

Lecture Outline of Han Iconologies

1. The Han passion for representing clouds, breath, or vapor (qi) was rooted in the contemporary cosmology, in which the universe was thought to be filled and formed with such creative clouds. Perhaps it is more accurate to say the universe was the very origin of and source for such clouds. Therefore to represent (or rather to present) the clouds it is crucial to represent (or present) the universe.
2. This new interest might have been caused by two reasons. (1) The Western Han dynasty witnessed a rapid development in science and technology, in particular, astronomy (of which another version is astrology), optics, mechanics, medical science, geography, and mathematics. (2) An interest in the image of the world. Han subjects started to reach a total picture of the world by combining their empirical knowledge and metaphysical assumptions.
3. Cosmological programming in arts. This organic universe, whose harmony decided the fate of the dynasty, each family, and each individual, was the very concern of the artists. To visually render this harmonic picture was a means to assert and enact its proper function and, according to the principle of "heaven and people resonate with each other," the good order and prosperity of the human world. These pictures were not strictly "representation," but rather magic enactment of the world.
4. The Han artists made this invisible universe visible in many works they made, ranging from as large as cities, temples, and tombs, to as small as censers, mirrors and chessboards.
5. Another important tradition that was established in the Han was the interest of painting historical events (either actual or wishful), or historical illustrations. In the Han, the genre "Narrative painting" was not yet existent, and they fused different moments of a story into a single composition (e.g. Wu family shrine pictures; Jing Ke assassinating the First Emperor of Qin)
6. The funerary complex consisted of various monuments aboveground and the decorated burial underground, forming a unified visual program.