Picturing Heaven in Second-Century China

A twentieth-century ink rubbing of an ancient Chinese bas-relief has recently been added to the Smart Museum’s Asian art collection (fig. 1a). The scene is well-known. In fact, it belongs to the most famous group of Han dynasty pictorial images created around the mid-second century C.E., known collectively as the carvings of the “Wu Family Shrines,” preserved at Jiaxiang in present-day Shandong province (fig. 2). The fame of the carvings rests not only on the sophistication and richness of their engraved images, but also on the long tradition of scholarship they have engendered. Since they were first recorded in the twelfth century, these decorated stone slabs from a number of destroyed mortuary buildings have been reproduced in numerous books and discussed by scholars all over the world. But despite this long history of scholarship, new observations and interpretations continue to be made by scholars who challenge us to see and think things that have not been seen and thought before. In studying the Smart Museum image, therefore, three methods of interpretation will be integrated into a coherent and new analysis of Han art. Although these methods have often been used separately for divergent purposes, together they will guide the reading of the rubbing in three consecutive stages: iconography will identify the individual motifs of the composition, contextualization will reinstall the composition back into its architectural setting, and iconology will relate the composition—not only its content but also its manner of representation—to a specific symbolic system of Han art.

THE RECTANGULAR COMPOSITION (fig. 1b) is divided into four tiers of equal width, which function as four horizontal “scrolls” exhibiting divinities, mythical animals, and celestial chariots in rhythmic movement. (For convenience, in the following discussion I will refer to these four registers, from top to bottom, as scenes one through four.) Showing little interest in representing depth, the artist depicted objects mostly in profile and rarely overlapped them. Like shadow puppets projected on a screen, their silhouettes highlight their features. One of the most important is scale: each register contains a large figure whose dominant position is reinforced by the motion and gestures of the secondary figures. These large figures can be identified as anthropomorphized versions of the Gods of Wind, Thunder, and Stars.

Starting at the top register (scene one), two figures of extraordinary size frame the horizontal picture. The figure on the right bends his knees while vigorously blowing air—a conventional Han image of the God of Wind. Here, however, the deity is not a self-contained icon for worship—rather, his role lies in producing clouds. The wind blown from his mouth transforms itself into a series of fantastic images moving toward the left side of the image. Greeted by a celestial official, these wind-made figures resemble animals with winged riders and a chariot driven by fairies, and symbolize clouds in their adoption of various patterns: the chariot’s canopy and wheels, for example, are composed of spiral forms while the flying animals have whirlwind-like bodies. With such clu-
Fig. 1. Celestial scenes: (a) Chinese, *Section of a Carved Wall from the Wu Family Shrines, Rear Group no. 4*, 20th century (after mid-2nd century C.E. original), rubbing, ink on paper, 43 1/2 x 58 1/2 in. (110.5 x 148.6 cm.) (image), Gift of Dr. Abraham Hoffer, 1994.76; (b) line drawing of Rear Group no. 4.
divided in the carving and attributed to different figures. Reducing the Duke's role only to generating thunder, the artist portrayed him holding a hammer to beat the drums. His second role is transferred to two smaller figures running ahead of him. Possibly the Duke's heavenly soldiers, they strike chisels with hammers. Interestingly, their action seems to be directed toward a man who kneels underneath—a detail which is represented more explicitly in another Wu Family Shrine carving (figs. 3a and 3b). Both carvings feature rain goddesses wearing elaborate headdresses and holding water containers (tuns or bowls) in their hands. But the second image has an addition—a rainbow in the form of a two-headed, upside-down, U-shaped dragon under a flying rain goddess.

