Assessing Scholarly Debates on the Significance of the Deity Xiwangmu in Han Dynasty Tomb Art

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Abstract

This paper discusses differing representations of Xiwangmu in Han art and texts. While these representations share some characteristics that indicate the same deity, Han artists' created a wide variety pictures of Xiwangmu in tomb murals. Many leading scholars have produced excellent pieces of scholarship regarding Xiwangmu as depicted in Han art. The Han period was a significant time for the transformation of Xiwangmu. Various descriptions of her were recorded in pre-Han texts, and she gradually became a deity representing *yin* during the Han dynasty. However, Han texts do not provide a clear explanation for this change. We believe that Han funerary art could offer evidence to fill this gap. Her images in tomb art are different in each area and each period. Scholars also interpret this archaeological evidence differently. Thus, the process of transformation may be difficult to unravel as there is no unified view concerning the image of Xiwangmu during the Han dynasty. We hope to offer insights regarding the evolution of Xiwangmu on the basis of scholarly debate.

Keywords: Xiwangmu, Chinese art history, Han dynasty, Chinese archaeology, Chinese religion

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1. Introduction

Xiwangmu 西王母, commonly known as the Queen Mother of the West in English, is a deity widely seen in Han art, especially in tomb murals. In text, she is somewhat different in each description. The textual representation that diverges from the rest the most might be Xiwangmu in *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas),[3] where she is depicted as having the form of a human with the tail of a leopard and the teeth of a tiger.[4] Obviously, this is some kind of a dangerous creature, not a beautiful fairy who resides in the west or the world of the dead and awaits our visit.

Wu Hung might be the most famous art historian who provides a perspective on Xiwangmu. He has produced much impressive work in the field of art history, such as his *Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West,* which has become the subject of much criticism. Jean James is another scholar who produced a lot of thoughtful work in art history. *An Iconographic Study of Xiwangmu during the Han Dynasty* is one of her major works. Paul R. Goldin also joins the debate. Even though his work is more in the field of intellectual history, his perspective regarding this matter is worth considering. He has written two thought-provoking articles regarding this topic, namely, *On the Meaning of the Name Xiwangmu, Spirit-Mother of the West* and *The Motif of the Woman in the Doorway and Related Imagery in Traditional Chinese Funerary Art.*

Before the Han dynasty, Xiwangmu was described in various texts. However, her appearance and functions were different in each. Fracasso proposes that descriptions of Xiwangmu in texts written between 500-300 BC can be categorized into three major traditions, of which *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Mu Tianzi Zhuan* 穆天子傳 (Tale of Mu, Son of Heaven) and *Shanhaijing* are the representatives. In *Zhuangzi*, Xiwangmu is a Daoist deity who has attained Dao since time immemorial; in *Mu Tianzi Zhuan*, Xiwangmu is a foreign ruler; in *Shanhaijing*, Xiwangmu is a feline demon (Fracasso 1988, 32). During the Han dynasty, Xiwangmu is mentioned in texts such as *Hanshu* 漢書 (Book of Han) which describes her as a deity who can reward believers and punish unbelievers (Cahill 1993, 23). However, there is no clear description of her appearance.

By the fifth or sixth century, descriptions of Xiwangmu had been standardized. She became an important deity in Daoism representing the ultimate *yin*[5] (Cahill 1993, 11-12). Though Han texts do not explicitly relate her to *yin*, there are traces of a connection between Xiwangmu and *yin* in Han funerary art. However, her characteristics and functions in Han art are very dynamic and have been interpreted differently by various scholars. Thus, Han funerary art could be an important bridge that links the pre-Han dynasty Xiwangmu as a tiger demon and Xiwangmu as the ultimate *yin* goddess in Daoism.

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[3] Fracasso states that passages in *Shanhaijing* are "the only ones where HWM exhibits monstrous features and is described as an evil demon." (Fracasso 1988, 8).

[4] 《山海經·西山經》：“西王母其狀如人，豹尾虎齒而善嘯，蓬髮戴勝,” (Chinese Text Project [n.d.-c]; Loewe's translation: "The form of the Queen Mother of the West is human, with the tail of a leopard and the teeth of a tiger. She is skilled at whistling; and over her disheveled hair she wears the *sheng*," (Loewe 1979, 90).

[5] *Yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 are the two primordial cosmic forces in the ancient Chinese philosophy. *Yin* is often associated with female and the dark while *yang* is often associated with male and the light. For more details about *yin-yang*, see Kohn 1998, 91-105.

2. On the name “Xiwangmu”

Bernhard Karlgren suggests that the name Xiwangmu in pre-Han sources refers to “Xi Wang Guo 西王國, a far-away western state, and at the same time the name of this state serves as a designation for its ruler. The character 母 is a short form of 畮 ‘acre, farmed field’. If this far-western state was located on the border of the ‘Floating Sands’ (the desert), it would be possible to call it ‘the Acres, farmed lands (the oasis) of the Western King’” (Karlgren 1946, 271). Karlgren bases his assumption only on *Erya* 爾雅.[6] His article is quite old and has already been criticized by other scholars. One piece of evidence that can be used to argue against his assumption is in *Zhuangzi*,[7] in which it is obvious that Xiwangmu is considered a deity along with Peng Zu 彭祖 (Fracasso 1988, 2-4). Since Karlgren believes that *Erya* could date back to the third century BC (Karlgren 1931, 49), he should have considered *Zhuangzi* which dates back to the same period.

According to Riccardo Fracasso, the story of King Mu visiting Xiwangmu on the top of Mt. Kunlun, the conversation between the two, and Xiwangmu visiting King Mu, are famous stories found in many texts such as *Mu Tianzi Zhuan*, *Zhushu Jinian* 竹書紀年 (Bamboo Annals), *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), and *Liezi* 列子. Fracasso suggests that the fact that King Mu was infatuated with Xiwangmu to the point that he neglected his duties indicates Xiwangmu is female (Fracasso 1988, 5-6).

Michael Loewe believes that *Zhuangzi* provides the earliest reference to Xiwangmu,[8] in which Xiwangmu is considered on par with male deities or legendary figures such as Fuxi 伏羲 and Peng Zu. He claims that the fact that Xiwangmu is included in the list of these immortals indicates an association with immortality, which later became a theme in Daoist literature (Loewe 1979, 89). Fracasso adds that Xiwangmu was first considered a patron of immortality in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 compiled during the Western Han.[9] He thinks 不死之药 “the drug of deathlessness” is evidence supporting his theory (Fracasso 1988, 7-8).

