

*Picturing Heaven in Early China*. By Lillian Lan-ying Tseng. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011. Pp. xxii + 446. \$69.95/£51.95.

Lillian Tseng's study of Han dynasty art and architecture is an ambitious attempt to reconstruct how members of the Han élite and the artisans who served them visualized and made visible, in various artistic media, *tian* 天 (Heaven) as a divine agency and spiritual realm as well as the host of benefits Heaven bestowed on those who enjoyed its favour. In pursuit of this scholarly goal, Tseng has read widely in the secondary archaeological literature though she has neglected significant secondary research in other relevant fields published during the last decade. Though thus limited, Tseng's work will nevertheless provide adequate guidance for those who want a more or less up-to-date account of the archaeological discoveries in China that relate to élite religious beliefs and practices during the Han. There are of course other recent books in English that overlap to an extent with Tseng's work in terms of either her interests or the archaeological evidence that she adduces.<sup>1</sup>

The five chapters of Tseng's book are preceded by a brief introduction in which she provides a short account of the earliest appearances of the term *tian* during the Western Zhou followed by a hurried overview of how the idea of Heaven evolved over time. (In her abbreviated treatment of the appearance of the word *tian* in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, Tseng awkwardly, and anachronistically, refers to "the Chinese's notion of Heaven" [p. 2].) While she mentions, on p. 3, the existence of early texts that "provide us with numerous examples of how the ancient Chinese presented, elaborated, questioned, and debated various ideas of Heaven," apart from a few lines here and there from the *Chu ci* 楚辭, these sources are rarely referred to in the introduction or elsewhere in Tseng's study. What interests her are the visual representations of Heaven that appear in large numbers during the roughly four centuries of the Han dynasty. These representations—generously reproduced in this volume in what are for the most part good-quality photographs, drawings, and rubbings—are part of "Han art," a unified corpus that, at least in Tseng's approach to it, need not be further differentiated in terms of time or local place.

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<sup>1</sup> Though it covers a much longer period of time than Tseng's work readers will find relevant Wu Hung's *Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010). An important recent study of artefacts of pre-Han date is Lothar von Falkenhausen's *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC): The Archaeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2006).

In Chapter 1, “Constructing the Cosmic View,” Tseng focuses on the concept of *tian ming* 天命 (Mandate of Heaven) and how the concept relates to the measures implemented by Han dynasty rulers to establish their political legitimacy, especially the building of the *ming tang* 明堂 (Bright Hall) which in Tseng’s analysis is both the place where a ruler received the mandate and at the same time a space that “embodied the mandate” (p. 37). To establish the background for this approach, Tseng talks about early Zhou dynasty sacrifices in their Bright Hall. But she does not clearly indicate that her sources, the *Liji* 禮記 and the *Kaogongji* 考工記 appendix to the *Zhouli* 周禮, are probably not reliable in this regard. That she does not fully grasp their limitations for providing evidence of actual Zhou dynasty buildings is further indicated by her observation that, when the Han sought to build a Bright Hall, they had no model to follow “[s]ince the building had not existed for centuries” (p. 20). We of course do not know if it ever existed before the Han.

Moving on to the Han dynasty and much firmer ground, Tseng looks closely at the evidence provided by the excavations of two of the three Bright Halls built during the Han and emphasizes, on p. 41, how the layouts of both “favor the interlocking of circles and squares.” This prompts a wide-ranging survey of various artefacts from Neolithic sites several thousand years earlier than the Han as well as literary and archaeological evidence of Qin and Han dynasty date that provides direct or indirect proof that the circle is a symbol of Heaven and the square represents earth. Though such argumentation is more suggestive than conclusive, there seems little reason to deny that the Han dynasty designers of the Bright Hall were, in Tseng’s words on p. 50, “translat[ing] the given cosmological vocabulary [of celestial circles and earthly squares] into an architectural complex.”

