In recent years Taoist art has attracted considerable attention from scholars whose published work has begun to constitute the basis for a new field of art historical inquiry. At the present stage of research, however, we can talk about this art confidently only when dealing with such Taoist icons as statues of the deified Laozi (later known as the Supreme Lord Lao, or Taishang laojun) and the Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning (Yuanshi tianzun), which appeared no earlier than the fifth century. It is true that some scholars, including myself, have referred to certain images in Han dynasty art, such as those of the Queen Mother of the West (Xi Wangmu) or the god Taiyi, as Taoist. But such identifications remain hypothetical. We all know that the cult of both the Queen Mother and Taiyi long predated organized Taoist religion. Although these deities were later absorbed into the Taoist pantheon, it would be ben mo dao zhi— "putting the cart before the horse"—if one were to identify an earlier image based on a later appropriation. Thus, although the existence of Taoist art during the Han dynasty seems beyond doubt, we still need to examine the evidence for this assertion systematically—we must trace its various regional traditions and map its intrinsic and extrinsic properties, including its visual forms, production, patronage, and function.

In undertaking such an investigation, it is crucial to remember that the meaning and content of Taoism have undergone many changes over the course of its long history, and that images of early Taoist art must have differed markedly from later ones. Generally speaking, any definition of Taoist art must be a historical and dynamic one, taking into account the continuity of this art as well as its specific manifestations in different places and times. While it is necessary to take later Taoist conventions into consideration, such conventions do not automatically yield a historical definition of early Taoist art. To this end, it is especially important to avoid assuming an "orthodox," retrospective Taoist position, for to do so would negate the complex history of Taoism and condemn earlier traditions as unorthodox or even un-Taoist.

Let us then undertake the task of reconstructing a Taoist art tradition at its earliest developmental stage and recognize that "art," in a broad sense, includes not only individual pictorial images and objects but also symbolic or narrative "programs" of images and objects, their architectural contexts and ritual functions, their makers and patrons, production and consumption, geographical distribution and period style, and so on. Thus, the term "art," as used here, means "visual culture": the different kinds of visual forms produced by a group of people who were linked together by a shared language, shared ideas and behavior, and a common sense of identity. The visual culture I investigate in this essay belonged to a branch of early religious Taoism that developed in the present-day provinces of Sichuan and southern Shaanxi during the second and early third centuries. Referred to in historical texts as Wudoumi Dao ("Five Pecks of Rice" Taoism), Tianshi Dao (Way of the Celestial Masters), Zhengyi Dao ("Orthodox One" Taoism), or Gui Dao (Ghost Taoism), this religious tradition was identified by the later orthodox Taoist church as its origin, and the initiator of this tradition, Zhang Ling, was claimed as the founder or the first Celestial Master of this church. This identification—whose historical reliability is a complex question that lies beyond the scope of this essay—has nevertheless prompted much effort by historians of Taoism to discover textual evidence for this tradition (hereafter referred to as Wudoumi Dao).

The main goal of this essay, however, is to discover visual evidence for the same religious entity. Since textual records of Wudoumi Dao contain little description of ritual paraphernalia or pictorial images, we cannot identify certain objects and images as the visual products of this Taoist tradition simply by
matching their physical forms with texts. On the other hand, these texts do allow us to connect Wudoumi Dao with certain visual forms on other levels. One such level is geography; we can investigate the geographic distribution of certain images, objects, and architectural types, and we can relate their distribution patterns to the regional development of Wudoumi Dao as recorded in texts. By pursuing such a research project, we may literally be able to put Taoist art on a second-to-third-century map.

The basis for this study is the "regional" characteristic of early religious Taoism. The two earliest Taoist sects to appear during the late Eastern Han dynasty were both regional organizations. Zhang Jiao's Taiping Dao was active in the east. According to historical records, its several hundred thousand followers were organized into thirty-six fàng—units distributed in Shandong, Hebei, northern Jiangsu, and eastern Henan provinces. Zhang Ling, on the other hand, established Wudoumi Dao in the southwest. His grandson Zhang Lu further became a local ruler of Shu for some thirty years, during which Taoism became the dominant religion in this southwest region and attracted believers from both Chinese and non-Chinese populations (min yì xīn xiàng). New immigrants to Shu adopted this religion under local pressure, as the History of the Latter Han (Hou Han shu) records: "Even those who came from other parts of the country were afraid not to adopt it." 6

Interestingly, these two regions of early religious Taoism, one in the east and one in the southwest, were also during exactly the same period the two main centers of Han funerary pictorial art. In both regions tombs with carved or painted scenes were built for people of different social classes and occupations. Abundant evidence demonstrates that in many of these tombs art served to realize the attainment of postmortem immortality. The developments of religious Taoism and funerary art thus show general parallels in terms of time, place, content, and function. This does not mean of course that funerary art in these two regions can simply be identified as a Taoist art. But these parallels do establish that we can, with additional evidence, define certain burials, mortuary objects, and cartouches as Taoist products. In fact, if we believe even half of what has been recorded in historical texts about the popularity of Taiping Dao and Wudoumi Dao, we can assume that their numerous followers must have left material traces of their religious beliefs and practices—that the many excavated Han tombs in these two areas must include those of Taoist believers, whose religious identity may well be reflected in the design, decoration, and furnishing of their own tombs.

