

A Comparative Study of the Status, Function and Iconography of the Lion Motif in Qashqai Carpets and the Fu Dog Motif in Chinese Carpets

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Abstract

Qashqai carpets, which are the main handicrafts of Fars province, are primarily woven by tribal women, where the lion motif is particularly popular, giving rise to "Lion Gabbehs" or "Lion Carpets." This motif, which is deeply rooted in Iranian art, has traveled to other regions, including China, and has found a special place in Buddhist iconography. The purpose of this research is to examine the image of the lion motif in the context of Qashqai tribal carpets and comparative Chinese samples. The main research question addresses the commonalities and contrasts in the design and motifs of this figure in the studied traditions. This research is descriptive, analytical, and comparative in nature. The study utilizes a library research approach along with fieldwork, especially through interviews and collecting data from existing samples. The comparative results, primarily limited to works of recent centuries due to the lack of preservation of ancient samples, demonstrate the existence of unique concepts and themes in both civilizations. In China, these themes originate from ancient rituals and profound Buddhist influences. Conversely, in Qashqai culture, these themes are rooted in tribal traditions and the specific lifestyle of the nomadic people. Conclusion: This research highlights a clear divergence in the representation and execution of this powerful motif, which strongly indicates two fundamentally different aesthetic origins and socio-cultural environments.

Keywords

Qashqai Carpet, Chinese Carpet, Lion Motif, Fu Dog, Comparative Analysis, Tribal Art, Symbolism.

Introduction

The lion motif has long held a distinct place in the popular culture of Iran's nomadic tribes, especially the Qashqai, where it stands as one of the most prominent motifs in their carpets and gabbehs. The genuine creativity of Qashqai weavers has produced diverse depictions of this animal, which have garnered international market attention due to visual similarities with modern abstract art (Tanavoli, 1977). Conversely, Chinese carpets feature wholly indigenous patterns rooted in ancient East Asian symbolism. A key mythological creature in Chinese carpet iconography is the Fu Dog (Guardian Lion), often described as having the head of a lion and the body of a dog. Tracing its origins to the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the Fu Dog is most famously seen as protective stone statues guarding Buddhist temples, and it appears in various forms in Chinese textiles. Despite the rich mythological and artistic significance of lion-like creatures in both cultural contexts, a comprehensive comparative study focusing on the depiction, iconography, and potential means of motif transfer between Qashqai and Chinese carpets remains scarce. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is a comparative study of the lion motif in Qashqai carpets and the Fu Dog motif in Chinese carpets, addressing the main question: What are the similarities and differences in the depiction and symbolism of the lion motif in Qashqai carpets and the Fu Dog motif in Chinese carpets? This research employs a qualitative, fundamental approach using a descriptive-analytical-comparative methodology.

Literature Review

There are articles and books available that introduce the characteristics and features of both Chinese lion carpets and Persian Lion Gabbehs, articulating the specific qualities of these weavings.

One such source is the book *Qālīn* by Sabahi (2014). In a section of this book, they examine the features and characteristics of Chinese lion carpets and the lion gabbehs of that country, covering the techniques and motifs used within them. Furthermore, Zakariyā Kermānī and Kargozar (2023) conducted a comparative study titled "A Comparative Analysis of Formal Structures, Styles, and Animal Imagery in Fars Lion Gabbehs and Chinese Lion Carpets." In their research, the authors highlight the symbolic functions associated with the lion motif in both cultural contexts. They argue that, despite differences in technique, geography, and artistic conventions, the lion imagery in Fars gabbehs and Chinese carpets serves as a potent emblem of power, protection, and spiritual significance. Their findings demonstrate that the recurrence of this motif in both traditions reflects deeply rooted cultural narratives, mythological heritage, and collective memory, thereby underscoring the cross-cultural universality of the lion as an artistic and symbolic figure. Mojabi and Fanayi (2010), in a part of the book *A Prelude to the History of World Carpets*, review Eastern carpets (China, Tibet, and East Turkestan). Furthermore, this book discusses the history of their carpet weaving and the details of their construction. Clifford (1911), in the book *Oriental Carpets*, introduces carpet weaving regions and dedicates an independent section to explaining Chinese carpets, particularly the lion rugs. Shvalkovski (2016), in the book *Symbols in Arts, Religion and Culture*, addresses the conceptual meaning of the lion motif in Eastern cultures, making references in certain sections to the lion carpets of Fars and China. Tanavoli (1977), in a work titled *Lion Gabbehs of Fars*, examines the characteristics and features of Fars Lion Gabbehs from various perspectives. Amiri and Black (2006), in an article titled "Chinese Carpet: Importance and Origin," investigate the imperial dynasties that ruled in China and discuss the history of carpet weaving in different periods and the motifs used in the carpets. The article "Review of Chinese Carpet Motifs with Emphasis on the Symbolic Role of the Lion-Dog and its Correspondence with Qashqai Lion Weavings," written by Baharlou and Chitsazian (2012), addresses the symbolic role of the Lion-Dog motif in Chinese carpets and the symbolic role of the lion in Qashqai lion gabbehs.

The distinction of this research from previous studies is that while earlier examples have addressed the features and characteristics of Iranian and Chinese lion carpets and discussed the symbolic meaning of the

lion in these two countries, the current article endeavors to achieve a comprehensive comparative analysis. By identifying the features of the lion carpets in both countries, it seeks to determine the similarities and differences between the two subject figures, ascertain the antiquity of the gabbehs, investigate the mutual influence of the two countries upon one another, and ultimately discover the weaving relationships between Iran and China.

