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Images, Rituals, and the Attitudes Toward Life and Death: An Analysis of the Cultural Meaning of Ming Zhao Liang's Tomb Coffin Paintings

Song Yiran

Abstract

In 2017 a painted, lacquered coffin was unearthed at the Jingde Temple excavation site in Wutuoli, Shijingshan District, Beijing; the tomb occupant was Zhao Liang, a eunuch of the Palace Internal Service Directorate in the Ming Dynasty. Two magnificent funeral procession and guard of honor scenes are exquisitely painted on the coffin's panels. The entire ritual process, from funeral procession (Fayin) to immortal realm reception (Jieyin), is depicted on the right side coffin panel, forging a visual pathway for the soul's ascension to immortality. The left side of the coffin portrays the scene of the soul's homecoming (Huiling), thus forming a closed loop. Through image nesting and spatial narrative, the picture-within-a-picture structure and clockwise viewing sequence of the coffin paintings reinforce the eternity of the tomb occupant's soul's presence, while also representing the funeral ritual procedures of eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty. The tomb occupant, Zhao Liang, drew on his own identity background as the official in charge of mausoleum construction and Buddhist beliefs to carefully design the coffin paintings with meticulous care during the mausoleum's construction. This design not only reflects his fervent aspiration for posthumous honors and a settled destination for his soul but also provides crucial material evidence for scholars' investigation of the funeral customs of the Ming Dynasty.

Key Words

Zhao Liang's tomb, painted lacquered coffin, picture-in-picture, funeral rituals

1. The Tomb's Background and Basic Information of the Coffin Paintings

In September 2017, to ensure the advancement of key municipal projects in Beijing, the Beijing Municipal Institute of Archaeology carried out archaeological excavations in the Nangong Area of the former site of Jingde Temple Village, Wulituo Subdistrict, Shijingshan District. During the work, the tomb of Zhao Liang was uncovered. Specifically situated at Tomb No. 2, Group A, in the southeastern section of the excavation zone, the tomb has dimensions of 9.7 m in length, 4 m in width, and 5.5 m in depth. Its structure comprises a tomb passage, a sealing door, two pairs of stone doors,

a burial chamber, etc. A variety of burial objects, including a stone offering table, a stone five sacrifices set, an epitaph, celadon jars, copper coins, a copper belt and textiles were unearthed in the tomb. A set of painted coffins and outer caskets was also unearthed from Zhao Liang's tomb (figure 1). The front part of the coffin is tall and wide, while the rear part is low and narrow, assembled via mortise-and-tenon insertion technology. Its inner walls were treated with plain vermilion lacquer finish, while the outer walls were decorated with elaborate painted scenes via the craft of polychrome painting, gold tracing, and lacquer overcoating. The rear panel (Houhe) is painted with a painted stupa, the front panel (Qianhe) is painted with a character plaque, the lid



Figure 1. The front and rear guards of Zhao Liang from Zheng Yan: "A Brief Discussion on the Painted and Gilded Lacquer Coffin Uncarthed from the Ming Dynasty Zhao Liang Tomb in Wulituo, Shijingshan, Beijing," *Collector*, no. 5, 2025.

is painted with interlocking lotus vine patterns, and the edges of the base and other sections are decorated with a variety of geometric patterns and floral patterns. The two funeral scenes on the left and right panels of Zhao Liang's coffin paintings are the most striking feature.¹ From a bird's-eye view, the procession unfolds from right to left through the mountainous terrain in both scenes, and the composition is essentially the same in both panels.

The coffin's right side panel depicts a scene from a funeral procession. It creates a visual image sequence that represents the journey from the secular funeral procession to the sacred immortal realm, stretching from the right to the left of the image (figure 2). Eight men in two rows are leading a hearse (Jiuche) on the painting's right side. An official's hat-wearing attendant stands in front of the hearse, which is carrying a painted coffin. Ten men form a disciplined processional lineup ahead of the hearse, carrying ceremonial ladders on their shoulders and holding funeral fans (Sha) in their hands. The procession also features workers carrying various objects, attendants holding effigies, servants carrying ceremonial palanquins (Xian Jiao), and mounted attendants. The postures of these various roles and the items they carried together created the entire scene of the funeral procession, even though it is impossible to identify each individual. On the left side of the image, four men carry a square black altar table. According to Li Jiguang, the house model placed on top of it symbolizes a yin house, which is a place bestowed upon the deceased to live in the afterlife.² Further to the left,

a two-wheeled land boat cart is pulled and pushed by several people from the front and the rear. Inside the carriage of the two-wheeled cart at the front puppeteers perform a puppet show, their movements faintly visible. At the far end of the land boat cart there are five people on stilts, upright. Nearer to the viewer, a group of monks plays music and chants sutras. Among the gaps in the procession of monks and Taoist priests, four attendants carry a silk pavilion (Juan Ting) with candlesticks installed inside. The ceremony ends at the left edge of the scene, where two warm palanquins (Nuan Jiao) can be seen within the procession — the front palanquin is slightly larger, containing not only a human figure but also an incense burner and candlesticks; the rear palanquin is slightly smaller, revealing only an incense burner with no visible human form inside. These two palanquins are Shadow Pavilions (ying ting), acting as the central vessels for enshrining the tomb's occupant, according to Yang Zhishui's research.³ In front of, and on either side of, the shadow pavilion stand five giant statues — the central figure modeled after the God of Longevity, flanked by Shide, Tieguai Li, Liu Haichan, and Hanshan, collectively embodying the core theme of Four Immortals Paying Homage to Longevity. These giant figures all feature small windows in their abdomens, indicating they are human-operated effigies. This practice bears similarities to the traditional folk shehuo rituals still observed in southeastern coastal regions today. The funeral procession shown in the right panel ends in a celestial realm nestled deep within the mountain ranges rather than at a typical earthly