Of the two regions, Sichuan provides the better opportunity for a regional study of Taoist art, because after Taoism was introduced to Shu prior to the mid-second century, it developed steadily in this region for close to a century. Such stability provided a likely condition for the invention and production of religious symbols and structures, which can in turn be recovered through archaeology. In addition, we have better knowledge about the local organization of Wudoumi Dao and the chronology of Sichuan pictorial art—two factors crucial for a study of Taoist art in this area.

A common misconception among some modern scholars is that members of early Taoist sects, including those of Wudoumi Dao, were "poor peasants" or ordinary people. Yet both textual and archaeological evidence demonstrates that followers of early Taoism were not restricted to lower social strata. This is especially true of the Sichuan region, where Wudoumi Dao maintained a close relationship with the region's elite and officials. Furthermore, we know from historical texts that many members of the local elite were believers of early Taoism, including at least two governors of the whole region in different periods. Zhang Ling, the founder of Wudoumi Dao, served as the magistrate of Jiangzhou before he went to Sichuan. His son Zhang Heng, the next Celestial Master of the sect, was offered the title Langzhong (gentleman of the interior) by the government. But it was Zhang Lu, the third Celestial Master, who fully integrated the organization of Wudoumi Dao with the region's civil administration.

According to the Record of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo zhi), Zhang Lu replaced local officials with Taoist priests called jüjiu, and this reform was welcomed by local people. From the late second to the early third century, Zhang Lu became the supreme ruler in this region and expanded his power to the Hanzhong area in present-day southern Shaanxi. After taking over Hanzhong, according to his biography in Record of the Three Kingdoms, he "assumed the title Shi jün [Master-ruler] and taught people Ghost Dao [i.e., Wudoumi Dao]. For some thirty years he ruled the region of Baijün and Han[zhong] majestically. This was at the end of the Han. Unable to subjugate him, the central government was forced to offer him titles such as General of Subjugating Barbarians and Grand Magistrate of Hanning." After the fall of the Han, Zhang Lu's subordinates proposed to honor him with the title of King of Han[zhong]; but he declined after weighing the political advantage. He was finally defeated by Cao Cao in 215, but was still left with a fief and a noble title. It is clear that Zhang Lu and his ministers/priests were far from being poor peasants or ordinary people, and that their culture simply cannot be identified as a "popular" one. In fact, using the
best available textual evidence, it can be said that Zhang Lu established the first Taoist regime in Chinese history. Thus, it is unthinkable that with such stability and power Wudoumi Dao did not develop its cultural and artistic production in this region. Indeed, many archaeological remains from this region, including large tombs and ritual objects, may be related to this early Taoist sect. The question that remains is how to prove this assumption by connecting archaeological materials with Wudoumi Dao.

First of all, it is possible to establish such connections because we are left with important records about the locations of the administrative centers of Wudoumi Dao. According to several texts, Zhang Ling established a series of Taoist centers called “the twenty-four zhi.” Zhang Ling and his successors may have also elaborated on this system with additional “secondary centers” called pei zhi and you zhi. Most of the twenty-four zhi were distributed in a broad belt from Xichang in the south to Hanshong in the north (fig. 1). The core area within this region was the Chuanxi Plain at the upper reaches of the Min and Tuo rivers, with the Wudoumi Dao headquarters, Yangping Zhi, at present-day Pengxian, northwest of Chengdu. It is possible that Yangping Zhi acquired this prominent position under the second Celestial Master, Zhang Heng, who practiced there and “ascended to immortality” (sheng xian) on Mount Yangping in 179.

Another basis for a study of early Taoist art in this region is archaeology. A number of large-scale surveys, mainly carried out by Sichuan archaeologists over the past thirty years, have yielded important information about the geographical distribution and temporal development of three categories of regional cultural and artistic products during the Eastern Han. These include: 1) architectural forms—predominantly cliff tombs and stone sarcophagi with pictorial carvings; 2) objects—principally “money trees” and bronze mirrors; and 3) pictorial carvings, including images of divinities and others possibly related to Taoist sexual arts. These three categories of archaeological evidence provide us with the basic materials and the analytical structure of further discussion.

**Cliff Tombs and Stone Sarcophagi with Pictorial Carvings**

During the Eastern Han and post-Han period, cliff tombs (ya mu) were a burial form unique to Ba and Shu (including present-day Sichuan, the Zhaotong area in Yunnan, and the Zunyi area in Guizhou). According to the Sichuan archaeologist Luo Erhu, thousands of such tombs are known; the earliest dated one bears an inscription from A.D. 65. Although cliff tombs are found throughout Sichuan, they are most densely distributed in the Chuanxi Plain; today the Leshan area alone preserves about ten thousand such tombs. Moreover, only the cliff tombs in the Chuanxi Plain, especially in Leshan and Pengshan, have rich pictorial carvings (see the shaded area in fig. 2). But even in this area, pictorial carvings appear only in a limited number of tombs. According to a survey conducted by Tang Changshou, of the ten thousand cliff tombs in Leshan only about one hundred are carved with pictorial decoration. He further divided these hundred tombs and those in the adjacent Pengshan area into three periods: 1) the period of emergence, during the first half of the second century; 2) the period of development, from the mid-second century to the 180s; and 3) the period of flourishing, from the 180s to the early third century. Stone sarcophagi with pictorial carvings are sometimes found in tombs of the second and third periods. According to Gao Wen, all known examples of such sarcophagi are from areas along the Min, Tuo, and Fu rivers (see fig. 3). The most elaborate ones have again been found in the Chuanxi Plain. Summarizing the research available thus far, we reach the general observation that although cliff tombs and sarcophagi were distributed over a large region, the richly decorated examples were limited to the core area of Wudoumi Dao and to the period in which Wudoumi Dao reached its greatest prosperity in this area.

