Sarcophagi

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Han sarcophagi

Surface, depth, context

WU HUNG

To the Chinese of the first millennium B.C.E., the invention of the coffin marked the beginning of regulated funerary rites. Thus The Book of Changes states: "In the remote past, people buried the dead in the open field under thick brushwood, without constructing tumuli or planting trees. The period of mourning was also not regulated. The later sages then replaced this ancient custom with inner and outer coffins." The same idea also underscores the first narrative of the history of mortuary architecture: Zhao Zi of the second century B.C.E. considered the invention of the coffin the single most important event in the history of tombs; all later developments of the tomb only elaborated upon the notion and form of the coffin, which, in a rudimentary but highly conceptual manner, first materialized and stabilized a special space for the dead. Zhao attributed the invention of the coffin to the Yellow Emperor, a legendary ruler in antiquity who is also described in Han texts as the inventor of ritual and of statecraft. Following the Yellow Emperor, according to Zhao, the royal house of the Western Zhou (eleventh-eighth centuries B.C.E.), multiplied the layers of coffins and embellished them with surface decoration. Subsequently, the powerful warlords of the Eastern Zhou (eighth-third centuries B.C.E.), constructed large, luxurious mausoleums for themselves, "squandering a handsome sum from state coffers in the realm of the Three Springs (that is, the underground)." Modern archaeology has basically confirmed this development outlined by Zhao Zi. Based on scientific excavations, we now know that timber coffins had appeared in China by at least the fourth millennium B.C.E. during the late Neolithic period, that the aristocratic coffins of the Western Zhou were covered with patterned fabric called huangwei, and that the coffins of the Eastern Zhou began to have decorative and symbolic images marked directly on their surfaces.

These early timber coffins are the subject of Alain Thote's chapter in this volume, which surveys Chinese coffins from the first millennium B.C.E. and analyzes the symbolism of some decorated examples. Over the next two thousand years, the Chinese continued to favor timber coffins as the dominant form of burial equipment while also creating stone sarcophagi during specific periods and in particular areas, such as during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) on the East Coast and in the Sichuan Basin, and again from the late Northern Dynasties to the High Tang period (roughly sixth-eighth centuries) in north China. A considerable number of stone sarcophagi are richly decorated with mythological and narrative scenes, which are generally absent on timber coffins. From a macroscopic historical perspective, what we find here are two interacting traditions of coffins, the development of which followed two distinct patterns. The dominance and omnipresence of timber coffins were occasionally challenged by stone sarcophagi, whose distinctive material, decoration, and architectural form defined them as special ritual objects. Such self-conscious distinction, in turn, implied specific customs, identities, and intentions on the part of the users of these objects. In other words, although stone sarcophagi never constituted a continuous historical form as timber coffins did, their intermittent bursting onto the scene betrays a different kind of historical logic and leads us to seek the specific historical forces that gave rise to their creation.

This article focuses on the first appearance of the stone sarcophagi in China. During the period from the second century B.C.E. to the early third century C.E., stone coffins emerged in two regions, first in the Shandong/Jiangsu region on the East Coast and then in the Sichuan region in the southwest (fig. 1). Sometimes carved with pictorial images, these Han dynasty

2. Fan Ye, Hou Han shu (History of the Later Han), (Beijing, 1965), pp. 1314-1315; quotation from p. 1315.
examples are analogous to Western sarcophagi. This connection may not be accidental— I will suggest later that in making stone coffins and other stone mortuary structures, the Han Chinese were inspired by masonry works from what they called the "Western Regions" (Xi yu). Instead of conveying the same meaning as the original foreign works, however, the new material and imported images helped express indigenous ideas about death, the posthumous soul, and immortality. From this perspective, the Han sarcophagi resulted from a cultural fusion: Carrying on the function of timber coffins in ritual practice, they also updated such practice with new, contemporary elements.

My second focus is the consistency and the variations to be found among Han sarcophagi themselves. Why did stone coffins flourish in these two geographically separate regions in Han China? What are the relationships between these two regional traditions of sarcophagi in terms of their decoration, pictorial program, and religious associations? Did they emerge as a single development, or as two separate developments? How did these two regions receive cultural influences from outside? Definitive answers to these questions are perhaps still beyond our reach. By raising these issues, however, I hope to suggest some directions for future research.

Body and soul, surface and depth

There is a fundamental paradox in the function of a Chinese coffin, and consequently in a coffin’s design and decoration. This paradox was rooted in the ambivalent concept of the “remains” of the dead, which a coffin was made to contain. On the one hand, the professed function of the coffin was to conceal and protect the physical body of the dead. So an ancient text offers this standard definition of the tomb: “Burying means hiding away; and that hiding [of the corpse] is from a wish that men should not see it. Hence there are the clothes sufficient for embellishing the body; the coffins all around the clothes; the casket all around the coffins; the earth all around the casket; and a mound further
raised over that grave with trees planted on it.” This understanding naturally inspired people to construct the tomb, and coffin, as self-contained units, which would be as strong and opaque as possible. It was in this spirit that Emperor Wen of the Western Han went to inspect his burial site in the early second century B.C.E. When he saw his tomb—the first recorded imperial tomb constructed inside a rocky hill—he sighed with satisfaction: “Oh! Using stone from the Northern Mountains to make my coffin, securing it with linen cloth and again gluing the cloth with lacquer, how can the coffin still be shaken?”

