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REAKTION BOOKS
In general, good officials make clear the laws, statutes and ordinances, and in no matter whosoever are they incompetent. Furthermore, they are pure and clean, sincere and prudent and love to assist their superiors.88

Bad officials are the opposite: they are unclean and impure, and by implication they pollute the religious or sacred routine of daily administrative life and the bureaucratic cosmos.

The Son of Heaven, the sage, was forced to use men, the bureaucrats, to control the phenomenal world, and to do this by keeping the world in complete harmony, in perfect time with the rhythms of the natural order. By bounding and positioning, the Qin tried to control individuals and groups and to create social and political space. They thought that they had developed an ideal system which would last for ten thousand years. But by their very natures, human bodies were subject to the corrupting influence of desires and to the gradual diminution of their Heaven-given essence or energy.89 The Qin tried to create the perfect bureaucratic system, but the cosmology on which they founded it contained a fatal flaw: Man.

Careful use of time was one of the principal ways, even the most powerful way, that the Qin sought to differentiate and yet relate, separate and yet combine, the actions of Man and the constant movement of the cosmos. Through the manipulation of time, the Qin tried to create a power with which to organize the universe. They placed the emperor at the centre, giving him the ‘positional advantage’ (quan) that enabled him to measure the actions, the performances, the desires of every single one of his subjects. Therefore it is only right-timing (shih) that the sage (shengren) values.90

But within two years of the First Emperor’s death in 210 BCE, the system that the Qin had created with so much effort and ingenuity collapsed through the greed, rapacity, pride and fear of the highest officials of the land, and through the oppression by the local officials of the populace at large. It was a great experiment, but it failed in the short term: only when the state ideology was refigured by incorporating Confucian doctrine did it become capable of surviving the next two thousand years, and thus influence us to this very day. Yet the organization of space into bounded units, the differentiation of the social order into mutually dependent categories, the acceptance of a natural hierarchy, the strict division of all phenomena within a single unitary totality, and the control of all parts, all persons, from a single centre: these dominating ideas the Chinese inherited from the Qin.

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Beyond the ‘Great Boundary’:
Funerary Narrative in the Cangshan Tomb
WU HUNG

The ancient Chinese word daxian, or ‘great boundary’, refers to the natural phenomenon called death, in which bodily functions and living experience cease. Yet, as is often the case in Chinese, the word is ambiguous and the concept of ‘boundary’ has multiple meanings: on the one hand, it means the ‘end’, ‘termination’, ‘cessation’, and ‘expiration’ of life; on the other, it implies a ‘dividing’, ‘demarcating’, ‘joining’, and ‘juxtaposing’ of this life and the afterlife. Daxian thus defines a single space and duration (this world and this life) or dual spaces and durations (this world and this life versus the other world and the afterlife). Moreover, since death (or more precisely, a death ritual) is a process in which the departed soul travels from this world to the world beyond, daxian is often conceived not as a transparent line but as an independent space and duration. The ‘great boundary’, therefore, can be understood in at least three different senses. These may be expressed diagrammatically:

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          'great boundary'          
          this world/this life      
          (1)                      
          other world/afterlife    

          'great boundary'          
          this world/this life      
          (2)                      
          other world/afterlife    

          'great boundary'          
          this world/this life      
          (3)                      
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This essay argues that the complex implications of the ‘great boundary’ help to deepen our understanding of ancient Chinese ideas of immortality and the afterlife, and that in particular they supply a useful means to analyse art-forms which are related to death. Modifying a conventional iconographic method which focuses on individual ‘scenes’ in funerary art, I will pay particular attention to forms which are invested with the notion of boundaries and thus signify the relationship between individual scenes. Taking an Eastern Han tomb in Cangshan county, Shandong province, as my chief example, I will show that such forms, though often eluding iconographic identification, serve as structural keys to a funerary narrative which developed in Chinese ritual art.