Methodology

This research employs a fundamental and qualitative strategy, utilizing a descriptive-analytical-comparative methodology to investigate the lion motif in Qashqai and Chinese carpets. The statistical population consists of all extant and accessible examples of the lion motif in Qashqai textiles (qālis and gabbehs) and the Fu Dog/Guardian Lion motif in Chinese carpets. Due to the limitations inherent in historical artistic artifacts, a non-probability, purposive (judgmental) sampling method is adopted, wherein the sample size is determined by and considered equal to the accessible and representative population of documented artifacts relevant to the analysis. Data collection is systematically conducted through both the library (documentary) method, involving the analysis of scholarly sources, and visual analysis (fieldwork/observation), focusing on the systematic examination and documentation of visual data. Finally, the data will be analyzed using a comparative-analytical approach that involves detailing the formal characteristics, interpreting the symbolic meaning (iconography), and formally comparing the similarities and differences between the Qashqai and Chinese motifs.

Qashqai:

1. *The History of the Qashqai Tribe*

The etymological root of the term Qashqai remains ambiguous and uncertain. It is unclear whether it is derived from "Qach Qayi," meaning "the one who escaped," or from "Qashqa," which in Turkic languages signifies a "white-forehead horse" or "a white blaze on the forehead" (Tanavoli, 2001). Based on historical evidence, various branches of this tribe migrated to Fars from different regions, including the western areas of the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan and the Caucasus) and the eastern regions (Turkmenistan and northern Khorasan). The author of *Farsnāmeh-ye Nāserī* considers the Qashqai lineages to be descendants of the Khaleji Turks who fled from the armies of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi and subsequently migrated to Fars. This interpretation supports the theory that the name Qashqai is derived from the Turkic verb "Qachmaq," meaning "to flee," which initially evolved into Qachqāni and later into Qashqāi (Nasiri, 1995).

Alternatively, the name might originate from Kashghar, as historical accounts suggest a group of Qara-Tatars resided in that city during the Seljuq reign, and twenty thousand of them accompanied Sa'd ibn Zangi to Fars. It is plausible that Kashghari gradually transformed into Qashqari and finally Qashqai. Mirzā Ja'far Khormuji asserted that the Qashqai tribe originated from the Turkmens of Dasht-e Qipchāq who entered Iran alongside the Salghurid Atabegs. In another interpretation regarding the etymology of the word, he suggests that "since one of the branches of the Yomut [Turkmen] tribe is named Qashqa, they were therefore named Qashqai." The late Abbas Iqbal Ashtiani supports this deduction, writing: "It must be almost certain that the Qashqai tribe belonged to the Turkmens of Dasht-e Qipchāq and its environs, later moving to the regions between India and Sistan, and from there found their way to Iraq [Arak], finally settling in Fars."

The exact time and circumstances of the Qashqai's migration to Fars remain uncertain. The oldest account regarding the settlement of Turkic-speaking clans in Fars consists of two vague and non-explicit reports from Ibn Battuta, the Maghrebi traveler of the eighth century AH, and Ibn Shihab Yazdi from the ninth century AH. Ibn Battuta, who traveled to Iran in the second quarter of the eighth century and journeyed from Isfahan to Shiraz in 727 AH (1327 CE), wrote that he traveled from Yazd (Khāss-e Izad) to Māyīn via Dasht-e Room, noting that "Dasht-e Room is the dwelling of the Turks." Despite the ambiguity of Ibn

Battuta's narrative, several inferences can be drawn that may approach the actual history of the Qashqai migration to Fars. Dasht-e Room begins seventy kilometers north of Fahlian in the Rostam Mamasani district and ends thirty-odd kilometers west of Komehr and Kākā'ān. This area has been inhabited by Lurs since ancient times, and its people call it "Rīm," believing it to be the field where Rostam and Sohrab fought single combat. The denomination of Dasht-e Room is therefore unclear, and it is unknown when it acquired this name. The only difficulty in establishing this inference is the possibility that Ibn Battuta may have transcribed Dasht-e Room as "Dasht-e Rūn." The route from Isfahan to Shiraz via Yazd (Khāss-e Izad), Dasht-e Rūn, and Māyīn was the shortest, whereas the route via Dasht-e Room was longer, more rugged, and perhaps less safe. The Qashqai is one of the two major and ancient tribes of Iran, the other being the Bakhtiari, with the majority of the Qashqai residing in Fars province (Hosseini & Amini, 2016).

2. Definition and Etymology of Gabbeh

A Gabbeh is a type of hand-woven coarse carpet particular to Iran, often considered synonymous with terms such as kharsak (rough rug), farsh (rug), and qālī (carpet). Most contemporary lexicographers have included the word Gabbeh in their vocabulary books, yet they have not indicated the source from which they derived the word. Contemporary carpetologists have also made efforts to define Gabbeh, tracing long paths to uncover the root of this word. At times, it has been connected to the Arabic language, equating its meaning with qabīh (ugly or rough). Others have suggested its root lies in the Avestan word "Gayer," meaning protection or guard. By interpreting qabīh to mean rough or simple, and Gayer to mean protection, scholars have reached certain conclusions regarding its fundamental meaning (Azadi, 1987).

3. Qashqai Carpet Weaving Tradition

Carpet weaving is a specialized craft and art form traditionally practiced by the girls and women of the Qashqai tribe. These carpets (qālīs) are typically woven for personal use or as part of a dowry, often possessing a durability that allows them to last up to three generations. Consequently, they are less frequently traded in the marketplace.

The weaving process, like that of other nomadic tribes, takes place on the ground using horizontal looms (dār-hā-ye ufuqī) and is executed without a detailed, pre-drawn pattern (naqsheh). During the tribe's seasonal migration (the kūch), the loom is rolled up and loaded onto a mule or donkey. Upon settling at a new camp, the loom is re-established, and work resumes. This interruption and resetting often result in weaving inconsistencies, such as distorted edges and subtle variations in color (Figure 1).

As Yasāwulī (1995) notes, "Since Qashqai gabbehs are woven during migration or at their temporary camps, noticeable diversity in design and color is often seen. Only a small amount of dyed yarn can be carried, and only a small quantity of wool is dyed during the migration, which itself leads to color variety".

