

## **Formosa and the Silk Road: A Mysterious Bronze Object from Taiwan**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is focused on one of Taiwan's important cultural treasures: an extraordinary bronze plaque discovered at the nationally designated archaeological site, Shihsanhang. This large and massively casted strap-end depicting a standing camel and its rider has long been recognized as a non-local item, possibly connected to the Silk Road. However, less is known about its 'social life' and artistic analogies. From this perspective, I will not only analyze the object and its archaeological background, but also intend to place it into the context of Taiwan's broader maritime interactions during her prehistoric times.

**Keywords: Taiwan, Archaeology, Shihsanhang site, Bronze plaque, Silk Road**

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# 福爾摩沙與絲路的交會： 從臺灣出土一件特殊青銅器談起

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## 中文摘要

本文聚焦在臺灣珍貴文化遺產之一：國定十三行考古遺址出土罕見的青銅腰牌。這件相對大件的模鑄銚尾描繪著站立的駱駝及騎師，無疑體現外來器物風格，並可能和絲路有關。然而，以往研究對於它所述說的社會生活以及風格藝術淵源討論有限，基此，作者通過解析該件青銅器的考古背景與器物風格，探討史前臺灣在更為廣域的海上互動網絡的脈絡。綜整考古、文獻與圖樣訊息，本文認為這件非凡的青銅銚尾可能屬於唐代製品（並可能晚到元代），體現了當時的世界主義，融合多重的文化風格，充分展現東西方藝術風格的交會。雖然青銅銚尾在臺灣顯然佚失其原本的功能和用途，卻在十三行地區重新被賦予全新的文化意，呈現出在地的接納以及再詮釋的過程。類似的文化接納與再脈絡化的現象，也見於中國六世紀前出現羅馬玻璃器，大量生產的生活器物被重新詮釋為特殊的珍稀物品，具備豐富的儀式和象徵意涵（Hoppál，2016、2018）。如此特殊的青銅器出現於十三行遺址，無疑描繪出十三行本地社群廣域的跨文化連結活動，從而將史前臺灣整合納入古代絲路複雜網絡中的一環。

**關鍵字：**臺灣考古、十三行遺址、青銅腰牌、絲路

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## Introduction

In 1991 during the excavations of the famous Shihshanhang site 十三行遺址 (hereafter SSH), an extraordinary bronze plaque of non-local origin was uncovered. The artefact itself is a large and massive casted strap-end (*chawei* 銚尾) with stylized relief of a standing camel and its rider. The depiction of both the camel and rider suggests a close connection to mediator cultures operating along the Silk Roads, the complex networks of land and maritime routes across Eurasia. It is important to note that bronze, especially decorated bronze items, are relatively rare at SSH and further mounted belts were clearly alien from the costume repertoire of SSH culture .

In this regard, several questions might be raised. How and when this strap-end arrived to Taiwan? Where was it made? How can its peculiar iconography be detected in visual arts of the various Silk Road cultures? How could such alien material be received by the local community? Despite the fact that giving a precise date to the artefact or finding its place of origin is still a very problematic matter, it is obvious that it was a non-local item, thus reflects to the complex networks of the SSH people and connects Taiwan with several nodes of the Silk Roads.

## Object descriptions

The bronze plaque was uncovered from the illustrious SSH site in 1991, which is one of the most recognized archaeological sites in Taiwan, situated in Bali district of modern New Taipei City. The object was discovered in burial No. 62 from the B area, an area occupied by several other burials dated to the Metal Age. The burial was badly preserved, only a few pieces of human teeth and small fragments of other bones (most likely of a juvenile based on the teeth ) remained along with a number of burial goods. Altogether 43 artefacts were buried with the deceased, many of which were non-local objects.<sup>1</sup> The associated 10 *Kaiyuan Tongbao* 開元通寶 coins, the longest used and most important currency of the Tang 唐 Dynasty (618-907 AD), provide *terminus post quem* for the burial.

