

Study on the “Soul Leading Bridge” Picture in the Tomb of the Song Dynasty in Luxian County

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Abstract: There are two stone carvings with handrails in No. 1 Tomb of the Song Dynasty found in Xinwuzui Village, Shiqiao Town of Luxian County, Sichuan Province. Academic circles have always considered these two stone carvings as music and dance carving and drama carving. After re-interpreting the two stone carvings, the author finds that actually, the two stone carvings form a group of pictures which show the scene of “leading the soul to cross the bridge”; they exactly reflect the funeral concept in the Song Dynasty. After the death of the owner of the tomb, it is necessary to release souls from purgatory. After crossing the bridge, the soul can ascend to immortality.

1. Introduction

Luxian County, formerly known as Jiangyang County, is located in the south of Sichuan Basin. Since 2000, a number of stone chamber tombs with wood-like structure have been found. These tombs were built in the Southern Song Dynasty. There are many exquisite stone carvings in these tombs. Among them, a stone carving of music and dance performance (Figure 1) and a stone carving of characters (Figure 2) attracted many scholars' attention. The two stone carvings are found in No. 1 Tomb of Xinwuzui Village, Shiqiao Town of Luxian County. They should be made in the middle of the Southern Song Dynasty. The sizes of the two stone carvings are similar. The shapes of the stone carvings are the same, with their lower parts concave upward. They are both shallow relief carvings with incised inscription. It can be sure that they are a group of corresponding stone carvings. One stone carving shows the picture of music and dance performance. On the bridge with curved railings, six women are performing music and dance. They wear long gowns decorated with tassels. The gowns have cross collars and broad sleeves. The women also wear silk shawls and corollas. The middle two ladies are dancers and the other four people play instruments. The instruments in their hands include a clapper, a flute, a drum and a flat drum from right to left. The other carving depicts characters and a story. The head of the left person is damaged; the figure bows forward, put his palms together devoutly in front of his chest. The person on the right side stands, with his left hand hang down. His right hand points to person on the right side.

Scholars have made many interpretations on these two stone carvings. Most of them agree that the two stone carvings show the scene of entertainment and theatrical performances, and the handrail-shaped structure in the stone carvings is Gou-lan (carved balustrade). But such an explanation is too hasty and needs to be reinterpreted. Since there is no inscription on these stone carvings, we can only rely on the costumes and actions of characters to interpret the contents. The relationship between the two stone carvings can be found from the same ribbon-like handrail structure. Through analyzing these details, we may have a glimpse of the content of the stone carvings and find out the relationship between the two stone carvings.

