Upper body detail of the monumental male winged lion on display at the Penn Museum. PM object C656.
The two winged lions that confront each other across the span of the Rotunda are the oldest and most massive Chinese sculptures at the Penn Museum. Carved around 200 CE, as the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE) was disintegrating, they predate all the stone monuments surrounding them in the gallery, and represent the first flourishing of monumental stone sculpture in East Asia.
This presents us with some interesting questions, especially when we consider the Egyptian Galleries next door filled with large-scale stone sculpture that date millennia earlier than the winged lions. Why are large stone monuments rare in early China, which by the time the winged lions were made had already experienced 1,500 years of literate civilizations with sophisticated arts in a variety of media? What initiated the Chinese enthusiasm for large stone sculpture, seen in the Buddhist monuments that fill the gallery? The winged lions are not Buddhist, but like that religion, which began to influence China at approximately the time they were made, they are the product of impulses from more westerly regions of the Asian continent.

It is 90 years since the winged lions arrived at the Penn Museum. Although several articles have discussed them in the past, Chinese archaeology has flourished spectacularly in the interim and now provides a context for these monuments that was not available earlier. It is time for them to be reexamined.

Winged Lions Arrive in Philadelphia

The winged lions are a pair, male and female. The sculptor provided them with unambiguous genitalia, as well as less obvious sex-linked characteristics: vertical chest-ribbing and a single horn for the male, contrasting with horizontal chest-ribbing and two horns on the female. Each has a beard.

After their arrival in Philadelphia in 1927, they were published by Helen Fernald, Assistant Curator at the Museum. Fernald compared them to the winged lions from the Southern Dynasties (420–589 CE) imperial tombs near Nanjing, which were already well-known thanks to pioneering photography and studies by Victor Segalen and Matthias Tschang. Though evidently related, the style of the Penn lions differs noticeably from the Southern Dynasties examples. Fernald also noted the unmistakable parallels with fantastic winged beasts of Western and Central Asia, including famous examples from Susa and from the Oxus Treasure. The old gallery photograph on the next page hints at this distant and ancient relationship, juxtaposing the female with a winged bull from the 9th century BCE palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud in present-day Iraq. (The winged bull and its counterpart on the other side of the arch, a winged lion, are now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

Another early gallery photograph, not pictured, shows a third Chinese winged lion in the Rotunda. Unlike the two lions that remain in our gallery today, which were purchased by the Museum from the dealer C.T. Loo, the third remained the property of Loo. It is no longer at Penn, having made the journey across the Atlantic in time to be displayed at the 1935–36 exhibition of
Chinese art at the Royal Academy, London—one of the most spectacular displays of Chinese art ever attempted, with loans from the United States, Europe, and China. Today, this third winged lion is in the Musée Guimet in Paris.

The Guimet winged lion is stylistically similar to the pair at Penn. All three are much more similar to one another than to any in the Southern Dynasties group near Nanjing. That all three appeared at the same time in Loo’s collection adds to the probability of a common origin. They clearly reflect a different time and place from the Nanjing examples. But what is their date and where are they from? Since Chinese monumental winged lions come in pairs, where was the counterpart to the third sculpture? Without knowing their original context, answering these questions was difficult. Writing in 1928, Osvald Sirén remarked with pointed irony that these and other examples were offered to museums by dealers with “every possible precaution being taken, of course, against any detailed investigation of their original position.”

Searching for the Origins of the Lions

In 1980, Barry Till, soon-to-be curator of Asian art at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in British Columbia, compared the Penn winged lions with a securely datable Eastern Han pair from the burial complex of a high-ranking official named Zong Zi (2nd century CE) and his family. Because of their stylistic similarity, the Penn monuments are likely also to be from the 2nd or 3rd century CE. Till had information, ultimately from C.T. Loo’s documentation, that the Penn monuments came from Nei quarantine County, in what is now Hebei Province.