Scene three resembles the composition in the top register with the God of Wind again positioned on the right, producing clouds. But unlike the clusters of clouds shaped like animals, immortals, and a chariot in the first scene, here spiral-patterned clouds constitute the waves of a single, sweeping movement. Tiny fairies, birds, and beasts emerge throughout the image, and their uniform orientation reinforces a sense of motion. The central theme of this scene is not so much the imaginary cloud-images as the force of the wind, a sense of which is given in a poem by Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty, which begins with the plain but powerful line, "Great wind arises, oh! Clouds fly..."5

The main deity in the fourth scene turns to face right and thus echoes the pose of the Duke of Thunder in scene two. He is identified by his heavenly vehicle, which is formed by the seven stars of the Big Dipper. Sima Qian referred to this image, writing that "[t]he bowl of the Big Dipper is the carriage of the god. It moves in the middle of the sky, commanding the heavenly fields in the four directions."6 Interestingly, the carving also has an eighth star, the smaller ball held up by a winged figure near the end of the Big Dipper's handle. This isolated star must thus be Fu or γ Bootis, believed by the ancient Chinese to be a primary assistant of the God of Stars.7 Three celestial officials, each wearing a strange cap with "horns" and holding a ceremonial stone tablet, follow the star deity obediently. To the right, a procession moves

---

Fig. 2. Location of Wu Family Shrines.

disseive forms, the image in this register embodies the Han impulse to identify figures and things in the ever-changing shapes of clouds (yunqi). A clear indication of this tendency is discussed by the early first-century B.C.E. historian Sima Qian. In his Shi ji (Historical Records), he writes that yunqi could appear as animals, boats, chariots, banners, and pavilions; by observing these shapes, a royal astronomer could predict the future.3

Figures in scene two move in the opposite direction towards the right. The principal figure sits on a sled, pulled and pushed by a team of assistants. Holding a hammer in his right hand, he prepares to beat the two drums that flank him. This image is based on a passage from the Lun heng (Disquisitions), a work compiled by Wang Chong about a half century prior to the creation of the relief carving, in which it states:

Painters depict the thunder as multiple drums heaped together. They also paint the Duke of Thunder as a powerful male, who beats the drums with his left hand, while holding a chisel in his right hand as though about to strike. The idea is that the rolling sound of thunder is generated by knocking the chain-drums, and that the sudden crashing of light is produced by the blow of the chisel. When the Duke kills a person on earth, he strikes him with both the drums and the chisel [i.e. with both thunder and lightning].4

The two functions of the deity described in the text, of controlling thunder and lightning, are
towards the Big Dipper: a rider leads a covered chariot on its way to the celestial court while four standing or kneeling figures enter the god’s domain to be received by him. No extant Han dynasty documents offer a textual identification of these figures; here, the iconographer seems to have come to the limits of the methodology.

THE FIRST PERSON to challenge a purely iconographic study of Han art's meaning was Wilma Fairbank, who wrote in 1941 that “the interrelationships and positional significance of the engraved stones is lost when they are studied as scattered slabs or rubbings.” This recognition resulted from a long period of research started in 1934, when Fairbank first visited the Wu Family Shrines in Shandong. She wrote:

When, after a long walk across the village-dotted plain south of Chia-hsiang [i.e. Jiaxiang], I entered the dark building which housed the slabs and saw inset in the walls the many gable-topped stones, the various border patterns which matched from slab to slab, and the free-standing pillars and prismatic-shaped stones scattered about an adjoining small building in the same compound, I could see at once that these were constituent parts of buildings. My curiosity was piqued. What sorts of buildings? How many? Where had they stood, above or under the ground? Would underground tomb chambers have been gabled? By matching the gables and linking the borders might it be possible to reconstruct them and set this jumble to rights? This impulse, which I can only describe as housewifely, gripped me forcibly that day and returned to haunt me in the months and years that followed.9

