THE EARLIEST PICTORIAL REPRESENTATIONS
OF APE TALES

An Interdisciplinary Study of
Early Chinese Narrative Art and Literature*

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In 1951, Richard Rudolph reported two pieces of bas-reliefs with similar pictorial representations in his well-known book, *Han Tomb Art of West China*.

Five years later, the Chinese scholar, Wen Yu, published these works again with brief discussions of their subject matter.

Both authors identified the provenance of the slabs as Xinjing 新津 in the Sichuan basin close to the Yangzi River. Rudolph described the pictorial scenes in a detailed figure-by-figure manner, but did not address their iconography; Wen Yu, on the other hand, mistakenly identified the representations as “ape-play,” a kind of circus.

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It is necessary to define some terms which are used in a cross-disciplinary sense in this study. The following definitions are based on P. Hanan’s and E. Panofsky’s contentions, with minor modifications. “Plot” means the narrative development of a literary work in its entirety. Since this term implies a temporal sequence, when applied to visual art, it will be only used to describe cases where more than one pictorial scenes illustrate a given story. “Motif” means the subject-matter of visual representations. The term is also used in the same sense of “stuff-material” as defined by Hanan: “the identifiable subject matter of a story regardless of its order and form.” Again, following Hanan, “theme” denotes an abstraction from, or a generalization about, motifs. But in this study, it is often used in a more extended sense to mean a generalization about related literary and artistic motifs. “Composition,” used specifically in describing art works, refers to the formal configuration of figures or individual scenes, while “pictorial complex” denotes the integration of a number of motifs according to their internal relationship of symbolic significance. cf., P. Hanan, *The Chinese vernacular story*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1981, p. 19–20; also E. Panofsky, *Studies in iconology*, New york, 1962, pp. 5–7.

1 R. Rudolph, *Han Tomb Art of West China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951, nos. 40–41.

2 Wen Yu, *Sichuan Han-dai Huaxiang Xuanji* 四川漢代畫像選集, 1956, nos. 32, 46.
Two other pictorial representations resembling the Xinjing carvings can be found at other locations in Sichuan: one carved in a cave-tomb at Leshan 樂山, the other, on a stone coffin discovered in 1956 in Neijiang 内江. While the increasing discoveries of such carvings has demonstrated the popularity of the pictorial motif in this area during the Han, the subject matter of the representations still remains open to question. The only new iconographic explanation is that given by the excavator of the Neijiang coffin, who vaguely described the scene as “dancing and acting.”

In my opinion, the importance of studying the content of these carvings lies not only in supplying an interpretation of the iconography of these specific art works, but also in that it provides clues for speculating on some general problems regarding the interrelationship between early Chinese narrative literature and art. First, these carvings, in fact, represent an early version of the “White Ape” legend which later became the subject of the famous Tang short story, Bu Jiang Zong Bai-yuan Zhuan (補江總白猿傳, A Supplement to Jiang Zong’s White Ape Tale). With their definite provenance and date, the carvings provide us with important evidence for tracing the origin and early development of this legend. Second, the “ape tale” motif and another motif, “Yang Youji 養由基 shooting a white ape,” co-exist in Sichuan pictorial art. These two motifs became two narrative “kernels” around which have developed two general themes of “ape” stories, (1) “a demonic ape abducting women” and (2) “the god Er-lang 二郎 defeating an ape spirit,” in post-Han literature and art.

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3 This pictorial scene has been catalogued by Rudolf. See R. Rudolf, op. cit., no. 14.
4 Before 1958, there had been a debate among scholars regarding the function and the proper name of the “stone boxes” found in Sichuan. V. Segalen called them “sarcophagi”; Shang Chengzuo 商承祚 considered them containers of clothes and prized possessions of the deceased; He Changqun 賀昌群 argued that their proper name should be “shi-chuang” 石床 or “stone bed.” The latter opinion was further supported by Wen Yu. In 1958, Chinese archaeologists published the excavation report of the Han tomb in Tianhui Shan 天邊山, Sichuan. They reported that “remains of a skeleton, as well as other artifacts,” were found inside such stone boxes. This report proves that these boxes were used as coffins during the Han, and thus seems to clinch the argument. Cf., R. Rudolph, op. cit., p. 8; Wen Yu, op. cit., pp. 1–2; Shang Chengzuo. “Sichuan Xinjing dengdi Han yamu zhuannu kaolue” 四川新津等地漢崖墓墓考略, Jin-ting Daxue xue bao 金陵大學學報, vol. 10 (1940), pp. 1–18; Liu Zhiyuan 劉志遠, “Chengdu Tianhuishan yamu qingli” 四川天邊山崖墓清理, Kaogu Xuebao 考古學報, 1958, 1, p. 87–103.
6 Ibid., p. 54.