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A Study on Land Worship Reflected in Tree Images of Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs

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Abstract. As an important visual carrier of the funeral culture in the Han Dynasty, the images on Han Dynasty stone reliefs not only reflect the Han people's cosmology, religious views and social structure, but also contain rich hierarchical symbolic meanings. Starting from the evolution of the concept of land and its forms of worship, this paper attempts to re-examine the common "tree images" in Han Dynasty stone reliefs. The study argues that these tree patterns are not merely simple reproductions of mythological symbols, but are closely related to the concept of "Earth Mother" and the belief of "Sheshu (sacred community tree)" in land worship during the Han Dynasty funeral rituals. Moreover, it provides a new perspective for revealing the significance of trees in the ancient Chinese tomb system.

Keywords: Tree Images, Stone Reliefs, Earth Mother Worship, Land Worship

1. Introduction

As an important part of the visual culture of Han Dynasty tombs, the images on Han Dynasty stone reliefs cover myths and legends, historical stories, real life, religious beliefs and other aspects. Among them, tree images, as a recurring motif in tomb art, have long been understood within the framework of myths and legends (such as Fusang and Ruomu). However, with the accumulation of archaeological materials and the renewal of image analysis methods, research on the symbolic meanings and social functions behind tree images has gradually become prominent. This paper attempts to place tree images in the conceptual history of land worship, and explore the possible deep-seated connection between the two through mutual verification of documents and images.

"Earth is what bears; it brings forth all things. Ground is what underlies; it carries all things beneath." This exegesis by Liu Xi of the Han Dynasty in Shiming inadvertently points out the two cores of land belief—nurturing and bearing. In the perception of ancient ancestors, land was not only the foundation of material life, but also the womb of meaning production. In the period of natural religion in primitive society, human beings were full of dependence, fear and mystery towards natural phenomena and forces. As an important foundation for human survival, the fertility or barrenness, harvest or failure of land directly affected people's lives. When this emotion could not be rationally explained, people believed that land had a soul, joys and sorrows like humans and animals, and a simple concept of "animism" came into being, holding that land itself had a soul and will. This concept was the basis for the formation of the idea of the land god. Nevertheless, the

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ancestors at that time still worshipped land as a natural object, without personifying it into a deity. Human beings lived on the earth and had deep feelings for land—whether in the primitive hunting or agricultural farming period, everything on which human survival depended came from land. Conceptually, they formed the idea that "land nurtures all things", imagining the fertility of the earth as a phenomenon similar to female reproduction. In When God Was a Woman, Merlin Stone proposed that the core of goddess religion worship was the Great Mother Goddess, and the highest stage of goddess religion development presented the mythological idea of a female creator [1]. As the mother of the origin of all living beings and even inorganic matter, the Mother Goddess gave birth to heaven, earth, all things and human beings. When primitive humans associated the nurturing of all things by land with the reproductive function of women similar to that of land, the worship of "Earth Mother" emerged, which further led to the personification of the land god [2]. This is also the realistic origin of the traditional Chinese philosophical thought that "heaven is father and earth is mother".

In the ancient natural worship system, the personification of the land god was second only to heaven in the religious deity sequence. Heaven and earth were closely related in the religious context. Although the concept of the world parents did not become a typical idea in Chinese theology, it developed in the classical symbolic meaning system. Heaven and earth were worshipped through rituals held by the Son of Heaven and his ministers and officials, rather than by ordinary people. At the same time, all people also worshipped heaven and earth: they burned incense and worshipped on mountain tops on specific autumn festivals; successful imperial examination candidates prayed to heaven and earth; most importantly, the bride and groom "worshipped heaven and earth" at weddings, a core part of traditional Chinese marriages symbolizing respect for the origin of all things [3]. After entering the civilized era, this land worship gradually evolved into the worship of "She (god of the land)". This evolution reveals the "dual dimensions" contained in ancient Chinese land belief: one is the "Earth Mother dimension", rooted in primitive reproductive worship and maternal metaphor, emphasizing the characteristics of land as the source of fertility and the place of life gestation; the other is the "Sheshu dimension", which gradually became prominent along with the process of civilization and national construction, focusing on the spatial symbolism, political coding and social integration function of the divinity of land.

