Engraved on the walls of underground tomb chambers, inside burial caves, and on stone sarcophagi, carvings in low relief vividly depict the ancient myths and legends popular in Sichuan during the Han dynasty. Scholars have studied the sources of these stories and their conclusions have provided invaluable evidence for the history of Chinese literature, religion, and mythology. Rather than restrict myself to literary identifications, I propose to interpret the pictorial and ideological relationships between the stories and to show that, even though the stories were based on divergent sources, they form a coherent pictorial structure. These tomb carvings reveal the distinctive significance of myth and folklore in Sichuan funerary art and the way in which this art reorganizes stories from the literary and oral traditions according to its own demands.

THE BAOZISHAN AND WANG HUI SARCOPHAGI: STRUCTURAL KEYS TO COFFIN CARVINGS

Since Victor Segalen found the first sarcophagus (stone coffin) during his expedition to Sichuan from 1914 to 1917, many coffins have been recovered from excavations, demonstrating the great popularity of coffin burial in Sichuan during the Han. Many of these coffins are made of wood or clay, while others are carved out of a single block of red sandstone, with flat, arched, or roof-shaped lids. The most elaborate ones are engraved with ornaments and narrative scenes. More than twenty-five of these complete pictorial coffins have been discovered, along with many fragments. They may be roughly divided into three stages of development according to their decorative features.

During the first stage, which occurred around the mid-Later Han dynasty, carvings depict decorative motifs without any narrative content. Coffins belonging to the second stage, towards the end of Later Han, show a far more complicated and sophisticated decorative style in their themes and artistic quality. The best works of this period are exemplified by those from Xinjin and attest to the flourishing pictorial art of Sichuan. In their style these carvings substantiate Paul Pelliot's contention that "Han sculpture in Sichuan has quite a different character from what it has in Shandong; it is more spontaneous and more alive." More important to the present study, these carvings also display a large variety of mythological and historical narratives. This style, however, changed dramatically around the end of the Han. Coffins belonging to the third stage show few narrative elements in decoration; instead, they are carved with isolated mythical animals organized into a more abstract symbolic structure. The Baozishan and Wang Hui sarcophagi are excellent examples of the second and third stages of this development.

Unfortunately, all the Xinjin sarcophagi had been cut into pieces and sold by antique merchants before 1949. Today the coffin from Baozishan (which was reconstructed) is the only extant example of a pictorial composition in its entirety. Scenes are carved on the four sides and the top. The front is decorated with a queue pillar gate through which a rider holding a banner enters (plate 57a). The rear depicts a pair of deities, Fu Xi and Nü Wa, identified by their characteristic iconography: they have human bodies and intertwined serpentine tails and hold up the sun and the moon with their hands (plate 57b). One side of the coffin represents two runners guiding a carriage procession toward a gate (plate 57e). The other side shows two separate scenes, each consisting of two figures. The scene on the left depicts a familiar Sichuan motif: two immortals kneel at a gaming board playing liubo with excitement (plate 57c). The scene on the right represents two men, one playing the qin zither and the other listening (plate 57d). A vulture-like bird flies towards the two men from the left, and a mythical beast, perhaps a winged dragon, appears on the right, balancing the image of the bird. The scholar Richard Rudolph has identified this scene as the story of the legendary musician Yu Boya. The top of the coffin is decorated
with a large, elaborate pictorial composition, dominated by two intertwined tree branches on which a pair of large elaborate birds rest in symmetrical fashion (plate 5/70). Smaller birds are scattered throughout the scene. Below the tree branches, an archer draws his bow and aims at one of the birds. As has been suggested by scholars, this represents the story of Yi shooting down the nine false suns.3

This description of the pictorial decoration of the Baodi- shan coffin offers identifications of the individual motifs. Several questions arise, however. Why were these motifs especially favored by the Sichuan people during the Han? Did these motifs have any specific meanings in a ritual context? What is the relationship between individual motifs? Art historians have proposed that these questions could be answered only by comprehending the entire pictorial complex—that is, its pictorial program or context. The larger pictorial composition rather than the individual motifs is directly linked with the symbolic context and gives special meaning to the motifs.