On the other hand, the ancient Chinese also believed that a person's posthumous remains included not only his physical body but also his invisible soul. According to this idea, a living person's soul is unified with his body, providing him with intelligence, emotion, senses, and the capability to act. Death then results from the detachment of the soul from the body, an event which turns a man from a living organism to a lifeless corpse. This belief was given a more rational form during the Eastern Zhou, when Confucian ritualists developed a theory of “twin souls” called hun and po. In this theory, only the hun, the “heavenly” soul, flies away when death occurs, while the po, the “earthy” or “bodily” soul, stays with the corpse in the tomb. The survival of both souls would depend on continuous nourishment provided by living family members in the form of ritual offerings both inside and outside the tomb. As the recipient of such offerings, the posthumous souls were imagined as autonomous entities with the ability to move. Even the heavier and less active po soul should be able to travel inside a grave to enjoy the offerings and to occupy various chambers that mimicked sections of a living household. To facilitate such movement, therefore, a solid coffin had to be redefined as being flexible and penetrable, as well as being a space of confinement. Its separation of the interior and exterior spaces could not be absolute, but was to be negotiated by the soul's movement. Such negotiation then became a central motivation behind the various designs and decorations applied to a coffin's surface.

The easiest—but by no means the ideal—solution to the dual function of the coffin appeared as a forced compromise: The walls of some urn-shaped Neolithic pottery coffins from the sixth to fifth millennium B.C.E. had round holes drilled in them. Whereas a hole would permit the soul to move in and out of the coffin, it also diminished the coffin's role of concealing and protecting the body. This dilemma was solved by providing the dead with double coffins with different designs, as we find in the famous Leigudun Tomb 1 at Suixian, Hubei province. In the tomb's east chamber, a set of two coffins contained the remains of Marquis Yi of the State of Zeng, who died in the late fifth century B.C.E. Based on the objects found in the tomb's four chambers, scholars have identified these spaces as underground counterparts of the Marquis's residence, including a formal audience hall, a private quarter, a harem, and an arsenal. Small openings on the interior walls linked these separate rooms into a continuum. These openings were likely prepared for the Marquis's soul to move around inside his grave—a hypothesis supported by the design of his double coffins. The outer coffin, a formidable structure of over seven tons, is constructed of thick hardwood around a bronze framework. Given how strong and solid this coffin is, it is surprising to find a rectangular hole, thirty-four centimeters tall and twenty-five centimeters wide, near the bottom of the coffin's headboard. “Openings” were also created on the inner coffin. Instead of cutting real holes, however, the designer painted doors on the coffin's two long sides and flanked them with


8. Sima Qian, Shi ji (Historic Records), (Beijing, 1959), p. 2753.


11. The earliest example of such urn coffins was found inside a house at Xinglonggou, Ch'eng, Inner Mongolia. First Inner Mongolian Archaeological Team, IA, CASS, “Neimonggu Chelengshi Xinglonggou juzuo yizhi 2002-2003 nian de faju” (2002-2003 Excavation on the Settlement Site at Xinglonggou, Cheleng, Inner Mongolia), Kaogu no. 7 (2004): 3-8.

supernatural guardians. With an additional window painted on the headboard, the coffin was transformed into a house-like structure (see fig. 4 in Alain Thote's essay in this volume).

In a more general sense, these painted doors and window signified a crucial development in coffin design and decoration. If the outer coffin continued an earlier tradition to provide the posthumous soul with an actual exit, the inner coffin fulfilled this purpose with illusionistic images. Framed by dense zoomorphic and geometric patterns, the doors and window appear as empty, negative spaces, recessing into the coffin's interior. From this point on, a dialogue between "surface" and "depth" persistently dictated the decoration of a coffin. Here "surface" means the decorated planes of a timber or stone coffin, which bear images and appear as a set of two-dimensional pictorial compositions on a three-dimensional structure. "Depth" means what is imagined to lie "behind" this material and pictorial surface. This interior space may be defined by the 3-D configuration of pictorial images on the coffin surface, which may turn a coffin into a symbolic household or a microcosmic model of the universe. It may also be alluded to by special images, which function as symbolic "passages" of the kind of which I have spoken. The painted window and doors on Marquis Yi's inner coffin still only imply such an interior space. On many later examples, however, the imaginary view on the other side of a door or gate is often pictorialized. Consequently, the dialogue between surface and depth is translated into images of this life and the afterlife, the human world, and immortal paradise.

Perceptual/conceptual modes of Han stone sarcophagi

The dialogue between surface and depth provides a key to understanding not only the dynamic relationship between various images carved on a single sarcophagus, but also different characteristics of the overall pictorial programs and conceptual schemes of individual sarcophagi. Instead of developing a rigid typology, this section proposes four basic perceptual/conceptual modes in sarcophagus decoration. Each mode reveals a particular notion of the sarcophagus as an art medium and as ritual paraphernalia. A mode may characterize the design and decoration of an entire sarcophagus, but can also be combined with other modes to form a more complex pictorial and symbolic program.

In the first mode, the artist treats a sarcophagus primarily as a pictorial medium, which offers him prepared surfaces on which to depict myths and legends, Confucian didactic tales, and human activities in large pictorial compositions. Featuring interacting figures in a coherent setting, such scenes often appear on the long sides of a sarcophagus; some compositions further generate a strong "narrative" impression because of their temporal progression and dramatic representation.