Historically, most Qashqai weavers chose wool for both the warp and weft of their carpets, occasionally incorporating goat or camel hair. The warps of these carpets are thick and often appear in a reddish-brown to black color. The pile is typically long, and the dominant colors found in the finished carpets are red, brown, blue, and golden yellow (Figure 2).

The preferred motifs of the Qashqai weavers, including medallion (tarānjes), boteh (paisley), tree, bird, rose, and mihrab (arch) designs, are all woven in geometric and broken-branch (angular) styles. Some designs in older Qashqai carpets are considered to be influenced by patterns originating in the Caucasus, particularly the Shirvan region. However, one key characteristic used to distinguish the old weavings of the Qashqai from Caucasian carpets is the warp color: the warps of Qashqai carpets are reddish-brown to black, whereas Caucasian hand-woven items generally feature lighter warps (Table 1).



Figure 1: Uneven dimensions due to various factors such as nomadic migration (the *kūch*) and the depiction of the lion with an unmaned tail (referencing the typical stylized motif). (Tanavoli, 1977).



Figure 2: The application of dominant colors, such as red and golden yellow, in the Qashqai lion qālipcheh (small carpet). (Tanavoli, 1989).

Table 1: Redesign of the Qashqai Lion Motif. (Authors)

Redesign of Design 1 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 2 (Authors)

4. The Lion Motif in Qashqai Carpet:

Qashqai weavers produce small carpets featuring the lion design, which are specifically known as Lion Gabbehs. The field of these gabbehs typically displays one or two large lions in the central area of the carpet, or sometimes several lions arranged in parallel rows (Figure 3). Because these weavings "lack specific features and structures other than the lion, they are referred to simply as Lion Carpets" (Yasāwulī, 1991). Historically, these Lion Gabbehs were often placed atop other carpets in the center of the tent, symbolizing the bravery, pride, and zeal of the tent's owner. Based on historical records, traditional beliefs, and the high regard the lion holds among the inhabitants of this region, "it appears that the design and weaving of Lion Gabbehs are an innovation of the Fars nomads, including the Qashqai" (Nasiri, 1995). The lion motif is, in fact, the most favored and popular design among the nomads of Iran's southwestern provinces, retaining its elevated status in both ancient Iranian culture and the Islamic tradition.

The lion holds deep religious significance in Shia Islam, where its attributes, courage, dignity, power, and other positive traits are attributed to Imam Ali (AS), the first Shia Imam, who is known as "The Lion of God" (Shīr-e Khodā). It seems the enduring focus on the lion motif stems largely from its association with the Imam's unparalleled courage and bravery. Furthermore, this powerful and courageous animal has long symbolized kings and royal power, evident in the famous reliefs at Persepolis, Sasanian artifacts, and in the

depiction of hunting scenes on carpets, where the lion is often seen in combat with heroes. Nomadic and village weavers drew inspiration from their surroundings, incorporating the lion into their designs. While the lion motif continued to be used during the Islamic era, it is suggested that the widespread and comprehensive revival of the lion's representation occurred during the Safavid period (Tanavoli, 1977). The representation of this animal naturally emerged in the carpets woven by tribes and nomads, with the Qashqai weavings being the most prominent in Iran. A key difference between Lion Carpets and other regional examples is the highly personal and emotional dimension of these weavings and its effect on the designs. While Oriental carpet weaving generally evolved toward a non-personal style over time (Tanavoli, 1977), this is not the case for the Lion Carpets and Gabbehs of the Qashqai. In these weavings, "tradition has been broken because the weavers intended to express their feelings in a specific way to the person for whom the carpet was being woven" (Tanavoli, 1977). A notable point is the absence of a single, fixed pattern for depicting the lion in these carpets (Figure 4 and Figure 5) and even in other ancient artworks. This may be partly due to the familiarity of the animal in the region and the lack of access to detailed artistic models. Consequently, "the lion's shape, posture, expression, and even its ornamental details are entirely the product of the imagination of the women weavers" (Tanavoli, 1977). Since the weavers intended to represent a symbol rather than strictly reproducing the lion's physical appearance, they used the pictorial form of the lion to embody a source of lasting power, masculinity, and courage (Tanavoli, 1977). Crucially, although carpet weaving among tribes is a source of income, Qashqai Lion Gabbehs never possessed a purely commercial aspect; they were woven in very small numbers, allowing the weaver's feelings and imagination to be expressed with complete freedom (Tanavoli, 1977) (Table 2).



Figure 3: The presence of lions in parallel rows, often depicted holding a sword (a symbol of power in their hands). (Parham, 1991).



Figure 4: Lack of consistency in the depiction of multiple lion patterns in the Qashqai tradition. (Tanavoli, 1977).



Figure 5: Lack of consistency in the depiction of multiple lion patterns in the Qashqai tradition. (Tanavoli, 1977).

Table 2: Redesign of the Qashqai Lion Motif. (Authors).

Redesign of Design 3 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 4 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 5 (Authors)

5. Evolution and Characteristics of Color

These early natural-color carpets (often referred to in the original context as Gabbehs) exhibit greater resistance to washing and sunlight, even exceeding the colorfastness of some later dyed carpets because their coloring agents are entirely natural. However, over time, as the nomads' migration paths changed, they gained access to vegetable dyes and knowledge of various plant pigments. This coincided with the introduction of these carpets to urban markets, expanding their use beyond the nomads' personal consumption. From that period, carpets began to be woven with diverse natural and vegetable-dyed colors. The coloration in these carpets is typically irregular (non-uniform), often reflecting the weaver's emotional states and personal expression. While a varied range of shades is employed, the primary color options for the Fars Lion Carpets are generally limited. The coloring of most pieces, with rare exceptions, is entirely natural and vegetable-based. Traditional dyeing and the use of vegetable colors lend special authenticity to the tribal handicrafts. The colors of the Fars tribal carpets exhibit a specific transparency, sharing similarities with Turkmen weavings.

