

Review Essays

Imagining the World Beyond: Representations of Heaven and the Netherworld in Early Chinese Religion

PICTURING HEAVEN IN EARLY CHINA

By Lillian Lan-ying Tseng

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ANCESTRAL MEMORY IN EARLY CHINA

By K.E. Brashier

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What does Heaven look like? Where do we go after we draw our last breath? Is there an afterlife? Such questions regarding the world that lies beyond daily human existence occupy a central place in almost all religious traditions. Picturing these distant realms, however, is not an easy matter. The more remote and otherworldly these places are, the harder it is to imagine them and give them shape. The two books under review make important contributions to the study of early Chinese religion by demonstrating the various ways in which the extrahuman realm was perceived, envisioned, and articulated during the Han Dynasty [206 BCE–220 CE]. Drawing on a variety of visual and textual sources, some of them only recently recovered in archaeological excavations, both books reveal the role of the creativity and human experience in constructing images of the world beyond.

Lillian Tseng's *Picturing Heaven in Early China* is a detailed study of visual representations of Heaven in Han Dynasty art and architecture. Drawing on a wide variety of visual media, mostly from recently excavated archaeological sites, Tseng attempts to trace the relationship between textual and visual depictions of Heaven and determine how did the various meanings attached to the concept of Heaven, as the sky, a supreme deity or cosmic force, and as the imagined land of the immortals, impact the ways in which it was visually represented. Tseng's main interest lies in inter-

preting the hermeneutics of the artistic process as a form of social communication between the artisan and his audience. *Picturing Heaven*, she argues, required a "significant rather than an imitative view of representation" (6); it was "an act of signification determined by convention" (7). Han artisans drew from a shared body of tacit knowledge derived from a wide variety of cosmological assumptions, astronomical observations, and mythological and literary accounts, and transformed this knowledge into unique works of art that conveyed certain coded meanings for their audience to decipher.

In Chapter 1, "Constructing the Cosmic View," Tseng examines the architectural layout of a specific religious structure, the Bright Hall, in the context of early imperial religious and political ideology, most notably the notion that earthly rule is a prerogative given by Heaven to its son, the emperor. Drawing on evidence provided by recent archaeological excavations in the former imperial capitals of Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an) and Luoyang, Tseng demonstrates that the fundamental design of the Bright Hall involved a combination of circles and squares, two motifs that are commonly associated with Heaven and Earth. In building the Bright Hall, she argues, Han artisans were simply translating these well-known cosmological tropes into architectural language to an audience who shared the common tacit knowledge of the circle-square symbolism (50). This allowed them to depict the Bright Hall not only as a ritualistic *place* where the emperor worshiped Heaven and declared the reception of its mandate but as a sacred *space*, an image of the cosmos (37).

In Chapter 2, "Engraving Auspicious Omens," Tseng discusses another important notion connected to communicability of Heaven's mandate, auspicious omens, through a detailed analysis of a specific site—the cliff carvings in the Western Passage, modern-day Gansu Province, which commemorate the administrative accomplishments of a local governor. These carvings contain textual inscriptions alongside visual representations of five auspicious omens—the yellow dragon, white deer, sweet dew, auspicious grain, and the interconnecting trees. The appearance of such omens, which were perceived as an indication of Heaven's support

or disapproval, was commonly used both by rulers to ascertain their political authority and by Confucian scholars to promote an ideal of moral government. By the Eastern Han [25–220 CE], argues Tseng, these auspicious omens were canonized both textually and visually. This process of standardization facilitated the identification of the omens' web of signification across the various social groups and geographical regions of the Han Empire. The depiction of commonly known omens along a frequently traveled route such as the Western Passage allowed the Han artisans to engage in an act of social communication. By publicizing the moral virtue of the governor who built it, they were able to perpetuate Heaven's approval of this project and solidify this message in public memory through visual imagery (147).

