

THE OVERSEEING MOTHER

Revisiting the Frontal-Pose Lady in the Wu Family Shrines in Second-Century China*

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Located in present-day Jiaxiang in Shandong province, the Wu family shrines built during the second century in the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) were among the best-known works in Chinese art history. Although for centuries scholars have exhaustively studied the pictorial programs, the frontal-pose female image situated on the second floor of the central pavilion carved at the rear wall of the shrines has remained a question. Beginning with the woman's eyes, this article demonstrates that the image is more than a generic portrait ("hard motif"), but rather represents "feminine overseeing from above" ("soft motif"). This synthetic motif combines three different earlier motifs – the frontal-pose hostess enjoying entertainment, the elevated spectator, and the Queen Mother of the West. By creatively fusing the three motifs into one unity, the Jiaxiang artists lent to the frontal-pose lady a unique power: she not only dominated the center of the composition, but also, like a divine being, commanded a unified view of the surroundings on the lofty building, hence echoing the political reality of the empress mother's "overseeing the court" in the second century during Eastern Han dynasty.

KEYWORDS: Wu family shrines, Central scene, mother, frontal view, gaze, Queen Mother of the West

INTRODUCTION

As "the probably best studied work and most published works of art remaining from the Eastern Han 漢 (25–220),"¹ the three stone funerary shrines of the Wu 武 family erected in the latter half of the second century have fascinated numerous scholars from antiquity to modernity for almost a thousand years.² Located in present-day Jiaxiang 嘉祥 in Shandong province in east China, these ruined funerary shrines, reconstructed by modern scholars as the Wu Liang Shrine (Wu Liang ci 武梁祠), the Front Stone Chamber (Qian shishi 前石室), and the Left Stone Chamber (Zuo

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¹ Berger 1990, p. 223.

² Chinese traditional scholarship on this site began with Ouyang Xiu's 歐陽修 *Jigu lu* 集古錄 and Zhao Mingcheng's 趙明誠 *Jinshi lu* 金石錄 in the 11–12th centuries and was revived in the 17th–18th centuries. Modern scholarship began with Chavannes 1893. A historiographic survey is found in Wu Hung 1989, pp. 3–70.

shishi 左右室), were commissioned respectively for three male members of an unknown Wu family once prosperous in the local area.³ Before falling apart, the shrines measured about two meters high, less than three meters wide, and nearly two meters deep.⁴ All of them were constructed with a set of well-fitted stone architectural parts including walls, roofs, and gables, which were lavishly carved with images or decorative patterns in low relief.⁵ Well known for their archaic style,⁶ complex iconography,⁷ and narrative elements,⁸ the Wu family bas-reliefs, from the skillful hands of “the fine craftsman Wei Gai 衛改,”⁹ have gained a widely acknowledged reputation in Chinese art history.¹⁰

Although scholars have documented, inspected, and interpreted almost every inch of the shrines, a female figure occupying the center of the rear wall (or the rear wall of the back niche made into the rear wall) in each of the Wu family shrines is yet to be fully understood. Facing the viewer and the entrance of the shrine head on, the lady emerges in full frontal view from behind the railings in the center of the second floor of a two-story pavilion (Fig. 1a, highlight, Fig. 1b).¹¹ The pavilion forms the heart of a relatively formulaic composition dubbed by various scholars as the “Central

³ For dating and attribution, see Fairbank 1941, p. 33; James 1995; Jiang Yingju – Wu Wenqi 1995, pp. 17–21.

⁴ For precise measurements, see Jiang Yingju – Wu Wenqi 1995, pp. 29–31.

⁵ Two shrines included pillars and niches. For reconstructions, see Fairbank 1941; Akiyama 1963; Jiang Yingju – Wu Wenqi 1981; Wu Hung 1989, pp. 17–24.

⁶ Bachhofer 1931, pp. 200–201; Rowley 1947, p. 52; Soper 1948, p. 174; Shih Hsio-yen 1961, pp. 102, 165–166; Powers 1984 and 1991.

⁷ Croissant 1964; James 1988–1989, pp. 39–72; Wu Hung 1989, pp. 73–217.

⁸ Murray 2007, pp. 27–36; Chen 1995, pp. 239–247.

⁹ Hong Gua 1985, pp. 168–169. While the archaeological context of the Wu family shrines was lost, a group of reused stone carvings that display indisputable similarities to the Wu family ones were excavated scientifically from some early medieval burials in Songshan 宋山 at Jiaxiang during the 1980s, and successfully reconstructed by Jiang Yingju 蔣英炬 into several smaller shrines; see *id.* 1983. These might have belonged to some relatively minor families in the local area. This discovery demonstrates that Wei Gai or artists related to him were probably responsible for other shrines in the local area during the second century.

¹⁰ In 2005, historians Michael Nylan and Cary Liu published their papers to question the authenticity of the carvings from the Wu family shrines and considered them potentially as later (Qing) forgeries, see Nylan 2005 and Liu 2005. But as some other scholars have pointed out, their literary evidence is questionable; see Kuroda 2010 and Bai Qianshen 2008. The greatest difficulty of the skepticism, however, is about the stones' flawless style and content. According to Nylan, the current stylistic dating of the Wu family shrine reliefs was the result of a “circular reasoning.” She points out that the group of bas-reliefs excavated in Songshan, used by scholars as evidence to support the authenticity of the Wu family carvings, was dated on the basis of the Wu family carvings themselves, and therefore “cannot help”; see Nylan 2008b, p. 339. This is, however, not entirely true. The Songshan stones were found as construction materials in a group of tombs that have been securely dated (based on archaeological criteria other than carving, including the form of the burial structures) to the 3rd or even early 4th century; see Shandong Jining diqu wenwuzu 1982. And scholars have studied the particular mortuary practice of reusing Eastern Han shrines to build tombs in Shandong, northern Jiangsu 江蘇 and Anhui 安徽 during the Six Dynasties period (220–581); see Sugimoto 1981, Zhou 1996, Qian – Liu 2005. Although Nylan's evidence may indicate that the Wu family bas-reliefs, discovered without an archaeological context, could be potentially forgeries, in an art historical point of view, till one can convincingly show what visual content, be it stylistic or iconographic, in the Wu family reliefs actually reflects “Qing” rather than “Han” characteristics, the skepticism will remain hypothetical, and therefore will not affect my argument in this essay.



Fig. 1a: Frontal-pose Lady in the Wu Family Shrines (Front Stone Chamber), from 186, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province.

Source: *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui* 中國畫像石全集編輯委員會, *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji* 中國畫像石全集 (Jinan: Shandong meishu chubanshe, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 44–45, pl. 66.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

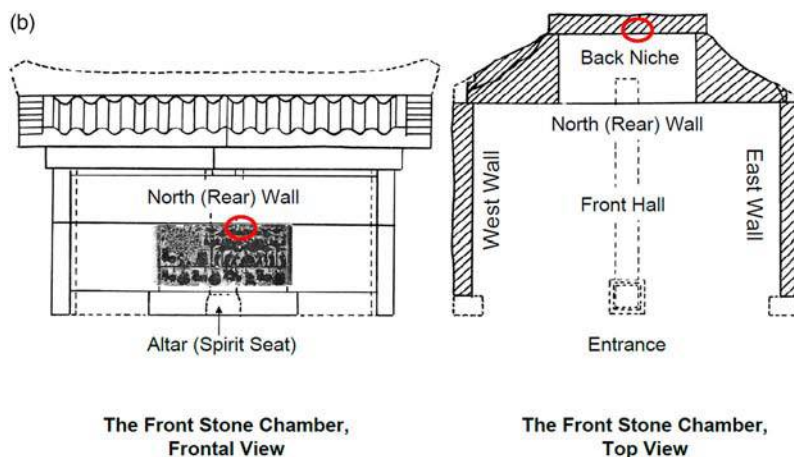


Fig. 1b: Position of the Frontal-Pose Lady in the Front Stone Chamber, from 186, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province.

Source: Made by the author after *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui*, *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 1, p. 40, fig. 8.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

¹¹ Miao Zhe 繆哲, following an earlier observation made by Nagahiro Toshio 長廣敏雄, recently contended that such apparent “two-story buildings” might represent, in the archaic perspective, two one-story buildings, one standing in front of the other; see Miao Zhe 2013, pp. 107–148. Although this theory may work in some particular cases, it hardly applies to the Wu family shrines, in which the two floors are clearly distinguished by the railings appearing only on the second floor, but never on the floor below. Clearly, the railings, represented in many Eastern Han architectural models, murals, as well as carvings, were used to protect people in the high stories from falling off the building. What is more, it should also be noted that Nagahiro

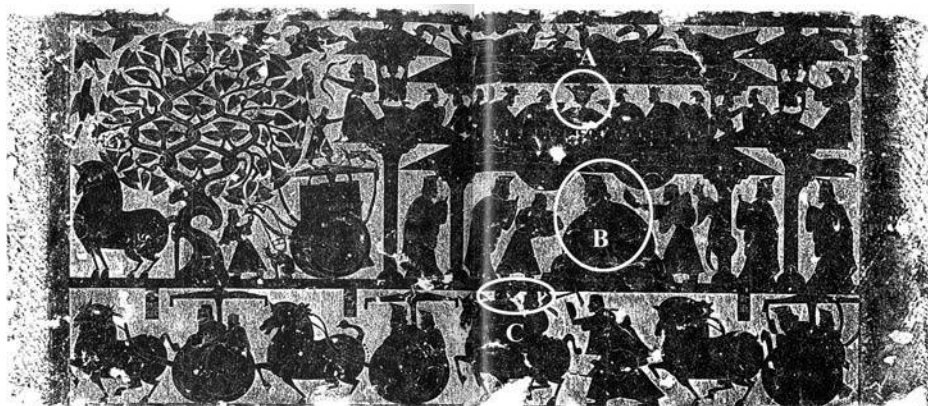


Fig. 2: Central scene in the Front Chamber of the Wu Family Shrines, stone bas-relief, from 186, ink rubbing, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province.

Source: Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 1, pp. 44–45, pl. 66.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

scene,” “Pavilion scene,” or “Homage scene,” which also includes a magnificent tree on the side and some rolling chariots below (Fig. 2).¹² In the pavilion the lady reveals her body from the waist up on the second floor above her male counterpart sitting on the lower floor (Fig. 2, highlights A, B). Unlike the silhouetted man, who leans his body actively forward in response to those paying homage to him,¹³ the lady en face remains solemnly upright and totally indifferent to her female companions who, portrayed in side view, flank her on both sides.

