On the Differences between Han Rhapsodies and Han Paintings in Their Portrayal of the Queen Mother of the West and Their Religious Significance

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Abstract: This paper argues that there exist two Queen Mothers of the West (Xiwangmu) in the Han era (206 BC–AD 220): one worshipped as a goddess of longevity and immortality by people from the upper class; the other worshipped by the ordinary people as a seemingly omnipotent deity with divine power over both the immortal world and the mortal world. This argument is based on a thorough comparative investigation of the surviving corpus of Han rhapsodies (fu) and Han paintings, the two major genres of art that give form to her cult in the Han period.

Keywords: the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu); Han rhapsody (fu); Han paintings; Hantomb stone reliefs; the Wuliang Shrine

1. Introduction

The Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) played a significant part in the history of Chinese art because its two major art forms, the Han rhapsodies (fu 赋), and Han paintings that have come down largely in the form of Han tomb stones reliefs, were not only extremely sophisticated but also influenced the development of literature and fine art in the following dynasties. In the past, most academic investigations of the two forms were concerned with their role in literary and artistic development. If viewed from the perspective of religious development, the Han rhapsodies and Han paintings also made great contributions in that they provide mutually verifiable evidence for the cult of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母, hereafter the Queen Mother), the arguably most popular deity in the Han era.

Han rhapsodies are a form of literary art, whereas Han stone reliefs are a form of visual art. There are not many cross-disciplinary comparisons between the two, and comparisons of them with respect to religious development are even less. This paper aims to fill the gap by examining the Han rhapsodies and Han stone carvings that feature the Queen Mother. In the process of demonstrating the images of the two Queen Mothers, we cross-use textual and graphic materials from the Han era. The texts are from handed-down official classics and modern anthologies of Han literature, and the images come from archaeological excavations and reports. Based on the differences in the appearance frequency and depiction of the Queen Mother in the two forms of Han art, this paper proposes a hypothesis: there were two Queen Mothers in the Han pantheon, one worshipped by people from the upper class as a goddess of longevity and immortality, and the other worshipped by the ordinary people as a seemingly omnipotent deity with divine power over both the immortal world and the mortal world as portrayed in Han tomb art.

2. Literary and Visual Representations of Queen Mother

The Han dynasty witnessed the rise of belief in the Queen Mother and also witnessed the flourishing of the rhapsody. Unfortunately, many Han rhapsodies failed to survive,
which is also the case with other genres of Han art and literature. As recorded in the *Quan Hanfu* (complete Han rhapsodies), one hundred-odd Han rhapsodies are extant entirely in a readable form (Fei et al. 1993), but a close reading of this complete collection shows surprisingly that only four of them mention the Queen Mother, describing her as a goddess of longevity and immortality. A survey of the archaeological excavation reports published in China in the past seventy years shows that 195 of them are concerned with paintings on Han tomb walls, stones, and bricks. A further examination of the 195 reports shows that fifty-two of them report findings of stone carvings of the Queen Mother. These data strongly suggest that the goddess did not attract so much attention from Han *fu* poets and their audiences as from Han artists, or more exactly, Han artisans and their patrons, although her cult spread throughout the country during the Han period (Yoshikawa 2011, p. 1120). This phenomenon does not escape scholarly attention. In her book *Picturing Heaven in Early China*, for example, Lillian Lan-Ying Tseng (2011, p. 359) notes, “The belief in ascending to Heaven and the cult of the Mother Queen of the West are rarely recorded in the extant Han texts; it is mostly through images that we gain understanding”.

A question arises as to why the Queen Mother is much less represented in Han rhapsodies than in Han pictorial stones. There is no definite answer, but if the question itself is analyzed, a plausible explanation for this phenomenon might be that there existed two Queen Mothers in the Han dynasty, one worshipped as a goddess of longevity and immortality by people from the upper class, for whom and by whom the rhapsody was composed, and the other worshipped by the ordinary people as a seemingly omnipotent deity with divine power over both the immortal world and the mortal world, for whom and by whom the stone carvings were etched. The reasons are as follows.

### 3. Han Rhapsodies and Han Paintings That Feature the Queen Mother

The Queen Mother was a major deity in the Han pantheon, who features in both rhapsodies and paintings, the two most important art forms of the time. After combing through specific works, the authors of this article have found that there are several differences between the depictions of the Queen Mother in rhapsodies and paintings. First of all, there is a huge contrast in quantity. It should be noted that in the spread of her cult in the Han dynasty, the King Father of the East (Dongwanggong 东王公, hereafter the King Father) appears as her consort. Thus, the following quantitative statistics of the Queen Mother also include mentions about the King Father.

#### 3.1. Han Rhapsodies That Feature the Queen Mother

There are a significant number of Han rhapsodies and they have been sorted and compiled through the following dynasties. The Complete Han Rhapsodies compiled and edited by the contemporary scholars Fei Zhengang, Hu Shuangbao, and Zong Minghua is currently the most comprehensive collection of Han rhapsodies and is the basic reference text used in this paper (Fei et al. 1993). Included in the collection are a total of 293 rhapsodies by eighty-three writers from the Han dynasty, of which one hundred are extant in their entirety and twenty-four known only by title, with the rest being fragments. Among the extant rhapsodies, four have literary depictions of the Queen Mother. Specifically, they are: “Daren fu” 大人賦 (Rhapsody on the Great Man) by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (ca. 179–118 BC) and “Ganquan fu” 甘泉賦 (Rhapsody on the Sweet Springs) by Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BC–AD 18) from the Western Han dynasty; “Lanhai fu” 覽海賦 (Rhapsody on Viewing the Sea) by Ban Biao 班彪 (AD 3–AD 54) and “Sixuan fu” 思玄賦 (Rhapsody on Contemplating the Mystery) by Zhang Heng 張衡 (AD 78–AD 138) from the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25–220) (Fei et al. 1993, pp. 91–96, 230–37, 252, 393–411).

After examining the portrayals of the Queen Mother in the extant Han rhapsodies, several conclusions can be drawn. First, literary works that involve the Queen Mother are only found in the Han grand rhapsody (dafu 大賦). The Han rhapsody has two sub-genres: “the grand rhapsody” and “the minor rhapsody” (xiao fu 小賦), which is also called the “minor lyrical rhapsody” (shuqing xiaofu 抒情小賦) because of its short form and lyrical
content. Sima Xiangru, Yang Xiong, and Zhang Heng were all famous dafu masters, and the four works by them mentioned above all belong to the dafu type. Second, the Queen Mother was a theme for the rhapsody throughout the Han dynasty. There were two periods in the Han dynasty, the Western Han and the Eastern Han. The Han rhapsody flourished throughout the Han dynasty. Sima Xiangru and Yang Xiong were Western Han fu writers, while Ban Biao and Zhang Heng were Eastern Han fu writers. They all wrote about the theme of the Queen Mother. Third, the Han fu writers were aware of but not highly enthusiastic about the cult of the Queen Mother. Among the hundred-odd legible Han fu works, only four of them feature the Queen Mother as a mythological figure. The length of relevant passages is limited, some passages only amounting to no more than a line.

3.2. The Image of the Queen Mother in Han Paintings

Thanks to recent archaeological achievements, the amount of Han paintings that we can study has skyrocketed. In total, 195 archaeological reports on Han paintings have been published thus far, sixty-six of which have reported findings of images featuring the Queen Mother, and fifty-two of which are about carved stone reliefs (Table 1). Judging from the data provided by the archaeological reports, we have the following views:

Table 1. Quantity distribution of Han stone reliefs that feature the Queen Mother and the King Father.

| Type | Images That Feature the Queen Mother and/or the King Father | Images of the Queen Mother Only | Images That Feature Both the Queen Mother and the King Father | Images of the King Father Only |
|------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Quantity | 52                                                        | 31                              | 19                                                            | 2                              |

First, the images of the Queen Mother are mainly to be found in Han stone reliefs. There are three types of Han paintings: Han stone carvings, Han brick carvings, and Han tomb murals. Han stones reliefs account for about 90% of all images of the Queen Mother. Second, the images of the Queen Mother are concentrated in specific locations. Stone reliefs were common everywhere in the Han Dynasty, but the images of the Queen Mother were mainly found in the Bashu area (including present-day Sichuan and Chongqing, where a total of twenty-one images of the Queen Mother have been found), the Central Plains (including Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Henan, where a total of twenty-seven images of the Queen have been found), Shandong and surrounding areas (including present-day Shandong, the northern part of Jiangsu, and Anhui. A total of eight images of the Queen Mother have been found in the area). These places are also the same areas where large numbers of other Han dynasty stone reliefs have been excavated. Third, the Han artists of stone carvings showed high enthusiasm for the Queen Mother. In the archaeological reports on the Han stone reliefs, one third report finding images of the Queen Mother, indicating that she was highly valued and welcomed at the time. Moreover, the types of depictions were varied. As for composition, there are three types: the Queen Mother in a singular composition, a combination of the Queen Mother and her consort, the King Father, and the single portrait of the King Father, making up a rich collection of her images (see Table 1 below).

