

THE WU LIANG SHRINE

The Ideology of Early
Chinese Pictorial Art

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ther's tumulus. His filial piety was so deep that it moved the birds flying over, who carried bits of earth in their bills to help him.¹⁰⁵

It would be misleading, however, to argue that all the pictures in this series indicate Wu Liang's practical wishes. In composing this series, he had more than one orientation. The stories cover the full range of a man's social relations with his parents, brothers, friends, and master, and the sequence of the pictures suggests a chronological order. While incorporating all these considerations into a coherent pictorial composition, he made it clear that his descendants should follow the historical models and serve their mother devotedly and should never forget their deceased father. His personal wishes were voiced through carefully selected historical examples, especially the first five and their accompanying inscriptions. In his own words, these historical personages were a "model for later generations, and [this model enables them] to follow the Principle." These words seem to be echoed on Wu Liang's memorial tablet, which was erected by his sons and grandson; they "followed the path of sonly duty and spent everything they had" to build their father's shrine.

Sovereignty and the Responsibilities of Subjects

A wide decorative band separates the images of virtuous men and the lower section. On the upper register of this section are illustrated the stories of nine historical figures, with inscribed cartouches indicating the names and titles of the major characters. These scenes, however, do not form a self-contained group, as in the cases of the virtuous men and women; instead they are subordinate to the homage scene unfolding in the elaborate central pavilion, which is also the focus of the procession scene and the kitchen scene depicted on the bottom register of the section. The relation between the historical scenes and the central pavilion can be noted at once: the nine narrative pictures are arranged roughly in a symmetrical fashion, flanking the pavilion. On the right side of the building are the picture-stories of three assassin-retainers (Cao Mei, Zhuan Zhu, and Jing Ke) and two ministers (Lin Xiangru and Fan Sui); and on the left side, stories about three other assassins (Yao Li, Yu Rang, and Nie Zheng) and Zhongli Chun, the wise queen of the state of Qi (Fig. 70).

The images and motifs in the lower section fall into two interrelated groups. The first consists of the nine narrative scenes, all of which depict events of the Eastern Zhou. The second group comprises the homage scene in the central pavilion and its related scenes. There is no definite epigraphic or textual evidence to prove that these illustrations portray historical events; rather, their implications are purely symbolic.

Accordingly, my investigation of the meaning of this section is divided into two steps. I first discuss the significance of the nine historical stories,

