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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Center and periphery: The expansion and metamorphosis of Han culture
—A case study of stone carvings in No. 1 Mahao cave tomb, Leshan, Sichuan Province, China

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Abstract The cave reliefs of Mahao in Leshan City, Sichuan Province, have been world-famous for containing an early Buddhist statue. Yet, little attention has been paid to the co-existent stone reliefs sharing the tomb cave and the cultural significance thereof. Through the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC–220 AD), the ancient Ba and Shu civilizations in what is Sichuan today gradually merged into the Chinese civilization, of which the Han civilization is the main body, on the one hand, the Han civilization exerted a strong influence on its south-western counterparts, as is revealed by the stone reliefs in the tomb cave; on the other hand, the south-western region was apparently assimilated into the Chinese civilization while concurrently absorbing elements of even farther civilizations (e.g., those in Central and South Asia). The early image of Buddha appeared against a wide cultural background.

Keywords Han culture, stone carvings, early Buddhist statues, Silk Road, cultural exchanges between China and other countries

摘要 四川乐山麻浩一号崖墓因其门楣上方雕刻的一尊早期佛像而著名于世，但是却很少有人注意到与其共存的其它墓内画像石刻所形成的墓内空间及其文化内涵。随着秦、汉以来巴蜀文化逐渐融入到中华文化体系，一方面，以此墓中的画像石刻为例，可以观察到以中原汉文化为中心的主体文化的强烈影响，另一方面，也可以发现处在这一中心边缘地带的西南地区在接受主体汉文化影响的同时，也吸纳了来

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自更为边远地区（如中亚与南亚）的诸多文化因素，早期佛像在此墓中的出现并非偶然，而是有其更为宽广的文化背景。

关键词　汉文化，画像石刻，早期佛像，丝绸之路，中外文化交流

Among the rock tombs of Mahao in Leshan, Sichuan, No.1 Rock Tomb, which was first discovered in the 1940s, has been well known in the archeological community, especially for those engaged in the studies of the earliest Buddhist sculptures in China, for it is where scholars found a Buddhist image engraved on the upper part of the lintel of the tomb.[1] The appearance of such a Buddhist image apparently has its historical backgrounds, and to unveil its mystic masks the author is confronted with a series of perplexities. This Buddhist image certainly did not appear without any origin. However, what is the relationship between this image and other vestiges and relics? How should we consider the burial background under which this Buddhist statute, the one with strongest Buddhist features, existed? Moreover, what is the relationship between the culture presented by this Buddhist image and the dominant Han culture on the Central Plains? This paper, based on a careful analysis of the published research data on the subject as well as the first-hand data collected through field study of the author himself, aims to answer these questions.

1 Cave reliefs and their arrangement inside No.1 Cave Tomb of Mahao

In order to answer the questions mentioned above, it is necessary to have a clear picture of the cave reliefs and their arrangement inside No. 1 Cave Tomb of Mahao.

Richard Edwards, the American archeologist who explored No.1 Cave Tomb of Mahao in 1949 and 1950, published his paper “The Cave Reliefs at Mahao” in 1954. In his articles Edwards definitely recognized the seated figure carved on the lintel in the back chamber of the cave tomb as a Buddhist image. In addition, he offered an overall introduction of the other cave reliefs.[2] Edwards’ discussion covers some particular cave relieves. His introduction also includes the outer appearance of the cave tomb, Heavenly Horse, the Buddhist image, the Monsters, the Fisherman, and the one reflecting Jin Ke’s Assassination of the King of Qin. The author also gives an estimate of the date when these reliefs came into being.

[1] The following articles are the earlier researches about the Buddhist statue in the tomb: Li Fuhua and Tao Mingkuan, 1957; Yang Hong, 1962, 1963; Yu Weichao, 1980; Wu Hong, 2005, 292–293.

[2] Edwards, No. 1, 5–28; No. 2, 103–129, translated by Qin Xuesheng.

Edwards' paper is the first serious research on cave reliefs of Mahao, and some of his findings are still worth of our attention today. I will discuss his perspectives later on in this paper.

In 1955, *A Selection of Cave Reliefs of Han Dynasty in Sichuan*, edited by Wen You and based on his collection of these pictures for many years in Sichuan, was published. In the section entitled "Sacrifice Chamber" are a group of rubbings of the cave reliefs of Mahao, including Picture C: A photo of the Sacrifice Chamber in Cave Tomb of Mahao; Picture 52: (A rubbing of) Angling; Picture 53: (A rubbing of) pulling a car; Picture 54: (A rubbing of) a draught horse; Picture 55: (A rubbing of) "Jin Ke's Assassination of the King of Qin"; Picture 56: (A rubbing of) roseflinch; Picture 57: (A rubbing of) eaves tile; Picture 58: (A rubbing of) eaves tile; and Picture 59: (A rubbing of) a seated figure.[3] In his book, Wen introduces and explains each of these pictures. For example, for the picture entitled "The Sacrifice Chamber in the Cave Tomb of Leshan," Wen explains that "it is the sacrifice chamber in the Cave Tomb at Mahao, Leshan, and as the tomb is located in a relatively low area, there is often water accumulating in the tomb."[4] The lower part of tomb space, as shown by the photo, is submerged into the water, and only the upper part of the tomb space including the lintel can be seen. Clearly, researchers at that time could not have investigated the inside space of the tomb or recorded the reliefs on the walls one by one.

What is worth mentioning is that Wen, even at that time, had noticed that the seated figure might be a Buddhist one. He named it "a straightly seated figure" out of cautiousness, and explained that "it is a straightly seated figure, with his right hand open, and his left hand holding something like a ribbon. What is most unique is that there is a circle around his head, resembling the light at the back of the head of a Buddha. When I first got a rubbing of the carved figure back in 1947, I suspected that it was added after the Han Dynasty. Not until I had an opportunity to visit the cave tomb at Mahao later was I sure about its being carved at the same time as the other reliefs inside of the tomb." Wen went on to point out that "besides this at Mahao, similar cave reliefs have also been discovered in a big cave at Shiziwan. The Shiziwan reliefs must have been carved at about the same historical time. I put the "seated figure at Mahao" in the collection of this book, hoping interested archeologists will do more investigation on it."[5] It turned out that the "big cave at Shiziwan" was also a rock cave tomb with similar structures and styles as well as cave reliefs of

[3] Wen You, 1955.
[4] Ibid., Fig. C.
[5] Ibid., Fig. 59.

Buddhist images on the lintel.[6] It can be reasonably concluded that Wen is the first scholar to claim that there are more than one Buddhist images in the cave tombs in the Leshan area.

Both Edwards and Wen talked about the cave reliefs at Mahao, but neither of their papers has scientifically recorded the contents and arrangement of these cave reliefs. Instead of giving the readers a clear picture of the cave reliefs and their relations with each other, these two papers only offer fragmental information. This defect remained unsolved until 1985 when The Bureau of Culture of Leshan organized a complete investigation of the cave tomb at Mahao and indexed all the cave reliefs one by one and published a figure of surface measurement of the No.1 Cave Tomb at Mahao as well. This work has for the first time enabled researchers to have an overview of the arrangement of the cave reliefs at Mahao.[7]

Based on the archeological report of Mahao and my own on-the-spot investigation, a general description of the structure of No. 1 Cave Tomb at Mahao and the arrangement of the cave reliefs can be offered as the followings.

