

Aesthetic analysis of the pattern of West queen mothers in the Shandong region during the Han dynasty

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Abstract The West Queen Mother, as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon, has long been the subject of scholarly attention. In recent years, particularly with the rise of traditional Chinese culture, the cultural significance of the West Queen Mother has gained considerable popularity. In the realms of cultural creativity, animation, and gaming, the portrayal of the West Queen Mother has undergone further evolution and innovation, resulting in corresponding shifts in aesthetics. This research investigates the content classification and features of the West Queen Mother's pattern in the Shandong region during the Han Dynasty. By employing a combined approach of pattern analysis and Chinese aesthetics, the aim is to gain a deeper and multifaceted understanding of the culture surrounding the West Queen Mother. This study interprets the aesthetic style and factors associated with the Queen Mother from the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetics. The conclusion drawn is that the pattern of the West Queen Mother in the Shandong region during the Han Dynasty exhibits aesthetic characteristics ranging from a flat abstraction with simplicity and naturalness to order, normativity, and symbolic representation of divinity. These characteristics demonstrate the richness of Han culture and reflect the Confucian aesthetic concept of the harmony between heaven and humanity, encompassing auspiciousness, loyalty, and filial piety as the highest moral standards, thereby aligning with the prevailing spirit and sociocultural context of the time.

Keywords: west queen mother, han dynasty, patterns, aesthetics

1. Introduction

The West Queen Mother, as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon, has long been the focus of scholarly attention. Especially in recent years, with the rise of a nationalistic trend, the culture surrounding the West Queen Mother has gained significant popularity. In the domains of cultural creativity, animation, and gaming, the portrayal of the West Queen Mother has undergone further evolution and recreation, leading to corresponding changes in aesthetics. The beloved myth of the West Queen Mother has deeply captured people's affection, and although her pattern has undergone multiple transformations throughout the vast expanse of history, she has already become ingrained in the collective memory of the Chinese nation. In this regard, we must delve into the Two Han Dynasties, during which the culture of the West Queen Mother experienced unprecedented flourishing (Fang, 1946). The initial pattern of the West Queen Mother can be traced back to the early Western Han period in the "Shan Hai Jing," where she was depicted as a half-human, half-beast creature with a "leopard's tail, tiger's teeth, and a skillful howl." These portrayals revealed the prototype of the West Queen Mother. The pattern of the Queen Mother during the Western Han period presented her as rugged, mysterious, barbaric, and powerful, almost verging on caricature. However, a fundamental transformation occurred during the Eastern Han period, evolving from a fierce half-human, half-beast deity to a benevolent goddess holding the "Elixir of Immortality." This portrayal continued to evolve until the Wei and Jin periods, when she was depicted as the chief among female immortals with a refined appearance. This nearly 180-degree shift in her pattern undoubtedly reflects the iterative updates of the worldview and aesthetic values within the Central Plains civilization. (Mao, 1981; Loewe, 1979).

According to existing research findings, more than 200 pictorial texts featuring the pattern of the West Queen Mother have been discovered in Han tomb murals. Categorized by region, the main distribution areas of West Queen Mother pictorial stones are the Su-Lu-Yu-Wan, Yu-Zhong-Nan, Shanbei, and Sichuan regions. Among them, the Shandong region possesses the largest number of Queen Mothers of West pictorial stones. The discovered pictorial stones from the Shandong region exhibit certain representativeness in terms of their compositional structure, the characteristics of figures and animals, and so on. Taking the Han Dynasty pattern of the West Queen Mother in the Shandong region as an example, after enduring the trials of time, her pattern evolved from a half-human, half-beast to that of a barbarian goddess and eventually to the chief among female immortals. This begs the question of whether modern aesthetics concerning the pattern of the West Queen Mother maintain continuity with the past, aligning with the prevailing spirit and sociocultural context of the time (Wu, 1989).

2. Literature Review

The study of the pattern of the West Queen Mother is a highly significant research focus. Since the early 20th century, scholars such as Sun Zuoyun and Fang Shiming have emphasized the study of the West Queen Mother's pictorial representations of Han pictorial stones and bricks based on archaeological evidence, becoming an essential component in research on the cultural phenomenon of the West Queen Mother. In the 1980s and 1990s, prominent scholars engaged in research on the West Queen Mother's pattern included Yu Weichao, Tang Chi, Wu Zengde, Cong Dexin, Li Song, Wu Hong, and Lu Weiyi, among others. Apart from studying Queen Mother's representations of pictorial stones (bricks), bronze mirrors, and inscriptions, some scholars have combined other unearthed artifacts to investigate the West Queen Mother. For example, Fang Shiming proposed the concept of "Qinghai as the land of the West Queen Mother" in his work "Study of the Legend of the West Queen Mother" (Shiming, 1946). Wang Zhen referenced the dancer patterns on colorful pottery bowls unearthed from Datong in Qinghai and suggested that they were fundamentally similar to the pattern of the West Queen Mother described in the "Shan Hai Jing."

