Images of animals in Neolithic Chinese Ceramic

The images of animals or their (more or less) stylised motifs once depicted in the form of painting and sculpture, and nowadays through various media, have many stories to tell. Their ancient images point to the undeniably great role that animals played in human life. The rich material culture, as well as the written sources we have today, enables us to examine – both in physical and spiritual terms – the coexistence and co-creation of the worlds of people and animals in the region that we now call China.

General animal research, especially within Europe, usually concerns spatial and physical differences; animals from ancient, medieval and early modern times are researched in the context of their utilitarian role, as well as their exoticism, discovering new species and deepening knowledge about those already known to man.

Creating a picture of the animal images in Chinese Neolithic art, I hope to present various social and political practices that have influenced the acquisition of knowledge about animals, and thus to discover their role in human life. Chinese animal studies to date in pre-dynastic and dynastic eras regularly focus on animals as spiritual beings and sources of nutrition. It is worth looking at the significance of animals from a different angle – from the perspective of art, which can inform us about animals and people in the context of religion, magic, symbols, aesthetics and the spiritual life of both. My article focuses particularly on the decorative motifs appearing in ceramics of three Neolithic cultures: Yangshao 4000–3000 BC, Hemudu 5500-3300 BC and Longshan 2500-1900 BC.

Keywords: China, art, painting, Neolithic, animals

The history of animal images in art probably begins in the Palaeolithic period (about 32,000 years ago) when on the walls of numerous corridors in what is now the Chauvet Cave in the Ardèche river valley in France, man created more than three hundred paintings depicting various species of animals. Giovanni Aloi suggests that it could have been some sort of reference for understanding animals, although he does not exclude other widely accepted theses, one of which hypotheses of the divinational nature of these images to enable successful hunting, while another supposes a spiritual element born as a result of shamanic practices referring not so much to the animals themselves as to their spirits.1 Regardless of the reasons that guided the authors of the paintings, Aloi notices that the animal images painted over thousands of years generally fell into two very extreme categories: food and deities.

The images of animals or their (more or less) stylised patterns once depicted in the form of painting and sculpture, and nowadays with the use of various media have many interesting stories to tell. It is thanks to them that we can learn about species of elephants that disappeared centuries ago, or the growing importance of horses or water buffaloes. Their ancient images point to the undeniably major role that animals played in human life. The rich material culture, as well as the written sources that we have today, enables us to examine – both in physical and spiritual

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1 Aloi 2012: 3.
terms – the coexistence and co-creation of the worlds of people and animals in the
region that we now call China.² For many cultures and social groups in ancient China, as well as later dynastic
times, animals were the link connecting the world of people with the cosmos; therefore, animal caretakers were eagerly employed as fortune-tellers and advisers at royal and imperial courts.³ Indeed, shamans were the ones who probably exercised supreme political power over individual social groups in the first centuries of the Chinese civilisation.⁴ From the shells of turtles, traces of snakes or birds, they read the announcement of some events, thanks to which they were able to “manage the present”.⁵ This is how Chinese writing is thought to have been created – thanks to the inspiration of the mythological official Cangjie 仓颉 in the traces of birds and other animals.⁶

Perhaps the oldest images of animals in Chinese art are represented by Neolithic petroglyphs carved in various parts of China. Their creators, using the natural space, were in no way bound by the frames to which the composition should be matched. The concept of the “frame” only developed along with the launch of ceramic manufactories or skeletal architecture.⁷