Far less convincing is Tseng’s claim that the design “embodied the mandate.” As proof she refers to the story of a white stone that was found in a well and bore an inscription that proclaimed the usurper Wang Mang 王莽 (45 B.C.E.–23 C.E.) emperor. While one can go so far as to allow that this stone may have been regarded as a symbol of Heaven’s mandate, it would be going too far to claim, as Tseng does on p. 54, that because the shape of the stone—round at the top and square at the base—resembled that of the main building of the Bright Hall, Wang Mang and others during the Han regarded the building as something that was “meant to create the illusion of Heaven’s mandate.” But on this questionable basis, Tseng constructs a narrative in which other objects—in particular bronze mirrors referred to as TLV mirrors because of the geometric pattern on their backs—served as symbolic vehicles for spreading “the illusion of Heaven’s mandate” during the reign of Wang Mang. Other explanations of the mirrors’ symbolism—that they were metaphors for Heaven or apotropaic talismans—are also mentioned by Tseng and, in my view, are more persuasive.

At the heart of Tseng's second chapter, "Engraving Auspicious Omens," is her analysis of an inscription and a set of five images that, among other things, commemorate the meritorious rule of Li Xi 李翕 when he served as governor of Wudu 武都 Commandery in present-day Gansu 甘肅 province. The inscription in three parts and the images were carved in 171 C.E. on a cliff face that forms part of the Xixia 西狹 (Western Passage) near Xiabian 下辨, a treacherous ravine the passage through which was made possible thanks to Li Xi's having replaced a precariously narrow footway with one that was widened and reinforced. Tseng introduces her discussion of the inscribed celebration of Li Xi's accomplishments with references to the well-known story of the capture of a unicorn in Confucius's native state of Lu 魯 and the debates that this story engendered during the Han. But her recounting of the arid discussion of the role of omens in the Han is not convincingly linked to the Li Xi inscription. When Tseng turns to that her narrative comes alive. Part of the reason for that is that Tseng visited the Western Passage and so viewed and studied the inscription *in situ*. That experience gives her account an immediacy that is often missing in art historical scholarship that studies artefacts apart from their original setting and context.

Tseng summarizes, too briefly in my view, the contents of the inscription.<sup>2</sup> But the little that she provides the reader is fascinating even in paraphrase. For example, the preface to the inscription describes the dangers faced by travellers before Li Xi had a new footway constructed: "They were constantly at risk of being overturned and falling into the ravine. Li Xi realized that sooner or later, there would be a disastrous mishap and immediately initiated a construction project to widen and reinforce the footway. The inscription says that travelers were now able to take the new footway easily even at night" (p. 99). Tseng then identifies the images that appear alongside the inscription: a yellow dragon, a white deer, sweet dew, auspicious grain, and interconnecting trees. As Tseng notes, they do not merely accompany the inscription; rather they appear as more prominent than the text.

In the inscription the five images are referred to as *rui* 瑞, that is they are representations of felicitous tokens that appeared to Li Xi, some even before he became governor of Wudu. Tseng devotes several pages to discussing Han dynasty omen catalogues intended to help the Han élite distinguish signs that were harbingers of blessings from those that portended bad luck. (While she mentions, in this context and again in Chapter 5, the manuscript diagram unearthed from Tomb 3 [168 B.C.E.] at Mawangdui 馬王堆 in Hunan 湖南 that illustrates unlucky cloud shapes and similar

<sup>2</sup> I would have preferred a full translation of what is evidently an important source for understanding the roles played by local officials in the more inaccessible parts of the Han empire.

