

# Three interpretations for “three mountains crown” decorative graphic in Han Dynasty

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## Abstract

This article takes deeply discussion and analysis into the relationships between “three mountains crown” decorative graphic in Han Dynasty with Kunlun mountain, oversea three sacred mountains, ancestor worship and fire worship respectively, in order to get the gradually forming meaning during long history evolution of this special symbol, as well as its impact on the chinese graphic art development.

**Keywords:**Han Dynasty, graphic, symbol, three mountains crown

## 1. Foreword

“Three mountains crown” is the essential decorative figure in Han Dynasty fable which is widely used in various characters and supernatural objects such as visualization of FuXi and Lady Wa. It takes the image of ring-handle on the door for carrier. Every “three mountains crown” has it's own shape. Some of them are composed with tree triangles, some are composed with a protuberant object with a shape like chinese character “介” in the top of ring-handle on the door and the protuberant object symmetrically aligned overhang. This kind of “three mountains crown” has been existing since primitive society. Although the formation of “three mountains crown” is devived form images in Primitive society, ShangZhou time and Warring States, the academic circle

have different understandings in whether Han people keep the old meaning of it after several thousands years evolution. Here takes three examples to discuss.

## 2. “Three mountains crown” with Kunlun mountain, oversea three sacred mountains

Related to the regular shape of “three mountains crown”, what must be first mentioned is the oversea three sacred mountains. “Records of the historian Qin Shihuang Chronicles” records “there are three mountains on the sea, named Penglai, Yingzhou and Fang Zhang”. A painting on silk from No.9 Han Dynasty grave at golden bird mountain in Linyi Shandong province describes a inscription ancient banner picture related to the oversea three sacred mountains(Fig.1). This silk painting is of long linearity, with 200 centimeters long and 42 centimeters wide which can be mainly divided into the top part, the middle part and the bottom part. What is worth to pay more attention to is three mountains behind the roof in the first part which just folds with the roof, seems like that its roof is a part of the three mountains which are obviously decorated with patterns on it. Scholars such as LinJiayi thinks “the top of the silk painting is the striking sun and moon, sky near the sun and moon is the white cloud flying upwards, below the sun and moon is the three sacred mountains named Penglai, Fangzhang and Yinzhou. There are magnificent and expensive buildings

in front of the three mountains, in which the grave owner (that is the old woman) want to become immortal and live (we can call the buildings “Jewelled palace”) [1]. But another scholar named Zengbuchuankuan thinks the mountain in the image should be Kunlun mountain. [2]

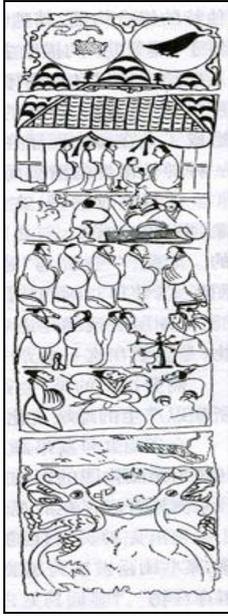


Fig. 1: Painting on silk from No.9 Han Dynasty grave at golden bird mountain

Whether or not it is the “three scared mountains” or “Kunlun mountains”, these three mountains are painted desirably by the painter in the silk painting, and combines ingeniously with the grave roof. Sun and moon, three scared mountains and jewelled palace are painted at the top; The scenario of living an idle life at home is painted in the middle; Monster of dragon and tiger are painted at the bottom. This makes us think the inscription ancient banner from the Changsha Mawangdui No.1 grave in War States which also divides the painting content into three parts, that is sky at top part, world in the middle part, and underground at the bottom part. Both of the in-

scription ancient banner paint sun and moon, mysterious leopard guarder, and monster of dragon and tiger. The difference is the one in golden bird mountain is mainly about human affairs, that is the grave owner living an idle life at home, including civil and military gate guards, honored guest meeting, dancing and music performance, which is closer to grave owner life in the middle part of the painting. Many inscription ancient banners are unearthed from Han dynasty grave recent years, mainly of them paint the figures of sun, moon, home idle life, welcomes and respects, dragon, tiger and leopard. Thus it can be seen this from is universal at that time. The inscription ancient banner is covered in the inner coffin when it is unearthed from the grave, lifted to raised before vehicle, having the function of making soul ascend to heaven. This kind of form inherits the silk painting such as “Character imperial dragon silk painting” and “Character dragon and Phoenix silk painting” in War States. According to the unearthed matter witness above, the painters’ purposes are hoping the grave owner climbing to the top of the scared mountains and arrive at the fairyland as soon as possible. The fable of oversea three scared mountains is generated at QIN or Han dynasty. At that time immortal thought is widely spread with the idea of returning to the paradise and making eternal life. The overall composition form of folding three scared mountains, buildings and characters together in this image makes us have a judgment tendency to the graphic composition and human character, that is what the picture unfolds is the world of the other shore to which the deceased life return.