As scholars have noted, the importance of this prominent lady lies beyond doubt. She is not only physically larger than all her companions but also holding the most notable position in the entire shrine in a most compelling upright, frontal posture. Situated right behind the altar in the shrine, the Central scene constituted the visual background of the empty “spirit seat” of the deceased (see Fig. 1b). Since the Central scene fills the lowest register of the rear wall, which was open directly to the entrance, the frontal-pose lady would have appeared approximately at the eye level of the worshipper, who was supposed to kneel down before the altar to worship. Upon lifting up his or her head, the prostrate worshipper would have confronted the lady eye to eye. No wonder Nagahirō Toshio 長廣敏雄 in an influential article on the Central scene recognized that the meaning of this female image was “huge.”¹⁴ And Doris Croissant, who

did not deny that the pavilion pictorially consisted of two floors in his writing, but only suggested that without the proper knowledge of perspective to represent depth in a convincing manner, the artist(s), who did not mean to make a two-story building, ended up laying the rear chamber clumsily on top of the front and formed, ironically, an actual two-story building; see Nagahirō Toshio 1961a, pp. 95–116.

¹² For a comprehensive discussion about the “Central scene” in the Wu family shrines, see Croissant 1964, pp. 125–152.

¹³ Wu Hung 1989, p. 133.

¹⁴ Nagahirō Toshio 1961a, p. 103.

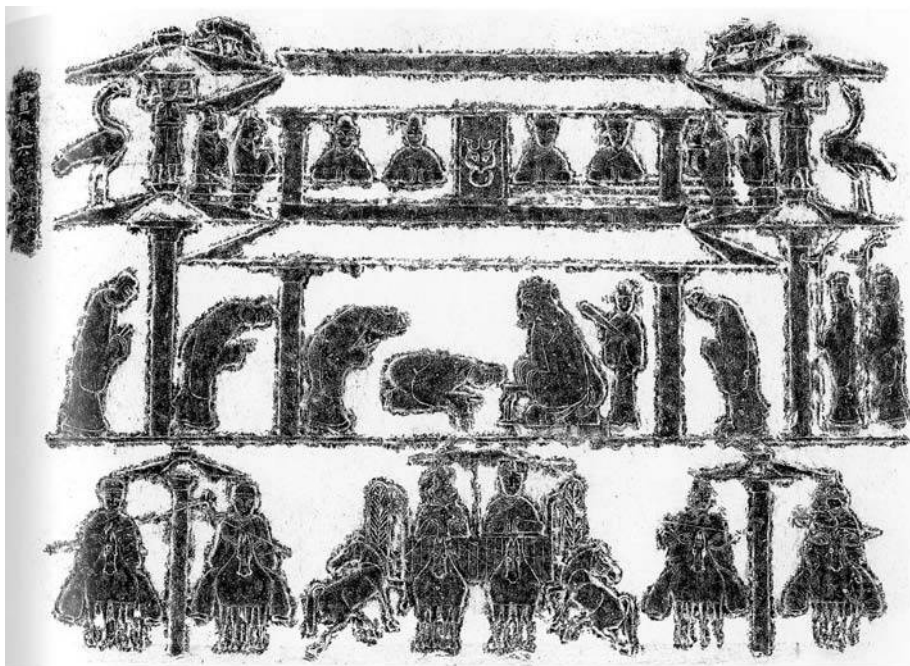


Fig. 3: Central scene with the ground floor figure in side view, stone bas-relief, 1st c., ink rubbing, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province.

Source: *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 2, p. 120, pl. 129.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

comprehensively interpreted the Central scene, also acknowledged that this eye-catching lady at the center of the second floor was “certainly significant.”¹⁵

Although these scholars appreciated the significance of the lady, they missed a basic physical feature of hers: the wide-open eyes, which suggest her visual attention is being directed at something in front of her (see Fig. 1a).

The decision to represent the lady en face with opened eyes was by no means arbitrary, but derived from an earlier motif that flourished during the first century in Jiaxiang (Fig. 3).¹⁶ In that early “naive” style (to borrow Jiang Yingju’s words), the major figures on the second floor, male or female, often keep consistent frontal view; the central figure on the ground floor, which always represents a man, remains in either frontal or side view. On occasions when ladies occupy the second floor, their bodies and facial features were sketched out with relatively simple lines. But the later artist(s) of the Wu family shrines did more to the female body by increasing her scale and introducing more physical details, including the compelling eyes with pronounced pupils (see Fig. 1a). It seems that during the

¹⁵ Croissant 1964, p. 142.

¹⁶ Nagahirō 1961a, pp. 105–110; see also Jiang Yingju 2008.

second century the Jiaxiang artist(s) developed a special interest in amplifying the feminine presence on the upper floor.

Focusing on the eyes of the frontal-pose lady in the bas-reliefs from the Wu family and other nearby shrines in Jiaxiang, the present article argues that this motif represents a particular symbolic action, overlooking, i.e., watching from an elevated spot, of the goddess-like mother in the Eastern Han society. By asking “how” instead of “who” she is, this article revisits the seemingly stereotypical lady in the compositional, architectural, and social context. In doing so, it relies on both internal and external evidence, analyzing second-century shrines in Jiaxiang and comparing them with newly discovered archaeological sites and transmitted texts. By unveiling this hitherto forgotten “encompassing” view, I wish to shed more light not only on the Wu family bas-reliefs, but also on the hidden maternal power in the patriarchic Eastern Han China.

THE FRONTAL-POSE GAZE

Let me begin by substantiating my basic observation: instead of just being upstairs, the frontal-pose lady is looking on the second floor (see Fig. 2, highlight A). To convey this idea in artistic terms, three elements are necessary: opened eyes (gazer), a visible target within the range and field of the eyes (the gazed upon), and an interest in this target sufficient for the eyes to turn in that specific direction (motivation for gazing). With her eyes wide open, the lady clearly meets the first condition but, is there a target for her eyes? To find out, a scrutiny of the female image per se, no matter how meticulous it may be, does not suffice; the lady has to be placed back into the larger pictorial composition of the Central scene.

The generally formulaic Central scene is divided into two registers. The frontal-pose lady is always situated in the upper register, and the lower register displays a chariot procession moving from the right to the left. Although to a modern-day viewer, the lady’s eyes must peer directly forward from the picture plane, this was not how Chinese viewers would have experienced this phenomenon during the Eastern Han. Instead, artists in second-century China often used a conventional method other than the linear perspective to represent three-dimensional space – so-called “height equals behind.” In this manner, an object located in front of the represented space appears in the bottom of the picture, and things in the rear of the space end up in the upper level of the picture.¹⁷ Viewed in this perspective, representing the lady above the chariot procession meant she was behind the scene.

A little detail of the bas-relief gives us sufficient evidence. Although the horizontal line drawn between the pavilion and the chariots appears to be no more than a partition line, it actually stands for the ground on which the pavilion is erected. In the Central scenes of the Left and the Front Stone Chambers (as well as several other later reconstructed shrines in Jiaxiang), the upper part of the lower chariot procession, such as the hats of the horsemen and the erected ears of the horses, slightly overlaps the ground line (Fig. 2, highlight C; see Fig. 7, highlight C; see Fig. 9, highlight B). Such overlaps suggest that the artist intended to represent these horses and

¹⁷ Wells 1935, pp. 13–14. The same method was used in another shrine at Xiaotangshan 孝堂山, as “the farther line of horsemen is fully shown directly above the nearer,” Soper 1941, p. 146.

chariots as passing in front of the building.¹⁸ To enable her to see the chariots outside, perhaps even afar, the lady is put in an elevated position to enhance her visual access, a point I will elaborate in the section “The Elevated Eyes.”

But why would the chariot processions interest the lady’s eyes? According to the inscribed cartouches in the Frontal Stone Chamber, the advancing travelers wearing official robes and hats, escorted by footed or mounted soldiers holding banners, fans, or ceremonial weapons, were supposed to be the deceased male host (*jun* 君), his office peers, or subordinates. Although the charioteers in the other two shrines remain unidentified, the chariots were almost surely official and associated with the male host.¹⁹ Consisting of open cars (*chaoche* 軺車) with the passengers exposed to the audience, such official chariot processions were meant to be social spectacles that showed off the charioteer’s honorable social status (see Fig. 2).²⁰ During the Han dynasty the imperial state made laws to regulate the use of official chariots as well as the number of escorts.²¹ People of higher ranks enjoyed more chariots and personnel. In the mind of the onlookers along the road, chariot processions spoke of power, wealth, and fame, and stirred up envy as well as admiration. According to historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (136–87 BCE), Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE), then just a young lad, marveled on the side of the road at the magnificent chariot procession of the First Emperor of the Qin, Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝 (r. 221–210 BCE). This future insurgent leader could not hold back his desire and let it dangerously escape his lips: “The fellow could be deposed and replaced!”²² On a similar occasion, the founder of the Han dynasty Liu Bang 劉邦 (256–195 BCE), by that time a low-ranked bureaucrat, was likewise impressed by the imperial cortege, sighed and murmured these words: “Ah, this is the way a great man should be!”²³ And even ladies found excitement in watching such scenes. According to the official history of the Eastern Han, a wealthy commoner surnamed Peng 彭 erected giant mansions and high buildings along a main road so that his wives and concubines could watch such spectacular scenes as the local administrator’s chariot processions.²⁴

Although in the Wu family shrines the motif of watching is disturbed by the ground line and clouded by many other surrounding images, it leaps out of obscurity in an earlier and more straightforward composition. In 2004, a late Western Han (206 BCE – 8 CE) polychrome mural discovered in present-day Xi’an 西安 (Shaanxi) brought to light one of the earliest known illustrations of feminine gaze in Chinese art.²⁵ In a single-chambered burial dated two centuries earlier than the Wu family shrines, one of the secular scenes painted on the west wall includes a group of ladies, who sit before a twofold screen, and rest upon a large threefold armrest to enjoy music, dance, and acrobatics performed in front of them (Fig. 4). Among the ladies, one, identified by the excavators as the hostess of the scene,

¹⁸ Using overlapping of images to represent depth was a popular strategy in Eastern Han art; see Soper 1948, pp. 174–175.