The second mode may be termed "iconic" and refers to the isolated images of cosmic deities, immortals, and auspicious animals and plants. Executed against the empty background, they form self-contained entities devoid of any temporal or spatial context. Their schematic, frontal representation and occasional labeling further enhance their significance as icons with conventional literary definitions.

Developed from the window and door images on Marquis Yi's inner coffin, the third mode refers to various kinds of symbolic passages, which facilitate the soul's entrance to an imaginary afterlife. Although such images often appear as independent symbols, they also can function as "frames" for scenes of the afterlife and in so doing pertain to a "liminal space" of ritual transformation. The combination of symbolic passages and the imaginary afterlife indicates the fourth mode of sarcophagus decoration. A dominant feature of Sichuan sarcophagi from the second to early third century, this mode both represents a journey to the afterlife and transforms a sarcophagus into a microcosm of the universe, an underground "happy home," or immortal paradise for the departing soul. These four modes are explained in the following examples.

Pictorial compositions

A stone coffin from Weishan, Shandong, bears one of the earliest narrative carvings on Chinese sarcophagi (fig. 2). Dating from the first century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., this and other decorated stone constructs from the East Coast have provided new evidence for the early development of funerary carvings in China. A long side of this sarcophagus bears three rectangular compositions divided and unified by wide frames. The left composition shows a tall figure presenting a roll of silk to a child. Although this scene bears some resemblance to the popular motif of Confucius paying respect to the "boy genius" Xiang Tao, it more likely represents an important funerary ritual, during which guests visited the deceased's home and offered gifts to his descendants. This interpretation is supported by the following scene, which represents a funerary procession centered on a large, four-wheeled hearse. Ten people pull the hearse,
while four men and four women follow it; these are probably the family members and acquaintances of the deceased. This funerary procession moves toward a graveyard shown in the third composition, in which a grave pit, perfectly rectangular, has been prepared in front of three triangular tumuli, probably belonging to the ancestors of the family. Groups of gentlemen are sitting or standing next to the grave, either paying homage or offering libations.

Created during an early phase of pictorial carvings and in a remote area, these stone pictures are naïve in carving technique and pictorial style. But the artist's intention to represent continuous funerary events is unmistakable. The juxtaposition of the three scenes implies a temporal sequence from the world of the living to the world of the dead; the transition between the two realms is established by a chariot procession. We find similar ritual sequences on later sarcophagi from Sichuan. The Sichuan carvings, however, are much richer in subject matter and include pictorial narratives of myths and legends. Such scenes especially characterize a group of examples from Xinjin near Chengdu, which also exhibit a distinguished figural style, sophisticated carving technique, and dramatic effect.

Unfortunately, most Xinjin sarcophagus carvings now exist as separate panels: According to Wen Yu, several stone coffins found here before 1949 were cut into pieces by antique merchants, who then sold them in Chengdu. One of these carvings is damaged at both ends, but still shows a portion of a mountain with a zigzag outline to the left; the rest of the composition depicts four highly animated figures (fig. 3a). A large ape or monkey with bare arms and legs is running towards the mountain. It carries a woman on its back, whose long gown and sleeves indicate her female identity. The woman turns her head back; her mouth is open as if crying out for help. The ape is in flight, stretching its arms to resist the attack from behind. The attackers are two men, both holding swords in their right hands. The one following the ape is striking a deadly blow; the other man behind him holds an object with diagonal stripes—perhaps some kind of basket used in hunting.

The second Xinjin carving is similar to the first composition but seems to represent the next episode in the story (fig. 3b). Instead of carrying a woman and fleeing, the ape is being killed by the gentleman who is thrusting his sword at its left eye. The animal's dramatic gesture signals a last-ditch struggle. The woman, whose gender is more clearly represented in this case by her hair and costume style, is seated in a peach-shaped cave watching the action. This composition can be read together with a third carving on a complete sarcophagus found at Neijiang, Sichuan (fig. 3c). Although much cruder in pictorial representation, it offers some interesting details absent in the Xinjin carvings: The fleeing ape is running toward a house, in which two


14. Wen Yu, Sichuan Han dai huaxiangshi xuanji (A Selection of Han Pictorial Carvings from Sichuan), (Beijing, 1955), caption of fig. ding.
women are seated facing each other, perhaps chatting or drinking.

I have discussed these carvings in a previous study and have suggested that they together represent an early version of the “White Ape” legend, which later became the subject of a famous Tang tale.¹⁵ In the story, Ouyang He, a general in the government army, was sent to the southern frontier on campaign. One night, his wife was spirited away from a locked room and no trace of her could be found. Grief-stricken, Ouyang spent months in search of her. Finally he entered a heavily wooded area and found a mysterious garden on a sheer cliff; more than a score of women lived there. They told him that they had all been abducted by a great white ape, and that his wife lay sick in a cave. The story ends with the slaying of the ape: The captive women disclosed the ape’s secret weakness, allowing Ouyang to destroy it with his sword.

Whereas the vivid depiction of the story has its own artistic and narrative value engraved on a sarcophagus, it also conveys the desire to protect the dead by warding off evil spirits.

