The Transparent Stone: Inverted Vision and Binary Imagery in Medieval Chinese Art

A crucial moment divides the course of Chinese art into two broad periods. Before this moment, a ritual art tradition transformed general political and religious concepts into material symbols. Forms that we now call works of art were integral parts of larger monumental complexes such as temples and tombs, and their creators were anonymous craftsmen whose individual creativity was generally subordinated to larger cultural conventions. From the fourth and fifth centuries on, however, there appeared a group of individuals—scholar-artists and art critics—who began to forge their own history. Although the construction of religious and political monuments never stopped, these men of letters attempted to transform public art into their private possessions, either physically, artistically, or spiritually. They developed a strong sentiment toward ruins, accumulated collections of antiques, placed miniature monuments in their houses and gardens, and “refined” common calligraphic and pictorial idioms into individual styles. This paper discusses new modes of writing and painting at this liminal point in Chinese art history.

Reversed Image and Inverted Vision

Near the modern city of Nanjing in eastern China, some ten mausoleums surviving from the early sixth century bear witness to the past glory of emperors and princes of the Liang Dynasty (502–57).¹ The mausoleums share a general design (fig. 1). Three pairs of stone monuments are usually erected in front of the tumulus: a pair of stone animals—lions or qilin unicorns according to the status of the dead—are placed before a gate formed by two stone pillars; the name and title of the deceased appear on the flat panels beneath the pillars’ capitals. Finally two opposing memorial stelae bear identical epitaphs recording the career and merits of the dead person. This sequence of paired stones defines a central axis or a ritual path leading to the tomb mound. As indicated by its ancient designation shendao, or “the spirit road,” this path was built not for the living but for the departing soul, which, it was commonly believed, traveled along


the path from its old home to its new abode, crossing the pillar-gate that marked out the boundary between these two worlds.2

Fifteen hundred years have passed, and these mausoleums have turned into ruins. The stone animals stand in rice fields; the stelae are cracked and their inscriptions blurred (fig. 2). But the “spirit road,” which never takes a material form but is only defined by the shapes surrounding it, seems to have escaped the ravages of time. As long as the pairs of monuments—even their ruins—still exist *in situ*, a visitor recognizes this “path” and he, or his gaze, travels along it. Like the ancients, he would first meet the twin stone animals, each with its body curving from crest to tail to form a smooth S-shaped contour. With their large round eyes and enormous gaping mouths, the mythical beasts seem to be in a state of alarm and amazement. Compared to the bulky animal statues created
three centuries earlier during the Han Dynasty, these statues exhibit new interest in psychology rather than in pure physique, in momentary expression rather than in permanent existence, in individuality rather than in anonymity, and in a complex combination of fantastic and human elements rather than in uniformity. The vividness of the animals even seems at odds with the solemn atmosphere of a graveyard. Standing in front of the stone pillars, these strange creatures seem to have just emerged from the other side of the gate and are astonished by what they are confronting.

The powerful imagery of these stone beasts must have contributed to the invention of abundant legends about them: people have repeatedly reported seeing them jumping up in the air. In 546, the animals in front of the Jianling mausoleum, the tomb of the dynastic founder's father, reportedly suddenly got up and began to dance. They then fought violently with a huge serpent under the pillar-gate, and one beast was even injured by the evil reptile. This event must have created a great sensation at the time: it was recorded in the dynasty's official history and the famous poet Yu Xin (513–81) incorporated it into his writings. This and other tales, obviously originating from the statues' symbolic

![FIGURES 3a–b. Mirroring inscriptions on stone pillars in Emperor Wen's tomb, 502 A.D. 62.5 x 142 cm. After Zhu Xizu et al., Liuchao lingmu diaocha baogao (An investigative report of Six Dynasties mausoleums; Nanjing, 1935), figs. 20a–b.](image-url)
function of warding off evil and from the desire to explain their decay over time, nevertheless demanded and inspired further political interpretations. Thus when a similar event was later reported to the court, some ministers considered it a good omen, but the emperor feared it as an inauspicious indication of future rebellions. Underlying both interpretations was the belief that the stone beasts carried divine messages to the living.6

Having passed the animal statues, the visitor finds himself before the stone pillars. As mentioned above, these bear two panels with identical inscriptions. In the example shown in figs. 3a–b, the passage reads: “The spirit road of Grand Supreme Emperor Wen,” the father of the founder of the Liang Dynasty. There is nothing strange about the content of these inscriptions; what is puzzling is the way they are written: the inscription on the left panel is a piece of regular text, but the one on the right panel is reversed.7

Readers unfamiliar with Chinese writing may gain some sense of the irony created by this juxtaposition from an English “translation” of the Chinese passages (figs. 3c–d): although the content of the two inscriptions is identical, their effect is entirely different. The inscription on the left is a series of words forming a coherent and readable text. But the inscription on the right, at first sight, consists of no more than individual and illegible signs. A temporal reading sequence

![Diagram: reversed images and reversed vision](https://example.com/diagram.png)

**FIGURES 3c–d (top).** English translation of mausoleum inscriptions.
**FIGURE 4 (center).** Diagram: reversed images.
**FIGURE 5 (bottom).** Diagram: reversed vision.
is thus established: even though the two inscriptions would be seen simultaneously from the spirit path, they must be comprehended sequentially. It would not take more than a few seconds for a literate person to read the normal inscription on the left, but to understand the inscription on the right he would first need to find clues. Such clues are found visually in the physical relationship between the two inscriptions: both their symmetrical placement and echoing patterns suggest that the illegible text “mirrors” the legible one. Unconsciously, the visitor will have taken the normal text as his point of reference for the other’s meaning.

The problem of comparing the individual characters of the two inscriptions no longer exists once the visitor realizes they are the same. The “illegible” inscription has become legible because he can read its mirror image (fig. 4). In other words, the mystery of its content has vanished: it is simply a reversed version of a regular piece of writing. What remains is the mystery of its reading: it would become not only legible in content but normal in form if the reader could invert his own vision to read it from the “back”—from the other side of the column (fig. 5). Once this inference is made, the reversed inscription changes from a subject to be deciphered to a stimulus of the imagination. Controlled and deceived by the engraved signs, the visitor has mentally transported himself to the other side of the gate. He has forgotten the solid and opaque stone material, which has now become “transparent.”

