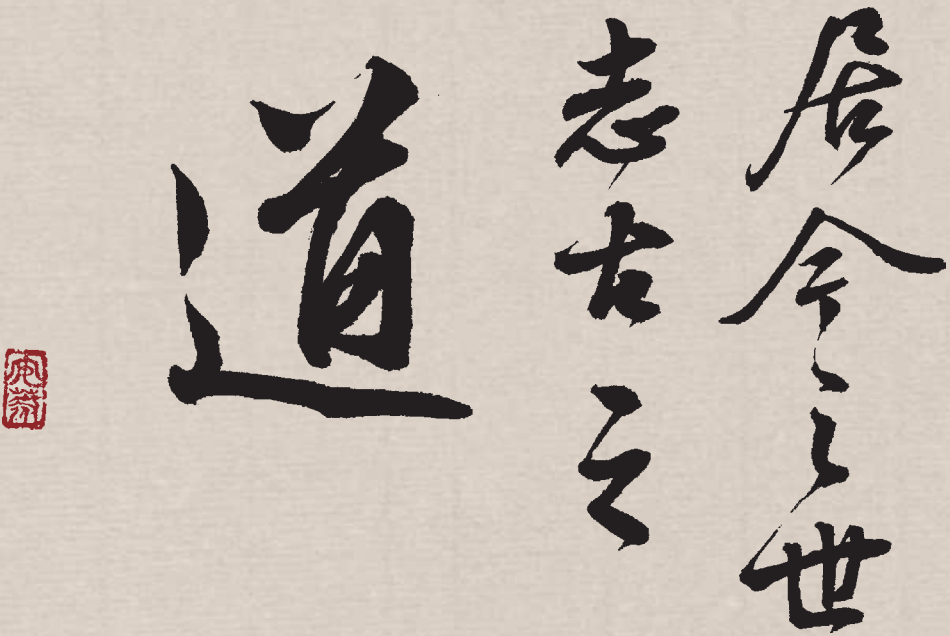


**Settled in the Present,
Committed to the Past**



Festschrift for Achim Mittag

Edited by
Fei Huang,
Dorothee Schaab-Hanke
and Martin Hanke

Settled in the Present, Committed to the Past

Festschrift for Achim Mittag
on the Occasion
of His 68th Birthday

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and Martin Hanke

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The calligraphy on the cover, created by Dan-wei Zhu-Mittag (2024), 居今之世，志古之道, alludes to a passage in Chap. 18 of the *Shiji* 史記 ('The Scribes' Records) that serves as the governing word of this volume. For more details, see the introduction.

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“Et in summitate cuiuslibet columpne est draco magnus circumdans totam columpnam, ...”: Marco Polo on the Dragon Columns of the Great Khan’s Bamboo Palace in Shangdu

Hans Ulrich VOGEL*

Looking at Marco Polo’s report, one will notice that when taking all the major versions into account, references to dragons can only be found in four instances. These four entries concern descriptions of depictions and designs of astrological, magical, artistic, architectonical and – perhaps implicitly – political meanings and can be subdivided into the following four categories:

- the dragon together with the “lion” and [ten] other animals as part of the zoomorphical cycle used by the Mongols and the Canbalu (Xānbaliq)¹ astrologers for the designation of years,
- golden dragons as an artistic as well as architectonical element of the golden and lacquered columns of the Great Khan’s bamboo palace in Ciandu (Shangdu 上都),
- dragons together with “lions”, birds and other animals as artistic decorative elements of the walls and ceiling of the Great Khan’s palace in Canbalu,
- dragons together with “lions” and other animals as magical tattoo designs of the people in the province of Caugigu (Jiaozhiguo 交趾國, i.e. Annam, the northern part of today’s Vietnam).

In contrast to real and observable animals that had frequently attracted the attention of the Venetian, the dragon was a fabulous and mythical creature and thus something which he did not dedicate much space to in his account. Moreover, it seems to me that dragons were something that Marco knew already from Europe and hence he may not have deemed it necessary to dwell on them extensively in spite of its obvious ubiquity in Chinese culture. Whatever the case, in this article I will only deal with the dragons coiling around the columns of Khubilai’s bamboo palace as they are mentioned in the traveler’s account. The other topics will be dealt with in another publication.

Dragon Columns in Marco Polo’s Account:

The Latin L Manuscripts (14th Century) and Ramusio’s Rendering (1559)

The description of dragons coiling around the columns of the Khubilai’s bamboo palace in his hunting grounds of Shangdu is only preserved in two of the major versions, that is in Ramusio’s Italian rendering R (*dragone*) and in the Latin version L (*draco*). In chapter 65 of the shorter L version – mostly labelled *Extracta et translata de libro Domini Marchi Paulo de Veneciis de diversis provinciis et regnis maioris Asiae, et de diversis moribus habitantium et de multis mirabilibus in hiis locis* in the available manuscripts, the dragon columns are described as below:

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For providing me with copies of literature not readily available otherwise I am indebted to M.A. Thomas Gaiser, librarian of the Tübingen Department of Chinese Studies, and his team of student assistants. For the copy-editing of the English I would like to express my gratitude to M.A. Scott Stelle, Tübingen.

1 For toponyms, I use the basic spellings in the F manuscript, as they are indicated in Burgio 2018, 321-325. For the identification of place names, I refer to Haw 2006, 82-123.