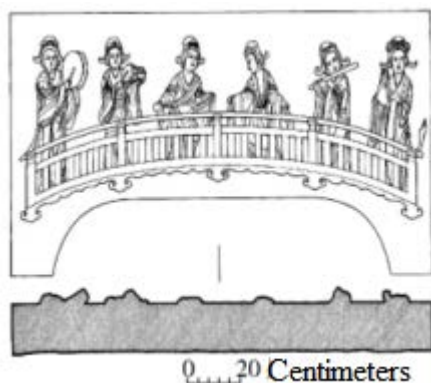


Figure 1. The stone carving of music and dance performance

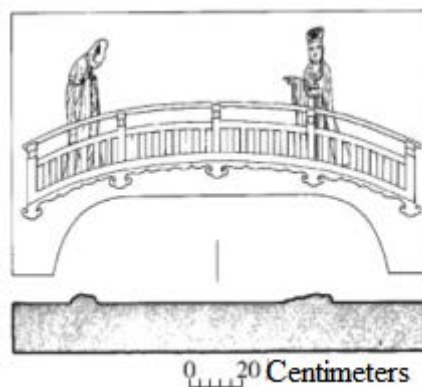


Figure 2. The stone carving of characters

2. Interpretation on the Content of the Stone Carving of Characters

The figures in the stone carving are dressed in hats, which are quite different from the characters in poetic dramas of the Song Dynasty. The figure on the right side of the stone carving is relatively completely preserved. He wears a Liang-guan hat, a gown with large sleeves and a white ornament on his collar. Such costumes are usually worn by the emperor or officials of the Song Dynasty in large formal occasions such as sacrificial ceremonies and congresses. They can also be used as court dress of officials. Generally speaking, in existing illustrations, the emperors and officials of the Song Dynasty usually wear gowns with round collars, with Fu'tou (black gauze cap) or "folded scarves" on the head. Such solemn appearances are rarely seen. From this we can see that it is not polite to wear sacrificial clothes in that situation. The figure stone carving does not depict sacrifices or occasions like congresses, so the right-hand character should not be a human emperor or the official. Liang-guan hat and the white ornament on the collar are not only used to represent mortal emperors and officials. They can also decorate immortal emperors in Taoist paintings, in order to demonstrate their dignity. In Song Dynasty, the costumes of Taoist immortals and human emperors are similar. During the reign of Dazhong Xiangfu, the Zhenzong Emperor set up Taoist rites in Yanen Hall because of his dream of immortals. When building the sites, the immortals descended from the heaven. Their costumes were depicted as following. "The Prime came, and his custom was like the image in the picture of Primusy. There are six people beside. Four people held jade Gui, and wore immortal clothes; two people wore Tong-tian Hat and dark red silk gown."^[1] The "Tong-tian hat" and the "dark red silk gown" here are identical to the sacrificial clothes of emperors of the Song Dynasty. According to the description of Taoist classics, many of the clothes and costumes of gods and monarchs are clearly defined as Liang-guan hat and the white ornament on the collar. So we can determine that the identity of the right-sided figure is a Taoist immortal. The left side character is more damaged, so the figure would not be analyzed in this paper.

This stone carving has no inscription or description. Obviously, its content must be a scene familiar to the people at that time. From the dress of figures, we can confirm that this is a stone carving with Taoist theme. The actions of characters also provide important information. The left character bows to show the manner of a disciple, while the right character points to the left person with the index finger and middle finger in his right hand, which shows a strong sense of "giving directions". In fact, this is a popular painting subject in the Song Dynasty: Wendao Tu, or the Picture of Asking the Way.

Wendao Tu appeared very early. Zi-qian Zhan, a painter of the Sui Dynasty painted a volume of Shile Wendao Tu. By the Song and Jin Dynasties, "Wendao Tu" has become a popular theme. Masterpieces handed down from generation to generation include the magnificent Wendao Tu of Qiushan Mountain, Wendao Tu of Kongtong Mountain drawn by Shi-chang Yang, a Taoist painter of the Jin Dynasty, as well as the Wendao Tu in Valley of Pine Trees and Ao Li Wendao Tu in Yaoshan Mountain. During the Song and Jin Dynasties, paintings with the theme of "asking the way" appeared constantly. The stories contained in these paintings were slightly different, but the

elements of images were fixed as a pattern. There were two protagonists in two opposite positions; one of them stood or knelt on the ground, with both hands in front of his chest to show the manner of disciple; the other person usually sat, pointing at another person with his fingers. This figure usually represents the image of Buddhism and Taoism.

In the Song Dynasty, Wendao Tu gradually became a mature theme which was repeatedly copied. A fixed collocation pattern was formed. This kind of picture lasted for a long time and exerted a deep influence in society. The general public should be aware of this pattern. Therefore, there is no need to illustrate with inscriptions. People know that this stone carving depicts the scene of “asking the way”. The content of this stone carving is to unfold a scene of “enlightenment” and “becoming immortality”.

3. Research on the Relation between the Two Stone Carvings

These two stone carvings have ribbon-like handrail structure, which was previously interpreted as “Gou-lan” by the academic circles. But it is not appropriate. This kind of ribbon-like arch building usually displays the “bridge”. In fact, this kind of architecture can be found in several Song tombs. In the Mural Tomb of the Song Dynasty in Pingmei, Xinmi of Zhengzhou, Henan Province, a “becoming immortal picture” with “bridge” was unearthed (Figure 3).^[2] The bridges here and those in the stone carvings of Xinwuzui Village of Shiqiao Town are all arch bridges with higher middle parts. The difference is that they have high pillars and magnificent pictures as ornament, with lotus flowers and cranes on the pillars. So can these two strip-shaped arch structures in the Song Tomb of Luxian be interpreted as a “bridge”? The issue needs to be further investigated from the content.



