Notes on the Stone Couch Pictures from the Tomb of Kang Ye in Northern Zhou

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In recent years, discoveries of tombs of people from the Western Regions in the Central Plains have attracted the wide attention of the academic community. The most representative examples include the tomb of Kang Ye dated in the sixth year of the Tianhe era in the Northern Zhou (571 CE) from the northern suburb of Xi’an in Shaanxi province, the tomb of An Jia dated in the first year of the Daxiang era of the Northern Zhou (579 CE), the tomb of Shi Jun dated in the second year of the Daxiang era (580 CE), the tomb of Yu Hong dated twelfth year of the Kaihuang era of the Sui (592 CE) from Wang Guo Cun in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, and the undated tomb from the mountain top of Wenshan in Shimaping, Tianshui, Gansu province. Some of the occupants of these tombs can be identified with certainty; they include the nine Central Asian lineages of Zhaowu from the floodplain of the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya in Central Asia, the so-called Sogdians during the Han to Western Jin Dynasties. Sogdians mostly believed in Zoroastrianism, and during the Northern and Southern dynasties many of them migrated to the inner plain and to the Xinjiang province of China.

The burial furnishings in these tombs are decorated with a rich array of pictorial images. On the basis of the ethnicity of the tomb occupants, some scholars conclude as a matter of course that these pictorial images are direct reflections of the real life events of the tomb occupants. They even use these materials as the basis to further construct the concept of an “art history of Zoroastrianism.” The contributions of these scholars deserve to be fully acknowledged. On the other hand, the methodology used in the iconographic interpretation of pictorial images in some of the studies needs to be questioned. Using the stone couch pictures from Kang Ye’s tomb in the northern suburb of Xi’an excavated in 2004 as examples, I will attempt to discuss my own point of view.

According to the tomb epitaph, Kang Ye is a descendant of the king of the state of Kangju, and had once held positions such as the Grand Heavenly Master during the Wei. The four stone slabs standing on top of the platform of Kang Ye’s stone couch are carved with pictures of a folding screen. In comparison to the pictorial images found on many burial furnishings of people from the Western Regions excavated earlier, the pictorial themes on Kang Ye’s stone couch are relatively simple and do not have references to subjects distinctly related to Zoroastrian beliefs and customs. For the sake of convenience in description, I have numbered the sequence of pictures from the first picture on the south end of the west wall, on to the main (north) wall, then to the first picture on the south end of the east wall as picture no. 1” to ” picture no. 10” respectively (Figure 1). Due to the limited scope of the present essay, I will only discuss five pictures: 1, 2, 3, 9, and 10. The compositions of these pictures have quite a few similarities that can be summarized into three main points. First, they are group portraits. At the center of the picture is a portrait of a male or female figure sitting on a small couch, with their faces turned at three-quarters view. Presumably they represent the tomb occupants as husband and wife. Surrounding the master and mistress are many attendants or guests, and some of these figures, either seated or standing, seem to be listening to the master’s or mistress’s

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speech. While these figures seem to be differentiated according to social status among themselves, they are obviously inferior to the husband and wife as tomb occupants. Second, all figures are located in mountains and forests. Third, all figures are gathered together under big trees.

Some scholars routinely categorize the pictorial images of figures participating in a banquet, entertainment, outing or other social activities as subjects in real life. They believe that such narrative pictorial images are related to the actual life experiences of the tomb occupants during their former lives. But the fact of the matter is that the relationship between mortuary pictorial images and the deceased is far more complicated than we can imagine. Under most circumstances, artisans would often produce pictorial images based on pre-existing artistic models, and the family of the deceased may not have even made any concrete requests concerning the content of the pictorial images. In the first place, these pictorial images belong to a larger iconographic system. The “right to publish” and deploy this system does not belong to an actual person as such; rather, it belongs to a social stratum of a specific historical period. Given this premise, a person from a specific social stratum of a specific historical period could make use of the resources of this system in order to express his own ideas. The two strata [social and private] are not mutually exclusive, but they ought to be differentiated in analysis.

By cross-checking against Kang Ye’s tomb epitaph, one can see that the pictorial images on the stone couch are not specifically intended to display the life and accomplishments of Kang Ye. At most, one can say that these pictorial images represent the deportment, identity and social standing of the tomb occupant. For example, the many appearances of the mistress could be identified as referring to the wife of the deceased. However, the tomb is not a double burial. Accordingly the present essay is not mainly concerned with the underlying theme of the pictorial images or with the life of Kang Ye; rather, through analysis of the form and style of these pictorial images it purports to examine some of the common characteristics of the art of painting in the sixth century.

