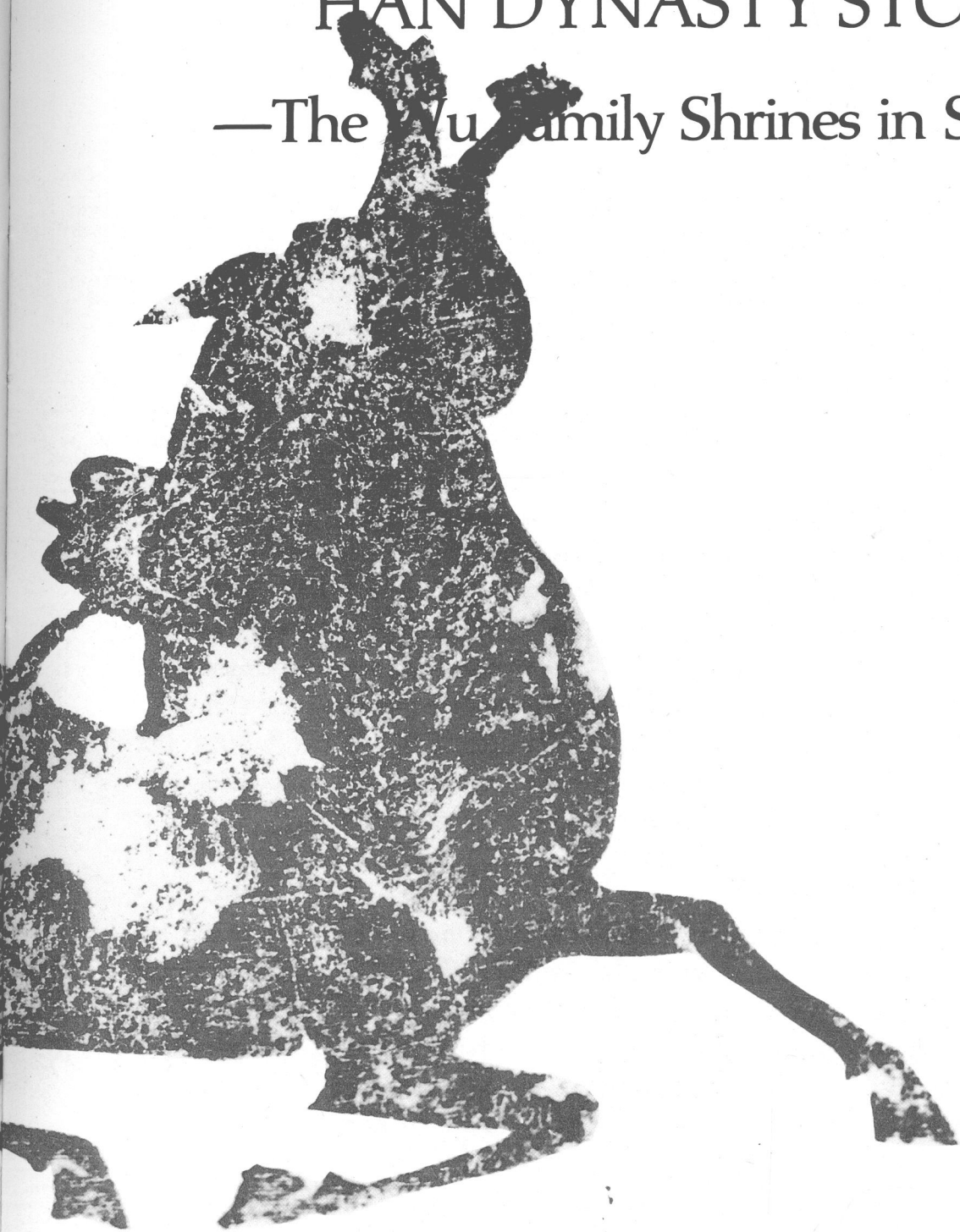


HAN DYNASTY STONE RELIEFS
—The Wu Family Shrines in Shandong Province

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藏书章

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—The Wu Family Shrines in Shandong Province



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Contents

Introduction	1
The Wu Liang Shrine	15
The Wu Rong Shrine	50
The Wu Ban Shrine	84
The Wu Kaiming Shrine	121
Side Towers of the Wu Family Shrines	139

Introduction

Liu Bang founded the famous Han Dynasty in 206 B.C. and made Chang'an (modern Xi'an in Shaanxi Province) its capital. Historians call the dynasty the "Western Han" or "Former Han" (206 B.C.-A.D. 8). Towards the end of the Western Han, class contradictions intensified and Wang Mang, a relative of the reigning emperor, took advantage of the situation and usurped the state power. He named his regime Xin (A.D. 9-23). A short time later, the new regime was overthrown by peasant uprisings, including those led by the Lulin ("Green Woodsmen"), the Chimei ("Red Eyebrows") and the Tongma ("Bronze Horses").

