What are the most difficult things to paint? What are the easiest? An ancient Chinese king once raised these questions with Han Fei 韓非 (280?–233 BCE), a leading scholar of legalism. Han picked dogs and horses as the most difficult to paint because people know them well and see them often. He considered ghosts and goblins as the easiest because they have no definite form.1 Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139 CE), a distinguished writer and astronomer, followed Han’s rationale in explaining why the artisans in his time preferred to depict ghosts and goblins over dogs and horses: “Truly, this is because substantial entities are difficult to shape, whereas insubstantial counterfeits are inexhaustible in shape.”2 Both Han’s and Zhang’s arguments touched upon the nature of representation. The depiction of the invisible calls for imagination, not imitation, making any images produced hard to judge. Zhang’s criticism also indicates the contemporary enthusiasm for creating images of invisible things. Heaven, the main focus of this book, was more obscure than ghosts and goblins, so it was probably the most challenging subject matter for artisans in the Han dynasty (207 BCE–220 CE), the historical period in which Zhang lived and the time frame of this book.

“Heaven” is a convenient but inadequate translation of the Chinese character tian 天. Tian is derived from another character, da 大, a graph depicting the frontal view of a person standing firm with legs apart and arms stretched out. The graph da, invented to distinguish an adult from a child, means, by extension, a big size. To create the written sign for Heaven from da, they added a solid circle atop da, as we can see in bronze inscriptions of the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE (Figure 0.1). The circle was simplified, becoming a horizontal line, around the ninth century BCE (Figure 0.2). Placing a horizontal line atop da became the standard way to write tian before the Han dynasty. The emphasis on the top indicates that the ancient Chinese regarded tian as high above human beings.3
Many things are both vast and higher than a standing person. To grasp the Chinese’s notion of Heaven, we must look at the contexts in which tian was used. Bronze inscriptions from the eleventh century BCE onward portray tian as the supreme deity who granted a king the right to rule and who made his judgments known by either bestowing blessings on or causing disasters in the human world. With the development of divine kingship as a feature of government came compounds like tianming 天命 (mandate of Heaven), tianzi 天子 (son of Heaven), and tiandi 天帝 (Heavenly Thearch). The Book of Changes (Yi jing 易經), probably compiled in the ninth century BCE based on earlier sources, presents a second aspect of tian: the sky, where people saw the appearance and disappearance of stars. The compound tianwen 天文 (patterns of Heaven) arose from observations of the night sky. In the Book of Odes (Shi jing 詩經), which includes poems dated between the eleventh and seventh centuries BCE, tian is a place where the Heavenly Thearch resides. This spatial denotation produced yet another group of compounds like tianting 天廷 (heavenly court), tiangong 天宮 (heavenly palace), and tianmen 天門 (gate of Heaven).
The ancient Chinese formed their basic ideas of Heaven—as the sky, the supreme deity, and the residence of the deity—in the Western Zhou period (ca. 1050–771 BCE). Political, social, and religious changes modified those ideas. Although the Zhou king was believed to be the sole mediator between Heaven and the human world, with the decline of the Zhou ruling house his monopoly on mediation was inevitably ceded to others. The First Emperor, whose great-grandfather vanquished the Zhou in 256 BCE, unified the warring states and established the Qin dynasty (222–207 BCE), yet the transitoriness of the Qin bore witness to the caprices of Heaven. The Han rulers, having overthrown the Qin, were eager to associate their reign with the mandate of Heaven and strived to maintain its favor. Political disorder and social dislocation during the prolonged decline of the Zhou over the course of five centuries had prompted people to ponder the connection between Heaven and their own world. On the one hand, celestial signs, once thought to foretell national affairs, gradually came to be correlated with the fate of individuals. The rising interest in celestial prognostication popularized sky lore in the Han dynasty. Correlative thinking also generated discussion about the correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm, starting sometime before the Qin’s unification of China and gaining currency after the establishment of the Han. Cosmologists regarded Heaven as a force—composed of qi 氣, which was divided into yin 陰 and yang 陽 aspects—that kept the cosmos moving. On the other hand, the Heavenly Thearch, who had communicated only with the highest ruler in the past, now became a mighty guardian for individuals. A Han inscription found on a stone inserted into the ceiling of a tomb records the wish to enlist the power of the Heavenly Thearch to ward off evil invasions in a private domain. People even fancied that the Heavenly Thearch would open his residence, where deities and auspicious animals gathered, to accommodate the deceased. The belief in ascending to Heaven after death became widespread in the Han dynasty.