Photography: Bogna Łakomska

The earliest ceramic decorations using animal motifs include patterns decorating dishes from the Yangshao仰韶 culture (5000–3000 BC). Among the many objects from that time, the objects discovered in the village of Banpo半坡 near the city of Xi’an 西安 deserve special attention. They are characterised by high-class artistry, especially in the context of design, which was probably made using some flexible brush-like tools. This assumption arises from the fact that the black patterns on the orange terracotta walls were made with very smooth tapering lines here and there, often with rounded ends. Some of the decorative motifs are quite realistic while others are schematic and reduced to almost abstract signs. The power of expression typical of many performances evokes delight. A great example of this is a terracotta bowl decorated on the outside with a drawing of three fish giving the impression of moving in the water (Figure 1). This suggestive movement is emphasised by clearly marked fins and wide-open mouths, revealing fairly prominent teeth. However, more important than aesthetic values seems to be the symbolic and religious meaning of the Banpo ceramic decoration. Fisheries certainly played an important role in the life of the local community, as evidenced by the numerous fish-catching tools discovered by archaeologists. Successful fishing guaranteed food, and thus joy of life, which is why the fish with its reproductive capacity symbolised not only prosperity but also fertility. It seems, therefore, that the fish ornamentation on the walls of the vessels served as divination to evoke happiness. This type of hypothesis seems particularly accurate in connection with a number of terracotta bowls decorated on the

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8 Yangshao culture developed in quite extensive areas covering the middle and lower course of the Yellow River (today’s Shaanxi, Hebei and Henan provinces), the southern and middle course of the Hanshui River 漢水 (today’s Hubei Province) and the Tao 淚 River (today’s Gansu Province). For more on Yangshao Culture, see: Zhang Zhongpei 2005: 45-83. For encyclopaedic information about ceramics from the Yangshao culture, see: Valenstein 1989: 3-8.
9 Liu Jing 2014: 14; Zhao Jing 2014: 15.
bottom with fish motifs as well as images of a human face (Figure 2). The bowl from the Chinese National Museum in Beijing is an excellent example of this. It is decorated with four symmetrically composed drawings of two fish and two faces/masks flanked at the ears with smaller forms of fish. Round masks alternate with schematically treated fish seen on one side only. Looking more closely, one may see that the fish point counter clockwise, while the masks look as if they were their mirror image. All this brings to mind a spell, and also indicates borrowings made by Chinese decorators. Indeed, very similar patterns using the motif of fish flowing in a counter-clockwise direction can be seen on the Neolithic ceramics from Samarra (an area of ancient Mesopotamia) (Figure 3). Modern researchers have no doubt that Chinese pottery culture owes much to the older civilisation of Mesopotamia.\(^{10}\)

Figure 3. Samarra Plate painted with fish decoration. Iraq, c. 5000 BC. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin.

Source: http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultDetailView/result.t1.collection_detail.STspPortfolioElementHandler0.link&sp=10&sp=Scollection&sp=SfieldValue&sp=0&sp=1&sp=3&sp=SdetailView&sp=0&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=F&sp=11743373&sp=T

\(^{10}\) Munsterberg 2011: 21.

Photography: Bogna Łakomska

The fish motif also appears on the outer walls of a terracotta pitcher from the Yangshao culture (the so-called Miaodigou period 廟底溝 4000–3000 BC) discovered in the village of Yancun 阎 村 near Linru 臨汝 in Henan province (Figure 4).¹¹ This time, however, in addition to fish, there is a colourful decoration featuring a heron¹² and an axe. The bird painted with white paint is probably the most eye-catching element in the whole composition. Featured in profile, it stands on slightly oblique legs holding a fish in its beak. Stiff limbs painted at an angle give the impression of tension and the heron’s large round eye signals concentration and intensity of emotions. One may form the impression that it cost the bird some effort to catch a large fish. Apart from the rather suggestive way of presenting the heron and passive fish, it seems that the overall composition is totemic.¹³ There is a presumption that the images of birds were considered protective symbols of tribes, especially those who once inhabited the lower course of the Yellow River. In turn, a painted stone axe

¹¹ One of the objects on the list of Chinese cultural monuments protected by law against export abroad and any exhibition there. See: China Cultural Heritage Protection Website 彩绘鹳鱼石斧图陶缸 http://www.wenbao.net/html/whyichan/64th/2caihuitaohong.htm (access: 04 10 2019).

¹² Contrary to popular belief that the painting shows a stork or a crane, I am of the opinion that this is a heron feeding on fish.

¹³ Fang 2011: 10. However, there are scholars who question the theories about totemism in prehistoric China. See: Yang Xiaoneng 2000: 82. This does not change the fact that there is still a lack of specific explanations in this regard.
with a handle wrapped in fabric (or leather) and decorated with geometric patterns could be a symbol of status and power. Tools of this type were used for ritual purposes to sacrifice food for ancestors.  