In A.D. 25, a powerful, influential landlord named Liu Xiu wrested the fruit of victory from the peasants, re-established the Han Dynasty and moved its capital east to Luoyang. Historians refer to the new dynasty as the "Eastern Han" or the "Later Han" (A.D. 25-220).

In order to consolidate and develop a feudal system, the ruling class of the Han adopted measures effective politically, economically and militarily, particularly in the realm of ideology where Confucianism was promoted at the expense of other philosophies. During the reign of Emperor Wu Di (Liu Che, 140-87 B.C.), Dong Zhongshu (179-104 B.C., Western Han philosopher) proposed to "honour only the doctrine of Confucius and ban all other schools." He elaborated on "the communion between heaven and man," "the divine right of kings" and the "Three Cardinal Guides" (the sovereign guides his subjects, the father guides his son, and the husband guides his wife) and the "Five Constant Virtues" (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity). Dong Zhongshu meant to make Confucianism a predominant ideology.

As the economy was prosperous, the development of

art and literature also attained an unprecedented height during the Han times. In the field of painting, murals were as popular as scroll paintings. The record shows that most palaces, government offices, schools, shrines, tombs, and mausoleums were adorned with paintings. For instance, at the time of Emperor Wen Di (Liu Heng, 179-157 B.C.), the Chengming Hall of the Weiyang Palace was painted with a species of grass which, according to ancient legends, was able to point out sycophants for their human masters. In the same hall could also be found the paintings of *feibangmu*, a wooden tablet which, allegedly, was set up by the legendary Emperor Shun at a major crossroad, so that a passer-by, unhappy with the government, could write his criticisms on it. There was also the painting of "Xie Zhi," an uncanny legendary animal that had the unusual gift of distinguishing right from wrong and would butt with its horns against those who were wrong. All this was meant to impress the people with the fact that good emperors were happy and willing to listen to the advices of their ministers, and the purpose of upholding power would be thus achieved.

Ancient records show that among the painted murals, prominence was given to the portraits of meritorious ministers. During the reign of Emperor Xuan Di (Liu Xun, 73-49 B.C.), for instance, the Qilin Tower was decorated with these meritorious ministers. During the reign of Emperor Mingdi (Liu Zhuang, A.D. 58-75) of the Eastern Han, in the Yuntai (Cloud Terrace) Pavilion of the Southern Palace could be likewise found the portraits of twenty-eight meritorious generals. "If a minister's or general's portrait was not included in the paintings, his descendants would be ashamed about this neglect. Why? His ancestors had not been judged virtuous." It can be readily seen that paintings in ancient times played an

important role of "promoting culture and education and of having an edifying effect on family relationships."

Then painting covered a wide range of subject matters and its content brimmed with flights of imagination. For instance, when the Prince of Reverence, son of Emperor Jing Di (Liu Qi, 156-141 B.C.), built Lingguangdian (Hall of Halo), Wang Yanshou, who excelled in prose-poems and whose dates of birth and death remain unknown, wrote a *fu* (expository essay) which reads in part as follows: "It depicts heaven and earth and describes the forms of a variety of living creatures—things and objects which manifest themselves in diverse forms. It depicts also mountain deities and sea spirits, with different colours. Each thing or object shows the singularity of its category, and its ideas and feelings. . . ." The murals described in prose-poems include characters in ancient myths and legends, emperors and kings of remote antiquity, loyal ministers, filial sons, fallen heroes and virtuous women. They are magnificent in scope and permeated with rich imagination. They provide specific data for understanding the content and art of murals in the Han palaces.

There were also many scroll paintings on silk. Ancient records show that in A.D. 189 Dong Zhuo of the Eastern Han stormed into Luoyang with his troops, deposed Emperor Shao Di (Liu Bian) and put Emperor Xian Di (Liu Xie) on the throne. Calling himself a Prime Minister, he was in fact a dictator. When other commanders launched a punitive expedition against him, he abducted Emperor Xian Di west with him to Chang'an. Later he was killed by a subordinate officer. After Emperor Xian Di moved west, Luoyang was so wantonly destroyed that books and paintings were used by soldiers to make tents and knapsacks. It is no wonder that few cultural relics of that time have survived. Luckily, some silk paintings of

that period were unearthed at Mawangdui in recent years. (Mawangdui is located on the outskirts of Changsha, capital of Hunan Province, where tombs of Marquis Da's family, having been excavated, yielded many highly valuable relics of culture.) These exquisite paintings verify the accuracy of written records, as they furnish actual objects for understanding the paintings of early Western Han times.

