

## Rethinking “Filial Piety (孝 *xiao*)” through a Reinterpretation of the “扶桑 *fusang*” Tomb Motif

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### Abstract

This presentation discusses the meaning of the sacred tree “扶桑 *fusang*” motifs on the walls of the family tombs in Eastern Han, China. This is mainly a reinterpretation of “*fusang*” on the central homage pavilion scene in the Wu Liang shrine (created in A.D. 151), using some ancient Chinese texts and contemporary images taken at tombs.

Eastern Han Shrines were structures for ancestor worship ceremonies of “filial piety (*xiao*)”. At first sight, the *fusang* motif has no relationship to the shrine. But in fact the motif was very important for representing the family tomb’s magical meaning of filial piety. I will examine the meaning of this motif from the point of view of the dedication of space to filial piety in Eastern Han.

## 1 The tombs and shrines in Eastern Han

### 1-1 The appearance of the shrines (祠堂)

In Eastern Han, the shrine, which is a structure for ancestor worship, appears in the context of family tombs. One example is the Wu Liang shrine (武梁祠) excavated in Jiexiang county (嘉祥县) of southwestern Shandong province (山东省). This shrine had a simple stone architecture. It had three walls supporting a span roof. It was 2 meters wide, 1.4 meters deep and 1.8 meters high. It was so narrow that alcoholic drinks and foods were placed on the inside altar from outside the shrine during the actual ceremony. This little building was located at the foot of a tomb-mound. It was adorned with a stone tablet (石碑), two stone *que* pillars (石闕), and two stone lions (石獸) in the front. Those were all on the ground of the tomb in the Wu family’s cemetery. This kind of style was linked to a change in the structure of tombs that took place in the Han dynasty. To put it shortly, the previous and more simple style consisted of only surrounding the coffin with a frame. This was replaced by the elaborate style of an underground house, which was built to look like the house the dead person had in real life. The coffin was placed inside this house. In addition, there was a passage leading up to the ground, which served to allow the spirits to pass to the world outside. This was because people thought that after death, life could continue as before through the practice of filial

rites by their descendants. Some facilities on the ground in the family cemetery were arranged to accompany this. As we will see later, this phenomenon also had close connection with the folk religion idea of ascending to Heaven. Inside the shrine the walls and roof were decorated by stones engraved with various pictorial motifs. Because the Wu Liang shrine had particularly elaborate and beautiful pictures, this shrine received the attention of some Song dynasty scholars.

## 1-2 The *xiao* (filial piety) as an ancestor worship

According to the tablet of Wu Liang transcribed by Song dynasty scholars, Wu Liang fell ill and died at the age of 74 in the year 151 AD. And his shrine was erected that year by his sons and one of his grandsons.

The tablet of Wu Liang says that his sons and grandson “personally followed the path of sonly duty and spent everything they had [to construct his shrine]. They chose excellent stones from the southern mountain; they took those of perfect quality with flawless color. In front they established an altar; behind they erected an offering shrine”.<sup>1</sup>

We can see that the construction of the shrine and other facilities of tomb was a big project for Wu Liang’s descendents, and they placed special emphasis on how much cost or effort they invested. This is closely related to the system of *xiaolian* (孝廉), meaning filial and incorrupt, in Han. This was a system in which the central government actively adopted virtuous men from local powerful families for a career as public officials.

## 2 The *fusang* (扶桑) pictorial motifs on the Wu family shrines

### 2-1 What is the *fusang*?—“the myth of ten suns”

On the central scenes in every Wu family shrine are beautiful tree motifs. These tree motifs are commonly interpreted as the sacred tree “扶桑 *fusang*”. The *fusang* tree is closely related to the sun worship. One example of this is “the myth of ten suns”. The story is as follows:

In king Yao (堯)’s time, ten suns appeared in the sky at once, and there occurred a terrible drought, so King Yao ordered Yi (羿) to take down nine suns with a bow and arrow.<sup>2</sup>

The ancient Chinese people thought that there are ten suns in the world, and during the sun’s revolving around the world, the nine other suns rest and relax on the branches of the *fusang* tree in the Eastern sea. Many images of this story from the Han period were excavated in Shandong province. The images show a strange tree and birds, which are a symbol of the sun, as well as a figure with a bow and arrow. We find the same images in the Wu family shrines.

