

Epilogue: The Ideology of the Wu Liang Shrine Carvings

*In the Middle Ages men had no great thought that they did not write down
in stone.*

Notre Dame de Paris, Victor Hugo

HUGO WAS NOT an art historian, but what he intuitively grasped from the carvings in Notre Dame is the essence of medieval cathedrals—their encyclopedic and “scholastic” character—which art historians have laboriously sought to demonstrate. The four divisions of the book *Speculum majus*, or the *Great Mirror*, by Vincent of Beauvais (ca. 1190–ca. 1264) have provided historians of Western medieval art with analogies, and even the direct sources, for the carvings on Notre Dame and other great cathedrals. The *Mirror of Nature* records all natural phenomena in the order in which they were created by God; the *Mirror of Instruction* reflects all branches of human knowledge and aims to explain the riddle of the universe; the *Mirror of Morality* demonstrates that knowledge is a means of virtue; and finally the *Mirror of History* documents the progress of humanity over the centuries under the eye of God. In stone images embodying these teachings, a cathedral demonstrates, in Emile Male’s words, “an effort of such scope [as] to embrace the whole of the universe.”¹

On a general level, Male’s words describe the arts of many religious traditions, both ancient and modern, including Han monumental art. Like Western medieval art, that Chinese tradition aimed at transforming a religious structure—a temple or a shrine—into a microcosm of the universe. This is exactly what is represented in the Wu Liang Ci carvings.²

Heaven manifests itself as concrete signs or omens on the ceiling, a decorative position denoting the physical existence of Heaven in space. It is “above” and opposite to Earth below, in accordance with the assertion of Dong Zhongshu, the founder of Han Confucianism: “Heaven covers all.”³ The Heaven represented on the Wu Liang Ci is not exclusively a

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physical, inanimate entity. It possesses purpose, will, and intelligence; it responds to human activities and guides them; it blesses the virtuous and benevolent and warns the evil and corrupt.

This Heaven is neither the theistic nor the anthropomorphic deity portrayed in Western religious art. What the viewer perceives in the omen carvings is a Heaven that is at once a concrete natural phenomenon and an embodiment of abstract principles. Heaven is directly related to, and interdependent on, the human world illustrated on the walls: all people are under Heaven, and their activities stimulate Heaven to manifest abstract principles as concrete, readable symbols.

The depiction of human history on the Wu Liang Ci follows the basic lines of Han historiography. This pictorial history both reveals the pattern of evolution and prescribes standards of human behavior. Just as omens symbolize Heaven, the images of individual figures make concrete the pattern of history and morality and political standards. A tightly integrated pictorial program allows the beholder to conceptualize the ideas implied in the visual forms.

The historical narrative begins with Fu Xi and Nü Wa. Half-animal, half-human, these shadowy figures stand between the divine and human worlds, and from their union emerge the first human infants. Following them are Shen Nong and Zhuan Xu; their simple clothes depict the stage of non-action. This stage ends with human engagement in political affairs and in the ensuing organized violence and regulation. This change is symbolized by the iconography of the Five Emperors, all of whom wear the same elaborate ceremonial crowns and robes that denote ruling power and refinement. Behind the depiction of these five legendary sovereigns following each other obediently is the idea of the Golden Age of Chinese political history—the ideal age of non-assertion and pacifism, a period of political harmony as opposed to the previous period of natural harmony. The next two scenes relate the beginning of the Three Dynasties. With the initiation of the hereditary dynastic system, history no longer proceeds in a linear fashion but follows the spiral pattern of the birth, decay, and re-birth of dynasties. Those who possess outstanding virtues receive the Mandate of Heaven, but the evil conduct of their descendants results in its loss. These opposing types of rulers, viewed by Han thinkers as the direct causes of dynastic transformations, are represented almost schematically by the images of Yu and Jie, the founder and the last ruler of the Xia.

The ancient sovereigns portrayed on the Wu Liang Ci can be viewed as a counterpart of the "Basic Annals," the first section of Sima Qian's *Shi Ji*; the subsequent depictions of the lives of famous historical figures match the "Memoirs" and "Hereditary Houses" sections of the same book. These persons are, as in the words of Wang Yanshou's prose-poem on the Hall of Spiritual Light, "loyal ministers and filial sons, noble

knights and virtuous women." What the Wu Liang Ci carvings enable us to see is the pictorial structure of the illustrations. These men and women are organized into three groups, centered on the Three Bonds—the relations between husband and wife, parent and son, and ruler and subjects—which were the backbone of Han Confucian political and ethical theory. Within this framework, the designer of the carvings transformed historical tales into moral lessons and turned their heroes and heroines into instructors. One after another, these historical scenes lead the viewer toward the last picture, that of Wu Liang himself, which marks the end of the pictorial history.