¹⁹ Croissant 1964, pp. 116–124; Jiang Yingju – Wu Wenqi 1995, pp. 52–82.

²⁰ Hayashi Minao 1966.

²¹ Sima Biao 司馬彪, *Xu Han zhi* 續漢志, *juan* 29, in Fan Ye 1965, p. 3639.

²² Sima Qian 1959, 7.296. Translation from Watson 1993, p. 18.

²³ Sima Qian 1959, 8.344. Translation from Watson 1993, p. 52.

²⁴ Fan Ye 1965, 77.2497.

²⁵ Xi’an shi wenwu baohu kaogusuo 2006.

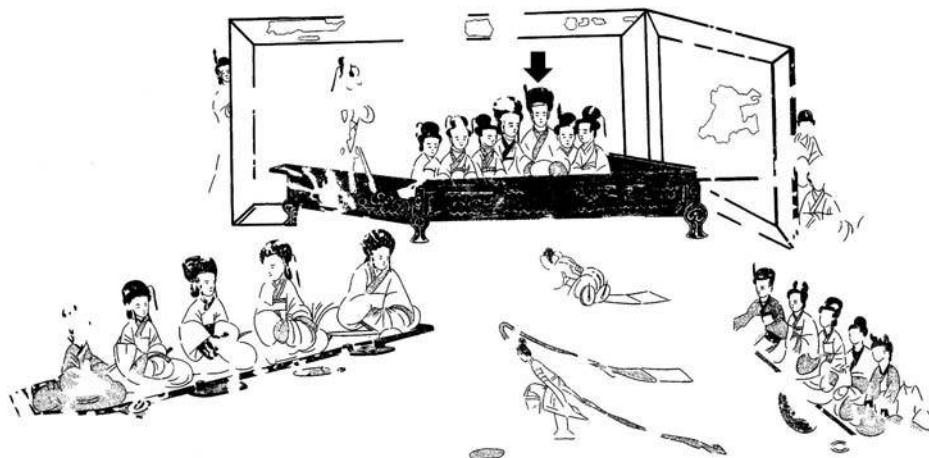


Fig. 4: Watching performance, mural from the Xi'an Institute of Technology, late 1st c. BCE, line drawing, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province.

Source: Xi'an shi wenwu baohu kaogusuo, "Xi'an Ligong daxue Xi Han bihuamu fajue jianbao," *Wenwu* 2006/5, p. 38, fig. 68.

Courtesy of the Wenwu Press.

stands out in the center (Fig. 4, highlight). Decorated with the most elaborate coiffure, this lady, like her Wu family counterpart, is physically taller and larger than her companions, including two women on her left side and four others on her right side. Also like her Wu family counterpart, the lady in the Xi'an mural sits in full frontal view, occupies the central position, and opens her eyes as if she is fully enthralled by the excitement of the performances. Accompanied by other interior and marginal beholders, this outstanding lady is indisputably the primary audience in this picture.²⁶ Without linear perspective in the picture, how is it possible that we, the modern-day viewers, so easily grasp the meaning?

It is the pictorial context rather than the use of scientific perspective that informs our eyes. Although in the Xi'an mural the lady's sight never technically falls upon the entertainers, the inherent purpose of performance renders her gaze evident: a show is always meant to be shown to an audience. Hence phenomenology replaces geometry (the meeting of the gaze and the object): the lady as beholder is semantically

²⁶ The immediate recognition of the watching lady is reminiscent of Erwin Panofsky's controversial "innocent eye." In *Studies in Iconology* (1939), Panofsky identified three levels of meaning that coexist in one work of art. The first level refers to simple identification through familiarity, or "primary or natural subject matter," which is self-evident to all viewers through time and across cultures. Although this concept was denounced by many scholars, including Ernst Gombrich, Nelson Goodman, Norman Bryson, and Miekell Bal among others, as Branko Mitrović has recently reminded us, "scholars in the humanities are often not aware how obsolete the view that there is no innocent eye has become," see Mitrović 2010, p. 4; see also *id.* 2013. The psychologist Zenon Pylyshyn has demonstrated that that perception is impervious to the direct influence of conceptual thinking. The intuitive grasp of space, unpolluted by subsequent conceptual thinking, is independent of any prior interpretation. Although the lady's watching is an illusion in no accordance with scientific perspective, as Pylyshyn points out, such illusions do not disappear even when we know they are illusions, see Pylyshyn 2003, pp. 64–68.

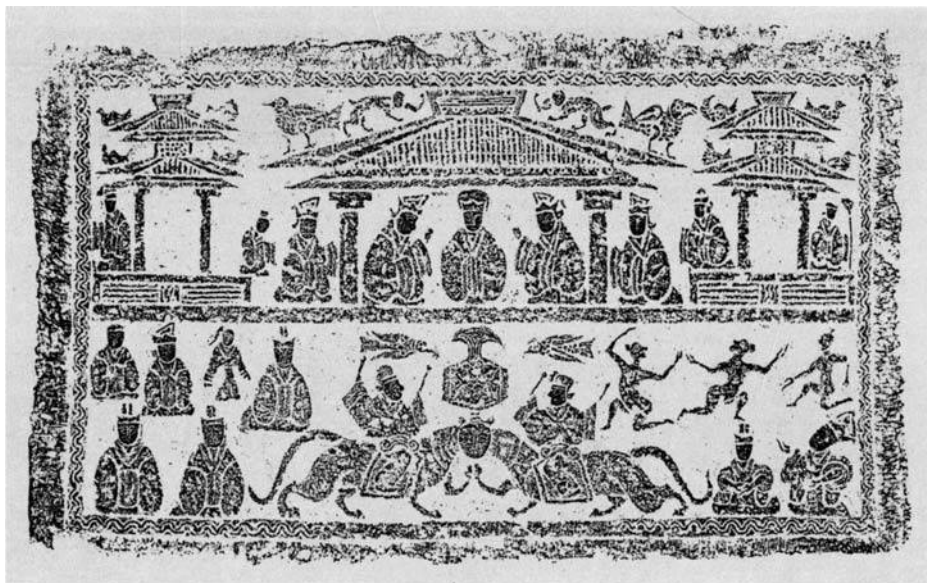


Fig. 5: Watching performance, stone bas-relief, 2nd c., ink rubbing, Weishan, Shandong Province.

Source: Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 2, p. 44, pl. 53.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

embedded in the motif of her watching performances. In this aspect, the similarity between the Wu family Central scene and the Xi'an mural is unmistakable.

Although the Xi'an mural might not have been a direct prototype for the Wu family shrines,²⁷ at least by the end of the first century similar motifs had appeared in many stone funerary shrines in the vicinity of Jiaxiang. In these closer models, the composition had been modified and relocated to the rear wall, giving rise to the earliest form of the Central scene (Fig. 5), and new decorative or symbolic elements including birds, monkeys, and trees were brought in. Many of these are auspicious symbols of good fortune.²⁸ But the most important modification is the addition of a ground line that divides the composition vertically into two registers. In the upper

²⁷ This basic compositional similarity, however, does not invalidate six differences between the two works. First, the mural existed two hundred years earlier. Second, the mural was from Xi'an in west China while the Wu family scene was from Jiaxiang in the east. Third, media are different: one is a wall painting and the other, a stone carving. Fourth, the location changed: the wall painting is a composition on a side wall in the tomb rather than a Central scene facing the entrance in the shrine. A fifth difference is of iconography, i.e., the disappearance of the dance performance and the inclusion of some other elements, including most notably the chariot procession in the Wu family Central scenes. Finally, the female beholder shifted her level, elevated from the ground floor to the second floor. However, the original undivided composition of the Xi'an mural was well preserved in a second-century pictorial stamped brick in Sichuan, in which the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母) sits in the place of the central lady with fantastic animals and human attendants dancing below her; see Chang *et al.* 1988, vol. 18, p. 173, pl. 216.

register, the beholder's seat is elaborated into a pavilion, sometimes two-storied.²⁹ In the lower register, the musical performance remains the same, although the kinds of performance often vary. All these new elements are found in the Wu family Central scene.

The reason for adding the ground line, which obscures the unified composition, is unknown, but it might be assumed that for Eastern Han viewers, this line was not as disturbing as it is to us, who too readily succumb to a modern scientific perspective. A frontal-pose beholder above looking at spectacles below was such a familiar and "natural" motif in the second century that everybody was supposed to recognize it without effort. To an informed eye, the lady's gaze stands out as an organic subject matter without disintegrating into seemingly unrelated subjects and objects. According to a famous motto attributed to Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (348–409), the Sage of Painters (*huasheng* 畫聖), "there is no living person who gestures or gazes without an aim."³⁰

Despite the borrowings from earlier models, the Wu family Central scene is not only stylistically finer and iconographically richer, but also conceptually innovative. The artists of the Wu family shrines took up the old motif and adapted it to the new social reality of the time. As mentioned earlier, whereas during the first century either male or female protagonists could occupy the second floor in frontal view, in the Wu family shrines a rule was set that only the lady did so, while her male counterpart always remained downstairs in profile. As I will demonstrate in sections "The Elevated Eyes" and "Looking Beyond" respectively, the two special views, i.e. the elevated one and the frontal one, were full of power for Eastern Han viewers and, as I will show in the last section "The Goddess-Mother," the dominant lady, portrayed as half human and half divine, was made uniquely entitled to such power in the second century to fit with the new political order headed by the supreme queen (empress) mother.

THE ELEVATED EYES

In the Wu family Central scene, the two-story building plays a critical role in reshaping the feminine gaze that characterizes in the Xi'an mural and other first-century bas-reliefs. By moving the lady one level up, the artist elevated her straight and level gaze to a higher, sweeping view, or, an overlooking.

In the Xi'an mural, thanks to the aforementioned perspectival principle of "height equals behind," the upper entertained and lower entertainers should be perceived

²⁸ For the birds and monkeys, see Xing Yitian 2000; for another interpretation of the intertwining tree from the perspective of religious studies rather than art history, see Brashier 2005.