Figure 2. The painted decoration on the right side of Zhao Liang's coffin.

cemetery. A group statue of the Eight Immortals, an inverted-bowl stupa, a five-treasure banner (Zhuang), a flower pavilion, a double-eaved pavilion, three stone steles, an unidentified canopy-topped banner, a temple, a flower pagoda, and, at the far end, a massive, four-eyed Fangxiang figure brandishing a long halberd are all arranged in this fairyland realm in an orderly manner from left to right. The narrative arc, from secular funeral procession to welcoming into the immortal realm, is completed when these components work together to construct a sacred and solemn afterlife world and form the ceremony's conclusion.

The left panel, together with the right one, forms a sequential ceremonial connection. A figure sits in a palanquin inside the city walls at the painting's upper right corner, with attendants crowding around in front and behind. This procession is approaching the city gate from left to right, about to pass through it. This detail implies that the ceremony has finished the sealing the tomb pit (Yan Kuang) part of the funeral ritual and is now starting the journey back. Four small palanquins with their screens and curtains completely closed are arranged in a line along the central path on the painting's right side. The two warm palanquins (Nuan Jiao), the Shadow Pavilions (Ying Ting) mentioned by scholars like Yang Zhishui, are each carried jointly by four bearers at the central path ahead of the small palanquins. Ahead of the two Shadow Pavilions stand four silk pavilions (Juan Ting), each carried by two bearers and decorated with brightly colored floral bouquets; these silk pavilions are carried by two bearers each. Ahead of them are five small pavilions marching two rows of

musicians, six in each row, with each musician holding a different musical instrument. The left side of the painting marks the end of this procession. Standing at the very front of the central procession, some attendants have dismounted and are exchanging bowing greetings with the welcoming party. At the left end of the painting stands a quadrangle (siheyuan) compound, its main gate facing off-screen. Several men are coming and going in the courtyard; judging from their costumes, they are neither Taoist priests nor monks. In combination with its architectural form and functional setting in the scene, it is inferred that this siheyuan is an ancestral hall or an offering hall. In front of the quadrangle's gate, a figure bends down to ignite a fire with a torch; black fuel is clearly visible in a brazier nearby. In the gap between the musicians and the courtyard, two young boys are frolicking merrily (figure 3).

In terms of the core themes portrayed on the left and right side panels of Zhao Liang's coffin, current academic research mostly holds the view that the right panel is depicting the complete funeral ritual process, from the "Commencement of the Funeral Procession (Fayin)" to the "Sealing the Tomb Pit (Yan Kuang)."⁴ Yang Zhishui also suggests that the description in *Jin Ping Mei Ci Hua* (*The Plum in the Golden Vase: Ci Hua Version*), "Upon arriving at the gate of the house, they lit a fire and walked in with the fire blazing," bears a striking resemblance to the scene on the left panel where a figure is holding a fire to ignite it in front of the quadrangle (siheyuan) gate. Therefore, its core theme should be identified as the "Spirit-Returning Diagram (Huiling Tu)." These two themes correspond



Figure 3. The painted decoration on the left side of Zhao Liang's coffin.

respectively to different stages of the funeral rituals. Though they seem to be two independent stages, they form a close visual connection with the coffin as the carrier. The image combination relationship formed by the two, along with the ingeniously crafted picture-in-picture expression within the paintings, is clearly not an accidental artistic arrangement. So, is this combined and nested compositional technique intended to serve the integrity of the funerary narrative, or is it derived from the personal instructions and design of Zhao Liang himself during his lifetime? An analysis of this question may be the key to further revealing the social and cultural concepts behind the coffin paintings.

2. Examination of the Coffin Paintings' Iconographic Content

The underground area is completely isolated — a separate universe created exclusively for the deceased, guaranteeing their connection to the afterlife — in contrast to the public nature of above-ground rituals. The magnificent ceremonial scenes portrayed on the coffin paintings of Zhao Liang's tomb represent not only his obsession with posthumous glory but also his own inquiry into the afterlife destination of his soul.

The right panel of the coffin paintings opens with the hearse transporting Zhao Liang's remains (figure 4), surrounded by a large number of family members and attendants. Nevertheless, the hearse's destination is not depicted in the painting. A celestial realm appears deep within the mountains at the far end of the scene,

unfolding toward the funeral procession in a receptive gesture. The stage for the shexuo performance *Four Immortals Paying Homage to Longevity* (figure 5), which includes the Four Immortals (Tieguai Li, Liu Haichan, Shide, and Hanshan) and a figure symbolizing the God of Longevity, is located below this celestial realm. Early depictions of the Four Immortals were mostly found in religious contexts, but they gradually became secularized and appear more frequently in folktales and theatrical productions. After the depictions of the Four Immortals entered the imperial court, their theme of praying for longevity became increasingly distinct. It had evolved into a fixed artistic motif by the Ming Dynasty and was widely used in birthday celebration scenes and other ritual scenes associated with longevity blessings.

