

Who's Agency? A Study of Burial Murals in Ancient China

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Abstract

After Chinese tombs shifted from vertical shaft tombs to horizontal chamber tombs, murals became popular to decorate burial chambers. The subjects of these murals usually include portraits of the living, as well as the universe, gardens, and landscapes of imaginary spaces. Past studies of tomb murals have been limited to the dualism of the living and the dead, suggesting that mural paintings were a reflection of wealth and status. This paper, however, proposes that Chinese tomb murals should not be limited to a single perspective of living or deceased, but should be restored in conjunction with the theme of the murals and the construction process of the tomb.

Introduction:

Burials are special spaces that build a bridge between the living and dead, connecting the past and future. Mural painting is one form of burial art that emerged in Chinese mortuary culture, reflecting how early humans transformed the concept of the afterlife from abstract to concrete. Previous studies interpreting these murals have focused on the perspectives of the living viewers and the builders of the chambers, or on the interaction between the deceased and the painted world (Wu “The Art” 64; Hay 17). Scholars suggest that these mortuary paintings, especially the ones that directly depict the deceased, were a connection with ancestry (Hong 237).

This paper will focus on the concept of agency, which can be conceived as the intentionality and structure of human interactions with social institutions and their material surroundings (Giddens 8). I argue the living and dead have equal agency in relation to the murals and should not be analyzed independently. Mural painting signifies how the elite population’s understanding of the real world reflects into death. Therefore, this article will first introduce Chinese mortuary tradition, explain the mural themes in different burial spaces, and then critically analyze existing research to demonstrate the agency of the living and the dead in mortuary context.

The Developing Mortuary Tradition

The structure of ancient Chinese graves underwent a major transformation from vertical shaft tombs to horizontal chamber tombs during the Warring States period (Lai 2). The shaft pit tombs developed before the Shang dynasty were dug directly from the ground, using wooden coffins and chamber boards to create a confined space that isolated the deceased. The waist pit at the bottom of shaft tombs is commonly interpreted as the entrance to the afterlife (Liu 58), demonstrating an attempt to connect with the netherworld. The development of the horizontal chamber not only complicated the structure of the tomb, but also increased the types of artifacts and decorations inside them. Generally, horizontal tombs have an access passage that allows humans to walk into the tombs, allowing the burial spaces to become the platform for the murals.

By the end of the Western Han Dynasty, horizontal burials had dominated the burial structure in ancient China. A rise in burial art began, as artifacts with no practical purpose called "*mingqi*明器" and terracotta figurines gradually replaced sacrifices (Wu "The Art" 92). Painting figures on the tomb walls also became a popular tradition, usually found in the tombs of royal kin or non-literati elites, the social class who gained their power through hereditary privileges or military prowess (Hong 206). The specific content of the murals in each tomb differ, but the subject matter is similar, including landscapes and figure paintings, religious motifs, and more (Wu "The Art" 31-63). Although the tradition of painting on tomb walls was abolished multiple times due to changes in social customs, the long history of development from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty highlights the importance of murals in elite burials.

The diversity and complexity of tomb murals portray the emergence of burial arts, detailing concepts of the afterlife, making human's imagination more vivid and realistic. In pre-Han burials, although the boundary between life and death was physically distinguished through burial spaces, archaeologists were unable to fully portray the landscape and symbolism of the netherworld in one culture. The emergence of tomb murals has filled the gap, allowing scholars to learn about the religious beliefs, lifestyle, landscape, hierarchy, and identities of the period, and build a complete image of their afterlife.

Spatiality and Content of Mural Paintings

The contents of tomb murals were usually carefully laid out according to the size of the "canvas" and the status of the tomb owner. From the entrance to the passage and chamber room, the content of the murals in each tomb flowed with its space, aiming to create an immersive experience of the afterlife. Though some burials were built as an imitation of actual living spaces, the layout of the murals did not always correspond to the internal and external scenes of the living rooms (Li "A Study" 21). In the tomb of Princess Linhe of the Eastern Wei dynasty (see Figure 1), when walking into the entrance and long passage, a ceremonial procession of warriors and attendants equivalent to the princess's status are illustrated on both walls (Li "A Study" 21-22). Above the chamber door are the botanical symbols and four animals of Chinese myths: the Azure Dragon, the White Tiger, the Vermilion Bird, and the Black Tortoise, signifying that the visitor has now entered the imaginative realm. Such ceremonial scenes can also be found in other burials, such as the tombs of Prince Li Xian and Princess Xincheng, as well as other middle-class noble burials.

