

# Folklore Thoughts in the Tomb Murals of Han Dynasty

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**Abstract**—The Han Dynasty was the first peak of Chinese painting art since the Pre-Qin Dynasty. Tomb murals were its main style and representative. The Han Dynasty was also a period of great development of Chinese traditional aesthetics. Different folklore thoughts constituted the value support of painting art. The Han Dynasty advocated “regarding death as life” and “attaching importance to funerals to show filial piety”, and carried out the system of “observing and promoting filial piety and honesty”, the lavish burial custom was prevailing. “The beliefs in ghosts and gods”, Confucianism and Taoism were the main ideas in the creation of tomb murals in this period.

**Keywords**—Han Dynasty; tomb murals; folklore thoughts; folklore beliefs

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Han Dynasty was a period of great development of painting art since the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, especially in terms of the diversity and complexity of folk thoughts. It has not only “the theory of gods and ghosts” in belief, but also “the theory of form and god” in cognition. It not only embodies the past life and immortality of Taoism, but also abides by Confucian doctrines and rules. These concepts are embodied in the tomb murals of the Han Dynasty, constituting the first peak of painting art since the pre-Qin Dynasty.

The painting styles of Han Dynasty have many forms, mainly palace murals, tomb murals, tomb silk paintings, stone portraits and brick portraits. But the Han Dynasty was remote, and many palace murals were almost destroyed. As a component of the tomb building, the stone and brick portraits are simplified and generalized in content. As an artistic style painted with ink and brush, the tomb murals represented the typical characteristics of the Han Dynasty paintings in shape, color, concept and creative techniques. In the excavated mural tombs of the Han Dynasty, the figures are light and relaxed, free in strokes and lines, brilliant in color, full in composition, rich in content and profound in meaning. “Some painted majestic scenes of the grave owner's journey, riding on chariot, followed by a huge troop of attendants carrying axe-shaped weapons, banners and drums, showing

the prominent position of the deceased in his lifetime. Some painted “Painting of Hundred Operas”. It was a scene of tomb owners feasting and watching operas. Some performers were dancing sword dance, some juggling, some standing upside down and some climbing poles, with different postures and expressions, which opened the pioneer of secular custom painting. There paintings were of historical facts and folklore, reflecting the people's interest in life at that time” [1]. These vivid tomb murals embody the customs, beliefs and aesthetic concepts of the Han Dynasty.



Fig. 1. Buqianqiu Tomb Murals of Western Han Dynasty in Luoyang.

## II. THE CONCEPT OF SOUL IN MURALS OF TOMBS IN HAN DYNASTY

The immortality of the soul was the common belief of ancient ancestors. From the primitive society, people believed that the soul still existed after death. They believed that life would last forever. At the same time, they believed that the afterlife and future life were a fairyland beyond reality, and it was an inevitable process that people would enter. This concept was particularly prominent in the Han Dynasty. “For the form of tomb murals, the mature period of complex composition and rich content should be the Western Han Dynasty.”[2] People believed that the soul dominated people's life and consciousness, so the custom of lavish

burial and offering sacrifice was prevalent. Many contents in the murals of the Han Dynasty tombs are the fairyland that leads to the ascent of the tomb owner to heaven and shows the auspicious fairyland of the dragon, phoenix, god and bird. This belief in ghosts and gods was the extension of the concept of immortality of the soul and the spiritual dependence of secularization since the pre-Qin Dynasty, and had a great impact on painting of Han Dynasty. Wang Yanshou of the Eastern Han Dynasty described in "Ode to Lingguang Palace": "From the beginning of the world in ancient times to the beginning of human society, many human-face dragon-body monsters are showed in the painting. There are five dragon brothers flying by riding five dragons respectively, man emperor with nine heads, Fuxi with human-head and dragon-body, Nvwa with human-head and snake-body and so on. In ancient times, people are simple and plain. The images they created are also rough and straightforward". [3] It also shows that the paintings of Han Dynasty integrated myths, legends and spiritual concepts into people's ideals and aspirations.