After the birthday blessings and prayers for longevity unfolded slowly ahead of the funeral procession with the Four-Eyed Fangxiang in the lead, flower pagodas, temples, prayer streamers (jingfan), stone stelae, inverted-bowl stupas, and the Eight Immortals, among other elements, followed. The image of Fangxiang originates from the "Minister of War (Xiaguan)" chapter of *The Rites of Zhou (Zhouli)*: "The Master of Fangxiang (Fangxiangshi), charged with wearing a bear skin covering his head, having four golden eyes, dressed in a black upper garment and a vermilion lower garment, holds a spear (ge) and raises a shield. He leads the hundred attendants to perform the seasonal Nuo ritual, searching the rooms to drive out plagues and epidemics. During grand funerals, he marches ahead of the coffin to the cemetery, and upon entering the burial pit at the

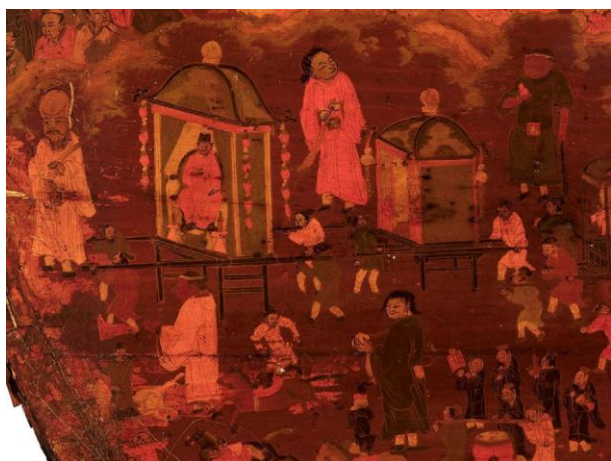


Figure 4. One of the painted parts on the right side of Zhao Liang's coffin.

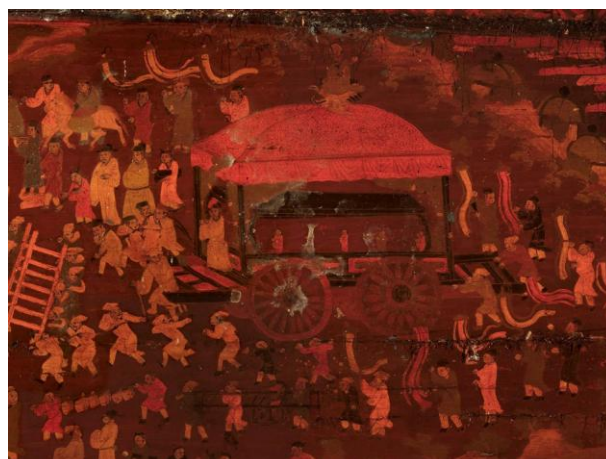


Figure 5. One part of the painting on the right side of Zhao Liang's coffin.



Figure 6. The combination of images on the right side of Zhao Liang's coffin.

tomb, he strikes the four corners with his spear (ge) to drive away the Fangliang (evil spirits).”⁵ As the presiding deity of the Nuo rites, the Fangxiangshi held a position equivalent to the chief sacrificial god. He also acted as the path-opening deity to guide the spirit coffin during funeral rituals, and possessed the shamanic power of warding off disasters (rangchu). According to the *Secret Book of Burial Rites of the Great Han Yuanling Mausoleum* (*Da Han Yuanling Mizang Jing*), the Fangxiang deity — classified as a spirit charm among burial artifacts (mingqi) — must be placed at the entrance of the burial pit. Its appearance is described as “Bound with multicolored cords, having four eyes, and holding a dencha (a ritual fork).”⁶ The text clearly defines the Fangxiang deity as a burial artifact (mingqi) that serves to guard the tomb and ward off evil spirits.

Based on the aforementioned records, it is evident that the Fangxiang undertakes two core functions in funeral rituals: first, to clear a path for the funeral procession and preside over the funeral procession of the deceased; second, to purge wandering ghosts and wild spirits around the tomb when the deceased's coffin is interred. These functions essentially perpetuate the primitive shamanic attribute of warding off plagues and epidemics (rangchu). Meanwhile, the Four-Eyed Fangxiang, positioned at the forefront of the celestial realm sequence, likewise inherits the traditional role of guiding the spirit coffin, warding off evil spirits, and eliminating all kinds of evil ghosts and impure substances.

The many artifacts behind the Fangxiang figure, including flower pagodas, temples, treasure banners (baozhuang), and inverted-bowl stupas in terms of their

