Where Are They Going? Where Did They Come From? – Hearse and ‘Soul-carriage’ in Han Dynasty Tomb Art

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Images of chariots are abundant in Han period (206 BCE-CE 220) tombs and serve different purposes. Some indicate the official rank of the tomb occupant or pertain to events in his life, while others depict funerary processions as well as imaginary tours taken by the soul. This paper focuses on chariot images of the second kind. Because of their dual function of representing actual ritual events and a fictional time/space after death, these images link life and afterlife into a continuous metaphorical journey, in which death is conceived as a liminal experience. Instead of elaborating on the already rich scholarship on the nomenclature of ancient chariots, therefore, this essay aims to uncover the logic of funerary ritual and ritual art.

In particular, I want to explore the role of chariot images in signifying movement and time. Moreover, by tracing the development in burial practices from the interment of actual chariots in the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE-CE 9) to the substitution of pictorial images during the Eastern Han (25-220), we can better understand an important mechanism of artistic creation in Han art.

The most explicit representation of a bipartite journey – first a funerary procession to the grave and then an imaginary tour in the afterlife – is seen in an Eastern Han tomb located at Cangshan in southeastern Shandong province, which is securely dated by an inscription in the tomb to 151. Amazingly, this inscription also explains the tomb’s carvings in a coherent narrative (Wu, 1994). To summarize, the writer of the inscription, who was most probably the designer of the tomb, begins his description in the rear chamber where the coffin lay. Images in this section are all mystical in nature and include heavenly beasts and intertwining dragons. He then moves on to identify the pictures in the main chamber. Here, human figures become the principal subject, and one finds a funerary journey represented in two horizontal compositions on the east and west walls above two niches. The first picture, on the west wall, shows a chariot procession crossing a river (Fig. 1a). The corresponding section of the inscription reads:

Ascending the bridge over the Wei river,
Here appear official chariots and horsemen,
The Head Clerk is in front,...

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

The Wei river was famous during the Han period. Flowing north of the Western Han capital Chang’ an (present-day Xi’an in Shaanxi province), it separated the city from the royal mausolea on the river’s north bank. Several Han emperors built bridges across this river to link the capital with their own tombs, and imperial guards and hundreds of officials accompanied their departed lords across these bridges. The Wei river, then, must have become a general symbol of death, and thus it is not surprising to find recurring images of a Wei river bridge (Wei Qiao or Weishui Qiao) in Han dynasty burials. In the enormous Helingeer tomb in Inner Mongolia (c. late 2nd century), a depiction of such a bridge appears above the passageway leading from the middle to the rear chamber. Most of the pictures in the middle chamber illustrate the cities and towns where the deceased held office during his career; the rear chamber has no such scenes but is embellished with images of an ideal afterlife, which include a large estate and an immortal ‘moon place’. The Wei river bridge painted over the entrance to the rear chamber thus both separates and connects life and the afterlife. A chariot procession depicted crossing the bridge further supplies a sense of movement from the former to the latter.

(Fig. 1a) Rubbing of mural showing the crossing of the Wei river bridge
Main chamber, west wall; Cangshan, Shandong province
Eastern Han period, 151
Stone carving
Height 51 cm, width 169 cm
(Alter Wu, 1995, fig. 4.69)
In the Cangshan tomb, the chariot procession crossing the bridge consists of male officials, while the wives of the deceased are taking a boat across the river, shown flowing under the bridge. (Perhaps the reason for this arrangement is that yin [female] has to be separated from yang [male], and water embodies the yin principle.) As the funerary journey continues onto the east wall, however, it becomes more private, and the wives take over the main role in the ritual practice, accompanying their husband to the burial ground (Fig. 1b):

[The women] then sit in a small ping-carriage; Following a horseman, they gallop to a ling-station. The awaiting officer [patrolman] pays them an audience, and then apologizes for his departure. At the rear [of the chariot procession], a yang che [ram carriage] symbolizes a hearse; Above, divine birds are flying among drifting clouds.

This passage identifies three components of the funerary procession represented in the picture: a horseman who guides the procession, a ping-carriage for the wives and a ram-drawn carriage for the dead. Both types of carriage are recorded in transmitted texts. A ping-carriage is identified in the Han period dictionary Shi Ming as a covered sedan for women. The term yang che is a pun on xiang che (‘auspicious carriage’), because yang (‘ram’) and xiang (‘auspiciousness’) are homonyms. (This is why so many Han tombs include ram images as lucky symbols.) A xiang che is recorded in the early Han period text Li Ji as a carriage whose ‘seat should be left empty’ during a funeral (Ruan, comp., p. 1.253). The commentaries explain that this is because the carriage was used by the deceased when he was alive, but as a hun che – a vehicle to transport his invisible soul – in his funeral procession. This ‘soul-carriage’, then, is not a hearse: its image in the Cangshan mural only ‘symbolizes’ a hearse. This distinction is confirmed by a scene in the Hel-tinger tomb, which also depicts the deceased being accompanied by his wives during a funerary journey. Here, however, the chariot following the wives’ ping-carriage is a long wagon covered with a vaulted awning. As I will demonstrate later, this is a typical image of a hearse in Han art.

