

A Floating Name: The Saddlebag “Dionysos” and the Limits of Classical Reception

Prologue

On the saddlebag of a Sui dynasty pottery camel slumps a man too drunk to stand. He has deep-set eyes and a high nose; two figures dressed in western style hold him up; a rhyton, some ivy, and Corinthian columns are also in the scene (Figure 1). Almost every scholar who has looked at this ancient Chinese piece agrees on one thing: the image comes from the distant West, carried along the Silk Road. Disagreement gathers around one question: who is the man in the middle?

The usual answer is Dionysos, the Greek god of wine. Several saddlebag plaques of the same type have been excavated from Sui tombs in Xi'an (modern-day name for Chang'an). This plaque was exhibited beside a similar complete pottery camel at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2004-2006, under the label "camel with Dionysian imagery" (Figure 2). The National Museum of China used the same label for another camel exhibited in 2026, and Chinese scholarship calls it *Zui Fulin*.¹ That answer has hardened into something close to a consensus. The piece discussed here was authenticated by the Met ceramics specialist Suzanne Valenstein and added by Ge Chengyong to the *Zui Fulin* series: three authorities confirming one name.

Yet the Met's catalogue entry now calls the figure's identity uncertain, offering two alternatives: the Indian Kubera, king of the yakshas, or a three-figure group derived from the Descent from the Cross.² An object repeatedly identified as Dionysos now carries three possible names.

This essay begins with the disagreement and refuses to assert which identity is correct. The drunken figure passed from the Mediterranean to Chang'an through so many copies, transports, and reinstallations that the original meaning can no longer be made out; evidence is scanty, and every stop assigned the form a fresh layer of meaning. "Who is he?" may prove unanswerable. Instead, this essay asks how and why his identity keeps changing during his journey down to today's museum label, and observes classical reception at work.

I. Locating the Problem

The standard account runs roughly as follows. An image of the Greek wine-god travels east along the Silk Road, crosses Central Asia, and comes to rest on the saddlebag of a pottery camel in Sui Chang'an. The main point of the account is the confirmation of arrival: Dionysos arrived in China, and this is the proof.

This account sits on a series of assumptions about how meaning travels. It supposes an original Dionysos, carrying a fixed content, whose every copy along the road is a replica. The scholar's task is to see through the copies and recover the original face: transmission as a single line running

one way, meanings thinning as they travel, and the scholar works upstream to the source.

Classical reception sets out to loosen this assumption. In *Redeeming the Text*, Charles Martindale proposed that meaning is always realized at the point of reception³, now a mantra in the field, its edge aimed at the presumed "original" awaiting recovery. Martindale goes further: we can neither recover nor should seek an "original" meaning stripped of later accretions and appropriation.⁴ Following this line, some have drawn a more radical conclusion: there is no privileged "original" ancient work to which we have access. Yet if we resist that strongest formulation, we can still grant a weaker claim this essay expresses: every reading and copy, alongside every title, produces meaning in its own moment.

Carry that outlook back to the camel saddle and the problem shifts. Scholars have asked whether the saddlebag figure "is" Dionysos; this essay instead explores what meaning the image was given at each stop on its eastward journey, who chose a name for it, at which moment, and to meet what kind of need.

Scholars have increased attention to engagements with Greece and Rome beyond the Western world. Glenn Most calls it the "third phase," marked by the importation of classical models into regions with no direct physical link to Greece or Rome.⁵ As a continent far away from the Mediterranean, Sui Chang'an is precisely such a place, and a western god on a Chang'an saddlebag sits at the leading edge of the field's interests.⁶

II. 'Dionysos' at Different Stations

Set aside the assumption of an original that wears away as it travels, and the journey looks different. The form moves on, and each place it reaches gives it a meaning of its own. Walked from one end to the other, the line is a series of realizations.