In the Wu Liang Ci representation of the universe, the relationship between Heaven and the human world is fundamentally political and ethical, and communication between these two realms follows a vertical path. This vertical structure of the universe, signified by the juxtaposition of heavenly omens on the ceiling and human figures on the walls, is further combined with a horizontal dimension, the carvings on the two gables, which correspond to East and West. As Wolfgang Bauer has pointed out, in ancient Chinese cosmology "it was the West and the East that were the classical compass points for paradise."⁴ The horizontal dimension of the universe is associated primarily with the afterlife rather than with life itself. The Queen Mother and King Father's immortal lands, where the water of deathlessness flows and the deathless trees grow, kept alive people's hope of achieving eternal happiness.

It would be misleading, however, to understand the carvings as a diagram of abstract philosophical thinking. Representations of the cosmos in different religious traditions around the world, whether in Hindu and Buddhist temples or in Christian cathedrals, always served certain functions. In China, the earliest pictorial representation of the universe—the famous silk banner from Mawangdui Tomb no. 1—combines scenes of Heaven, earth, and the underground world into a coherent pictorial structure. Most scholars agree that this illustrated banner was used to summon the soul, the most important ritual in Chu shamanistic art.

The decoration on the Wu Liang Ci is the second oldest surviving "cosmic representation" in Chinese art history, and its significance must be understood in terms of the multiple functions of the shrine in ancient Chinese ritual. Like the Mawangdui banner, one of these functions is associated with deeply rooted beliefs about the soul.

Passages from the ritual canon *Li Ji* (Book of rites) document the belief of the dual division of the soul. After a person's death, the "body and *po* soul go downwards, while the *hun* soul is on high."⁵ The relation between this belief and the division of the funerary complex into a shrine and a tomb was explained by a certain Master Zhang. After summarizing the *Li Ji* passage, he concludes: "Thus, [ancient people] erected the tablet [of the deceased in his shrine] and made offerings to call his spirit [i.e., the *hun*

soul]. They sealed up the corpse and the *po* securely [in the tomb] to express their deep longing. These [rituals] were based on their understanding of the nature of ghosts and spirits and on their genuine filiality and love."⁶

This theory was stated even more clearly by the Ming dynasty writer Qiu Qiong in his ruminations on the grave-sacrifice, which, after being initiated by Emperor Ming during the mid-first century A.D., continued to be practiced by rulers of later dynasties. "I consider that a son should serve his parents according to the ritual regulations [i.e., *li*]. . . . When his parents die, their bodies and *po* souls return to the ground below, and thus the son builds tombs to conceal them. Their *hun* soar into the sky, and thus the son erects a temple or a shrine to house them."⁷

Both Master Zhang's and Qiu Qiong's statements recall the ritual function of the Chu banner. Through the shamanistic ritual of calling back the soul, the wandering *hun* of the deceased would be caught and attached to the banner and could be brought back and reunited with the *po*. Thus, a consistent relationship between the belief in twin souls and funerary facilities may be observed from the Eastern Zhou dynasty to the Ming, although later documents place more emphasis on filial piety. Almost certainly, Eastern Han funerary structures reflected ideas on the dual nature of the soul. A passage from the inscription on Xiang Tajun's shrine, which was built in A.D. 154 at Donga in Shandong, closely parallels Qiu Qiong's mode of reasoning:

[The second son,] Wuhuan, is carrying on the family line. He deeply bears in mind his parents' generosity and remembers constantly the mournfulness and grief [that he felt at his parents' death]. He and his younger brother worked in the open air in their parents' graveyard, even early in the morning and even in the heat of the summer. They transported soil on their backs to build the tumulus and planted pine and juniper trees in rows. *They erected a stone shrine, hoping that the hun souls of their parents would have a place to abide* [my italics].⁸

This ritual significance of the shrine provides a key to explain why the decoration of all known funerary shrines dating to the second century A.D. shares a basic symbolic structure. Like the Wu Liang Ci, their ceilings are the stage for celestial scenes (celestial phenomena, heavenly beings, omens), on the two gables are always portrayed the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East, and the engravings on the walls commonly depict worldly events. This symbolic structure is described in an inscription on an Eastern Han funerary shrine in Shandong: "Above, there are clouds and immortals; below, personages of filial piety, excellent virtue and benevolence."⁹ As I have suggested, this structure transforms a shrine into a representation of the universe; it is in this simulated universe that the deceased's *hun* abides once it is detached from the body.