"Lavish burial was prevalent in the Han Dynasty, especially after the death of princes, generals and clan leaders. They often imitated the living form of the deceased, trying to restore the living state of the deceased, that is, to regard death as life". [4] Located in the west of Shaogou Village, south foot of Mangshan Mountain, Luoyang, and the Buqianqiu Mural Tomb was in the middle period of the Western Han Dynasty. It was named after "a seal of Buqianqiu" unearthed from the tomb. The mural paintings in the tomb are rich in content, and many images are strange and mysterious, as can be seen from "Fig. 1". The wall behind its main chamber was painted with a pig-face man-body monster. It has big eyes, big ears, purple clothes, red skirts, bare arms and bare feet, and looks powerful and brave. Researchers regard it as the animal to protect tomb and avoid evils. It's chilling. There are many figures in the flat ridge painting on the top of the tomb, such as Nuwa, Xianweng, fairy, Fuxi, the owner of the tomb riding phoenix and becoming immortal, a man riding a snake-shaped boat. These characters are not only unconstrained in body structure, relaxed and elegant, but also lively in freehand brushwork, solemn and deep in color painting, which are closely related to the spiritual belief of the Han Dynasty. For example, the tomb animal "Fangxiangshi" is a combination of a variety of beasts. Ancient people thought that it could contain the souls of a variety of beasts and had extraordinary power. On the surface, they are nothing more than simple and extensive paintings, but the aesthetic implication they represent and contain is the direct embodiment of the concept of soul in the society of the Han Dynasty. It also shows that the idea of ghosts and gods and the concept of soul in the Han Dynasty had an important impact on the painting at that time.



Fig. 2. The Tomb Mural of the Eastern Han Dynasty from Luoyang Daobei Gas Station "Nvwa Qingyue Painting".

The eastern part of the Mural Tomb of Luoyang Daobei Petroleum Station was painted with "Fuxi Qingri Painting". As is shown in "Fig. 2", Fuxi had a big head, round face, broad eyebrows and narrow eyes, vermilion lips and scattered black hair. He lifted his arms and held the sun over his head. The western part is "Nuwa Qiangyue Painting". Nuwa had a big and square face. The heads of its eyebrows are thick and ends are thin, pointing toward the forehead. It had an eight-character mustache and combed a bun, with elegant appearance. There is a toad in the moon and a snake entwining underneath the belly. It's frightening. At first glance, you can see that it is a mythical figure. Fuxi and Nuwa are fairies in legend. In the murals of tombs in Han Dynasty, such subjects occupied a large chapter. The spiritual life of the people in Han Dynasty is closely related to the belief in ghosts and gods and the quest for immortality. In fact, the paintings in the tombs mostly lead the souls of the deceased into immortality and show the happy life of the tomb owners in the future. This also shows that the paintings in Han Dynasty lay particular stress on the feelings and pursuit of the spiritual world and the ideal world. People regarded the soul as a kind of more lofty sustenance and conversion than the real world. Even the living people were dreaming of the perfection and freedom that emerges as immortals and ascends into the heavens after death.

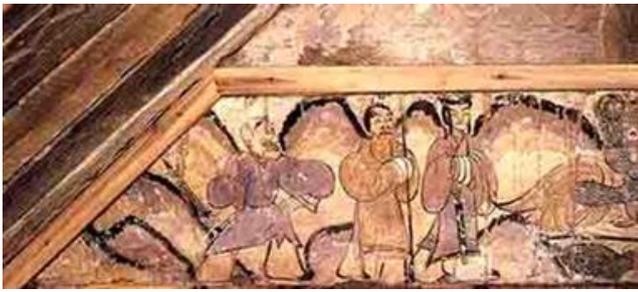


Fig. 3. No. 61 Tomb Mural of Western Han Dynasty from Shaogou Village "Hong Men Banquet".