Icons

A very different visual logic separates “icons” from the narrative scenes discussed above. No temporal sequence or dramatic effect is pursued here; instead, these isolated images all depict subjects that transcend time and space. Sometimes the carvers labeled these images with cartouches, as we find on a second-century C.E. sarcophagus from Guitoushan in Jianyang, Sichuan (fig. 4).¹⁶ Among the many images carved on


this sarcophagus, a pillar-gate is labeled as the Gate of Heaven (Tianmen). Several other images are identified as cosmic symbols, including the sun and the moon, directional animals (a tortoise, a dragon, and a “white tiger”), and the two cosmic deities Fuxi and Nüwa. There are also symbols of immortality—two winged fairies playing chess (labeled xianren bo) and another immortal riding on a horse (labeled xianren qi). A fourth category of images symbolizes wealth and prosperity: A raised two-story building, the “Grand Granary” (taicang), is envisioned to supply the dead with inexhaustible food; a “white pheasant” (baizhi), a “cassia-coin-tree” (guiwu), and a beast called a lili typify three basic kinds of auspicious omens, each drawn from the animal, bird, or plant kingdom.

Among the icons carved on the Guitoushan sarcophagus, the union of Fuxi and Nüwa was especially prominent in the Sichuan area during the second century and customarily appears on the rear end of a coffin. The two images read almost like a diagram of yin and yang, the two universal forces in Han cosmology (fig. 5). This symbolism is suggested not only by the different genders of the two deities but also by the celestial orbs they hold: Fuxi supports the sun with his right hand and Nüwa supports the moon with her left hand. Inside the moon is a hare, and inside the sun, a bird. According to ancient Chinese mythology, these creatures inhabit the cosmic symbols of the sun and moon. The perfect symmetry of these images signifies the opposition of yin and yang, whereas the joining tails of Fuxi and Nüwa further alludes to the interaction and transformation of these cosmic forces.

Another major deity frequently depicted on Sichuan sarcophagi is Xiwangmu, “Queen Mother of the West” (fig. 6). But instead of transforming a stone coffin into a microcosm of the universe like Fuxi and Nüwa do, she symbolizes eternal happiness in the realm of immortals. The tale of Xiwangmu may have developed from antiquity. During the Western Han she was further associated with Kunlun, a magical mountain to the West. Shortly before the Christian era, she became
the subject of a religious cult, and was then absorbed into the emerging Taoist pantheon during the second century C.E. Portrayed on a long side of a Sichuan sarcophagus, she is seated upon her dragon-and-tiger throne and is accompanied by a group of miraculous animals, including a nine-tailed fox, a three-legged crow, an elixir-pounding hare, and an immortal toad. On a sarcophagus excavated at Shuangheya, Pengshan (fig. 6), there is the additional image of a woman who is entering the Queen Mother court while making an offering. This is probably a portrait of the dead, who is imagined to have achieved immortality after death.

"Passages"

Continuing the tradition of painting and constructing doors and windows in Eastern Zhou tombs, "passage" images constituted a dominant motif category on stone sarcophagi when this type of burial equipment first emerged on the East Coast. Zheng Yan's chapter in this volume offers a general introduction to these early examples. Briefly, the stone coffins from the East Coast found in present-day Shandong and northern Jiangsu—the earliest examples of such artifacts in China—have been dated from the second century B.C.E. to the first century C.E. No two sarcophagi repeat the same decoration, but all utilize the images of doors, gates, and perforated bi-disks, and all play up the tension between surface and depth, or between positive and negative spaces, in an increasingly complex manner.

A relatively simple example in this group is a sarcophagus from Qishan Tomb 1 at Peixian in Jiangsu, which bears two groups of carvings on either of its two ends (fig. 7). One composition depicts a gate formed by two pillars, which marked the entrance to a formal architectural compound in ancient China. Two men flanking the gate are bowing their heads, as if paying homage to someone who is entering the gate, while a third figure stands in front of the gate, offering an object to the arriving guest. The other composition is centered on a circular bi-disk, coupled with an animal mask to form a pushou image. Two gentlemen standing at either side of the bi seem to be holding it up with strings.

Abundant evidence from Han tombs has revealed that a special jade bi was placed or painted next to the deceased to symbolize the passage of his or her posthumous soul. More specifically, with a circular hole in the middle, this ritual object or its image was believed to possess the magical power to guide the soul to leave the corpse and enter a higher realm. This belief is clearly disclosed by a number of second-century B.C.E. "jade suits"—actually constructed "jade bodies"—of

17. On the history of the Queen Mother of the West, see Wu Hung (see note 3), pp. 108–141.

18. I have discussed this symbolism of the bi-disk in Han funerary art in "Yin hun ling bi" (the bi-disk as a conduit of the soul), in Wu Hung and Zheng Yan, eds., Gudai muzang meishu yanjiu (Studies on ancient tomb art), vol. 1 (Beijing, 2011), pp. 55–64.
deceased royal princes. Inevitably, a bi-disk is installed on the top of the head, allowing the soul to leave the physical body.¹⁹ The famous silk banner from Mawangdui Tomb 1, again from the second century B.C.E., further provides a vivid pictorial account of the soul’s posthumous transformation: Two scenes in the middle of the painting are framed by a pair of dragons, whose bodies intertwine while penetrating a large jade bi (see fig. 7 in Eugene Wang’s essay in this volume). Below the disk and flanked by the dragons’ tails, mourners are holding a funerary vigil, offering food and wine to the corpse of the deceased. Above the bi and flanked by the dragons’ upper bodies and heads, the deceased woman re-emerges in all her vividness. I have proposed that this second image actually portrays the woman’s soul, now freed from her temporal, material form.²⁰ Separating yet connecting her body and soul, the jade bi and ascending dragons facilitate the transformation of the soul into a disembodied, eternal presence.

