

Philosophical Culture Interpretation of Feather Men Figures in Han Paintings

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ABSTRACT

Han painting is a visual art of the Han Dynasty, which can be roughly divided into three categories based on its production methods: descriptive type (silk paintings, lacquer paintings, murals, etc.), carving type (portrait stones, portrait bricks, etc.), and sculptural type (stone carvings, wood carvings, clay sculptures, metal sculptures, etc.). Feather man is a hypothetical image of "the unity of humans and birds, and the unity of humans and gods". Its historical origins are diverse, either originating from traditional Chinese culture, foreign culture, or a product of the fusion of the two. It embodies the ancient Chinese cosmology and life and death philosophy, involving traditional Chinese witchcraft, Taoism, and Confucianism. In Han Dynasty paintings of music and dance, sacrificial scenes, and street scenes, the images of feather men are common. Their body postures are varied, their spatial shapes are clever, and their cultural connotations are rich. They are either originally dance images or with great potential for development.

Keywords: Feather men figures in Han paintings, Philosophy, Culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Han Dynasty paintings, a large number of narrative patterns of characters can be seen, including music and dance paintings, sacrificial paintings, and market paintings. In these pictures, the feather men often appear in the form of immortals, with their bodies covered in hair, their shoulders turned into wings, and they walk on clouds, growing old and immortal for a thousand years. This fully reflects the vigorous and romantic spiritual power of ancient people. This article takes the Han Dynasty as a period, Han paintings as a section, and the feather men figures as a breakpoint, aiming to explain the historical origins, cultural manifestations, and philosophical perspectives of the feather man dance images in Han paintings through rigorous historical research and scientific methods.

2. RELIGIOUS CULTURAL COMPOSITION

2.1 Field - Immortal World

In the ancient cosmology, space was divided into three parts: the "immortal world", the "real society", and the "underworld". People lived in the real society during their lifetime, and after death, they either ascended to the immortal world or entered the underworld. In the view of life and death, time is considered a false image, and death is life, but it changes the space and the field of life. The images of feather men in Han paintings are mythical fairy images imagined by ancient people. As a concrete symbol, they indicate the existence of the immortal realm and can help ancient people achieve immortality and reach the fairyland. So, in the Han paintings of mainstream society, people can see a realm of faith beyond secular life - the "world of immortals".

The portrait on the west wall of Songshan Temple in Jiayang, Shandong is about 74 cm high and 68 cm wide, divided into four layers from top to bottom. Among them, at the top is the realm of

the immortal world, where the Queen Mother of the West sits upright in the most central position, wearing a splendid crown and clothing, with wings on both shoulders, exuding a dignified demeanor. On the left and right sides closest to the Queen Mother of the West, there are two feather men kneeling respectively. On the left side is the "feather attendant", and on the right side is the "feather maker of immortal medicine". In the first layer of the immortal system, in addition to the stable triangular structure formed by the Queen Mother of the West and two kneeling feathered men to express the relationship between master and servant, there are also various auspicious and exotic beasts such as jade rabbits, toads, and divine birds around, or the development of immortal medicines, or soaring clouds and rolling mist, presenting a mysterious and peaceful scene; The second layer of the portrait reproduces the historical allusion of "Zhou Gong assisting King Cheng". Zhou Gong was the younger brother of King Wu of Zhou. After King Wu's death, Zhou Gong devoted himself to assisting the young son of King Wu, King Cheng of Zhou. Even in the face of slander from treacherous ministers, he remained loyal and helped to consolidate the court situation. In the portrait, the young King Cheng of Zhou is located in the center and has a short stature. There are three people on each side, including waiters and officials; The third layer also records historical allusions, with the content being "Li Ji harmed the life of Prince Shen of Jin". During the Spring and Autumn Period, Li Ji, as the favored concubine of Duke Xian of Jin, was ambitious and planned to kill Prince Shen Sheng of Jin in order to let her own son inherit the throne. The kneeling figure in the middle of the screen is Prince Shen Sheng of Jin, holding a dagger and facing himself. On its right is a dog lying on the ground watching, implying that the treacherous minister's scheme has succeeded; The fourth layer depicts the scenes of everyday life in the immortal world and under the imperial court. In the picture, cars come and go, and on the far left, a person and a dog seem to be waiting for the arrival of distinguished guests on the roadside.