As shown in the above table, there are thirty-one pictorial stones bearing the image of the Queen Mother only, whereas only two pictorial stones known to us bear the image of the King Father only. This shows that the Queen Mother was a deity that was of paramount importance in the human pursuit of longevity in the Han period, as she was in pre-Han China. The appearance of the King Father as the consort of the Queen Mother indicates that the male deity began to be entrusted with the divine responsibility of assisting the Queen Mother in delivering mortal beings into immortality.

Through a statistical analysis of the Han rhapsodies and Han paintings, we find that there is a significant difference in number between the two. There are four texts that feature the Queen Mother in the surviving corpus of the Han grand rhapsody, whereas there are
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fifty-two images of her in the Han stone reliefs. Works of both art forms feature the Queen Mother, albeit with a large gap in the quantity and manner of dissemination.

4. Class Discrepancy in Works That Feature the Queen Mother

The significant difference in number between the Han rhapsodies and Han stone reliefs that feature the Queen Mother reflects the difference in attitudes towards the cult of the Queen Mother and the difference in belief in the goddess among different groups of people during the Han period.

4.1. The Class Difference of the Artist Groups

4.1.1. The Writers of Han Grand Rhapsody

Writers of the grand rhapsody were mostly, if not all, members of the upper class, evidence of which can be found in official historical records. First, fu writers always composed their works by the emperor’s side all year round. Ban Gu 班固 (AD 32–92) depicted the grand occasion on which writers composed rhapsodies in the preface to his “Liangdu fu” 兩都賦 (Rhapsody on the Two Capitals):

The ministers whose duties relied on language skills, such as Sima Xiangru, Yuqiu Shouwang 鄧丘壽王, Dongfang Shuo 東方朔, Mei Gao 枚皋, Wang Bao 王褒, and Liu Xiang 劉向, spent entire days composing articles and often offered them to the emperor. The officials who held important positions in the imperial court, such as Ni Kuan 倪寬 as yushi dafu 禁史大夫 (Censor-in-chief), Kong Zang 孔臧 as taichang 太常 (Minister of Ceremonies), Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 as taizhong dafu 太中大夫 (Palace Counsellor), Liu De 劉德 as zongzheng 宗正 (Minister of the Imperial Clan), and Xiao Wangzhi 蕭望之 as the taizi taifu 太子太傅 (the Grand Mentor), and so on, all took time to write fu. (Fei et al. 1993, p. 311)

Those that Ban Gu alludes to were all representative masters of Han dafu. The view that they were yanyu shicong zhi chen 言語侍從之臣 (the ministers whose duties relied on language) is generally recognized in academic circles. Second, fu writers have their biographies in the official historical records. The four fu writers who wrote about the Queen Mother have their independent biographies in the official history. This is a clear indicator that can show that fu writers were aristocrats who enjoyed a relatively high social status (see Table 2).

Table 2. Biographies of Han fu masters in dynastic histories.

| Name of the Fu Writer | Fu Works that Feature the Queen Mother | Source(s) |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------|------------|
| Sima Qian             | “Daren fu” (Rhapsody on the Great Man) | Shiji (117.2999–3057) Hanshu (57A.2529–2577) Hanshu (57B.2577–2613) |
| Yang Xiong            | “Ganquan fu” (Rhapsody on the Sweet Springs) | Hanshu (87.3513–3557) Hanshu (87.3557–3589) |
| Ban Biao              | “Lanhai fu” (Rhapsody on Viewing the Sea) | Hanshu (100.4167–4235) Hou Hanshu (49.1323–1330) |
| Zhang Heng            | “Sixuan fu” (Rhapsody on Contemplating the Mystery) | Hou Hanshu (59.1897–1951) |

4.1.2. The Artists of Han Stone Reliefs

Judging from the available materials, the artists of Han stone reliefs were generally commoners. There are very few records about artists in the official historical records of the Han dynasty. Zheng Wuchang 鄭午昌 (1894–1952) provides statistics on this aspect in Zhongguo huaxue quanshi 中國畫學全史 (A Complete History of Chinese Painting): “We have traceable records of six artists of the Western Han dynasty, namely Mao Yanshou 毛延...
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4.1.3. Class Analysis of the Artist Groups

From the historical materials we known that the Han writers of the grand rhapsodies were a small group of literati elites at the service of the emperors. They enjoyed high social status, and even had their biographies written into the official histories. In sharp contrast are Han stone carvers, about whom no mention whatsoever is found in the dynastic histories. They were commoners—a group of nobodies with no official records about them. In alignment with the difference in social statues between the poets of grand rhapsodies and the engravers of stone reliefs is the difference in the level of esteem accorded to the two forms of art, the rhapsody and stone carving in the Han period. Generally speaking, the former was a high form of art created by and for members of the upper class, and the latter a lower form of art created by and for commoners.

Han China was a strictly hierarchical society, in which there was little social interaction between members of different classes, and social mobility for commoners was limited. The theme and subject matter, motifs, images, symbols, and stories presented in these two forms of art, we may safely say, reflect the distinctive tastes, beliefs, imaginations, views,
and needs of their creators and particularly of their audiences/patrons. In his study of Han stone carved tombs, Chen Li (2018, p. 91) correctly points out, “Though not necessarily from their own experiences, it is within the society that people generally acquire and locate their memories. The carved images and their combinations of objects preserve a social context in which the story of the tomb occupants and general trends are placed.”.

4.2. The Social Classes of the Patrons

4.2.1. Patrons of Han Dafu

The patrons of Han dafu were aristocrats, and relevant materials in this area abound. First, the supreme ruler of the Han Dynasty empowered fu writers. Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty 漢武帝 (r. 156 BC–87 BC) once issued an edict to invite fu writers, including the father and son of the Mei 枚 family, to serve at court. Mei Cheng 枚乘 (ca. 201 BC–ca. 138 BC) received the invitation, though he, unfortunately, died on the way. In Hanshu 漢書 (History of the Han Dynasty), Ban Gu offers a detailed record of this:

When the Han dynasty quelled the Rebellion of the Seven States, Mei Cheng 枚乘 gained popularity for his famous fu, the “Seven Stimuli” (Qifa 七發), written during this time. Emperor Jing 景帝 (r. 157 BC–141 BC) soon appointed Cheng as the Chief Commandant (duwei 都尉) of Hongnong County. Cheng had long been a distinguished guest of the dynasty. He frequently traveled with young talents of that time; getting what he wanted, doing what he liked, he was not particularly fond of being a government official. Eventually, Cheng resigned from his post on the excuse of illness. Cheng then traveled to Liang (Han’s vassal state). Liang’s resident intellectuals were good at fu and writing and Cheng excelled amongst them. After the death of King Xiao 孝王 (r. 168 BC–144 BC), Cheng traveled back to Huaiyin 淮陰. The newly enthroned Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 141 BC–87 BC) was an admirer of Cheng since he was a prince. By this time Cheng had reached old age. Emperor Wu invited Cheng to serve the court, sending him a special carriage with tires covered by palm leaves, which stabilized the carriage better than the typical ones of that time. Cheng died on the way. (Hanshu, 50.2365)

After that, Mei Cheng’s son, Mei Gao 枚皋 (b. 153 BC), entered the imperial court and became a prolific fu writer. Hanshu records:

When Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty felt emotional, he often let Mei Gao write fu. Mei Gao wrote very quickly; he finished the works almost as soon as he received the imperial orders. Therefore, he was very prolific. (Hanshu, 20.2367)

There is evidence that aristocrats and nobles from various places enjoyed and patronized fu writing. According to Shiji 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian):

It happened that Emperor Jing was not fond of literature. When King Xiao of Liang came to visit the court, scholars who were good at lobbying also came along, including Zou Yang 鄒陽 from Qi State, Mei Cheng 枚乘 from Huaiyin, and Zhuang Ji 莊忌 from Wu. Sima Xiangru took to liking them instantly and soon resigned from his position with an excuse of illness, and then he lived in Liang state as a sojourner. King Xiao of Liang asked Sima Xiangru to reside with the lobbyists, so Xiangru was able to stay with them for several years. He thus composed “Zixu fu” 子虛賦 (Rhapsody on Sir Vacuous). (Shiji, 117.2999)

Third, many fu masters showed great enthusiasm and dedication in making fu for the emperor. Ge Hong’s 葛洪 (AD 283–AD 363) Xijing Zaji 西京雜記 (Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital) records how fu masters composed fu in this way:

When Sima Xiangru wrote “Shanglin fu” 上林賦 (Rhapsody on the Imperial Park) and “Zixu fu”, his heart was relaxed and unconstrained, no longer connected with the outside things. He used all things between heaven as the material of his poetry; his spirit traveled between ancient and modern times. He would appear
listless and dreary at one point, but uplifted at another and continued to compose *fu*. A couple of hundred days later, the *fu* was completed.