The funerary journey in the Cangshan tomb ends at a ling-station (see Fig. 1b), which, in earthly life, was a guest house for travellers, but is depicted here to symbolize a tomb. Entering the station signifies burial: the deceased will live in his underground home for eternity. This is why, up to this point, the deceased is represented only by symbols. In the next picture, however, he is portrayed in his human form. The following scenes represent an idealized underworld: the deceased is shown accompanied by immortal ‘jade maidens’, enjoying musical and dance performances, and he takes a grand outdoor tour. This last scene on the tomb’s façade (Fig. 1c) is described in the inscription:

The face of the door lintel: You are now taking a tour. Chariots are guiding the retinue out, While horsemen remain at home. The shu (low-rank military official) is in front. And the zì cūn (policeman) is at the rear. Above, tigers and dragons arrive with good fortune; A hundred birds fly over bringing abundant wealth.

This chariot procession differs fundamentally from the previous ones in the main chamber: instead of representing a funerary ritual, it depicts a journey taken by the deceased’s soul after the funeral. Not coincidentally, this journey reverses the orientation of the funerary procession; running left to right instead of right to left, it is directed towards the Queen Mother.
of the West (Xiwangmu), a principal immortal in Han mythology, whose image appears on a column supporting the door lintel.

If the funerary procession is represented symbolically in the Cangshan tomb, it is rendered in more realistic form in other burials. An early example of such realistic representations is found on a stone sarcophagus from Weishan in Shandong province. Dating from the late Western or early Eastern Han period, this and other stone sarcophagi discovered in recent archaeological excavations have provided new evidence for the early development of funerary stone carvings. One of the long sides of this sarcophagus is carved with three rectangular compositions separated by wide frames (Figs 2a and b). The left picture shows a tall figure presenting a roll of silk to a child. Although this scene bears some resemblance to the popular motif of Confucius paying respect to the "boy genius" Xiang Tao, it more likely represents an important funerary ritual during which guests visited the deceased's home and offered gifts to his descendants. Interpreted in this way, this scene leads logically to the next, which illustrates a funerary procession centred on a large, four-wheeled hearse. The ten people pulling the hearse are most likely acquaintances of the deceased, while the four men and four women following it may be his family members (Wang et al., p. 70). The procession moves toward a graveyard, shown in the third composition, in which a burial pit, perfectly rectangular in shape, has been prepared in front of three triangular tumuli, probably belonging to the ancestors of the family. Groups of gentlemen are sitting or standing next to the grave, either paying homage or offering libations.
Created during the early phase of pictorial carvings and in a remote area, this sarcophagus is naive both in carving technique and pictorial style, but the artist's intention to represent actual funerary rites is unmistakable. The juxtaposition of the three scenes also implies a temporal sequence from the world of the living to the world of the dead, with the transition between the two realms being established by the funerary procession. About two centuries later, a set of much more sophisticated representations of funerary rituals was created for a large tomb at Yi'nan in southeast Shandong, not far from Cangshan. I have contended previously that many pictures in the front and middle chambers of this tomb depict mortuary rites based on descriptions in the Eastern Zhou period (770-221 BCE) text *Huang* and that the various buildings at the foci of these scenes are likely ritual structures, such as an ancestral temple, funerary shrine and tomb. This theory has been greatly developed by Lydia Thompson, whose doctoral dissertation provides the first comprehensive reading of the pictures in this extraordinary tomb (Thompson, 1998). The present discussion on Yi'nan chariot images supplies further evidence for her general interpretation of the tomb's decorative programme.

On the north wall of the middle chamber, horses gallop and a chariot procession moves swiftly leftward (Fig. 3a). Their destination is a queue-pillar gate, in front of which two officials greet the procession. Thompson's idea that this gate marks the entrance to a graveyard can be sustained by an additional piece of evidence: on top of each pillar stands a pole bearing a cross called a biao—a funerary symbol. This image appears in an early sixth century stone carving which depicts a filial son kneeling between two such crosses while paying homage to a tomb mound (Wu, 1995, fig. 5.8). The scene in the Yi'nan tomb must therefore illustrate a funerary procession. Included in the retinue are three chariots of different typologies: the first is a dao che, or a canopied 'leading carriage'; it is followed by a windowless sedan with a sloping roof and then by a covered wagon, whose long and narrow carriage has a vaulted awning. Based on the carvings found in the Cangshan tomb, I previously identified the second chariot as a ping-carriage and the third as a hearse. I would like to revise this identification and propose a more likely possibility—the last two chariots are both for the dead, the difference between them being that one carries the body of the deceased and the other transports his soul.

