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Introduction

The Funeral Banner, called Mawangdui, is unfurled before us. It is a superb object. A sumptuous color scheme spreads over the darkened silk, rendered even more mysterious and amazing by its sojourn of two thousand years underground. We witness the embrace of legendary animals; we see clearly the elegance and vigor of the individuals, shown by their noble postures and the beauty of their features and shapes. These attributes, along with the firmness of the calligraphic design, the soundness of the techniques used, and the exceptional state of the Banner's conservation, combine to give us an art object of first quality and a fathomless document containing historic and archaeological information. We are offered, through imagery, a powerful and simple synthesis of life at the time of the establishment of the Empire begun by the Qin Dynasty and consolidated by the Han Dynasty (end of the 3rd C. - beginning of the 2nd C. BCE). Those of us who ardently desire an interpretation of life that is at the same time rigorous, rich, and supremely elevated, will carefully study this assemblage of mythology, ritualism and thought about a living being's tour of the universe, revealed by this funerary Banner. In it there is enough to dream about and think upon. There is material for meditation, for reasoning, and for educating oneself about what life is and the "passages" that must be taken to accomplish its immense proposal in the best way.

Such richness outshines more meager sketches whose deadened abstractions attempt to rationalize, and thereby reduce, the eternally begun and never-finished exuberant movement that gives each of us our individuality without disturbing our total immersion in universal life.

The Chinese genius has pierced the secret of the mystery-shrouded order that governs the world, that has produced the world, and that goes on producing it. Through divination, the Chinese attempt to reach the points of access to the authentic being. Their ideogrammatic system, foundation of the classical language, proceeds directly from their effort to succeed (through the meaningful "line") in meeting the animating force and, secondly, in setting the modes of thinking and acting that will advance human society. The Chinese characters themselves are rituals.

We see how the teaching of the Banner is meant to be received, and we see also the preoccupations that inhabited the spirit of the time. This Banner is a guide and a talisman. It shows the way; it commands the way. If one knows the natural order, a correct picture gives power to draw forth the qi of life. The order of the world is revealed to the one who possesses the talisman. The barrier between life and death does not stop the qi. There are numerous passages; one must know how to negotiate them. The official appointed to make the ritual carving of the sacrificial ox for Prince

Hui of Liang was a butcher, master of the art of emptiness and of the knife. He found unerringly and without wear and tear the way of putting something together for life, and the way of taking it apart for sacrifice.

In Burton Watson's Translation:

Cook Ting was cutting an ox for Lord Wen-hui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee - zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music.

"Ah, this is marvelous!" said Lord Wen-hui. "Imagine skill reaching such heights!"

Cook Ting laid down his knife and replied, "What I care about is the Way (*dao* 道), which goes beyond skill (*ji* 技). When I first began butchering oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now - now I go at it by spirit (*shen* 神) and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding (*guan zhi* 官知) have come to a stop (*zhi* 止)¹ and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup (*tian li* 天理), strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So, I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint. A good cook changes his knife once a year-because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month-because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces (*jian* 間) between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness (*wu hou* 無厚)². If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room - more than enough for the blade to play about it (*you* 游). That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone. However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until - flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away."

"Excellent!" said Lord Wen-hui. "I have heard the words of Cook Ting and learned how to care for life (*yang sheng* 養生)!"

Unless we closely observe the movement of qi contained in the design of this incredible silk painting, it might as well have never seen the light of day.

The Discovery of the Banner and Its Meaning

TWO BURIAL MOUNDS AND THREE TOMBS

In 1972, archaeologists excavated two burial mounds in the outskirts of Changsha, the capital of an ancient kingdom of the land of Chu, and present capital of the Hunan Province.

Approximately twenty meters high, these mounds were assumed to be the sepulchers the tomb of the family of Prince Ma Yin of Chu (period of the Five Dynasties, 907-960). Hence the place-name: Mawangdui.³ Three tombs were discovered, numbered 1, 2, and 3.

These proved to be something entirely different from a simple tomb of the tenth century of our era. The sepulchers dated from the second century before Jesus Christ, at the beginning of the Han Dynasty.⁴ Tomb #2 had been violated and pillaged, but Tombs #1 and #3 were intact. The funeral chambers harbored more than one thousand objects, including:

- lacquers: bowls, plates, spoons, boxes, trays, vases, stands or tripods;
- toilet articles, games;
- ceramics for the preparing and cooking of food;
- musical instruments: sitars, mouth organs, various flutes;
- wooden figurines, substitutes for servants and musicians: an entire staff of miniature personnel for serving at the banquets, for performing dances and spectacles offered on this occasion;
- seals and stamps;
- jade discs (*bi* 璧);
- silk scrolls and clothing, embroidered fabrics;
- all sorts of dishes, extraordinarily preserved (grains, beans, fruits, vegetables, meats⁵);
- medicinal plants, elephant tusks, and rhinoceros' horns;
- funeral money.