Tombs often offered a reconstruction of their occupants' lives on earth. In the Han times the custom of sumptuous burial seemed to be highly popular. In the tombs could be found an abundant supply of precious funerary objects. Moreover, inside many of them were also frescos engraved on stone walls of the burial chambers, shrines and side towers. Sometimes the frescos were stamped on the surface of the building bricks. Engraved stones or stamped bricks were later unearthed in large numbers in many parts of China.

Many burial chambers of the kind described above have been discovered, and the paintings and engravings in them are rich in content. Most of the finds are located in Shandong, Henan, Sichuan, Shaanxi and Jiangsu provinces. As they are located in various areas with different living conditions and customs, the unearthed engravings also show different subject matters and artistic styles. Economically, these regions at that time had a thriving industry and commerce; politically, they were the places where many powerful bureaucrats, landlords and merchants concentrated. Hence the burial chambers in these regions were constructed on a large scale. Before they died, the tomb occupants obviously believed that they could also live in the same style in their afterlife. They used murals, stone engravings, and stamped bricks in the burial chambers and sacrificial halls to portray their

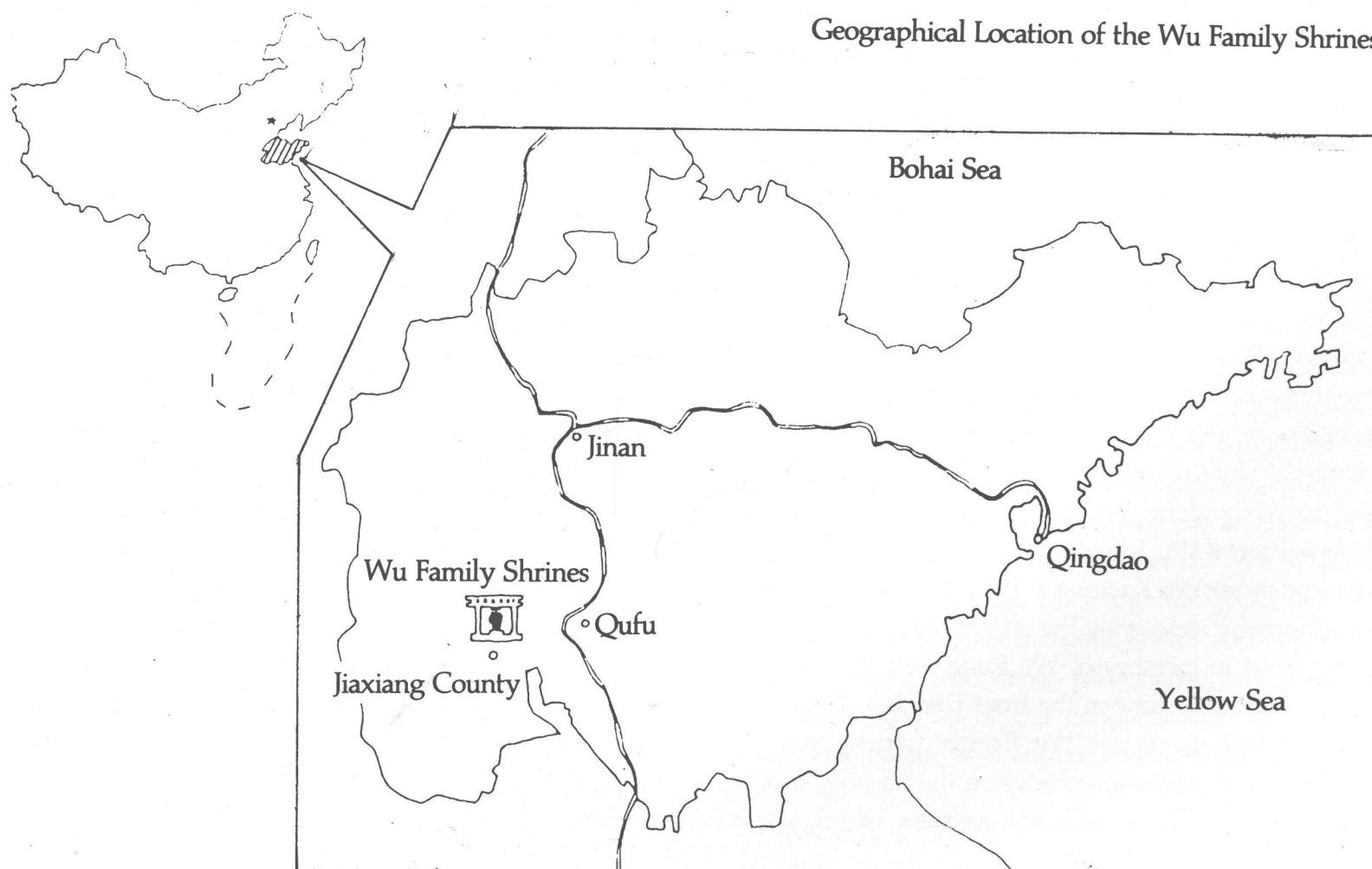
worldly life, such as feasting, working, and hunting. These artistic creations reflect truthfully the political, economic and living conditions in the then society.