As Wilma Fairbank stated forty-five years ago in her pioneering paper, “The Offering Shriners of Wu Liang Ts‘u”: “The interrelationships and positional significance of the engraved stones is lost when they are studied as scattered slabs or rubbings. A grasp of this positional significance will be shown to illuminate subject matter at present obscure.” Here the term positional significance means the significance of a given motif, as defined by its position in an entire pictorial composition containing several other motifs and corresponding to the form of a ritual structure. A pictorial motif did not exist independently but was purposefully composed together with other motifs to decorate a funerary object—a coffin—and thus, a symbolic structure underlies its pictorial scheme.

The motif of the que pillar gate on the front of the Baozishan coffin appears in the same position on many other Sichuan sarcophagi. It represents the pillar gate in Han cemeteries that marked the entrance of the mingju, “the Dark House,” and flanked a road called the shendao, “the path of the soul.” Such pillars were built in both imperial mausoleums and graveyards for some of the wealthy.4 Historical records tell us that during a royal funerary ceremo- nology 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 the monthly sacrifices, a procession escorted the crown and clothes of the emperor through this gate to his temple.5 Thus, the que pillar gate scene symbolizes the passage of the soul of the deceased into the spiritual world. This explains why the que pillar gate and a “greeting” figure are often carved on the front of a coffin. It also provides an interpretation for the arrangement of the pictorial scenes in Yangzishan Han tomb number one (see Appendix). A pair of double-roofed que pillars decorate the walls of the ante-chamber at the entrance, thus forming a “gate” leading into the tomb itself.

The simple que motif may perhaps be viewed as a condensed version of a larger procession or greeting scenes in which carriages proceed toward a door and are welcomed by officials. Such procession scenes are common in Han funerary carvings and have been interpreted by some scholars as representations of journeys taken by the deceased when they were alive. In some cases such interpretations may be accurate, depending on the pictorial context. A newly excavated inscription, however, provides a different interpretation: “[You, the honorable deceased, and your assistants] ride in small chariots. One follows the other, galloping to a rest-house. An officer entitled yuaxi waits there and comforts you. At the end of the procession, the ram-pulled car symbolizes [your] coffin, while divine birds fly above in floating clouds.”6

While this inscription clearly indicates the symbolic or ritual significance of the procession scene as the journey
of the tomb occupant's soul into a spiritual world, the union of Fu Xi and Nü Wa depicted on the rear transforms the coffin into a microcosm of the universe. These two deities read almost like a diagram of yin and yang, the two universal forces. This is suggested not only by their different genders and joining tails but also by the celestial orbs they hold in their hands. Fu Xi supports the sun with his left hand and Nü Wa supports the moon with her left hand. Inside the moon is a hare, and inside the sun, a bird. According to Han mythology, these creatures inhabit the cosmic symbols of the sun and moon. All these images represent the abstract principle of opposition and are depicted in an almost perfectly symmetrical fashion.

On the top of the Baozishan coffin, the concept of heaven is represented by the legend of the divine archer Yi. According to the story, after a series of victories Yi went east, where he discovered a gigantic jusang tree; on the tree were ten golden birds blowing fire to form ten suns whose heat was burning up all living creatures. He shot nine arrows in succession and struck the birds; the nine suns immediately turned into red clouds and melted away. In works of Han art, such as offering shrines, this composition is always depicted as corresponding to the east, because the legend is connected with the sun myth. In the basic framework of Han thinking known as the yin-yang and Five Elements theory, this composition belonged to the yang side and was the symbol of the sun, the sky, and the east—as opposed to the yin side, symbolized by the moon, the earth, and the west. Because of its association with the sun and the sky, the legend of archer Yi is appropriately placed on the top of the coffin to symbolize the celestial world.

In general, the motifs carved on the lids of Sichuan sarcophagi are celestial scenes. These include the flying dragons and a beautiful representation of "The Weaving Maid and the Cowherd" legend found on a coffin from Pixian county (plate 50). The kernel of this famous legend first appeared in the Book of Odes. In a Han poem we find a more elaborate version:

Far away twinkles the Herd-boy star;
Brightly shines the Lady of the Han River.

Slender, slender she plies her white fingers;
Click, click go the wheels of her spinning loom.
At the end of the day she has not finished her task;
Her bitter tears fall like streaming rain.
The Han River runs shallow and clear;
Set between them, how short a space!
But the river water will not let them pass,
Gazing at each other but never able to speak.