Additional archaeological evidence further links specific cliff tombs and sarcophagi in this area with practices of Wudoumi Dao. One type of evidence consists of engravings, including both images and inscriptions. A considerable number of cliff tombs in Pengshan and Leshan, for example, are carved with a sheng pattern above the entrance (among them, Pengshan tombs 45, 166, 169, and 530; see fig. 5). The sheng is the head-dress of the Queen Mother of the West and the most important symbol of this goddess. It could not be a casual act to mark a tomb with this symbol in such a way that anyone could see it before even entering the tomb. In some other cliff tombs, a composite dragon-and-tiger motif occupies the same position above the entrance (in, for example, Leshan tomb 99 and Pengshan tomb 355; see fig. 7). The relationship between longhu (dragon and tiger) and early Taoism is well known. It is recorded in various texts, for example, that at the moment when Zhang Ling attained immortality in Shu he saw a multitude of heavenly beings arriving with dragons and tigers. The headquarters of the later Celestial Masters Taoism, possibly founded by Zhang Ling’s great-grandson Zhang Sheng, was at the Dragon and Tiger Mountain (Longhu Shan) in Jiangxi. A passage from the
Fig. 1
Map of Sichuan province showing the locations of the twenty-four zhi of Celestial Master Taoism.

Fig. 2
Map of Sichuan province showing the distribution of cliff tombs. The shaded area indicates the region where tombs decorated with pictorial carvings are most densely located.
Fig. 3
Map of Sichuan province showing the distribution of stone sarcophagi with pictorial carvings.

Fig. 4
Map of Sichuan province showing the distribution of excavated "money trees."
“Genealogy of the Celestial Master Zhang” (Zhang Tianshi shijia) explains that the mountain was so named because a dragon and a tiger emerged when Zhang Ling succeeded in making the Divine Elixir of Nine Heavens (jiuqian shendan) in this place. Indeed, “dragon” and “tiger” are chief metaphors used in Taoist writings on both internal and external alchemy; they refer specifically to lead and mercury, the two most important ingredients used in making elixirs. In addition, Taoist deities are often described and portrayed as riding dragons and tigers or accompanied by them. All this literary and artistic evidence suggests that the sheng and dragon-and-tiger images carved above the entrance to a Sichuan cliff tomb may signify the religious identity of the tomb occupant. Similar symbols are abundant on stone sarcophagi from the same region and should have served the same role.

Among numerous pictorial motifs and scenes found in cliff tombs and on sarcophagi, one particular figural image may depict a Wudoumi Dao priest. Discovered in a Leshan tomb (Mahao M1), he appears as a standing figure wearing a tall hat (fig. 6). According to Tang Changshou, who found this image, “The figure wears a long robe and a tall hat of an unusual type. He holds a ceremonial staff (jie zhang) in his left hand and a medicine bag in his right hand. . . . This image is carved next to the door to the rear chamber—a position which indicates an intimate relationship between this image and the deceased [buried in the rear chamber].” Tang has identified this image as a fangshi-necromancer, who is recorded in Records of the Historian (Shiji) and other texts as holding a jie zhang. While Tang’s proposal is well taken, it is possible to identify this image more specifically as a Wudoumi Dao priest called a shi, described in texts as a religious professional who held a special ceremonial staff (jiu jie chang) while praying and reciting incantations for believers. Similar images also appear on sarcophagi, que-pillars in front of tombs, and mirrors from this region. On a sarcophagus from Nanxi, for example, a half-open gate represents the “heavenly gate” (tian men) or “the gate of the soul” (hun men). Outside the door is a man who kneels while holding a long staff. The subject of his veneration is inside the gate—a deity on a dragon-and-tiger throne (fig. 8). On another sarcophagus, from Changning, this figure reappears, again holding his staff. But this time he is following a deer on the way to an immortal mountain (fig. 9). We also find this figure on the stone tower Gao Yi Que in Ya’an, again depicted outside a half-opened gate, and it appears twice on an inscribed bronze mirror likely produced in the Sichuan region, once before an “ancestor” (xianren) figure and once before a “divine lady” (shen nu). In
all these cases, therefore, this image is represented as an intermediary between the human world and the immortal realm.

In addition to symbols and pictorial images, inscriptions also provide important evidence for the relationship between certain cliff tombs and Wu doumi Dao. Some of these inscriptions disclose the Taoist ideal of immortality. For example, an inscription in a cliff tomb near Chongqing, dated to the third month of 135, identifies the tomb as a "stone chamber which prolongs life" (yuantian shishi) (fig. 10). Another inscription in a cliff tomb at Jianyang reads: "On the eighteenth day, the fourth month, the first year of Han’an [i.e., A.D. 142], I come here to meet immortal friends" (fig. 11). The tomb chamber was thus a meeting place with immortal friends (xianyou), a term that may designate either supernatural figures or fellow believers in a religious sect such as Wu doumi Dao. A third and much longer inscription from Sichuan, traditionally known as the "Jijiu Zhang Pu Inscription," was first recorded by the Song antiquarian Hong Kuo. Zhang Pu was a Wudoumi Dao priest with the title jijiu. In this inscription he recorded that he and some fellow believers gathered together to transmit "subtle scriptures" (weijing). Hong Kuo noted that the carving of this inscription is rough and irregular, unlike that of formal stele inscriptions. Perhaps it too was a "cliff inscription" (moya keci) like the two previous ones.

