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Animating the Cosmos: The Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Dark Warrior in Han Tomb Art and Thought

Abstract

This article explores the artistic development and cosmological significance of the Four Cardinal Deities—the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Dark Warrior—in Han dynasty funerary art. Drawing from a rich corpus of archaeological materials, including mural paintings, engraved bricks, and stone reliefs, as well as classical texts and scholarly literature, the study traces the deities’ evolution from pre-Han to Han periods.

Originally rooted in early totemic symbols and astral beliefs, these figures became increasingly codified within the cosmological frameworks of *yin-yang* and Five Phases theory during the Western Han. The analysis highlights how these deities were integrated into elite tombs to convey notions of cosmic order, celestial harmony, protection, guidance, and immortality, reflecting broader shifts in religious thought and funerary practice by the Eastern Han period.

In the Han belief system, the tomb was a microcosm of the universe: the directional arrangement of the deities reflected both the soul’s place at the cosmic centre and its journey through the afterlife. Through case studies of major tomb sites and artifacts, the article shows how the deities’ iconography evolved from static symbols of time and place (directions) to dynamic figures deeply embedded in complex narrative compositions. The study also explores their spatial arrangement, symbolic attributes, and the interaction between the cardinal deities and other cosmological and mythical figures—such as Fuxi, Nüwa, and the sun and moon—as part of a comprehensive visual language of transcendence. Special attention is given to regional and temporal variations in their depiction and placement. Ultimately, the article argues that these deities were active symbols of cosmological ideology, ritual authority, and spiritual aspiration in Han burial culture.

Keywords: Four Cardinal Deities, Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, Dark Warrior, Han dynasty, Han murals, decorated tombs, funerary art, pictorial brick, ancient Chinese cosmology, ancient China

Introduction

Tomb decorations are artistic legacies from the ancient world. They not only preserve rich historical information but also reflect the prevailing aesthetics and cultural traditions of their time. China has the largest number of decorated tomb sites (especially tomb mural sites) in the world.¹ Over a span of 70 years (1949–2019), 1,495 mural tomb sites were excavated in the country, revealing a wide range of artistic techniques used to richly decorate royal tombs.² These included the embellishment of tomb gates, passageways, brick chamber and stone chamber walls and ceilings, as well as burial goods and interior furnishings. Numerous tombs depicting the Four Cardinal Deities have been discovered from the Han 漢 202 BCE – 9 CE; 25–220 CE) to the Khitan-led Liao 遼 dynasties (916–1125). These findings have brought renewed scholarly attention to the iconography of the guardian beasts across East Asia, as well as to broader questions concerning ancient cultural exchange within the region. In an effort to clarify the iconographic genealogy of the Four Cardinal Deities, extensive research has been undertaken mostly by Chinese and Japanese scholars. Prior studies have approached the subject from diverse disciplinary perspectives—including art history, archaeology, intellectual history, and conservation science.

This article offers a comparative study of the Four Cardinal Deities as they appear in pre-Han and Han period tombs. Drawing on the author's doctoral research³ conducted between 2012 and 2016 in Japan, the study examines visual representations of these deities in ancient China. It considers a range of material, including murals, reliefs, and engraved designs, with particular attention to their artistic and symbolic roles in elite burial practices. The article focuses on how the depictions of the Four Cardinal Deities evolved.⁴ Over time, how they were integrated into mural and relief compositions, and how their iconographic features developed in different regions. By analyzing both archaeological and written historical evidence, it views the decorations from a multi-dimensional perspective in conjunction with relevant historical records,⁵ and explore the preserved artistic ideas and cultural beliefs of the Han people. To be more specific, it traces the transformations of the four guardian figures, highlighting the cultural influences that shaped their form and meaning before and during the Han period. It also highlights their role in conveying concepts of protection, harmony, and

¹ Decorated tombs belonged to wealthy officials, generals, and other members (lords) of Chinese society highly ranked on the social scale.

² Shi and Wang 2023: 166.

³ Lázár 2018.

⁴ The study does not seek to explore the regional totemic origins of the independent dragon, bird, tiger, turtle, and snake spirits.

⁵ In this study, all translations are the author's own.

the cosmic order. This investigation is limited to representations of the cardinal deities within the context of Chinese funerary traditions and does not address their appearance in other settings. Although several Chinese scholarly works, image catalogues, and classical texts were consulted, the study equally draws on Japanese secondary sources authored by researchers who participated in fieldwork in China and published their findings as part of Sino-Japanese collaborative research projects.

Recent scholarship on Han-period Chinese decorated tombs and funerary concepts has seen significant contributions from both Eastern and Western academics, employing interdisciplinary methods to deepen our understanding of these ancient artworks. Without claiming to be exhaustive, it is worth mentioning Yang Hong's and Huang Peixian's detailed works that offer a comprehensive study of Han mural tombs, systematically collecting, categorizing, and analyzing numerous mural tombs unearthed from various regions, focusing on developments from the Western Han to the Eastern Han periods. In her 2011 study, Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik explores how mural paintings in Han dynasty tombs embody ancient Chinese cosmological concepts. Cheng Wanli's and Wang Xiaodun's monographs delve into the origins and systematization of the cardinal deities in Chinese cosmology and art, examining archaeological findings, such as tomb murals and artifacts, illustrating the deities' significance in Han dynasty funerary practices and their role in expressing cosmological beliefs. Another publication of Wang Xiaodun from 2008 utilizes a wealth of archaeological and ethnographic imagery, combined with classical texts, to explore the origins and development of the deities in ancient Chinese thought. It examines the significance of animal worship and totemic beliefs in early Chinese culture and how these elements contributed to the formation of a symbolic system centred around the beasts. Among the most prominent Japanese-language contributions is the work of Hayashi Minao, whose analysis of pictorial stones offers valuable insights into ancient Chinese cosmology and the iconographic lineage of spiritual birds and dragons up to the Han period. Further comparative research has been carried out by Donohashi Akio, who has examined religious mural art across East Asia, with a particular focus on the imagery of the cardinal deities in Chinese and Japanese contexts. Notable studies by Nagahiro Toshio and Ōgata Tōru have also shed light on the symbolic and stylistic characteristics of the period. Lastly, it should also be mentioned that in her doctoral dissertation, the author examined the artistic and cultural-historical representations of the Four Cardinal Deities in China, Korea, and Japan from antiquity to modern times, presenting and analyzing their distinct developmental trajectories within the religious, artistic, and cultural histories of each area.

The Four Deities in Pre-Han Representations

The Four Cardinal Deities (*sishen* 四神)—also known as the ‘Four Spirits’ (*siling* 四灵), ‘Four Directions’ (*siwei* 四维), or ‘Four Images’ (*sixiang* 四象)—refer to the four auspicious beasts: the Azure Dragon (*Qinlong* 青龍)⁶ of the East, White Tiger (*Baihu* 白虎) of the West, Vermilion Bird (*Zhuque* 朱雀) of the South, and Dark Warrior (*Xuanwu* 玄武, a turtle and snake intertwined) of the North.



Figure 1. Motifs of Han tiles emblematically representing the cardinal directions⁷

In order to understand the origins of the widespread appearance of the Four Deities in Han dynasty tombs, we must begin by examining their pre-Han representations and conceptual foundations. These figures originated from ancient Chinese totemic worship, astral beliefs, and divinatory systems, and they are imbued with rich mythological significance. Based on archaeological evidence, understanding the early conceptualization of the deities requires a departure from simplistic or static interpretations. This section, by drawing on relevant material and textual sources, aims to trace the ideological roots and developmental trajectory of the Four Cardinal Deities prior to the Han dynasty.