There were also bamboo writing tablets as well as pieces of silk upon which ancient texts were painted in black varnish. The value of these manuscripts is inestimable, whether they are from texts that are already known and preserved by tradition, or from books that have long been lost. More than fifty manuscripts have been counted, among them:

- medical works dealing with moxibustion, enumerating “Fifty-two diseases”, exploring diverse aspects of the art of maintaining one’s life and reaching longevity;
- classical texts: two copies of *The Book of the Way and the Virtue* (*Daodejing*), authenticate the relatively late versions that are available to us; a text of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), and of *Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn Annals*);
- books of astrology and astronomy⁶;
- plans of the city, and the oldest known geographic map of the world⁷



In Tomb 3 four paintings were also found among all these objects. One is a banner in the shape of a “T”. Its state of preservation, as well as its interest for us, are nothing in comparison with the Banner from Tomb 1 which is the object of this study. Two other paintings are representations of the life of aristocrats, showing a State procession and travel by land and by sea. The fourth one illustrates the art of retaining one’s vitality through forty-four *Daoyin* exercise postures⁸. It certifies the great age of these techniques, attesting also that the occupants of the Tombs were adepts of “nurturing life” (*yang sheng*).

THE OCCUPANTS OF THE TOMBS

Among the objects listed, many carried inscriptions and seals. One can easily read the following: "Family of the Marquis of Dai" or "Administration of the Marquis of Dai."⁹ Tomb 1 would be that of the Marchione of Dai, Xin Zhui by name; Tomb 2, that of the Marquis of Dai, Li Cang (the tomb already opened and partially plundered); Tomb 3, that of a son who died at around age thirty. There is good reason to think that they are the first generation of the Marquisat, being the first Marquis and his wife (Tombs 2 and 1).

The creation of a Marquisat on this portion of the border would have fitted a need for surveillance and for the defense of an Empire whose capital was situated 500 kilometers farther north.



Changsha was already the capital of Hunan, a vassal kingdom of Chu under the Han, and a nearly independent kingdom under the Zhou. Hunan was a southern region, gradually made to be Chinese, but retaining a national tradition, known especially through the *Songs of Chu* or *Songs of the South* (*Chu Ci*)¹⁰. Changsha, being a city of metal-casters, lacquerers, and silk manufacturers and merchants, had all the characteristics of a regional capital.

The occupant of Tomb 1 is a woman who died suddenly at about the age of fifty. Her embalmed body is still relatively supple, two thousand years after her burial. An inscription on a seal found in Tomb 2 reads: "Seal of the Marquis of Dai." In Tomb 3, an inscription gives the date of the funeral ceremony as the Twelfth Year of Wendi (168 B.C.E.¹¹).

The objects buried with these three persons of rank evoke, rather than reveal, the court of nobles who were vassal-kingdom representatives of the all-powerful but distant monarch, the Han Emperor of the period. The Banner must be studied by itself and compared with texts inspired by *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Liezi*, *Huainanzi*, *The Book of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhaijing*), *The Songs of Chu* (*Chuci*), *The Records of the Great Historian* (*Shiji*), the Five Classics, and the medical classics (*Huangdi Neijing*),

among others. Such a focus enables us to identify the beliefs and hopes which, at the depths of their consciousness, assured the occupants of the three tombs that their ephemeral existence was taking them somewhere.

THE ENCASED COFFINS

Excavating the mound at the location of the first tomb, the archaeologists discovered a burial chamber perfectly isolated and protected by considerable quantities of lime and carbon. Placed with its front facing south and its back-facing north, this caisson 6.72 meters long, 4.88 m. wide, and 2.8 m. high, contained in its side-boxes most of the objects enclosed with the deceased. In its center were found several encased coffins, each one inside another.

The most central one, made of uncarved wood decorated with feathers and animal hair glued to silk, contained the body of the Marchioness. The dimensions of this sarcophagus are 2.02 m. long, .69 m. wide, and .63 m. high.



朱地彩繪棺

The next two coffins are ornamented with lacquer painting of astonishing arabesques. Curves of breaths surge into a median in which clouds take the form of waves. They are sometimes ridden by genies mounted on animals that do not belong to the visible world. As light as feathers, the genies ride the wind and the waves, showing the way from the point of departure toward the Beyond, protecting the occupant from influxes and harmful demons. The background against which these figures emerge is black for the outermost coffin and red for the next one in,

as if two worlds -- that of death (black, color of yin) and that of vitality (red, color of yang) -- both opposed and surrounded each other. An examination of the figures shows that the coffins provide spiritual protection through the style of drawing. They also provide material protection, supplied by the high-quality texture of the wood, and by the lacquer that protects against all moisture.