Similar descriptions are also found in Huan Tan’s 恒谭 (AD 23–56) Xinlun 新論 (New Treatises):

Yang Xiong also said that Zhao Zhaoyi 趙昭儀, a concubine of Emperor Cheng 成帝 (r. 33 BC–7 BC) of the Han dynasty, was favored by the emperor. Every time he went up to the Ganquan Palace, Emperor Cheng would order Yang Xiong to compose a *fu*. This exhausted Yang Xiong. He had to rack his brains every time to complete the *fu*. Finally, he was feeling tired and had to rest in bed, during which time he dreamed that his five internal organs were exposed on the ground, and he gathered them back into his body with his hands. When he woke up, he was inflicted with asthma and often could not breathe properly. He fell ill for a year afterward. From this, we can know that it overtaxes one’s nerves and spirit to make *fu*.

From these quotes, we can see that the *fu* writers sacrificed a lot for their work, sometimes to the point of serious illness. *Fu* experts might be restricted in subject matter and emotional expression when they made *fu* for the emperor. However, the Han Dynasty was a centralized system, and the Han empire was overwhelmingly powerful (even abroad). Therefore, when *fu* masters composed dafu, a genre generally aimed at celebrating the power of the empire, they could still maintain emotional consistency with the emperor.

### 4.2.2. Patrons of the Han Stone Reliefs

The materials for investigating the patrons of Han stone reliefs mainly come from archaeological excavations, which show that the tomb occupants and the tomb construction participants did not have a high social status.

First, inscribed texts from the Han tombs decorated with stone reliefs show that these are low-class burial sites. Yang Aiguo, an expert on Han stone reliefs, conducts a statistical analysis of the stone reliefs used as decorations for Han tombs, concluding:

The owner of the highest status among the Han stone tombs was a vassal king, and up till now among all excavated Han tombs there is only one such instance, which is the tomb of Liu Chong 劉崇 (r. AD 120–124), King Qing of Chen of the Eastern Han dynasty. Liu Chong’s tomb is of a very large scale, but there are not many stone reliefs inside the tomb, with most of them only being used at the entrance gate to the tomb. The original location of another stone relief fragment unearthed in the tomb cannot be determined. It can be seen that the stone reliefs were not the foremost body of the decoration of tombs of the princes and kings of the Han dynasty. The use of stone reliefs as tread stones for the toilet in the murals for the stone cliff-side tomb in Shiyuan, Yongcheng, Henan, may also be proof. (Yang 2006, p. 177)

Below is a table (Table 4) drawn on the basis of the statistical data provided by Aiguo Yang (2006, pp. 183–88).

**Table 4.** Statistics on the identity of occupants of Han tombs decorated with stone reliefs.

| Tomb Occupants | Princes | Prefects | Lower Ranking Officials | Commoners |
|----------------|---------|----------|-------------------------|-----------|
| Number of tombs with stone reliefs | 1       | 5        | 18                      | 35        |

As shown above in the table, 90% of the tomb occupants were either junior-ranking officials or commoners, and commoners alone account for 60%, which strongly indicates that the occupants of the Han tombs decorated with stone reliefs basically belonged to the commoner class.
Second, the general lack of jade grave goods indicates that the Han tombs decorated with stone carvings were not of high class. Burial jade was widespread amongst high-grade Han tombs. Burial jade is commonly seen in higher-class Han tombs, but is rarely found in Han tombs with pictorial stones. In addition, according to Lin Xu (2006, p. 138):

Up till now, among the unearthed 102 tombs of Han vassal kings, more than 1800 pieces of jade artifacts have been found. ... Among the unearthed jade artifacts, more than 1400 pieces have been unearthed from the tombs of high-ranking vassal kings (houwang 侯王), accounting for 79% of the total. Another 380 pieces of jade were unearthed from the tombs of lower-ranking adjunct marquesses (liehou 列侯), accounting for 21% of the total. (Xu 2006, p. 136)

No stone reliefs have been found in these elite Han tombs where many jade artifacts were unearthed. All the known archaeological evidence points to the fact that Han tombs with stone reliefs are generally not of high class. More such evidence comes from an Eastern Han tomb in Xingyuan 杏園, Yanshi 僰師, Henan Province. This is a high-class tomb decorated with murals, but the inner walls of the chamber were built inside the tomb chamber, about which there is an archaeological record, which reads:

The top arch is supported with two kinds of fan-shaped bricks. The four walls have two layers, inner and outer, and the outer layer is covered by ‘one and a half bricks’ (two horizontal bricks and one vertical brick in each layer). The walls are coated with 0.5 cm thick white plaster, and on the walls, images of carriage processions are drawn. The inner layer clings to the mural with strips of bricks. The top-down single-layer bricks are staggered and flat, stopping at a height of 2.2 m, enclosing the mural completely. Hence, the inner walls were undoubtedly added later. The reason behind it may have been that the content of the murals on the outer layer did not match the actual identity and official position of the tomb owner, so it was sealed. (Huang and Guo 1996, p. 169)

The inner walls of the tomb are more than 2 m high, completely concealing the outer mural that depicts the aristocratic life. This indicates that the occupant of the tomb attempted to cover up the fact that his social status was not high. Of course, the construction of tombs decorated with stone reliefs was relatively expensive, so their occupants/owners may have been wealthy commoners.

4.2.3. Class Analysis of the Patrons

Han grand rhapsodies or dafu were generally popular among members of the upper class and were liked and systematically supported by the supreme rulers, whereas Han pictorial stones were mainly popular among commoners and their use for tomb decoration was systematically restricted by the ruling class. Therefore, Han grand rhapsodies were a creative art of the upper class, and Han pictorial stones were that of commoners.

4.3. The Significance of the Class Analysis of Han Rhapsodies and Han Pictorial Stones

The Han dynasty was the first dynasty in China to have perfected centralized power. An outstanding feature of centralized power is the emphasis on hierarchy. Due to the implementation, maintenance, and operation of the hierarchy, artistic creation was bound to be greatly influenced. When we analyze the texts and images related to the cult of the Queen Mother, it is essential to consider the influence of class and systematic factors.

Han dafu was an art form of the aristocracy. Because of the support of the supreme ruler, fu writers had great zeal for creation and a good environment. Han dafu works are lengthy and contain very detailed descriptions of various social phenomena within the Han Empire. That being said, there is a lack of portrayal of the image of the Queen Mother, although there are many descriptions of gods and deities. “Rhapsody on King Gong of Lu’s Palace of Numinous Light” (Lulingguang dian fu 魯靈光殿賦), for example, offers a vivid account of various deities and spirits, such as Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女媧, and so on (Fei et al. 1993, pp. 527–30). The reason behind the lack of depictions of
Queen Mother is complicated. The scholar-official class had a relatively indifferent attitude towards belief in the Queen Mother. Suzanne Cahill pays attention to this particular literary occurrence and tries to put it into its historical context. She believes that the worship of Queen Mother could not enter the mainstream social stratum, probably because “[t]he accounts in the Book of Han [Hanshu] suggests that historians interpreted her cult as an abnormal occurrence that corresponded to heavenly patterns and as an ominous portent for the royal house” (Cahill 1993, p. 21).

Contrary to this, images of the Queen Mother were widespread amongst the Han stone reliefs of the commoner class. They came not only in huge numbers, but also in various types, including portrait and profiles, base, and no base, and various depictions of the celestial and real world. These phenomena all illustrate the enthusiasm of the common people about the cult of the Queen Mother.

4.4. Special Comparison between Han Fu and Other Literary Works

Why do we select from among the literary genres of the Han dynasty the rhapsody for a discussion here about the cult of the Queen Mother? The reason is that the Han rhapsody is the most representative and influential genre of literature that enjoys an unrivalled status in Han dynasty literature.

