

Representation of Heaven and Beyond: The *Bi* Disc Imagery in the Han Burial Context

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Abstract

The *bi* (“disc”) is an object that was originally made from jade, and became an independent motif that appeared widely in different pictorial materials during Han times. The *bi* disc is considered one of the earliest jade forms, and has been used for ritual purposes or as an ornament from the Neolithic period until today. This paper focuses on the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), a period in which jade *bi* discs were extensively used and placed in burials of different ranks. Present finds show that images of *bi* discs also appeared widely in Han burials, in which they were depicted on coffins, funerary banners covering coffins, and mural paintings, and were also engraved on pictorial stones and pictorial bricks, these practices becoming more ubiquitous in the later Han period. By studying various images of *bi* discs in different burials throughout the Han period, this paper will explore the development and significance of different pictorial representations of *bi* disc in Han burial context, and also attempt to reveal the rich content and thoughts embedded in the form of *bi* discs during this period of time.

Keywords: *bi* disc, imagery, pictorial representation, heaven, Han Dynasty

Upodobitev Neba: podoba diska *bi* v grobnem kontekstu dinastije Han

Izvilleček

Bi (»disk«) je predmet, ki je bil prvotno narejen iz žada, pozneje je postal samostojen motiv ter se je pogosto pojavljal v različnih slikovnih podobah v času dinastije Han (202 pr. n. št.–220 n. št.). Disk *bi* velja za eno izmed zgodnjih oblik žada, ki se je uporabljala za obredne namene ali kot okras od neolitika pa vse do danes. Pričujoči članek se osredotoča na obdobje dinastije Han, v katerem so se diski *bi* uporabljali v velikem obsegu in različnih oblikah znotraj grobne komore. Opazimo jih lahko na krstah, na pogrebnih praporjih, ki so prekrivali krste, v grobnih poslikavah in tudi kot rezbarije na kamnitih in opečnatih zidkih. Vse te prakse so postale še posebej razširjene v pozni dinastiji Han. S pomočjo raziskav upodobitev diska *bi* v različnih tipih pogrebov skozi celotno obdobje dinastije Han bo članek prikazal razvoj in pomen različnih slikovnih

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upodobitev tega diska v grobnem kontekstu dinastije Han ter razkril bogato vsebino in ideje, ki se kažejo v upodobitvah diska *bi* v tem obdobju.

Ključne besede: disk *bi*, podoba, slikarske upodobitve, Nebo, dinastija Han

Introduction

There is much rich and vivid imagery in Han burials, particularly when sarcophagi and stone-chambered tombs were introduced in the middle and late Western Han periods, and became ubiquitous in the Eastern Han. The image of a *bi* 璧 disc was among one of the most frequent motifs in Han burials, and was a unique motif in that its original counterpart—jade *bi* discs—were also commonly used and placed in tombs.

The *bi* disc is a very old jade form used from the Neolithic period until today. Interestingly, the appearance of *bi* discs is not necessarily associated with the original material of jade. Finds to date demonstrate that there were different versions of *bi* discs that have appeared throughout history. During the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), the mortuary use of *bi* discs was widely distributed in both high ranking and modest cemeteries, and a wide range of materials such as glass, clay, wood, and so on, were used for manufacturing *bi* discs, in addition to jade. Ultimately, the representation of *bi* discs depicted in mural paintings, inscribed on stone, or impressed on bricks—a way of presenting the form or image detached from the jade material—became the most prevalent presentation mode of *bi* discs during later Han times.

Although the form of *bi* discs has remained unchanged throughout the ages, the presentation and signification of this form has kept evolving and was enriched as the context of usage and the perception of the materiality of the object changed. Research on *bi* discs in Western Han noble tombs found that non-jade *bi* discs did not necessarily serve as less precious versions of jade originals, and that the use of non-jade discs was not simply driven by the availability of jade (Lam 2018). But there remain limited in-depth discussions about the pictorial representation of *bi* discs in Han burials. By adopting typological and iconographical approaches, this paper focuses on various pictorial representations of *bi* discs in Han burials, a rather under researched area, and seek to chart the development of the motif of *bi* discs and untangle the rich signification embedded in its shape.

The *bi* disc images appeared in both high-ranking elite and ordinary tombs, this paper will first give an overview of the distribution and development of the use of the motif throughout Han times, so as to highlight major features and contexts.

It will then examine the images of *bi* discs in Eastern and Southern elite tombs in the early Han by looking at the placement and the way these images appeared in these two regions, so as to address the origins of different practices. Finally, this paper will discuss the images of *bi* discs in ordinary tombs, particularly in the Eastern Han period, to explore the development and connections with the early Han noble tombs, as well as the vibrant significations of the *bi* disc form that developed during this time.

An Overview of *Bi* Disc Imagery in Han Mortuaries

The earliest *bi* disc images appeared no later than the Warring States period and became less common after the Eastern Han dynasty. When compared with jade *bi* discs, the images appeared much later and lasted for a shorter period of time. In fact, the discoveries of *bi* disc images prior to the Han period are very few and restricted to Hunan province (Chu area of the time); to date, only three examples are known from modest burials at Changsha 長沙, with *bi* disc images all appearing as openwork decorative design on *lingchuang* 簀床 (“wooden bed”) (Hunan 1963b, 169; Zhongguo 1957, 22, 63). By the time of the Western Han (202 BCE–8 CE), *bi* disc images were presented in a far more extensive range of materials or media; besides on wooden beds, the *bi* disc motif was painted on lacquer coffins, lacquer screens, silk funerary banners, mural paintings, and inscribed on the walls of wooden chambers, pictorial stones and bricks (Table 2). Geographically, the adoption of *bi* disc image was expanded slightly in the Western Han; during the early Western Han, *bi* disc images were very rare and only found in Hunan and Jiangsu provinces, and all of them were found in high ranking elite tombs, including the princely tomb at Shizishan 獅子山, Xuzhou 徐州 city, Jiangsu, and tombs at Mawangdui 馬王堆, and Changsha city, in Hunan. At sites dating between the middle and late Western Han, *bi* disc images also have been discovered in Henan and Shangdong provinces, but predominately in small and medium tombs. Surprisingly, there have been no *bi* disc images found in burials in Hunan province after the middle of the Western Han. (Table 1) “A pair of dragons or mythical animals pass through a *bi* disc 二龍/二獸穿璧” and “a *bi* disc suspended by two crossing ropes 穿璧紋” are the two most frequent motifs during the early Western Han, with the patterns becoming more diverse from the late Western Han.

Table 1: Distribution of bi disc images in Han Dynasty burials¹

Date	Location/ no.												
	An-hui	Gan-su	He-nan	Hu-nan	Inner Mongolia	Jiang-su	Sha-anxi	Shan-dong	Shan-xi	Sichuan/Chong-qing	Zhe-jiang	un-known	Total
Early W. Han	-	-	-	7	-	1	-	-	-	-	-		8
Mid W. Han	-	-	5	1	-	3	-	4	-	-	-		13
Late W. Han	-	-	5	-	-	-	-	14	-	-	-		19
Subtotal: W. Han	-	-	10	8	-	4	-	18	-	-	-		40
Xin Dynasty	-	-	2	-	-	-	9	3	-	-	-		14
E. Han	5	1	13	-	1	12	33	35	2	33	3	1	143
Total	5	1	27	8	1	16	42	56	2	33	3	1	197

Table 2: Statistics on bi disc images on different media in Han burials (*ibid.*)

Date	Medium										Total no.
	Jade coffin	Lacquer coffin/screen	Lingchuang "wooden bed"	Mural painting	Pictorial brick	Pictorial stone	Sarcophagus	Silk funerary banner	Wooden chamber		
Early W. Han	1	5						2			8
Mid W. Han			1	2	2	1	4		3		13
Late W. Han				2	3	1	13				19
Subtotal: W. Han	1	5	1	4	5	2	17	2	3		40
Xin Dynasty				2	9	1	2				14
E. Han				2	26	99	16				143
Total	1	5	1	8	40	102	35	2	3		197

1 The statistics are based on the following sources: Li et al. 1995; Liu 1988; Luoyang 2010; Huang 2012; Neimenggu 1978; Ouyang 2001; Pan 1983; Sichuan 2016; Xu 2012; Zhao 1992; Zhongguo 1957; Yu and Jiang 2000; Yu and Lai 2000; Yu and Jiao 2000; Tang et al. 2000a; Tang et al. 2000b.