In the structure of the entire picture, the feather men are located at the top of the picture, in the realm of the immortal world. The feather men above the immortal court, although often appearing in the form of a servant, is located closest to the Queen Mother of the West and can refine elixirs and turn clouds and mist, possessing significant divine characteristics. Based on the position of the feather men in the entire mural field and its

relationship with the position of the Queen Mother of the West in the immortal world, it can be concluded that the feathered figure is the highest form of spiritual sustenance for ancient people after death. They hoped to become immortal and reach the immortal world after death, becoming the closest person to the Queen Mother of the West and realizing their wish of immortality. As for the depiction of historical allusions such as "Zhou Gong assisting King Cheng" and "Li Ji harmed the life of Prince Shen of Jin" in the lower level of the immortal realm, it is because the prerequisite for ascending to immortality requires being loyal and filial in real society. Therefore, the content depicted in the lower level of the immortal realm serves as a warning to oneself.

2.2 *Function - Entertaining God*

The scene where the feathered figure is depicted on the west wall of the Songshan Temple in Jiaxiang, Shandong is the world of immortals at the top of the Han portrait, surrounded by the supreme deity - the "Queen Mother of the West". In the painting, the feather men images appear in various forms, showing different behaviors, all of which revolve around the Queen Mother of the West.

"Feather men servants" are the most common image of a feather man in the realm of the immortal world. "Feather men servants" mainly take care of the daily life of the Queen Mother of the West. The image of feather men in Han paintings is often depicted by ancient people in their own tombs, and is also an imagination of their own reincarnation after death. But why do they lower their status so much and willingly become a servant to please the Queen Mother of the West? The fundamental reason is that it was deeply influenced by the Confucian thought of the Han Dynasty. Under the constraints of the "Three Obediences and Five Constants" ideology, ancient people believed that the closer one was to the center of power, the more noble their status and identity would be. Even if they were servants of those in power, they were the ultimate glory. To obtain this honor, one must respectfully and earnestly take care of the gods in their hearts. When the gods gain pleasure, they gain pleasure themselves.

The "feather men for making immortal medicine" are also located in the realm of the immortal world, and its main function is to assist the Queen Mother of the West in refining immortal medicines that will not age. In the immortal system of Han paintings, the Queen Mother of the West is

the only deity who holds the secret to making the elixir of immortality, which can help people achieve their desire for immortality. Therefore, as a mythical figure of ancient times, once the feather man entered the realm of the immortal world, he was endowed with the function of assisting the Queen Mother of the West in making elixirs. This is also one of the most important purposes for ancient people to create the images of feather men in their own tombs, which is to assist the Queen Mother of the West in refining elixirs, receive rewards from the Queen Mother of the West, and then obtain elixirs, realizing their personal desire for eternal life.

In addition, there is also a type of feather men known as the "feather men for leading the rising immortals". This type of feather men is often depicted as soaring through clouds and mist, full of agility and possessing exceptional abilities. It can help ancient people transform from a human body into a feather man, and then ascend and transform, achieving a connection between the real society and the immortal world. However, it must be noted that the function of the feather man in "leading the rising immortals" is also bestowed by the Queen Mother of the West. The objects and timing of the feather men's leading of rising immortality are also given unified instructions by the Queen Mother of the West. So, what "feather men for leading the rising immortals" did in this process was to execute the orders of the Queen Mother of the West and gain her recognition and trust.

In the realm of the immortal world, in addition to "feather men servants", "feather men for making immortal medicine", "feather men for leading the rising immortals", there are also feather men images with various shapes and postures such as "feather men holding immortal grass" and "dancing feather men". These images are also incarnations of human images, and the feather men serving and pleasing the Queen Mother of the West is like people serving and pleasing the Queen Mother of the West, with all its functions aimed at entertaining the gods.