²⁹ For examples, see *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui* 2000, vol. 2, pp. 43, 44. This composition can be traced back to the late Western Han, or the late first century BCE to the early first century CE. For example, a hollow brick (*kongxinzhuan* 空心磚) with stamped low-relief images shows two human figures sitting on the second floor of a two-story pavilion in full frontal view, presumably watching a performance of two musicians beating a drum on the ground floor. Although the sketchy drawing does not tell directly whether these two spectators are male or female, a third figure in full side view kneeling toward them on the right side on the same floor is clearly a man as he wears a sword. As women were almost always served by women in Han pictorial art, it is unlikely that the two spectators are women; for the image, see *Shandong sheng Jining shi wenwuchu* 1989, pl. 8.3.

³⁰ 凡生人，亡有手揖眼視而前亡所對者，see Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠, *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記, *juan* 5, in *Lu Fusheng* 1992, vol. 1, p. 141. Translation mine.

intuitively as sharing the same ground in the illusive pictorial space, even in the absence of a uniform ground level (as required by linear perspective).³¹ This illusionary ground level allows the eyes and their object, which never physically link up in the pictorial space, to be cognitively connected in the viewer's mind. In the Wu family Central scene, despite the lady's position, much higher than that of the chariot procession below, the artist did not redirect her eyes toward the lower target. A tension thus emerges: on the one hand, the lady's eyes still remain open and active; on the other hand, they have lost fixed targets in the picture. The seemingly insignificant upward moving of the spectator's position actually redefined the nature of her watching: viewing from superior heights generates a radically different experience, lends the lady much broader visual access, and converts her from a gazer to an overseer.

Like the frontal-pose female beholder, the elevated overseer, usually associated with the watchtower, was a motif that had existed before the construction of the Wu family shrines. The first century witnessed the emergence of a number of new compositions with one or more persons in the upper story of the pillar towers (*que* 闕) or on the top level of a building, usually revealing the upper half of his or her body behind railings or opened windows.³² More importantly, these figures are sometimes shown in strict frontal view, resembling the frontal-pose lady in the Central scene. For example, the entrance to the Wu family cemetery was once marked by a pair of stone pillar towers, still preserved in good condition. On one side of each pillar, a self-reflexive image of a two-story pillar tower is visible, the second of which is taken by two figures in full frontal view behind railings (Fig. 6). Due to the blurriness of the carving caused by centuries of natural corrosion, scholars are no longer able to distinguish the gender of the figures. The solid contour of the body reveals a stiff, solemn posture strongly recalling the lady in the Central scene, however, located just a few meters away.³³ Positioned on the upper level of the pillar towers to watch the entrance to the cemetery, these figures most likely represent gatekeepers, whose job was to keep an alert eye on anyone approaching the cemetery. And this was precisely the major function of the building:

Que (pillar towers) means *guan* 觀 (to oversee). During the Zhou dynasty (1046–255 BCE) the entrance to the palace was marked by two flanking pillar towers, whose upper floors were inhabitable. Built for people to ascend and gaze into the distance, these structures were called *guan*, or watchtowers.³⁴

³¹ See note 17.

³² For examples, see *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui 2000*, vol. 5, p. 164, *Xuzhou shi bowuguan 1985*, figs. 98, 99. Besides bas-reliefs, another group of pottery towers emerged about the same period during the first century. These objects can be viewed as a three-dimensional counterpart of the bas-reliefs. Found exclusively from tombs, these miniature buildings may rise up to a height of five feet and literally stand out among all other burial objects. More importantly, all the central figures on the upper story sit behind a window and steer their eyes straight forward, unmoved by scenes nearby. The open windows, the only access to the outside world on the upper floor, render these "persons" (figures) behind them into potential spectators. For a survey of these models, see *Lewis 1999*.

³³ For discussions of the pillar towers, see *Erickson 2005*; *Jiang Yingju–Wu Wenqi 1995*, pp. 7–14.

³⁴ 闕，觀也。周置兩觀以表宮門，其上可居，登之可以遠觀，故謂之觀；see *He Qinggu 1999*, p. 370. Translations mine.



Fig. 6: Watchtower, stone bas-relief from the northern side of the Western Pillar Tower of the Wu family cemetery, 2nd c., ink rubbing, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province.

Source: Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 1, p. 10, pl. 18.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

According to this definition, those on the watchtower were supposed to be elevated spectators.³⁵

Sometimes these spectators were included directly in the Central scene to accompany the frontal-pose lady. The juxtaposition reveals a close relationship between the two motifs. For example, a bas-relief unearthed during the 1980s in Jiaxiang

³⁵ According to Zheng Xuan's 鄭玄 (127–200) annotation to *Liji*: “*Guan* refers to pillar towers” (觀, 闕也); Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義, 21:185, in Ruan Yuan 1980, vol. 1, p. 1413; the same annotation can be found in Xing Bing 邢昺, *Erya shu* 爾雅疏, 5:31, in Ruan Yuan 1980, vol. 2, p. 2597.

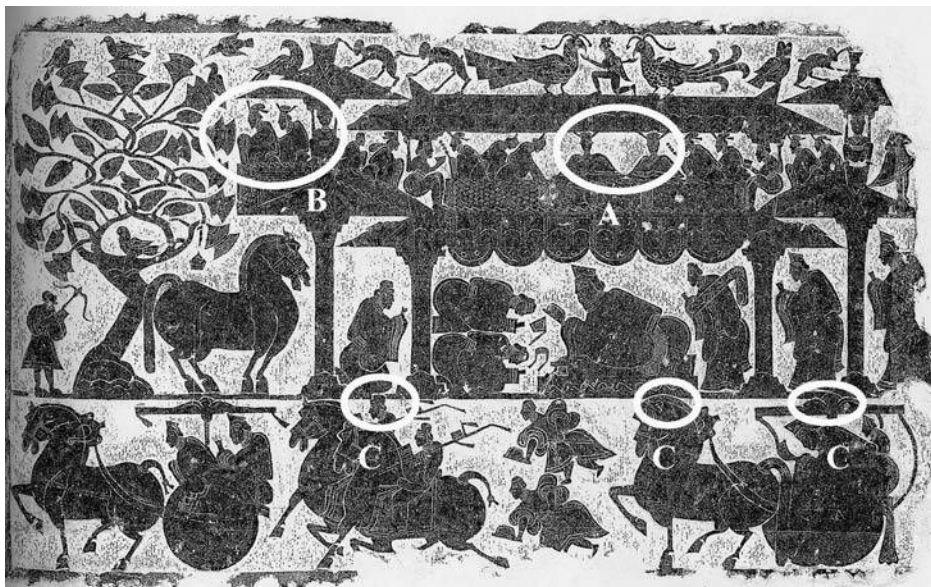


Fig. 7: Central Scene Depicting Multiple Central Ladies on Second Floor, stone bas-relief, mid-2nd c., ink rubbing, Jiayang, Shandong Province.

Source: *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 2, p. 96, pl. 104.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

bears such a similar style that the carving was probably from the same hands that worked for the Wu family shrines.³⁶ In this Central scene, the central pavilion is likewise flanked by two pillar towers. Whereas the two central ladies on the pavilion remain frontal, the peripheral female spectators, behind the railings on the second floor of the two-story pillar tower on the left, stare into the distance in full side view (Fig. 7, highlight B). Dressed and posed in an identical stock manner, the female spectators are of no significant difference in form from the ladies in the center, except that they laterally turn 90 degrees to face to the left.³⁷ The unmistakable similarity indicates that the frontal-pose lady in the central pavilion is in the same position as those elevated female spectators.

The watchtower motif, though also expressing “watching,” is essentially different from the previous motif of “frontal-pose lady watching spectacles.” First, the former is deprived of the attendants that flank the latter, indicating that the spectators on the watchtower are not always high-ranked; second and more importantly, the former does not specify a visual target in front of the viewer as the latter does. In fact, gazing itself is not the point; it is the visual access that matters. This is what watchtowers were built for: to facilitate overseeing.

The above scenario is most explicit in another bas-relief uncovered from present-day Pixian 郫县 in Sichuan province in southwest China, dated likewise to the

³⁶ Jining diqu wenwuzu 1982, p. 66, fig. 14.

³⁷ On another occasion, these spectators are men instead of women; see Jining diqu wenwuzu 1982, p. 66, fig. 15.

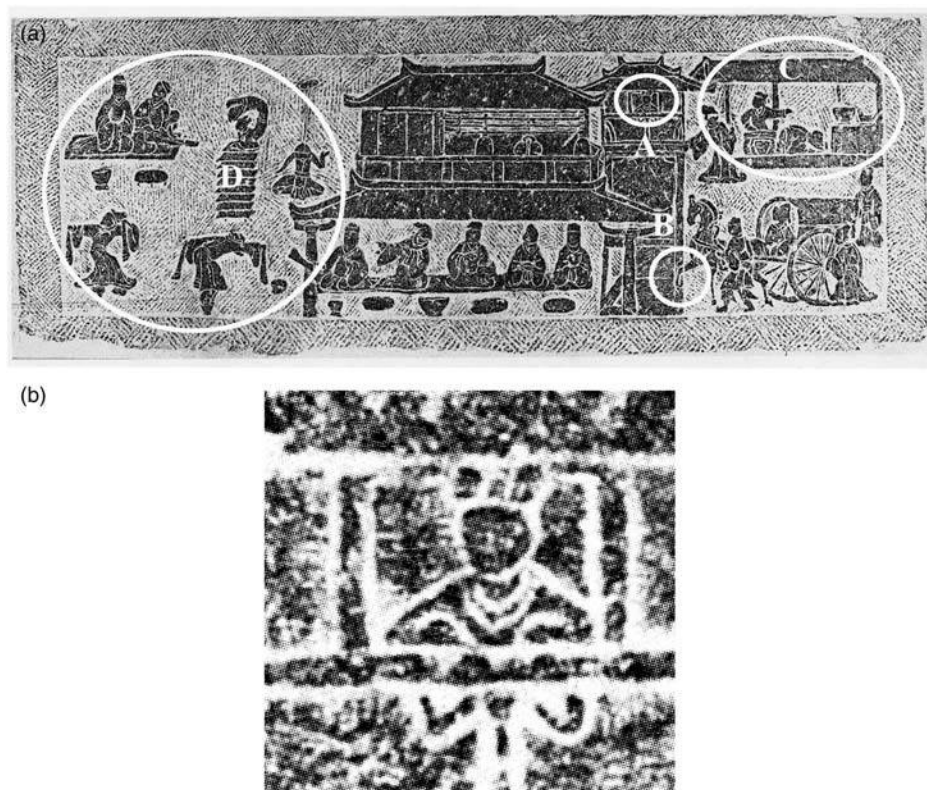


Fig. 8: a. Overseeing, stone bas-relief on a sarcophagus, 2nd c., ink rubbing, Pixian, Sichuan Province.

b. Detail showing a female spectator on the watchtower, 1st c., ink rubbing, Pixian, Sichuan Province.

