

Guest Editor's Foreword

The excavation of numerous tombs in China has brought to light a great quantity of very rich archaeological material that has considerably widened our knowledge of how the “Chinese” viewed the afterlife and their place in the cosmos, and of how their ideas concerning such matters were reflected in their posthumous, subterranean dwellings. At the same time, this wealth of material offers profound insights into earlier socio-political activities, ideological tendencies, and technological achievements. The earliest tombs consisted of no more than a bare and unadorned burial “container,” which provided a physical space for the preservation of an individual’s mortal remains, but by gradually adding objects and pictorial elements, which were painted or carved on the walls and coffins, this space came to be transformed into a vivid and dynamic representation of the philosophical, ideological, religious, and cosmological notions that were prevalent at the time. Both the structure of tombs in ancient China and their furnishings were influenced by the development of various aspects of ritual activities, which would come to play a dominating role in artistic production.

This special issue of the journal *Asian Studies* is dedicated to the meaning and transformation of Chinese funerary art during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and the subsequent Wei Jin Nanbei period (220–581 CE). The “horizontal-pit grave,” which first appeared in the middle Western Han period, marked a departure from the hitherto prevailing design based on a vertical shaft. This new form permitted the development of several burial chambers with distinct functions—a layout that would culminate in large-scale tombs with multiple chambers arranged along a central axis and flanked by side rooms and corridors. Another feature that distinguishes Han tombs from those of earlier periods is the use of brick and stone. The new horizontal-pit graves constructed from these materials provided an ideal substrate for a variety of decorations (stamped, carved or painted). These embellishments, which began to appear together with the new construction technique in the middle Western Han period, achieved their greatest diffusion during the Eastern Han period (25–220 CE). With the rapid outward expansion of the powerful Han state, accompanied as it was by the transfer of government officials and military commanders from the centre to the borderlands, the culture of the Han people, including their burial practices and tomb designs, spread to the frontier regions. As a result of the political and social disorder that characterized the latter years of the Eastern Han period, and which was accelerated by the dynasty’s downfall, the Central Plain was thrust into a state of war and turmoil, provoking even greater migration to the remote border areas in the northwest and northeast, as well as to the southern areas.

As cultural information was carried from the centre to the periphery, and also handed down from one generation to the next, there emerged a “composite” style

of funerary art, in which iconographic features from different regions were combined and the conventional, often stereotypical images of various Han deities and animals were refashioned in response to new regional contexts. The prevalence of non-Han peoples in northern China and the rapid spread of Buddhism also fostered the incorporation of foreign or Buddhist motifs into Han funerary art. This process illustrates how the peripheral regions inherited knowledge from the Chinese central territory, which in turn assimilated new norms and values.

The motifs that have come to light in tomb complexes—on mural paintings, relief carvings, coffins or on burial goods—often tend to be considered in isolation, without taking into account their original context. However, it is only by looking at these motifs within the framework of the whole composition—in particular, by identifying the connections between the pictorial contents of a painted or carved scene and the surrounding architectural elements and burial goods—that one can establish a solid basis for interpretation. Pursuing such a holistic approach, the present issue of *Asian Studies* explores how the choice of material, form, and ornamentation could sometimes determine the iconographic and religious aspects that were given greatest prominence in the construction and interior design of tombs. Although a standard iconography and uniform stylistic features developed in Chinese funerary art over time, regional variations can still be observed: these are the result of “localization” of the original motifs as they acquired various local features. Accordingly, this issue also investigates how motifs were transformed across different artistic media and adapted to meet specific needs at a time when certain beliefs were spreading from the Chinese cultural core to its peripheries.

The issue is divided into three thematic sections. It opens with a section dedicated to the imagery of Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女媧, two of China's most prominent indigenous deities, who began to be represented widely in funerary art during the Han dynasty, when their mythology was gradually being formulated and their iconography codified. In subsequent centuries, the imagery associated with this primordial couple would come to incorporate various visual elements and compositional styles as it spread to the Chinese borderlands and beyond. This first section focuses on previously unnoticed aspects of the Fuxi-Nüwa imagery and on how these were disseminated during the early imperial and medieval periods. Zhao Jinchao, in her article “Integration and Transformation: A Study of the Sun and the Moon Depicted in the Imagery of Fuxi and Nüwa,” offers an in-depth examination of the links between Fuxi-Nüwa and the sun and the moon during the Han and Wei-Jin periods. The author identifies four primary strategies used by artists to integrate the two celestial bodies into visual images of the divine couple: the sun and the moon side by side with Fuxi and Nüwa; the sun and the moon held by Fuxi and Nüwa in their hands; the sun and the moon in front of the chest of each of them; and the sun above Fuxi and Nüwa with the moon underneath. By

taking a closer look at the dissemination of each of these modes of representation, the author is able to trace systematic links to, and interactions with, regional imagery. In depictions from the early phases of the Fuxi-Nüwa iconography it is not always possible to identify the divine couple unequivocally. This article therefore also engages with the debate over another set of paired deities who are connected closely with the sun and the moon, namely their respective mothers, Xihe 羲和 and Changyi 常儀.

The regional dynamics at work in the diffusion of the Fuxi-Nüwa imagery are further discussed by Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik in her article “Transmission of Han Pictorial Motifs into the Western Periphery: Fuxi and Nüwa in the Wei-Jin Mural Tombs in the Hexi Corridor,” which looks at representations of the divine couple inside mural tombs from the Wei and Western Jin periods in the Gansu region and compares them with their Han counterparts. By also examining the origins of the migrants to the Hexi Corridor on the basis of historical records, the author investigates the influence of the various regional traditions transmitted through migration from different parts of the central Chinese territory to the western periphery. As shown by this case study, the Shandong regional style became the model for the depiction of Fuxi and Nüwa in the Gansu region, which further developed an iconographic tradition of its own.