By the time of the Eastern Han, *bi* disc images were much more widely distributed. Besides Henan, Jiangsu, and Shandong, *bi* disc images have also been found in tombs in Anhui, Chongqing, Gansu, Inner Mongolia, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Sichuan, and Zhejiang provinces. Table 1 shows that a total of 143 examples of Eastern Han *bi* disc images have been discovered to date, which is three times more than the number of images found in Western Han tombs. Interestingly, most of the *bi* discs are on sarcophagi, walls of pictorial stone-chambered tombs and pictorial bricks, with no images yet found on wooden beds, lacquer coffins, screen and silk banners from this period. (Table 2) Moreover, Eastern Han *bi* disc images show a wider range of themes or scenes, which reveals the rich significations embedded in the pictorial form of *bi* discs during this period. This will be further examined in the following discussions.

Jade *Bi* Discs Before and During Han

Undoubtedly, jade *bi* discs are the original source of the *bi* disc imagery. Long before *bi* disc images appeared in burials, jade *bi* discs were placed around the deceased in eastern China, and this was a long practice that can be traced back to the Liangzhu 良渚 culture (ca. 4000–2,500 BCE) of the late Neolithic. There were impressive numbers of jade *bi* discs, placed together with *congs* 琮, and other jade objects in burials of the Liangzhu, which primarily came from the lower Yangtze River area (Li 2008, 282–83). For example, in tomb no. 3 at Sidun 寺墩, Changzhou 常州 city, Jiangsu, the deceased was covered with over a hundred jade objects, among which there were 24 jade *bi* discs (Nanjing 1984). This practice is in accordance with an early statement about *bi* discs in *Zhouli* 周禮 (*Rites of the Zhou*), a well-known early Chinese text that was compiled during the Warring States period (ca. 403–221 BCE): “*Bi* discs and *cong* are arranged for the burial of deceased (疏璧、琮，以斂屍)” (Zheng 2009, 35). The use of jade *bi* discs diminished when the Liangzhu culture disappeared (Rawson 1995, 130–31). Then in the later Eastern Zhou period (late fifth century BCE), in the region of the state of Chu 楚國, a substantial number of large jade discs were found placed upon the deceased in tombs in present-day Anhui, Henan and Hubei. This phenomenon has been interpreted as a revival or continuation of the Neolithic period, and also a key stage toward adopting the *bi* disc as a mortuary ritual in an effort to protect the body, a significant belief that was widespread in the Han era (*ibid.*, 248).

During the Western Han, the belief in the preservative powers of jade was supported in various classical texts,² and this has been further reinforced by the archaeological evidence that jade objects, including jade *bi* discs, were placed in the innermost layer of the noble burials in rock-cut cave tombs. For example, the intact rock-cut tombs of the King of Zhongshan 中山 in Mancheng 滿城, Hebei province (Zhongguo 1980), and the King of Nanyue 南越 in Guangzhou, Guangdong province (Guangzhou 1991a), both yielded a considerable amount of jade *bi* discs, which were used to cover the corpses of nobles before they wore jade suits. In fact, except for the tombs of the King of Nanyue, these Western Han noble rock-cut tombs are primarily located in eastern China, and among these jade, particularly jade *bi* discs, were continuously in favour with the elite and believed to be one of the most significant jade objects to protect a dead body.

Bi Disc Images in the Eastern Noble Rock-cut Tomb: Close Association with Jade

There is an exceptional case that *bi* disc images were inscribed on the jade slabs of a jade coffin, which were discovered in the Western Han rock-cut tomb of the King of Chu, at Shizishan (c.175–154 BCE), Xuzhou, Jiangsu province (Wei 1998) (Fig. 1). In this tomb, 29 jade *bi* discs were also discovered and placed close to the jade coffin and the corpse. In fact, besides being placed on corpses, jade *bi* discs were also commonly used to decorate both jade and wooden coffins of the elite tombs in the Eastern China during the Western Han (Chen et al. 2012, 14). For example, in the rock-cut tomb of Dou Wan 竇綰, Queen of Zhongshan (c.118–104 BCE), Mancheng, Hebei province, and in the tomb of the Queen of Jiangdou 江都 (c.129–127 BCE), Dayunshan 大雲山, Jiangsu, both jade suits and jade coffins were discovered, and the jade coffins were inlaid with a number of jade *bi* discs (Zhongguo 1980, fig. 177; Nanjing 2013). In addition, the jade *bi* discs found in the rock-cut tomb of Chu King at Beidongshan 北洞山 (c.140–118 BCE), Xuzhou city, Jiangsu, were also believed to have been attached to the coffin (Wang

2 For example, 1. *Huainan Wanbi shu* 淮南萬畢術, attributed to Liu An 劉安 (ca. 180–22 BCE) said: “burying stones at the four corners of the house would prevent it from being disturbed by ghosts (埋石四隅, 家無鬼)” (Lin 2004, 334); 2. the “Biography of Wang Mang” 王莽傳 in the *Hanshu* 漢書, mentions that a piece of excellent jade could cure a wound; 3. the *Hou Hanshu* (後漢書) (ca. 398–445 CE), a “Biography of Liu Penzi” 劉盆子傳 records that the bodies of Empress Lü 呂后 and other nobles placed in jade shrouds from the imperial mausoleums of the Western Han were all well preserved and still looked lifelike nearly 200 years later when the Vermilion Eyebrows Soldier 赤眉軍 dug out the tombs (Lin 2004, 334).

2017; Ge 2018). The findings at Shizishan were remarkable, as the *bi* discs were carved as images, instead of being separate *bi* disc objects, and these images were inscribed on jade—the material initially used to manufacture *bi* discs. This practice possibly was a timesaving way to represent the actual jade *bi* discs attached on coffins.

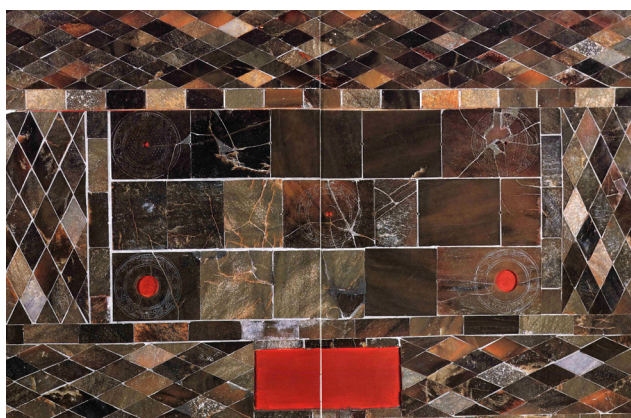


Figure 1: Jade coffin from the tomb of the King of Chu at Shizishan, Xuzhou, Jiangsu, early Western Han (After Zhongguo et al. 2005, 322–23).

There were another two discoveries of *bi* disc images, slightly later than those discovered in Shizishan, and both were found in the rock-cut tomb of the King of Liang at Shiyuan 柿園 (c. 136–118 BCE), Mangdangshan 芒碭山, Yongcheng 永城 county, Henan. Unfortunately, this tomb was severely looted, and some jade suit plaques were the only jade objects found in the main chamber (Henan et al. 2001, 231). The two discoveries of jade images in this tomb are different from those at Shizishan and were not inscribed on jade material. One of the discoveries is a repetitive pattern of *bi* discs suspended by two crossing ropes, and this is used as a decorative border pattern framing the mural paintings of dragons and other mythical animals on the ceiling, southern and western walls of the main chamber (ibid., 115–20). Another *bi* disc image was inscribed on the stepping stones of the lavatory, located at the very south-eastern corner that is far from the main chamber, which is a motif of “a *bi* disc suspended by two crossing ropes” (Fig. 2a).³ Given this is the only discovery to date, the reason and exact meaning of placing the motif on these lavatory stones remain unresolved,

3 The motifs of a bird above three trees and a house above a tree are inscribed on the top of the *bi* disc images on the right and left stepping stones, respectively.

but one possible functional purpose of the pattern is to make the stepping stone less slippery.



