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# SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

Number 307

February, 2021

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Symbol of Universal Kingship:  
A Study of the Imagery on the Brocade  
with Lion Hunting in the Horyuji Temple

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# SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS

FOUNDED 1986

*Editor-in-Chief*

VICTOR H. MAIR

*Associate Editors*

PAULA ROBERTS

MARK SWOFFORD

*ISSN*

2157-9679 (print) 2157-9687 (online)

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Symbol of Universal Kingship:  
A Study of the Imagery on the Brocade with Lion Hunting in the Horyuji Temple

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ABSTRACT

The “Brocade with Lion Hunting” preserved in the Horyuji Temple (Nara, Japan) is one of the most important examples of the cultural exchange on the ancient Silk Road. In a thirteenth-century manuscript about the history of the temple, the magnificent piece is called the “Brocade with Four Heavenly Kings,” and legend has it that it was Prince Shotoku’s processional banner. Modern scholars widely believe that the brocade was brought back by a Japanese embassy from China in the seventh century as a diplomatic gift; some scholars further suggest that it was created by Sogdians in China, who borrowed the motifs of heavenly kings from Sasanian royal art. While scholars have extensively studied the provenance, technique, and sources of its decorative motifs, the exact meaning of the imagery on the Horyuji brocade has not yet been clearly understood. Based on a detailed visual analysis, this paper argues that the “Heavenly Kings” on the Horyuji brocade were intended to be viewed as Chinese sovereigns. The paper reveals that the Horyuji brocade depicts or implies at least eight of the twelve royal symbols traditionally used to decorate the court garments of Chinese emperors. This indicates that the fabric was originally reserved for imperial use and the so-called “Heavenly Kings” are probably stand-ins for Chinese emperors. By incorporating royal emblems from diverse religions and cultures on the Silk Road, the makers of the Horyuji brocade created an unprecedented image of Chinese rulers with universal appeal.

Key words: Sogdian Silk, Sasanian Art, Chinese Kingship, Twelve Symbols of Sovereign

## INTRODUCTION

On the ancient Silk Road, silk was not only a luxury commodity but also a symbol of power and prestige. There is no better example of the cultural significance of silk in this context than the famous *jin* 錦 or brocade banner now preserved in the Temple of Horyuji (Nara, Japan), reputedly a prized possession of Prince Shotoku before becoming part of the temple collection (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Modern scholars agree that the brocade was produced in China and brought to Japan by a Japanese emissary around the middle of the seventh century CE; it thus may have been a diplomatic gift from the court of the Tang dynasty.<sup>2</sup> Known for its lion-hunting motifs, which are rendered in a marked Sasanian style, the banner is a result of the use of woven silk in the construction of royal regalia. Its magnificence is still obvious, despite the fact that the bright red color of the banner's silk background has long since faded away.

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<sup>1</sup> As Angela Sheng has noted, *jin* 錦 in Chinese (*nishiki* in Japanese) can be translated into “brocade,” insofar as the English term is used broadly to refer to woven silk with colorful and intricate designs. Yet the technical designation of *jin* or *nishiki* discussed in this paper should be samite or weft-faced compound twill. Since the paper concerns the design rather than the technique of the fabric, the term “brocade,” which is more accessible to the general reader, is adopted. See Sheng 1998, 157.

<sup>2</sup> For Japanese scholars' study of this object, see Okuda 1915, 196–206; Suzuki 1974, 346–358; Kuwayama 1976, 137–162; Kakiage 1982, 234–242; Tanabe 1983, 1–17; Machida 2002, 415–426; Yokohari 2006, 155–173.



**Figure 1.** Brocade with lion hunting. Seventh century CE. China. West-faced compound twill. The Horyuji Temple. Nara, Japan. Donohashi Akio and Nakano Toru, eds., *Sekai bijutsu daizenshu. toyo-hen dai 4-kan* (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2000), 273, pl. 250

Over the past several decades, archaeologists have discovered a large number of silk fragments in Northwest China dating from the early to mid-seventh century.<sup>3</sup> Some of these were woven using the same technique as the Horyuji brocade and incorporate similar motifs that are of obvious Sasanian origin. Based on meticulous analysis of the weaving techniques of these discoveries, many scholars suggest that the Horyuji brocade was created by Sogdian textile artists working for Chinese emperors;

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<sup>3</sup> For a recent and the most comprehensive study in English of these newly uncovered materials, see Gasparini 2019.

the best known among them was He Chou 何稠, a third-generation Sogdian immigrant who hailed from a family of merchants and artisans.<sup>4</sup> From the biography included in the *Sui shu* 隋書 (Book of Sui), we know that He Chou was an expert in a wide range of crafts, including silk weaving, and he was chosen by Chinese emperors to direct the imperial workshop from the 580s to the 610s, when he is said to have succeeded in reproducing a gold-threaded brocade (or “samite”) presented by envoys from the Sasanian Empire.<sup>5</sup>

