

Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West

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As the search for immortality rose to an unprecedented height during the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), the goddess Xiwangmu, whose name had appeared in Shang (16th-11th century BC) oracle bone inscriptions and Eastern Zhou (770-256 BC) philosophical writings, evolved into the most powerful symbol of both immortality and happiness on earth. Her offering shrines were officially erected in various provinces; one of them was located as far away as the Lake Kokonor region in Qinghai province. She was worshipped at court as well as in rural households. The many works of Han art in which the goddess is prominently featured attest to the popularity of the Xiwangmu cult.

Xiwangmu and the Yin-yang Opposition

A comprehensive study of Xiwangmu imagery has appeared in Michael Loewe's *Ways to Paradise*. While this work is outstandingly thorough, it neglects the importance of regional variations in the representation of Xiwangmu. The development of the Xiwangmu cult over the vast Han empire actually consisted of synchronous local movements. While there was a common tendency to integrate this divinity with prevailing cosmological concepts and popular mythological figures, the forms of this integration



(Fig. 1) Detail of silk banner from Jinqiushan tomb no. 9 Chinese, Shandong province, 2nd century BC Shandong Provincial Museum (After *Wenwu*, 1977:11, inside cover)

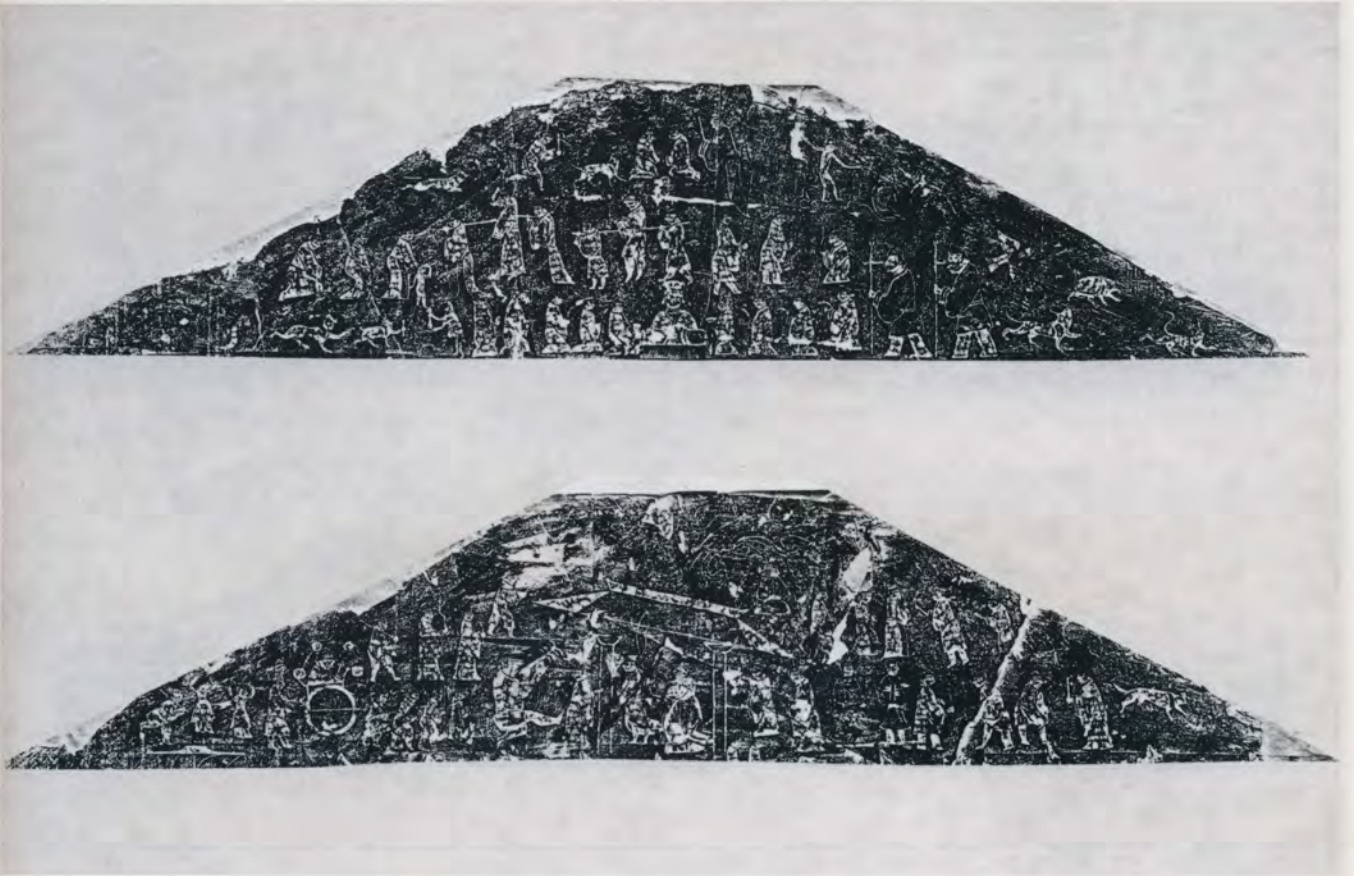
varied in different regions. A good example of such geographical divergence is the synthetic representation of Xiwangmu and symbols of the two cosmic forces *yin* and *yang*.

