

Portraits on the Door of the Eastern Han Tomb in Sishilipu, Suide, Shaanxi Province

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Keywords: Queen Mother of the West; immortal officer; becoming immortal.

Abstract: This paper analyzes the contents of portraits on the door of the Eastern Han tomb unearthed in Suide, Shaanxi Province in 1975, and discusses the properties of these portraits. It is believed that the tomb door portraits exemplify the "outlook on life and death" of people in Han Dynasty, and describe the process of "becoming immortal" of the dead in Han Dynasty.

1. Introduction

Portrait stone was an artistic expression of decorating tombs in Han Dynasty. Images depicted and carved on stones not only play a role in decorating tombs, but also embody the "outlook on life and death" of people in Han Dynasty.

In April 1975, a set of portraits on the tomb door were unearthed in Sishilipu, Suide of Shaanxi Province (Figure 1). [1] The tomb structure, as well as funeral objects and portraits in the tomb chamber are unknown because no excavation report has been published. The date of the tomb has not been specifically mentioned in relevant materials. But the style of portraits is close to pictures found in another chronological stone tomb unearthed in Sishilipu of Suide, namely Shisilipu 97M in Suide. [2] It can be judged that the date of this tomb is close to the date of 97M: the fourth year of Emperor Yongyuan's reign, namely 92 AD. In this paper, the tomb is called as "Sishilipu 75M1 in Suide".

Reasons for studying portraits on the door of that tomb are as follows. First, the contents of these portraits are special. In this tomb, part from the portrait on door leaves, all other portraits mainly depict characters. But a large number portraits unearthed in northern Shaanxi depict hunting scenes, auspicious beasts, trips with carriages and horses, as well as the scenario of music, dance and opera performance. Second, these portraits are right-and-left symmetrical; but pictures on the lintel of the tomb door, as well as the left and right pillar stones seem to express different scenes. Third, in the lintel stone, Pushou with ring-handle serves as the boundary of two scenes: Queen Mother of the Western and other fairies on the right side and the "picture of visitation" on the left side. On the lintel, the person being visited can stand with the Queen Mother of the Western, what's his identity? What kind of situation did the left and right pillar pictures express, and what are relationships among these pictures? With these problems, this paper tries to analyze portraits on the tomb door, and to explore the procedure of "becoming immortal" expressed in these portraits.

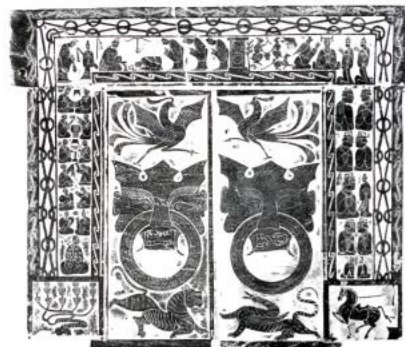


Figure 1. Portraits on the tomb door

2. Analyses of Portraits

2.1 Portraits on door leaves.

Portraits on left and right door leaves of the tomb are made up of Phoenix, Pushou with ring-handle, White Tiger and Dragon. The Han Dynasty Portrait Stone in Northern Shaanxi holds that "on the top there is the Suzaku". [3] The differences between Suzaku and Phoenix are not very obvious. According to records in Book of Mountains and Seas, [4] it is more appropriate to call the bird here as "Phoenix". Phoenix is an auspicious bird, symbolizing the fairyland. Pushou, Dragon and White Tiger are depicted in the portrait as auspicious beasts. In addition to the functions of counteracting evil force and guarding the tomb, [5] they also symbolizes the fairyland. Dragon on the door has wings on its shoulders.

Tombs and fairyland are two different cosmic spaces. Tombs are the destination of the "death" while fairyland is the place of "rebirth after death". The images of auspicious signs and guarding tomb suggest the dual nature of the tombs, namely "death" and "rebirth after death".