The object itself is a large and massive casted strap-end with rounded loop and linear frame (Figure 1). Its full length is 6.61 cm, its maximum width is 4.27 cm and its maximum height is 0.53 cm. All basic information is available in the digital database of Institute of Philology and

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<sup>1</sup> Many of them are only single beads though.

Archaeology 歷史語言研究所, Academia Sinica 中央研究院, while the object itself is currently held at the Shihshang Museum of Archaeology 十三行博物館.

On the central section a stylized relief of a standing camel and its rider is depicted against the depressed background. The camel is standing with slightly raised front left leg, turning its head and looking at its male rider, thus its pronounced and rounded right ear is shown along with its right eye and long eyeshadows.<sup>2</sup> It has a long face, and a stylized wide strap is visible on its muzzle. Its tail is thick and curly, but it is also possible that a rolled carpet or another type of mercantile good is depicted. Possibly a square or short rectangular shaped cushion covers its back. Its male rider is portrayed with flat head piece (possibly a hat?), long beard and moustache, and slightly almond-like eyes. He most likely wears a long-sleeved upper dress and rests his hand(s) on his leg(?) or possibly a long carpet-like(?) material swung across the back of the animal. The camel is possibly standing on sand dunes(?) or lotus flower(?),<sup>3</sup> which however the official description interprets it as clouds (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> The left side of the object is pierced by five small vertical holes, while on the right side there are only two located in the upper and lower corners (Figure 3). The function of the holes is uncertain, it is possible that they were applied to help fixing the strap, or were pierced secondary in order to tie the object to something else (piece of fabric?).<sup>5</sup> The asymmetrical position of the holes might suggest the latter. The reverse of the strap-end is hollow with five pronounced rivets. (Figure 4)

## **The problems of Artistic Analogies**

### **1. General Observations**

To nearsighted people, many things appear strange. They see a camel and think it is a horse with swollen back. 少所見，多所怪，睹駱駝，言馬腫背

*Mou-tzu Li-huo lun 牟子理惑論* (Keenan, 1994: 82)

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<sup>2</sup> Its height, long neck and legs and the whole posture of the animal suggest that a camel has been depicted, although the idea of being another ungulate (horse perhaps) cannot be totally ruled out.

<sup>3</sup> The author would like to thank the idea provided by Dr. Ágnes Kelecsényi, head of the Department of Oriental Collection, Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>4</sup> [http://archeodata.sinica.edu.tw/2\\_3/teaching\\_website/TWgolden01\\_T0030434.html](http://archeodata.sinica.edu.tw/2_3/teaching_website/TWgolden01_T0030434.html) 以及 <http://catalog.digitalarchives.tw/item/00/1c/21/2c.html> (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>5</sup> The author would like to thank the idea to Dr. Zsófia Rácz, Institute of Archaeological Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University.

Although it is quite problematic to find a close analogy to its peculiar pattern, thus no exact date can be given, but from its style it is very likely that the strap-end is not earlier than the Tang era, in fact, the overall casting style even indicates a Yuan or later date (Sun, 2010: 1174-1175).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as it was mentioned above, the Kaiyuan Tongbao coins also provide a Tang period *terminus post quem*. It has been long assumed that the artefact arrived to Taiwan from or via mainland China.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, similar shapes of strap-ends are relatively common from as early as the Tang Dynasty, but especially in the Liao 遼 (916-1125 AD), Jin 金 (1115-1234 AD) and Yuan 元 (1271-1368 AD) periods. The usual belt set contains belt buckle(s) (*daikou* 帶扣), square/rectangular and oval(-like) shaped mounts (*kua* 銙) and strap-end(s) (*chawei* 銙尾), most often made of jade, precious metals<sup>8</sup> or (gilded) bronze, being fastened to a leather belt (*ting* 鞵) by small rivets (Xu, 2016). Originally, wearing such mounted belts (*diexie dai* 蹠蹻帶) and their simplified versions (*kuadai* 銙帶) was a Central Asian nomadic influence which became gradually more recognized during the Jin 晉 (265-420 AD), North Wei 北魏 (386-534 AD) and the Northern and Southern Dynasties 南北朝 (420-589 AD), while later in the Tang Dynasty the fashion became widespread but strictly regulated (Li, 2001: 22-24; Tian, 2016: 63). Not only the emperors and court officials wore decorated belts but lower officials (both civil and military), commoners and typically foreigners too. However, the number, shape and materials of the mounts varied greatly depending on the status and identity of their owners, despite that regulations also varied slightly through time (Feng, 2009: 52). Bronze and iron belts with six or seven mounts were generally attributed to low-ranked officials (*liuwaiguan* 流外官), common people (*shuren* 庶人), foreigners (*buqu* 部曲) and slaves (*nubi* 奴婢), according to *New History of the Tang Dynasty* 新唐書.<sup>9</sup> The archaeological evidence dated to the Tang period shows that (gilded) bronze belts are far less represented than jade specimens (Tian, 2016: 64), but during the Liao