The tome is carved into the red sand rocks on the cliff. The process of constructing can be described as: First, a short tomb passage was carved into the cliff, and a smooth vertical cliff surface was made at the end of the passage. Upon that surface a tomb door was carved, and then, by further carving into the surface horizontally, the tomb space was constructed. The tomb space was divided into a front section and a back one; the front section, facing westward, was divided by two vertical rock columns into three doors facing the passage. The floor of the front section is an irregular rectangular. Because it was carved at different time, the front section might have witnessed a period of expansion, as is shown by the back wall which, instead of standing on a straight line, twists inward at some point, making it looking like “bevel-shaped,” as stated in the archeological report of Mahao. Into this back wall were three parallel tomb chambers, which have been designated as North Back Chamber, Middle Back Chamber and South Back Chamber respectively. A side wall of South Back Chamber was broken by another cave tomb constructed beside it, now indexed as IM5. (See Fig. 1)

[6] Ibid., Fig. 63.
[7] Leshan shi wenhua ju, 1990.

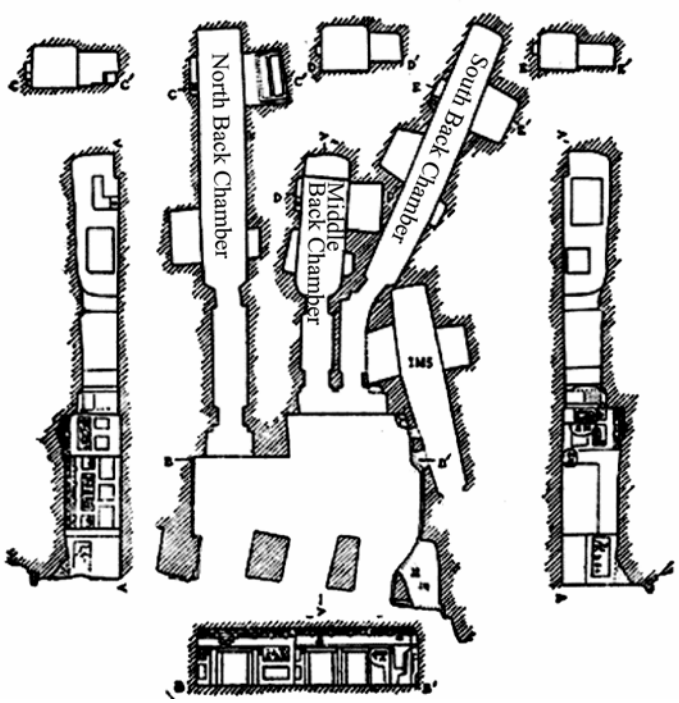


Fig. 1 The Mahao tomb in Leshan laid out horizontally

Source: Leshanshi wenhua ju: Sichuan Leshan Mahao yihao yamu.

The structure of No.1 Cave Tomb at Mahao, with a front section horizontally laid out in front of the tomb chambers, is very much similar to that of No. 5 tomb at Shaogou, Luoyang of the Han Dynasty. Both "have a rectangular spacious front hall, and tomb chambers laid out vertically to the front hall, which we call Horizontal Hall."[8] The appearance of these type of spacious front halls in tombs of the Han Dynasty has something to do with the custom of setting up the alter of sacrifice to the dead in the front section of the tomb space. "The spacious front hall and its increased height enabled people to offer sacrifices to the dead and conduct relative rituals,"[9] and it makes much sense for Wen You to call the front hall of No.1 Cave Tomb at Mahao "The Sacrifice Chamber," meaning a place to offer sacrifices to the dead.

There are 27 cave reliefs in the Tomb. 10 of them were carved on the gate, and all the rest were on the walls of the front hall. On the north wall are 3 carvings, and there are 10 and 4 carvings on the east and west walls respectively. The

[8] Luoyang qu kaogu fajue dui, 1959, 79–82.
[9] Ibid., 241.

archeological report of Mahao indexes all the cave reliefs and has enabled us to recapture the original tomb space decorated with these carvings. Based on the specific location of each relief, the author re-divides the cave reliefs as the followings.

1.1 Carvings on the tomb gate

Carvings on the tomb gate include the carvings on the lintel and those on the gate itself. The carvings on the lintel can be further divided into two parts, the upper part and the lower part. On the upper part of the lintel are components of pseudo-wooden structures, including eaves tiles and rafters. Between the two rafters of the neighboring gates are a row of grids, in which are reliefs of auspicious animals such as birds, double beasts, head of beast, fish, double birds, a crouched animal, bird, and a rodent animal. On the lower part of the lintel are tiers of brackets, or *dougong*, with its upper end sustaining the eaves. Below the brackets are some ring-shaped ornaments. At the left end of the brackets is a beast with a long tail. Below san bracket (*sandou*, 散斗) and lu bracket (*ludou*, 櫨斗) are plates (minban, 皿板). Round columns sustain lu brackets. At both sides of the second lintel are carvings of kneeled sheeps, couples kissing and hugging on the back of some sheep, and three entertainers who are playing flute, drum, and strings.

On the upper half of lintel of the tomb gate, there are two sets of reliefs. The first set is located at the north of the tomb gate, above the two center pillars and is opposite to North Back Chamber. On the one side of the first set, one man shouldering objects stands; one man kneeled down in the middle; another man sits on his knee in a room, carrying an infant. According to the opinions of Li Fuhua and Cao Dan, this set of reliefs is named *Heliang songbie tu* (Farewell at the riverside).[10] On the other side of the first set, a large tree is carved. There is a man and a single-wheel cart under the tree. These reliefs have been seriously dilapidated. Also according to Li and Cao's opinions, this set of reliefs is named *Dong Yong shifu gushi tu* (The story of Dong Yong serving his father).

The second set of reliefs is located above the center pillar of the tomb gate. On the left side, one man facing the door is in a gesture of welcoming guests. This sculpture is named *Yingye tu* (The picture of welcoming guests). On the right side is an old woman, holding a stick with her right hand and pointing front with her left hand. There are several people kneeling down at the right side of this set of sculpture. It is named *Kaifeng tu* (The picture of the southern breeze).

[10] Li Fuhua, Cao Dan, 1956.

1.2 Carvings on the Northern Wall of Front Hall

The Northern Wall of Front Hall can also be divided into lintel, the upper and lower halves of threshold. On the lintel, components of pseudo-wooden structures are carved. On the top of the lintel are eaves tile and plate tile; below is the carving of small eaves; further down are square rafters with carvings of net print and coin print inside of the rafters. An animal, probably a rabbit, is carved in the middle square. The reliefs of the threshold are formed by three pictures of "Jin Ke's assassination of the King of Qin." Its detailed content will be introduced later in this article.

1.3 Carvings on the Eastern Wall of Front Hall

The Eastern Wall (Back Wall) of Front Hall is also the front wall of the Back Chamber. The reliefs of this area are the richest in the tomb. According to the arrangement of the tomb, we can also divide it into lintel and threshold. The lintel can further be divided into upper and lower parts. The carvings of the upper part are mainly components of pseudo-wooden structures such as eaves tile, plate tile, and rafters. From the north to the south, one can divide the lower part of lintel into three sets. Two of them are in opposite to North Back Chamber and Middle Back Chamber, and the third one is at the side of South Back Chamber. Between the two timbers of the upper lintel above North Back Chamber, a bird in a flying gesture and the head of a dragon are carved. Between the timbers of the upper lintel above Middle Back Chamber, there is a famous seated sculpture of Buddha. Above South Back Chamber is a relief of fishing. A man with his hair worn in a coil by a scarf bares his feet and kneels down with one leg. He holds a fishing tackle and is in a gesture of angling.

We can roughly divide the threshold reliefs of the East Wall into three sets. The first set includes two pictures and is located at both sides of the hallway of North Back Chamber. On the left side, a man with a strange, tall cap wears long robe and carries a stick which has three layers of ornaments. He also holds a purse with his right hand (Fig.2).