Presumably, from the Zhou dynasty (11th century BCE – 3rd century BCE), the Four Cardinal Deities were regarded as mythical spirits who ruled the segments of the sky. At the Xishui 西水坡 site (Puyang City, Henan Province), associated primarily with the Yangshao Culture (c. 5000–3000 BCE), several Neolithic burials were discovered, including a few from the Longshan Culture and Eastern Zhou period (c. 771 – 256 BCE). Tomb M45 yielded white clam-shell figures of a dragon and tiger, dating to roughly 6400 years ago. The dragon and tiger figures flank the buried body, a tall adult male, while three child skeletons are laid nearby. Based on the positioning of the dragon and tiger figures, which correspond to the (later) traditional stellar locations of the Azure Dragon and White Tiger, some researchers propose that this may constitute an early

⁶ In early sources, the Azure Dragon is also known as Canglong 蒼龍.

⁷ Digital lineart made by the author based on the original outlines of decorated tiles from Chang'an.

depiction of two of the Four Cardinal Deities.⁸ As shown in Figure 2, the tiger is placed protectively behind the deceased, suggesting a guardianship role. While it cannot be definitively stated that the Xishuiipo dragon and tiger are the direct origin of the cardinal deities, there is little doubt that the pairing of dragon and tiger dates back to a very early stage in Chinese cultural history.



Figure 2. Dragon and tiger figures of Tomb M45 at Xishuiipo site⁹

In early (and not complete) examples of the Four Cardinal Deities imagery from the Warring States period, we typically find only the Azure Dragon and White Tiger represented as a pair in the burial. The earliest confirmed depiction of the deities is found on a lacquered garment box (height: 40.5 cm; width: 47 cm; length: 71 cm) from the 5th century tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng 曾侯乙墓 in Suizhou, Hubei province (Figure 3). The box's interior, painted red, represents a living space, with its floor symbolizing the earth. The lid's centre features the Big Dipper, encircled by all twenty-eight lunar mansions 二十八宿,¹⁰ along with the Azure Dragon on the right and the White Tiger on the left. This suggests that although a full cosmological scheme of the cardinal deities and the twenty-eight lunar mansions was not yet in place, astronomical concepts involving two of the deities were beginning to emerge around the 5th century BCE in Hubei province.

⁸ Nán 2012: 112–115.

⁹ Digital lineart made by the author based on page Nán 2012: 113 (Fig. 92).

¹⁰ The twenty-eight mansions correspond to constellations along the celestial equator and are divided into four groups of seven. Initially, the Four Cardinal Deities functioned as symbolic representations of the constellations in the four quadrants or palaces of heaven.



Figure 3. Tiger and dragon depiction on a box (E66) from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng¹¹

Presumably, by the end of the Warring States period, only the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, and Vermilion Bird were fully conceptualized as heavenly guardians; the cardinal deity of the north had not yet taken definitive shape. One of the first classical sources that explicitly links the northern lunar mansions of the 28 constellations with the Dark Warrior is the following:

Correct Interpretation of The Documents,¹² Chapter 2:

Among the stars in heaven are figures of a dragon, tiger, bird, and tortoise; each of the four directions contains seven constellations that form one of these images. The east forms a dragon, the west a tiger, both facing south with tails to the north; the south forms a bird, the north a tortoise, both facing west with tails to the east.¹³

尚書正義, 卷二 堯典第一

是天星有龍虎鳥龜之形也。四方皆有七宿, 各成一形。東方成龍形, 西方成虎形, 皆南首而北尾。南方成鳥形, 北方成龜形, 皆西首而東尾。¹⁴

¹¹ Digital lineart made by the author based on a figure on page 171 of Wang (2008a).

¹² The *Book of Documents* 尚書 is one of the Five Classics of ancient Chinese literature. It is a collection of rhetorical prose attributed to figures of ancient China. The complete original collection likely reached its final form during the Late Zhou or Han dynasty. There are different versions of the text. *Shangshu Zhengyi* 尚書正義 was published in 653 and made the official interpretation of the *Book of Documents* by imperial decree.

¹³ Translation mine. For published translations, see Legge, James. 1865. *The Chinese Classics, volume III: the Shoo King or the Book of Historical Documents*. London: Trubner; rpt. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960.

¹⁴ *Shangshu Zhengyi* 尚書正義 [Correct Interpretation of The Documents]. Chinese Text Project <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=127873>

Various animal motifs appeared on pre-Han bronze mirrors excavated from tombs, including those depicting the Four Cardinal Deities.¹⁵ In most cases, the Dark Warrior is absent, and hybrid mythical creatures or different animals take its place.¹⁶ For example, bronze mirrors unearthed from the Guo State 虢国 tombs at Shangcunling 上村岭 in Henan feature birds, deer, dragons, and tigers arranged in various compositions.¹⁷ The tomb has been identified as dating to the Western Zhou period.



Figure 4. Bronze mirrors from M1052 of the Shangcunling site¹⁸

One of the mirrors is decorated with bird and beast motifs, including a dragon-like creature on the right side of the bird. A dragon and tiger combination, believed to represent the Azure Dragon and White Tiger, is visible on another mirror from the same site. These mirrors from Shangcunling offer valuable evidence of the transitional phase from early ritual symbolism to more structured cosmological systems. The consistent placement of animals at the four cardinal points of a mirror—top, bottom, left, right—suggests that they already had fixed symbolic associations. They may carry different meanings depending on the region or ethnic group. In early periods, different regions of the Central Plains already had distinct ritual systems. As populations expanded and diverse cultures converged, a shared visual language began to form. Yet, at this stage, we still do not find the fully formed set of the Four Cardinal Deities that would become standard in the late Warring States (ca. 475–221 BCE)¹⁹, Qin and Han

¹⁵ In the Western Zhou (西周 c. 1046–771 BCE), mirrors became more refined and stylized, evolving from practical items into symbolic cosmograms.

¹⁶ Before the formalization of the Dark Warrior iconography, northern guardian figures often took the form of hybrid mythological beasts with duck heads, scaled bodies, or fish tails.

¹⁷ Kitamura 2005: 102–104.

¹⁸ Digital lineart made by the author based on figures of Zhongguo 1959: 24–25.

¹⁹ The use of the Four Cardinal Deities as military formation symbols can be traced to the late

period. From the available evidence, the cardinal beasts of the Western Zhou initially functioned as a set of signs, emblematic representations of cardinal directions, seasons, and celestial domains. Later on, this logically structured set started to evolve into a system of conceptual symbols with profound and stable meanings. All four deity figures became part of ritual codes such as the *Zhouli*, *Yili*, and *Liji*, which regulated the use of directional animal imagery in formal rituals. Even then, they were not always depicted as a group of four.

The Four Symbols During the Western Han Dynasty

Sanfu huangtu, Vol. 3.²⁰

The Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Dark Warrior are the Four Celestial Spirits of Heaven, assigned to govern the four cardinal directions.²¹

三輔黃圖 卷之三

蒼龍，白虎，朱雀，玄武，天之四靈，以正四方。²²

The Han dynasty was China's second unifying empire, divided into Western and Eastern periods. Unification involved centralizing governance and promoting standardized cultural values. However, regional cultures persisted; imperial rule integrated rather than erased local distinctions. It was in the early Han period that the mystical traditions of the aristocracy, including the attributes of the Four Cardinal Deities and their cosmological role, were first officially unified.²³ The cosmological theory of *yin-yang* 陰陽²⁴ and the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行)²⁵ had already become systematized as well.

