## 2. Tracing the Origins of the Deer Antler Town Tomb Animal

Sorcery was held in especially high regard within the state of Chu, and Chu culture was consequently never wanting for an element of the strange, the fantastical, and the magnificent; the tomb-guardian beast, as one form of lacquered wooden object, likewise emerged as a product shaped by this environmental and cultural background. The Japanese scholar Mizuno Seiichi paid considerable attention to this object, naming it, in his essay "On the Wooden Figures Excavated at Changsha," both the "tomb-guardian beast" and the "mountain-spirit effigy." Beyond this, according to the explanation offered in the Dictionary of Chinese Archaeology, its "primary function was to ward off malevolent spirits and guard the tomb entrance, and it was generally interred in pairs, placed on either side of the passage leading into the burial chamber."<sup>[1]</sup> Yet the antlered tomb-guardian beast under the background of Chu culture that this essay seeks to investigate does not entirely accord with this stated meaning, for its manner of placement and the connotations carried by the lacquerware itself do not wholly correspond to the function traditionally ascribed to the tomb-guardian beast.

First, it is necessary to set out something of the culture surrounding the deer and antlers within Chu culture. Tracing the matter back through ancient China, the deer has long served as an auspicious symbol. The "Heavenly Questions" chapter of the Chu Ci records that "long ago a woman gathered fern shoots and, startled by something, took flight, whereupon she came upon a deer, and thereafter her household flourished and prospered, for Heaven had blessed her"—from which the auspicious significance attached to the deer becomes evident. The "Lament for the Times" chapter of the Chu Ci likewise states: "Riding through drifting cloud and mist into the darkness beyond, mounted upon a white deer, at ease and unhurried." From this it may be seen that, within the belief system of the Chu people, the deer had already become a sacred and auspicious creature capable of communicating between heaven and earth. This point finds corroboration as well among the artifacts unearthed from the relevant Chu tombs—for instance, the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng yielded numerous examples of lacquered wooden cranes bearing deer antlers, fashioned with the crane as their basic form (Fig. 1), antlers inserted into either side of the head, the figure standing atop a square base with both wings spread level to either side, conveying an impression of effortless ascent into the sky. Beyond this, composite deer-derived images have likewise been unearthed from such burials as Chu Tomb No. 1 at Tianxingguan in Jiangling and Tomb No. 2 at Jiulian Mound in Zaoyang, Hubei.



Figure 1: A bronze standing crane fashioned from deer antlers, unearthed from the Tomb of Marquis Yi of State of Zeng.

Taking Zhaoxiang Tomb M4 at Dangyang in Hubei as an example of the early phase of the tomb-guardian beast (Fig. 2), the object combined a head-and-body section with a base, the two joined by means of a mortise-and-tenon structure and set off by simple decorative patterning; the excavation report describes it as follows: "the head is formed with rounded corners into a square shape, incised with rolling-cloud motifs and circular designs; the body stands as a four-sided

prismatic column, beneath which is joined an inverted, dou-shaped square base."<sup>[2]</sup> From this it may be seen that the tomb-guardian beast of this period possessed a simple and unadorned form, with no element related to antlers yet in evidence. As the tomb-guardian beast continued to develop, by the middle phase—taking Yutaishan Tomb M354 at Jiangling as an example (Fig. 2)—the decorative patterning had grown progressively more intricate, the overall presentation trending toward elaboration. This change manifested, first, in the continued presence of a humanoid head-and-body form, though the human facial features had by this point become considerably clearer; second, in the newly emergent beast-faced head type, comprising both single-headed and double-headed variants, the beast face typically characterized by "protruding eyes, bared fangs, a long tongue, and a curved neck," certain examples of which may be understood as dragon-shaped (or serpent-shaped). It was likewise during this period that the antlered tomb-guardian beast came into being. Finally, the late phase—taking Tomb M51 at Jiudian in Jiangling as an example (Fig. 3)—reverted once more to plainness, simplicity becoming the dominant mode, while the overall number of surviving examples fell away sharply.



Figure 2: A quadrilateral prism-shaped tomb guardian animal unearthed from Tomb No.4 at Zhaoxiang, Dangyang (Mid-Spring and Autumn Period).



Figure 3: Line drawing of the tomb guardian figure unearthed from the Jiudian site at Jiangling

### 3. The Multiple Causes Behind the Emergence of the Antlered Tomb-Guardian Beast

Why, then, did there emerge under the cultural background of Chu a tomb-guardian beast that incorporated antlers as part of its presentation? This is precisely where the question of the significance of the antlers, long debated among scholars, comes into play. According to incomplete statistics, more than four hundred antlered tomb-guardian beasts have been unearthed to date, drawn from a fairly broad geographical range. According to the number of heads, they may be divided into single-headed and double-headed varieties; according to facial characteristics, into beast-faced, human-faced, and transformed dragon-faced varieties; and according to the material of the antlers themselves, into those employing genuine antler and those employing wooden antlers carved in imitation.