Some timber coffins from Sichuan originally bore bi-shaped copper plates, on which the circular disk is integrated with a gate motif, sometimes labeled as the Gate to Heaven. The additional images of immortals further clinch the meaning of the disk/gate combination as the entrance to a celestial paradise (see fig. 7a in Lillian Tseng’s essay in this volume). Most stone sarcophagi from the region, however, are only carved with a gate on the front (fig. 8). Consisting of two pillars and called a que, this gate also marked the entrance to a Han cemetery along a road called the shendao, “the path of the soul.” Historical records tell that during a royal funerary ceremony, a mourning procession carried the coffin of the deceased emperor through this gate, along the shendao, and then buried him in the tomb located at the end of the path. During monthly sacrifices, a procession escorted the crown and clothes of the emperor through this gate to his temple. There is little doubt that the pillar gate engraved on a sarcophagus has the same meaning, symbolizing the soul’s passage into a spiritual world. This reinterpretation also explains why the pillar gate and a “greeting” figure must appear on the front of a sarcophagus, and why a rider is sometimes added: Holding a funerary banner, he is guiding the soul to enter the open gate (fig. 9).

Posthumous realms

As defined earlier, the fourth perceptual/conceptual mode of sarcophagus decoration is characterized by the combination of a symbolic passage and scenes of the imaginary afterlife. This mode thus both represents the soul’s journey to the afterlife and transforms a sarcophagus into a microcosm of the universe, an underground “happy home,” or an immortal paradise for the departing soul. A simple way to achieve this effect is to reconceptualize a liminal gate as a picture frame. One such example can be seen on the Shuangheya

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¹⁹ For a discussion of these “jade bodies” during the Han, see Wu Hung, “The Prince of Jade Revisited: Material Symbolism of Jade as Observed in the Mencheng Tombs,” in Chinese Jades, Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia no. 18, ed. R. E. Scott (London, 1997), pp. 147–170.

Figure 8. Sarcophagus from Sichuan, second century C.E. Photo: After Gao Wen, Sichuan Handai Shiguan huaxiang ji (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1998), fig. 146.

Figure 9. Ink rubbing of the head of a sarcophagus from the Chengdu area, second century C.E. After Gao Wen, Sichuan Handai Shiguan huaxiang ji (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1998), fig. 199.
sarcophagus from Pengxian. I have discussed the Queen Mother image carved on one of the long sides of this coffin (fig. 8). The opposite side bears a series of images inside a que gate, including two winged animals, a phoenix, a riderless horse, and an intertwining tree (fig. 10). We may compare this scene with the images on the Guitoushan coffin to find their similarities and differences: Whereas the Guitoushan sarcophagus presents a series of itemized icons including an isolated gate (fig. 4), the gate on the Shuangheya sarcophagus assumes the role of a frame to unite separate icons into a single space. To complete this picture’s significance as a spatial representation, the artist also depicts two men journeying inside the gate—figures which the scholar Luo Erhu has identified as “fairy friends” guiding the deceased into the land of immortality.\(^\text{21}\)

On some second-century sarcophagi, an intriguing image further enhances the spatial quality of such a composite composition. It is a half-opened gate, with a figure emerging from behind it. Holding a still closed door-leaf, he or she seems to be about to open it for the dead. On a sarcophagus excavated at Rongjing, Sichuan, this door placed in the middle of one of the long sides, appears as the entrance into an elaborate building (see fig. 1 in Eugene Wang’s essay in this volume). The four bays of the building enable the artist to depict the views beyond the gate: Here we find the Queen Mother of the West, the symbol of immortality, to the right, and an embracing couple to the left. Scholars have proposed different theories for the specific meanings of these images. On a more general level, however, it seems safe to see them as expressions of intimate desire projected into the afterlife.

The front side of the Rongjing sarcophagus still bears the image of a que pillar gate; the coexistence of this motif and the half-opened gate thus suggests a certain divergence in their significance. Considering the pictorial context of each passage, it is possible that the que gate primarily symbolizes the entrance to a posthumous universe, as it is conventionally paired with the union of Fuxi and Niwa at the rear of a sarcophagus, or in some cases is even inserted between these two cosmic deities.\(^\text{22}\) The half-opened gate, in contrast, is more closely associated with the idea of entering the posthumous paradise. Besides the Rongjing coffin, another sarcophagus from Nanxi, Sichuan, confirms this association but in a different way. The composition on one of this coffin’s long sides consists of three groups of figures, seemingly describing a series of events in a temporal progression (see fig. 6a in Lillian Tseng’s essay in this volume). To the right is a parting scene, in which a man is bidding farewell to a friend. In the middle, a man followed by a deer kneels in front of a half-opened gate as a figure emerges from the gate to receive him. The final scene to the left portrays the Queen Mother of the

\(^{21}\) Luo Erhu, *Handai huaxiang shiguan* (Pictorial sarcophagi of the Han dynasty), (Chengdu, 2002), p. 46.

\(^{22}\) For an example, see ibid., p. 91, fig. 84.
West on her throne; a figure is walking toward her from the half-opened gate.