**Immortality and the afterlife**

Death inspires fear, and the recognition that life has its ‘great boundary’ leads to the desire to postpone crossing that boundary or even to avoid it entirely. The incessant pursuit of longevity by ancient philosophers, necromancers and princes aimed not at overcoming death but at infinitely prolonging life – if their efforts were successful, the dangerous ‘great boundary’ would be erased altogether for them. This goal, which may be called ‘achieving immortality during one’s lifetime’, might be pursued by internal or external means – longevity might be realized either by transforming oneself into an immortal or by transporting oneself to an immortal land. As early as the late Zhou period, people began to think that through certain physical practices, such as purification, starvation and the breathing exercise called daoyin, the practitioner could gradually eliminate his material substance, letting only the ‘essence of life’ remain. On the other hand, there simultaneously emerged the belief in the ‘lands of deathlessness’ – the two most prominent being in Penglai Islands in the east and Mount Kunlun in the west. It was thought that on reaching such a place, one’s biological clock would automatically stop ticking and death would never occur.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{('great boundary' erased)} & \\
\text{•} & \\
\text{•} & \\
\text{immortality} & \\
\text{this world/this life} & \\
\text{•} & \\
\text{•} & \\
\text{ordinary life} & \\
(4)
\end{align*}
\]

The happy endings of both types of pursuit of longevity are suggested in the above diagram, and were described in ancient literature. Zhuangzi (active c. 300 BCE) vividly portrayed those ageless men unaffected by time and other natural rules: ‘There is a Divine Man living on faraway Ku-shé Mountain, with skin like ice or snow, and gentle and shy like a young girl. He doesn’t eat the five grains, but sucks the wind and drinks the dew, climbs up on clouds and mists, rides a flying dragon, and wanders beyond the four seas’.

With similar vividness, the lore of immortal lands was spread by necromancers. They told their audience, often rich and ambitious princes who were anxious about losing their worldly glory, that Penglai was in the Bohai Sea and consisted of three individual island-peaks. There, all the birds and beasts were pure white, and all the palaces and gates were made of gold and silver. Gazed at from afar, the islands looked like clouds but, as one drew nearer, they seemed instead to be drowning under the water. Understandably, such an elusive fairyland could only be spotted by experts, and so necromancers could demand wealth and servants from their powerful patrons in order to accomplish their costly missions.

Zhuangzi focused on man, while the necromancers focused on place; but in their accounts, a divine man and a divine place share similar features and both appear in disguise. Both are still found in this world and still assume human and natural forms; only their unusual colours, habits and locations make them seem unworldly. Their extraordinary features, therefore, are signs of immortality or longevity: these men and places are no longer governed by the laws of decay and death, and the concept of the ‘great boundary’ can no longer be applied to them. Once we understand this train of thought, we can correct a confusion in modern scholarship on early Chinese religion and art, which often equates ‘immortality’ and ‘afterlife’. In fact, the pre-Han idea of xian, immortals, firmly rested upon the hope of escaping death. The notion of an afterlife, however, was based on the other implication of the ‘great boundary’ as a predestined event – that death marked the beginning of one’s continuous existence in the other world.

Indeed, instead of approaching death as the total elimination of living consciousness, the ancient Chinese insisted that it was caused by, and thus testified to, the separation of the body and the soul. In a learned paper, Ying-shih Yü demonstrates that this concept had appeared long before the desire for immortality: ‘the notion that the departed soul is as conscious as the living is already implied in Shang-Chou sacrifices.’
Based on a new archaeological find, we can further date the idea of the autonomous soul to at least the 5th millennium BCE: a Yangshao pottery coffin was drilled with a hole in its wall to allow the soul to move in and out. The same belief must have survived into the 5th century BCE, for it seems to have inspired the decoration of Marquise Yi's coffin, on which large painted windows symbolize the entrance and exit of the soul of the deceased lord.

