

The Humanistic Beliefs Conveyed by Patterns in Han Dynasty Tomb Art

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Abstract:

The Han Dynasty represents a pivotal period in the development of Chinese art. During this time, ancient ritual vessel art declined while portraiture thrived, with tomb portraits being a dominant form of artistic expression. The art of the Han Dynasty closely intertwined “painting” with “tombs”, amalgamating artistic form, aesthetic ideology, artistic function, and religious significance. This paper delves into Han people’s thoughts through the lens of tomb murals, which marked a grand artistic movement, turning tombs into microcosms and using portraiture to convey the concept of the “happy home” within the Han people’s souls to the viewers. The tomb murals of this period significantly influenced the evolution of the entire art system and underscored the unique position of the Han Dynasty in the development of Chinese art.

Keywords:

Han Dynasty Tombs, Yin and Yang Philosophy, Theological Ideas, Mural Patterns

1. Introduction

Sima Qian, in his “Records of the Grand Historian”, documented the mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang, the first ruler in Chinese history to unify the nation and be hailed as the “First Emperor”. Qin Shi Huang adhered to the philosophy of Huang-Lao Daoism, a tradition within Daoism that included ideas of cultivating inner virtues, returning to simplicity, pursuing longevity, and immortality. He considered himself an eternal sovereign and constructed his underground kingdom in the Li Mountain. The construction of this mausoleum laid the foundation for the earliest underground burials in China. Prior to the introduction of Buddhism, Chinese religious practices mainly involved ancestral worship based on blood relations. Due to the continuity of Qin’s Legalist ideology during the early Han period and the subsequent promotion of Huang-Lao Daoism, a preference for simple burials persisted. It wasn’t until the reign of Emperor Wu of Han that Confucianism gained prominence, leading to the rise of elaborate burials. During the rule of Emperor Ming of Han, in the seventeenth year of the Yongping era, the “Ceremonies at the Imperial Mausolea” were established, and even the “Ceremonies of Sacrifice” were moved to the tombs. During this period, the once-prominent “ancestral temple” (“miào”) lost its significance in Eastern Han, while the “tomb” (“mù”) became the central focus of ancestral worship.

Yang Kuan, in his research on the history of ancient Chinese burial systems, mentioned that the formation of the “Ceremonies at the Imperial Mausolea” was the aristocracy's further promotion of “ascension to immortality” at that time. During this historical period, these rituals were controlled by hereditary authorities, and ancestral worship gradually shifted from ancestral temples, originally intended for communal use, to family or individual tomb sites. This shift underscores transformations in social structure, religious beliefs, and ancestral worship practices. In the pre-Han era, the concept of “xian” often emerged from a desire to evade death. However, during the Han period, the idea of “becoming a xian after death” gradually gained popularity. People began to view themselves or the occupants of tombs as potential xian, categorizing them within the realm of “xian”. This shift indicates that people started connecting the concept of xian with the state after death, believing that through certain means, individuals could become xian after death and continue to exist. [1]

During the Eastern Han period, this transformation turned tombs into shared dwelling places for spirits, deities, and souls. Simultaneously, this paradigm shift in thought directly led to changes in the forms of religious art, with an increasing number of depictions of paradisiacal landscapes being incorporated into tomb murals.

During the Han Dynasty, the development extended beyond the refinement of the “ascension to immortality” concept, emphasizing the unity of heaven and humanity in tomb mural images. The Han people conveyed the meaning of human fortune by depicting the changes of the sun, moon, and stars in these images. Furthermore, the Han Dynasty enhanced the subterranean divine bureaucracy system within the pantheon, including land gods (earth deities) and gods from the four directions. In “Archaeological Studies of Chinese Taoism”, it is documented that 91 inscriptions were unearthed from Han Dynasty tombs, recording nearly 20 types of subterranean officials responsible for governing the subterranean world, especially within tombs. [2]

2. The Astronomical Beliefs of “Sun, Moon, and Stars”

Tomb burials, as unique products of their time, represent the social, historical, and cultural characteristics of the era. They offer glimpses into the societal structure of that period. Tomb chamber murals, as a special composite product reflecting interests and aspirations within burials, continually synthesize the desires and interests of the tomb's owner or, more broadly, of the specific societal period. [3] During the Han Dynasty, the belief in “becoming a xian after death” gained prominence. The murals in tombs reflect the tomb's owner's desire for an idealized afterlife world. Consequently, the top murals of tomb chambers typically include patterns resembling celestial stars and constellations to embody this belief. These patterns generally encompass constellations, the sun, the moon, images of deities, and can be referred to as celestial images, star charts, or astronomical images. They are a highly significant and common feature in Han Dynasty tomb murals, almost omnipresent throughout the entire Han Dynasty tomb mural tradition. Celestial patterns are depictions of the stars as images in the ancient understanding of the cosmos. These stars were connected and named based on their positions, a precursor to what we now refer to as constellations. They were also known as the “Twenty-Eight Constellations.” [4]