Early texts, both those unearthed and those transmitted, provide us with numerous examples of how the ancient Chinese presented, elaborated, questioned, and debated various ideas of Heaven, beginning in the eleventh century BCE. Visual representations of Heaven did not emerge in significant numbers, however, until the Han dynasty. The sudden outpouring of depictions of Heaven then was due in part to artisans’ shift in focus from patterns on the surfaces of bronze vessels to pictures on the surfaces of wood, lacquer, and stone. Changes in the political system, the social structure, and religious practices made Heaven a leitmotif at the pictorial turn. The depictions of Heaven cast light on at least two essential questions that I hope to answer in this book: Was Heaven represented as it had been referred to in writing—as the sky, the supreme deity, a cosmic
force, a pantheon of deities, and a land of immortals? And, how did the many meanings of Heaven influence how it was represented?

References to Heaven in Han art were indeed manifold and matched the notion of *tian* as it developed. Take, for example, the image of the Heavenly Thearch in a Wu family shrine erected in the second century in what is now Shandong (Figure 0.3). Though dressed like a Han official, the deity is distinguished by his larger size and his position of authority—he is receiving figures who are either bowing or kneeling before him. What truly makes him the Heavenly Thearch, however, is his seat in the scoop of
The dipper, which is punctuated by seven big circles, represents the Northern (Big) Dipper. The scene conveys a Han view of Heaven that conflated the sky and the supreme deity, a conflation that a court historian, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE), had articulated centuries earlier in his Book of Celestial Offices (Tian guan shu 天官書). According to Sima Qian, the brightest star in the constellation of the Celestial Pole was the permanent abode of the supreme deity, whom he called Grand Unity (taiyi 太一). And the Northern Dipper, composed of seven stars, was the vehicle of the supreme deity, from which he was able to govern at the center while reaching out to the four quarters. After the liberation of Heaven from its theocratic framework, the Han people welcomed a Heavenly Thearch with less political clout than his predecessor. The design on a bronze mirror discovered in Henan, probably created no later than the carving in the Wu shrine, captures the new view of the deity (Figure 0.4). We see the deity in the outer circle of the mirror’s back, where he is seated in a vehicle pulled by two dragons, driven by two charioteers, and about to pass through a pair of gate pillars. The two characters inscribed between the dragons and a mass of clouds label the deity as tiangong 天公 (Heavenly Lord). The longer inscription along an inner circle identifies the scene as an excursion of the Heavenly Lord (tiangong xingchu 天公行出). The gate pillars must therefore be the entrance to his celestial palace. No doubt the design reminded viewers that Heaven was
both the supreme deity and his residence. Since the First Emperor had appropriated the character 
帝 (thearch) to refer to his emperorship, using 公 (lord) to denote the supreme deity made it clear that the deity was expected to bestow his favors not only on monarchs but also on all human beings. Other representations show that the Han people even accepted a kind of Heaven without any anthropomorphic dominator. A wood carving, excavated in a late-first-century BCE tomb in Jiangsu, portrays Heaven as an array of the sun, the moon, the Milky Way, and stars (Figure 0.5). If the carving depicts the sky, then the celestial bodies are complete with mythological elaboration: the sun is carried by a bird, the moon contains a toad, and the Milky Way is embodied by three fish. A celestial being flying over the sun adds a non-astronomical touch to the imaginary sky.