According to the research findings related to the pattern of the West Queen Mother, the methods and perspectives of some overseas scholars also deserve attention. For instance, Michael Loewe's book "Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality" examines the West Queen Mother on pictorial stones and bronze mirrors from Shandong, combined with Han dynasty literary sources, to study the relationship between the Queen Mother and belief in immortality (Loewe, 1979). Wu Hong, in the essay "Xiwangmu, the West Queen Mother: The Western Goddess", takes the pattern of the Queen Mother in Han pictorial representations as the primary research subject and argues that the evolution of the Queen Mother's pattern is closely related to the spread of Indian Buddhist art (Hong, 1989).

Overall, considerable emphasis has been placed on linguistic literature in historical research, but relatively less attention has been given to visual documents. When reviewing the research findings of modern and contemporary scholars on the West Queen Mother, it is evident that most of these studies mainly rely on classical Chinese literary materials, occasionally supplemented by historical research or geographical discoveries, or even incorporating religious and folk customs. However, none of these studies have elevated the discussion and analysis of the Queen Mother's pattern to an aesthetic perspective.

3. Research methodology

The research methodology combines pattern analysis with traditional Chinese aesthetics, offering diverse perspectives and in-depth understanding while studying the pattern of the West Queen Mother. From the perspective of pattern analysis, pattern analysis is a discipline that focuses on studying patterns, including aspects such as their generation, expression, and transmission. When studying the pattern of the West Queen Mother, pattern analysis is employed to analyze and interpret the pattern found in the Shandong region during the Han Dynasty. Through the analysis of content, classification, and symbol meanings, the aesthetic significance of the Queen Mother's pattern in visual expression is revealed.

The Wu Liang Shrine is derived from the acronym Jiaxiang Wu Family shrines. This artifact was detected in the northern region of Wudishan village, which is located in Jiaxiang County, Shandong Province. This artwork originated in the early years of Emperor Heng's rule during the Eastern Han dynasty in 151 AD. It is a representative piece that was made at the peak of the worship of the Queen Mothers. The "Sage Kings Image" stands out as the most visually striking of the stone portraits at the Wu Liang Shrine (Yuan, 1991). The stone portrait is intricately etched on the western wall of the Wu Liang Shrine. The archaeological report provides a description of it in the following manner:

The engravings on the western wall of the Wu Liang Shrine: Wu Liang Shrine III is the initial designation of the stone. The top portion of this stone features a distinctively acute arch. The picture is divided into five vertically arranged levels, each adorned with friezes or straight bars embellished with intricate moire patterns, double diamond patterns, interconnected arc patterns, and other similar designs. Within the central position of the primary tier's arch, the Queen Mother is accompanied by otherworldly beings and attendants such as celestial entities adorned with feathers, the lunar rabbit, the three-legged toad (a manifestation of Chang'e), and an avian monster with a human head. The second layer showcases engravings of prominent figures from Chinese creation mythology and ancient emperors, including Fuxi and Nüwa, as well as Zhurong (the god of fire), Shennong (the second mythical emperor), Huangdi (also known as the "Yellow Emperor" and the third mythological emperor of ancient China), Zhuanxu (or Gaoyang, the grandson of the "Yellow Emperor"), Emperor Ku (also known as Gaoxin, one of the Five Emperors and a descendant of the Yellow Emperor, also referred to as the "White Emperor"), Emperor Yao (the second son of Emperor Ku), Emperor Shun (the last of the Five Emperors), Xia Yu (or Yu the Great, a legendary king who established the Xia dynasty in ancient China), and Xia Jie (or Jie of Xia, the last ruler of the Xia dynasty). Their titles are listed from right to left. On the third layer, positioned from the right, there are depictions of four filial sons along with their corresponding titles: Zengzi's mother discarding the shuttle upon hearing rumors (Zeng mu tou zhu), Min Ziqian losing control of the whip and carriage while driving, hermit Laolaizi devising means to entertain his parents, and Ding Lan crafting woodcarvings of his parents. On the fourth layer, positioned from the right side, renowned tales of assassins are depicted, such as Cao Zi's manipulation of Duke Huan of Qi to relinquish territory to Lu, Zhuan Zhu's murder of

King Liao at a banquet using a concealed knife inside a fish, and Jing Ke's failed attempt to assassinate King Zheng of Qin. Each story is accompanied by a title. The sixth layer depicts a leftward procession of chariots (Jiang & Wu 1980; Zhu, 1992).

In "Wu Liang Shrine III", two distinct universes are shown. The uppermost stratum encompasses the realm of longevity and immortality, where the Queen Mother dwells, while the subsequent four strata correspond to the tangible reality. While the actual world consists of four layers, the eternal universe is composed of just one. Positioned at the highest layer, the Queen Mother exerts a visual dominance over everything below. The concept entails the Queen Mother serving as a spiritual guide, facilitating the owner's transition from the mortal realm to a state of enduring life and immortality. It is a purposeful arrangement designed to enhance her prominence in the photo. The depiction of the Queen Mother in a position of elevated prominence is also prevalent in other Han stone reliefs. Nevertheless, eleven legendary rulers rank below the Queen Mother, which is a noteworthy occurrence.

These eleven legendary rulers had a very elevated status in the tangible realm of the Han Dynasty. Furthermore, in addition to receiving devotion and admiration, they also undertook many distinct social governing roles. For example, Fuxi and Nüwa fostered the development of the human race, while the Yellow Emperor assumed the role of a deity who is considered the ancestor of all. Although these tasks did not have a direct impact on the owner's daily life in the ancestral hall, they were intricately connected to the government of society. If the Queen Mother had the same role in governing society, then it was logical for her to be ranked above the legendary emperors. In addition to depictions of emperors, there are also illustrations of dutiful sons, narratives from the Warring States era, and images of chariot processions, among other significant real-world events. These subjects may also be included within the realm of social government.