Belief in 'immortality during one's lifetime' and 'the conscious soul after death' were inherited and developed by the Han (206 BCE - CE 220). The search for Penglai and Kunlun continued, but now these magical places were imagined to be occupied by immortals who, having themselves gained the secret of deathlessness, would unselfishly grant mortal beings eternal life. More replicas of magic mountains were made at this time than at any other time in Chinese history; people believed that these and other imitations of divine forms would attract the immortals with their elixir. At the same time, though almost self-contradictorily, funerary art flourished to an unprecedented degree, and it became customary for a person to prepare his or her own tomb while still living. The fundamental premise of this practice — that death is unavoidable and must be faced squarely — seems to indicate a kind of rationalism. Yet the idea of the posthumous soul led to intense concerns with the afterlife, as well as with mortuary structures and rites. It can be said that the whole of Han funerary art was based on the notion of accepting the 'great boundary' but also attempting to go beyond it. Emperor Wen, for example, began his testamentary edict of 157 BCE with a philosophical statement: 'Death is a part of the abiding order of heaven and earth and the natural end of all creatures.' But the same emperor also constructed for himself the only Western Han imperial mausoleum dug into a mountain cliff, with a special stone coffin that aimed to preserve his body forever. He also carefully planned his own funeral in advance, so that when death took place he would be safely transported into his stone palace. Even more telling, a regulation in the Book of Rites [Liji] requires a ruler to prepare his inner coffin as soon as he ascends the throne, and to paint and repaint it every year until his death. This coffin was thus both a symbol and a practical piece of mortuary equipment. As a symbol, it was a reminder of the inevitable 'great boundary', and as a piece of mortuary equipment, it would eventually become the ruler's underground home beyond this boundary. In this way, it attests to the central idea underlying funerary art, that is, accepting death but attempting to overcome it.

It is apparent that this kind of thinking differs radically from the notion...
of becoming a living immortal, and that we must distinguish the principles of funerary architecture and art from those of longevity symbols. But as in many historical situations in which opposing ideas are mixed together and influence each other, during the Han the concepts of immortality and the afterlife drew increasingly closer until they were finally integrated. Frequently, a person spent his whole life searching for a magic island while also preparing his tomb. It would be simplistic to interpret such common, but contradictory, practices as symptoms of opportunism. A more profound reason can be found in the complex implications of the ‘great boundary’ in Han thought. When viewed as the end of life, death was nothing but a threatening tragedy that had to be avoided by all possible means; but when viewed as the beginning of a promising afterlife, the important thing became how to safely undergo the transformation from this world to the other. These two opposing points of view, which were inherent in the single concept of the ‘great boundary’, allowed a person to envision and pursue both an ideal life and an ideal afterlife.

The idea of immortality was gradually absorbed into funerary art. During pre-Han times, the afterlife in its most ideal form seemed no more than a mirror-image of life itself – the tomb of an aristocrat was usually arranged as his or her underground dwelling, containing all kinds of luxury goods and all sorts of food and drink for a comfortable life. This ‘happy home’ of the dead was further protected by tomb guardians, who were at first buried soldiers and then sculptured and painted underground deities. The great Lishan Mausoleum of the first Qin emperor, in Shaanxi province, though constructed and considered as a monument of a new historical era, was still based on this traditional approach. Its underground chamber contained models of ‘palaces and pavilions’, and ‘self-triggering crossbows’ were installed there to shoot unwelcome visitors. Sima Qian has also told us that in this chamber, rivers and oceans were made of mercury and were activated by a mechanical device, while ‘all of the Heavens’ were represented above and ‘all of the Earth’ below.\(^9\) If the Grand Historian’s words are reliable, the home of the deceased emperor was modelled upon the whole Universe. This Universe, however, cannot be simply identified as a ‘paradise’ (as some writers have proposed), since all its components – rivers, oceans and other heavenly and earthly phenomena – were symbols of nature, not of immortality. There were no replicas of an immortal land – such motifs became a legitimate part of funerary art only from the early Han, as we find in the famous tomb no.1 Mawangdui, Hunan province, of the mid-second century BCE.

\(^{11}\) On the one hand, the tomb incorporates almost all the beliefs and forms that were traditionally related to death: its ‘central unit’ (consisting of the fourth or innermost coffin and the well-known silk banner placed on it) preserves the tomb-occupant’s body and soul; the decorative theme of its second coffin is the divine protection of the deceased in the underworld; and its guo section with more than 1,000 pieces of tomb furnishings duplicates the real household of an aristocratic family. On the other hand, beliefs and forms which were not traditionally related to death also found their way into the tomb. Most importantly, immortality was now conceived as part of the afterlife. We find Mount Kunlun, with its three adjacent peaks and flanking auspicious animals, depicted on the third coffin, transforming it into a transcendent paradise. This new practice of placing immortality symbols in a funerary context testifies to an essential change in the concept of immortality itself: instead of being equated with ‘longevity’ and pursued during one’s lifetime, it was now hoped that one’s soul would attain immortality after death. The afterlife thus also correspondingly changed its meaning: rather than passively mirroring this world, it became ‘superior’ to this life because it made the soul eternal.
The scene beyond the 'great boundary' was thus enriched, but not yet unified. The afterlife is conceptualized and constructed as an assemblage of independent realms represented by different objects and images in various sections of the burial. The relationship between these realms is by no means certain; nor is it clear in which particular realm the deceased should abide. It seems that in their eagerness to express their filial piety and to please the dead, the tomb builders simply provided all the answers that they knew of to the mute question about the world beyond the 'great boundary'.