Figure 3. The “becoming immortal picture” in the upper part of the northeastern wall of the Baisha Tomb of the Song Dynasty

We can assume that the structure is a “bridge”. Then the two stone carvings which have the same form of “bridge” should have corresponding relationship in contents. The two carvings should depict the story in the same space. It also reveals that there is a time sequence between the two stone carvings. Thus, the “bridge” should be a place passed by the tomb owner; it is a place in which the two sequential events take place. The “bridge” decorated in the tomb must display a journey of the tomb owner, rather than a destination. This journey is the only way to “ask the way and become immortality”, so the “bridge” here is “Duxian (becoming immortal) Bridge”.

The “Duxian Bridge” is also known as “Shengxian Bridge”^[3] or “Dufa Bridge”^[4]. It is the only way to pray for disaster relief and rebirth after death. The function of “Duxian Bridge” is written in the Lingbao Infinite Redeem Doctrine which was published in the early Ming Dynasty. The person should “offer incense, worship the immortal for nine times, and then prostrate on the ground and click teeth for 36 times... For a long time, the jade pillars of the Duxian Bridge appear.”^[5] The

purpose of “Duxian Bridge” is to make the prayer for resurrection from death and disaster relief. According to this method, the five Zang organs of the Taoist priest can turn into a “Duxian Bridge”, which links to the celestial realm. So it can “eliminate crime, relieve misfortune and prolong life”.

The “Duxian Bridge” in the tomb also carries the prayer’s hope of realizing another kind of “bringing the dying back to life”. That is to say, it will lead the dead to the heaven and become immortality. The Taoist rituals of releasing the souls from suffering are also recorded in the Lingbao Infinite Redeem Doctrine. One of the key links is to lead the souls to the Duxian Bridge: “Each Fanlingbao Mansion has 120 soul-inviting children. The prisoner boy guards the soul; the soul-inducing boy leads the soul to go around and show their bodies after sitting down. After bathing and ordaining, the souls can go to the Duxian Bridge”.

Besides helping people to become immortality, the “Duxian Bridge” also has the function of releasing the suffering of the world. “The person walks quickly. Immortals are guiding these guests. The place is full with treasures, streamers and fragrant flowers. The boats are easy to be burnt; numerous people die from fire. But it is difficult to fall from the Duxian Bridge. The immortals are guiding souls; the bridge is busy, calm and peaceful”.^[6] According to this poem written by Yu Ma, a Taoist priest in the Jin Dynasty, we can know that if mortal souls go to the Duxian Bridge, they can no longer indulge in the sea of bitterness. They can get relief and carry on the reincarnation peacefully and steadily. This obviously implies the scene of funeral ceremony in which souls get redeemed and released from purgatory.

The images of “bridge” appear in the two corresponding stone carvings of Luxian tomb. They are obviously the same bridge. Its purpose is to explain the process of Taoist funeral ceremony of “leading souls to become immortals”, and show the time sequence through the different states of the same “bridge”. Tao Fa Hui Yuan has a volume of Golden Fire Tin Reception Instrument, which clarifies the specific procedure of “leading soul to become immortal”. “Shenxiao Emperor and Yuqing King are preaching ... Fairy Princesses control the carriage; Jade Girls play fairy music. Ten thousand of sounds settle down; fragrance scattered in the hall. Yuqing King will relieve hardship; all people can step on the Buxian Bridge.”^[7] According to above-mentioned ritual of “leading souls to become immortals”, the duties of jade ladies playing music on Duxian Bridge are similar to those of the “ladies holding streamers” as well as “guarding and leading boys”. They are all responsible for guiding the souls of the dead, preventing them from going around and leading them to step on the “bridge” smoothly.