A shrine was the hall where ancestors were worshipped by their descendants. In the Han Dynasty it was, in general, built in the vicinity of the burial ground. Historical books of the Han times mentioned, time and again, the building of shrines in front of tombs. For instance, in the "Biography of Huo Guang" of *The History of the Han Dynasty* it is recorded that "Huo Guang's widow

now set about altering the grave which Huo Guang had designed for himself, making it much larger and grander. She constructed three entrance gates, with a 'spirit road' leading up to one of them. She decorated the sacrificial hall elaborately and built a covered road for hand-drawn carriages, connecting the hall with the women's quarters of the grave keeper's house, where she confined Huo Guang's ladies in waiting, female slaves and concubines, with orders to tend the grave."

Other sources also mentioned that "Wealthy families

Geographical Location of the Wu Family Shrines



built tombs . . . erecting large mounds, planting pines and cypresses and constructing houses and tomb shrines." It can be seen that building permanent sacrificial halls or shrines for ancestor worship was a widespread practice during the Han times.

Today, China has two fairly well-preserved sacrificial halls or shrines. One is the shrine in honour of Guo Ju at Xiaotang (Hall of Filial Piety) Hill in Feicheng, Shandong Province. The other is known as the Stone Shrines of the Wu Family. Both shrines were built of stone, and the walls of their rooms were covered with engravings and paintings.

With the progress of time, nothing has been left of the Han Dynasty timber buildings and the murals in them. Consequently, these stone shrines and the engraved designs on their walls possess a historical and artistic value of unusual importance.

The Wu family shrines are situated on Wuzhai Hill, fifteen kilometres to the south of the seat of Jiaxiang County in Shandong Province. They consist of four stone shrines, respectively for Wu Liang, Wu Rong, Wu Ban and Wu Kaiming. Altogether they are known as Wu family's tomb shrines of the Eastern Han. With the exception of the Wu Liang shrine, the other three can be referred to by their locations, front, rear and left. According to study done by researchers, the front shrine is believed to be Wu Rong's, the left shrine Wu Ban's and the rear shrine Wu Kaiming's. The researchers reached the conclusion by identifying the official titles recorded on the stone tablet in memory of Wu Rong with the inscription on the engraved stone in the front chamber. The epitaph on the tablet also says: "Wu Rong's courtesy name was Hanhe. He wrote commentaries on the Lu version of the *Book of Songs*." There were four versions of this ancient

classic. The Qi, Han and Lu versions had been long lost and only the Mao version has survived. Wu Rong followed the tradition of Wei Xuancheng, one of the schools during the Eastern Han doing research work on the Lu version of the *Book of Songs*. The portraits of the ten sons of King Wen in the front stone chamber originate from the Lu version of the *Book of Songs*. The researchers, therefore, have concluded that the front chamber must be Wu Rong's shrine.

A related book that deals with the tablet in memory of Wu Kaiming says as follows: "In the second year of Emperor Shun Di's reign of Han'an (143), Wu Kaiming was promoted to be superintendent in charge of the empress' affairs and then official in charge of chariots and horses in the Changle Palace where the Empress Dowager lived." The depiction, in the rear chamber, of carts, other wheeled vehicles, and the chariots of emperors and kings of remote antiquity conforms with Wu Kaiming's title of official in charge of chariots and horses. The rear chamber, therefore, must be Wu Kaiming's shrine.