Fig. 2 A man with a symbolic stick and a purse carved on the gate of Mahao No. 1 tomb
Source: Leshanshi wenhua ju: Sichuan Leshan Mahao yihao yamu.

On the right side is the sculpture of *Xiwangmu ji xianren liu bo tu* (the Queen Mother of the West and six immortals playing chess). The Queen Mother of the West sits in the middle of the sculpture with feathers on her shoulders. Two immortals are playing chess behind her. Above her stand the rabbit pounding medicine and the toad holding a box. There are also maids at her sides.

The second set is located at one side of Middle Back Chamber with only one picture which is named *Wan ma tu* (pulling horses). The left side of this picture is manger, and the horse is carved in the middle. A man carved on the right side is pulling the horse (Fig.3).

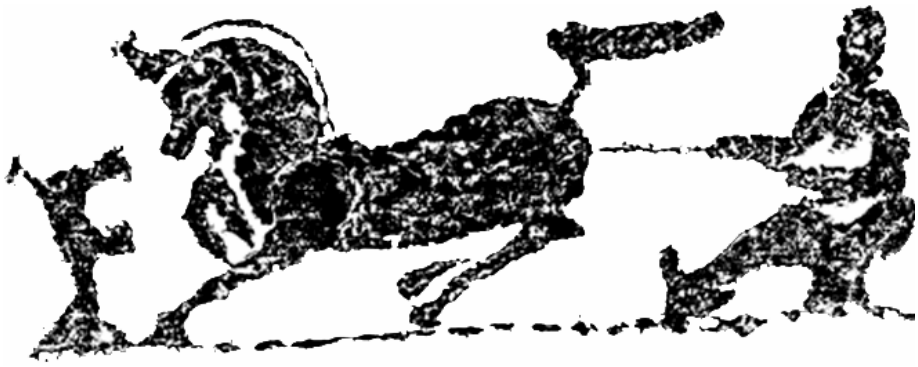


Fig. 3 A man pulling a horse carved on Mahao No. 1 tomb
Source: Wen You: Sichuan Handai huaxiang xuanji.

The last set also has one picture only and is located outside of the hallway of South Back Chamber. This relief is an unfinished carving of a house.

1.4 Carvings on the Southern Wall of Front Hall

The basic structure of the reliefs on the Southern Wall of Front Hall is similar with those on other walls. However, the carvings on this Southern Wall are not finished; most surface of the wall is not engraved. The finished reliefs are on the lintel and threshold. The components of pseudo-wooden structures are engraved on the lintel as in other chambers. Above the lower threshold is a picture of door guards. A man dressed in short clothing and head scarf holds a dustpan with his right hand, and a broom in his left hand. Right next to the right side of this picture is another picture which is named *Wan nian tu* (pulling the cart) in the archeological report. In this picture, two people are riding a cart and another person is pulling the cart forward on the right side of the cart.

Observing many archeological traits, Cave No.1 at Mahao underwent construction for more than once. As mentioned above, the Eastern Wall (Back Wall) of Front Hall appears to have a shift of curved shape which apparently is not part of the builders' original plan. In addition, most surfaces of the Southern Wall of Front Hall and the wall next to the door of South Back Chamber do not have any relief. The relief of *Ju zhai tu* (residence picture) engraved on the wall outside of the hallway of South Back Chamber is also unfinished. The components of pseudo-wooden structures carved on the southern part of Front Hall are not on one line with those on the northern part. Therefore, it is possible that among the three chambers behind Front Hall, North Back Chamber was constructed first, Middle Back Chamber second, and South Back Chamber last. Accordingly, the archeological report assumes: "the construction of the cave started from the north to south and was stopped carelessly for unknown reasons." The author believes that from the shift on the Back Wall of the cave, the construction of the cave can be separated into two periods: the construction of North Back Chamber is the first period, and the construction of Middle Back Chamber and South Back Chamber is the second period.

2 The relation between the cave reliefs and the tomb space

As far as the subjects and themes of these cave reliefs are concerned, what can be most obviously identified are those components of pseudo-wooden structures, then come those reliefs reflecting historical events like "Jin Ke's Assassination of the King of Qin," and those propitious animals protecting the spirits of the dead. There are other reliefs that can only be understood in a more specific

spatial context, such as the Buddhist statue that was originally named as "A Seated Figure," and those portraying a Heavenly Horse or a monster. All the reliefs mentioned above are not unsystematically arranged, spatially or thematically. A careful study reveals the interrelationships of these cave reliefs and the meaningful underground tomb space they have holistically formed.

With respect to the distribution of reliefs in the tomb space, there are some rock coffins, also of the Han Dynasty and excavated in Sichuan area, which have tomb space with reliefs most similar to those at Mahao. Let us look at some of them:

The first example is a rock tomb (sarcophagus) excavated at Shuanghe, Peishan, within 100 km from Mahao.[11] The reliefs here are carved on both sides of the stone coffin. One side of the coffin wall is divided into two layers by a long horizontally arranged lintel. There is a column in the middle of the lower layer, and standing near the stone carvings erected to imply the entrance of the tomb are two men, holding something in their hands. Also close to the column in the middle are two propitious creatures, a unicorn and a phoenix with its wings spread out, both facing the column. These reliefs together construct the starting point of the rock tomb reliefs as a whole. On the upper layer is a tree, with a winged horse standing on one side and a man kneeling down on the other. In front of the man is something in the shape of a bucket, and judging from the man's extending hands it can be concluded that he is giving water to the horse. Two other men stand laterally, and both wear high cap. One of them is holding an object of stick shape; the other one folds his hands in a bow and is in waiting. Behind these two men is a auspicious beast with wings. Here, the winged horse and the auspicious beast face the same direction. The person kneeling down and the other two men face the auspicious beast and are in a gesture of welcoming. In the center of the relief at another side of the stone coffin is the Queen Mother of the West, sitting on the Dragon and Tiger Seat. She wears ornaments on her head and folds her hands in front of her belly. There are one three-foot bird and one nine-tail fox at her left side, and a toad at her right side. Two other immortals sit on their legs without any clothes and seem to play chess. The hair of both immortals is worn in double coils. There is one more man standing with straight back, and holding an object with both hands. Above his left side is a pot (See Fig. 4).

[11] Gao Wen, 1987, Fig. 25, Fig. 26.

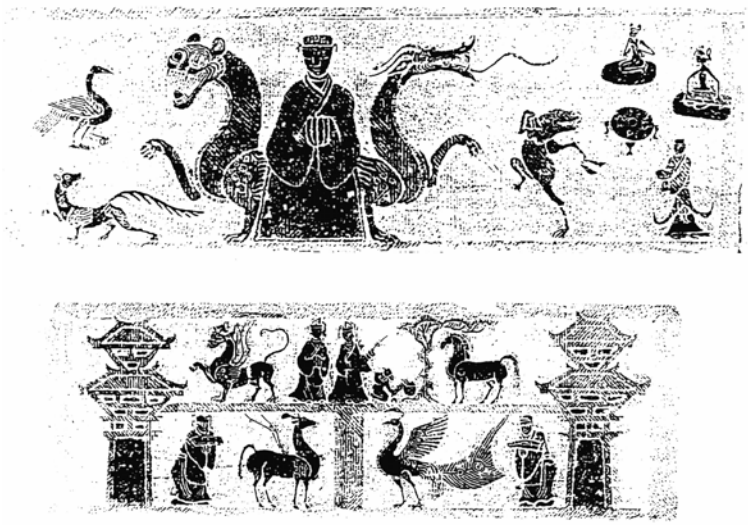


Fig. 4 Images on the stone coffin unearthed in Peng county of Sichuan
Source: Gao Wen: Sichuan Handai huaxiang shi.