The use of color in tribal art is linked to various factors, with the most important being the accessibility of the plant pigment required for a specific color. Nomads dye fibers for their handicrafts and essential items such as clothing, decorations, tents, animal accessories, storage containers, and ropes based on both artistic preference and the availability of plants. Among the traditional Qashqai vegetable dyes, the red family is the most significant (Figure 6 and Figure 7). All its shades, ranging from delicate pink and bright crimson to dark lac and magenta, are extracted from the madder root (*rūnās*). The use of cochineal (*qermez-dāneh*) is not widespread in Qashqai weaving, making carpets colored with it entirely exceptional. The color palettes of Qashqai Lion Carpets are indistinguishable from those of other Qashqai carpets, as the lion design is a subset of the general Qashqai weaving style. The main dyeing materials used in these carpets are: Asphodel (*jāshīr*), Weld (*esparak*), Madder (*rūnās*), Turmeric (*zardchūbeh*), Gandel, and Indigo (*nīl*). Madder (*rūnās*) is the dominant dyeing material in Qashqai lion carpets, primarily yielding the red family of colors (Figure 8 and Table 3).



Figure 6: The dominant use of the color red in the Qashqai lion pattern. (Parham, 1991)

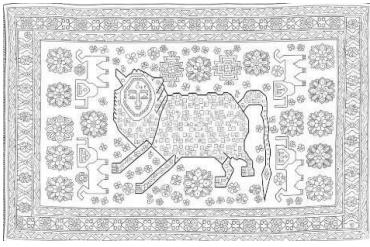
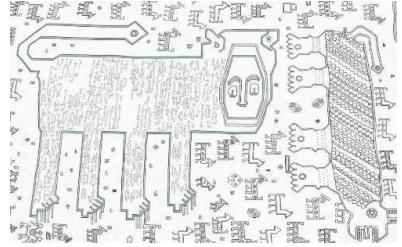


Figure 7: The dominant use of the color red in the Qashqai lion pattern. (Tanavoli, 1977).



Figure 8: The dominant use of the color red in the Qashqai lion pattern. (Tanavoli, 1977).

Table 3: Redesign of the Qashqai Lion Motif. (Authors)

		
Redesign of Design 6 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 7 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 8 (Authors)

China:

1. History of Chinese Carpets

Carpet weaving was only accepted as a significant court art in China relatively late, starting around the second half of the 17th century, much later than other Eastern weaving centers. This late start can be partially attributed to the fact that wool was primarily sourced only from the northwestern regions of China. However, a more significant reason was the specific characteristics of carpet weaving itself, which could not entirely conform to the traditional Chinese aesthetic rules that prioritized the execution of delicate artistic works and impeccable calligraphy. For these reasons, carpets were often historically dismissed in China as the art of "uncivilized people" from Central Asia. Therefore, unlike in India, where a new foreign commodity was introduced, carpet weaving in China was already a known commodity used for centuries in certain parts of the country that only later received elevated artistic status.

In fact, the art of carpet weaving was initially brought to China in ancient times by Central Asian tribes who invaded the northwestern provinces. Consequently, the carpet weaving tradition primarily developed in these border regions. Even after the newly established Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) showed interest in carpets in the mid-17th century and began accepting them as a valuable form of art, production remained limited to the northwestern regions and was primarily confined to home workshops. Although the art did not develop extensively in imperial workshops, Chinese carpet weaving nonetheless found its own path, adhering to the general aesthetic principles of Chinese art and the perfectionist demands of the ruling class. Most of the extant older examples date back to the 19th century, with pieces dating to the 17th century being extremely rare (Figure 9) (Bassam, 2013).

2. History of East Turkestan Carpets

East Turkestan, the region known today as Xinjiang Province in China, is situated between West Turkestan and Mongolia. This area is mostly desert, with habitation possible only in small, developed oases. Archaeological discoveries in this region have unearthed carpet remnants in the Tarim River bed dating back to the 3rd century CE. Thus, carpet weaving in East Turkestan is an ancient practice. However, firm evidence is scarce, as complete, well-preserved examples only date from the late 18th century onward.

East Turkestan carpets were generally woven by men in specialized workshops and are commonly known by the trade name "Samarkand," after the city in West Turkestan which served as the trade and export hub for these carpets heading west. Although Xinjiang's location at the confluence of Silk Road routes connecting East and West made it susceptible to influences from China, West Turkestan, Iran, and India, and it suffered extensive damage from numerous invasions, its people remained committed to their pre-Islamic traditions, especially Shamanism and Buddhism. Consequently, these carpets drew inspiration from a simple, rudimentary philosophy that resulted in designs that were both strong and vibrant (shādāb), preserving their tradition for centuries. However, in samples from the late 19th century onwards, this vitality diminished, and pastel colors (Figure 10) began to dominate the palette (Bassam, 2013).

3. Tibetan Carpets

Tibetan carpet, or Tibetan qālī, is an Oriental carpet woven in Tibet, a region located in Central Asia bordered by Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar to the south, India to the west, and China to the north and east. The oldest archaeological fragments of Tibetan carpets, dated using carbon dating, trace their history back to 1700 BCE. While empirical methods have dated existing woven carpets to the 17th century, the beginning of established commercial weaving is more confidently placed around the 1880s. Evidence of workshop or commercial carpet production has been documented since the late 18th century (Bassam, 2013).

Design and Symbolism: Tibetan carpet design is primarily influenced by Chinese carpets and, to a lesser extent, by East Turkestan carpets. Some indigenous Tibetan motifs are also utilized. Color choice is often linked to the intended use; for instance, orange and gold are incorporated into carpets designated for religious ceremonies. Reddish-brown is frequently used for temple floor coverings. The tiger skin motif (Figure 11) has long been favored by Tibetan nobility and rulers, and thus, older Tibetan carpets featuring the tiger skin pattern were considered a mark of distinction. Many antique Tibetan carpets also feature checkerboard or chessboard patterns (Table 4 and Table 5).