At first sight then, the *fusang* motif seems to have no relationship with the shrine’s purpose. I would like to argue, however, that it does have a special meaning.

1 「從事武梁碑」(『隸釋 (Li Yi)』卷6). Translated by Wu Hung (in his “*The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art*”, 1989 on p. 25)

2 「逮至堯之時，十日竝出，焦禾稼，殺草木，而民无所食。……堯乃使羿……上射十日殺……万民皆喜，置堯以為天子。」(『淮南子』本經訓)

## 2-2 The present interpretations of the central pavilion scene and the *fusang*.

Now I would like to reconsider the meaning of the *fusang* tree motif in the central pavilion scene of the Wu Liang shrine. This central scene is located above the alter, which is used for dedicating foods to the ancestor. Therefore I believe that this scene must have had a very important meaning. But this scene has no inscription, and therefore it is difficult for us to understand its meaning. So this is a controversial point. We can roughly classify present interpretations of the homage pavilion scene into five groups; (1) First interpretation: this scene represented the visit of King Mu (穆) to the Queen Mother of the west (西王母)<sup>3</sup>; (2) it represented a feast in the life of the master of the shrine;<sup>4</sup> (3) it represented sovereignty<sup>5</sup>; (4) it depicts the hospitality the dead person receives at the pavilion of heaven<sup>6</sup>; (5) it reflects the actual dedication of food to the dead by their descendents at the real graveyard space.<sup>7</sup>

## 3 Reinterpretation of the *fusang* as having two functions

### 3-1 Comparison of the central pavilion scene with the ascending scene

As mentioned above, there is no agreed interpretation of the pavilion scene yet. I would like to interpret it from a different viewpoint, by computing it with the ascending scene that we find in another Wu family shrine. The possibility of a comparison between the central scene and the ascending scene has been ignored in the past. But I believe there are important similarities between the two.

In general, this ascending scene was regarded as representing the master of the shrine being led to Heaven. This scene describes a man with a carriage caught in the cloud and lifted from the ground up. On the other end of the composition, we see the twin gods. One of them looks like the Queen Mother of the West (西王母). According to Chinese mythology, she lives on the sacred mountain of *Kunlun* (崑崙). Ancient people hoped to ascend to *Kunlun* and achieve immortal life. In the scene, this god is coming down from the sky to meet the master of the shrine.

When we compare this scene to the pavilion scene, we find that the elements of the two compositions are very similar. The similar elements are the *que* pillar, the building, the horses and the twin gods.

On the other hand, the ascending scene does not contain a *fusang* motif. Instead it contains a kind of cloud or wind spurting from the ground in a similar position in the composition.

My hypothesis is that the function of *fusang* in the pavilion scene and the function of the cloud motif in the ascending scene are the same. I would now like to examine this hypothesis using some texts from ancient China.

3 For example, Stephen W. Bushell, *Chinese Art*, London: Board of Education, 1910.

4 Wilma Fairbank is one representative of this view. See his "Adventures in Retrieval", Harvard-Yenching Institute Studies 28. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972.

5 See, for example, Wu Hung (1989).

6 Sahara Yasuo (佐原康夫), *Kandai Shido Gazo Ko* (漢代祠堂画像考), *Tobo Gakuho* (東方學報), 63, 1991-3.

7 For example, Xin Lixiang (信立祥). See his "Thugoku Kandai Gazoseki no Kenkyu (中国漢代画像石の研究)": Doseisha (同成社), 1996.

### 3-2 *Fusang and Fuyao (扶搖) as interchangeable*

Let us examine the passage from the *Huainanzi* (淮南子), which describes to the ascending to the mountain of Kunlun.

