

Skeuomorphism, Miniaturization, and Architecture in the Tang Dynasty Tombs: An Examination of Their Manifestations

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Abstract

This study examines mimetic, miniature and architectural art in Tang dynasty tombs, focusing on the specific manifestations of these elements in tombs and their cultural significance. Analyses of excavated artefacts and murals from Tang dynasty tombs reveal the role of mimetic objects (e.g., pottery, gold and silverware, terracotta figurines and stone carvings) in reflecting the social status and cultural beliefs of the tomb owners. The article also explores the application of the concept of mimesis in tomb murals, which embodied the ancient Chinese concept of “life as death” by vividly depicting scenes of the tomb owner’s life before death. In addition, the architectural design of Tang Dynasty tombs, including above- and below-ground structures, siting methods, and construction techniques, is studied, demonstrating the importance of Tang Dynasty tombs in material culture and social beliefs. Through these analyses, this study aims to deepen the understanding of Tang Dynasty burial culture and reveal its unique value in ancient Chinese society.

Keywords: Tang dynasty tombs, skeuomorphism, miniaturization, architectural design

Chinese ancient tombs have experienced a long history of development and formed a unique burial culture. The study of ancient tombs in China is of practical significance to the understanding of ancient Chinese culture. Wu Hong (2012) believes that in the first millennium BC, the invitation to a coffin became the beginning of the Chinese funeral ritual system. In ancient China, a traditional book called *Change* says that in the distant past, people buried their dead in open fields under thick bushes, without building graves or planting trees. There is no set period of mourning. Later stages replaced this ancient custom with inner and outer coffins. (Ruan, 1980) Since then, with the development of the dynasty, the styles of the inner and outer coffins have also changed, which can be seen in the material culture such as decoration, epitaphs, and funerary goods. Macionis et al. (2011) pointed out that material culture, including technology, architecture and art, is about the concrete expression of culture. Therefore, material culture may have a certain relationship with non-material culture, because this material culture is created by human beings, and non-material culture comes from human thinking. Therefore, the study of China’s important material culture can reveal the Chinese view of life and death. This paper will take Tang Dynasty tombs as an example to analyze the specific performance of miniaturization, simulacrum and architecture in Tang Dynasty tombs, and try to explore how people’s views of life and death in ancient Chinese culture were formed and developed step by step through the observation of ancient tombs.

Miniaturization mainly refers to a concrete object or an abstract concept that is reduced to a small time of the original volume or scope, and the concept of miniaturization is applicable to many different backgrounds, so in different backgrounds, miniaturization often has different connotations. Knappett (2012) pointed out that the application of miniaturization in figurative entities may be considered from the cultural level, so it should have special meaning in a specific historical and cultural background. There are many funerary objects unearthed in Tang Dynasty tombs, many of which are miniaturized individuals, such as pottery, gold and silver ware, pottery figurines, and stone carvings. Pottery is one of the most common funerary objects in ancient China. Its style

mostly mimics basins, pots, pots and bowls in production and life, but the body size is generally much smaller than the actual use of objects in life. Gold and silver ware is a variant of funerary pottery, which is generally suitable for noble tombs of higher grade because of its rare and expensive materials and complex production process. According to Hahn (2005, pp. 40-45) and Stevenson (2009, pp. 159-164), through the analysis and understanding of pottery, we can better understand the relationship between people and things. This is because the object is a concentrated embodiment of the production and life, product production, and social form of the time it was made. Through the analysis of pottery, we can analyze the social status and etiquette system of the tomb owner according to the quantity and quality of the pottery buried with him. If there is a considerable number of gold and silver ware in the funerary goods, it can indicate that the tomb owner was either rich or expensive at that time. By studying both individual pottery and combinations, we may be able to gain a general understanding of the craft, artistic style and cultural beliefs of the time. Stone carvings and pottery figurines were also common burial objects in Tang Dynasty tombs. The stone carvings are generally located on the ground buildings of the tombs, or the image of soldiers or beasts, and the conventional position is on both sides of the passage to the mausoleum, while the pottery figurines are generally on both sides of the tomb door of the underground building part of the tomb, or the human face and animal body or the image of the mythical king. Through the research on the production process and quantity of stone carvings and pottery figurines, and the use of tomb animals in pottery figurines is legally stipulated that only the status level can be used at a certain level, so it can reflect the social status of the tomb owner. Moreover, the costume style of pottery figurines is also one of the important reference objects for the study of ancient art. The actual size of the burial goods mentioned above is smaller than that of similar items in production and life, which is one of the evidence to distinguish the burial goods and daily necessities, and perhaps also the intention of ancient humans to distinguish the living and the dead, looking at the dead as the living, so making some daily necessities for burial is a good wish and memory for the rest of the deceased.