Figure 2a: Bi disc images inscribed on the right stepping stone of the lavatory, tomb of the King of Liang, at Shiyuan, Henan, mid-Western Han (After Henan et al. 2001, 98, fig. 40.1).



Figure 2b: Images inscribed on the left stepping stone of the lavatory, tomb of the King of Liang, at Shiyuan, Henan, mid-Western Han (After Henan et al. 2001, 98, fig. 40.2).

The placement of the *bi* disc images in a rock-cut noble tomb context, although the quantity is limited, shows a pattern that the *bi* disc images appeared very close to the tomb owner, like those in the tomb of the King of Chu at Shizishan, which were inscribed on jade; while the *bi* disc images on materials other than jade, such as the mural depictions and stone engravings discovered in the tomb of the King of Liang at Shiyuan, were not placed near to the deceased. As discussed in the previous section, under the deep-rooted beliefs about jade developed in the Han era, particularly among the nobles, jade was regarded as a distinctive material possessing magical properties, and thought to be efficacious to ward off demons and prevent the body from decomposition, therefore jade objects were always placed in the innermost layer of a body's wrappings to encase the corpse. This explains the reason why only *bi* disc images on jade were placed near the deceased, and those depicted or inscribed on non-jade materials were not put close to the body, as they were not considered to be able to protect the deceased to the same extent, but likely served a decorative or more functional purpose. In addition, the arrangement of *bi* disc images further reveals that the image itself was not seen as able to protect the tomb owner against harm from demon and decomposition, but rather the jade itself had these properties. In other words, as long as the *bi* disc was made or of inscribed on jade it would be effective, and thus there were 29 jade *bi* discs along with *bi* disc images on a jade coffin in the main chamber of the Shizishan tomb. This is also further proven by jade *bi* discs in other noble tombs that were broken into small pieces to be placed on the deceased (Chen 2012; Xi'an 2003), or cut as plaques for to be jade coffin inlays, burial suits (Gu 2005b, 77; Guangzhou 1991a, 364; Xuzhou 2003), and jade pillow inlays (Chen, 2012; Zhongguo 1980, fig. 177; Zhongguo 2005, 332–35). As long as an object is from a jade *bi* disc, even the form is incomplete, it was still strong enough to safeguard the deceased. In short, for the purpose of ensuring protection and preservation of the dead, jade itself had precedence over the shape of a *bi* disc in these noble rock-cut tombs in the eastern region.

***Bi* Disc Depiction in Southern Elite Burial: A Detached Shape**

In contrast to the noble rock-cut tombs, the *bi* disc images in the high status tombs of the southern region of early Western Han were depicted on non-jade material and placed very close to the deceased. For example, in the intact tomb no. 1 of Lady Dai 軫 at Mawangdui,⁴ there were *bi* disc depictions on the lacquered wooden coffin (Fig. 3) and a funerary banner (Fig. 4) that was placed on the innermost coffin

4 It is a vertical earth pit tomb. Lady Dai died several years after 168 BCE.

(Hunan et al. 1973a). Intriguingly, the high ranking early Western Han tombs in the southern region in fact yielded very few jade items. For example, tomb no. 2 of Marquis Dai at Mawangdui (Hunan et al. 2004) and the tomb of the King of Changsha at Shazitang (Hunan 1963a) only have one jade disc placed close to the deceased; or they are even absent of jade, like the intact tomb of Lady Dai and another intact tomb no. 3 of Marquis Dai's son at Mawangdui (Hunan et al. 2004).⁵ But the rich and luxurious objects, such as exquisite lacquerware, textiles, etc., unearthed in these elite tombs and some low ranking graves in the same area that also yielded jade *bi* discs reveal that neither a shortage of jade in the region nor economic considerations were the critical reasons for the absence of jade *bi* discs and jade objects in these elite tombs (Hubei 1976; Changsha 1986). Another possibility is that the region did not have such a strong belief in the supernatural attributes of jade as did the eastern part of the state at that time. This is shown in the way they preserved the deceased in the tomb of Lady Dai and the son of Marquis Dai, where both corpses were covered with multiple layers of luxurious garments instead of layers of jade. In addition, the same tomb placed peach wood figurines rather than jade in the coffins to ward off evil.⁶



Figure 3: The pictorial image of *bi* disc on the southern panel of the coffin from the tomb of Lady Dai at Mawangdui, Hunan, Western Han (After Hunan et al. 1973a, fig. 24).

- 5 The intact tomb of Lady Dai at Mawangdui did not hold any jade discs and jade objects, even the disc placed closest to the tomb owner that was hung from top of the head panel of the inner coffin was made of lacquer (Hunan 1973a, 36–37, fig. 36).
- 6 In tomb no. 1 of Lady Dai, 36 peach wood figurines were placed between the coffins and on the inner coffin to ward off evil (Hunan et al. 1973a). Meanwhile, in tomb no. 3 of the Marquis Dai's son at Mawangdui, two peach wood figurines were also found between the inner coffin and middle coffin (Hunan et al. 2004, 179). A written reference to this practice can be found in the Qin bamboo slips called *rishu* 日書, that were excavated at Shuihudin 睡虎地, Hubei province. They mention that “peach wood” and white stones could ward off evil (Liu 1994, 257).

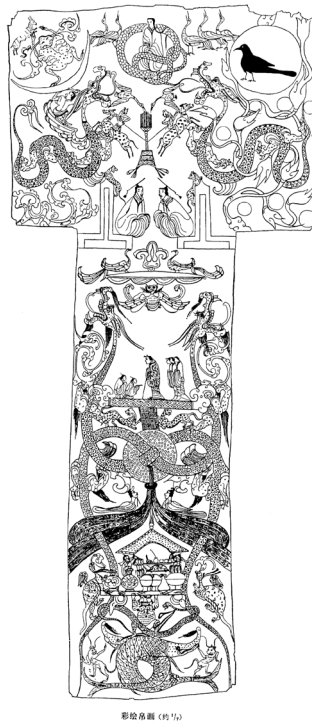


Figure 4: The funerary banner from the tomb of Lady Dai at Ma'wangdui, Hunan, Western Han (After Hunan et al. 1973a, fig. 83).

Research also suggests that a disconnection between the shape of *bi* disc and its original jade material may possibly have already appeared in the Warring States period (cf. Lam 2018). Three *lingchuang*, a wooden board placed on the bottom of the coffin for holding the deceased, were unearthed in small Warring States tombs in the Southern Chu area, today Changde 常德 and Changsha in Hunan, on which were engraved with openwork designs of a *bi* disc motif interlocked with simplified dragon pattern (Hunan 1963b; Zhongguo 1957). In addition, some modest tombs in Hubei and Hunan with no jade held *bi* discs made of alternative materials, such as wood, which were decorated with floral or geometrical patterns, typical motifs on lacquerware at that time (Yunmeng 1981, 55–57).⁷ The very different selections of materials, decoration and method of presentation for the *bi* disc showed no attempt

⁷ For example, a Warring States tomb no. 7 and Qin Tomb no. 9 at Shuihudi, in Yunmeng 雲夢, Hubei, yielded two and four wooden *bi* discs respectively. They were painted and lacquered on one side with floral or geometrical patterns (Yunmeng 1981, 55–57).

in these cases to maintain the appearance of jade. These are early examples of the form of the *bi* disc being disconnected from the original jade material in the southern region, and demonstrate the association between jade and *bi* discs in the southern region was not as strong as it was in the eastern areas.

However, the *bi* discs became essential burial items in the region, regardless of rank;⁸ and hanging or placing a *bi* disc at the head of the deceased was a ubiquitous practice in this southern region that began no later than the Warring States period.⁹ Scholars have provided detailed discussions and relate the source of the practice to the long standing custom to perforate a hole in burial containers (cf. Wu 2011; Huang 2001, 63), for example, the perforated ceramic urns of the Yangshao 仰韶 culture (c. 5000–3000 BCE);¹⁰ and in the early Warring States period tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng 曾侯乙 at Leigudun 擂鼓墩, Hubei, the ornate painted outer coffin has a rectangular opening on the foot panel (Hubei 1989, 9–55).¹¹ It was generally believed that such holes were made to allow the soul of the deceased to freely move in and out of the burial containers (cf. Li 1976; Li 2012; Wu 2011). Although many ordinary tombs in the Southern region during Han times continued to adopt glass or talc discs as inferior versions of jade discs, the high-status tombs developed a very different approach, and depiction became favoured. In the jade-absent tomb of Lady Dai at Mawangdui, paintings of *bi* discs are repeated in different places—on the funerary banner that covered the inner coffin, the southern panel of the coffin, and a panel in the northern compartment (Hunan 1973a). Wu Hung suggests that the northern compartment was a setting

8 For discoveries of *bi* discs from the ordinary burials in the region, see Changsha 1986; Fu 1999; Hubei 1976; Hunan 1957.