Academics have observed the occurrence of the Queen Mother in two distinct realms. According to Professor Wu Hung, the depictions of the Queen Mother, the King Father, and their divine abodes are considered "iconic," but the lower elements of the heavenly realm are arranged in a "episodic" manner. Accordingly, he asserts that the two processes of composition suggest distinct approaches to making and perceiving artworks. The increase in the religious importance of the Queen Mother, particularly in relation to her divine status, required the creation of a new iconic representation to symbolize her deity. The emergence of this art form signifies a shift toward a purely devotional image, which reached its peak in later Buddhist art during the Northern and Southern dynasties. Professor Wu examines the two realms of the Queen Mother using "iconic" and "episodic" compositional approaches. This method deviates from the conventional understanding of the contrast between the real world and the world of eternal life, but it serves as a reminder of the significance of this contrast. The placement of the picture of the Queen Mother above the images of eleven mythical or legendary monarchs has symbolic significance, representing the social and religious role of the Queen Mother as the ultimate ruler over mortal humans. Michael Loewe and Primarily, the Queen Mother of the West habitually adorns a distinctive crown as an essential characteristic. The crown may be seen as a representation of her authority to intricately connect the fabric of the cosmos, signifying the ability to sustain human existence. Furthermore, the concept of Yin and Yang is often depicted via several means, either through verbal portrayal or visual representation.

Loewe's correlation of "weaving the web of the universe" with "sustaining human existence" aligns with our perspective that the Queen Mother bears two distinct but interconnected divine obligations: to govern both the eternal realm and the mortal realm.

The primary source of information on the patrons of Han stone reliefs is derived from archaeological excavations. These excavations revealed that neither the individuals buried in the tombs nor those involved in the building of the tombs possessed significant social standing. Han tomb inscriptions adorned with stone reliefs indicate that these burial places are of lower social status. Yang Aiguo, a specialist in Han stone relief, performed a statistical examination of the stone reliefs utilized as embellishments for Han tombs. His findings reveal that the tomb of Liu Chong 劉崇 King Qing of Chen of the Eastern Han dynasty is the sole excavated Han tomb that belongs to a vassal king, indicating the highest level of status among these tombs. The tomb of Liu Chong is characterized by its immense size, yet it has limited stone relief. These reliefs are mostly found near the entry gate of the tomb. The precise provenance of an additional stone relief piece discovered in the tomb cannot be ascertained. Evidently, the stone reliefs were not the primary form of ornamentation in the graves of the princes and kings of the Han period. The use of stone reliefs as stepping stones for the toilet inside the murals of the stone tomb located on the cliff side at Shiyuan, Yongcheng, and Henan might serve as evidence.

Furthermore, from the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetics, Chinese aesthetics is the study of traditional Chinese artistic aesthetic thoughts and concepts. Combining Chinese aesthetics with pattern analysis allows for an interpretation of the aesthetic characteristics and factors associated with the pattern of the West Queen Mother in the Shandong region during the Han Dynasty, as well as its connection to the contemporary sociocultural context and value system.

By combining pattern analysis and traditional Chinese aesthetics, this research methodology provides diverse perspectives and research tools, integrating different methodologies and theories to enrich the understanding of the pattern of the West Queen Mother. This comprehensive approach allows for a more profound exploration and interpretation of the visual expression and aesthetic significance of the Queen Mother's pattern in the Shandong region during the Han Dynasty. It offers a new pathway and perspective for the study of Queen Mother's culture, promoting a more in-depth exploration of

ancient Chinese artistic aesthetics and cultural traditions and leading to a comprehensive and profound investigation of the visual expression and aesthetic significance of the Queen Mother's pattern.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Western Queen Mother Pattern Classification and Content Analysis

3.1.1. Historical Evolution of the West Queen Mother Myth

The historical evolution of the West Queen Mother Myth has always been a focal point of research. Mao Dun, in his work "Mythology Studies," uses the "Western Queen Mother Myth" as an example to divide the historical development and evolution of the West Queen Mother Myth into three stages: the first stage is the transformation of the West Queen Mother from a fierce half-human, half-beast deity in the "Shan Hai Jing" to a benevolent goddess holding the "Elixir of Immortality" in the "Huainanzi"; the second stage involves the transformation of the item held by the West Queen Mother from the "Elixir of Immortality" to the "Peach"; the third stage, which occurred during the Wei and Jin periods, saw the West Queen Mother become the "leader of the immortals," and the myth of the West Queen Mother reached its final embellishment and completion (Mao, 1981). This categorization has had a profound influence, and scholars generally agree with Mao Dun's view of the evolution of the West Queen Mother myth. Yuan Ke, in "The History of Chinese Mythology," also provided a summary of the evolution of the West Queen Mother myth. In the later stages, the pattern of the West Queen Mother was mostly fixed, but during the turbulent period of the Sixteen Kingdoms, her influence gradually declined, and the popularity of the West Queen Mother waned during the Sui and Tang dynasties. During the Northern Song period, the West Queen Mother's pattern experienced a preliminary revival, but the portrayal became more conservative. It was not until the Ming and Qing periods that the West Queen Mother transformed into the "Queen Mother of the West" and appeared in novels and dramas, often paired with the Jade Emperor. Today, mythological stories are still prevalent in people's lives, and the West Queen Mother has been revived in various forms, accommodating diversity and appearing in games, animation, and cultural creations.