During the same period the legend began to be depicted in pictorial scenes such as the one seen on the Pixian coffin. In this scene the weaving maid on the right holds what appears to be a spinning loom in one hand and waves a piece of silk in the other. On the left the herdsboy pulls his ox furiously toward the maid, as befits an impetuous young lover. A large empty space stretches between them, intended perhaps to evoke the Han River or the Milky Way, described in the poem as linking, yet mercilessly separating, the two lovers. The literary description has been beautifully transformed into an emblematic visual expression.

The celestial associations of both "Yi Shooting the False Suns" and "The Weaving Maid and the Cowherd" determine their decorative position on the coffins. Following the same logic, the ceilings of Han funerary shrines in other parts of China are also decorated with celestial or mythological scenes. This pictorial scheme strongly suggests that the shrines and coffins symbolically represented the universe of the deceased. For the Han people, as for people of all times and all places, the universe was delineated by heaven above and earth below.

An analysis of the Baozishan sarcophagus provides a structural key to this pictorial program: A gate opens at the front through which a rider guides the soul of the deceased into another world—the world defined by the cosmic symbols of sun and moon, Fu Xi and Nü Wa, and by the celestial scenes on the top. The pictorial program is coherent and clearly comprehensible. The same symbolic structure underlies the decoration of the Wang Hui sarcophagus; the pictorial motifs that the artist employed, however, differ from those displayed on the Baozishan coffin.
The Wang Hui sarcophagus, found in a brick tomb in Lushan county in 1940, is the only known Han sarcophagus inscribed with an epitaph (plate 69a): "The deceased Steward of Accounts, Wang Hui, styled Bozhao, died in the last decade of the ninth month of the sixteenth or ximmou year of the jian'an era (A.D. 221). He was buried on the jiaxu day of the sixth month of the seventeenth year (A.D. 222). Alas!" During Han times the burial day of the deceased was chosen according to ritual calendars. It was believed that the correct day could bring good fortune to the deceased's family. This is probably why Wang Hui was buried one year after his death.

According to the inscribed date, the Wang Hui sarcophagus was made about a half century later than the Baozhishan coffin. The shape of this sarcophagus (plate 70) differs markedly from earlier examples and resembles the fashion of later Chinese coffins, which had heavy lids with a waved surface. Compared to the complicated narrative scenes on the Baozhishan coffin, the decoration is considerably simplified, consisting of isolated figures and beasts rendered in round relief against an empty background. Two divine animals, the Blue Dragon and the White Tiger, are depicted in a symmetrical fashion on both sides, with similar lengthened bodies and arched tails (plates 70d and 70e). In Han cosmology these two beasts are symbols of the east and the west respectively. Depicted on the rear is the union of a snake and a tortoise—the symbol of the north (plate 70c). Thus, like the decoration of the Baozhishan sarcophagus, the design of the Wang Hui coffin clearly reflects the desire to transform the coffin into a cosmic structure. The coffin was originally placed inside the brick tomb so that the front faced south: the symbolic beasts were thus arranged to correspond with the four cardinal directions.

According to this decorative scheme, the front of the coffin should depict the Red Bird, the symbol of the south. But since this section of the coffin had to represent the entrance through which the soul of the deceased entered the other world, the scheme was altered. On the front of the Wang Hui sarcophagus, a divine maiden emerges from a half-opened door (plate 70a). She holds a leaf of the door and seems to be about to open it for the soul of Wang Hui. The symbolism of this scene, therefore, resembles the que pillar gate engraved in the same position on the Baozhishan coffin. Significantly, a wing is growing from her right shoulder and feather-like patterns striate her leg. These features may mark an attempt to merge this anthropomorphic figure with the Red Bird or to identify her as an immortal welcoming the deceased to the immortal paradise.

THE WORLD OF IMMORTALITY AND EARTHLY DESIRES

People of the Han longed to enter the paradise of immortality after death; nevertheless, death represented a stage beyond their lived experience and was a constant source of fear. The darkness where the deceased would enter might be full of harmful ghosts, spirits, and wild beasts, and the soul might encounter great dangers on its journey to the immortal paradise. Such fears had become the central motivation behind various shamanistic practices aimed to guide or to protect the soul in a world unknown. Before the idea of a transcendent paradise had been fully developed, a happy conclusion might simply have been for the soul to return to its old body. The concrete expression of such a belief is found in "Zhaohun" (Summoning the soul) and "Dazhao" (The great summons) in Chu Ci (Elegies of Chu). These two poems, in the form of shamanistic prayers, were written during the Eastern Zhou. The idea of immortality had already emerged at this time but it was assumed that it could be reached only through the arduous self-cultivation of philosophers or through a ruler’s costly discovery of an overseas immortal land, such as the Three Islands of the Blessed in the Eastern Sea.