If the Horyuji banner was indeed the work of Sogdian artists, it raises some critical questions we need to consider. First, why would a Chinese emperor want to commission such a work featuring Sasanian motifs? Second, if the banner was meant to be a diplomatic gift, what political messages would the intricate imagery on the brocade have sent? Most scholars have approached the Horyuji brocade as

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<sup>4</sup> The overall design of the Horyuji banner imitates textiles produced in Central and West Asia, but it incorporates some salient Chinese elements, e.g. archaic Chinese characters. Because of this, many scholars have considered it to be a product of Sogdian immigrants in China. Zhao Feng, one of the top specialists in the technology of ancient Chinese textiles, further points out that the Horyuji banner could have been created by Sogdian artist He Chou in the court workshop of the Sui or Tang dynasty. The main reasons are threefold. First, while the banner was woven as weft-faced compound twill, a technique introduced to China proper by Sogdian immigrants around the turn of the seventh century, the warp threads of the fabric were twisted in a typical Chinese style (from left to right, or so-called S twist) instead of the Persian and Sogdian style (from right to left, or so-called Z twist). Second, the silk banner shows supreme quality, exquisite patterns, and monumental size, which ascribe its origin to a court workshop (this corroborates the assertion that it came to Japan as a diplomatic gift). Third, fragments of similar textiles from tombs in Astana, Xinjiang, can be dated by tombstone inscriptions up to the 620s, a period when He Chou oversaw textile production in the court and was said to have achieved the feat of reproducing Sasanian woven silk. For details of the discussion, see Zhao 2010, 71–83. What Zhao does not mention is that He Chou is also said to have excelled in wooden construction, an indispensable expertise required to build possibly the most advanced loom of the time for a grand project like the Horyuji brocade. In a word, given the sophistication and complexity of silk weaving and loom construction, even if the banner was not created directly by He Chou, it must have been produced under his direction or that of a Sogdian textile and engineer expert like him (also see Lin 2016, 572–583). Overlooking the extensive involvement of Sogdian immigrants in textile production in central China, Mariachiara Gasparini puts forward a less well-grounded speculation that the silk banner was woven in the Turfan region of Northwest China, by either Chinese artisans familiar with Sogdian textiles or Sogdian weavers assisted by Chinese co-workers (Gasparini 2019, 45). Although the Turfan region yielded a great portion of extant silk products dating from the sixth and seventh centuries (largely because of the arid climate), many of them were woven in central China and brought to Turfan as merchandise or diplomatic gifts.

<sup>5</sup> Wei Zheng 68.1596–1598.

if it were a purely decorative fabric influenced by Sasanian and Central Asian art; consequently, they have had little reason to seriously address questions about the sociopolitical context that produced the object. In this paper, I will argue that the Horyuji brocade was designed to cast Chinese emperors as universal rulers of the Eurasian world.<sup>6</sup> In a transitional period (sixth to seventh centuries) that saw China emerging from centuries of disunion to become a vast empire and an international superpower, the Sogdian artists responsible for the brocade used their cross-cultural perspective to construct a formidable image of Chinese royalty, one that would be legible to a global audience and thus serve the expansionist policies of the Sui and early Tang dynasties.

#### SOURCES OF MOTIFS ON THE HORYUJI BROCADE

As many scholars point out, Sogdian merchants and artisans were deeply involved in brocade production in China during the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to their familiarity with the diverse art traditions that came together on the Silk Road, these Sogdian immigrants were able to combine multiple cultural elements into their products. The brocade banner in the Temple of Horyuji is often cited as an epitome of such an artistic exchange and mingling. The artist who designed it ingeniously interwove Sasanian, Greco-Roman, and indigenous Chinese motifs into a single fabric.

The most notable motifs on the banner are the royal hunting figures encircled by giant pearl roundels, which were borrowed from Sasanian or Central Asian art.<sup>8</sup> The royal figures are shown hunting lions on horseback, wearing crowns decorated with wings as well as the cosmic emblems of the sun and the crescent moon. Such representations were originally associated with images of Sasanian sovereigns, as exemplified by those found on many of the silver vessels commissioned by the Sasanian court (Fig. 2).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the royal figures on the banner are shooting backward. This gesture is

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6 As Canepa's study of Sasanian and Byzantine art has shown, the most important function of luxury decorative objects circulating on the Silk Road was their power in conveying political messages and defining identity; see Canepa 2010, 136–140.

7 Zhao 2010, 71–83; Lin 2016, 229–236; Sheng 1998, 117–160; Gasparini 2019, 45–90.

8 Gasparini 2019, 54–55.

9 Machida 2002, 415–426.

known as the “Parthian shot,” and so can be understood as another Persian reference embedded in the design.<sup>10</sup> The prototype of the handsome winged horses on the brocade was Pegasus, a Greco-Roman mythical creature which was also popular in Sasanian court art.<sup>11</sup> These Western elements notwithstanding, the flanks of the brocade’s horses are branded with Chinese characters for “mountain” (*shan* 山) and “auspicious” (*ji* 吉).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the jumping lions on the banner look more like Chinese foo-dogs than the ferocious beasts of West Asia.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 2. Shapur II on a lion hunt. Fourth century CE. Sasanid. Silver. Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

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<sup>10</sup> Tanabe 1983, 1–17.