Fracasso traces the name Ximu 西母 back to oracle bones (Picture 1) where he found only one example, appearing in association with Dongmu 東母 (Eastern Mother). However, the evidence is insufficient; one shell is not enough to associate the Shang Dynasty Ximu with Eastern Zhou’s Xiwangmu, and the gulf of about a thousand years between the oracle bones and literary texts is also too wide. Fracasso proposes

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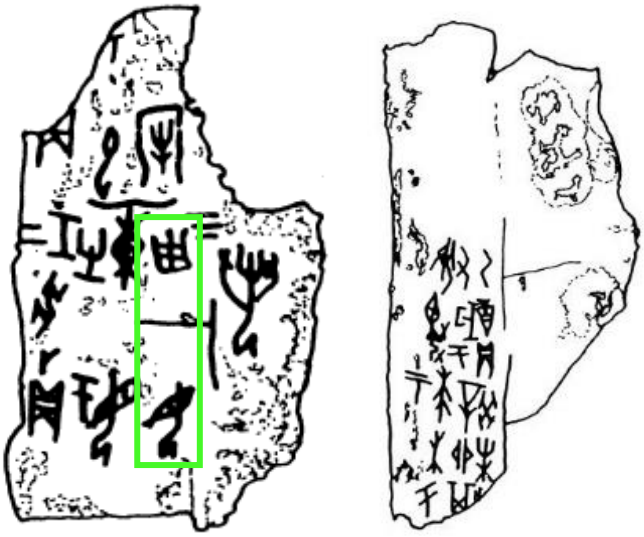
[6]《爾雅.釋地》：“觚竹，北戶，西王母，日下，謂之四荒.” (Chinese Text Project [n.d.-a]; Karlgren’s translation: “Guzhu, Beihu, Xiwangmu, Rixia, those are the four farthest wilds.” (Karlgren 1946, 270).

[7]《莊子. 內篇 .大宗師》：“西王母得之，坐乎少廣，莫知其始，莫知其終；彭祖得之，上及有虞，下及五伯；傅說得之，以相武丁，” (Chinese Text Project [n.d.-e]; Graham’s translation: “the Western Queen Mother who found it sits in Shao-guang; none knows their beginning, none knows their end. Peng Zu found it, who lived right back in the time of Shun right down to the Five Tyrants. Fu Yue found it, and used it to minister to Wu Ding,” (Graham 1989, 87).

[8] Loewe probably refers to the passage in footnote 4.

[9]《淮南子.覽冥訓》：“譬若羿請不死之藥於西王母，姮娥竊以奔月，悵然有喪，無以續之.” (Chinese Text Project [n.d.-b]; Loewe’s translation: “We may compare Yi’s request for the drug of deathlessness from the Queen Mother of the West and Heng'e’s theft and flight with it to the moon. He was saddened by the loss, having no means of replacing the drug,” (Loewe 1979, 94).

that Dongmu and Ximu might be interpreted as natural deities, associated with the sun (Dongmu) and the moon (Ximu) (Fracasso 1988, 19-31).



Picture 1: Ximu in an oracle bone (on the left) (Fracasso 1988, 21) [10]

Fracasso reads the whole text (left and right) as "Pyromantic crack-making on the day *ren-shen* (the 9th). Divination performed: *Yu*-sacrifice to the Eastern Mother and to the Western Mother. This will be found agreeable." (Fracasso 1988, 23).

Paul R. Goldin proposes that the name Xiwangmu should be translated as "Spirit-Mother of the West" instead of the common translation "Queen Mother of the West," because the term *wang* 王 does not mean "king or ruler" but *wangmu* refers specifically to the powerful spirit of a deceased paternal grandmother. The term 王 is glossed by Wang Shumin in his discussion of *Zhuangzi* as the equivalent of 旺/暀 "to flourish, to gleam." (Wang 1994, 111). Thus, Goldin assumes that if *wang* was rendered as gleaming spirits in the ancient language,[11] the name could be adjusted to something like "numinous mother." However, "spirit mother" better captures the overall perception of Xiwangmu (Goldin 2002, 83-85). Goldin's suggestion on the translation of the name Xiwangmu seems to be a better option than the common name "Queen Mother of the West," but it may be difficult to change a term that has already become well known.

[10] The character for xi 西 is on the upper part and the character for mu 母 is on the lower part highlighted in the green frame. For an oracle bone character dictionary, see Philology Hall 2021.

[11] Goldin possibly refers to the language used during the time between the Zhou and the Han dynasty.

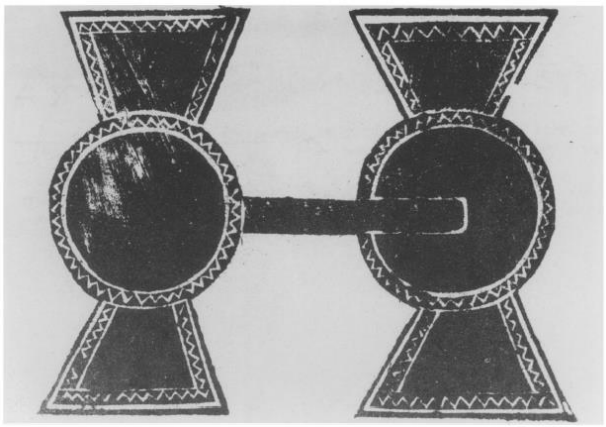
3. Xiwangmu in Chinese arts

This section reviews four scholars' opinions regarding Xiwangmu in Han arts. The four leading scholars are Wu Hung, Jean James, Lanying Tseng, and Paul R. Goldin. We choose seven tombs from three provinces, namely, Henan, Shandong, and Sichuan. This debate has two main contentions. The first is the role Xiwangmu played in Han funerary art. In other words, what kind of representations Han artists used when they painted her image. The second is whether Xiwangmu represents *yin* and Dongwanggong (commonly known as King Father of the East) represents *yang*. We will discuss these views subsequently.

One thing that should be noted is that the Han period spans over four hundred years, and covers a large area of land, thus representations of Xiwangmu varied significantly over time and by region. The Han dynasty is roughly divided into the Western Han (206 BC – AD 9) and the Eastern Han (AD 25–220). The tombs from Henan province discussed in this paper are dated to the Western Han, while the tombs from Shandong and Sichuan are dated to the Eastern Han.