Fairbank’s questions, certainly not “housewifely,” finally led to her 1941 article, “The Offering Shrines of ‘Wu Liang Tz’u,’” which the eminent French sinologist Paul Pelliot hailed as “among the most interesting American research papers published during the wartime.”10 Fairbank began her reconstruction of the abandoned ritual buildings from the records of Huang Yi and Li Kezheng, two Qing dynasty officials who rediscovered the Wu Family carvings in four isolated locations in 1786 and 1789.11 Reproduced from Fairbank’s original article, figure 4 identifies these groups, along with some scattered slabs, as the Wu Liang Group, the Front Group, the Left Group, and the Rear Group. The rubbing in the Smart Museum’s collection was made from the fourth stone in the Rear Group.
Traditionally, scholars considered each group to be the remains of an individual mortuary shrine. The four shrines were attributed to four male members of the Wu Family, whose names appear on the stone pillar-gate at the entrance of the family’s graveyard. Fairbank’s work both confirmed and rejected this hypothesis; she could only reconstruct three shrines out of the materials contained in the four groups of slabs (figure 5 shows her reconstruction of the Front Shrine). She was most troubled by not being able to find places for five rectangular and exceedingly beautiful carvings in the Rear Group (numbers one through five in Fairbank’s diagram), which include the scene in the Smart Museum rubbing. Regrettably she wrote that these carvings “...must represent parts of one or more additional shrines, the structure of which will, it is hoped, be understood on further study.”

This “further study” was carried out by two Chinese scholars, Jiang Yingju and Wu Wenqi, in 1981. Their method was similar to that of Fairbank. The only difference, and one that placed their investigation on more solid ground, was that they observed, measured, and diagrammed all the slabs in every dimension after they were dug out of the walls of an old exhibition hall for better preservation in 1972. They were also able to test their reconstruction plan by matching the stones together physically. One of their most important discoveries was that the five Rear Group slabs, which Fairbank left unidentified, have sculpted tiles on the back. This feature, which Fairbank could not possibly have known because the stones were then built into the walls of the exhibition hall, clearly indicates that these slabs functioned as roof stones. Furthermore, Jiang and Wu noticed that among the five slabs, numbers four and five were placed side by side in their original setting.
These two stones are similar in size (number four is 59 1/2 x 84 5/8 inches [151 x 215 centimeters]; number five is 59 1/2 x 87 1/2 inches [151 x 222 centimeters]), identical in shape, and both bear square holes on the borders—"mortises" which would have been locked with "tenons" on a shrine's side walls and partition gable. After matching these two stones with the three reconstructed shrines, Jiang and Wu determined that they originally covered the front part of the Front Shrine. The back slope of the roof is still missing (fig. 6).

The reconstruction of this shrine, started by Fairbank and completed by Jiang and Wu, is vital to a deeper understanding of its pictorial carvings. When a composition is identified for a particular place in a ritual structure, not only does its content contribute to its meaning, but also its position. A short look at the Front Shrine reveals an overall symbolic structure that underlies the shrine's decoration. This structure's three integral elements correspond to the shrine's three architectural units: the walls, gables, and ceiling. The walls are the domain of men. A broad decorative band divides the three walls into upper and lower zones. In the upper section of a side wall (fig. 7), the top register is dedicated to Confucius: flanked by his seventy-two disciples, the ancient sage inquires...
about ritual affairs from Laozi. A large chariot procession advances below these Confucian icons; most scholars believe that such a procession depicted in a funerary shrine reflects the social prestige of the deceased. The lower zone beneath the decorative band contains a wide array of scenes—historical stories, Confucian paragons, auspicious omens, a banquet, music and dance performances, and a battle over a bridge. These scenes surround a focal image on the back wall, in which a royal figure gives an audience in an elaborate pavilion (fig. 8).

The other two sections of the pictorial program are not concerned with human affairs.
Fig. 9. Celestial scenes: (a) Chinese, *Section of a Carved Wall from the Wu Family Shrines, Rear Group no. 5 (Roof Stone of Front Shrine)*, 20th century (after 2nd century C.E. original), ink rubbing; (b) line drawing of Rear Group no. 5.
Immortality and eternal happiness are the central themes of the gable carvings; they are expressed primarily by the presence of the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East. Accompanied by dragons, phoenixes, and fairies, these two legendary figures were believed to be masters of paradises lying in the East and West. Their placement on the two opposing gables, therefore, attests to a pattern firmly established in ancient Chinese thinking: that East and West were places of refuge and immortality. In this way, these two triangular pictures also distinguish themselves from the scenes on the ceiling, which represent the heavens or the sky. While the carvings on one ceiling slab (shown in the Smart Museum rubbing) have already been identified as symbolic representations of clouds, thunder and lightning, the wind, and stars, additional mythological figures appear on the other surviving ceiling stone (figs. 9a and 9b). Except for the couple in the second register united by their intertwining serpentine bodies, most of these figures cannot be precisely identified. The couple, however, is composed of Fu Xi and Nüwa, the primary embodiments of the yin and yang forces in ancient China. Their visual similarity to plant roots also suggests why they were considered the first ancestors of the human race, and why they hold a compass and a carpenter's square—symbols of the two sexes as well as the ability to design the world.

