

Xiaoyang Wang

The History of Chinese Tomb Murals

Translated by Shanhua Zhu · Shixiao Wang

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Preface

Chinese tomb murals are of an incomparable status in the development history of world art as a rich cultural heritage of more than 2000 years of history, with thousands of remains of tombs with murals and a total mural area exceeding 10,000 square meters. Tomb murals are primarily preserved through burial; moreover, the continuous improvement in the archaeological work will yield more excavation discoveries. Admired greatly, Chinese tomb murals are a treasure trove in the history of Chinese art, a pinnacle of its artistic achievements, and an important carrier of the inheritance of Chinese civilization.

I have long aspired to compile the general history of the Chinese tomb mural, but three questions remain difficult to resolve. Firstly, which religious belief underpins Chinese tomb murals? The tomb murals depict the tomb occupants' journey to the afterlife, and thus should be classified as religious art, but the tomb murals have been discussed in the field of secular art for a long term. Although their identity as religious art has been recognized in recent years, the question of which religious belief Chinese tomb murals belong to has not been elaborated on yet. Secondly, what is the scale of the remains of Chinese tomb murals? The study of tomb murals depends on the scale of archaeological findings. Various compendiums of the materials can be found but complete statistics are hardly available, for example, even the Han stone relief tombs, which both Chinese and foreign scholars are extremely concerned with, lack accurate statistics. Thirdly, what position do the Chinese tomb murals have in the world history of art? Only the Chinese tomb murals' contexts have never been disrupted around the world and the historical evolution continues orderly, meanwhile, mainstream society and non-mainstream society had devoted huge enthusiasm to it, but there are no systematic contributions by the academic community in this field at present.

These three questions concern theory, material, and final evaluation, all of which are fundamental. Regarding compiling the general history, these questions should be discussed in-depth and systematically. Theoretically, we put forward rebirth belief and state explicitly that Chinese tomb murals gain their theoretical support from rebirth belief, which belongs to the Confucianism system. In terms of material resources, we collect the archaeological reports exhaustively, compile the first

chronology of Chinese tomb murals including stone and brick reliefs, and firstly offer an index for tomb murals' area. In terms of status in world art history, a case study of comparison between Chinese and Egyptian tomb murals has been conducted. We initially put forward that there are two iconographic systems of the tomb occupants and deities in Chinese mural tombs, but only one iconographic system of the Pharaohs in Egyptian mural tombs. Furthermore, we discuss the differences and religious significance between the continuous narration of the afterlife in Chinese funeral jades and the discontinuous narration of the afterlife in Egyptian Mummy. In all these discussions, we attempt to explain rebirth belief, a term most difficult to define, like the following: as a belief system of Chinese traditional culture, rebirth belief is mainly concerned about the transition from life to death, with the conceptions of soul and ancestor worship as core notions, and the following traditional cultures as components: ritual, filial piety, and obsession of hierarchy. The ultimate reality is the transition from life to death by tombs. As a religious experience showing death as a form of eternal life, rebirth belief embodies a Confucian conception that regards death as inseparable from life, which differentiates itself from Buddhist and Taoist. Rebirth belief formed in the Han Dynasty and evolved down the successive dynasties, finally into not only a relatively independent belief system but also supplementary to Confucianism. At the same time, it also exerted a widespread, far-reaching, and continuous impact on many traditional cultures such as folk religion and folk customs.

As a general history, dividing the developmental stages is also a primary problem, and there are very few findings in this aspect at present. Chinese feudal society was characterized by a centralized political system, and the change of dynasties affected the development of tomb murals; meanwhile, the development of the tomb murals also followed its own intrinsic patterns. In the context of the combination of these two factors, we put forward the viewpoint of three stages: the first stage is the burgeoning period of the Han, Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties. At this stage, with the widespread adoption of the horizontal cave tomb, the tomb murals became popular among all social classes; meanwhile, rebirth belief was also firmly established as a guiding principle. The second stage is the thriving period of the Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, Liao, Jin, Western Xia, and Yuan Dynasties. At this stage, rebirth belief remained an independent religious experience, and the tomb murals developed in parallel with other religious arts. The secularization in the Tang Dynasty, the plebification in the Song Dynasty, and the pluralism of the Liao, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties brought the long-term prosperity of tomb murals. The third stage is the declining period of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Tomb murals were no longer the focus of funeral activities, thus stepping down from the historical stage.