Although Eastern Han shrines resemble each other in terms of basic

symbolic structure, they show great variation in iconography. Some shrines favor mythological scenes; others are engraved with rows of Confucian images. A funerary shrine was a personal or familial monument, and to some extent the different selections of pictorial motifs must have been determined by the patron.¹⁰ The degree of the patron's involvement in designing the shrine, as well as the reasons for his involvement, may have varied considerably. We should analyze each example carefully in order to determine if the carvings were designed by craftsmen, by the family of the deceased, or by the person to whom the shrine was later dedicated. A study of this sort can be realized, however, only through a synthetic analysis of both pictorial and literary data. In addition to a well-preserved set of carvings, a researcher needs texts and/or inscriptions that provide significant biographical information. To my knowledge, the Wu Liang Ci is the best, if not the only, such example. The inscription of Wu Liang's memorial tablet records that the shrine was built by his descendants and that the craftsman's name was Wei Gai. A number of important connections between the pictures and Wu Liang's life and ideas as recorded in his epigraph, however, have led me to the conclusion that these carvings were designed by Wu Liang himself.

According to his epigraph, Wu Liang was a Confucian scholar who retired to engage in private learning and teaching. The image of this retired gentleman is carved at the end of the historical narrative, which matches the position of the autobiographies of Sima Qian and Ban Gu in their historical works. The epigraph informs us that Wu Liang belonged to the Han School, and I have argued from historical data that members of this school were renowned for their knowledge of omens and for their stern social morality. Moreover, as a retired scholar, Wu Liang belonged to a political group engaged in a heated power struggle during the mid-second century. It is no coincidence that carvings on the Wu Liang Ci delineate the ideal of the retired worthy. The tightly integrated pictorial program and well-phrased cartouches indicate the designer's unusual training in history and literature; Wu Liang's epigraph states that "he studied widely and examined [texts] in detail. He inquired into the roots of texts and there was no book which he did not read."

The significance of identifying the creator of the Wu Liang Ci carvings is twofold. First, this identification helps explain many distinctive features of the shrine; second, it casts the Wu Liang Ci as the earliest known artwork in Chinese history to be designed by an individual to convey his own personal ideas.

The Eastern Han dynasty was an important transitional period in Chinese art history, during which educated scholars began to emerge as individual artists. From the beginning of the Eastern Han, these scholars began to participate directly in artistic activities. Some famous Confucian

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scholars, such as Liu Xiang, Cai Yong, and Liu Bao, illustrated well-known literary motifs. Zhao Qi designed the decoration for his own funerary structure and wrote a eulogy for each image. This last instance provides an exact analogy to the creation of the Wu Liang Ci carvings. None of these scholars' paintings have survived. The Wu Liang Ci is thus our sole material for studying the beginning of individualism in Chinese art.

The term *individualism* is used here to signify art forms (primarily motifs) that manifest personal motives. Studies of pre-Han art have shown that bronze, jade, pottery, and lacquer objects were essentially made according to some prevailing artistic or ideological formula; they lack significant signs of an individual mentality at work. Even during and after the Han period, conventions were still all-powerful, especially in ritual or religious art. The underlying cosmic structure of the Wu Liang Ci carvings, in fact, can be viewed as a conventional symbolic formula for decorating an Eastern Han shrine. This structure itself fulfilled the basic function of a shrine in funerary rites and did not represent ideas specific to either patron or artist. The individualism of the Wu Liang Ci carvings is found in the selection and composition of motifs. These motifs both form the material used to construct the cosmic structure and focus on specific political and moral issues.