“De civitate Ciandu, et de quodam pallatio Magni Canis.”

[3] Et in medio huius viridarii est pallatium sive logia, tota super columpnas. Et in summitate cuiuslibet columpne est draco magnus circumdans totam columpnam, et hic substinet cooperturam cum ore et pedibus. [4] Et est coopertura tota de cannis hoc modo: [...].²

In other words, all around each of the columns of the bamboo palace a large dragon is coiling which supports with his mouth and his feet the cover.

The more elaborate R passage, which is contained in chapter 55 of Book I of *I Viaggi di Messer Marco Polo*, published by Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485–1557) in the second volume of his *Navigazioni et viaggi* in Venice in 1559, reads as follows:

“Del bellissimo palazzo del Gran Can in la città di Xandú; [...]”

[5] In mezzo di quei prati, ove è un bellissimo bosco, ha fatto fare una casa regal, sopra belle colonne dorate et invernicate, et a cadauna è un dragone tutto dorato che rivolge la coda alla colonna, et col capo sostiene il soffittado, et stende le branche, cioè una alla parte destra a sostentamento del soffittado et l'altra medesimamente alla sinistra.³

In Yule's English edition of Marco's account, passages that are contained only in Ramusio's rendering are indicated with brackets. The relevant wording about the dragon columns in R is translated by him as below:

Of the City of Chandu, and the Kaan's Palace there.

Moreover [at a spot in the Park where there is a charming wood] he has another Palace built of cane, of which I must give you a description. It is gilt all over, and most elaborately finished inside. [It is stayed on gilt and lackered columns, on each of which is a dragon all gilt, the tail of which is attached to the column whilst the head supports the architrave, and the claws likewise are stretched out right and left to support the architrave].⁴

Before we turn to the Chinese scenario, let us first dwell on these two traditions and their relationship to each other. According to Eugenio Burgio, the Latin L version is preserved in six manuscripts from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. It circulated first in Ferrara (Emilia-Romagna) and in Padua (Veneto), from where it then spread to Flanders. In the majority of the extant versions, it is mainly entitled *Extracta et translata de libro Domini Marchi Paulo de Veneciis de diversis provinciis et regnis maioris Asiae, et de diversis moribus habitantium et de multis mirabilibus in hiis locis*, which is based on a now lost Franco-Venetian model near to F, but also contains elements not present in F, probably – albeit not in the case of the dragon columns – taken over from the Venetian V redaction, the latter being only preserved in one MS from the late fifteenth century. In the evaluation of Italian Studies philologists, the L redaction is considered to occupy a high position within the family tree of Marco Polo texts. According to their microtextual analysis, it is judged to be very near to the Venetian's now lost *Urtext* and represents an intelligent reading of it by preserving its essentials, adhering respectfully and with great fidelity to the thought of its writer, while being also precise, energetic and systematic in its form of presentation.⁵

As to the origin of Ramusio's information, substantial research has been undertaken likewise by Italian Marco Polo specialists. According to their research, the main sources used by Ramusio were Pipi-

2 For an authoritative digital edition of L, see Simion and Burgio 2015.

3 For an authoritative digital edition of R see likewise Simion and Burgio 2015.

4 See Yule 1993, vol. 1, 299 [Chapter LXI].

5 Burgio 2015, “L”.

no's Latin redaction (P), the Venetian VB redaction and a more complete but now lost version of the Latin Z rendering, i.e. the so-called Ghisi codex.⁶ They, however, do not exclude the possibility that some of the Ramusian passages that are not contained in the Franco-Italian F manuscript may have their origin in L.⁷ With regard to the dragon column passage this is, however, not considered probable, certainly because of the difference in the details given by L and R. Hence, I would agree with them that perhaps the more complete Z version, the now not anymore extant Ghisi codex, may have provided Ramusio with the description of this interesting architectural feature.⁸

Historical Relics of Dragon Columns of the Eastern Han Period

Although so far I could not find an arrangement exactly in the way described by Marco Polo, it is a well-documented fact that dragons being used as decorative elements on columns of Chinese palaces and temples have a long history. While real-size examples of such architectural elements did not survive from early times, "dragon columns" (*longzhu* 龍柱) or "columns with entwining dragons" (*panlongzhu* 盤龍柱) are depicted already on tomb stone-reliefs (*huaxiangzhuan* 畫像磚) of the Eastern Han period (25–220). The relevant two-dimensional illustrations from a tomb chamber excavated in 1973 in Haining District 海寧縣 in Zhejiang Province that show most probably doorposts are perhaps the first pictorial evidence of this decorative feature (Fig. 1).⁹ Moreover, dragons carved out on stone columns were discovered in tombs of the same period. This three-dimensional type of evidence has been testified in a number of sites in the province of Shandong and the north of Jiangsu Province (see Fig. 2 as one of the prominent examples).¹⁰ These and other types of tomb

6 See, e.g., the diagram in Simion, Eusebi and Burgio 2024, 96.

7 See Burgio 2015, "Z".

8 See comments to R I, 55 (5) in Simion and Burgio 2015.

9 Liu 2021, 72, states that the dragons depicted on three walls of the tomb had been called by researchers "coiling dragons" (*panlong* 蟠龍) or "snake-dragons" (*huilong* 虺龍). The latter expression refers, as it seems, to the uncertainty of the identification of the creatures depicted on the columns. Judged from the legs and claws visible in the illustrations, it seems, however, clear to me that these were indeed dragons, and not snakes.