<sup>11</sup> Ettinghausen 1972, 11–17.

<sup>12</sup> For the practice of branding horses in the royal stable during the Sui and Tang dynasties, see Soma 1972, 50–56.

<sup>13</sup> Cai 2009, 25–40.

This integration of Western and Eastern motifs on the brocade attests to the Sogdian artist's cosmopolitan vision of art and culture. It seems clear that the artist was familiar with more than one artistic tradition and did not confine himself to a single cultural framework in the creation of this piece. From an economic perspective, there are reasons to believe that Sogdian merchants introduced motifs of diverse origins into their products as a commercial strategy.<sup>14</sup> As market-savvy traders on the Silk Road, they must have understood that textiles featuring different cultural elements would appeal to a larger number of customers. More customers, of course, would mean more profit.<sup>15</sup> While such an economic perspective should not be excluded from our study of Sogdian textiles, the particular design of the Horyuji brocade might not have been determined by commercial considerations. As previously noted, the object most likely served as an imperial gift, which means it may have been a work commissioned directly by the court.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the brocade's monumental size (250 cm long and 134.5 cm wide) and intricate royal imagery make it quite unlikely that it was ever an item for sale.<sup>17</sup>

#### SASANIAN AND BUDDHIST SYMBOLS OF KINGSHIP

If the Horyuji brocade was not intended to circulate as a commodity, how should we interpret the function and meaning of the diverse motifs depicted on it? In the following, I describe in detail what I consider the most important aspect of this fabric — the way it integrates royal motifs and symbols from three major artistic traditions on the Silk Road: Sasanian court art, Buddhist iconography, and above all, Confucian ritual symbolism. Through this integration, the designer of the brocade made its hunting figures into stand-ins for Chinese sovereigns with universal authority, situating them in the “global

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<sup>14</sup> For Sogdians' commercial activities on the Silk Road, see Vaissière 2005, 95–196.

<sup>15</sup> In *Xin Tangshu* (New Tang History) published in 1060, it is said “men of Sogdiana have gone wherever profit is to be found” (Juliano and Lerner 2001, 221). While this reflects the entrepreneurial culture among Sogdians, it also represents one of the negative stereotypes about them in Chinese literature.

<sup>16</sup> Zhao 2010, 71–83; Lin 2016, 229–236.

<sup>17</sup> The use of silk was strictly regulated by sumptuary codes in the Sui and Tang dynasties. See Chen 2019, 47–76.

visual culture of royalty,” to borrow a phrase of Matthew Canepa, that emerged across Eurasia during the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>18</sup>

Among the royal elements on the Horyuji brocade, these human figures inspired by portraits of Sasanian or Central Asian kings are the most conspicuous. Each beaded roundel displays four identical human figures arranged in a symmetrical composition; the headwear of these figures points unequivocally to a kind of crown worn by Sasanian sovereigns, such as the one associated with the late-fifth-century king Peroz I, whose image could be seen on many Sasanian silver coins circulating in China in the sixth and seventh centuries (Fig. 3).<sup>19</sup> Similar crowns were also widely adopted by rulers in Central Asia.<sup>20</sup> Aside from the crown, lion hunting had been associated with kingship in West Asia since as early as the second millennium BCE; a prominent theme in Sasanian royal art, it speaks to the king’s sacred power to bring order to cosmic chaos.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Canepa 2009, 216; 2010, 121.

<sup>19</sup> For the circulation and functions of Sasanian silver coins in China, see Juliano and Lerner 2001, 271–281; Sun 2004, 35–54. The crown is also attributed to Khosrow II, see Kuwayama 1976, 137–161.

<sup>20</sup> Kageyama suggests that the crown on the Horyuji brocade was made under the influence of Hephthalite art. See Kageyama 2007, 11–23. However, the composition of the hunting scene as a whole bears a much closer resemblance to that on Sasanian silver plates.

<sup>21</sup> Whitfield 2018, 207–210.



Figure 3. Sasanian silver coin with the portrait of Peroz I. 457–484 CE. British Museum

In addition to Sasanian sovereigns, the hunting figures on the brocade also evoke the images of Buddhist heavenly kings, particularly the guardian deities said to reside in each of the four cardinal directions (Lokapalas in Sanskrit). The link between these figures and Buddhist iconography was first made in an inventory preserved in the thirteenth-century manuscript titled *Shotoku taishi-den shiki* 聖德太子伝私記 (A private version of Prince Shotoku’s biography), which lists the fabric as *shitenno nishiki* 四天王錦 (brocade with four heavenly kings).<sup>22</sup> This note could be interpreted as a reference to the four royal protectors of the world that are often represented in Buddhist art. Indeed, there was a widespread cult of heavenly kings in China and Central Asia during the sixth and seventh centuries. Two stone statues of the heavenly king have been uncovered in Chengdu, both dating from the early sixth century CE.<sup>23</sup> Standing as independent subjects of worship, they testify to the popularity of the deities in China at the time. Notably, from very early on, representations of Buddhist heavenly kings in

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<sup>22</sup> Donohashi and Nakano 2000, 421.