Recorded in the “Epitomes of Poetry and Rhapsody” (shifu lue 詩賦略) of the History of the Han Dynasty are seventy-four fu writers in the Western Han dynasty who produced a total of 941 pieces of work (Hanshu 30. 1747–1753), but only about 100 of them have survived, and many of them are incomplete. Can these surviving works explain the attitude of the Han literati towards the Queen? To this question, our answer is affirmative.

In his study of the evolution of the Xiwangmu narrative in early China, Du Wenping provides statistics on the occurrence of the Queen Mother in the literature of the Han dynasty. Below is a table (Table 5) drawn on the basis of the research materials provided by Wenping Du (2014, pp. 162–73).

Table 5. Quantitative statistics on the occurrence of Xiwangmu narrative in the literary works of the Han dynasty.

| Genre                      | Book Title                                      | Occurrence Number | Total |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Historical Works           | Origins of Things (Shiben 世本)                 | 1                 |       |
|                            | The Great Commentary to the Book of Documents (Shangshu dazhuan 尚書大傳) | 2                 | 8     |
|                            | Shiji                                          | 1                 |       |
|                            | Hanshu                                         | 1                 |       |
| Masters’ Philosophical Works | New Writings (Xinshu 新書)                  | 1                 |       |
|                            | Huainanzi 淮南子                                 | 1                 |       |
|                            | Records of Rites by Dai the Elder (Dadai liji 大戴禮記) | 1                 | 5     |
|                            | Discourses Weighed in the Balance (Lunheng 論衡) | 1                 |       |
|                            | The Numinous Constitution of the Universe (Lingjian 粹憲) | 1                 |       |
| Philological Studies       | Approaching Correct Meanings (Erya 爾雅)         | 1                 | 1     |
| Han Rhapsodies             | “Rhapsody on the Great Man”                      | 1                 |       |
|                            | “Rhapsody on the Sweet Springs”                   | 1                 | 4     |
|                            | “Rhapsody on Viewing the Sea”                     | 1                 |       |
|                            | “Rhapsody on Contemplating the Mystery”           | 1                 |       |
The statistics only cover the stories of the Queen Mother composed by the author of the literary work from the Han dynasty with those quoted from other sources excluded. The table suggests that Han literati, similar to other groups of the upper class, did not seem to show much enthusiasm for the Queen Mother, either. In most cases, the Queen Mother appears only once. The highest frequency of appearance occurs in the History of the Han Dynasty, which mentions the goddess three times. As with the aforementioned four Han grand rhapsodies, the description of the Queen Mother in these works is in general short and simple.

5. The Differences in Functions of the Queen Mother in Han Rhapsodies and Han Paintings

Han rhapsodies and Han paintings came from two different social classes. Understandably, the artists had distinctive perceptions of the Queen Mother. In Han grand rhapsodies and Han stone reliefs, the Queen Mother had different functions.

5.1. The Queen Mother in the World of Longevity and Immortality in Han Grand Rhapsodies

There is nothing but four paragraphs featuring the Queen Mother in Han rhapsodies. These passages fall into two categories: the description of the Queen Mother’s living environment, and comments on her.

5.1.1. Passages That Describe the Queen Mother’s Living Environment

Ban Biao’s “Rhapsody on Viewing the Sea” describe the living environment of the Queen Mother as follows:

The immortals Chisongzi 赤松子 and Wang Ziqiao 王子喬 sat in the east wing while the Queen Mother sat in the west wing. They asked Han Zhong 韓眾 and Qi Bo 戚伯 to tell and collate the books read by deities. They hoped to be able to make friends with them and be enlightened therein, so as to travel far away from the mortal plane and roam afar. (Fei et al. 1993, p. 252)

[I] met the Queen Mother at Yintai 銀臺 (the moon) and ate the celestial food yuzhi 玉芝 (jade mushroom). She smiled and was delighted, complaining that I was a bit too late. Having brought the fairy maiden (attending the immortals) from Taihua Mountain along with her, she also summoned the Luoshui goddess Mi fei 宴妃 (Concubine Mi). They were both so beautiful and captivating, with their charming eyes and fine and delicate eyebrows. (Fei et al. 1993, p. 396)

5.1.2. Materials That Comment on the Queen Mother

Sima Xiangru’s “Rhapsody on the Great Man” and Yang Xiong’s “Rhapsody on the Sweet Springs” have comments on the Queen Mother, which are as follows:

Having wandered and soared in the Yinshan Mountains, I only got to see the Queen Mother with my own eyes today. . . . Gray-haired with a sheng 勝 head-dress, the Queen Mother lived in a cave. Fortunately, there was a three-legged bird as her messenger. If to become immortal, one had to live forever like her, it is not joyful at all. (Fei et al. 1993, p. 92)

[When Emperor Cheng 成帝 (r. 33 BC–7 BC) of Han] thought of the Queen Mother, he happily went to celebrate her birthday and avoided the fairy maidens, Jade Lady and Concubine Mi. They thus had no chance to look at him with their bright eyes, or show him their slender eyebrows. Emperor Cheng mastered the essence of the subtle and strong Way and received the counsel of the gods. (Fei et al. 1993, p. 172)

5.1.3. Discussion of the Function of the Queen Mother in Han Grand Rhapsodies

In the descriptions of the living environment of the Queen Mother, the fu writers are consistent with each other. All are full of praises, wistfulness, and yearning when they talk
of the Queen Mother’s dwelling place where many ancient sages reside, surrounded by exotic flowers and rare herbs. When commenting on the Queen Mother, the writers fall into two categories. Sima Xiangru raises doubts, while Yang Xiong continues to admire the Queen Mother’s living environment. This is how Sima Xiangru expresses these doubts: living in a cave far away from the world, with gray hair and wearing rough clothes—what is the point of being immortal after all?

However, the *fu* writers recognized the identity of the Queen Mother, that is, she was treated as a god who mastered (the function of) longevity and immortality. The *fu* writers described a paradise of immortality and an illusory path to it, which was symbolized by the Queen Mother. In Han *dafu*, the Queen Mother was a god of longevity and immortality.

5.2. The Queen Mother Who Combines the Immortal World with the Mortal World in Han Stone Reliefs

The number of Han stone reliefs that feature the Queen Mother is very large. All the distribution areas of the Han stone reliefs have a large number of such images. This is in sharp contrast to the few paragraphs in Han *dafu*.

5.2.1. The Regional Distribution of the Images of the Queen Mother

Based on the archaeological findings, Han stone carvings of the Queen Mother are usually classified into four categories according to their regions:

Based on existing archaeological results about images of the Queen Mother, the Han Dynasty stone reliefs are divided into (1) Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, and Anhui Districts; (2) central and southern Henan Districts; (3) northern Shaanxi District; and (4) Sichuan District. First, in the Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, and Anhui Districts, the images of the Queen Mother were mostly found in Shandong Province, but some were also found in Jiangsu Province. Most images of the Queen Mother are frontal, with her hands arched together, sitting on her knees. According to the presence or absence of a base, they can be divided into two types: BI [frontal image on a pedestal] and BII [frontal image without a supporting pedestal]. Second, in the Central and Southern Henan Districts, the characteristics of the Queen Mother images can be summarized as: a flowery jade hairdress (*sheng*) worn on the head, holding objects in her hands, sitting on the mountains or a pedestal. Those Queen Mother images fall into two groups: AI [profile on a pedestal] and AII [profile without a supporting pedestal], considering her different sitting postures: one being a three-quarter profile, and the other a regular profile. Third, in the northern Shaanxi District, the basic feature of the Queen Mother images is that she sits on her knees with *sheng* hairdress worn on her head facing the front. These images can also be divided into two types, BI and BII, according to whether they have bases or pedestals. Fourth, in the Sichuan District, the images of the Queen Mother unearthed have obvious local characteristics: the dragon-tiger throne seen in this area’s images are rarely seen in other districts. (*Cong 2008, pp. 1200–22*)

Among the existing remains of the stone reliefs of the Han dynasty, although variations do occur as found in all the sites, such as the presence or the lack of pedestals, and frontal versus profiled images, the Queen Mother is always at the center of the entire picture. All elements of immortality exist around her, thus gaining their iconic significance. Since such a composition with the Queen Mother in the center is highly consistent in different sites, it can be argued that her central deity status was already established at the time. Professor Wu Hung also paid attention to the phenomenon of the Queen Mother as a central deity. He believes that the emergence of the “central deity,” and the henceforth establishment of the visual focus and the composition arrangement of the primary and secondary images “was an important breakthrough in the development of the image of heaven in the Han dynasty” (*Wu 2005*, pp. 255–56).
5.2.2. The Distribution of Subject Types of the Images of the Queen Mother