A comparison of the ceiling carvings of the Wu Liang Ci and those of other shrines demonstrates Wu Liang's purposeful selection of motifs. As mentioned earlier, in the cosmic structure of shrine decoration, the ceiling is always the space where Heaven is represented. On all other Eastern Han shrines except for the Wu Liang Ci, however, we find depictions of Heavenly phenomena or celestial beings, such as the sun and the moon, the Weaving Maid and the Cowherd, the Duke of Thunder and the Marquis of Wind, and dragons and phoenixes. Although these images symbolized the natural existence of Heaven and satisfied people's interest in mythology, they did not indicate the other, more important aspect of Heaven in Han Confucian cosmology as the origin and embodiment of political and ethical principles. This aspect could not possibly be overlooked by Wu Liang, a radical member of the Confucian New Script School. The motifs that he chose to symbolize Heaven are omens, the concrete manifestations of Heaven's will. This will is synonymous with Wu Liang's own political ideas, as the inscriptions make clear: "The jade horse appears when a ruler is pure and incorrupt and honors the worthy"; and "the red-maned white horse appears when a ruler employs virtuous and good officials."

Likewise, the historical scheme of the Wu Liang Ci wall carvings is unconventional and must be considered Wu Liang's composition. Wu Liang interpreted the human world as subject to patterns of evolutionary changes and woven of a network of relationships. He combined the diachronic historical process and a synchronic cross-section of society into a

large composition imbued with the deep scholarly tradition of Confucianism. This representation of history also conveyed Wu Liang's thinking. He was trying to demonstrate the distinction between virtue and evil and was urging viewers to take the correct path.

This last argument leads back to the problem of the function of the Wu Liang Ci carvings. The offering shrine was instrumental in the complicated Eastern Han ritual system. In addition to its mortuary function of housing the *hun* soul, the shrine was a center both of family ancestral worship and of public activities.

Once a shrine was erected and the ancestor's *hun* soul had settled in it, the relationship between the dead and the living was continued through constant sacrifices. The *Li Ji* states that "of all the methods for the good ordering of men, there is none more urgent than the use of *li* [rituals]. *Li* are of five kinds; and there is none of them more important than . . . to offer sacrifices to ancestors."¹¹ The following inscription occurs on the shrine erected by a certain marquis of Beixiang for his parents: "I make sacrifices every morning, offering food at all times."¹² Similar expressions can be found in other Eastern Han shrines as well as in texts.¹³ The most important sacrifice took place at the *la* ceremony at the end of the year; all family members gathered at the shrine to pay homage to the deceased. This ceremony is described in the inscription on Xiang Tajun's shrine. Xiang's sons erected the shrine and hoped that "during the yearly *la* ceremonies, descendants of the family will be able to pay respect [to their ancestors in this shrine] and that they will be glad [to fulfill their filial duty]."¹⁴

Most important, these ritual activities provided the living with an opportunity to communicate with their ancestors. It was understood in ancient China that during a ceremony the living expressed their filial piety both by offering sacrifices and by receiving teachings from their ancestors. This two-way communication process as the essence of ancestral worship is described as a religious regulation in the *Li Ji*: "On the day of the sacrifice, when he [i.e., the filial son] enters the ritual structure, he will seem to see [the deceased] there Thus the filial piety taught by the ancient kings required that the eyes of the son should not forget the looks [of his parents], nor his ears their voices; and that he should retain the memory of their aims, likings, and wishes."¹⁵ Rather than passively entrusting members of his family to "retain the memory" of his "aims, likings, and wishes," Wu Liang illustrated his instructions on the memorial hall. Through images of selected historical models, he instructed his widow, sons, relatives, and servants in correct behavior. As if to avoid confusion about the purpose of these pictures, he wrote beside the filial son Zengzi: "He is the model for later generations. And [this model enabled them] to follow the Principle."

Although the center of ancestral worship within the family, an Eastern shrine also existed as a focus of large social gatherings. Textual records enable us to isolate five major sections of a Han funeral ceremony: (1) *fasang*, the deceased's family announced the death to all clan members and the friends, students, and colleagues of the deceased; (2) *bensang*, the clan members hasten to pay their respect to the deceased; (3) *diaosang*, friends, students, and colleagues present their condolences to the deceased's family; (4) *huisang*, clan members and others attend the formal funeral ceremony; and (5) *songsang*, those attending the ceremony escort the funeral procession to the burial ground. The people of the Han were renowned for postponing the final burial; sometimes the *songsang* took place a full year or two after a person's death.¹⁶ Such delays may have been caused partly by the custom of waiting for an auspicious burial date and partly by the lengthy time required to complete these rites.