Source: Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 7, p. 96, pl. 122.

Courtesy of Gao Wen.

second century. Found as a side panel of a stone sarcophagus, the picture shows a manor, perhaps an image of the deceased's posthumous home (Fig. 8a). Near the center of the composition, slightly on the right stands a compelling watchtower, in which a woman indicated by a typical coiffure with two round hair bundles reveals her face in frontal view from behind an opened window on the upper floor (Fig. 8a, highlight A, Fig. 8b). On the right side of the watchtower, a chariot (a simplified version of the chariot procession) is approaching the gate, above which a kitchen is located. To the left of the watchtower, symposiums and various "entertainments" are offered in a two-story building (or, this time, two one-story buildings, one in front of the other) and a courtyard. Although her role as an elevated spectator is beyond question, it remains indefinite what exactly she is looking at, for none of the scenes appears directly below her, while the multiple spectacles coincide in different directions of the building. However, most of these scenes must have been visualized as occurring somewhere in front of the watchtower, because they overlap the building at various points, such as the raised

foreleg of the horse that covers a small portion of the pillar tower (Fig. 8a, highlight B). Represented in this manner, the female spectator has extensive visual access to multiple scenes before or below her, including the symposium, the performance, the approaching chariot (procession), and perhaps even the kitchen, whose relative position to the watchtower remains unclear.³⁸ Although the overlooking lady is not apparently setting her eyes on any particular scene, the point is: the female spectator is the only one in the composition who is able to see everything else in the picture from above.

Therefore the blending of the watchtower motif with the motif of “frontal-pose lady watching spectacles” raises an intriguing question: does the central lady under discussion still focus her eyes on the chariot procession? Or does she rather have a broader scope? I will argue that the artist made this seemingly paradoxical synthesis intentionally to combine two equally important attributes on the central frontal-pose lady: she is not only the major consumer of what is visually present in front of her, but also the top overseer of what surrounds (in space) and occurs next (in time). And this “surrounds” and “next” also includes things beyond the Central scene, as I will demonstrate below.

LOOKING BEYOND

The unique power of frontal view also manifests itself through the fact that this is the only perspective that allows the spectator’s eyes to radiate from the picture plane out to the other walls.

As was demonstrated in the Pixian bas-relief, by the time the Wu family shrines were built, Chinese funerary art had developed a set of conventional motifs often represented around the central pavilion, including a lavish kitchen scene (*paochu* 庖廚) and a spectacular mixed show of dancing and acrobatics (*yuewu* 樂舞). Scholars have called them the two “invariable motifs” in the decorative program of most funerary shrines.³⁹ These two motifs represent the most popular activities held on ritual occasions during the Han dynasty.⁴⁰ Although neither of them is present in the Central scenes, the two motifs were not expelled from the Wu family shrines. The shrine in which the Central scene belonged was once a rectangular hall, consisting of the rear wall, which possessed the Central scene, the two side walls, as well as the ceiling. The interior faces of these architectural elements were all covered with more or less generic pictorial motifs. A busy kitchen and a dance and acrobatic show were almost always represented on the lower registers of the east side wall of the shrine; other spectacular scenes such as hunting or fighting, probably

³⁸ A rare intact first-century tomb recently unearthed at present-day Jiaozuo 焦作 in Henan province contained a pottery tower that might serve as a great parallel and footnote to the Pixian bas-relief. The clay building, the tallest of all burial objects in the tomb, stood in the center and was surrounded by miniature stoves, barns, pigsties, wells, servants, and various types of utensils, which a prosperous Han-dynasty manor would have possessed. The spectator, in this case a man, is keeping all the properties of his posthumous home within his visual field. For the excavation report, see *Jiaozuo shi wenwu gongzuodui* 2010; for other relatively well-preserved tombs that also contained clay building models, see *Suo Quanxing* 1995; *Henan sheng wenwu yanjiusuo* 1989.

³⁹ *Sahara* 1991, pp. 15–16; *Xin Lixiang* 2000, pp. 139–143.

⁴⁰ *Yang Kuan* 1985, pp. 119–122.

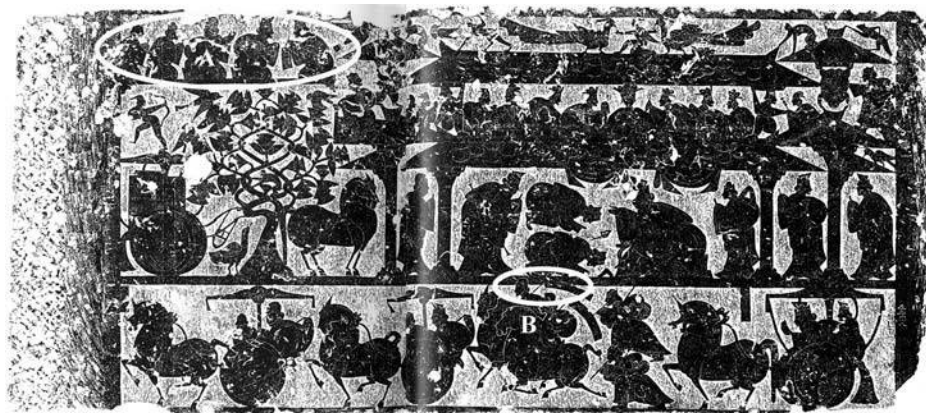


Fig. 9: Central Scene from the Left Stone Chamber of the Wu Family Shrines, stone bas-relief, from 148, ink rubbing, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province.

Source: Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 1, p. 61, pl. 84.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

historical plays,⁴¹ were customarily carved on the west side wall (see Fig. 1b).⁴² Both walls were physically located in front of the Central scene and therefore intuitively subject to the lady's encompassing eye on the rear wall.

As an elevated female spectator, the frontal-pose lady in the Central scene can be compared to the one on the Pixian sarcophagus panel, which also includes such motifs as kitchen, symposium, music, and dancing (see Fig. 8a, highlights C, D). In the Left Stone Chamber, the Central scene includes a small scene of five men sitting together in the upper left corner (Fig. 9, highlight A). This scene, underlined by another dividing line which also indicates the ground below, makes perfect sense in light of the Pixian bas-relief as representing an ongoing event in the courtyard by the central pavilion. In the Wu family shrines, however, the artists allocated some of those spectacular motifs onto the two side walls. Let me take the Wu Liang Shrine, the structurally simplest of all the Wu family shrines, as an example. Among the three walls, the kitchen scene appears on the lower right corner of the east wall (Fig. 10, highlight A). If on the Pixian panel the elevated spectator still operates her overarching gaze within the two-dimensional pictorial composition, it seems the Wu family artists opened up the picture and created a three-dimensional space along the three walls of the shrine. And this relocation did not shatter the uniformity of the composition, because the lady's frontal view – and only this potent view – allows her eyes to radiate from the picture plane and access the spectacles displayed on the side walls (Fig. 10, highlight C).

⁴¹ Bulling 1966–1967 and *id.* 1967–1968. Part of her assumption “that a visible artistic form must be in a great many cases explained as a scrupulously close imitation of an original in some other medium, the transfer involving no essential change in meaning” was criticized by Alexander Soper (1968, p. 258). Although Bulling's study may be flawed with overgeneralization, her observation that these historical representations put an emphasis on creating dramatic spectacles, which resemble later theatrical plays, remains an interesting point.

⁴² For theories of such spatial arrangement, see Xin Lixiang 2000, p. 129.

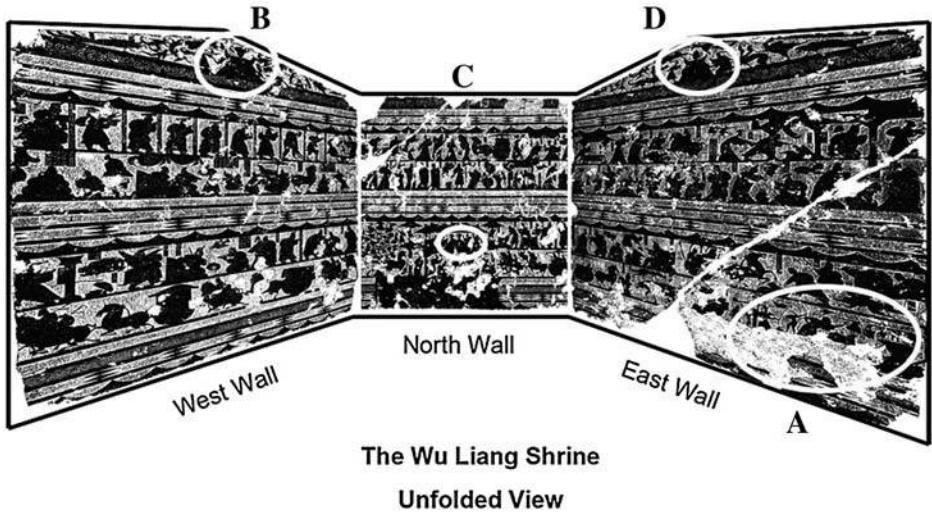


Fig. 10: Unfolded view of the Wu Liang Shrine. Stone bas-relief, from 151, ink rubbing, Jiayang, Shandong Province.
Source: By the Author.

Why? This is the simple magic of frontal view: wherever you move in front of the picture, the represented figure's eyes follow you all the way, because the whole world in front of the picture falls into the figure's visual field (Fig. 11a). In contrast, "if the eyes in a portrayed face seem to be glancing to the side when viewed from the front, there is no way that we can move laterally to make the eyes look at us."⁴³ In other words, even the slightest side views confine the spectators' viewing only to things within the picture rather than those beyond it (Fig. 11b). The (re)location of some "invariable motifs" onto the side walls in the Wu family shrines suggests that the artists of the Wu family shrines might have deliberately exploited the intuitive power by making the lady look straight out of the picture plane.