This synthesis was rooted in traditional Chinese thought, which viewed the whole universe as a manifestation of the interaction of two opposing

forces. The juxtaposition of the symbols of *yin* and *yang* — the sun and moon (Fig. 1) or the divine couple Fuxi and Nüwa (Fig. 2) — had been a primary feature of pictorial art prior to the Eastern Han (AD 25-220). When Xiwangmu rose to the status of a cosmic figure, it was inevitable that people would have tried to locate this goddess in the old cosmological framework. This attempt is evident in the first-century BC mural (Fig. 2) of the Bo Qianqiu tomb near Luoyang, Henan province, where Fuxi and Nüwa, the half-human, half-serpent ancestors of mankind, are depicted at the two ends of the composition. Associated with the sun and moon, their images give the polar principles visual form. Close to Fuxi, Xiwangmu is receiving an audience from worshippers and mythical beasts and birds. The Chinese scholar Sun Zuoyun has suggested that this scene depicts the spiritual journey of the deceased to Xiwangmu's paradise (*Wenwu*, 1977: 6, pp. 18-19). From this Western Han (206 BC-AD 23) prototype grew two prevailing Eastern Han variations of the combined representation of

(Fig. 2) Drawing of mural painting from the Bo Qianqiu tomb Chinese, near Luoyang, Henan province, 1st century BC (After *Wenwu*, 1977: 6, Fig. 17, p. 62)





(Fig. 3) Rubbing of gable carvings of the Xiaotangshan shrine Chinese, Shandong province, 1st century AD (After E. Chavannes, *Mission Archéologique dans la Chine Septentrionale*, 1913, vol. II, pl. XXVI-XXVII)

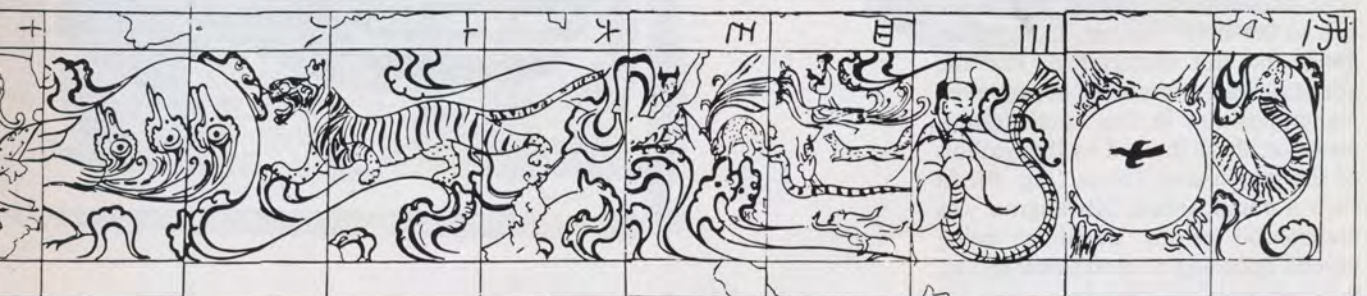
Xiwangmu and *yin-yang* symbols. The first form developed in Shandong in northeastern China, while the second was in southwestern China's Sichuan basin.