2.3 Aesthetics - Integration of Confucianism and Taoism

During the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, the political proposition of "expelling all schools of thought and revering Confucianism alone" was implemented, and Confucianism held an absolute dominant position. However, even so, Taoist thought was not completely separated. At that time,

Confucianism was flourishing, and Dong Zhongshu was listed as the leader of the group of Confucian scholars. In terms of the study of Huang Lao in Taoism, masters such as Sima Qian also emerged, forming the cultural characteristic of "the integration of Confucianism and Taoism" in the Han Dynasty. This characteristic also influenced the aesthetic characteristics of the feather men figures in Han paintings.

The images of feather men kneeling around the Queen Mother of the West, or following her instructions, although revered as a fairy in the immortal world, still respectfully serving on both sides of the Queen Mother of the West, are clearly influenced by deeply rooted Confucianism. At the same time, two kneeling feather men and the Queen Mother of the West form a triangular structure in the picture, reflecting the stable relationship between servants and masters. The class relationship in this immortal world also comes from the Confucian emphasis on "benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, trustworthiness, loyalty, filial piety, brotherly love, and integrity". At the same time, the images of feather men are vivid and lively, and their scenes of refining elixirs and swirling clouds and mist also reflect the culture and aesthetics of Taoism.

In summary, the immortal realm in which the feather men figure in Han paintings are located contains both Taoist immortal thought and Confucian ethical principles. In this way, the Confucian and Taoist schools not only integrated in concept, but also in form, ultimately forming the body language characteristics of the feather men figures in Han paintings, which are both elegant and heavy, dynamic and profound.

3. SECULAR CULTURAL COMPOSITION

3.1 Field - Real Society

The feather men figures in Han paintings are artistic images created by people living in the real world. Therefore, in addition to appearing outside the realm of immortals, their images also appear in the space of real society and have secularism. The top of the tomb chamber of the Han Dynasty in Anqiu, Shandong Province depicts a lively and intricate painting of music, dance, and various plays. In the upper left corner of the entire scene, there are two dancers performing the Han Dynasty stomping drum dance. On the right side of the two dancers, there are three people using Han dynasty

instrumental music to accompany their dance, while on the left side, there is an audience watching the music and dance performance, which is quite lively; On the right side of the portrait is the performance of "holding pole play". A large pole shaped like a cross is supported by a person on its base, and several children climb on the vertical and horizontal poles, performing handstands or somersaults; To the right of the screen, a person is performing acrobatics called "playing balls and swords", while a viewer sits on the ground and observes; At the bottom of the screen is the image of auspicious birds and beasts. In the composition of the entire picture, the images of the feather men are located in the center left position of the picture, with rich content and diverse forms. Among them, two feather men sat facing each other, one feather man danced gracefully, and one kneeling feathered figure presented objects to a standing feather man.

3.2 Function - Entertaining Human

The Han Dynasty was one of the most powerful empires in Chinese history. The strength of the Han Dynasty included comprehensive strength in politics, economy, culture, and other aspects. Especially with the great development of the economy, the material life of the Han people began to become richer. People bid farewell to the barbaric life of "eating raw food and drinking blood" in primitive society, and began to pursue higher spiritual civilization, including the enjoyment of life and peace after death, with rational thinking. This aspect is deeply reflected in the image of feathered figures in Han painting.

"Liubo" is a game with a nature of playing chess, similar to modern Go but with significant differences. It is one of the representative cultural and entertainment activities of the Han Dynasty people. It can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn Period, Warring States Period, and the Han Dynasty, and has become very popular. According to records, not only ordinary people, but also Han emperors such as Emperor Wen and Emperor Wu, were obsessed with the "Six Treasures" game. Therefore, ancient people depicted this favorite entertainment game in their tomb after death, hoping to have the same pleasure of entertainment as in the world after death.

Like the "feather men Liubo", "feather men playing with beasts" are also common Han painting images of feather men in secular settings, with their main function being to comfort and delight the human soul. The divine beasts played by feather

men mainly include larger and ferocious beasts such as tigers, bears, and leopards. In ancient times, people often lacked the ability to resist large and fierce beasts, and the image of feathered men in Han portraits often appeared in a victorious posture, capable of subduing various fierce beasts, and these subdued beasts could help people dispel disasters and pray for blessings. So, "feather man playing with beasts" reflects the ancient people's imagination of conquering nature, which is a comfort to themselves, hoping for their own safety and health.