In addition to the interesting subject matter, this scene undoubtedly deserves attention for purely artistic reasons. The image of a heron catching a fish is certainly the result of careful observation of the world. All elements of this composition indicate that this is not so much a pattern as an individual work of a unique character distinct from other decorations made with black paint according to a specific model.

Slightly later (c. 3000 BC), although also associated with the Yangshao culture, comes the painting decoration of a terracotta pitcher discovered in Wangjiayinwa 王家陰窪 (Qin’an 秦安, Gansu Province) (Figure 5). The decoration of the gourd-shaped vessel is made of two patterns of pig masks joined by a common eye. They were painted with brown paint on the upper part of the belly, on both sides of the pitcher. Stylistically similar decorations in the form of animal masks were found on dishes discovered in Jiangzhai 姜寨 (Lintong County 临潼, Shaanxi Province). They are probably totem-style patterns indicating the significant importance of this animal for local communities.


Photography: Bogna Łakomska

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14 Examples of Neolithic stone ritual tools see: Rawson 1996: 44-45.
People domesticated the pig in China some 8,000–6,000 BC, in order to have access to meat without hunting.\textsuperscript{16} Wild pigs living near human settlements were easily enslaved, giving them food from surpluses of cultivated cereals in return. They became an indicator of prosperity and happiness, which people also strove to achieve and maintain in the afterlife. Hence, the dead at their burial sites were often accompanied by amulets made of pig bones or figurines of pigs moulded from clay. This animal provided “protection” for the family, its breeding did not require any special skills and did not pose too many problems, so as a creature useful to humans, not too demanding and constantly accompanying them, it became an artistic motif repeatedly used in various configurations. The vase decoration from Wangjiayinwa recalls stage makeup so much so that it is worth considering the theory whether the form of the pig mask is not associated with shamanic rituals in which it was necessary to paint the face as an animal.

Figure 6. Painted pottery vase with a giant-salamander design. Archaeological site: Xiping, Gansu. Yangshao culture, dated around 3200 BC, Gansu Provincial Museum.

\textsuperscript{16} Archaeological discoveries from Zengpiyan 鬿皮岩 in Guilin 桂林 (Guangxi province 廣西) or Cishan 磁山 in Wu’an 武安 County (Hebei Province) are to prove this. Mark 2019: https://www.ancient.eu/article/1320/pigs-in-ancient-china/
A much more expressive approach is characterised by the representation of a giant salamander made with black paint on the longitudinal belly of a terracotta vase discovered in Xiping (Gangu County in Gansu Province) also associated with the development of the Yangshao culture and dated around 3200 BC (Figure 6). The whole looks like a hastily made sketch; the lines overlap in places as if the author was not entirely sure of his/her movements. In any case, he/she implied that this is an extremely long and flexible animal, capable of touching the top of its head with its tail. Indeed, giant salamanders (Andrias davidianus) reach up to 1.8 meters in length and are able to bend their body to an impressive extent. It is one of the largest living amphibians, practically unchanged since the time of the dinosaurs. Unfortunately, today it is a critically endangered species due to overexploitation, environmental pollution, and thus numerous diseases and loss of habitats. Once, the giant salamanders inhabited numerous mountain rivers and lakes in central and southern China, and today they occur extremely rarely in their natural habitat. This animal has a large flattened head, small eyes without eyelids and a wide mouth. Its skin is wrinkled and is distinguished by a spotted pattern, which, as can be seen, the author of the Xiping vase decoration also tried to express. For some reason, however, he/she decided to paint the salamander with huge eyes and frighteningly large teeth. Since this is one of the many representations of the giant salamander in the decoration of Yangshao ceramics, it is likely that it was a tribe’s totem or some other form of manifestation of attachment to that animal. And since the animal’s head resembles a human head, some scholars are of the opinion that it may be the image of Fuxi – the legendary ancestor and monarch of all Chinese depicted with a human head and body of a snake.

Figure 7. Painted pottery basin with a snake design. Archaeological site: Taosi, Shanxi. Longshan culture (2500–1900 BC). The Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing.