<sup>23</sup> Huo 2018, 104–113.

East Asia manifested features related to the representation of Sasanian or Central Asian royalty.<sup>24</sup> One of the statues from Chengdu, for example, has a bearded face and a winged crown, which both recall the image of a Sasanian or Central Asian king (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4.** Drawing of stone statue of Heavenly King. Sixth century CE. China. Sichuan Museum. Chengdu wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, ed., *Chengdu xiatongren lu fojiao zaixiang keng ji chengshi shenghuo yizhi fajue baogao* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2017), fig. 63

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<sup>24</sup> Li 2002, 132–134.

The designer of the Horyuji brocade seems to have made a special effort to establish the link between the brocade's royal hunting figures and Buddhist heavenly kings. They incorporate a popular Buddhist motif: a Bodi tree standing in the center of the roundel. Due to the prominence of representations of the "Sasanian kings" and Pegasus on the brocade, the tree has often been identified as the tree of life, a familiar motif in Hellenistic and ancient Persian arts.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, as Harada Yoshito has noted, the peculiar shape of the tree makes it more like a Bodhi tree one would find in Buddhist art of the sixth and seventh centuries than any surviving representations of the tree of life (Fig. 5).<sup>26</sup> In Buddhist teachings, it was under a Bodhi tree that Prince Siddhartha achieved enlightenment. Therefore, in Buddhist art, the Bodhi tree often stands for the Buddha. Shown hunting beneath the Bodhi tree, the kings appear to be positioned as the protectors of Buddhism.



Figure 5. Detail of the altarpiece with Amitabha and attendants. 593 CE. China. Bronze.  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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<sup>25</sup> Zhao 2010, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Harada 1930, 172–180.

However, the interpretation of the royal figures either as Sasanian emperors or Buddhist heavenly kings creates some difficulties when it comes to discerning the exact function and meaning of these figures on the Horyuji brocade. On the one hand, if they were supposed to appear as Sasanian rulers, why would they be riding winged-horses instead of the real chargers more commonly seen in Sasanian art? Why would they be in a group of four? And why in the world would Chinese emperors have commissioned such majestic images of foreign kings?<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, within the context of Buddhist art, the four heavenly kings are customarily made to appear different from one another, each possessing some distinguishing attributes.<sup>28</sup> On the Horyuji brocade, however, the figures look like identical images of one another. Moreover, heavenly kings in Buddhism have never been shown as shooting lions from horseback, since lions are sacred creatures in Buddhist art often regarded as an embodiment of the Buddha.<sup>29</sup> If these royal figures were intended to be Buddhist deities, how would one explain these significant deviations from Buddhist iconography? To avoid such difficult questions around the identities of the royal figures on the brocade, many scholars choose to describe them with more generic terms, such as “horsemen,” “foreigners or barbarians,” or simply “human figures.”

#### CONFUCIAN SYMBOLS OF KINGSHIP

Given the ingenuity of the design on the Horyuji brocade, such iconographic ambiguity would not seem to be an accident. This leads me to search for a new identity for the royal figures. As I will show next, these figures might have been intended to be perceived as Chinese emperors, an identity rooted in an unprecedented vision of Chinese kingship emerging toward the end of the sixth century. Although the imbrication of Sasanian and Buddhist kingship on the brocade is often mentioned, few scholars thus far have noticed the assemblage of Chinese symbols for royal status that was woven into the textile

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<sup>27</sup> In Chinese art of the seventh century, foreign kings were treated as subjects in a submissive posture. One such example is a stone statue of the eldest son of Yazdegerd III, the last Sasanian king, which stands with other subject kings and foreign emissaries by the gate of Emperor Gaozong (d. 683) and Empress Wu (d. 705)'s mausoleum (Canepa 2010, 130).

<sup>28</sup> Li 2002, 105–141.

<sup>29</sup> In Buddhist texts, the Buddha is known as the lion of the Shakya clan, and his teaching is compared to the roar of a lion. In Buddhist art, the lion performs as a faithful guardian of the Buddha's preaching assemblies.

design. These symbols are pivotal in transforming the brocade’s foreign-looking hunting figures into powerful images of Chinese monarchs. The key to deciphering these symbols lies in the two Chinese characters branded on the flanks of the horses ridden by the hunters. One stands for “auspicious” and the other means “mountain.”

As the Chinese character for “auspicious” is one of the most popular decorative motifs in the Chinese tradition, scholars have considered the use of this character here nothing more than a generic sign of good will. However, if one takes Confucian ideology into account, it seems more likely that the character on the brocade was meant to function as an indigenous symbol of kingship. To understand the character’s royal connotations, we need to look at a type of coin called “Yong’an wuzhu 永安五銖 (Five *zhu* of the Yong’an reign),” which was minted in the early sixth century during the Northern Wei dynasty (Fig. 6). On the obverse of the coin is the regnal title of the ruling emperor, which is common in traditional Chinese currency. What makes the coin special is that the Chinese character *tu* 土 (earth) is displayed on the reverse. In Confucian cosmology, the universe is composed of five basic elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth.<sup>30</sup> Each element corresponds to a specific direction, moral virtue, color, organ, and so on. Among these five elements, earth is situated in the center of the universe, and its attributes, such as the color of yellow, have long been associated with royalty in Chinese history.