In the old days, Fengyi (馮夷) and Dabing (大丙) drove a carriage of thunder drawn by six clouds. They played with thick fog in ecstasy, and went around further and higher..... They caught the *fuyao* (扶搖)[twister] holding the *yangjiao* (羊角)[a twisting wind that looks like sheep's horn]. They went over mountains and over rivers, and ascended to the mountain of *Kunlun*. And they opened the first door of heaven, and entered into heaven.<sup>8</sup>

In this description, the “*fuyao* (扶搖)” is a twister helping to ascend to the mountain of *Kunlun*. And we can easily notice that the word “*fuyao* (扶搖)” is similar to “*fusang* (扶桑)”. If we examine the word “*fuyao*”, we find that its common meaning was twister. But it also meant a sacred tree in the eastern sea, just like “*fusang*”. Here is an example for from the *Zhuangzi* (莊子):

Yunjiang (雲將) [Spirit of cloud] took a trips to the east. When he reached there and passed a branch of *fuyao* (扶搖), he met Hongmeng (鴻蒙) [This is the spirit of nature, who is said to be a kind of steam in the sea].<sup>9</sup>

The Ming dynasty scholar Li Yi (李頤) also comments that “*fuyao*” means a sacred tree in the eastern sea.<sup>10</sup> Therefore I think we can conclude that “*fuyao*” is another name for “*fusang*”.

I would like to further buck up this idea by some texts and images from ancient China. We can find that the “*fusang*” or a tree of “*sang*” (桑 mulberry) corresponded to the spirit of wind in some ancient Chinese texts. For example, in the *Tianshu* (典術) we can read:

A tree of *sang* (桑) is *Jixing* (箕星) [the star of straw raincoat].<sup>11</sup>

Here is another example, from the *Duduan* (獨斷):

*Fengbo* (風伯 The spirit of wind) is *Jixing* (箕星). He is in the sky and can generate wind.<sup>12</sup>

Another evidence is connected to the description we read from *Huainanzi* (淮南子). I

8 「昔者馮夷·大丙之御也，乘雷車，六雲蜺，游微霧，驚悅忽，歷遠弥高，以極往。經霜雪而無迹，照日光而無景。扞扶搖，抱羊角而上，經紀山川，躡騰崑崙，排閭闔，淪天門。」(『淮南子』原道訓)

9 「雲將東游，過扶搖之枝而適遭鴻蒙。」(『莊子』在有)

10 李頤注「神木也，生東海。」(Ouyangjingxian (歐陽景賢), Ouyangchao (歐陽超), *Zhuangzi Shiyi* (莊子釈譯): Hubei Renmin Chubanshe (湖北人民出版社)), 1986.

11 「桑木者箕星之精。」(『典術』引, 『太平御覽』卷955, 木部4, 桑)

12 「風伯神箕星也，其象在天，能興風。」(『獨斷』卷上)

quote again: “They caught the *fuyao* (扶搖) [twister] holding the *yangjiao* (羊角) [a twisting wind that looks like sheep’s horn]”. There was a relationship between “*fusang*” and sheeps horns in the sun worship of the Shandong province in Han. In excavations from this area, we find some images where sheep’s horn motif is combined with the tree motif.<sup>13</sup>

### 3–3 *Fusang* representing the rite of filial piety

The above evidences indicate that “*fusang*” and “*fuyao*” are interchangeable. And that therefore the “*fuyao*” motif in the ascending scene is a transformation of the “*fusang*” motif. If this is correct, it means that the “*fusang*” motif is not just an accompaniment of the central pavilion scene, but a very important element that serves the purpose of the shrine and the tomb.

In addition to representing hospitality at the pavilion of heaven for the dead, I believe that the pavilion scene had a second role. It also represented the dedicating of food to the dead by their descendants at the actual graveyard space. There are several proofs that the central scene represented a real space of shrine and tomb. One example is from an excavation at the foot of the *Xiaotang Shan* (孝堂山) in the *Zhangqing* county (長清縣) of Shandong province. We see there a son who comes to the tomb and dedicates foods and a garden lantern to his deceased parent in front of a shrine. At the side of the shrine we find a tree with a similar shape to the *fusang*. Based on this evidence, I believe that trees besides the actual graveyard space were charged with the wish to ascending to Heaven.