9 For example, in the Warring States Chu tomb no. 2 of a *dafu* 大夫 ranking official at Baoshan 包山, Jingmen 荊門 city, Hubei, a jade *bi* disc was hung by ropes from the top of head panel of the inner coffin (Hubei 1991, 61–68); another two Chu tombs at the same site of Baoshan, tombs no. 4 and no. 5, both had a jade disc buried near the head of the deceased (ibid., 286–318); a Chu tomb no. 406 at Changsha city, Hunan had a jade *bi* disc placed between the head panels of the inner and outer coffins (Zhongguo 1957, 26, fig. 22); a number of medium to small tombs in Changsha city had a talc *bi* disc placed vertically inside or outside the head panels of the coffins (ibid., 65–66); and several medium to small tombs at Zhaojiahu 趙家湖, Dangyang 當陽, Hubei, a jade or agate *bi* disc was placed near the head of the deceased (Hubei 1992), etc.

10 This is the earliest finding to date which shows that burial containers possess perforations, with a hole being very common on the cover or at the bottom of ceramic urns (Xu 1989, 334).

11 Besides, on the coffin of the tomb owner there are depictions of a window-like pattern on the foot panel and on the side panel there are guardians. In the same tomb, the coffins of the attendants or sacrifices also have a similar window-like pattern either on the head panel or foot panel (Hubei 1989, 9–55). In addition, each chamber room is connected with a door hole opening (ibid., 14), so as to allow the soul of the deceased to enter and exit from the coffins and also roam around different rooms within the burial (Wu 2011).

that served as the afterlife dwelling space for Lady Dai, and the panel placed at the far west in this space signified the throne for and presence of Lady Dai (Wu 2011, 59–61).¹² Similarly, in another jade-absent noble tomb of Marquis Dai's son at Mawangdui, images of *bi* discs were also depicted on the funerary banner and a panel in the northern compartment (Hunan et al. 2004). Another nearby tomb at Shazitang also has depictions of *bi* discs on the northern panel and on the cover of the outer coffin (Hunan 1963b).

These pictorial versions of *bi* discs were generally presented as suspended by two crossing ropes, or in a scene showing a pair of mythical animals such as dragons passing through a suspended disc. Evidently, this motif echoed the contemporaneous custom of hanging or placing *bi* discs in a funerary context, particularly those depicted on the head or foot panels of the coffin; meanwhile, the contents were substantially enriched and embodied by adding the elaborate mythical animals in the pictorial images. Although the precise meaning of this iconography is still subject to debate, different scholars have suggested it probably refers to the transition of the soul of the deceased ascending to an eternal otherworld (Erickson 2010; Loewe 1979: 17–59; Wu 1992). The pictorial presentation of *bi* discs appeared repeatedly on items that were placed in close proximity to the tomb owners. On the one hand that indicates the region did not have a strong belief in the preservative quality of jade, as seen in the eastern region;¹³ on the other hand, it reveals that the nobles of this region felt that the image of a *bi* disc alone was efficacious and also a more desirable method to protect and assist the deceased in afterlife (Lin 2004, 328; Thorp 1979, 79).

12 Wu Hung used the tomb of Lady Dai as an example, and suggested that, on the one hand, from the setting in the north compartment, we can assume the tomb beneath the earth is the dwelling place for the *po* 魄 ('spirit') of the deceased, and on the other, particularly the depictions on the coffin and the funerary banner, the *hun* 魂 ('soul') of the tomb owner would leave the tomb and transit to the eternal otherworld (Wu 2011, 59–61). This situation echoes the statement documented in the "Jiao-Ritual Sacrificial Animals (Jiao tesheng 郊特牲)" of the *Records of Ritual (Liji, 禮記)*, "The *hun* soul pneuma returns to the heaven, and the *po* spirit form returns to the earth (魂氣歸於天, 形魄歸於地)" (Csikszentmihaly 2006, 117).

13 In fact, the nobles in the eastern region probably shared similar beliefs with regard to the form of the *bi* disc as the southern elites, but they selected an alternative way to present its presence which still served the same purpose. For example, the noble rock-cut tombs also placed a jade *bi* disc at the head of the deceased, but the jade *bi* disc was included at the top of headgear and become part of a jade burial suit (for examples see Guangzhou 1991a). Likewise, in the tomb of Liu Sheng, Prince of Zhongshan, a rock-cut tomb at Mancheng, an ornate jade *bi* disc embellished with a pair of dragons was placed on the inner coffin (Zhongguo 1980, 133, 135), this jade *bi* disc echoes the motif that was depicted on the coffins and funerary banners in the Southern noble tombs (Gu 2005a, 190). The persistent adoption of jade for *bi* disc presentation reinforces the strong belief in this material as seen in the noble tombs in the eastern region, very different to the practice in the southern region.

According to the textual documentation pictorial coffins became a standard burial ritual for aristocrats during the Eastern Han period, and *bi* discs are one of the significant motifs painted on coffins. In the “Record of Rites” in *Hou Hanshu* (後漢書·禮儀志) it is written:

……東園祕器……畫日、月、鳥、龜、龍、虎、連璧、……

Dongyuan miqi (imperial coffin), ...on which painted sun, moon, bird, turtle, dragon, tiger, joint *bi* discs, ... (Fan 1965, 3141)

However, apart from the discoveries of early Western Han noble tombs in the southern region, objects with *bi* disc depictions have not yet been found in other contemporaneous nor later noble tombs.

***Bi* Disc Images in Ordinary Tombs: A Hybrid Continuity**

The *bi* disc images discovered from the early Western Han were primarily unearthed in high status burials of the eastern rock-cut tombs and the southern earth pit tombs. Although relatively few of these images have been found in these elite tombs to date, they are significant examples, showing these two areas both regarded *bi* disc as essential burial objects that were placed close to the deceased, but with very different choices of presentation that reveal their divergent interpretations and emphases with regard to the *bi* disc form and its original material of jade. The different practices of adopting *bi* disc images in the two regions' elite tombs, in fact, had certain influences on and became references for the development of *bi* disc images that flourished among ordinary tombs in later Han times.

Between the middle and late Western Han periods, *bi* disc images became less common in elite tombs and began to appear in ordinary graves located in the eastern region, mainly in Henan, Jiangsu and Shandong provinces (Table 1). In the meantime, sarcophagi, a new type of coffin made of stone, were also introduced in the east coast area, and Zheng Yan noted these were not high-status burials, and the tomb owners were no more than ordinary wealthy landowners (Zheng 2012, 65, 69). Given this background of changes, sarcophagi unearthed in the Shandong area contain the largest number of *bi* disc image found from the time (Tables 1, 2). The adoption of stone in ordinary tombs in the eastern region to replace wood to make coffins was not a coincidence, but probably related to the prevalent rock-cut noble tombs in the east, which showed a strong belief in the preservative attribute

of jade and stone.¹⁴ However, the *bi* disc imagery engraved on sarcophagi was perhaps not influenced by the eastern noble tombs. As nearly all of the *bi* disc images on sarcophagi are shown suspended by two crossing ropes (Figs. 5, 6, 7), this suspended *bi* disc motif is reminiscent of the prevalent practice of hanging a *bi* disc at head of the deceased in the southern Chu region, and this was also a common motif depicted on the burial objects, including wooden coffins, in southern elite tombs, only which were usually depicted more delicately. In contrast, in the eastern noble tombs, jade *bi* discs were more often used and attached to the coffin, and these were fixed by gilt bronze nails rather than hanging down by ropes, and the disc images inscribed on the jade coffin at Shizishan also do not have two crossing line passing through them. In addition, Zheng Yan notes that Chu culture in the southern region had an impact on the funerary practices of the eastern area of the state, which is further proven by funerary banners, a typical burial item in the Chu region, that were unearthed in different high-ranking Western Han tombs at Linyi, Shandong (Linyi 1977; Zheng 2012, 69). Altogether, the practice of engraving disc images on the sarcophagi developed during this period are a hybrid imitation or continuity of the elite tombs in the east and south: the choice of stone for the coffin was possibly an inferior simulation of a jade coffin or rock-cut structure in the eastern region, but more importantly these ordinary tombs and the noble rock-cut tombs shared the belief in the immortality of stone. Meanwhile, the inscribed disc images are likely imitating and developed from the practice of hanging a *bi* disc and the depiction of *bi* disc on coffin in the southern Chu tombs.

