Analytic Category and the Limits of Interpretation in the Mortuary Art of the Eastern Han

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This article examines methodological problems that attend the descriptive categories used in art historical and archaeological analyses of Eastern Han mortuary iconography, as well as the implications that these categories hold for historical interpretation of meaning and function. To the extent that Eastern Han examples have served as a measure for establishing chronologies and iconographic significance in the study of mortuary art in adjoining regions and periods—even when that comparison has involved an outright denial of historical connection or influence, as in the case of certain theories regarding the endogenous origins of muraled tombs of Koguryŏ—questions raised about the analytic categories and procedures applied to Han sites may be seen as instrumental to the study of other mortuary practices of Northeast Asia.

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I. Funerary Iconography of the Eastern Han and the Problem of Its Meaning.

The surge in archaeological excavation of Han dynasty tomb sites that took place in China since the 1950s brought to light numerous chambered tombs and free-standing funerary shrines that bore elaborate depictions variously carved in relief or incised in stone, stamped in brick, or painted in polychrome on plastered surface. Upon comparison, these pictorial assemblages have demonstrated a consistency in both iconographic repertoire and composition that is sufficiently formulaic to lead scholars to regard their constituent motifs as comprising a visual program that was a standard feature of Han burial practice. To the extent that this visual reiterability implies routinized meaning and ritual function, historians of Han art have sought to reconstruct the development, form and significance of these constituent motifs within a larger field of Han burial convention. The list of representative pictorial motifs—and the formal terminologies used to identify them—is strikingly consistent from author to author, indicating not only the probability that such a unified field of mortuary culture did to some measure exist, but also the confidence that archaeologists and historians of Han art are in close agreement contours. Typically, the inventory looks something as follows (Fig.1):

1) Scenes of official service and/or socio-political status, represented chiefly by the two distinctive motifs of (a) central "pavilion," "homage"

(*libai* 禮拜圖), or formal "banquet" (*yanshi* 宴食, *yanyin* 宴飲圖) scenes and (b) official "[carriage and horse] procession or excursion" (*[chema]chuxing* [車馬]出行圖) scenes.

2) "Daily life scenes" (*shenghuo ticai* 生活題材圖), depicting stereotypical scenes of domestic and estate life--farming, hunting, banquets and entertainment, wives and household retinue, stables, kitchens and storehouses, etc.

3) "Celestial" (*tiankong* 天空圖) "cosmological" (*tianwen* 天文圖) or Daoistic "celestial/immortal ascent" (*chengxian* 成仙圖; *shengtian* 昇天圖) scenes, which variously include depictions of stellar objects (*xing* 星) and asterisms (*xiu* 宿), "gods or spirits" (*shenming* 神明), "immortals" (*xian* 仙), and sundry "fabulous or hybrid divine beings" (*guaishou* 怪獸) from Chinese mythology.

4) Scenes of "filial piety and morality" (*xiaolian* 孝廉圖), usually in the form of figures or episodes from classical history (*lishi gushi* 曆史故事)--sage kings, officials, legendary men and women-- that involve celebrated examples of virtuous rule, official service, and moral piety.

5) "Omen scenes" (*xiangrui* 祥瑞圖) or scenes of politically charged miracles, usually connected with the notion of virtuous rule or its obverse.[1]

1 For a general discussion of shrine and tomb pictorial repertoires and a description of their motifs in the Wu shrine and related Han or shrine tomb panels, see Hung Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Wilma Fairbank, "The Offering Shrines of Wu Liang tz'u," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6.1 (1941), p. 1-36; Martin Powers, *Art and Political Expression in Early China* (New Haven: Yale University Press,1992); Jean James, "An Iconographic Study of Two Late Han Funerary Monuments: the Offering Shrines of the Wu Family and the Multichamber Tomb at Holingor" (University of Iowa Ph.D. dissertation, 1983); Nagahiro Toshio, "Kandai chōshidō ni tsuite," in *Tsukamoto Hakase shō ju kinen Bukkyō shigaku ronbunshū* (Kyoto, 1961), pp. 546-566; Nagahiro Toshio, *Kandai gazō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Chūō kōron bijutsu shuppan, 1965); Nagahiro Toshio, "Bushishi gazōseki ni tsuite," *Tōyō bijutsu 4* (1930), pp. 109-113) and 5 (1930), pp. 36-47; Sahara Yasuo, "Kandai jitō gazō ko," *Tōhō gakuhō* 63 (March, 1991), pp. 1-60; and Huang Minglan and Guo Yinqiang, *Luoyang Hanmu bihua* (Luoyang: Wenwu chubanshe, 1996); *Anping Donghan bihuamu* (Beijing: Beijing wenwu chubanshe, 1990); Susan Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Lydia du Pont Thompson, "The Yinan Tomb: Narrative and Ritual in Pictorial Art of the Eastern Han (25-220 C.E.)" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Institute of Fine Arts, New York, 1998); Chu Qi'en, *Zhongguo bihua shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo gongyi yishu chubanshe, 2000); Hung Wu, ed., *Between Han and Tang: Religious Art and Archaeology in a Transformative Period* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2000); Hung Wu, "Where are They Going? Where did They Come From? Horse and Soul Carriage in Han Dynasty Tomb Art," *Orientations* 29.6 (June, 1998), pp. 22-31.