Warring States period, when cosmological principles began to be applied to strategic geography and military deployments, and became systematized later during the Han dynasty.

²⁰ *Sanfu huangtu* ('Yellow [imperial] maps of the three metropolitan areas') is a local geography of the ancient capital region around Chang'an. The book was compiled by an unknown author during the Southern and Northern dynasties period, or probably somewhat earlier.

²¹ Translation mine.

²² *Sanfu huangtu* 三輔黃圖 Chinese Text Project <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&res=596049>

²³ Vampelj S. 2011: 41.

²⁴ *Yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 define the universe as the interaction of polar opposite but complementary forces. Yin is the female, cold, dark, passive power, while yang represents masculinity, light, and warmth. The interplay of the two forces makes up *chi* 氣, the material principle governing the universe (Inada 2003: 42–43).

²⁵ *Wuxing* explains the interactions and relationships created in phenomena that consist of fire, water, wood, metal, and earth, and lead to life, death, change, and rebirth. It was combined with the *yin-yang* theory during the Spring and Autumn period (approx. 770 to 481 BCE) in China and was developed during the Han dynasty into a comprehensive and logical view of

Cardinal Deity	Elements	Colors	Season	Directions	Yin/Yang
Azure Dragon	Wood	Azure	Spring	East	Yang
Vermilion Bird	Fire	Red	Summer	South	Yang
Yellow Dragon	Earth	Yellow	Time between seasons	Central	Yin and Yang
Dark Warrior	Water	Black (Dark)	Winter	North	Yin
White Tiger	Metal	White	Autumn	West	Yin

Table 1. Correspondence with the Five Phases and *yin-yang* theory²⁶

This cosmological system of rules is detailed in the *Zhoubi Suanjing* 周髀算經²⁷ and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子,²⁸ among other works.²⁹

Master(s) from Huainan, Chapter 3: The Treatise on the Patterns of Heaven

The east corresponds to wood... its deity (spirit) is the Year Star <Jupiter>, and its creature is the Azure Dragon. The south corresponds to fire... its deity is the Shining Mischief Star <Mars>, and its creature is the Vermilion Bird. The centre corresponds to earth... its deity is the Quelling Star <Saturn>, and its creature is the Yellow Dragon. The west corresponds to metal... its deity is the Great White <Venus>, and its creature is the White Tiger. The north corresponds to water... its deity is the Celestial/Time Star <Mercury>, and its creature is the Dark Warrior.³⁰

the cosmos, which could be applied to every field of human society. (Inada 2003: 68–77).

²⁶ Fung 1983: 22–26.

²⁷ The *Zhoubi Suanjing* (*Arithmetical Classic of the Gnomon and the Circular Paths of Heaven*) is a collection of ancient Chinese texts on astronomy and mathematics, probably assembled during the Western Han dynasty in the first century BCE.

²⁸ It is a compilation of 21 loosely connected chapters on metaphysics, cosmology, matters of state, and conduct written in the mid-Western Han period (2nd century BCE) under the patronage of Prince Liu An. Chapter 3 provides a summary of astronomical and astrological knowledge in the early part of the Han period.

²⁹ Major 1993: 38–39.

³⁰ Translation mine. For published (partial) English translation, see Major, John S. 1993. *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huainanzi*. New York: State University of New York Press. A notable French translation exists in Le Blanc, C., Lévi, et al. 2003. *Philosophes taoïstes. Tome II: Huainanzi. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* (494). Paris: Gallimard.

淮南子 卷三 《天文訓》

東方木也...其神為歲星、其獸蒼龍...南方火也...其神為熒惑、其獸朱鳥...中央土也...其神為鎮星、其獸黃龍...西方金也...其神為太白、其獸白虎...北方水也...其神為辰星、其獸玄武。³¹

This passage makes clear that by this time, the cardinal deities had been systematically integrated into the framework of Five Phases cosmology. Each of the deities thus acquired symbolic associations with direction, colour, and season, and began to be widely used as decorative motifs in imperial architecture. They became particularly popular in Han funerary traditions as decorations within tomb interiors. Moreover, Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BCE), in his work *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), *Tian Guanshu* 天官書 (Book of Celestial Offices), articulated a Han cosmology in which the heavens mirrored imperial bureaucracy: the polestar ruled the central palace like the emperor, while the twenty-eight lunar lodges served as officials within the four cardinal palaces (*sigong* 四宮). The cardinal deities were described as their governor, and this concept was also represented in mural tombs.³²

The Western Han (206 BCE – 8 CE) was a period when the burial forms underwent two crucial changes: a change from vertical structure to horizontal structure³³ and a change in building materials from wood to stone or brick. The typical design of tomb chambers, featuring arched ceilings and square-based walls, reflects the *Gaitian* 蓋天 theory³⁴ and the widely held cosmological belief in a round heaven and a square earth. The subjects depicted on tomb decorations included scenes from the daily lives of the Han elite, depictions of historical tales and legends, depictions of animals and geometric patterns, as well as Daoist and cosmological imagery, such as the Queen Mother of the West³⁵ and King

³¹ Huainanzi 淮南子, *Chinese Text Project* <https://ctext.org/huainanzi/zh>.

³² *Shiji*, *Chinese Text Project* <https://ctext.org/shiji/tian-guan-shu/zh>.

³³ The horizontal structure resembles a house, incorporating architectural elements such as doors, walls, and occasionally columns and windows.

³⁴ This theory holds that Heaven is a solid, rotating dome like an inverted bowl covering a flat, square Earth below, with the sun, moon, and stars moving inside this canopy as it turns around the pole star.

³⁵ Xiwangmu 西王母 is one of the oldest deities of Chinese mythology. She has complete control over life, death, creation, and destruction. During the Western Han period, she was further linked with the concept of a western immortal land. She is married to the Jade Emperor and tends to the Peaches of Immortality in their palace gardens. Her image became standard decoration for tombs and funerary shrines.

Father of the East,³⁶ Fuxi and Nüwa,³⁷ the Four Cardinal Deities and celestial motifs.³⁸

Han murals, silk paintings, carvings and reliefs were not merely decorative but served as visual manifestations of correlative cosmology, particularly the principles of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases. These decorations helped to artificially create a cosmic space within the tomb; they reinforced the belief in cosmic harmony and eternal life. According to Chinese ideas of the afterlife, the social status of the deceased person in the realm of the dead corresponds with their life on earth. It was important that the soul of a person of high rank should be protected and should live in harmony in the afterlife, and so the interior of the tomb and its iconographic design were created according to the principles of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases.³⁹

By the Han period, the cardinal deities were considered symbols that could protect and guard the soul, exorcise evil spirits, maintain the cosmic order, and bring good fortune. They often appear within astral representations in tombs depicting individual constellations or the complete system of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. The directional placement of the deities on the ceiling also expressed the centrality of the aristocrat's soul within the cosmos, and a wish for an immortal form of materialization of their existence. Each deity's iconography reflected a connection between heaven and earth, signifying the fulfilment of the nobles' ascent and transcendence. Furthermore, the seasonal symbolism associated with the deities reflected cosmic time; they represented dynamic forces of regeneration that drove the cyclical rhythm of the universe and ensured the continuous renewal of life.