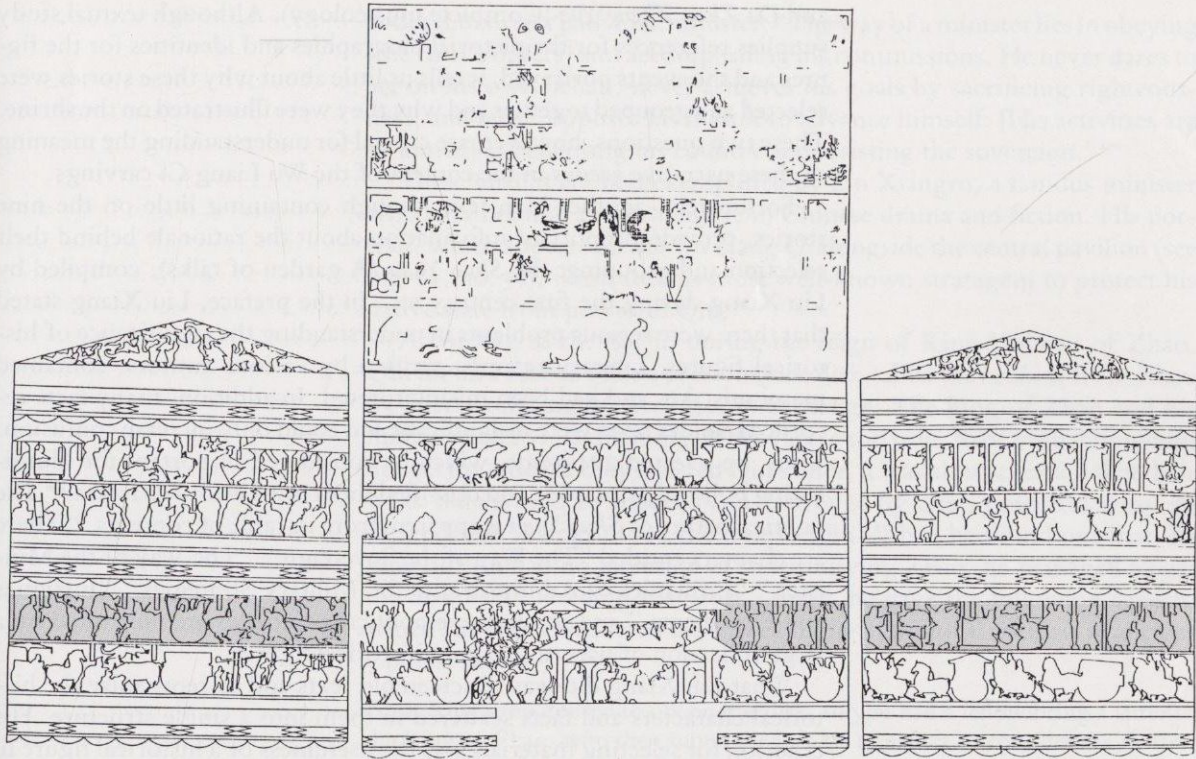


Fig. 70. Position of the carvings of wise ministers, loyal assassin-retainers, and a virtuous queen in the Wu Liang Ci.

not their cartouches and literary sources, which are studied in Appendix A, but their meaning in the context of the Wu Liang Ci carvings as a whole. I then focus on the homage scene, which, as the most powerful motif on the shrine, has been a focus of scholarly debate for many years. The examination of these two groups of motifs provides the information necessary to understand the theme of the whole composition: the ideal of sovereignty and the correct relation between ruler and subject.

Wise Ministers, Loyal Assassin-retainers, and a Virtuous Queen

In contrast to the homogeneity of the two preceding series, here the two ministers, six assassins, and the queen lack a common identity. These three subgroups of figures include both men and a woman, and their deeds, virtues, and conduct vary. Another difference is that the two preceding series are based on two texts, the *Lienü Zhuan* and the *Xiaozi Zhuan*, whereas the stories about these nine historical figures were never compiled into a single book, but derive instead from a variety of literary works, including the *Shi Ji*, *Zhanguo Ce*, *Lienü Zhuan*, *Wu Yue Chunqiu* (The spring and autumn annals of Wu and Yue), *Qin Cao* (Lute playing),

and *Da Zhou Zheng Yue* (Complete musicology). Although textual study supplies references for the pictorial biographies and identities for the figures and the events portrayed, it tells us little about why these stories were selected and grouped together and why they were illustrated on the shrine. These two questions, however, are crucial for understanding the meaning of these narrative scenes in the context of the Wu Liang Ci carvings.

Fortunately, another Han text, though containing little on the nine stories, provides important information about the rationale behind their selection and grouping: the *Shuo Yuan* (A garden of talks), compiled by Liu Xiang during the first century B.C. In the preface, Liu Xiang stated that there were serious problems in understanding the significance of historical figures. Literary records, written by various authors, contained many mistakes and had been misinterpreted. In addition, many facts recorded in older texts were insignificant and could only increase confusion. Thus, he selected 784 items, which he considered important for illuminating political principles, and classified them into twenty chapters.¹⁰⁶ The political nature of *Shuo Yuan* is apparent from its table of contents.¹⁰⁷ There are chapters entitled "The Way of the Sovereign," "The Way of the Minister," "Principles of Administration," "Military Strategies," "Intrigues and Expedients," and so on; these political principles are illustrated by a large collection of narratives about historical figures.

What Liu Xiang did was to screen old texts and to reorganize the historical characters and facts scattered in them into a single structure. His criterion for selecting materials was the usefulness of a historical figure in demonstrating political principles; in turn, his criterion for organizing and categorizing this material was the principles a figure and his or her actions exemplified. The same mentality was at work in Sima Qian's writing of the *Shi Ji*; the same idea also underlies the selection and compilation of the nine historical stories on the Wu Liang Ci.

There is another correlation between the nine historical scenes on the Wu Liang Ci and Liu Xiang's writings. Together with its twin composition the *Xin Xu* (A new compilation), the *Shuo Yuan* forms a trilogy with the *Lienü Zhuan* and the *Xiaozi Zhuan*. The division of subject matter in this trilogy is based on the Three Bonds theory. The *Lienü Zhuan* focuses on the relation between husband and wife, the *Xiaozi Zhuan* on the relation between father and son, and the *Shuo Yuan* on correct relations between ruler and subject, as well as other political principles. The Wu Liang Ci historical carvings exhibit a similar structure: the 33 narrative scenes, which are all centered on exemplary historical figures, are divided into three groups corresponding to the three parts of Liu Xiang's trilogy.