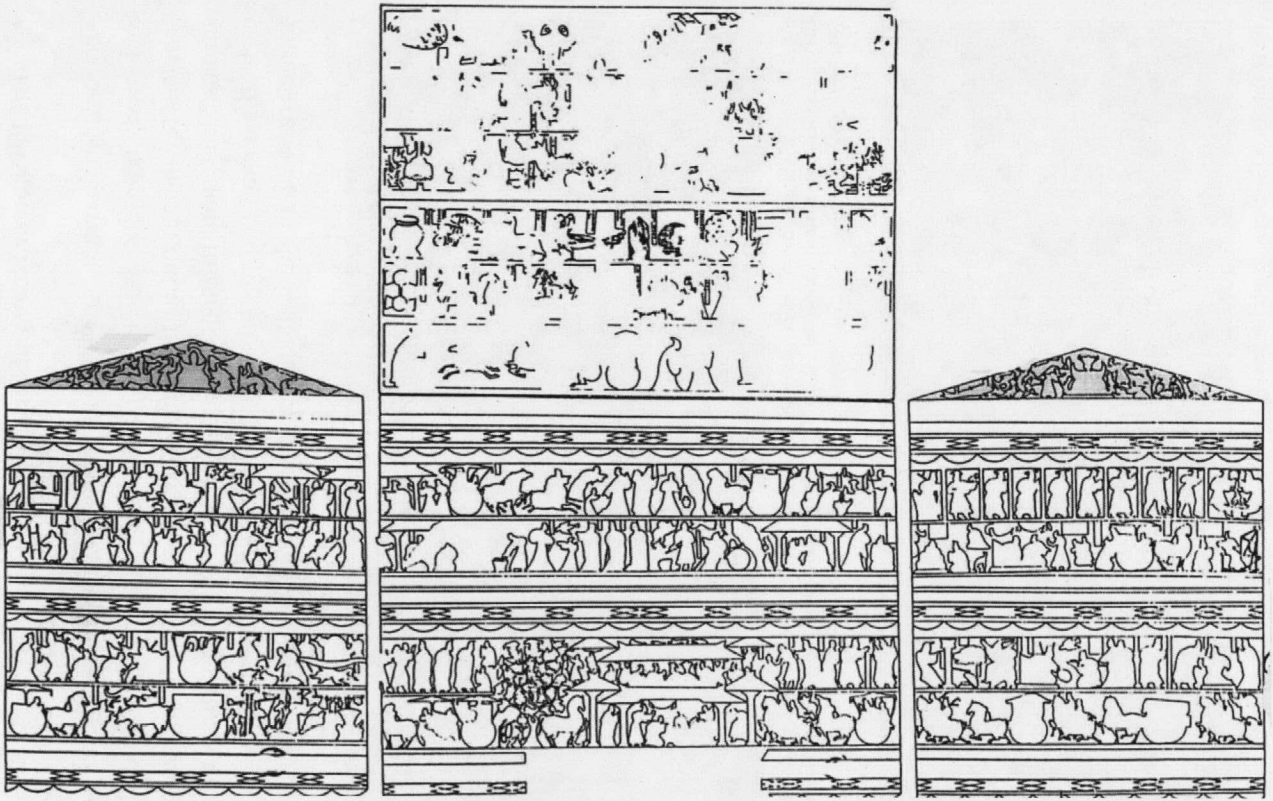

Fig.1 Pavilion or homage scene (center panel, bottom register); procession scene (left and right, bottom register); historical and virtuous figures (upper register); Xiwangmu, immortals and celestial beings (left and right gables). Wu Liang Shrine, Jiaxiang, Shandong, 151 C.E. After Hung Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, p. 109, plate, 40.

- **The Pavilion or Homage Scene (Figs. 2a-d)**

The so-called "pavilion" or "homage" scene is one of the most conspicuous and widely reproduced motifs of Han funerary art, leading any number of scholars to single it out as the central organizing motif of Han tombs and shrines. It is found through virtually all periods of Han mortuary art, from early to late, and is common to the interiors of both free-standing ancestral shrines (as seen in the well-known Xiaotang and Wu family shrines from

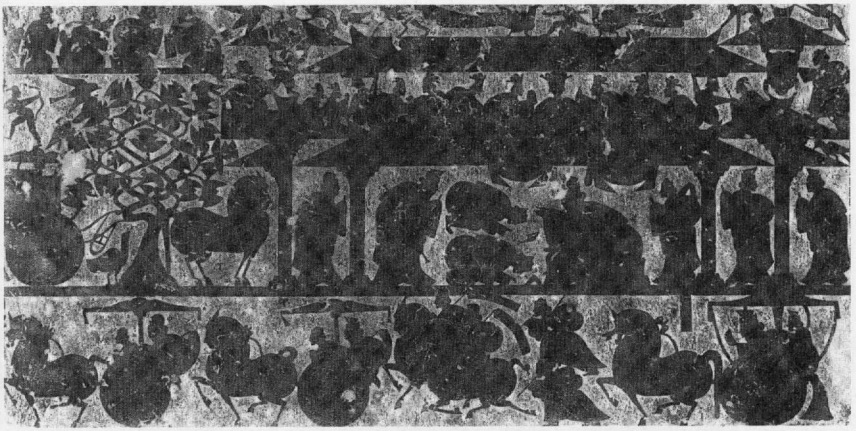

Fig.2a Pavilion or homage scene (upper register); Procession scene (lower register). Stone engraving. From the left Wu Family Shrine. Jiaxiang, Shandong, 147-167 C.E. After Martin Powers, *Art and Political Expression in Early China*, p33, plate 13.

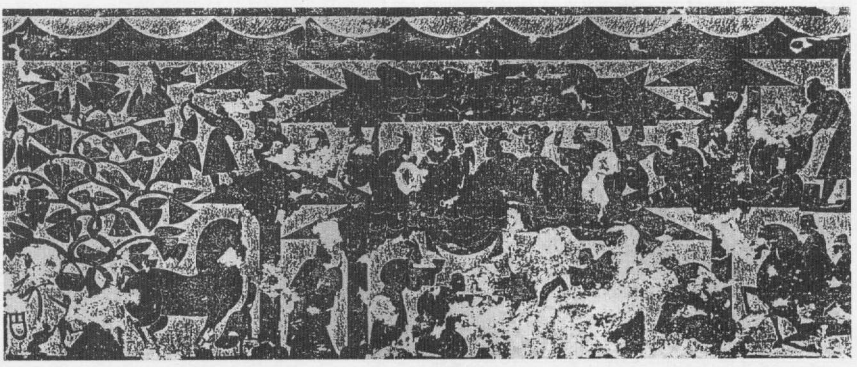

Fig.2b Pavilion or homage scene. Stone engraving. Relief. Wu Liang Shrine, Jiaxiang, Shandong. 151 C.E. After Edouard Chavannes, *Mission archaeologique dans la Chine septentrionale*, vol. 2, plate 46 no. 77.

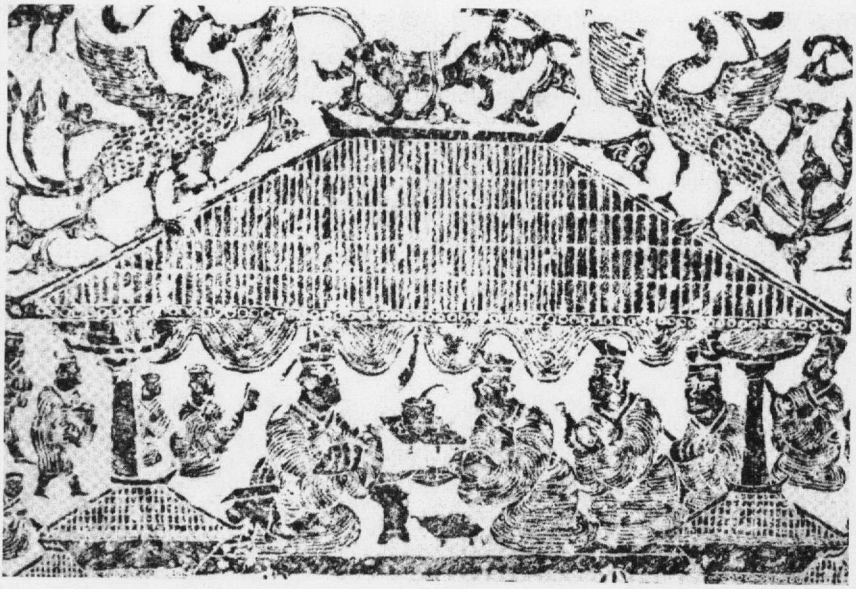

Fig.2c Pavilion banquet scene. Stone engraving. Tongshan, Xuzhou, Jiangsu. 2nd c. C.E. After Martin Powers, *Art and Political Expression in Early China* (Yale University Press, 1991), p. 154, plate 84.