Simulacrum is a philosophical and cultural theoretical concept that usually refers to the imitation or reproduction of reality but has reached the point where it is impossible to distinguish between the original and the replica. Baudrillard proposed three stages of skeuomorphism, namely the imitation stage, the simulation stage, and the stage of pure production (1993). Mural paintings of burial chambers are paintings painted by painters with various pigments on the passages, doors and walls of the underground structures of the chambers during the construction of the chambers. The contents include large-scale life scenes such as rituals, banquets, hunting, and entertainment, portraits of ladies and attendants, portraits of tomb owners, realistic paintings of buildings and landscapes (Anon, 2019), as well as stars, the sun and the moon, and auspicious stars on the tops of the burial chambers. For example, the mural painting on the west wall of the tomb of Prince Yi De, shown in Figure 3, depicts a huge Tang Dynasty palace and palace buildings, which is important for contemporary understanding of Tang Dynasty architecture, as there are only three Tang Dynasty buildings in China, and pre-Tang Dynasty buildings have long since ceased to exist. (Anon, 1972; Pei, 2011) These artworks found in the tombs are undoubtedly the best way to recover historical buildings. In Figures 4 and 5, the picture of a playful dog on the north side of the west wall of the second passage hole of the tomb of Prince Zhanghuai and the picture of a polo ball on the west wall of the tomb of Prince Zhanghuai vividly depict the recreational and sports activities of the aristocracy in the middle of the Tang Dynasty, and it is through these artworks that the social life of more than 1,000 years ago is shown. Figure 6 shows the east wall of the tomb of Li Xian, Prince Zhanghuai. (None, 1972) Even more interesting is the fact that it is a realistic picture of guests coming to Chang'an to pay homage to the emperor. Chinese archaeologists have surmised the identities of the figures in the mural based on their costumes, headgear, and facial features, and believe that the figures are, from left to right, three Chinese diplomatic officials and three envoys from various countries. (Wang, 1996) These lifelike paintings are artistic creations of artists based on social life and culture. The use of murals in tombs is one of the forms of anthropomorphic expression, which not only shows the restoration of the rank, status and upper-class life of the tomb owner during his lifetime, but also makes the originally gloomy and cold burial chamber a touch of life. Ancient craftsmen used their own rich imaginations to make the burial chamber into a dwelling place of the dead in paradise, which is also the embodiment of the concept of treating death as if it were a life, as it was perpetuated in ancient China.

Burial building is a special part of the building, and its uniqueness not only lies in its service object for the deceased, but also reflects in the design concept, site selection method, construction technology and practical application of the building. In terms of design concept, as a place to put the dead, the tomb building should first have a reasonable spatial layout. Secondly, it should be strong and not easy to collapse and have the function of anti-theft. Burial buildings are generally divided into two parts: above ground and underground buildings. (Fig.7 and Fig.8) Taking the Tang Dynasty aristocratic tombs as an example, the above ground buildings are generally mausoleums, with stone carvings and the sealing soil above the tombs as the main body. The underground space layout can be roughly divided into patio aisles, front and back chambers, and some of them also have side