This pictorial program, therefore, is based on the principle of correlation, which Dong Zhongshu, the head theologian in Emperor Wu's court during the second century B.C.E., claimed to be the primary feature of the Universe:

In all things there must be correlates. Thus if there is the upper, there must be the lower. If there is the left, there must be the right.... The yin is the correlate of the yang, the wife of the husband, the subject of the sovereign.

The same sets of correlations govern the Front Shrine carvings: upper and lower, Heaven and man, east and west, male and female. The significance of the sky scenes in the Smart Museum rubbing thus lies in constituting this symbolic structure and in transforming the ritual structure into a microcosm of the universe.

SUCH AN INTERPRETATION, however, leaves an important question unanswered: the conceptual correlations in Han thinking can only set a basic framework for shrine decoration; what factors, then, determined the specific forms of pictorial motifs? In other words, a general concept such as Heaven can be represented by different images; what are these images and why do they appear on different shrines? This question implies a twofold motivation in designing or selecting pictorial motifs for a shrine. First, as an integral element of a large symbolic structure, a motif must have been conventionally associated with a fundamental concept (such as Heaven, earth, or immortality) and was thus a readily understood symbol. Second, as the decoration on a personal monument, the motif often reflected the patron's or the artist's ideas, tastes, and other personal preferences. Therefore, although the wall carvings of Han funerary shrines conventionally represent the human world, some shrines have more historical scenes while others favor colorful entertainment. Likewise, although the ceiling carvings normally depict Heaven, these images vary in every case. By exploring such variations, not only the general conception implied in the Smart Museum rubbing but also the peculiarity of its celestial scene can be understood.

Three or four Wu Family shrines have been completely or partially reconstructed. Their ceilings depicted heavenly scenes of different sorts. A visitor to the Wu Liang Shrine during the Eastern Han dynasty would have found that its ceiling was covered with unconnected images—hybrid animals and birds, unusual plants, ritual objects, and so on—organized in a cataloguing format (figs. 10a–d). The drawing style is schematic and diagrammatic; the images are flat and isolated, with no suggestion of background or physical context. A short cartouche, inscribed in a vertical strip near each picture, identifies each image as a particular heavenly omen and specifies the political condition for its manifestation. For example, "[t]he Jade Horse: it arrives when a ruler is pure and incorrupt and honors worthies;" "[t]he Intertwining Tree: its
Fig. 10. Ink rubbings of omen images from the Wu Liang Shrine (151 C.E.): (a) jade horse; (b) intertwining tree; (c) birds joined at the wings; (d) fish joined at the eye.

interwining branches grow when a ruler's virtue is pure and harmonious, and when the eight directions are unified into a single state;” “Birds Joined at the Wing: they appear when a ruler's virtue reaches far and wide;” and “Fish Joined at the Eye: they appear when the virtue of a ruler extends to those who live in reclusion and retirement.”

Such pictures and inscriptions (two aspects of Han omen motifs) are rooted in the Confucian theory of the “heavenly mandate,” which provided a foundation for Han political rhetoric. This theory emphasized two essential links between Heaven and the emperor: first, Heaven bestows its mandate on the emperor to rule the world; and second, Heaven constantly evaluates and responds to the emperor’s behavior. Both links were established by omens. Dong Zhongshu thus stated that “[w]hen a king is about to rise to power, beautiful signs of good omens will first appear.” There are also numerous instances in which emperors used omens to prove their rule was good. Meanwhile, Confucian scholars such as Wu Liang himself employed omens to express their view of ideal government and to criticize the current regime.