Another possible relationship between some Sichuan cliff tombs and Wudoumi Dao is suggested by objects found in these tombs. Sichuan archaeologists have discovered, for example, a clay jar buried in the front chamber in Mahao tomb 99 at Leshan. Inside the jar were pieces of mica and other minerals. This is not the first time such a finding has been reported: the Song poet and traveler Lu You recorded a similar discovery and identified the minerals as materials for "making golden elixirs." Because the front chamber of a cliff tomb functioned
as an offering shrine, and because these minerals were related to Taoist alchemical practices, using such minerals as offerings seems to indicate the religious identity of the deceased. In addition, Luo Erhu believes that a kind of "stove" found in many cliff tombs was used, either symbolically or practically, to make elixirs—a suggestion that again connects these tombs with Taoist practices.

In 1973 a bronze seal was found in a cliff tomb in Ziyang county. Some scholars have found that the style of its characters is neither zhuàn nor lì, but resembles certain Taoist talismanic writings. So far six seals with such characters are known, all from Sichuan (fig. 12). The seal from Ziyang is the first example found through an archaeological excavation, and its placement in a cliff tomb seems again to point to the religion of the deceased.

"Money Trees" and "Mirrors with Images of Immortals on Three Levels"

In addition to the evidence of Taoist practices offered by the cliff tombs and sarcophagi presented thus far, archaeological examination of a cliff tomb at Hejiashan in Mianyang has produced two "money trees" and a bronze mirror with "images of immortals on three registers" (sànduàn shénxuànjīng). Both types of object have been identified as local products of Shu, and both bear direct connections with Wudoumi Dao. The term "money tree" (qíanshù or yào qíanshù) is actually a later designation and a somewhat misleading one because the main decorative motifs on both the bronze tree and its clay or stone base are not coins, but deities on dragon-and-tiger thrones, immortals playing the liúbo game, heavenly horses, the drug-pounding hare, and musicians and dancers. Coins appear only as leaves hanging down from each branch (see fig. 13). In view of the fact that some trees are decorated with large, iconlike, divine images (see fig. 14), if we must give this object a name, a "divine tree" (shēnshù) probably better reflects its nature.

According to Susan Erickson, more than eighty such objects have been reported, mostly from tombs dated to the late Eastern Han (see fig. 4). The Chinese scholar Xian Ming has further outlined the region in which "money trees" have most frequently been found: "Most of them are from a belt-like region, which extends north to Hanzhong in southern Shaanxi and south to Xichang and Zhaotong, passing the areas of Guanyuan, Mianyang, Santai, Guanghan, Pengxian, Chengdu, Xijin, Pengshan, and Lushan. This region therefore basically overlaps with [Wudoumi Dao's] twenty-four zhi." Xian Ming also reported that a
considerable number of “money trees” and “money tree” bases have been unearthed at the locations of some of the twenty-four zhī of Wudoumi Dao, including three examples from Pengxian, the location of Wudoumi Dao’s headquarters, Yangping Zhi. These studies confirm, therefore, that this type of ritual object enjoyed a definite popularity in the central area of Wudoumi Dao during the flourishing period of this religion.

Images on “money trees” and “money tree” bases are largely identical with those found in cliff tombs and on sarcophagi from the same region, and they are clearly products of the same religious and artistic tradition. But the three-dimensional form of a “money tree” base gave the artist greater freedom to create original and complex sculptural images. One of the most impressive “money tree” bases, excavated from the suburbs of Chengdu, vividly represents a journey in search of immortality (fig. 15). The clay base is shaped like a columnar mountain. Men and women are climbing the mountain and appear on three levels. Those on the first level still have a long way to go; those on the third level are about to reach the top of the mountain where they will join the deity on the summit. The design of this base thus translates into a visual form a passage from the Taoist text the Master of Huainan (Huainanzi): “He who climbs onto the Chilly Wind peak of Kunlun will achieve deathlessness; he who climbs twice as high onto the Hanging Garden will become a spirit . . . ; he who climbs twice as high again will reach Heaven and will become god.” An interesting feature of this sculpture is the caves on the three levels. Punctuating the journey, each of them marks a particular stage in the search for immortality. This is the earliest example I know that represents the concept of dongtian (literally a “cavern-heaven”). It is also possible that the three levels of the mountain represent metaphorically the three stages of a Taoist spiritual cultivation toward immortality.

A tale cited in the Taoist encyclopedia Seven Slips of the
Cloudy Satchel (Yunjì qìqian) also helps identify the religious associations of a “money tree.” It is said that a man living at Yangping Zhi adopted an orphaned boy, who was then married to an orphaned girl. One day a flood came and there was a great shortage of food. The couple then used their magic to obtain anything people needed from a tree. When asked where they learned this magic the young man answered: “I am actually an immortal in the Yangping Cave, descending to this world because I had made a small mistake. I will leave soon.” Ten days later the couple disappeared. What this story implies is an intimate relationship between a divine tree and a Taoist immortal in the Yangping Cave.