All this may seem a psychological game and a quite subjective interpretation, but the perceptual transformation explored here is seen frequently in the funerary art and literature of the Six Dynasties. During a funerary rite, the “visitor” whom I have just described would have been a mourner. As a mourner, his frame of mind would be focused on the function of a funerary ritual and the mortuary monuments framing it. Who was supposed to be in a position to read the reversed inscription “obversely”? In other words, who was thought to be on the other side of the stone column looking out?

A gate always separates space into an interior and an exterior. In a cemetery these are commonly identified as the world of the dead and the world of the living. The pair of inscriptions on the twin pillars signifies the junction of these two worlds and the meeting point of two gazes projecting from the opposite sides of the gate (fig. 5). The “natural” gaze of the mourner proceeds from the outside toward the burial ground, while his “inverted” gaze is now attributed to the dead man at the other end of the spirit road (where his body was buried and his life was recorded on memorial tablets).

The important point is that this reading/viewing process forces the mourner to go through a psychological dislocation from this world to the world beyond it. Confronted by the “illegible” inscription, his normal, mundane logic is disrupted and shaken. The discovery of the mirror relationship between the two inscrip-
tions forges a powerful metaphor for the opposition between life and death. The sequential reading of the inscriptions creates a temporal shift from within to without; by mentally dislocating himself to the other side of the gate he identifies himself with the dead and assumes the viewpoint of the dead. The function of the gate is thus not merely to separate the two spaces and realms. As a static, physical boundary it can easily be crossed, but it is always there. More important, to completely fulfill the ritual transformation, the material existence of the gate has to be rejected. The underlying premise of this ritual transformation is that only when a living person accepts the otherworldly view can he enter the encircled graveyard without violating it, and only then can he not only pay respect to the dead but also speak for the dead.

In this light we can understand the progression traced by Lu Ji’s (261–303) series of three mourning songs. In the first song a funeral is narrated as if it were being watched by an anonymous but dispassionate observer:

> By divination an auspicious site is sought . . .
> For early departure attendants and drivers are roused . . .
> Life and death have different principles;
> To carry out the coffin there must be a time.
> A cup of wine is set before the two pillars;
> The funeral is begun, and the sacred carriage advanced.

The funeral procession is still the focus of the second song, but the description becomes subjective and emotional. The poet speaks for the mourners and sees through their eyes:

> Wandering, the thoughts of relatives and friends;
> In their distress their spirits are uneasy . . .
> The soul carriage is silent without sound;
> Only to be seen are his cap and belt,
> Objects of use represent his past life . . .
> A mournful wind delays the moving wheels;
> Lowering clouds bind the drifting mists.
> We shake our whips and point to the sacred mound;
> We yoke the horses and thereafter depart.

The point of view changes again as soon as the funeral procession finally departs toward the sacred mound. In the third and last song, it is the deceased who is seeing, hearing, and speaking in the first person. The poet no longer identifies himself with the mourners but with the dead:

> The piled-up hills, how they tower!
> My dark hut skulks among them.
> Wide stand the Four Limits;
> High-arched spreads the azure skies.

The Transparent Stone
By my side I hear the hidden river’s flow;
On my back, I gaze at the sky roof suspended.
How lonely is the wide firmament!

When Prince Xiao Ziliang (459–94) went to Mount Zuxing, he gazed at his family tombs there and lamented: “Looking north there is my [dead] uncle; directly before me I see my [deceased] brother—if you have consciousness after your death, please let me be buried here in your land.” Ziliang was grieving for both his deceased kin and himself—as the survivor of the family he already saw himself buried in a dark tomb. Sentimental and self-pitying, he seems to have set an example for Xiao Yan (464–549), the founder of the Liang and a great patron of literature. Xiao Yan, or Emperor Wu of Liang, dedicated the Jianling mausoleum to his deceased father, Xiao Shunzhi (444–94), whose mirror inscriptions have been the focus of our discussion; he also had the Xiuling mausoleum constructed for himself. During a trip in the third month of 544, he sacrificed at his father’s graveyard and then visited his own tomb, where “he was deeply moved and began to cry.” One wonders what moved him to tears in this second mausoleum; the only possible answer is the vision of himself lying underground on the other side of the pillar-gate.

The concept of “mourner” thus needs to be redefined. A mourner was not only a living person who came to a graveyard to meet a deceased Other, but also possibly a person who visited his own tomb to mourn for himself as the Other. In the first case, the pillar-gate separated yet connected the dead and the living; in the second case, it separated and connected a man’s split images that confronted each other. In the late third century, Lu Ji had tried to speak for both the mourners and the dead; in the fifth and sixth centuries people lamented for themselves as though they were dead. From this second tradition emerged three great songs by Tao Qian (365–427), which chillingly observe the world from a dead person’s silent perception:

How desolate the moorland lies,
The white poplars sough in the wind.
In the ninth month of sharp frost,
They escort me to the far suburbs.
There where no one dwells at all
The high grave mounds rear their heads.
The horses whinny to the sky,
The wind emits a mournful sound.
Once the dark house is closed
In a thousand years there will be no new dawn.
There will be no new dawn
And all man’s wisdom helps not at all.
The people who have brought me here
Have now returned, each to his home.  
My own family still feel grief—  
The others are already singing.  
What shall we say, we who are dead?  
Your bodies too will lodge on the hill.\textsuperscript{14}

Tao Qian must have been fascinated by the various possibilities of “inverting” himself—observing and describing himself and his surroundings as though he had become a bodiless and transparent “gaze,” moving along the funeral procession like a camera lens. He wrote \textit{jiwen}—sacrificial eulogies—for his relatives, and in these pieces he presents himself as a living member of the family lamenting dead kin.\textsuperscript{15} But he also composed a sacrificial eulogy for himself. Unlike the funeral song in which he (as a dead man) follows and watches the entire mortuary rite, in the short preface to his self-eulogy he placed himself in the shifting zone between life and death:

The year is \textit{dingmao} \textsuperscript{427} and the correspondence of the pitch pipe is \textit{wu yi}. The weather is cold and the night is long. The atmosphere is mournful; the wild geese are on the move; plants and trees turn yellow and shed their leaves. Master Tao (i.e., Tao Qian himself) is about to take leave of the “traveler’s inn” \textit{[life]} to return forever to his eternal home \textit{[death]}. His friends are sad in their grief for him; they will join in his funeral feast this very evening, make offering of fine vegetables and present libations of clear wine. The faces he sees already grow dim; the sounds he hears grow fainter.\textsuperscript{16}

If life and death are separated by a pillar-gate, the experience described here must take place between the two pillars on the gate’s threshold. Unlike Lu Ji, who narrated a funeral in distinct stages progressing from the living to the dead, Tao Qian assumes a position between the two. This suspended position was not completely Tao’s invention, however. We find a classical example in Confucius’ life:

In the year \textit{ren si} \textsuperscript{479 B.C.}, on the morning of the 11th of the 4th moon, Confucius arose, and then, supporting himself with his walking stick in one hand while the other hand rested behind his back, he advanced majestically to the front door of his apartment and began to chant the following words: “The mountain saint is going to disappear; the main beam of the empire is going to be broken; the sage is going to die!” After the rhythmic recital of this solemn prediction he went and placed himself \textit{in the center of the gateway}.... After seven days, on the 18th day of the 4th moon, near midday, he expired at the age of seventy-three.\textsuperscript{17}

With this anecdote we return to the theme of the gate, but with a new interest in the elusive, two-dimensional plane between its two pillars rather than in the two spaces separated by it. Guided by this interest, our attention also shifts from the actual gates standing in a cemetery to their image depicted on flat stone. Beginning in the second century, such images were often engraved on the frontal sides of sarcophagi.\textsuperscript{18} In some cases an empty gate indicates the entrance to the other world (fig. 6); in other cases horses or a rider guide the wandering soul

FIGURE 7 (top right). A rider guiding the soul to enter a pillar-gate. Ink rubbing of carving on right side of stone sarcophagus from Xinjin, Sichuan Province; Eastern Han, 2nd century A.D. Collection of Sichuan University Museum, Chengdu. After Gao Wen, *Sichuan Han dai huaxiangshi* (Han Dynasty pictorial stone carvings from Sichuan; Chengdu, 1987), plate 86.

through the gate (fig. 7). A third variation offers a more complex illustration (fig. 8): a figure emerges from a half-opened gate, holding the still closed door-leaf. The gate is thus half empty and half solid; the empty space recedes into an unknown depth, while the solid door-leaf blocks the spectator’s gaze from penetrating the hidden space. The figure crosses these two halves, both exposing himself against the empty space and concealing himself behind the closed door-leaf. It seems that he is about to vanish into the emptiness, but is still grasping the door and looking at the world to which he once belonged. This image graphically signifies an intermediary stage between life and death.

We are reminded of Tao Qian’s description of himself in his eulogy: “Master Tao is about to take leave of the ‘traveler’s inn’ to return forever to his eternal home. His friends are sad in their grief for him. . . . The faces he sees already grow dim; the sounds he hears grow fainter.” We can imagine that the same words could be murmured by the depicted figure who, with half of his body inside the dark sarcophagus, belongs to neither this world or the world beyond it. Both the implied artist and the poet Tao Qian assume a “liminal position” on the threshold of the gate (fig. 9). Their vision may be called a “binary vision” because they look in the opposite directions of life and death at the same time (fig. 10).

This mode of visualization is related to a general phenomenon during the Six Dynasties: many contemporary writers, painters, and calligraphers sought to see the “two facets of the universe” simultaneously. As we return to the reversed inscriptions, the focus of their investigation shifts from the viewer’s perception to the artist’s ambition to create such inscriptions. But who was the artist? Usually we assume that an engraved stone inscription copies a piece of writing and reflects the original style of the calligrapher. But if a calligrapher wrote only a single “regular” text, which was then inscribed twice as both the front and back inscriptions on the two pillars, the calligrapher’s work was essentially irrelevant to the final product; he can hardly be claimed as the writer of the reversed inscription. But if he had indeed created both versions of the text, it would be far more intriguing. This would mean that the mirror inscriptions directly reflected the artist’s creativity and state of mind, for, as Emperor Wu of the Liang once stated
himself, "the hand and mind [of a calligrapher] must work in correspondence." 20 This, in turn, would mean that the calligrapher had first tried to "reverse" himself; before there was any "transparent stone" he had to make himself transparent.

Two methods may enable us to solve this puzzle. We can check contemporary literary records for mentions of reversed or inverted writing. We can also try to find other clues from existing inscriptions. In an essay, the master calligrapher Yu Yuanwei (6th century) introduces himself as a calligraphic acrobat who once inscribed a screen in a hundred different scripts, both in ink and in color. He lists all the fancy names of these scripts (such as "immortal script," "flower-and-grass script," "monkey script," "pig script," and "tadpole script"). Toward the end of this long inventory appear two names: daoshu (reversed writing) and fanzuoshu (inverted and left writing). 21 Even more fascinating, in the same essay he identifies the origin of a type of reversed writing:

During the Datong reign period [535–46], a scholar [named Kong Jingtong] working in the Eastern Palace could write cursive script [caoshu] in a single stroke. His brush stroke, which broke only at the end of a line, was fluent, graceful, and restrained, and reflected his distinctive nature. Since then no one has been able to follow him. [Kong] also created the "left-and-right script" [zuoyoushu]. When people exchanged their writings at a gathering, no one could read his piece. 22

Yu Yuanwei’s record offers at least three kinds of information. First, the term "left writing" (zuoshu) or "inverted and left writing" (fanzuoshu) should indicate
completely inverted or "mirror calligraphy," so that "no one could read" it at first sight. (As I explain below, the term *daoshu* or "reversed writing" probably refers to the method of writing a text in reverse order; the characters are not necessarily inverted.) Second, Kong Jingtong wrote both regular and inverted versions of a single text ("left-and-right writing") and exhibited them on a single occasion. As a gifted and popular calligrapher, he must have first learned the conventional way of writing but later mastered the inverted style of calligraphy through a painful self-inversion. Third, Kong developed two different calligraphic styles: the first was the "cursive script" (*caoshu*) in a single fluent brush stroke; and the second was the "left-and-right" mirror texts. Both writing styles place form over content.