## 4 My reinterpretation of the entire Wu Liang shrine

### 4–1 The double meaning of the central pavilion scene

We can now rethink the central pavilion scene based on above evidence. As mentioned, we can classify common interpretations of the pavilion scene into five groups. My hypothesis is that the fourth and fifth interpretations are compatible. Namely that first, it depicts the hospitality the dead person receives at the pavilion of heaven; and second, that it reflects the actual dedication of food to the dead by their descendents at the real graveyard space. So the central pavilion scene had two functions rather than just one. And moreover, the *fusang* motif is an element that *combined* these two functions. It represented both the rite of filial piety and the ascending of the dead person to heaven, which is the result of this rite.

### 4–2 The relationship between the historical figures motifs and the *fusang*

The next question is how to interpret the historical figures of virtuous men and women that appear in the shrine. And those figure separated the “*fusang*” motif from “the Queen Mother of the west”. They represented the virtues of *xiao* (filial piety), *ren* (仁 benevolence), *ti* (悌 brotherly love), *zhong* and *yi* (忠 loyal and 義 righteous).

The first function of these figures is that the descendents of Wu Liang are expected to follow

13 See, for example, Chin Zhilin (靳之林), *Shenming Zhi Shu* (生命之樹): Zhongguo Shehui Kexue chubanshe (中国社会科学出版社), 1994.

their model. Like the virtuous figures, the descendants are expected to perform the ritual of filial piety, which will guarantee that Wu Liang will ascend to heaven.

Now let us reconsider the meaning of the virtue of filial piety from the viewpoint of the interchangeable image of *fusang* and *fuyao*. Returning to the ascending scene, we can find that the wind is not only ascending but also descending. I think it is a notable fact.

In ancient China, there are several meanings to virtue, “*de* (德)” in Chinese. For example, virtue meant the physical power achieved by harmony with the *yin* and *yang* (陰陽). Ancient Chinese thought that the cycle of the seasons is caused by the movement of *qi* (氣). They regarded spring as the season in which the *qi* of the heaven goes down and the *qi* of the ground goes up. This condition meant harmony between these two *qi*, between *yin* and *yang* (the *Li Ji*, *Yueling* (禮記·月令))<sup>14</sup>. Thanks to such changes, the world can be dynamic and reborn. Another example are the rite of the *Baihu Tong Derun*, *xiangshe* (白虎通德論·鄉射)” and the *Li Ji*, *Sheyi* (禮記·射義). This was an important rite for the emperor, in which an arrow was being shot toward heaven, in order to harmonize with the *qi* of heaven and the *qi* of the ground.<sup>15</sup> This rite was also performed at the birth of a boy,<sup>16</sup> in order that he would become virtuous.<sup>17</sup>

On the basis of the above examples, the motif of the figure shooting the arrow by the *fusang* tree in the Wu Liang shrine did not only guarantee the virtue of Wu Liang and his filial descendant. It also represented the physical power to change *fusang*, namely the trees next to the real shrine, into *fuyao* namely the twister ascending the master of shrine up to heaven. The figure shooting toward the sky represented the dynamic nature of the world, and the possibility of change from the earthly world to the world of heaven.

## 5 Conclusion: The double function of the shrine and the *fusang* motif

Based on what we have seen, we can conclude that the shrine had a double function; the first function was to make an appeal for filial son toward society. The second function was to lead the master of the shrine to heaven. This is a combination of Confucianism and an other mystic thought, such as folk religion. Similarly, the *fusang* motif also had a double function. First, it represented the trees that stood by the real shrine, thereby referring to the earthly, social function, namely the function of filial piety. In addition, the *fusang* also represented a *fuyao*, namely a twister ascending the master of the shrine to heaven. We can therefore say that the meaning and purpose of the *fusang* motif is precisely this magnetic role: the role of connecting the two worlds.

14 「〈孟春之月〉是月也，天氣下降，地氣上騰，天地和同，草木萌動。」

15 「天子所以親射何，助陽氣達万物也。春氣微弱，恐物有窒塞不能自達者，夫射自內發外，貫堅入剛，象物之生。故以射達之也。」

16 「男子生桑弧蓬矢六以射天地四方者男子之所有事也。…故事之尽礼樂而可數為以立德行。」

17 「礼者鄉射也。射者男子之事，必飾之以礼樂者，所以養人之德。」