We may assume that such ambiguities and inconsistencies in the notion of the afterlife would have anticipated a more systematic theological interpretation. But, for better or worse, this interpretation was not attained before the introduction of Buddhism. The Han Chinese of the pre-Buddhist era seemed to have adopted a more practical or formalistic approach: since each of the realms in the afterlife could offer something special and valuable to the dead, the important matter became how to represent these realms in a more unified manner, rather than which to sacrifice for the sake of a consistent theory. Thus, while a serious inquiry into the ontological status of the afterlife is absent in the huge corpus of Han literature, the structure and decoration of burials did constantly change. The tomb designers either attempted to depict the journey of the dead to the immortal paradise, or tried to relate the disconnected realms in the afterlife into a single pictorial composition. The first effort gave rise to narrative art, as exemplified by the Bu Qianqiu tomb of the late first century BCE. The second effort, which aimed at synthesizing divergent images into a coherent but static structure, is typified by a sarcophagus of the second century CE from Guitoushan in Sichuan.

A mural in the Bu Qianqiu tomb is the earliest illustration known of the soul's journey to the paradise of the Queen Mother of the West. The long, horizontal picture is framed at both ends by male Fuxi and female Nüwa, two cosmic deities who, with the sun and the moon beside them, symbolize the opposition and harmony of yin-yang forces. Between them, the Queen Mother, the primary symbol of immortality, is situated on wave-like clouds, awaiting the arrival of a deceased couple who are travelling on the backs of a snake and a three-headed bird. Most significantly, the central theme of this scene is not the final attainment of immortality, but the path and movement leading to it.

The Guitoushan sarcophagus, on the other hand, reflects the other tendency of Han funerary art: instead of organizing images into a diachronic sequence, a synchronic structure combines previously scat-
tered images. Unlike many similar examples, this newly discovered sarcophagus is thoroughly inscribed with cartouches explaining its carvings. We find that an engraved pillar-gate is identified as ‘the Gate of Heaven’ (*tianmen*) – the entrance of the departed soul into the afterlife. Other images, including Fuxi and Nüwa, the sun and the moon, and directional animals (a tortoise, a dragon, and a ‘white tiger’), transform the stone box into the Universe of the dead person. The third group of motifs are symbols of immortality – two winged fairies are playing chess (labelled ‘*xianren bo*’) and another immortal is riding on a horse (labelled ‘*xianren qi*’). A fourth category of images symbolizes wealth and prosperity: a raised two-storied building is the ‘Grand Granary’ (*taicang*) which would supply the dead (as well as all the figures and animals engraved on the sarcophagus) with inexhaustible food; a ‘white pheasant’ (*hatchi*), a ‘cassa-coin-tree’ (*guizhu*) and a beast called a *lili*, typify three basic kinds of auspicious omens of animals, birds and plants. In an almost graphic manner, these carvings express an image of the ideal afterlife: in the land of darkness the sun and the moon will still shine; *yin* and *yang* will operate in full harmony; the departed soul will never suffer from hunger; and, most importantly, as the ‘great boundary’ of death has been crossed, the deceased will forever enjoy ‘longevity’.

The Cangshan tomb represents both the fusion and the culmination of these two trends. Ten relief carvings found in this tomb comprise a sophisticated narrative, which is also told in a long, rhymed inscription from the same tomb. Most importantly for this present analysis, both pictorial and textual evidence allow us to pin-point certain key motifs that punctuate this narrative – dividing it into sections that pertain to the various stages in the soul’s transformation from this life to the afterlife, and also linking these sections and stages into an organized whole.
can deduce that this text was in all likelihood from the hand of the artisan who designed the tomb. My translation of this difficult passage takes into consideration a number of readings by Chinese scholars, and tries to relate the text to the ten pictorial scenes in the tomb:

On the twenty-fourth day of the eighth month, in the first year of the Yuanjia reign period [CE 151],
We completed this tomb chamber
to send you, the honourable member of the family, off on your journey.
If your soul has consciousness,
please take pity on your descendants.
Let them prosper in their livelihood and achieve longevity.