Photography: Bogna Łakomska

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The snake motif in Chinese painting on ceramics also occurs in the Neolithic era. One of the oldest images of this type is the pattern painted inside a shallow bowl discovered in a tomb in Taosi (Xiangfen County, Shanxi Province) in the area of Longshan Culture (2500-1900 BC) (Figure 7). The terracotta dish could have been a platter or a type of washbasin, albeit rather symbolic and intended only for the use of the grave owner in which the object was found. This suggestion results from the fact that the bowl was fired at a fairly low temperature, and the painting decoration was made only after firing, which calls into question the usefulness of the object in everyday life.

The image of a rolled-up snake with protruding ears and a clearly marked long jaw apparatus and a tongue ending in a bizarre form resembling an ephedra branch* may evoke some associations with the image of a dragon, which was expressed in a similarly circular manner in jade carved figurines. This unique pattern was made in a technique slightly different from the other Longshan ceramic products. The author of the decoration applied a red pigment to the black primed ceramic surface, which was rather rare in the products of this culture dominated by grey and black colours. There are some suggestions that the object was made of inspiration with articles decorated with red and black lacquer,** produced by the inhabitants of today’s Hangzhou Bay already during the period of the Hemudu culture (5500-3300 B.C.). However, we cannot exclude the hypothesis that the bowl was made in the eastern area, and then presented as a gift on the basis of an exchange that was then performed by the elite.*

An image of an ear snake or dragon placed on a bowl discovered in the so-called the “big grave” of Taosi certainly had some symbolic significance. It could be, as Min Li suspects, a clan emblem or a religious symbol. The reptile was the object of worship especially among tribes inhabiting areas along great rivers. Under his form various water deities were imagined, believing in their extraordinary powers.

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** Hogarth 2000: 11. Compare with Min Li 2018: 120.
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* Li Liu speculates that the objects of exchange could be primarily ritual jades and drums covered with alligator skin found in the same grave in Taosi as the ceramic bowls with the pattern. See: Li Liu 2005: 136.
* Min Li 2018: 120.
** Eberhard 2006: 331.
Another motif appearing in the decoration of the Neolithic Chinese ceramics was also associated with water – namely, a frog and toad in various forms. One of the more discernible designs is the image of a frog painted with black paint on the bottom and internal walls of a terracotta bowl discovered in Shizhaocun 師趙村, near Tianshui 天水 (Gansu province) (Figure 8). It is a product associated with the Yangshao culture (Miaodigou period 4000–3000 BC) stylistically reminiscent of the representation of a giant salamander from a pitcher discovered in Wangjiayinwa. The similarities relate to the enhancement, and exaggerations characteristic of both vessels, as well as the method of filling the contoured space with the help of diagonal and intersecting lines resembling a mesh. Despite the excessive bluntness – the round body of the frog tightly fills the bottom of the bowl, while its head and limbs diverge into the inner walls of the vessel – the animal was captured with elemental accuracy, which indicates a thorough observation of nature. Indeed, the amphibian has a clearly defined dorsal line suggesting a composition taken from above. Moreover, the hind legs are actually longer than the front ones. A further interesting idea is the black “rim” connecting all the frog’s limbs with its head and bulky belly painted on the inside walls. This treatment means that the image of the amphibian – perfectly integrated with the form of the bowl – acquires illusionist features.

The frog motif or toad occurring in the Neolithic ceramic decoration certainly had a lucky connotation resulting, for example, from the ability to produce numerous offspring by the amphibian, while its round form was probably associated with the image of the full moon, which, moreover, was reflected in various Chinese myths about, inter alia, toads that swallowed the moon, or Chang’e 嫦娥 – the wife of the victorious archer Hou Yi 后羿, who stole his reward, the elixir of life, and then escaped to the moon and was turned
The frog/toad, like fish, birds, pig, salamander, snake and many other animals belonged to the language of symbols supposedly to facilitate an understanding of the relationships occurring in the world. Its various images adorning ceramic dishes were not only decorative but also, if not primarily, a divination of good fortune (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Painted pottery jar with a frog design. Archaeological place: Shizhaocun, Gansu. Yangshao culture (Miaodigou period 4000-3000 BC). Gansu Provincial Museum.