Figure 6. Coin of “Yong’an wuzhu.” Sixth century CE. China. Bronze. Private collection

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<sup>30</sup> For the theory of *wuxing*, or “five elements,” see Wang 2000, 75–128.

Earth also symbolizes the virtue of the Yellow Emperor, a legendary sage king who has been regarded as the primordial ancestor of all Han Chinese people since the second century BCE. After the Xianbei rulers conquered North China, to establish their legitimacy they proclaimed that they were the descendants of the Yellow Emperor; they even sought to associate their clan name — Tuoba 拓跋 — to the Chinese character for “earth.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, for the better part of the sixth century, the character “earth” had been a pronounced emblem of royalty, one that circulated widely on this type of coin.

On this particular kind of coin, the character “earth” has additional significance. There is a square hole beneath the character in the center of the coin, a standard feature of Chinese coinage after the First Emperor’s unification of China in the third century BCE. Anyone who could read basic Chinese would easily recognize that the character for earth, coupled with the square shape beneath it, makes up the Chinese character *ji* 吉, or “auspicious.”<sup>32</sup> Because of its affiliation with the character for earth, the character for auspicious on the coin assumed a political function, and we have good reason to believe that it was used to indicate royal status in many other places. On the Horyuji brocade, the character for auspicious is enclosed by a bolded circle that immediately recalls this type of coin (Fig. 7). Such a visual connection to Chinese coinage further encourages one to read the character as a royal emblem.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Wei Shou, *Wei shu* 1.1.

<sup>32</sup> Zhongguo qianbi dacidian bianweihui 2008, 193.

<sup>33</sup> Given the continuity of the Confucian tradition in China, a later example can be used to further illuminate the significance of the character “auspicious” as a royal marker. For over five hundred years, until 1911, the Forbidden City in Beijing functioned as both the symbolic and the functional seat of imperial power of China. The core of the immense palatial complex is made up of three main halls located in the outer court and another three in the inner court, all arranged successively along the central axis that runs through the Forbidden City. The three halls in the outer court, including the throne hall, sit on a platform shaped like the character for earth, which symbolizes the center of the universe. The three halls in the inner court were built into a rectangular walled enclosure. By no coincidence, it was aligned with the “earth”- shaped platform to constitute the character for “auspicious.”



Figure 7. The character for “auspicious” on the Horyuji Brocade

## TWELVE SYMBOLS OF SOVEREIGNTY

The second Chinese character on the Horyuji brocade means “mountain.” Scholars have been puzzled by its inclusion, because this Chinese character was seldom used as a decorative motif during the sixth and seventh centuries. That said, the pictorial symbol for mountain has long been used to signify royalty in Chinese history. According to Confucian classics, an emperor’s court garment (*mianfu* 冕服) should be adorned with a set of symbols.<sup>34</sup> During the Eastern Han dynasty (59 CE), the number of the symbols in this set was officially fixed at twelve: (1) the sun – *ri* 日, (2) the moon – *yue* 月, (3) the constellation of stars – *xingchen* 星辰, (4) the mountain – *shan* 山, (5) the dragon – *long* 龍, (6) the pheasant – *huachong* 華蟲, (7) the fire – *huo* 火, (8) the sacrificial vessels – *zongyi* 宗彝, (9) the waterweed – *zao* 藻, (10) the grains of rice or millet – *mi* 米, (11) the sacrificial ax – *fu* 黼, and (12) the *fu* symbol – *fu* 黻. The importance of each symbol decreases sequentially, and the first three are reserved solely for the use of emperors. Among these twelve symbols of sovereignty, the mountain was considered to be one of the

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<sup>34</sup> Wang 1966; Choi 2007.

most prestigious, ranking the fourth, just after the astral emblems. The mountain, as Confucian scholars explained, symbolized the emperor's magnificence and sublimity.<sup>35</sup> Given the hieroglyphic nature of Chinese written language, it is probably not too far-fetched to consider the character for mountain on the Horyuji brocade as a symbol of sovereignty as well.<sup>36</sup>

If one of the twelve symbols of sovereignty is present, we may wonder whether or not other symbols are also on display. After all, in extant representations of imperial garments from the seventh century, the twelve symbols always appear as a group, though not in their entirety, as far as we know. In Cave 220 at Dunhuang, which dates from the early seventh-century, the painted Chinese emperor is dressed in a court robe covered with repetitive mountain patterns, along with images of the sun, the moon, waterweeds, circular clusters of grain, *fu*-symbols, and a dragon (Table 1). On a late seventh-century stone engraving that includes a royal portrait of, possibly, Emperor Zhongzong, the imperial garment is further decorated with pheasants and constellations of stars, in addition to the sun disc, the crescent moon, mountain images, and the dragon (Table 2).<sup>37</sup> In light of these examples, we must ask if other symbols of sovereignty can be identified on the Horyuji brocade.