forms, are essentially an abbreviated iconography of Buddhist beliefs. Early Buddhists regarded stupas as objects of worship for the Buddha — in other words, the stupa is the Buddha itself. Thus, the stupa and the Buddha are inextricably linked in Buddhist concepts.⁷ Second, the treasure banner (*baozhuang*), as a banner that honors and adorns Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, also demonstrates the presence of the Buddha to a certain extent. This scene is strikingly similar to the description in Xia Yan's poem "Ruihe Xian·Responding to the Imperial Command on the Crane Descending at the Inner Garden Altar (Ruihe Xian·Neiyuan Jiaotan Heping Yingzhi):" "I envision the void, where treasure banners and feather canopies stand in disorderly profusion, guiding immortal birds to descend faintly." This verse depicts a sacrificial ritual where treasure banners and feather canopies are scattered in disarray, guiding the arrival of sacred birds (black cranes). Sacred cranes descending from the celestial realm to the top of the treasure banner imply that the heavenly deities have dispatched a ceremonial procession to accompany the black cranes in response, guiding the tomb owner's soul forward to the profound sacred space in the depths. The legendary stories of the Eight Immortals bear distinct Taoist cultural characteristics; as Taoism evolved and transformed, the initial fixed composition of the Eight Immortals was finalized during the Jiajing reign of the Ming Dynasty.⁸ According to research, the prototypes of the Eight Immortals were originally ordinary mortal figures who actually existed in history. Even after they later cultivated to attain enlightenment and joined the ranks of immortals, they still retained the thoughts and emotions of ordinary people in the world. In various folk legends, the Eight Immortals are often regarded as symbols of eight different mortal circumstances — Lv Dongbin, He Xiangzhi, Zhang Guolao, Han Xiangzi, Cao Guojiu, Zhongli Quan, Lan Caihe, and Li Tieguai corresponding respectively to the eight identities of men, women, the elderly, children, wealthy merchants, nobles and officials, poor scholars, and commoners of low status. Ordinary people in different circumstances inevitably have different social aspirations and cultural mindsets, and these differences are naturally reflected in the immortal figures corresponding to each of them.

In the folktales of the Eight Immortals, the masses have infused their emotions into the shaping of the Eight Immortals' images, giving them distinct personalities and vivid forms. Each of the Eight Immortals' portraits on the painted coffin of Zhao Liang's tomb has a distinct demeanor and sentiment. Zhao Liang's own desire for immortality is also entrusted in this secularized portrayal: anyone can enter the celestial realm and

join the ranks of immortals regardless of their status in life. Furthermore, the Eight Immortals' dwelling place represents the true celestial realm. If Zhao Liang's spirit made it to the place where the Eight Immortals reside, it meant that he had completed the process of ascending to immortality under the protection and guidance of Fangxiang and the treasure banner (*Baozhuang*).

According to the narrative logic of the right panel of the coffin painting in Zhao Liang's tomb (figure 6), at the front of the funeral procession, close to the entrance to the celestial realm, are the Four Immortals Paying Homage to Longevity. Their meaning has changed from longevity to blessings and tranquility in the afterlife. Here, the Four Immortals and the God of Longevity can be seen as symbolizing the guidance of the tomb owners into the celestial realm, and securing longevity and blessings for them in the realm. This combination's essential essence is to provide auspicious protection for the tomb owner's afterlife. The Fangxiang deity is positioned at the forefront of the celestial realm — i.e., at the junction between the celestial realm and the mortal funeral procession. Its role is to purge evil spirits that might exist between the mortal and sacred celestial realm, preventing the soul from being disturbed before it enters the celestial realm and ensuring the safety of the path to immortality. The numerous artifacts arrayed behind him serve to guide the deceased's soul, implying the acceptance of the deceased's soul by the divine beings. The Eight Immortals, located deep in the celestial realm, symbolize the recognition that the soul has attained immortality. The author argues that, in this scene where various images are intermingled within the celestial realm, the various images are not independent symbols of faith. Instead, through the combination of these images, they jointly serve the aspiration of escorting the deceased soul into the celestial realm, which embodies Zhao Liang's own longing for the attainment of immortality.

3. The Deconstruction of the Circular Form of Coffin Paintings

As previously mentioned, Zhao Liang's tomb features a returning the spirit (*Huiling*) scene on the right panel and a returning the spirit scene on the left panel of the coffin paintings. The custom of the chief mourner and other mourning family members of the host family escorting the deceased's spirit tablet (or portrait of the deceased and spirit tablet) back to the main family home where the funeral is held after the burial, is known as Returning the Spirit (*Huiling*). *Huiling* is the folk