Picturing Heaven clearly requires a significative rather than an imitative view of representation. In language, the relation between a name and what it names (for example, “tree” and a tree) is arbitrary, based on or set by convention. In pictorial art, the relation between a picture and what it depicts (for example, a portrait of Henry and Henry himself) is less arbitrary because picture and subject trigger cognition through similarities. If we recognize similarities, we can interpret a portrait of Henry as a depiction of Henry.
Nevertheless, the three Han images just introduced—a man with a constellation, a man about to pass through gate pillars, and three fish between two circles—may not be depictions of Heaven. Only if we know of conventions that allow them to refer to Heaven can we identify them in that way. Picturing Heaven is thus an act of signification determined by convention.

Artisans must have borrowed tacit knowledge from convention to make Heaven visible and accessible. The artisan who decorated the Wu family shrine did not invent the idea of positioning the supreme deity in his celestial vehicle, the Northern Dipper. The imagery came from the court experts who explained heavenly bodies in terms of a human bureaucracy. Likewise, the artisan who designed the bronze mirror was not the first to associate the supreme deity with gate pillars. In *Elegies of the Chu* (*Chu ci* 楚辭), an anthology of verse by Qu Yuan 屈原 (341?–283? BCE) and his followers, poets described how gatekeepers controlled the entrance to the heavenly palace or the heavenly capital. The artisan who made the wood carving would not have populated the Milky Way with fish were there no folktales portraying it as a celestial river that separated the Weaving Maid (three stars in Lyra) and the Oxherd (three stars in Aquila). As I will demonstrate, the tacit knowledge that the Han artisans borrowed to represent Heaven ranged widely from cosmology to mythology to astronomy.

That picturing Heaven is an act of appropriation does not diminish the value of the artisans’ contribution to its representation. Artisans exhibited their talent in how they transformed knowledge into image. Although the court experts envisioned the supreme deity dwelling at the Pole Star and riding on the Northern Dipper as he presided over the celestial realm, it was an artisan who gave supremacy and transportation their pictorial forms by creating a gigantic, kingly figure receiving homage, by rendering the Northern Dipper as a chariot in profile, and by installing scrolls of clouds beneath the scoop of the dipper as if they were wheels. Likewise, it was an artisan who fleshed out the Heavenly Lord’s excursion on the bronze mirror from a theme summarized by only four inscribed characters. To distinguish the anthropomorphic deity from human beings, the artisan added wings to his shoulders. To indicate the outing, the artisan placed the deity in a dragon-drawn cart and captured the moment when he departed from his palace. And to show the deity’s magnificence, the artisan created an impressive entourage that included the sun, the moon, the River Lord in charge of the Milky Way, and various auspicious animals.

Artisans also played an active role in deciding how pictures of Heaven should be used. The Jiangsu wood carving, for instance, helped furnish a deceased couple’s tomb. Their double coffins, both made of wood, were located in a pit. The outer coffin, rectangular in
shape, is divided into two units: the larger one houses two inner coffins, and the smaller one stores funerary goods. Only the interior of the larger unit is decorated, with two carvings on the ceiling and three on the partition wall. The carving introduced earlier is on the ceiling, juxtaposed with a carving that features dragons and stars (Figure 0.6). One wall carving depicts the retrieval of a lost tripod from a river (Figure 0.7), and another depicts a musical performance, dancing, acrobatics, and an animal act (Figure 0.8); the third carving is damaged. If the tomb is a microcosm, then the wood carving on
the wall represents the human world, and those on the ceiling the celestial realm. If the tomb served as a site of transition because dragons were said to assist people in reaching Heaven, then the decoration on the ceiling signifies the supreme deity’s dwelling, to which the deceased hoped to climb. In this case, the carvings on the ceiling, though denoting the imaginary sky, connote the celestial ascent and paradise after death. The patrons who commissioned the funerary project may have expressed their wish to make the tomb more like a microcosm, a transitional site, or both. But none could have dictated the complicated visual signification—borrowing from mythology to create the sky and using the mythical sky to stand for the celestial paradise—except for the artisan himself.