celestial signs of ill-omen, Tseng does not treat it as fully as she might have given the importance of the object to the overall theme of her study.<sup>3</sup>) Tseng then analyses in some detail the significance of the five images as propitious omens. But I am not sure that her approach fully captures the meaning and function of the five images as they appear on the cliff face of the Western Passage. Their prominence as well as the divine felicitousness that they embody suggest to me that the five images might also have served as gigantic talismans to protect travellers from the famous perils of their journey just as, in other places and at other times, images of the Buddha were believed to provide sailors safe passage on the treacherous rivers on whose banks the images were carved.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 3, “Imagining Celestial Journeys,” provides Tseng with an opportunity to explore an impressively large number of Han dynasty art objects—mostly unearthed from tombs—that in her view provide visual evidence of the Han élite “fantasy” of ascending to Heaven upon one’s death. In this regard Tseng’s analysis is somewhat at odds with that of Wu Hung. In his most recent book on the subject of tombs and their furnishings,<sup>5</sup> Wu Hung argues that the final destination of the dead is the Yellow Springs 黃泉, a decidedly subterranean realm that tombs in their architecture and furnishings either represent or help one reach. As in her other chapters, though she brings to bear a large number of artefacts for consideration, Tseng focuses on a small number to prove her point. In this case her main interest is with the famous funerary banner found atop the innermost coffin in Tomb 1 at Mawangdui (which was sealed several years after the 168 B.C.E. date of Tomb 3). Although not all of the elements of her analysis are original to her—she owes a big debt to the much earlier work of

<sup>3</sup> For detailed and insightful studies of the Mawangdui diagram see the following: Liu Lexian 劉樂賢, *Mawangdui tianwen shu kaoshi* 馬王堆天文書考釋 (Guangzhou 廣州: Zhongshan daxue chubanshe 中山大學出版社, 2004); and Donald Harper, “Communication by Design: Two Silk Manuscripts of Diagrams (*Tu*) from Mawangdui Tomb Three,” in *Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China: The Warp and the Weft*, ed. Francesca Bray, Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtmann, and Georges Métaillé (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 169–89. Neither work is cited by Tseng.

<sup>4</sup> I would also suggest that the images are otherwise more multidimensional in meaning and purpose than Tseng’s analysis suggests. For example, the *mulianli* 木連理 (interconnecting trees) is said by Tseng, on pp. 125–26, to signal “harmony and unification.” That is fine as far as it goes. But the name of the image, renderings of the trees found in other artefacts adduced by Tseng, and literary allusions (that are admittedly later in date than the Han) suggest to me that the harmony and unification they supposedly represent were connected to a more erotic coupling symbolized by the trees.

<sup>5</sup> See note 1 above.

Michael Loewe and others<sup>6</sup>—few previous studies of the banner’s iconography have been as thorough and detailed as Tseng’s.

Important to Tseng’s interpretation of the Mawangdui banner as representing the theme of ascending to Heaven is her analysis of the three decorated coffins in Tomb 1. At one point in her study (on p. 187), Tseng links the illustration of a *bi* 璧 disk on the banner—which is clearly another circular symbol of Heaven—with a wooden replica of a *bi* disk that is also placed on the innermost coffin close to the banner and, as Tseng points out, above the head of the corpse of Lady Dai 軼侯夫人, the tomb’s occupant. What Tseng neglects to emphasize is that the placement of the disk above Lady Dai’s head is symbolically significant because of the well-attested relationship between Heaven in the cosmos and the head in the microcosm of the human body.<sup>7</sup> This connection is visually affirmed by the jade suit that enshrouded the corpse of Liu Sheng 劉勝 (d. 113 B.C.E.), the Han dynasty king of Zhongshan 中山. The uppermost part of the suit is fashioned and sewn together in such a way that a *bi* disk covers the top of his head. (Though it could be argued that Liu Sheng’s jade suit and the other artefacts found in his tomb at the site of Mancheng 滿城 in present-day Hebei 河北 province add valuable information relevant to Tseng’s study, nowhere in her study does she mention the tomb and its contents.<sup>8</sup>)

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), pp. 55–56; and Wu Hung, “Art in a Ritual Context: Rethinking Mawangdui,” *Early China* 17 (1992), pp. 111–43.