Photography: Boga Łakomska


Photography: Boga Łakomska

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26 Eberhard 2006: 364.
Of a slightly different character, although in all likelihood also related to a desire to attract prosperity, is a decoration in the form of dogs adorning a ceramic vessel discovered near the village of Shaodian 邵店 (Qin’an County, Gansu Province), where at first the Dadiwan 大地 culture developed (around 5900-5200 BC), and then the Yangshao. This vessel dating back to the late Yangshao period (3500–2900 BC) was decorated with the representation of two pairs of dogs in conflict with each other (Figure 10). All the animals were painted using means typical of the Yangshao ceramic decorations, i.e. “mesh” to fill the outline silhouettes of dogs in profile, and the method suggesting emotions was also used, i.e. the effect of the big round eye. The way of painting the latter resembles the expressive eye of a heron from the discovered pitcher in Yancun. However, in addition to the standard elements used, it is apparent that the author of the image wanted to express a specific situation most likely seen in everyday life. One side of the pitcher features an image of two dogs facing each other in a horizontal position (on four legs only fragmentarily preserved), while on the other side, the animals are pushing against each other standing on their two hind legs and raising the front legs. Big eyes, open mouths with dangerous teeth protruding and raised (?) ridges inevitably suggest a fierce fight. The subject of the dispute is the fish visible only in one of the paintings. Apart from the realism of this scene, it is likely to be symbolically associated with the afterlife.27 Both images were clearly enclosed in a lane marked by two lines, one of which runs at the top and the other at the bottom, which may indicate the afterlife. In turn, fish, according to the theory of some researchers, can be interpreted as a human soul struggling in this afterlife,28 so what role do the dogs play? The results of archaeological research indicate that dog breeding began to spread through China around 8000 BC mainly for food purposes, but also to improve hunting and safeguard homes.29 Around 7000 BC, a tradition emerged involving the burial of dogs in human graves as sacrifices who were also supposed to be guardians protecting the dead from evil forces.30 This tradition persisted in many regions for the next millennia, including in the Dadiwan and Yangshao cultures, especially between 5900 and 2900 BC. In the context of these burial rituals, the decoration of a ceramic vase with images of fighting dogs should probably be understood as the representation of the guardians and guides of the human soul or guards located in two worlds, fighting fiercely to protect a lost soul.

Presenting only a fragmentary overview of the early history of animal images in Chinese art, I merely intended to signal the various social practices that influenced the acquisition of knowledge about animals, and thus discover their role not only in human life but in the world in general. Looking at animals from the perspective of art, we can discover the relationship between people

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29 Kudinova 2018b: 97.
and animals once sought in the context of religion, magic, aesthetics and the
spiritual life of both.

Hundreds of years ago, the Chinese already realised that all things,
including animals, people or the heavens were governed by the same
fundamental principles, as indicated by modern sources of research.31

“This meant that all these principles were also potentially present in all
things, and that differences between people and animals therefore could only
be a matter of the degree to which such principles became apparent or were
brought into effect. Such an approach manifested itself, for instance, in the
notion of language as a continuum of all beings, in which animals, like
humans, had the capacity to speak – in their own way.”32

Huainanzi 淮南子 (a collection of essays by various scholars from before
139 BC) informs, inter alia, about how much animals were valued in China
(for example foxes, raccoons or insects such as silkworms or cicadas); thanks
to them, as John Major points out, Chinese scholars began to think in a new
way about time, space, life and death. Among others, the principles of
distinguishing things between yin and yang only, or the theory of the five
phases (transformations or elements) were verified. According to the new
view, it was observed, for example, that animal pregnancy reveals
numerological principles, and animal behaviour is a structural grid for
everyday life.33 It seems that Chinese scholars have for centuries been aware of
the need for humans to derive some methods of learning from animals that
could productively enrich our knowledge.34 Chinese sages, scholars and
philosophers of ancient times, according to cosmological views, believed that
the highest form of knowledge could be achieved when an animal prompted a
person to think about universal principles.35 It would be beneficial for us to
remember this today.

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