10 For an excellent overview with rich illustrations of such Eastern Han relics, see Liu 2021, 72, and Liu and Huang 2022, 5-7 and illustrations on 9-10. The sites mentioned there are:

– Mengzhuang 孟莊 of Pingyin District 平陰縣, Shandong, round stone column located between front and central chamber of Tomb M1

– Dawenkou 大汶口 of Tai'an City 泰安市, Shandong, center stone column located between front and rear chamber on the western part of the tomb and the center column between the two east-west front chambers of the tomb (excavated in 1960)

– Dongjiazhuang 董家莊 of Anqiu City 安丘市, Shandong, round stone column carved in relief and located below the center partition beam of the back chamber of the tomb (in or before 1992)

– Baiyangdian 白楊店 of Duoshizhen 垛石鎮, Jiyang District 濟陽縣, Shandong, round stone column carved in relief (2014)

– Wubaizhuang 吳白莊 of Linyi City 臨沂市, Shandong, center stone column with winged dragon, winged tiger and birds carved in high-relief and located below the center beam in the front chamber of the tomb

– Banjingcun 班井村 in Tongshan District 桐山縣 of Xuzhou City 徐州市, Jiangsu, centered stone column carved in bas-relief and located below the beam separating the front and rear chamber of Tomb No. 1, probably the earliest example of its kind (1997)

– Xuzhou Museum of Han Tomb Stone-reliefs Art (Xuzhou Han huaxiangshi yishuguan 徐州漢畫像石藝術館), stone wall column carved in relief with two dragons standing opposite one another

decorations and grave goods were destined to provide the deceased with comforts also in afterlife, and thus doubtless were imitations of things existing in the this-worldly sphere. We may therefore assume with quite some confidence that these two-dimensional depictions and three-dimensional stone carvings were most likely replicating wooden structures of contemporaneous palaces or temples and that dragons coiling around columns were already a quite common architectonical, religious and artistic feature of that period.¹¹

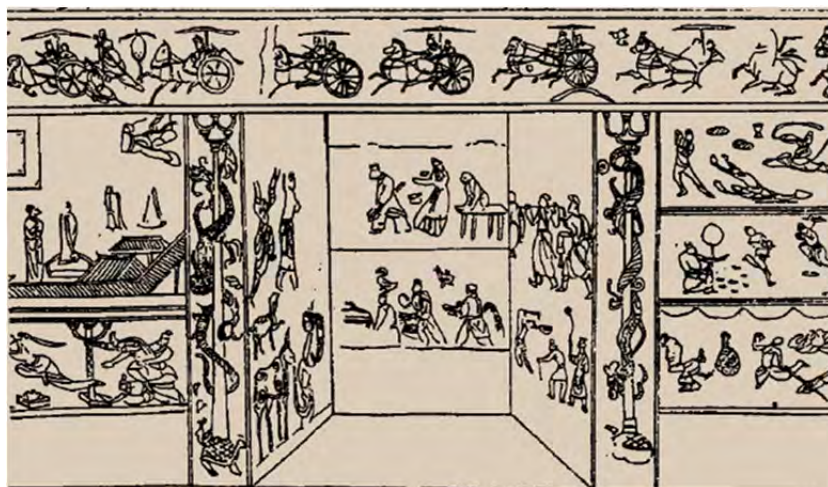


Figure 1 (left): Tomb stone-reliefs of the eastern wall of the front chamber of a Late Eastern Han/Three Kingdoms tomb, excavated in 1973 in the Haining Middle School of Chang'an zhen 長安鎮 in Haining District 海寧縣, Zhejiang Province¹²

Figure 2 (right): Dragon column in the center of the beam dividing the front and back chamber of Tomb No. 1 of the Eastern Han period, excavated in 1992 in Banjingcun 班井村 of Tongshanxian 銅山縣 in Xuzhou 徐州, Jiangsu Province¹³

It is interesting to note here that Liu and Huang 2022, 3, 24, think that the Chinese dragon-wrapped column arose from a hybrid fusion of local and foreign cultures. Basing their judgement on a variety of similar relics from different cultural contexts they argue convincingly that spiral-fluted columns with their abstract design originated in Mesopotamia, were then popularized during the Greco-Roman period in the eastern Mediterranean and subsequently transmitted to China via the Maritime Silk Road during the Eastern Han dynasty, though only few specimen and limited to this period were found in Shandong and Northern Jiangsu. A more speculative hypothesis of Liu and Huang is the following argument that relates to the origin of the Chinese-style dragon columns per se: "While the Greco-Roman spiral-fluted column is an abstraction of the Mesopotamian serpent-wrapped column, when the former came into contact with the indigenous Chinese tradition of dragon and serpent imagery, it 'reverted' to its origins in the Mesopotamian serpent-wrapped column, the difference being that the dragon and snake wrapped around the column in the Han tombs were infused with the belief in Han culture that the dragon and the dragon-related divine serpent could ward off evil spirits, rather than the original Mesopotamian meaning of serpent or Python [representing the Persian evil] in the Greek setting."