Triangular molded bricks with divine beast imagery (especially in the Eastern Han period in Luoyang) were typically installed at the upper portions of arched tomb entrances or at the upper sections of the rear chambers. Furthermore, the spatial distribution of the Four Cardinal Deities in the tomb gate area exhibits a high degree of typological consistency and regularity. Especially in mural tombs from Shaanxi, the Four Cardinal Deities are commonly depicted on the stone doors. When all four creatures are represented in the tomb gate area, the Azure Dragon appears on the right door leaf, and the White Tiger on the left. When the Dark Warrior is absent and replaced by motifs such as bronze vessels, immortals, sacred herbs, trees, or horses, the Azure Dragon still appears

³⁶ According to Daoist mythology, Dongwanggong 東王公 is the tutelary deity of the Daoist immortals.

³⁷ Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女媧 are mythological siblings and cultural ancestors in Chinese tradition, credited with creating humanity and establishing fundamental aspects of civilization such as marriage, writing, and cosmic order.

³⁸ Vampelj S. 2011: 23–24.

³⁹ Cheng and Wang 2012: 46–53.

on the right door leaf and the White Tiger on the left, maintaining alignment with the configuration in complete sets of the four beasts. These images form a counterclockwise circular arrangement around the central axis of the spirit road (神道) depicted on the gate, mirroring the directional layout of the cardinal deities atop tomb chambers. Tombs like those at Suide 綏德 or Qingjian 清涧 show excellent preservation of this symbolic system, with variations in detail but strong adherence to directional symbolism. What is particularly noteworthy is that while the central axis of the deities atop tomb chambers is the tomb mound itself, the centre of the circular arrangement in the tomb gate area is the spirit road relief carved at the core.⁴⁰

In the following, I will examine how the four deities were generally depicted in Han dynasty tombs, supplementing the analysis with excerpts from written sources that seek to interpret the variations in their names. The artistic style of the Four Cardinal Deities during the Western Han period favoured minimalism and abstraction, focusing on the static, symbolic significance of the deities.

The Vermilion Bird is frequently depicted with an uplifted head, outstretched wings, curled feet, and a fanned tail, all arranged in a posture of dynamic motion. That being said, out of the four beasts, the depiction of the Vermilion Bird remained somewhat in flux throughout the Han dynasty, exhibiting both regional and temporal variations; no standardized form existed for representing the bird-like figure. The guardian deity of the south is often associated with radiant, splendid imagery, conceptually linking it to other auspicious birds. In classical sources, the term *Zhuque* 朱雀 is sometimes used interchangeably—or even confused—with other solar-associated figures such as *Zhuniao* 朱鳥 (Vermilion Bird), *Fenghuang* 鳳凰 (Phoenix), *Sanzuwu* 三足鳥 (Three-Legged Crow), *Cuniao* 踐鳥 (Sun Bird), and *Luanfeng* 鸞鳳 (a phoenix-like bird), leading to a certain degree of terminological ambiguity. These accounts reinforce the phoenix's and crow's deep connection with solar imagery, fire, and auspiciousness—concepts that also overlap with the mythological and astronomical symbolism of the *Zhuque*, further explaining the ongoing fusion of their identities and depiction.

⁴⁰ Only in the exceptional case of the tomb excavated at Suide is the orientation reversed: the Azure Dragon is on the left and the White Tiger on the right. However, this arrangement does not include the Dark Warrior or substitute elements. Cheng and Wang 2012: 184.



Figure 5. Image of the Vermilion Bird on a stone tomb mural from Dongguan, Fangcheng, Henan (河南方城东关画像石墓朱雀图像)⁴¹

Three main morphological types of the Azure Dragon have been identified in Han dynasty tombs and in related archaeological sites: the curved-neck form, the straight-neck form, and the backward-looking form. Among these, the curved-neck type is the most common. Although the body of the beast commonly appears as a dragon, it is also occasionally depicted in the form of a hybrid bull, horse, lizard, or serpent-like beast.

⁴¹ Digital lineart made by the author based on the figure of Wang 2008a: 34



Figure 6. The Azure Dragon depicted in a Han pictorial stone tomb from Sichuan
(四川郫县东汉砖墓石棺画像)⁴²

Dragons frequently appeared as the symbolic or mythological ‘vehicles’ facilitating transcendence and thus became more prominent in funerary art. Han dynasty pictorial stones and bricks (produced in both rectangular and triangular forms) depicting ascension scenes often feature images such as feathered beings playing with dragons or immortals riding mythical beasts such as the Azure Dragon.

The White Tiger of the West is usually portrayed as a leaping tiger with bared fangs and claws, four limbs, five claws, a short-eared head, and a long, swaying tail, poised as if galloping through clouds. Before the first century CE, the deity of the West was occasionally replaced by a horse, a *qilin*, or another type of one-horned beast. In Han dynasty pictorial stone carvings, depictions of the White Tiger and the Azure Dragon of the following type are quite common:

⁴² The author took this photo at the exhibition ‘Heavenly Land of Abundance — Rubbings from Han Dynasty Pictorial Art of Sichuan’ (*Tianfu Letu — Sichuan handai huaxiang yishu tuopian zhan* 天府乐土—四川汉代画像艺术拓片展) of the China Cultural Center in Budapest, Hungary, June 2025.



Figure 7. Stone carving from an Eastern Han pictorial stone tomb
in Hejiang county, Luzhou, Sichuan
(四川合江石室墓石刻)⁴³

What is especially noteworthy is that while images of divine turtles and serpents (in an independent form), birds, dragons, and tigers appeared prior to the Western Han, representations of the Dark Warrior (a tortoise intertwined with a snake) as the fourth cardinal deity do not emerge fully until the early Western Han period. The intersection of the turtle and snake represents the union of opposing genders, the union of *yin* and *yang*, and the concept of endless life or transcendence. Moreover, in ancient Chinese tradition, both the tortoise and the serpent are associated with longevity and thus symbolize the long life of the sovereign. By the end of the Han period, the composite image of the Dark Warrior ultimately became dominant; however, it was rarely replaced by a range of alternative figures during the Han period, including the *fangxiangshi* 方相氏,⁴⁴ a steed, a fish-like woman, a yellow snake, the Vermilion Bird, a simple turtle or snake, a constellation, a *qilin* or a unicorn, reflecting regional and temporal variations in cosmological representation.⁴⁵ This suggests that the cardinal deities were not the result of an organic, spontaneous development in the early Han period, but were rather deliberately constructed in concert with the formation of the cosmological framework of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases, and the unification of the religious, astrological traditions and folk beliefs of the aristocracy.

⁴³ Digital lineart made by the author based on the figure of Wang 2008a: 17.

⁴⁴ The *fangxiangshi*, or 'the one who sees in all directions', was a ritual exorcist or sorcerer. In funerary contexts, he is believed to lead the funeral procession to exorcize corpse-consuming spirits from the burial chamber.

⁴⁵ Zhang 2000: 109–119.



Figure 8. Pictorial brick of the Dark Warrior from the Mausoleum site of Emperor Wu of Han⁴⁶

In the following, I provide a short list of major Western Han dynasty decorated tombs in which representations of the Four Cardinal Deities appear and explore these significant depictions in great detail.