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<sup>6</sup> The author would like to thank the opinion to Dr. Lu Yahui 盧亞輝, Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 中國社會科學院考古研究所.

<sup>7</sup> Although a Southeast Asian arrival is also assumed, it seems to be less likely to the author. See: [http://archeodata.sinica.edu.tw/2\\_3/teaching\\_website/TWgolden01\\_T0030434.html](http://archeodata.sinica.edu.tw/2_3/teaching_website/TWgolden01_T0030434.html). (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>8</sup> For the latter see e.g. a stolen item from the collection of East Asian Art: <http://collections.mea.org.uk/view-item?i=1726&WINID=1549267573878>. (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>9</sup> See e.g.: *New History of the Tang Dynasty*: Volume 24 Treatises 15: Carriages and Attire 《新唐書》卷二十四志第十四〈車服〉. More detailed historical references *conferatur* Tian (2016: 62-65).

and Jin Dynasties bronze became widely used.<sup>10</sup> Three main types of pattern of (jade) belt sets can be recognized: human, animal and floral motifs. Humans are mostly foreigners, who are often depicted performing dance or playing with musical instruments, although belt plaques portraying individuals showing Han features are also existing. Animals are often deers, lions or mythical creatures (Shaanxi History Museum, 2003: 208). These patterns became more elaborate and complex since the Five Dynasties 五代 (907-960 AD), and the number of materials and techniques used for decorations also increased greatly (Ma, 2006: 135; Feng, 2009: 52).

The massive appearance of the SSH specimen suggests that it was casted (*zhuzao* 鑄造), although in the case of metal belts other techniques were also employed, such as chasing, repoussé (*qiaohua* 敲花) and granulation (*hanjinzhu* 焊金珠) for decorations. It is also interesting that the frame around the depressed background for this SSH piece clearly differs from the obverse side of similar metal strap-ends, but instead resembles jade strap-ends. This may have suggested that the decoration of the SSH piece might have been inspired by engraved jade belts. For instance, similar frame can be found on the jade strap-end with pattern of dancing human figures from Hejiacun 何家村 (Yang, 2017: 109). Another example (Figure 5) can be found in *The Complete Collection of Unearthed Jades* 中國出土玉器全集 (Gu, 2005: 82). Moreover, inspiration of jade engraving techniques on metal belts, or even imitation of jade belt ornaments, might not have been extraordinary in Tang China, as for example the Shaanxi History Museum stores a bronze belt set with great technical similarity to the jade belt set with gold rivets from Hejiacun again (Figure 6; also *c.f.* Tian, 2016: 66-67 with another example).<sup>11</sup>

Various representations of camels (with or without riders) are again, foreign influences in China (e.g., Kanuer, 1998: 18, 34-43), and belt plaques with camel design- but typically made by open work technique- which had already appeared in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, were derived from nomadic art of the Steppe region, where they were common phenomenon (Korolkova, 2007). As the quote in the chapter title from Master Mou's 'Li Huo Lun illustrates, in Han times camels were already widely known phenomena thus eligible for such significant manual of Chinese intelligentsia- still crudely depicted though (Kanuer, 1998: 39-41). During the Tang era depicting