11 Cf. Liu and Huang 2022, 6.

12 The dragon columns rest on a base in the form of a tortoise. Also the northern and eastern walls show dragons coiling around columns. See Wu 1996, 23.

13 The dragon sculpture is carved in the stone column in bas-relief. This is the clearest example of Eastern Han tomb columns showing one dragon coiling around one column in upward direction, thus very much in the style of relics and documentations known from the Song period. In dragon columns of other tombs, the curling around the column is not or much less evident. See Liu 2021, 72, 74.

Apart from the cases mentioned above which all show features of one dragon coiling around one column, and this – as it appears – mostly in upward direction, there exist also Eastern Han tomb columns with dragons and/or serpentine creatures curling up columns in a helical (spiral) form and braided pattern. In general, the relief covering these stone columns looks like a woven layer of fibrous, durable and pliable materials, such as bamboo skin or leather, carved in the shape of dragons to protect and decorate the column. Hence, this type of columns which were likewise discovered in tombs in Shandong and Northern Jiangsu are called “stone columns with wrapped-bamboo style stone-carvings” (*shidiao shuzhu zhu* 石雕束竹柱) by Liu Guan. The braided bands of these columns at times show a fish-scale pattern, sometimes with dragon heads visible above, and there could be up to nine dragons or serpentine creatures twisting and coiling around each other, sometimes in a regular, but other times also in an irregular manner. Again, it has to be assumed that those with a regular pattern were imitations of this-worldly wooden columns that had been decorated and protected by bands made of bamboo stripes or other materials.¹⁴

Besides the relatively rich, though stylistically still varied testimonies from the Eastern Han period, we know also of two other pre-Song examples of stone column dragons. Two of them were found on the two side columns of the doorway of Cave 1 on the southern Xiangtangshan 響堂山 (Mountain of Echoing Halls) of Handan City 邯鄲市 in Hebei, a relic of the Northern Qi dynasty (550–577) that is dated to the second half of the sixth century. An even older site with dragon columns is mentioned by Liu Guan and Huang Bing, namely the Ssang-Yeongchong 雙楹塚 (Twin-column Tomb) of the Goguryeo 高句麗 period (37 BC–668 AD), built in the second half of the fifth century and discovered in 1913 in Nampo, South Pyongan Province, Korea. In the hallway between the front and back chambers of the tomb there are two octagonal stone columns embellished with painted images of wrapped dragons.¹⁵

Dragon Columns in Written Sources of the Han Period?

In Chinese contributions to the history of dragon columns, references are made to three written sources that are interpreted as describing this feature in palace architecture. One of these sources is the *Wenxuan* 文選 (Selections of Refined Literature), an anthology compiled by the Prince Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531) during the Liang dynasty (502–557), in which, among other literary pieces, *fu* 賦 (rhapsodies) and *shi* 詩 (lyric poems) from the Qin (221–207 BC) and Han (206 BC–220 AD) dynasties are preserved.¹⁶ In Wang Yanshou's 王延壽 (floruit ca. 140–ca. 165) “Lu Lingguangdian fu” 魯靈光殿賦 (Rhapsody on the Hall of Numinous Brilliance in Lu), there is a description of a palace constructed by the Han Prince Liu Yu 劉餘 (reg. 154–128/129), Prince Gong 恭 of Lu 魯, and later also used by the Lu princes in the Eastern Han period. It contains the following passage:

- | | |
|---------------|---------------------------|
| a) 雲縈藻梲，龍桷雕鏤。 | f) 頷若動而躑躅。 |
| b) 飛禽走獸，因木生姿。 | g) 朱鳥舒翼以峙衡， |
| c) 奔虎攬竿以梁倚， | h) 騰蛇蟠虯而繞榱。 |
| d) 仡奮豐而軒髻。 | i) 白鹿子蛻於櫨櫨， |
| e) 虯龍騰驤以蜿蟺， | j) 蟠螭宛轉而承楣。 ¹⁷ |

14 For more details, see Liu 2021, 72–74; Liu and Huang 2022, 7–15.

15 Liu and Huang 2022, 4–5 and illustrations on 8–9.

16 On the *Wenxuan*, see ICTCL, 891–893; Chkn.

17 *Wenxuan*, ch. 11, “Gongdian” 宮殿 (Palace Buildings), 339.

The verses referring to dragons are translated rather freely by Liu Guan and Huang Bing in the following ways:

- a) The dragon and cloud are carved in an openwork design into the rafter and column. [...]
- e) with the dragon meandering across the area,
- f) its head up and running, and its mouth hovering and twisting.
- g) The vermilion bird flaps its wings and spins to balance itself during this period,
- h) while the flying serpent coils and twists itself around the rafters. [...]¹⁸

Hence, Liu Guan and Huang Bing seem to suggest that dragons were carved not only into the rafters, but also the columns of the Hall of Numinous Brilliance. This interpretation cannot be upheld if we follow the much more precise translation of David R. Knechtges who renders the pertinent lines as below:

- a) Cloud cap blocks [*jie* 簷], pondweed king posts [*zhuo* 柂], and dragon rafters [*jue* 桷] are carved and incised.
- b) Flying birds and running beasts, are given form by the wood.
- c) Prowling tigers, clawing and clasping in vicious clenches,
- d) raise their heads in a furious frenzy, manes bristling,
- e) Curly dragons leap and soar, twist and twine,
- f) their jowls seeming to move as they limp and lumber along.
- g) The Vermilion Bird, with outspread wings, perches on the crossbeams;
- h) the Leaping Serpent, coiling and curling, winds round the rafters.
- i) The White Deer heaves its head among the brackets;
- j) a coiling wivern, writhing and wriggling, clings to the lintels.¹⁹

Jie 簷 is an alternative term for *dougong* 斗拱, that is, a system of interlocking wooden brackets connecting vertical columns and horizontal beams in Chinese buildings, and *zhuo* 柂 is indeed a king post set up on a cross beam (*liang* 梁), while *jue* 桷 is another expression for *chuan* 椽, both meaning rafter. This, therefore, does not support the interpretation of Liu Guan and Huang Bing who in the case of line a) speak of dragons carved both into rafters and columns. Moreover, the commentaries of Li Shan 李善 (ca. 630–689) imply that the clouds, pondweeds and dragons were not carved, but painted onto the brackets, kingposts and rafters, respectively.²⁰ Yet, it cannot be ruled out that the lines e) and f) describe indeed “curly dragons” twisting and twining around columns, though this is not made explicit and thus cannot be ascertained.

Another quite similar passage we can find in the *Shiyi ji* 拾遺記 (Records of Picked-up Leftovers) which is a collection of *zhiguai* 志怪 (accounts of anomalies) compiled by the Eastern Jin period (317–420) writer and Daoist Wang Jia 王嘉 (d. before 392) and edited by the scholar Prince Xiao Qi 蕭綺 of the Liang dynasty (502–557). It relates to topics that have taken place in the period from the time of the mythical emperors up to the end of the fourth century AD.²¹ It contains a description of a palace called Bright and Shining Hall (Zhaoyangdian 昭陽殿) in which lived Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 (?–1 BC), a Chinese courtesan and empress of the Western Han Dynasty. Her husband was Emperor Cheng (51–7 BC) who reigned from 33 to 7 BC. In one passage of this account referring to the year 146 AD we are told that:

18 Liu and Huang 2022, 9, 11.

19 Knechtges 1987, 282.

20 *Wenxuan*, ch. 11, “Gongdian”, 339.

21 On this work, see Lei 2014, 302–305; Chkn.

椽桷俱刻龍蛇形，縈繞其間，鱗角分明，見者莫不兢慄。

The rafters (*chuanjue* 椽桷) are all carved in the shapes of dragons and snakes, lingering between them, and the scales and horns (*linjiao* 鱗角) are so distinct and clear that none of the people who see them would not tremble.²²

Although again it was not the columns that had been embellished with dragons, but the rafters, Wu Qingzhou is right in stating that this passage shows that dragons had become a widespread aesthetic element in Han palace architecture.²³ Moreover, in contrast to the probably painted dragons of the *Wenxuan*'s Hall of Numinous Brilliance, the creatures of the Bright and Shining Hall were expressly said to have been carved.

More promising as a textual description of dragon columns, likewise quoted by Wu Qingzhou,²⁴ is an entry in the *Hou Han ji* 後漢紀 (Annals of the Later Han), a historiographical account of the Eastern Han dynasty. It was written by Yuan Hong 袁宏 (328–376) during the Jin dynasty (266–420).²⁵ It contains an account of the Yin-Yang-Hall (Yinyangdian 陰陽殿) of Liang Ji 梁冀 (d. 159), a powerful military general and politician during the Eastern Han.

梁柱門戶，銅沓紆漆，青瑱丹墀，刻鏤為青龍白虎，畫以丹青雲氣。

The beams and columns, the gates and doors, sleeved in bronze and linen-lacquered, blue-greenish interlocking patterns [decorating doors and windows] and vermilion steps, with carvings of blue-greenish dragons and white tigers and painting of vermilion and blue-greenish cloudy haze.²⁶

Again, the carving of dragons is mentioned. Although this is not directly linked with the character for columns (*zhu* 柱), there is at least an indirect link to the topic of this sentence, which talks of beams, columns, gates and doors. Hence there is some probability that some of the dragons indeed adorned the columns. But even if none of the passages listed above can be adduced as unambiguous evidence for dragon columns, from tomb architecture and reliefs it can be inferred beyond doubt that dragon columns were part and parcel of many palace buildings since the Han period, at the latest.

Historical Relics of Dragon Columns of the Song and Yuan Periods

The earliest surviving example of this-worldly wooden dragon columns comes from the Song period, from the Sage Mother Hall (Shengmudian 聖母殿) of the Jin Shrines (Jinci 晉祠), a famous temple complex located at the foot of the Xuanweng Mountains 懸瓮山 about 25 km southwest of

22 This entry is not to be found in the transmitted version of the *Shiyi ji*, but is quoted in the *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成 (Complete Collection of Illustrations and Texts of Old and Modern Times), compiled by Chen Menglei 陳夢雷 (1650–1741) et al. and revised by Jiang Tingxi 蔣廷錫 (1669–1732) et al., 1726, “Jingji huibian” 經濟彙編 (Classified Compilation on Statecraft), “Kaogong dian” 考工典 (Records on Examinations of Craftsmanship), ch. 5. The description of the Bright and Shining Hall is also in ch. 1 of the *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 (Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital). This work whose compilation is attributed to Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343 or 363) [?] and which likewise belongs to the genre of *zhiguai* literature tells stories of variant content from Chang'an, the capital of the Western Han Dynasty, and other cities. For this work cf. ICTCL, 406–407; Chkn. In the German translation of Heeren-Diekhoff 1981, 32, the *Xijing zaji* passage reads as follows: “Die Dachsparren waren alle geschnitzt zu ineinandergeschlungenen Drachen und Schlangen, deren Schuppen (*linjia* 鱗甲) deutlich zu erkennen waren. Niemand, der sich bei ihrem Anblick nicht gefürchtet hätte!”