The No. 61 Mural Tomb of Shaogou Village in Luoyang was also painted with "Hong Men Banquet" and "Divine Tiger Eating Female Spirit", as can be seen from "Fig. 3". The characters in "Hong Men Banquet" have different expressions, vivid and concise modeling, full composition and interesting meanings. In the painting of "Divine Tiger Eating Female Spirit", a woman is naked with her long hair hanging on a tree. On the right is a pair of winged tigers. Tiger claws were clawing on the shoulder of the woman, and opening its mouth to eat the woman. Most of these murals came from historical allusions or customs and beliefs. They were used in tombs. They are all related to immortals, ghosts, spiritual fantasies and legends. They are products of people's spiritual world. This reveals a basic feature of people's conception of past life and the belief of social subject in Han Dynasty. It also shows that paintings in Han Dynasty proceeded in accordance with social values. Their creative thinking was based on the epistemology and conceptualism of aesthetics in Han Dynasty, and the concept of soul was the core subject in the creation of tomb murals in Han Dynasty.

### III. TAOIST THOUGHTS IN TOMB MURALS OF HAN DYNASTY

The Han Dynasty was an important period in which Taoist thought derives and develops, and the understanding on life is quite mysterious. "The body is the shell of life. Qi is full of life. Spirit is the mechanism of life. All of them are important. In absence of anyone, it can endanger life". [5] It points out that the essence of human being is its spirituality. The development of tomb murals in the Han Dynasty was also influenced by Taoism, which was mainly embodied in three aspects: First, paintings in the Han Dynasty were full of Romantic spirit, reflecting certain immortals and ghosts, myths and legends, historical allusions of emperors and generals, filial piety and loyal ministers, as well as spiritual pursuits such as singing and dancing, seeking immortals and Taoism. It was unified with illusion and imagination, and created an ideal world of harmonious coexistence of heaven and earth, man and gods. It was also the value exploration of life theory and ageless thought in Taoist aesthetics. Second, most of the tomb murals in the Han Dynasty are based on Taoist themes. This is because the Han Dynasty was a period of great development of Taoist thought, which was in the mainstream of social aesthetics and was different from the orthodoxy of Confucianism. Thirdly, the ruling class relied on the propaganda of religious superstition, and also hoped

to unify people's thoughts by means of heaven's and god's fates. This prompted the Han Dynasty tomb murals to be associated with the quest for immortality, and to form certain ideal feelings.



Fig. 4. Cao-and-Wei Tomb Mural from Luoyang Zhucun Village "A Couple's Banquet".

In the mural tomb at Luoyang Zhucun, "A Couple's Banquet" is a relatively complete figure painting, in which a purple curtain was painted, as shown in "Fig. 4". Under the curtain, a couple was sitting on the collapsed bed for a banquet. There were two male and two female servants. The master had a good crown on his head, a peaceful face, a high nose, two big ears, an eight-character mustache, a long whisker under his chin and a brilliant look. The mistress is in the right, wearing a black hat, with arched eyebrows and narrow eyes, a small mouth and high nose, with a plump manner and proper facial features. This picture shows that the tomb owner was also extremely honored in his lifetime, hoping to continue to enjoy the past life, to be immortal and a high official, and not separating with his wife. The artistic conception of this figure painting is to turn the realistic scene into the illusion and sustenance after death, and also a yearning and an illusion for the emergence of immortals. This romantic ideal and the reincarnation belief of life and death are the direct manifestation of Taoist aesthetic thought.



Fig. 5. Xinmang Tomb Mural from Yanshi Xincun Village "Fangxiangshi".

In the Mural Tomb of Yanshi Xincun Village, there is a Fangxiangshi to protect tomb and avoid evil. As can be seen from "Fig. 5", it had a tiger head a strange body, two ears

facing the sky, two dark eyes and a huge mouth and sharp teeth and horsehair on its back. The whole panting is full of weird faces, which is frightening. There was a banquet painting on both north and south sides. On the just top of middle and back chambers is a painting of the Queen Mother riding on clouds, and there are also jade rabbits, toads, nine-tailed foxes and Zhuque beast. These contents are mostly about Taoist concepts such as the longing for bliss, leisure, deification, folk beliefs, and the generation of immortals. They represent the common value recognition of life and afterlife in the Han Dynasty.