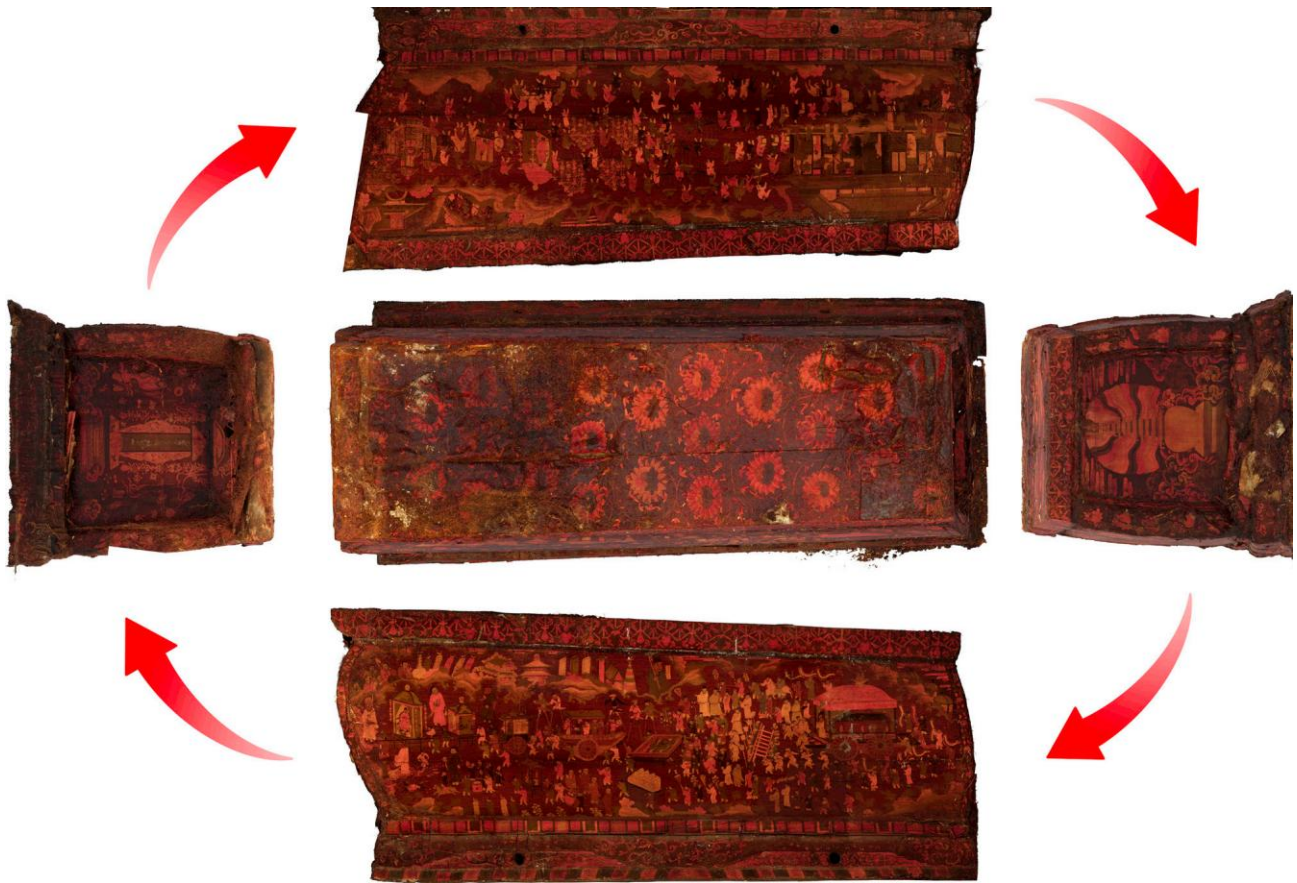


Figure 7. The combination of images on Zhao Liang's coffin.

term for this practice, while the formal term in funeral rites is *Fanku* (Returning to Mourn). There is scant documentation of the Returning to Mourn ritual in the Ming Dynasty historical records. It is only mentioned in relation to the mourning customs for officials of various ranks in the *History of the Ming Dynasty*: “inscribe the spirit tablet, enshrine it, place it on the carriage, and perform the Returning to Mourn (*Fanku*) ritual.”⁹ It can be reasonably inferred that the Returning to Mourn (*Fanku*) ritual also existed in the Ming Dynasty. The specific procedures of this set of rituals were roughly as follows. After the interment ceremony was completed, the deceased's spirit tablet (or portrait of the deceased and spirit tablet in some cases) was placed on the spirit carriage. The spirit carriage was surrounded by relatives present at the ceremony, who vented their grief and sorrow to the full. When the spirit carriage arrived at the chief mourner's home, the attendants accompanying the carriage disembarked first, and the master of ceremonies presiding over the funeral enshrined the deceased's spirit tablet reverently on the spirit seat. Led by the chief mourner, the group then climbed the western steps step by step, and they each wept in mourning on the eastern

side of the spirit seat in order of seniority (by age and generation).

The three key stages of a funeral, from the departure of the coffin (*Fayin*) to the return of the spirit (*Huiling*), are depicted on the left and right panels of Zhao Liang's coffin in chronological order. The temporal nature of the coffin paintings is even more evident in the three-dimensional unfolded diagram of Zhao Liang's coffin (figure 7). On the right panel of Zhao Liang's coffin, the procession transporting the hearse to the entrance of the burial pit for the pit-sealing ritual (*Yankuang*) starts at the foot end of the right panel and ends at the head end. The inscription “the coffin of the late Zhao Liang, Eunuch of the Imperial Household Directorate, style name Liang” carved on the front panel of the coffin clearly confirms the definition of the nature of the remains: “When a person dies, (their body) is called a corpse on the bed, and a hearse (柩) when placed in the coffin.” Subsequently, the Returning to Mourn (*Fanku*) ritual depicted on the left panel of the coffin unfolds from the head end to the foot end, conveying the deceased's spirit tablet to the ancestral hall (*Xiangdian* *Citang*). Finally, it culminates at the inverted-bowl stupa

on the back panel, symbolizing that the deceased's soul has reached its final resting place in the celestial realm.

