

<b>Institution: SOAS</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 34 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory</b>
<b>Title of case study: Alternative Readings of China's Early Material Culture (Lukas Nickel)</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Dr Lukas Nickel's archaeological fieldwork, art historical research and philological study have led to his proposition of novel theories that question the conventional wisdom surrounding the influences on, methods of production and historical-contextual details of key genres and elements of the Chinese art historical canon, including the famous <i>Terracotta Warriors</i>. Both in China and internationally, his theories have motivated debate, experimentation, and informed and shifted interpretation amongst those working in a range of cultural institutions as well as the general public.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Lukas Nickel studied Sinology, Oriental Archaeology and East Asian Art History in Berlin, Halle and Heidelberg. He has taught at SOAS since 2004, first in a joint position with the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, and full-time at SOAS since 2011. He pursues research on early China that includes casting technology in Bronze Age China, early China in the Asian context, Han dynasty funerary culture, and Buddhist archaeology.</p> <p>Nickel's research is driven by his conviction that material culture can provide significant insight into past societies, societies that are (in the Chinese case) often studied primarily through literary sources. He employs art historical, archaeological and philological approaches and methods, and uses traditional excavation as well as experimental archaeology and aerial photography. This range of interdisciplinary methods has greatly supported his generation of alternative and often challenging views.</p> <p>His research on bronze casting techniques questions the traditional understanding of casting procedures -- issues that were considered to be uncontroversial since the 1930s. Informed by in-depth study of Chinese bronze vessels from Chinese excavations and European and American collections, his article on the question (output a) was subsequently translated into Chinese and republished so as to be readily accessible to a Chinese readership and particularly Chinese archaeologists and curators. Through the study of inconsistencies in the surface design and other anomalies in the archaeological record that detail the excavation of numerous bronze objects of identical shape and size, but with highly-variable surface decoration or no decoration at all, Nickel suggests that ornamentation in relief was fashioned not on the original clay model (as previously suggested) but on the inner walls of the moulds used for casting. He further suggested that some decorative motifs in relief were added to the mould through a process of "tube lining," or applying soft clay tubes to a surface using a piping bag, which would be the earliest instance of use of this advanced technology. In recent years Nickel's investigation of Chinese bronzes has extended to investigate the social issues that shaped technological achievement, a theme explored at a major conference he organised in 2011, "Emergence of Bronze Age Societies – A Global Perspective", in Baoji, China.</p> <p>Nickel also worked on Buddhist figurative sculpture and temple architecture in eastern China. He compiled, edited and contributed to the catalogue for the exhibition <i>The Return of the Buddha</i> featuring pieces from a recently discovered hoard of Buddhist sculpture that was exhibited in Berlin, Zurich, London and Washington (2001-2004). Published just five years after their excavation, Nickel was the first to assemble all available archaeological and textual information that enabled a full formal analysis of the figures (and the temple that once stood above the buried hoard), as well as to provide ample information relating to their historical context. Work on the catalogue motivated Nickel to initiate and undertake a joint excavation with Chinese archaeologists of a second temple site, the White Dragon Temple, of the same period and in the same region in</p>

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2003-2005.

Nickel's more recent work on early silver and sculpture identified links between the material cultures of China and Central Asia/the Hellenistic East in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, well before the beginnings of cross-Asian contacts according to literary sources and common belief. As the 3<sup>rd</sup> century is of crucial importance in the creation of China – the time when the country was first unified by the First Emperor – the findings led Nickel to re-investigate the period of unification and the establishment of the first Chinese empire and to examine Eurasian empires of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC in a comparative manner. Significant insights of this research include Nickel's assertion that Persian influence can be seen in Chinese silverware of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and that the *Terracotta Warriors* reference Hellenistic figurative styles, countering the traditional dogma of Chinese cultural self-sufficiency.

**3. References to the research** (indicative maximum of six references)Bronze casting technology

a. "Imperfect Symmetry: Re-Thinking Bronze Casting Technology in Ancient China." *Artibus Asiae*, 66/1 (2006): 5-39.