Within the agrarian society of antiquity, where technology remained undeveloped, people of the time made long use of sharp animal fangs or elongated implements as instruments of defense, these objects serving as symbols of strength and thereby fulfilling an apotropaic function. The Chu region, abounding in lakes and hills, was rich in elaphure and sika deer, and its people naturally developed a deeper affection for the deer as a result. The ancients invested their thinking in physical objects

around them, gravitating instinctively toward things drawn from their immediate surroundings—not merely because they possessed a deeper familiarity with such objects, but because such objects often carried within them a distinctive local cultural significance. Just as the "Gongshu" chapter of the Mozi records, "Jing possesses its Yunmeng marshes, filled to overflowing with rhinoceros, buffalo, and deer," the people of Chu had extensive contact with deer of various kinds and would accordingly have been thoroughly familiar with the regular pattern by which antlers grow.<sup>[3]</sup> For this reason, the Chu people set aside ivory and other sharply pointed materials in favor of the antler, an object with which they were far more intimately acquainted, as ornamentation for the tomb-guardian beast. At the same time, the fact that antlers shed seasonally and yet possess the capacity for regeneration offers a further point of assistance in examining the underlying connotations of the antlered tomb-guardian beast.

Beyond this, the Chu people's fondness for the deer may likewise be counted among the causes underlying the emergence of the antlered tomb-guardian beast, a point not difficult to discern in other artifacts of the Chu state. The "Deer Cry" ode in the "Minor Odes" section of the Book of Songs states: "Softly, softly cry the deer, feeding on the artemisia of the wild fields; I have here my honored guests, striking the zither and sounding the reed-pipe." It may thus be seen that the people of Chu took pleasure in listening, through the "Deer Cry," to the sound of the sound of the "softly crying deer"—as exemplified by the lacquered wooden deer-drum unearthed in the Jingzhou region (Fig. 4), its entire form carved into the shape of a reclining deer, lacquered black as its base coat and then painted over in red and yellow to depict the mottled pattern of the deer's coat. Similar examples include the ear-cup decorated with a running-deer motif unearthed from the Huangshan burial ground at Jingzhou, the lacquered wooden screen-stand carved with a phoenix-and-deer motif unearthed from Wangshan Tomb No. 1 in Jiangling, Hubei, and the jade seal of the "Deer King," a symbol of royal authority housed within the Jingzhou Museum—all of these being objects bearing a deer-related motif.



Figure 4: Painted lacquer wood figure of a reclining deer from the Warring States period

This naturally brings to mind the cultural identity that the Chu people's fondness for the deer gave rise to, in the form of deer worship. Cultural identity refers to the shared perception and recognition that people hold toward a given cultural inclination, arrived at through the refinement and elevation of the natural world into a corresponding degree of specific recognition and acknowledgment directed toward "a given object." Different cultures possess different forms of cultural identity, and cultural identity accordingly manifests itself as a sense of belonging toward one's own culture, while at the same time potentially serving as a boundary distinguishing one culture from another.<sup>[4]</sup> Placed within the context of the antlered tomb-guardian beast under study in this essay, the cultural identity attached to "the deer" within Chu culture may be said to exist precisely along these lines. Shamanic culture likewise exhibits a phenomenon of deer worship: the first form is totemic worship, totemic worship having served, since the earliest ancestors, as a medium through which people entrusted their hopes and sought communion with the spirit world—the vehicle for such totemic worship being by no means confined to the deer alone; the

second form regards the deer as a divine spirit capable of communicating with heaven, an expression of deer culture found among a small number of nomadic peoples. The Confucian and Daoist traditions belonging to the Han ethnic group likewise possess their own corresponding cultural expressions concerning the deer. Within Daoist mythological legend, the white deer serves as the mount of the immortals; the "Basic Annals of the Yellow Emperor" chapter of the Seven Bamboo Tablets of the Cloudy Satchel records: "The Queen Mother of the West, essence of the Great Yin and daughter of the Celestial Emperor... admiring the virtue of the Yellow Emperor, rode upon a white deer to present a white jade ring. There was also a divine being who came from the south, riding a white deer, to present fragrant wine."<sup>[5]</sup> Li Bai, who was fond of seeking out immortals and pursuing the Way, likewise wrote: "Han Zhong rode his white deer, westward into the midst of Mount Hua. A thousand jade maidens and more followed close behind amid the clouds. Seeing me, they transmitted their secret arts, sincerity and devotion communicating with Heaven itself."<sup>[6]</sup> Furthermore, among the pictorial stone reliefs of the Han dynasty, one frequently encounters feathered immortals and transcendent beings riding upon deer, scenes depicting their transformation and ascent into immortality; and in *Journey to the West*, the Old Immortal of the Southern Pole likewise rides a white deer as his mount.