The full frontal view even forced direct visual contact between the lady and the worshipper who came to visit the shrine, a public ritual site.⁴⁴ The "spirit seat," an empty stone altar or dais upon which to seat the deceased's soul, imagined as a living person, was often placed directly in front of the rear wall, where the Central scene was carved (see Fig. 1b). As noted earlier, this "spirit seat" dictated that the worshipper, when kneeling upon the ground, must confront the central lady's face and eyes head on. Such a moment was captured in another second-century stone bas-relief discovered at present-day Feicheng 肥城 in Shandong province, in which a male worshipper kneels and faces the entrance of a shrine. In front of him a bowl (of sacrificial grains?) is dedicated on the ground, and a lamp lit up to indicate the dusk time when sacrifices were usually scheduled (Fig. 12).⁴⁵ Not coincidentally, situated about 60–90 centimeters above the ground, the frontal-

⁴³ Kemp 2011, p. 16.

⁴⁴ Wu Hung 1995, pp. 189–250.

⁴⁵ Sekino Tadashi 1938, pl. 1; see also Xin Lixiang 2000, p. 82.

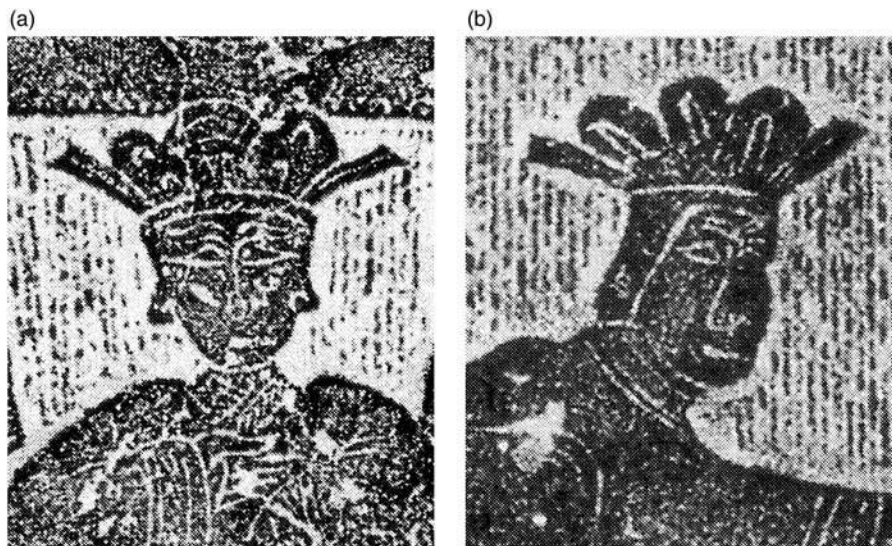


Fig. 11: a. Frontal View of the Central Lady in Wu Family Shrines, stone bas-relief, 2nd c., ink rubbing, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province.
b. Side View of a Lady in Wu family Shrines, stone bas-relief, 2nd c., ink rubbing, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province

Source: Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 1, p. 61, pl. 84. vol. 2, p. 36, pl. 58.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

pose lady in the Central scene in the Wu family shrines remained approximately at the eye level of a kneeling adult.⁴⁶

During the actual ritual festivals, the lady's all-inclusive sight might have even reached the ritual performances staged in front of the shrine. According to ample historical documents, during the annual festivals held in the cemetery to remember the dead, various rituals and sacrifices were offered to occupants of the shrine. The hosting family would invite guests to the cemetery and entertain them with banquets, music, dancing, and acrobatics, as vividly illustrated on the walls of the shrines.⁴⁷

THE POWER OF OVERLOOKING

The active, dominant, and all-encompassing eyes entitled to the elevated lady in the central pavilion were imbued with a symbolic power – the power of watching from above, in Eastern Han society. The forgotten cultural meaning of overseeing can be reconstructed through a number of references in contemporary transmitted texts.

At the experiential level, taking a higher point of view naturally lends the spectator a superior view of the world. This was also true in the Han dynasty, as “ascending high to gaze into the distance” (*denggao yuanwang* 登高遠望) became a favorite

⁴⁶ See note 4.

⁴⁷ Yang Kuan 1985, pp. 119–122; Wu Hung 1988, p. 103.



Fig. 12: Worshipping before the Shrine, stone bas-relief, 2nd c., line drawing after an ink rubbing, Feicheng, Shandong Province.

Source: Xin Lixiang 信立祥, *Handai huaxiangshi zonghe yanjiu* 漢代畫像石綜合研究 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2000), p. 82, fig. 43.

Courtesy of Xin Lixiang.

motif not only to artists but also among writers. Li You 李尤 (44–126), a talented poet, described in his “Pingleguan fu” 平樂觀賦 (Rhapsody of Watchtower of Peace and Happiness) his breathtaking panoramic view of a dazzling variety of magic shows, masquerades, and acrobatics (recalling the performances portrayed by the Pixian bas-relief), which were staged in all directions across the imperial capital city Luoyang 洛陽 to celebrate the first day of the first month of the year.⁴⁸ While people on the ground had to walk arduously from street to street to meet the performances one by one, the elevated spectator could see them in combination without lifting his feet off the floor.

At the symbolic level, overlooking represented the ruler’s unlimited power and unblocked control of the world. One of the sacred Confucian canons taught at the Eastern Han imperial academy (*xueguan* 學官), *Shangshu* 尚書 (The Book of Documents), proclaims such an idea. During the visit to the ancestral temple on the first day of the first month of the year (the same day as described in the above-mentioned “Pingleguan fu”), Emperor Shun 舜, one of the legendary sage rulers, opened the four gates and four windows of the building to conveniently peer into all four directions “and allowed no corner under heaven to be concealed.”⁴⁹ The political metaphor is unmistakable: commanding a panoramic view over surrounding areas represents an exemplary ruler’s thorough and brilliant control over his country. Perhaps following this example, emperors of the Han dynasty ritually scaled high buildings to stare into the distance.⁵⁰ Considering that the members of the Wu family to whom the shrines were dedicated were masters of Confucian canons and imperial officials in the local government, as I will discuss later, this symbolism must have been a commonplace to the well-educated and ideologically instilled patrons.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Fei Zhengang 1993, p. 384.

⁴⁹ Kong Yingda, *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義, 3.18, in Ruan Yuan 1980, vol. 1, p. 130; Pi Xirui 1986, p. 72.

⁵⁰ Ban Gu 1962, 98.4029.

The symbolic power of overseeing made it a taboo for the highly ranked to be overlooked by the lowly ranked. According to a convention during the Han dynasty, when high-ranking officials went out on journeys, armed escorts had to clear all other passengers off the road to avoid offending the honored travelers. A law was made that anyone who dared to peep at the traveling officials from a high building were to be mercilessly stopped by a shower of arrows.⁵² A real story in *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (History of the Later Han) verified such harsh punishment. Mr. Peng, the one who erected high buildings for his ladies to ascend for the watching of official chariot processions, was the victim. When Governor Huang Chang 黃昌 (*fl.* mid 2nd c.) learned that his chariot procession was being overseen by Peng's ladies, he flew into a fury and ordered Peng's execution.⁵³

Huang's rage, which resulted in Peng's death, might have been fuelled by the gender-sensitive nature of the scenario. In a patriarchic society in which males were considered superior to females, being overseen by ladies could be humiliating and even outrageous for men. In a story from *Shiji* 史記 (The Records of the Historian), which might have been circulated widely during the Han dynasty, Prince Zhao Sheng 趙勝, better known as the "Lord of Pingyuan" 平原君 (ca. 308–251 BCE), lived next door to some very proud gentlemen. One day some of Zhao's concubines stood on the upper story of the building and saw a lame gentleman limp his way along to draw water from a well. They could not help laughing at his awkward appearance and manner.⁵⁴ Enraged by the laughter, the gentleman went to Zhao and asked him to execute the ladies for their improper conduct. Unwilling as he was, the lord was advised to sacrifice his concubines to save his public fame. The same book includes a similar story. When the Jin 晉 state sent Xi Ke 郤克 (*fl.* 6th c. BCE), a hunchbacked nobleman, to visit the neighboring Qi 齊 state, the Queen Mother of the Qi ascended to the upper floor of the palace gate and laughed at what she considered his humorous appearance. Bitterly feeling insulted, Xi swore to take revenge. Later Xi led an army to attack the Qi, defeated it, and humiliated the king by taking him prisoner.⁵⁵

In all the three stories, the frenzy of men was triggered by the eyes of women who looked over them, even though the women came from a socially higher rank. The gender hierarchy was no less stubborn than the social hierarchy. The dictionary definition of the word "woman" (*fu* 婦) in the Eastern Han was "obedience." Thus states *Baihu tong* 白虎通 (Comprehensive Meanings Held in the White Tiger Hall), the official exegetic canon of the Eastern Han dynasty: "The word *fu* (women) means *fu* 服, or, to be obedient according to the ritual and etiquette."⁵⁶

Within this ideological background, what was portrayed in the Wu family shrines appears abnormal. The frontal-pose lady was blatantly overseeing the official chariot procession, formed entirely by men, with no fear of consequences. One may wonder what unusual power and privilege was granted to her to defy the

⁵¹ Jiang Yingju – Wu Wenqi 1995, pp. 17–22.

⁵² "Those who took a high position and peeped down must also be shot." 有乘高窺闕者, 亦射之. Cui Bao 1985, p. 5.

⁵³ Fan Ye 1965, 77.2497.

⁵⁴ Sima Qian 1959, 76.2365.

⁵⁵ Sima Qian 1959, 39.1677.

⁵⁶ 婦者, 服也, 以禮屈服. Chen Li 1994, p. 376.



Fig. 13: Queen Mother of the West, stone bas-relief, 2nd c., detail of ink rubbing, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province.

Source: Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui, *Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji*, vol. 1, p. 66, pl. 91.

Courtesy of Jiang Yingju.

social convention and protocol. The answer lies in the lady's half divine and half human identity in the historical context of second century China.

THE GODDESS-MOTHER

There has been a hot debate on the identity of these frontal-pose ladies in the Wu family shrines. The central question is: is she divine or human? Some scholars assumed that this apparently important lady represented a deity, but others contended that she must be the wife of the deceased male on the first floor. Both arguments have good ground.