In Chapter 3, "Imagining Celestial Journeys," Tseng turns her attention away from the political and public aspects of Heaven to a more "individualistic approach to Heaven," namely its association with immortality and its visual depictions as an imagined extraterrestrial space inhabited by deities and immortals (152). Based on a close reading of key visual motifs depicting the celestial realm and its inhabitants found in Han elite funerary art, especially the tomb of Lady Dai found in Mawangdui, modern-day Hunan province, Tseng joins fellow scholar Wu Hung in suggesting that one of the main aims of Han tomb art was to function as a road map to Heaven to be used by the soul of the deceased (Wu 2010). Influenced by new notions of death and immortality, Han artisans began mapping out this remote and unknown space through standardized pictorial programs and symbols for the purpose of guiding the spirits of the dead to their new abode. This, concludes Tseng, is a good example of the influence of religious ideas on the development of new genres and mediums in Han visual cultures (233).

Chapter 4, "Highlighting Celestial Markers," focuses on Heaven as a physical space containing astral bodies. Tseng argues that Han artisans translated the astronomical layout of the sky into a conceptual Heaven through a recurring use of celestial markers such as the cardinal emblems, the Milky Way, and the sun and the moon (236). Originally derived from empirical astronomical observations, these markers later became standardized iconographical symbols associated with divine power. In Han funerary art, they were used conventionally as markers, identifying the depicted scene as celestial and asserting the role of the land of the immortals as a gateway to Heaven. Tseng surveys a variety of references to celestial markers in textual sources and concludes that these particular motifs were chosen by Han artisan since they already had cultural value and well-developed mythologies. This type of tacit knowledge, she concludes, "served as the bridge between the artisans and the intended viewers" (297).

In chapter 5, "Mapping Celestial Bodies," Tseng continues her discussion on the popularization of astronomical knowledge in the Han. Drawing on celestial treatises, maps, and rhymed *aides-mémoires* produced by Han literati, Tseng traces the growing interest in astronomical observations to the ascendancy of the correlative cosmology—the belief in a correlation between celestial phenomena and human affairs. The emergence of various models of the sky resulted in the creation of a repository of images from which Han artisans drew while creating their own subjective imagined visual models of Heaven. The use of celestial images in tomb art, stresses Tseng, was not just an "exercise in astronomy" or an attempt to accurately represent the physical sky but a conscious artistic effort to modify astronomical knowledge for a religious purpose—ensuring the safe ascension of the deceased to the heavenly realm (354). By employing these conventional visual markers, Han artisans were able to create a visual program for the deceased, equipping them with guidance and directions to their final destination—Heaven.

Tseng concludes by reasserting the value of studying visual culture in reconstructing the various meaning attached to Heaven in Early China. "Texts and images," she argues, "preserve different aspects of the past" (359). Artisans, much like philosophers or poets, transformed tacit knowledge into text by extracting diverse signs from the realms of cosmology, mythology, and astronomy, and then modified and rearranged them in order to suit their creative and religious goals. Making sense of the hermeneutics of the artistic process is thus crucial in discovering how Heaven was envisioned and understood by both artisans and viewers. Before addressing the implications of this book, I turn to Brashier's *Ancestral Memory in Early China*, which is, in many ways, a complementary textual companion to Tseng's visual study.

In his book, Brashier examines the history of the early Chinese ancestral cult, the cognitive aspects associated with its rituals, and its influence on the formation of conceptions of death and the netherworld in early China. The ultimate goal of this study on the mechanics of ancestral memory, declares Brashier, is "to excavate the color and vitality of the early ancestral cults, quelling our assumptions that it was a simplistic and uninspired exchange of food for longevity, of prayers for prosperity" (5). Drawing on a variety of early literary, philosophical, and religious textual sources, as well as modern theories of ritual, Brashier argues that ancestral worship was not simply a mechanical offering of sacrifice or passive reminiscence of the ancestors but an act of active meditation and focused thinking by the living designed to contact the dead and give them shape and existence. The cult of the ancestors thus represented a mature idea system that "aroused serious debates about the nature of postmortem

existence, served as the religious backbone to Confucianism, and may have even been the forerunner of Daoist and Buddhist meditation practices” (5).