Fig.2d Homage and pavilion banquet Scene. Polychrome on plaster over brick. Zhucun Tomb, Luoyang. Late 2nd to early 3rd c. C.E. After "Luoyangshi Zhucun Donghan bihua mu fajue jianbao," *Wenwu* 1993, no. 5, pp. 1-17.

first and late second-centuries C.E.) and to mounded tombs bearing stone chambers with carved or painted murals. Typically it is placed in a central location, and not infrequently repeated—sometimes with varying degrees of scale—in more than one chamber. Usually this is in the highly visible and directionally auspicious central panel of a south- or east-facing wall. For instance, in the case of the Xiaotang and Wu shrines, it appears in the center of the rear walls directly facing the viewer as he or she enters the chamber—a "focal point" of the shrines, as one scholar has put it. In several of the Wu shrines (Wu Liang and Wu Rong), its presence is further accentuated by being set within a special niche.

The composition itself tends to be quite routine: An oversized figure situated in full frontal view—its proportions noticeably larger than those of surrounding figures—is shown seated in an open architectural pavilion (*ge* 閣) or on a dais under a stately cloth canopy (*huzhuang* 胡帳), surrounded by regalia of eminence and wealth, such as raised dais and folding screen. An additional figure or figures, generally female, are often shown seated alongside the main figure; or they are placed nearby within the building, such as on the second floor, if the pavilion is shown with two stories. The scene is ubiquitously taken to be a representation of the tomb "occupants" (主人, 墓主), a claim underscored by its exaggerated proportions and central placement. Its associations with the notion of "homage" or "official administrative status" arise from the fact that the central figures are often attended in the scene itself or in surrounding panels by servants or processions of individuals come to show homage or to banquet and consult with the chief figure[s]. The idea of a "banquet scene" (*yanshi* 宴食, *yanyin* 宴飲), which can have both official and domestic resonances, stems from the additional elements of feasting or servants bearing trays of food. Acrobats, musicians and other entertainers may also form part of the extended panorama.

One particularly distinctive variation on this motif appears with seeming frequency: the central pavilion or canopied structure may be flanked on

2 Characteristics and prevailing interpretations of the homage motif are discussed, variously, by Hung Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art*, pp. 141-148 and 193-195, and Jean James, "An Iconographic Study of Two Late Han Funerary Monuments: the Offering Shrines of the Wu Family and the Multichamber Tomb at Holingor," pp. 52, 131 and 170.

one side by a groom with riderless horse and tree with intertwining branches. At times an archer accompanies them, bow drawn in aim at the limbs of the tree. The saddled horse is matched on the opposite side of the structure by a closed horse-drawn carriage. Not infrequently, celestial omens, such as phoenixes and other auspicious manifestations, are also often found perched on the rooftop of the setting or situated in spaces nearby.[2]

- **The Carriage Procession Scene (Figs. 3a-d)**

Although it certainly does appear as an independent pictorial motif, the procession scene is often found in close proximity to or conjunction with the more central "homage" scenes, with its extended array of figures serving to focus attention on and, hence, highlight the homage scene. The composition is fairly uniform: series of bullock- or horse-drawn carriages—some open, with canopy; some fully closed—are arranged in linear sequences, with phalanxes of servants, armored horsemen, lesser officials, bannermen and musicians accompanying them in front, behind, and to either side. These processions can be quite lengthy, extending across several walls. The direction of the procession varies, but usually a visual relation of some sort exists between it and the central homage scene.

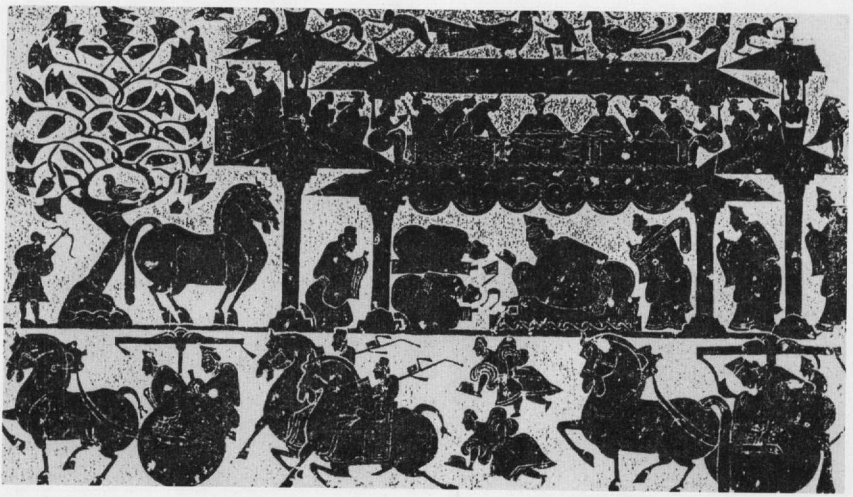

Fig.3a Procession scene (lower register); pavilion and homage scene (upper register). Stone engraving. Songshancun, Jiaxiang, Shandong, 2nd century. C.E.

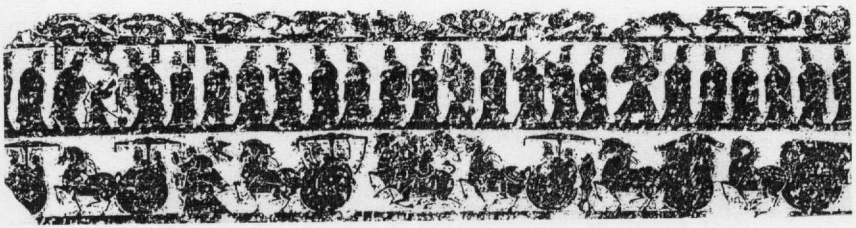

Fig.3b Procession scene. Engraved stone. Qishan, Jiaxiang, Shandong. Eastern Han.

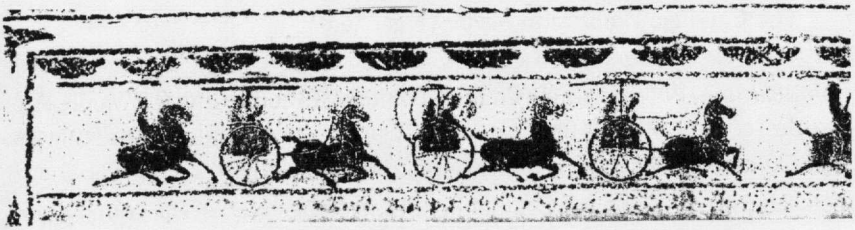

Fig.3c Procession scene. Engraved stone. Chengcun, Jiaxiang, Shandong. Eastern Han.

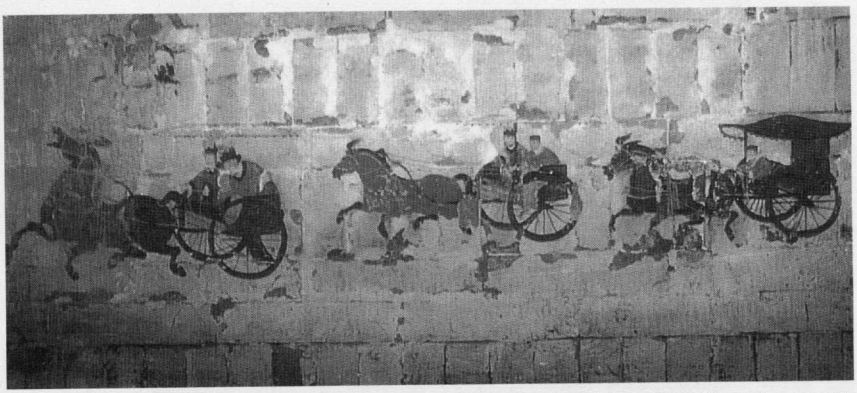

Fig.3d Procession scene. Polychrome on plaster, over brick. Zhucun Tomb, Luoyang. Late 2nd to early 3rd c. C.E. After "Luoyangshi Zhucun Donghan bihua mu fajue jianbao," *Wenwu* 1993, no. 5, pp. 1-17.