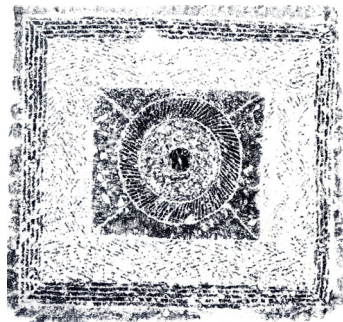


Figure 5a: *Bi* disc image on the north panel of a sarcophagus, unearthed at Qingyunshan, Shandong, mid-Western Han (After Yu and Jiang 2000, 73).

14 For a detailed discussion on the significance of stone for funerary architectural building see Wu 1997. Wu Hung relates the popular rock-cut tombs in the east coast and the prevalence of sarcophagi in the eastern region and later in Sichuan area (that accompanied by the popularity of cliff tombs) to the introduction of Buddhism and Indian culture (Wu 2012, 210). While Jessica Rawson suggests the noble rock-cut tombs were derived from Western Asia via intermediaries in Central Asia or Siberia (Rawson 1999).

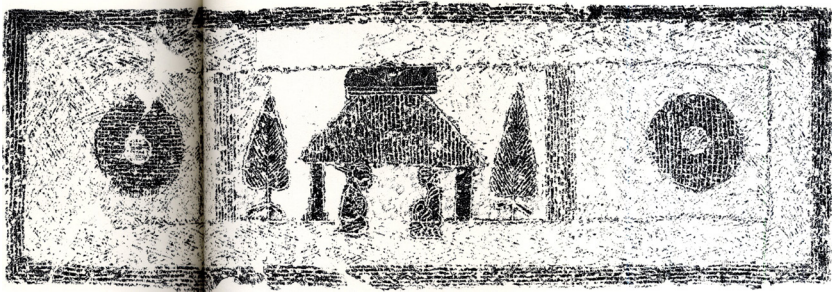


Figure 5b: Images on the east panel of a sarcophagus, unearthed at Qingyunshan, Shandong, mid-Western Han (After Yu and Jiang 2000, 72–73).

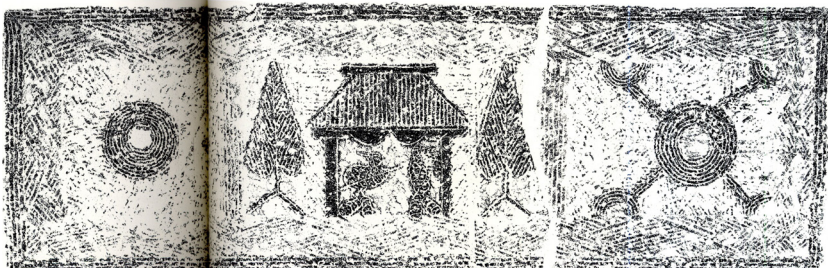


Figure 5c: Images on the west panel of a sarcophagus, unearthed at Qingyunshan, Shandong, mid-Western Han (After Yu and Jiang 2000, 72–73).

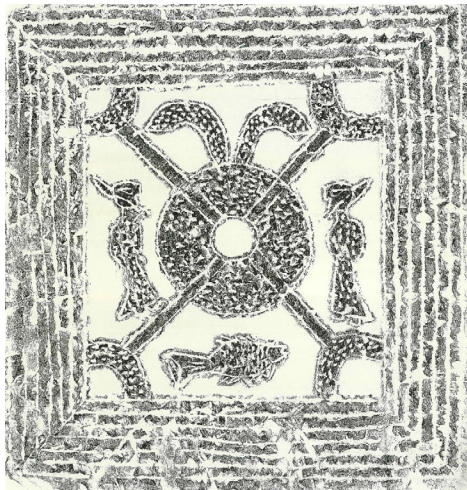


Figure 6: Bi disc image on a sarcophagus, unearthed at Tengzhou, Shandong, mid-Western Han (After Yu and Lai 2000, 176).

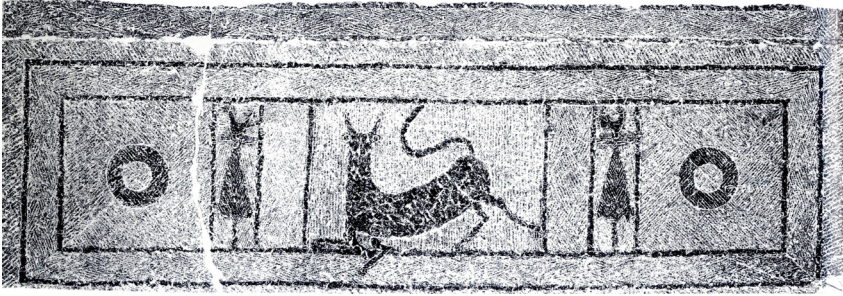


Figure 7: Images on the east panel of a sarcophagus, unearthed at Qishan, Pei county, Xuzhou city, Jiangsu, early Eastern Han (Tang et al. 2000a, 3).

It is intriguing that the motif of *bi* disc images found at Shiyuan, Henan, a mid-Western Han noble rock-cut tomb, inscribed on the lavatory stepping stones is very similar to those engraved on the sarcophagi in Shandong (Figs. 5, 6, 7). In fact, besides *bi* discs, the motifs of evergreen trees, a house and a bird on the stepping stone were also motifs that often appeared together with *bi* discs on contemporaneous sarcophagi (cf. Yu and Jiang 2000, 72–73) (Figs. 2a, 2b), all these motifs symbolised longevity and related to a belief in the afterlife.¹⁵ In addition, the images on the lavatory stone and those on the sarcophagi were both engraved in a rather primitive style—objects made of geometrical shapes and adopting parallel lines chiselled in different directions to form a hatched background on unpolished stone (Zheng 2012, 68) (Figs. 2, 5), though there are nuanced differences due to the different skills of the stonemasons. These similarities, however, do not suggest the engraving in Shiyuan is the original source of the *bi* disc images on the sarcophagi in Shandong, as the Shiyuan’s carving did not predate the images on sarcophagi. In fact, as discussed in earlier in this paper, the images appeared in the lavatory, a remote location from the main chamber, demonstrating that the motif did not have any great significance for the deceased, but possibly served a functional (non-slip) or decorative purpose. The use of rock inscribed with similar motifs but adopted differently in different ranking burial contexts—in the lavatory for nobles, while for other on the coffin—on the one hand reveals the different economic status between the nobles and ordinary people (even the rich). It also indicates the prevalence of *bi* disc motifs together with images of a house and evergreen trees during this time, and also suggests that perhaps similar stone engraving sketches were used for the burials for people of different social statuses.