In addition to “money trees,” a particular type of bronze mirror may also be identified as a product of Wudoumi Dao. This type is conventionally known as a “Mirror with Images of Immortals on Three Registers”—a designation based on the composition of the mirror’s central circular area, which is divided into three registers of equal height by two horizontal bars. The top and bottom registers are each centered on a nonfigurative image. As exemplified by one such mirror in the Seattle Art Museum (fig. 16a), the central image on the top register is a broad umbrella standing on the back of a turtle. Several figures, including a “jade maiden” (yunì), stand beneath the umbrella and pay homage to it, while a much larger figure with wings on the shoulders is seated to one side. Images on the middle level always constitute a symmetrical pair. On most “three register” mirrors, including the one found in a cliff tomb at Hejiashu, Mianyang, this pair is formed by the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East. In other cases this pair consists of a dragon and a tiger, as exemplified by a mirror in the collection of Beijing’s Palace Museum (fig. 16b). Figures on the lower register are centered on a loop motif in the shape of a figure 8, possibly a tree with two intertwining trunks.

Based on archaeological and stylistic evidence, Professor Huo Wei of Sichuan University has made a convincing argument for the Sichuan (Shu) origin of this type of mirror. More specifically, he has identified the Chuaxi Plain as its production center, and has associated this type of mirror with the so-called Ghost Dao, an alternative name for Wudoumi Dao. His opinion can be supported by additional archaeological finds as well as by the images on a “three register” mirror. In terms of archaeological evidence, at least three mirrors of this type have been found in various locations in southern Shaanxi. That Shu mirrors appeared in this region around the end of Han is logical because,
as discussed earlier, during this period Zhang Lu established his seat in Hanzhong and expanded his territory to include southern Shaanxi. In terms of decoration, images on a “three register” mirror reflect Taoist ideas and may have been designed to facilitate Taoist meditative practices.

Among the various images on a “three register” mirror, the identifications of those on the middle level—the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East—are most certain. Hayashi Minao has further identified the loop motif on the lower level as jian mu, described in ancient texts as a divine tree at “the center of Heaven and Earth,” along which heavenly lords (di) moved back and forth between these two realms. This identification seems to be supported by similar tree images found on other objects from Sichuan. For example, on a stone sarcophagus mentioned earlier, a tree with loop-shaped, intertwining trunks is juxtaposed with other images related to the idea of immortality. A male figure under this tree seems to be bidding farewell to a female figure; in fact, he may be about to ascend to Heaven along this divine tree. Another similar tree image is found on a pottery “money tree” base from Guanghan; its intertwining branches reach Heaven and embrace the fantastic world of the Queen Mother of the West. This last example leads us to speculate on a possible relationship between the mythological jian mu and the “money tree.” Based on the decoration of a “money tree,” I suggested above that a more precise designation for this object would be a “divine tree,” which provides a path to the world of immortals. Just as this “divine tree” is a unique subject of Sichuan Han art, jian mu is believed to be located in this particular area in China.

Several texts specify the location of jian mu as Duguang in the Southwest. Huo Wei has suggested, again very convincingly, that Duguang is also known as Guangdu, a place located thirty li west of Chengdu according to some post-Han texts. I would add that this place was very close to the location of Yangping Zhi, the headquarters of Wudoumi Dao. It is possible that to strengthen its authority and mystique, Wudoumi Dao appropriated an ancient myth for its own use, and identified Yangping Zhi as “the center of Heaven and Earth.” This, in turn, implies a close relationship between Wudoumi Dao and mirrors decorated with the jian mu tree.

The most controversial image on a “three register” mirror is the umbrella image and the accompanying figures on the top level. Hayashi Minao believes that the winged figure next to the umbrella represents the Great Heavenly Emperor (Tianhuang dadi) at the North Pole in Heaven, and that the umbrella symbolizes the Huagai xing (“Elaborate Canopy” constellation), which consists of a series of nine stars next to the North Pole. Hayashi’s opinion has been challenged by Higuchi Takayasu and Huo Wei. In particular, Higuchi argues that it would be illogical to depict the “canopy” stars in the center and to place the Heavenly Emperor to one side. I agree with this criticism, and I want to propose a new identification for the umbrella image. In my view, any interpretation of this image must take these three features into consideration: 1) its placement in the most honorable position in the decorative program of a “three register” mirror; 2) its composite form as an umbrella standing on a turtle (in some cases on a Xuanwu—a combination of a turtle and a snake); and 3) its role as the subject of reverence and worship by surrounding figures. Relating these features to textual references, I propose that this image actually represents the defied Laozi in a symbolic form.

The transformation of Laozi from an individual historical figure to a cosmic deity has been the subject of much scholarly discussion. A turning point in this transformation was marked by a series of events taking place in 165 and 166, when Emperor Huan built a shrine to honor Laozi in his birthplace and offered sacrifices to Laozi both in this shrine and in the imperial palace. These events have been discussed in every book on early Taoism as a definite indication of Laozi’s deification. The form of the imperial sacrifice in 166, however, has drawn less attention from scholars. Here is how this ritual is described in the “Chapter on Sacrifices” (“jisi zhi”) in the History of the Latter Han:

[The emperor] personally offered sacrifices to Laozi in the Zhulong Palace. An altar covered with patterned woolen fabric was prepared, and vessels decorated with gold rims [were used]. A seat was set up [for Laozi] under an elaborate canopy (the huagai zhi zuo). The music played during the sacrifice was adopted from the semiannual sacrifice to Heaven. (Italics added.)