In summary, during the Two Han Dynasties, the historical evolution of the West Queen Mother was completed, transforming from a combination of humans and beasts to a female goddess, and it developed comprehensively and became popular. During the Wei and Jin periods, she transformed into the chief among female immortals and became part of the Taoist system, gradually declining afterward.

3.1.2. Classification of Western Queen Mother Patterns

The pattern of the West Queen Mother during the Han Dynasty mainly appeared in two types of art pieces: tomb murals and relief sculptures on the back of bronze mirrors. In terms of usage, the former mainly appeared in tombs, while the latter were primarily used as everyday utensils. Some of the bronze mirrors also served as burial goods in the Han Dynasty tombs. Hence, due to the difference in usage, the depiction of the West Queen Mother in these two types of pattern texts also differed. This study primarily focuses on the West Queen Mother pattern in Han Tomb murals.

Within the two types of Western Queen Mother pattern systems, there are also representations of toads, jade rabbits, three green birds, Donghuang Gong, and other characters, animals, and plant patterns, forming a complex pattern text. Therefore, the pattern of the West Queen Mother is classified into four categories: 1) the West Queen Mother with extraordinary animals; 2) the West Queen Mother with magical plants; 3) the West Queen Mother with other deities; and 4) the West Queen Mother with immortal mountains.

3.1.3. Content Analysis of the West Queen Mother Patterns

(1) West Queen Mother and Extraordinary Animals: In the pattern of the West Queen Mother during the Han Dynasty, her connection with animals remained significant. First, due to the importance of the moon in ancient cosmology, the West Queen Mother was often associated with toads and jade rabbits. For instance, in the mural on the west wall of the Wu Family Temple, there are patterns of toad dancing and a jade rabbit pounding medicine on both sides of the West Queen Mother. Second, under the influence of symbolist thought, mythical creatures such as the Nine-Tailed Fox and the Three-Legged Crow from pre-Qin mythology were given new symbolism during the Han Dynasty. Figure 6 shows a stone relief from Jin Dou Shan in Zou Cheng, Shandong Province, which depicts the West Queen Mother sitting on a high platform that resembles a Lingzhi mushroom. Below her, there are representations of mythical creatures such as the Nine-Tailed Fox, the Divine Deer Dragon, the Tiger, and the Xuanwu. The three-legged crow also appears in some depictions. Additionally, the White Tiger or Dragon-Tiger Seat also holds significance in relation to the West Queen Mother. A stone relief from Bei Zhai village in Yinan County, Linyi city, Shandong Province, depicts a tiger near the West Queen Mother; on the other hand, there is a corresponding blue dragon near Dong Wang Gong. Similar examples can be found in the Shénrén Lóngǔ Huàxiàng Jìng (神人龙虎画像镜) and other artifacts, representing the duality of the universe. Sometimes, patterns such as the pottery figurine of the West Queen

Mother sitting on a Dragon-Tiger Seat alone can also be found, showcasing these extraordinary animals as integral cultural symbols in the West Queen Mother myth (Wang, 2012).

(2) West Queen Mother and Magical Plants: When talking about the West Queen Mother or Queen Mother of the West, the grand feast of the Peaches of Immortality (蟠桃会) is perhaps the most well-known event. The longing of Queen Mother's magical peaches is often vividly reflected in various depictions of the West Queen Mother. Originally, the Peaches of Immortality were not truly the Elixir of Immortality, but they became closely associated with the West Queen Mother. In legends, the peaches were said to be extremely delicious, and Emperor Wu of Han requested them, leading to the story that the Queen Mother gave him five peaches out of the seven she possessed, having already consumed two herself (from Han Wu Di Shi). The portrayal of the Peach Banquet became a recurring theme in the literature: the Yuan Zaju and Ming-Qing novels. Thus, the magical peaches gradually became an indispensable element in the mythological pattern of the West Queen Mother. Before the Peaches of Immortality became a focal point, Lingzhi mushrooms were the rare treasures held by the West Queen Mother. During the Eastern Han period, the pattern of the West Queen Mother often featured Lingzhi mushrooms, a stone relief from Song Shan in Jiexiang County, Jining City, Shandong Province. In this relief, the West Queen Mother is sitting on a high platform resembling a Lingzhi mushroom. Surrounding her are many winged figures offering various offerings. Such decorations of vine-like plants in the patterns are numerous.