In the Tengzhou Han Portrait Stone Museum in Shandong Province, there is a precious treasure of the museum - the "Music, Dance, and Acrobatics" painting, which is set in the real society of the Han Dynasty and includes various acrobatics, dances, musical instrument performances, and more. In the bottom right corner of the image, there are two feather men holding sticks, performing "feather men fighting". Fighting is a form of resistance, which embodies the indomitable spirit of ancient people and also reflects the normal emotions of joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness in the world. The ancient people depicted the images of feather men fighting, whose function was to defend their life and dignity in the afterlife world, and to obtain peace and tranquility in the afterlife world through their own strength.

The feather men figures in Han paintings are imaginary images carved by Han people in tombs, but the so-called imagination is actually what people know in real life, created based on the daily behavior of people in real life. The emergence of scenes, such as "feather men Liubo", "feather men playing with beasts", and "feather men fighting", is a representation of real social life, which are the scenes depicted by ancient people of their carefree life after death. The images of feather men figure in Han paintings dispelled people's fear of death and provided spiritual comfort for the living. So, the images of feather men figure in Han paintings have the function of entertaining human.

3.3 Aesthetics - Interaction Between Elegance and Vulgarly

The Han Dynasty was the rising stage of China's feudal autocratic society, and it was another great unification of China after the Qin Dynasty. Although the Qin Dynasty was the first to unify China, its duration was too short, so the true national culture, psychology, and consciousness of the Chinese nation began to take shape during the

Han Dynasty. The culture of the Han Dynasty was all encompassing, with the biggest feature being the interaction between elegance and vulgarity. In terms of aesthetic objects, especially in the appreciation of traditional Chinese culture, the distinction between elegance and vulgarity has always existed, and there is even an extreme viewpoint that suggests a clear distinction between elegance and vulgarity. However, in the cultural aesthetics of the Han Dynasty, there was a situation of "interaction between elegance and vulgarity". Among them, "acrobatics" is one of the more representative artistic styles in the culture of "interaction between elegance and vulgarity".

Acrobatics, also known as "Jiaodi," has various forms of performance, such as comedic plays (played by various clowns to please others), opera carriages (similar to today's high-altitude steel wire and high-altitude manned); Chong Xia (also known as Yan Opera, similar to the current "worming in knife circle") and so on. This kind of hundred opera music and dance clearly originated from the folk and flourished in the folk, representing the "vulgar" culture. However, according to the "Annals of Emperor Wu of the Book of Han", during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, the programs in the Hundred Plays were constantly innovated and enriched, becoming important performances for entertaining guests and representing the level of performing arts of the Han Dynasty. Every time an important foreign guest arrives or a major festival is held, a hundred plays are performed in the palace. The palace often enjoys watching "Hundred Plays" for entertainment, which can be confirmed by another example: "In the early years of Emperor Xiaohan's reign in the Eastern Han Dynasty (107 AD), Liu Qing, the Prince of Heqing, died. He was Emperor An's biological father, and Emperor An ordered "forbidding the normal people spreading acrobatics". It can be seen that there were often "acrobatics" performed in the palace at that time, otherwise there would be no need to order a ban on performances. If a ban was needed, it proved its prosperity. As a result, the "acrobatics" originating from the folk also ascended to the hall of elegance, pioneering the aesthetic paradigm of "interaction between elegance and vulgarity" in Han Dynasty culture.

4. CONCLUSION

The images of feather men figures in Han paintings are one of the most representative art forms in Han Dynasty plastic arts. These originated

from the worship of bird totems by primitive residents, and in the wheel of historical progress, they collided and blended with social trends and external factors, ultimately forming the image of immortals in China. The images of feather men figures in Han paintings reflect a strong religious color and people's strong desire to become immortals. The concepts of filial piety and brotherly love, yin and yang, the five elements, immortal techniques, and divination and astrology are all present in traditional Han culture. In the social and cultural context of the integration of Confucianism and Taoism, as well as the interaction between elegance and vulgarity, feather men figures in Han paintings coexist in the world of immortals and the real world, and their images become increasingly rich. The images of "feather men serving", "feather men playing with beasts", "feather men Liubo", "feather men fighting" not only have certain cultural connotations, but also reflect rich aesthetic and dance beauty, and have high artistic value.

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