In Part 1, “An Imaginary Yardstick for Ritual Performance,” Brashier analyzes textual descriptions of the basic ritual prescriptions that defined the ideal practice of ancestral worship. Drawing mostly on the *Ritual Records*, a ritual compendium edited in the Han Dynasty based on earlier sources, Brashier argues that these descriptions endeavored to “script an ideal performance” and thus represented an ideal blueprint or baseline against which actual ritual practices were measured (55). Brashier emphasizes that texts such as the *Ritual Records* were not produced as an attempt to create ancestral worship from scratch but to “streamline existing practice and iron out differences” (89). While we cannot be sure that all of this ritual system was ever fully implemented, its depiction functioned like a “rarely enforced speed limit on a major highway: most people knew the limits and accepted the rationality behind them but did not precisely abide by them” (99).

The discussion in Part 1 is indicative of Brashier’s main goal—uncovering the experiential and performative components of ritual participation. This, however, turns out to be a particularly tricky challenge in the case of early Chinese religion, as the only source of information available to the modern scholar is the idealized accounts preserved in texts such as the *Ritual Records*. Fully acknowledging this problem, Brashier dedicates Part 2, “A History of Remembering and Forgetting Imperial Ancestors,” to comparing the descriptions of these ritual systems to historical accounts of their implementation in order to ascertain how specific sociopolitical circumstances “percolated upwards to affect the prescriptive ancestral rituals” (104). Drawing mostly on official histories such as Sima Qian’s *Historical Records* and Ban Gu’s *Han Documents*, Brashier traces a history of debates over imperial ancestral worship through thirteen chronologically ordered cases and concludes that while the idealized prescriptions of ritual were never fully implemented, they were still incorporated into the language of imperial memorials and edicts and in some cases used to curb rulers who wished to deviate from commonly accepted ritual practices (182).

Whereas Part 2 focused on the living sacrificers, Part 3, “A Spectrum of Interpretations on Afterlife Existence,” deals with the recipients of the sacrificial offerings—the ancestors. Brashier’s main goal in this chapter is pointing out the diversity of early Chinese conceptions of death and the afterlife and the lack of one dominant attitude toward the ancestors. He identifies a spectrum of five mental attitudes toward ancestral spirits that highlight different visions of interactions between the dead and the living. These attitudes, which represent a “spectrum of approaches dependent upon the

degree of external agency assigned to the dead” (187), range from a mechanical *do ut des* model that treats the living and the dead as two distinct parties engaged in ritual commerce to a skeptical attitude that regards the dead as nonsentient beings and denies the possibility of interaction with them. The greatest emphasis is given to the mental attitudes that are situated in the middle of the spectrum, which stress the role of performative thinking and the role of ritual in the “making of the ancestors” (209). According to this model of ancestral worship, the survival of the ancestors is dependent on their continued existence in the memory of their descendants aided by the performance of sacrificial rituals. Ritual, in this sense, is an artificial tool designed to overcome the natural fading of the memory of the dead (208).

Brashier devotes the remainder of this book to studying the nature and role of performative ritual in the Chinese ancestral cult. In Part 4, “The Context of Early Chinese Performative Thinking,” he attempts to elucidate the “making of the ancestors” through an examination of other contemporaneous types of performative thinking in early China. Often articulated through cosmological terms, Chinese performative thinking asserts that reality can be manipulated through the medium of the mind and other artificial tools such as ritual and music.

Minds, especially the unique mind of the authoritative individuals such as rulers and sages, produce *qi* that can alter the physical world. Given the popularity of performative thinking in political and metaphysical thought, concludes Brashier, the ideas of “thought-sustained ancestors” and of “ritually thinking the ancestors into existence” was perfectly “reasonable and natural” in early China (279).

In the fifth and final part, “The Symbolic Language of Fading Memories,” Brashier examines the role of symbol clusters associated with death and remembrance in models of postmortem existence in early China. Depictions of the afterlife in textual sources and in tomb art, he argues, reveal that the relationship between life and death was often articulated through an interplay between light and darkness, clarity and fuzziness. Moreover, while the latter was seen as the natural situation of the cosmos, clarity and light were often characterized as artificially enhanced. Rituals, shrines, stele inscriptions, and other means of remembrance were seen as tools that can be used to ward off darkness for as long as possible (332). The provisional efficacy of these tools is important to Brashier since he sees impermanence as an inherent part of the ancestral cult. The ancestors, he emphasizes, were not conceived as immortal beings but as slowly fading energies and their worship was thus a part of “structured amnesia,” a way to deal with danger of death without letting it control the lives of the living. The intrinsic uncertainty of death led to attempts of compensation in the form of religious ideas, such intricate visions of the netherworld as a

bureaucratic realm, and practices, such as ancestral rituals. Ritual, in this sense, was seen as the most efficacious artificial tool designed to compensate the natural process of the fading of memory of the ancestors (347).