[Allow us] to list and explain the pictures inside the tomb.

The rear wall (p. 94, top):
The Red Bird encounters a roaming immortal.
Phoenixes trail after the White Tiger who is strolling in the middle.

The central column [in front of the rear section] (p. 94, bottom):
Here a pair of intertwining dragons,
guard the tomb’s heart and ward off evil.

The ceiling of the [rear] chamber:
A wusi carriage is followed by servant girls who are driving carps;
The chariot of the White Tiger and the Blue Dragon runs ahead (p. 95, top);
The Duke of Thunder on wheels brings up the rear;
And those pushing the vehicle are assistants – foxes and mandarin ducks.

[The lintel above the west chamber] (p. 95, middle):
Ascending the bridge over the River Wei,
here appear official chariots and horsemen.
The Head Clerk is in front,
and the Master of Records is behind.
Together with them are the Chief of a Commune,
the Assistant Commandant of Cavalry,
and a barbarian drawing his cross-bow.

Water flows under the bridge;
a crowd of people are fishing.
Servant boys are paddling a boat,
ferrying [your] wives across the river.

[The lintel above the each niche] (p. 95, bottom):
[The women] then sit in small ping-carriages;
Rubbing of a relief carving from the rear wall of the Cangshan tomb.

Rubbing of a relief carving from the ceiling of the rear chamber of the Cangshan tomb.

Rubbing of a relief carving from the west wall of the main chamber of the Cangshan tomb.

Rubbing of a relief carving from the east wall of the main chamber of the Cangshan tomb.
following one another, they gallop to a ting station.\textsuperscript{53}

The awaiting officer youxi pays them an audience,\textsuperscript{54} and then apologizes for his departure. Behind [the procession], a ram-drawn carriage symbolizes a hearse;\textsuperscript{55} Above, divine birds are flying in drifting clouds.

The portrait inside [the east niche] (p. 97) represents you, the member of the family. The Jade Maidens are holding drinking vessels and serving boards—how fine, fragile and delicate they look!

The face of the door lintel (p. 98, top):
You are now taking a tour.
Chariots are guiding the retinue out,
while horsemen remain at the home.
The dudu is in front,\textsuperscript{56} and the zeicao is at the rear.\textsuperscript{57}
Above, tigers and dragons arrive with good fortune; a hundred birds fly over bringing abundant wealth.

The back of the door lintel (p. 98, bottom):
Here are musicians and singing girls playing the wind-instruments sheng and yu in harmony,
while the sound of a hu-pipe strikes up.
Dragons and birds are driving evil away, and cranes are poking at fish.

The three columns of the front hall:
In the middle, dragons ward off evil (p. 99, left);
On the left, are the Jade Fairy and immortals (p. 99, middle);
And on the right, [two characters missing], the junior master is called upon, and drink is served by his newly wedded wife (p. 99, right).\textsuperscript{18}

The ceiling of the front hall is decorated beautifully:
Surrounding a round protrusion, melon-leaf patterns embellish the centre; and fish patterns are added at the end of the leaves.

[All these figures and animals,] when you eat and drink, May you eat in the Great Granary, and may you drink from the rivers and seas.
Rubbing of a relief carving from the front of a façade-lintel in the Cangshan tomb.

Rubbing of a relief carving from the back of a façade-lintel in the Cangshan tomb.

You who devote yourself to learning,
May you be promoted to high rank and be awarded official seals and symbols.
You who devote yourselves to managing livelihood,
May your wealth increase ten-thousand fold in a single day.
[But you, the deceased,] have entered the dark world,
Completely separated from the living.
After the tomb is sealed,
It will never be opened again.

Two scenes described in this text are missing from the tomb. Since these are both supposed to embellish the ceilings, including the strange creatures and chariots in the rear chamber and the melon-leaf patterns in the front hall, it is possible that the tomb was somehow hurriedly finished before the top parts were fully decorated. But the absence of these carvings only confirms my earlier proposal: the text must have been written by the artisan and must document the original and intended design.