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<sup>10</sup> The mixture of different materials, e.g., jade and gilded bronze, can also be found (Li, 1987; Wu, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.sxhm.com/index.php?ac=article&at=read&did=10695> (accessed June 10, 2019)

camels became characteristic for the period. As important means of transportation across the deserts, these animals soon became the most illustrative mark of cross-cultural interactions, and were used as symbols of prosperity of the Silk Roads (Qi and Genito, 2017: 47-49), indicating close relationship to foreign cultural elements. Depicting camels and their riders were relatively common in other forms of visual arts, such as ceramics and textiles, and the motif is often regarded as proof of encounter with West Asian art traditions (e.g., Kadoi, 2009: 16; Zhao, 1999: 97-99). Camel representations- particularly camel figurines- reached their zenith in Tang times, but it seems that their production (along with other animal sculptures) reappeared in the Yuan Dynasty (Kadoi, 2009: 87, note 73).

Although earlier examples exist, representations of foreigners, just like those of camels, also start to appear in a larger scale from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries when cross-cultural interactions became increasingly vivid (Mahler, 1959: 120; Qianling Museum 乾陵博物館, 2008: 16). In many cases foreigners are represented in close connection to camels: as their riders, traders or musicians, and performers entertaining the public, but individual images can also be found. From the Tang era foreigners can be regarded a very popular theme of several forms of visual arts, and they are also portrayed on belts plaques to a greater extent (*c.f.* Fan, 2008: 82).

At the same time, the stylized depiction of the camel and its rider of the SSH specimen narrows the possibility to find analogies to their iconographic elements. However, some wider examples can be drawn. Camel portrayals with their foreign riders can be found on massive belt sets from and beyond the Tang period, although none of them has exactly the same design as the SSH piece<sup>12</sup>.

In fact, certain details of decoration of the SSH object cannot be regarded as a set of commonly used motifs/elements of the Tang-Yuan period decorative arsenal. For instance, the static posture of the SSH camel with its head turned sideways/back to its rider is less usual in Chinese visual arts as such camels are usually represented in a much more vivid and dynamic

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<sup>12</sup> For example, one belt set claimed dated to be Liao Dynasty can be found: <https://www.cang.com/trade/goods/6441823>. Possibly another type of ungulates can be seen here: [http://www.gucn.com/Service\\_CurioStall\\_Show.asp?Id=2486542](http://www.gucn.com/Service_CurioStall_Show.asp?Id=2486542) or here in reduced quality (modern imitation?): <http://bbs.chcoin.com/show-10276240.html?authorid=57094>, or further on a Yuan Dynasty jade strap-end from the Guanfu Museum 觀復博物館 <http://www.jianbaodangan.com/uploads/allimg/141011/216-1410112302034P.jpg> (accessed June 10, 2019)

posture (Figure 7).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, due to its broadly formed decoration it is quite problematic to define the exact species of the camel depicted (one or two humps), but it cannot be excluded that it might be a dromedary or Arabian camel (*Camelus dromedarius*), similar to pottery figurine from Dai Lingyang's tomb 戴令言墓 in Luoyang 洛陽 of Tang period, currently held at the Beijing Palace Museum 北京故宮博物院.<sup>14</sup> A more recognized example of dromedary was discovered in Qi Biming's tomb 契苾明墓 in Xianyang City 咸陽市, currently held in the Xianyang Museum 咸陽博物院.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Arabian camels are less frequently represented in Chinese visual traditions, despite the fact that they were not unacquainted as already mentioned in the *Hanshu* 漢書.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Further analogies

Again, as the camel and its rider are rather crudely depicted and badly-preserved, it is even more challenging to find other comparable artistic elements in the visual traditions of the Tang-Yuan era. Taking into account all unclear details and problematic identifications of certain motifs, in the following, some possible comparableness will be introduced. Such element- being as dubious as it is- might be the shape of the possible cushion on the back of the camel. In general, among the Chinese camel representations oval or longer rectangular cushions slung across the animals are depicted, however said examples can also be found less-frequently in Tang and later decorative arsenal.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, similar portrayals to the possible SSH camel cushion are

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<sup>13</sup> For example, the Tang camel and its rider from collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Met\\_camel\\_and\\_rider\\_tang\\_dynasty.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Met_camel_and_rider_tang_dynasty.JPG). Auction examples of jade can be found on websites with unclear dating.