Technique and Structure: With few exceptions, most antique Tibetan carpets are all-wool. Many old pieces feature a red fabric backing and red edging. Knotting in Tibetan carpets is done using a unique weft-wrapping method (known as the Tibetan knot). Some Tibetan carpets are woven using the symmetrical (Turkish) knot. The knot density (or knot count) of these carpets typically ranges between 12 and 35 knots per inch (kpsi), with older carpets being generally coarser. Contemporary carpets are often given a relief carving or high-low pile effect after being cut from the loom.

Key Characteristics: Tibetan carpets are characterized by their vibrant, intense colors (Figure 13). The main features of Tibetan weavings include:

- Abstract and Stylized Floral Motifs (Figure 13).
- Abstract/Mythological Motifs such as the dragon, phoenix, Snow Lion (Figure 14), tiger, and bat.
- Geometric and Abstract Motifs prevalent in Chinese carpets, including squares, circles, and other forms.
- Designs are rendered in both medallion (*tarānj-e-dār*) and repeating pattern (*vāgīreh-ī*) styles.
- The overall aesthetic is often more primitive than that of Chinese designs.
- Many carpets are bordered only on the top and bottom ends (Bassam, 2013).

Modernization and Diaspora: Following China's actions to incorporate Tibet in 1959, many Tibetans fled to Nepal, Bhutan, and India. In the refuges established in these countries, Tibetans began commercial production of carpets using their traditional methods. The designs of these commercial carpets became highly varied, with only a small number of traditional motifs persisting. Chemical dyes (Figure 12) were introduced, often resulting in colors that were not harmonious with the traditional natural palette. These commercial carpets typically have a knot density of around 20 kpsi and possess a suitable structure. More recently, custom-ordered carpets are being produced in Tibet using traditional designs and methods, along with natural dyes, resembling the efforts seen in the Dobag project in Turkey (Bassam, 2013).

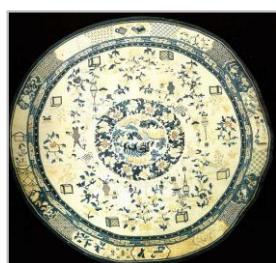


Figure 9: Chinese carpet (17th century). (Milan, Niloufar Collection)



Figure 10: East Turkestan floral carpet sample (pastel colors). (Verona, Tiziano Miglioranzi Collection)



Figure 11: Tibetan tiger-motif carpet. (Bassam, 2013).



Figure 12: Tibetan tiger-motif carpet (Bassam, 2013).



Figure 13: Abstract motifs in a Tibetan carpet. (Bassam, 2013).



Figure 14: The Snow Lion motif in a Tibetan carpet. (Bassam, 2013).

Table 4: Redesign of the Chinese Lion-Fu Dog Motif. (Authors)

Redesign of Design 9 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 10 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 11 (Authors)

Table 5: Redesign of the Chinese Lion-Fu Dog Motif. (Authors)

Redesign of Design 12 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 13 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 14 (Authors)

4. Characteristics of Chinese Carpets

The designs and motifs employed in Chinese carpets predate the weaving techniques themselves in terms of historical significance, with many patterns rooted in ancient customs, beliefs, and philosophical traditions. These motifs are observed not only on textiles but also on other artistic and decorative objects, signifying a tradition spanning several millennia. Furthermore, the religious beliefs of the Chinese people have profoundly influenced the creation of symbolic imagery in their traditional arts, particularly carpet weaving. Buddhism and Taoism are the most prominent manifestations of this influence (Sür Isräfil & Juleh, 1999). These two schools of thought, alongside Confucianism, have always pioneered intellectual and cultural development, making substantial contributions to Chinese art, to the extent that it has been observed that "the influence of religion on art was even stronger in China than in the Islamic world" (Gombrich, 2006).

Motifs and Aesthetics: The patterns and designs found in older Chinese carpets are often motifs with specific conceptual meanings, and only a very small number of designs are purely decorative. Plants, animals, and even abstract motifs possess precise and fixed meanings (Figure 15 and Figure 16) (Bennett, 2004). While certain Iranian designs (particularly those from Isfahan and Qom) are occasionally observed among the patterns of Chinese carpets, the authentic and traditional Chinese designs are applied with complete finesse and beauty to both the borders and the field of the carpet (Yāvari & Noor Māh, 2005).

Technical Specifications: Chinese carpets are woven using the asymmetrical knot (Persian knot) and typically feature a low knot density. On average, 15 to 16 cotton warp and weft threads are concealed beneath the relatively long pile. The technique of carving or embossing the pile around the contours of the motifs was innovated at the beginning of the 20th century to create a raised, relief effect on the design. Antique carpets are generally close to a square shape, with average dimensions of approximately 270 \times 200 centimeters. In contrast, newer carpets vary greatly in size and dimension, sometimes being quite large, averaging around 400 \times 300 centimeters. Given that most weaving areas were located in northwestern China, identifying the exact place of origin solely based on the design is challenging. However, differences in weaving methods have allowed for the identification of several distinct regional weaving groups, including Ningxia, Gansu, Baotou, Suiyuan, and Peking (Bassam, 2013) (Table 6).