Numerous carved and/or painted hollow bricks 空心磚 and pictorial stone slabs 畫像石 depicting the cardinal beasts have been discovered as part of Han tomb decoration. A representative example from the Western Han dynasty is the set of richly decorated bricks unearthed at the ancestral temple ruins of the Deyang Palace (also referred to as the Luoqing Stone site 羅經石遺址, 153–126 BCE), part of the Han Yangling 漢陽陵 Mausoleum complex in Xianyang, Shaanxi.⁴⁷ As the most important ceremonial structure within the tomb precinct, its layout consists of two concentric squares. Surrounding the base is a corridor paved with bricks and a drainage area, with fourteen wall columns and three gates on each of the four sides. This architectural layout and the structural organization appear to have been strongly influenced by the cosmological system of the Five Phases. The stairways at the gates are paved with hollow bricks featuring the motifs of the Four Cardinal Deities. It appears that several types of bricks were made with multiple images to suit different placements. The bricks, walls, and roof of each side were dyed in four distinct colours—blue, red, white, and black—corresponding to the four cardinal directions and presumably representing elements and seasons within the Five Phases. It is possible that each

⁴⁶ Digital lineart made by the author based on the figure of Wang 2008a: 159.

⁴⁷ Yangling is the mausoleum complex in which Emperor Jing 景帝 (r. 157–141 BCE) and Empress Wang 王皇后 were interred together; however, their burial chambers were constructed separately.

brick bearing the image of a directional beast was laid on the staircase facing the direction it was meant to guard. The Azure Dragon brick (66 cm long, 37 cm high) presents a dynamic, curved-neck type dragon figure, with forelegs shown on either side of the body. It is rendered in a C-shaped posture, with a wide-open mouth, slender neck, sharp claws, and coiled tail. To the dragon's left, an object resembling a sacred pearl appears. The body is rendered with a scaly texture, and dotted patterns mark the limbs, exhibiting fine detailing. Surrounding the dragon are swirling, dynamic cloud motifs that enhance its mysterious and majestic appearance. Notably, unlike the later representations from the Western Jin period, which often depict the beasts with wings, these dragon-tiger versions from the Western Han period appear to be wingless.



Figure 9. Azure Dragon brick from the Luojing Stone site, Yangling complex, Shaanxi⁴⁸

The Vermilion Bird brick (37.2 cm high, 50 cm long, 7.5–9.6 cm wide) features four tail feathers resembling those of a peacock and two ornamental feathers atop its head. The depiction shows it with a slender, pointed beak, hooked talons, and outstretched wings—imbuing it with an aura of elegance and transcendence. One of the Dark Warrior bricks likely measured over one meter in length and displays a finely detailed tortoise shell with pronounced patterns.⁴⁹ A snake circles around the large shell but does not entwine the short-legged tortoise; instead, it loops along the surface of the shell, curving its tail in an S-shape and bending its head down near the tortoise's front. On another brick, the tortoise's shell is rendered with a variety of patterns, and the legs are unusually long. The style is consistent with the above-mentioned Azure Dragon brick. The

⁴⁸ Digital lineart made by the author based on Wang 2006: 63.

⁴⁹ Its left edge lacks a vertical border, suggesting the original piece may have been even longer.

snake passes under the shell and reemerges behind the tortoise's neck.⁵⁰ One of the many White Tiger bricks shows two tigers facing each other, both raising their front paws. The side of the brick also portrays the tigers in confrontation, separated by a circular motif resembling a *bi* 璧 disc.⁵¹ They are depicted with the head, body, and limbs outlined in flowing lines of varying curvature. Short, V-shaped strokes create both tigers' fur patterns, lending them a fierce and imposing presence, befitting their sacred and inviolable nature. Another type of White Tiger brick is about the same height as the adjacent Black Tortoise brick, though roughly half its length. The tiger's face appears to be smiling, but its claws are sharply rendered. Additionally, a jade door fitting carved with the four deities motif was discovered on the eastern side of the Mao Mausoleum. Measuring 36.5 cm in width, the artifact is greyish-green in colour and features a prominent central knob at the bottom. Each of the four corners is engraved with one of the sacred beasts.⁵²

In the enormous ceiling mural unearthed from the tomb of King Gong of Liang (?–137 BCE) at the Shiyuan site in Yongcheng, Henan Province, an elaborate image (*sishen yunqi-tu* 四神雲氣圖 from the early Western Han reveals fascinating compositional details. Measuring approximately 5.14 meters in length and 3.27 meters in width, it stands as one of China's earliest and most complete large-scale murals, predating the renowned Dunhuang murals by over six centuries. Although the Dark Warrior is not identifiable, the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, and Vermilion Bird are vividly illustrated amidst stylized clouds. A prominent S-shaped dragon occupies the centre, its body covered in scales, wings extended, and tongue entwined with a mythical creature resembling a duck-billed, fish-bodied beast. This aquatic creature may have functioned as a substitute for the Dark Warrior. Positioned below, the White Tiger is shown climbing a celestial mountain, holding a flowering branch in its mouth, and presumably reaching for a *lingzhi* mushroom of immortality. Above, the vermilion bird is depicted pecking at one of the Azure Dragon's horns, its long tail feathers elegantly trailing. Surrounding these central figures are motifs of auspicious clouds, mushrooms, exotic flowers, and other symbols associated with immortality and the celestial realm.

⁵⁰ Fragmentary dimensions: 52 cm in length, 34 cm in height, 10 cm in width.

⁵¹ A *bi* disc is a type of ancient Chinese jade artifact, typically a flat, circular disc with a central perforation. Emerging as early as the Neolithic period, they were often buried in elite tombs and associated with ritual practices. In early Chinese cosmology, the disc is commonly interpreted as a symbol of heaven or the celestial order, complementing the square *cong* 琮, which represented earth.

⁵² Wang 2008a: 14.; Wang 2008b: 917–918.

Classical texts such as *Lingxian* 靈憲⁵³ and the *Huainanzi* (chapters three and seven) articulate the cosmological relationship between *yin-yang*, the Five Phases, the cardinal deities, and Fuxi-Nüwa.⁵⁴ Within tombs, the imagery of Fuxi and Nüwa alongside the Four Deities was thus composed to visually transform the tomb's interior into a microcosm of the heavenly palaces and the universe. These pictorial schemes were cosmologically significant, symbolizing the tomb as a celestial domain. The oldest known example of the paired image of Fuxi and Nüwa and the Four Cardinal Deities dates to the late Western Han and appears in Bu Qianqiu's 卜千秋 tomb in Luoyang (ca. 94 BCE – 48 BCE).