The subtle distinction between the que gate and the half-opened gate, however, seems to have largely vanished in the early third century. The best evidence for this change comes from a dated sarcophagus from Lushan, Sichuan (see fig. 1 in Lillian Tseng's essay in this volume). Found in a brick tomb in 1940, it bears an epitaph which reads: "The deceased Steward of Accounts, Wang Hui, styled Bozhao, died in the last decade of the ninth month of the sixteenth or xinmou year of the Jian'an era (c.e. 221). He was buried on the jianxu day of the sixth month of the seventh year (c.e. 222). Alas!"

Compared to the complicated narrative scenes on some of the earlier sarcophagi, the decoration of this sarcophagus is considerably—and deliberately—simplified, consisting of a few isolated images rendered in round relief. On the front side, a figure emerges from a half-opened door. Replacing a pillar gate in this position, the half-opened door now assumes the meaning of the entrance to a posthumous universe. This new significance is revealed by other images on the coffin: Two divine animals, the Blue Dragon and the White Tiger, are depicted in a symmetrical fashion on both sides, with similarly elongated bodies and arched tails. In Han cosmology these two beasts are symbols of the east and the west, respectively. Depicted on the rear is the composite symbol of a snake and a tortoise—the combined symbol of the north. These directional symbols constitute a three-dimensional symbolic structure, transforming the stone box into a microcosm of the universe.

But the half-opened door on this sarcophagus still subtly retains its traditional association with the idea of immortality: We find that the figure inside the gate has a wing growing from his shoulder, and feather patterns striding his leg. These features identify him as an immortal. So the cosmic space into which he is admitting the deceased also takes on the meaning of an immortal paradise.

First, during this period, the concept of the posthumous soul underwent an important transformation. As mentioned earlier, a traditional theory about death was based on the dualism between the hun and po souls: The hun flies away when death occurs, while the po stays with the body in the tomb. This bipartite division of the soul was closely related to the temple/tomb dualism in traditional ancestral worship.23 A very significant passage in The Book of Rites records a conversation between Confucius and his student Zai Wo. In answering Zai Wo's question about the nature of ghosts and spirits, Confucius explains that "ghost" refers to the po, which remains underground after death, whereas the spirit, or hun, flies on high to become a divine being. "Once this opposition is established," the Master continued, "two kinds of rituals are framed in accordance and (different) sacrifices are regulated."24 Whereas temple sacrifices are offered to the heavenly existence of ancestors, grave sacrifices serve as a tribute to their earthly existence.

Such distinctions between the two souls and related ritual services became obsolete during the Han or existed only in theory. Following the decline and obsolescence of the collective lineage temple, the hun and po were reunited in the graveyard. Numerous Han texts, including mortuary inscriptions found in tombs and on funerary shrines, reveal a new concept of the posthumous soul. As Ken Brashier has shown, in most Han sources, hun and po form a compound that simply means the soul, and the tomb is imagined as its dwelling place.25 Consequently, the tomb was reimagined as the soul's otherworldly dwelling, leading to the invention of the "chamber grave," which imitated the architecture of a household. The emergence of the stone sarcophagus around the same time was likewise inspired by the desire to construct an eternal home for both the hun and po. As we have found, pictorial carvings on a sarcophagus not only depict earthly delights such as eating and drinking, but also transform the stone box into a microcosm of the universe or a heavenly realm.

24. "Li ji" (The Book of Rites.) in Shisanjing zhushu, ed. Ruan Yuan (see note 1), pp. 1595–1596.
Second, the pre-Han idea of xian, or immortality, hinged upon the hope of escaping death. Starting from the Han, however, a new belief in “postmortem immortality” prevailed. Images of immortal lands increasingly decorated tombs. Miraculous tales circulated, describing how ancient sages such as the Yellow Emperor ascended to heaven after having been buried in a grave. A certain Canon of Immortality (Xian jing) further classifies immortals into different ranks: While those of the higher ranks have the ability to defy death, those of the lowest rank “cannot avoid death and have to shed their physical shells like a cicada.”

According to this new belief, instead of preventing a person from achieving immortality, death actually offers an alternative route to reach paradise. This idea soon attracted millions of people of different classes, mainly because it finally guaranteed the possibility of immortality without demanding laborious effort. No external proof was required to demonstrate the magical transformation taking place in the tomb. Or, such proof could be produced through art by embellishing a tomb or coffin to make it a fantastic immortal land.

Third, following the establishment of the Han, a rapid territorial expansion toward the West fundamentally changed China’s relationship with the rest of the world. This historical process may have already begun in the early Han, but it only culminated during the reign of Emperor Wu (141-87 B.C.E.), who made use of the strength accumulated in the early years of the dynasty to double the size of his empire. By defeating the Huns in a series of campaigns, the Chinese armies pushed ever farther towards the West across Central Asia until they finally confronted the Roman Empire. Two highways to make the Silk Road were established; the one north of the Heavenly Mountains ran through the Gobi Desert to Bashan, while the one south of the mountains led across the Tarim Basin to Kashgar and Khotan. “Over both roads came Western ideas and art motifs to be incorporated into but never to dominate the Chinese aesthetic canon.”

Two other international routes originating from China’s East Coast and the Southwest, respectively, traversed the vast ocean and deep mountain gorges to connect the Han empire with the Indian world.