15 For a discussion on the symbolic meanings of tree and bird motifs on the Han pictorial stones, see Zhang (2012).

By the Eastern Han, the *bi* disc motif was still commonly seen on sarcophagi, but there was also a rapid increase in its use on pictorial stones (Table 2), and in addition to Shandong, Henan and Jiangsu, Shaanxi and Sichuan provinces have also seen many such discoveries (Table 1). This is coincident with the development that stone-chambered tombs became prevalent, particularly in today's Shandong, Shaanxi and Sichuan provinces, and many of the stone-chambered tombs are cliff tombs that have sarcophagi. The stone-chambered tombs are possibly derived from the eastern elite rock-cut tombs that shifted from the vertical to lateral plane, but on a smaller scale and as an imitation of an ordinary house with an architectural structure in the interior. With these changes, the tombs have a more spacious interior with larger surface for engraving, and the content of the motifs used during the Eastern Han also became more diverse and complicated. While *bi* discs remained one of the most common motifs, it more often appeared in a repeated manner (Figs. 8, 9) and accompanied by different immortals or in an immortal scene, for example, Xiwangmu 西王母 (the Queen Mother of the West), Dongwanggong 東王公 (the King Father of the East), two winged immortals playing chess, etc. This was particularly common in Shaanxi and Sichuan provinces, where some stone-chambered tombs bear inscriptions saying “a ten-thousand-year chamber home (萬歲室宅)” (Li et al. 1995, 493, 610, 612), “stone chamber which prolongs life (延年石室)” (Wu 2000, 84, fig. 10), “...to meet immortal friends (會仙友)” (ibid., 84, fig. 11), etc. Wu Hung suggests these inscriptions reveal the Taoist ideal of immortality (ibid., 83), and this also indicates these tombs were regarded as the eternal home for the tomb occupant to stay with the immortals. Therefore, the motifs, including *bi* discs engraved in the tombs, were altogether constructing the immortal heavenly world.

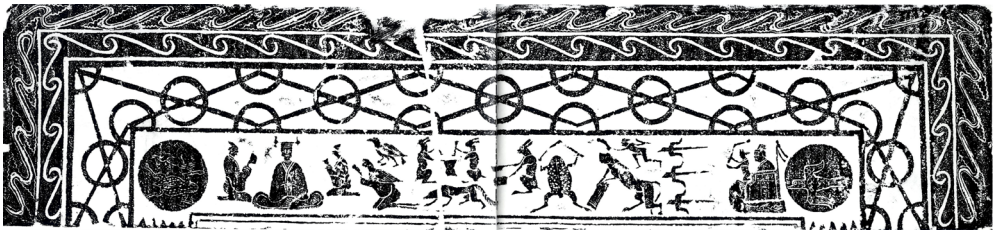


Figure 8: A scene of Dongwanggong and Xiwangmu with immortals and mythical animals surrounded by a strip of pattern of “a bi disc suspended by two crossing ropes” on a pictorial stone lintel, unearthed at Suide county, Shaanxi (After Tang et al. 2000b, 114–15).



Figure 9: A scene of two winged immortals holding lingzhi in their hands and a lingzhi grows in between them, flanked by a repeated pattern of bi discs on a sarcophagus, unearthed at Gubexiang of Changning county, Sichuan (After Gao et al. 2000, 82–83).

Significations of *Bi* Disc Representation in Ordinary Tombs

Bi discs were a motif that was continuously and widely adopted in ordinary tombs in different regions between the mid-Western Han and Eastern Han periods (Table 1), even with the diverse tomb styles (for example, mural tomb, stone-chambered tombs, etc.) that were developed and prevalent among small to medium sized graves in different areas during this time (Erickson 2010; Liu 2015, 149–59). Therefore, *bi* disc images have been found in various media, including mural paintings, engravings on sarcophagus, pictorial stones and pictorial bricks (Table 2). But these different pictorial representations of *bi* discs indeed bore common connotations, which can be summarized as follows.

Symbol of Heaven and Divinity

The motif of dragons or mythical animals passing through *bi* discs (or flanking a *bi* disc) is one of the most common images of *bi* disc, which resembles and is also a continuation of the images on the coffin panel of Lady Dai at Mawangdui and the tomb of the King of Changsha at Shazitang. However, this type of *bi* disc image in ordinary tombs was usually painted on the ceiling of the tomb or engraved on the tomb stone lintel instead of on the coffin. For example, a mural painting discovered at tomb CM1231 in the Qianjingtou village 淺井頭, Luoyang (Lu 1993); another mural painting at tomb in Jinguyuan 金谷園, also in Luoyang (Fig. 10); pictorial bricks at tomb M36 in Erdaoyuan 二道原, Xianyang 咸陽, Shaanxi province (Xianyang 2012); a pictorial brick at Fanji 樊集, Xinye 新野, Henan (Fig. 11), etc. In fact, not only *bi* disc images, but

also many celestial images, including the sun, moon, stars, clouds, Nüwa, Fuxi, the four cardinal animals (dragon, tiger, bird, and tortoise), etc., also frequently appeared on the ceiling, such as the ceiling painting in Tomb 61 in Shaogou 燒溝, Luoyang (Henan 1964), tomb CM1231 in Qianjingtou, Luoyang (Lu 1993). This reveals that *bi* discs were regarded as part of the celestial realm at the time. The earliest relevant textual support for this belief can be traced back to a statement about *bi* discs in the *Rites of the Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), a well-known early Chinese text that was compiled during the Warring States period (ca. 403–221 BCE):

以玉作六器，以禮天地四方。以蒼璧禮天，以黃琮禮地……

Jade is made into six (ceremonial) objects to worship heaven, earth and the four directions. Greenish *bi* discs are used for worshipping Heaven; yellowish *cong* is used for worshipping the Earth...(Zheng 2009, 15)

Moreover, the Eastern Han scholar Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 adds the following footnotes to the statements about *bi* discs from the *Rites of the Zhou*, “...the *bi* disc is ring-shaped to represent Heaven (璧圓象天)”; and “(the burial) including a *bi* disc and *cong* communicated with Heaven and Earth (疏璧琮者，通於天地).” (Zheng 2009, 15) These texts reflect a contemporaneous perception about *bi* disc, particularly in a burial context. Moreover, a passage on the *biyong* 辟雍 (the Jade Disc Moat) in the *Proceedings of the White Tiger Hall* (*Baihu tong* 白虎通) provides further information of contemporary thinking about the symbolic meanings of *bi* discs, “Why does the Son of Heaven erect a *biyong*? ... *Bi* means “jade disc”; it imitates the roundness of the jade disc, which models itself on Heaven (天子立辟雍何?辟者，璧也，象璧圓又以法天).” (Tjan 1949, 488) These



Figure 10: A mural painting of four *bi* discs and two dragons at a mural tomb in Jingyuan, Henan, Xin dynasty (After Luoyang et al. 2010, 155).

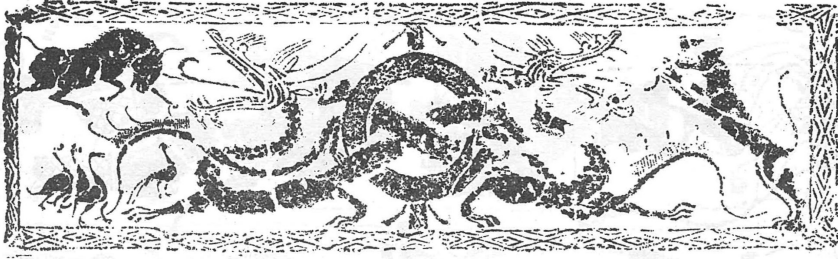


Figure 11: Rubbing of a pictorial brick of two dragons intersecting and passing through the hole of a *bi* disc, unearthed at Fanji, Xinye county, Henan, Han dynasty
(After Henan et al. 2012, 124).

narrations show that the deep-seated thought about *bi* disc has a close association with the heaven or even was regarded as heaven representation.

In a late Western Han tomb, Tomb no. 61 in Luoyang, another presentation of *bi* disc images reveals a clearer contemporaneous interpretation of the object. On the reverse side of the partition unit pediment facing the rear chamber there are five *bi* discs above a narrow-open gate, and two winged dragons with winged riders flanking the gate (Fig. 12). Another side of the pediment has depictions of different mythical animals and immortals, and the celestial images on the ceiling behind can be seen through the open crack of the gate (Chaves 1968). Similar arrangements of five *bi* disc images were also discovered in the tomb of Lou Rui 婁睿, a later tomb of Northern Qi 北齊 period at Wangguocun 王郭村, Taiyuan 太原, Shanxi (Tao 1992).¹⁶ In the context of Tomb 61 in Luoyang, the corpses of a couple were placed in the rear chamber, and therefore the images on the pediment that faces the rear chamber were regarded as a scene depicting the tomb owners being guided by dragons and immortals through the doorway to reach the realm of Heaven above. Some scholars suggest the open gate represents the Gate of Heaven,¹⁷ and the five *bi* discs arranged above the doorway embody the round Heaven, so that the entire pediment depiction is a representation of the imaginary scene of the Gate of Heaven (cf. Tseng 2011, 205–33; Wu 2011).¹⁸ The idea that *bi* discs are associated with the Gate of Heaven was reinforced by the finding of

16 Differently, the imageries of *bi* discs in this tomb are depicted on the entrance gate of the tomb.

17 For further discussions on the significations of the motifs of ajar doorway and half-open door, cf. Chaves 1968, 19–20; Tseng 2012.