Brashier and Tseng's books are a welcome addition to the growing field of early China studies. Recent years have witnessed a surge in book-length monographs devoted to early Chinese funerary practices and visions of the netherworld (Cook 2006; Wu 2010), self-cultivation and individual pursuits of immortality (Poo 1998; Puett 2002), state cult (Bujard 2000), and ritual (Sterckx 2011; Ing 2012), as well as an impressive two-part edited volume dealing exclusively with religious beliefs and practices between the Shang and Han Dynasties [1250 BCE–220 CE] (Lagerwey and Kalinowski 2009). These studies are important because, as opposed to other religious traditions and to some extent also to China's two organized religious traditions of Daoism and Buddhism, what modern scholars refer to as "early Chinese religion" is a rather amorphous entity, devoid of a canonical set of sacred scriptures, organized clergy, or a fixed pantheon. Brashier himself is aware of the limitation in using the category of "religion," with its inherent post-Reformation Protestant baggage, to describe early Chinese discourse on postmortem existence, which, according to him, emphasized "shared origins and common practices" over sectarian concerns of "differing beliefs" (41).

Since early Chinese religion does not have a single authoritative canon or a fixed body of praxis, reconstructing its diverse beliefs and rituals requires a multifaceted effort combining the study of material and textual sources. In this sense, despite the difference in their methodology and academic disciplines, Tseng and Brashier can both be regarded as archaeologists attempting to reconstruct coherent idea systems by sifting through fragments of information. Tseng surveys a wide variety of recently excavated material sources in order to elucidate the different facets of Heaven, while Brashier is engaged in archaeology of ideas, trying to bring the rituals of the ancestral cult and the religious beliefs that accompanied them into life based on their description in prescriptive ritual manuals, philosophical treatises, and historical documents.

Although Tseng and Brashier share a similar scholarly agenda and topic, namely Han Dynasty images of the extrahuman world, both play to their own strengths and seldom venture beyond the borders of their given academic disciplines. Tseng, an art historian, devotes her efforts in deciphering visual motifs associated with Heaven and deliberately tries to eschew the tendency of some scholars to "view the image as a visual translation of the textual tradition" (170). Brashier, on the other hand, focuses almost entirely on textual sources and, except in a few specific cases (80–89), rarely attempts to use material evidence from

recent archaeological excavations to elucidate textual descriptions. For these reasons, while both studies contain numerous valuable insights on their own, reading the two books side by side makes for a particularly rewarding experience.

One case in point is Tseng and Brashier's analyses of the influence of man-made constructs on the augmentation of memory retention. In her study of the Western Passage, Tseng discusses the power of the visual image and depicts the carving of auspicious omens on a permanent and public medium such as the cliff stone walls as part of an attempt to defy their transience and perpetuate their presence in communal memory (147). Brashier's analysis of the ancestral cult focuses on a different man-made tool, ritual, which he defines as an artificial tool that allows humans to compensate for the natural fading of the memories of their ancestors (208). In effect, the Han artisans who tried to create visual depictions of Heaven and the Han literati who constructed elaborate ritual systems to venerate their ancestors were both engaged in a similar project—giving form to what lies beyond the human realm, whether it be Heaven or the netherworld. Moreover, Tseng and Brashier equally demonstrate how human experience structures our conceptions of the extrahuman world. Tseng, for example, presents the Han model of Heaven as a combination of empirical observations and subjective projections from the sociopolitical structure of the Han Empire (310). Brashier, on his end, demonstrates that the projection of earthly man-made structures on the netherworld and the anthropomorphization of the ancestors were part of an attempt to bestow a sense of order and familiarity onto an otherwise chaotic postmortem existence (347).