“The images of Fuxi and Nuwa in the murals of the Han Dynasty are the reflection of the worship of human ancestors in the murals of the tombs of the Han Dynasty. The image descriptions of Zhuque, Xuanwu, Qinglong and Baihu reflect the belief and worship of gods and gods in the Han Dynasty, and they are the representatives of the four-side gods”.[6] These murals often have a strong idea of Yin-Yang, Five Elements and the unity of heaven and man, which is to construct the universe into a life body inspired by consciousness through the illusion of man and god, which is also the basic attitude of Taoist doctrine to the concept of the universe. “God” in the aesthetics of the Han Dynasty has two attributes: one is god in aesthetic speculation, which leads people's aesthetic consciousness to move forward; the other is “god” in folk belief, which is a part of the social life concept and an ideal value demand. Both of them played an important role in the Han Dynasty's painting. The former gave the aesthetic construction of theoretical form in the ontology of artistic knowledge, while the latter generated many creative elements in the concept and subject matter of painting, which made the attributes of “god” more specific. These structures of “god” are mostly ontological knowledge derived from Taoist thought.

#### IV. CONFUCIANISM IN TOMB MURALS OF HAN DYNASTY

In the palace and tomb murals of the Han Dynasty, there was also a strong Confucian doctrine. Loyalty and filial piety were the two basic points of painting creation. Emperor Guangwu of the Eastern Han Dynasty, in order to record merits of his officials, had ordered people to draw 28 meritorious officials in the south palace of Yuntai Pavilion. It was historically known as 28 Meritorious Ministers in Yuntai Pavilion. But unfortunately the original painting could not be examined. “Han tomb murals are quite different from Han ground architectural murals in subject matter. The ground murals were mostly to record merits and citrus and teach people to be good, while the tomb murals were to reflect the attitude towards life in the afterlife of the underworld.” [7] “Filial piety” was an important rite and virtue worshipped by the ruling class in the Han Dynasty. It was embodied in the funeral system and they attached importance to lavish burial. It was not only in official families, but also ordinary families tended to devote all their money to their parents' graves. The luxurious construction of their graves is often more luxurious than the houses on the ground. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, the system of observing filial piety and honesty was implemented. Whether or not the tombs were built for parents became one

of the criteria for assessing officials. The atmosphere of “worshipping mourning and offering sacrifices to show filial piety and treating guests for fame” was particularly serious. The murals of the underground tomb mainly are to describe the living pictures of the deceased about power, prestige and wealth before death and predict the god image of the deceased after ascending as immortal. The tomb was built to win the good name of filial piety and help the official career. Now, it is precisely these tomb murals based on the concept of filial piety that leave behind the splendid and wonderful cultural treasures of Han painting art.

“The contents of murals in Jinguyuan Xinmang Tomb are mainly deified heaven and legendary characters. The pictures were arranged according to the five elements of Yin and Yang. Most of them are imaginary gods with human head and bird body, bird head and human body or human head and monster body. These images are romantic, free and interesting, and full of artificial imagination. Its ideological content and artistic style are same as the murals of Buqianqiu Tomb. It is a thought of respecting heaven and a reflection of Dong Zhongshu's “theory of sensation between nature and man” in the murals of tombs”. [8] The thought of respecting heaven is an important doctrine of Confucianism, which regards everything as the act of destiny. This kind of image of man-god is not only imagination, but also a yearning and sustenance for the value of life given by social reason and custom. The integration of human and animal in form and spirit becomes the destiny of heaven.



Fig. 6. The Eastern Han Tomb Mural from Tanggong Road Glass Factory “A Couple's Banquet”.