During the Han the idea of summoning the soul and the idea of immortality were amalgamated in popular beliefs dealing with death. People were now convinced that immortality was not the exclusive pursuit of philosophers or emperors who possessed great intelligence or wealth: immortality could also be achieved by an ordinary person, whose soul would enter the realm of Xiwangmu, the “Queen Mother of the West.” There it could enjoy happiness greater than in any earthly abode. As this immortality cult rose to an unprecedented height, representations of Xiwangmu and the western paradise
came to be found on many Han tombs, offering shrines, and coffins.

Even so, the old belief in summoning the soul was still deeply rooted and the old assumption that the most pleasant dwelling place for the soul was the deceased’s homeland continued. This paradox led to a dualism in Sichuan funerary art. On the one hand, this art reflects the desire that the deceased be transported to a transcendent immortal paradise. On the other hand, the world of the deceased was also depicted as an extension of his former life and, more importantly, as an idealized model of the secular world: death would permit the deceased to enjoy that which he had been deprived of during his lifetime. He would live in elaborate halls served by numerous attendants and feast on delicacies while watching colorful performances. An ideal society would be realized in death, a society regulated by the highest social and moral values of Confucian teachings. The elaborate banquet scenes, carriage processions, and Confucian morality tales illustrated in funerary art enact these earthly desires.

Myths and Legends of Immortality

On Sichuan sarcophagi the central figure most frequently depicted in the paradise scenes is Xiwangmu “Queen Mother of the West.” The tale of Xiwangmu may have developed from antiquity; some scholars believed that the worship of this goddess can be traced back to the Shang.²⁶ In the writings of Zhuangzi and Xunzi, the two famous philosophers of the Eastern Zhou, she was described as timeless and deathless. During the Former Han Xiwangmu was further associated with Kunlun, an immortal land to the west. Shortly before the Christian era she became the subject of a religious cult. A mass movement, centered on the worship of the goddess, burst out in 3 B.C.

In the first month of the fourth year of the Jianping era, the population was running around in a state of alarm, each holding a stalk of straw or hemp, carrying them on and passing them to one another, saying that they were transporting the wand of the goddess’s edict. Large numbers of persons, amounting to thousands, met in this way on the roadsides, some with dishevelled hair or going barefoot. Some of them broke down the barriers of gates by night; some clambered over walls to make their way into [houses]; some harnessed teams of horses to carriages and rode at full gallop, setting up relay stations so as to convey the tokens. They passed through twenty-six commanderies and kingdoms, until they reached the capital city.

That summer the people came together, meeting in the capital and in the commanderies and kingdoms. In the village settlements, the lanes and paths across the fields, they held services and set up gaming boards; and they sang and danced in worship of Xiwangmu. They also passed round a written message, saying: “The Queen Mother tells the people that those who wear this talisman will not die; let those who do not believe her words look down at the pivots on their gates, and there will be white hairs to show that this is true.”²⁷

Interestingly, we find many elements of this cult in the pictorial representations of Xiwangmu. Wearing a jade crown called a sheng, she is seated upon the dragon-and-tiger throne on Kunlun mountain, as if holding court before immortals and divine animals including a nine-tailed fox, an elixir-pounding hare, an immortal toad, and other attendants (plates 61, 62, and 63). Her worshipers hold long-stalked objects, presumably a stalk of straw or hemp—the wand of the goddess. In some reliefs she scene of immortals playing the game liubo is depicted (plate 69), reminiscent of the “gaming boards” used in the ceremonies of the Xiwangmu cult. As Xiwangmu’s role in the cult of immortality expanded, her tale gradually integrated many other legends.