If the types of the materials about the Queen Mother indicate that her deity status had been established, what kinds of imageries were covered in depictions of such a deity? Nanyang city in Henan Province is the major site for Han Dynasty stone reliefs, images excavated from which are representative of the development of Han stone carvings. Nanyang han huaxiangshi 南陽漢畫像石 (Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs in Nanyang) compiled by Wang Rulin 王儒林 and Li Chenguang 李陳廣 classified the subject matters of Han dynasty stone carvings in Nanyang, and it is now recognized in academic circles. The details are as follows:

Daily life: including chariot procession, feasting, lecturing, field hunting, pavilion construction, arsenal(s), Liubo 六博 [ancient Chinese board game], cockfighting, and hunting with hounds. These are addressed to a variety of local magistrates, and servants. (2) Ancient myths: including Fuxi and Nüwa from the Chinese creation mythology, the Queen Mother, the King Father, Hou Yi 後羿 Shooting Ten Suns, Lady Chang’e’s 嫦娥 Flying to the Moon, etc. (3) Historical tales: including Killing Three Generals with Two Peaches, Hongmen Feast (鴻門宴 the banquet where Liu Bang 劉邦 escaped attempted murder by his rival Xiang Yu 項羽), Fan Sui 戰勝 receiving the robe, Nie Zheng 聶政 taking his own life, Qin Shi Huang 秦始皇 (First Emperor of Qin) dispatching a thousand men to search for the Nine Tripod Cauldrons lost in the Si River. (4) Astronomical images: the sun and the moon, the sun and the moon harmoniously hanging together in the sky, sun and moon glowing together, constellations such as the Black Dragon 蒼龍, the White Tiger 白虎, Beidou 北斗 (the Big Dipper), Gouchen 勾陳 (the North Star), and so on. (5) yuewu baixi 樂舞百戲 (“hundred operas,” or ancient acrobatics, music and dance performances in general): various dances including drum and dance, changxiuwu 長袖舞 (long sleeve dance), qipanwu 七盤舞 (seven-tray dance), etc.; chongxia 沖狹 (ancient aerobatics, jumping through a grass ring studded with knives), feijian tiaowan 飛劍跳丸 (flying sword and juggling), nonghu 弄壺 (balancing a pot on an arm), tuhuo 吐火 (spitting fire), juedixi 角抵戲 (sports and aerobatics such as wrestling, ancient pod lifting, illusion magic, etc.). (Wang and Li 1989, p. 8)

Among the five major themes, three are real-life themes, namely, daily life, historical tales, and yuewu baixi. Two are related to deities, namely ancient myths and astronomical images. Such a distribution of themes shows that Queen-Mother-themed images cover both real life and eternal life and longevity. This is a very important phenomenon, which means that the Queen Mother assumed other functions in addition to bestowing longevity and immortality.

5.2.3. A Discussion of the Functions of the Queen Mother in Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs

In the archaeological findings of the stone reliefs of the Han dynasty, the image of the Queen Mother has different features from that in the grand rhapsody. Han tomb stone carvings of the Queen Mother show that the goddess has acquired the status of a supreme deity. For example, in earlier Han stone reliefs, portraits of the Queen Mother were profiles, but later and more popular images of the Queen Mother were frontal views. This is very important because all the great gods were shown with frontal images, which was an indicator of their divine status. Along with this, the Queen Mother was centralized in all compositions, positioned either in the middle or at the top. This shows that the Queen Mother had obtained the status of a supreme deity with the ability to fulfill the various wishes of people. In regard to the relationship between the frontal portraits of the Queen Mother and the status of her as a supreme deity, Wu Hung thus writes:
Sitting on the summit of Kunlun or a dragon-tiger throne, she is portrayed frontally as a solemn image of majesty, ignoring the surrounding crowds and staring at the viewer beyond the picture. The viewer’s sight is guided to her image in the center, to be confronted directly by the goddess. (Wu 2010, p. 56)

The images of the Queen Mother cover all daily life scenes. In the iconographic narrative of Han stone reliefs, there are many such daily life scenes. These include banquets, kitchen scenes, travels, sacrifices, wars, hunting, and reproduction. Having such wide scopes of description illustrates the Han people’s imagination of living in the other world after gaining immortality. It also shows that the Queen Mother had the ability to cover all scenes of life, and her divinity made her capable of replicating this life in the other world.

5.3. Hierarchical Order and Functional Role as Seen in the Hierarchy of Han Pantheon

The hierarchy of the Han pantheon can reflect the social stratification of the time. The renowned British Sinologist, Lu Weiyi (aka Michael Loewe) notes:

There also exists the idea about the class of deities. In the Huainanzi, we find the two deities acting as representatives of the emperor were on duty throughout the night by walking arm in arm. Many other passages also show that both deities and ghosts are subordinate to the hierarchical order under the emperor. A second century author even differentiated a series of deities corresponding to the hierarchy of the human world. Thus, some deities were prescribed to be worshiped by emperors or nobles, others were said to be in the charge of wizards, and still others were the objects to be prayed, aspired and awe-stricken of lesser mortals. (Lu 2009, p. 31)

Clearly, the spirit world is a hierarchical society as is the human world in human imagination. Accordingly, there are higher deities and lower deities, who are worshipped by people of the upper class and people of lower classes, respectively, as observed by Fuller (1988) in his insightful study of the Hindu pantheon and hierarchical society in India. The same can be said of the cult of the Queen Mother in Han times, when there existed two Queen Mothers, one worshiped by the upper class and the other by the lower classes, as indicated in the difference in the depictions of the goddess in the Han rhapsody—an high form of art, and in the Han stone relief—an lower form of art.

Of course, apart from the hierarchical disparities, there are also differences in their social and theological function. Muchou Poo (1998, p. 120) notes:

We cannot say that all the religious objects or activities in the official religious sacrifice system are not referred to as the folk beliefs. The religion of the Han Dynasty may be characterized by the entanglement between the official religious system and folk beliefs. This can be regarded as a continuation of the development of ancient Chinese religious beliefs since the pre-Qin era, that is, the cosmology of basically sharing the same religions between the upper and lower societies without any fundamental conflicts, and there are only some differences in application.

We agree with Poo’s view on the interrelation between official religions and folk beliefs and judgment, and particularly his view on the existence of “some differences in application”, which feature prominently in the cult of the Queen Mother in the Han era, where the same Queen Mother is entrusted with two different yet interrelated responsibilities: to rule over the immortal world as a patron deity of the upper society, and to rule over both the immortal world and the mortal world as a patron deity of the commoners’ society.

In summary, the Queen Mother in the Han grand rhapsodies revolves around the immortal world which has a beautiful environment, a path to follow, and an evaluation after successful arrival at it; this is a narrative that is full of mystery, with the Queen Mother as the goddess of longevity and immortality. The Queen Mother in the Han stone reliefs is also centered on this theme, but many real-world scenes are added in addition to the immortal world, and the narrative is full of realistic style and flavor. Here, the Queen
Mother is the goddess of longevity and immortality, but she also makes her power felt in real life as a supreme ruler. As a consequence, she confronts an abundance of social problems that exist in real life. How would she solve them then? The answer is also provided in Han stone reliefs.

6. Special Significance of the Sage-King Images in the Wu Liang Shrine

Among the remains of the Han Dynasty stone reliefs, the Wu Liang  is world-famous, and relevant research findings are already very rich. However, from the perspective of conducting comparative studies between Han fu and Han paintings, many pieces of important information have been overlooked. For example, the “Sage-Kings Image” or Wu Liang Shrine III (Stone Chamber No. 3) can show that the Queen Mother has the function of ruling both the real world and the world of longevity and immortality.

There are eleven mythical emperors in Wu Liang Shrine III, and thus the image of the relief is also known as the “Sage-Kings Image”. Through the relationship between the Queen Mother and the ancient emperors, this stone portrait completely describes how the Queen Mother rules both the real and the immortal worlds. From these contents, we can see how the two worlds overlap. Hence, we can be inspired to look for mutual evidence from the official history, and at the same time confirm that the Han stone relief tombs were owned by the civilian class. Therefore, the “Sage-Kings Image” can be regarded as a paradigm for the cult of the Queen Mother among commoners in the Han dynasty. Of course, this involves the issue of folk beliefs as well (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Wu Liang Shrine III (Portrait on the west wall of the Wu Liang Shrine), Jiaxiang County, Shandong Province, the first year of Emperor Heng’s reign (Yuanjia reign era), Han dynasty (AD 151). Retrieved from: Jiang Yingju, ed. Complete Collection of Chinese Stone Reliefs, Vol. 1, Shandong Han Stone Reliefs, Jinan: Shandong Fine Arts Publishing House, 2000, p. 29.