The general history is of enough materials to offers opportunities for unique insights and holistic thinking, and panel discussions are included in each part. In Part One, the iconographic system of the cliff carvings of Mount Kongwang is

discussed, suggesting the possibility that early Buddhism was spread based on rebirth belief. Meanwhile, the features of the mural tombs in the imperial mausoleums of the Northern and Southern Dynasties are discussed and summarized, revealing an upward movement in the imperial mausoleums of the Northern Dynasties and a downward trend in the imperial mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties. In Part Two, it is discussed that the secular characteristics of tomb murals resulted from the consolidation of imperial power of the Tang Dynasty and the characteristics of plebification were shown in the images of the tomb occupants in the Northern Song Dynasty. In Part Three, the text-image relations are inquired into, and a comparative study on Han Fu and paintings in the Han Dynasty is conducted, which leads to the conclusion that Han Fu shows the predominance of linguistic art while paintings in the Han Dynasty display the equilibrium of image art. In addition, a comparative analysis between Chinese and Egyptian tomb murals is conducted.

In terms of its framework, we focus on two primary considerations: material prioritization and structural progression. Firstly, in terms of material prioritization, we prioritize reviewing the achievements from the archaeological reports. In theoretical discussions, we first summarize various viewpoints and then develop our arguments. At the level of the general history structure, we first describe the existing phenomena, and then discuss the reasons. Secondly, in terms of the structural progressive relations, we establish three components, including the theme system, distribution system, and development stage, all of which are progressively centered on the theme. The theme system describes the criteria of theme selection, taking the image type as the index; the distribution system explores the structural arrangement of themes, taking image shape as the index; and the development stage describes the formation process of theme selection and arrangement, taking the time cycle as the index.

In terms of the theoretical orientation of this book, we hold a specific discussion on the aesthetic features of the tomb murals. Different from that of the handed-down art, the artistic value of the tomb murals needs to be realized through two stages of aesthetic appreciation. The first one is a closed form conducted among the tomb owner and the participant in the burial activity, and ends as a one-off event; the second one is an open form without limitation for the participants and will be repeated as needed. The second opens the closure of the tombs against the wishes of the tomb occupant, and even carries a destructive nature. Such aesthetic relationships derive value from religious beliefs; thus, the tomb murals form two aspects, that is, secular aesthetics and religious aesthetics. The dual-layered aesthetic process constitutes the key aesthetic feature, which provides a theoretical framework encompassing art, religion, and archaeology.

In Chinese traditional culture, historiography is not only an exceptionally challenging task but also a profoundly honorable pursuit. I am not qualified to write the general history of Chinese tomb murals with my knowledge. However, thanks to our era, I dare to undertake such an endeavor here. Our era offers a very good condition,

especially the abundance of new archaeological findings every year, and theoretical achievements involved in various aspects, which would have been unimaginable to our predecessors. Systematically sorting the development of Chinese tomb murals is a great blessing of the times.

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Fig. 12.14 Image of the banquet, No. 1 Tomb of Xiawanzi, Aohan Banner, Inner Mongolia, the late Liao Dynasty (Jin Weinuo. *The Complete Collection of Tomb Rurals in China 3*. Hebei Education Press, 2011) 350

Fig. 12.15 Image of a couple sitting face to face, the mural tomb of the Jin Dynasty in Song Village, Tunliu County, Shanxi Province, the Jin Dynasty (Shanxi Institute of Archaeology, Changzhi Museum. Mural tomb of Jin Dynasty in Tunliusong Village, Shanxi. *Cultural Relics*, 2008(08)) 351