Figure 15: The application of floral (plant) motifs alongside animal motifs. (Moulaeian Gallery)



Figure 16: The application of floral (plant) motifs alongside animal motifs. (Moulaeian Gallery)

Table 6: Redesign of the Chinese Lion-Fu Dog Motif. (Authors)

Redesign of Design 15 (Authors)	Redesign of Design 16 (Authors)

5. The Fu Dog (Lion-Dog) Motif in Chinese Carpets

The Fu Dog (Lion-Dog) motif and the mythological lion-dog figure have been abundant in Chinese art throughout history. The Buddhist Lion, whose duty is to protect the law and defend sacred temples, has

long stood in the form of stone lions in front of structures, repelling evil spirits. The lion was sometimes depicted with one of its forepaws resting on a sun globe. Images of this type, likely originating in Iran, reached India and, from there, followed the path of Buddhism to China around the 4th century CE, arriving in Japan in the 5th century. A curious transformation occurred when lions were adopted as guardians of Buddhist temples: "The lion acquired some aspects of Chinese toy dogs. At this time, the sun globe beneath the lion symbolized the Cintāmani or the Buddhist holy jewel" (Hall, 2001). Due to the lack of extensive wool production resources in China, the earliest Chinese carpets were woven with silk fibers. China's silk weaving and sericulture history spans approximately four thousand years, and until the Italian Renaissance, nearly all silk textiles in Europe were imported from the East. Therefore, the oldest Chinese weavings are considered to be silk textiles (Baharlou & Chitsazian, 2012). Many scholars believe that carpet weaving was first introduced to China via East Turkestan (Sūr Isrāfil, 1999). Other sources support this, stating that "the art of carpet weaving seems to have reached China from East Turkestan along the Silk Road" (Harris, 1997). It is hypothesized that pile weaving began in China after the demise of the Ming Dynasty and the subsequent takeover by the Manchus. The color scheme of these carpets is notably soft and mild. Background colors are often blue (Figure 17) and yellow, used in varying degrees. Yellow-brown and purple are also occasionally used, but green and red are rarely found in antique carpets (Liebetrau, 1963).

The Fu Dog as a Cultural Symbol: The lion image depicted on Chinese carpets is rooted in the symbolic tradition of Far Eastern culture. The lion motif symbolizes the Protector of Buddha. The Lion-Dog (Shīr-Sag, or Fo Dog the Chinese name for Buddha), is a mythological creature with the head of a lion and the body of a dog (Figure 18). Its origins date back to the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), and it has appeared in various forms in Chinese art throughout history, most characteristically as the stone statues found in front of Buddhist temples, a motif which subsequently permeated Chinese carpet designs (Table 7).

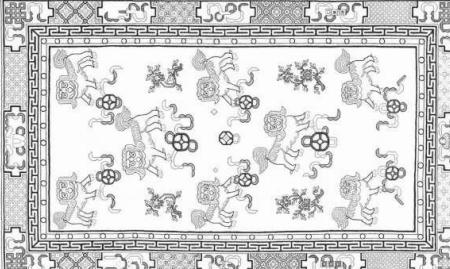


Figure 17: The use of the color blue in the field of the lion-motif carpet. (Moulaeian Gallery).



Figure 18: The Fu Dog motif in an antique Chinese carpet. (ID Oriental Rugs, n.d).

Table 7: Redesign of the Chinese Lion-Fu Dog Motif. (Authors)

 Redesign of Design 17 (Authors)	 Redesign of Design 18 (Authors)
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Comparative Analysis of Qashqai and Chinese Lion Motifs

Despite the great antiquity and deep roots of the lion motif, whether simple or integrated, within the beliefs and culture of both Iran and China, the perishable nature of the raw materials used in carpet construction means few ancient examples survive to demonstrate the application of the lion motif in the textiles of different civilizations. Surviving woven examples bearing this motif in both Iran and China generally date back only to the last two or three centuries. However, historical evidence from both countries confirms the existence of the lion motif in other art forms, such as sculpture and relief carving, for thousands of years.

The historical depth of the motif suggests a nuanced relationship between the two cultures. The Qashqai are Turkic speakers who migrated from Central Asia in centuries past, meaning the lion motif might have been part of their weaving tradition even before settling in Fars. Furthermore, considering Fars was a cradle of art during the Achaemenid and Sasanian Empires periods, known for prominent lion iconography, the ultimate adoption and subsequent divergence of the motif in both Iran (via ancient Persian heritage and Turkic migration) and China (via the Silk Road) may stem from a partially shared, deep-rooted iconographic ancestry in the greater Asian continent.

Through millennia of mutual artistic influence in carpet weaving, the two regions have nonetheless followed and maintained their own unique styles and methods, evident even in the distinct weaving traditions within each country. A study of the core motifs found in Qashqai and Chinese carpets, specifically the Lion, the Fu Dog, the Tiger, and the Snow Lion, allows for a detailed comparison based on antiquity, historical meaning, application, and weaving method.

Synthesized Comparative Findings (Table 8 and Table 9)

- **Stylistic Execution and Aesthetics:** The Qashqai lion design is characterized by its geometric, angular, and highly abstract aesthetic, reflecting a non-patterned, improvisational tribal weaving tradition. The motif emphasizes the vitality of the subject over anatomical precision. In contrast, Chinese lion motifs, particularly the Fu Dog, adhere to a fixed, curvilinear, and formalized style, driven by strict symbolic requirements. Chinese methods often incorporate pile carving or embossing to raise the motif from the background, a technical refinement absent in the Qashqai weaving style.
- **Function and Symbolism:** In the Qashqai tradition, the lion motif is a personal and tribal emblem symbolizing bravery, honor, and religious allegiance. These carpets were historically non-commercial, woven for family use or dowry, functioning as a declaration of the owner's status and pride. The Chinese Fu Dog, conversely, functions as a public, institutional protector, historically adopted by Buddhism as a guardian against evil spirits. Its symbolism is tied to Imperial authority and codified religious doctrine, fitting into a more standardized production framework.
- **Color and Material Palette:** The Qashqai carpet tradition relies heavily on all-wool construction (warp, weft, and pile), utilizing a strong, intense palette dominated by the red family, which is primarily derived from the native madder root. The color is often irregular, reflecting the weaver's personal mood. The Chinese tradition, especially in its antique forms, utilized silk and fine wool with cotton warps. The dominant colors are typically soft, mild hues of blue and yellow, reflecting courtly aesthetic preferences and contrasting sharply with the Qashqai's pervasive use of deep reds.
- **Weaving and Production Context:** Qashqai carpets originate from an indigenous, nomadic tradition using mobile, horizontal looms, resulting in slight technical inconsistencies (e.g., uneven edges). The process is highly personalized. The Chinese carpet tradition was adopted later in its history, arriving via Central Asia. Production, centered in northwestern provinces, developed into a more standardized, workshop-based system, reflecting the demands of court and early commercial markets.