"The Way of the Minister," the second chapter of the *Shuo Yuan*, parallels the pictures on the Wu Liang Ci representing the stories of Lin Xiangru and Fan Sui, ministers of the states of Zhao and Qin, respectively. The introductory paragraph to this chapter expresses the author's understanding

about the correct path for a minister: "The way of a minister lies in obeying [the ruler's orders] and accomplishing his commissions. He never dares to act on his own behalf, never achieves his goals by sacrificing righteousness, and never opposes his master to advance himself. [His activities are all aimed] at benefiting his country and assisting the sovereign."¹⁰⁸

These virtues are best exemplified by Lin Xiangru, a famous minister who later became a central figure in Chinese drama and fiction. His portrait, which appears on the Wu Liang Ci alongside the central pavilion (see Fig. 61, no. 38), illustrates his most well-known stratagem to protect his native state from powerful Qin.

According to the *Shi Ji*, during the reign of King Huiwen of Zhao, Qin hit on a ruse to seize a precious jade disk called the *he shi bi* from Zhao by falsely offering fifteen cities in exchange. The king of Zhao and his ministers were in a dilemma. If they gave the jade, they probably would not get the cities; if they rejected Qin's offer, it was almost certain that their weak state would be attacked and destroyed by Qin's powerful army. In the end, Lin Xiangru took the disk to Qin. When he found out that the king of Qin had no intention of indemnifying Zhao, he managed to get the disk back. Holding it against a pillar, he gave the following speech, which has been considered the best example of political rhetoric in ancient Chinese history:

Great King, you desired to obtain this disk, so you had a fellow bring a letter to the King of Chao, who then summoned all his ministers to consider the matter. All said, "Ch'in is covetous and, relying upon her military might, seeks to get the disk with empty promises. We fear we shall never be able to secure the cities as payment." And they decided that they did not wish to give the disk to Ch'in. But I believed that even in dealings among commoners there is still no question of cheating one another, and how much more [must this be so between] great states! Moreover, [I pointed out that] one cannot, for the sake of a single jade disk, oppose the pleasure of powerful Ch'in. Thereupon the King of Chao fasted for five days and dispatched me to present the disk, reverently handing over his letter to me in the great audience-chamber. Why was this? He scrupulously observed your country's majesty by paying his respects to it. Now that I have arrived, Your Highness receives me in an outer palace, with manners most rude; and having secured the disk, you pass it about among your women to insult me. I perceived that you have no intention of indemnifying the King of Chao with those cities, and therefore I have taken back the jade. If you actually intend to coerce me, my head and this disk will now smash together against this pillar!¹⁰⁹

The fame of this speech derives not only from its literary value but also from its demonstration of the way of a minister. Lin Xiangru appears bold and clever, humble and dignified, and his words both rhetorical and straightforward. He acts on behalf of his sovereign and his country, but he also displays his own personality and diplomatic skill; he achieves his political goal, without sacrificing any moral principles. These qualities,

which are identical with those emphasized by Liu Xiang in *Shuo Yuan*, are transformed into visual images on the Wu Liang Ci (see Fig. 144). The scene represents the climax of the meeting between Lin Xiangru and the king of Qin. Leaning against the pillar, Lin Xiangru raises the jade disk in one hand, while the king lowers his body—evidence that this powerful ruler is overwhelmed by Lin Xiangru's spiritual strength.

If the picture-story of Lin Xiangru demonstrates the qualities a minister should possess, the scenes illustrating the deeds of six assassin-retainers present the virtues of another type who is able to help his ruler achieve political goals. Most of these historical figures receive high praise in the chapter "Fengshi" (Commissions) in the *Shuo Yuan*. As a striking passage from this chapter reads:

When Zhuan Zhu assassinated King Liao, [his movement] was like a comet attacking the moon and like a falling star shining in bright daylight. When Yao Li assassinated Prince Qin Ji, [his movement] was like a dark eagle striking a tower-terrace. When Nie Zheng assassinated the uncle of the king of Han, [his movement] was like a white rainbow crossing the sun. These three people were all commoners. . . . But when they were still nursing their anger, their power could even terrorize great kings. Nothing would have happened if they had no anger; but once they grew angry, there would be two corpses [of the assassin and his object] lying on the ground, and blood would splash thirty yards away!¹¹⁰