2. The expression of land divinity in tree images of stone reliefs

Huainanzi·Sayings of the Mountains records that the Earth Mother was called "She" in the Jianghuai area. The Chinese god of agriculture evolved from the Earth Mother, and the original image of the She pillar was the worship of "earth's breast", namely the worship of the clan mother. In Religion and Mythology in Ancient China, Ding Shan argued that "the pillar that grows all kinds of grains and vegetables is another name for 'Earth Mother' and a short term for 'Houtu'." The interpretation of the character "di (earth)" can be traced back to the description in Shuowen Jiezi: "When the primal qi first divided, the light, clear and yang qi became heaven, and the heavy, turbid and yin qi became earth, where all things are displayed. It is composed of the character 'tu (soil)' and pronounced as 'ye'." Xu Shen, a Confucian scholar of the Eastern Han Dynasty, interpreted the character "ye" as female genitalia according to its seal script form in Shuowen Jiezi. Duan Yucai of the Qing Dynasty further elaborated in his annotation: "The original meaning of this seal script is female genitalia, and it is undoubtedly borrowed as a function word, which shallow people doubt. Xu Shen must have had a basis at that time; do not judge with a surprised mind." As for the character "mu (mother)", Guangya·Explanation of Kinship states: "Mother is the root." Shiming·Explanation of Kinship explains: "Mother is to cover; she contains and gives birth to oneself." Book of the Later

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Han·Biography of Kui Xiao also clearly points out: "Earth is mother." The character "di (earth)" is composed of "tu (soil)" and "ye". "Tu" is a pictographic character, and "di" is a associative character. Under the ancient analogical thinking, the mother who gives birth to all things is called "di (earth)". In the early ideology of primitive humans, the commonality between land and female reproductive function formed the basis for the conceptual connection between "di (earth)" and "mu (mother)". The formation of the Earth Mother concept demonstrates the personified interpretation of land by human beings under the early awareness of land worship [4]. Earth Mother worship originated from the reproductive function of land, reflecting human understanding of natural laws. Baihu Tong·Heaven and Earth states that "earth is change", revealing the nurturing, transaction and changing characteristics of land, and strengthening the rationality of the connection between "earth" and "mother". Under this concept, land is the cradle of life and the foundation of cultural inheritance.

The social soil of this "Earth Mother" concept is undoubtedly the matrilineal clan system [2].Du Zhengqian's research shows that the analogical thinking of "regarding earth as mother", as a reflection of reality, could only be bred under the matriarchal system where women occupied the central position of society due to their reproductive capacity [5]. In the matriarchal period, women played a key role in the social structure, and human reproduction depended entirely on women's reproductive capacity. However, the society's understanding of female reproductive function was insufficient at that time, and women's fertility was regarded as a great and mysterious natural phenomenon. According to the marriage system theory expounded by Lewis Henry Morgan in his work Ancient Society, most historical stages of primitive society were in the form of matrilineal clan society, because family relations tied by matrilineal blood could be clearly defined from the perspective of blood relationship, while patrilineal families could not achieve the same degree of stability. The formation of the Earth Mother concept was directly related to the development of primitive agriculture. Archaeological findings show that settled agriculture had emerged in the Yellow River and Yangtze River basins 6,000 years ago, and the 50-centimeter-thick rice accumulation layer in the Hemudu Site confirms the core position of agriculture in the social economy [4].Primitive people observed the similarity between "land nurturing all things" and "women gestating life", thus forming the analogical thinking of "regarding earth as mother". This thinking left distinct traces in character construction—the oracle bone script of the character "di (earth)" was composed of "tu (soil)" and "ye", a pictograph of female genitalia, intuitively presenting the connection between land and female fertility.