Several aspects of Han sarcophagi are likely related to this profound historical process—their material, timing, geographical distribution, and patrons. I have written extensively on the “Chinese discovery” of stone from the second century B.C.E. to the first century C.E., connecting this phenomenon with new trends in Han religion and with people’s fascination for the mysterious West. Briefly, it was at the height of the westward expansion of the Han Empire that the Chinese began to employ stone in making statues, funerary monuments, and sarcophagi. At the same time they also made frequent connections between four essential elements in Han religion and religious art, namely, immortality, the West, stone, and death. As the search for eternal happiness—including postmortem immortality—dominated Han religious thought, people also increasingly oriented their longing and search toward the space beyond the desert and high mountains. To them, not only were the magical mountain Kunlun and the Queen Mother of the West both located there, but a horse from the West was called a “heavenly horse,” and a tribute elephant, “a passenger of the gods.” These two beasts are portrayed on a chariot ornament made in central China at the beginning of the first century B.C.E. (fig. 11a on page 196); their similarities with images found in present-day Pakistan (fig. 11b on page 210) prove that before this time,

31. For an introduction to these stone sculptures, including a famous group from General Huo Qubing’s tomb, see Wu Hung, “From the Neolithic to Han,” in A.F. Howard, et al., Chinese Sculpture (New Haven and Beijing, 2006), pp. 82-97. According to Jiang Yingju and Yang Aiguo, stone sarcophagi appeared around the same time. See Jiang Yingju and Yang Aiguo, Han dai hua xiang shi yu hua xiang zhou huan (Han Dynasty Pictorial Stones and Bricks), (Beijing, 2001), pp. 73-74.
32. It is said that winged heavenly horses were found in the third year of the Yuanshou era (120 B.C.E.) and again in the fourth year of the Taichu era (101 B.C.E.). In celebrating these events, Emperor Wu wrote poems which read: “The horse of Heaven has come. / Open the far gates, / Raise up my body, / I go to Kunlun”; and “The horse of Heaven has come. / Mediator for the dragon, / He travels to the gates of Heaven, / And looks on the Terrace of Jade.” Ban Gu, Han shu (History of the Western Han), (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), pp. 176, 202, 1067. The same emperor also wrote a poem for a tribute elephant: “The elephant, white like jade / Came here from the West . . . . / It reveals Heaven’s will, / Bringing happiness to human beings.” Ibid., pp. 176, 1069.
33. For a study of this object and its decoration, see Wu Hung, “A Sanpan Shariot Ornament and the Xiangnu Design in Western Han Art,” Archives of Asian Art, XXXVII (1984): 38-59.
certain Indian art motifs had been brought to China and copied there. The knowledge of stone monuments and sculptures and of cave temples and cliff tombs may have reached China around the same time and inspired local practice. Significantly, when people of the Han adopted this material, they used it only for religious buildings and sculptures dedicated to the gods and the dead. A stone tomb or coffin was therefore created to confirm its association with death, immortality, and the West.

When stone sarcophagi first emerged in southern Shandong and northern Jiangsu around the second and first centuries B.C.E., local princes in this area also constructed “cliff tombs” for themselves (see fig. 1). Built inside rocky hills, these enormous burials are sometimes over thirty meters long and consist of dozens of chambers. Neither this burial type nor the stone sarcophagus originated in China, but both can be traced to the regions west of the Han empire. Interestingly, when the stone sarcophagus was resurrected in Sichuan in the second century C.E., it was again accompanied by the popularity of cliff tombs in the region (fig. 12). The recurrent coexistence of these two burial forms on the East Coast and in Sichuan directs us to uncover an important factor shared by these two regions. Textual and archaeological evidence reveals that within the Han empire, the East Coast and the Sichuan area were under the strongest Buddhist influence; such influence in turn contributed to the emergence of religious Taoism in these two places.

Although we are still unable to determine how early Buddhism had reached China, we do know that Liu Ying, a ruler of the Chu principality who held court at Pengcheng in present-day northern Jiangsu, “observed fasting and performed sacrifices to the Buddha” in the first century.34 These and other records have led Eric Zürcher to argue that “around the middle of the first century AD Buddhism appears already to have penetrated into the region north of the Huai River, in eastern Henan, southern Shandong and northern Jiangsu.”35

This is an important observation for the present study, because the area that Zürcher outlines overlaps exactly with the region in which the first group of stone sarcophagi and cliff tombs has been found. This is not to say that there is a direct relationship between these burial forms and Buddhism. Rather, it suggests that the arrival of Buddhism was not an isolated event, but was related to the introduction of other cultural phenomena and their impact on local ritual practices. It is possible that certain architectonic forms related to Buddhism and Indian culture, such as rock-cut sanctuaries and stone reliquaries, had influenced the local population on the East Coast even before Liu Ying formally embraced the foreign religion. As Zheng Yan notes in his text in this volume, the earliest stone coffins in Shandong and Jiangsu typically belonged to small and mid-sized tombs, indicating the attraction of such alien forms for common people.