The history and social function of this group of people, called *youxia* or *cike*, have been the subject of much scholarly research.¹¹¹ Of interest here is the political symbolism underlying the Wu Liang Ci carvings. These men were commoners, or, to use Liu Xiang's term, "gentlemen who wear cotton clothes." They were considered heroes because they did not hesitate to sacrifice their own lives to destroy powerful enemies. However, their victims were neither their own personal enemies nor "evil" people, but simply the enemies of those who commissioned them. This is why Liu Xiang grouped the stories of these individuals into the chapter "Commissions." Liu Xiang expressed the essential quality of these men by putting the following words in the mouth of an assassin named Xie Yang: "It is called 'righteousness' when a master can [convince his subjects] to carry out his commission; it is called 'faithfulness' when a subject can carry out the commission. I received the order from my lord before I set out, and even if death is waiting for me I will never shift my loyalty."¹¹² This idea runs through the six assassination pictures on the Wu Liang Ci. It would be redundant to repeat each story in this section (for discussion, see Appendix A); Yao Li's assassination of Prince Qing Ji (see Fig. 149) is briefly sketched here to show the common pattern of these assassins' deeds.

The king of Wu wanted to kill Prince Qing Ji, who was said to have the strength of ten thousand men. The king's minister Wu Zixu recommended Yao Li as the assassin. Because the king recognized and appreci-

ated his talents, Yao Li decided to devote the rest of his life to accomplishing the king's commission. In order to win Prince Qing Ji's trust, Yao asked the king to kill his wife and children, to burn and expose them in the marketplace, and to cut off his right hand. Pretending to have been a victim of the king's cruelty, Yao Li persuaded Qing Ji to attack the king of Wu; as they were crossing the Yangzi River, he assassinated the prince. After he had accomplished his commission, his followers congratulated him, but he said: "To have killed my wife and children to serve my lord was inhuman. To have killed the son of my former master for the sake of my new master was to fail in my duty. To consider my death significant would be to treat lightly a lack of propriety." And then he "cut off his hands and feet, fell on his sword, and died."¹¹³

The third and last major theme of these nine historical scenes—the political relationship between king and queen—is represented by the story of Zhongli Chun, depicted on the leftmost section of the series (see Fig. 61, no. 43). This scene also provides one of the most important pieces of evidence proving the designer's conscious grouping of the historical narratives. This story, like the seven biographies of eminent women illustrated on the top register, is taken from Liu Xiang's *Lienü Zhuan*. Zhongli Chun's story is depicted separately because its theme is political in essence; it represents the responsibility of a queen as a political figure, rather than as a wife honored for her chastity and integrity.

The *Lienü Zhuan* describes Zhongli Chun as a hideously ugly and poor woman. "She had a mortar-shaped head and sunken eyes, long fingers and big joints, a turned-up nose and a swollen throat, a thick neck and sparse hair. She was stooped at the waist with a protruding bust; her skin was as dark as if it had been varnished, and she was already forty years of age and without a place to go."¹¹⁴ This woman, however, offered herself in marriage to the king. She performed this unusual act not because she was seeking honor and comfort in the court, but because she wanted to assist the king in governing the country. In the Wu Liang Ci carving, she is standing before the king and advising him (Fig. 126). According to the *Lienü Zhuan*, she warned him of several dangers facing the kingdom. First, although the kingdom was ringed by powerful hostile states, the king had not set up a son as heir; second, although the common people were utterly weary, the king had wasted a great amount of money to build his palace; third, virtuous men were hiding in the mountains, but flatterers and tricksters surrounded the king and controlled state affairs; and fourth, the king wallowed in sensual pleasures and neglected relations with other states. King Xuan was alarmed; he honored Zhongli Chun as his queen and accepted her criticism. As a result, "the kingdom of Qi enjoyed great peace, all due to the effort of an ugly woman."¹¹⁵

These nine stories, therefore, represent three types of people who, with their distinct virtues and talents, were "model" assistants: ministers in

charge of important state affairs, commoners with no scruples in accomplishing their missions, and queens who wielded a strong moral influence on their lord. Since no similar grouping of these nine historical motifs has been found in Han texts or on other contemporary works of art, we must assume that the composition was planned by the designer of the Wu Liang Ci to express his political ideas.¹¹⁶ The depiction of exemplary officials and assassin-retainers was, however, certainly not unprecedented; the nine illustrations, in fact, are an outgrowth of a long tradition. According to historical records, the practice of portraying meritorious ministers and generals existed by at least the mid-Western Han. During the Western Han, however, the officials portrayed were usually famous personages of that dynasty, but in the Eastern Han the depiction of pre-Han heroes also became popular. In both cases, a major reason for portraying these personages was to hold them up as model subjects.