The prehistoric "Venus statues" are the materialized expression of Earth Mother belief. The pottery pregnant female statues unearthed from the Hongshan Culture Site at Dongshanzui, Kazuo, Liaoning, highlight reproductive features such as bulging abdomen, plump hips and breasts, consistent with the style of prehistoric goddess statues found in Europe, Siberia and other regions. These statues were buried in sacrificial pits, symbolizing the primitive idea that "all things are bred from the earth". Yu Weichao pointed out: "Primitive people took female statues as the symbol of the god of agriculture, because women have the attribute of fertility, just like the earth that produces crops." [6] This worship reached its peak in matrilineal clan society, reflecting the dual sacredness of women as both reproducers and leaders of agricultural production. The emergence of the Earth Mother image reflects the important position of women in human society. Some scholars pointed out that the appearance of numerous goddess statues in China was not accidental, but a reflection of human belief in female ancestors [7]. In ancient times, women were the main undertakers of gathering, fishing, farming and household chores such as cooking, childbearing, caring for the elderly and the young, which were also social labors, so women occupied a dominant position in

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society at that time. Meanwhile, the clan society at that time was tied by matrilineal blood, and women became the bearers of this bond. The emergence of goddesses was actually a reflection of women's former important social status at the religious level. In the artistic statues revealed by archaeology, human worship of women was mainly reflected in the reverence for female reproductive organs. Primitive humans regarded the earth as a mother who gestates life, and believed that it had reproductive organs similar to those of women. In primitive society, the worship of female fertility was consistent with the belief in the earth nurturing all things, both being affirmations of species continuation and the essence of life. The stability and prosperity of clan society could not be separated from population prosperity. Therefore, the ancestors attached great importance to reproduction, worshipped reproductive organs, and held sacrificial activities to pray for the blessing of the god of reproduction, expecting human beings to achieve population reproduction and growth just like the earth breeding plants and animals reproducing offspring [8].

The worship of the Earth Mother was reflected in Han Dynasty stone reliefs as the desire for agricultural fertility. Ancient China took agriculture as the "fundamental industry". The growth of crops and the harvest or failure of production directly affected the national economy and people's livelihood. Therefore, the discussion on the original meaning of the "auspicious grain" images presented in Han Dynasty stone reliefs can also be regarded as an embodiment of primitive reproductive worship. "Auspicious grain", also known as "auspicious millet", appeared most frequently in divination activities of successive dynasties. Books such as Taiping Yulan record: Sun's Ruiying Tu calls auspicious grain the leader of the five grains and the essence of great virtue; in the Xia and Yin dynasties, the refined type had two stalks with one ear, and the plain type had one stalk with two ears; in the Zhou Dynasty, auspicious grain had three stalks with different ears, growing in the state of Tang Shu, and was presented to the Duke of Zhou and then to the Temple of King Wen. Book of Documents, Shangshu·Zhonghou, Li Hanwen Jia, Li Dou Weiyi, Xiaojing Yuanshen Qi, Baihu Tong, Jin Zhengxiang Shuo, Book of Song·Records of Auspicious Signs also record auspicious grain. For example, Book of Song·Records of Auspicious Signs states that when a king has great virtue, two seedlings grow into one ear; in the Zhou Dynasty, three seedlings grow into one ear; in the Shang Dynasty, one stalk has two ears; in the Xia Dynasty, two stalks have one ear. During the reigns of Emperor Xuan and Emperor Zhang of the Han Dynasty, auspicious millet and auspicious grain fell in the prefectures and kingdoms. After analyzing the auspicious grain images of the Han Dynasty, Yang Yanping concluded that they had leaves and ears, with pointed leaf tips and many thin strips, and the ears were mostly drop-shaped, long strip-shaped or spindle-shaped and drooping. Auspicious grain had plump and numerous ears with upward-pointing leaves, while ordinary grain had only one plump ear with downward-pointing leaves. The auspicious grain images in Han Dynasty stone reliefs demonstrated the Han people's earnest expectation for high grain yields, and were also a manifestation of their land reproductive worship.