The last article in the first section is by Fan Zhang. Entitled “Chinese-Buddhist Encounter: Synthesis of Fuxi-Nüwa and *Cintamani* in Early Medieval Chinese Art,” it focuses on the juxtaposition of the Buddhist magic jewel *cintamani* with the iconographic features of Fuxi and Nüwa in a mural painting inside the tomb of Lady Poduoluo 破多羅 (dated to 435 CE) at Pingcheng (the present-day city of Datong) in Shanxi province. The author shows how the multiple meanings of the *cintamani* (immortality, rebirth after death, guarding of the tomb, and the brightness of Heaven) have been assimilated into the funerary space, in contrast to previous scholarship which interpreted the jewel merely as symbolizing the sun and the moon. It is argued further that this kind of syncretism occurred first in Pingcheng and subsequently influenced artistic production in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (specifically in Cave 285, dated to 538). The article thus examines the interactions (in terms of movements of motifs, artisans, artists, and patrons) not only between the central Chinese territory and the border regions, but also between funerary and religious art.

The second section considers various objects and images typically found inside tombs. The opening article by Hau-ling Eileen Lam, “Representation of Heaven and Beyond: The *Bi* Disc Imagery in the Han Burial Context” is the first comprehensive study to appear in any western language on the *bi* 璧 disc images, which were extensively used in Han burials and have come down to us in different material and media. These motifs were depicted in paintings on coffins, funerary

banners, and walls, and they were also engraved on pictorial stones and bricks. The author illuminates the blurred dichotomy between high-ranking tombs and those of commoners, since *bi* disc images were used in both, and raises important questions concerning the connection between the discs' material and shape. For the *bi* disc form was eventually separated from the material originally used (jade) and began to be used as imagery in its own right. After some elaboration it became a symbol of the heavenly gate, an auspicious omen, or simply a repeating pattern that was meant to accompany the deceased in the afterlife. The article reveals the complex dynamics underlying the various pictorial representations of *bi* discs and their meaning in the context of Han burials.

In the second article, "The Meaning of Birds on *Hunping* (Spirit Jars): The Religious Imagination of Second to Fourth Century Jiangnan," Keith Nathaniel Knapp considers why so many birds are depicted on the funerary objects commonly known as *hunping* 魂瓶, or "spirit jars." Even though the extensive use of animal imagery—particularly bird imagery—is one of the most remarkable features of such jars, previous scholarship has been much more concerned with the function of these vessels and with the meaning of the images of Buddha that are also to be found on them. It is generally thought that the birds represent the souls of the departed flying heavenwards; however, such an explanation can hardly account for the large number of bird representations on the jars. Instead, the author ventures an explanation based on the local Jiangnan belief according to which sparrows stole rice from Heaven in order to save mankind from hunger. Birds thus came to be seen as deities associated with grain and fertility, and became a local emblem of good luck for both the dead and the living.

The third and last section moves the discussion beyond the central Chinese territory to the southwest and towards the northern frontier. The opening article, "Cliff Tomb Burial and Decorated Stone Sarcophagi from Sichuan from the Eastern Han Dynasty," deals with a distinctive feature of the southwestern region in early imperial China. The author, Hajni Pejsue Elias, argues that the practice of cliff tomb burial, which experienced a sudden flourishing during the Eastern Han dynasty but petered out by the 3rd century CE, was a response to wider developments. A drive towards frugality in a society that enjoyed relative social and political stability, as well as considerable economic prosperity, was reflected in cliff tomb burial, which was seen as less ostentatious and more intimate. Hence the preference for sharing a single tomb among several family members, and also for decoration on a smaller scale: instead of large pictorial designs on the tomb walls, we find a profusion of motifs adorning the stone sarcophagi. The new layout of cemeteries heralded a shift from the public towards the private, together with a greater emphasis on family ties.

The next article, entitled "Dual Portraits of the Deceased in Yangqiaopan M1, Jingbian, Shaanxi," is by Leslie Wallace, who studies two portraits on the walls of

an Eastern Han tomb, Yangqiaopan M1 楊橋畔, which was excavated near the city of Jingbian in the north of Shaanxi province (part of the Han northern frontier at the time). While the deceased in the first portrait appears in a processional scene on the left front wall and wears the typical clothing of the Han elite, the deceased in the second portrait has quite different facial features and hairstyle, and is represented between his wife and another figure on the top of the rear wall as part of a “spirit seat” (*lingwei* 靈位) composition. Proceeding from the observation that non-Han features are incorporated into the Yangqiaopan murals in a way that differs from other Han tombs—where foreigners are portrayed with stereotypical features, usually in scenes of combat—the author argues that the two frescoes constitute a dual portrait of the deceased, and that they are intended to express different aspects of his social status and identity.

The last article, “The Representation of Military Troops in Pingcheng Tombs and the Private Household Institution of *Buqu* in Practice” by Chin-Yin Tseng, focuses on the armed men who appear, arranged in military formation, in mural paintings and as figurines inside three tombs from the Northern Wei dynasty in the city of Pingcheng. The author points out that such military scenes may not necessarily attest to the tomb owner’s having had a large army at his command; instead, they could conceivably be representing the non-professional soldiers, commonly known as *buqu* 部曲, who made up the private retainer corps of wealthy families. Adopting the well-tried approach of considering material culture within the socio-political context, the author traces the resurgence of this motif in the tombs from the Pingcheng period, and argues that its popularity may have been a response to the Northern Wei’s policy of disbanding tribes.

This special issue of *Asian Studies* is intended to contribute to the field of Chinese funerary art by opening up new angles from which to readdress some of the issues that remain underexplored. I hope that you will enjoy reading it.

Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik, Guest Editor

