PICTURING OR DIAGRAMMING THE UNIVERSE

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This paper is a broad speculation on image-making from the late Eastern Zhou to the Han. The kinds of images I want to consider include pictorial motifs and compositions (which are conventional subjects of art history) as well as abstract signs and patterns (which usually escape art historians’ attention). My main thesis is that during this period, not one, but a number of systems developed side by side to supply different types of images. A single “subject matter” could thus be rendered in different visual presentations that operated as different languages and interacted in an increasingly complex visual culture.

Having laid down this basic claim, I want to focus on one such “subject matter”—the universe—defined as an all-inclusive entity, encompassing all things—heavens, earth, and all that is in them—as well as time and space. Based on this definition the universe means an absolute interiority, a closed system that has everything inside and nothing outside. It is easy to understand why this interiority was imagined in terms of architecture in various ancient cultures. Such imaginations, in turn, stimulated the interest in fashioning a building as a microcosmic architectural representation of the entire cosmic order.

Two kinds of microcosmic buildings were pursued through divergent cultural practices in China from the Eastern Zhou to Han. One of these was an idealized ritual structure known as Mingtang 明堂, translated into English as Bright Hall or the Hall of Light. Fig. 1 a–b shows the remaining foundation of the Bright Hall constructed by Wang Mang 王莽 in 4 AD. The structure was highly geometric. The central building, the Bright Hall itself, had a ya-shaped (亞) floor plan, with three rooms on each side. Standing on a round platform, it was surrounded by alternating circles and squares, the shapes of Heaven and earth. Han texts praise the Bright Hall as “the greatest thing

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1 The editors would like to thank Wu Hung for kindly allowing us to include this transcribed version of the presentation that he gave at the panel on “Tu (diagrams, charts, drawings) in traditional Chinese culture”, Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Chicago, 1998. The editors took the liberty to add cross-references to other contributions in this volume.
among all things,” which “manifests the deepest meaning of all mean-
ings.” This is not because the hall has an imposing monumentality (in
fact, Wang Mang’s building is said to have been completed in a mere
twenty days), but because the hall’s architecture demonstrates the
working of the Universe. The building itself thus becomes “the source
of changes and transformations.” As the second-century author Cai
Yong 蔡邕 wrote, “It brings all things into its unifying light, and this
is why it is called Bright Hall.”

The other kind of microcosmic architecture developed in a quite
different context. It resulted from changing mortuary practices and
especially from a new vision of the afterlife. Understandably, a grave
was by nature divided from the world outside and had interior only.
From the Eastern Zhou to the Han, when the afterlife began to mimic
life itself in people’s imagination, images of heaven, earth and men
were fabricated and installed in a tomb to transform it into a self-con-
tained microcosm of the universe. The earliest known example of
such a structure is probably the grave of the First Qin Emperor 秦始
皇帝. According to Sima Qian 司馬遷, it contained artificial rivers
and oceans, models of palaces and the hundred officials, and all sorts
of strange objects and valuables. Sima Qian summarizes the tomb’s
decoration in a single sentence: “Above were all the Heavens and
below all the Earth.” We have no way to verify his report: the burial
chamber at Lishan 驪山 has not been opened, and to my knowledge
no excavated tombs from the third and second centuries BC had cele-
tstial bodies painted on their ceilings. Such architectural murals have
only been found in tombs dating from the first century BC, actually
very close to Sima Qian’s own time (Col.Pl. III). These murals began
a powerful art movement, in which numerous images were invented
to transform a tomb, a mortuary shrine, or a sarcophagus into a vivid
pictorial universe. In this universe, Heaven is not an abstract circle,
but a concrete space filled with gods and spirits, emerging in clouds
whose changing shapes convey the sense of transformation (Fig. 2.1–
2.2). Other spaces in this universe include the immortal realm and the
human world, where one finds different sorts of figures and events
(Figs. 10–12).

The title of this paper thus intends to capture a main difference be-
tween these two systems of visual presentation: one system diagrams
the universe with abstract symbols and patterns; the other pictures the
universe with a predominantly descriptive language. That these two
systems developed in parallel for hundreds of years must imply some