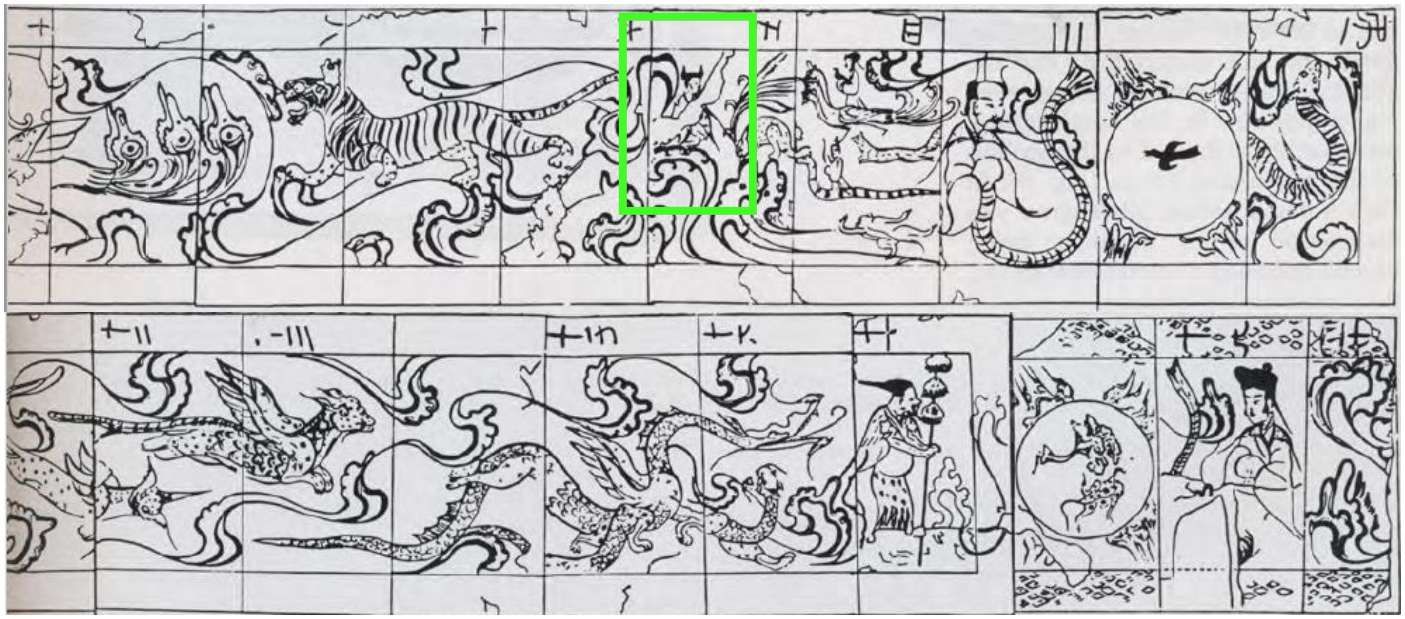
3.1 Xiwangmu mural from Bu Qianqiu 卜千秋 tomb

The first mural is from Bu Qianqiu tomb in Henan, dated to the first century AD (Picture 3). Xiwangmu is depicted with other mythical figures such as Fuxi next to the sun on the right. Other figures include mythical and real animals such as a toad, a fox, and a rabbit. There are also two people, one riding a snake, the other riding a three-headed bird. Wu Hung, Jean James, and Lanying Tseng all agree that the figure wearing a *sheng* 勝 (headgear) is Xiwangmu. Xiwangmu is described in *Shanhaijing* as wearing a *sheng,* [12] so this headgear is used by many scholars to identify Xiwangmu in funerary art, but other details about her in *Shanhaijing* are very different from these images. Debate centres on the human figures riding animals, which reflect the interpretation of Xiwangmu's role. There are two main interpretations regarding this topic.



Picture 2: *Sheng* 勝 (James 1995, 29)

[12] See footnote 2 for the passage in *Shanhaijing*.



Picture 3: a mural from Bu Qianqiu tomb, Henan (Huang 1977, 10-11)[13]

Picture 3.1: Xiwangmu

First, these two human figures could be worshippers of Xiwangmu, as proposed by Wu Hung. He uses this image as evidence to support his argument that Xiwangmu rose to the same deity status as Fuxi and

[13] Xiwangmu is highlighted in the green frame.

Nüwa 女媧 during the Western Han. This image depicts Xiwangmu as on a par with those two mythical figures, who had been central in funerary art before the Western Han. This composition presents Xiwangmu in the old framework where there were previously only Fuxi and Nüwa. Wu Hung claims that this concept would later influence the image of Xiwangmu in the Eastern Han, representing the spiritual journey to Xiwangmu's paradise (Wu 1987, 24). The images from tombs in Shandong and Sichuan are also used to support this assumption, which we will discuss in later sections.

Picture 4: Two human figures: one riding a snake (below),
and one riding a three-headed bird (above)

The second theory is that these two human figures represent the "souls" of the tomb occupant. Jean James and Lanying Tseng both support this argument. The two souls in Chinese beliefs are *hun* 魂 and *po* 魄. Basically, the *hun* soul will leave the body and go to paradise, while the *po* soul will remain with the body after death. This is a simplified explanation for the sake of convenience; the concept of these two souls is still controversial among scholars. Regarding this image, Jean James believes that the human figures represent the *hun* soul (James 1995, 22). Lanying Tseng also adds that the person holding a stick with three tassels standing closer to Xiwangmu is a spiritual guide who leads the "souls" of the tomb occupant (Tseng 2012, 121).

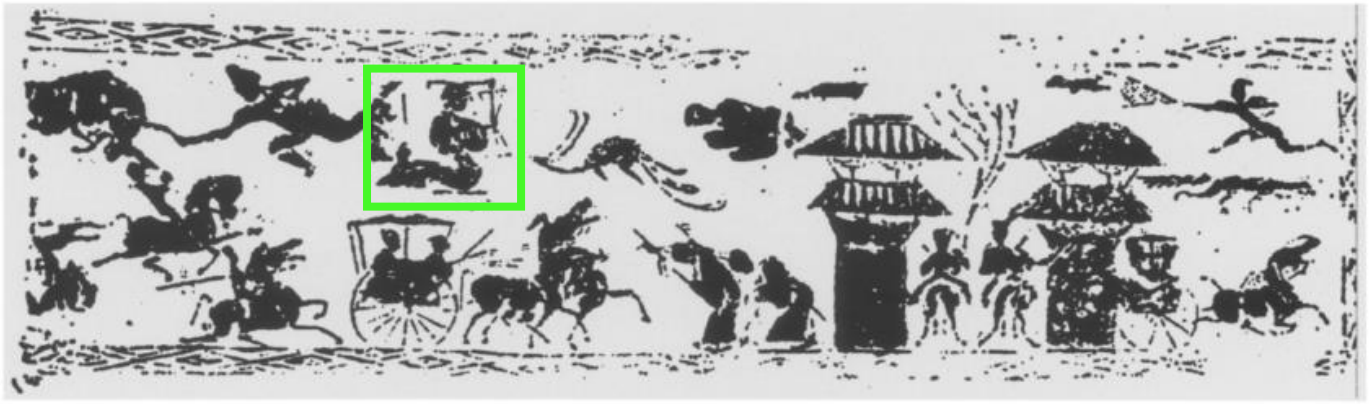
Picture 5: The spiritual guide proposed by Lanying Tseng

Based on these two interpretations, two conclusions can be reached. One is that if the two human figures are the tomb occupant's souls, it can be implied that Xiwangmu played a significant role in the process of transition between life and death, as Xiwangmu is awaiting the arrival of the soul of the deceased. However, the other conclusion is that if these two people are just worshippers of Xiwangmu, then her role in the afterlife remains unclear. The only thing that could be confirmed is that she had already become an important figure in funerary art during this period.

These two interpretations both have strong points and weak points. Wu Hung's assumption that Xiwangmu rose to the same status as Fuxi and Nüwa is well-grounded and can be obviously seen. However, regarding the two human figures (Picture 4) that Wu Hung interprets as worshippers, we are inclined toward Jean James that they represent the souls of Bu Qianqiu and his wife. The main difference between Wu Hung's and Jean James' interpretations is the two people in Picture 4 which is cropped from Picture 3 at the first row and the fourth column from the right. We agree with Jean James that these two human figures (Picture 4) are likely the tomb occupant and his wife rather than random worshippers. Bu Qianqiu possibly believed in Xiwangmu's power as recorded in the *Hanshu* [14] and planned to have this image in his tomb in order to protect and guide the couple's souls after their death.