According to the *Huang*, a series of rites was conducted in the ancestral temple of the deceased's family on the day before the burial. Two types of carriages were displayed in the temple courtyard: a hearse and one or more chariots used by the deceased when he was alive. The Eastern Han author Zheng Xuan (127-200) explained the use of the second type: [The ritual of displaying it in the temple] is modelled on the custom of a living person displaying his chariot before taking a journey. Nowadays, people call it a 'soul-carriage' [hun che]. This chariot is therefore identical to the 'auspicious chariot' recorded in the *Li Ji* and depicted in the Cangshan tomb (see Fig. 1b). The *Huang* also stipulates that when the hearse delivers the coffin of the deceased to the graveyard the following day, it should be accompanied by the soul-carriage, which should travel to the tomb with its seat unoccupied (Ruan, comp., pp. 1,147-49).

The connection between this record in the *Huang* and the Yi'nan procession scene is established by another picture in the...
A conventional view of the chariot with a vaulted awning—identified here as a hearse—is that it represents a freight wagon for transporting heavy goods (Zhao, pp. 79-80). This opinion, however, ignores the pictorial context of these images, which always occupy important positions in a tomb and sometimes even define the focus of a composition, as seen, for example, in the Eastern Han period carving in Figure 6. Archaeological excavations of certain important Western Han tombs containing remains of actual carriages provide additional evidence for identifying this chariot as a hearse.

One such burial is the famous Mangcheng Tomb No. 1 of Prince Liu Sheng, who ruled the Zhongshan principality (in present-day Hebei province) from 154 to 113 BCE. As shown in a tentative reconstruction illustrated in Figure 7a, the tomb consists of three main sections: the first includes two side chambers, a storage room and a stable, located near the entrance. The main chamber was fashioned into a reception hall centred on two covered seats, around which vessels, lamps and figurines were arranged in rows, suggesting a banquet or sacrifice. Separated from this central hall by a stone gate were the private quarters of the deceased prince. His body disintegrated long ago; what has survived is a 'jade body' which originally encased the corpse. I have written about this 'jade body' and the tomb's architectural symbolism (Wu, 1997), but that discussion does not address a very important component of the tomb: the two horse-drawn chariots in the vestibule before the main chamber. The excavators noticed that by being placed in this position, these two chariots seem to have been deliberately distinguished from those in the stable (Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo and Hebei Sheng Wenwu Guancha, p. 179). The excavation report includes a drawing of the remains of the disintegrated chariots, but the authors did not attempt to reconstruct or identify the carriages. Still, the drawing is quite useful, yielding to a careful observer invaluable information about the form of the chariots (Fig. 7b). Of particular importance are the small metal fittings which would have originally embellished the wooden framework of the roof or
canopy. Though found on the ground in a seemingly chaotic jumble, these metal pieces outlined distinct enough shapes (marked with dotted lines in the drawing) to indicate the typology of each chariot. Fifteen such fittings from the first chariot form a rough circle: clearly, they decorated the spokes of an umbrella which originally stood on a chariot that must have resembled the leading carriage in the Yi'nan funerary procession scene (see Fig. 3a). Only eleven fittings remain from the second chariot. Instead of forming a circle, they outline a curved contour which suggests the front opening of the vaulted awning on a wagon. Again, we find an image of this wagon in the Yi'nan picture.

Another group of chariots was found in Dabaotai Tomb No. 1 near Beijing, probably belonging to Prince Liu Jian, who died in 45 BCE. Unlike the earlier Mancheng tomb, which was built inside a mountain cliff, this tomb was constructed entirely of thick timber. Another difference to the Mancheng tomb is that not two, but three chariots were buried in front of the main chamber (Fig. 8a). The first and third chariots in this group are identical in typology to the two Mancheng chariots. The first had an umbrella standing on a very shallow carriage
Although the third chariot cannot be reconstructed because of insufficient data, enough remained to allow the excavators to describe it as 'a large wagon with a vaulted awning, larger than the two chariots in front of it, [with a] carriage that was especially narrow and deep' (Dabao Hanmu Fajue Zu, p. 85). In their opinion, it was very likely a hearse, while the first chariot probably served to guide a funerary procession. Their reconstruction of the second chariot shows a roofed sedan, which they tentatively identified as the main vehicle of the tomb occupant (Fig. 8c). These three chariots are almost identical to those depicted in the funerary procession scenes from Yi'nan and other tombs (see Figs 3a, 4 and 5). Since the Mancheng tomb lacked the second chariot, it is possible that a 'tripartite' procession consisting of a leading carriage, a soul-carriage and a hearse was not introduced until the late Western Han and was then represented pictorially in funerary art during the Eastern Han.