2.2 Portraits on the lintel stone.

The edging of the lintel stone over the tomb door is connected with edging of the left and right pillars. The outermost layer is carved with double hook pattern. Two, three or four hooks are reversely connected, each hook is surrounded by a number of "C" patterns. The second layer of tomb door from outside to inside is made up of patterns of ribbon links Bi, a round flat piece of jade with a hole in its centre. The fourth layer, namely the lowest layer of the lintel stone and the most inner layer of pillar stones, is the pattern of a number of "S" connect each other. As for the pattern of "ribbon links Bi", Er-hu Luo thinks that "more emphasis is placed on linking the heaven and the earth, and symbolizing the kingdom of heaven with Bi". [6] This pattern can be found on the lintel of the door, as well as the left and right pillar stones of the tomb door, suggesting that this place is the fairyland of "rebirth after death".

The third layer of the tomb door from outside to inside is the main body of the portrait, which is divided into three parts: lintel stone, left pillar stone and right pillar stone. In the center of the lintel, a Pushou with ring-handle divides it into two parts. In the right part, Queen Mother of the West sits on the tomb door. On her right side are two people with mountain-shaped crowns, holding immortal grass and facing her; they should be servants of the Queen Mother of the West. On the left hand, there is a god with wings and chicken head, kneeling, holding the fairy grass and facing the Queen Mother of the West. There is also a three-legged crow looking down, a fox with nine tails, two Jade Hares pounding medicine and an immortal grass. The Han Dynasty Portrait Stone in Northern Shaanxi holds that what the two maids and the chicken head god hold should be called as "feather fans". By comparison, the object that two maids and the chicken head god hold are the same thing as the immortal grass behind the Jade Hares.

On the left side of the door is the "picture of visitation". There are seven people in this scene; the third person from left to right is the "person be visited". He sits in front of a desk, with an official hat on his head and a ribbon attached to an official seal. A ring knife hangs behind him; a bow and crossbow hangs in front of him. Two lieutenants stand behind the person be visited. The left one faces the master's back, wearing a hat, holding a bag in hand, bowing his head to pay respects; the person on right side shows his front face in the portrait, with a towel ties his hair, holding a stick by right hand [7] and a bag in his waist. There are four people in front of the person be visited. The first one wears a small pointed cap, goes down on his knees and holds a Hu, or Wat board in his hand. According to pottery figurines excavated in Sichuan Province, this kind of small pointed cap is close to "Limao" worn by peasants in Han Dynasty. [8] It is estimated that people wearing this kind of pointed cap are in low social status. A large number of people wearing small pointed cap can be found in portraits of late Eastern Han Dynasty unearthed in Shandong; most of them are attendants. Therefore in this portrait, the person wearing such cap should be a civilian. The second and third person wearing hats of officials; the fourth person wears a cap similar to the first person. These three persons stand to pay respects, each holding a Hu in hands.

"Pictures of visitation" are rarely seen in lintel stones found in northern Shaanxi, but common in Eastern Han tombs of Shandong Province. Most of them are carved in the lower floor of double-decked pavilions; the scenes depicted are similar to the portrait found in Sishilipu 75M1 of Suide. The person being visited sits in front of a low table, followed by attendants. In front of him are visitors paying respect. In the early Eastern Han Dynasty, the picture of upper floor of the pavilion is composed of a door with Pushou with ring-handle in the middle, and several people sitting on both sides. In the middle and late periods of Eastern Han Dynasty, the door is replaced by a woman. The lower floor of pavilion is a picture of trip with carriages and horses. As for the identity of "person being visited", I have explained in the article Discussion on the image of "Xianshi Jinjiang" in stone portraits of Han Dynasty. [9] First of all, in the double-decked pavilion, there are various beasts and buildings symbolize the fairyland; the pavilion should be the fairyland. Secondly, "the person being visited" has a ribbon attached to an official seal. "In ancient China, the ribbon is as a sign of social class... Longer ribbon means higher status. The emperor's ribbon is 2.99 zhang; the ribbons of feudatory kings are 2.1 zhang; the ribbons of nobles are 1.7 zhang; the ribbons of other officials are also in different lengths. [10] Therefore, "persons being visited" in pavilions of Eastern Han tomb in Shandong Province are "officials" in the fairyland. The person being visited in Sishilipu 75M1 of Suide should be an "immortal officer", since he appears in the fairyland with the Queen Mother of the West.