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<sup>35</sup> Wang 1966, 91–99.

<sup>36</sup> It is not uncommon to replace an emblem with a character on an emperor's court robe. Such an example can be found on the fifth-century lacquer screen from the tomb of Sima Jinlong. On it, the Chinese character for fire substitutes for the emblem for fire.

<sup>37</sup> For the inscription on the stone, see Zhou 2017, 257–267; for the royal symbols on it, see Li 2020, 49–53.

Table 1. Symbols of sovereignty on the robe of a Tang emperor. Seventh century CE. Cave 220. Dunhuang



1. Sun



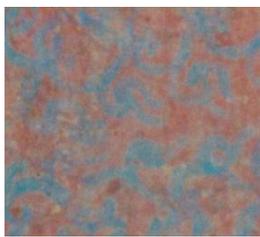
2. Moon



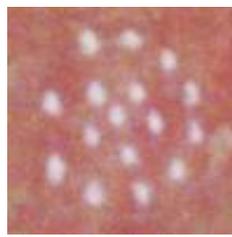
4. Mountains



5. Dragon



9. Waterweeds



10. Grains



12. *Fu*-symbol

**Table 2.** Symbols of sovereignty on the robe of a Tang emperor, possibly Emperor Zhongzong. Seventh century CE. Stone base of a Buddhist statue. Museum of Han and Tang Stone Carvings in Shaanxi, Xi'an



1. Sun



2. Moon



3. Stars



4. Mountains



5. Dragon



6. Pheasant

Compared with the two abovementioned examples, the Horyuji brocade can be said to demonstrate or insinuate at least eight of the twelve symbols of sovereignty, including the six most important ones. In addition to the character for mountain, they are the symbols for the sun, the moon, constellations of stars, pheasants, waterweeds, axes, and the dragon (Table 3). First, it is clear that each royal figure on the brocade wears a crown featuring the symbols of the sun and the crescent moon; the

crowns also show a pair of wings, which in the Sasanian art stands for the divine falcon or eagle, but in the Horyuji brocade could be repurposed as an emblem of the pheasant.<sup>38</sup> The linked pearls on the horses' wings and necks might allude to constellations of stars, resembling those represented on the garment of Emperor Zhongzong. Similarly, the vegetal motifs, filling in the space between the roundels on the brocade call to mind the waterweeds on the court robe in the Dunhuang painting.<sup>39</sup> While the symbol for the sacrificial ax cannot be found in the previous examples, it appears in a rather unexpected place on the Horyuji brocade: the ribbons tied around the horses' ankles are shaped like ax heads.<sup>40</sup> On extant brocades made in Sasanian or Central Asian styles, it is common for horses to be adorned with streaming ankle ribbons, but none are made to resemble the profile of an ax. This unique rendition on the Horyuji brocade cannot be a coincidence.

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<sup>38</sup> For the symbolism of Sasanian crowns, see Göbl and Severin 1971.

<sup>39</sup> Some scholars identify the vegetal motifs as acanthus and palmette, both popular in Hellenistic art; see Kakiage 1982, 237–238.

<sup>40</sup> Sienna Ropert, an art history student at Vassar, pointed out this connection to me.

Table 3. Symbols of Sovereignty on the Horyuji Brocade.



1. Sun, 2. Moon, 6. Pheasant



3. Stars (Linked Beads)



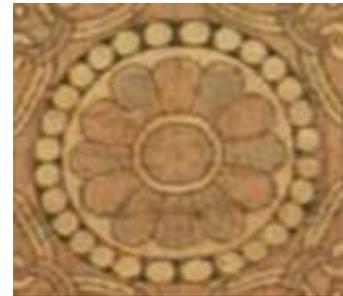
4. Mountain



5. Dragon (Heavenly Horses)



9. Waterweeds



10. Grains (?)



11. Ax



12. Fu-symbol (?)

The dragon, the most potent and ubiquitous symbol of imperial authority in Chinese culture, does not seem to appear on the Horyuji brocade. However, the mythical creature might be represented by the four winged horses ridden by the royal figures. In traditional Chinese astronomy, the ecliptic is divided into twenty-eight mansions or constellations.<sup>41</sup> One of them is called *fang* 房 or “room.” Consisting of four stars, it has another name, *tiansi* 天駟, which means “four heavenly horses (of a quadriga chariot).”<sup>42</sup> The brocade seems to hint at a connection between the four horses and the constellation of *tiansi*, since the linked pearls look like a string of stars and their wide open wings indicate the celestial nature of the horses. Once we perceive this connection, it is not difficult to interpret these winged horses as surrogates for the dragon symbol. After all, *tiansi* (“four heavenly horses”) is also called *tianlong* (“heavenly dragons”) in traditional astronomical texts.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it constitutes the central section of the Azure Dragon, the Celestial Palace made up of seven constellations located to the east of the ecliptic.<sup>44</sup> Because of these, Chinese poets often speak of the dragon as the heavenly horse, and vice versa.<sup>45</sup>

The other four royal symbols—the fire, the grains, the sacrificial vessels, the *fu* symbol—are not easy to make out on the brocade. It is possible that they were excluded from the design, since they are among the less important of the twelve symbols. Nevertheless, it could also be that they have more subtle implications, or that their meanings have become unintelligible to modern viewers. In fact, if we stretch our imaginations a bit, two more symbols might be identified on the brocade. First, the circles of linked pearls in the space between the roundels echo the shape of those circular clusters of grains in

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41 Needham 1959, 242–258.