(3) West Queen Mother and Other Deities: The West Queen Mother is often paired with the Eastern King Father, representing the west and east in ancient cosmology. From the Eastern Han Dynasty onward, whether in Eastern Han murals or later temple constructions, they often appear together, representing the celestial couple ruling over male and female immortals. In the "Hai Nei Shi Zho" ("Sea Inside Ten Countries") chapter, the text states, "Under the copper pillar of Kunlun, there is a place called Hui Wu, with steep cliffs that are several zhang high, and there are birds named Xiyou. The bird's left wing covers the Eastern King Father, and the right wing covers the West Queen Mother." Apart from the Eastern King Father, figures such as Nüwa, Fuxi, Wang Zi Qiao, and Chi Songzi are also closely related to the West Queen Mother. A stone relief from Biguo village in Tengzhou city, Shandong Province, dating from the mid-Eastern Han period and now housed in the Tengzhou Museum, depicts the West Queen Mother sitting on the left with a heavenly umbrella covering her head. On both sides of her, there are figures of Nüwa and Fuxi in a copulating posture. Nüwa and Fuxi were legendary figures associated with harmonizing yin and yang, practicing transcendence, and escaping the cycle of life and death. As the West Queen Mother controlled the Elixir of Immortality and governed life and death, they also appeared in her pattern. Dongfang Shuo was an early figure closely related to the West Queen Mother in ancient mythology. Records in "Bo Wu Zhi" mention that Emperor Wu of Han met the West Queen Mother, and no one else could enter the hall except for Dongfang Shuo, who secretly observed her from the south chamber. The West Queen Mother noticed him and told Emperor Wu about the peeping, which was a great surprise. This incident led to Dongfang Shuo being regarded as a celestial being. This tale continued the myth of Dongfang Shuo secretly stealing the peaches.

In later legends of celestial beings, figures such as Shouxing Laoren (寿星老人, Old Man of Longevity), the Eight Immortals, Laozi, and Magu, who bestow long life, also appear in various paintings and prints from the Ming and Qing periods, having close connections with the West Queen Mother. In novels such as the "Journey to the West," the elixirs created by Laozi and the West Queen Mother's peaches are both considered treasures capable of granting eternal life.

(4) West Queen Mother and Celestial Mountains: From the "Shan Hai Jing" (Classic of Mountains and Seas) onward, the myth of the West Queen Mother has been closely connected with the Kunlun myth. In the "Shan Hai Jing," the West Queen Mother resides on Jade Mountain, which is to the west of Kunlun Mountain. The "Hai Nei Bei Jing" chapter mentions that the West Queen Mother resides "north of the virtual Kunlun." The "Da Huang Xi Jing" chapter explicitly states that the West Queen Mother resides in a cave on Kunlun Mountain: "South of the West Sea, beside the Flowing Sands, after the Red Water, before the Black Water, there is a great mountain called the Kunlun Hill. A person named Dai Sheng, with tiger teeth and a leopard tail, resides in a cave named the West Queen Mother. This mountain possesses all things." (Yuan, 1991) Kunlun Mountain was the core area of pre-Qin mythology, the capital city of the Heavenly Emperor in the mortal realm, the abode of many deities and treasures, the source of the Yellow River, and a paradise where everything was abundant. The West Queen Mother's connection with Kunlun Mountain highlights her boundless divine power and exalted status.

The "Hai Nei Shi Zhuan" describes Kunlun Mountain as having "three corners, ten thousand li wide, and shaped like a basin, narrow at the bottom and wide at the top; thus, it is named Kunlun Mountain Three Corners." This specific description reflects people's yearning and infinite anticipation for Kunlun as a place of ascent to immortality during that time. From the "Shan Hai Jing" to the "Hai Nei Shi Zhuan," the relationship between the West Queen Mother and Kunlun Mountain became increasingly clear, and the descriptions of Kunlun Mountain became more specific. Correspondingly, the pattern of the West Queen Mother is often depicted on top of multitiered murals or on celestial mountains and platforms. The most distinctive example is Figures 2-12, a Han tomb mural from Bei Zhai village in Yinan County, Shandong Province. Both the West Queen Mother and the Eastern King Father are seated on the "mountain" character-shaped Kunlun Mountains, and dragons, tigers, immortals, and jade rabbits vividly depict their identities and the sanctity of Kunlun Mountain. The character "山" (mountain) in Chinese also resembles the description of "Kunlun Mountain Three Corners" in the literature. Other depictions, whether

set on the sea, in the mountains, or in the clouds of the Yaochi, reflect different imaginations of Kunlun and the world of immortals by later generations.

3.2. Characteristics of Western Queen Mother Patterns in the Shandong Region

During the collection and compilation of Western Queen Mother patterns in the Shandong region, four significant characteristics were summarized. Firstly, the Western Queen Mother is primarily depicted from a frontal angle, with fewer depictions in a three-quarter profile. Secondly, the extant patterns are mainly carved on portrait stones, with a considerable proportion being stone shrine portraits. Thirdly, distinct styles are exhibited in different regions, forming regional schools, with the Jiaxiang style being the most distinctive. Lastly, the majority of these patterns date back to the Eastern Han period.

3.3. Aesthetic Style of Western Queen Mothers in the Shandong Region

Shandong and its surrounding areas are the most abundant regions for Han dynasty portrait stones and are mainly concentrated in the southern part of Shandong, including the northern part of Jiangsu, with Xuzhou as its center, as well as northern Anhui and eastern Henan. Pattern types are generally classified into the same region. The existing Western Queen Mother patterns in this area are primarily in the form of portrait stones (funeral chamber portrait stones and shrine portrait stones), which exhibit relatively simple forms. However, these patterns also display different patterns due to regional and temporal variations. We can use four classification methods to describe these styles:

1. Carving Techniques and Styles: The two main styles are the Jiaxiang style and the Tengxian style. The former is closer to flat-plane painting, emphasizing the edges and contour lines of the objects; the latter features shallow relief carving, creating a sense of volume and depth.