[http://www.997788.com/211941/search\\_271\\_65541434.html](http://www.997788.com/211941/search_271_65541434.html) and

[http://www.997788.com/217842/search\\_271\\_66263656.html](http://www.997788.com/217842/search_271_66263656.html) (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/sculpture/234234.html> (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.xywwly.gov.cn/www/jpjs/355547.htm>. Other examples of dromedary figurines from China dated to Sui 隨 and Tang periods found in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art 1974.289.4 and 63.175.1.: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/63005?&searchField=All&sortBy=Date&ft=camel&offset=20&rpp=20&pos=32> and <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/62991?&searchField=All&sortBy=Date&ft=camel&offset=20&rpp=20&pos=34> (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>16</sup> 《漢書》西域傳卷 96 上〈大月氏國〉.

<sup>17</sup> Examples see in the decorated cushion on the Tang Dynasty camel discovered near Xi'an held in the collection of the Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an might be similar to the badly depicted carpet of the SSH piece. <http://www.sxhm.com/index.php?ac=article&at=read&did=10476> (accessed June 10, 2019)



relatively common in Persian art e.g., on bowls and tiles depicting the story of Bahram Gur from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>18</sup> or on miniatures from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries (Figure 8).<sup>19</sup>

Another unusual detail is the thick curly tail of the camel. Tang and later camels are usually portrayed with straight tail or with no tail present (e.g., Qi and Genito, 2017: 44), although curly but slimmer tails also exist.<sup>20</sup> A curly and relatively thick example can be seen on the claimed to be Han Dynasty jade camel on an auction website (Figure 9).<sup>21</sup>

Identifying the base on which the camel is standing is again a problematic element. Among the possible interpretations, i.e., cloud, sand dunes or lotus, the most similar representations to the SSH piece are the several depictions of lotus- the flower associated with Buddhism.<sup>22</sup> Although animals are less frequently portrayed on a lotus base, comparable iconography can be seen on a Javanese ring from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On the gold jewelry dated to the 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century, an elephant is standing on a relatively similar lotus base (Figure 10).<sup>23</sup> Camels can also be found in context of Buddhist imaginary, particularly from 5<sup>th</sup> century, e.g., on the Buddhist-Daoist stela made by Wei Wenlang 魏文朗 from 424 AD (Li, 1994; Wang, 2005: 29, 43; Wong, 2004: 109-114).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the gate of An Jia 安伽's tomb depicts three camels standing on a lotus pedestal- in a Zoroastrian context (Shaanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo, 2003). However, the whole scene, and particularly the representation of the lotus is

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<sup>18</sup> See for example a piece in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Strikingly on 10.56.2. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/445993?&searchField=All&sortBy=Date&ft=camel&offset=60&rpp=20&pos=67> (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>19</sup> See a miniature with an attribution to Bihzad, Herat (Binyon *et al.*, 1933: pl.87a; Adamova, 2004: 1, fig. 1)

<sup>20</sup> For example a Tang figurine from the Sotheby <http://www.sothebys.com/es/auctions/ecatalogue/2008/fine-chinese-ceramics-works-of-art-including-chinese-and-japanese-art-from-the-collection-of-frieda-and-milton-rosenthal-n08464/lot.96.html#> (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>21</sup> Further description can be found in Chinese Han Dynasty Hetian Jade Camel and Old Man Statue Dimension: 145x55x85(mm) [https://www.liveauctioneers.com/en-gb/item/57271537\\_chinese-han-dynasty-hetian-jade-camel-and-old-man-statue](https://www.liveauctioneers.com/en-gb/item/57271537_chinese-han-dynasty-hetian-jade-camel-and-old-man-statue) (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>22</sup> Form of the lotus petals (*lianban* 蓮瓣) can be found on Tang metalwares, strikingly similar to the inner pattern of the gold bowl (*yuanyang lianban wenjin wan* 鴛鴦蓮瓣紋金碗) from the notable Hejiacun hoard 西安市南郊何家村窖藏 (Shaanxi History Museum, 2003: 109-114).