The tablet in memory of Wu Ban records as follows: "In his early years he had the lofty qualities of Yan Shu, a virtuous man, and of Min Ziqian, a filial son, and was versed in literature like Ziyou and Zixia (two disciples of Confucius) when he reached adulthood. He was known far and near for his good reputation and fine character. The prefecture thought highly of his moral integrity. . . ." In the left stone chamber the story of "Yan Shu living in solitude" was depicted. The tablet in memory of Wu Ban quotes two lines of poetry: "His filial piety was deeper than the feelings expressed in 'Soft and Kind Wind' (a poem in the *Book of Songs*) / His lofty aspirations purer than that described in 'Lamb' (another poem in the *Book of Songs*)." Therefore, the left chamber should be

assessed as Wu Ban's shrine.

An inscription on one of the side towers say: "Wu Liang's younger brothers Suizong, Jingxing and Kaiming employed stonemasons Meng Li and his younger brother Meng Mao to build these side towers." From this recording we know that Wu Kaiming was Wu Liang's younger brother. It also mentions that Kaiming's son Xuanzhang was first an official in Jiyin, then served as a garrison commander of Dunhuang. In view of the fact that the tablet in memory of Wu Ban records the Dunhuang garrison commander Wu Ban as having the courtesy name Xuanzhang, Wu Ban, without doubt, was Wu Kaiming's son. The tablet in memory of Wu Rong says that "Wu Rong was the second younger brother of the Dunhuang remembrancer." Hence we know that Wu Rong was Wu Ban's younger brother.

More than forty blocks of stone engravings are now stored in the Wu family shrines. In addition, there are two tomb tablets: one in memory of Wu Rong (now stored in the Iron Pagoda Temple in Jining City, Shandong Province) and another in memory of Wu Ban (now stored at the original site of the Wu family shrines). The other two tablets, in memory of Wu Liang and Wu Kaiming, have been lost a long time ago. Two side towers and a stone lion have survived. The construction of the stone shrines took some twenty years, from the first year of the Jianhe period (147) to the tenth year of the Yanxi period (167). These precious relics of more than a thousand years old already attracted the attention of scholars specialized in bronze and stone inscriptions as early as the Song Dynasty. The earliest record was seen in "Jin Shi Lu" ("Notes on Ancient Bronze and Stone Inscriptions") written by Zhao Mingcheng of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). It mentioned that the Wu family had several

tombs with stone chambers, on the walls of which were engraved the portraits of ancient sages and men of virtue. The names and inscriptions were in the Ba Fen script, which was a combination of eighty percent in the small seal script and twenty percent in the clerical script. It also says that the calligraphy and the painting were vigorous and that the inscriptions were in a style of classical elegance. Later, damaged by the elements and the floods, year in and year out, the Wu family shrines sank into the water.

In the 51st year of the Qian Long reign (1786), during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Huang Yi passed by Jiaxiang where he conducted an investigation. He found out that the Wu family shrines were actually built on Wuzhai Hill. He employed stonemasons to dig up more than forty blocks of stone engravings. In the tenth year of the Tong Zhi reign (1871), he discovered a stone block of He Kui and a stone design of auspicious omens. In the sixth year of the Guang Xu reign (1880), he again found a stone of Wanglingmu. As a matter of fact, the stone of Wanglingmu constituted the rear part of the first stone in the Wu Ban shrine. The two stones are entirely identical in engraving technique, layout and even in the calligraphic style insofar as writing inscriptions are concerned. So the two stones are assessed to have been originally the same stone and later broken into two pieces. This book identifies the block of Wanglingmu as the first stone of the Wu Ban shrine. And, when carefully observed, the stone of He Kui presents the same layout and engraving technique as the first stone, particularly in connection with the calligraphy of the two characters "Liu Hui." Hence it should also be identified as belonging to the Wu Ban shrine.

The stone engravings in the Wu family shrines are rich

in content. The more than forty existing ones depict ancient emperors, kings, assassins, loyal ministers, filial sons, virtuous maidens, chaste women, myths, legendary stories as well as auspicious phenomena and scenes of the life of the tomb occupants before they entered the next world.

The engraved ancient emperors and kings were leaders of some tribes, who had some distinguished exploits in remote times, or representative figures who had created some material culture in the different stages of historical development. The Han rulers often eulogized them as "ancient sages or virtuous kings." All this shows not only China's long history and well-developed culture but also her pride as a Chinese nation.

The first stone in the Wu Liang shrine depicts the stories that Fuxi and Nuwa were the creators of mankind; Shennong invented farming tools such as ploughs and hoes and taught people to plant grain crops; King Yu of the Xia Dynasty who, wearing a bamboo hat with a conical crown and broad brim and holding a spade, succeeded in conquering floods; and despotic King Jie, the last ruler of the Xia Dynasty, was portrayed to have straddled women whom he used as his chariot. These stories were deeply steeped in China's folk legends, and the artists, in the course of creation, injected his own feelings, love and hatred into it.