One of these legends pertains to the divine turtle believed to support on his back immortal mountains in the sea. The final version of this legend is found in Lie Zi, a philosophical work dated to the Six Dynasties period.²⁸ The prototype of the story, however, appeared during the Eastern Zhou in “Tianwen” (Heavenly questions), a poem attributed to Qu Yuan. Among other questions about the universe, we find these:

When the Great Turtle dances along with an island on his back,
How does he keep it steady?
If he leaves the sea and walks over dry land,
How does he move it?²⁹

The legend of the turtle supporting an immortal island may have been based on the ancient belief that this reptile
has power over water. Two passages from the same poem shed light on this belief. One states that when Gun, the father of Yu, was trying to regulate the Yellow River, he saw a procession of turtles walking beak to tail. He then built his dike on the path the turtles had indicated. The other passage suggests that, in an effort to prevent flooding, Gun himself was transformed into a "yellow turtle."²⁸

In the Han period the turtle legend was connected with the idea of immortality, just as the story of "The Weaving Maid and the Cowherd" had been. The islands borne by the turtle are identified as the three famous immortal mountains in the Eastern Sea. Liu Xiang remarked in his Lie xian zhuan (Biographies of immortals), "There is a giant divine turtle who dances and plays in the ocean with the immortal island Penglai on his back."²⁹ The Later Han poet, Zhang Heng, chanted in a fu rhapsody:

Unworried,
I step on immortal Penglai.
The turtle dances,
But keeps the island steady."³⁰

The theme of the divine turtle was expressed in various media—dance, drama, architectural design, and pictorial carving.³¹ On a side of the coffin from Pixian that is decorated with the Weaving Maid and the Cowherd on the top, fairies play the game liubo and auspicious birds and heavenly animals fly in the sky. A giant turtle walks toward this immortal land with a mountain island sitting on its back. Raising its head and brandishing its claws, the creature seems to be dancing in joy, just as Liu Xiang and Zhang Heng describe him.

Alongside the liubo scene on the Baozishan sarcophagus is the story of Yu Boya, the divine musician of ancient China (plate 57c). Boya's portrait, accompanied by an inscription with his name, sometimes decorates Han-type mirrors.³² The Baozishan carving, however, is the only example of a stone relief depicting this story.

As early as the Eastern Zhou, Boya was considered the world's finest zither player. The philosopher Xunzi once mentioned that when Boya was playing the zither, even horses raised their heads and laughed with enjoyment.³³ Towards the Qin dynasty, however, another version of the story was told. Boya's audience was no longer the horses but his bosom friend, Zhong Ziqi. Boya's tale of deep friendship and sorrow became one of the most beautiful Chinese legends.

Boya played the zither and Zhong Ziqi was the audience. As soon as Boya started playing he was transported to the Tai Mountains, and Ziqi sighed: "How wonderful is the music! It is as imposing as the Tai Mountains!" In a little while, Boya's mind shifted to the flowing river, and Ziqi was moved: "How graceful is the music! It is as vast as a flowing river!" After Ziqi died, Boya smashed his zither, cut the strings, and never played again in his life. He no longer had a soul mate in this world worthy of his music.³⁴

Boya's story continued to develop during the Former Han,³⁵ and later the story was integrated with the popular idea of immortality. An additional episode relates that Boya's teacher, Cheng Lian, had transported his pupil to the Isles of the Immortals to perfect his technique.³⁶ The pictorial scene on the Baozishan coffin seems to represent this later version, showing Boya and Ziqi in an immortal paradise, next to the two immortals playing liubo.

Legends and Stories of Secular Ideology

As mentioned previously, some of the stories and images carved on the Sichuan coffins embody ideological values and meanings that differ from those related to immortality. These are illustrations of Confucian texts. The best example of a Confucian morality tale is the story of Qiu Hu's wife. This story is depicted on coffins from Xinjing in Sichuan (plate 55) as well as on a carving from the Wu Liang shrine in Shandong (figure 13). Although the Wu Liang carving differs in style, its iconography closely resembles that of the coffin and inscriptions identify the names of the figures.

The story of Qiu Hu's wife, told in the Han text Lie nü zhuan (Biographies of outstanding women), was a celebrated exemplary model for women. Legend had it that she had been married only five days when her husband, Qiu Hu, who was from the state of Lu, had to leave home to take up office in the state of Chen. Five years later he returned. On his way home he saw a woman by
the roadside picking mulberry leaves and he stopped to
flirt with her. She happened to be his wife, but they did
not recognize each other because of the long absence.