To examine existing inverted and left inscriptions, we can employ a simple method: turning over a rubbing of such an inscription and placing it against a light table, we should find standard calligraphy if the inscription was made by
reversing a piece of regular writing. The best preserved inverted inscription is found in Prince Xiao Jing’s tomb (fig. 11; the counterpart “front” inscription was unfortunately lost long ago). Following the method suggested above, I have reversed this inverted inscription (fig. 12a) to obtain the version shown in fig. 12b. Any Chinese calligrapher of even an elementary level would immediately point out its weakness: the structure of several characters is unbalanced, and the horizontal strokes generally drop instead of rising as in normal writing. Both are typical symptoms of reversed writing or left-handed writing done by a right-handed person. This examination reveals that the term “left-and-right writing” may also mean that a calligrapher used both hands to write. From his right hand came a normal and readable text; from his left hand, reversed and illegible signs.

FIGURES 13a–d. Left and center: ink rubbings of inscriptions on a pair of pillars in Prince Xiao Ji’s (d. 527) graveyard; Jurong, Jiangsu Province. After Kanda Kiichiro, Shodo zenshō (Corpus of calligraphy; Tokyo, 1957–61), vol. 5, plates 54, 55. Right top and bottom: English translation.
Such ambidextrous skill seems almost supernatural. (Similar legends are still being created in modern Chinese literature. In a popular martial arts novel by the writer Jin Yong, the heroine Little Dragon Girl [Xiaolongnü] has mastered the amazing skill of using her left and right hands simultaneously to fight in two entirely different yet complementary styles of swordplay. She thus combines two gongfu masters in one and, by making her moves incomprehensible even to a master opponent, becomes undefeatable.)

The inversion of an existing convention, however, may also create a new convention. Suppose that the left-and-right scripts were standardized and became a norm—they would lose their power to confuse readers and the supernatural calligrapher would become merely a humble craftsman. Upon receiving such writing from Kong Jingtong, a guest would immediately lay bare his trick, and when a funeral procession proceeded toward a pillar-gate, no mourner would be intrigued by the pair of inscriptions because they would now be readily understandable. The stone columns would remain solid and opaque, and although the boundary marked out by the gate could be physically crossed, it would never be erased.

All seven surviving inscriptions on the pillar-gates of Liang tombs have been called zhengfanshu (front and reversed writing). But if we examine these inscriptions more closely, we find three distinctly different ways of reversing or inverting regular writing. The case discussed above (fig. 3) exemplifies one of these methods: regular writing is completely reversed to form a true mirror image. Another method, represented by the inscriptions reconstructed and "translated" in figs. 12a–b, is to write the characters backward while keeping the standard right-to-left sequence of writing and reading (left-to-right sequence in English). The third way is again an inversion of the second method (figs. 13a–b): the normal right-to-left sequence is changed to left-to-right (right-to-left in English), but all characters are written in their regular form. This last script may be identified as daoshu, a type of reversed script found on Yu Yuanwei's list.

All inscriptions "inverted" according to these three methods were made during a very brief period of some thirty years. We must assume that some profound reason led to such interest in metamorphosis. Such rapid changes can only testify to a deliberate effort to escape from a fixed pattern. The task is not easy since a regular inscription must be paired with an inverted one on the two pillars so that they can together define the junction of two opposing views, yet any standardization would turn the inscriptions into static symbols without psychological power. It is probably no coincidence that only the earliest surviving examples of "front-and-back" writing—the pair of inscriptions dedicated to the father of the dynasty's founder—appear as true mirror images. To avoid repeating the same imagery, later generations either reversed the characters or reversed the writing (and reading) sequence. In fact, these three methods are the only possible ways to reverse a text. The Liang tried them all.
The period known as the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386–589) is commonly recognized as a turning point in Chinese art history. Major developments during these two centuries include the construction of enormous Buddhist cave chapels, the emergence of great painters and calligraphers, and a profound change in visual perception and representation. This last achievement has often been characterized as the discovery of pictorial space, meaning that the artist was finally able to turn an opaque canvas or stone slab into a transparent “window” open to an illusory reality. The assertion is not false, but it often attributes this development to some master artists or treats it as an independent evolution of pictorial forms. An alternative approach advanced in this paper is that the new visual forms rebelled against traditional ritual art. While old types of monuments (the mortuary shrine, sarcophagus, and stele) continued, surface patterns (inscriptions and decorations) began to assume independence. Although still ceremonial or didactic in content, an inscription or pictorial scene engaged the eye and the mind. By transforming a ritual monument into a sheer surface for pictures, these forms allowed people to see things that had never been seen or represented before.

A number of stone funerary structures created at the beginning of the sixth century best demonstrate this transition. Dating from 529 (and thus contemporary with the reversed inscriptions), a small funerary shrine now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (fig. 14) shows no major difference in form and structure from a Han shrine established some four centuries earlier. What distinguishes it from a Han ritual building are its engravings, especially those executed on the single stone panel that forms the shrine’s rear wall (fig. 15). Here, a faintly delineated architectural framework represents the timber facade of a building, a “frame” enclosing the portraits of three gentlemen. Attired in similar costumes and each accompanied by a female figure, the three men differ from one another mainly in age. The figure to the right is a younger man with a fleshy face and a strong torso; the one to the left is heavily bearded with an angular face and a slender body. Whereas these two figures, both shown in three-quarter view facing outward, appear vigorous and high spirited, the third figure in the middle is a fragile older man retreating into an inner space. Slightly hunchbacked and lowering his head, he concentrates on a lotus flower in his hand. The flower—a symbol of purity and wisdom—originated in Buddhism, which had rapidly spread among Chinese literati by the sixth century. Lost in deep contemplation, this focal figure is about to enter the wooden-framed building, leaving this world and us, the viewers, behind.