23 Wu 1996, 22, 24.

24 Wu 1996, 22.

25 On the *Hou Han ji*, see Chkn.

26 *Hou Han ji*, ch. 20, 10a.

Taiyuan 太原 in Shanxi province.²⁷ The Sage Mother Hall is the oldest building of this religious and architectonical treasure, with its foundation probably dating back to the ninth year of the Taiping Xingguo reign era (984) of the Northern Song Dynasty and with its current timber structure likely to have been built between 1038 and 1087. The Hall is dedicated to the goddess of the Jin Springs, who was officially canonized as the Sage Mother of Manifest Aid (Zhaoji shengmu 昭濟聖母 by the Song Court in 1077, a title that was changed to Spirit of the Jin Springs (*Jinyuan zhi shen* 晉源之神) in 1370, at the beginning of the Ming dynasty.²⁸ The forefront of the hall has eight columns, with a dragon coiled around each of them in a variety of postures (Fig. 3, 4 and 5).

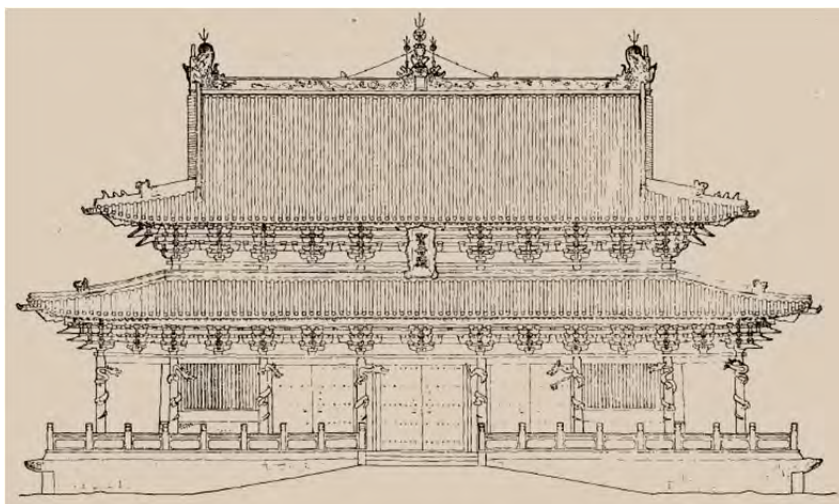


Figure 3: The front of the Sage Mother Hall (Shengmudian), built between 1038 and 1087, Jin Shrines (Jinci) near Taiyuan, Shanxi Province. *Source*: Qi 1992, 54



Figure 4: The eight columns on the front of the Sage Mother Hall, built between 1038 and 1087, Jin Shrines near Taiyuan, Shanxi Province. *Source*: I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Cao Jin and Dr. Alexander Jost, University of Salzburg, who in August 2024 travelled to the Jin Shrines to make the photos for me.

27 For concise information on the Jin Shrines, see Miller 2018. For more extensive discussions, see Qi 1992; Peng 1996; Miller 2007; Li 2012.

28 Cf. Miller 2007, 122; Miller 2018; Zhuge 2018.



Figure 5: The eight columns from left to right on the front of the Sage Mother Hall, built between 1038 and 1087, Jin Shrines near Taiyuan, Shanxi Province. *Source:* Photos made in August 2024 by Dr. Cao Jin and Dr. Alexander Jost, University of Salzburg, 2024

We know that six of the dragons had been added to the front columns in 1087, the other two perhaps at a later date. As Tracy Miller has pointed out, these dragons were more than mere decoration, for they were most likely considered “to contribute to the rainmaking process as well as to denote the power of the deity within the hall had over water.”²⁹

Wooden column dragons of various postures from the Southern Song period (1127–1279) are also known from the Buddhist Cloud-cliff Monastery (Yunyansi 雲岩寺) of 1181, Jiangyou 江油 in Sichuan. They were adorning the Flying-to-the-Sky [Sutra] Repository (Feitianchang 飛天藏) of the Hall of the same name (Fig. 6). The repository is said to have been repaired in the Zhizheng reign era (1341–1371) of the Mongol Yuan dynasty.³⁰ We also have knowledge of relief-carved, dragon-wrapped columns from the Northern Song period (1127–1279). Unfortunately, the reliefs of these columns supporting the eaves of the famous Pavilion of Revolving [Sutra] Repository (Zhuanlongzang ge 轉輪藏閣) (Fig. 7) of the Longxing Monastery 隆興寺 in Zhengding 正定, Hebei, had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).³¹