Preliminary confirmation of this location was provided in 1987 by the Chinese scholar, Wang Luyu, who interviewed villagers in the county. They recalled that three “flying horses” were removed some time before the Japanese invasion of 1937, one from the village of Shifangcun and two from the neighboring village of Wucun. They also recalled that a fourth was found while ploughing fields in 1952, but reburied and its location lost. Remarkably, this fourth winged lion reappeared in 1999, confirming the story. In size and style, it is a good match for the Guimet specimen, and the two are likely to be a male-female pair.

Monuments to the Dead

The four winged lions from Wucun and Shifangcun tell us that there were two individuals buried there of sufficient social status to have large stone monuments guarding their tombs. Given the proximity in place and date, it is likely that they were members of the same family. We have already mentioned the comparable winged lions that belonged to Zong Zi and other members of his lineage. During the 2nd century, Zong Zi was Governor...
Decoding the Winged Lions

At first glance, the two winged lions on display in the Penn Museum’s Rotunda are deceivingly similar in their visual appearance. Upon closer inspection, though, there are several features that designate the gender of the lions as either male (PM object C656) or female (PM object C657). In Chinese art, it is typical to represent pairs of guardian animals as male and female. The winged lions are differentiated by their genitalia and by several differences in physical features; in later periods, guardian lions were differentiated with more subtlety by the placement of a paw on a cub (female) or a ball (male).

- **Wings**
  For both lions, the sculpted wings are nearly identical, indicating that they are not gender-defining features.

- **Posture**
  The male winged lion is shown above while the female winged lion is seen in the large image below. Both lions are represented with limbs outstretched as if in motion, and their powerful postures and emphasized muscles convey equal strength and fearsomeness.

- **Genitalia**
  The winged lions are represented with unambiguous genitalia, clearly identifying them as either male or female.
Horns
The female lion has two horns running down the back of her head (far left circle inset) while the male lion has only one horn.

Beards
The lions’ beards curve in opposite directions, with the male’s beard curving more dramatically (circle inset, directly above).

Chest Ribbing
The chest ribbing of the female lion is horizontal (seen here to the left), whereas that of the male is vertical (shown below).
(taishou) of Runan (modern Henan), one of the highest ranks in the Han administration, and came from a long line of senior officials. So, we would expect the Wucun and Shifangcun tombs to belong to a similarly prominent family active sometime around the 2nd century CE, but with ties to the Hebei region.

The village of Wucun, from where the Penn Museum winged lions came, is also the site of the remains of a prominent tomb mound. County gazetteers going back to the 17th century report that this was the tomb of Zhang Yan, a warlord who emerged from obscure bandit origins during the social upheavals at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty. According to his biography in the Records of the Three Kingdoms, by the time of his death early in the 3rd century, he was the most powerful individual in the Hebei region, and recognized as such by the last Eastern Han monarchs, who granted him titles like “General Who Pacifies the North,” and “Marquis of Anguo.”

Most of the tumulus and burial chamber were destroyed in the 1960s, leaving only a fraction of the original volume. No formal record was made of the disturbed tomb, but the objects said to have come from the tomb were of a kind that would be expected for an elite burial of Eastern Han date. So, although total certainty is not possible, it is very likely that the original owner of the Penn Museum winged lions was indeed the warlord Zhang Yan who died in the early 3rd century CE. The Guimet stone sculpture and its rediscovered counterpart likely belonged to a son or grandson.

Inspiration for These Fantastic Beasts

The families of powerful men such as Zhang Yan and Zong Zi were probably emulating the Eastern Han emperors when they erected monumental stone sculpture at their tombs. As we noted before, the use of large-scale monuments in stone was a recent innovation in China, roughly coinciding in time with the first eastward transmission of Buddhism into the Chinese-speaking world. A tradition of massive stone winged lions and other beasts appears much earlier in the Neo-Assyrian
Stone Columns: A Shared Past

The free-standing, fluted columns with sculptural capitals and inscriptions found at Southern Dynasties tombs are best compared to Indian commemorative pillars. Right: Ashoka’s edict-bearing pillars with animal (including lion) capitals were distributed throughout the subcontinent. Photo by Bpilgrim, Wikimedia. Center: The Heliodorus Column provides a close stylistic match for the Southern Dynasties columns. Photo from Wikimedia. Far right: The column from the tomb of Liang Wen Di in Danyang, Jiangsu Province. Photo by Eric N. Danielson.