Qu Hu was pleased with her and he descended from his car-
riage and spoke to her, saying, “as it is very hot to pick mul-
berries and I have been on a long journey, I desire you to allow
me to eat in the shade of the mulberry tree and to spread out
my cloak to rest.” The woman went on picking mulberries
without stopping and [again] Qu Hu spoke to her saying, “To
labor in the field is not so good as to happen on one good har-
vest; to pick mulberries is not so good as visiting with the
minister of the state. I have money that I desire to give you.”
The woman said, “Oh no! I use my strength to pick mulber-
ries; I spin and weave in order to supply clothes and food; and I
serve my parents-in-law and raise my husband’s children. I do
not want men’s money; I had hoped that the minister would
have no ulterior motive; and also I have no intention of giving
in to lust. Take up your travelling cloak and your money!”

In the Xinjin relief the setting is indicated by a mulberry
tree on the left. A woman preoccupied with picking the
leaves turns her head to respond to a man behind her,
who seems to be conversing with her. She rejects his
advances. The artist focuses on her virtue and deliberately
avoids the tragic ending of the tale. After their
meeting Qu Hu returned home and learned that the woman
he had met was his own wife. She upbraided him for being unrighteous and then cast herself into a
river. Like many other Confucian tales about virtuous
women and filial sons depicted in Han pictorial art, this
didactic story treats problems of the secular world rather
than the delights of the immortal world.

In Sichuan funerary art such Confucian tales are pre-
sented alongside motifs of immortality. This duality is
also evident in the pictorial decorations of the Wu Liang
shrine, where ancient emperors, sages, filial sons, and
virtuous women are carved in orderly fashion on the
walls, while images of Xiwangmu and other immortals
decorate the gable (figure 17). The arrangement of the
pictorial representations on the Wu Liang shrine clearly
indicates that the wall scenes were intended to remind
people of the figures who embodied the highest level of
Confucian morality, the basic code of conduct during
the Han. The images of immortals on the gables embod-
ied people’s dreams of eternal life or immortality. The
mingling of these two ideals—the worldly and the tran-
cendent, the Confucian and the immortal—is common
in Han art and appears in the Sichuan reliefs. The differ-
ence, however, is that the Confucian motifs are over-
whelming in the Shandong reliefs such as the Wu Liang
shrine, while in pictorial scenes from Sichuan, the
immortality motif, which was often related to Daoist
beliefs, predominates. This is understandable in light of the
different religious histories of the two regions: the
Shandong area was the heartland of Han Confucianism;
Sichuan, on the other hand, was dominated by a form of
religious Daoism known as the “Sect of the Five Pecks of
Rice.”

The distinctive religious and ideological values underly-
ing Sichuan pictorial art explain its modification of
“imported” imagery and selection of decorative motifs.
For example, a coffin from Xinjin is carved with three
groups of images on its side wall (plate 54). To the left
are two figures, identified by the inscribed names Shen
Nong and Cang Jie. In ancient mythology Shen Nong
was venerated as the creator of agriculture and medicine,
and Cang Jie, as the creator of writing. A portrait of
Shen Nong also appears in the Wu Liang shrine, where
this legendary figure is depicted as an emperor, wearing
an imperial crown and a ritual costume. He is placed in
a group of ancient sovereigns who symbolize the Confu-
cian tradition. In the Sichuan relief, however, Shen
Nong and Cang Jie are portrayed together as a pair of
immortals or Daoist recluse and seem most interested in
the “long-life” plants they have picked. The dramatic
and delightful nature of such a “botanical outing” scene
differs radically from the solemnity of the Wu Liang
carving.

Next to Shen Nong and Cang Jie in the Sichuan scene
are two other figures, identified by inscriptions as Confu-
cius and Laozi. The picture represents a historical
meeting between these two masters. According to Shiiji
(Historical records), written by the great Han historian
Sima Qian, Confucius set out with a disciple to inquire
about ritual affairs from Laozi, who at that time was a
high dignitary in the Zhou capital of Luo-yang. Confu-
cius obtained an audience with the old sage, who con-
cluded the meeting with the following words of wis-
dom: “The rich of this world are accustomed to give presents to parting guests; wise men prefer to give them good advice. How many men who call themselves intelligent, close their eyes to their own pitiable state, in order to take pleasure in criticizing others; how many who pretend to be wise, hide from their own defects, and spend their lives haranguing the labors of others.”