The designer of these carvings begins his description from the rear chamber, which contained the physical remains of the dead. The images planned for this chamber were all mythical: directional animals and
heavenly beasts transformed the solid-stone room into a microcosm (p. 94, top; p. 95, top), while intertwining dragons guarded the entrance to keep the corpse safe (p. 94, bottom). The artist then moves on to tell us his design for the front hall, which provided him with another enclosed space for the following parts of his pictorial programme. His voice suddenly changes from description to narrative, as he now follows a funerary procession which would be illustrated in two compositions. The first picture on the west wall shows the procession crossing a bridge over the River Wei (p. 94, middle). Two famous Han emperors, Jing and Wu, had built bridges across the River Wei north of Chang’an to link the Han capital with their own mausoleums; imperial guards of honour and hundreds of officials had accompanied their departed lords across these bridges; and the River Wei had become a general symbol of death. Inspired by these royal precedents, our artist determined to label the riders in his picture with official titles, but only with the names of the local ranks familiar to him. He also decided to draw the wives of the deceased, who would dutifully accompany their deceased husband to his burial ground. But the women had to take a boat across the river, since female (yin) had to be separated from male (yang), and since water embodied the yin principle.

As the movement of the funerary procession continues on the east wall, the participants are reduced to the close family members of the deceased (p. 94, bottom). The wives, having crossed the River of Death, get into special female carriages, delivering the hearse to the suburbs. They arrive at a ting-station, and are greeted by an official in front of it. This station, which in real life was a public guesthouse for travellers, symbolized the tomb of their husband; and the official who greeted the procession would be the tomb’s guardian. Elsewhere, stone statues erected in cemeteries with the official title tingzhang (the officer of a ting-station) inscribed on their chests convey the same idea. To emphasize this special implication of the station, the artist adapted a popular motif and depicted the station with half-opened gates, with figures emerging from the unseen place behind these gates. Holding a still-closed door-leaf, each figure seems to be about to open it for the dead. This image thus reminds us of the ‘Gate of Heaven’ on the Gutoushan sarcophagus and another stone coffin from Sichuan (p. 101). Belonging to a certain Wang Hui who died in 220 CE, this second sarcophagus bears a similar half-opened gate on the front end, as the entrance to an underground Universe inside the coffin that is defined by cosmic symbols on the other sides of the stone box.

The first two pictures in the front hall, therefore, both represent a funerary ritual. Stated plainly, in the first scene the deceased is sent out by a formal ceremonial procession of local officials, and in the second scene he is further escorted by his wives to his burial ground. This funerary journey ends at his tomb – the station with the half-opened gates – and entering these gates meant the burial of the deceased and the beginning of his underworld life. This is why, in the next scene, he resumes his human form as the honoured guest in an elaborate banquet (p. 97). This ‘portrait’, engraved in a special niche in the front hall, therefore, announces his rebirth: he is now living in his underground home with his human desires regained. Logically, this ‘portrait’ introduces the next series of carvings: his fulfilment of all of his desires in the afterlife. He is accompanied by immortal Jade Maidens, is entertained by musicians and dancers (p. 98, middle), and takes a grand outdoor tour (p. 98, top). These last two scenes are engraved on the front and back of the tomb’s facade-lintel. One facing outside and the other inside, they summarize the two main aspects of the life of leisure which the occupant of the Cangshan tomb would forever enjoy. The divine animals on the central facade-column (p. 99, left; p. 102) protect the front hall, just as the intertwining dragons guard the rear chamber. Images on the other two columns portray immortals and descendants of the deceased (p. 99, right, middle). Flanking the tomb entrance, these two groups of figures seem to symbolize the two worlds that are separated by the ‘great boundary’.