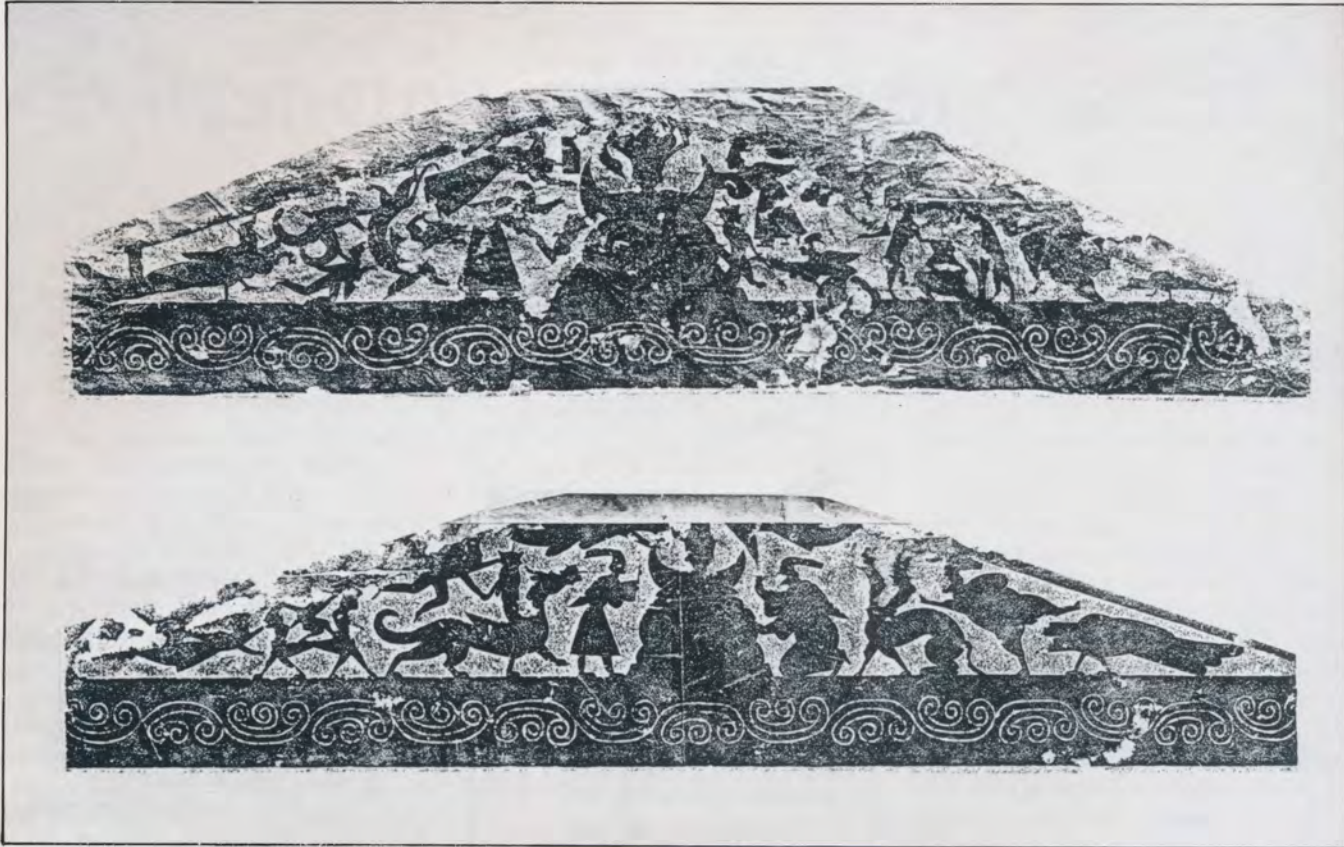
Except for the Zhu Wei shrine, all known Shandong funerary shrines are carved with symbols of *yin* and *yang* on the two gables corresponding to the east and the west. While this pictorial programme suggests a connection with the *yin-yang* juxtaposition in pre-Eastern Han art, the symbols themselves underwent a series of changes. On the first-century AD Xiaotangshan shrine (Fig. 3), the *yin* force is represented by both Nüwa and Xiwangmu, while Fuxi, the earlier symbol of *yang*, is replaced by a curious scene, in which a figure, an anthropomorphic Ji star