chambers, also known as ear chambers. (Figure 9 and 10) The coffins of the people in the tombs were usually placed in the back chamber of the tombs, and in the front chamber or the ear chamber, burial goods and epitaphs were usually placed, and pottery figurines such as beasts of the tomb may be found on both sides of the door of the tombs or both sides of the entrance of the back chamber. (Li, 1972; Zhang, 2013) In terms of siting, the method of siting varied from dynasty to dynasty, such as the tombs of emperors in the Han Dynasty and Tang Dynasty were generally built on the original high ground around the capital Chang'an City at that time and backed up by a large mountain or formed their own tall and majestic mound (Wu, 2015, p. 256-257), while in the earlier Shang and Zhou periods, the tombs were generally not built with a mound or planted with trees above them. (Ruan, 1980) whereas Song dynasty imperial tombs would have chosen geographical locations that were low-lying but in line with the feng shui science of the era. In the construction technology, because of the different social status, the form of the tomb and the architectural characteristics will be different, to the Tang Dynasty tombs, for example, there are the most common commoner's earth cave tombs and vertical hole earth pit tombs, aristocrat's tombs will be used with a patio over the hole of the brick chamber tombs or earth cave tombs, and often in the tomb passage and the walls of the tomb chamber will also have a colored mural, to add vitality of the chamber to restore the owner of the tomb's life before life. (Li, 1972) In practical application, the construction of tomb architecture usually precedes the death of the tomb owner, in other words, the construction or completion of the tomb has already begun before the owner's death, and this feature is most prominent in the aristocracy. In a word, burial architecture is significantly different from other architecture in all aspects, which makes it a unique form of architecture. On the other hand, due to the development of culture, the characteristics of the tomb architecture in each period are slightly different, which makes it one of the most important materials for the study of the social culture of each historical period.

In architectural design, miniaturization and simulation are important means of expression. In the design of tombs in the Tang Dynasty, miniaturization was used to place the supplies in production and life in the tomb chamber, which was also deliberately intended by the design house to build the tomb chamber into a living place with more living atmosphere rather than a cold place for the placement of corpses. In addition, the skeuomorphism is more focused on restoring the scene and status of the tomb owner before his death. In the murals, the banquet images of drums and whistles blowing the windpipe are vivid, and the scenes of hunting and playing polo are even more lively. The maids and door officials on the walls of the tomb chamber show respect and respect, as if they were welcoming the tomb owner home at any time. However, these miniaturized and simulated artistic expressions are not only the understanding of the designers and the owners of the tombs to the social life at that time, but also exaggerated artistic expressions. How to create an inclusive and vibrant home in a limited and cold space is their common pursuit and yearning for a better life.

The tomb architecture art of the Tang Dynasty occupies an important position in the ancient tomb architecture of China. Firstly, the Tang Dynasty ruled for a long time, and secondly, the Tang Dynasty was one of the most powerful countries in the world at that time with a highly developed civilization. Therefore, the research on the tombs of the Tang Dynasty can enable us to examine that era more comprehensively from the material and cultural aspects and understand their politics, economy and culture. Through the specific expressions of miniaturisation, skeuomorphism and building in Tang tombs, we can further understand their important role in material culture. The three aspects combine and use special expressions to build this special building, which can bring temperature to the underground tomb that should be cold. This is also the original intention of the tomb designer, and it is also the most intuitive embodiment of the ancient Chinese culture that regards death as life. Now, after a thousand years, the re-unveiling of these mysterious underground buildings also gives us a deeper understanding of ancient Chinese culture.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Gold bowl with mandarin ducks and lotus petals (<https://www.sxhm.com/collections/detail/514.html>)



Figure 2. Three-colour camel figurine with music (<https://www.sxhm.com/collections/detail/509.html>)

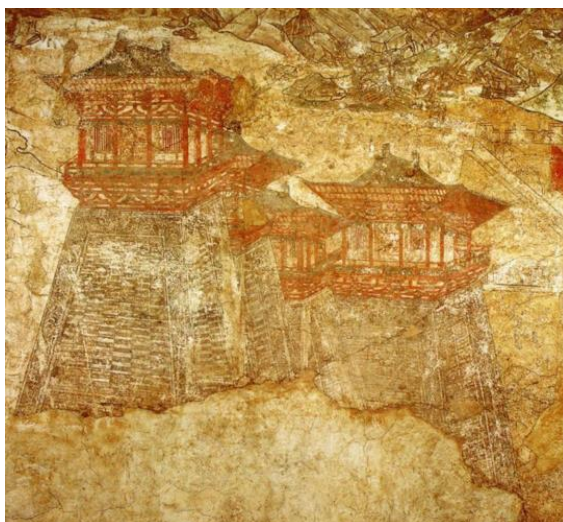


Figure 3. A view of the citadels on the east and west sides of the tomb passage of Prince Yi De's Tomb