[14] For discussion regarding Xiwangmu in the *Hanshu*, see Cahill 1993, 23.

3.2 Xiwangmu in pictorial brick from Xinye, Henan



Picture 6: pictorial brick from Xinye, Henan (143 BC – AD 9) (Zhao 1990, 503)[15]

Jean James uses an image on pictorial brick from Xinye, Henan (Picture 6) to support her argument that Xiwangmu played a role in the perception of death. James first divides the image into two pieces: above and below, by her own imaginary line. The upper part is interpreted as heaven, while the lower part is the human world. One important point related to the previous subsection is that there are depictions of Xiwangmu in the upper part, worshippers, and the "souls" of the deceased (James 1995, 21). Nevertheless, James interprets that the "soul" is *po* instead of *hun*, which means that this is a depiction of the afterlife within the tomb, because the *po* soul is supposed to remain with the body. It is only logical if the paradise where Xiwangmu resides is not in the sky or another dimension, but inside the tomb.

6.1 Xiwangmu

6.2 Two bowing people

6.3 Two people on horseback

Jean James proposes that the two bowing people (Picture 6.2) are the deceased's descendants, who are paying respect to Xiwangmu (Picture 6.1) in order to ask for her protection for the souls of the dead. James interprets that the *po* soul is located between the two towers (Picture 6.3), which signify the rank of the deceased when he was alive. There are other details irrelevant to the previous subsection, such as

[15] Xiwangmu is highlighted in the green frame.

hunting. James believes that hunting is an activity that the *po* soul does in the afterlife, which is represented by many people on horseback. She interprets the fox as a symbol of Xiwangmu's benevolence, because foxes are associated with good fortune. James cites *Hanshu* on the imperial edict to prevent comet-related disasters by praying to Xiwangmu, which signifies her benevolence (James 1995, 21). We think the two towers represent the imperial palace, which could be an indication of official rank as James has proposed. If what is on the picture is actually a depiction of hunting, then this means the tomb is a parallel world where the soul can enjoy the same activities as when it was alive.

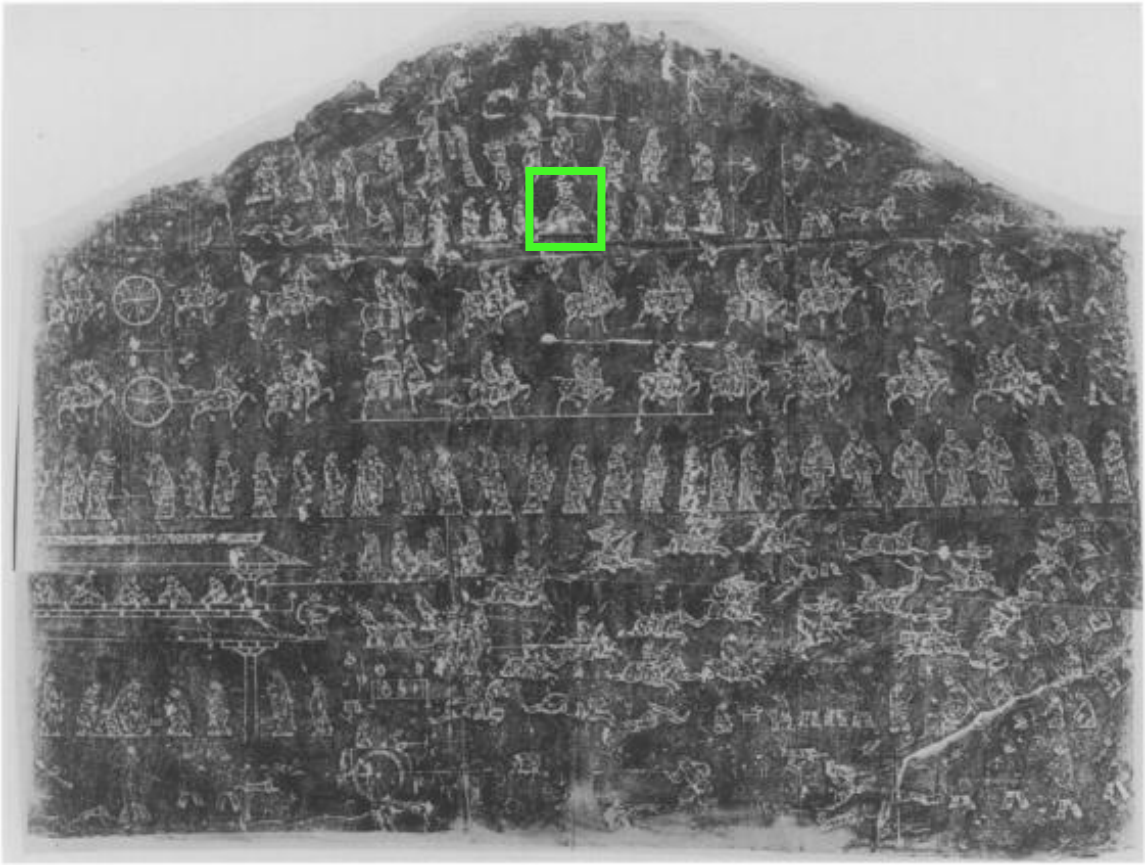
Picture 7: Two people bowing to the person on the chariot

This image seems to support Jean James' argument that Xiwangmu played a role in protecting the soul in the afterlife. However, our interpretation is different from hers regarding the two bowing people shown in Picture 7. We propose that they do not look like they are paying respect to Xiwangmu. It could be interpreted that they are bowing to the person on the chariot, indicating the two figures between the towers are soldiers. Thus, our interpretation is that this is the depiction of an event in history when regional warlords surrendered to the Han. If the tomb occupant was an official, then it is possible that he was proud to be part of the Han empire to the extent that he put this image in his tomb.

3.3 Xiwangmu in Shandong tombs

This subsection is a debate about whether Xiwangmu represents extreme *yin* or the balance between *yin* and *yang*. Wu Hung proposes that Xiwangmu and Dongwanggong represent "two opposing extremes," in which *yin* is associated with winter, and *yang* with summer while Jean James argues that Xiwangmu and Dongwanggong represent a "balance of autumn and spring" instead of *yin* and *yang*. This subsection will discuss this topic based on four pictures from two locations (Xiaotangshan 孝堂山 and Wu Liang Shrine 武梁祠). Shandong tombs all date back to the Eastern Han. In addition to the debate regarding *yin* and *yang*, the differences of Xiwangmu in the Eastern and Western Han art (such as Bu Qianqiu tomb) can also be seen from these four images. The main thrust of the debate centres on the interpretation of the West and