or the Master of Wind, is jumping up in the air and using a pipe to blow away the roof of a building. On other Shandong carvings of the first century, however, Fuxi and Nüwa have both disappeared, leaving Xiwangmu and the Ji star as the sole symbols of the 'two cosmic forces'. This change may be related to an increasing emphasis on geographical and astronomical symbolism; Xiwangmu was believed to rule a western paradise while the Ji star was said to inhabit the 'Eastern Palace' constellation.

The gable carvings of the famous Wu Liang shrine (c. AD 151) represent the next step in the pictorialization of the *yin-yang* opposition in Shandong art. A new deity called Dongwang-gong, or King Father of the East, has

replaced the Ji star and become the embodiment of *yang* (Fig. 4). This deity was invented because he could more effectively signify *yang* than the Ji star as his name, which perfectly balances the Queen Mother of the West, discloses. Fuxi and Nüwa were withdrawn from the gables and moved to a wall of the Wu Liang shrine among a group of ancient sovereigns, where they now portrayed the first rulers in Chinese history.





(Fig. 4) Rubbing of gable carvings of the Wu Liang shrine Chinese, Shandong province, 2nd century AD (After E. Chavannes, *Mission Archéologique dans la Chine Septentrionale*, 1913, vol. II, pl. XLIV-XLV)

The Sichuan integration of Xiwangmu and the *yin-yang* symbols followed a very different path. The *yin-yang* symbolism of Fuxi and Nüwa was emphasized by all possible pictorial means (Fig. 5). The polar features of these two deities are indicated not only by their different genders and perfect symmetry but also by the celestial orbs that they hold in their hands. Fuxi supports the sun with his right hand, while Nüwa supports the moon with her left. Inside the moon is a toad under a cassia tree, and inside the sun, a bird.

Consequently, in Sichuan art, Xiwangmu never embodied the principle of *yin* as she did in Shandong, and so her male partner, Dongwanggong, did not materialize. But the goddess was promoted to an even higher position in this southwestern province; she is flanked by the symbols of the two cosmic forces (Fig. 6). In such a composition, Xiwangmu was understood as an 'absolute' being beyond opposing or conditional forces, thus representing eternity.



(Fig. 5) Fuxi and Nüwa
Chinese, excavated from Chongqing,
Sichuan province, 2nd century AD
Pottery tomb tile
Height 39.5 cm, width 48 cm
Sichuan Provincial Museum



(Fig. 6) Rubbing of Xiwangmu and the sun
and moon deities
Chinese, excavated near Chengdu,
Sichuan province, 2nd century AD
Pottery tomb tiles
28.5 cm x 50 cm; 40 cm x 46.5 cm;
28.5 cm x 48 cm
Sichuan Provincial Museum





(Fig. 7) *Xiwangmu*
 Chinese, excavated from Songshan, Jiaxiang,
 Shandong province, 2nd century AD
 Stone carving
 Preservation Institute of the Wu Family Shrines
 (After Shandong Provincial Museum and
 Shandong Institute of Cultural Relics and
 Archaeology, *Shandong Han Huaxiangshi*
Xuanji, Qilu Publishers, 1982, Fig. 187)

Xiwangmu and the Immortal Mountain Kunlun

Like Xiwangmu, Kunlun is described in Eastern Zhou literature as a symbol of immortality. These two concepts, however, show virtually no relationship prior to the Han. The author of *Erya* (a c. 3rd-century BC dictionary) identified the location of Xiwangmu as the 'outermost point of the western wilderness'. The Chu kingdom poet Qu Yuan (c. 340-278 BC), on the other hand, took Kunlun as the end of his aerial journey, but never mentioned Xiwangmu in his descriptions of immortal worlds full of curious deities. This anomaly has led Dubs to believe that the Xiwangmu myth may have originated in northern China and was not indigenous to the southern Chu state (Dubs, 1942, p. 229, note 9).