Daoism originated within the Chu region, and Chu culture accordingly came to form a relationship of mutual interfusion with Daoist thought; within the notions of "spirit communion" and "the guiding of the soul's ascent to heaven" found in Chu culture, one may likewise detect a reflection of Daoist thinking. The philosophy of the Zhuangzi advances the notion that "the form may be diminished while the spirit remains whole," a concept that would seem to accord with the connotative expression carried by the antlered tomb-guardian beast—neither fully human nor fully bestial, set off with antlers, and resembling in certain respects a dragon, conforming to no natural standard form, and thereby exhibiting an extraordinary power to awe and overawe. This may well be understood as reflecting both the recognition that Chu culture extended to the deer, having invested it as a physical object with numinous power, and the mutual accommodation reached between the Daoist conception of the world and Chu culture itself.

#### **4. The Cultural Significance of the Antlered Tomb-Guardian Beast**

The foregoing has offered an account of the origins of the antlered tomb-guardian beast and of the reasons underlying its emergence; what follows is a brief analysis, on the part of this author, of its inner significance.

Within the shamanic culture mentioned above, the deer was regarded as a species capable of spirit communion between heaven and earth, and shamans would don caps adorned with antlers while performing their rites, thereby seeking to bring their wishes to fruition. Gao Guofan, in *A History of Chinese Sorcery*, arrives at the conclusion that "ancient shamans, both in China and abroad, were invariably adorned with horns atop their heads, some bearing two horns and others three."<sup>[7]</sup> Given that "the mysterious and fervent religious sentiment within Chu culture, permeating a boundless expanse of historical and psychological time and space that appears to know neither beginning nor end, and to move in cyclical recurrence while yet remaining ceaselessly generative, gives expression to nothing other than the free spirit of life itself,"<sup>[8]</sup> might one then draw the conclusion that the antlered tomb-guardian beast bears some connection of origin with shamanism? It is worth noting that any tomb interred with a tomb-guardian beast is invariably accompanied as well by the presence of a drum, and this combined relationship between the two cannot help but call to mind the relationship between the drum and the shaman within shamanic religion. The "Treatise on Suburban Sacrifices" chapter of the *Han Shu* states: "King Huai of Chu placed great weight upon sacrificial rites, devoting himself to the service of ghosts and spirits."<sup>[9]</sup> Within a state of Chu where

shamans and sorcerers held sway, might the antlered tomb-guardian beast then be understood as representing, within aristocratic burials, the presence of a shaman-sorcerer figure? For, thus far, among the nearly ten thousand Chu tombs discovered to date, only somewhat more than four hundred have in fact been found to contain a "tomb-guardian beast" as a burial good—a point that this author believes may likewise serve to lend support to this view.

Other interpretations of the function of the tomb-guardian beast include the mountain-spirit theory, the apotropaic theory, the death-deity theory, and the theory of the dragon of life, among others, with no definitive conclusion yet reached. As noted earlier, the antler possesses the capacity for regeneration; one might consider whether connecting this capacity to the tomb-guardian beast itself yields any new interpretation, given that the antler undergoes periodic shedding followed by regrowth. At the same time, from a biological standpoint, the length and complexity of a stag's antlers stand in direct proportion to its reproductive capacity, such that the antler naturally comes to serve as a symbol of male fertility.<sup>[10]</sup> Given that the forms taken by antlered tomb-guardian beasts likewise differ markedly from one another, these two considerations together permit the bold inference that the antlered tomb-guardian beast reflects a form of fertility worship, the antler thereby naturally becoming a symbol of that worship. Examining the antlered tomb-guardian beast as a whole, particularly during the flourishing period of the middle Warring States era, one finds that the base of the antlered tomb-guardian beast came to take on the form of a tiger. The tiger, in antiquity, represented the feminine principle of yin; Ye Shuxian, in demonstrating the tiger imagery found among Yin-Shang artifacts, affirmed the intertextual relationship between the female and the tiger, while Fu Daobin, discussing the tiger as a totemic animal associated with female fertility worship, attributed this to the vigorous vitality and nurturing capacity possessed by the female tiger.<sup>[11]</sup> The tiger-shaped base, presented in the form of a crouching tiger, conveys beneath its ferocity an undertone of gentleness and yin softness; combining this with the antler—brimming with vitality and symbolic of the male principle—cannot help but reveal the ancestors' expectation and hope for fertility and continued propagation. Within the fertility-worship culture of the early ancestors, one object was frequently inserted into another perforated object as a means of expressing the union of yin and yang, the union of male and female, thereby achieving, within the framework of magical thinking, the aim of a flourishing population and abundant produce—a point corroborated by the stone axe inserted directly into its haft found on the painted pottery urn bearing the design of a heron, fish, and stone axe unearthed at Yancun in Linru, Henan. Within the antlered tomb-guardian beast, the head-and-body section serves as the medium connecting the two elements, thereby achieving the effect of the mutual generative union of yin and yang.