Table 8: Comparative Analysis of the Lion Symbol in Qashqai and Chinese Carpets (Authors)

Examination of Influential Components in Both Cultures	Qashqai Carpet	Chinese Carpet
<p>China The emergence of the Fu Dog (Lion-Dog) as a symbolic and integrated motif in China, and its initial presence in Chinese art, whether as sculpture or other artistic designs, dates back to the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). This period coincides with the introduction of Buddhism to the country.</p> <p>Qashqai (Iran) The lion motif and its various applications across artistic works and crafts have been a customary feature in Iran, particularly in the Fars region, since ancient times. The Persepolis reliefs, carvings, and other surviving works of art evidence this.</p>		
	<p>(Tanavoli, 1977)</p>	<p>(Moulacian Gallery)</p>
<p>China</p>		
<p>Qashqai (Iran)</p>		
<p>In most instances, the Qashqai lion is regarded as a symbol of majesty, glory, power, and magnificence. It is sometimes merged with other ancient motifs, such as the sun and the star (Figure 3).</p>		
	<p>(Tanavoli, 1977)</p>	<p>(Moulacian Gallery)</p>
<p>China</p>		
<p>The animal's face in China often possesses a mischievous or playful expression. Due to its function of repelling evil and misfortune, it is typically depicted with wide, staring eyes and frequently features a prominent spot in the center of its forehead.</p>		
<p>Qashqai (Iran)</p>		
<p>The lion carpets and gabbehs of the Qashqai, much like their counterparts in China, generally date to only the last one or two centuries.</p>		
	<p>(Yasawuli, 1991)</p>	<p>(Moulacian Gallery)</p>
<p>China</p>		
<p>The first known examples of Chinese carpets featuring the Lion-Dog (Fu Dog) motif date back to the early decades of the 17th century CE. This contrasts with the surviving works of this design in other artistic and industrial domains (such as sculpture), which have a much older history.</p>		
<p>Qashqai (Iran)</p>		
<p>The lion motif in Qashqai weavings is a product of the imagination of the women weavers and largely lacks the physical and superficial reality of the lion. What holds greater importance in these weavings are the underlying symbolic and intrinsic concepts.</p>		
	<p>(Tanavoli, 1989)</p>	<p>(Milan, Niloufar Collection)</p>

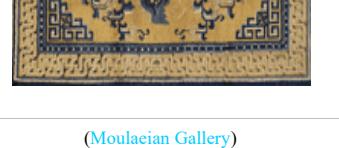
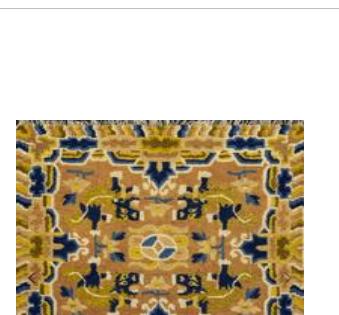
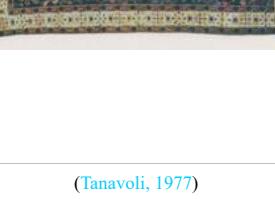
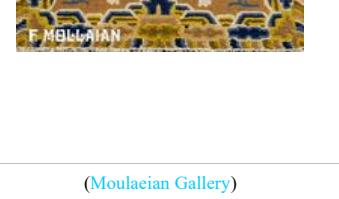
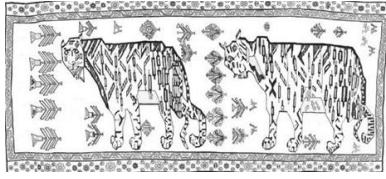
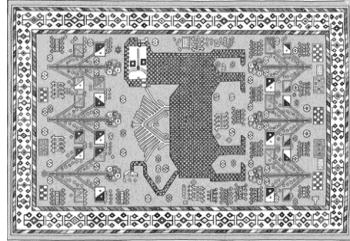
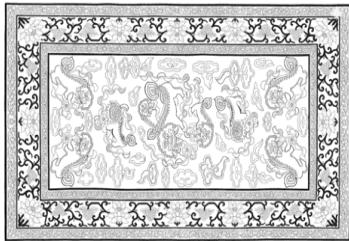
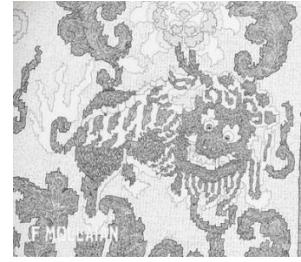
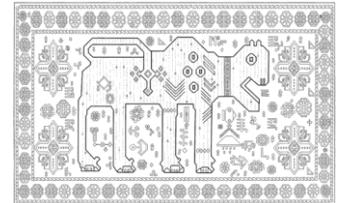
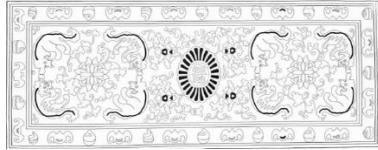
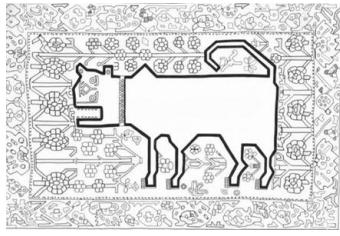
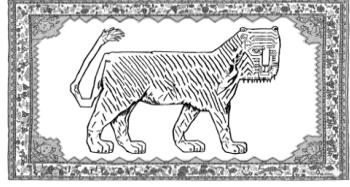
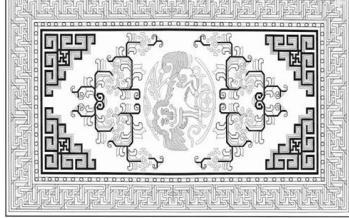
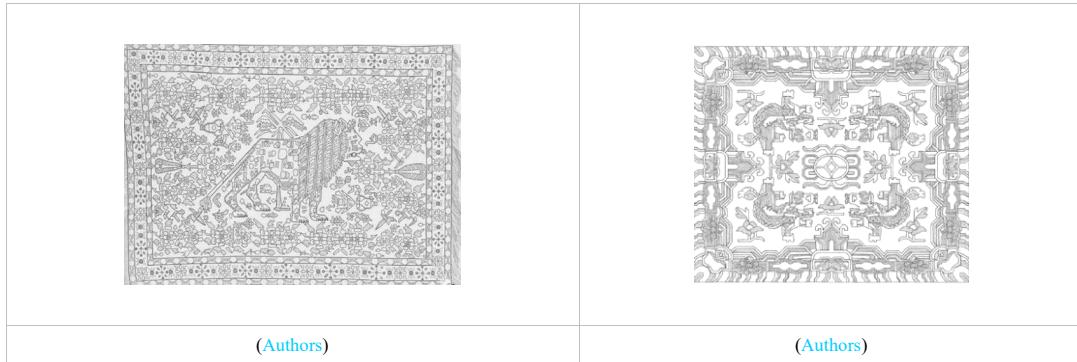
<p>China</p> <p>The woven design of this symbolic creature in Chinese carpets generally features multiple instances of the motif in a circular arrangement around a smaller central medallion. In some cases, the motifs are placed in the field or the four corners, predominantly displaying symmetrical and ordered characteristics.</p>		
<p>Qashqai (Iran)</p> <p>The lion motif in Qashqai weavings is often solitary (single) and spans the entire surface of the carpet continuously, exhibiting less visible symmetry.</p>		
<p>China</p> <p>Chinese Fu Dog carpets were primarily woven in imperial workshops, served an ornamental function, and most of them were presented as gifts to the emperors.</p>		
<p>Qashqai (Iran)</p> <p>Lion gabbels and carpets had no commercial aspect, were woven in limited numbers, and the weaver's emotions and imagination were paramount in their design.</p>		
<p>China</p> <p>The Fu Dog is a creature typically represented with a sphere (gong) beneath its paw, symbolizing the peace and tranquility that the animal preserves for sacred spaces. However, in the majority of Chinese carpets, this sphere is not woven, and only the motif itself is depicted. Sometimes a coin, which is a Buddhist symbol, is placed in the center, and in some weavings, the Lion-Dog is adorned with antique objects and other decorative elements.</p>		
<p>Qashqai (Iran)</p> <p>In some instances, the lion motif in the Qashqai tribe is accompanied by other motifs, such as plants and other animals, creating the visualization of a jungle or wilderness. This type of compositional setting is less frequently observed in the lion carpets of China.</p>		