In the much-studied Wu Liang shrine, for example, a procession of chariots and figures on foot and horseback commences on the west wall and wends its way, clockwise, to the foot of the pavilion and homage scene in the center of the north wall, its figures taking up the entire lower register across these two walls. A parallel array of officials lined up in attendance or procession extends across the east and rear walls, their movement proceeding, counterclockwise, toward the same central homage scene on the north wall.

(James 1983, 157)[3]. As Wu Hung observes, "the pavilion's importance is established by the scenes around it," underscoring the central scene's significance as an "homage scene." (Wu 1989, 145)[4].

The nearby shrine for Wu Rong, quite close in style of composition to that of Wu Liang, contains two large procession scenes: The first of these extends across the exterior of the front wall, just beneath the eaves. Accompanying cartouches identify the attending officials and the scene itself with events from Wu Rong's career. The second is a lengthy procession of figures, with chariots, baggage, etc., that takes up two registers on the side and rear walls of the inner chamber and is directed toward the central homage scene at the center of the north wall (two-storied pavilion with large figure [possibly Wu Rong] seated in full frontal view below, attended by servant with fan and four officials to sides and foreground; wives with maids on second floor; towers, tree with intertwining branches and archer, riderless horse and carriage outside) (James 1983, 179-80; Hayashi 1966, 189-90).

- **Daily Life, Domestic Estate, and Related Scenes (Figs. 4a-b)**

The descriptive category of "domestic estate" or "daily life" scenes encompasses a variety of subsidiary motifs, many of which not only bear topically on details of daily existence, but which will often—but not always—be grouped together into extended compositional assemblages. Although topologically continuous, these motifs can be locally variant to the point of suggesting an explicit effort to point up differences in regional custom and material culture. This seems especially to be the case when the visual program extends to representations of local peoples, flora and fauna, as we find in the so-called "folk-culture scenes" (*minzu shenghuo tu* 民族生活圖) of "life on the steppes" that appear in the Helinge'er and Jiuquan (Gansu) tombs—two examples from the Han frontier. Such intentional anomalies notwithstanding, the greater part of the domestic and estate repertory is giv-

3 James interprets it as a procession of officials and attendants on their way to pay respects to Wu Liang, or "Wu Liang's departed soul/memory."

4 Wu discusses the procession scene from the Xiaotang Shan shrine, dated 1st century C.E., one of the earliest such examples. Here a procession occurs in conjunction with a pavilion scene.

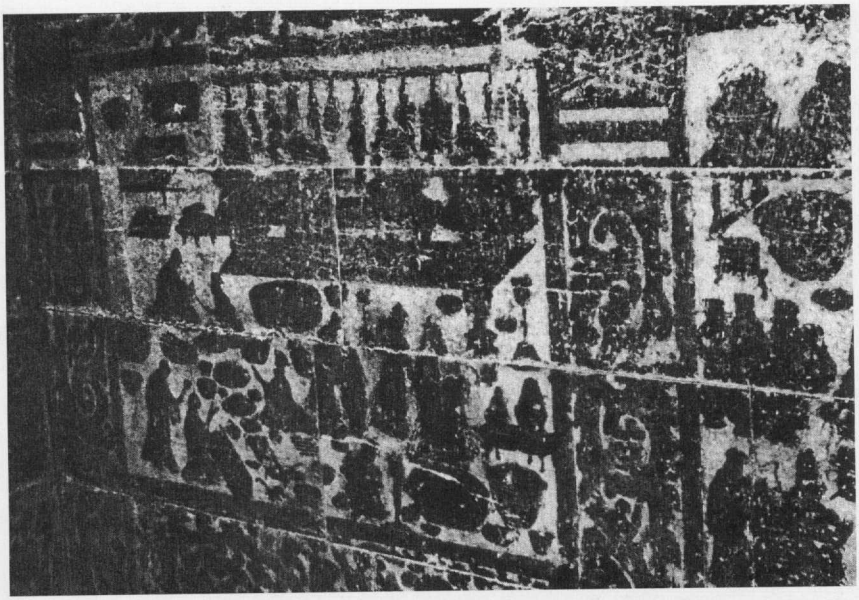

Fig. 4a Kitchen scene. Meat and fowl hang from rack (above); cooks prepare food (below). Engraved stone. East chamber of Dahuting 1, Mi County, Henan. 2nd c. C.E. After Martin Powers, *Art and Political Expression in Early China*, p. 293, plate 127.

en to a fairly circumscribed range of visual topics, of which "kitchen" (*paochu* 庖廚) and "storehouse" (*cangku* 倉庫) scenes, "hunting"(*shoulie* (狩獵) scenes, and "banqueting" (*yanyin* 宴飲) or "homage" (*libai* 禮拜), "dancing" (*wuyong* 舞踊), "musicians" (*qiyue* 器樂), "wrestling," and other forms of domestic entertainment are the most frequently encountered.

Among the Wu family shrines, the east wall of the shrine to Wu Rong (which is axis right, the shrine being

Fig.4b Kitchen scene, with racks of meat (above); cooks preparing food and carrying serving trays (below). Polychrome on plaster. Xincun, Yanshi, Luoyang. Xin-Mang era, 1st c. C.E. After "Luoyang Yanshixian Xinmang bihua mu qingli jianbao," *Wenwu* 1992 no. 12, pp. 1-20.

northward facing) offers a good early example of the more commonplace range of such banquet and domestic scenes. The Xiaotang shrine displays similar scenes of domestic routine on its west wall, the placement of which parallels that of the Wu Rong shrine, since the shrine itself is south facing. Their visual repertoires comprise such elements as banqueting, servants preparing and bearing food, dancers, acrobats, musicians, wrestlers, and sundry other contests, the individual components of which are organized extrinsically into a tightly woven and focused panorama. Nearby one might additionally find kitchens stocked with curing meats; stables with horses, cattle, and equipage and carriages of all sizes; a large granary; scenes of hunting and fishing; and various other stock images suggestive of extraordinary opulence and domestic fortune (Powers 1992, 50).