Based on above analysis, it can be determined that the railhead-shaped structure here should be interpreted as “bridge”. The musical and dancing performers in the stone carving should be immortal jade ladies who play fairy music and lead the souls of the dead tomb owners; the Immortal Emperor on the right side of the stone carving should be the Taoist God Emperor who illuminates the dead souls; the person on the left side should be the tomb owner. The two stone inscriptions fully describe the process in which the dead soul was first attracted by “fairy music played by jade girls”. His was enlightened by the music, and went to the “Xianqiao”, or the “fairy bridge”. On the bridge he was relieved, rather than “fall down”. After “asking the way” and getting the guidance from the Taoist Immortal Emperor, he can finally “cross the bridge” and “become immortal”.

4. The Funeral Concept of “Three Religions in One” Embodied in the “Soul Leading Bridge” Picture

In summary, the two stone carvings are illustrations of the scene, “leading the soul to cross the bridge”; the picture contains Taoist funeral thoughts. “Leading the soul to cross the bridge” is a kind of Taoist rite, its purpose is to “help the dead to go out of the Hades, and guide them to become immortal in the heaven realm after passing the ‘fairy bridge’.”^[8] “Becoming immortal” is a traditional Taoist funeral theme. The stone carvings of the Song Tomb in Luxian County are also a sequence of illustrations of “becoming immortals”, but they embody some new concepts of the integration of the three religions. At the end of Tang Dynasty and the beginning of Song Dynasty, influenced by Buddhist philosophy of the Pure Land, a new style of “guiding Bodhisattva” is formed combined with the Han people’s own beliefs. Their duty is to “lead souls” to the Western

Pure Land. Some scholars have pointed out that the “guiding Bodhisattva” is usually used in occasions like shui-lu rites and Qiqi Zhai, so this image is a compact “shui-lu painting”, which reflects the religious meaning of the “releasing - leading” of the shui-lu rites.^[9] This simplified “shui-lu painting” combined with Taoist beliefs resulted in the picture of “leading soul to cross the bridge” in the tombs of the Song Dynasty.

Influenced by Buddhism’s concept of taking across sentient beings universally, Taoism in the Song Dynasty formed similar funeral ceremony concept, namely to help the souls of the deceased to avoid going to hell and ascending to heaven. It began to pay attention to the ritual of “sending souls to heaven”^[10] after death. In the two stone carvings of the Song Tomb in Luxian County, the “Jade Girl playing fairy music” has the function of attracting souls, and implies the meaning of praying for the deceased to free themselves from the sea of bitterness. The figure stone carving depicts the scene in which the tomb owner asks the way on the “Duxian Bridge”, and thus become immortal after enlightenment. The combination of the two stone carvings is a complete response to the Taoist funeral belief mentioned above.

5. Conclusion

The two stone carvings with handrails in No. 1 Tomb of the Song Dynasty found in Xinwuzui Village, Shiqiao Town of Luxian County, Sichuan Province were interpreted as simple music and dance performance as well as theatre performance by the academic circles before. The handrail-shaped structures on the stone carvings were interpreted as “Gou-lan”, which was obviously inappropriate. After re-interpretation, the author confirms that these are two stone inscriptions contain the traces of Taoist belief. The themes are “asking the way” and “becoming immortals”. “Becoming immortals” is a traditional decorative theme in tombs since the Han and Wei Dynasties. But compared with the traditional theme, this group of stone carvings in the Tomb of Song Dynasty in Luxian County has a new development. That is, people can escape from sufferings in the hell through “leading souls” and “enlightening”. This is because in the Southern Song Dynasty, the Taoism was influenced by Buddhism. Buddhist doctrines such as “karma”, “reincarnation of three generations” and “nirvana annihilation” were absorbed by Taoism.^[11] As long as we can confess with the Buddhism, we can avoid going to hell, and then get aid and be enlightened. At that time, ordinary people can also become immortals has become a social consensus.

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