2. Styles of Western Queen Mother Patterns: Four main styles can be identified: Jiaxiang style, Tengxian style, Yinan style, and Xuzhou style.

3. Classification based on time and the relationship with Western Queen Mother patterns: This classification divides the patterns into two stages: the early stage, represented by single Western Queen Mother patterns with no corresponding paired patterns (Eastern King patterns), dating back to approximately the 1st century AD; the later stage, represented by paired patterns (Western Queen Mother and Eastern King) during the Eastern Han period.

4. Classification based on Shrine patterns: This classification divides the patterns into three types: Shrine pattern Type I, Shrine pattern Type H, and Shrine pattern Type L.

The categorization and dating of Han dynasty portrait stones in Shandong Province have been reliably discussed by scholars such as Jiang Yingju and Wu Wenqi from the Shandong Provincial Stone Carving Art Museum and Xing Lixiang from the China National Museum of History. Jiang and Wu divided the Shandong portrait stones into early and late stages, with Emperor He's ascension to the throne (AD 89) as the dividing point, starting from the late Western Han period. Xing Lixiang, on the other hand, classified them into three to four periods based on tomb portraits, shrine portraits, and gateway portraits: early stage (late Western Han to early Eastern Han), middle stage (mid-Eastern Han), and late stage (late Eastern Han). The author of this paper agrees with Jiang and Wu's early- and late-stage division methods. Now, we will discuss the aesthetic styles of Western Queen Mother patterns in chronological order, taking into account the styles mentioned above.

3.3.1. Aesthetic Style of Early Western Queen Mother Patterns in the Shandong Region (Late Western Han to Early Eastern Han)

During the early Eastern Han period, Western Queen Mother Patterns were depicted individually, without corresponding symmetrical patterns. For the purposes of this text, the early Eastern Han period generally refers to the 1st century AD when the Eastern King patterns had not yet been produced. Jiang Yingju noted that most of the early portraits in this region were stone coffins, with the portraits carved on the boards of the coffins originating from wooden coffins. The time frame for this period was from the late Western Han to the Wang Mang era. Notably, some of the late period patterns during this time depict mythological characters related to the West Queen Mother. The early batch of portrait stones from stone coffins is likely the oldest, and most of these Western Queen Mother patterns are portrayed from a frontal angle. A typical example is the stone coffin portrait from the Xishan Tomb in Peixian, Xuzhou, Jiangsu. The tomb is believed to be from the early Eastern Han period. The West Queen Mother pattern is carved on the inner wall to the right of the middle coffin. The pattern can be divided into three sections from left to right: the first section depicts the West Queen Mother and her attendees, with the West Queen Mother sitting on the pavilion, wearing the Daisheng crown and leaning on a table. There is a large bird feeding from her hand, possibly the three green birds that bring her food. Outside the pavilion, two figures are seen pounding medicine (not rabbits). Above, there is a bird bringing food and a nine-tailed fox also holding food. Below, there are four worshippers, each with a different appearance: a human head and snake body, a horse head and human body, a chicken head and human body, and a crowned elder. The second section depicts a bird shooting scene, and the third section portrays entertainment scenes, including a building drum, dance, and a cockfight. Another pattern inside the stone coffin, positioned opposite to this pattern, depicts the scene of a funeral, as correctly identified in the archaeological report.

It shows the funeral process and the scene of driving away evil spirits, corresponding to the scene of worshipping the West Queen Mother, forming a continuous narrative of the funeral, driving away evil spirits, carrying travel, and finally meeting the West Queen Mother, representing a complete process (Jiang, 1987).

Another stone coffin portrait found in Weishan County, Shandong, is somewhat similar to that in Peixian. The pattern is divided into three sections: on the left side, the West Queen Mother is still seated in the pavilion, facing forward, with an attendant on each side. Below, there are five standing worshippers: a bird-headed human, a horse-headed human, and two human-headed snake-bodied figures, as well as one standing person. The human-headed snake-bodied figures are all holding items, most likely symbolic of Fu Xi and Nüwa. The second section shows a scene of carriages and horses, and the third section depicts driving away evil spirits. The archaeological report accurately identified the time frame as late Western Han to early Eastern Han, and the pattern opposite this one on the stone coffin portrays a funeral scene, representing the continuous narrative of the funeral, driving away evil spirits, carriage travel, and finally, meeting the West Queen Mother, forming a complete process (Xin, 1989).

Another typical example from the early period is a set of small shrine portraits unearthed in Wulao Wa, Jiexiang County. These 15 pieces of portrait stones, discovered in 1981, were reused in the tombs from the Three Kingdoms or Western Jin period. Their origin is likely not limited to a single place. According to Jiang Yingju, the third, fourth, and fifth stones in this set were small shrines from the early Eastern Han period. The fifth stone depicts the West Queen Mother, and the pattern is divided into three sections vertically. The West Queen Mother is seated in the center of the upper section, leaning on a table and facing forward, with attendees kneeling on both sides. They hold offerings of fairy fruit and auspicious grains. At the left end, there is an attendant with a chicken head and human body.