The last two ceremonies in the funerary process related directly to the shrine. Some shrines were built before the person's death, whereas others may have been completed only during the lengthy preparation for the final ritual gathering. The scale of these gatherings was sometimes astonishing. More than ten thousand chariots accompanied the funeral of the famous scholar-official Kong Guang (B.C. 65–A.D. 5) to his burial ground, and more than thirty thousand people attended the services for Chen Shi (A.D. 104–87), an official well-known for his uprightness. When the Confucian scholar Zheng Xuan died, "all those who had studied with him, from those who held the official post of governor on down, put on their mourning robes to attend the funeral, over a thousand in all."¹⁷ According to *Yantie Lun* (Debates on salt and iron), even a commoner's funeral could be quite elaborate; the host family provided a large banquet with plenty of wine and food, as well as various entertainments.¹⁸

Many funeral services served important social and political purposes. The guests attended a service because they had specific connections with the deceased. The guests at Zheng Xuan's funeral, for example, were students of this Confucian master, a relationship that was not only scholarly but also strongly political. A funerary shrine was always built by the family, but guests often erected inscribed memorial tablets in front of the shrine to honor the deceased. As Martin Powers has rightly indicated, the inscriptions on memorial tablets documented the motives of the guests: praise for the deceased's accomplishments in his scholarly and/or political career, expressions of loyal devotion and commitment to common ideals, and enhancement of their own reputation, which was important for official success because of the recommendation system.¹⁹

In contrast, a shrine expressed the ideas and desires of the deceased and his family. In Wu Liang's case, the pictures in his shrine confirmed his accomplishments as a Confucian scholar and expressed his commitment to

Confucian political and moral principles, thus implicitly encouraging his friends and students to follow these principles. For his sons, this shrine was proof of their filial devotion and enhanced their public reputation.

It would be too simplistic to attribute the popularity of offering shrines during the Eastern Han solely to filial piety. Rather, arranging a graveyard and building an elaborate offering shrine testified to the fulfillment of a son's public duty, a duty that grew more elaborate with time. Early shrine inscriptions often mention only the name and official titles of the deceased, the date of his death, and the date of the completion of the shrine.²⁰ By the late Eastern Han, however, the focus of inscriptions had shifted to the expression of filial piety on the part of the contributors. In lengthy inscriptions, such as those carved on the Xiang Tajun Shrine (A.D. 154) and the An Guo Shrine (A.D. 158), the contributors described their sorrow and gratitude, their dedication to erecting the shrine and to holding ancestral sacrifices, their general moral commitment and achievement, and so on. Such words are repeated over and over, occupying most of the memorial. A common theme in these passages is the physical hardships encountered in erecting the shrine and the emotional attachment to the family cemetery.

They [An Guo's two younger brothers] long for An Guo with deep sorrow and cannot bear to leave his tumulus. They erected a funerary shrine, and transported soil on their back to make the tomb mound.

I [the Marquis of Beixiang] am bent on serving and worshiping [my deceased parents]. I am grievous and sorrowful that I have not repaid [their favor] with filial piety. Wailing without end, I am afraid that soon I will be unable to keep myself alive.²¹

Or from Wu Liang's tablet:

His filial sons, Zhongzhang, Jizhang, and Jili, and the filial grandson, Ziqiao, personally followed the path of sonly duty and spent everything they had. They chose excellent stones from south of the southern mountain; they took those of perfect quality with flawless and unyellowed color. In front they established an altar; behind they erected an offering shrine.

Another common topic of Eastern Han shrine inscriptions is the cost of construction work and the effort to accumulate the requisite funds. The costs of seven Eastern Han shrines are known from inscriptions:

1. Dai Family Shrine (A.D. 113): 17,000 cash
2. "Yongjian Fifth Year" Shrine (A.D. 130): (?) 5,000 cash (characters missing before "five")
3. Yang Family Shrine (A.D. 137): 10,000 cash
4. Wen Shuyang Shrine (A.D. 144): 17,000 cash
5. Xiang Tajun Shrine (A.D. 154): 25,000 cash

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6. An Guo Shrine (A.D. 158): 27,000 cash

7. Kong Dan cemetery (A.D. 182): 300,000 cash (for both the shrine and the tomb)²²

A similar statement on a pillar dedicated by Wu Liang and his brothers to their deceased mother states that they spent 190,000 cash to add the pillar gate and a pair of stone lions to the family cemetery.