In this passage Sima Qian, an admirer of Daoism, obviously emphasized the superiority of Laozi, who assumed the role of teacher. The meeting scene in the Xianju carving clearly reveals the same idea in pictorial language, even though it discloses a conscious choice of a “Confucian” theme. In this scene it is the Confucian master who is represented as bowing and paying respect to Laozi. With both hands in his sleeves, Laozi is deferentially raising his head and watching the visitor.

There was a very different emphasis in Shandong. Portraits of Confucius were extremely popular in Shandong during the Later Han. The master and his seventy-two disciples were frequently portrayed in ritual buildings; his image became almost an icon of state worship. The “Meeting of Confucius and Laozi” carved on a Wu family shrine (figure 12) represents Laozi going out of the capital and greeting Confucius on the road as a token of respect.

These divergences in the same pictorial themes lead us to consider a general tendency regarding the transformation and localization of Han pictorial art. Although the decorative schemes of Sichuan coffins and Shandong funerary shrines share a mixture of Confucian and Daoist ideas on life and death, the pictorial traditions of these two regions emphasized different aspects. A number of pictorial motifs such as “Immortals Playing Liubo” and “The Divine Turtle Carrying an Immortal Mountain” occur only in the Han art of Sichuan and may be considered the innovations of Sichuan artists. The finest pictorial representations of stories such as “The Weaver Maid and the Cowherd” and “Bo Ya Playing the Qin” are also found in the Sichuan reliefs. These myths and legends are associated with Daoism and immortality. In contrast, the Confucian stories and images on the Sichuan coffins are considerably simplified, the imagery revised, and the implications altered. These changes show that Sichuan artists followed the prevailing scheme of Han funerary art in their decoration of stone coffins, but they also responded to the special demands of their local patrons and the particular values of their own culture. Judging from the pictorial evidence, Daoist motifs were in greater demand than Confucian themes.

Han tomb reliefs were the anonymous and probably collective work of several artisans and were created for symbolic rather than for purely aesthetic purposes. Certain pictorial motifs were widespread and were duplicated from region to region and from generation to generation. But Han pictorial art also developed in different regions along various lines. The relationship with and the difference between Han narrative art and literature is also worth considering here, for many pictorial motifs depicted on the Sichuan reliefs are found in literature. When a story was transformed from the written or oral tradition into a pictorial representation on a coffin, the narrative content and meaning changed. An individual pictorial scene is meaningful on two levels, the literary and the ritual or symbolic. On one level a scene—such as the meeting between Qiu Hu and his wife or Yi shooting the false suns—tells the story by depicting a specific episode; it was assumed that even without an inscription, the rest of the plot would be reconstructed by the viewer who would have been familiar with the well-known story. An understanding of the plot would lead the viewer to comprehend the symbolic meaning of the picture in its ritual context. He would understand the celestial symbolism of the Yi legend and the Confucian morality embodied in the tale of Qiu Hu’s wife. These individual scenes or motifs thus became elements of an overarching symbolic pictorial structure.

The examples discussed in this essay show that the pictorial scenes decorating Later Han coffins follow a structural program. The celestial scenes appear on the top. The entrance scene and cosmic symbols occupy the front and the rear respectively. Various combinations of motifs are depicted on the two sides of the coffins, but they always focus on specific themes such as the protection of the soul, feasting and entertainment, the world of immortality, and Confucian values. The repetition of
pictorial scenes in different compositions suggests that sets of pictorial motifs existed and that a specific choice may have reflected the preferences of the artisan or the patron. The motif chosen nevertheless always belongs to one of the above categories and becomes a readily understood symbol. As symbols, the motifs embody certain general ideas and meanings, so that even if they are replaced by other motifs belonging to the same category, the whole structure will remain intact. These images, derived from different literary sources, powerfully create the illusion that the coffin is no longer a simple stone funerary box but a universe, a paradise, a temple, or a banquet hall inhabited by the deceased in the afterlife.