The modern Chinese scholar Huang Minglan has offered an interesting reading of this composition. He suggested that all three images represent Ning

FIGURE 15 (below). Portraits of Ning Mao (?) on the back wall of Ning’s shrine.

Mao, to whom the mortuary shrine was dedicated, and that these images together narrate the stages of Ning’s life, from his vigorous youth to his final spiritual enlightenment. Ning Mao’s epitaph, which may still exist in China, includes his biography (fig. 16). It mentions three dated events: at the age of 35 (486) he became a clerk at the Ministry of the Imperial Cabinet. A few years later, in 489, he was promoted to general of the Imperial Mausoleum Guards in charge of ritual affairs. After the Northern Wei moved the capital to Luoyang in 494, he assumed the post of chief of Construction Corps in charge of building new palaces and temples. He was promoted to chief secretary of the Construction Office after the completion of the main palace, but soon fell ill and died in 501. Although the three portraits on Ning’s shrine do not necessarily coincide with these specific events, they do show the general contour of his life as described in the epitaph. His positions as ritual specialist and imperial architect must also explain the unusually high quality of the engravings on his memorial shrine. The sentiment conveyed by the portraits—transformation from engagement in...
worldly affairs to the internal pursuit of spiritual peace—was a favorite intellectual subject during the Northern and Southern Dynasties; Lu Ji and Tao Qian’s poems, quoted above, describe similar experiences. But in the pictorial representation, the conflict between life and death, between worldly activities and internal peace, is crystallized in the “front-and-back” images. Again, we find that lived experience ends at the point where someone turns inward, about to penetrate the solid surface of the stone.

The juxtaposition of “front-and-back” images became a pictorial formula. In many cases this composition no longer possessed a specific ritual or philosophical implication, but was used as a standard device to increase the complexity of representation. Fig. 17 reproduces a scene engraved on a famous Northern Wei sarcophagus now in the collection of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum in Kansas City. Compared with Han depictions of similar subjects, this and other pictorial stories of filial paragons, which cover the two long sides of the stone box, signify many new developments, most noticeably a new sequential narrative mode and a three-dimensional landscape setting. Framed by a patterned band, each composition seems a translucent window onto an elusive world.

The strong sense of three-dimensionality in these pictures has enticed scholars to interpret them in light of a linear perspective system using overlapping forms and the technique of foreshortening. In such an analysis the researcher, either consciously or unconsciously, equates the Chinese example with post-Renaissance painting that employs linear perspective as the most

powerful means to create pictorial illusions. But if we examine the pictures on
the sarcophagus more carefully, we find some peculiar features that do not agree
with the basic principles and purposes of linear perspective, but fit perfectly well
with the “binary” or “front-and-back” representational mode developed in fifth-
and sixth-century China. In simplest terms, the single station-point assumption
of linear perspective is that the artist’s and viewer’s gaze travels from a chosen
vantage point to a fixed vanishing point (fig. 18). The “binary” mode, however,
is based on the assumption that a form should be seen from both the front and
the back; when a form is represented as such, it guides the viewer’s gaze back and
forth but never toward a real or implied vanishing point in the picture (fig. 19).

A detail on the Nelson sarcophagus (fig. 17) depicts the story of the famous
Confucian paragon Wang Lin, who saved his brother from bandits. A tall tree in
the middle divides the scene into two halves. Alexander Soper has boldly sug-
gested that the images in both halves actually represent a single episode—the
confrontation of Wang Lin and the bandits. The difference between the two
scenes is that one is depicted from the front and the other from the rear. It
seems to me that in making this assertion Soper has gone too far. In the left-hand
scene a rope is tied around Wang Lin’s brother’s neck, and Wang Lin has thrown
himself on his knees in front of the bandits, begging them to take him instead of his brother. In the right-hand scene, both Wang Lin and his brother have been released. These two scenes, therefore, represent two consecutive episodes of the story in a temporal sequence.

This iconographic explanation, however, does not rule out Soper's basic observation regarding the front-and-back views offered by the two scenes. What is most important here is not which episode or episodes the picture stands for (since similar stories had been abundantly illustrated from the Han), but how these episodes are depicted and viewed. In the left scene we find that the bandits have just emerged from a deep valley and are meeting Wang Lin (in a more general sense, they meet us the viewers). In the next scene, Wang Lin and his brother are leading the bandits into another valley and the whole procession has turned away from us; all we can see are people's backs and the rear end of a horse. This composition once again reminds us of the reversed inscriptions, one confronting us and the other showing us its back. But here our vision is controlled by the figures' motion. In viewing the left "frontal" scene our eyes take in the arriving figures, but when we turn to the next scene we cannot help but feel that we are abruptly and in a sense very rudely abandoned and ignored. The figures are leaving us and about to vanish; in an effort to catch them our gaze follows them into the deep valley.

This "binary" approach uncovers the compositional formula of another famous example of Northern and Southern Dynasties art: the celebrated handscroll "The Admonition of the Instructress to Palace Ladies" ("Nushizhen tu") attributed to the master painter Gu Kaizhi (ca. 345–406). This attribution is not

![Diagram](image)

**FIGURE 18 (top).** Diagram: single-station perspective.

**FIGURE 19 (bottom).** Diagram: binary perspective.
secure—there is no pre–Tang Dynasty reference for Gu’s depiction of the subject, yet a newly discovered fifth-century screen bears a picture almost identical in composition to one of the seven scenes on the “Admonition” scroll.36 Provided with this piece of evidence, we can view the scroll and the Nelson sarcophagus as approximately contemporary works. Not surprisingly, one of the most interesting features of the scroll is the binary composition, which, however, has been even further removed from its original ritual context to become a purely pictorial mode.