Most of these funerary monuments belonged to local gentry and low-level officials. Some families probably did encounter difficulties pooling enough money to build an offering shrine immediately after a death. Curiously enough, some inscriptions emphasize the family's straitened financial condition and the long time needed to save enough money to build the shrine.²³ Although such statements clearly express the filial devotion of the contributors, they also raise the questions why such devotions had to be played up, and why detailed accounts of the cost of a shrine were formally inscribed on the buildings.

To interpret these phenomena, we must understand the public dimension of Eastern Han shrines. A cemetery was a center of social gatherings and provided the deceased's family an opportunity to demonstrate their filial piety, which was an important criterion, if not the most important criterion, for promotion in the Eastern Han recommendation system.²⁴ In other words, an expensive funerary service possessed a double significance. On the one hand, such an act discharged the moral obligations of family members to the dead; on the other hand, it could bring the family renown and perhaps more practical benefits.

Both motives could have contributed to the hypocrisy of funerals and the inflation of memorial rhetoric. Even during the time, many realized the dangers of these contradictory motivations. In the famous debate over the nationalization of the salt and iron industries, a scholar expressed his skepticism about the motivation behind expensive funeral services.

Nowadays when the parents are alive their children do not show love and respect, but when they die their children would elevate them to very lofty positions through extravagant [spending]. Even though they have no sincere grief, they are nonetheless regarded as filial if they give [their parents] a lavish burial and spend a lot of money. Therefore their name becomes prominent and their glory shines among the people. Because of this even the commoners emulate [these practices] to the extent that they sell their houses and property to do it.²⁵

This also helps explain the tendency to inscribe detailed and sentimental memorials on funerary shrines. The amount of money a family spent on a shrine could well become an index of its filial piety; in the same vein, hardships in collecting the requisite sum and in constructing the funeral site, extravagantly described in the inscriptions, could reinforce popular respect for the builders.

Located in a complicated social network, an Eastern Han shrine was both private and public. The Wu Liang Ci was a medium for communications between Wu Liang and the living members of his family, between Wu Liang and society at large, and between his family and the public. The shrine was open to both family members and the public during and after the funerary ceremony, in the hope that the shrine, with its engraved pictures, would continue to be educational. As an Eastern Han shrine inscription stated, "Why shed bitter tears? We advise our descendants to lead honorable lives. You, observers, please offer your pity and sympathy. . . . We are stating clearly to people of virtue and kindheartedness within the four seas: please scrutinize these words and do not ignore them."²⁶

During the Han dynasty, in Homer H. Dubs's words, Confucian ideology "developed from being the teaching of a few pedants in semi-retirement, at the end of the Chou period, to become the official philosophy of the government, which had to be adopted by anyone who hoped to enter public life. This victory set Confucianism on its way to become the dominating feature of Chinese culture and to affect profoundly a large portion of humanity."²⁷

This victory was brought about by a painstaking and almost heroic effort to synthesize all concepts and things into an ordered system. The result was a colossus juxtaposed to its giant twin—the newly founded empire. To the people of the Han, the necessity for such a synthetic ideology was proved by the alarming example of the preceding Qin dynasty, whose fall immediately followed its persecution of philosophy, history, ethics, and all other branches of intellectual learning and moral cultivation. Ironically, the anti-intellectual policy of the Qin had similarities to the Han ideal of *datong*, the Great Unification. For the Qin, however, unification meant an inanimate world under an absolute central power. A concrete example is the First Emperor's mausoleum, an enormous tumulus symbolizing the central power, surrounded by its subjects buried in a chillingly uniform fashion. In contrast, the Han Confucian concept of *datong* tried to balance contradictory forces. According to this philosophy, once these forces were balanced, the myriad things became interrelated and interdependent and therefore constituted a harmonious whole. This ideal is visualized in the Wu Liang Ci carving.

The absence in Chinese art history of an interest in Confucian art is surprising. Compared to the scholarship on Buddhist and Taoist art, discussion of Confucian ideology in art has been so rare that one cannot help questioning the existence of this genre. When I propose that the Wu Liang Ci embodies Han Confucian ideas and can thus be considered an outstanding example of Han Confucian art, it is necessary to identify some basic features of this art.