What the viewer perceives in the omen images on the Wu Liang Shrine, therefore, is a Heaven that possesses purpose, will, and intelligence: it responds to human activities and guides them, and it blesses the virtuous and benevolent and warns the evil and corrupt. But this Heaven is neither a theistic nor anthropomorphic deity—omnipresent but invisible, it manifests its presence only through concrete omens.

These omen images differ markedly from another depiction of Heaven found in the Wu Family cemetery (figs. 11a and 11b), which, according to Jiang Yingju and Wu Wenczi, once embellished the ceiling of the Left Shrine. At the bottom of the composition, a funerary procession has arrived at a graveyard (an architectural com-
plex consisting of a shrine, a que-pillar, and several tomb mounds). The chief mourner, an official wearing a gentleman's cap, has just descended from a chariot. Following his two assistants, he approaches the tumuli. The assistants, leaving their horses behind, carry funerary banners to lead the way. While the second assistant converses with the official, the first assistant turns his eyes to the sky and seems to be startled by a miracle. Following his gaze and raised arm, we find a cloud emerging from the tomb mounds. It rises upwards and forms the path for two covered horse-drawn chariots. The chariot to the right has a female driver, while the one to the left is driven by a man. Winged fairies and celestial officials appear here and there along the cloud-path, welcoming the chariots on their heavenly journey. Each chariot heads toward a principal deity, portrayed in a frontal, iconic pose close to the upper edge of the picture. The female-driven chariot stops in front of a female deity, possibly the Queen Mother of the West; while the male-driven chariot is parked next to a male deity,
probably the King Father of the East. This composition, therefore, depicts a journey from the earth to the domain of immortality.

An important inscription found in a Han tomb at Cangshan in Shandong offers an invaluable clue for understanding the religious significance of this picture. In describing a funerary narrative represented in a series of tomb carvings, the inscription identifies a scene as a funerary procession to deliver the deceased to his tomb, which is symbolized by a building with half-opened gates (fig. 12). Significantly, the presence of the deceased is symbolized by a covered chariot, similar to those engraved on the ceiling of the Left Shrine. In fact, what the picture represents is two consecutive stages of the soul’s transformation. The carvings in the Cangshan tomb depict the ritual process in which the deceased is transported from the living world to the threshold of his underground home; this journey thus ends at the tomb gate. On the other hand, the picture on the Left Shrine describes the soul’s rebirth in the immortal world, an event that happens on the other side of the que-gate and in the wishful imagination of the mourners.

Unlike the isolated, two-dimensional omen images on the Wu Liang Shrine, the ceiling of the Left Shrine is transformed into a reachable celestial kingdom. While the Confucian Heaven signified by the Wu Liang omen images is absolute and self-sustaining, here the immortal realm of the Queen Mother and the King Father inspires a journey. That people can reach this place through certain mysterious channels holds out the hope of transcending the imperfect, mundane world. In Han art, this hope is realized by transforming the structure into an immortal world. When Xiang Wuhan and his younger brother were preparing a tomb site for their deceased parents, they inscribed these words on the mortuary shrine:

We worked in the open air in our parents’ graveyard, even early in the morning and even in the heat of summer. We transplanted soil on our backs to build the tumulus and planted pine and juniper trees in rows. We erected a stone shrine, hoping that the souls of our parents would have a place to abide.

Though they did not mention whether they had the Queen Mother’s immortal land carved on the shrine, one can imagine that a shrine exhibiting such images would be an ideal place for the soul to abide.