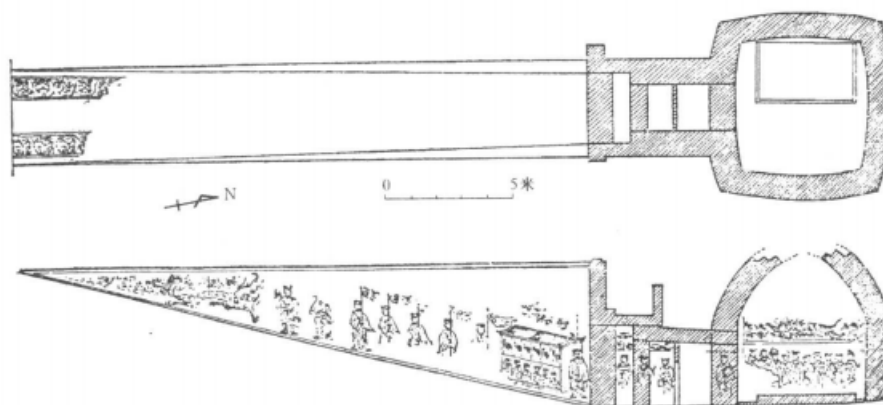


Figure 1: Multi-view diagram of the burial of Princess Linhe in Ci County (Li “A Study” 22)

Many ancient Chinese tombs contain the imaginative motif called a “half-open door” on the back wall facing the entrance, with a character standing between the door, guiding the visitor inside (Goldin 539). This mural separates the “outer space” from the “inner chamber”, creating the effect that the tomb has not yet reached its end, breaking the confines of the tombs’ physical space. The character that opens the door is usually a young woman, but is sometimes a monk or an immortal, with a symbolic meaning of luring or guiding the deceased to the afterlife (Zheng 18).

The images in the interior of the chamber room are arranged in a particular order, and can be categorized into vertical or horizontal compositions. In the case of horizontal compositions, the tomb walls are divided into three spaces: upper, middle, and lower. Scenes that portray everyday life are usually placed in the lower parts, with storytelling images in the middle, and religious and divine themes in the upper parts (Li “A Study” 22, 26, 30-31). On the ceiling, motifs such as the cosmos and the galaxy are painted, forming a clear contrast between the heavenly and human realms. Vertical compositions are often used for large landscapes or portraits, sometimes drawing a scene in its entire form, and at times with a deliberate border to separate it into different frames, transforming burials into exhibition halls (Wu “Simulated” 8).

Chamber room murals have a variety of subjects, often including feasting, drama, chariot and horse travel, buildings, landscapes, and portraits of the deceased (Li “A Study” 21). For example, the tombs of Prince Li Xian and Princess Xincheng of the Tang dynasty contain a large number of paintings of both male and female attendants, and leisure activities including polo and hunting (Eckfeld 39, 118-120). One corner of Prince Li Xian’s burial chamber is depicted as a secluded garden, with a dignified woman relaxing in this intimate space surrounded by her maids and eunuchs. In non-literati elite burials, the tomb occupants, usually a couple, are often drawn. They are typically seated facing each other with calm expressions, and are served by their attendants. The scene appears situated in their lifetime residence, with furniture, screens, and tableware (see Figure 2). Overall, the themes of the tomb murals are usually similar and change with the status of the tomb owner, but the artistic approach and expression are usually different.



Figure 2: Tomb occupants and their attendants, in Baisha Tomb No. 1 (Hong 222).

Afterlife and its United Experience

By restoring the process of tomb and mural creation, we see that both the living and the dead are the audience of the murals. First, it is the living who think and imagine, depicting and creating an ideal afterlife. Then, the tomb is built, followed by the funeral, then the closure of the burial. Finally, the soul of the deceased travels and experiences everything in the painted world. Thus, a complete afterlife experience should start from the construction of the tomb to the funeral, and extend into the afterlife. Early studies, however, often overlooked this point, approaching mural paintings from two discrete perspectives: 1. understanding mural paintings as a symbol to demonstrate hierarchy of the living community; and 2. only focusing on the living's agency in mural paintings.

This first focus emphasizes the role that mural paintings play in a community, and its ritual or cultural significance to the living. Wu Hung emphasizes the concealment of the inner world of the tomb from the living, as well as how burial decorations, such as murals, evoke the imagination about the afterlife. He suggests that murals in early Chinese graves “focus on private life and entertainment” (Wu “The Art” 42), as well as the “dead person’s public image and social status” (Wu “The Art” 42). Hong believes that the portraits of the tomb owners express ancestor worship and “developed their own channels of pursuing genealogical

interests and consolidating lineages” (Hong 206). Lian proposes that the primary audience for the murals in the tombs was not the deceased, but the living who were shown in terms of economic power and social status, although the display may have been very brief (Lian 69).