Finally, we also know of an example of dragon columns that survived from the Yuan period itself. Two dragons made of clay are coiling around each of the two entrance columns of the Hall of the Flying-from-Afar [Hill] of the Great Temple (Damiao Feilaidian 大廟飛來殿) (Fig. 8), which belongs to the Temple of the Eastern Peak (Dongyuemiao 東嶽廟) complex, two kilometers to the north of the county seat of Emei 峨眉 in Sichuan Province. The hall, built in the Southern Song period, was destroyed and rebuilt in 1278 or 1279, and rebuilt or restored in the 1320s during the Yuan dynasty and is thus considered one of the most significant Yuan buildings within the Sichuan area.³²

29 See the discussion in Miller 2007, 123–124.

30 See Wu 1996, 24. On details of the temple complex of Yunyansi, see *Baidu baike*.

31 Liu 2021, 71; Liu and Huang 2022, 4.

32 The dating of this temple is somewhat unclear. Cf. Zuo 2010, 60, 61, 65, and *Wikipedia* (in Chinese) as well as *Baidu baike*.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Figure 6 (left): Drawing of one of the wooden column dragons of the Flying-to-the-Sky [Sutra] Repository (Feitiancang) of the Buddhist Cloud-cliff Monastery (Yunyansi), built in 1181 during the Southern Song and restored during the Zhizheng reign-period (1341–1371) of the Yuan, Jiangyou, Sichuan Province. *Source:* Wu 1996, 24

Fig. 7 (right): Relief-carved, wrapped-dragon columns for supporting the eaves of the Pavilion of the Revolving [Sutra] Repository (Zhuanlongcang ge) in the Longxing Monastery (Longxingsi), Northern Song, Zhengding, Hebei Province, photo of early 20th century. *Source:* Tokiwa and Sekino 1914, as reproduced and described by Liu and Huang 2022, 8



Fig. 8: Two dragons made of clay coiling around the right front pillar at the entrance to the Damian Feilaidian (Hall of the Flying-from-Afar [Hill] of the Great Temple), Dongyuemiao (Temple of the Eastern Peak) complex, built during the Southern Song and rebuilt and restored during the Yuan, Emei, Sichuan Province. *Source:* Ma and Tang 2022

Dragon Columns in Written Sources of the Song and Yuan Periods

Apart from the architectural remains mentioned in the chapter above, another interesting testimony can be found in a pertinent written source of the Northern Song period, i.e., the *Yingzao fashi* 營造法式 (Standards and Models of Architecture), completed in 1100 by Li Jie 李誡 (1065–1110), then Director of the Palace Buildings, and officially published in 1103.³³ Chapters 29 and 32 of this work show depictions of “clouds and a dragon entwining a column” (*chanzhu yunlong* 纏柱雲龍) on a baluster (*wangzhu* 望柱) and a “dragon entwining a column” (*chanzhulong* 纏柱龍), respectively, the former being a high-relief sculpture (*tidi qitu* 剔地起突) made in stone, while the latter represents a three-dimensional round and open-work sculpture (*hunzuo* 混作) carved out of wood. (Fig. 9a, b)³⁴ The dragon on the wooden column bears quite some resemblance with the specimens of the Cloud-cliff Temple and also those of the Sage Mother Hall.



Fig. 9a



Fig. 9b

Figure 9a (left), 9b (right): Column dragons in stone on a baluster (left) and in wooden open-work on a column (right) as depicted in Li Jie's *Yingzao fashi* (Standards and Models of Architecture), 1103. Source: *Yingzao fashi*, 29.12a, 32.31a

And last but not least, we learn from Tao Zongyi's 陶宗儀 (1329–1410) *Nancun chuogeng lu* 南村輟耕錄 (Records from Nancun while Ceasing Farm Work; preface of 1366)³⁵ that the Damingdian 大明殿 (Great Brightness Hall), Kubilai's main audience hall, had

丹楹，金飾龍繞其上。

cinnabar columns, with gold-decorated dragons coiling around them above.³⁶

33 On Li Jie's work, see, e.g., Feng Jiren 2012; Wilkinson 2000, 681; Chkn.

34 Cf. Liu 2021, 71. The illustrations relate to chapters 3: “Shizuo zhidu” 石作制度 (System of Stone Work) and 20: “Diaozuo zhidu” 雕作制度 (System of [Wood] Carving), respectively, of the *Yingzao fashi*.

35 On this work see Chkn under *Chuogenglu*.

36 See *Nancun chuogeng lu* 21.2b; Steinhardt 2023, 40. For the location and more details of this hall, see Steinhardt 2023, 34, 36, 39–41 and 105–106.