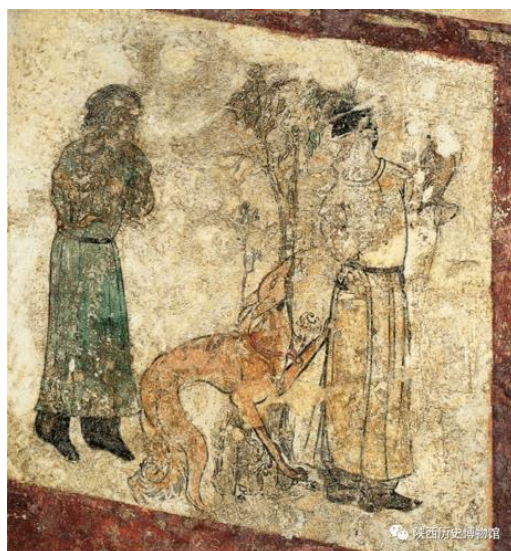


Figure 4. A picture of a playful dog on the north side of the west wall of the second passage hole of the tomb of Prince Zhanghuai



Figure 5. Polo on the west wall of the tomb of Prince Zhanghuai



Figure 6. East wall of the tomb passage of Prince Zhanghuai



Figure 7. Qian Mausoleum

(<https://www.chinaxiantour.com/xian-travel-guides/xian-attractions/the-qianling-mausoleum.html>)



Figure 8. Zhao Mausoleum

(http://www.360doc.com/content/20/0815/09/3196639_930431687.shtml#google_vignette)

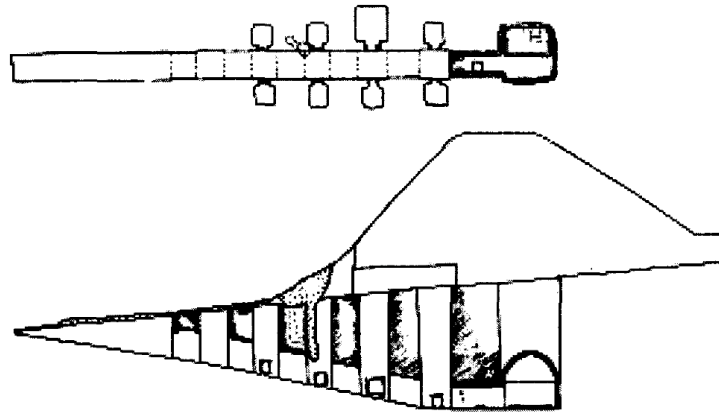


Figure 9. Plan and section of the tomb of Princess Xincheng (Tang Zhaoling New Town Princess Chang's Tomb Excavation Report, Archaeology and Cultural Relics, 1997(03): 3-29+31-38.)

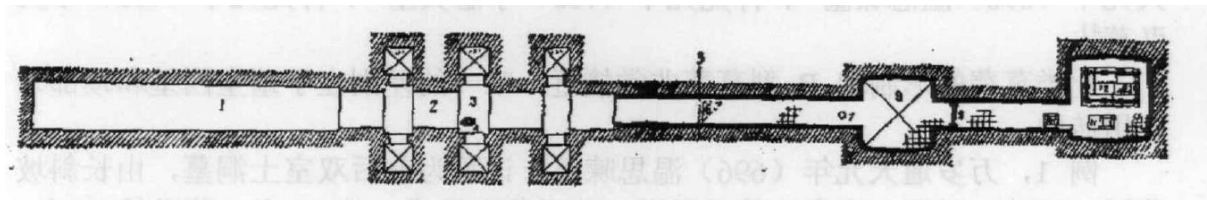


Figure 10. Plan of the Tomb of Prince Zhanghuai of Tang

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