Leogryphs – The guardians of University Hall
Père David’s deer (麋鹿) is an animal that not only looks like a hybrid of four animals (cow, camel, horse and deer), but is very much endangered. Almost the entire population of this animal, some 2,000 or so, lives at a conservation farm in Beijing. You can look it up in Baidu or Wikipedia.

For decades, these statues at the foot of the entrance stairs to University Hall have been known as Père David’s deer or in Chinese, 四不像 (Unlike Any of the Four), not because they are Père David’s deer but because people think that they are an amalgam of the auspicious elephant, a qilin (麒麟), a lion and a horse. The nickname supports the superstitious tradition that students who unwisely touch the statues will suffer the fate of failing their exams.

During a recent examination of the statues, dedicated alumni and students of University Hall found out that they are leogryphs, a mystical animal with a lion’s body and an elephant’s head. Clearly, the body, limbs and tail are those of a typical lion statue, while the head is that of an elephant. The heads and trunks turn backwards, possibly in reference to fung shui to symbolise conserving, as opposed to wasting, good fortune and wealth.

In Hindu temples in India, where they are called yali, leogryph statues can be found guarding entrances. In China, leogryph statues are rare with just a few reported and only in a temple in Xiamen. In Hong Kong, there are only these two.

The leogryph statues at University Hall date back to the beginning of the heritage building. As the photo on the top shows, they guarded Douglas Castle built by Douglas Lapraik, the successful merchant from Scotland, way back in the 1860s. When the French Mission redeveloped Lapraik’s Castle into Nazareth House, the statues were placed at the foot of the entrance stairs and there they have remained ever since.

Next time you visit University Hall, spend a moment admiring these unique antique leogryph statues, and think of the times they have witnessed and will witness. ■

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