Chinese translation: "不完美的对称—重新思考中国古代青铜铸造技术." In *Shang Zhou qingtong taofan zhuzao jishu yanjiu* 商周青铜器陶范铸造技术研究, edited by Jianli Chen and Yu Liu, 23-48. Beijing: Wenwu Press, 2011.

Buddhist sculpture

b. "Longxing Temple and the Discovery of the Sculpture Hoard." In *The Lost Buddhas: Chinese Buddhist Sculpture from Qingzhou*, 27-33. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2008.

(Chinese translation: 龍興寺及青州佛教造像窖藏的出土 pp. 34-35)

c *Die Rückkehr des Buddha. Chinesische Skulpturen des 6. Jahrhunderts – Der Tempelfund von Qingzhou*, edited by Lukas Nickel. Zürich: Museum Rietberg, 2001 (p. 236).

English editions:

*The Return of the Buddha – Buddhist Sculptures of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century from Qingzhou, Shandong*. Zürich: Museum Rietberg, 2002.

*Return of the Buddha – the Qingzhou Discoveries*. London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002; Washington D.C.: Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2004 (p. 175).

Cross-Asian relations in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC

d. "The First Emperor and Sculpture in China." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76 (2013): 413–47.

e. "The Nanyue Silver Box." *Arts of Asia* 42/3 (2012): 98-107.

f. "Tonkrieger auf der Seidenstrasse? Die Plastiken des Ersten Kaisers von China und die hellenistische Skulptur Zentralasiens." *Zurich Studies in the History of Art/Georges Bloch Annual* 13-14/2006-07 (2009): 124-49.

Chinese translation: "亚洲视野中的兵马俑." In *Studies on Ancient Tomb Art vol. 1*

古代墓葬美术研究 (一), edited by Yan Zheng and Hung Wu, 23-40. Beijing: Wenwu Press, 2011.

**4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

What follows chronicles the recent impacts of three distinct themes in Nickel's research, spanning 1) the bronze casting methods of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties (1600-1046 BC and 1046-256 BC), 2) recently-excavated 6<sup>th</sup>-century AD Buddha and bodhisattva figures, and 3) the possible influence of Hellenistic figurative representation on the *Terracotta Warriors*.

1) "Imperfect Symmetry" (output a) has elicited much discussion in China and beyond, initiating

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renewed scrutiny of the techniques used to adorn ancient bronze vessels with often complex relief decoration. The Museum of Ezhou, in Hubei, commissioned a series of experiments to test Nickel's theories concerning casting techniques. Although the results of the experiments did not fully support Nickel's theory relating to "tube lining," they supported his suggestion that ornaments were made on inner faces of moulds. His theories were intriguing enough to motivate the Museum's experimentation and subsequent publication of its findings (1, below). The Vice-Director of the Ezhou Museum, and himself an expert caster, Dong Yawei, said (2):

*"We think the theory of Lukas is very unique and interesting. His method is a Western interpretation of Chinese bronze. His method is quite different from our traditional theory, but diverse academic opinions are good for our studies, therefore we need to do experiments to find the truth... As the experiment demonstrated, Lukas's method does not work, but this outcome does not mean his opinion is wrong. The technology that enabled ornament needs to be further explored in the future, his argument may be right." \**

The Museum published a report with photographs on the initial experiment in *Nanfang Wenwu* in 2008 (3). In November 2011 Dong invited Lukas Nickel to participate in further experiments in Ezhou that resulted in the casting of four vessels using Nickel's method. Both agreed that ornaments can be applied to the outer moulds.

2) In 1996, workers clearing ground 400 miles south of Beijing discovered a large burial pit containing hundreds of fragments of 6<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist figures. Eventually, more than 200 torsos, 144 heads of the Buddha and 50 heads of bodhisattva figures, many retaining traces of coloured pigments and gilding, were unearthed, representing one of China's most significant recent archaeological finds (7).