The painting illustrates the third-century poet Zhang Hua’s composition of the same title. One of the scenes (fig. 20) depicting Zhang’s line—“Human beings
know how to adorn their faces”—demonstrates an extremely sophisticated use of the binary composition. The scene is divided into two halves, each with an elegant palace lady looking at herself in a mirror. The lady on the right turns inward with her back toward us, and we see her face only in the mirror. The lady on the left faces us; her reflection in the mirror becomes implicit (only the mirror’s patterned back is visible). The concept of a “mirror image” is thus presented literally (fig. 21): each group is itself a pair of mirror images, and the two groups together again form a reflecting double. We may also imagine that this composition may be viewed from both sides of the scroll: a hypothetical viewer on the other side of the canvas would find the same picture as we do, but the images he sees would be reversed ones.

No picture like this existed before the Northern and Southern Dynasties. What we find on Han monuments are silhouettes “attached” to the pictorial plane. The virtuous widow Liang holding a mirror in her hand (figs. 22a–b) or

the filial paragon Zengzi kneeling before his mother. In viewing these pictures our eyes travel along the surface of stone slabs, whose striped patterns only make the medium even more impenetrable. Even pictures created during the fourth century do not substantially alter this traditional representational mode. It is true that the well-known portraits of the “Seven Worthies in the Bamboo Grove” (“Zhulin qixian”) exhibit some new elements: more relaxed and varying poses, spatial cells formed by landscape elements, and an emphasis on fluent lines (fig. 23). But the images are still largely attached to the two-dimensional picture surface, never guiding our eyes to penetrate it. The real revolution took place only in the fifth and sixth centuries: the figures in the Wang Lin picture seem to be coming and going of their own free will, and the ladies in the “Admonition” scroll stare at their own reflections and their gaze guides us to see them. In both cases our vision follows the pictured figures in and out, effortlessly crossing the stone or canvas that is once again transparent.

All these pictorial works—the engravings on the Ning Mao shrine and the Nelson sarcophagus, and the painted images on the “Admonition” scroll—testify to a desire to see things that had never been seen or represented before. The new points of view pursued by the artists, however, were not actual (or assumed) station points on earth. The mundane achievement of seeing and representing things “naturalistically” could hardly fulfill the artists’ high aspirations, for art, they claimed, should allow them to transcend observed reality with its temporal and spatial boundaries. The relationship between seeing and imagining, or between eyes and the mind, became a central topic of art criticism at the time. Sometimes the relationship was considered antithetical. Wang Wei (415–43), for example, criticized painters who relied only on their physical faculties and “focused on nothing but appearances and positioning.” When a good artist
painted, he told his contemporaries, “it is not in order to record the boundaries of cities or to distinguish the locale of prefectures, to mark off mountains and hills or to demarcate floods and streams. For things which are rooted in form must be smelted with spiritual force, and that which activates the permutation is the heart-mind.” His view may have represented an extreme; other critics such as Xie He (fl. 500–35) considered both “physical likeness” (yinwu xiangxing) and “spirit resonance” (qiyun shengdong) necessary qualities of good art; nevertheless he placed the latter at the top of his “Six Laws” of painting.

Simultaneously there appeared the notion of an ideal artist who could realize the artistic goals the new age demanded, and whose unrestrained imagination would make him immortal:

He moves along with the four seasons and sighs at their passing on,
Peers on all the things of the world, broods on their profusion . . .
Thus it begins: retraction of vision, reversion of listening,
Absorbed in thought, seeking all around,
[His] essence galloping to the world’s eight bounds,
[His] mind roaming ten thousand yards, up and down . . .
He empties the limpid mind, fixes his thoughts,
Fuses all his concerns together and makes words.
He cages Heaven and Earth in fixed shape,
Crushes all things beneath the brush’s tip.

Such description was not considered purely metaphorical; when Xie He came to rank painters based on artistic merit (thus giving himself the status of an authoritative viewer), he employed similar criteria and found his ideal artist in Lu Tanwei of the fifth century:

He fathomed the principles [of the universe] and exhausted the nature [of man]. The matter is beyond the power of speech to describe. He embraced what went before him and gave birth to what succeeded him: from ancient times up till now he stands alone. Nor is he one whom even [the most] fervent enthusiasm could [adequately] praise. For is he not simply the pinnacle of all that is of highest value? He rises beyond the highest grade, and that is all there is to be said.

Xie He seems to have felt short of words. Of an artist who has fathomed the universe and exhausted human nature, there is indeed nothing one can say except to acknowledge his godlike existence. Such glorification gives us little sense of the actual masterpieces from that period (which have all long since disappeared), but the pictures on another sixth-century stone sarcophagus, created when Xie was compiling his classification of painters, may allow us to perceive the kind of art he had in mind. Like the Nelson sarcophagus, this example in the Minneapolis Art Museum was unearthed at Luoyang, the capital of the Northern Wei after 494 (fig. 24). Again, like the Nelson sarcophagus, both long sides of the sarcophagus are covered with a rich combination of pictorial and decorative
images. At the bottom of each rectangular composition, a rolling hillock establishes a continuous foreground and extends into the depths along the picture's vertical sides. Tall trees further divide this U-shaped picture frame into a number of subframes or spatial cells for depicting individual stories of famous filial paragons. Scholars have been astonished by the naturalism of these narrative scenes: well-proportioned figures—a series of famous filial paragons from China's past—sit or kneel on a tilted ground or on platforms that recede into the depths. Behind them are mountain peaks and floating clouds, whose greatly reduced size indicates their remoteness.

This coherent spatial representation serves symbolic purposes, however. It groups historical figures of different times and places into a synchronic setting; the rationale of this synthesis is that all these figures share the same virtue and their lives show a similar contour. The naturalism of the illustrations thus diminishes any vestige of historical reality. The figures belong neither to the past nor the present; rather, they represent timeless Confucian paragons, who are again abstractions of history and human deeds. This may be why these virtuous men are positioned in the lower half of the pictures: they are still earthbound and so the naturalism of their portrayal attests to the trueness of the human principles they embody.