The situation, however, changed during the Han. Following the intensive cultural fusion within the unified empire, the Xiwangmu legend and the Kunlun myth were no longer confined

to separate cultural spheres; they became the properties of a larger Chinese culture, and both were often mentioned in a single text. The similar symbolism of Xiwangmu and Kunlun drew them closer and closer, until they were finally united. Works of art suggest that this final synthesis occurred during the Eastern Han; only after this time do Xiwangmu and Kunlun appear together in a single composition.

Three major forms of Kunlun co-existed in Eastern Han art. In the first (Fig. 7), Xiwangmu is situated on the summit of a throne that looks like a flat-topped mushroom with a winding stem. The sources of this image are mythological and geographical texts dated from the later Eastern Han to the Six dynasties (265-589). *Hetu Kuodixiang* and *Shenyi Jing* both describe Kunlun as a round 'column' connecting heaven and earth, while *Shizhou Ji* draws a more detailed picture, saying that Kunlun 'resembles the shape of a flat basin; it is narrow at the bottom and broad on the top.'

Kunlun, however, is more often

described as a great mountain consisting of three peaks (or levels) of different heights. As a passage from Huainanzi's (d. 122 BC) Daoist text (*Huainanzi*) reads:

He who climbs onto the Chilly Wind Peak will achieve deathlessness; he who climbs twice as high onto the Hanging Garden will become a spirit and will be able to make wind and rain; he who climbs twice as high again will reach Heaven and become a god.

The most sophisticated representation of this form of Kunlun comes from Sichuan (Fig. 8) and is a three-dimensional clay sculpture that originally served as the base of a bronze 'money tree' (see below). Men and women are climbing the column-like mountain and appear on three layers, which symbolize the different stages of their quest for happiness. At the end of their journey is Xiwangmu, who, enthroned on the magic mountain, is synonymous with the attainment of immortality.

The third form of Kunlun is exemplified by another 'money tree' base

(Fig. 9) from Lushan, Sichuan. This stone miniature of Kunlun is distinctive for its more naturalistic setting and lack of schematic and fantastic elements, which we often find in other works with the same subject matter. The mountain is formed by differently shaped layers of rock, while Xiwangmu appears as a hermit on a terrace in their midst. Surrounding the mountain are carved trees, animals and human figures, some of whom play or hold musical instruments. They are probably the 'Music People' who, *Huainanzi* tells us, also inhabited Kunlun. These figures are shown in various poses and gestures, behind rocks or inside caves. The vivid images and the repeated overlapping forms demonstrate a serious attempt to inject naturalism into the symbolism of the Kunlun motif.

Xiwangmu and her Worshipers

In the imagination of the people of the Han, Xiwangmu's land or Kunlun was full of marvels. There trees of deathlessness grew and the water of deathlessness flowed; the goddess was accompanied by mythical beasts and birds—the three-legged crow as the symbol of the sun, the dancing toad as the symbol of the moon, the elixir-producing hare and the nine-tailed fox as the symbols of longevity. Many of these iconographic attributes, which can be seen on a relief (Fig. 6, centre tile) from the vicinity of Chengdu, have been identified by Loewe (M. Loewe, 1979, pp. 101-12) and other scholars. One neglected aspect of the Xiwangmu motif, however, are the human figures in the goddess' court. Interestingly, we find that in Shandong carvings these figures sometimes appear with dishevelled hair and are often holding tree branches, depicted either naturalistically or in more stylized forms, resembling a 'shiskebab' (Figs 3, 4 and 7). Evidence to explain these images is found in the historical text *Han Shu*, which records that a mass religious movement arose in 3 BC:

In the first month of the fourth year of the Jianping era, the population was running in a state of alarm, each holding a stalk of hemp, carrying them and passing them to one another, saying that they were transporting the wand of Xiwangmu's edict. Large numbers of people, amounting to the thousands, met in this way on the



roadsides, some with dishevelled hair or going barefoot. Some of them broke down the barrier of gates by night; some clambered over walls to make their way into houses; some harnessed teams of horses to convey the tokens. They passed through twenty-six commanderies and principalities, until they reached the capital city [Chang'an].

That summer, the people came together, meeting in the capital and in the commanderies and principalities. In the village settlements, in the lanes and paths across the fields, they held services and set up gaming boards; and they sang and danced in worship of Xiwangmu. They also passed around a written message, saying 'The Mother tells the people that those who wear this talisman will not die. Let those who do not believe her words look below the pivots on their gates, and there will be white hairs as verification.' (based on M. Loewe's translation, 1979, pp. 98-99.)

This passage makes it clear that the tree branches depicted in the Shandong carvings are actually 'stalks of hemp'

(Fig. 8) Base of 'money tree'
Chinese, excavated from Sichuan province,
2nd century AD
Pottery
Height 66 cm
Chengdu Municipal Museum, Sichuan province

identifying their carriers as loyal followers of the goddess. Likewise, the depiction of figures with dishevelled hair and gaming boards can be identified as features of the Xiwangmu cult. According to *Han Shu*, the 3 BC movement originated somewhere east of the Hangu Pass in Henan province. Dubs has emphasized the possibility of its Shandong origin (H. Dubs, 1942, p. 236), which may explain why the images of tree branches commonly appear in Shandong carvings but are rarely seen on Sichuan works.

More importantly, this record reveals that the significance of Xiwangmu in Han popular religion extended far



(Fig. 9) Base of 'money tree'
Chinese, excavated from Lushan, Sichuan
province, 2nd century AD
Stone
Height 45.7 cm
Lushan County Museum, Sichuan province

beyond immortality. She was seen as omnipotent, not only able to help people gain immortality in the afterlife, but also able to benefit her followers on earth. Information about this second aspect of the Xiwangmu worship is found in *Yi Lin*, a divinatory index written about the same time as the mass movement. Of the twenty-four passages on Xiwangmu, some concern the importance of the goddess to worldly happiness and prosperity, while others convey the desire to escape disaster and danger. For example, one promises that Xiwangmu 'will grant you a happy son and permit you

to live forever with happiness and riches,' while another reads, 'Only with the Queen Mother's blessing will your trouble not become disastrous and will you be free to return home.'

As Xiwangmu's images symbolized both immortality and happiness on earth, her images decorated funerary structures as well as objects used in daily life, such as bronze mirrors and furniture, and symbols of prosperity, such as the 'money tree', which was an art form popular in Sichuan. An Eastern Han 'money tree' always consists of two sections: a ceramic or stone base and a bronze tree, whose branches are densely decorated with a 'coin' motif and mythological images. Because of their extraordinarily fine openwork design, very few examples have survived intact. The 'money tree' excavated from Guanghan (cover and Fig. 10) is not only the best preserved, but is also the largest and most elab-

orate among all known examples. Perched on top of the tree is a large bird with an elaborate peacock tail (Fig. 10a). This design was derived from the Chinese sun myth: in the Eastern Sea grew a gigantic *fusang* tree; every morning the golden sunbird would perch on top of this tree, presenting the world with light and warmth. Underneath the bird motif are six layers of branches, each comprising four identical branches pointing to the four directions. Each ornate branch has a pointed 'tenon' at one end, which is inserted into a mortise on the tree trunk, so the whole work could be taken apart or assembled at will.