18 The combination of the ideas of *bi* disc and gate also resonates with the Gate with *Bi* Discs (*bi men* 璧門) in the Jianzhang Palace in Chang'an, which Emperor Wu construct to entice immortals to visit. The gate, located in the southern part of the palace complex, and which was very well known, so that the artisans at the time appropriated it to stand for the gate of Heaven in the funerary context (Tseng 2011, 206–7).

a pictorial brick unearthed in Xinzheng, Henan, which is impressed with a motif of a double-story structure *que* 闕 gate-pillar with two *bi* discs hanging from the lintel, and the word *tianmen* 天門 (“The Gate of Heaven”) inscribed on it (Xue 1993, 19). Several circular gilt bronze plaques which are affixed to wooden coffins, discovered in Wushan 巫山, Sichuan and Wudou 武都, and Gansu, all bear the motif of a *bi* disc placed between a gate-pillar, and each of which also has the inscription of *tianmen* “The Gate of Heaven” (Huo 2017; Li 2015) (Fig. 13). The inscriptions ostensibly tell us that a *bi* disc together with the entire scene represent “The Gate of Heaven.” According to the “Record of Rites and Music” in *Hanshu* (漢書·禮樂志), when passing through the “The Gate of Heaven,” one will arrive at Kunlun, the place for immortals.¹⁹ An image of a double-plank gate with a *bi* disc on each plank and an upward-pointed arrow above the *bi* disc was engraved on the head panel of a sarcophagus discovered in the Eastern Han Tomb M12 at Longcheng 龍城, Anhui. It is suggested that the *bi*-disc decorated gate is regarded as “The Gate of Heaven,” and the arrow signifies the direction one needs to go to Heaven (Anhui 2013, 31). Another exceptional example is in the cliff tomb at Changning 長寧, Sichuan, on the relief image on the frame of the tomb gate, a winged dragon holding a rope-tied *bi* disc, flying toward a gate-pillar, with the words *shenyu* 神玉 (“divine jade”) inscribed next to the *bi* disc (Luo 2005). To emphasize the divine quality of the *bi* disc image, along with the presence of a dragon and gate-pillar—a picture of the “Gate of the Heaven” is constructed to represent the afterlife journey of the deceased ascending to Heaven. From different finds of *bi* disc images in ordinary Han tombs, it can be concluded that *bi* discs were one of the significant images serving as a symbol guiding the afterlife journey, and also signified the destination (“The Gate of the Heaven”) for the deceased to aim for.



Figure 12: *The partition unit pediment (facing the rear chamber side), in Tomb no. 61 in Luoyang, late Western Han (After Luoyang et al. 2010, 62).*

19 Original text records in the *Record of Rites and Music* in *Hanshu* (漢書·禮樂志): “Flags of the deities, passed through the Gate of Heaven, and thousands of chariots [that carry the deities], gathered at the *Kunlun* (神之旂，過天門，車千乘，敦昆侖)” (Ban 1962, 1066).



Figure 13: Gilt bronze plaque, unearthed at Wushan, Sichuan, Eastern Han
(After Zhongqing et al 1998, 78–79).

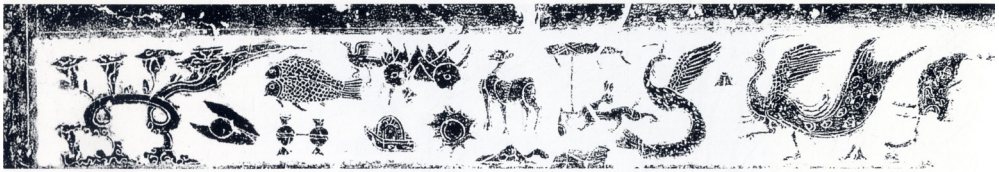


Figure 14: Details of the pictorial stone of auspicious omens in a tomb at Haining, Zhejiang,
Eastern Han (After Tang et al. 2000a, 169).

As Auspicious Omen

Bi discs also appeared as auspicious omens in tombs. To date, there are two such findings, one is on the pictorial stone in the Eastern Han tomb in Haining 海寧, Zhejiang (Pan 1983, 17, fig. 47) (Fig. 14), and another on the mural painting in an Eastern Han tomb in Helinge'er, Inner Mongolia (Neimenggu 1978). For the depiction in Helinge'er, the *bi* disc image bears inscriptions that likely read [*biliu*]*li* [璧流]離(离) (“glass *bi* disc”), but the inscription has been severely damaged, and only the last word “*li*” can be recognized.²⁰ A similar image has been also found in the famous Wu Liang Shrine 武梁祠,²¹ a cartouche inscribed next to that *bi* disc image provides its comprehensive meaning, “The *Bi* Disc of Glass. It arrives when a ruler does not dissemble his faults (璧流離，王者不隱過則至).” (Wu 1989, 240). Auspicious omen images became ubiquitous during the Han regime, regarded as a tangible sign of Heaven’s mandate, conveying

20 Each of the auspicious omens in this tomb bears an inscription that records the name of the object (Neimenggu 1978, 34).

21 Wu Liang Shrine, located in the site of the Wu cemetery at Jiexiang county, Shandong.

Heaven's will and mood to the human world. The development and meaning of auspicious omens are not the focus of discussion here, but the concern is that when *bi* discs served as an auspicious omen and appeared in the burial context its purpose was supposed to be celestial rather than political, as with those recorded in the historical texts (cf. Wu 1989, 76–87; Tseng 2011, 101–32). And therefore, both the *bi* disc omen images found in burials do not bear detailed cartouche inscriptions, like those in the Wu Liang Shrine,²² but rather are presented in a diagrammatic format and appeared on the top of the wall. These *bi* disc images in the ordinary tomb context were regarded as one of the auspicious omens to represent and convey good will to the deceased, and this also reveals that *bi* discs were thought to be endowed with a strong association with Heaven, particularly during the later Han time.

Repetitive Pattern

The motif of “a *bi* disc suspended by crossing ropes” frequently appeared on the exterior surfaces of sarcophagi in Shandong during the middle to late Western Han, such as the images on the panels of sarcophagi discovered at Qingyunshan 慶雲山 in Linyi 臨沂 (Yu and Jiang 2000, 73) (Figs. 5a, 6), and Tengzhou 滕州, Shandong (Yu and Lai 2000, 176) (Fig. 11b). The engravings of *bi* disc images on these sarcophagi bear a resemblance to the elaborate depictions of *bi* discs on the lacquered wood coffins in the Western Han noble tombs of the Southern region (Fig. 3), or perhaps they also signified the long-standing ritual practice of placing (or hanging) an actual *bi* disc at the head of the deceased, as the inscribed *bi* disc images are mainly on the head or foot panels of the sarcophagus, but these images were more crudely made as inferior imitations (Zheng 2012). During the Eastern Han period, the motif of “a *bi* disc suspended by crossing ropes” was even more ubiquitous, but was presented in a repetitive manner. In the meantime,

22 Wu Hung found that the omen images on the Wu Liang Shrine are the only known omen catalogues engraved on Eastern Han shrines. He suggests such an unusual and unconventional presentation of the omen images on the Wu Liang Shrine is related to the special identities of its owner, Wu Liang, who is a scholar belonging to the New Script School and also a member of a political group called the “retired worthies”. When access to official positions for retired worthies became more restricted during the Eastern Han, they (retired worthies/ Confucian scholars) were more keen to use omens to express their political ideals and criticisms, and Wu Hung points out that the omen images on the Wu Liang Shrine are examples representing the political criticisms of the retired worthies during Wu Liang’s time (for a detailed discussion, see Wu 1989, 96–107). Differently, there are no evidences showing that the tomb owners of the discussed tombs in Haining and Horing are a member of the retired worthies, but they seem to be a wealthy commoner and a regional official respectively (Pan 1983; Neimenggu 1978).