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/50244?&searchField=All&sortBy=Date&when=A.D.+500-1000&ft=lotus&offset=40&rpp=20&pos=43> (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>24</sup> Camels also appear in the context of Zoroastrianism such as Yu Hong 虞弘's sarcophagus (Juliano, 2016: 30-31).

quite different from the SSH object.<sup>25</sup> Another interesting example can be found on Yu Hong 虞弘's sarcophagus on which not only a camel (and its rider) surrounded by lotus flowers is depicted, but a fire altar with lotus petals represented in a way comparable to the SSH piece can also be found (see Figure 12, Shaanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo, 2005).<sup>26</sup>

Foreigners are often depicted with beard particularly in Tang times, however chiefly with a carefully trimmed one, e.g., Qi and Genito (2017: 47). Long beards- like in case of the SSH plaque- are less common. An example of a relatively long bearded foreigner can be found in the collection of the Beijing Palace Museum.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, aforementioned head-piece (the 'flat hat' [*maoyan* 帽檐]) on the SSH item is less frequent among foreigner portrays,<sup>28</sup> thus it is possible that he is wearing a decorated headband (*jinjin shufa* 錦巾束髮) as in case of the Tang figurines from Jialicun 嘉裏村 tomb 1 and from Qi Bimin's tomb (Han, 2000: 28-29). Possibly some other type of head scarf (*touxi fujin* 頭系襖巾) like in case of the Tang figurine discovered in Chigangchong, Changsha 長沙市赤崗沖, currently held at the Hunan Museum 湖南博物館.<sup>29</sup> It is also possible that it is crudely depicted as belted headwear (*futou* 襖頭), like on many of the Tang foreigner figurines, such as in the collection of the Beijing Palace Museum.<sup>30</sup>

As camels are usually heavily loaded with several goods, it is not uncommon to find an extra carpet swung across the animal's back,<sup>31</sup> however the existence of the extra carpet on the SSH piece is very provisory (Figure 11)

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<sup>25</sup> Depictions of camels and caravans on stone reliefs see Rong (2005), which are all particular in respects of Western influence or likely connection to Westerners such as Sogdians 粟特.

<sup>26</sup> The author would like to thank Dr. Gábor Kósa (MTA – ELTE – SZTE Silk Road Research Group) for pointing out this interesting iconographic analogy.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/sculpture/233424.html.html> (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>28</sup> A possible example can be seen on object from an auction website with unclear dating: [http://www.997788.com/211941/search\\_271\\_65541434.html](http://www.997788.com/211941/search_271_65541434.html) (accessed June 10, 2019)

<sup>29</sup> With a long introduction see: <http://www.hnmuseum.com/zh-hans/zuixintuijie/%E8%83%A1%E4%BA%E7%89%B5%E9%AA%86%E9%A9%BC%E4%BF%91> (accessed June 10, 2019), while for various foreigner representations can be found in Qianling Museum (2008).

<sup>30</sup> For example: <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/sculpture/233425.html> (accessed June 10, 2019); More detailed discussions on Hu dress 胡著 during the Tang Dynasty can see found in Li (2001: 43-46).

<sup>31</sup> For example the Northern Wei/Northern Qi camel figurine from the Metropolitan Museum of Art <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/49543?&searchField=All&sortBy=Date&ft=camel&offset=20&rpp=20&pos=30>, or a questionable example from an auction website with unknown date <https://www.cang.com/posts/post/820061> (accessed June 10, 2019) Also see Knauer (1998: 44-69, 106-108).