Gandhara is the hinge of the story both on the map and in this argument. After Alexander's campaigns, Greek culture took root in Bactria and northwest India, and the imagery of the Dionysian feast remained (Figure 3). By the Kushan period it had entered Buddhist space. Ge Chengyong concedes himself, noting that the rites of Dionysos were drawn into the Gandharan Buddhist world.⁷

And how were they drawn in? Ge did not ask, and the Gandharan sites themselves have an answer. Pia Brancaccio and Xinru Liu observe that scenes of Dionysian revelry keep to a fixed position, carved onto the stair-risers leading to the stupa's base. The Buddha never appears in these images of drinking and dancing; he stands as a preamble to worship, carrying the devotee from the happiness and madness of daily life toward asceticism. A stair-riser with another common Hellenistic theme was found in the monastery of Shotorak in Kapisa. It was found reinstalled upside down for a second use.⁹

Here we can see that in Gandhara, the same Dionysian form was placed at a structurally defined threshold, the passage from the secular into the sacred. Whatever religious meaning it had carried in Greece had ceased to matter; what mattered here was the function the Buddhist setting assigned it. Before the form ever reached Chang'an, it had been realized afresh in this way at least once. The single recoverable original was already gone.

There are other carriers besides stone. Bacchic scenes traveled east on Sasanian, Sogdian, and Roman silver; the Jingyuan plate is an example. It is a Roman work that passed through Bactrian and Sogdian hands, found in Gansu, China (Figure 4). Coinage seems to have contributed less than might be supposed. So far, most coins recovered from northern Chinese tombs are Byzantine or Sasanian, with emperors, crosses, and fire altars, not the wine-god.¹⁰ So the portable media delivered western forms without the original mythology, legible as foreign but illegible as Dionysos.

Now let us turn to Sui Chang'an. Ge Chengyong reads the funerary camels' details carefully: the camel is a symbol of long-distance Silk Road exchange, its saddlebags carrying exotic goods, the whole figure pointing toward the cosmopolitan display which the Sui Guanlong aristocracy admired.¹¹ The reading is solid, and it shows that the saddlebag Dionysos indeed had a meaning in Chang'an.

However, it is Chang'an's meaning. For the Chang'an viewers, the drunk foreign figure, the rhyton, the ivy and Corinthian columns all stand for the exotic luxury of the West, a status marking the tomb's occupant as a man who had seen a broader world; it has nothing to do with the frenzy of the Greek Dionysos or the threshold function of the Gandharan stair-riser. Chang'an produced its own meanings and fitted it to the form. The camel's entry into several Sui aristocratic tombs evidences this local production.

Now set the two stations together. The Gandharan Dionysos sits on the stair-riser, between secular and sacred; the Chang'an "Dionysos" sits in the funerary camel, between this world and the next. Each fits the drunken figure into local life, the same form bearing meanings unrelated to one another. In Aby Warburg's term, the figure behaves like a *Pathosformel*, which is an expressive formula that migrates intact while each culture recharges it with its own content.¹² No station is a faithful replica of another, and none stands outside the chain as an origin against which the rest might be measured. Martindale's mantra is proved here: meaning is realized at each point of reception, and the points of reception are equal.

Here another question arises: at different times and places, what did people do with the form? There is one link which remains unspoken. "Dionysos" is not a name that was used by Chang'an people. Its Chinese name *Zui Fulin* was supplied by later scholars. In the next sections we will explore where the name comes from, who assigns it and on what grounds they assign it.

III. A Floating Name

The difficulty of naming this drunken figure has a long history on the Chinese side. *Zui Fulin* has had no fixed reference for hundreds of years in China.

Ge Chengyong has himself traced this history, and although his aim is to set one of the names straight, the material leads to the opposite conclusion. Shen Congwen, in his *Catalogue of Lion Imagery*, grouped under the single name *Zui Fulin* the "foreigner riding a lion" ewers and lamp-stands appearing from the Western Jin onward, together with "foreigner and lion" images; Ge judges this an error.¹³ By the Song dynasty, according to the *Tieweishan congtao* and the *Kui tan lu*, a gold belt shipped in by sea and ornamented "in the manner of *Zui Fulin*" bore the name again.¹⁴ One name wandered across a lion, a belt, and a camel over the better part of a millennium.