The two groups of chariots in the Mancheng and Dabaotai tombs share a peculiar feature: they were placed facing outward, not inward. In other words, it seems that after the deceased had been sent from the ancestral temple to his grave, the chariot procession was turned around to face the outside before the tomb was sealed. This final position, therefore, implies an orientation opposite to that of the funerary procession. If this orientation indicates a journey, its destination could not possibly be the tomb, now behind the chariots. Having answered the question about where these chariots came from, we now face another question: Where are they going?

This question has been partially answered by the Cangshan inscription cited at the beginning of this essay: the chariot procession carved above the tomb's entrance represents an imaginary tour taken by the deceased's soul. This procession, in fact, has nothing to do with a funerary ritual, but, as stated earlier, depicts the further transformation of the soul in the
afterlife. While the inscription does not specify the end-point of the journey, the procession clearly moves toward the Queen Mother of the West portrayed on the right door column. This reading is confirmed by another second century carving, originally a ceiling stone from a funerary shrine in Jiaxiang, Shandong province (Figs 9a and b). A masterpiece of Han funerary art, this carving vividly represents the soul’s journey after death.

At the bottom of the composition, three men have just descended from their chariot and horses. They are mourners who carry funerary banners, and they are depicted slowly approaching a group of mortuary structures which include a shrine, a gate, and a tomb mound. Their leader raises his head and left arm, and following his motion, we find a thread of cloud rising upward from the mound. Along the cloud’s swirling path, two covered sedans pulled by winged horses are ascending, greeted by fairies and immortals. The chariot with a female driver, most likely belonging to a deceased wife, halts in front of the Queen Mother of the West, while the chariot with a male driver, probably belonging to the dead husband, stops next to a male deity, the King Father of the East (Dongwanggong).

The two vehicles undertaking this heavenly journey resemble the second chariot in the Yi'nan procession scene and are clearly the soul-carriages of a deceased couple. However, in some cases, especially in remote regions in Shaanxi and Sichuan provinces, a hearse with a vaulted awning is sometimes shown about to approach the Queen Mother or to enter the Gate to Heaven, as in the depiction on a sarcophagus from Leshan (Sichuan province) in Figure 10. This is understandable: just as at Cangshan a soul-carriage could symbolize a hearse, here the hearse assumes a double role, acting also as a soul-carriage. The real importance of all these carvings, however, is that as pictorial images they gave concrete form to ideas that were only vaguely implied by the chariots buried in the Mancheng and Dabaotai tombs. In those earlier tombs, a single group of chariots pertained to two stages of a posthumous journey—the first starting from the ancestral temple and ending at the tomb,
(Fig. 10) Rubbing of mural showing the soul's heavenly journey. Sarophagus, Leshan, Sichuan province, Eastern Han period, 2nd century. Stone carving. Height 77 cm, width 213 cm (After Gao Wen and Gao Chenggang, Zhongguo Huaxiang Shijian Tushu, Taiyuan, 1996, fig. 45.)

This bipartite journey was not only given explicit pictorial form during the Eastern Han period, but actually became a powerful impulse towards artistic creation, inspiring artists to invent various ways of representing it. Several examples discussed earlier, including the Cangshan carvings and the Jiaxiang ceiling stone, are the result of such invention. A tomb at Yangzishan near Chengdu in Sichuan province introduced another pictorial formula for representing this journey (Fig. 11a). Three vaulted chambers of this tomb are built as a continuous tunnel, and pictorial tiles and stone carvings decorate the antechamber and main chamber in two horizontal bands (Fig. 11b). Entering the tomb, images of que-pillars on the two walls form a symbolic gateway. Each wall of the main chamber bears a depiction of a chariot procession, but the two processions move in opposite directions. To the right as one enters, a group of horses and chariots is shown having passed the que-gate and moving toward an elaborate banquet inside the tomb; to the left, a much grander procession occupies the entire length of the wall and is depicted leaving the tomb. This pictorial programme, which graphically conveys the...
idea of a bipartite posthumous journey, provided a blueprint for some of the great tombs built after the Han period. Among these later tombs, that of Lou Rui, a high official of the Northern Qi dynasty (550-77), is an outstanding example. Possibly decorated by famous court painters such as Yang Zihua (6th century), its 21-metre long entryway appears as a painting gallery. 71 scenes are organized into two enormous compositions on the two walls. On the right wall, as one faces inside the tomb, horsemen have dismounted and are entering the tomb (Fig. 12a), but on the left, they are galloping on horseback toward the tomb’s entrance, about to enter the vast space beyond the dark grave (Fig. 12b).