Similar pictorial features can be readily found in other previously discovered materials. For example, there are the pictorial images depicting filial sons and grandsons on the two side panels of the stone coffin of Yuan Mi dated fifth year in the Zhengguang era (524 CE) of the Northern Wei, now in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The pictorial images on Yuan Mi’s coffin do not seem to emphasize the narrative turn of events. Instead, only a few individual, static scenes are selectively depicted (Figure 2). With reference to the original story, these scenes are not representative in nature; however, they do share certain underlying commonalities. For example, the sitting pose of figures in three-quarters’ view, the differentiation between figures according to their social standing, the lush growth of trees and forests, etc., are similar to those in the pictorial images on Kang Ye’s stone couch.

The pictorial images on the Northern Wei stone couch excavated from Mt. Mang in Luoyang are not accompanied by inscriptions (Figure 3). The narrative content is subdued almost to the point of being entirely eliminated,
and the theme cannot be deciphered in every detail. Meanwhile, the pictorial composition imitates the form of a screen – a feature in common with the pictorial images on Kang Ye’s stone couch.

The screen imagery can also be found in the tomb of Cui Fen, dated second year of the Tianbao era of Northern Qi (551 CE) at Haifushan, Linqu County, Shandong (Figure 4), as well as on the mural painting of a screen with lofty recluses in a Northern Qi tomb from Dongbaliwa, Jinan. Although very few human portraits are included in these pictorial images, they share a common characteristic with the pictorial images on Kang Ye’s stone couch in having figures seated under trees. As pointed out by Mr. Yang Hong, the Northern Qi portraits of lofty recluses from Shandong originated from the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove of the Southern Dynasties. This directs our attention in the direction to the Southern Dynasties. In the well-known brick pictures from the tomb at Gong Shan, Xishanqiao, Nanjing, the Seven Sages and Rong Qiqi are all portrayed seated under trees. The murals from the tomb at Gong Shan can be clearly subdivided into eight evenly sized units, and each unit comprises a single figure and a single tree. This composition may have resulted from a painting of a screen in which the dividing frames of the screen have been eliminated.

From the examples mentioned above, we can see several styles of pictorial composition that are similar to those on Kang Ye’s stone couch. These styles of composition are not related to the content of the story as the same story can even be conveyed in different styles. By comparing the story of Ding Lan depicted on the stone coffin of Yuan Mi with that in the Eastern Han Wuliang Shrine from Jiaxiang, Shandong, we can easily detect...
the differences between the two (Figure 5). In the former, the trees, mountains and forests are not based on the original text of the story but are new elements that emerge within a particular historical period.

The relief carving of the Story of Vimalakirti on the stone stele dated first year of the Wuding era of the Eastern Wei (543 CE), now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 6), contains many elements that are similar to those in the pictorial images on Kang Ye’s stone couch. For example, behind Vimalakirti and Manjusri are big trees. The two figures are both seated with faces turned at three-quarters view. Conducting a speech, each person is surrounded by a large gathering of listeners. According to the scripture, Vimalakirti and Manjusri are both in the same room. However, in the process of iconographic development the dualistic form of Vimalakirti and Manjusri facing each other is the one that becomes relatively more mature and established. In this form, the two persons are seated inside different houses or under
different canopies, and both faces are shown in three-quarters view. This angle is especially suitable for describing the relationship between the two persons participating in a debate, unlike human portraits shown in full profile in which the existence of the observer outside the picture space is not taken into account.

According to the scripture, when Manjusri goes to visit Vimalakirti at his house, “eight thousand bodhisattvas, five hundred disciples, a hundred thousand heavenly beings accompany him.” But in the relief carving, the accompanying figures are distributed around both Vimalakirti and Manjusri, not concentrated only on the side of Manjusri. If the picture is split down the middle, each half of the picture still preserves the main character in the mode of delivering a speech, but the bilateral, balanced composition with both Vimalakirti and Manjusri would no longer exist, and the relationship between the main character and surrounding figures becomes that of a lecturer with his respective audience. We can find this type of arrangement in the pictorial images from Kang Ye’s tomb. This way of dividing the entire picture into two is not a purely subjective treatment. It is precisely during the sixth century that the existence of the central Buddha niche in the cave shrine necessitates the splitting of Vimalakirti and Manjusri with their respective audiences on either side of the niche.

In the scripture one cannot find any description of big trees in Vimalakirti’s abode. On the other hand, during the period from the Northern Dynasties through the Sui dynasty, trees have become constant elements in illustrations of the Story of Vimalakirti. As it has been pointed out by So Hyon-suk, there is a similarity between the placement of the triad image of [one] Buddha with [two] Bodhisattvas between two trees in the north and south walls of Lu Dong in the Longmen grottoes and the composition of Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove and Rong Qiqi murals. Furthermore, it can be easily seen that the depiction of the scene of Buddha Preaching the Law on the reverse of the Southern Dynasties stele from Wanfosi in Chengdu shares many similarities with the pictorial images on Kang Ye’s stone couch.