<sup>7</sup> A twelve-sided jade artefact, dating perhaps to the late fourth or early third century B.C.E. and now in the collection of the Tianjin Museum 天津博物館, is inscribed with a poem on the subject of guiding the *qi* 氣 (vital breath) through the body. That poem describes the movement of the breath first downwards and then upwards in terms of the positions of earth and Heaven. I had the good fortune to visit the Tianjin Museum in November, 2008, to study the artefact. I am grateful to Mr Li Rui 李銳, the Vice Director of the Museum, for granting me access to the piece. The best transcription is by Chen Banghuai 陳邦懷, “Zhanguo ‘Xingqi yuming’ kaoshi” 戰國《行氣玉銘》考釋, in *Guwenzi yanjiu* 古文字研究, vol. 7 (1982), pp. 187–93. Li Ling also has a transcription (based on Chen’s) and an authoritative discussion of the artefact in his *Zhongguo fangshu kao* 中國方術考 (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe 東方出版社, 2000), pp. 342–46. Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), p. 126, has translated the inscription in full.

<sup>8</sup> For Liu Sheng’s burial and illustrations of his jade suit, see Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所, *Mancheng Han mu fajue baogao* 滿城漢墓發掘報告 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe 文物出版社, 1980). On p. 251, Tseng does mention an incense burner found in the tomb of Dou Wan 竇綰, Liu Sheng’s consort.

Had she been aware of the association between the *bi* disk as a symbol of Heaven and the head of the body, Tseng perhaps would have been forced to consider an anomaly in her analysis of the three decorated coffins. As she notes, on p. 188, the “foot panel” of the second coffin is decorated with the motif of a pair of dragons threading their way through a *bi* disk while the panel at the head of the coffin shows two deer climbing up an abstract rendering of the Kunlun Mountains 崑崙山, an earthly emblem in Tseng’s scheme. That is, the placement of the symbols of Heaven and earth is exactly the opposite of what one would expect and thus casts a measure of doubt on whether the iconography of the coffins lends support to Tseng’s reading of the banner as representing the theme of ascending to Heaven.

The first half of Tseng’s fourth chapter, “Highlighting Celestial Markers,” is devoted to studying the creatures that are the emblems of the four cardinal directions—the Blue-green Dragon of the east, the Vermilion Bird of the south, the White Tiger of the west, and the Dusky Warrior of the north. The balance of the chapter presents a brief overview of images associated with the Sky River (i.e., the Milky Way) followed by a somewhat longer treatment of the sun and the moon in which Tseng studies numerous examples of the different ways in which Han artisans represented them as a complementary pair.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to the emblems of the cardinal directions, Tseng includes the fascinating (and remarkably early) find—in a Neolithic tomb (dated to sometime between 5000 and 2750 B.C.E.) at Puyang 濮陽 in Henan 河南 province—of images formed of clamshells of the Dragon and the Tiger. The images are stretched out on the east and west sides of the skeletal remains of the tomb’s occupant, a disposition that suggests that they may have been meant to signal that the grave was properly oriented for some ritual purpose unknown to us; or perhaps they were intended to protect the tomb and its occupant. Tseng wisely withholds her views on what function these Neolithic images may have served. Another important archaeological discovery with regard to the emblems of the four directions is the lacquer hamper from the c. 450–400 B.C.E. tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng 曾侯乙 at Sui Xian 隨縣 in Hubei 湖北 province. The lid of the hamper is decorated with the Dragon and the Tiger on either

<sup>9</sup> Among the examples she treats, Tseng discusses, on pp. 285 and 287, the carved representations of the sun and moon on the ceiling of a first century C.E. tomb at Qilin’gang 麒麟崗 in Nanyang 南陽, Henan province. She discusses the ceiling in its entirety on pp. 360–63. At neither point does she cite Donald Harper’s important comments on what the Qilin’gang ceiling tells us about early Chinese religious cosmology. See Donald Harper, “The Nature of Taiyi in the Guodian Manuscript *Taiyi Sheng Shui*: Abstract Cosmic Principle or Supreme Cosmic Deity?” *Chūgoku shutsudo shiryō kenkyū* 中国出土資料研究 (Studies on Chinese Excavated Materials) 5 (2001), p. 12.