Both books are meticulously researched and draw on an impressive range of primary textual and material sources. Given the thoroughness of these studies, it is quite surprising that Tseng and Brashier pay such little attention to what may be the most important development in the field of early China, namely the recent discovery of excavated manuscripts that were never transmitted into the received literary corpus. The bamboo and silk manuscripts found in sites such as Mawangdui, Fangmatan, and Shuihudi reveal the existence of a flourishing literary tradition comprised of ritual almanacs, technical self-cultivation manuals, and divination and exorcism handbooks, which offer us a glimpse into the realm of popular religiosity. Moreover, analysis of these manuscripts suggests that the authors of these texts, namely astrologers, physicians, diviners, and other ritual specialists, were active participants in the Warring States' intellectual scene and their literature functioned as an important vehicle for the transmission of ideas from popular religion to elite philosophical discourse (Kalinowski 2004).

The new information revealed in recently excavated manuscripts is especially pertinent to the range of topics raised by Tseng and Brashier, such as the nature of death and postmortem existence and the interaction between the humans and ghosts and spirits. Poo Mu-chou, for example, utilizes the Shuihudi demonographies to show the central role played by ritualistic interaction with ghosts and spirits among all social strata in the Han (Poo 1998). Donald Harper, drawing on texts from the Fangmatan corpus that deal with the notion of resurrection, argues that bureaucratic models of the netherworld can be traced back as far as the Warring States period [453–211 BCE] (Harper 1994). Lastly, Anna Seidel's study of late Han tomb ordinances reveals an array of coherent beliefs regarding postmortem existence that were later incorporated into organized Daoism (Seidel 1987).

While some of these studies are briefly mentioned by Tseng and Brashier, their decision to focus on the received literary corpus limits their conclusions to the realm of elite religiosity. Moreover, this strategy also prevents them from dealing with issue of regional variants and the question of local religion. In her study of the Tomb of Shao Tuo in Baoshan, modern-day Hubei Province, Constance Cook analyzes the architectural layout of the tomb, the various funerary artifacts found in it, and the contents of the divinatory and administrative bamboo manuscripts discovered alongside them, and concludes that these reflect local religious beliefs and practices unique to the ancient state of Chu (Cook 2006). While the Han regime strived to deemphasize regional differences in favor of a homogeneous imperial ideology, local identity continued to play a significant role in the realm of religious life. Tseng tendency to conflate depictions of Heaven takes from a wide variety of geographical regions under the rubric of "Han visual culture" certainly downplays the role of regional variation. Moreover, Tseng's discussion on omenology, for example, could have benefited from the conclusions drawn by Harper based on the Mawangdui silk manuscripts (Harper 2007), especially since most of the third chapter of her book is devoted to the layout of that tomb and the funerary art it contains.

All in all, when read in concert, these two studies provide the reader many new insights on Han elite religion. Tseng's book, which contains about 300 skillfully reproduced images, rubbings, and drawings, will mostly appeal to students and scholars of Chinese art and culture. While Tseng sites Cassirer, Merleau-Ponty, and E.H. Gombrich as sources of inspiration and reveals that her interest in images of Heaven in the Han derived from studying theories of semiotics, she also stresses that the purpose of her book "is not to fill Western theoretical framework with Chinese data but to exploit whatever approaches facilitate

our understanding of the visual representation of Heaven in Han China" (12). Brashier, on the other hand, is fully versed in contemporary religious studies discourse and is motivated by a desire to "derive a larger lesson for comparative religions from this analysis of the early Chinese ancestral cult" (345). Drawing on the writings of seminal Western theorists such as Durkheim, Eliade, and Ricoeur, as well as the contemporary ritual theories of Catherine Bell, Roy Rappaport, and Harvey Whitehouse, Brashier tackles fundamental questions such as the limitations of using the Western category of "religion" to describe the early Chinese ancestral cult (35–40) and the role of ritual as digital framing technique designed to combat the natural analogical process of fading memory of the deceased in the mind of their descendents (347). Brashier's astute application of Western theory to highlight certain aspects of Chinese beliefs and practices, and his attempts to use his explication of the discourse surrounding the early ancestral cult and postmortem existence in order to draw attention to religious concerns regarding death, remembrance, and the efficacy of ritual, make this study valuable to all scholars of religion.

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