To make the invisible visible, both artisans and viewers relied on tacit knowledge for coding and decoding, which made picturing Heaven an act of social communication. There were bound to be social and regional distinctions in approaching and representing Heaven in the Han, since the empire lasted for four centuries and encompassed an enormous territory, stretching from present-day North Korea in the east to Vietnam in the south, the Pamir Plateau in the west, and the Great Wall in the north. Nevertheless, received texts and archaeological finds offer us mostly information about social elites in urban areas. How images of Heaven functioned in the life of commoners is unclear. The scant, scattered, and unevenly distributed data likewise make it difficult to distinguish regional preferences. Still, we do know that different elite groups in the Han evinced different attitudes toward Heaven and its visualization. In this book, we will see the fierce
competition between Confucian scholars (*rushi* 儒士) and masters of methods (*fangshi* 方士) at the Han court. Confucian scholars, who interpreted Confucius’s (551–479 BCE) teachings within a framework of cosmological synthesis, emphasized the mandate of Heaven and urged benevolent rule. The masters of methods, in contrast, pushed their view of Heaven as a land of immortals and advocated ways to achieve immortality. The contests between the two groups yielded two types of architecture in the capitals. The ruler who listened to masters of methods had the celestial paradise re-created in the imperial park, whereas the rulers who listened to Confucian scholars ordered the construction of Bright Halls in which the son of Heaven received his subjects while claiming his heavenly mandate. We will also see the tension between rulers and Confucian scholars. Both believed that good omens would appear if Heaven approved a reign, but for opposite reasons: the rulers sought to reaffirm their legitimacy, and the Confucian scholars tried to prevent rulers from becoming despots. The discourse of omens came into play not only at court but also in local politics. Han emperors often granted tax relief to the districts whose administrators reported the emergence of good omens. Over time the Han people came to believe that the head of the local government, like the emperor, could be graced by omens if his governance proved to be benevolent. Local officials thus regarded omens as a means to gain social benefit or individual promotion; some went so far as to falsify omens’ appearance. Under the circumstances, illustrated catalogues were produced and circulated to meet the need to correctly identify omens.

The significant weight of Heaven in ancient China has drawn the attention of modern scholars. Intellectual historians are intrigued by how the ancient Chinese elites pondered their association with Heaven. A. C. Graham and Michael Puett offer their macroscopic views, sketching the transformative dynamics from the pre-Han to the Han eras. Robert Eno, Edward Machle, and John Major present case studies on the notions of Heaven seen in the writings of pre-Han Confucians and Han cosmologists. Historians of science are naturally enthusiastic about the astronomical aspect of Heaven. Nathan Sivin articulates the way scientific knowledge—astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and chemistry—emerged in early China and identifies the people who sponsored, possessed, and transmitted these branches of knowledge. Xiaochun Sun and Jacob Kistemaker examine three major conventions used to map the sky in the Han period. Christopher Cullen scrutinizes an early text on astronomy and mathematics that was probably compiled by Han experts. Historians who are interested in politics cannot ignore the impact of Heaven’s mandate. Both Cho-yun Hsü and Edward Shaughnessy touch upon the issue in their Western Zhou histories, and Aihe Wang gives the topic a book-length analysis and extends the discussion to the Han dynasty. These scholarly works, admirable
though they are, reflect the concerns of modern disciplines more than they do the complexity of Heaven in early China. The interdisciplinary approach that I favor in this book acknowledges the need to treat the complexity of Heaven as a whole, which is how it had evolved since the height of the Chinese Bronze Age.

Despite abundant modern literature, scholars have not studied how the Han Chinese pictured Heaven. The dearth of scholarship has many causes. Some are rooted in circumstances and academic tradition. The closed-door policy adopted by Communist China after 1949 confined art historians to portable objects already in public or private collections overseas. Ancient bronze vessels, medieval Buddhist sculpture, and later paintings became three dominant areas of research. To establish or present collections, art historians devoted themselves to connoisseurship, employing typology, iconography, and formal analysis for dating and authentication. Seldom did they take into consideration the social context in which objects were produced, distributed, and received. Nor did they pay much attention to the physical context in which objects were discovered or may have been displayed. In such a scholarly environment, Han art was at a disadvantage because Han artisans preferred to engrave stones, paint on walls, and decorate lacquerware. These media—difficult to remove or preserve—were not among the favorites of early tomb looters. The limited access to Han art inevitably made it a marginalized field, dismissed as work done during either the twilight of the Bronze Age or the dawn of the Buddhist era.