Returning to the heavenly image in the Smart Museum rubbing, we find yet a third conception and representation of Heaven. Here, it is neither an invisible political and moral authority nor an immortal land governed by the King Father and the Queen Mother. Rather, Heaven is conceived as a collection of natural deities—the Duke of Thunder, the Lord of Wind, the God of the Big Dipper, and others. Instead of constituting a hierarchical pantheon, these deities are portrayed in parallel registers and seem to be responsible for their own duties which include the normal workings of the natural world as well as rewarding good and pun-
ishing evil. Such a concept is at work in scene two, where the two soldiers of the Duke of Thunder produce lightning to hit the man kneeling underneath. This scene documents a widespread belief during the Han period, acknowledged by Wang Chong:

In midsummer, thunder and lightning, rapidly following in succession, split trees, demolish houses, and sometimes kill men. Common people believe that when a person is killed by lightning, it is for his secret faults.26

This heavenly punishment is balanced by a scene of rewarding people for good behavior. As stated above, the covered chariot in scene four is a symbol of the deceased. But the destination of the soul is neither a graveyard nor an immortal paradise; it is the Big Dipper. According to *Zhen gao* (Divine Declaration), a post-Han Taoist text, “[t]he Big Dipper, or the Master of the Fourth Heaven, is in charge of affairs such as calamities and prosperity, auspicious and inauspicious, and the deeds that one accumulated during one’s life.”27 The author Tao Hongjing also provided a number of exemplary men and women, whose hidden virtues (or *yinde*)—loyalty, filial piety, and chastity—were ignored by men but recognized by the star deity.28 Perhaps it is no coincidence that in the carving for the Smart Museum’s rubbing, as the roof of a heavenly dwelling, the handle of the Big Dipper shields a group of people who worship the star god with reverence while the god receives them with benevolence.

Wu Hung is the Harrie A. Vanderstappen S.V.D. Distinguished Service Professor in Chinese Art History at the University of Chicago and the author of two forthcoming books: Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture (Stanford University Press) and The Double Screen: Media and Representation in Chinese Painting (Reaktion Books and University of Chicago Press).

---

**Notes**

All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.


2. Ibid., 113–14.


5. See Sima Qian, 389.

6. Ibid., 1291.

7. See Jiang Xiaoyuan, *Xingzhanxue yu chuantong wenhua* (Astrology and traditional culture) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 119.

fied these four scenes as: the immortal of the Miaogushu Mountains, the transformation of Fu Xi and Nüwa, the journey of an unidentified deity, and the ox spirit of the southern mountains. Despite his identifications, Hayashi recognized that they were only tentative. See Hayashi Mino, “Kandai kinshin no sekai” (The Han world of ghosts and spirits), Tōhō gakubō 46 (1974): 223–306.


19. In addition to the Wu Liang Shrine, the Front Shrine, and the Left Shrine, I believe that a number of scattered slabs from the site originally belonged to a Fourth Shrine. See Wu, 20–24.

20. Dong Zhongshu, Chunqiu falu (Zhejiang shuju, 1901), 16.3.

21. We know from Wu Liang’s epitaph that he was a virtuous Confucian scholar who “felt ashamed of the conventional ways in which people copied one another in the world,” and who “never paid attention to those who wielded power.” We also know that he belonged to a particular Confucian school that especially favored omen exegesis. The omen images engraved on the ceiling of his memorial shrine reflect his ideas and political identity. For a detailed discussion, see Wu, 96–107.


23. For a discussion of this tomb and its carvings and inscriptions, see Wu Hung, “Beyond the ‘Great Boundary’: Funerary Narrative in the Gangshan Tomb,” in John Hay, ed., Boundaries in China (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 81–104. A similar funerary procession also appears in the famous Yi’nan tomb in Shandong, although there the graveyard is represented by a pair of qie-pillars, a funerary structure normally erected at the entrance of a Han cemetery. See Zeng Zhaoyue et al., Yinan gubuxiang shimen faju baogao (Excavation report on an ancient carved stone tomb in Yinan) (Shanghai: Cultural Administrative Bureau, 1956), plate 50.

24. It was generally believed during the Han dynasty that the Queen Mother’s paradise was on top of Kunlun Mountain, but some texts also mention Kunlun as a transitional stage to Heaven. A passage from the Huainan zi, a second-century B.C.E. text, describes three stages in the quest for eternal happiness: “He who climbs onto the Chilly Wind peak 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 become a god.” See John S. Major, Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 158.


26. Wang, 294; see also Forke, 285.


28. Tao, 190.