In the front chamber of a Han tomb found in Beizhai Village of Yinan, the portrait carved on the lintel stone of the west wall [11] illustrates the relationship between the "immortal official" and the "door with Pushou with ring-handle". In this portrait, the low table appears in the left rear of the "immortal officer". The "immortal officer" wears an official's hat, with a ribbon attached to an official seal. There are visitors paying respect in front of him and servants behind him. Behind the officer there is a door with double leaves. Pushou with ring-handle appears on the door leaves, while diamond-shaped patterns and "ribbon links Bi" patterns appear on the lintel stone. The door is supposed to be a "fairy gate"; the "person being visited" and his attendants should come from the world inside the door. What does the "fairyland" look like? The portrait on lintel stone of Sishilipu 75M1 in Suide explains the relationship between the "door with Pushou with ring-handle" and the "fairyland of the Queen Mother of the West". Therefore, it is inappropriate to interpret "the fairy grass and the door with Pushou with ring-handle" as "the dividing line between man and god". [12] It is also inappropriate to interpret "servants behind the fairy officer" as "officials that manage the world of ghosts underground". [13]

With a thorough analysis of the picture in Sishilipu 75M1 in Suide, the "picture of visitation in a pavilion" found in the Eastern Han tomb of Shandong, and the portrait in Han tomb found in Beizhai Village of Yinan, the contents of the lintel stone portrait in 75M1 can be clearly understood. The ultimate goal of visitors is the fairyland of the Queen Mother of the West; the gate of this fairyland is a door with Pushou with ring-handle. Outside the door there is a fairy official. All visitors, including civilians, civil officers and military officers, have to consult this "immortal officer" before they step across the door and see the Queen Mother of the West.

2.3 Portraits on pillar stones.

The left and right pillars of the tomb door are equally divided into two layers; the upper frame decoration and the main portrait are connected with the lintel.

The immortal grass in the lower layer of the left pillar should be lucid ganoderma. According to the 11th Volume of Baopuzi Neipian written by Hong Ge that should be the "luminous lucid ganoderma". [14] The third column from left to right is the main part of the portrait. There are seven groups of characters from top to bottom. The top six groups are composed of two people sitting opposite each other, and the last group has only one person. In the first group, the person on the left wears a hill-shaped hat. The two persons hold each other with one hand, with the other hand up to their chests. There is a tripod on the edge of picture. Persons in the second group wear small pointed hats, with a chessboard in the middle of them. They are playing Chinese chess; under the chessboard there is a tripod. Persons in the third group wear small pointed hats, with a pot in the middle, and

chopsticks in their hands. People in the fourth, fifth and sixth groups are dancing with their arms waving. There is only one exception. The person on the left side of the fourth group holds a long pointed object in his left hand; it is supposed that he is showing his fencing skills. The only person in the next group is sitting on his knees, wearing an army cap and elegant clothes, holding a halberd, and turning his head to the left. According to Cong-wen Shen's study on the image of "magistrate of a Ting" in Han Dynasty in the book *Han Dynasty Portrait Stone in Northern Shaanxi*, [15] this figure should be "a magistrate of a Ting". The image of that magistrate is described as follows. "On the seventh layer there is a person wears elegant clothes and the hat of official, holding a fan in his hand and looking to the right". [16] According to *Book of the Later Han*, [17] the hat of the magistrate should be an "army cap" instead of a "hat of official"; the object he holds should be a "halberd" rather than a "fan". Cong-wen Shen has already explained it in detail in the *Study of Ancient Chinese Clothing*. [18]