Other reasons for the lack of scholarly attention to the Han depiction of Heaven have to do with the development of Chinese archaeology. Even though avid antiquarians and collectors have encouraged tomb looting in China for centuries, scholars did not begin to experiment with scientific excavation in north China until the early twentieth century. Li Chi, a Harvard-trained anthropologist, was the first to garner governmental support for a large-scale project in Anyang 安陽, a capital of the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE). Work on the project, initiated in 1928, continues to this day. Li and other experts who explored the field of archaeology mainly sought evidence of civilizations from the prehistoric period to the Shang. They cared little about later dynasties like the Han. The situation changed after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, when archaeology became a national enterprise. More than 100,000 Han tombs have been discovered all over the country since then. The material that Wang Zhongshu introduced in *Han Civilization* in 1982, with K. C. Chang’s assistance and translation, has been vastly augmented. The constant unearthing of new caches has turned the landscape of Han art from bleak to blooming.

When China reopened its doors to the world in the 1970s, scholars in the West could put Han art into better perspective. Michael Loewe, a textual historian, took advantage
of the archaeological breakthroughs in his *Ways to Paradise* in 1979. He boldly relied on images to illustrate the Han quest for immortality, using, for example, a decorated brick found in 1965 to articulate the popular cult of a goddess in charge of the land of immortals and a silk painting discovered in 1972 to explain the belief in ascending to Heaven. Because of his rigid iconographical approach, the book, albeit insightful, drew criticism. It was Wu Hung and Martin Powers who secured the place of Han art in Western scholarship. In *The Wu Liang Shrine* (1989), Wu bridged the gap between iconography and iconology by restoring the visual program for an otherwise scattered group of Han carved stones, reconstructing the sociopolitical context in which the group was situated, and analyzing the ideology that it represented. Powers sought to associate style with society. In his *Art and Political Expression in Early China* (1991), he investigated how various social groups, owing to different tastes and concerns, developed their distinct stylistic preferences in the Han period. Both Wu and Powers drew upon many archaeological finds available only in the second half of the twentieth century to substantiate their arguments. I am greatly indebted to Chinese archaeologists for their painstaking fieldwork and to the pioneering scholars for their intellectual endeavors. In particular, Loewe introduced the imagined celestial field, whereas Wu and Powers discussed issues concerning images of omens. None of them, however, addressed the sudden outburst of visual materials about Heaven in the Han. Nor did any of them consider omens or the imagined celestial field as part of a multifaceted, sophisticated discourse on Heaven.

