Few scholars today possess the talent to capture the interest of a general audience for topics in ancient Chinese history of thought. A remarkably large share of such exceptional studies has been produced by the British tradition of scholarship. Arthur Waley, Joseph Needham and Michael Loewe, among others, have written books in a beautiful style intelligible and delectable to read for anyone seriously interested in China, while endowing these books with so many new data and insights that they became milestones or even classics of scholarship for the specialist. After Crisis and Conflict in Han China, an excellent study on the intellectual and institutional history of the middle Han period (104 BC to AD 9), Michael Loewe turned to the investigation of the mythology and religion of the Han. In Ways to Paradise, as the dust-jacket informs us, he “assesses a wealth of new archeological evidence in an attempt to uncover the attitudes of the pre-Buddhist Chinese to matters relating to death and the hereafter”.

This overall concern unites the three specialized studies on Han art and iconography that compose the book: 1° the recently discovered painting on the silk funeral banner from Ma-wang tui dated around 168 BC; 2° the bronze mirrors of the so-called TLV pattern that came into fashion around the beginning of the Christian era and reflect the rich cosmological symbolism characteristic of Han thought and 3° the representations of the Queen Mother of the West which testify to growing beliefs in personified cosmic powers, from perhaps a century later. With his extensive knowledge of recent archeological discoveries (see Loewe, 1976 and

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1977 in the bibliography app. to this review), the author combines great skill in relating them to the written sources of this early and seminal period of Chinese history which was to become the classical age for all later Far Eastern philosophy, religion and art.

If the present review grew into an article, it is not because of any need for lengthy criticism or corrections but rather in response to the wealth of stimulating new ideas which the book presents on some of the most magnificent and controversial new finds in Han tombs. None of the author's main conclusions have yet been contradicted by new archeological evidence or by the fast moving worldwide discussions on these finds. An attempt to include some of the most important of these newer discoveries and discussions (since 1978) has further lengthened the following pages.

I. The Han frame of mind

The ideas about death and afterlife that presided over the creation of Han tombs are described in a short first chapter. The author distinguishes three facets of Han mentality, one centered on nature—representing what can vaguely be called the Taoist trend of the time—, a second concerned with the forces of destiny which can be known and dealt with through divination, and a third, associated with the Confucian tradition, emphasizing the role of man and attributing a controlling influence to Heaven. None of these views contained a satisfactory explanation of death or of man's fate after death. The contemporary beliefs about life and death are reflected in some symbols of Han art that were designed to lead the spiritual force of man (hus) to an otherworldly paradise, and in the lavish tomb furnishings which tell of a concern to keep the remaining vital force (p'i) appeased, and to prevent it from reappearing as a malevolent ghost (kuei). The common ideas concerning an existence after death were, acc. to the author, expressed in beliefs, myths and legends about paradises: the isles of the immortals in the Eastern sea and later, increasingly, the K'un-lun mountains in the West.

The Han period was also the time when beliefs in deathless immortality gained acceptance, as exemplified in Emperor Wu's search for the elixir and in the evolution of physiological techniques