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The first and perhaps most important feature of Han Confucian art is the portrayal of a self-generating universe, a goal shared by the Wu Liang Ci carvings. *Self-generated* means that such a representation negates any external creator or ultimate cause; it is generated by a cosmic order internal to itself.²⁸ In Joseph Needham's words, it is "an ordered harmony of wills without an ordainer."²⁹ This characteristic distinguishes Han Confucianism and its art from many other religions and religious arts in the ancient world.

Strictly speaking, it is not because the Chinese have no idea of God external to the created cosmos that they have no choice but to accept the cosmology as an organismic process. Rather, it is precisely because they perceive the cosmos as the unfolding of continuous creativity that it cannot entertain "conceptions of creation *ex nihilo* by the hand of God, or through the will of God, and all other such mechanistic, teleological, and theistic cosmologies." The Chinese commitment to the continuity of being, rather than the absence of a creation myth, prompts them to see nature as an "all-enfolding harmony of impersonal cosmic functions."³⁰

Such an organismic cosmology lies at the heart of Han representations of the universe as exemplified by the Wu Liang Ci carvings. No external force manifests itself in the pictorial cosmos; even Heaven operates only in response to human affairs. Images are not the elusive instructions of God; they are the substance of the universe itself because their interrelationship reveals the internal, inflexible workings of the universe.

This understanding immediately leads us to the second feature of Han Confucian art: the iconographical scheme of a cosmic composition.³¹ Because the cosmos was self-generated, it had to be all-encompassing and all-interpretive. It was both physical and metaphysical, and it embraced both this world and what lay beyond it. Moreover, the desire to interpret everything could be realized only if all things were rationalized into some basic metaphorical codes. Thus, the following passage by Dong Zhongshu set a solid framework for Han Confucian cosmology:

In all things there must be correlates. Thus if there is the upper, there must be the lower. If there is the left, there must be the right. . . . These are all correlates. The Yin is the correlate of the Yang, the wife of the husband, the subject of the sovereign. There is nothing that does not have a correlate, and in each correlation there is the Yin and Yang. Thus the relationships between sovereign and subject, father and son, and husband and wife, are all derived from the principles of the Yin and Yang. The sovereign is Yang, the subject is Yin; the father is Yang, the son is Yin; the husband is Yang, the wife is Yin. . . . The three cords of the Way of the [true] King may be sought in Heaven.³²

The same sets of correlations govern the Wu Liang Ci carvings: upper and lower, east and west, Heaven and sovereign, sovereign and subject, parent and son, and husband and wife. In fact, the all-encompassing and

all-interpretive nature of Han Confucianism relates to the iconography of Han Confucian art on two levels: the ambition to encompass the whole universe gave rise to the encyclopedic nature of the art, and the philosophical mode of interpretation provided art with a pragmatic key for composing pictures.

Confucian cosmology, however, set only a basic interpretive framework for pictorial representations; the "stuff-material" used to construct and concretize the structure was largely left to the individual. The third and last principal feature of Han Confucian art, therefore, was that even though this art had a strict iconographical program, the iconographical imagery was flexible. The correlates—upper-lower, east-west, Heaven-man—that underlie the designs of numerous works are represented by different motifs. Although some individual motifs enjoyed greater popularity, the combination of motifs varies from shrine to shrine. Often, a number of motifs could be used alternatively to decorate identical sections of monuments. This phenomenon suggests that the decorative motifs for a specific monument were selected from sets of samples. The same phenomenon also suggests a twofold motivation in motif selection. First, each pictorial motif must have been conventionally associated with a larger concept and was thus a readily understood symbol; it could be substituted for other motifs belonging to the same category and still keep the whole program intact. Second, the selection reflected the selector's personal preference, and because of the encyclopedic nature of Han Confucianism and its art, his tastes and ideas could be effectively conveyed through the manipulation of conventional symbols.

Thus, any motif decorating a shrine functioned as a double allusion. As in the Wu Liang Ci carvings, depictions of stories and omens derived from catalogues and other popular picture collections served as references or indexes for both abstract concepts and for individual preferences. As embodiments of abstract concepts, these depictions are the building blocks of the impersonal universe; as embodiments of individual preferences, they reveal Wu Liang's intellectual and political aspirations. I have suggested that such personal implications signified the beginning of individualism in Chinese art. At this stage, however, individualism could be realized only through a manipulation of conventional forms. Forms were treated as words and the artist was a rhetorician, and "meaning" was found in the twilight zone between symbolic and representational art.