The drift shows up beyond the term *Zui Fulin* as well, in the assignment of identity to a single object. The gilt-silver plate from Jingyuan in Gansu has at its center a young male god, seated on a lion or panther; the figure is indistinct, and scholars have disagreed sharply. Chu Shibin read him as Apollo, or else as Bacchus; Ishiwatari Mie analyzed the inscription and says it was Dionysos; Lin Meicun confirmed that it was Dionysos.¹⁵ So here he has two potential identities, and which name prevails depends on the field's acceptance, but acceptance and truth are two different things.

The same thing happens at both ends of the Silk Road. In the west, a form comes loose from its original context while being copied and reinstalled. In the east, a name comes loose from its original reference and is fastened onto a lion, a belt, a plate, or a camel. The form drifts, and the name drifts. The tie between signifier and signified is slack at both ends of this road.

This gives the question "is the saddlebag figure Dionysos?" its true shape. It looks like a matter of factual verification. But the drift of *Zui Fulin* shows that naming this figure has never meant recognizing a name already attached to it. Instead, someone throws a name onto it to meet some need at a certain moment. The next section examines how modern scholarship carries out this latest step.

IV. A Double Standard

Ge Chengyong's handling of the stone funerary couch in the Musée Guimet gives away a standard he himself holds. On one couch panel there is a drunken figure, holding a beast-headed rhyton, which Judith Lerner had read as a Dionysian subject. Ge rejected the identification on a specific ground: the scene carries no grape-cluster ornament, so the reclining drinker falls short of a Greek wine-god. He reads the scene instead as a Sogdian aristocrat's imitation of the Western convention of "reclining to drink."¹⁶

That judgment concedes something inconvenient for his larger argument. A drinker with a

rhyton can be just a borrowed posture, with no mythological reference behind it. Ge's standard here treats identification by form as unreliable.

The trouble is that with the very camel he analyzes, he puts this standard aside. For the drunken figure on the camel saddlebag, he firmly identifies Dionysos. If "rhyton plus drunkenness" on the Guimet couch is insufficient to secure a Dionysian identity, how is "supporting arms plus rhyton plus ivy" on the saddlebag enough? Both rest on the same set of borrowable, reproducible visual motifs. In the one place Ge demands semantic evidence, the presence or absence of grape clusters; in the other he is satisfied with formal resemblance, one standard applied here and withheld elsewhere.

The inconsistency is sharper in his comments on the Met's entry, which had suggested the three-figure group might derive from the Descent from the Cross in early Christian iconography. Ge dismisses the reading as 望图生义 *wang tu sheng yi*, reading into the picture a meaning that is not present.¹⁷ The criticism is meaningful. But in naming the saddlebag figure he does the same thing. He assigns a foreign mythological identity to an ambiguous image, believing it was there all along, waiting to be recognized.

A symmetry thus appears. The Met says "Descent from the Cross," Ge says "Dionysos," and both throw a name onto a form that cannot speak for itself. Ge insists his name is recovery, and the other is projection. But he separates the two with a standard he dropped at the Guimet couch and picked up again at the camel, and uses it only when it gives him the conclusion he wants.

Here this essay turns. Once we grant that form can travel free of meaning, that "rhyton plus drunkenness" can be posture alone, there is no longer a firm standard for telling a wine-god from an imitation. No clear method draws the line between recovery and projection. Identifying the saddlebag figure as Dionysos, Kubera, or the Christ of the Descent from the Cross rests on the same inference from formal resemblance. Some might say that the name "Dionysos" only tells us where the image came from, not what it means. But the Guimet couch tells us that if form can travel as posture alone, passing from genealogy to identity is to cross a line that cannot be drawn. What separates the competing names is only which one the field finally accepts.

