



MONEY TREE

China • Bronze and green-glazed earthenware
Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) • 1996.29



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The Money Tree is named for the abundance of round coins with square holes that hang from the branches. Thought to emit light, coins guided the deceased, who would ride on a winged ram up the ceramic mountain to the bronze tree of paradise. These coins could also be plucked for needs on the journey from earth to the realm of immortals. Money trees are associated with **Taoism**, a philosophy originating in China that offers ideas about harmony and balance, nature and change. Images like the ram were popular in Han times because the Chinese character for ram is part of the character meaning “lucky.” Ram also has the same sound as yang, the masculine, positive principle of the Taoist duality yin and yang, which creates balance in the forces of nature.

The Western Paradise of Taoist immortals is ruled by the Queen Mother of the West (*Xiwangmu*), who sits atop this tree on her tiger of the west and dragon of the east throne, representing yin (dark) and yang (bright). *Xiwangmu* is the most famous Taoist immortal because she holds the secret of immortality. Money trees are decorated with scenes of paradise containing magical creatures and immortals including the sun bird, the moon toad, the deer who finds the main ingredient for the elixir of immortality, and the clever monkey who steals the elixir.

Similar trees have been found in the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) tombs in western China in and near Sichuan province. Creators hoped that money trees would aid the soul of the deceased in its journey to paradise.

Notes:

Money trees continue to be popular among families during the Chinese New Year. According to custom, money trees are made of a bushy pine or cypress branch nestled inside a porcelain pot filled with rice grains. Melon seeds and pine nuts are sprinkled over the top of the rice. Decorating the branches are gold and silver coin garlands made of paper. Symbols of long life (including paper cranes and deer) also embellish the tree, which is usually topped by the genie of wealth, Liu Hai, or the character for happiness (*fu*).