42 Lu 2013, 275.

43 One such text is the *Classic of Stars* (*Xing jing* 星經), reputedly written in the fourth century BCE. For the passage concerning the “four heavenly horses,” see Chinese Text Project. Accessed September 9, 2020.

<https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=en&file=48723&page=170&remap=gb>

44 In Chinese art before the seventh century CE, the Celestial Palace of Dragon was often represented as a flying dragon. However, as far as extant evidence is concerned, the mansion or constellation of *tiansi* has always been depicted as four linked dots. See Tseng 2011, 236–245.

45 In a *fu* poem attributed to the Han-dynasty scholar Liu Xin (d. 23 CE), the poet states, “I harnessed six dragons to Quadriga and Room.” Here, “quadriga” (*tiansi*) and “room” denote the same constellation of *fang*; both “six dragons” and “quadriga” refer to the carriage of the Han emperor (Knechtges 2015, 395–396). Also see Chen 2015, 168, 173.

the Dunhuang painting; they could have been intended to symbolize grains. Second, the rigid and awkward way the two lions at the bottom of the roundel are posed seems to mimic the symbol of *fu*, which consists of two bow (*gong* 弓) -shaped signs, as can also be seen in the Dunhuang painting.<sup>46</sup>

In summary, the Horyuji brocade contains at least eight of the twelve symbols required by Confucian ritual protocols for court garments. Despite their partial convergence with Sasanian royal motifs, these symbols, as a whole, project an unambiguous Chinese identity onto the royal figures portrayed on the brocade. Given the high possibility that the brocade was a product of the imperial workshop in China, its artist would naturally have considered the Chinese rulers that sponsored the workshop to be its primary viewers and users. In a royal milieu, the brocade could have been used as a banner, a hanging, as the material for imperial costumes, or as an imperial gift.<sup>47</sup> In either case, its principal function would have been to communicate the power and prestige of the Chinese emperor either to an internal or external audience. By interweaving various royal symbols into a single brocade, the Sogdian artists responsible for the brocade cast the Chinese emperor as a universal monarch, one whose dominance transcended not only cultural boundaries but also the distinction between the secular and the spiritual.

## IMPERIAL IMAGES AND PORTRAITS

On the Horyuji brocade, the celebration of martial deeds forms a marked contrast to the civic tone dominating conventional images and portraits of Chinese emperors. The pictorial tradition of royal figures in China can be traced back to the Han dynasty, and was first fully exemplified by images on the Wu Liang shrine, which include the portraits of ten ancient sovereigns who reputedly ruled China in its prehistorical period.<sup>48</sup> Except for one seated figure, all the legendary kings are shown in a standing posture (Fig. 8). Most significantly, an image of the Yellow Emperor is found on the Wu Liang shrine—this king's costumes later became a prototype for the court garments of Chinese emperors.

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<sup>46</sup> My student Isabella Dalton-Fenk at Vassar brought this to my notice.

<sup>47</sup> For the use of luxury silk in a court context, see Gasparini 2019, 91–125.

<sup>48</sup> Wu 1989, 156–166.

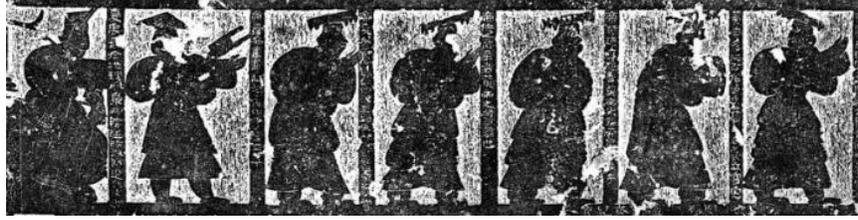


Figure 8. Legendary emperors. Ink rubbing of stone carving from the Wu Liang Shrine. 155 CE. Jiaxiang, Shandong

The format of the portraits on the Wu Liang shrine continued to be used well into the seventh century, as we can see on the famous hand-scroll painting “Emperors of Successive Dynasties.”<sup>49</sup> This painting is attributed to a court painter called Yan Liben 閻立本 (ca.600–673). It depicts thirteen Chinese emperors who reigned before the seventh century (Fig. 9). Like their antecedents on the Wu Liang shrine, the emperors in this painting either sit or stand upright, some wearing court garments and others casual dress. Together, these figures represent the standard images of Chinese emperors during the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>50</sup>



Figure 9. Detail of *Portraits of Successive Emperors*. Attributed to Yan Liben (ca. 600–673). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

49 Ning 2008, 96–128; Shen, 2019.

50 Sun 2019, 301–340. Even though North China was ruled by the Xianbei people for the most part of the sixth century, the extant images of those non-Han Chinese rulers look no different from their Han Chinese counterparts. Notable examples include the depictions of the Northern Wei emperor in the Buddhist cave chapels at Longmen and Gongxian, as well as the Northern Zhou emperor depicted in the *Emperors of Successive Dynasties*. For the imperial portraits at Longmen, see McNair 2007, 31–50.