V. The Latest Naming

Since that line cannot be drawn, everyone who has named this drunken figure stands on the same chain, and no one stands outside as arbiter.

That chain starts from the Greek Dionysos to the Gandharan stair-riser, and to the Chang'an funerary camel. Each station provides its own ritual work. The final station is the contemporary naming. When Chu Shibin says Apollo, Ishiwatari Mie says Dionysos, and Ge Chengyong says *Zui Fulin*; when Suzanne Valenstein sets this saddlebag plaque beside the Met's camel, and when

the Met's label hesitates among Dionysos, Kubera, and the Descent from the Cross, all these modern acts of naming are the chain's latest link.

Modern scholars believe they are supplying the “correct” recovery, which means seeing through a thousand years of copying and corruptions to make out a long-lost original face and restore its proper name. The title of Ge's article, “The Greek Wine-God in China,” is a manifesto. But there is not such a clear “correct” origin waiting ahead. The Athenian Dionysos is not a faithful replica of some earlier prototype, and the Gandharan Dionysos is not a replica of the Athenian Dionysos. Every link is a fresh realization. Modern scholars cast names rather than recover the object to meet their own needs. What makes the difference is disciplinary authority. When modern scholars throw names, the names get recorded and printed on labels, which makes the act look like discovery.

The pattern is also seen in other examples. Objects accumulate identities as they move through institutions, like Kopytoff's “Cultural Biography of Things”. Meanwhile, reattribution is a normal museum event which is documented case by case.¹⁸ A label speaks with institutional authority. A name closes the file, and this closure is the comfort a label offers, but it is what this figure with three names refuses to provide.

We can now return to the object we started with. This is a plaque authenticated by Valenstein, once exhibited with the Met's camel, included by Ge into the *Zui Fulin* series. Three authorities confirmed the name. Yet their determinations are less a settled fact than a more contemporary act of naming.

For a thousand years this drunken figure has traveled east, named afresh at places it arrives. Modern scholarship is the latest link in this long chain. The impulse to ask “who is he” seems an effort to end the series with a verdict, but in fact it carries the interpretation further. *Zui Fulin* shows that classical reception was dynamic in the past. It is still under way at present, in the very act of trying to give a name.

Notes

1. Ge Chengyong, “Zui Fulin: The Greek Wine-God in China — A Study of the Foreign Mythological Imagery on the Camel Saddlebags Excavated from Sui Tombs at Xi'an,” *Wenwu* 1 (2018): 58–69. For the excavation of the Xi'an pieces, see Xi'an Institute of Cultural Relics Protection and Archaeology (Zhang Quanmin et al.), “Excavation Report on the Joint Tomb of Zhang Lin and Xue Shilan of the Sui Dynasty in Chang'an, Xi'an,” *Wenwu* 1 (2018): 26–46.

For the Met camel, see Suzanne G. Valenstein with Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner, ‘Hellenism in Sui-Tang Chang'an: Dionysiac Imagery on Mortuary Camels,’ in *New Research on Central Asian, Buddhist and Far Eastern Art and Archaeology*, Inner and Central Asian Art and Archaeology 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 319–334

2. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Camel with Dionysian imagery on its saddle bags," China, Sui dynasty (581–618), Object Number 2000.8. The current catalogue entry states that the central figure's identity is "uncertain" and lists both the Kubera and Descent from the Cross readings.
3. Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3.
4. *Ibid.* Martindale argues that we neither can nor should attempt to return to an "original" meaning free from later accretions and the processes of appropriation.
5. Glenn W. Most, "Afterword to the Special Issue: The Global Dissemination of Classical Learning," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 30, no. 1 (2023): 131–137, esp. 136.
6. On classical reception in East Asia, see Almut-Barbara Renger and Xin Fan, eds., *Receptions of Greek and Roman Antiquity in East Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2019). Most's examples of the third phase largely belong to contexts of modern European colonialism.
7. Ge Chengyong, *art. cit.*, sec. 3, "The Culture of Dionysos." Ge offers only a general remark, without addressing the imagery's specific spatial placement.
8. Pia Brancaccio and Xinru Liu, "Dionysus and Drama in the Buddhist Art of Gandhara," *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 2 (2009): 219–244. On the route of transmission, see also Tadashi Tanabe, "The Transmission of Dionysiac Imagery to Gandhāran Buddhist Art," in *The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art*, ed. Wannaporn Rienjang and Peter Stewart (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 86–101.
9. J. Meunié, *Shotorak*, MDAFA X (Paris, 1942), 14. The stair-riser was found in situ in Court F. The find is reported, with the reference to Meunié, by Alice Casalini, "Pathways to Nirvāṇa: Aquatic Imagery and Visual Metaphors in Gandhāra," *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale* 61, Supplement (2025): 165–204, fig. 6b; Brancaccio and Liu (2009) discuss the stair-riser reliefs.
10. On Byzantine coins and imitations in Chinese tombs, F. Thierry and C. Morrisson, "Sur les monnaies byzantines trouvées en Chine," *Revue numismatique* 36 (1994): 109–145; on the South Indian hoards, whose reverses carry state deities and personifications but effectively no Dionysiac imagery, P. J. Turner, *Roman Coins from India* (London, 1989); on Dionysiac subjects in Sasanian silver, P. O. Harper, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period* (New York, 1981). The Byzantine pieces were Zui Fulin coins in the strict sense, yet carried no Dionysos.
11. Ge Chengyong, *art. cit.*, sec. 1. The extension of the camel emblem into "a token of status marking the tomb occupant as a man who had seen the world" is this essay's inference, not stated by Ge.
12. Aby Warburg's *Pathosformel*, the migrating and rechargeable formula of expressive form, is developed across the essays collected in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999).
13. Ge Chengyong, *art. cit.*, citing Shen Congwen's *Catalogue of Lion Imagery* on the naming of "zui Fulin taming a lion," which Ge judges "in fact very likely an error."
14. Ge Chengyong, *art. cit.*, citing the *Tieweishan congfan*, *juan* 6, and the *Kui tan lu*, *juan* 12, with Ge's suggestion that the Song gold belt may have been a late Byzantine import brought by sea.
15. Ge Chengyong, *art. cit.*, citing Chu Shibin for Apollo or Bacchus, Ishiwatari Mie (on the basis of the Bactrian inscription) for Dionysos, and Lin Meicun confirming Dionysos.
16. Ge Chengyong, *art. cit.*, on the stone funerary couch in the Musée Guimet, Paris. Lerner's reading is here reported via Ge; her own account is A. L. Juliano and J. A. Lerner, "The Miho Couch Revisited in Light of Recent Discoveries,"

Orientations 32, no. 8 (October 2001): 54–61

17. Ge Chengyong, *art. cit.*, on the Met's English entry, which he judges "open to question," singling out the Descent from the Cross reading as *wang tu sheng yi*.

18. Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), 64–91. No systematic count of museum renaming exists; the case literature suffices — e.g., the serial demotions of the Rembrandt Research Project's *Corpus* (1982–2014) and the Getty kouros, long displayed under a label declining to decide its antiquity. On the authority of display, Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London, 2006).

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Camel with Dionysian imagery on its saddle bags." China, Sui dynasty (581–618), late 6th–7th century. Object Number 2000.8.

Appendix

Figure 1: The molded pottery 'figural' appliqué of Sui Dynasty (<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6575609>)



Figure 2: Camel with Dionysian Imagery in the Met (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/53630>)



Figure 3: Bacchanalian Relief, Pakistan, Gandhara, Kushan period, the Cleveland Museum of Art.
(<https://www.clevelandart.org/art/2011.140>)



Figure 4: The Jingyuan Gilded Silver Plate (靖远鎏金银盘), Gansu Provincial Museum, China