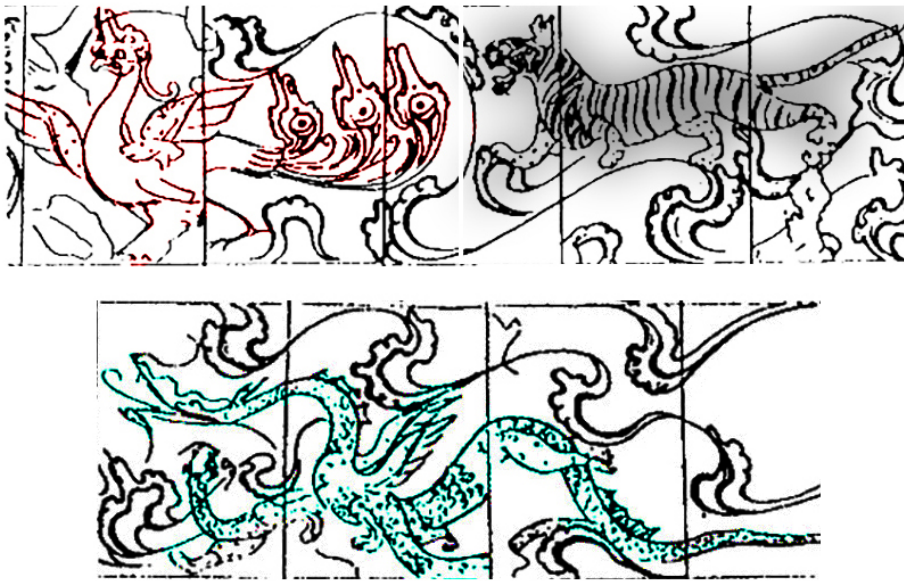


Figure 10. Images of the Vermilion Bird, White Tiger, and Azure Dragon murals from the tomb of Bu Qianqiu⁵⁵

On the long, narrow spine of the main chamber's ceiling, twenty specially shaped bricks are laid horizontally, with images of a leftward-moving procession painted on them. The composition begins with depictions of Fuxi and the

⁵³ The *Lingxian*, written around 120 CE by the polymath Zhang Heng, is an astronomical treatise. It addresses a wide range of topics, including the origin of heaven and earth, the evolution of the cosmos, the structure of the universe, and the nature and movements of the sun, moon, and stars.

⁵⁴ Nüwa occupies the *yin* realm with the moon and symbolizes *yin*, hence often pictured with the White Tiger or the Dark Warrior. Conversely, Fuxi, like the Azure Dragon and Vermilion Bird, is situated in the *yang* realm with the sun and represents *yang*.

⁵⁵ Digital lineart made by the author based on figure 5-19 of Wang 2008b: 562.

sun and concludes with Nüwa and the moon. Following Fuxi, the female tomb occupant is portrayed riding a three-headed bird, while the male tomb occupant rides a serpent. Guided by the cardinal deities (which were apparently not yet standardized in this area) and other creatures, the couple journeys toward the realm of the immortals.⁵⁶ The cardinal emblems sent from above are escorting the deceased to heaven. This configuration of the cardinal deities, Fuxi and Nüwa, is also seen in other Western Han funerary contexts, such as the stone ceiling mural of the Qianjingtou 浅井頭 mural tomb in Luoyang, Henan.

Another noteworthy example from the late Western Han is the medium-sized, decorated brick chamber tomb Xi'an Jiaotong daxue 西安交通大学, excavated in Shaanxi. Here, the tomb ceiling was constructed using rectangular and wedge-shaped bricks to form an arched vault, at the centre of which a double-ringed circle (a star map) was painted. Within the inner circle are representations of the sun—depicted as a red disc with a three-legged black bird inside—and the moon—shown with a rabbit and a toad, accompanied by auspicious clouds and cranes. The annular space between the circles contains depictions of the Four Cardinal Deities and the twenty-eight lunar mansions. The link between astronomical and mythological traditions is notable, as it associates specific constellations with particular figures or animals that are symbolically related to them. For instance, a degree of fusion is evident between the cardinal deities and the lodges. For example, the first six mansions of the Azure Dragon (Jiao, Kang, Di, Fang, Xin, and Wei) are collectively rendered as a single dragon figure, which also includes star diagrams. Only the final mansion, Ji, is represented separately as a figure holding a star-formed winnowing basket. Similar compositional strategies are applied to the White Tiger and Vermilion Bird, though fewer mansions are combined. In total, approximately 18 identifiable star groups remain visible (some are damaged), and their order corresponds precisely to the traditional arrangement of the deities and the lunar mansions, allowing for systematic interpretation with the aid of the accompanying imagery.⁵⁷

Further examples of decorated hollow bricks with four deities imagery were excavated near the tomb of Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) of the Western Han, at the site known as Maoling Mausoleum 茂陵 in Shaanxi. The pictorial bricks were used in the base platform known as the White Crane Pavilion. Among them, the Dark Warrior brick is of particular interest (see Figure 8). The composition is symmetrical, with a vine-like plant rising vertically at the centre. On either side, two turtles face inward toward the central motif, their heads raised. Entwined with each turtle is a snake, one lifting its head dramatically, facing its turtle counterpart. One of the turtles is shown gripping aquatic vegetation in its mouth—a detail that is both distinctive and suggestive of symbolic meaning.

⁵⁶ Kominami 2010: 32–33.

⁵⁷ Kitamura 2005: 81–82.

An important example is a set of pictorial bricks excavated from a tomb group in Yinqueshan 银雀山, Linyi City, Shandong Province. The rectangular bricks are greyish-blue and depict each creature with lively realism. The Azure Dragon curves its neck and opens its mouth to bare sharp teeth. Its body crouches low, and its left foreleg is lifted upward. The Vermilion Bird is shown holding grass in its beak, wings outstretched in flight. The White Tiger turns its head back, roaring with an open mouth and glaring eyes. The Dark Warrior is represented by a turtle pulling its head in as it advances, while a snake wraps around its shell, lifting its head upward in a dynamic pose.

The Four Cardinal Deities imagery during the Xin (9–23 AD) and Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 AD)

The depiction of the Four Cardinal Deities underwent notable transformations between the Western Han and Eastern Han dynasties, reflecting shifts in artistic conventions, religious beliefs, and funerary practices.

During the Eastern Han period, the predominant burial types were cliff tombs and brick or stone chamber tombs, designed to resemble domestic dwellings and typically covered by burial mounds. Chamber tombs were constructed entirely of brick, entirely of stone, or with a combination of both materials, though their overall architectural layouts remained largely consistent. These tombs commonly featured burial chambers equipped with walls, doors, ceilings, and occasionally columns. In mixed-material constructions, large stone slabs were typically employed for door panels and walls, while bricks were used to form barrel-vaulted ceilings.⁵⁸ The increased number of reliefs and tomb frescoes was created in different, more complex compositions. As a symbol of the *yin-yang* energies and the circle of the Five Phases, the ceiling of Eastern Han tombs continued to be decorated with spiritual beings (e.g., the Four Cardinal Deities), pairs of gods or culture heroes, and magical celestial motifs, representing the eternal movement of the dual celestial world. In the case of the Four Cardinal Deities murals, it can be observed that there was a shift towards more narrative-driven depictions with dynamic poses. Moreover, they were moved from the high plane of the ceiling to the lower plane or to the upper plane of the side walls.⁵⁹ As for tomb reliefs decorated with the guardian figures, we can occasionally observe a rectangular panel layout, with multiple horizontally divided registers (see Figure 10).

⁵⁸ Xuan Chen 2014: 4.

⁵⁹ E.g., the Binwang 邠王 tomb and the Qianyangxian 千陽縣 tomb in Shaanxi.



Figure 11. A Han dynasty tile emblematically representing the five cardinal directions⁶⁰

This change can be attributed to the new concept that, in the Daoist cosmic worldview, the deities were no longer just static symbols or cardinal directions and guardians of Heaven, but their role was transformed to serve as a kind of guidance deity for the aristocrats. They also seem to take on roles as bearers of auspicious meaning.