The historical Confucian figures, as well as the realistic pictorial style associated with them, disappear from the upper half of the composition, where we find fantastic and possibly Taoist images: an enormous dragon juxtaposed with a huge phoenix, beautiful fairies riding on clouds or exotic birds, fierce demons roaring against the wind. Instead of being united by a three-dimensional landscape, these images are harmonized by the swelling, rhythmic lines that shape them. We may
say that these fluent lines are themselves a metaphor of the vital energy of the universe, from which all these images of the imagination—heavenly flowers, auspicious birds, mystical beasts, fairies, and demons—emerge. Floating and ever-changing, these line images seem to shift smoothly on the two-dimensional picture plane without penetrating it.

The design is further complicated by a focal image crossing the upper and lower halves—an animal mask with a ring hanging from its mouth. The model for this image is a sculptured mask made of gilded copper attached to a wooden coffin. Here it has been transformed into a flat silhouette on stone. A new layer of visual rhetoric is added: integrated into the overall two-dimensional pictorial representation, the mask seems suspended in air in front of the surrounding scenes, which recede and vanish behind it. Firm and unyielding, the mask reminds us of the stone surface and forces us to pull our gaze (and mind) back from the distant and fantastic worlds, reasserting our own proximity to the solid sarcophagus. This image restores the surface of the picture plane but only to allow the artist to decompose and recompose it again. On either side of the mask, two windows, perfectly square, guide our gaze “into” the sarcophagus. Two figures stand inside each window and stare at us. These windows, which allow us to see what is concealed behind the pictorial surface, thus reject any coherent system of pictorial illusionism and any fixed spatial or temporal station.

Viewing such a complex picture that integrates so many contradictory elements, we feel that the artist is constantly challenging us with new modes of pictorial representation. Traveling through time and space, he leads us to confront different realms and states of beings—to “gallop to the world’s eight bounds” and to “peer on all the things of the world [and] brood on their profusion.” He creates and recreates tension between different images and between these images and the medium: whenever a scene is about to assume its independence and become “real,” he brings in a conflicting image or style that dismisses any sense of illusionism and restocks the pictorial surface with new possibilities to further expand the visual field. Thus we find that the picture seems to ceaselessly rebel against itself—“reversing” itself and then balancing itself. The illusionist narrative in the landscape scene is juxtaposed with the elusive, decorative immortal imagery; the “relief” animal mask is juxtaposed with the “sunken” windows. The first set of motifs transforms the pictorial surface into images and thus erases it; the second set restores the surface because the mask must be attached to it and the windows must be opened on it. The structural key to understanding the creation of such a composition, therefore, is again the binary mode: the artist develops his imagery along opposite yet complementary paths. In making such an effort he breaks away from conventional representation and pushes the possibility of human perception to a new limit.
Notes

1. According to the inventory in Yao Qian and Gu Bing, *Liuchao yishu* (Art of the Six Dynasties; Beijing, 1981), altogether eleven Liang mausoleums have been found: 1) Jian Liang (of Emperor Wen, Xiao Shunzhi; probably built in 535), 2) Xiu Ling (of Emperor Wu, Xiao Yan; built before 549 when the emperor died), 3) Zhuang Liang (of Emperor Jianwen, Xiao Gang; built before 552), 4–11) tombs of eight Liang princes: Xiao Hong (d. 526), Xiao Xiu (d. 518), Xiao Hui (d. 527), Xiao Dan (d. 522), Xiao Jing (d. 525), Xiao Ji (d. 529), Xiao Zhengli (d. before 548), Xiao Ying (d. 544). The remains of the Zhuang Ling of Emperor Jianwen, however, are buried and cannot be seen.

2. The terms *shendao* and *suidao* denote the path extending from the pillar-gate to the tomb; see Zhu Xizu et al., *Liuchao lingmu diaocha baogao* (An investigation report of Six Dynasties mausoleums; Nanjing, 1935), 100, 202. This is why the word *shendao* is always inscribed on the pillar-gate.

3. Ibid., 23.

4. *Jiankang shilu* (A factual record of the history of Nanjing; Beijing, 1937), 17, 19b. I interpret the word *suitou*, which means literally “the opening of a suidao path,” as the place under the pillar-gate. As Zhu Xizu has explained, the term *suidao* or *sui* indicates the path extending from the pillar-gate to the tomb mound; see note 2.


7. Here I assume a visitor’s view. Chinese and Japanese authors usually describe the pillars from the position of the tomb mound (i.e., from the position of the deceased); thus the “right pillar” in their writings is the left one in mine and vice versa.

8. Most inscriptions on the pillar-gates in the Liang mausoleums face outward; the only exception are those on Emperor Wen’s gates, which face each other and form a pair of true mirror images. My analysis here focuses on the majority of cases.

9. In other words, the “binary” inscriptions first appeared as something external to and independent of the visitor; they then became something to be visualized and comprehended, and finally became the stimulus for an imagined vision or visualization. For a concise discussion of images and imagination, see Ray Frazer, “The Origin of the Term ‘Image,’” *English Literary History* 27 (1960): 149–61. Here I also borrow ideas from Pauline Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), 3–19.


11. Xiao Zixian, *Nan Qi shu* (History of the Southern Qi; Beijing, 1972), 701.


13. As scholars have noted, writing funeral songs in the voice of the dead was not Tao Qian’s invention; Lu Ji and Miao Xi (186–245) wrote a number of such works (see Davis, *T’ao Yüan-ming*, 1:167–68). This tradition may be even traced back to the Han; the author of the *yuefu* poem “Battle South of the City” (“Zhan chengnan”) assumes the view of a dead soldier. But only Tao Qian wrote funeral songs for himself.


18. For the decorative programs of such sarcophagi and the symbolism of the “gate” motif, see Wu Hung, “Myths and Legends in Han Funerary Art: Their Pictorial Structure and Symbolic Meanings as Reflected in Carvings on Sichuan Sarcophagi,” in Lucy Lim, ed. *Stories from China's Past* (San Francisco, 1987), 73–81.