Except the components of pseudo-wooden structures, the tomb gate of Cave No. 1 does not have clear stone carvings erected in front of the tomb. However, the pillars erected in front of the tomb door are equal with the stone carvings on the rock coffin.[12] As those carvings on the stone coffin, the reliefs of the tomb gate in No. 1 Tomb include auspicious animals, entertainers who are playing flutes, drums, and string instruments, and also people who are in a gesture of welcoming guests. As a whole, these reliefs can be regarded as the beginning point of the tomb space.

According to the general rule of Han portrait arrangements, the lower part of the double stone carvings on the rock coffin in Shuanghe, Pengshan, can be regarded as the beginning point of the burial space; the reliefs of the upper part and another side of the rock coffin can be seen as the continuation of this starting point. The contents and styles of the main reliefs on the rock coffin and the reliefs on the Eastern Wall (Back Wall) of Front Wall at Tomb No. 1 of Mahao are worth of careful comparison. For example, on the upper reliefs of Shuanghe stone coffin stands a horse and its herdsman under a tree. On the Eastern Wall of Front Hall of Tomb No. 1 of Mahao is also a relief: *Wan ma tu* (pulling the

[12] Wen You. Fig. B. Wen points out in the explanation of this figure: "This is part of Leshan cliff tomb. It is located about ten miles away from Gao Bei Men. Inside of the door was double *que* 闕 carved. Such carvings usually exist in larger cliff tombs. However, the carvings of Leshan tomb preserved better than others."

horses), showing a horse and its herdsman. On the Shuanghe stone coffin, there is a man wearing tall cap, holding a stick and in a gesture of welcoming guests. The same image also appears on the Eastern Wall of Front Hall at Tomb No. 1 of Mahao. Moreover, the reliefs of Shuanghe coffin have the sculpture of the Queen Mother of the West and the three-foot bird, nine-tail fox, toad, and six immortals surround her. In the Tomb No.1 of Mahao, except the sculpture of the Queen Mother of the West is replaced by a seated Buddhist sculpture, the rabbit pounding medicine, the toad holding a box and six immortals playing chess are the same.

Furthermore, the reliefs of No. 2 stone coffin unearthed at the Changshun Hill of Nanxi County, Sichuan Province, provide another example of comparison. On this stone coffin the stone carvings (*que*) are engraved on one side of the head of the coffin. On the other side of the head is the relief of auspicious birds (such a situation is more common on the stone relief in Sichuan of the Eastern Han Dynasty.)[13] Other reliefs spread out successively: in the middle of coffin body is a small door of the shape of the character, mountain. The door is half opened, and inside of the door stands a man. Taken this door as the boundary line, on the right side of the door are four men standing. Two of them are facing each other and another two men stand next to them. In front of these four men is an auspicious animal with wings standing. (It seems to be a horse with wings) A man holding a stick sits on the ground in front of the auspicious animal, facing the door. On the left side of the door stands a man facing the Queen Mother of the West. He seems to be informing the Queen Mother the coming of visitors as she is sitting on the Dragon Tiger Seat. Above this set of reliefs is an ornament. On its right side there are the companions of the Queen Mother, such as the toad and nine-tail fox; on the left side of the ornament, five immortals are sitting on the ground while another two immortals are playing chess on their left side (See Fig. 5).

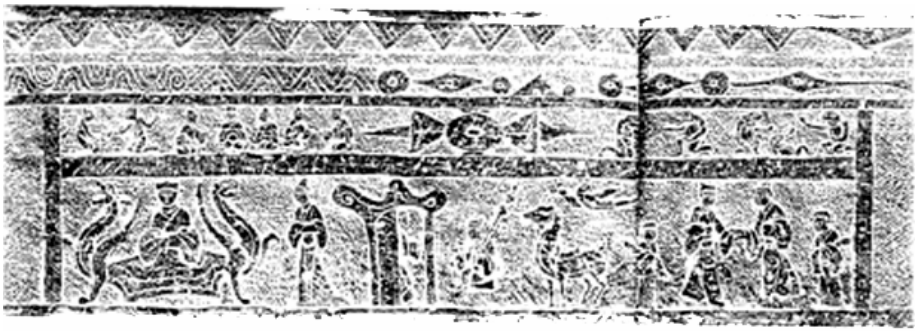


Fig. 5 Images on a stone coffin unearthed in Changshunpo of Sichuan

Source: Gao Wen: Sichuan Handai huaxiang shi.

[13] The data of reliefs of Eastern Han stone coffin in Sichuan comes from Gao Wen, 1987; Luo Erhu, 2002.

Analyzing and contrasting these reliefs on the stone coffins and the reliefs of Tomb No. 1 of Mahao, we discover that although there are changes of the composition style, the basic formation of the space of these coffins and tombs are still the same. Considering the above discussions together, common characteristics can be concluded as the followings.

First, except the components of pseudo-wooden structures, double stone carvings or door pillars are usually the beginning point of burial space. Second, the immortals who welcome or instruct the death often appear at this point, and they are usually accompanied by divine animals and plants symbolizing the auspicious signs. Third, horses of special appearance and carrying the death to heaven often appear at the gate of the Queen Mother's palace; fourth, the master who directs the immortals usually appear outside of the Queen Mother's residence and holds a stick. Last, the Queen Mother of the West and her divine companions such as three-foot birds, nine-tail fox, toad, rabbit, and six immortals becomes the main symbol of the divine realm. Under certain specific circumstances, the statue of the Queen Mother can also be replaced by Buddhist statue as what occurs in the No.1 Tomb of Mahao.

If the above analysis is correct, these reliefs on the stone coffins and those reliefs in Mahao Cave constitute a complete underworld space independently. These reliefs reflect the process and passages taken by the deaths in order to become immortals. The first part is the entrance of the divine realm which is usually presented by double stone carvings or door pillars at the tomb door. Moreover, the door is also a copy of the door of the halls on earth. The second part is the door of the divine realm guarded by the Queen Mother of the West. In Cave Tomb No.1 of Mahao, the entrance of the Back Chamber presents such a door. When the deaths are sent to the Back Chamber by passing Front Hall through the tomb door, their connections with the living are completely cut off, and the immortals will direct them into the divine realm. Because of the limitation of space on the stone coffins, these images are presented by more condensed style.

The copper ornament on the stone coffin unearthed in an Eastern Han tomb in Wushan, Chongqing is another archeological object which shows that this underworld space is represented by the condensed style of reliefs. The shape of this kind of copper ornament is round, and there are double stone carvings, human images, and auspicious animals on them. Most of these ornaments carry the title "the Heavenly Door" which is guarded by auspicious animals such as phoenix and unicorns (See Fig. 6).[14]

[14] Zhongguo shekeyuan kaogu yanjiushuo Sanxia gongzuodui, 1998.

Fig.6 The animal ornaments of the heavenly gate unearthed in Wushan
Source: Zhongguo shekeyuan kaogu yanjiusuo Sanxia gongzuodui: “Chongqing Wushan xian donghan liujin tong paishi de faxian yu yanjiu.”