- **Cosmological, Immortalist, and Soul Ascent Scenes (Figs. 5a-b)**

Relegated to (and, in fact dominating) the ceilings, gables, eaves, and upper panels of tombs and shrines, the so-called "cosmological" or "celestial pattern" (*tianwen* 天文), "celestial immortal" (*tianxian* 天仙) and "soul ascent" (*chengxian* 成仙, *shengtian* 昇天) motif[s] draw their name from the combined fact of their spatial placement and their sole occupation with astral and mythological images, or phenomena otherwise associated in the Han prognosticatory imagination with the "canopy of heaven" (*tiangai* 天蓋). Situated amidst sinuous "clouds" (*yun* 雲) of cosmic energy (*qi* 氣) and other abstract patterns are images of immortals (*xian* 仙) and jade maidens (*yunu* 玉女) mounted on fabulous birds or beasts, unicorns (*qilin* 麒麟), phoenixes (*fenghuang* 鳳凰), and various mythological beings or gods (*shen* 神) depicted in mixed human and animal form. Not infrequently individual gods are identified by written caption, or else made recognizable through use of a highly conventionalized image and placement. Such is the case, for example, with the so-called "four directional divinities" (*sishen* 四神) that often grace the four quadrants of the ceiling or upper eaves of Later Han tombs, or with the much-studied assemblages of the Queen Mother of the West (*xiwangmu* 西王母) and the Lord of the East (*dong wang/hou* 東王/候) that routinely grace the lateral eaves or lintels of Han tombs. Individual orbs

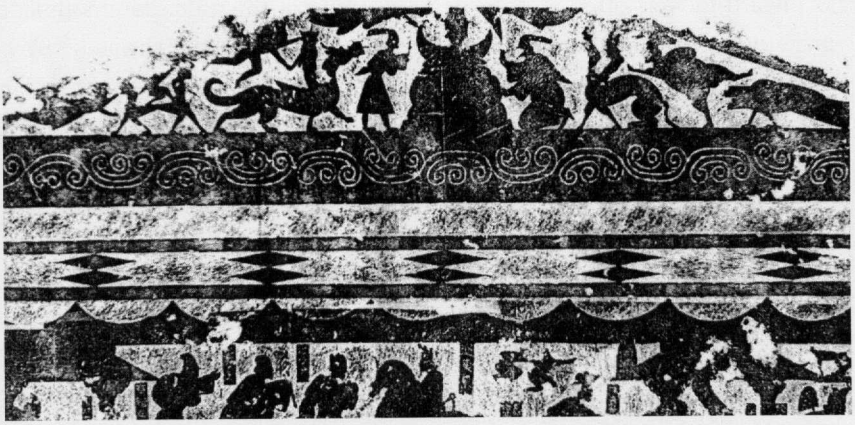

Fig.5a Xiwangmu and her divine court; mythical beasts and immortals (above); historical figures and virtuous men and women (below). Engraved stone. Gables of Wu Liang Shrine, 151 C.E. After Martin Powers, Art and Political Expression in Early China (Yale University Press, 1991), p. 32, plate 11.

Fig.5b Immortal with unicorn. Combined incised and relief engraving on stone. Jianudun, Xushou, Jiangsu. After Martin Powers, Art and Political Expression in Early China (Yale University Press, 1991), p. 119, plate 56.

or series of orbs linked by lines into complex configurations are often used as a stylized way of depicting planets (*xing* 星) and asterisms (*xing, su* 星, 宿). Upon occasion, the same stellar objects may be represented in the form of their simulacra or resident humanoid forms, images of the Celestial Thearch (*tiandi* 天帝) of the Dipper or Great Bear constellation (*beidou* 北斗), the Herd Boy (*suoniu* 索牛) and Weaving Maiden (*zhinu* 織女), or the three-footed crow in the sun and toad in the moon being some of the more frequently encountered examples. Along the lower registers of the ceiling, one will also find cloud hidden peaks, through which mounted hunters—bows drawn—give chase to deer, tigers, and other exotic animals.

Because they are associated with the paradisial abodes of Kunlun and Penglai and the Han culture of immortality, such motifs as the Queen Mother of the West and Lord of the East—usually depicted on the western and eastern gables—have often been taken as representative of the "Daoist" ascent of the soul of the deceased to an ever-lasting celestial paradise. Extended arbitrarily to encompass the representations of immortals, mythical beasts, and heavenly asterisms that grace other sections of the ceiling, the entire repertoire of celestial imagery is often read as a grand visual map or guide that was intended, ritually speaking, to assist the ascent of the occupant's *hun* 魂 or "soul" to immortality or the realm of the ancestors. Hence, the alternative generic labeling of these ceiling motifs as "Daoist," "immortalist," or "celestial ascent" scenes. Such a restrictive reading, of course, is not without its problems, not the least for its failure to take into account other, possibly more prevalent, Han Chinese views of the sky and its operations, such as prognosticatory elements of cosmic order and resonance.[5]

- **Scenes of Filial Piety and Moral Achievement or Exemplary Figures and Events of Classical Antiquity (Figs. 6)**

The visual genre of exemplary figures and episodes from antiquity largely comprises illustrations of virtuous sons and daughters or celebrated officials, sovereigns, and mythical heroes from the Chinese past. As representations of the historical vision formulated by the largely Confucian-oriented historiographers of the Han court, their content could best be described as

5 Compare, for example, the treatments of immortalist and celestial imagery by Sōfukawa Hiroshi, *Konronzan e no shōsen* (Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha, 1981); Jean James "An Iconography of two Late Han Funerary Monuments," pp. 1-65; Jean James, "Some Recently Discovered Late Han Reliefs," *Oriental Art* 26.2 (Summer 1980), p. 190; etc., with more recent alternative interpretations in Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, pp. 108-141; and Michael Loewe, *Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 160-235. Also see Loewe, pp. 38-54 for discussion of the "hybridized" imagery of gods and demons in Han. Additional sources on the subject include Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Quest for Immortality* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979); Hayashi Minao, "Kandai kishin no sekai," *Tōhō gakuhō* 46 (1974), pp. 223-306. Wu Hung, among others, has discussed at length the problems that attend the Queen Mother of the West motif, especially the facile association of the motif with Daoist "immortality." John Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought*, Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huainanzi (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

"classical," especially insofar as it celebrates the Han court's romantic and moralistic view of the historical achievements of Zhou antiquity. In the Wu Liang and related Wu family shrines, scenes of this kind occupy a series of registers that extend—in chronological sequence—from west to east across the upper section of the chamber walls, each panel or episode of which is identified with an inscription. Together they offer what Wu Hung has aptly described as "a visual metaphor for the continuing historical process. . . arranged in chronological order, the viewing of which . . . is almost like reading a book" (Wu 1989, 142 and 144). The "book" in question, it is implied, is the synthetic—eventually to become the officialized—narrative of pre-Han events devised by the likes of Sima Tan and Sima Qian on the basis of the Confucian classics and miscellaneous pre-Han sources. "Virtue" and its lack being the common thematic denominator in this narrative, the panels are also characterized as scenes of "filial piety", since filial piety constitutes the cardinal pivot around the majority of exemplary episodes of past sons, daughters, officials, and historical notables orbit. Apart from the gable scenes of the Queen Mother of the West and the central pavilion and accompanying procession and estate scenes on the walls, the Wu shrines devote the remainder of their space to these historical depictions and the thematically related "omen scenes".

Fig.6 Image of Shun (virtuous figures and episodes from antiquity). Engraved stone. Wu Liang Shrine, Jiaxiang, Shandong. 151 C.E. After WU Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, p. 255, plate 116a.

