

At the Crossroads of the World of the Living and the Dead: Tombs of Tenth-Century Northern China

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Archeology in recent decades has disclosed a large number of Song and Jin-dynasty tombs in the area along the Taihang Range — corresponding approximately to modern Hebei, eastern Shanxi, and northwestern Henan. These tombs are distinctive in their selection of motifs, such as banquet and theatrical scenes arranged in a domestic setting. They were often accompanied by paintings or carvings of stories of filial piety. These tombs were built with bricks in imitation of aboveground wooden structures. While the differences between these Song-Jin tombs and their Tang predecessors are generally acknowledged, little is known of how and when the changes came about in the first place. This paper examines some tenth-century tombs from the region and argues that the character of tombs changed fundamentally in the tenth century, paving the way for further developments in the Song and Jin dynasties. I will first analyze the visual devices used to create the image of a tomb as sitting at the crossroads of the world of the living and that of the dead. Then I will argue that no later than the tenth century a distinctive formula for the decoration of Song-Jin tombs emerged in the Taihang Range. Finally I will suggest that the change in the nature of tomb space owed largely to contemporary notions of purgatory as well as a growing concern with the relationship between the living and the dead.

By the mid-tenth century, such attempts had been made in the design of tombs as to suggest the existence of a world of the dead behind and beyond the walls of the tomb. An early example of such an attempt are the curtains painted around the two marble plaques inlaid into the side-walls of the rear chamber of Wang Chuzhi's tomb (dated 924). The mural shows long hanging curtains drawn to the side in order to reveal the otherwise invisible and inaudible troupe hidden behind the curtains. The raised curtains signify a space extending behind the walls of the tomb, and they make the space enclosed by the walls look like a courtyard.

Similar to the raised curtains, panel screens painted with landscapes were also used to suggest a space behind the screens. In the case of Wang Chuzhi's tomb, a room considerably smaller in size was concealed behind the back of the main (front) chamber. Separating the two rooms is a wall on which just such a landscape screen is

depicted. Obviously the space behind the screen was not meant to be seen from the main chamber; rather, it was reserved as a private quarter for the dead. By the same token, a similar private quarter is suggested by the landscape screen painted at the back of each of the two side-chambers.

In the tomb (dated 958) of Feng Hui, curtain images are used to such an extent that it creates the illusion of a “theatrical stage set up inside a courtyard.” First of all, except for the ceiling where a star-map is painted, the main chamber of this tomb is covered with images of highly ornamental curtains. Likewise, curtains and streamers are painted all over the subordinate rooms adjacent to the main chamber, and the murals in these subordinate rooms are further elaborated by additional images of large tassels and embroidered balls at the back. All of these curtains, tassels and embroidered balls are painted in strikingly bright colors, creating a festive atmosphere. In the antechamber, fourteen pairs of bricks carved with images of a theatrical troupe are inlaid into both of the long walls. All of the above elements work together to convert the tomb space into a theater inside a courtyard. The entrance to the courtyard house is also the entrance to the tomb, which imitates a two-storey wooden structure with a half-open door on the upper level.

In architectural terms, a courtyard is by nature a transitional space, a place between inside and outside. Its ambiguity makes it a suitable visual metaphor for the transition between this world and the netherworld. That is, those tombs resembling a courtyard sit at the crossroads of this world and the world of the dead. Through them, one can travel freely to and from the worlds adjacent to them. Abundant accounts of journeys to the netherworld can be found in the Tang-Song *biji* literature. In other words, these tombs make tangible the space through which such journeys could take place.

The then new concept of purgatory is crucial in re-defining the character of tombs in the tenth century. During purgatory, it was possible for the dead to collaborate with their descendents and accumulate merit in exchange for a satisfying rebirth. Among the endeavors to achieve this goal, the Huanglu or Jiuyou rite was particularly efficacious in saving the deceased from hell and further transcending them to heaven, or even bring them back to life. By the ninth-century, filial piety was believed by Daoists to have karmic consequences. Helping the deceased ancestors gain a better rebirth was considered filial piety, and enormous rewards were promised to these pious descendents. Moreover, scholars of Chinese popular religious culture

have long been aware that theater and ritual are not always exclusive; in fact, the origins of certain forms of local drama are closely related to the Yulanpen ritual, which is conducted during the Ghost Festival to save all deceased from suffering. This explains the presence of theatrical/ritual scenes and the accompanying images of filial children in the Song-Jin tombs.