Understanding the art forms of early Chinese cosmic images

In Chinese art, especially art concerned with the universe, whether in the form of murals, craftwork, or architecture , we find many mysterious themes that we cannot understand immediately . But we also find many similarities in the images in these artefacts : including a shared concerned with cyclicity, circularity and symmetry.

Through research in the relevant literature, we can find the cosmological thinking that informs these artefacts , including Yin and Yang, occult ideas and those taken from mythology.these all belong to the knowledge called 方术 at the early period.

So how can we understand this complicated 方术 more directly? And how can we connect them with these early artworks?I believe that behind these arts and cultures, there has always been a cosmic model that is constantly optimized and enriched through history which is called Shi in the earliest texts. It is a core tool to imitate the structure of the universe in 方术. It is used for divination and the study of time, in order to create a system that can operate on its own instead of through observation of astronomical phenomena. The circularity or rotating depiction brought about by this fixed model aims to let people understand the laws inside directly.

 The picture on the right is the earliest known representation of Shi. If we read the words at the top, we can see the mutual correspondence and circulation of many things from the text (time, direction, astrology) .The spirit of traditional Chinese art was informed by this all-encompassing cosmic system.//So how can we understand the classic Han Dynasty mural such as the picture on the right?

Shi is a core structural model. It integrates to all the content of Chinese original cosmological thinking. This mural representing the universe, and echoing with the Shi model, not only produces the laws of nature, but also enriches and beautifies the image. From this we can see that when it comes to express the idea of the cosmic，there was a Latent image logic in Ancient Chinese art , but at the same time, because of the symbolic potential, there is still a lot of room for the artisans to expand and develop their representations. This is perhaps why we feel that these forms of ancient art that express the universe are both familiar and different.

To Sum up, cyclicity , circularity, and symmetry in early Chinese art about the universe is based on early Fangshu knowldge, and the origin of the art form can be found in the cosmic model- Shi.