Rubbing of a carving on the front side of the sarcophagus of Wang Hui, Lushan, Sichuan, dated 221 CE.
In retrospect, we realize that this pictorial programme has three main parts with different themes. The rear chamber is transformed into a microcosm for the deceased, where his physical body is the reminder of his former existence. The next two carvings in the front hall depict a funerary journey, during which the deceased is transported to the threshold of the other world. The following scenes, inside and outside the front hall, represent the life of the deceased in the other world: he is enjoying all the delights and wonders promised by death. But if viewed as independent units, the first and third sections in this series are not ‘narrative’ at all, but only depict static ‘realms’ or ‘states’ of being. Their scenes do not form temporal sequences, but only reveal different aspects of these realms and states. It is the second part – the journey – that supplies the sense of happening, event, movement and orientation. But what is this second part? We find that it is a complex interpretation, perhaps the most complex interpretation, of the ‘great boundary’ in Han art:

other world/afterlife
__________________________________________________________ station
‘great boundary’
__________________________________________________________ river
this world/this life

(6)

No longer a punctuating moment, here ‘death’ is represented as a lasting stage in which the deceased remains shapeless, concealed in his coffin and carried by the hearse. The key images of the two scenes define this stage: in the first picture, the ‘river’ separates this stage from the living world, and in the second picture the ‘station’ distinguishes this stage from the world beyond. The concept of ‘death’ or the ‘great boundary’ is thus understood differently from its conventional meaning as the expiration of bodily functions. Instead, it means precisely a ‘ritual duration’, which provides a crucial transition that links life and the afterlife into a narrative of the soul’s transformation. I would like to term this kind of representation a transitional narrative.

This transitional narrative mirrors the structure and function of a funerary ritual. Many anthropologists have pondered on the meaning and definition of ritual. No single agreement has been reached but, as James Watson observes, ‘in all studies of the subject it is generally assumed that ritual is about transformation – in particular, it relates to the transformation of one being or state into another, changed being or state.’ In the Cangshan tomb, what is being transformed is the state of the deceased or his soul; what transforms the deceased is the ‘transitional’ ritual sequence. Watson continues: ‘rituals are ... expected to have transformative powers. Rituals change people and things; the ritual process is active, not merely passive.’ A ritual process demands its own space and duration; a single liminal ‘boundary’ must thus be multiplied to frame this space and duration.

We can thus understand why the two ritual scenes in the Cangshan tomb emphasize the efforts made by the living to convey the dead across the ‘river’ and send him through the ‘half-opened gate’, and why these two scenes are presented in the central hall in the tomb. Placed in such a prominent position, they not only define an individual space and duration, but also set up a distinctive point of view for comprehending the first and third parts of the pictorial programme. From this point of a funerary ritual, the mundane world and immortal paradise appear as static entities, with their respective ‘features’, but without internal movements. A swimmer in a river senses the flow of water, but sees only the still banks on either side; to him, this moving river connects the separated terrain and makes it into a whole landscape. We can apply this analogy to the Cangshan funerary narrative: it becomes a narrative because its non-narrative parts – static pictures representing the former and future existences of the deceased – are linked into a continuity by the scenes depicting the movement in the intermediate zone. And it is a
transitional narrative because the narrator's point of view is determined neither by this world nor by the world beyond, but by the funerary procession which escorts the dead person as he crosses the 'great boundary'.

It has become something of a commonplace to assert that the supreme literary achievement of Chinese elite culture lies in its classical poetic tradition, and that the highest expression of this high culture was reached during the period later labelled, appropriately, the High Tang, which corresponds roughly to the first half of the eighth century CE. Either constituent of this commonplace could be interrogated with profit, of course, for the cultural priority assigned to poetry in China is as vulnerable to scrutiny as is the privileging of Tang—and especially High Tang—poetic production. Attention to the latter element first, however, not only affords a more specific and therefore manageable focus, but it also illuminates likely motivations and conditions behind the larger question as well.

The historical record tells us that some 2,200 poets and almost 49,000 works were collected in the Complete Tang Poems [Quan Tang shi], commissioned by the Qing emperor in 1705 and completed two years later; and yet, fewer than one hundred of these writers are represented in the anthology that has become most familiar to both scholarly and popular audiences: the Three Hundred Tang Poems [Tang shi sanbai shou]. Of these, perhaps only half might enjoy some name recognition among Western scholars of Chinese literature. And although the more than 2000 poets from the Tang whose works were collected in the larger compendium certainly reflect a considerable increase over the poetry-writing population of previous eras, the figures are even more impressive in the following centuries: four times that number were active during the succeeding dynasty, the Song, when individual poets are known to have produced several thousands of poems on their own, not to speak of the thousands of writers and tens of thousands of poems from the Ming and Qing dynasties thereafter. Moreover, hundreds of poets who happened to be women or monks—and thus not potential examination candidates—were either consigned to the margins of anthologies, collected in