With the transformation of social structure to patriarchy, Earth Mother belief underwent personification and functional differentiation. In primitive times, based on the worship of nature, people revered land and regarded it as the "primordial grandmother", the common ancestor of the clan-tribe, respectfully called "Great Grandmother Earth" or "Earth Great Grandmother", abbreviated as "Earth Mother" [5].The concept of "Houtu" emerging in the late Western Zhou Dynasty marked the transformation of the Earth Mother from a natural god to a personified god. Zuo Zhuan·The Twenty-ninth Year of Duke Zhao records: "Gonggong's son named Gou Long became Houtu... he could level the nine lands, so he was worshipped as She." Gou Long was honored as the land god for his achievements in governing water and soil [9].At this time, the divinity of the Earth Mother split into two: one was "Heaven and Earth" corresponding to "August Heaven", representing

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the philosophical cosmic ontology; the other was "Houtu the Earth Officer", one of the five elements officials, in charge of agricultural harvests [9].Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty conferred the title of "Houtu the Earth Deity Following Heaven and Imitating Law with Great Virtue and Broad Light" on Houtu, and the popularity of Earth Mother Classic in the Qing Dynasty popularized the title of "Earth Mother" among the people, highlighting the lasting vitality of its belief. It is precisely the dual divinity of reproduction and space contained in the concept of "Earth Mother" that laid the conceptual foundation for the later "Sheshu" as the carrier of land divinity; while the needs of patriarchy and national politics completed the key transformation from the feminine "Earth Mother" to the genderless and institutionalized "Sheshu".

In Han Dynasty stone reliefs, tree patterns are often combined with images of figures, buildings, animals and other objects in specific ways to form an image program with religious ritual significance. These images not only continue the concept of "sacred tree" in mythological traditions, but also reflect the worship and prayer to the land god in the funeral context. In the field of sociological research, with the evolution of society, a phenomenon has been observed: in the historical stage with men as the main labor force, the corresponding deity images also tend to be masculine. Specifically, in the discussion of the diachronic changes of land worship, the worship of the Earth Mother transformed into the worship of the She god.

In a large number of Han Dynasty stone relief compositions, trees are often placed in key positions such as "gate towers", "pavilions", "tomb entrances" or "on both sides of altars", forming clear spatial landmarks. This layout is highly consistent with the description in documents that "Sheshu are planted around the She altar", indicating that the trees in the stone reliefs are not random decorations, but visual reproductions of the real "Sheshu" system. In the stone reliefs unearthed in Nanyang, Xuzhou, southern Shandong and other places, the "evergreen tree" images are often independent or combined with jade bi, divine birds to form the "tree-bi-bird" pattern. In Zheng Tongxiu's Evergreen Tree Carvings in Han Dynasty Images and Han Dynasty She Sacrifices, it is pointed out that the trees planted on circular mounds are Sheshu, namely "evergreen trees" [10]. It is incomplete to conclude that this tree symbolizes land or the land god only according to the records in relevant documents. A holistic analysis of the stone reliefs on another stone coffin outer coffin, with mutual verification of documents and physical objects, can better prove that such trees have the meaning of the land god. A holistic analysis of the single stone coffin relief unearthed from Pudong Community, Longquan Street, Tengzhou City in 2006, when the stone coffin outer coffin is unfolded, clearly shows that the circle at the head of the corpse symbolizes "heaven", and the tree at the feet is the opposite "earth". In ancient China, the form of heaven and earth was often summarized as "heaven is round and earth is square". In symbols and images, circles and squares were often used as symbols of the cosmic model [11]. The "tree-bi-bird" pattern combination not only has mythological symbolic significance, but also reflects the ritual intention of worshipping the "She god" in the context of land worship. The jade bi symbolizes the sacrifice, the divine bird is the messenger of the deity, and the tree is the master where the She god resides. The three together form a complete sacrificial image system.