The lower floor of the right pillar is a horse and a saddle, which is not connected with the symbolic pattern of the fairyland. It should be a picture about the world outside the fairyland. At the same time, the horse has "tied mane and tail, and vigorous posture". [19] It is similar to the horse in the "picture of trip with carriages and horses" in lower floor of the pavilion found in the Eastern Han tomb of Shandong province. The horse should be a celestial horse which takes the death to the heaven. The second column from left to right on the upper layer of the right pillar is the main body of the portrait. It depicts five groups of people standing or kneeling face to face. The person on the left side of the middle group wears a hat of official, kneeling, with an object hanging in his neck. The shape of this object is similar to the "luminous lucid ganoderma" depicted in the lower layer of the left pillar stone; it should be an immortal grass. The person on the right side stands, with a ribbon attached to an official seal. The image is similar to the lieutenant in the lintel stone; these two people should be related to the fairy world. People in the upper two groups are sitting opposite each other, wearing hats of official. People in the lower two groups are sitting opposite each other, too. The two persons in the upper group wear hats of official; the two persons in the lower group wear army caps.

Pictures on the left and right pillars are mainly composed of characters, but the scenes are quite different. The left pillar picture shows peaceful atmosphere with happy characters in easy life, while the atmosphere in right pillar picture is cold and serious. Both pillars are decorated with patterns of ribbon links Bi and express scenes related to the fairyland. Why do they convey so different atmosphere?

Playing chess, holding chopsticks and "hill-shaped hats" are scenes related to the fairy world. Er-hu Luo holds that, "playing Chinese chess and zither are common celestial entertainment... They have common features: no spectators, no banquets. These self-entertaining activities are deliberately depicted to emphasize the carefree atmosphere of the ideal fairyland in heaven. [20] Thus, the left pillar stone describes the scene of entertainment "after becoming immortal". The atmosphere is cheerful and auspicious.

In portraits of the tomb door, characters of the right pillar stone and the lintel stone pay respect to the immortal officer. The biggest difference between them is that in the lintel portrait, people who pay respect hold Hu in their hands, while characters of the right pillar stone do not have Hu. In *Baopuzi Neipian*, Dan Cai describes the fairyland as follows. "... Gods include Wutou Zi, Daojing Jun, Yinlu Gong, Zhonghuang Sir and six senior officials. The style name of Yang Zhang is Zi-yuan. People who do not have The Tally of Laojun Zhushi are not allowed to access. " [21] Therefore, it is presumed that the right pillar stone depicts the scene in which the visitor comes to seek immortality, but has not yet been able to see the immortal officer.

3. The Procedure of "Becoming Immortal" Conveyed by these Portraits

Portraits on the tomb door are carved in plane stones. Although lacking the perspective effect, these pictures express complete contents. The whole tomb door is divided into three parts by "the door with Pushou with ring-handle". The door leave inscribed with Pushou with ring-handle is the "gate" of the fairy world. When the deceased passes this gate by riding a horse (or sitting in the carriage), he gets rid of the "death". With the guidance and help of lieutenants, they queue up to see

the fairy official that obeys the Queen Mother of the West. It is the key to "become immortal". Only through this gate can the dead see the Queen Mother of the West and lead a carefree life of immortals depicted on the left pillar. The story depicted in the tomb door has a plot; the sequence of various components should be: door leaves → the right pillar stone → the "visitation picture" in lintel stone → the single door with Pushou with ring-handle → the combination of Queen Mother of the West and other fairies → the left pillar stone. If portraits are arranged according to the procedure of becoming immortal, the right-to-left sequence should be the "visitation picture" → the single door with Pushou with ring-handle → the combination of Queen Mother of the West and other fairies. Existing portrait stones are in the contrary order. The reason for such layout is temporarily unknown. Possible reasons include the manuscripts of portraits and the subjective factors of artisans.

As for the "picture of visitation in a pavilion" found in the Eastern Han tomb of Shandong province, though its composition is completely different from door portraits of this tomb, it also expresses a complete procedure of "becoming immortal". This point of view has been expounded in Discussion on the image of "Xianshi Jinjiang" in stone portraits of Han Dynasty. [22]

Therefore, portraits on the stone are not simple sculpture images. Through these carved images, people in Han Dynasty expressed their "outlook on life and death". These images can help the deceased to "rebirth" and step into the comfortable and interesting fairyland.

Acknowledgements

Fund Project: This paper is supported by Foundation of China Scholarship Council.

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