As mentioned earlier, whether from literary sources or actual patterns, Western Queen Mother patterns from the late Western Han period fully embodied the appearance of a female figure. By the early Eastern Han period, the esteemed position of the West Queen Mother remained unchanged, but there were subtle changes in composition, particularly in the arrangement of her attendees. In the stone coffin portraits, there is no symmetrical relationship between the West Queen Mother and her attendees. In the Western Hukou and Huzi Western Queen Mother pattern, the attendees are already arranged symmetrically. As time progressed, this symmetrical phenomenon became more pronounced, indicating a progression from disorder to order. The aesthetic style evolved from simple and rough to gradually complex and refined, manifesting as a flat abstraction, simple and natural, with a restrained beauty. For instance, simple geometric patterns such as triangles, oblique lines, and circles are carved on the inner walls of stone coffins, not only for decorative purposes but also to convey symbolic meanings.

3.3.2. Aesthetic Style of the Late Western Queen Mother Patterns in the Shandong Region (Mid- to Late Eastern Han Period)

During the 2nd century AD (mid- to late Eastern Han period), the West Queen Mother Patterns were most prevalent in Shandong. This period witnessed two significant changes and characteristics: the emergence of Eastern King patterns and the formation of regional styles and schools. The Wu family shrine, which has always been a hot topic in Han dynasty art research, represents the culmination and epitome of the Jiexiang style. Due to the successful restoration by Jiang Yingju and Wu Wenqi, we can conduct an overall study of these patterns (Yingjun & Wenqi, 1981). They restored three stone shrines, each featuring paired patterns of the West Queen Mother and the Eastern King. According to their findings, the owner of the Wuliang Shrine was Wu Liang, who died in the first year of Yuanjia (AD 151); the owner of the front stone chamber was Wu Rong, who probably died in the first year of Jianning (AD 168); and the owner of the left stone chamber was possibly Wu Kaiming, who died in the second year of Jianhe (AD 148) (Yingjun & Wenqi, 1995).

The West Queen Mother and Eastern King patterns are positioned in the upper triangular sections of the west wall and east wall of the three shrines (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Three Shrines in the Eastern Han Period.

Table 2 Comparison of the patterns of West Wangmu and East Wanggong in the Three Ancestral Shrines of the Jiaxiang Wu Clan.

	West Wall		East Wall	
	Queen Mother of the West	Main group of people	Queen of the East	Main group of people
Left stone chamber:	Hair in a three-ringed bun, seated on a couch, shoulders with two wings.	Left: Feathered man flying, human-headed bird-bodied person holding a needle to break it; Right: two rabbits pounding medicine, feathered man with pterodactyl above him	Wearing a mountain-shaped crown, seated on a couch in front of him, with wings on each shoulder	Left: Chicken-headed and horse-headed figures, a man with a bird's head holding a fairy plant, a feathered man, and a toad; Right: Erliaoyi feathered man, two two-headed sphinx, a feathered man, and a giant birdsphinx, a feathered man, and a giant bird
	West Wall		East Wall	
	Queen Mother of the West	Main group of people	Queen of the East	Main group of people
Wu Liang Ancestral Hall	Her hair is arranged in a three-ringed bun, and she is seated on a couch with two wings on her shoulders and the heads of two dragons on either side of the seat.	Left: Feathered man flying, winged attendant, human head and bird body; Right: two rabbits embracing medicine, toad stack and bird, winged attendant	Wearing a mountain-shaped crown, seated on a couch in front of him, with wings on each shoulder	Left: two-headed winged dragon, two-headed sphinx, feathered man flying; Right: two-headed sphinx, two-headed bird, human-headed realm palletizer
Former stone chamber	Hair in a three-ringed bun, seated on a couch with two wings on the shoulders, the seat suspended and supported by two dragons	Left: two rabbits pounding medicine, toad, big bird, feathered man; Right: feathered man, toad, swimming dragon	Wearing a mountain-shaped crown, seated on a couch in front of him, with wings on each shoulder, the seat suspended, - a feathered figure and a winged dragon bearing the support	Left: two-headed serpent-bodied person, three-headed bird, large bird with one hand to hold an object, feathered man flying; Right: two-headed serpent-bodied person with pterodactyls, feathered man, strange fish, toads

Table 1 shows that the pattern characteristics of the three Wu family shrines are relatively stable. The pattern characteristics of the West Queen Mother are as follows: 1. She is depicted with a three-looped high bun, which is identical to the headgear of the wives and concubines of the deceased found in the shrines. 2. She has wings on her shoulders. 3. She is seated frontally on a couch. The necessary accompanying patterns for her are as follows: 1. The pounding medicine rabbit; 2. Toad wedding. The secondary accompanying patterns include the following: 1. Feathered people; 2. Human-headed bird-bodied figures; 3. Dragons.

The pattern characteristics of the East King Duke are as follows: 1. He wears a special male crown, different from the popular slanted crown worn by the deceased in the tombs and the various crown styles of the emperors in the Wu family shrines. It seems to be specifically designed for the East King Duke. The crown has a three-layer structure with higher central parts and lower sides, and there are flat and drooping bands on both sides, which show symmetry with the headgear of the West Queen Mother. Similar flat bands are also observed on the crown of the Thunder God pattern in the Left Chamber and the Front Chamber, which also appear to be divine symbols. 2. He has wings on his shoulders. 3. He is shown seated frontally on a couch. The accompanying patterns for him include feathered people, human-headed animal-bodied figures, large birds, dragons, double-headed human-faced beasts, and double-headed beasts.