Quiet a few scholars have done primitive researches on these copper ornaments and consider that the implications of these decorations are related to the ancient idea of becoming immortals.[15] Zhang Xunliao combines the documents of Daoism and further argues that "[these ornaments] are first formed by the early *Tianshi dao* (Sect of Celestial Master). Later on, the sect spread to Sichuan and become *Wudoumi dao* (Sect of Five Decalitre of Rice). The copper ornaments were products of Daoist divine system after the Queen Mother of the West consolidated her status in Daoism. Therefore, [the copper ornaments] are the religious remains of the early *Wudoumi dao*."[16] Scrutinizing the portraits on these copper ornaments carefully, the main cultural implications which appear in the caves and on the coffins mentioned above still exist no matter how the size of the space changes: on these copper ornaments, the entrance of the divine realm presented by the double stone carvings is clearly labeled as the "Heavenly Door," and auspicious animals such as rosefinches guard the "Heavenly Door;" the Queen Mother of the West sits on the Dragon Tiger Seat and surrounds by divine spirits such as feather men, nine-tail fox, toads and divine plants. She is the first person whom the deaths must visit after entering the "Heavenly Door." This kind of copper ornament intentionally emphasizes the relation between the Queen Mother of the West and the "Heavenly Door." Its structure significance of combination has many in common with the reliefs in Cave Tomb No. 1 of Mahao and the reliefs on other Eastern Han stone coffins in Sichuan. Comparing with the Eastern Han reliefs mentioned above, the only difference is that in Cave Tomb No. 1 of Mahao the image of the Queen Mother of the West is replaced by a Buddhist statute of typical Indian Buddhist style. We will discuss the reasons that cause such a change later in this article.

3 Expansion and metamorphosis: The new elements on the reliefs

From the above analysis, we can see that the burial structure and the contents of the cave reliefs in Cave Tomb No. 1 of Mahao are apparently influenced by the dominant Han culture of the Central Plain. Reliefs such as "Jin Ke's assassination of the King of Qin," "farewell at the river side," and "the story of Dong Yong serving his father" obviously result from the expansion of the Central Plain Culture to the frontier regions. In the periods of the Han and Jin dynasties, as people emigrated from the Central Plain to Ba and Shu regions (Sichuan) and Ba Shu people's acceptance of Han culture increased, it was inevitable that these

[15] Zhao Dianzeng, Yuan Shuguang, 1990.
[16] Zhang Xunliao, 2002, 146–168.

subjects would appear in the cave tombs of Leshan region where the economy was the most developed in Sichuan. Wang Mingke has a discussion on the issue of "the periphery of China." He argues that the image which Chinese have about the people living in the periphery indicates the boundary of Chinese culture: on the one hand, it explains that outside of this edge, why these people living in the periphery were not considered as Chinese; on the other hand, it interprets the quality of a "Chinese." In order to attain cultural identity, people living in the periphery often need to define their "race boundary" by emphasizing or forsaking certain cultural characteristics.[17] After the Ba Shu region was included in the system of the Central Plain Culture, it became more necessary for the Ba Shu people to express their submission to the central government and admiration of the Central Plain Culture by adopting such approaches. Moreover, such approaches can further distinguish the "race boundary" between the Ba Shu people and other contemporary races that the Han historian, Sima Qian, called the "barbarians of the South West." The appearance of the cave reliefs with strong cultural traits of the Central Plain in Leshan Cave Tomb can be taken as the cultural marks which the Ba Shu people stamped on themselves as they were accepting the influence of the Central Plain Culture.

However, because of the strong vitality of the Ba Shu cultures itself, many regional characteristics remained as the Ba Shu cultures were integrated into the system of the Central Plain Culture. Therefore, a Han cultural style with strong features of Ba Shu cultures was formed in the Ba Shu regions—such is the "metamorphosis" of Han Culture which this article will discuss below. This phenomenon is fully presented by the cave reliefs in Cave Tomb No.1 of Mahao.

Wu Hong has once made an interpretation on the arrangements and features of the cave reliefs in Cave Tomb No.1 of Mahao:

> Carved on the wall of Mahao Cave tomb, the components of pseudo-wooden structures implies the living space (or courtyard) of the deaths. People and scenes of the reliefs are located respectively on the lintel above the gate and the four walls below. Historical stories and human images such as "Jin Ke's assassination of the King of Qin," "The Shihuang Emperor's search of precious vessel," the heavenly horse, and the doormen are carved between the pillars on the four walls. The dragon head and the Buddhist statue are carved on the lintel above the gate. Such arrangements can be compared with the scenes of the famous Wuliang Tomb. In the tomb, Three Emperors and Five Kings, Sages and Filial Sons, and historical stories such as "Jin Ke's assassination of the King of Qin" are engraved on the lower wall. The King Father of the East, the Queen Mother of the West,

[17] Wen Minke, 2006, 204.

> and the divine beasts, divine birds, and monsters which guarded the King and Queen are decorations placed above the scenes of historical stories.[18]

The author agrees with Wu Hong that the components of pseudo-wooden structures imply the living space of the deaths. However, when taking the Wuliang Tomb as a comparison, one can observe the difference between these two. While the reliefs of the Wuliang Tomb presents the characteristics of Han culture in the Central Plain, the characteristic of Han culture in the Cave Tomb No. 1 of Mahao appears to have more features of indigenous Ba Shu cultures. The scenes with strongest flavor of Han culture—the scenes of the Three Emperors and the Five Kings, the Sages and the Filial Sons—did not appear in Cave Tomb No. 1 of Mahao. This situation implies that the themes which present the highest moral standards of Confucianism and can imprint strongest impression of ancient sages in the audience's mind did not attract any attention from people living in the south west regions (where was far from the center of Confucian thoughts). Although the scene of "Jin Ke's assassination of the King of Qin" appears in both Cave Tomb of Mahao and the Wuliang Tomb, the styles of presentation are very different.

The story of "Jin Ke's assassination of the King of Qin" is presented by three scenes in Cave Tomb No.1 of Mahao. The first scene shows that both the King and his subordinate raised their right hands and are in a retreating gesture. In the second scene, the image of the King is carved on the left side, and a round pillar is engraved in the middle. The King broke his sleeve and raised the sword, avoiding Jin Ke around the pillar. His broken sleeve is still twining on the pillar. On the right side of the scene is Jin Ke. In the third scene, Qin Wuyang kneels down with his head touching the ground; the box in which lies Fan Yuqi's head is in front of Qin's head (See Fig. 7).

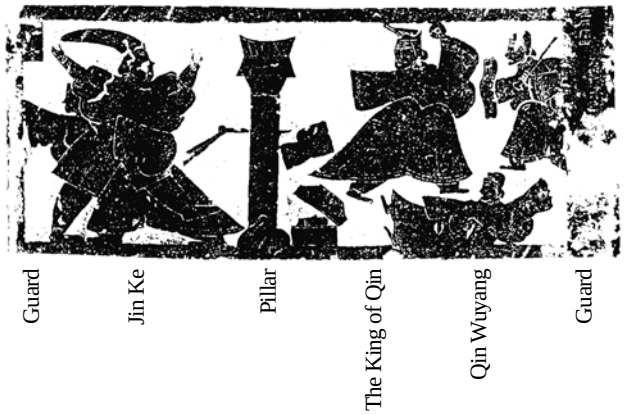
Fig. 7 Jin Ke's assassination of the King of Qin carved in Mahao No. 1 Tomb
Source: Wen You: Sichuan Handai huaxiang xuanji.

The American scholar, R. Edwards, has noticed the subtle difference of presentation style between the reliefs in Cave Tomb No. 1 of Mahao and the

[18] Wu Hong, 2005, 293.

Wuliang Tomb: “On the relief of the Wuliang Tomb, the King is holding a jade dagger; a side of Fan Yuqi’s head is revealed beneath the half-opened box lid. Besides the pillar, there is a segment of clothing that is torn from the King in his struggling. A dagger pierced through the wooden pillar. Jin Ke’s standing hair on his head reveals his rage. All these scenes are attached with precise word explanation” (See Fig. 8).

(1)



(2)

(3)

(4)

Fig. 8 Jin Ke's assassination of the King of Qin carved in Wu's temple
Source: Wu Hong: *Wuliangci: Zhongguo gudai huaxiang yishu de sixiangxing*, Fig.148.