The above ideas ignore how the living considered the interaction between the dead and the murals. Ancient Chinese tombs would be completely closed after the funeral, and the family of the deceased would never enter again if not necessary. Thus, the original meaning of the mural images was not the presence or absence of a living "spectator" but the creation of an intimate space for the dead. According to the complete process of the funeral, Wu and Lian's analysis of murals on living agency can only be applied to the construction of the tomb, up to the completion of the funeral, as the living only interacted with the murals for a short period of time. When the funeral was finished and the burial was closed, the living were no longer allowed to participate in the development of the afterlife. Hence, focusing solely on the perspective of the living ignores the experiences of the true protagonist of the tomb, equating funerals with secular events, and ignoring their symbolic connotations.

When studying the use of space after a tomb is closed, we must consider how the spirits of the deceased interact with the murals. In Hay's research, he chooses a completely different perspective that explores the ability of the dead to use the grave, that is, how "painting implied a more actively participatory viewer" (Hay 53). For the deceased, their agency began with the funeral and reached the most active state after the chamber door was closed. According to the imaginations of the living, the souls of the deceased would slowly enter the passage along with the procession, and the image of the "opening of the gates" marked their formal entry into the otherworld, where the chamber was a space entirely devoted to their enjoyment. They were surrounded by many servants and roamed around in different scenes, just as they did during their lifetimes. As a result, the mural is not only spatial, but also temporal, as its audience changes throughout the funeral process.

When analyzing the tomb murals, the variation of themes becomes very important as the sacred animals, scenery, and galaxies depicted are not seen in the human world. Since these imaginary creatures and places are not real but in the netherworld, the murals are for the dead, as their final destination. Thus, I argue that the living and deceased are equally participating in the funeral, and that the mural is an imaginary world created by the living and inhabited by the dead.

Limitation of Mural Paintings

However, burial art cannot fully address the human understanding of the post-mortem world. Due to cost and labour, mural painting is a joint product of society, culture, and class. When society was unstable or a simplified burial culture was revered instead, the mural tradition would be briefly abolished. The elements and motifs highlighted in the murals, including clothing, religious symbols, and social activities in which different populations participated, were expressions of the local, contemporary culture. This is the reason why a high degree of diversity is reflected in the murals of different dynasties and regions. At the same time, the expensive cost of the murals led to their presence in the tombs of only a small group of people, suggesting that this art was embedded in a social hierarchy. Existing studies on the use of murals sometimes overemphasize the role of murals in shaping the world view of ancient Chinese peoples, while ignoring the importance of socio-cultural influence and

hierarchy. I would therefore like to mention that the murals reflect only the elite population's perception of death rather than that of the society as a whole.

Murals depict the elite population's rosy vision of life after death, with a joyful journey that was built on their wealth and status. This understanding may have been different among the civilian population, that is, those who did not have access to chamber tombs. These populations, who were attendants and servants during their lifetimes, would not have wanted to continue their suffering in the afterlife. Unlike the elite population who enjoyed a joyful post-mortem experience, the netherworld where commoners lived could be happy or miserable, full of great randomness. The post-mortem world, as understood by these civilians, was likely different from the elite population, perhaps gruesome, perhaps more ideal, but these cannot be explored through murals. Thus, archaeologists are unable to get a glimpse of the overall population's view of death because art was limited to rich populations.

Conclusion

Under the influence of animism, where everything is considered spiritual and the soul is believed to be immortal, elite populations in ancient China persistently sought immortality and strived to prolong their lives. The afterlife represented their spiritual quest, which intensified and externalized itself along with the development of society. The first priority of the people during this period was to complete this quest through tomb murals and other decorations. The large, lavish chambers were filled with images that depicted the owners' prestige in life, preserved all their previous social relationships, and depicted the imaginary realm of the afterlife.

Despite the limitations of murals, we can see the figuration of the afterlife in the tomb, not only in the shift from vague concepts to detailed depictions, but also in the shift from material to spiritual. The murals shape space, establish a hierarchy of areas within the tomb, and share a developed cosmology between the living and the dead. By holding funerals, the living convert material culture into spiritual culture, allowing the deceased to continue living in fantasy. Both the ancestry worship and social structure represented by the living, and the journey of the soul of the deceased, can be found in the same mural. Its complexity and immersion require scholars to reconsider its symbolic meaning from multiple perspectives, linking life and death. Through this article, we re-investigated the equal contribution of human agency in funerary art and how murals act as a medium. A deeper understanding of the cosmology behind funerary culture in terms of temporality was gained, suggesting the lens of "created by the living and experienced by the dead" when interpreting ancient Chinese burial murals.

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