19. In an earlier article (ibid., 74–77) I suggested that this figure stands at the entrance of the other world to receive the dead. Although this interpretation is not impossible, my present discussion offers an alternative understanding. Supported by Tao Qian's writings and other literary evidence, this interpretation focuses on changes in perception after the Han.

20. Quoted in Li Fang, *Taiping yulan* (Imperial reviewed encyclopedia of the Taiping era; Beijing, 1960), 3315.

21. Ibid., 3318. “Master” is based on Yu Yuanwei's self-introduction. In fact, we know nothing about Yu and his works except for this piece of writing which, moreover, is preserved only as fragments in later encyclopedias.


23. The only existing example of this type of inscription is found in Emperor Wen's mausoleum.

24. An example of such an inscription is found on a surviving pillar in Xiao Jing's (Emperor Wen's nephew) tomb. Only two “reversed” characters in the inscription dedicated to Xiao Xiu have survived. According to Mo Youzhi, the original inscription was also written in the regular right-to-left order; see Zhu Xizui, *Liuchao lingmu diaocha baogao*, 57.

25. Examples of this type of inscription have been found in tombs of Xiao Hong (Emperor Wen's son), and Xiao Ying, Xiao Zhengli, and Xiao Ji (Emperor Wen's grandsons).

26. According to *Yudí zhi*, the stone animals in front of the Jianling mausoleum (and perhaps other stone carvings as well) were made in 535; quoted in Danyang xianzhi; see Zhu Xie, *Jiankang Lanling Liuchao*, 23.


29. Laurence Sickman first saw the stone shrine in Kaifeng in 1933. Later, he came upon a complete set of rubbings in Beijing, including both the engravings on the shrine and an epitaph on a separate stone; see Tomita, “Chinese Sacrificial Stone House,” 109, n. 1.


31. This sarcophagus was probably made for Lady Yuan in 522. It has been repeatedly

32. One such study is Alexander C. Soper, "Life-Motion and the Sense of Space in Early Chinese Representational Art," *Art Bulletin* 30, no.3 (1948): 167–86; for his discussion of the Nelson sarcophagus, see 180–85.


35. This painting has been repeatedly published and discussed. For references, see James Cahill, *An Index of Early Chinese Painters and Paintings* (Berkeley, 1980), 12–13.

36. Both scenes illustrate the virtuous conduct of the Han imperial concubine and historian Ban Zhao. The screen, which originally belonged to Sima Jinlong, a Northern Wei royal relative, was found in his tomb near Datong in present-day Shanxi Province.


38. Ibid., 36–40.

39. Lu Shiheng ji (Writings by Lu Ji; Shanghai, 1930), 1a–4b; trans. based on Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 90–110. See Yu, *Chinese Poetic Tradition*, 33, 35. Owen comments on the expression *shoushi fanting* ("retraction of vision, reversion of listening"), which is intimately related to the reversed perception discussed in this section: "Most Chinese exegetes ... interpret this passage as a cutting off of sense perceptions, taking *shou* ["retract"] in a common usage as "cease," and apparently taking *fan* ["revert"] as the attention of listening "re- Turtle.


41. The Chinese scholar Wang Shucun recently reported that more than ten such sarcophagi have been found in the Luoyang area; "Zhongguo shige xianhua lueshi" (A brief history of Chinese line-engraving), preface to *Zhongguo meishu quanj, vol. 1, pt. 19, p. 11.

42. For a study of this sarcophagus, see Okumura Ikuro, *Kaka* (Tokyo, 1939), 359–82.


44. These figures may represent servants of the deceased: another Northern Wei sarcophagus discovered in 1973 in Guyuan is decorated on two sides with similar windows and figures, and the deceased is portrayed on the front side of the coffin. Guyuan Cultural Relics Work Station, "Ningxia Guyuan Bei Wei mu qingli jianbao" (A brief excavation report of the Northern Wei tomb at Guyuan, Ninxia), *Wenwu* (Cultural relics) no. 6 (1984): 46–56.

45. There are interesting parallels, both superficial and profound, between this picture and Velasquez's famed painting "Las Meninas," which also employs sets of (seemingly) disconnected images to extend the visual field. In particular, directly facing the spectator in the background, a framed rectangular mirror holds in its glow two standing
figures who are staring at the spectator. In Foucault’s words, this mirror “shows us nothing of what is represented in the picture itself. Its motionless gaze extends out in front of the picture, into that necessary invisible region which forms its exterior face, to apprehend the figures arranged in that space. Instead of surrounding visible objects, this mirror cuts straight through the whole field of the representation, ignoring all it might apprehend within that field, and restores visibility to that which resides outside all view”; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1973), 7–8. This mirror imagery is thus comparable with the window imagery on the sarcophagus.

46. Norman Bryson has compared Western and Chinese painting in terms of their different notions and treatments of the pictorial plane: “Through much of the Western tradition oil paint is treated primarily as an erasure medium. What it must first erase is the surface of the picture-plane: visibility of the surface would threaten the coherence of the fundamental technique through which the Western representational image classically works the trace, of ground-to-figure relations: ‘ground,’ the absence of figure, is never accorded parity, is always a subtractive term. . . . The individual history of the oil-painting is therefore largely irretrievable, for although the visible surface has been worked, and worked as a total expanse, the viewer cannot ascertain the degree to which other surfaces lie concealed beneath the planar display: the image that suppresses deixis has no interest in its own genesis or past, except to bury it in a palimpsest of which only the final version shows through, above an indeterminable debris of revisions.” In Chinese painting, on the other hand, “everything that is marked on the surface remains visible, save for those preliminaries or errors that are not considered part of the image.” A Chinese painting “cannot be taken in all at once, *tota simul*, since it has itself unfolded within the *durée* of process; it consists serially, in the somatic time of its construction”; *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven, 1983), 92, 94. The engraving on the sarcophagus, however, also shows these two modes of representation in a single composition: some scenes erase the surface while others restore it.