A detail in picture no. 2 on Kang Ye’s stone couch shows a standing woman reaching a tree branch with her right arm and resting her left arm akimbo at her waist (Figure 7). The meaning of this scene is difficult to decipher. Based on the form alone, one can say that it is closest to the narrative illustration of the birth scene of Sakyamuni. In Gandhara relieves dating from the end
of the second century to the beginning of the third century CE, one can find depictions of Queen Mahamaya in the pose of grasping a tree branch with her right hand and crossing both legs (Figure 8). This subject is commonly found in China as well. For example, it can be found in the relief carving on the central pillar of Cave 6 in the Yungang Grottoes (Figure 9).

The last point I would like to discuss is the presence of mountains and forests in the pictorial scenes. Mountains and forests are related to Taoist religion, Buddhist religious beliefs and folk customs; that they are also intimately connected to the development of garden culture during the Southern Dynasties is already an issue of common knowledge. On the basis of formal characteristics of the pictorial images alone, one can cite two examples that share similarities with the pictorial images on Kang Ye’s stone couch. The first one is Yuan Mi’s stone coffin mentioned above, the second one is the coffin with pictures of filial piety in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (Figure 10). In both examples, all narrative events take place in mountains and forests.

The third example comes from a textual source. In the Record of Painting Cloud Terrace Mountain traditionally known as an essay authored by the Eastern Jin artist Gu Kaizhi, there is a reference concerning the method of painting landscapes in which some of the descriptive words used almost seem to “match” the pictorial images on Kang Ye’s stone couch. The text mentions that “next to the outer face of the cliff, a white tiger is shown at a rocky ledge drinking water.” This detail can be found in two pictures on Kang Ye’s stone couch, pictures nos. 9 and 10 (Figure 11). The text is not describing a pure landscape painting as such, but a narrative illustration of the story of Zhang Daoling testing his disciples such as Zhao Sheng and others on Cloud Terrace Mountain. The main theme of the picture is concerned with many figures, and the same feature can also be found in the pictorial images on Kang Ye’s stone couch.

In past studies, examples such as those above are often subsumed under different categories such as Buddhist art, Taoist Art, Funerary Art, and discussions of these forms are often confined to specifically designated subjects and meanings. The present essay, on the other hand, attempts to break down the boundaries between the secular and the religious, even the boundaries between Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Xuanxue (Learning of the Profound). What I would like to emphasize are the formal similarities between these works of art. Lu Xun once said: “Eminent people since the Western Jin have been known to cultivate three pet pursuits simultaneously: first is the Analects of Confucius and the Book of Filial Piety, sec-
ond is the Laozi, third is the Scripture of Vimalakirti." That is to say, essentially different scriptures are actually mingled together in real life. For example, in the Biography of Zhang Rong in the Nanqi Shu is a record of Zhang Rong’s will stated by himself that he wishes to be buried “holding the Book of Filial Piety and Laozi in his left hand, and the Short Version of the Prajñāparamitā and the Lotus Sutra in his right hand.” If different scriptures could be interred in the same person’s coffin, pictorial images that are even further removed from their scriptural sources would have even more opportunities to be interwoven together.

The forms of pictorial images and their interactions could bring about changes in the meaning and function of artworks. In other words, the form itself is an important part of the content of an artwork. In literature landscape is often used as a figure of speech for the appearance of a person. A similar approach can be found in painting. Gu Kaizhi once painted the portrait of Xie Youyu amongst rocks and cliffs; accordingly rocks and cliffs have become an essential tool in the creation of images of persons. This is similar to the use of landscape in the pictorial images on Kang Ye’s stone couch. In Kang’s pictorial images, seats originally used for the Buddha, for the Taoist Lord of Heaven, for lofty recluses and filial sons are occupied at ease by the tomb occupant. Instead of reading these pictures as illustrations of scriptures, it may be more appropriate to see them as idealized and stylized portraits constructed by people for their afterlife existence while still alive in this mundane society.

Like those Xianbei people who conquered the Central Plains, Kang Ye is typical of people from the Western Regions who settled in Han territory. While these people retained their original cultural traditions in varying degrees in terms of religion, customs and art, at the same time they aspired to be integrated into the local culture. The very use of earthen burials, coffins, outer coffins and funerary couches is in itself an indication of Sinicization. Similarly, we can use the adaptation of pictorial art forms of the Central Plains in the pictorial images of Kang Ye’s stone couch to evaluate the cultural affiliation of those Sogdians that have settled in China. Perhaps it is in this sense that we can consider the link between the funerary images and the social status of the tomb occupant. With regards to the study of pictorial images, we should give priority to the examination of logical connections between processes of dissemination, replication, adaptation and transformation instead of making hasty constructions of dramatic events in the biography or ethnic history of the tomb occupant on the basis of these pictorial images.
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References


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