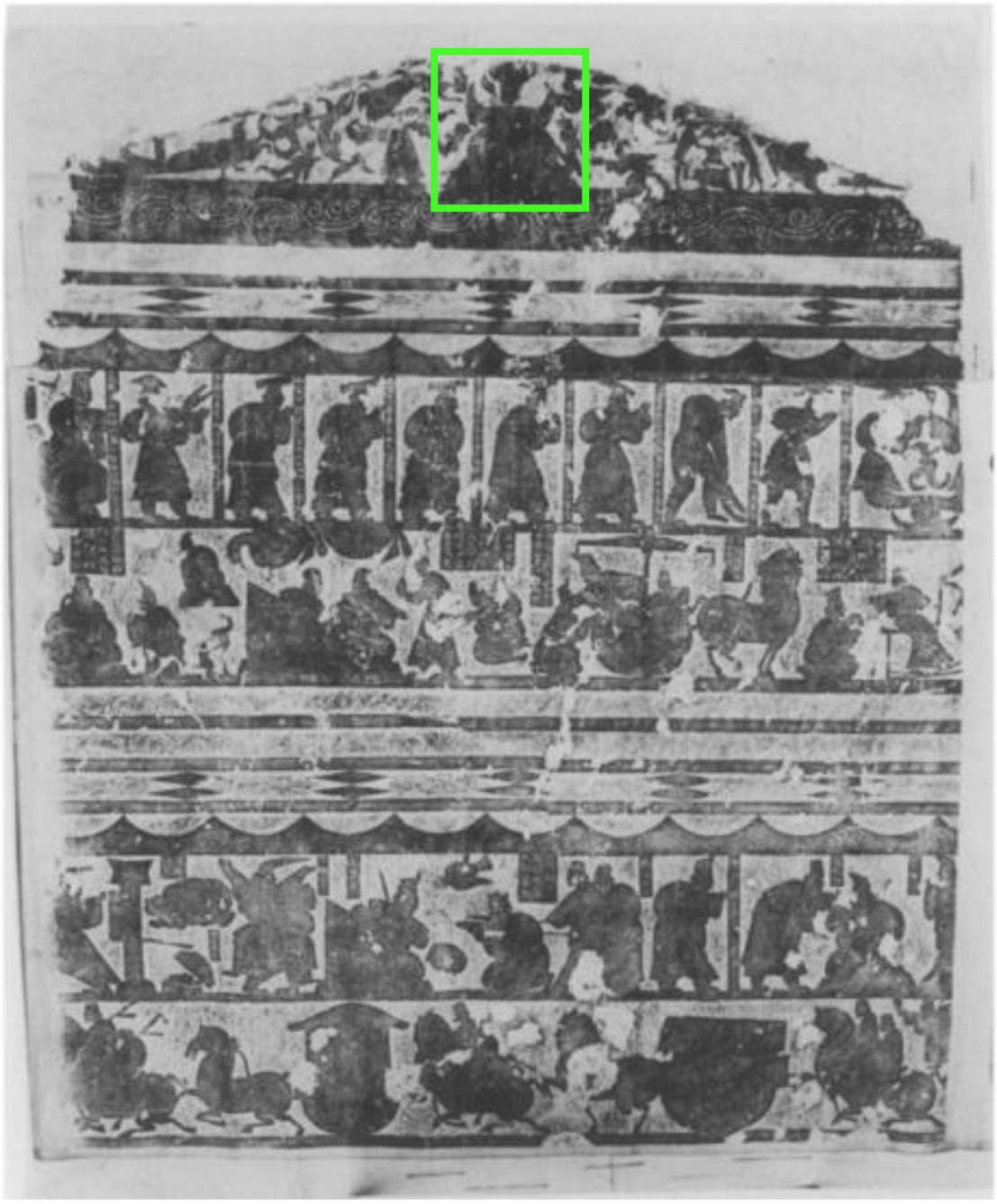
the East, in terms of direction. Wu Hung associates the West with *yin* and the East with *yang*, while Jean James associates the West with autumn and the East with spring.



Picture 8: *East* Wall, Xiaotangshan shrine, Shandong (Chavannes 1913, figures 47 and 50)[16]

[16] Xiwangmu is highlighted in the green frame. Whether this is the east or west wall is contested between various sources, which will be discussed later in this section.

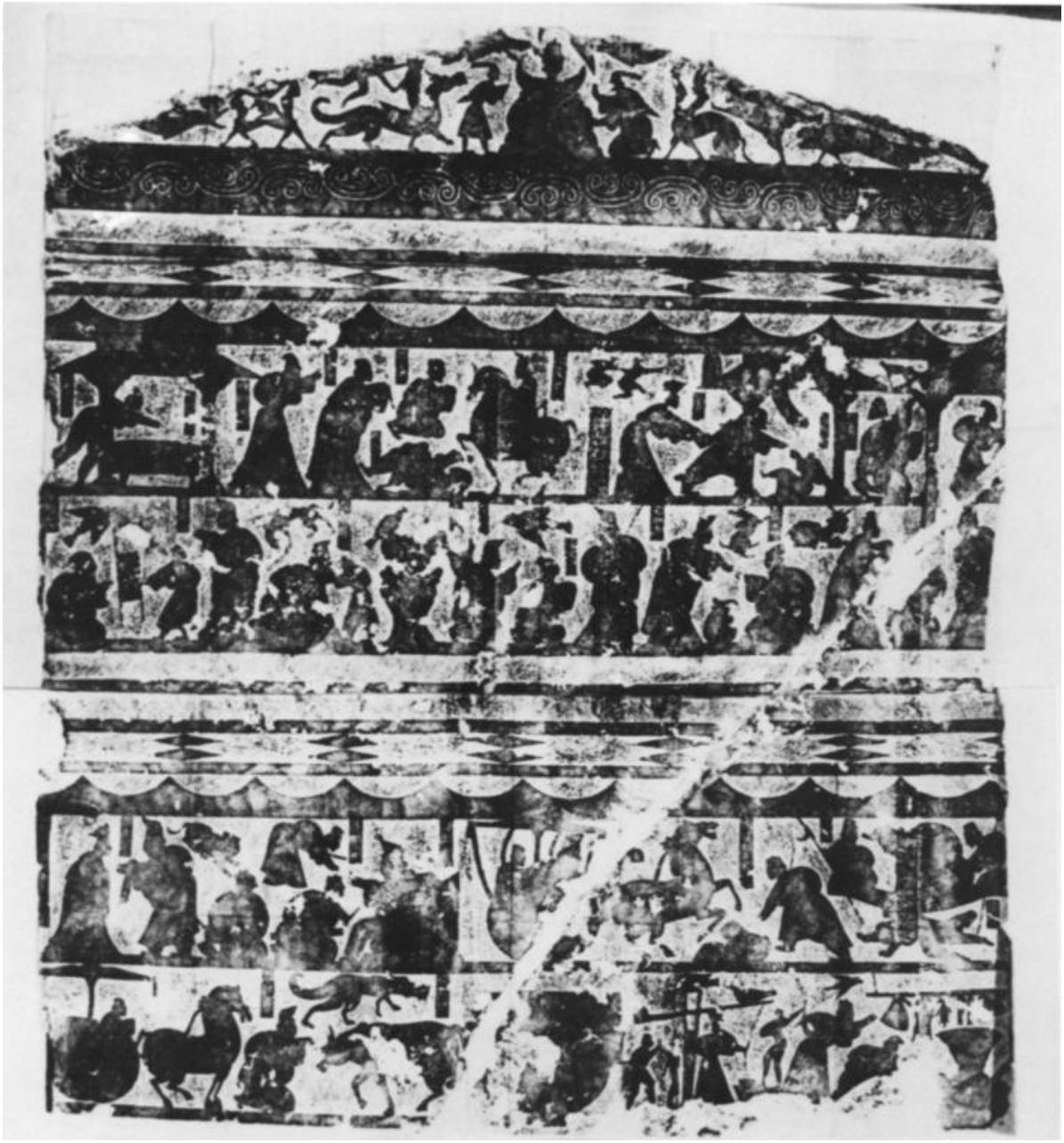
Picture 8.1: Xiwangmu



Picture 9: West wall of Wu Liang Shrine, Shandong (James, 1995, figure 14)[17]

[17] Xiwangmu is highlighted in the green frame.