side of a circular arrangement of the names of the Twenty-eight Lunar Lodges that surrounds the name of the Northern Dipper written with an especially large graph.<sup>10</sup> The hamper is important evidence of the early association between the emblems of the cardinal directions and the lunar lodge constellations, an association that Tseng analyses through reference to numerous Han dynasty sites. At no point does Tseng address the question of why the artisan who made the hamper chose to write the names of the Lunar Lodges and the Northern Dipper rather than depict the asterisms themselves or render them symbolically. Moreover, Tseng's attempts to identify the emblems of the four cardinal directions, as they appear in the Han examples, as helpmates in accomplishing the ascent to Heaven—the theme she elaborates upon in Chapter 3—are not persuasive.

Though it is mentioned in pre-Han and Han poetry, examples of which are quoted by Tseng, there are no Han dynasty visual representations of the Milky Way. As Tseng points out, on p. 266, the “earliest known pictorial representation of the Milky Way comes from the tomb of Yuan Yi 元乂 (d. 526 CE) in Luoyang: the Milky Way, painted with the blue whirlpool pattern, stretches across the ceiling.” Tseng also carefully studies other post-Han dynasty images that show the Oxherd and Weaving Maid stars separated from one another by the Sky River. Tseng's use of such post-Han materials serves to remind us that with regard not only to renderings of the Milky Way but also more generally the other subjects she treats in her study it is more than a little arbitrary and counterproductive to treat Han dynasty culture in isolation from the richness of what follows in the Six Dynasties and Tang periods.

For Tseng, the absence of graphic representations of the Sky River as a river in Han times, means that the Han artisans preferred to “allude” to it indirectly rather than concoct a visual counterpart to the literary images found in Han poetry. But her evidence for this argument—a decorated bronze mirror found at Xinye 新野 in Henan province that dates to sometime between the first and second century C.E.—is inadequate. A short inscription on the mirror identifies a figure that appears on the rim as Hebo 河伯 (Sire of the River), the god of the Yellow River who is well-known from transmitted literature. Another short inscription identifies another figure on the mirror's rim as Tiangong 天公 (Celestial Lord). That the mirror's long inscription refers to the “progress of the Celestial Lord” (*Tiangong xing chu* 天公行出) suggests to Tseng that the Sire of the River is a subordinate part of that progress and so he must be the celestial divinity “in charge of the Milky Way” (p. 7). Another

<sup>10</sup> Tseng returns to the Sui Xian hamper again in Chapter 5 where she repeats much of what she says in Chapter 4. Nevertheless readers will want to consult both passages in order to get a fuller sense of Tseng's views of the significance of the piece.

interpretation—and one perhaps more in keeping with what the transmitted literature says about the Sire of the River—is that the two short inscriptions are meant to identify a pair of complementary divinities—the Celestial Lord representing Heaven and the Sire of the River representing earth—and thus that the mirror is an emblem of the complementary powers of Heaven and earth.<sup>11</sup> Viewed this way, the mirror cannot support Tseng’s opinion that Han artisans chose to allude to the Sky River rather than create a visual counterpart to the literary images found in poetry.

Chapter 5, “Mapping Celestial Bodies,” is a continuation of the fourth chapter but with the greatest emphasis on the asterisms of the Twenty-eight Lunar Lodges. Tseng chooses as her main visual evidence for this and other aspects of Han dynasty astrology and astronomy a painted tomb of Han dynasty date that was discovered in 1987 on the grounds of Xi’an Jiaotong University 西安交通大學. Tseng carefully examines how the lunar lodges are represented on the ceiling of the tomb and compares them with other visual evidence as well as with some written accounts, in particular the “Tianguan shu” 天官書 of Sima Qian. On the basis of this comparison she concludes, on p. 338, that the artisans who created the tomb “were equipped with adequate astronomical knowledge.” Tseng speculates that at least part of what artisans and their patrons knew about astronomy derived from “oral tradition.”