- **Omen Scenes (Figs. 7)**

The depictions of auspicious omens in many respects are an extension of the same theme of cosmic order and the moral resonance of human action that informs the historical representations of virtue. While the scenes themselves are highly individualized, their constituent images are stereotyped—each one indexed to a specific virtue. The images are typically clustered in sequences of horizontal panels, each image or panel identified by inscription. Comparative studies of these sequences and their constituent images by Wu, Powers, and others have found considerable uniformity among the examples found in different Han tombs and shrines, which would suggest standardization and ready identification. As with the historical panels described above, this uniformity has been convincingly attributed to the existence of a counterpart textual tradition—in this case established omen books or manuals, from which the panels themselves might have been directly reproduced.[6]

The six categories we have summarized above, including their constituent nomenclatures, are well-established conventions of Han archaeological and art historical scholarship. Not without coincidence, they enjoyed considerable currency in the formalistic analyses of the archaeologists of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (i.e., the Archaeological Institute and Bureau for Preservation of Cultural Relics) who undertook the first sustained studies of Han tomb sites in the 1950s. But more significantly, they

Fig.7 Auspicious birds and hare (with identifying inscriptions). Polychrome on plaster. Tomb no. 2 at Wangdu, Hebei. 2nd c. C.E. After *Wangdu er hao Han mu* (Beijing: Wen wu press, 1959), plate 9. Idem., Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, p. 79, plate 36.

6 For a detailed discussion of the *Songshu* omen index and its connection with Han omen texts, see Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, pp. 76-85 and, especially 234-245; also see *Songshu* 28 and 29. Powers provides an insightful treatment of the rhetorical significance of omen images in his *Art and Political Expression in Early China*, pp. 224-278.

are the same descriptive categories and neologisms that Japanese archaeologists adopted, several decades earlier, in their studies of Han-related tombs in Liaoning Province and P'yŏngyang, which helped to shape Chinese archaeological practice. Since that time, other scholars have produced a steady stream of work on the individual motifs and collective repertoire of Han funerary art—much of it conceived under the weight of an ongoing emphasis on formal analysis and style. The unquestioning way in which some art historians use the categories gives the impression that, for their Han clientele, these visual assemblages were well-defined topoi with a uniform meaning or significance. Over the past two decades, identification of the individual and collective meaning of Han funerary iconography has been one of the most intensely debated issues in Chinese art.

Recently, however, this mode of enquiry has been challenged, on the grounds of both stylistic analysis and epistemology. To begin with, they have raised questions about the integrity of accepted iconographical categories and their interpretations by showing that the categories compositionally blend into one another in ways that compromise their discreteness as identifiable motifs or self-contained units of meaning. More importantly, the fact that these thematic categories and labels are the invention of twentieth century art historians and not those of Han thinkers and artisans—that they have no discernible counterpart in Han period documents or discourse—further suggests that they are less reflective of Han culture than of the cognitive conventions by which modern scholars have problematized and carved up the landscape of Han mortuary culture.

While this raises significant questions about referential identification and the method for interpreting the visual topoi in Han muraled tombs, it does not negate their existence as conventions of Han funerary art per se. Nor does it obviate the need to think seriously about the thematic and stylistic continuities that exist among Han muraled tombs and their outlying counterparts. In point of fact, in his eagerness to redress the formalistic excesses of art-historical convention Powers neglects to mention that there are, indeed, examples of tomb epigraphy and in situ inscription that identify and, to some measure, narratively synthesize the various motifs of Han tomb art. Although he is correct to say that Han literature and epigraphy, as a

whole, provide no single key to Han funerary iconography, the lack of such an explicit cipher does not disprove the presence iconographic conventions—and the possibility of conventionalized visual sensibilities—in Han tomb culture.

The challenge that the preceding argument might best be understood to offer is that the art historian's search for a strict indexical relationship between "iconography" and "meaning" may be methodologically suspect, especially if "meaning" is understood to entail some preordained set of concepts or motivations that transcends human agency as an a priori property or function of the object. Rather, as a historically-specific social and cultural operation, it makes immense sense that the relationship between object and meaning be returned to the economies of communication through which they were actually produced. In the process, it is also necessary to make a methodological distinction between different forms and levels of intensity that signification can assume, depending on the specific contexts of ritualization and social setting through which funerary iconography is itself engaged. This is not to say that Han mortuary iconography lacked a conventional "meaning"; it is simply to say that it did not have a fixed or totalized meaning that existed apart from the people who produced it. As something constructed strategically within the course of social practice, that meaning was malleable, manifold, and—most importantly—localized. Meaning and significance, in other words, are not to be mysteriously extracted from objects as preordained structures that inhere—intrinsically, inviolably, and ahistorically—to the object itself. They are to be discovered by examining the ways in which objects and their symbolic assemblages were deployed as intentional acts of communication within a particular economy of social and cultural practice. To establish the sociocultural parameters of Han funerary iconography, then, it is necessary to examine (through local examples) the broader pattern of Han mortuary assemblage and practice.

II. The Tomb-Shrine Complex of the Eastern Han as a Site of Social and Cultural Performance.

Among the elite cultures of the China central plain, the tomb complex and

the ancestral shrine have been the key monuments and loci of mortuary activity since the early Zhou period, possibly even the late Shang. The tomb itself was largely considered an abode of the dead, located outside of city walls and palace complexes and often separated from them by a river or other natural boundary. Its chamber housed the individual dead, to whom offerings were presented at regular intervals throughout the year, usually in a small mausoleum or ritual structure constructed of wood located near the tomb. The ancestral temple or shrine, by contrast, developed as an auspicious site, set within the precincts of human habitation. In it, families maintained their genealogical records and performed rites to ancestors, including the trunk and collateral lines of the clan, as well as its semidivine or mythic progenitors. Arranged in hierarchical order, its lineage altars served not only as a testament to the clan's historicized presence, but also as a site for active negotiation of social relations among living clan members and associates, as staged through the regular ancestral rites that were collectively maintained there.

With the late Eastern Zhou and Warring States period, the mortuary practices of the central and northern elite appear to shift to the individual tomb or graveyard, with the ancestral hall being largely abandoned. This development may reflect the disintegration of the culture of blood lineage that came with the collapse of the Zhou feudal system. In lieu of the collective clan temple or shrine, individual tombs developed their own shrines, which replicated the temple format and appropriated the symbolic conceits of clan ancestry to the deceased and his immediate kin. These grave com-

7 The most celebrated example of this architectural shift--and one that itself appears to have become paradigmatic for subsequent Han elites--is the funerary park of the First Qin Emperor at Lishan. At Lishan, a vast earthen mound was constructed over an elaborate chamber which is alleged to be a replication of both the Qin emperor's palace and the entirety of heaven and earth, with the emperor's remains situated at its center as its symbolic sovereign. Rather than a clan temple of the traditional Zhou style, an individuated shrine of temple and/or palace design was constructed on the mausoleum grounds. It contained a ceremonial or shrine hall proper in the foreground, with a "retiring hall" (qin) for ceremonial storage of the emperor's vestments and sacred/personal memorabilia to its rear. See Hung Wu, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 111-115. Also see Hung Wu, "From Temple to Tomb: Ancient Chinese Art and Ritual in Transition," *Early China* 13 (1988), pp. 78-115; and Michael Loewe, *Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy in Han China*, pp. 267-299.