Picture 9.1: Xiwangmu



Picture 10: East wall of Wu Liang Shrine (James 1988, figure 9)[18]

The mural of the Bu Qianqiu tomb (Western Han), which Wu Hung explains shows Xiwangmu's status becoming equal to other "cosmic figures," namely, Fuxi and Nüwa, because they are all in the same picture. However, Xiwangmu had not become the representative of *yin* yet. Fuxi and Nüwa were still representatives of *yang* and *yin*, indicated by the sun and the moon, respectively (Wu 1987, 24). Wu Hung proposes that Shandong's funerary art (Eastern Han) places Xiwangmu as the representative of *yin*, because all shrines in the area except Zhu Wei 朱鮪 have the symbol of *yin* on the west gable, and *yang* on the east gable. Wu

[18] Dongwanggong is at the top of the picture.

Hung concludes that the artists of the aforementioned tombs in Shandong associated *yin* with the West, and *yang* with the East, directionally. Then, Xiwangmu who is placed on the west wall of Wu Liang Shrine is, in turn, the representative of *yin*. Dongwanggong was a newly created deity representing *yang*. Thus, Fuxi and Nüwa were replaced by Dongwanggong and Xiwangmu. At this point, Fuxi and Nüwa were moved to join other ancient sovereigns on another wall in Wu Liang Shrine (Wu 1987, 24-25).

Wu Hung also discusses the development of the representative of *yang* as the counterpart of Xiwangmu (*yin*). The image in Xiaotangshang (which dates to before the Wu Liang Shrine) indicates Xiwangmu as the representative of *yin*, but Dongwanggong does not represent *yang*. An anthropomorphic Ji Star 極星 became the representative of *yang* during this period. Other tomb walls in Shandong during the first century also contain Ji Star as the representative of *yang*. Since Fuxi and Nüwa are not on those walls, Wu Hung concludes that Xiwangmu and Ji Star had already replaced Fuxi and Nüwa as "cosmic forces" in Shandong during the first century. Wu Hung explains that this change stems from "an increasing emphasis on geographical and astronomical symbolism," (Wu 1987, 25) in other words, Wu Hung suggests that at this point, deities associated with geographical directions or stars (such as Xiwangmu and Ji Star) replaced Fuxi and Nuwa as cosmic forces.

Wu Hung's explanation, which associates the West with *yin* based on the symbol of *yin* on the west gable alongside Xiwangmu, and his conclusion that Xiwangmu then became the representative of *yin*, are reasonable. However, only the Wu Liang Shrine and four other small shrines follow this pattern as Jean James has pointed out (James 1995, 25).

Wu Hung also proposes that "an increasing emphasis on geographical and astronomical symbolism" is the reason why Xiwangmu and Ji Star replaced Fuxi and Nüwa. We would like to propose another explanation that Sima Qian placed Fuxi in the sentence preceding Yao and Shun,[19] which implies that they are of equal status.[20] Thus, Fuxi and Nüwa, who always appear, changed from "cosmic figures" to "ancient sovereigns" during the Western Han. Xiwangmu, upgraded into the status of "cosmic figure", then replaced these two. Nevertheless, if there is *yin*, there must be *yang*; Dongwanggong also replaced Fuxi as *yang* to pair with Xiwangmu.

This could be argued using evidence from a tomb in Chongqing, Sichuan (Wu 1987, 25), which dates to the same period as the Shandong tombs (second century). Fuxi and Nüwa in the Sichuan tomb are still "cosmic figures" representing *yang* and *yin*. The reason for this is that Sichuan was very far from the capital, and therefore the changes to the ideal of Fuxi and Nüwa had not yet reached there.

Jean James proposes that Xiwangmu depicted in Shandong tombs is a deity with a dual function. On the one hand, she is a helper of those in need, and on the other, a cosmic figure. Jean James disagrees

[19] Yao and Shun were legendary ancient rulers; for more information, see Kern 2017, 23–61.

[20] 《史記 – 列傳 – 太史公自序》: "余聞之先人曰: 伏羲至純厚, 作易八卦。堯舜之盛, 尚書載之, 禮樂作焉." (Chinese Text Project [n.d.-d]; our translation: "I (Sima Qian) have heard from the previous generation that when Fu Xi reached purity and profoundness, he created the eight trigrams of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes). When Yao and Shun achieved prosperity, the *Shangshu* (Book of Documents) recorded it. Rituals and music were created during this time."

with Wu Hung's idea that Xiwangmu represents extreme *yin* on the Xiaotangshan *east* wall as opposed to extreme *yang* on the opposite wall. Instead, she believes that Xiwangmu represents the balance between *yin* and *yang*. The main reason for this is that Jean James believes that East and West are associated with spring and autumn. Spring and autumn represent balance between *yang* and *yin*, as opposed to winter (extreme *yin*) and summer (extreme *yang*). Jean James further explains that in all thirty tombs excavated in Shandong, only the Wu Liang shrine and four other tombs follow Wu Hung's pattern. She proposes that images of Xiwangmu in Shandong should rather be categorized into three patterns: Xiaotangshan, Wu Liang Shrine, and various other tombs (James 1995, 25-27).

Jean James' argues that the west is associated with autumn and the east with spring, or in her own words: "By locating the two deities on the west and east walls, which in Chinese cosmology are assigned to autumn and spring respectively, the seasons of the year when the two forces of *yin* and *yang* are in equilibrium at the equinoxes are indicated. The two deities represent not the extremes of *yin* in the winter, *yang* in the summer, but the balance of autumn and spring" (James 1995, 27). She does not explicitly cite sources for "Chinese cosmology" but it can be assumed that she bases her interpretation on the ideas in *Huainanzi*. Thus, the "Chinese cosmology" here possibly refers to the theory of five phases (*wuxing* 五行) in the *Huainanzi.*[21]

Regarding the Shandong funerary art, except for Xiaotangshan, we agree with Wu Hung's theory that Xiwangmu represents *yin* as opposed to *yang*. We also agree with Jean James about the function of Xiwangmu as a beneficent helper. However, for Xiaotangshan, there are inconsistencies concerning the location of Xiwangmu, whether she is on the east wall or the west wall. Jean James, Chavannes, and Harvard's Fine Arts Library[22] identify the location of Xiwangmu as the east wall, while Suhadolnik, Xin, and Academia Sinica[23] identify her location as the west wall. Wu Hung also refers to images of Xiaotangshan's walls from the same source as Jean James, but he does not explicitly identify the direction of Xiwangmu's wall. Although this fact can be checked by visiting the site, it is interesting that this important fact is inconsistent between otherwise reliable sources.