What suggests to her the existence of such oral tradition in the Han are later poems that present in verse the names of the stars that had been listed in star catalogues that she says, on p. 338, “were widely circulated in the Han.” She assumes that antecedents to these later poems must have existed during the Han. One of the poems is the *Xuan xiang shi* 玄象詩 found among the manuscripts preserved in the Dunhuang cave library. The manuscript is dated 621 C.E. which gives the *terminus ante quem* for the poem.<sup>12</sup> The other is the *Bu tian ge* 步天歌, a poem attributed to Wang Ximing 王希明 who lived during the first half of the eighth century. Tseng argues that the rhymes employed in such poems would have made memorization of the star names and lore they contain “easier than it would otherwise have been.” So easy, in fact, she claims: “Even an illiterate person could have managed to remember the constellations well enough” (p. 341). I am less certain of that than Tseng is. I find the contents of the poems to be richer and more complex in their contents than Tseng suggests. I also question whether the poems were simply intended as memory aids for

<sup>11</sup> For more on this way of looking at the mirror, see Donald Harper, “Contracts with the Spirit World in Han Common Religion: The Xuning Prayer and Sacrifice Documents of A.D. 79,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 14, no. 1 (2004), pp. 227–67. Harper’s work is not cited by Tseng.

<sup>12</sup> Tseng cites a study of the poem by Deng Wenkuan 鄧文寬 in the journal *Wenwu* 文物, but she mistakenly gives the year of publication as 1970. Deng’s study was in fact published in the 1990.3 issue of the journal.



those who wished to know the names and positions of the constellations. The closing lines of the *Xuan xiang shi* say that the poem was meant for those who wanted to *tui bu* 推步, a reference to the esoteric arts of “pacing” the sun, moon, planets, and stars to calculate their positions and determine one’s fortune on that basis. Similarly, the title of Wang Ximing’s poem seems intended to link it to the Taoist poetry and practices that related to the arts of *bu xu* 步虛<sup>13</sup> by which Taoist adepts treaded the array of stars in order to gain mastery over them.

As I mentioned at the outset of this short review, Lillian Tseng’s work is ambitious in its reach. Parts of it promise to do for Han dynasty studies what Edward Schafer’s 1977 work *Pacing the Void* accomplished in its exploration of Tang dynasty literary images of the stars, planets, and other celestial bodies that interest Tseng.<sup>14</sup> Yet nowhere in her book does Tseng cite Schafer nor for that matter even list his book in her bibliography. That is a pity. There is much in Schafer’s work that would have improved and enriched Tseng’s efforts and helped her achieve her ambitions.

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*Mortality in Traditional Chinese Thought*. Edited by Amy Olberding and Philip J. Ivanhoe. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011. Pp. ix + 313. \$85.00.

A study of the ideas of mortality and death as conceived in the traditional world of the West would start from the differing doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and the teachings of the philosophers of Greece. For traditional China there are few, if any, direct pronouncements that can be placed alongside the teachings of St. Paul

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<sup>13</sup> In his detailed study of the *Bu tian ge*, Zhou Xiaolu 周曉陸, *Bu tian ge yanjiu* 步天歌研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian 中國書店), p. 203, briefly refers to the influence of Taoism and Taoist poetry on early astronomy, astrology, and calendrics, as well as on poetical works such as the *Bu tian ge*. While it is clear that Tseng relied heavily on Zhou’s scholarship, she overlooks the importance of Taoism in her comments on the *Xuan xiang shi* and *Bu tian ge* and more generally in her reconstruction of the Han and early medieval history of Chinese astronomy.

<sup>14</sup> Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the Void: T’ang Approaches to the Stars* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977). For a review of Schafer’s work that captures its significance for our understanding of Chinese astronomy and culture in general, see John S. Major’s piece in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40, no. 1 (June 1980), pp. 278–85.