Nickel's pioneering catalogue of many of the pieces (output c of 2001) has since become the seminal source on which all later exhibitions of the same material (Sydney 2008; Singapore, 2008; Paris, 2009) have strongly relied (4). Gilles Béguin, Director of the Musée Cernuschi in Paris wrote in the preface to that exhibition's 2009 catalogue (5):

*"Il convient ici de rendre hommage à l'étude remarquable du professeur Lukas Nickel et de ses assistants, à l'occasion de la première venue en Europe de sculptures du Longxingsi en 2001-2002. Sans leur travail fondamental, le présent catalogue n'aurait pu voir le jour." (It is appropriate here to pay homage to the remarkable scholarship of Professor Lukas Nickel and his assistants, on the occasion of the first showing in Europe of the Longxingsi sculptures in 2001-02 [Return of the Buddha]. Without their foundational work, the present catalogue would not have seen the light of day.)*

As a direct result of Nickel's research and excavation of the second Buddhist temple in Shandong, archaeologists he has collaborated with (notably Li Zhengguang of the state-sponsored Shandong Province Archaeological Institute) have begun a large-scale survey of all early Buddhist sites in the province.

3) Nickel's recent research on the transmission of style and individual motifs eastward along the Silk Road from the eastern Mediterranean through the Middle East and Central Asia to China has attracted much controversy as an explicit questioning of mainstream interpretations that refute the possibility of external influence on Chinese art. Outputs d, e, and f analyse art historical and archaeological evidence and argue for a re-evaluation of the dynamics of stylistic influence in Chinese history. The theories advanced in output f in particular were highlighted in the *New York Times* in June 2012 by the well-known critic Soren Melikian (8a), and in a full-page feature in *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung* in July 2012 (8b and d).

This research was also mobilised in the making of a 50-minute documentary film in the popular German /French "Terra X" series (9). Beginning in 2011, Story House Media Group for Terra X worked on the documentary investigating discoveries of early links between China and the West, mainly focussing on well-known evidence of the Buddhist period. After contacting Nickel for an

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interview and reading outputs e and f, the producers radically changed the script and broadened the scope of the film to include substantial discussion of Nickel's theories both in relation to the influence of Persian styles on Chinese silver and Hellenistic influence on the Terracotta Warriors. They travelled with Nickel to two sites in China in December 2012, ultimately adopting Nickel's contributions as the framing device for the whole the film. The documentary aired on both French and German primetime television in September 2013.

\* Interview conducted and translated by a native Mandarin speaking SOAS PhD student doing her own fieldwork near Ezhou.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

#### Bronzes

1. Casting experiments and conference: <http://www.ezbgw.com/oldweb/9h123.htm> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
2. Interview by Biqing Ouyang with Dong Yawei, September 2013
3. Nanfang Wenwu: 何薇, 董亚巍, 周卫荣, 王昌燧: “商前期青铜罍铸造工艺分析与模拟实验研究”, 2008/4, 115-123.

#### Buddhism

Museum exhibition catalogues:

4. *The Lost Buddhas: Chinese Buddhist Sculpture from Qingzhou*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales 2008.
5. *Les Buddhas du Shandong*. Musee Cernuschi, Paris, 18 Sept 2009 to 2 January 2010.
6. China Cultural Relic News, 2011, (Newspaper operated by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage): <http://www.ccrnews.com.cn/plus/view.php?aid=4058> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
7. Article in *Sydney Herald* of 2008  
<http://www.statues.com.au/statues-articles/2008/8/30/heavenly-bodies/> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
8. *Links along the silk road*:
  - a. Soren Melikian in the NYT:  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/arts/09iht-melikian09.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/09/arts/09iht-melikian09.html?_r=0) [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
  - b. Mitteldeutsche Zeitung:  
<http://www.mz-web.de/halle-saalekreis/halle-seidenstrasse-aelter-als-gedacht,20640778,17083788.html> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
  - c. Schatzjagd-an-der-Seidenstrasse <http://zdf.de/ZDFmediathek/beitrag/video/1979182/> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
  - d. Mitteldeutsche Zeitung: <http://www.mz-web.de/halle-saalekreis/zdf-reihe-terra-x-wegbereiter-der-china-sensation-ist-ein-hallenser,20640778,24741122.html> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
9. ZDF documentary on German television and interview: <http://zdf.de/Terra-X/Schatzjagd-an-der-Seidenstrasse-29412618.html> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].