plexes also borrowed architectural forms traditionally associated with the clan-based feudal palace, turning their conventions to service of a newly-risen class of independent-minded warlords who sought legitimization through displays of personal status and power.[7]

Very much the heir to these Warring States developments, Western Han burial practices were typified by vertical open-pit burials with earth-mounded tumulus (*fen* 墳) and single subterranean vault of wood or brick (*guo* 槨), which contained a single or, at most, a paired burial of wooden inner coffins (*guan* 棺). Most tombs were isolated structures, dedicated to and attended by members of an immediate nuclear family. Decor in these crypts—if decor was to be had at all—was achieved by various media, including woven and painted tapestry of the sort found in the Mawangdui tomb, polychrome paintings on the surface of the coffin, and prepared panels or murals incised in molded-brick walls. Wooden offering shrines (*ci* 祠) with approaching "spirit path" (*shendao* 神道) were constructed at the mound's foot; and an accompanying commemorative stele might be erected if the individual was sufficiently affluent or prominent.

In the more impressive examples—notably, the tombs of the Han royal clan—the subterranean crypts or casements are vast, multi-chambered structures that might either be cut horizontally into the rock of hillsides or constructed of molded brick. Often their interiors mimic the estate of the deceased, with individual sections replicating the confines of audience or banquet halls, private quarters, storehouses and stables, lavatories, and so forth. In the case of the Mancheng tombs no. 1 and 2—which include the tomb of the Han prince Liu Sheng, dated to 113 B.C.E—wood and tile facsimiles of structures in the deceased's estate were actually constructed, wholesale, within the chambers of the tomb itself. Their confines were in turn filled with functional objects such as chariots, foods, figurines, daises and bed chambers, as is reputed to have been the case with the Qin emper-

8 Additional examples include the large Western Han rock-cut tomb at Beidongshan, Xuzhou (dated 2nd c. B.C.E.); also Luoyang Tomb no. 61, brick with stone and polychrome, dated 1st c. B.C.E. of the Western Han. Xuzhou bowuguan, et. al., "Xuzhou Beidongshan Xi-Han mu fajue jianbao," *Wenwu* 1988.2, pp. 2-18. For the Mancheng tombs, see Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo, *Mancheng Han mu fajue baogao* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1980).

or's tomb at Lishan (Wu 1995, 116-119 and 130-134)[8].

Little material evidence remains of the wooden offering shrines (*ci* 祠) that are known to have been constructed alongside of individual tombs during the Western Han, which makes it difficult to speculate on their form. However, literary evidence suggests that their walls and ceilings, too, were richly decorated with murals. According to familiar theories about Han views of the soul and afterlife-as stereotyped and hackneyed as they may be--the tomb was generally regarded as the abode of the *po* 魄 or "earthly soul" that inhered within the physical remains of the deceased. The tomb offering shrine, or the detached clan ancestral shrine, was variously regarded as the abode of the *hun* 魂 or "celestial and intelligent" soul. In order to properly serve both the *hun* and *po* souls, it was necessary for families to make ritual observances at both the tomb and its accompanying offering shrine, or at the tomb and the appropriate altar of the clan ancestral hall (*miao* 廟). Research into Han religion has recently challenged the primacy and prevalence of the dualistic hun-po 'soul theory', suggesting that most people held very loose and unsystematic views of ancestral souls and existence, the image of which centered largely around the notion of a single presence of the *hun*. Ethnographic studies of contemporary practices at grave site and ancestral shrines further show that primary attention tends to be given to ritualistic and performative action, rather than systematicity of 'soul theory' belief. Hence while constituting a single hun or thanatological presence/entity, ancestors are presumed present at both tomb site and ancestral shrine during the course of their respective ritual events (Brashier 1996, 125-158; Loewe 1986, 649-725; Loewe 1982).

The last years of the Western Han and the first century of the Eastern or Later Han witnessed a gradual change in burial form, with the single-pit (or "estate") burial giving way to complex brick or stone chambered tombs built near or below ground level, served by a horizontal entrance passage allowing regular access to the tomb interior. A single large antechamber, in part used for ceremonial offerings at the time of burial, was joined at the rear to a single burial chamber or series of parallel burial chambers (in which the coffins were placed). Tombs with parallel burial chambers (which seems, again, to have been a special development of the Eastern Han) could accommodate

as many as four or more coffins, allowing for the multiple burial of persons within or perhaps even beyond the generation of the immediate nuclear family.

Contemporaneous with this shift in form, we also find a growing tendency to incorporate multiple tomb-and-shrine complexes into extended, architecturally integrated burial grounds. Such a burial might contain numerous tomb and shrine units, each unit containing tomb, shrine, commemorative stele, and so forth, laid out axially along its own individual "spirit path" (*shendao*); or it might contain a group of tombs—usually smaller in scale, with simple front and rear chamber design and single or double burial—arranged in genealogical proximity, with only a single shrine structure serving them all. During this period of the Eastern Han, wood also gave way to stone as the preferred medium of construction for both the tomb chamber and the accompanying shrine, with their decor executed in incised line, in bas relief, or in polychrome on a prepared plaster surface.

Along with this shift in mortuary construction, the Eastern Han seems to have witnessed a corresponding relocation of these ancestral rituals exclusively to the site of tomb or graveyard. Archaeologists have offered various explanations for this development, the most accepted one being the institution of official restrictions on collective construction and maintenance of detached ancestral halls (*miao*). In 58 C.E., Emperor Ming abolished the Han collective royal temple sacrifice and replaced it with services at the mausoleum of his father, Guangwu. Emperor Ming was said to have made this change because of his profound filial respect, but scholars speculate that it was a move to lessen emphasis on royal pedigree, claims to which were not easily sustained for the line of Guangwu and Ming. Looking to Ming's precedent, the Han official and royal elite are thought to have taken up and popularized this form, causing the grave complex to become the overriding center for the discharging of all ancestral obligations. Thus, far from being created solely for the gaze of the deceased and set apart from human habitation, the grave and shrine complex (*mu/ci* 墓/祠) complex of the Eastern Han became a site of intense social activity and the public discharging of the same sort of rituals earlier might have taken place at the corporate clan shrines.

Scholars believe that the further development of corporate graveyard and shrine complexes was inspired by the Han court's lifting of restrictions on common residence of multi-generational clans or families (a ban that was enacted in the Former Han as part of the general effort to break the local power base of traditional feudal aristocracy). With the growing prestige of Old-Text Confucianism and the bureaucratic scholar-official class in the Later Han, Han authorities encouraged the consolidation of extended families—a move that fostered the development of local networks of gentry identity and power and manifested itself, archaeologically speaking, in increasingly complex clan tomb-shrine burial grounds (Wu 1989, 30-36). (For poorer or more socially isolated families, the external shrine and stele appear to have been dispensed with and their basic *topos* reproduced in the antechamber of the tomb itself (Huang 1995, 51-52). This basic arrangement—in both its simple and more complex forms—prevailed into the Wei and Jin period, until a new set of strictures against the building of grave shrines and the erecting of commemorative stele forced families to move the external shrine and epitaph structure to the interior of the tomb (Huang 1995, 52).