Significantly, no image or statue of Laozi is mentioned. The reason is simple: as the personification of the Dao, Laozi was considered to have neither matter nor form; he could therefore only be symbolized by an empty “seat” (zuo), not represented by a figurative likeness. This early Taoist convention persisted until at least the fifth century. A passage from Falin’s In Defense of What Is Right (bianzheng lun) relates that the Taoist master Tao Hongjing “set up both Buddhist and Taoist institutions on Maoshan and paid homage in both every day. In the Buddhist halls there were sacred statues, which the Taoist temples did not have.”

In the context of the present discussion on an early Taoist artistic tradition in Sichuan, it is important to note that the
Xiang'er Commentary on Laozi (Laozi Xiang'er zhu), a Taoist text attributed to Zhang Lu, especially stresses this aniconic approach. This text identifies Laozi with the Tao and insists that the latter is formless: "The Dao is infinitely superior. It is subtle and hidden, without shape, resemblance, or image. People can only follow its teaching, but cannot comprehend it through appearance." From this position, the text criticizes any figurative representation of Laozi or the Tao as a "false method" (wei ji): "Now there is this false method in the world, which represents the Dao with concrete forms, giving it clothes and names as well as facial and bodily forms. This is all wrong, all evil and false!" This strong conviction probably represents an orthodox approach within Wudoumi Dao, according to which a proper representation of Laozi should only emphasize the hidden nature of the Tao.

With this in mind, we return to the umbrella image on a "three register" mirror. As mentioned earlier, this is the most honored image in the entire decorative program, and it also is a subject of worship and reverence. This image, in fact, can be called huagai zhi zuo—"the seat under an elaborate canopy"—for this is the phrase used in the History of the Latter Han for the place of Laozi in the imperial sacrifice. This image can thus be identified as Laozi's seat, which in turn symbolizes the existence of this Taoist patriarch. Additional evidence for this interpretation is found in the Baopuzi of Ge Hong (283–343). Instructing how to use a mirror to visualize the "true form" (zhengxing) of Laozi, this Taoist text identifies Laozi's throne as a "divine turtle" (shen gui). It cannot be a coincidence that the "elaborate canopy" illustrated on a "three register" mirror is supported by a turtle.

Images of Divinity

As mentioned earlier, the Xiang'er Commentary on Laozi attacks figurative representations of the Tao or Laozi. It is unclear from this text whether such prohibition also extended to other gods and immortals worshipped by Wudoumi Dao followers. Archaeological evidence, however, reveals that the practice of depicting images of many deities existed in the area of Wudoumi Dao. I say "many deities" because these images, though sharing a lot of features, are distinguished from one another by some important iconographic markers. Their differences, however, have largely been ignored. As a result, divine figures sitting on dragon-and-tiger thrones in a frontal posture—a popular composition in Sichuan Han art—have been uniformly identified as the Queen Mother of the West. The question remains: Is this identification reliable?

A number of reasons prompt me to raise this question. Most importantly, examining the ever-increasing supply of archaeological materials, we begin to notice some subtle but significant differences among these so-called Queen Mother images. Scholars agree that one of the most important iconographic features of the Queen Mother is her sheng headdress. Images of figures wearing this headdress indeed existed in Sichuan, but a large number of deities depicted on the dragon-and-tiger throne are not wearing sheng. Instead they wear various caps including a miian (see fig. 17), a three-pointed warg guan (see fig. 18; also see fig. 7), a flat military cap decorated with bird features above the ears (see fig. 19), or a small vertical cap similar to those worn by later Taoists (see fig. 20). While in real life a sheng was worn by women, all these other caps were for men or male deities. It is unthinkable that a Sichuan artist could have freely altered the cap or headdress of a deity represented as the central icon in a composition. It is more likely that these images with different caps and headdresses actually represent different deities. As commonly seen in other traditions of religious art, different deities are often distinguished not by their overall shapes but by some minor features, often their headdresses. Thus, what these Sichuan images demonstrate is probably not a religion centered on the worship of the Queen Mother of the West, but a religion that began to fashion a pantheon consisting of a multitude of male and female deities. Based on textual evidence, some Taoist scholars have noted a similar effort made by Wudoumi Dao. For example, Zhengyi fawen jingzhang guanpin lists 120 deities including both civil and military types, "each with his or her own administrative duties." It is possible that the image of the Queen Mother of the West, which had become widespread in various parts of China since the first century, provided a basic compositional formula for depicting these new deities, while minor iconographic features were invented to differentiate them.

Furthermore, archaeological evidence reveals that within this growing pantheon of gods and goddesses in Sichuan, the Queen Mother of the West seems to have acquired a specific significance. In a number of cases, images of this goddess are combined with sexual symbols and scenes. One such example is found on a stone sarcophagus from Yingjing (fig. 21). Here, the Queen Mother, wearing a typical sheng headdress, is juxtaposed with a couple at an intimate moment. A similar but more explicit love scene was originally carved above the main gate of a cliff tomb at Pengshan (fig. 22). The third example is a clay "altar" found recently in a tomb at Guangan, in a place very close to the Wudoumi Dao's headquarters, Yangping Zhi. On the front
Rubbings from stone sarcophagi.

side of the altar is an image of the Queen Mother of the West, wearing a sheng and seated on a dragon-and-tiger throne. Two figures, half human and half beast, kneel on top of the altar, both showing erect male organs. Between them, in the center of the altar, is a sculpted phallus (fig. 23). In all these cases, the Queen Mother of the West seems to have been associated with a fertility cult or Taoist sexual arts, indicating the changing symbolism of this goddess toward the post-Han period. Decorating tombs, sarcophagi, and funerary objects, these divine and erotic images seem to indicate a particular path toward eternal happiness.