## **Concluding remarks**

In light of the above, it can be concluded that the overall depiction of the pattern, i.e., the static posture, and curly and thick tail of the camel, along with the hat and beard of its rider, and the rectangular or square shaped cushion over the animal together, cannot be regarded as typical representations in China during Tang/Yuan dynasties, nor in other cultures of the Silk Roads (though less recognized analogies might exist). At the same time, as individual elements these motifs all existed in the mainland, and many were derived from non-local artistic practice. Those iconographic analogies suggest that the strap-end could not be made earlier than the Tang, during the period when both the fashion of wearing mounted belts and depicting camels with their foreign riders were widespread. At the same time, using bronze for belt ornaments only became extremely popular during the Liao and Jin Dynasties. Moreover, casting details along with the overall style of the pattern and some iconographic elements even suggest a later, possibly Yuan Dynasty date, when a revival of camel representations can also be detected.

Although at this point only the Tang *terminus post quem* seems to be certain, by finding a closer analogy or/and giving a more precise date of the SSH site with the B62 burial, we might be able to have a better insight on the actual production date and possibly even the production place of the SSH item.

Taking into accounts all its peculiarities, the strap-end seems to arrive from the mainland, where in fact it is an example of alien inspiration as indicated by both the camel and its rider. Moreover, the abovementioned atypical details of its pattern suggest that different traditions might have played role in forming its design in accordance with the Tang(or later) taste/preference - among which a certain Western Asian influence can be detected. As it is the case with other belt sets with multicultural design (Shaanxi History Museum, 2003: 206), possibly the SSH object might have been made by a non-local craftsman or was produced in a non-local workshop, most likely for consumer(s)/community(ies) residing in mainland China.

Taking that bronze belts were generally attributed to commoners and foreigners, and camels and their foreign riders were mostly associated with the Silk Road trade activities and multiculturalism, it is possible that originally the belt set (including the SSH strap-end) might have been related to somebody involved in such activities. However, this idea needs to be

confirmed by further study on the social background and identity of the deceased buried with such mounted belts of multicultural designs, including depicting camels, lions, and foreigners etc., in and beyond the Tang era.

### **Further considerations on the social background of the artefact**

Despite the fact that giving a precise date to the artefact or finding its place of origin is a very problematic matter, it is obvious that it was a non-local item, thus reflects to the complex networks of the SSH people. Although less is known about its place of production, but thanks to its well-documented context, a few thoughts about its position in the receiving culture can be formed.

As the burial was badly preserved, little is known about the exact position of the artefact within the pit but it is quite clear that no other items of the original belt set were placed into the burial, thus the strap-end is a lone piece without its set. It is also very clear that it was not in a wearing position, most likely placed into the pottery along with other non-local items. Its finding context, together with the lack of other pieces of the belt set, might suggest that its owner/deceased (or the community responsible for the burial) had no intricate understanding regarding the functionality of the object, or that they simply did not intend to use it in a wearing context.

Bronze as a material, especially decorated objects made of bronze are quite rare at SSH site (Tsang and Liu, 2001: 82-83) and it is a broad yet accurate assumption that such mounted belts are alien from the SSH culture costume repertoire. Also, based on its peculiar decoration and relatively rare material, and considering from presence of other non-local objects in the same burial (although non-local items are fairly common among other burials in general), it may be again a broad yet plausible postulation that the strap-end was a valuable item, although it would be premature to decide whether it might have been a prestige object or simply an 'exotic' item without any immaterial value. The fact that it was buried as a lone piece might either suggest that it was treasured for a long time before its burial, while all other pieces of its belt set had been lost with time, or that it was acquired as an individual piece, even without the belt itself. If we accept that the asymmetrical holes on its sides were pierced secondarily, their mere existence would also

prove that the object was tied to something and thus was not used for its intended(original?) purpose .

To be sure, all of the abovementioned peculiarities fall within the context suggesting a specific reception and reinterpretation of this interesting object, in which the strap-end had lost its original function and was attributed with new understanding(s)/meaning(s). Such communal and culturally specific reception (when a non-local item got a new interpretation) can also be seen in case of Roman glass vessels in pre-6<sup>th</sup> century China, where the mass-produced Roman glass from common utensil was reinterpreted to be a genuine prestige object and was enriched by ritual and symbolic aspects (Hoppál, 2016, 2018).