Developments in the use of bas relief, incised line, and polychrome on the stone walls of tomb chamber and shrine proceeded rapidly under these circumstances, producing the distinctive repertory of images we have described above. And indeed, because of the uniqueness and persistence of this alliance between the stone-chambered tomb and this repertory of images, scholars have taken it to represent a uniquely "Eastern Han" mortuary style. Throughout the latter part of Eastern Han period, this pictorial and decorative repertory remains inseparably tied to the historical fortunes of the chambered tomb and shrine assemblage, suggesting an equally close tie to the assemblage's social and cultural functions, ritual and otherwise.

That the tomb and shrine, since early Han, were respectively regarded as the resting place and locus of continued interaction with the corporal and vital powers or presence of the deceased—the po and hun souls—is a sufficiently well-known truism of Han religion to require no further comment here; that a large part of people's relationships with the ancestors consisted of regular ritual offerings at the tomb and the accompanying shrine is also

beyond dispute. Han philosophical treatises, popular tales, and mortuary inscriptions make it abundantly clear that forbears became even more powerful in death than they were in life, and that families' fortunes depended on the goodwill, protection, and blessings the ancestors would show in response to ritual offering, commemoration, and clan banqueting at the tomb, shrine, and home. Given this overtly religious valence, most scholars of Han mortuary culture accept that the structure and decor of tomb and shrine possess a symbolic significance that, to some extent, was integral to these religious functions—whether as a means of instruction, as an icon, as a simulacrum to be used as part of a ritual performance, or (as art historians are typically wont to hold) as some mysterious code or key to the culture's essential "self-expression." That is to say, tomb and shrine iconography could, in part, be understood to be directed to the gaze of the deceased—both to keep the dead pacified and to solicit their benevolent presence, when the occasion called for it. But as commonplace as the notions of *hun* and *po* souls, the so-called Daoist idea of ascent to immortality and paradisial existence after death, and even the concept of ancestral presence might have been in Han China, our understanding of them remains so general and abstract as to be almost useless—especially when we try to account for the variations in iconography and symbolism in burial practices over the four hundred years of Western and Eastern Han.

But what Han sources seem to lack in systematic doctrine with regard to the afterlife, they more than make up in their intense concern for the details of ritual and social display that attend death and the afterlife. As major ceremonial events, the construction and ritual use of the tomb and shrine were part of established social routine, and thus woven integrally into an extended fabric of public expectation, making them open to and inviting of public scrutiny and judgment. Not surprisingly, it is this more performative and social dimension that seems to receive the most attention in Han documents, where in some cases it is inspected, recorded, gossiped over, debated and theorized to a remarkable degree. As we shall see, this is even the case for writings found *in situ* with shrine and tomb—the tomb grave notice, commemorative stele, and inscriptional caption. What we don't find is anything close to the level of concern for the symbolics of ascent to

immortality and the afterlife that certain art historians have given these themes in their studies of Han mortuary art. (Sofukawa 1981; Doi 1986).

In addition to the burial services proper, people held formal rites of offerings to the ancestors routinely at various points of the year, including the la ceremony that marked the end of the year, the *qingming* 清明 or "pure brightness festival" and the death anniversaries of particular ancestors. By every indication, they were elaborate affairs that carried a powerfully reflexive dimension. Just as living kin presented themselves and their offerings for the deceased's approval, so the feats and testament of the deceased might be recollected and bequeathed to descendants, the ritual event and the tomb-shrine setting served as an occasion for education and renewal of bonds among extended kin. In this capacity, tomb and shrine became a kind of site for collective acculturation and self-definition—a memorial that "expressed the ideas and desires of the deceased and his family," as Wu Hung has put it.

Martin Powers and Patricia Ebrey have further observed that such ceremonies were not infrequently an occasion for the convening of an entire range of social relations beyond the immediate family, including friends, students, colleagues, subordinate officials—virtually anyone of significance to the family's socioeconomic network. Thus they also served to dramatize and cement various bonds of clientage among local cliques and elites. We can see the importance of this dimension of mortuary ritual not only in the Former Han court's attempt to suppress the local influence of the feudal aristocracy by restricting corporate ancestral lineage temples (*miao* 廟), but also in the public surge in shrine (*ci* 祠) and tomb (*mu* 墓) building that occurred a century or two later when the Later Han eased up on these restrictions in an effort to foster the influence of the scholar bureaucrat class (Ebrey 1983; Powers 1992, 97-101).[9]

So, as we have seen, though some aspects of the burial culture ma have

9 Powers sees this development in the Later Han as resonating closely with the court-sponsored Confucian discourse of virtue and various strategies of political patronage that arose with the Han recommendation system and scholar-bureaucrat class. Also see Michael Loewe, "Religion and Intellectual Background," in *The Cambridge History of China: vol. 1: The Ch'in and Han Empires*, pp. 715-725.

remained the same between the Western and Eastern Han, there was a definite shift toward the increased sociality of both tomb and shrine, a shift that is underscored by architectural changes in the tomb complex itself. Unlike the individual and sealed burials of Former Han vertical crypt tombs, the accessible, horizontal access tombs with multiple burials that become the norm in the Later Han stone-chambered tumuli (and, of course, the complex arrangement of burials in extended family or clan graveyards) must have corresponded to an increased use of the tomb/shrine structure for complex social activities, lending a strong public dimension to both the burial site itself and the subsequent clan ritual activities for which it served as a focal point.

Far from being a dangerous and inauspicious place unilaterally fixated on the gaze of the dead or even on the devotions of the immediate family kin, the shrine and tomb also looked to another gaze—that of the community at large. Indeed, as Martin Powers has pointed out, the funerary monument might not only be a site where patronage was reaffirmed among social peers but a medium through which "claims of patronage could themselves be made." People gathering at tomb and shrine would not only view the ceremony, but also see the murals and odes engraved there. If the tomb itself was being opened for a new burial or offerings to the deceased, the mourners who accompanied the casket into the tomb (*songguan* 送棺) would also see the scenes contained therein. Powers, Wu Hung, Ebrey, Huang Yuanxie and others have noted the attention to rhetorical flair and effect characteristic of Han funerary inscriptions, documents that by and large were composed by contracted specialists explicitly for these reasons. Scholars have also noted the ubiquitous tendency of these inscriptions to dwell on the conspicuous expense and display of the tomb and funerary ceremonies, the circumstances of which reflect simultaneously the stature of the deceased and the piety of the descendants.

As Martin Powers has observed, "[The ritual and pictorial conventions of Later Han tombs and shrines] don't merely proclaim rank [of the deceased]; they also demonstrate that survivors have virtues appropriate to high rank" (Powers 1992, 44). Thus, the decor of the tomb and shrine becomes a simulacrum that unites both the gaze of the dead and the living in

an extended rhetoric of power and prestige. After all, was not this social networking and renewal precisely the sort of blessing that descendants sought from their ancestors? One might go on to surmise that the repertoire of motifs found in the mortuary art of the Later Han do not simply express power and status, but constitute an integral part of the generative symbolic idiom through which power and status were negotiated among Han elites.

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