In the camp of the “goddess theory,” the lady is indisputably analogous to the Queen Mother of the West, a supreme goddess Han subjects believed as dwelling on the sacred Mountain of Kunlun 崑崙 in the remote western region of China.⁵⁷ The goddess appears on the triangular west gable above the west wall of the shrine (Fig. 10, highlight B). Like the central lady, the goddess takes the central position and possesses a notably larger stature than her attendants on both sides. Even some of their physical features are similar. Featuring the distinctive flower-like coiffure, she sits in full frontal view, holds an upright posture with hands clasped before the stomach, and maintains a solemn facial expression, while the respectful attendants are bowing and presenting her cups, toiletry cases, mirrors, or other daily necessities (Fig. 13, compare Fig. 1a). In this aspect, the images of the goddess and the lady were probably based on the same basic archetype; in fact the latter was portrayed almost like a mirror image of the former. These similarities even convinced some scholars that the central lady represented the goddess herself.⁵⁸

But to those believing in the “human theory,” the above formal resemblances between the lady and the goddess are at odds with their iconographic differences. First, all the major divine features unique to the goddess, including feathers or wings, the toad and hares pounding immortal drugs, and flanking demigods, were absent;⁵⁹ second, whereas the Queen Mother of the West only appeared as singular,

⁵⁷ For studies of the Queen Mother of the West, see Wu Hung 1989, pp. 132–141; James 1995, pp. 17–41; Li Song 2000.

⁵⁸ One such opinion links the scene to the legendary King Mu's visit to the Queen Mother of the West. See Bushell 1909–1910, vol. 1, p. 30, fig. 16, caption; Huang Minglan 1982, pp. 28–30.

⁵⁹ Croissant 1964, p. 142; Jiang Yingju – Wu Wenqi 1995, p. 96.

in the Central scenes the frontal-pose lady could be rendered twice or even multiple times in a row (see Fig. 7, highlight A).⁶⁰

In response to this counterargument Nagahirō and Doi Yoshiko 土居淑子, who were still convinced of the lady's divinity, suggested that these figures might represent the shrine founder's multiple ancestors living in paradise, while the male central figure downstairs referred to a king.⁶¹ But this theory shunned the gender specificity on the second floor: how could all the male ancestors, even more important than the female ones in the traditional Chinese ancestral worship be excluded?

The "human theory" offers a different solution. To Croissant, the lady on the second floor is the female counterpart of the central male figure sitting in profile on the ground floor.⁶² Jean M. James further identifies the lady as the wife of the gentleman below.⁶³ Aligned with this train of thought, Xin Lixiang and Jiang Yingju uncover inscriptional evidence from shrines in the neighboring areas around Jiexiang to argue for the identity of the lady as the wife of the deceased.⁶⁴ Wu Hung thinks the lady represents a queen, while the gentleman below stands for the emperor.⁶⁵ Despite the different interpretations, to all of these scholars, the two-story pavilion signifies a domestic division between husband and wife rather than a religious split between humanity and divinity.⁶⁶

Indeed, the "human theory" solves a few problems that plague the "goddess theory." That in the Central scenes the lady could be rendered more than once reflects the polygamic nature of the Eastern Han society, in which a wealthy man

⁶⁰ This image was from a bas-relief discovered at Songshan in Jiexiang in 1980; see Jining diqu wenwuzu 1982, p. 66, fig. 16. Although it was not directly from the Wu family shrines, the similar artistic style and carving technique demonstrate that it was almost surely associated with the same workshop or group of artists; see Jiexiang xian Wushici wenguan suo 1979, pp. 5–6. Jiang Yingju demonstrates that this and other similar later discovered bas-reliefs were also Central scenes from other local shrines of the same period; see *id.* 1983.

⁶¹ Nagahirō Toshio 1961a, pp. 111–112; Doi Yoshiko 1986, pp. 107–111.

⁶² Croissant 1964, p. 142.

⁶³ James 1988–1989, p. 43.

⁶⁴ Xin Lixiang 2000, pp. 101–102; Jiang Yingju – Wu Wenqi 1995, pp. 96–97. New inscriptions carved in a Central scene dated to 73 at Feicheng, only 110 kilometers to the northeast of the Wu family sites, has bolstered this new theory. In this bas-relief from Feicheng two cartouches were inscribed next to the lady on the top floor, labeling her as the wife (*furen* 夫人) of a marquis (*hou* 侯), whose image was represented on the lower floor. This bas-relief bears a fragmentary inscription that identifies one of the upper-floor frontal-pose ladies as "Wife of Marquis X" (X *hou furen*) and a second one labels the man in rough profile on the lower floor as "Marquis X" (X *hou*). A third inscription identifies the person paying homage to the marquis on the left as "Eldest son of Marquis X." It seems to me that the damaged character X should be read as "Zhai" 齋 or "Qi" 齊; see Cheng Shaokui 1990, pp. 92–93; Yang Aiguo 2006, p. 39. We may extrapolate from the Feicheng example that the lady on the second floor might have similarly referred to a wife while the man downstairs was her husband.

⁶⁵ Wu Hung 1989, p. 197.

⁶⁶ It must be noted that this theory is based on the questionable assumption that all Central scenes during the Han dynasty shared the same iconographic program. It might have been the case that each shrine and its pictorial program were somewhat distinct. However, images in Eastern Han funerary shrines were not totally individual or unique, either; many of them consisted of common formulas and structures; see Xing Yitian 2011, pp. 400–402. Therefore a balanced methodology that heeds both the individuality and the collectivity of these images should be attempted.

could marry multiple women.⁶⁷ Within this domestic context such mundane feminine activities unique to the second floor, arranging hair or looking in the mirror make good sense.⁶⁸ The theory also coheres with the Confucian teaching on keeping a proper fence between husband and wife, for it is ritually inappropriate for men and women to blend together.⁶⁹ Many contemporary murals and stone carvings indeed represent husbands and wives in two separate rows.⁷⁰ In the Wu family shrines, as male occupy the lower floor of the pavilion, the second floor forms an exclusively feminine space loftily cut off from the outside world.

Nevertheless, the humanity of the lady does not negate her godly characteristics, which distinguish her from all other human figures in the shrine.⁷¹ Although “imprisoned” on the upper floor, she stands above her socially superior husband and indeed everything else in the earthly world. In a similar lofty manner, the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母) and her male counterpart, the King Father of the East (Dongwanggong 東王公), reside in parallel on top of the two side walls respectively (see Fig. 10, highlights B and D). Furthermore, the frontal-pose lady is the only human representation in the shrine that features the potent frontal posture and encompassing eyes that characterize only the gods in the shrine. Little doubt remains that the Wu family artists creatively modified the local pictorial conventions and forged a visible analogy between the Queen Mother of the West and the frontal-pose lady without denying the latter’s human identity. In other words, the frontal-pose lady was intentionally made both divine and human, and in either case, a mother (*mu* 母), at least in the descendants’ point of view.

The motivation of creating such a godly mother in the family shrine was embedded in the political context during the first to second centuries. During the late Western Han, the Queen Mother of the West, first as the keeper of the elixir, was transformed into a mirror image of the empress mother named Wang Zhengjun 王政君 (71 BCE – 13 CE), aunt of Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE – 23 CE), who usurped the emperorship and established the short-lived Xin 新 dynasty in 9 CE.⁷² There was a linguistic trick behind the analogy: both ladies in Chinese were called *wangmu* 王母, meaning either

⁶⁷ Ch’ü T’ung-tsu 1972, pp. 44–48; Yang Shuda 2000, pp. 44–46; Liu Zenggui 1980, p. 19; this view was reconfirmed by recently excavated manuscripts, see Wang Zijin 2004.

⁶⁸ Such motifs were later appropriated by early great Chinese painting masters in similar domestic contexts. A great example is a scene of adornment in the famous Admonition Scroll, attributed to Gu Kaizhi, see McCausland 2003, pl. 7.

⁶⁹ Zhongguo huaxiangshi quanji bianji weiyuanhui 2000, vol. 2, p. 97, pl. 105. While men were assigned to the public “outer” space, women were left in charge of the private and “inner” space. No violation between the two sides was expected: “The male was not to speak of domestic matters, nor the female of matters outside the home” (*Nan buyan nei, nü buyan wai* 男不言內、女不言外); see Kong Yingda, *Liji zhengyi*, 27.234, in Ruan Yuan 1980, vol. 1, p. 1462. Accordingly, female family members in the Han dynasty were often called “those inside the chamber” (*neishi* 內室), a reference to their non-public, domestic role, see Raphals 1998, pp. 195–234.

⁷⁰ A slightly earlier mural tomb at Xunyi 旬邑 in Shaanxi province, dating from the first century contains inscriptions that verify the separation between husband and wife. Although in this tomb there are no multistory buildings, the motif of men in profile versus women in frontal view is similar. Blurry inscriptions label these rigidly sitting ladies as wives of the corresponding gentlemen; see Greiff – Yin 2002, Abb. 29, 32a, 32b.

⁷¹ Xin Lixiang 2000, p. 93.