⁶⁰ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Five_cardinal_directions,_a_pottery_tile_of_the_Han_Dynasty,_Cernuschi_Museum,_2006-08-12.jpg

We can find evidence of the new, enhanced roles of the beasts as guiding spirits on inscriptions of grave goods and in certain liturgical works of Chinese poetry, such as the *Xi shi* 惜誓 poem of the *Chu Ci* 楚辭 poetry collection.⁶¹

Songs of Chu, Sorrow for the Troth Betrayed:
The Vermilion Bird soared forth as celestial herald,
guiding the divine chariot of Taiyi.⁶²
Azure Dragon coils as the left-hand steed,
while the White Tiger raced ahead as the right-hand charger.⁶³

楚辭:惜誓
飛朱鳥使先驅兮,
駕太一之象輿。
蒼龍蚺虯於左驂兮,
白虎騁而為右馱。⁶⁴

A TLV bronze mirror (*fangge gui* 方格規矩四神鏡)⁶⁵ from the Xin Mang period (9–23 CE), now housed in the National Museum of China, bears a particularly intriguing inscription:

During the reign of the Xin dynasty, the best copper is produced in Danyang; the copper makes a pure and bright [mirror] when mixed with silver-coloured tin. Dragon on the left, Tiger on the right—they govern the four quarters. Vermilion Bird and Dark Warrior follow the harmony of *yin* and *yang*. Eight sons and nine grandsons rule the centre. With the engraved square pavilion, misfortune is driven away. Wealth for the household, befitting kings and lords.⁶⁶

⁶¹ The *Chu Ci* is an ancient anthology of Chinese poetry comprising texts traditionally attributed primarily to Qu Yuan and Song Yu of the Warring States period, alongside a substantial corpus of later compositions from the Han dynasty. It derives its imagery from shamanistic ritual.

⁶² Taiyi 太一 is a name of the supreme God of Heaven that had become prominent besides the older ones during the Han dynasty in relation to the figure of the Yellow Emperor.

⁶³ Translation mine. For published English translations, see Williams, Nicholas Morrow 2022. *Elegies of Chu: An Anthology of Early Chinese Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; or Hawkes, David Chapter 5 in Minford and Lau 2000. *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations*, Vol. I: From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁶⁴ *Chu Ci* <https://ctext.org/chu-ci/xi-shi/zh>.

⁶⁵ The TLV mirror is a Han dynasty mirror characterized by a central knob, a square inner border, and symmetrical T, L, and V-shaped patterns arranged around it. Its design is widely interpreted as a cosmological diagram, symbolizing the structure of the universe, the cardinal directions (and their deities), and the harmony between Heaven and Earth. These mirrors, which depict the guardians rendered in fine linework within a square-gridded frame, were widely produced through the Eastern Han period. Many were transmitted via the Korean Peninsula to the Japanese archipelago.

⁶⁶ Translation mine.

新有善銅出丹陽、和以銀錫清且明、左龍右虎掌四彭、朱雀玄武順陰陽、
八子九孫治中央、刻婁博局去不羊、家常大富宜君王。⁶⁷

Another Eastern Han mirror (*shangfang qiru sishenjing* 尚方七乳四神鏡) bears an inscription with similar thematic content:

Dragon on the left, Tiger on the right⁶⁸—they repel misfortune. Vermilion Bird and Dark Warrior follow the *yin* and *yang* order. Long life, like metal and stone, brings unending joy. May wealth and nobility be preserved for both parents. May sons and grandsons thrive in the central domain. Daughters become noble wives, sons become honored ministers.⁶⁹

左龍右虎辟不祥，朱鳥玄武順陰陽，子孫備具居中央，長保二親樂富昌。
子孫備居中央、女為夫人男為卿。

The following section will highlight a few representative examples from the Eastern Han period, without claiming to be exhaustive.

Incidentally, the practice of depicting the Four Cardinal Deities, in combination with Fuxi and Nüwa, within the interior of tomb chambers became widespread during the Later Han period in the Central Plains region, especially in the capital area. These images often appear on tomb ceilings, showing the beasts, and Fuxi and Nüwa raising the sun and moon (disc) above their heads. They are frequently integrated into broader and complex compositions that include constellations, guardians, deities, spirits of elements, and celestial bodies such as the Five Planets or large diagrams of the sun and the moon—all elements associated with the cosmos. In connection with this, it is necessary to mention a Xin brick-chambered tomb from Luoyang: the Jingyuan 金谷園 tomb. The tomb is composed of a passageway, corridor, front chamber, rear chamber, eastern side chamber, and a corridor-side chamber. Mural paintings are found in both the front and rear chambers. In the rear chamber, on the ceiling and on the upper parts of the eastern, western, and northern walls are depicted the

⁶⁷ Kitamura 2005: 107.

⁶⁸ The first part (左龍右虎辟不祥) is a protective formula in traditional Chinese thought, especially in Daoist cosmology and feng shui principles. It expresses the idea that placing the dragon on the left and the tiger on the right creates a powerful alignment that wards off evil and misfortune. Dragon (yang, benevolent, expansive force) and Tiger (yin, fierce, contracting force) are paired as balancing cosmic forces. Similar inscriptions are frequently found on bronze mirrors from the Han dynasty to the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). Furthermore, the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, in the ‘Qu Li’ chapter, states that in military formations the proper orientation is ‘Vermilion Bird in front, Black Tortoise behind, Azure Dragon on the left, and White Tiger on the right.’ These four military banners symbolize the cosmic power of the Four Cardinal Deities, enabling one to command the four directions and to ward off inauspicious influences.

⁶⁹ Translation mine.



Figure 12. TLV bronze mirror with Four Cardinal Deities imagery (1st century CE)
(Sakurai City, Nara, Japan)⁷⁰

cardinal deities, large diagrams of the sun and moon, and the divine assistants of all five palaces of Heaven (Houtu, Jumang, Zhurong, Rushou, and Xuanming). Accompanying these are depictions such as immortals riding tigers, immortals commanding dragons, and immortals playing with celestial horses, symbolizing ascension to immortality and auspicious omens. All the scenes are interwoven with flowing patterns of red clouds. The visual system is highly complete and clear, vividly and distinctly reflecting the concepts popular in the Han dynasty, including *yin-yang* and the Five Elements, the resonance between Heaven and humanity, and the belief in the soul's ascent to the heavens. Similarly, the Cijian 磁涧 tomb in Luoyang is also famous for its ridge-shaped painted ceiling with

⁷⁰ Photograph taken by the author on April 27, 2013, at the Tokyo National Museum (Tokyo, Japan).

the above-mentioned cosmological and mythological themes. The compositions are beginning to exhibit greater complexity and colorfulness compared to Western Han depictions, and they also spread to more remote provincial regions.