Edwards compares the difference of style between these two: "In the south, however, in a perhaps not so remote Leshan of Sichuan that certainly at times had contact with far corners of the earth and was doubtless not as orthodox as a region near the birth-place of Confucius, flesh and blood and movement had their meaning. Sometimes the figures appear crude to us today, but this may not have been true of their original state. At any rate, movement and life is present in this series of onrushing diagonals that are not mere symbols but plastic forms in high relief which registers a complete version of flight—here toward the mouth of the cave. This is modified only by what is left behind: the cut sleeve that whirls around the pillar; the forcibly detained Jin Ke; the cringing form of Qin Wuyang; the un-moved guard who must continue to block the outer entrance, or perhaps the hall below, as the master flees to inner apartments….How different the movement of flight in the Sichuan relief."[19] Edwards reaches the following conclusion: "The Shandong carver presents the story in the timeless realm of an idea. It is not a question of an orderly temporal sequence, but rather of presenting all the facts so that in the world of the mind the tale is complete. In the [Leshan] Mahao Cave Tomb we are dealing with a point in time and with figures that lived in that temporal world, sculptured with an unmistakable sense of form, weight and earthly existence."[20]

Comparable to "Jin Ke's Assassination of the King of Qin" carved in the Cave Tomb of Mahao is the carvings reflecting the same topic inside a stone tomb discovered in Haining, in the coastal province of Zhejiang. The story of Jin Ke's assassination is also carved on the second layer which locates at the north of a

[19] Edwards, 68.
[20] Ibid., 29–70.

small room in the tomb. “The carving exaggerates the moment when the struggle reaches the boiling point: Jin Ke staged the King but failed; he is held at the waist by the guards but still struggles to move forward. The King got rid of the broken sleeve, escaping around the pillar. The palace physician, Xia Wuqie, raises the medicine bag and is going to throw it at Jin Ke. The box in which the head of Fan Yuqi is placed is on the ground and Qin Wuyang is lying prostrate on the floor” (See Fig. 9).[21]

Fig. 9 Jin Ke’s assassination of the King of Qin carved in a stone tomb in Haining of Zhejiang
Source: Yue Fengxia, Liu Xingzhen: “Zhejiang Haining Chang’an zhen huaxiang shi.”

The scene shows that everyone is rushing to the same direction. It is so full of motion that the audience can experience that startling moment in history. The presentation style and the basic composition of the carving are highly similar to the relief in Tomb No. 1 of Mahao.

Here, we can observe an implication with highly significant meanings. Locating in the central region of Han culture and influenced by orthodox Confucian ideas, the relief in the Wuliang Tomb emphasizes the historical event itself and presents an orthodox conception of history. In order to convey this conception to the audience, the relief in the Wuliang Tomb even has precise explanation in writing next to the reliefs. However, in the peripheral Sichuan and Zhejiang, only rough frames of historical event is maintained. The vivid moments of history are what the reliefs intend to emphasize. Artists in the peripheral regions seem to have the imagination not confined by history and exaggerated artistic style. After studying the stone tomb reliefs of the Eastern Han Dynasty unearthed in Sichuan, Wu Hong also observes that “The presentation of Confucian stories in Sichuan reliefs is comparatively simpler. Not only the images of the reliefs were modified, the contents were also changed. These changes explain that on the one hand, Sichuan artists not only absorbed some popular themes of burial arts in the Han Dynasty; on the other hand, they did so in order to pander to the special requests of sponsors and the unique values

[21] Yue Fengxia, Liu Xinzhen, 1984, 47–53, Fig. 4.

of local culture."[22]

In addition, large amount of contents not seen in the Han culture of the Central Plain appear on the reliefs of Tomb No.1 of Mahao. For example, the stone carving on the lintel of the tomb gate has the scene in which two people are hugging and kissing on the kneeling sheep. This relief is considered as one with sexual meanings and is named *Mi xi tu* (the scene of secret game.) It is often compared with another relief which is named *Ye he tu* (intercourse in the field.)[23] On the lintel of tomb door in the cave tomb No. M550 of Pengshan, Sichuan, there is also one stone sculpture of a couple kissing and hugging each other.[24] A side relief on a stone tome unearthed in Taojiaguai of Yingjing County, Sichuan, in 1972, also has a scene of a couple sitting on their legs and hugging each other.[25] Wu Hong inclines to relate this kind of relief with "the art of inner chamber" of *Wudoumi dao*, the early Daoism sect in Sichuan region.[26] In the orthodox Han culture of the Central Plain, it is difficult to find such scenes.

A relief is carved at the left side of the hallway in North Back chamber of the Eastern wall in Cave Tomb No. 1 of Mahao. The relief is a man wearing a high cap and long robe and holding a stick which has three layers of ornaments in his left hand. In his right hand is a small bag. Both Tang Changshou and Wu Hong believe that this man is a Daoist priest. Tang Changshou quotes the records from "Fengshan shu" of *Shiji* and *Hanwudi neizhuan* to prove that the Daoist priests who are the medium between human and deities all hold sticks. Therefore, he considers that the Daoist priest is caved in the tomb in order to be the communicator between human and deities and to guide the soul of the tomb owner to Heaven.[27]

On the relief of the stone coffin in the tomb No. 2 unearthed at Changshun Hill of Nanxi County, Sichuan, there is also a man holding a stick and sitting on the floor in front of the divine beast which is carved at one side of the "Heavenly Door." He guides the visitors to meet the Queen Mother of the West. Zhang Xunliao believes that this man "is the messenger of the God or the messenger sent by the Queen Mother of the West to welcome the owner of the tomb. He is to direct the owner of the tomb to enter the Heavenly Door and report to the Queen Mother at the door of her residence."[28] The rules of the Han Dynasty regulated that the envoys sent by the emperors should hold sticks. Such custom later was introduced to the Daoist rituals. The Daoist canons have many records

[22] Wu Hong, 2005, 184–185.
[23] Gao Wen, 1995.
[24] Wu Hong, 2005, 501–503.
[25] Li Xiaoou, 1988, 93.
[26] Wu Hong, 2005, 501–503.
[27] Tang Changshou, 1993, 61; Wu Hong, 2005, 490–491.
[28] Zhang Xunliao, 2002, 164.

of immortals holding sticks. For instance, in "Shen Xi zhuan," chapter 8 of *Shenxian zhuan*, it says that: "Shen Xi is the native of Wu County…he studies Daoism in Shu….The Daoist sages, the Yellow Emperor and Lao Zi, dispatched messengers to welcome him….Three immortals wore feather clothes and held sticks….[they] carried Xi to Heaven."[29] This record shows that in the Daoist belief of Sichuan, such envoys who held sticks indeed had the responsibility of guiding the owner of the tomb to Heaven. Such belief is also closely related to the popularity of Daoism in Ba Shu regions.

As mentioned above, the lack of the Queen Mother of the West is the largest difference between the reliefs in Tomb No. 1 of Mahao and other reliefs of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Sichuan. However, a seated Buddhist sculpture appears above the lintel of the Back Chamber in Tomb No. 1 of Mahao. According to the above analysis of the relation between the images and the burial space, one can conclude that this seated Buddhist sculpture is actually the "metamorphosed form" of the Queen Mother of the West. Those early Buddhist sculptures discovered in the tombs of the Eastern Han Dynasty in the north of the Central Plain often appear side by side with the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East.[30] However, in Sichuan the early Buddhist sculpture and the sculpture of the Queen Mother of the West did not appear together. This situation is the largest difference between Sichuan tomb and the tomb at the north of the Central Plain. I have discussed this issue in other articles.[31] If further observation on the Buddhist statue and other sculptures co-existing with it is made, one can see that the elements of the western culture seem to be embodied in these objects.