All records about Kunlun mountain are related to queen mother of the west. It is handed down that there are many Yao pools in Kunlun mountain. Usually people who see the Kunlun mountain will think of queen mother of the west, the

two things cannot be divided. It is very possible that people decorate “three mountains crown” in the head of immortals such as queen mother of west in order to express longing to immortals and their life level, which is similar to queen mother of the west having everything and living a comfortable life in Kunlun mountain. But according to the drawing pattern on the recently unearthed stone portrait of Han, images about queen mother of the west are very universal, often composed the image with jade ware on the moon, people with feather, dragon and tiger seat, and fox with high tails. The purpose of grave owner carving this kind of graphic is also hoping he can achieve the “having everything” life as immortals in Kunlun mountain after died and ascend to heaven. Due to lack of explicit proof about the three scared mountains, Mr Zengbuchuankuan thinks it still need to be researched on whether the mountains in the image is Kunlun mountain or not.

Above all, it is more appropriately to understand “three mountains crown” on the silk painting to oversea three scared mountains, the symbol of life return, and the other shore of immortal world. Thus “three mountains crown” has incarnated to the symbol of immortal world.

### 3. “Three mountains crown” with ancestor worship

“Three mountains crown” usually takes another graphic “ring-handle on the door” for carrier. Many archaeology reports about “ring-handle on the door” graphic describe the prominent object at the top of it as triangle hair, or head with a shape like chinese character “山”, or hair with a shape like chinese character “介”. Just as the description from Mr Lixianzhong “it has triangle hair and prick ear” [3](Fig.2) and the description from Mr Lifalin “the head of ring-handle on the door is of chinese character ‘山’ shape” [4]. All these

opinions have certain truth because from the unearthed stone portrait at Han dynasty in Henan, Shandong, Shaanxi provinces, the shapes of the prominent object at the top of ring-handle on the door can be mainly divided to following kinds: shape of chinese character “山” which is “three mountains crowns”, triangle shape, shape of chinese character “介”, shape like “RuYi”, and shape like dragon horn. These shapes have a similarity, that is small head and big bottom, just like an abstract outline of a shape-changed arrow. Conservative view, PU SHOU image is a comprehensive reflection of bronze animal ornamentation in Shang dynasty. Many scholars think PU SHOU is the conversion of a mythical ferocious animal which chinese named it Tao Tie.



Fig. 2: image rubbings of ring-handle on the door in stone portrait unearthed from the ShiHuiyao village in Tanghe county in Henan province.

But, according to the actual image, PU SHOU in Han dynasty inherits from the animal ornamentation in Shang and Zhou bronze such as tiger ornamentation and dragon ornamentation. “deer horn with long neck” is a kind of dragon ornamentation which is common in Shang dynasty. It is usually seen at the dragon decoration in of Shang dynasty bronze with a shape like mushroom and a con top of large top and small bottom. So some scholars think it’s a corn with a shape like chinese character “且” or “菌”. Because it looks like the giraffe horn, people name it “giraffe horn”. But according to the documents

records, China never grown giraffe. The giraffe from Ethiopia and Somalia were introduced to China in around East Han dynasty. [5] meanwhile, giraffe never appear in all of the places which the fourth century paleontology live. Thus it can be seen, people never see giraffe before Eastern Han dynasty. It is also proved that this kind of horn doesn't matter with giraffe. Scholars such as Liu Zhixiong think "this kind of horn looks more like the shape of Chinese character '且(祖)' in the inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells. The prototype should be production of reproductive worship '祖' whose prototype should be male genital organ". [6] They think this mushroom shaped prominent object is that taking the symbol of male genital organ as a horn which is added to the head vertex of dragon. This is actually a result of primordial reproductive worship and ancestor worship.

Now that the symbol of Chinese character "且" can be taken as a dragon horn, the prominent object which can be commonly seen on the top of PU SHOU is considered as an added horn with a shape like Chinese character "且" symbolizing the reproductive worship on the top of PU SHOU. But because the carved style of portrait stone is usually complanate, it looks like a triangle or the shape like Chinese character "介" from a positive perspective. As time goes on, people from different areas make various decorations and processes on this shape, such as a shape like "Ru Yi". As early as the Shang dynasty and even the primitive society period, people have the common religious belief and the original object of worship, so this kind of horn appears in the PU SHOU in everywhere of the country. Phallic worship begins about the middle of the Neolithic Age. Archaeological finds many artistic utensils such as stone progenitor and Tao Zu. It can be seen that the desire for life and the future generations of breeding are the common ide-

als and wishes for ancient people in that low productivity time.