The pictorial stone tomb in Beizhai Village 北寨村, Yinan County, Shandong, is constructed from 280 stone blocks, of which 42 are pictorial stones bearing 72 engraved scenes, distributed across lintels, walls, beams, pillars, coffered ceilings, and partition walls. The pictorial carvings depict a wide range of themes, including mythological figures (such as the four guardians), exotic animals, beast-head motifs, immortals, sacrificial rituals, travel, banquets, music and dance, cloud motifs, battles, and historical narratives. The Four Deities in the front chamber are not isolated images; they are interwoven into narrative and cosmological frameworks and characterized by their exquisite craftsmanship and fluid, refined line work.⁷¹

As this study draws to a close, it is also worthwhile to briefly discuss one more category of finds that can be encountered in Han tombs: decorated sarcophagi. Stone sarcophagi first emerged in southern Shandong and northern Jiangsu in China around the second and first centuries BCE, and were resurrected in the Sichuan area in the second century CE. Reliefs on the exterior of Han sarcophagi have various themes, including cosmological and mythical figures that transform the stone box into a microcosm of the universe or a heavenly realm. The stone coffin⁷² of Wang Hui⁷³ 王暉 was found in Lushan, Jiangxi, and features exquisite carvings of the deities of the east, west, and north, each occupying a side of the coffin to represent their respective directions. The right side features the Azure Dragon, while the left side depicts the White Tiger; both high reliefs are incredibly vivid. Their bodies and tails are both elongated and winding. The dragon is characterized by prominent fins extending from its body, elongated tendrils or feelers surrounding its mouth, and distinct horn-like projections on its head. Both mythical creature has wings. Their gestures suggest that these two deities are escorting and protecting the master's soul to ascend to heaven. The bottom right corner shows a snake entwined with a turtle (Dark Warrior). The deity of the south is not depicted; instead, the front depicts double doors, a *taotie* motif, and an immortal, making the sarcophagus look like the deceased Wang Hui's postmortem house. The craftsmanship reflects the high

⁷¹ Wang 2008a: 24; Hayashi 1974: 226.

⁷² The stone sarcophagus is grand in scale, with both the sarcophagus and its lid carved from single blocks of red sandstone. The total dimensions are 2.5 meters in length, 1.01 meters in width, and 0.83 meters in height.

⁷³ Wang Hui served as a *shangjishi* 上计史 in Hanjia Prefecture (modern-day Lushan County, Ya'an). His role was to report annually to the court on the prefecture's fiscal revenues and expenditures, population, cultivated land, and public order, etc.

artistic standards of the period, with detailed attention to the anatomical features and symbolic attributes of each deity.⁷⁴

Textual sources also document the depiction of the cardinal deities on Han period coffins. For instance, Chapter 93 *Ning Xing Zhuan* 佞倖傳 (*Biographies of Favourites*) of the *Hanshu* 漢書 (*Book of Han*) records:

Upon the death of Emperor Ai, [...] Xian committed suicide. His father, Gong, and others showed no remorse. Consequently, they once again used sand to paint the coffin in the colours of the four seasons: the Azure Dragon on the left, the White Tiger on the right, and adorned the top with gold and silver representations of the sun and moon, along with jade garments, pearls, and jades to decorate the coffin—nothing more could be added, even for the most exalted.⁷⁵

哀帝崩 (...) 賢自殺，父恭等不悔過，乃復以沙畫棺，四時之色，左蒼龍，右白虎，上著金銀日月玉衣珠璧以棺，至尊無以加。⁷⁶

Summary

This study has traced the iconographic evolution and cultural significance of the Four Cardinal Deities—the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Dark Warrior—within Han dynasty tomb art and cosmological thought. Drawing from a broad range of written sources and archaeological materials, including simple or complex murals, reliefs, and engraved bricks, the analysis reveals that these mythological figures played a central role in shaping the visual and spiritual landscape of elite burial practices in ancient China. Emerging gradually from earlier totemic and astral beliefs, the guardian beasts became fully conceptualized and integrated into the cosmological framework of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases during the Western Han. Until then, depictions of the beasts in a funerary context appear either in singular form or without the Vermilion Bird

⁷⁴ Chen 2014: 192.

⁷⁵ Translation mine. There is no complete English translation of the *Han Shu*, but several notable partial translations exist. The following overview, without claiming to be exhaustive, presents notable translations: Dubs, H. 1938-55. *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, 3 vols. Baltimore: Waverly; Hulsewe, A.F.P. and Loewe, M.A.N. 197. *China in Central Asia; the Early Stage: 125 BC - AD 23: An Annotated Translation of Chapters 61 and 96 of the History of the Former Han Dynasty*. Leiden: Brill; Owen, S. 1997. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*. New York: W.W. Norton. 215–218; Watson, B. 1974. *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China. Selections from the History of the Former Han*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁷⁶ 漢書 [Book of Han], Chinese Text Project <https://ctext.org/han-shu/ning-xing-zhuan/zh>.

and Dark Warrior, typically showing only the Azure Dragon and White Tiger inside tomb chambers.

From the Han period, their standardized directional, seasonal, and elemental associations not only reflected but actively reinforced contemporary religious and philosophical systems. The rise of Daoist immortality beliefs and ascension ideology gave rise to their imagery. The deities' representations in tombs—positioned to guard the soul, create a cosmic microcosm, and signal the deceased's elevated status—illustrate a sophisticated understanding of life, death, and the universe. Variations in their depiction across time and region underscore both the flexibility of their symbolic meanings and the localized nature of Han funerary traditions. The transition from the Western to the Eastern Han dynasty saw the cardinal deities evolve from primitive symbols to dynamic figures embedded within narrative frameworks (with other mythical figures and symbols). While the Western Han emphasized the deities' cosmological roles through simple symbolic representation, the Eastern Han highlighted their didactic significance through narrative art forms.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates how these symbols, often paired with cosmological figures like Fuxi and Nüwa, or the sun and the moon motifs, served not merely as protective emblems but also as guides in the soul's journey toward transcendence. Ultimately, the Four Cardinal Deities were not static motifs, but dynamic carriers of folk belief, shaped by evolving intersections of ritual, art, and ideology in early imperial China. After the Han dynasty, the imagery of the Four Cardinal Deities continued to play a vital role in Chinese funerary art, but their visual forms, symbolic functions, and cosmological integration evolved significantly. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties (220–589 CE), and especially in the Sui (581–618 CE) and Tang periods, their representations became increasingly standardized, richly embellished, and often embedded within more complex religious and narrative frameworks.

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Sources of illustrations

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- Fig. 2: Lázár, Marianna 2025. *Dragon and tiger figures of Tomb M45 at Xishuipo site* [Author's digital work].
- Fig. 3: Lázár, Marianna 2025. *Tiger and dragon depiction on a box (E66) from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng* [Author's digital work].
- Fig. 4: Lázár, Marianna 2025. *Fig. 4. Bronze mirrors from M1052 of the Shangcunling site* [Author's digital work].
- Fig. 5: Lázár, Marianna 2025. *Image of the Vermilion Bird on a stone tomb mural from Dongguan, Fangcheng, Henan* [Author's digital work].
- Fig. 6: Lázár, Marianna 2025. *The Azure Dragon depicted in a Han pictorial stone from Sichuan* [Author's photo at the exhibition 'Heavenly Land of Abundance — Rubbings from Han Dynasty Pictorial Art of Sichuan' of the China Cultural Center in Budapest, 2025].
- Fig. 7: Lázár, Marianna 2025. *Stone carving from an Eastern Han pictorial stone tomb in Hejiang County, Luzhou City, Sichuan Province* [Author's digital work].
- Fig. 8: Lázár, Marianna 2025. *Pictorial brick of the Dark Warrior from the Mausoleum site of Emperor Wu of Han* [Author's digital work].
- Fig. 9: Lázár, Marianna 2025. *Azure Dragon brick from the Luoqing Stone site, Yangling complex, Shaanxi* [Author's digital work].
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- Fig. 12: Lázár, Marianna 2025. *TLV bronze mirror with Four Cardinal Deities imagery (1st century CE) (Sakurai City, Nara, Japan)* [Author's photo, Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, Japan].