Three other coffins, called the "externals," completed the protection. The most interior of these three externals was entirely of black-lacquered wood; the two others were fixed in place as part of the structure of the burial chamber.

The Chinese generally practiced double-burial and used the triple coffin¹². The double-burial assures that only the bones will be committed to the earth. The triple or quadruple coffin retains the integrity of the whole body, after embalming, rendering it perfectly incorruptible¹³. Both are ancient techniques and proven rites. The appearance of a mummy in the innermost coffin of Tomb 1 was a sensational discovery. A preparation which has remained unknown, aided by the exceptional conditions of the burial site, had preserved the body from putrefaction, and even more surprisingly, it had kept the skin soft and the tissues intact. An autopsy revealed exact knowledge of her last meal!

Certainly, the occupant of this tomb had carefully prepared her passage to the Beyond and taken all the precautions so that the qi of her own animation would remain available and effective, in a hermetically sealed space.

The Banner had been carefully placed on the lid of the innermost coffin (of the six encased coffins); a Jade Disc of Honor¹⁴ was attached to the upper part. Vegetable dyes were used for the background colorings of the silk. Time has darkened them; they may have been red originally. The other colors have remained fresh and bright. According to a technique still in use, finely pulverized stone dust mingled with the lacquer gives these dazzling shades of cinnabar red, lapis-lazuli blue, and malachite green.

THE TALISMAN

The Banner, of finely woven silk, looks like a long garment with wide, short sleeves, in the shape of a "T".

T-shaped banners can familiarize us with the thought and the beliefs of the Han period. They contain the qi that lifted the spirit and the heart of the craftsmen, whose calling was to conceive and make such objects for men and women who put their hope into them at the moment when a stronger qi than all others carried them beneath the ground and into Heaven.

The Banner, known as Mawangdui (from the place-name), is made of three pieces of silk sewn together. The total height is 205 centimeters; the width (not counting the seams) is 92 cm. in the upper part, and 47 cm. in the lower part. The

upper part (92 cm. wide) has a height equal to a third of the whole (a little more than 68 cm.). At the top, a bamboo rod is passed through the hem. A silk cord is attached to it to hang the Banner. In the two corners of the lowest part and in the two lower corners of the upper transversal band are attached free-floating ribbons of fine black linen, each 17 cm. long. The exhalations of the dragons on the upper band, and the tails of the dragons at the very bottom of the Banner, are extended to the outside by these ribbons.

The painting is naturally divided into three sections:

- The upper part (corresponding to the horizontal bar of the T) is a vision of Heaven, the abode accessible to souls after death, and the natural end of their journey – the place where blessed spirits enjoy Long Life. It is not the sky that we see, but the Heaven beyond light and darkness.



- The middle part (between the Gate of Heaven and the platform that holds the banquet scene) is the Heaven and Earth we know, with the picture of the deceased and her spiritual souls (*hun*) moving towards Heaven under the care of a protective deity;

- The lower part (the underworld, that of the "Yellow Springs") is the domain into which the corporeal souls, *po*, disappear, returning to the Earth to be dissolved, hence the disturbing quality of these regions, as suggested by strange animals.

ENCHANTMENT AND INSPIRATION

No person can see, look at, examine or scrutinize the Mawangdui Banner without feeling a strong emotion. This inspiring object, ordered from an expert artisan by a noble family of the Kingdom of Chu, always exerts upon those contemplating it the power of charm proper to a talisman. In that respect this painting is not inferior, in its genre, to any funeral bronze, any well-known calligraphy, or any robe or tunic of an Emperor or a great Daoist dignitary. The power of Chinese works of art lies in their perpetual intent to say something in such a way that our spirits are endlessly implored to acquiesce to the realities behind the obvious. The inspiration that underlays the entire composition enchants us.

This is not the effect of chance; it is the happy result of techniques that, thanks to this discovery, we know were already in use during the Han Dynasty. It had been thought that painting began in the Tang Dynasty (7th to 10th century). However, the discovery of the banner shows it was already perfectly mastered by the Later Han Dynasty. We can assume that mastery of composition, design and perspective¹⁵, of contour and colors was reached in the South even before the Empire (founded in 221 B.C.E.).

MYTHOLOGICAL PAINTING

The Mawangdui Banner reveals strange animals, genies, and monsters that illustrate in visual art what is described in poems and works that seek to evoke the mysterious powers of life during the same period.