All things considered, this extraordinary strap-end is an example of cosmopolitanism, perhaps post-Tang(?), showing several cultural traditions and its mere existence is interconnecting the West and the East through artisan performance. Its presence at SSH site clearly illustrates the vast cross-cultural connections of the local community, and integrates Taiwan into the complex network system of the Silk Roads.

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Figure 1: Front view of the camel plaque. (Courtesy of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica)



Figure 2: Drawing of the plaque. (Courtesy of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica)

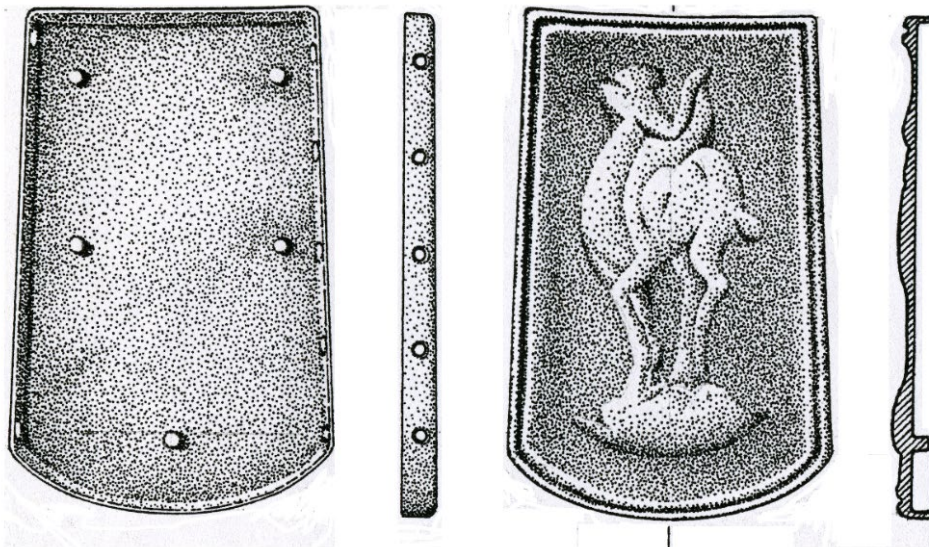


Figure 3: Drawing of the camel plaque by the author based on pictures provided by the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica. Note that figure 3 is somewhat different from figure 2 due to different artists' reconstructions.



Figure 4: Back view of the camel plaque, Courtesy of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica



Figure 5: Early Liao Dynasty jade strap-end with pattern of human figures from Inner Mongolia. (Gu, 2005: 82)

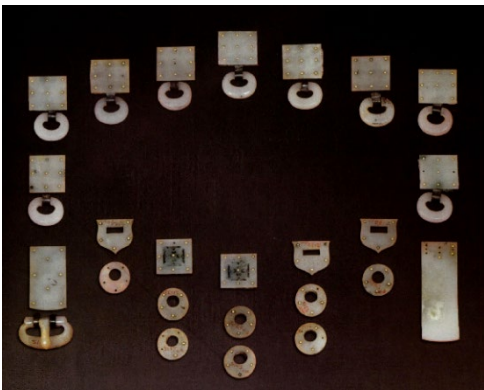


Figure 6(a-b): Tang Dynasty jade belt set and its bronze technological counterpart from the collection of the Shaanxi History Museum (Tian 2016: 67, figures 11-12)



Figure 7: Tang Dynasty camel figurine from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 8: Tile depicting Bahram Gur and Azada. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 9: Jade camel figurine represented with a thick curly tail. Courtesy of the Quan Rong Gallery.



Figure 10: Ring with an elephant standing on a lotus. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 11: Camel figurine represented with an extra carpet. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 12: Line drawing of the relief depicting fire altar with lotus petals on the base of Yu Hong's marble sarcophagus. (Shaanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo 2005: 134, Figure 181)