The essence of "She" is the land god. Ancient books such as Shuowen Jiezi mostly interpret "She" as "lord of the land" or "god of the soil". However, the connotation of "She" is far more than an abstract deity concept. Its sacrificial place—the "She altar" and its core components—become the key to understanding the new form of land belief. The core symbol of the early She altar was "mounded soil", that is, an artificially piled mound, which can be regarded as a symbolic abstraction and ritualization of the "Earth Mother" matrix that breeds all things. Nevertheless, the symbol of "soil" alone is not sufficient to fully meet the multiple needs of defining sacred space, highlighting

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vitality and communicating heaven and earth. Therefore, "Sheshu", as the material carrier of land divinity and the explicit mark of sacred space, was introduced and became an indispensable core element in the She sacrifice system, completing the key link of land belief from the worship of "Earth Mother" to the worship of "Sheshu". "She is composed of 'shi' and 'tu'; 'shi' means 'si (sacrifice)'; sacrificing to the soil, so it is called 'She' [9]. Therefore, soil is She, and She is the god of land." However, this view is only one of many studies on "She". In addition to this view, there are totem theory, Gao Mei god theory, primitive gathering mark theory, jungle worship theory, combination of jungle worship and tree worship theory, place for folk witchcraft rituals theory, sacred land or patron god of primitive social groups theory, Earth Mother god theory originating from ancestor worship theory, Mongolian and Manchu oboo sacrifice theory, cosmic axis theory of communication between heaven and earth, genital worship theory, water control theory, sacred land and sacred power symbol theory, etc [1]. Among the above theories, the theory that She is the land god is more common and can be mutually confirmed with ancient records. The so-called "Fei has She and Ji" in Analects·Advanced refers to the county She. Li She was more common: "In ancient times, twenty-five families formed a li, and each li had a She", showing that She existed all over the country from the Son of Heaven to the villages. Rites of Zhou records: "Twenty-five families form a She, and each plants trees suitable for the local soil." According to historical records, She was established at all levels from the state to the villages, and She sacrifice activities were held. According to ancient customs, trees were usually planted at the place where She sacrifice was held. When planting trees around the She altar, different varieties of trees were selected according to the local environment, so the types of Sheshu varied in different countries and villages. Mozi·Explaining Ghosts states that in ancient times, the sage kings of the three dynasties of Yu, Xia, Shang and Zhou, when they first established states and built capitals... must choose places with lush trees and establish them as Cong She... Analects·Bayi records that Duke Ai asked about She to Zai Wo, who replied: "The Xia people used pine, the Yin people used cypress, and the Zhou people used chestnut—to make the people tremble with fear." Chuxue Ji Volume 13 quotes Shangshu·Wuyi: "The Great She uses pine, the East She uses cypress, the South She uses catalpa, the West She uses chestnut, and the North She uses scholar tree." Thus, wherever She exists, the matching Sheshu is planted there, and the types of Sheshu vary according to the characteristics of different regions. According to the descriptions in ancient books, it not only conveys the view that "She" exists to worship the land god, but also reveals the relationship between "She", "Sheshu" and "She god": that is, the She god and Sheshu are identical, or the She god resides in Sheshu.

The She sacrifice system is the institutional expression of ancient Chinese land belief. The character "She" in Warring States period scripts such as the Zhongshan King Pot and the Chu Bamboo Slips of Geling mostly consists of "shi", "tu" and "mu", revealing its core components—sacrifice, land and sacred tree. The sacredness of Sheshu is reflected in many aspects. First, it is a totem mark of clan identity. The types of Sheshu carry the memory of ethnic groups. Analects·Bayi records: "The Xia people used pine, the Yin people used cypress, and the Zhou people used chestnut", taking pine, cypress and chestnut as Sheshu respectively. Thus, trees became totem marks of clan identity. The evergreen pine and cypress symbolize the permanence of political power, while the chestnut tree is closely related to secular life due to the edibility of its fruits. Second, it is a medium for communication between heaven and earth. Four large stones stand in the center of the Shang Dynasty She sacrifice site discovered at Qiuwan, Tongshan, Jiangsu, surrounded by a large number of skeletons of human sacrifices and dog sacrifices, all with their heads facing the central stone. As a medium between heaven and earth, trees are endowed with divinity for their form of connecting heaven and earth. The Shang Dynasty She Sacrifice Site at Qiuwan, Tongshan, Jiangsu