My curiosity about Heaven in Han art parallels my interest in the study of symbols and signs. To begin with, I was intrigued by Ernst Cassirer’s philosophical contemplations on symbolic forms and by Erwin Panofsky’s demonstration of perspective as a symbolic form in European pictorial art. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on the visible and the invisible fascinated me later, as did Hubert Damisch’s illustration of the way clouds are used in Correggio’s (1489–1534 CE) paintings, as both a signifier and the signified, to de-compose and yet complete the system of perspective. E. H. Gombrich’s meditations on a hobby horse remain inspiring, especially his use of the psychological concept of symbolization to consider a broomstick more a substitute for a horse (function) than a portrayal of a horse (form). Unsatisfied with the semiotic approach, David Summers has called for a post-formalist art history based more on real spaces than on planar surfaces. Much though I benefited from all these and many other stimulating discussions and debates, the purpose of my book is not to fill Western theoretical frameworks with Chinese data but to exploit whatever approaches facilitate our understanding of the visual representation of Heaven in Han China.
Although this book does not go beyond Han China in scope, I hope it helps shed light on similar visual materials from other cultural areas. The Chinese, for instance, were not the only people in the ancient world to ascribe divinity to kings. The Mesopotamians developed the idea as early as the third millennium BCE. They transformed the idea into images, of which the stele of Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 BCE) was a famous example (Figure 0.9). Hammurabi, the sixth king of the Amorite dynasty of Babylon, erected the stele to promulgate his laws. To emphasize the authority of his codes, Hammurabi had a relief added to the top of the stele, right above the columns of legal texts. The relief shows two figures: the standing one is a king, presumably Hammurabi himself, who wears a
royal polos headdress and a simple robe; the seated one is the sun god Shamash, who has rays of sun radiating from his shoulders, wears a divine headdress with four horns over a voluminous bun, and sits on a throne decorated with lintels evoking a city gate or a temple portal. The scene captures the moment when the sun god is giving a ring and a staff, emblems of authority, to the king. The ancient Mesopotamians depicted divine kingship in figurative art, whereas the Han Chinese preferred to show it in architecture. As we will see in this book, Han emperors claimed their mandate as the sons of Heaven at the center of Bright Halls, structures intended to manifest the cosmos in miniature.

Heavenly ascent is another idea shared by many people in the ancient world. A fresco from the hypogeum of Vibia provides an interesting example that dates to mid-fourth-century Rome (Figure 0.10). The inscriptions in the painting inform us that the Good Angel (Angelus Bonus) is leading the deceased woman (Vibia) through a gate. Inside the gate, as we also read, Vibia reappears. Now she is seated at a table with five others, who, like her, were approved by the judgment of the righteous (Bonorum Iudicio Iudicati). The scene, which combines induction and dining, not only suggests Heaven as a destination for the deceased but also attests to the fusion of pagan customs and Christian beliefs in Late Antiquity. The added gate and angel distinguish the scene from the depictions of other Roman banquets, which were often held at graves or in churches. The Han Chinese, too, viewed Heaven as a desirable place to spend one’s afterlife. The gate of Heaven and a guide to Heaven—a winged immortal, not an angel—were popular motifs in Han funerary art. Instead of focusing on life in Heaven, such as the promise of a ban-
quet, the Han artisans and their clients were obsessed with the passage to Heaven. We will thus learn much more about what took place before the gate to the Han Heaven than about what supposedly happened beyond it.

I organize the book around different references to Heaven that the Han artisans took into their visual productions. Chapter 1 is an examination of the architectural manifestation of Heaven’s mandate. By looking at the Bright Halls erected by three Han rulers, I investigate how and why architecture became a convergence of cosmology, history, and legitimacy during their reigns. I also discuss how the Bright Halls came to represent Heaven to both rulers and the ruled by the manipulation of architecture in terms of locality, symbolic form, and ritual imagination. Chapter 2 deals with how the Han people viewed omens as tangible evidence of Heaven’s mandate and how the Han artisans depicted those omens. Focusing on the cliff engraving made to honor a governor’s meritorious services in what is now Gansu, I explore the way mountains were employed to forge the monumentality of Heaven’s mandate. Chapter 3 introduces fantastic journeys from the Earth to Heaven. I analyze the shift from morality to immortality as seen in the Chang’an architectural complex, the wish to ascend to Heaven evident in the visual program of Lady Dai’s tomb at Mawangdui, and the question of whether the gate of Heaven, a prevalent icon in Han funerary art, defined the destination of the celestial ascent. In chapter 4, I look into the celestial markers in Han art and explain how the presence of the cardinal deities, the Milky Way, and the sun and the moon sufficed to stand for Heaven. In chapter 5, I tackle the Chinese zodiac—specifically, how the system of twenty-eight lunar lodges was established and how the knowledge of the lodges was transmitted from experts to the general public. A painted tomb in Xi’an provides a basis for a discussion of the way the Han artisans transformed a celestial map into an “animated” sky—one with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elaborations—and then used the animated sky in the funerary context to refer to Heaven, the eventual home of the deceased.