6.1. Description of How the Two Worlds Overlap

The name the Wu Liang Shrine is the abbreviation of Jiaxiang Wu Family shrines. It was unearthed in the north of Wudishan Village, Jiaxiang County, Shandong Province. It dates back to the first year of Emperor Heng’s reign (Yuanjia reign era) of the Eastern Han dynasty (151 AD) and is a typical work created in the heyday of the cult of the Queen Mother. Among the stone portraits in the Wu Liang Shrine, the most eye-catching is the
“Sage Kings Image”. This stone portrait is carved on the west wall of Wu Liang Shrine. The archaeological report describes it as follows:

The carvings on the west wall of the Wu Liang Shrine: The original number of the stone is Wu Liang Shrine III. The upper part of this stone has a sharp arch. The image is divided into five layers from top to bottom with friezes or straight bars that are decorated with curling moire patterns, double diamond patterns, connected arc patterns, and so on. In the arch of the first layer, the Queen Mother sits in the middle, flanked by supernatural creatures and servants such as feathered deities, the moon rabbit, the three-legged toad (transformation of Chang’e), and a human-headed bird. On the second layer, pictures of creation mythology figures Fuxi and Nüwa, as well as ancient emperors are engraved, including Zhu Rong 祝融 (god of fire), Shennong 神農 (second of the mythical emperors), Huangdi 黃帝 (or the “Yellow Emperor”, third of ancient China’s mythological emperors), Zhuang Xu 顓頊 (or Gaoyang, grandson of the “Yellow Emperor”), Emperor Ku 帝嚳 (or Gaoxin 高辛, one of the Five Emperors, a descendant of the Yellow Emperor, the “White Emperor”), Emperor Yao 帝堯 (second son to Emperor Ku), Emperor Shun 帝舜 (the last of the Five Emperors), Xia Yu 夏禹 (or Yu the Great 大禹, legendary king in ancient China who established the Xia dynasty), and Xia Jie 夏桀 (or Jie of Xia, last ruler of the Xia dynasty), along with their titles from right to left. On the third layer, from the right, there are the tales of four filial sons, with their titles as well: mother of Zengzi throwing away the shuttle after hearing rumors (Zeng mu tou zhu), Min Ziqian losing control of the whip and the carriage while driving, hermit Laolaizi finding ways to entertain his parents, and Ding Lan making woodcarvings of his parents. On the fourth layer, starting from the right side are the famous assassin stories including Cao Zi coercing Duke Huan of Qi to return the land to Lu, Zhu Zhi killing King Liao in a party with a dagger hidden in a fish, Jing Ke’s attempted assassination of King Zheng of Qin, all with titles. The fifth layer paints a line of chariots’ procession to the left (Jiang 2000, p. 16).

In “Wu Liang Shrine III”, two worlds are depicted. The first layer is the world of longevity and immortality that the Queen Mother resides in, and the four layers below are the real world. Although the immortal world has only one layer, while the real world has four, the Queen Mother is located at the top, thus creating a visual effect of her dominating everything from above. The idea is that the Queen Mother can guide the owner of the tomb from the real world to longevity and immortality. It is a deliberate arrangement to elevate her within the picture. The composition of the Queen Mother being high up above everything is also common in other Han stone reliefs. However, there are eleven mythical emperors below the Queen Mother, a phenomenon that also demands our attention.

These eleven mythological emperors held an extremely lofty position in the real world of the Han Dynasty. In addition to being worshipped and respected, they also assumed many specific social governance functions. For example, Fuxi and Nüwa nurtured the human species, and the Yellow Emperor assumed the role of ancestor god. These functions were not directly related to the daily life of the owner of the ancestral hall, but they had a clear logical relationship with the governance of society. If the Queen Mother bore the same function of society governance, then the composition of her being above the mythical emperors was reasonable. Under the emperors, there are also pictures of filial sons, stories of the Warring States period, and pictures of chariot procession, etc., all of which were major events in the real world and hence can also be placed under the scope of social governance.

Scholars have noticed this phenomenon of the Queen Mother residing in two worlds. Professor Wu Hung believes that the images of the Queen Mother, the King Father, and their immortal planes are “iconic,” while the parts below the celestial land adopt an “episodic” composition. He, therefore, claims that the two compositional methods “imply two different ways of creating and seeing works of art” (Wu 1989, p. 134). Especially with the elevation of the Queen Mother’s religious significance, her established divine status “necessitated a new iconic image to represent such a deity . . . The appearance of this art form reflects a development toward a purely devotional image (that culminates in later Buddhist art during the Northern and Southern dynasties)” (Wu 1989, p. 141). Professor Wu analyzes
the two worlds of the Queen Mother from the “iconic” and “episodic” compositional methods, a method which is not completely consistent with our common understanding of the dichotomy of the real world versus the world of longevity and immortality, but it can remind us of the importance of this dichotomy.

In essence, the image of Queen Mother is placed above those of eleven mythological or legendary rulers is of symbolic meaning, indicating the social and theological function of the Queen Mother as a supreme ruler over mortal beings. This theme does not escape the attention of Michael Loewe or Weiyi Lu (2009, p. 31), who argues:

The image elucidates this theme in two ways. First of all, the Queen Mother of the West usually wears a unique crown as a necessary attribute. This crown can be interpreted as a symbol of her power to weave the web of the universe, symbolizing the power of perpetuating the human life. Second, the theme of Yin and Yang is often presented in other ways: either as a description or as a symbol.

Loewe’s associating “weaving the web of the universe” with “perpetuating the human life” is in agreement with our view that the Queen Mother is entrusted with two different yet interrelated divine responsibilities, that is, to rule over both the immortal world and the mortal world.

6.2. The Mutual Evidence in Official Historical Records

There are materials in the official historical records of the Han dynasty that can serve as powerful circumstantial evidence for the Queen Mother’s role or function in social governance. The History of the Han Dynasty, for example, records an incident that involved hundreds and thousands of famine victims known as the Queen Mother Incident in its “Aidi ji” 哀帝紀 (Annals of Emperor Ai), “Tianwen zhi” 天文誌 (Treatise on Celestial Patterns), and “Wuxing zhi” 五行誌 (Treatise on the Five Phases), respectively. Below is the description of the incident given in the “Treatise on the Five Phases”:

In the first month of the fourth year of Jianping (3 BC), during the reign of the Emperor Ai of the Han dynasty, people fled in panic, holding a stick of dried-up wood or hemp stalk in their hands, and passing it to one another, which is called “passing edict sticks” (xing zhaochou 行詔籌). Thousands of people ran across each other along the road. Some walked barefoot with scattered hair, some destroyed the official pass at night, some went over the wall, and some took carriages or rode on horseback, changing horses at the relay station for fresh ones to continue their journey. It was only after passing through twenty-six vassal states did they arrive at the capital. In the summer of that year, people in the capital gathered in the alleys, streets and squares, and they set up gaming tools and sang and danced to worship the Queen Mother of the West. Then there came a word, saying: “The Queen Mother of the West tells the people that those who carry this amulet shall not die. Those who don’t believe what I have said, just look under your door hinge and you will find white hair.”. The incident did not stop until autumn. (Hanshu, 27.1476)

The Queen Mother Incident recorded in the History of the Han Dynasty occurred in the late Western Han era and involved thousands of people. From the History of the Han Dynasty, we know that this incident was not only large in scale, lasting in time, but also very influential. In the incident, the Queen Mother’s role to solve social problems is highlighted, especially in the religious experience of “those who carry this amulet shall not die (busi 不死)”. The message is clear that those who believed in the Queen Mother and obeyed her orders would survive the drought and famine. Here, the Queen Mother is portrayed as a savior who has the divine power to deliver people from a severe social crisis caused by natural disasters. This kind of power goes beyond helping people achieve longevity and immortality, thus adding solving the social problem of starvation to the divine role of the Queen Mother. Therefore, the cult of the Queen Mother had both functions of helping to achieve longevity and immortality as well as solving social problems.
The ruling class also acknowledged that the Queen Mother could solve social problems. The *Hanshu* records that Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9 BC–AD 23), who was in power in the late Western Han dynasty, once issued a decree, “Da Gao” 大誥 (Great Announcement), hoping to obtain the blessing of the Queen Mother:

The Grand Empress Dowager (Empress Xiaoyuan) was with the blessing of the holy land of Shalu 沙鹿 in Yuancheng 元城, as well as the auspicious sign from the deity who represented the yin essence and fertility. Consort of Emperor Han Yuan, she gave birth to Emperor Han Cheng. Thus, she was able to show the harmony of the Han family, and also received the blessings and auspicious signs from the Queen Mother, to protect the emperor’s clan, stabilize the long-standing and influential families, and continue their lineage to inherit the feats of the Han family to dominate the world. (*Hanshu*, 84:54:3432)

However, Wang Mang’s knowledge came after the Queen Mother Incident and had a clear political purpose. The *Hanshu* records one of his edicts as follows:

During the reign of Emperor Ai of the Han dynasty, rumors about the miracle of Queen Mother’s book of immortality were prevalent among the people. Therefore, people worshiped Xiwangmu 西王母 and prayed to her for a peaceful year. This is a sign that the Grand Empress Dowager will become the mother of all generations. How dare I disobey the destiny of heaven! Therefore, I deliberately chose an auspicious day to personally lead the royal family, ministers, and celebrated scholars to present the seal of the empress dowager respectfully to show to the world that I have complied with the will of heaven. (*Hanshu*, 98:68:4033)

Wang Mang held sacrificial activities for the Queen Mother, with the purpose of using her cult to whip up public opinion for himself in order to usurp the power of the Han dynasty. Wang Mang’s recognition of the Queen Mother occurred after the Queen Mother Incident. He took advantage of the disaster. He was influenced by the Queen Mother Incident of the civilian class.

In a nutshell, the materials in official historical materials recorded the Queen Mother Incident, which occurred in the civilian class and also had an impact on the ruling class. Therefore, we can make a more comprehensive description of the cult of the Queen Mother. The Queen Mother was not only a god of immortality and longevity but also a god who had the function in social governance.

### 6.3. Properties of Commoners’ Class Characteristic of Han Tombs with Stone Reliefs

Regarding the class attributes of the owners of the Wu Liang Shrine, Wu (1989, pp. 26–27) once sorted out biographical information of the owners of the shrine:

Wu Ban 武班 died in 145 at the age of 25. Before his death, he served as a chief clerk to a protector-general of the Dunhuang District.

Wu Ban’s father, Wu Kaiming 武開明, died in 148. He once worked in the imperial house as a royal coachman.

In 151, Wu Kaiming’s older brother, Wu Liang 武梁, died at age 74. He was a “virtuous man” who became a recluse devoted to learning.

This text provides two pieces of information: First, the owners of the Wu Liang Shrine did not have high social status. They either held low official positions or were in office only for a short time. Second, Wu Liang, the most prestigious owner of the Wu Liang Shrine, was not an official. In contrast, he lived in seclusion for a long time. These two pieces of information indicate that the owners of the Wu Liang Shrine were scholars far away from the imperial court and they belonged to the civilian class. Their tombs should be categorized as low-level tombs.

In a nutshell, the “Sage-Kings Image” or Wu Liang Shrine III is very distinctive in composition. The Queen Mother is high above, and the 11 mythical emperors are placed...
underneath. This composition conveys three important messages. First, it shows that in popular belief, the Queen Mother could make the real world overlap with the world of longevity and immortality. Second, the words in *Hanshu* prove that people believed the Queen Mother could govern the real world. Third, biographical information of the owners of the shrine demonstrates that in the Han Dynasty, the civilian class used stone reliefs in tombs. This information makes the image of the sage kings especially precious.

7. Conclusions

The cult of the Queen Mother is a very important phenomenon in the historical development of Chinese religion, and has long been a hot topic for discussion among scholars of Chinese religion and folk beliefs, but few of them study her cult in the Han era from a comparative perspective of literature and fine art. This paper fills the gap by closely comparing the appearance frequency and depiction of the goddess in the Han rhapsodies and Han stone carvings. The comparison of these two different forms of material finds that the image of the Queen Mother appears much more frequently in Han tomb stone reliefs than in Han rhapsodies. This suggests that Han rhapsody writers were less enthusiastic for the cult of the Queen Mother than Han stone carvers. Han rhapsodies were penned by members of the upper class, while Han stone reliefs were created by commoners, from which it follows that the cult of the Queen Mother was not confined to a society but rather spread across societies in the Han period. Our further examination of the Han rhapsodies and Han tomb pictorial stones shows that the former only describes the world of longevity and immortality that the Queen Mother resides in, whereas the latter both the immortal and the real world. The difference between the Han rhapsody and Han tomb art in their depiction of the Queen Mother and her surroundings suggests the difference in divine function or responsibility the goddess was entrusted with by people from different classes of society.

All this points to the fact that there existed two different Queen Mothers in the Han era: one worshipped by people from the upper class as a goddess of longevity and immortality as portrayed in Han rhapsodies; the other worshipped by the ordinary people as an omnipotent deity with divine power over both the immortal world and the mortal world as portrayed in Han tomb art.

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### Appendix A

**Table A1.** Chronology of Portrait Stone Remains that Feature the Queen Mother and/or the King Father in the Han Dynasty (Wang 2018, pp. 391–491).

| Composition | Name of the Remain | Location | Period | Source (Archaeological Report) |
|-------------|--------------------|----------|--------|-------------------------------|
| Sarcophagus adorned with pictorial stone carvings from a brick tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty (Sarcophagus No. 1) 四川郫縣東漢磚墓的石棺畫像 (一號石棺) | Sarcophagus adorned with pictorial stone carvings from a brick tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty (Sarcophagus No. 1) 四川郫縣東漢磚墓的石棺畫像 (一號石棺) | Pixian County, Sichuan 四川郫縣 | Eastern Han | Liang 1979 |
| Sarcophagus adorned with pictorial stone carvings from a brick tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty (Sarcophagus No. 2) 四川郫縣東漢磚墓的石棺畫像 (二號石棺) | Sarcophagus adorned with pictorial stone carvings from a brick tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty (Sarcophagus No. 2) 四川郫縣東漢磚墓的石棺畫像 (二號石棺) | Pixian County, Sichuan 四川郫縣 | Eastern Han | Liang 1979 |
| Sarcophagus adorned with pictorial stone carvings from a brick tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty (Sarcophagus No. 4) 四川郫縣東漢磚墓的石棺畫像 (四號石棺) | Sarcophagus adorned with pictorial stone carvings from a brick tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty (Sarcophagus No. 4) 四川郫縣東漢磚墓的石棺畫像 (四號石棺) | Pixian County, Sichuan 四川郫縣 | Eastern Han | Liang 1979 |
| Sarcophagus in cliff-side tomb, Shuanghe Township, Pengshan County 彭山縣雙河鄉崖墓石棺 | Sarcophagus in cliff-side tomb, Shuanghe Township, Pengshan County 彭山縣雙河鄉崖墓石棺 | Pengshan County, Sichuan 四川彭山 | Han Dynasty | Gao 1985 |
| Leshan Mahao Eastern Han cliff–side tomb 樂山麻浩東漢崖墓 | Leshan Mahao Eastern Han cliff–side tomb 樂山麻浩東漢崖墓 | Leshan, Sichuan 四川樂山 | Eastern Han | Tang 1987 |
| Fushun Sarcophagus 富順石棺 | Fushun Sarcophagus 富順石棺 | Fushun County, Sichuan 四川富順 | Eastern Han | Gao and Gao 1988 |
| Hejiang Sarcophagus 合江石棺 | Hejiang Sarcophagus 合江石棺 | Hejiang County, Sichuan 四川合江 | Eastern Han | Gao and Gao 1988 |
| No. 12 Luzhou Sarcophagus 濟州12號石棺 | No. 12 Luzhou Sarcophagus 濟州12號石棺 | Luzhou, Sichuan 四川瀘州 | Han Dynasty | Xie 1991 |
### Table A1. Cont.