Assassins formed another contingent of "knight-errants" under the patronage of slave-owning aristocrats in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770-221 B.C.). The Wu Liang, Wu Rong and Wu Ban shrines depicted some stories of the assassins, including Jing Ke who attempted to assassinate King Ying Zheng of Qin (later called Qin Shi Huang, First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty) and Zhuan Zhu, Yu Rang, Yao Li, and

finally, Gao Jianli who attempted to assassinate the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty while strumming his *zhu*, a zither-like stringed instrument in ancient times. Although these stories have different plots, they present the same viewpoint that "a minister must be loyal to his ruler" and "a true man dies for one who appreciates him." They lay stress on righteousness, on personal favour or hatred. If one had been favoured by a king, a prince or a lord, he would risk everything for his sake or avenge him if he had been wronged.

These engravings displayed the superb skill of artistic presentation on the part of their creators, who were frequently able to capture the most intense moment in the development of a story and, truthfully but not without exaggeration, to convey the central theme of the story.

The Han Dynasty honoured Confucianism as the state cult. Confucian teachings gradually became the predominant ideology. Confucius and his seventy-two disciples and also the story of Confucius meeting with Lao Zi became frequent topics in painting.

The stories of loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness were ever more the focus of what the ruling class of the Han Dynasty propagated. Some people retold these stories in paintings as examples to be handcopied everywhere, and these paintings produced a far-reaching influence. This category of subject matter delineated in the Wu family shrines represents the sole well-preserved group at present. There are, for instance, such stories as those of Lin Xiangru who bravely and resourcefully brought a piece of jade, a priceless treasure, back unscathed to the State of Zhao from the powerful State of Qin; plain woman Zhongli Chun from Wuyan who advised a muddle-headed king at the risk of her own life; and Wang Ling's mother who killed herself to strengthen

her son's determination to assist Liu Bang, the King of Han, who later founded the Han Dynasty.

The protagonists of feudal society advocated that "there should be distinction between men and women," so men had supreme power over women who were only appendages to men. Sexual inequality began to appear in the process of forming patriarchal clans. A whole set of theories on women came into being in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. In the Han times these theories, advancing one step further, donned the coat of theology. "The husband guides his wife" became an unalterable principle, esteemed as truth self-evident. To enhance the effect of this moral tenet, the Han Dynasty rulers compiled such books as *Lie Nu Zhuan* (*Lives of Virtuous Women*), *Xu Lie Nu Zhuan* (*Sequel to the Lives of Virtuous Women*) and *Lie Nu Tu* (*Pictures of Virtuous Women*) which was a pictorial version of the first two books.

The Wu family shrines also made use of chaste and virtuous women in the history as objects of eulogy, such as "Chaste Queen of King Zhao of Chu," "Qiu Hu of the State of Lu," "Aunt of Righteousness," "Liang, the Woman of Virtue," "Righteous Woman of the Capital," "Aunt of Honour in the State of Liang" and "Stepmother of Qi." Although some stories did speak of the lofty qualities of women, most of these "chaste women" or "women of virtue" were commended for no higher purpose than to impose feudal moral tenets on women generally so as to uphold the authority of the husband and further consolidate monarchical power.

Filial piety was one of the magic weapons to maintain the kinship of the landlord class so as to govern the people in a feudal society. The Han Dynasty encouraged the practice of filial piety and made it a part of the feudal ethical code of the so-called Three Cardinal Guides and

Five Constant Virtues. It, for instance, chose "men of filial piety and honesty" recommended by the provinces to serve to government. It also erected monuments, wrote biographies and painted pictures for filial sons as examples for others to follow.

The stories depicted in the Wu family shrines eulogize not only filial sons but also docile and obedient citizens under the control of emperors and kings, who would not rebel against feudal rulers and make trouble. These filial sons included "Lao Lai Zi who, dressed in motley, clowns to amuse his parents," "Min Ziqian who drives a chariot for his father" and "Boyu who sobs when he finds out that his mother's flogging is no longer vigorous."

The Wu family shrines also contain engravings of stories that are of educational value to the people, for example, the stories of filial grandson Yuan Gu and also Xing Qu who feeds his toothless old father.

Subject matter drawn from the myths and legends constitutes a certain proportion to the drawings found in the Wu family shrines, occupying a predominant position in the Wu Ban shrine in particular. The myths and the legends dated back to remote times. Lu Xun says in his book *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*: "When primitive men observed natural phenomena and changes which could not be accomplished by human beings, they made up stories to explain them, and these explanations became myths."