The location of Xiwangmu can lead to different interpretations following the relationship between the four directions and *yin-yang* in the *Huainanzi.*[24] Thus, we propose an interpretation based on whether Xiwangmu is on the east or west wall. If Xiwangmu is on the Xiaotangshan west wall, we would agree with Wu Hung that Xiwangmu became a cosmic figure representing *yin*. However, If Xiwangmu is on the Xiaotangshan east wall, this would suggest a different story, as the east is supposed to be associated with *yang* rather than *yin*. If so, we still agree with Wu Hung that Xiwangmu represents *yin* and Dongwanggong

[21] For English translation of the *Huainanzi*, see Liu 2010, 118.

[22] Jean James and Wu Hung cite Chavannes in their papers while Harvard University cites various sources (including Chinese sources), see James 1995, figure 12; Chavannes 1913, figures 47 and 50; Harvard University, Fine Arts Library 1900-2000.

[23] Suhadolnik cites Xin in her paper while Academia Sinica cites a few Chinese sources, see Suhadolnik 2011, 39; Xin 2000, 155; Academia Sinica Digital Resources [n.d.].

[24] For the relationship between the four directions and *yin-yang* in the *Huainanzi*, see Liu 2010, table 7 and table 8.

represents *yang* in the case of the Wu Liang Shrine; however, we would disagree with him regarding the case of Xiaotangshan (dated before Wu Liang Shrine). If Xiwangmu is not associated with *yin* here, she probably does not have the role of a cosmic figure; thus, we would also disagree with Jean James about her dual function (a cosmic figure and a beneficent helper) in the case of Xiaotangshan. Fuxi and Nüwa could have remained cosmic figures on the Xiaotangshan walls. In summary, if Xiwangmu is on the west wall as she is supposed to be, there is not much to discuss, but it would be surprising that many reliable sources provide incorrect information; If Xiwangmu is on the east wall, her role may not be the cosmic force as suggested by Wu Hung and Jean James. A conclusive answer cannot be reached until further investigation on the Xiaotangshan site to check this fact regarding the location of Xiwangmu.

3.4 Xiwangmu in Sichuan tombs

This subsection is a debate on whether Xiwangmu is a cosmic figure in Sichuan funerary art, similar to the subsection on Henan. The Sichuan tombs discussed in this paper date to the Eastern Han, which is the same time period as the Shandong tombs. Wu Hung and Jean James provide different explanations regarding Xiwangmu's status. This subsection will discuss two images from Sichuan tombs, which have very similar layouts despite being different pictures.

Wu Hung claims that Xiwangmu became a cosmic figure higher than *yin* and *yang*. She became an "absolute being" or "eternity." The main evidence that Wu Hung uses to support his argument is the image from Chengdu, Sichuan, which Xiwangmu is flanked by "two cosmic forces," namely, *yin* and *yang.* With this composition, Wu Hung interprets the status of Xiwangmu as higher than *yin* and *yang*, becoming "eternity" (Wu 1987, 27).

Picture 11: Xiwangmu and the sun and moon deities, Chengdu, Sichuan (2nd century) (Wu 1987, 27)[25]

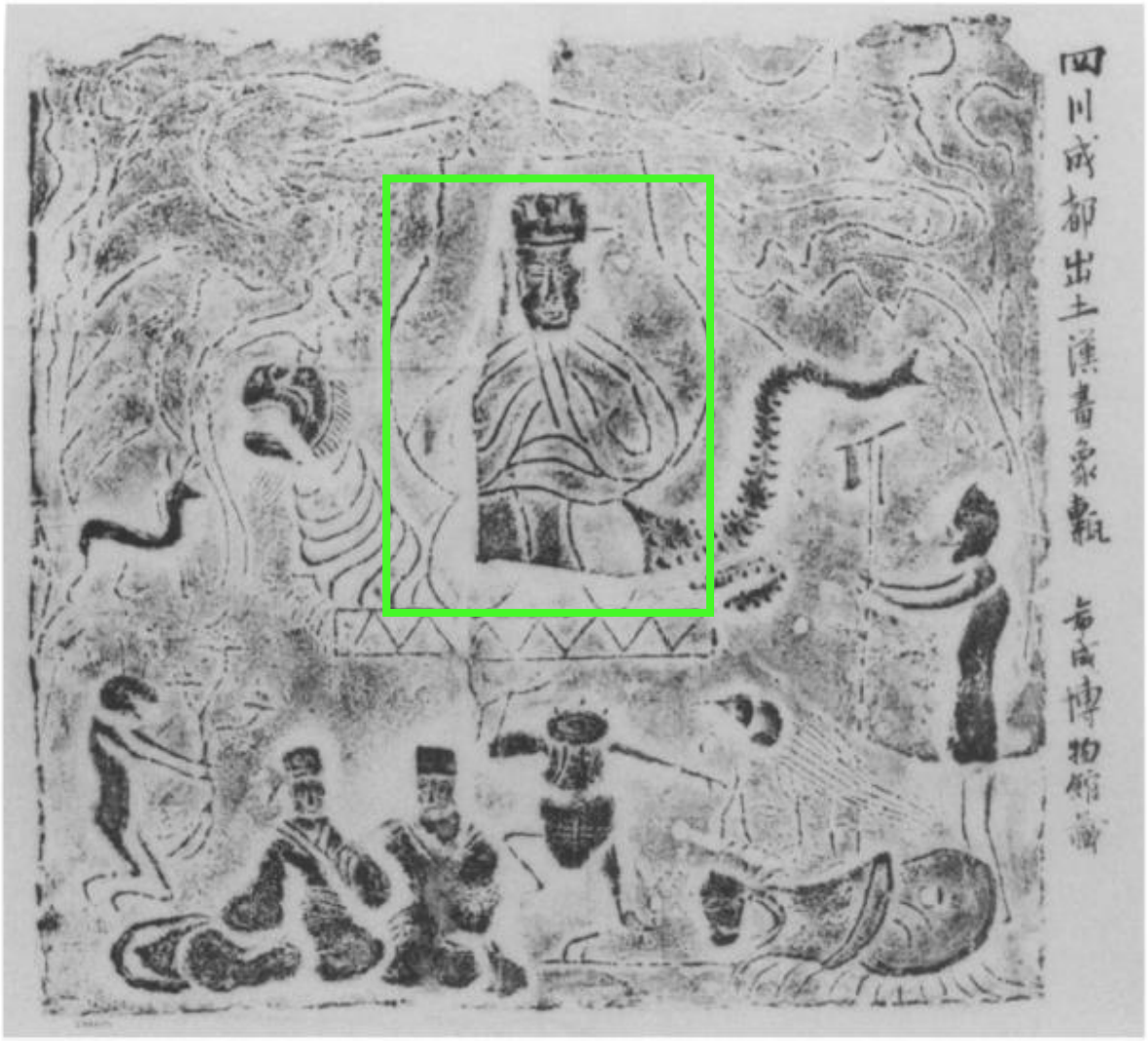
[25] Xiwangmu is highlighted in the green frame.