The mythological delirium of works like the *Shanhaijing* (*Book of the Mountains and Seas*) or the *Odes of Qu Yuan*, and marvelous accounts preserved in *Zhuangzi* or *Huainanzi*, to mention only a few known examples, have already given us an intimation of the direction in which we must search for the sources of the Banner imagery. One might think that the totality of Chinese mythology has been reproduced in the temples and palaces, but those fragile works, lost forever, are given witness and are somehow present in the Banner. It is mythology that explains what all the beings shown therein this silk fabric have come to, from Zhulong the Flame-Dragon at the top of the painting, to the sea monsters at the bottom. We will briefly note the techniques of the craftsmen with the intent of better understanding how the vitality, vivacity and *qi* animate, from within, this fluttering Banner.

The extent to which these myths still conveyed a religious content in the second century B.C.E. cannot be evaluated. By that time, Ritualism occupied a predominant place, while the religious and spiritual vision passed more and more through the "rationalized" approach of the intellectuals. However, if there were a place in China where, at that period, the myths and especially poetic literature remained impregnated with their ancient religious meaning, it would have been the land of Chu¹⁶. That is what justifies the reading of this painting at the highest spiritual level.

IDENTIFICATION

To what object, known in the classical writings, can the Banner be related? Did the Banner have some use for the deceased?

Its function is not pure decoration. Objects appear in a burial chamber because people believe in the survival of the soul. The objects participate in the life after death; they assist the soul during the sojourn in the tomb, and during the subsequent journey. There was a reason for the Banner to be so near the body of the Marchioness of Dai.

Was it a garment¹⁷? A magical garment for visual pleasure, but above all for conferring powers. A garment for the soul to don as it flew towards the heavens and which, by its decoration, would show the itinerary? Yes, without a doubt.

However, the three rituals furnish a better identification. The rituals are the Rites of the Zhou (*Zhouli*), The Book of Ceremonial Étiquette or the Book of Étiquette and Rites (*Yili*), and The Book of Rites or Record of Rites (*Liji*). A banner, upon which the name of the deceased was inscribed, played a role in the funeral ceremonies:

When there is a great funeral service Funeral Attendants assist in the washing of the body; they place cooked dishes (cooked grains from the offering); they raise the banner that bears the name (i.e. a banner on which the name of the deceased is written)¹⁸.

(*Zhouli*, Officials of Springtime, Offices of Spring)

The Officiant takes the banner upon which the names of the deceased are written; he raises it near the (memorial) tablet of the deceased (i.e. the tablet on which is inscribed the name of the deceased ancestor, and which is kept in the ancestral shrine). The head of the household makes an unlimited number of outburst leaps. (*Yili*, from the Evening Lamentations ch. *Jixili*)

Ritually, the son of the deceased person jumps, effected by his grief:

On the third day there was the (slighter) dressing (of the corpse). While the body was on the couch it was called the corpse; when it was put into the coffin, it was called "jiu." At the moving of the corpse, and lifting of the coffin, (the son) wailed and leaped, times without number. Such was the

bitterness of his heart, and the pain of his thoughts, so did his grief and sorrow fill his mind and agitate his spirit, that he bared his arms and leaped, seeking by the movement of his limbs to obtain some comfort to his heart and relief to his spirit.

(*Liji*, ch. *Wensang*, Legge's translation)

Banners carried the name of the deceased. They could be ornamented with inscriptions, with drawn or painted motifs, and eventually finished with colors. Inscriptions, thematic drawings, and colors of the fabric could all vary with the rank of the deceased and could even subtly indicate his or her rank and title. Although similar banners have been found elsewhere, none attains the magnificence and richness of the Mawangdui¹⁹

At the time of death, the banners were attached to the corner of the roof of the house facing West. Then at the funeral ceremony, they were planted in front of the deceased, near the memorial tablet that represented the soul of the deceased. Later they were placed beside the coffin or on the funeral chariot. They accompanied the cortège to the burial ground. At the very moment the body was placed in the tomb, the banners were draped on the lid of the coffin. In this way these banners, identifying the deceased, had an essential function, which was to represent the spirits of the dead person and to serve as a protection and a guide for the journey towards the beyond.

The surname and name of the deceased are inscribed on the funeral banner²⁰. Because one can no longer [see the deceased and consequently] recognize him, his son uses this banner to mark his presence. Because he loves him, he inscribes his surname and his name; because he respects him, he shows him all possible honors.

(*Liji*, ch. *Tangong II*)

LEGGÉ's translation for *Liji*, ch. *Tangong II* :

The inscription forms a banner to the eye of fancy. Because (the person of) the deceased can no longer be distinguished, therefore (the son) by this flag maintains the remembrance of him. From his love for him he makes this record. His reverence for him finds in this its utmost expression.

The first tablet for the spirit (with this inscription on it) serves the same purpose as that (subsequently) placed in the temple, at the conclusion of the mourning rites.