Similarly, there existed a strong link between Sichuan and Buddhist art during the later Han. In fact, although Buddhist motifs have been found in different parts of Han China, images of the Buddha appeared in this southwest region in greater number and more authentic form.36 These images include, for example, two relief carvings in cliff tombs at Mahao and Sizihuan in Leshan (fig. 13), and miniature icons on bronze “money trees.” The iconographic features of these images, such as the hand gesture, the halo, and the usnīsa, directly link them to Indian prototypes created at Mathurā and Gandhāra in the second century.37Given the frequency of such images in Sichuan during the second and early third centuries, however, it is curious that no text records the practice of

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34. Fan Ye, Hou Han shu (History of the Eastern Han), (Beijing, 1965), pp. 1428–1429. Evidence for Liu Ying’s worship of the Buddha is also found in an edict issued by Emperor Ming: “The King of Chu recites the subtle words of Huang-lao, and respectfully performs the gentle sacrifices to the Buddha. After three months of purification and fasting, he has made a solemn covenant (or a vow) with the spirits. What dislike or suspicion (from Our part) could there be, that he must repent (of his sins)? Let (the silk which he sent forth) redemption be sent back, in order thereby to contribute to the lavish entertainment of the upāsakas and śrāmanas.” Trans. from E. Zürcher, The Buddhist Conquest of China (Leiden, 1959), vol. 1, p. 27.

35. Translation based on E. Zürcher (see note 34), vol. 1, p. 26.


37. For such Indian examples, see ibid., pls. 3, 4.
Figure 12. Distribution of stone sarcophagi and cliff tombs in Sichuan, second century B.C.E.—third century C.E. Circles denote cliff tombs, squares denote stone sarcophagi. Map made for this essay by the author with assistance from Shi Jie.

Figure 13. Buddha image in a cliff tomb at Mahao, Leshan, Sichuan, second–third century C.E. Photo: After Wu Hong, "Liyi zhong de meishu" (Beijing: Sanlian chubanshe, 2005), vol. 1, fig. 13.
Buddhism in this region at this time. Instead, abundant documents describe Sichuan as a Taoist center after the mid-second century, when the Taoist patriarch Zhang Ling moved there from the East Coast to establish a sect known as Heavenly Master Taoism (Tianshi Dao) or Five-Bushel Taoism (Wudoumi Dao). His grandson Zhang Lu further became a Taoist ruler in Sichuan and southern Shaanxi for some thirty years, during which Taoism became the dominant religion in this southwest region.

Zhang Ling’s connection with the East Coast (which also developed into a stronghold of religious Taoism in the second century) may explain the re-emergence of stone sarcophagi in Sichuan. Indeed, although these two regional traditions of sarcophagi were separated by a temporal gap, the many shared elements in their decoration, including both individual motifs and large pictorial programs, link them into a single development. The dominance of Taoism in Sichuan also explains the nature of the Buddhist images found there. It is an established fact that when religious Taoism first emerged in the second century, it utilized many elements from Buddhism, from the Buddha’s miraculous tales to icon worship. The Buddhist images from Sichuan did not furnish Buddhist sanctuaries, but instead decorated tombs and “money trees” (local ritual objects possibly used for Taoist-related purposes). In all cases, these images aimed at strengthening the pursuit of immortality or enriching the emerging Taoist pantheon. In fact, if the East Coast sarcophagi reflect an early stage of cultural interaction between China and the outside world, the Sichuan sarcophagi may have been part of a Taoist visual and material culture. In a previous essay, I compared the documented locations of major centers of Heavenly Master Taoism with the distribution patterns of major types of religious images and objects in Sichuan art, including the cliff tomb, the sarcophagus, the “money tree,” and images of the Queen Mother of the West and the Buddha. The comparison showed that two “maps”—one of a regional religious tradition and the other of a ritual art tradition—clearly overlap. A closer examination of special images on selected sarcophagi, such as the portraits of Taoist priests and a symbol called a sheng, further substantiated the Taoist identity of their users.38

To sum up, this paper has examined Han dynasty sarcophagi from three different but interrelated angles. The first is to relate these examples to the painted timber coffins of the Eastern Zhou. As early as the fifth century B.C.E., the design of some timber coffins already reflected a tension between surface and depth, which would persist in the decoration of stone sarcophagi. Rooted in the Chinese conception of an autonomous soul after death, this tension manifested itself most clearly in the creation of “passages” on a coffin’s surface. Either portrayed as an empty door or as a jade disk with a hole in the middle, these special images made a solid sarcophagus “transparent” and “penetrable” to facilitate the soul’s movement in and out. At the same time, a three-dimensional sarcophagus was also conceived as an eternal home of the dead, transformed accordingly into a metaphorical space, which offered posthumous security, prosperity, and immortality.

This basic understanding led me to distinguish a number of perceptual/conceptual modes in sarcophagus decoration. Differing from a typological, iconographical, or stylistic classification, these modes emphasize the viewer’s visual experience and cultural understanding of images on sarcophagi. A pictorial composition, for example, illustrates the “White Ape” tale with a vivid narrative representation, but it also helps ward off all sorts of evil spirits on a more abstract, symbolic level. A que gate can be an isolated icon pertaining to the boundary separating this life and the next, but it can also be used to frame other images and define the latter as concrete representations of the afterlife. Instead of focusing on an image per se, a perceptual/conceptual mode connects the viewer to the meaning of a sarcophagus. It is both a cultural product and an embodiment of cultural experience.

This finally led me to interpret Han sarcophagi within two broad contexts, one ideological and the other historical. The former is related to an important development in Han religious thought. In particular, the changing notions of the soul and immortality provide a foundation from which to understand the invention of stone sarcophagi and their pictorial programs. The other context is the Western expansion of the Han empire, which brought home new knowledge of the West, including stone monuments and statues, anthropomorphic gods, and the religion of Buddhism. These two contexts inform us about the general historical, cultural, and religious conditions of Han sarcophagi, and also provide information about regional uses of sarcophagi for specific purposes.