The Mural Tomb of Tanggong Road Glass Factory in Luoyang was of the late Eastern Han Dynasty. The tomb is of brick structure. The mural scenes are magnificent and colorful. On the yellow lime wall, cinnabar, purple-red, yellow and black mineral pigments were used to depict many figures (as can be seen in “Fig. 6”). There was a vermilion curtain on the mural of eastern tomb wall. The master and mistress were sitting on the bed couch. On the southern mural, a maid with a long gown and large sleeves was holding a dish and moving slowly and gracefully. The east end of the north wall painted a servant and a master, walking eastward. The female master with a hair bun was wearing red trousers and plain shoes. The servant with black shoes was holding a long-handled canopy and following his master. The lines of murals are flexible and long lines are consistent. The figures are simple in form, bright and clear in color. The proportions of figures were intentionally lengthened, highlighting the thin and light beauty. At the same time, we can also see the obvious customs, rites, cultural systems and

social ranks of the Han Dynasty. Even the position of the servants was regulated and couldn't be overstepped a little. The mural also placed the tomb master's life scene before death underground. From the relationship between the painted master and servant, it is also an expression of feudal ethics, especially the ranking level of man. This kind of thought of superiority and inferiority and feudal rite is the typical feature of Confucian doctrine, and it has also become the intuitive embodiment of the feudal system and social customs in the tomb murals of the Han Dynasty.

In fact, Confucianism in the Han tomb murals is mainly reflected in loyalty, filial piety, hierarchy, ritual system and respect for heaven and other rules of rite. The construction of luxurious tombs was the expression of loyalty and filial piety, the great virtue of the Han Dynasty. This custom also stemmed from the Confucian education. At the same time, the relationship between the characters in the paintings shows that the ritual system of the Han Dynasty was very strict. The relationship of dignity and inferiority among people cannot be overstepped. Even after death, people were continuing and fantasizing the power and authority of life, which is also an expression of the fate thought of the Confucian in the Han Dynasty.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The creation of tomb murals in the Han Dynasty mainly tended to concepts of life such as ghost stories, spiritual ascension and reincarnation, which had a direct relationship with ghost-god theory in the aesthetics of the Han Dynasty. For example, Qiantoujin Han Tomb Mural "Ascending as Immortal" is full of fantasy and witchcraft concepts. These pictures show man getting along with gods, gods with monsters, auspicious birds and beasts and fairyland, connecting the heaven with the world and realizing the freedom of soul in wishes and fantasies. They also reflect the desire of human beings for the pursuit of eternal happiness with gods, birds and beasts. As Wang Chong said, "Qi is what keeps man alive" [9]. In addition, inscriptions on traditional Chinese paintings are also found in tomb murals of the Han Dynasty. "For example, in Nanyang, a stone tomb was found with a portrayal painting of Feng Junru in the Xinmang Tianfeng 5th Year. On the door of inner chamber inscribed ,Yu Ping Da Yin Feng Junru Xinmang Tianfeng 5th Year buried on October 17, in lunar calendar, and will never be discovered.' Another example is the epitaph of Xu Aqu's portrait in the Eastern Han Dynasty. There is an inscription of 136 words beside Xu Aqu's portrait". [10] These are the earliest records of known postscripts on painting inscriptions.

The tomb murals in the Han Dynasty lay particular stress on the expression of people's spiritual world and ideal sustenance, and the pursuit of the liberation and freedom in people's mind and spirit, which is also an important feature of the folk beliefs in the Han Dynasty. The murals of Han Dynasty, which mainly focused on preaching, describing meritorious deeds, commemorating and ascending as immortals, had diverse aesthetic needs and spiritual conversion. Their folklore concepts were mostly the direct expression of people's ideals and fantasies. They hoped to

deify themselves to control the whole universe and communicate with the unknown world to realize the fulfillment of life value. At the same time, it can be seen that, on the one hand, people accepted the ethical propaganda of loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, virtue and integrity facing the social customs of political codes; on the other hand, they sought freedom and liberation in their spiritual world, hoping to transcend reality and move towards the fairyland of bliss and perfection, so as to get rid of the shackles and become immortal. This kind of conflict and harmony between reality and ideal become a main feature of the folklore thought of tomb murals in the Han Dynasty.

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