The overall viewing logic of Zhao Liang's coffin painting forms a clockwise circular structure that starts at the foot end of the right panel, ends at the head end, then starts again at the head end of the left panel, and ends at the foot end. This clockwise circular (Youxuan Xunhuan) structure also has its counterpart in Buddhist rituals. As stated in the first volume of the *Sutra of Amitayus (Wuliangshou Jing)*: "I bow my head to the Buddha's feet and circumambulate three times to the right."¹⁰ Chapter 15 of the *Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma (Miaofa Lianhua Jing)* refers to the ritual of circumambulating the Buddha in reverence: "Circumambulate three times to the right, with joined in respect and devotion."¹¹ This passage also emphasizes the act of circumambulating the Buddha in a clockwise direction (rightward). The *Sutra on the Merits of Circumambulating the Stupa to the Right (Foshui Yourao Fota Gongde Jing)* details various blessings that can be obtained by circumambulating the stupa to the right — such as a prosperous and stable life, an adequate supply of food and clothing, and immunity from disasters and dangers, to name a few. The formation of this ritual custom is rooted in the core concept of "valuing the right side as honorable" in traditional Indian culture; its essence is to convey devout reverence for the Buddha, stupas, and all venerable elders through specific rituals. Starting from the right side of a Buddha statue or stupa, devotees circumambulate in a continuous loop along a fixed path. This circular movement itself forms an eternal cycle with no beginning or end, and its essence is to guide practitioners onto the path of liberation toward freedom from suffering and attainment of bliss, which aligns with Buddhism's worldview of the continuity of life and death and the cyclicity of cause and effect. Furthermore, when Zhao Liang elaborately designed this coffin painting during his lifetime, he may have imagined the presence of viewers in front of the painting. The funeral rituals depicted on the coffin painting guide the viewer's gaze to shift step by step, as if accompanying Zhao Liang's soul on a journey of ascension from death to immortality. The clockwise ritual (Youxuan Yigui) endows the deceased's remains with sacred attributes, thus unifying the ritual connotations of circumambulating the stupa and circumambulating the coffin.

"Beginning is the end, and the end is the beginning, like a ring with no starting or end point," states the *Xunzi*. The funeral scene depicted on Zhao Liang's coffin paintings is both temporal and spatial (existing in both time and space). In addition to fully presenting

the funeral rites of the Ming Dynasty — such as the departure of the coffin (Fayin), the pit-scaling ritual (Yankuang), and Returning to Mourn (Fanku) — the coffin paintings also disassemble this coherent timeline into the burial space of the lacquered coffin's left/right panels and front/back panels. By viewing the coffin while circumambulating it, spectators or those who perform the funeral rituals can reenact the entire funeral process during their spatial movement, thus completing the spatial transition of Zhao Liang's soul from the mortal world to the celestial realm. The cyclical structure of the pictorial space resonates with the viewer (or the viewer's viewing movement). When viewers think they have reached the end, they find themselves back at the beginning instead. Zhao Liang had no heirs to continue his lineage, making the secular continuation of his family impossible. Thus, by triggering interaction between viewers and the pictorial space, he transformed linear time into closed-loop space and constructed a scene of merged time and space with no beginning or end, which was intended to alleviate Zhao Liang's anxiety, as a member of the eunuch class in the Ming Dynasty, regarding the whereabouts of his soul after death.

4. The Distinctive Visual Story of the Coffin Paintings' Pictures Within Pictures

By focusing on the details of the coffin paintings, we can observe that in the right panel of the coffin, the curtains of the hearse transporting the coffin are drawn aside, revealing the coffin containing Zhao Liang's remains placed on the hearse. On the side of this coffin, five monks walking forward with their palms joined are clearly depicted (figure 8). This distinctive picture-within-a-picture form breaks the single narrative of traditional coffin paintings. It embeds a secondary scene (a coffin painting within the coffin painting) in the primary scene (the secular funeral depicted on the coffin painting) in a nested structure, forming a visual narrative parallel to that of the main coffin painting. Although the picture-within-a-picture only occupies a small local space of the hearse in the main scene, the images of the five monks with palms joined depicted in it are highly similar to those of the monks in the primary scene on the right panel, and their direction of movement is also highly consistent, both advancing from the foot end to the head end of the coffin painting. It can be seen that this design was most likely Zhao Liang's preset for his real funeral, emphasizing that his funeral after death should be held exactly as depicted in the painting. The



Figure 8. Detail of the right-side hearse of Zhao Liang's coffin.

coffin paintings he designed himself would inevitably appear at his funeral. However, due to the limited size of the picture-within-a-picture, only the most representative plot — the monks with palms joined leading the way — could be implied.

Eunuch tombs contemporary with Zhao Liang's tomb (1559) — including the tomb of Eunuch Liu Zhong of the Imperial Horse Bureau (1554),¹² tomb M5 of the Eunuch of the Shu Principality at Hongpailou, Chengdu (1561),¹³ the tomb of Eunuch Ma Yongcheng of the Imperial Horse Bureau (1518),¹⁴ — were all looted and devoid of coffins. As a result, it remains unconfirmed whether the coffins in these tombs had lacquer paintings. Evidence from a vermilion-lacquered burial coffin uncovered from the Ming Dynasty eunuch tomb at Dianchang Village, Fengtai District, Beijing (Jiajing reign to the late Ming period),¹⁵ and fragments of red lacquer skin found in the tomb of Ming Dynasty Eunuch Yang Qing (1432) show that the application of vermilion lacquer to Ming Dynasty eunuch burial furnishings complied with established protocols.¹⁶

Nevertheless, there is currently no conclusive evidence confirming whether painted decorations were present on these vermilion lacquers.