In primitive society, productivity was low and man had only a limited scientific knowledge. Faced with natural and social phenomena, capricious and unpredictable, man wanted to explain them and hence myths and legends came into being. An example is the story about Nuwa who "melted rocks to mend the sky." "The Queen Mother of the West is in the shape of a human being

with the tail of a leopard and the teeth of a tiger and she is skilled at whistling," and there are the legends of a human being with two wings, a man riding on dragon back, four fish driving a chariot, the Wind God, the Master of Rain, and rare birds and exotic animals. All these stories are personified and vivid.

The myths and legends were a distinguished art form among the Chinese people in history. They reflected the social ideology of ancient Chinese. Many of them were permeated with optimism, enterprising spirit, courage, tenacity and romanticism. They show flights of imagination in abundance and a highly creative talent on the part of ancient Chinese.

Some myths and legends that appear on the stone engravings in the Wu family shrines have lost the original visage and significance to a varying degree. For instance, the Queen Mother of the West, except for the two wings on her shoulders, looks very much like an elegant and dignified lady in fine costumes. The seven stars of the Big Dipper also look like high-ranking officials serving a ruler. This explains that the fancies and imagination of the Han times did not depart from the reality of a worldly life. On the other hand, it also illustrates that myths can also be used to serve the monarchical power.

The theme of auspicious omens also reflected the popular beliefs of a Han society. It showed that people dreamed of good luck and yearned for happiness, while the monarchs made use of people's superstitions to propagate the theory of the mandate of heaven. Allegedly, a monarch received a mandate from heaven to govern the country; when people disobeyed him, they would incur the wrath of heaven and thus natural disaster. In short, this theory was merely a rationalization for the rule by monarchs. In the Eastern Han times, auspicious theme

became particularly prevalent, and bizarre and motley statements appeared, including quotations from the classics. Good omens were often fabricated for monarchs to justify their "rule by divine right."

Dozens of auspicious themes are presented in the Wu family shrines. Sacred tripods, two trees with branches intertwined, etc.—all these were meant to eulogize the "virtues" and "achievements" of feudal rulers and put on a false show of peace and prosperity. They were also praises for the virtuous deeds of the Wu family.

The topics of engravings of feasting, kitchen, dancing and theatrical entertainments, chariots, horses and excursions, hunting, military exploits as well as battle scenes were all meant to show the tomb occupant's wealth and illustrious prestige in his worldly life and constitutes a mirror that truthfully and vividly reflects the life of Han Dynasty officials.

Feasting was an important pleasure enjoyed by the high-ranking officials and powerful landlords. In the Wu family shrines several pictures of feasting are presented prominently. Upstairs the master is sedately seated, waiting for the banquet to begin, while the attendants are busily carrying plates and wine cups to serve him. Downstairs servants are hurriedly fetching water, slaughtering and roasting pigs, chickens and fish. The engraving is rich in details. The contrast between leisure and pleasure on the one side and hard work on the other shows the class relationships of Han times.

Music, dancing, and theatrical entertainments also represented a main theme of the luxurious life enjoyed by high officials and their distinguished relatives during the Han times. A theme of this kind usually appears side by side with the scene of feasting. Officials and dignitaries regarded graceful dancing and melodious music as a way

to enhance their pleasure in drinking. Singers, dancers and actors, all of low status, were only tools of amusement for others. Still, the graceful and vigorous dancing and the superb skill in doing handstands on a plate as depicted in one of the stone engravings demonstrate unquestionably the artistic talent of ancient performers.

Chariots and horses were important vehicles for transportation, war, hunting and excursions. Hence, in the burial chambers, mighty processions of chariots and horses are often portrayed to display the status and prestige of the tomb occupants. In the Han burial chambers and halls for ancestor worship, there were processions of chariots and horses showing the high rank and status of the tomb occupant. Wu Ban was a young general during his worldly life. Wu Rong had also occupied important posts. Therefore, in their sacrificial halls, there are scenes of mighty battles recording their achievements in wars and gigantic excursions with processions of chariots and horses.

Horsemanship and archery represented the social trend of the aristocratic class of the Han times. The hunting scene in the Wu Kaiming shrine shows how the tomb occupant hunted for pleasure during his worldly life. It presents a profile of courage and tenacity on the part of the labouring people of the Han Dynasty, fearless in face of ferocious animals. It also amounts to a praise of their strength, showing the depth of the artists' insight into life and also their remarkable creative talent.