Fuxi and Nüwa remain cosmic forces in the image from Chongqing, Sichuan. Fuxi holds the sun, and Nüwa holds the moon, which obviously correspond to *yang* and *yin*, respectively, in Han cosmology. Inside the sun is a three-legged crow, and inside the moon is a toad. This is not the main point of the debate, but it is an image that Wu Hung mentions many times in his discussion of Sichuan funerary art.

Picture 12: Fuxi and Nüwa from a tomb in Chongqing, Sichuan (2nd century) (Wu 1987, 27)

Wu Hung's explanation for Xiwangmu being a "cosmic figure" is very brief; only that she is flanked by two cosmic forces, which are sun and moon deities. Based on Wu Hung's statement, it is also possible that even in other images in Sichuan without the sun and moon, *yin* and *yang* symbols could still be present in the composition of the image of Xiwangmu. A three-legged crow could represent the sun or *yang*, and a rabbit or a toad could represent the moon or *yin*.

Jean James argues that Xiwangmu in Sichuan art does not have the status of "cosmic figure" as she does in Shandong, but she is a deity who helps the *hun* soul on the journey to Heaven. Her evidence to support this claim is a pictorial tile from Chengdu, Sichuan. This image contains two souls paying respect to Xiwangmu and a descendant of these two bowing to them. Thus, she concludes that Xiwangmu is a deity who helps the soul of the deceased (James 1995, 37-38).



Picture 13: A pictorial tile from Chengdu, Sichuan (James 1995, 35).[26]

As opposed to Wu Hung who only provides a brief explanation, Jean James explains every detail in the image, such as a rabbit being Xiwangmu's companion and the idea that "a three-legged bird means three birds bringing food to Xiwangmu." The main point that Jean James uses to support her argument is the two people sitting and one bowing. She interprets the two sitting humans on the left as the souls of the deceased couple, while the one bowing on the right is their son, concluding that the son is praying to Xiwangmu to protect his parents. Based on this image, she assumes that Xiwangmu in Sichuan funerary art represents a deity who grants wishes to both the dead and the living, but has no "cosmic role" (James 1995, 37-38). One thing that we disagree with Jean James on is her interpretation of the three-legged bird. We think this is not an ordinary bird, but a crow representing the sun or *yang*, thus, Wu Hung's theory is more convincing, even though there is no symbol of *yin* and *yang* on each side of the image.

[26] Xiwangmu is highlighted in the green frame.

In summary, we agree with Wu Hung that Xiwangmu has the status of "cosmic figure," and became "eternity," but we also agree with Jean James that Xiwangmu was perceived as a deity who grants wishes to the dead and the living alike. The main point we disagree on is her interpretation of the three-legged bird. It is better to interpret it as the representative of the sun or *yang*, which supports Wu Hung's argument on the role of Xiwangmu as "cosmic figure." Therefore, our thought is Xiwangmu here has a dual function as a "cosmic figure" and a deity who grants wishes.

13.1 Rabbit representing the moon (*yin*)

13.2 Three-legged crow representing the sun (*yang*)

3.5 A female figure at the half-open gate with Xiwangmu in the same picture

The debate in this subsection is not concerned directly with the role of Xiwangmu, but the woman at the half-open door, who is in the same image as Xiwangmu. One view proposed by Lanying Tseng is that this girl is Xiwangmu's maid (Tseng 2012, 123-128), another view proposed by Paul R. Goldin is that this female figure represents a sexual fantasy, which was created to reflect sexual freedom liberated from traditions after death. He points out that her pose was not considered a norm according to the literati at the time (Goldin 2001, 539-548).

Here, we will discuss scholars' views concerning an image on a sarcophagus excavated in 1969, in Xinjin, Sichuan (Picture 14), which contains another interesting representation of Xiwangmu on the right. Lanying Tseng explains that the half-open door represents the transition between life and death, which has already been proposed by Wu Hung (Wu 1995, 248-258). Tseng believes that the woman at the gate is Xiwangmu's maid (Tseng 2012, 126), representing the blessing given by Xiwangmu. Regarding the identity of the female figure at the door, Goldin does not state explicitly, but only explains why the artists painted this image. He believes that she represents the space between the real world where sexual desires were prohibited, and the afterlife where "dreams of sexual liberation" could come true (Goldin 2001, 548). The main point that Goldin uses to support his argument is that a woman standing at a door was considered "licentious," because a woman during the time should keep herself inside the house at all time without

letting anyone see. The female figure, which breaks with tradition, is possibly a symbol of sexual invitation (Goldin 2001, 540).

Picture 14: image on a sarcophagus from Xinjin, Sichuan (2nd century) (Gao 1987, 60)[27]

We think Lanying Tseng's interpretation of the female figure at the half-open gate as Xiwangmu's maid is unlikely, because if so, then she would have been located closer to Xiwangmu. In addition, as Goldin has pointed out, she does not look like a well-behaved woman according to the norms of the time. Goldin raises a very thought-provoking point: it seems that all the images of women at gates in Han art look erotic. We think she is a deity who guards the gate to Heaven, so she could be mysterious and seductive at the same time. According to Tseng, the tomb occupant was a man named Wang Hui (Tseng 2012, 128). The role of this woman at the half-open door is probably to welcome the deceased, help him overcome his fears of the afterlife, and lead him to his sexual fantasy as Goldin has suggested.

Picture 15: a sarcophagus from Changshunpo, Nanxi, Sichuan (second half of the 2nd century) (Gong 1998, figure 375)[28]

[27] Xiwangmu is highlighted in the green frame.

[28] Another example of the depiction of Xiwangmu together with a girl at a half-open door; Xiwangmu is highlighted in the green frame. However, this image is not the focus of the debate among scholars discussed in this paper.

4. Conclusion

There are many other scholars who have produced scholarship on Xiwangmu; we have chosen only a few who are considered leaders in the field. Interpreting images is very important for the understanding of Han perceptions of life and death. Even though scholars have different opinions on the details, they agree on at least one thing: Xiwangmu played a vital role in Han funerary art.

During the Han dynasty, representations of Xiwangmu transformed. However, known Han texts do not provide enough information regarding this transformation. Han funerary art serves as a complement to textual evidence for investigating the evolution of her representation. Her image is under discussion and changes every time a new tomb is excavated. She was perceived differently in each period, each region, and by each scholar. She could certainly be both regarded as a generous deity who assists the soul of the dead through a journey to heaven, and a "cosmic figure" representing *yin* during the Han. Though interpretations of Xiwangmu differ between scholars, it is clear that she gradually transformed into a central figure during the Han dynasty. Thus, Han funerary art could lead to better understanding of the development of Xiwangmu's image from a tiger demon to an important Daoist goddess representing the ultimate *yin* which, in turn, would contribute to a better understanding of Han beliefs.

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