NOTES


   Before 1938 scholars debated the function and the proper name of the “stone boxes” found in Sichuan. V. Segalen called them “sarcophagi”; Shang Chengzuo considered them containers of clothes and prized possessions of the deceased; He Changjun argued that their proper name should be shi-chuang, “stone bed.” The latter opinion was further supported by Wen Yu. In 1958 Chinese archaeologists published the excavation report of the Han tomb in Tianhu Shan, Sichuan. They reported that “remains of a skeleton, as well as other artifacts,” were found inside such stone boxes. This report proves that these boxes were used as coffins during the Han and thus seems to clinch the argument. Cf. Richard C. Rudolph, Han Tomb Art of West China (Berkley and Los Angeles, 1951), 8; Wen Yu, Sichuan Han database (1955), 2; Shang Chengzuo, “Sichuan Xinjin dengdi Han yamu zhuangmu kaolu” (On Han cave tombs and brick tombs at Xinjin and other places in Sichuan), Jinfeng xuebao 10 (1940): 11–18; He Changjun, Sichuan de Mandong yu Xiangdi de yamu (“Barbarian caves” in Sichuan and cave tombs in West Hunan) (1940); Liu Zhishun, “Chengdu Tianhuashan yamu qingli” (The excavation of the cave tomb at Tianhuashan in Chengdu), Kaogu xuebao, no. 1 (1958): 91.


   4. From a passage quoted in Rudolph, Han Tomb Art, 17.

   According to Wen Yu, all coffins found at Xinjin before 1949 had been cut into pieces by antique merchants who then sold them in Chengdu, Wen, Sichuan Han database, interpretation of fig. ding.

   5. Rudolph, Han Tomb Art, 28–29.

   6. Ibid., 28; Wen, Sichuan Han database, interpretation of fig. 31.


   9. Cf. Gujizhu (Commentaries on antiquity and the present), quoted in Fan Ye’s Hou Han shu (History of the Later Han) (Beijing, 1965), 3149–3150; Yang Shuda, Hanhu hanshu lishu kao (An examination of marial and funerary ritual customs of the Han dynasty) (Shanghai, 1933), 172–78.

   10. Cf. “Biography of Shusun Tong” in Ban Gu’s Han shu (History of the Former Han) (Beijing, 1963), 2130.

   11. Cf. Li Falin, Shandong Han huaxiangshi yanjiu (A study of Han pictorial carvings from Shandong) (Jinan, 1982), 97.


   13. The story is recorded in the “Ban Jing Xun” chapter in Hui Nan Zi and in the “Zhao Han” and “Tian Wen” in Chu Chi, attributed to Qu Yuan. Cf. Yuan Ke, Zhongguo guandi shenxue (The ancient mythology of China) (Shanghai, 1957), 173–86.


   16. Translated by A. Waley in Chinese Poems (London, 1982), 33–54. Scholars have suggested that a more advanced version of the “Weaving Maid and the Cowherd” legend had existed during the Former
Han. One source in the *Hui Nan zi* states that “Black magpies fill up the Milky Way, and thus enable the Weaving Maid to cross the heaven-ly river.” A passage from the *Fenghou tuqi* says that “The Weaving Maid crosses the Han River at night every July Seventh, and she has magpies construct a bridge.” See Li Jiangguo, *Tanggian zhiquai xiangshuo shi* (A History of pre-Tang “Zhiquai” stories) (Tianjin, 1984), 499. However, these two passages are both absent from the present texts and were cited by authors of the Tang dynasty. Their authenticity still remains open to question.


18. Based on Rudolph’s translation in *Han Tomb Art*, 32.


20. The development of the Xiwangmu tale has been discussed by many scholars. Two recent discussions can be found in Kominami Ichiro, *Toho Gakubu* 46 (1974): 31–82; M. Loewe, *Ways to Paradise* (Cambridge, 1979), ch. 4, 86–126.


22. This dating is based on Yang Buqiu’s opinion in *Lie Zi jishi* (A general commentary on *Lie Zi*) (Shanghai, 1988), 224–43.

23. Based on D. Hawkes’s translation in *Chu’s Text*, *The Songs of the South* (Boston, 1959), 51.

24. Ibid., 48.

25. Ibid., 50.

26. This passage from *Lie xian zhuang* is quoted by Wang Yi in his commentary on *Chu Ci*. Cf. Zhu Xi, *Chu Ci jishi* (A general commentary on the *Chu Ci*) (Shanghai, 1979), 61–62.


32. Cf. Yang Shuda, *Hua Li nan zi shen guan* (Testimony of *Hua Li nan zi*) (Beijing, 1957), 117. Two versions of Boya’s story coexisted during the Former Han. The earlier one was followed by *Hua Li nan zi*, while the later version appeared in Liu Xiang’s *Shuo yuan*. Cf. Yu Jianzi, *Shuo yuan huzheng* (Supplementary verification of *Shuo yuan*) (Taipei, 1955), 84–85.