The stone engravings in the Wu family shrines are the richest and most versatile in terms of content among those that have been preserved in China. People can see for themselves that the stories, whether historical or fictional, are based on the reality of life. The stories reflect correctly the political and economic conditions of

the Han society in terms of concepts and ideology, and they are valuable materials in studying the politics, economy, culture and art of the Han times.

The works in the Wu family shrines are forceful and untrammelled in style, breathing with a rustic simplicity. We can see in them the artists' painstaking efforts in presenting their themes. Whether it is a large miscellaneous engraving or a small one conveying a single theme, it maintains its own theme, appearance and spirit. With concise lines and eloquent motions, it enhances the artistic appeal of the engraved topics.

The ability of choosing the crucial moment in the development of an episode and of bringing out the focus of contradictions represents one of the salient achievements in the stone engravings of the Wu family shrines. The three shrines of Wu Liang, Wu Rong and Wu Ban portrayed historical events in different fashions. "The assassination of the King of Qin by Jing Ke" pictures the assassin's unsuccessful attempt, as someone grabs Jing Ke's waist with both hands and the assassin, therefore, cannot free himself. His hair bristles with anger and, risking everything on a single throw, he hurls his dagger at the king, misses him and hits a pillar instead. Panic-stricken, the king flees around the pillar. With the greatest fidelity to the theme of the story, the engraving brings into prominence the climax of the conflict. The artist ingeniously uses the method of contrast, portraying Qin Wuyang prostrate on the ground and trembling with fright as a sharp contrast to Jing Ke's indomitable spirit.

There is an engraving of "salvaging a bronze tripod from the Si River." Tripods symbolized monarchical power in ancient China. When Emperor Qin Shi Huang passed the Si River on a tour of inspection, he ordered

people to salvage a Zhou Dynasty tripod that had fallen into the water. As soon as the tripod emerged from the river, the workers, with bated breath, pulled the rope vigorously, only suddenly losing the balance and falling on the ground. They did not realize that a divine dragon had bitten off the rope that fastened the tripod, which, consequently, fell into the water again. The transformation from success to failure, which occurred in a fraction of a second, was most dramatic.

Take another example. Duke Ling of the State of Jin, with an evil intention, hurriedly fled from a banquet and set loose a mastiff to chase after Zhao Dun whom he tried to kill. At the critical moment of imminent peril, Qi Miming, a subordinate of Zhao Dun, kicked the lower jaw of the mastiff. What happened next? The answer was in suspension. The ability of presenting a fraction of a crucial second shows the exquisite skill of the Han artists.

Their artistic method of skilfully capturing the apex in the development of a story is also displayed in other engravings. In the engraving of "Liang, the Woman of Virtue," the woman in question reluctantly damages her own visage, so as to decline the marriage offer from a king. The artist captures the key moment successfully when she is portrayed to hold a knife in order to cut off her own nose. The story eulogizes the woman's "virtuous deed" while describing eloquently the low and miserable status of women during the Han times.

The story of "The Plain Woman Zhongli Chun of Wuyan" is about a woman, almost forty years old and extremely plain, whom nobody had ever wooed. Though mocked by local people as "old maid—unwanted," she had lofty qualities. Ignoring personal safety, she remonstrated with a muddle-headed king not to cling

obstinately to his own way. Her wisdom and noble virtues were greatly appreciated by King Xuan of the State of Qi, who not only listened to her loyal advice but also bestowed upon her the title of queen. The engraving depicts how Zhongli Chun, in court costumes and with the queen's coronet on her head, accepts King Xuan's conferring of the title.

Take another example. In the story of Yu Rang's assassination of the Lord Xiang of Zhao, the writer selects the episode of Yu Rang's repeated failures in attempting the assassination and his request to be given Lord Xiang's coat to pierce through as a token of revenge. He raised his unsheathed sword and then symbolically pierced the coat three times so as to fulfil his wish that "a true man dies for one who appreciates him."

In the story of "Min Ziqian driving a chariot for his father," the engraving features the episode of his father's regret. After learning about the reason for Min Ziqian's losing control of the reins, his father, with a guilty conscience, strokes and comforts his son who, even though he has been maltreated by his stepmother, begs his father to be lenient towards her. The portrayal shows not only Min Ziqian's filial piety and also the deep affection between father and son, but also, most effectively, the stepmother's deplorable behaviour. By means of such artistic presentation, the artists skilfully capture the best moment in an episode to present and give full play to the function of a single engraving in presenting the theme of a story. The artists who did the stone engravings in the Wu family shrines had indeed a masterful command of the artistic skills in reflecting life and presenting a theme.

The composition of the stone engravings in the Wu