| Composition | Name of the Remain | Location | Period | Source (Archaeological Report) |
|-------------|--------------------|----------|--------|--------------------------------|
| No. 13 Luzhou Sarcophagus 瀘州13號石棺 | Luzhou, Sichuan 四川瀘州 | Han Dynasty | (Xie 1991) |
| Eastern Han cliff–side tombs, Tuoguzui, Leshan City, Sichuan 四川樂山市沱溝嘴東漢崖墓 | Leshan, Sichuan 四川樂山 | Eastern Han | (Hu and Yang 1993) |
| Hejiang Zhangjiagou No. 2 cliff–side tomb sarcophagus adorned with pictorial stone carvings (Hejiang No. 4 Coffin) 合江張家溝二號崖墓畫像石棺 (合江四號棺) | Neijiang, Sichuan 四川內江 | Han Dynasty | (Wang and Li 1995) |
| Changshunpo No. 2 Sarcophagus adorned with pictorial stone carvings, Nanxi District 南溪縣長順坡二號畫像石棺 | Nanxi, Sichuan 四川南溪 | Period of sarcophagus known; patterned bricks date back to Han Dynasty | (Yan 1996) |
| Tomb No. 1, Tiantai Mountain, Qijiang cliff–side tombs, Santai, Sichuan 四川三臺郪江崖墓群天台山1號墓 | Santai, Sichuan 四川三臺 | Han Dynasty | (Zhong 2002) |
| M3 sarcophagus adorned with pictorial stone carvings in Huzhu Village, Sanhe Town, Xindu District 新都區三河鎮互助村M3畫像石棺 | Chengdu, Sichuan 四川成都 | Eastern Han | (Chen et al. 2002) |
| Cliff-side tomb HM3, Huzhu Village, Sanhe Town, Xindu District, Chengdu 成都市新都區三河鎮互助村崖墓HM3 | Chengdu, Sichuan 四川成都 | Eastern Han | (Chen et al. 2007) |
| Niushihan cliff-side tomb, Luxian County, Sichuan 四川瀘縣牛石函崖墓 | Lu County, Sichuan 四川瀘縣 | Late Eastern Han | (Luzhou Museum and Chengdu Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology 2009) |
| M6, Area A, Shizizwan cliff–side tombs, Leshan City, Sichuan 四川瀘州市柿子灣崖墓A區M6 | Leshan, Sichuan 四川樂山 | Late Eastern Han to Shu Han | (Chen et al. 2014) |
| Eastern Han Tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Yanjiacha, Suide County, Shaanxi 陝西綏德縣延家岔東漢畫像石墓 | Suide, Shaanxi 陝西綏德 | Eastern Han | (Dai and Li 1983) |
| No. 2 Tomb with pictorial stone carvings, Yanjiacha, Suide, Shaanxi 陝西綏德延家岔二號畫像石墓 | Suide, Shaanxi 陝西綏德 | Eastern Han | (Li 1990) |
| Tomb with pictorial stone carvings with Portraits in Wuyequan Village, Suide 綏德呂咽泉村畫像石墓 | Suide, Shaanxi 陝西綏德 | Around the Reign of Emperor He (AD 88–106) and Emperor Shun (AD 125–44) of the Eastern Han Dynasty | (Wu 1992) |
| Composition | Name of the Remain | Location | Period | Source (Archaeological Report) |
|-------------|--------------------|----------|--------|-------------------------------|
| Stone tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Sishilipu, Suide County, Shaanxi | Suide, Shaanxi 陝西綏德 | Eastern Han | (Cultural Management Committee of Yulin Prefecture and Museum of Suide County 2002) |
| M6 Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings, in Huangjiata, Suide County, Shaanxi | Suide, Shaanxi 陝西綏德 | Han Dynasty | (Li 2004) |
| M9 Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings, in Huangjiata, Suide County, Shaanxi | Suide, Shaanxi 陝西綏德 | Han Dynasty | (Li 2004) |
| M3 Eastern Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Dabaodang, Shenmu, Shaanxi | Shenmu, Shaanxi 陝西神木 | Eastern Han | (Xiao et al. 2011) |
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Shenhuzhuang, Juxian County, Shandong | Juxian County, Shandong 山東莒縣沈劉莊漢畫像石墓 | Late Eastern Han | (Su and Zhang 1988) |
| M2 Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings, Shantou Village, Tengzhou City, Shandong | Tengzhou, Shandong 山東滕州 | Early Western Han | (Tengzhou Han Stone Relief Museum 2012) |
| Brick tombs with pictorial stone carvings at Dazhulin, Taojiazhen, Jiulongpo, Chongqing | Jiulongpo, Chongqing 重慶九龍坡陶家大竹林畫像磚墓 | Eastern Han | (Lin and Liu 2007) |
| M1 Eastern Han cliff–side tombs in Bishan County, Chongqing 重慶璧山縣畫像石墓群 (M1) | Bishan, Chongqing 重慶璧山 | Late Eastern Han | (Fan et al. 2014) |
| Tomb No. 3 in Bainijing, Zhaotong 昭通白泥井三號墓 | Zhaotong, Yunnan 雲南昭通 | Eastern Han | (Sun 1955) |
| Ancient tombs in Zhaotong, Yunnan 雲南昭通古墓葬 | Zhaotong, Yunnan 雲南昭通 | Eastern Han | (Yunnan Provincial Cultural Relics Team 1960) |
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings No. 1 (Grave of Nine Women) in Chulan District, Suzhou, Anhui 安徽宿州汪魚塚漢畫像石墓一（九女塚） | Suzhou, Anhui 安徽宿州 | Eastern Han | (Wang 1993) |
| Eastern Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings No. 14 in Lishi, Shanxi 山西離石漢畫像石墓（14號） | Lishi, Shanxi 山西離石province | Eastern Han | (Shang and Liu 1996) |
| Eastern Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings No. 19 in Lishi, Shanxi 山西離石漢畫像石墓（19號） | Lishi, Shanxi 山西離石 | Eastern Han | (Shang and Liu 1996) |
| Eastern Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings No. 44 in Lishi, Shanxi 山西離石漢畫像石墓（44號） | Lishi, Shanxi 山西離石 | Eastern Han | (Shang and Liu 1996) |
Table A1. Cont.

| Composition | Name of the Remain | Location | Period | Source (Archaeological Report) |
|-------------|-------------------|----------|--------|--------------------------------|
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Shipancun, Lishi, Shanxi | Lishi, Shanxi 山西离石 | Han Dynasty | (Wang 2000) |
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Shipancun, Lishi, Shanxi | Lishi, Shanxi 山西离石 | Eastern Han | (Wang 2005) |
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Mamaozhuang, Lishi | Lishi, Shanxi 山西离石 | Han Dynasty | (Wang and Wang 2006) |
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Mamaozhuang, Lishi | Lishi, Shanxi 山西离石 | AD 171 | (Wang 2009) |
| Han pictorial stones painted with colors in Liulin, Shanxi 山西柳林 | Liulin, Shanxi 山西柳林 | Han Dynasty | (Gao and Kong 2014) |
| Han pictorial stones painted with colors in Xipo, Zhongyang, Shanxi | Zhongyang, Shanxi 山西中陽 | Han Dynasty | (Qiao and Kong 2016) |
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings No. M8 in Huangjiata | Suide, Shaanxi 陝西綏德 | Han Dynasty | (Li 2004) |
| Tomb with pictorial stone carvings No. 2 in Guanzhuang | Mizhi, Shaanxi 陝西米脂 | Mid-Eastern Han | (Ji 2011) |
| Wu Liang Shrine 武梁祠 | Jiaxiang, Shandong 山東嘉祥 | Late Eastern Han | (Jiang and Wu 1995) |
| Stone tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Wubaizhuang, Linyi, Shandong | Linyi, Shandong 山東臨沂 | Late Eastern Han | (Guan et al. 1999) |
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings No. M1, Wohushan, Zoucheng City, Shandong | Zoucheng, Shandong 山東鄄城 | Late Western Han or Early Eastern Han | (Hu 1999) |
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings No. M2, Wohushan, Zoucheng City, Shandong | Zoucheng, Shandong 山東鄄城 | Late Western Han or Early Eastern Han | (Hu 1999) |
| Tomb with pictorial stone carvings from the Three Kingdoms Period in Tengzhou City, Shandong Province | Tengzhou, Shandong 山東滕州 | Cao Wei or Western Jin Dynasty | (Tengzhou Museum 2002) |
| Luzhou No. 1 Sarcophagus 瀘州一號石棺 | Luzhou, Sichuan 四川瀘州 | Eastern Han | (Gao and Gao 1988) |
Table A1. Cont.

| Composition | Name of the Remain | Location | Period | Source (Archaeological Report) |
|-------------|--------------------|----------|--------|---------------------------------|
| Han Tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Wayao, Xinyi, Jiangsu 江蘇新沂瓦窯漢畫像石墓 | Xinyi, Jiangsu 江蘇新沂 | Late Eastern Han | (Wang et al. 1985) |
| Han tomb with pictorial stone carvings in Liujiamian, Feixian County, Shandong Province 山東費縣劉家漢畫像石墓 | Feixian, Shandong 山東費縣 | Late Eastern Han | (Yu et al. 2018) |
| Han tombs in Changli Reservoir 常樂水庫漢墓群 | Donghai, Jiangsu 江蘇東海 | End of Eastern Han | (Li 1957) |

Notes

1 See the Appendix A (Table A1) for more details about the Han stone carving remains that feature the Queen Mother.

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