It is appropriate to discuss the Buddha's image in Sichuan in this section on Taoist deities, because the adoption and appropriation of these images, if viewed in its cultural and religious context, actually took place within the domain of Taoist art. As I have discussed elsewhere, most existing images of the Buddha and Buddhist symbols in Han art are located either inside tombs or within the territory of a Taoist temple. These images were used to strengthen the pursuit of immortality or to enrich the emerging pantheon of early religious Taoism. The present study provides a more precise regional context for this argument.
Based on an increasing body of archaeological evidence, we can reach the basic understanding that, in Sichuan, images of the Buddha were used by Taoist followers for their own sake. Although Buddha-like figures have been found in different parts of Han China, Buddha images appeared in Sichuan in much greater number and in more authentic form. Yet there is no text recording the practice of Buddhism in this region during the period when these images were created. The answer to this dilemma is found in the new cultural and religious contexts of these images. No longer decorating Buddhist temples, these images were combined with Taoist symbols and used to embellish cliff tombs, bronze "money trees," and clay "money tree" bases. As discussed earlier, all these architectural forms and objects were related to the practice of Wudoumi Dao in the area. Moreover, these Buddha images have only been found in the core area of Wudoumi Dao in the Chuanxi Plain.

Two Buddha images of similar form have been found in cliff tombs at Mahao and Siziwang in Leshan. In each tomb the image appears on the back wall of the front chamber above the entrance to the burial chambers, and defines the focus of visual perception and ritual homage. The one at Mahao is better

Figs. 22–23
Stone relief of an "embracing couple," originally above tomb 550 at Pengshan, Sichuan.

Fig. 23
Clay altar from Guanghan, Sichuan.

Figs. 24a–b
A cliff tomb at Mahao, Leshan, with an image of the Buddha carved on the lintel above the entrance to the burial chamber and b) detail showing the image of the Buddha.
preserved (fig. 24). The figure is seated, with the left hand holding a portion of the gown. The right hand is raised in the gesture known as the abhaya mudra. The face is unfortunately damaged, but an extra protuberance or usnisa on top of the head—one of the Buddha’s holy marks—is still visible and is ringed by a halo. All these features, as well as the heavy folds of the robe, can be traced to Indian images of the Buddha created in Mathura and Gandhara in the second century. But in the Mahao tomb, this “Buddha” is juxtaposed with a sculpted dragon on the lintel.

The basic iconography of this image is shared by another Buddha figure—a three-dimensional image on a “money tree” base found in a cliff tomb at Pengshan (fig. 25). The Chinese scholar Wu Zhuo has noticed that the usnisa on the head of the Buddha is unusually tall and is shaped almost like a small cap. He has also identified the two standing figures on either side of the Buddha as two attendants of different ethnic origins, one Chinese and one non-Chinese, and the animal motifs on the Buddha’s circular base as a tiger and a dragon. His observation reveals that this sculpture, rather than being a pure Buddhist image, synthesizes various Buddhist and Taoist motifs into an iconic presentation. Such religious fusion is demonstrated by additional Buddha images found recently in a cliff tomb at Hejiashan in Mianyang. Decorating fragments of a bronze “money tree,” each image shows the Buddha grasping the end of his gown with his left hand and raising his right hand in the abhaya mudra. An interesting feature of these images is the figures’ moustaches, which indicate a possible Gandharan origin; but other motifs on the “money tree” are traditional Chinese symbols of immortality. It is also significant that this tomb yielded a “three register” mirror, which, as discussed earlier, was closely related to the practice of Wudoumi Dao in this area.

It is not difficult to explain how images of the Buddha could facilitate Taoist beliefs and practices. This artistic borrowing was actually part of a larger religious phenomenon that characterized the development of religious Taoism during the second and third centuries. In the Taoist scripture Taiping jing, for example, the story of the miraculous birth of Laozi is an outright copy of that of the Buddha. The same text twice relates that Heaven sent evil gods and Jade Beauties to test the religious conviction of Taoist believers. Both accounts are clearly based on the temptation of the Buddha by Mara and his daughters. Also around this time, the story of “Laozi converting the barbarians” (Laozi huahu) circulated widely in Taoist circles. An early version of this story relates that “Laozi went to barbarian lands and became the Buddha.” It is quite certain that in the second and third centuries, many Taoist followers believed that the Buddha was none other than Laozi or his manifestation. It is thus not surprising that stories of the Buddha were used to create a biography for the legendary founder of religious Taoism. For the same reason, an image of the Buddha could have been thought of as an image of Laozi; the Taoist prohibition of representing Laozi may have encouraged this deliberate misunderstanding. This complex situation explains a strange Taoist argument, which identifies Laozi as the inventor of the image of the Buddha: “The barbarians do not believe in emptiness and non-being, therefore when Laozi emigrated [to the West] he had them make statues of his form, and with the help of these images he converted these barbarians.”