⁷² It was during this period that the iconic image of this goddess suddenly appeared and became popular across the empire; see Miao Zhe 2007, pp. 102–108; Xing Yitian 1988.

the Queen Mother of the West or the mother of the Wang family. After the fall of the Xin, empress mothers were granted even greater real and symbolic power during the Eastern Han dynasty, when a total of six empress dowagers, unparallel in all Chinese history, successively became the de-facto controllers of the court after 88.⁷³ Among the ten emperors of the Eastern Han dynasty, five ascended the throne younger than ten, and the other five were between eleven and seventeen in age.⁷⁴ When the emperor was too young to make decisions, it was the time for the empress mother to step into the public political arena, traditionally a world reserved for men only, to “oversee the court” (*linchao* 臨朝).⁷⁵ This turned into a convention throughout the second century, when the construction of the Wu family shrines occurred. The earliest Left Stone Chamber was established in 148, the second year into the reign of the Emperor Huan 漢桓帝 (r. 146–168), who ascended the throne at the age of fifteen. The factual supreme ruler behind the young emperor was Empress Mother Liang (Liang Rui 梁妠, 106–150), who maintained a firm grip on the power till her very last breath. As a matter of fact, between 89 and 186, when the latest Front Stone Chamber was finished, the empire was in the hands of the empress mothers and their brothers’ clans (consort-clans) for nearly half of the period.⁷⁶

At the same time, from late Western Han to early Eastern Han, the image of the Queen Mother shifted from three-quarter view to full frontal view, turning the representational mode of this goddess from “episodic” to “iconic.”⁷⁷ More mundane domestic elements were introduced into the otherwise supernatural motif, as is shown on a stone sarcophagus panel excavated in present-day Xuzhou 徐州 in Jiangsu province, about 160 kilometers to the south of Jiayang. Instead of dwelling in an abandoned mountain cave as described by the texts, the goddess wearing a prominent *sheng* 勝 headdress was portrayed as the sole inhabitant of the second floor of a typical Chinese pavilion on the left side of the panel, like the head of a secular household, with people beating drums, hitting chimes and dancing on the right. Meanwhile, the figure is also receiving homage from grotesque-looking deities, some of them with animal bodies or heads, a reminder of her supernatural status.⁷⁸ On another stone sarcophagus panel from present-day Zoucheng 鄒城 (Shandong), no more than 85 kilometers to the east of Jiayang, a lady attended by a group of women on both sides sits en face in the upper register, analogous with the previous Xi’an lady. She is watching supernatural birds (perhaps the vermilion birds, or, *zhuque* 朱雀) playing with a string of starry beads and a hare pounding the elixir, an iconographic hallmark of the Queen Mother of the West. It seems that the early first-century artist(s) intentionally blurred the boundary of heaven and earth so that the imagery of goddess and that of housemistress could merge. Such ambiguous feminine images anticipated the mother-goddess by the Wu family

⁷³ Hinsch 2003; for English translations of the biographies of some of these empresses, see Swann 1931; Goodrich 1964–1965 and 1966.

⁷⁴ Taniguchi Yasuyo 1980, p. 90.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–98; Yoshinami Takashi 2007, pp. 93–97.

⁷⁶ Fan Ye 1965, 4.165, 4.195, 5.204, 5.241, 6.175, 7.320; see also Watanabe Yoshihiro 1990, p. 31; Ch’ü T’ung-tsu 1972, p. 216.

⁷⁷ Wu Hung 1989, pp. 133–141.

⁷⁸ The iconographic blending has led some observers to wonder whether such a goddess-like image actually represented the wife of the male tomb occupant; for example, Liu Hui 2010.

artist(s), who unambiguously distinguished the two characters in iconography while keeping the two in both form and placement as mirror images of one another.

The Wu family, which was involved in the Eastern Han government, must and could not have been blind to this new political and artistic reality. Although no historical records about these gentlemen survive, the excavated stelae from the Wu family cemetery show them as favored by the court.⁷⁹ Wu Kaiming 武開明 (91–148), Wu Ban 武班 (120–145), and Wu Rong 武榮 (d. 168) were all nominated as “filial and incorrupt” (*xiaolian* 孝廉) and appointed as local officials; Wu Liang 武梁 (78–151) was also offered official positions, which he declined.⁸⁰

The similar educational background of the Wus suggests that they should have appreciated the important role of mothers within the family and society, as did many of their contemporary colleagues or peers.⁸¹ The Confucian canons in which the Wus majored were among the earliest Chinese literature that praised virtuous mothers and wives. Both Wu Liang and Wu Rong were scholars of *Shijing* 詩經 (The Book of Odes), one of the five Confucian classics taught in the imperial academy.⁸² Wu Liang specialized in *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (External Commentary to the Han Odes, compiled 2nd c. BCE), an exegetic text of *Shijing* with a special interest in the stories of virtuous women.⁸³ This text included a focus on two famous heroines, the mothers of Mengzi 孟子 and Tian Ji 田忌 who used their authority to help their sons to correct errors. Both were eminent figures in Chinese history. Wu Rong was a specialist of the Lu 魯 text of *Shijing*, which nurtured Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE), the author of *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Biographies of Eminent Women, comp. first c. BCE).⁸⁴ Since both the Han and the Lu texts used a number of stories of exemplary women to interpret *Shijing*, it is unthinkable that Wu Liang and Wu Rong would have been ignorant of such didactic narratives and their ideological and political scenarios of great mothers.

This assumption is substantiated by the fact that most illustrations of the virtuous women in the Wu family shrines came from *Lienü zhuan*.⁸⁵ Not coincidentally, these illustrations sometimes emphasize the role of the mother more than they do that of the father. In the Wu Liang Shrine, for example, eight of the thirteen illustrations of virtuous paragons deal with a son’s filial piety toward his mother and his deceased father, and six concentrate on the love between mother and child.⁸⁶ In a patriarchal society such as the Eastern Han, as Wu Hung once remarked, “the primary subject matter of the Wu Liang Ci (Shrine) carvings is the mother-son relationship. It is especially surprising to find that the first picture in the series focuses on this theme.”⁸⁷ To the Wu family members thriving in the political environment of second-century China, in effect, this must have come as no surprise.

⁷⁹ For English translations of the inscriptions, see James 1983, pp. 98–103.

⁸⁰ Jiang Yingju – Wu Wenqi 1995, pp. 18–21.

⁸¹ Ch’ü T’ung-tsu 1972, pp. 72–75; Brown 2003 and 2007, pp. 65–84; Yan Aimin 2005, pp. 325–334; Lewis 2012.

⁸² James 1983, pp. 101, 103; Wu Hung 1989, p. 97; Jiang Yingju – Wu Wenqi 1995, pp. 17, 20–21.

⁸³ Xu Fuguan 2001, vol. 3, pp. 27–28.

⁸⁴ On the relationship between the Lu text and *Lienü zhuan*, see Chen Qiaozong 1819, preface 2b; for the emphasis of *Lienü zhuan* on the role of mother, see Takao Shimomi 1994, pp. 23–56.

⁸⁵ Wu Hung 1989, pp. 176, 252–272.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 182–183.

CONCLUSION

The frontal-pose lady in the Central scene in the Wu family shrines synthesizes three existing motifs, including the dominant feminine gaze, elevated eyes, and the iconic Queen Mother of the West. The new synthesis is not a lady's portrait, but the godly mother's overseeing. The ultimate goal of the artist(s) in making this creation was to pictorialize the dominant role of the mother in contemporary society and the current political scene, and to propagandize it in a public ritual space – the funerary shrine.

Because the family shrine, as the public “face” of the entire clan, must have been under critical public scrutiny during regular ritual festivals, it was absolutely vital that its every detail should be both ideologically and politically correct, although ideology and politics could conflict.⁸⁷ The decoration of the shrines, so dearly invested in, had to be flawless even to the most critical and informed eyes of the time, because, as we can easily imagine, any artistic mistakes could have disgraced the family, or even worse, totally ruined it. In other words, the design of the shrines had to comply both with the Confucian patriarchal ideology, in which the father must always remain as the head of the house, and with the contemporary political reality that the mother must act as a powerful backstage overseer. The artists' final solution, which most scholars have taken for granted, was indeed quite clever and innovative: in the Central scenes, while the father claimed his importance through his larger physical stature and direct engagement in the public space (audience hall), the smaller mother, who was confined to the second floor to meet the traditional Confucian ideology, nonetheless displayed her power via an indirect act, that is, by executing a commanding, that is to say, a dominant, all-encompassing gaze over everything before or below her.

But besides the historical and political meaning, this case study also aims at a methodological contribution: to open a door toward new questions and explorations for historians of Chinese art. Being more than a portrait, the female frontal view must be thought of as a “soft” motif instead of a “hard” one.⁸⁹ Whereas conventional “hard motifs” represent such intuitively sensible entities as gods, people, plants, animals, buildings, or events, which are topics of traditional iconographic study,⁹⁰ “soft motifs” visualize cognitive, ideological, and social relations between those entities, and wait to be further explored. For example, a lady's portrait is “hard,” but overseeing is “soft,” because while the former can be counted and measured, the latter finds its existence precisely in the intangible link and logic between the subject (overseer) and the object (overseen).

However, without an informed eye that knows how to connect the lady, the chariots, the building, the kitchen and so on, many such “soft” motifs as the feminine overseeing just fade before our eyes into oblivion. To reveal, or indeed, to excavate

⁸⁷ Wu Hung 1989, p. 183.

⁸⁸ It was modeled after ancestral temples; see Nagahirō Toshio 1961b; Croissant 1964, pp. 92–105; Wu Hung 1995, pp. 189–192; Nylan 2008a.

⁸⁹ My concepts of “hard” and “soft” are, though different from, inspired by a similar formulation of Michel Serres, who uses the former to denote objects for natural sciences (physical) and the latter for cultural studies (conceptual); see Serres 1997, pp. 72–73. To me, Serres's distinction between hard and soft is of no essential difference from Martin Heidegger's distinction between “mere” physical things and works of art, see Heidegger 1993.

⁹⁰ One of the most comprehensive such studies includes Finsterbusch 1966–2000.

such forgotten motifs, it is necessary to retrieve the original relational context that surrounds the lady's eyes and to relearn the old way of seeing. In this sense, the open eyes of the lofty lady in the Wu family shrines make us open ours.

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CHINESE ABSTRACT

居高臨下——東漢武氏祠堂正面女性形象再思

位於山東省嘉祥縣、建於東漢中后期的武氏祠堂是中國早期最著名的藝術傑作之一。儘管數百年來眾多學者對它進行了極為詳盡的研究，但是祠堂（或祠堂小龕）後壁“樓閣拜謁圖”中二樓上的正面女子形象尚有討論的餘地。本文從該女子的眼睛出發，論證此形象并非只是一个類型化的肖像（“硬母題”），而是表現母親“登樓觀望”（“軟母題”）。嘉祥藝術家把三個傳統題材——正面女主人賞樂、樓閣遠望、和西王母——熔冶為一，賦予了二樓正面女性特殊的權力，使之不僅成為畫面中主導的中央觀者，也可居高臨下、統觀周圍的景象，並在姿態、裝束上比擬神明。這一女性形象出現在墓地祠堂這一重要的公共禮儀空間之中，呼應了東漢時代、特別是二世紀盛行的皇太后臨朝聽政的政治現實。

關鍵詞：武氏祠、樓閣拜謁圖、母親、正面像、觀望、西王母

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