In Tomb No. 1 of Mahao, there are also a relief which is named *Le tianma* (strangling the heavenly horse) by the American scholar, Edwards, and a relief of dragon head. Edwards correctly connects these reliefs with the eulogy of "heavenly horse of the west land" in "Jiaosi ge" of "Liyue zhi" in *Hanshu*. He also points out that: "The horse is brought into close ritual connection with the emperor himself, and in this tenth hymn of the sacrificial series it takes its place as a symbol of cosmic power. For it is the horse who is so close to and is a sign of the advent of that even more heavenly creature, the dragon, and it is the horse who in the song of the ritual goes through the gates of heaven to the very seat of the Lord of Heaven."[32] Edwards especially notices the characteristic of the figure holding the horse in check: "[he] seems clearly to be wearing the high and rather blunt-peaked cap characteristic of nomadic Scythian dress, and the shadowy silhouette of costume is that of the booted nomad." Based on such observation,

[29] Li Fang eds., reprint 1985, Ch. 5, 36.
[30] Yu Weichao, 1980.
[31] Huo Wei, 1999; 2000.
[32] Edwards, translated by Qin Xueshen, 66–94.

Edwards argues that "we must relate this Mahao cave with the cosmopolitan world of its time, and juxtaposed with one great import from the west—the heaven-sent horse—we are in this same moist crumbling sandstone confronted with that other great western, Indian or Central Asia fact—the Buddha."[33] Today, Edwards' observation and arguments still embody significant inspiration that can help us to understand the deep meanings of the stone reliefs in Tomb No. 1 of Mahao.

Among the stone reliefs and brick reliefs from the Eastern Han Dynasty in Sichuan, the relief of a horse standing outside of the gate of Heaven often appears with the reliefs of the Queen Mother of the West and the gate of Heaven. Some reliefs have horse herdsmen; some only have the images of the horse. Some horses have wings, indicating that the horse can carry the death into the divine realm (See Fig. 10).

Fig. 10 The "Heavenly Horse" image carved in an Eastern Han tomb stone in Sichuan
Source: Gao Wen: *Sichuan Handai huaxiang shi.*

When comparing this feature with the relief of the horse in Tomb No.1 of Mahao, I believe that this combination of themes and the documentary materials indicate that these horses are the "Heavenly Horses."

After the Wu Emperor of the Han Dynasty began the contact with the West, the legend of the Heavenly Horse appeared and developed. The second section of "Yue shu," the chapter [24] of *Shiji*, records:

> When the Emperor got a divine horse bathing in the water, a song of Taiyi was composed. It says: From the cosmos a Heavenly Horse with red sweat and red spittle was presented. The horse used to gallop thousands of miles, but now it is tamed and accompanies the dragon. The emperor conquered Dayuan and attained a fine horse named Pushao which could run for one thousand miles a day. A song for the horse is composed, and it says: the Heavenly Horse comes from the west. It travels thousands of miles to submit to the virtuous. It wades across drifting sand and the four barbarians

[33] Ibid., 80–81.

and foreign countries surrender to its mighty spirit.

A clearer description is recorded in the chapter 19 of "Jiaosi ge," the second record of "Liyue zhi" in *Hanshu:*

> The Heavenly Horse comes down from cosmos with red sweat and red spittle. Being a unique and remarkable creature, it steps (籋) the clouds and gallops in the dark. It has fine body and appearance and can runs for thousands of miles. Now it is tamed and accompanies the dragon. Yan Shigu of the Tang Dynasty annotated: "this says that the Heavenly Horse was bestowed by the cosmos." Su Lin also explained: "籋 reads niè. Here it means that the Heavenly Horse steps the clouds.

The Heavenly Horse comes from the west. It crossed over dripping sand and nine barbarians submitted. The Heavenly Horse comes from the spring. It has a tiger-like body and a figure of ghost. The Heavenly Horse crossed boundless desert, traveling along the Eastern road for thousands of miles. It can carry its rider to the residence of the God. The divine dragon will also follow the horse, traveling between the palaces of the God. The annotation following the lyrics says: "the Wu Emperor of the Han is said to be interested in magical arts. He often wishes that the Heavenly Horse could come and carry him to Heaven. Ying Zhao of the Han Dynasty notes: "*Changhe* is the door of the heaven. The jade pavilions are the residence of the God."

In comparison with the eulogy of the Heavenly Horse, there is a chapter which especially praise the door of the heaven in "Jiaosi ge." The lyrics say: "The Gods travel through the door of the heaven. The cars they ride number to thousands. They gather (敦) in the God Father's palace." Yan Shigu annotates: "敦 reads dun. It means to gather together."

In this worship eulogy of royal ceremony in the Han Dynasty, the legends of the Heavenly Horse, the door of the heaven, and *Kunlun* were related to each other. The explanation of Wen Ying mentioned above has unveiled the meanings of these legends: in the mind of the Wu Emperor who believed in immortals and magic arts, these fine horses from the west meant more than the ordinary, good horses that were used on the battlefields. They were "divine horses from the west" bestowed by Taiyi God and could "steps the clouds, ascend the door of the heaven, and disappear in the palace of the God." The Heavenly Horse could carry those who rode them to the divine realm—*Kunlun*.

In order to further understand this issue, it is necessary to borrow a few important concepts about the Lord of the Heaven from the Han documentary materials to briefly explain these lyrics.

Firstly, the term "*Taiyi*" presents the most respected God in the Han system of religious deities. In section 5b of "Jiaosi zhi," the chapter 25 of *Hanshu*, it says:

> A man from Bo, Miao Ji, presented a memorial. It says: "Taiyi is the most honorable among the Gods. The Five Emperors were said to be his assistants. In ancient times the Son of the Heaven worshiped Taiyi God at the south of the palace. A cow, a sheep, and a pig were presented at the ceremony for seven days to open eight paths to the divine realm." Therefore, the Son of the Heaven ordered the imperial official in charge of the worship to build a shrine at the southeast of Chang'an city and worshiped the Taiyi God regularly. Later, a memorial was presented and said: "in ancient times the Son of the Heaven worshiped the Heaven, the Earth, and the Taiyi God with a cow, a sheep, and a pig once every three years." The Son of the Heaven agreed with this proposal so ordered the imperial official in charge of the worship to lead the ceremony at the shrine of the Taiyi God as recommended.

In the same document it also records:

> Next year, a Qi man, Shao Weng, presented a memorial to the emperor and was given the position of Wencheng general. The general says: "If the emperor wants to communicate with Gods, the decoration in the palaces must imitate the divine realm, or the Gods will not come." Therefore, paintings of clouds and cars were made. Moreover, the Ganquan Palace was built. In the middle of the palace was a shrine, and there were paintings of the divine beings, such as the heaven, the earth, and the Taiyi God. Later, wooden columns and copper pillars were made. The next year, the Wen Emperor died and the heir apparent was ill seriously. After the prince recovered from his illness, he gave an order of amnesty and established the Deities of Shou Palace among which the Taiyi God was the most respected. The officials in charge of the worship of the the Deities of Shou Palace were *Taijin* and *Simin*.

In section 6 of "Tianwen zhi," the chapter 22 of *Hanshu*, it says:

> The brightest star of the North stars is the residence of Taiyi. The stars around it were the companions of the Taiyi God. The *dou* star of Big Dipper is the Taiyi God's car. The God travels at the center and controls four seas. From the *dou* star, he separates yin and yang, establishes four seasons, balances five elements, transforms the climates of a season, and determines the time.