Table 9: Redesign of the Motifs from Table 8 (Authors)

Redesign Qashqai Carpet	Redesign Chinese Carpet
	

	
(Authors)	(Authors)
	
(Authors)	(Authors)
	
(Authors)	(Authors)
	
(Authors)	(Authors)
	
(Authors)	(Authors)



Conclusion and Discussion

The extensive examination of the lion motif in Qashqai and Chinese carpets reveals a compelling case of shared ancient iconography manifesting into profoundly divergent textile traditions. While both cultures boast a history spanning millennia where the lion served as a powerful symbol in sculpture and relief (Point 1), its widespread integration into the art of carpet weaving is a relatively recent phenomenon, mainly documented from the 17th to 19th centuries due to the perishable nature of the materials.

The core distinction between the two traditions lies in the motivation for creation and the aesthetic philosophy employed. The Qashqai Lion Carpet is fundamentally a textile of personal and tribal identity. Its symbolism is rooted in concepts of courage, pride, and the Shi'a religious veneration of Imam Ali (the Lion of God) (Point 2), and it was a non-commercial item, a personal expression from the weaver (Point 6). Conversely, the Chinese Fu Dog (Lion-Dog) motif is deeply institutional and public. It is derived from Buddhist doctrine as a mythological guardian that wards off evil spirits and protects sacred spaces, and its presence on carpets signifies formal authority and ritualistic protection (Point 2).

Aesthetic differences reflect their respective production environments. The Qashqai motif is characterized by its geometric, abstract, and often asymmetrical style (Point 5), resulting from the personal imagination of the nomadic women weavers (Point 4) and a disregard for strict physical realism. The dominant palette is the intense red family, sourced from native madder (Point 7). In contrast, the Chinese motifs are curvilinear, symmetrical, and highly formalized (Point 5), adhering to the high-art standards of courtly taste. They were often produced in specialized imperial workshops (Point 6). The preference for a softer color palette, blue, yellow, and pastels, further differentiates it from the bold tribal reds. The Fu Dog often features fixed elements such as the sphere or coin, though the sphere is often absent in the woven design (Point 7).

In conclusion, the comparative analysis confirms that despite the lion symbol's presence along the Silk Road conduit for shared cultural exchange, the Qashqai and Chinese traditions developed in separation regarding their functional and aesthetic application. The Qashqai Lion embodies the individualistic, emotional, and religious zeal of a nomadic tribe, utilizing an abstract, geometric style and a dominant red palette, with the design being the sole product of the weaver's mind. The Chinese Fu Dog, on the other hand, embodies institutional authority, rigid symbolism, and public protection within a formalized, symmetrical style and a predominantly blue/yellow palette. The study of these two powerful motifs underscores how geography, religious doctrine, and socio-economic structure, nomadic autonomy versus imperial workshop, serve as the fundamental forces dictating the execution and meaning of textile art. The Qashqai Lion Carpet is a defiant personal banner, while the Chinese Fu Dog Carpet is a refined, ordered guardian of the state and temple.

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