At the same time, the form taken by the antlers of the antlered tomb-guardian beast frequently presents the extending, branching form of a growing tree. The early ancestors of ancient China held the tenacity and resilience of trees in a certain reverence; not only this, but trees likewise possess a remarkably rapid capacity for propagation, and for this reason a kind of tree-worship psychology arose as well. Elements such as the divine tree appear frequently within ancient mythological texts such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and even within contemporary mythological dramas one commonly encounters such motifs as the "thousand-year divine tree" or the "tree spirit," mythic vehicles formed around the tree as their central motif. The form of the antlers on the antlered tomb-guardian beast bears a striking resemblance to the branches and trunk of a tree, and it is difficult not to suspect some connection between this particular formal choice and the worship of trees. Among the artifacts unearthed from Chu tombs, the branches of numerous divine trees sweep upward in great number, bearing an extremely close resemblance to the antlers of the antlered tomb-guardian beast. The tree gave expression to the early ancestors' worship of the divine tree, and the resemblance between the antler and the divine tree determined that the antler would carry forward the ancestors' hopes invested in the tree, while at the same time absorbing the reverence

that the Chu people held for the shaman's capacity to communicate between heaven and earth. Through the rich imaginative faculties of the people of Chu, the divine power possessed by the divine tree was thereby channeled onto the auspicious creature of the "deer," further strengthening the numinous quality of the tomb-guardian beast and naturally reinforcing as well the likelihood of the tomb occupant's soul ascending to heaven. Needless to say, the foregoing interpretation of its inner significance rests merely upon inference drawn by combining unearthed artifacts with records preserved in ancient texts and other elements of cultural heritage; as for precisely what the antlered tomb-guardian beast signified within the minds of the Chu people, this remains a matter requiring continued correction and refinement through the ongoing process of art-historical and archaeological research.

## 5. Conclusions

Among the artifacts unearthed to date and the relevant textual sources, the body of literature devoted specifically to the study of antlers remains, it must be said, rather limited in scope. It may be said that the antlered tomb-guardian beast represents the product of a particular historical stage; and in seeking the reason for this, one finds that the tomb-guardian beast, as a lacquered wooden object externalizing a given culture, embodies in miniature the ancient conception of "serving the dead as one serves the living, and serving the departed as one serves those who remain," the antlered tomb-guardian device offering a glimpse of this very conception, seeking, through an exaggerated visual tension that conjures an atmosphere of terror, to render tangible the magical power of communion with heaven and thereby to fulfill the ancients' aspiration for the unbroken continuation of their descendants. The people of Chu, through their worship of the deer, came to fashion the antler upon the tomb-guardian device, expressing the concrete in abstract form by means of a mutual interplay between form and spirit. Viewed from the standpoint of the contemporary context, the artist, by making use of products drawn from the natural world in the course of artistic creation, both preserves the original texture of the medium and simultaneously brings into being an entirely new artistic mode of being. On the other hand, the early ancestors, owing to their cultural identity, took the antler as an object of spirit communion, using it as a vessel for spiritual investment in the course of artistic creation, folding their blessings for the departed into the diminutive, antler-shaped form of the tomb-guardian beast's body, and thereby outlining an entirely new form for the tomb-guardian beast—one that gives expression to the cultural confidence and cultural continuity found within the distinctive culture of Chu. It may be said that the antlered tomb-guardian beast stands as a symbol of the numinous power of the shaman-sorcerer, giving expression to the early ancestors' long-cherished wish for the union of yin and yang, while at the same time carrying forward their worship of the tree. In the final analysis, what lies at the root of this is, first and foremost, human subjective agency: people come to know the world and then proceed to depict that world, endowing natural objects with varied forms of power, and through such means as objectification transforming the scenery observed by the eye into the distinctive forms of the various images conceived within the mind, thereby giving rise to an artistic expression that transcends everyday life. The antlered tomb-guardian beast, too, rests upon precisely this foundation; among the burial objects it remains but a small and modest thing, and although the span of time over which it persisted was not long, it stands nonetheless as a single silhouette cast by the vast expanse of Chu culture—an anonymous anthem, composed by nameless forebears, to an age shaped by the romantic and fantastical spirit of Chu culture.

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