The Han Dynasty's concept of celestial fate led people to imbue constellations with mystical and mythological significance. It was believed, “Heaven has the sun and the moon, while Earth has yin and yang. Heaven has five stars, while Earth has five elements. Heaven has constellations, and Earth has regions.” This belief emphasized

the interdependence of yin and yang, the five elements, and fortune and misfortune. [5] The star patterns in Han tomb murals were closely associated with the concepts of yin and yang, the five elements, and the interaction between heaven and humanity. The flourishing of these ideas led people to incorporate various celestial phenomena into the framework of the “five elements”, creating a plethora of auspicious celestial images. Early Chinese astronomy was primarily used for divination and celestial observations to predict the fortunes and changes of the state, and it was closely tied to politics and royal authority, mainly serving the nobility. The general population had limited access to it. This suggests that the tomb owners who included celestial images in their burials typically held esteemed social positions. Tomb chamber murals not only reflect the artistic aesthetic of the time but also provide clear insights into the lifestyle and ideological beliefs of the ruling class at that time.

Celestial images have always been significant elements in Han Dynasty tomb murals. They assist in the study of the thoughts, religious beliefs, and funeral practices of people during the Han Dynasty. Tomb chambers famous for their celestial images can be found in numerous locations, including the Xi'an Jiaotong University Tomb, the Bu Qianqiu Han Tomb in Luoyang, and Tomb No. 61 at Shaogou in Luoyang. [6] In the Xi'an Jiaotong University Tomb, the earliest known celestial images, specifically images of stars and star numbers, were discovered, known as the “Twenty-Eight Constellations” (Figure 1). These vivid images of characters and animals represent the names of various constellations, displaying a degree of scientific understanding and reflecting the early astronomical beliefs of ancient times.



Figure 1. *Twenty-Eight Constellations Chart (Partial) from the Xi'an Jiaotong University Tomb.*

In the tomb of Bu Qianqiu in Luoyang, murals are extensively distributed on the upper part of the tomb chamber, the ridges, and the central position of the back mountain wall. These murals depict various immortal figures ① and portray elements related to nature and the universe ②, along with scenes of the tomb owner ascending to immortality on a phoenix. The male and female tomb owners are depicted riding dragons with bows and riding three-headed phoenixes holding golden crows, respectively. Led by a celestial being holding a scepter, they ascend to immortality in the company of mythical beasts in the wind. The sun, symbolized by the golden crow, and the moon, symbolized by the cassia tree and toad, along with celestial beings with human heads and scaled bodies such as Fuxi and Nuwa, are represented in the heavenly realm. The four gods representing the directions of the heavens and earth—Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Black Tortoise—are also present. Although these elements may seem unrelated, they are intricately interconnected and cleverly arranged in a stylized pattern resembling a celestial chart. This composition of “Guiding the Soul to Ascend to Heaven” is particularly prominent in the celestial diagram.

Analyzing the formal elements in celestial charts provides insights into the customs and social ideologies of the Han Dynasty. Among the celestial charts found in Han Dynasty tombs, those depicting ascension to immortality are the most abundant. [7] In the mural art of Han Dynasty tomb chambers, all the narratives revolve around the theme of “ascension to immortality”, reflecting the Han people’s desire for longevity, immortality, and spiritual attainment. This belief also influenced the artistic elements and direction of mural art in Han Dynasty tomb burials.

3. “The Unity of Heaven and Humanity” Concept of Life and Death

The prevalence of burials in the Han Dynasty was closely tied to the prevalence of the Yin-Yang and Five Elements philosophy. Dong Zhongshu’s idea of ‘abandoning the hundred schools and exclusively respecting Confucianism’ proposed the doctrine of “unity of heaven and humans” and “interaction between heaven and humans”, which was highly appreciated by Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. As emphasized by Mr. Li Zehou, represented by Confucianism, the pre-Qin rational thought gradually infiltrated into the fields of literature, art, and people’s thoughts, and Confucianism established a dominant position in Chinese society for over two thousand years. Its core philosophy combined Confucianism with Yin-Yang and Five Elements doctrines, merging various authorities like divine, royal, paternal, and marital authority into a unified imperial theological system. [8]

The “unity of heaven and humans” concept emphasizes the harmonious relationship between heaven, earth, and humans, considering them interdependent and indispensable. This division of the three entities also created a hierarchical perspective in politics, emphasizing the interconnections and dependencies between various roles and hierarchies. [9] “Heaven” represents the inviolable emperor, while the Yin-Yang and Five Elements philosophy carries a strong sense of feudal class distinction. Han Dynasty murals, serving as a form of funeral art, were created for the service of the deceased. The artistic function of these murals not only conveys the tomb owner’s consciousness to the viewers but also serves to pray for blessings on behalf of the deceased and guide the tomb owner’s ascent to immortality, leading them to an ideal home filled with happiness and bliss through the concept of “unity of heaven and humans.”

Under the influence of Han Dynasty Yin-Yang philosophy, a large number of images depicting Nüwa and Fuxi appeared in Han tombs. The sun and moon, symbolizing the relationship between Yin and Yang, play a significant role in these tombs’ murals. The Han people sought harmony between Yin and Yang, as recorded in the “Rites of Zhou”, which states, “Yin and Yang alternately follow and complete each other, bringing harmony to the world”. [10] The rising and setting of the sun and moon, their cyclical and endless movement, also symbolize the cosmic harmony in these various tomb complexes.