(9th to 7th centuries BCE) and Achaemenid (6th to 4th centuries BCE) empires. In Indian stone reliefs from Buddhist monuments like the Great Stupa at Amaravati, we often find winged lions playing an ornamental role at about the same date as the Penn felines. In addition to its burial mound and winged lions, the village of Wucun has one other feature that sheds light on the exotic roots of stone winged lions in China. But to understand its significance, we first need to take a detour to the imperial tombs of the Southern Dynasties.

After the Han Empire, what had been its territory was for 500 years divided between numerous, often ephemeral, successor dynasties. The so-called Southern Dynasties (420–589 CE) had their capital and their imperial burial grounds near modern Nanjing. The tombs of the royal families are the sites of the biggest and best-known assembly of stone winged lions in China. The Southern Dynasties monarchs had continued (or perhaps had been prompted to revive) the Eastern Han tradition of stone winged lions as funeral monuments.

The Southern Dynasties tombs preserve the original layout of the tomb complex, with stone monuments aligned symmetrically along a “spirit road” toward the burial mound. Since none of the Han period sites with monumental winged lions preserves their original and complete layout, the configuration at the Southern Dynasties tombs is a useful guide to how the Han monuments might have been arranged.

A key to understanding the foreign origins of the Chinese winged lions, and to reconstructing the historical processes connecting them to Assyrian, Iranian, or Indian precursors, is the monument shown above: a free-standing, limestone, fluted, inscription-bearing column. Pairs of such columns, originally with lion capitals, were an indispensable component of the Southern Dynasties imperial tombs.

The presence of columns like these in China is striking. For many observers today, a fluted column might evoke the architecture of the ancient Mediterranean world (and its many revivals), or perhaps Persepolis. Besides formal similarity to stone columns in other cultures, and an association with foreign-looking winged lions, several things indicate that stone columns are exotic in China. The use of stone columns in China is narrowly circumscribed, confined to funerary contexts. During the 5th and 6th centuries they are uniquely associated with the Southern Dynasties imperial tombs. Examples from the 2nd to 4th centuries are also known, and again only as tomb monuments.

They have no architectural analogues either. Weight-bearing pillars are fundamental to Chinese architecture, but like all other structural elements in traditional
Chinese buildings, they are wood and never stone. The Chinese stone columns are free-standing, and the only load they bear (when it survives in place) is a lion or similar sculptural capital. Free-standing columns are a prominent feature of early Indian stone monuments. The edict-bearing pillars of Ashoka with animal capitals (3rd century BCE) are well-known. The free-standing inscribed Pillar of Heliodorus (2nd century BCE) in Madhya Pradesh provides a closer formal match for the capital, fluting, and other ornamentation found on the Southern Dynasties stone columns. The exact functions of these commemorative pillars varies of course: the Chinese examples mark tombs, with the name of the tomb occupant recorded in the inscription, while the Indian pillars and their inscriptions have no funerary associations. The subcontinent-wide distribution of the Ashokan edict pillars, and Heliodorus’ inscription recording his embassy from the Hellenistic king Antialkidas of Taxila (northern Pakistan), hint at some of the mechanisms responsible for a widespread currency of this monumental form. This includes the unprecedented interregional connectivity made possible by the growth of empires and their literate bureaucracies. These empires invested in monuments at their political and religious centers, and influential courtiers traveling between these centers carried news of what they had seen.

The Importance of Stone Columns at Wucun
Returning to the village of Wucun, it will now be obvious why the discovery of a fallen stone column in the vicinity of the tomb mound is significant. Stone columns and monumental winged lions are known to occur at Han tombs, but Wucun, despite the damage to the tumulus and the dispersal of its winged lions, is the only site earlier than the Southern Dynasties tombs where we have evidence that winged lions and stone columns were used together as “spirit road” monuments. We expect that other Eastern Han tombs would have combined winged lions with free-standing columns, and it will be interesting to see if future archaeological work bears this out.