The decor of the top layer differs from the others, but all branches are decorated with two prominent motifs: Xiwangmu and 'coins'. The goddess is seated on her dragon-and-tiger throne, surrounded by animals and figures who are performing acrobatics, playing musical instruments, riding on horses and playing chess. Imitations of the 'wuzhu' coin are hanging down in rows from the branches. Embossed with leaf and stamen patterns, these coins are represented as flowers or fruit growing from the tree. This unique design has led scholars to speculate on the function and symbolism of the 'money tree'. Some people have suggested a relation with the worship of Mother Earth, the goddess of prosperity (Yu Weichao, *Wenwu*, 1980:5, pp.75-6); others consider the tree a symbol of immortality (Shen Zhongchang and Li Xianwen, 'The Eastern Han Bronze Money Tree', reprinted in *Selected Articles on Art Works in the Sichuan Provincial Museum*, 1983, p. 45). It is more likely that the tree with the Xiwangmu images represented peoples' desires regarding both this life and the afterlife. Worshipped in a household or placed in a tomb, a 'money tree' symbolized the world where people hoped to abide — a world full of sunlight, a world of riches and deathlessness.

The 'Iconic' Representation of Xiwangmu

When our attention shifts from the iconographic components of Xiwangmu imagery to its visual representation, we find that Xiwangmu's court is portrayed in Eastern Han art according to two compositional rules that differ markedly from those of

(Fig. 10) Detail of Bronze 'money tree' with a pottery base
Chinese, excavated from Guanghan, Sichuan
province, 2nd century AD
Height 153 cm
Guanghan County Cultural Center, Sichuan province





(Fig. 11) Buddha image carved on the lintel of the front chamber of the Mahao tomb Chinese, Leshan, Sichuan province, 2nd century AD

previous Chinese pictorial art. They are compositional symmetry and frontality of a central icon.

Taking the west gable of the Wu Liang shrine as an example (Fig. 4), its carving is designed to be perfectly symmetrical with an obvious visual focus on the centre, where there is a large image of Xiwangmu, while animals and fairies are arranged so that they move toward this focal image from either side. The visual centralization is reinforced by the triangular shape of the stone. As the gable is filled with figures who are all moving towards the centre, the triangle itself no longer remains static; its sloping sides become strong compositional elements which, together with the moving animals and immortals, guide the viewer's eyes towards the central axis along which is carved the major deity, the Queen Mother of the West.

While the secondary figures are all shown in profile, Xiwangmu is

portrayed *en face*. She is a solemn hieratic deity, ignoring the surrounding crowds and staring at the viewer beyond the picture. The viewer finds himself directly confronting the central icon. The composition, therefore, is not self-contained. Xiwangmu not only exists *within* the pictorial context, her religious significance is also realized in the direct relationship between her image and the viewer. In fact, the design of such an 'open' composition is based on the unspoken assumption that *there is* a viewer or a worshipper outside the picture.

Pictures possessing these two features are commonly seen in religious art and have been called 'iconic', as opposed to another type of composition that may be termed 'narrative'. A 'narrative' composition is usually organized asymmetrically and figures are always positioned to confront one another. The figures are interrelated, with gestures and movements representing actions and reactions. A 'narrative' composition is self-contained, its significance fully realized within its own pictorial context.

The 'narrative' mode was initiated at the very inception of Chinese pic-

torial art and dominated it until the beginning of the first century AD. It provided a basic compositional framework for the decoration of Eastern Zhou 'pictorial' bronzes, Chu silk paintings, Western Han murals and the majority of Eastern Han carvings. This mode was also used in early representations of Xiwangmu. In the mural of the Bo Qianqiu tomb (Fig. 2), Xiwangmu appears in three-quarter view, facing the worshippers and mythical animals who are moving towards her in a procession. A similar three-quarter portrayal of Xiwangmu is also found on a decorated mirror dated 8 AD (Sofukawa Hiroshi, 1979, Fig. 43), demonstrating the popularity of this pictorial formula around the onset of the Christian era.