3.1. Images of Nüwa and Fuxi

The Han Dynasty’s “Huainanzi” contains records related to Nüwa and Fuxi. “Di wei jue” refers to the “di wei”, which means the rope binding heaven and earth together. This rope bears the sacred mission of connecting heaven and earth, and the previous existence of Nüwa and Fuxi, who are now presented mainly as deities of procreation. This also reflects the concept of the union of Yin and Yang, with the female Nüwa paired with the male Fuxi. The images of Nüwa and Fuxi united

represent a theme of procreation, highlighting the idea of the union of Yin and Yang, where the male symbolizes “Yang”, and the female symbolizes “Yin”. This concept is vividly portrayed in these murals. [11] The origins of primitive religion in China began with the worship of the sun. As time passed, religious beliefs evolved, including the worship of a sun god and the dual worship of the sun and the moon. This transformation marks an important starting point for the concept of Yin and Yang in Chinese philosophy. [12] The earliest representation of this concept is found in the images of Nüwa and Fuxi. The images of Nüwa and Fuxi in Han Dynasty tombs signify the harmonious coexistence of male and female, symbolizing the concept of life created through the union of Yin and Yang. Sun and moon symbols not only represent the concept of Yin and Yang but also carry the meaning of marital harmony, matching the relationship assigned to Nüwa and Fuxi. Therefore, Han tomb murals often depict images of Nüwa and Fuxi surrounded by sun and moon patterns, which is a reflection of the Han people’s desire for marital harmony and the harmony of Yin and Yang.



Figure 2. Female and Male Deities in the New Village Tomb of Yan Shi, Luoyang, New Empire Period, Luoyang Ancient Tomb Museum.

In the previous discussion of the Bu Qianqiu tomb, it was mentioned that the tomb layout follows the celestial pattern, and the primary theme is centered around “ascension to immortality”. The wall paintings in the Bu Qianqiu tomb are unique compared to other Han dynasty tomb chamber murals. Typically, in other tomb chamber murals, Nuwa and Fuxi are depicted with human heads and snake bodies, intertwined together. However, in the Bu Qianqiu tomb, these two images are separately depicted, starting with Nuwa (Figure 4), followed by the Bu Qianqiu couple (Figure 3), with Bu Qianqiu situated above, and then, Fuxi is portrayed (Figure 5). This layout and element presentation in the murals are different from the typical Han dynasty mural depictions.

Han dynasty tombs were usually reserved for nobility and aristocracy, and the construction of these tombs and their murals was often planned and designed by the deceased individuals during their lifetime. Therefore, the sequence of the figures in the murals, as depicted in the Bu Qianqiu tomb, reflects Bu Qianqiu’s particular beliefs and ideals for his afterlife. It represents the ideal dwelling for Bu Qianqiu and his wife in their afterlife. The division of these two deities in the mural layout signifies Bu Qianqiu’s deep respect and love for his wife, as it presents Bu Qianqiu riding a phoenix above, and Bu Qianqiu riding a dragon below. This profound demonstration reveals Bu Qianqiu’s respect and affection for his wife. In the strict hierarchical system of the Han dynasty, this perspective is unique and stands out, promoting gender equality while emphasizing the tomb owner’s respect for his spouse. Therefore, the depictions of the sun and moon deities Fuxi and Nuwa in the tomb

mural do not merely represent ancient sun and moon myths but symbolize the union of yin and yang.



Figure 3. *Bu Qianqiu and His Wife Ascending to Immortality, Bu Qianqiu Tomb.*



Figure 4. *Image of Nuwa, Bu Qianqiu Tomb.*



Figure 5. *Image of Fuxi, Bu Qianqiu Tomb.*

4. Conclusions

The Han Dynasty tomb murals, with their overarching theme of “ascension to immortality”, epitomize a collective yearning for life beyond death. These artworks, adorned with celestial charts and depictions of Nüwa and Fuxi, signify a deep understanding of the cosmic order and its profound connection to human destiny. Rooted in the “unity of heaven and humanity” concept, these murals reflect a societal structure that venerates imperial authority and emphasizes harmony between celestial, earthly, and human realms. The unique layout in the Bu Qianqiu tomb challenges norms, revealing individualized beliefs and an unusual promotion of gender equality. In essence, these murals transcend mere artistic expression, serving as conduits for cultural and religious ideals, providing a vivid snapshot of the interplay between art, philosophy, and spirituality in this pivotal period of Chinese history.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.Y.; methodology, S.Y.; formal analysis, S.Y.; data curation, S.Y.; writing—original draft preparation, S.Y.; writing—review and editing, S.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Notes

①: Wang Zi Qiao, Nuwa, Immortals, Fairies, Fuxi, and Fang Xiangshi, etc.

②: Sun, Moon, Colorful Clouds, Twin Dragons, Owls, Vermilion Birds, White Tigers, Yellow Snakes, Toads, Jade Rabbits.

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