because pictorial stone-chambered tombs and brick-chambered tombs began to be favoured in the Eastern Han time, the motif usually appeared as border strips pattern, surrounding the inner or lower tier of different scenes depicted along the pillars and lintels of tomb chambers. For example, the depictions on the lintels and pillars in the tomb at Suide 綏德 in Shaanxi (Fig. 8), and Dangchaxiang 黨岔鄉, Hengshan 橫山, and Shaanxi (Fig. 15). For some cases, the repetitive pattern of *bi* discs served as a background decoration that fully filled the empty space of a thematic scene, such as the pictorial stone collected in Juning 睢寧 county, Jiangsu (Fig. 16a); a pictorial stone collected in Jiawang 賈汪, Xuzhou, Jiangsu (Fig. 16b); a pictorial stone discovered at Qianliangtai 前涼臺, Zhucheng 諸城, Shandong (Yu and Jiao 2000, 126), etc. Some pictorial stones and pictorial bricks were entirely engraved with repetitive pattern of *bi* discs without any narrative purpose, but purely as a design pattern. This can be seen on a pictorial stone unearthed at Miaoshan 苗山, Jiangsu (Fig. 17); the pictorial bricks found at Xinye 新野 (Lu 2012), and Deng 鄧 county (Nanyang 2012), in Henan, etc. When the *bi* disc images developed into a repetitive pattern, the intricate significations of the image became unclear and difficult to distinguish, and they perhaps only served a decorative purpose.

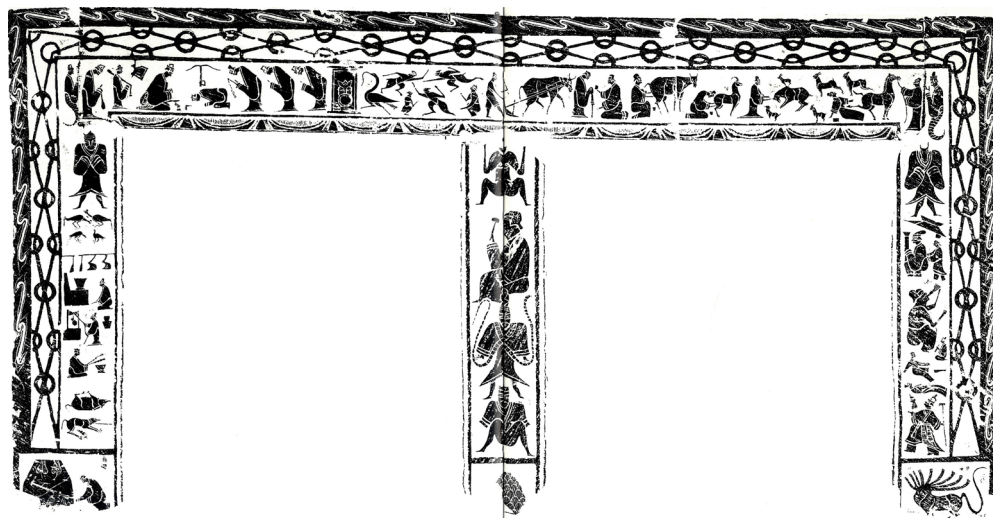


Figure 15: Repetitive pattern of *bi* discs on pictorial stones, unearthed at the tomb in Dangchaxiang, Shaanxi, Eastern Han (After Tang et al. 2000b, 174–75).

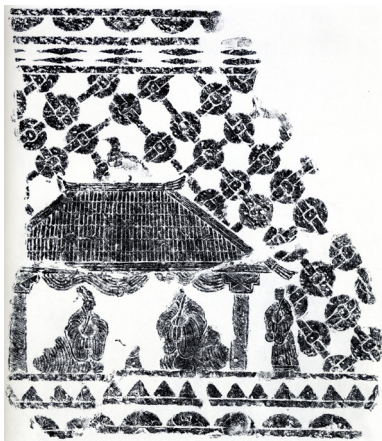


Figure 16a: Repetitive pattern of bi discs on a pictorial stone, collected at Juning county, Jiangsu, Eastern Han (After Tang et al. 2000a, 94).



Figure 16b: Repetitive pattern of bi discs on a pictorial stone (offering table), collected at Jiarwang, Jiangsu, Eastern Han (After Tang et al. 2000a, 67).

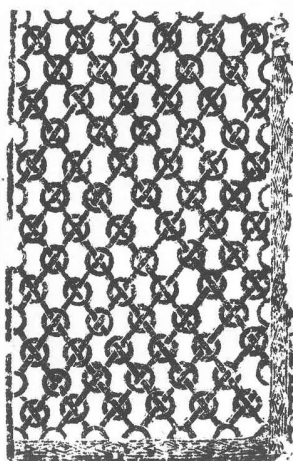


Figure 17: A pictorial stone unearthed at Miaoshan, Jiangsu, Eastern Han (After Ouyang 2001, 107, fig. 138).

Conclusion

Bi disc images in early Western Han burials predominantly appeared in elite tombs in Hunan, part of the former Chu area. These early images of *bi* discs were primarily painted on lacquer wooden coffins or funerary banners that both were placed in the immediate proximity of the corpse. These depictions related to the practice of placing a *bi* disc near the head of the deceased in this region, and the belief that the soul of the deceased was led to an eternal other-world by passing through the opening on the disc. Nonetheless, *bi* disc images were seldom found in tombs of the southern region thereafter, and there is no substantial evidence found to date that could fully explain this situation. One of the possible reasons is objects with paintings were difficult to preserve, and also a painted coffin was a prestigious burial rite for aristocrats, which was prohibited for commoners to adopt, and most ordinary tombs in the area continued placing inferior versions of *bi* disc, such as talc or glass discs, rather than the image form, to substitute for a jade *bi* disc (Fu 1999).

At the same time, although *bi* discs were very often used in those elite rock-cut tombs found in the eastern region (Jiangsu, Shangdong, Hebei, etc.) to protect the corpses, depictions of *bi* discs were seldom adopted, as these do not seem to have been as trusted as the jade objects. Interestingly, the ordinary tombs in the eastern region, i.e. today's Shandong and Henan, were keen on replicating the southern region practice of using *bi* disc images in burials that started from the middle of the Western Han, and rest of the region, e.g. Sichuan, Shannxi, Jiangsu, and Anhui, also followed the practice in the later Han time. But they modified the forms of presentation; instead of painting *bi* disc images on lacquer wood coffins and funerary banners, they were either depicted as mural paintings, or inscribed on the sarcophagi, the walls of stone-chambered tombs or pictorial brick-chambered tombs, and the use of *bi* disc depictions in burials diminished after the Eastern Han period. These changes were in accordance with the fashion of elite tomb structure shifting from the vertical to horizontal plane during the period, particularly when rock-cut tombs were favoured in eastern China (cf. Rawson 1999; Zheng 2012). The ordinary tombs imitated the structure of the elite tombs, and also shared the belief that jade and stone possess a protective power for the deceased. The ordinary people could not afford to use jade coffins and build enormous rock-cut tombs, but sarcophagi and stone-chambered tombs were adopted as simulations of these.

On the one hand, this imitative practice in the ordinary tombs, revealed that the protective purpose was no longer sustained by the *bi* disc image, but the sarcophagi and stone-chambered tombs continued to bear the same function; on the other

hand, under the new tomb design (in the horizontal plane), the grave was regarded as a model of spacious living houses, while it also served as a miniature of the universe; therefore, the grave ceiling usually signified the celestial realm. *Bi* disc images were often arranged on the ceiling in juxtaposition with immortal images, or laid above the entrance of a tomb, so as to represent the heavenly world or the presence of the Gate of Heaven—through which the soul of the deceased could reach the destination of the otherworld to rest eternally.

When the form of *bi* disc was separated from the jade material, and appeared individually as an image, the content and significations of the *bi* disc were able to be further developed and enriched on the basis of the depiction that has been found in the southern region elite burials of the early Western Han. The symbolic meaning of the form was advanced separate from the original object, and it became a symbol of the Gate of Heaven, an auspicious omen and even a motif in a repetitive pattern that often accompanied vivid, imaginative scenes of immortal life, which experienced an entirely different trajectory from the jade *bi* disc object, and also reveals the complex idea associated with *bi* discs during this period of time.

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