Chinese winged lions, then, were not an isolated borrowing from more westerly parts of Asia. They were just one of several monumental features, including stone columns and perhaps extending more broadly to the use of stone masonry and rock-cut chambers, which had pre-

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**Indian Stone Monuments**

A description from the *Record of Buddhist Countries* by Faxian, *ca. 420 CE*

“We came to the city of Pataliputra in Magadha, where King Ashoka had once had his capital. The halls of the royal palace which stand today as in antiquity were all built by demons and spirits, with masonry walls and gates, and carved ornament and sculpted reliefs, like nothing made in this world.

Ashoka demolished the seven stupa reliquaries to construct eighty-four thousand new ones. The Great Stupa, the first that he built, is three miles south of the city. Before it is a footprint of the Buddha, where the king constructed a monastery with its entrance facing north toward the stupa. South of the stupa stands a stone column twelve feet in circumference and twenty-five feet tall bearing an inscription....Three or four hundred paces north of the stupa is where Ashoka built the castle of Nili, in the center of which is a stone column, again over twenty-five feet in height, with a lion capital, and an inscription recording the reason for building the castle of Nili and the date.”

_ABOVE_: Detail of Ashoka pillar in Vaishali Bihar, India, with a lion-headed capital. King Ashoka placed numerous pillars throughout North India. Photo by Mself, Wikimedia.
viously been uncommon in China. These diverse traits were combined and reinterpreted during the 1st and 2nd centuries CE to form the monumental configurations that we find at elite Eastern Han tombs.

It has sometimes been suggested that the winged lion in Chinese art was introduced via the nomads of the Eurasian grasslands through easily transported small metal ornaments. Fantastic, aggressive felines are certainly part of the art of the nomads, and of the wide currency of the winged feline motif. But stone columns have no counterpart in nomadic art, and indicate a different mechanism of transmission: eyewitness encounters with stone monumental complexes by socially well-placed, intellectually engaged individuals with influence in the Chinese courts.

No such eyewitness accounts early enough to have influenced Eastern Han winged lions and columns have come down to us in writing, although many people would have been capable of relating them. We get some sense of how the stone monuments of India, Central Asia, and Parthian Iran might have impressed themselves upon the imagination of visitors from the Eastern Han by reading the later, 5th-century CE travelogue of the Buddhist monk Faxian, the earliest work of Chinese literature to include detailed accounts of foreign monuments and architecture. Faxian’s journey via Central Asia to India was motivated by his distress at the fragmentary state of the books of monastic rules then available in China, and Faxian’s legacy includes translations of Buddhist texts into Chinese made after his return. In his travelogue, he describes the already ancient stone architecture of Ashoka’s palace at Pataliputra (modern Patna, Bihar, India), and the city’s reliquary stupas and monasteries. At Pataliputra and elsewhere, Faxian’s description dwells upon free-standing stone columns with lion capitals, set up to bear commemorative inscriptions, which find echoes both in the Southern Dynasties monuments erected during the century and a half following his return to China, and in stone pillars erected earlier at Eastern Han sites like Wucun, where the Penn winged lions once stood.

In the Museum gallery, the winged lions stand surrounded by examples of monuments from China’s subsequent tradition of stone sculpture that continued many of the same traits that they exemplify. These include the two famous reliefs of warhorses from the burial complex of the Taizong Emperor (r. 626–649 CE) of the Tang Dynasty, where the convention was continued of arranging monumental sculpture symmetrically along the main line of approach to a major tomb. The Buddhist statues and narrative steles reflect the same creative response by Chinese sculptors to the stimulus of ideas and visual vocabulary from China’s Asian neighbors.

Adam Smith, Ph.D., is Assistant Curator in the Asian Section. Qin Zhongpei is a graduate of the Penn School of Design.

FOR FURTHER READING
Detail of the Penn Museum’s female winged lion, with horizontal ribbing on its chest. PM object C657.