Another opinion is that the three mountains crown is not only the prominent object in the middle of deity head, but also the symbol of male genital organ. On cultural reproduction worship written by Zhao Guohua records "ancient people takes birds as the male genital organ in the middle of two legs, and the total number is three" [7]. So, when they paint the bird pattern, in order to stress the function of oviposition, they take the central part corresponding to the male genital organ, and paint the bird pattern as the three feet. Actually, this is not uncommon. The three feet of three feet birds in paintings of Han dynasty probably has the same meaning. Liangzhu ancient phallic worship is characterized by the jade three leg utensil and its ornamentation. It has a shape like Chinese character '山', deity of animal face on it. Actually, this kind of model is the form changing reflection of erection of male genital organ. According to the large trident shaped bronze unearthed from Zhongshan Mausoleum which mentioned above, it looks much like the bronze PU SHOU in Han dynasty. And it has the same origin as ring-handle on the door in Stone Carvings. The only difference is the tricuspid decoration on its top is usually with a regular shape. So coming very naturally, we take consideration of them with the ring-handle on the door in Stone Carvings. That is tricuspid on the top and animal face at the bottom. So we can conclude that the "three mountains crown" most probably eventually forms by taking some appearance factors of the jade ware of Liangzhu culture into its formation.

Archaeological documents show that in the period of primitive society, there already has "three pointed high crown" image on painted pottery; The beast face on the supernatural beings and adzes made of jade in Longshan culture is also with

shape like three pointed object or the deformation of that; three pointed symbol also appears in the “TaoTie” ornament in Liangzhu culture... scholars think they are the symbol of fire which are similar as the “three mountains crown” model at the top of PU SHOU in Stone portrait of Han(Fig.3). Scholar Zhang jingsong thinks “the three pointed or the three pointed crown symbol originated from the fire worship of primitive man. It is the symbol of fire, and also the symbol of fire-fiend... three pointed crown are painted on the ancient myth of the Tu, Yu Lei, and also on the Tu, Yu Lei of the Stone portrait of Han. PU SHOU taken as the exorcism of evil spirits fetish is usually decorated by the art up three pointed crown symbol”.[8] So it can be seen “three mountains crown” model of Han dynasty image follows the one in primitive society. Why it’s of shape of three pointed? This is accumulated in daily life and gradually formed. The Shang and Zhou bronzes have “three legged tripod” whose model originated from the habit that primitive civilian use three stones to support a pot named “three foots range”. Until now, this habits is still in use in some minorities. So the “three foots” and “fire” have all kinds of connections with each other. For example, the “three foots bird” in ancient myth also has the meaning of fire bird or sun bird. Later formed all sorts of fire hieroglyphs in inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells, which is mainly of the three ponits mountain shape.

All of them take fire as the god or origiantion of light and god or origiantion of clean, and also as the god of family kitchen range. From the time which acient people discover fire and acquire the use of it, civilization has been to open their doors. Fire can bring light, drive away wild animals, and also provide healthy and dilicious food, give them physical courage to cover natual. But meanwhile brings the disaster to them.

Fire signs are widely permeates in chinese traditional image, and have rich folk background and multy faith connotation. Since ancient times, people worship the fire, regard it as the god, and start to sacrifice it. the shape like three pointed mountains gradually extended to fire image. From the above, “three mountains crown” of Han dynasty decoration image is most probably the symbol of god of fire, and the extension of primitive witchcraft behaviour. It can be understood that all of the heads of god in Han myth are painted god of fire symbol. People worship the various gods graphics wearing god of fire’s crown, hoping to get the protection from gods.



Fig. 3: rubbings of ring-handle on the door unearthed from the Shandong Pingyin Meng Zhuang Han portraits tomb

Which is the origiantion of three mountains crown, The acient worship or the fire worship? Actually the two are co-existing. Since ancient times, when people worship ancestors, they usually put offerings and wares for pray in from of the tablet. The behaviour proves there are relationships between them. Mr Li Zong-tong think “In the ancient society, the flame is equal to the totem and ancestor. In Roma and italy, the ancient nation offer sacrifices to holy fire is actually to offer sacrifices ot ancestors...”[9] In the life of Mongolia, worship fire must be carryed on when worship ancestors. Mongolia later integrate the fire worship into the ancestor worship. People believe

ghost never die, so they think the ancestor ghost is the protection god for the clan, tribal and family. Fire the the holy granted from the ancestor to later generations. Children and grandchildren inherit the holy fire from their parents who also inherit it from theirs. In this way, god of fire worship and ancestor worship intercommunicate with each other.

#### 4. Conclusion

It can be seen from the above opinions, “three mountains crown” have a complicated origination in culture. It seems very difficult to carding them because of the various clues, culture backgrounds and image symbols. Until now, there isn’t detailly document to prove the positive connection between three mountains crown and oversea tree scared mountains as well as KunLun mountain. The fame of “oversea three scared mountains” start to spread out since Han dynasty. It is proved by the facts that “three mountains crown” has been existing since primitive society. It is farfetched to think there are relations between the “three mountains crown” and ring-handle on the door in Han dynasty. This time, The decorative pattern “three mountains crown” is endowed with fire worship, also contains the ancestor worship culture connotation. But these images are usually used for door decoration, warn or decorations on the sarcophagus. It is more usually taken as the supernatural object for charm and exorcise evil spirits because its specific environment. Whether or not PU SHOU is decorated on the door, or carved on the coffin chamber of Han dynasty, it is the symbolizing object like the rosette and white tiger which carved on the door.

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