The same work describes dragon columns also for another palace, the Hall of All-pervading Coolness (Guanghandian 廣寒殿) which was located on top of the Ten-thousand Years Hill (Wanshoushan 萬壽山) on Hortensia Island (Qionghuadao 瓊花島) to the west of the palace city.³⁷ We are informed that

四面瑣窗，板密其裏，遍綴金紅雲而蟠龍矯蹇於丹楹之上。

its trellised windows on all sides are tightly encircled by wooden panels, embellished all over with golden and red clouds, and coiling dragons are stretching up loftily above on the vermilion columns.³⁸

The dragons twisting around the columns of the Hall of All-pervading Coolness were also mentioned by Xiao Xun 蕭洵 in his *Gugong yilu* 故宮遺錄 (Records of the Remains of the Imperial Palaces) of 1398. Xiao Xun was a Ming official charged with the destruction of the Yuan capital in order to prepare the ground for the rebuilding of the city by the new Chinese dynasty.³⁹ He described the Guanghandian as follows:

登廣寒殿，殿皆綠金朱瑣窗，綴以金鋪。內外有一十二楹，皆繞刻龍雲，塗以黃金。

A palace with trellised windows painted in gold and vermilion and embellished with gold leaf and with twelve columns inside and outside which are all encircled by carved dragons and clouds painted in yellow gold.⁴⁰

Although these reports refer to dragon columns in the Yuan capital Dadu, and not in Shangdu, they make clear that this kind of adornment was a well-known architectonical element not only in the Song period, but also during the period of Mongol rule as well. One small, though insubstantial difference can be noted with regard to the colors: Ramusio says that in Shangdu both columns and dragons were of golden color. The two sources quoted above likewise speak of golden dragons, but in contrast to the R rendering state that the columns around which these creatures coiled were not painted and lacquered in gold, but in vermilion or cinnabar color.

Conclusions

As demonstrated by relics and written source material discussed above, it is clear that already in the period from the Eastern Han to the Song and Yuan dynasties dragon columns were a well-known and widespread architectural, aesthetic, religious and political feature of palaces and temples. Column dragons of different types can be found thereafter in many places all over China, with stone dragon columns becoming especially popular in Fujian and Taiwan.⁴¹ Wu Qingzhou distinguishes six main categories of column dragons. These were dragons carved out from wood, dragons formed from clay, dragons carved into stone (consisting of four sub-categories), dragon columns painted

37 On the location of Qionghua Island and thus of the Guanghandian and on further details about this hall, see Steinhardt 2023, 32, 33, 35 and 45-46.

38 *Nancun chuogeng lu*, ch. 21, 2b.

39 Steinhardt 1990, 156.

40 See *Gugong yilu*, 5. Cf. with the paraphrasing of Ying 1931, 36, which appears to me not precise enough in the description of the dragons: “After climbing several flights of steps, one reaches the Hall of All-pervading Coolness (Kuang Han Kung). All the trellised windows thereof are painted in gold and vermilion and embellished with gold leaf. The 12 partitions of the encircling veranda are all ornamented with carved figures of dragons and clouds and are elaborately decorated in gold.”

41 For Taiwan, see Mo 2016.

with bituminous gold lacquer, dragons worked in metal, and dragons made of colorful rug.⁴² What was seen by Marco Polo were most probably column dragons that have been carved out from wood, and among the different arrangements the one that perhaps comes nearest to the Venetian's description of dragons seemingly supporting the architrave with their head and claws are the two upper dragons of the two pairs right and left at the entrance of the Hall of the Flying-from-Afar [Hill] of the Great Temple (Damiao Feilaidian) of the Temple of the Eastern Peak (Dongyuemiao) complex. Their heads are below the architrave and they use at least one claw for further supporting it (Fig. 8). But also the two dragons that we can see on the entrance columns of the Great Hall of Government (Dazhengdian 大政殿) in the Imperial Palace in Shenyang 沈陽 (Mukden) (Fig. 10), a building dating from the year 1636, provide us with some additional impression of what the Venetian may have seen in Shangdu. At any rate, because the description of dragons coiling around columns is only available as a short passage in the Latin L and in a somewhat more detailed account in Ramusio's Italian edition, this topic has – as far as I know – not been yet the subject of in-depth research and comparison.



Figure 10: Photo of dragon columns at the entrance of the Dazhengdian (Great Hall of Government), Imperial Palace in Shenyang, Liaoning Province, 1636. Photo by Gary Lee Todd, Ph.D., CC0, commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=102115214 (8 April 2025), Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication

My short contribution to Marco Polo research presented here thus may also prove helpful for discussions dealing with questions about the veracity and authenticity of the Venetians report. As dragon columns are quite a specific and peculiar element of Chinese temple and palace architecture, it appears reasonable to conclude that the descriptions of dragon columns in the Venetian's report were based on eyewitness testimony rather than on information transmitted to him by hearsay or in written form.

42 See Wu 1996, 24-27.

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The essays assembled in this volume have been contributed by long-standing collaborators, colleagues and friends, students and former students of Achim Mittag. The contributors are from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Austria, North America, Mainland China and Taiwan, who came to know him through conferences, research projects, and sustained scholarly conversations, as well as through the daily university work, and they all have enriched his life and academic career.

If one reads the 29 articles contributed by altogether 30 contributors attentively, one will find that most of them discuss topics that Achim Mittag himself has already explored in one way or another and that the authors explicitly refer to these talks or publications. What holds the contributions together is a shared interest: a curiosity to know more than was hitherto known or thought, and to scrutinize a detail that turns out to be a piece of the puzzle that makes up the bigger picture.

The volume is divided into eight thematic sections, namely Part I: "Macrohistory Versus Microhistory", Part II: "Between Historical Geography and Travelogue", Part III: "Working on Texts", Part IV: "Society versus Individual", Part V: "Intellectual Debates in China's Past and Present", Part VI: "Memory Culture and Identity", Part VII: "Early Cultural Encounters with China and the Beginnings of Sinology", and Part VIII: "China Expertise and 'Greater China'".

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