Zhao Liang was the Chief Eunuch holding the Seal of the Imperial Household Directorate (Neiguanjian), one of the Twelve Directorates of the Ming Dynasty. As this directorate was one of the largest eunuch organizations in history, he ranked among the highest-ranking eunuchs. His main duties included “the ten workshops (timber, stone, tile, earth, construction materials, Eastern and Western supply routes, lacquer, ceremonial rites, and gunpowder), as well as the Rice and Salt Storehouse, the Construction Storehouse, and the Imperial Altar Storehouse.”¹⁷ He was responsible for all state-funded palace and tomb construction, as well as the production of ceremonial furniture made of bronze and tin, utensils, and matters related to ice chambers. His responsibilities clearly included constructing palaces and tombs, indicating that he was not only familiar with the specifications for crafting funerary objects but also had the opportunity to participate in the design and

construction of painted coffins. Second, Zhao Liang's tomb was excavated at the site of Jingde Temple. *A Study of Old News from the Sun* (*Rixia Jiuwen Kao*) states that the temple was first constructed approximately sixty li from the capital after the fourth year of the Zhengtong reign of the Ming Dynasty (1439–1449).¹⁸ Zhao Liang was buried in the thirty-eighth year of the Jiajing reign (1559), while the tombs of Eunuch Chen Zan (1474) and Eunuch Chen Gui (1489) of the Imperial Household Directorate (*Neiguanjian*) had already been built there before that. Liu Ruoyu recorded in *Zhuozhong Zhi*: “Among eunuchs, most believe deeply in cause and effect, and many are devout Buddhists; their tombs must be located within Buddhist temples.” This precisely proves that Jingde Temple was originally a place for eunuchs to build their longevity retreats (*shoucang*). During the Ming Dynasty, it was customary for eunuchs to prepare their longevity retreats in advance. Such preparations included shrouds, burial furnishings, tomb chambers, mausoleums, and epitaph inscriptions, to prepare for unexpected circumstances.¹⁹ This provided a prerequisite for Zhao Liang to personally design the coffin paintings. As a devout Buddhist, Zhao Liang chose to be buried here. This not only complied with the eunuch community's burial custom that tombs must be located within Buddhist temples but also ensured continuous incense offerings and sacrifices after his death by relying on the temple. His attention to posthumous affairs, combined with the convenience of his role overseeing construction work, gave him sufficient motivation to personally design a magnificent and lively coffin painting to demonstrate his social status. The picture-in-picture form adopted in the coffin paintings not only provides space for us to interpret Zhao Liang's pre-conceived ideas about his own funeral during his lifetime, but also serves as an image carrier for expressing the continuous existence of his soul after death.

5. The Presence Embodied in Picture-within-a-Picture

Presence is one of the key words in Western philosophy of the twentieth century. Its basic meaning refers to manifest existence or the manifestation of existential meaning. It mainly emphasizes the directness and immediacy of time and place. In this sense, images are one of the symbols that possess the strongest presence effect.

In ancient beliefs, tombs served as the deceased's afterlife residence. To settle the souls of the departed,

the living arranged the images in the tomb to create the illusion that, although the deceased had passed away, their souls remained present. A small false door is painted on the north side of the coffin bed in the back chamber of Liao Dynasty Tomb No. 10 in Xuanhua, Hebei Province. This false door faces the door panels beneath the gate tower (figure 9). According to scholar Li Qingquan, this structure was actually a bedroom passage specially created by the tomb designers for the deceased's soul. During the day, the tomb owner's soul could rest on the coffin bed and regard it as the main hall of his home while he was still alive. At night, it could return to the bedroom through this passage (the false door) to sleep.²⁰ In such a system of visual and spatial logic, the back chamber of the tomb was transformed into a main hall where the deceased could carry out their daily routines and receive attendances. The bedroom was located opposite the main hall and was materialized through the visual illusion created by decorations such as the tomb's false door. Additionally, portraits of tomb owners and their wives, which were common in Song and Jin period tombs, as well as portraits of the deceased enshrined in memorial halls, were all created to ensure that the deceased's souls could receive sacrifices and offerings.²¹ Later, portraits of couples sitting face to face evolved into the image motif of the Kaifang Banquet (Feast of Opening Fragrance). Attendants, teacups, food, and other items were painted around the figures. The portraits of the tomb owners and their wives were created within the tomb space. They symbolized that the true souls of the tomb owners were receiving offerings and sacrifices, and that the entire tomb had become the abode of their souls. The ancient people constantly experimented with diverse spatial expression methods to make the souls of the deceased present.

As previously mentioned, the coffin paintings in Zhao Liang's tomb presented his own funeral plans on the surface of the lacquered coffin. A coffin on the coffin (*Guanshangguan*) was also painted in the images to express his expectations for the actual funeral. It is no longer verifiable whether Zhao Liang's actual funeral fully followed his preconceived ideas during his lifetime. However, the picture-in-picture form did establish a clear parallel between his ideal funeral plans and the ritual scenes depicted in the coffin paintings at the very least. On this basis, a further parallel relationship was established between the overall coffin paintings and the coffin on the coffin, which refers to the miniature coffin image nested within the paintings. This picture-in-picture is not merely a coffin, but a reference to the future ongoing funeral. This infinitely nested visual structure reinforces the state of “the funeral is in