While such conventional portraits of Chinese emperors arose primarily from Confucian ritual teachings and protocols, the imperial images that the Sogdian artist created on the Horyuji brocade represent the synthesis of more than one cultural tradition. As noted previously, the brocade's hunting figures are based on Sasanian or Central Asian prototypes and bear traces of the Buddhist iconography of heavenly kings; yet they exhibit an array of Confucian symbols of sovereignty that transform them into Chinese rulers. Unlike the static and worldly conventional Chinese portraits, the figures on the Horyuji brocade are involved in a vigorous and supernatural act, a triumphal performance unprecedented in Chinese history (Fig. 10).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> As Leslie Wallace has observed, while hunting was an increasingly popular royal sport over the early medieval period in China (220–581), it had been condemned as a cruel and amoral activity by Confucian and Buddhist intellectuals. This negative attitude toward hunting might have contributed to the scarcity of depictions of hunting kings or emperors in Chinese art. See Wallace 2017, 122–134.



Figure 10. Hunting emperor on the Horyuji Brocade

To understand why Chinese emperors might have commissioned such distinctive images on the Horyuji brocade, we must take into account the political context of the time. Simply put, after nearly three hundred years of discord and chaos, China was finally unified again under the Sui and Tang dynasties around the turn of the seventh century. The process of unification coincided with rapid imperial expansions. Emperors of both dynasties waged frequent wars against the rulers of surrounding regions, even as they eagerly sought foreign allies on the Silk Road.<sup>52</sup> Because of these military and

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<sup>52</sup> Twitchett 2007, 32–37.

diplomatic campaigns, Chinese emperors must have felt an urgent need to promote an image of themselves that could inspire awe and fear among Chinese subjects but also among people beyond China.<sup>53</sup> The Horyuji brocade was probably commissioned against this geopolitical backdrop, and no one would be more qualified to design such a work than Sogdian artists like He Chou.<sup>54</sup>

#### C O D A

The Horyuji brocade, in a word, presents a revolutionary image of the Chinese emperor, a symbolic portrait that speaks to multiple cultural traditions on the Silk Road. Given the intense diplomatic exchanges during the Sui and early Tang dynasties, we have reason to believe that brocade banners like this one were sent to many countries outside of China.<sup>55</sup> As a result, a final note can be made about the meaning of the images on the Horyuji brocade. It is noteworthy that each roundel on the banner is divided into four quarters. This could be a pictorial strategy meant to invoke the Chinese term *sifang* 四方 (four directions), which means “the territories of the entire world.”<sup>56</sup> In classical Chinese, the term “*sifang*” or “four directions,” is often used as an equivalent of *tianxia* 天下, which means “all under heaven.” Since “four squares” and “four directions” are written using the same two characters in Chinese, the concentric squares, which divide the pearl roundel evenly into four parts, now reiterate the all-inclusive conception of the world represented by the term “four directions.” With such visual and

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53 According to Canepa, this urge to establish a global image was shared by sovereigns across Eurasia in the seventh century, which led to extensive mutual appropriations of royal symbols among different empires (Canepa 2010).

54 One portrait similar to the imperial image on the Horyuji banner was recovered from the famous palace hall at Afrasiab (late seventh century, Sarmarkand, Uzbekistan), the political center of the Sogdian's homeland. On the northern wall, an oversized horseman is depicted in a heroic hunting pose. He is identified as a Chinese emperor, probably Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty. Scholars suggest that the portrait was copied from a painting brought to Afrasiab from China by Sogdian envoys. The cosmopolitan rulers portrayed on the Horyuji banner would probably have had a more impressive effect than the hunting emperor in the mural painting. After all, they look not just valiant, but also sacred and cultivated. Most importantly, their message of imperial power was universal. For the royal portrait at Afrasiab, see Compareti 2006, 173–184.

55 Canepa discusses silver plates exchanged as diplomatic gifts between Sasanian and Byzantine emperors, which bear their respective images in the triumphal act of hunting wild beasts (Canepa 2009, 154–187).

56 For the concept of *sifang* in Chinese cosmology, see Wang 2000, 23–74.

linguistic associations, the designer of the brocade situated the cosmopolitan emperors in a universal topography. As the brocades were sent to the four quarters of the world, the ideal of a universal kingship would be symbolically brought to life.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude goes to Mimi Yiengpruksawan, Valerie Hansen, Xie Jisheng, and students in my class on the Silk Road for their support and comments during my writing of this paper. All opinions and mistakes are my own. I would also like to thank Victor H. Mair, Paula Roberts, and Mark Swofford for their help in this turbulent and trying time.

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