Secondly, as the annotation of Ying Zhao in the Han Dynasty, the term *chang he* means the door of the heaven. "Yuandao xun" of *Huainanzi* also records that the residence of the God of the Heaven has a door of the heaven. To see the God of the Heaven, one has to enter the door of the heaven. Such is the path to the Heaven:

> A man, Feng Yi, rode in the car of thunder and passed the rainbow of six colors. He held the sheep horn and rose up. He passed Jishang River, entered the door of the heaven and arrived at the God's auxiliary capital.

Shiji zhenyi quotes the words of Wei Zhao: *Chang he* is the door of the heaven.[34] *Huainanzi* also says: at the west are the mountain of the heaven and the door of the heaven.

In the legends of the Han Dynasty the term "Kunlun" no longer represented a simple geographical concept of the western region of China. Instead, the meaning of the term evolved and meant the auxiliary capital of the Taiyi God. *Shiji zhenyi* quotes the words of Zhang Shoujie:

> *Haineijing* says: Kunlun is fifty thousand miles away from China. It is the auxiliary capital of the Lord of the Heaven. The mountains there stretched over one hundred miles and with heights of eighty thousand feets. Nine cities facing nine wells were built. The thresholds were made of jade. Next to the cities are five doors and guarded by auspicious beasts.[35]

As the auxiliary capital of the Lord of the Heaven, Kunlun is the outermost part of the God's residence. In the minds of mortals it is the "pillar of the Heaven" which connected the Heaven, the Earth, and the underground world. One could enter the Heaven or the underground world by passing through this "pillar of the heaven." Therefore, in the royal ceremony of the Han Dynasty, Kunlun became the path which could convey the Son of Heaven's respect to the God. In the royal worship place, "the Hall of Brightness," special facilities named "Kunlun" even appeared. Section No. 5 of "Jiaosi zhi" in chapter 5 of *Hanshu* records:

> At the beginning, the Son of the Heaven offered sacrifices on Mountain Tai. In ancient times, there was a sacrifice hall at the northeast of Mountain Tai. However, it was located at a dangerous location. The emperor wanted to build a new sacrifice hall, but did not know the structure plan. A Jinan man,

[34] Sima Qian, Ch. 117, No. 57 of "Sima Xiangru's biography."
[35] Ibid.

> Gong Yudai, presented a blueprint of the Yellow Emperor's sacrifice hall. A room without walls was built in the sacrifice hall. Its roof was made of cogon grass. The tunnels with water surrendered the room. At the southwest was a floor named Kunlun. The Son of the Heaven entered the room through the floor and offered sacrifice to the God. Therefore, the emperor ordered to build the sacrifice hall above the river as described in the blueprint. The son of the Heaven entered from Kunlun and began the sacrifice at the hall as the one offered to the Heaven and the Earth.

Investigating the fine horses from the west region such as "red sweat horse" by placing it in this belief system, one can easily understands the special meanings of these horses: originally, this kind of fine horse from the western region came with the cultural exchange after the Han Dynasty began its communication with the Western region. They were not very different from other precious animals, such as lions, elephants, birds, and rhinoceroses, which came to China at the same time. However, under the historical background of the Han Dynasty which has deep color of magical arts, the original meaning of the horse was transformed, divinized and connected with the pre-Qin legend of Kunlun. These fine horses from the Western region were attached with the magical function of carrying the riders to pass the door of the heaven and reach the Heaven. Therefore, they became the "Heavenly Horse."

After understanding this important change of Han Chinese's knowledge about the Heavenly Horse, one can easily understand the relationship between the Eastern Han reliefs in Sichuan such as the religious system of the Queen Mother of the West, the door of the heaven, the scene of immortals guiding the owner of the tomb to Heaven. Moreover, when considering them together with the objects of early Indian Buddhist style in the Tomb No. 1 of Mahao, such as the Buddhist statue and the horse of strangling sky, the connections between these artistic objects become clear: after the Wu Emperor of the Han Dynasty dispatched envoys to begin the contact with the Western region, Chinese people who had long worshipped divine dragon gradually acknowledged and equaled the Dragon God with wings worshipped by ancient Indo-European as the Horse God in Chinese culture. Because from the time of pre-Qin, China also recognized tall, strong horses as dragons, therefore, the Heavenly Horse from the West was related to the dragon in traditional Chinese culture and was further transformed into a divine spirit of Chinese Kunlun legend, leading mortals to the Heaven.[36]

More meaningfully, in Sichuan where was at the periphery of China but being closest to the West, the Buddhist statue and the Heavenly Horse from the far West were absorbed into the traditional religious system of the Queen Mother of

[36] Huo Wei, 2003.

the West, the door of the heaven, the Taiyi God, and the worship of Kunlun. After the transformation and metamorphosis, they naturally integrated and became an important product of the cultural exchange between China and the Western region in the Han Dynasty. Western scholars once related the way of digging in the Han cave tombs of Sichuan with the way of digging in the caves and temples of ancient Egypt, the Western Asia, and Persia, and considered that the digging way of caves in Sichuan originated from the West.[37] Although this argument has its inadequacy, the appearance of the Buddhist statue and the relief of the *Le tian ma* undoubtedly should be considered under the background of the Wu Emperor's contact with the Western region. Only when we consider these artistic objects with the background of cultural exchange between China and the Western region shall we be able to understand their meanings.

4 Conclusion

To sum up, this paper has the following findings: first, through the on-the-spot investigation, the author believes that instead of being individual scene, the cave reliefs at Mahao form a complete space of underworld and reflect the path to Heaven and different function of the tomb architecture. Viewing from the depth of the tomb, the first layer of the architecture in the tomb is the entrance of the divine realm which is often presented by the double carvings (阙, *que*) or the pillar of the tomb door. The tomb door also imitates the door of the main hall in the house on earth and has components of pseudo-wooden structures. The second layer is the door of heaven guarded by the Queen Mother of the West. In Tomb No. 1 of Mahao, the door is the entrance of the Back Chamber. When the deaths pass the Sacrifice Hall from the tomb door and are sent to the chamber behind it, they are separated from the living permanently and will be guided in to the Heaven by the immortals. This theme of entering the divine realm is often presented by the stone reliefs of the Queen Mother of the West and her immortal companions. However, in Tomb No. 1 of Mahao, the statue of the Queen Mother of the West is replaced by a seated Buddhist sculpture which has the same function of the statue of the Queen Mother of the West.

Second, viewing from either the structural characteristics of the tomb or the basic contents of the stone reliefs, Tomb No. 1 of Mahao is influenced by the Han culture of the Central Plain. However, because of its strong vitality, the Ba Shu cultures still maintain many indigenous traits in the process of being assimilated into the culture system of the Central Plain and became a Han culture style which embodies strong color of Ba Shu cultures—a metamorphosis of Han

[37] Zheng Dekun, 1947.

culture in the Ba Shu region.

Third, in Sichuan which is located at the periphery of the Han China but closest to the West, the Buddhist statue and the Heavenly Horse are assimilated into the traditional religious system which includes the Queen Mother of the West, the door of Heaven, Tayi God, and worship of Kunlun. After the process of transformation and metamorphosis, these objects became important products of cultural exchange in the Han Dynasty.

Moreover, the above conclusion reflects a cultural significance. In the process of repeating assimilation with the Han culture, cultural elements of the Sichuan region, which is located at the periphery and away from the center of Han culture, experienced many changes and became a new regional style of the Han culture. The Han culture of these peripheral regions can further be reflected back to the center, be absorbed into the dominant cultural system of the center, and form a meaningful exchange. It is such long interactions that made the Chinese civilization as a whole change, evolve, and advance ceaselessly.

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