Several decades later, however, this type of Xiwangmu image was suddenly, and almost completely, replaced by a new type of representation, in which the goddess is depicted frontally and in the centre. Why did this 'iconic' composition appear during this specific period? Was it a Chinese invention or was it borrowed from another artistic tradition? To the present author, the answers to these questions is precise:

the 'iconic' composition in Eastern Han art was derived from Indian Buddhist art.

There is little doubt that Buddhist art was introduced to China during the Eastern Han. In a previous study, this author discussed quite a few Han examples that exhibit definite Buddhist elements (Wu Hung, 1986, pp. 264-73). Most significantly, the Buddha images or Buddha-like images show strong and consistent relations with Xiwangmu; they appear in places traditionally decorated with images of Xiwangmu or in juxtaposition to the goddess. For example, in the Wu Liang shrine, Xiwangmu appears on a gable above historical scenes on walls; here the goddess symbolizes a transcendent realm. In a cave-tomb at Mahao, Sichuan, historical stories also decorate walls; on the lintel, however, the Buddha replaces Xiwangmu (Fig. 11). Moreover, the Sichuan 'money tree' bases are usually decorated with Xiwangmu images, but on a base from Pengshan, in place of Xiwangmu is a Buddha image (Fig. 12). The tall *uṣṇīṣa*, the fashion of the gown and the hand gesture unmistakably attest to the Gandharan origin of the imagery. The Buddha is seated *en face* and is flanked by two standing figures in a typically 'iconic' composition. Interestingly, the Xiwangmu images on other 'money tree' bases appear to be close imitations of this format.

The 'interchangeability' and formal resemblance between Xiwangmu and the Buddha images are related to their similar religious significance. When the Buddha was first introduced into China, he was simply understood to be an immortal in traditional Chinese terms. A passage from *Hou Han Ji* provides an Eastern Han description of this deity:

The Buddha is sixteen feet in height, golden in colour and wears lights from the sun and moon on his neck. He can assume countless forms and enter anything at will. He is able to succour people and to communicate with the myriad things.

A number of parallels between the Buddha described in this passage and Xiwangmu are noticeable. Both possessed supernatural powers and were able to assist people. They were cosmic figures connected with the sun and moon, and, finally, they both abided in a remote western land, believed to be paradise by the Eastern

Han Chinese.

Thus, during the Eastern Han, the understanding of the Buddha was modified to fit that of Xiwangmu, while the image of Xiwangmu assumed the form of the Buddha. This transformation of Xiwangmu imagery mirrored the change in her religious function. As she became the subject of religious worship, there arose a strong demand for a new art form to represent this hieratic deity. The newly arriving Indian art provided the solution. The appearance of the 'iconic' form of Xiwangmu imagery marked the beginning of a development toward a purely devotional image that will culminate in later Chinese religious art from the Northern and Southern dynasties (386-589).

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In this and the following article by Kenneth J. DeWoskin, unless otherwise noted, all photographs are by Chris Huie, Joe Samberg and Li Jiping, and are courtesy of the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco.



(Fig. 12) 'Money tree' base with a Buddha image Chinese, excavated from Pengshan, Sichuan province, 2nd century AD Pottery Height 21 cm Nanjing Museum (After *Museums of China*, vol. 4, Nanjing Museum, Wenwu Press, Beijing, 1984, pl. 77)

Suggested further reading

Homer H. Dubs, 'An Ancient Chinese Mystery Cult', *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. XXXV, no. 4 (October 1942), pp. 221-40.
 Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise*, George Allan & Unwin, London, 1979, chapter 4, 'The Queen Mother of the West', pp. 86-126.
 Kominami Ichino, 'Xiwangmu and the Legend of the Weaving Maid and the Oxherd', *Toho Gakuho*, vol. 46 (1974), pp. 33-82 (in Japanese).
 Sofukawa Hiroshi, 'Kunlun Mountain and Paintings of Immortality', *Toho Gakuho*, vol. 51 (1979), pp. 83-186 (in Japanese).
 Wu Hung, 'Buddhist Elements in Early Chinese Art', *Artibus Asiae*, vol. XLVII (1986), 3/4, pp. 263-352.