References to portraits of contemporary officials can be found in the *Shi Ji*, *Han Shu*, *Hou Han Shu*, and other texts. According to these texts, such portraits appeared on murals on palace halls or official buildings. The Qilin Ge (Unicorn Pavilion), an important Western Han site that functioned as a memorial hall to good officials, was erected by Emperor Wu following the sighting of a unicorn, an important omen. He issued orders to paint the image of this auspicious beast in the hall, along with the portraits of famous ministers and generals who had contributed to the founding of the dynasty.¹¹⁷ About a hundred years later, in the third year of the Ganlu era of Emperor Xuan (51 B.C.), the portraits of eleven other ministers were added to the same hall. According to the account in the *Han Shu*, these pictures "represented their images, and their names and official titles were inscribed beside [each portrait]."¹¹⁸ These murals, together with the imperial palace, were probably destroyed during the war at the end of the Western Han. After the Eastern Han was established and the capital was moved to Luoyang, a new pavilion called the Yuntai (Cloud Terrace) was erected in the Southern Palace for a similar purpose. The *Hou Han Shu* records that in A.D. 60, Emperor Ming ordered that it be decorated with the portraits of 28 generals and four ministers important in the founding of the Eastern Han. Ban Gu wrote a eulogy to praise them:

In pursuing his imperial career,
The emperor longed for meritorious [assistants].
These men, arising from different regions,
Helped him to complete the great undertaking.
The emperor was like a dragon flying into the sky,
And accompanying him were the great statesmen.¹¹⁹

Similarly, images of provincial officials were painted in the meeting halls of different provincial departments. Important evidence for such practices is given in the *Han Guanyi* (Han bureaucracy) of Ying Shao:

On the walls of the meeting halls of provincial departments are painted the portraits of previous chief provincial officers, with accompanying eulogies. This practice, which began in the Jianwu era (A.D. 25–55), has continued to the Yangjia era (132–35). In the eulogies, each official—his purity or corruptness, and his advancement or retirement—is commented upon. The eulogies, which neither cover up errors nor praise merits falsely, are quite loyal to historical fact. These portraits will give both advice and warning to later people who come to see the pictures.¹²⁰

In fact, the practice of painting portraits in the main halls of official departments may have been introduced in the imperial court. During the Han, in addition to the portraits in special memorial halls like the Unicorn Pavilion and the Cloud Terrace, portraits of meritorious ministers were painted in the main audience hall of the imperial palace. The *Hou Han Shu* mentions that in the sixth year of the Xiping era (A.D. 177) Emperor Ling issued a special edict to portray a retired chief minister and a famous general inside the hall. The Confucian master Cai Yong was ordered to write a eulogy. The first two lines of his elaborate poem read:

Like great mountains, dignified—
They assisted and accompanied [the Son of] Heaven!¹²¹

Moreover, exemplary historical figures from earlier ages were also portrayed on the walls of the palace. “The chief ministers made their reports [to the emperor] in the Mingguang Dian [Hall of Brilliant Light]. In the past, the walls of this hall were covered with *hufen* [a kind of plaster], on which ancient heroes were painted. They were enclosed in purple and green frames, and eulogies were inscribed in double lines.”¹²²

Although the criteria for determining whose portraits should be painted in the palace were their contributions to the dynasty and their official status, the point of departure in selecting historical heroes was the political principles they embodied. The selection, therefore, was an important process. Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han once issued a special edict ordering the two most famous contemporary Confucian scholars, Ban Gu and Jia Kui, to select historical stories from the Confucian Classics and historical writings as subjects for paintings in the palace.¹²³ Interestingly, this event parallels Liu Xiang’s selection of exemplary historical figures and events for the *Shuo Yuan*.

Portrayed inside the palace meeting hall, the ancient heroes flanked the living emperor seated on the throne, just as though they were still alive. This parallels the Wu Liang Ci composition, in which ancient heroes flank the grand figure in the central pavilion, which is a symbol of sovereignty.

The Homage Scene: A Representation of Sovereignty

The specific importance of the homage scene in the central pavilion, as suggested by its decorative position, size, and elaborateness, has long been