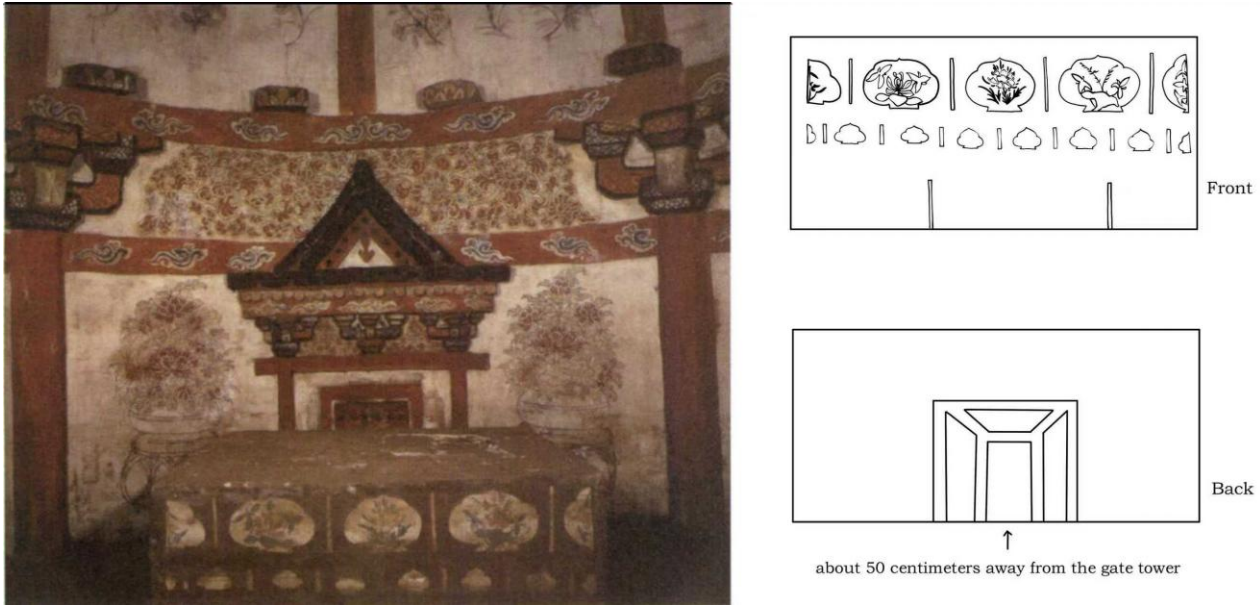


Figure 9. is excerpted from Li Qingquan's *Spatial Logic and Visual Implications: A New Discussion on the 'Woman Opening the Door' Diagram in Song, Liao and Jin Tombs*.

progress.” It perpetuates the funeral through the nesting of images, creating an infinite and never-ending cycle. In this dual-parallel imagery, Zhao Liang’s soul exists not only in the actual coffin but also permanently resides in the ideal funeral depicted in the paintings. He is both the recipient of the funeral and the designer of the funeral rituals, thereby ensuring his presence during the execution of the actual funeral.

We can envision such a spatial expression. It allows the tomb owner’s soul to follow the continuous progression of the rituals depicted in the coffin paintings and complete the transition from death to immortality under the protection of numerous relatives and attendants. This embodied path to immortality not only fulfilled Zhao Liang’s desire to witness the glory of his posthumous life; more importantly, it alleviated his anxiety — as a eunuch, he had to face not only the worry of leaving no descendants to continue his family line and no one to offer sacrifices to him after his death. In Zhao Liang’s tomb, this coffin painting — which he personally oversaw the design of — is no longer a static scene, but a soul passage that can operate perpetually, creating a virtual space in which the deceased is never distant, and life and death are interconnected.

Conclusion

The life trajectory of eunuchs is essentially a chapter filled with hardships and sorrows. Living as palace servants for years left the eunuch group lacking both

professional skills to make a living outside the palace and the corresponding physical capacity for self-sustenance. Above all, due to their physical mutilation, eunuchs have long faced prejudice and ostracism from the world; many of their family members also felt ashamed of this, trapping them in a predicament of having no way to return home — even after their death, they could not be buried in the family cemetery. Intertwined hardships prompted the eunuch group to turn to Buddhism for spiritual comfort, hoping to gain peace and blessings in the afterlife through this. As a result, they devoutly believed in Buddhism, donated money to temples, built new temples, ate vegetarian food, and recited Buddhist scriptures. Furthermore, their difficult situation after leaving the palace in old age compelled them to plan for their old age in advance. Against this backdrop, the coffin paintings from Zhao Liang’s Ming Dynasty tomb — as the lacquer-wood artifact with the most grand figure scenes among all archaeologically unearthed lacquerware in China to date — condense the funeral rituals and spiritual world of the eunuch group into a single cultural relic through visualized pictorial remains. It provides a rare and valuable case for us to interpret the living circumstances, religious beliefs, and funeral concepts of eunuchs during the Ming Dynasty, and also fills the gap in material evidence for research in relevant fields.

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ENDNOTES

1. This text assumes that the viewer is facing Zhao Liang's coffin's front barrier, with the "left panel" on the left and the "right panel" on the right.

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圖像、儀式與生死觀：明趙諒墓棺畫的文化意涵探析

宋緯苒

摘 要：2017年北京石景山五塔裏淨德寺遺址發掘區內出土一具彩繪漆棺，墓主為明代內官監太監趙諒。其棺槨彩繪以精湛工藝描繪出兩幅宏大葬禮儀仗場景。右幫圖像呈現從“發引”至“仙境接引”的完整儀式進程，構建出靈魂成仙的視覺路徑；左幫則表現“回轍”場景，形成儀式閉環。棺畫採用“畫中畫”結構與右旋觀看順序，不僅再現明代宦官喪儀流程，更通過圖像嵌套與空間敘事，強化了墓主靈魂“在場”的永恆性。墓主趙諒憑藉其職掌陵墓營造的身份背景與佛教信仰，精心設計此棺畫，既反映其對身後榮典與靈魂歸宿的強烈訴求，亦為學界考察明代喪葬風俗提供了關鍵實物依據。

關鍵詞：趙諒墓；彩繪漆棺；畫中畫；喪葬禮儀