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records that four natural stones stand in the center of the site, with 20 human skeletons, 2 human skulls and 12 dog skeletons distributed around the center. Most of the human skeletons are in a prone and kneeling position with their hands tied behind their backs. Those whose gender and age can be identified include 6 males and 4 females, all young and middle-aged, who were killed and buried on the spot with loess. About half of the skulls of all human skeletons are broken, and some stones are unearthed next to some skulls or wrist bones, which seems to indicate that the main cause of death was being beaten to death. Yu Weichao judged that this reflects the remains of She sacrifice [6]. The central stone replaces Sheshu as the "object relied on by the earth deity", and the 20 sacrifices with their heads facing the center reflect the absolute authority of the "sacred focus"—the She altar is essentially a violent performance field that strengthens the human-deity contract through spatial order. This site symbolizes the reliance of the She god with the central stone, and strongly demonstrates the dual nature of fertility and deterrent authority of She as a sacred space with cruel human sacrifice rituals, confirming the records in ancient books that the She altar was a place for executing punishments. Third, it is also a symbol of national penal authority. Records such as "execute at She" and "use humans at Bo She" in Zuo Zhuan, and Zai Wo's explanation of "make the people tremble with fear" in Analects, all reveal the deterrent power behind Sheshu (or She master).

At the ritual level, the function of Sheshu is more specific. According to Rites of Zhou·Spring Officials, blood sacrifice must be performed when sacrificing to She and Ji. Zheng Xuan annotated this: "Yin sacrifices start with blood, valuing qi and odor." Land belongs to yin, and animal blood also belongs to yin; sacrificing to earth with blood conforms to the logic of like attracting like. Pouring animal blood into the roots of Sheshu, since blood belongs to yin and land and women also belong to yin, blood is used to communicate with the earth deity. This is not only a follow-up to the principle of "yin sacrifices value qi and odor", but also a ritual reproduction of the ancient reproductive imagination that "the Earth Mother drinks blood to nurture all things". In She sacrifice, trees are not only the object of sacrifice, but also the "divine master" where deities reside. Most trees in Han Dynasty stone reliefs are symmetric, crown-expanded and with hidden roots. This stylized treatment not only enhances visual stability, but also metaphorizes the symbolic meaning of trees "taking root in the land and blessing one side". In some stone reliefs, there are platforms or mounds under the trees, which is an intuitive reproduction of the combination of "mounded soil" and "Sheshu". In addition, trees are juxtaposed with "field"-shaped or "well"-shaped patterns in some stone reliefs, which may imply the symbolism of agricultural space and land ownership. This image combination can be regarded as a visual expression of "Sheshu" as a "territorial mark", revealing the internal connection between land god worship and national spatial governance.

In some stone reliefs with more specific carvings, kneeling figures, sacrificial tables with offerings, and even sacrificial animals often appear under or on both sides of the trees, forming a complete sacrificial scene. These images are highly consistent with the records of "blood sacrifice to She" and "tree as divine master" in documents, indicating that trees are not only the place where deities reside, but also the central object of sacrificial acts. For example, in a stone relief unearthed in Linyi, Shandong, there is a table under the tree with offerings on it, figures kneeling on both sides, and divine birds circling above the crown. Here, the tree is not only the place where the deity resides, but also the central object of the sacrificial act. In the funeral context, it plays the dual roles of "incarnation of the Earth Mother" and "object relied on by the She god", becoming an important medium connecting the living, the dead and the god of land.

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3. Conclusion

To sum up, the tree patterns in Han Dynasty stone reliefs are not merely the "sacred tree" images with mythological traditional significance as previously understood, but are endowed with clear connotations of land worship in the Han Dynasty funeral context. From the spatial layout, morphological characteristics to the combination relationship of the images, we can see the visual presentation of the "Sheshu" system and the evolutionary logic behind it from the ancient reproductive worship of "Earth Mother" to the nationalized sacrifice of "She god". These trees rooted in tomb art are not only a microcosm of the Han people's cosmic concept, but also a key symbol connecting individual life, clan continuation and land divinity, opening a unique window for us to understand the spiritual world of the Han people.

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