It can be inferred that in the Wu family shrines, the emphasis on the West Queen Mother is not on her connection to Mount Kunlun but rather her divine status high in the heavenly realm. The artists, such as Wei Gai, employed an active and romantic imagination to elevate the divine nature of the West Queen Mother, making it sublime and fascinating (Zhang, 2014). Both the West Queen Mother and the East King Duke are unshakable rulers, each with their own domains and attendants, yet together form a complete heavenly realm. Various divine beings and mythical creatures float around them, displaying a sense of freedom and liveliness. The clouds appear in the shape of birds, and feathered people and clouds touch the divine wings of the West Queen Mother and the East King Duke. Double-headed divine beings are engaged in secret conversations, creating an atmosphere that is solemn yet vibrant. These nonhuman forms embody the ideal realm of human life and undoubtedly evoke a sense of awe and wonder in people's hearts. The descendants who worship in the shrines receive education from these patterns, including historical and Confucian teachings, as well as reflections on life and death. They no longer mourn for the deceased but rather take pride in their achievements and feel fortunate for their ultimate destination, as they are no longer afraid of death. Influenced by the Daoist concepts of Yin and Yang and the teachings of



Confucianism, the aesthetic expression of the later Han period is characterized by order, norms, and the use of symbolic representations of divinity, reflecting the richness of Han culture, as well as the Confucian aesthetic concept of harmony between heaven and humans and the highest moral standards of auspiciousness and loyalty (Wang, 1989)

3.4. Aesthetic Factor Analysis of the West Queen Mother Patterns in Shandong Region

Art originates from social life and is the material and spiritual wealth created in social practices. Various social factors interact to produce the art phenomena of a specific historical period. Therefore, to understand a particular aesthetic style, one must grasp it from the macro system of social activities. To comprehend the aesthetic style of the West Queen Mother patterns in the Shandong region during the Han dynasty, it is essential to deeply analyze and connect various aspects, including the fundamental political system and philosophical trends of the Han dynasty. Only then can we understand the profound significance of their artistic aesthetics.

4. Final considerations

Through the study of Western Queen Mother patterns in the Shandong region during the Han period, it was discovered that these patterns exhibited different aesthetic characteristics and trends. In the early Han period, the patterns were presented with a flat, abstract, simple, and natural beauty, while in the later Han period, they displayed order, norms, the unity of heaven and man, and symbols with divine significance, reflecting the richness of Han culture and the highest moral standards of Confucian aesthetics and auspiciousness. These characteristics are aligned with the cultural environment of that time and reflect the aesthetic concepts and trends of the Han period.

The study of Western Queen Mother patterns allows for a comprehensive and deep understanding of the cultural connotations and influences of West Queen Mother culture. The pattern of the West Queen Mother is not merely a pattern in artistic works; it also reflects ancient Chinese people's aesthetic concepts, belief systems, and cultural traditions. By employing a research method that combines pattern studies with Chinese aesthetics, the patterns of the West Queen Mother can be interpreted from the perspective of visual texts, enriching our understanding of Western Queen Mother culture, and providing new perspectives and methods for the study of traditional Chinese aesthetics.

In conclusion, through the study of Western Queen Mother patterns in the Shandong region during the Han period, we can gain a deeper understanding of the position and influence of Western Queen Mother culture in the society of that time, as well as glimpse the aesthetic concepts and social culture of the Han period. In the Han period, mural patterns were representative of local art before Buddhism entered China, with distinct characteristics of Chinese local art. They embody the dynamic, enterprising, and romantic artistic spirit of the Han period. These research findings are highly important for enhancing our understanding of ancient Chinese culture, traditional aesthetics, and the significance of Western Queen Mother patterns in art and culture. Moreover, in the context of pattern studies, there are no useless or arbitrary patterns; there are only patterns that we have not fully explained or are correctly understood.

The disparity between Han rhapsody and Han tomb art in their portrayal of the Queen Mother and her environment implies divergence in the divine role or duty that the goddess was assigned by individuals from different social levels. These observations indicate the presence of two distinct Queen Mothers during the Han era: one revered by the upper class as a deity associated with long life and immortality, as depicted in Han rhapsodies; the other revered by the common people as an all-powerful deity with control over both the immortal and mortal realms, as depicted in Han tomb art.

5. Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to consider the pattern of the West Queen Mother as a visual text, using the example of the West Queen Mother's pattern in the Shandong region during the Han Dynasty. By analyzing the content classification of the Queen Mothers' pattern and employing a research method that combines pattern analysis with traditional Chinese aesthetics, the aim is to gain a deeper and multidimensional understanding of the West Queen Mothers' culture. From the perspective of traditional Chinese aesthetics, this study seeks to interpret the aesthetic style and factors associated with the Queen Mother, providing new insights and reflections for artists engaged in artistic creation and positively impacting the spirit and sociocultural context of the new century. All of these findings indicate the significant importance of studying the Queen Mother's pattern and aesthetics in terms of inheriting excellent traditional Chinese culture and promoting a splendid and profound Chinese civilization.

Ethical Considerations

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest between them.

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