**Conclusion**

To map early Taoist art means to integrate the studies of Han art and early religious Taoism in a coherent historical framework. Taking the geography of an early Taoist sect as its cue, I have tried in this essay to compare the locations of major centers of Wudoumi Dao with the distribution patterns of certain
images and objects in Sichuan art. This comparison shows that two “maps”—one of a regional religious tradition and the other of a regional art tradition—clearly overlap. A closer examination of the content, function, and context of these images and objects has further substantiated the strong Taoist characteristics of this regional art tradition.

It should be emphasized, however, that early Taoist art was an extremely complex phenomenon and consisted of many different traditions and levels of representation; this essay deals with only one of these traditions. My purpose is therefore to prompt, not to conclude, an important, but much neglected, line of inquiry in the field of Chinese art history. It is not possible for me to explain here why the study of Taoist art has largely been ignored in this field until recent years; but I hope that this essay has demonstrated the potential contribution of this study to a renewed understanding of Han art.

Many architectural structures, objects, and pictorial images discussed in this essay are familiar to students of Han art, but they have only been studied as general properties of a unified “funerary art” from the third century B.C. to the third century A.D. By contextualizing these visual forms in a local religious tradition, it is now possible for us to identify their specific meanings and to reconstruct their specific historical development. A “Taoist” study of these forms also allows us to explore the identity and intention of their makers and owners, and provides a new perspective from which to understand certain cultural interactions. A study of early Taoist art, therefore, will, I hope, not only rediscover a forgotten tradition, but also contribute to the general body of research in the field of Chinese art history. Together with a growing scholarship on the Confucian influences in Han art, this study will bring our understanding of Chinese art during this period to a new level.75

NOTES

I have presented different versions of this paper in a number of conferences, including the “Daoism in East Asia” conference (Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto, March 1999), the “Religion and Power in Ancient China” conference (Harvard University, May 1999), and the “Between Han and Tang: Religious Art and Archaeology in a Transformative Period” conference (University of Chicago, November 1999). I want to thank the organizers of these conferences and all the scholars whose comments have helped me in revising this paper.


2. The earliest examples of such Taoist icons or combinations of Taoist and Buddhist icons are found on the Wei Wenlang stele dated to 424 and on the Yao Bodo stele dated to 406. Studies of early Taoist art have often focused on these and other examples; see Ding 1984; Han and Yin 1987; Li 1991; Kamitsuka 1978 and Kamitsuka 1993; Pontyzen 1980 and Pontyzen 1983; Ishimatsu 1998; James 1988; Bokkenkamp 1996–97; Abe 1996–97; and Seidel 1996a.

3. For a discussion of intrinsic and extrinsic analyses of works of art, see the introduction to Kleinbauer 1971.

4. It is noteworthy that the development of Taoism is often characterized by a tendency to negate a previous developmental stage. This tendency became noticeable even during the Han: Zhang Lu’s Laozi Xianger zhu attacked “those who followed the teachings of the Yellow Emperor, the Divine Lady, Gongzi, and Rong Cheng” as “sham Taoists”; see Rao 1991: 11. In all likelihood, this text represents a position within early Taoism, which claimed orthodoxy by separating itself from other, more “primitive” Taoist traditions. Later, when Kou Qianzhi tried to reinvent Tianshi Dao in the early fifth century, he again accused the teaching of Three Zhangs (i.e., an earlier Tianshi Dao tradition represented by Zhang Ling, Zhang Heng, and Zhang Lu) as “false Taoism.”

5. It is recorded that after Zhang Jiao founded Taiping Dao, “all people in Qin, Xu, You, Ji, Jing, Yang, Qi, and Yu responded to his call. [In order to follow him] some sold or abandoned their properties. Traveling to join him they filled the roads; more than ten thousand fell ill and died before reaching their destinations”; ZJTJ 50: 5; 1864.


8. This approach is especially prevalent in mainland Chinese scholarship on early religious Taoism. See, for example, Qing 1992: 65–66; Lou 1992: 69.

9. One of the two, Wang Fu, was the Magistrate of Chongguan from 37 to 75 and the Governor of Yizhou from 84 to 86. He established a stele and personally wrote the inscription to honor Laozi and the Sage Mother. See Quan Hou Han wen (A complete collection of writings from the later Han), juan 32, in QHW. The other person was Liu Yan, the Governor of Yizhou at the end of Han, who took Zhang Xu and Zhang Lu, two main leaders of Wudoumi Dao of his time, into confidence. See HHS, Liu Yan zhu: 2435–36; SCZ, Zhang Lu zhu: 263–64.


11. SCZ, Zhang Lu zhu: 263.

12. During the Eastern Han, Hanzhong was part of Yizhou. Zhang Lu changed the name of Hanzhong to Hanning after he occupied this place. For the history of Hanzhong, see Li 1999: 166.


14. Ibid.


pronounced male organs. About the possibility that these images served as fertility symbols, see Tang 1993: 70.
67. For such Indian examples, see ibid., pls. 3, 4.
72. HHS: 1082. The same story was reiterated in the Xiong zhuan (Records of western barbarians) in GSZ.
73. For a detailed discussion of the different versions of the “Laozi huahu” story, see “The Conversion of the Barbarians” in Zürcher 1972: 288–320.
74. This Taoist argument is cited in the Buddhist work Shi sanpu lun (Examining the essay on threefold destruction), collected in T 2102: 52.52b.
75. For discussions on Confucian elements in Han art, see Powers 1991; Wu 1989, esp. 228–30.