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## Sacrality, Mythologism and Realism of Mural Painting of the Han Dynasty and Its Influence on the Further Development of Chinese Art and Architecture

### Sakralność, mitologizm i realizm. Malarstwo ściennie dynastii Han i jej wpływ na dalszy rozwój chińskiej sztuki i architektury

**Keywords:** sacrality, mythologism, funerary murals, China, Han Dynasty

**Słowa kluczowe:** sakralność, mitologizm, ściennie malarstwo funeralne, Chiny, dynastia Han

#### Introduction

The research topic is related to the analysis of the origins and specific features of the murals of the tombs of the Han period. Although China's ancient architecture is widely known, the long-standing Chinese murals of the Han, Wei, Jin, Sui, Tang, Song and Liao periods are much less known to the general public outside of China. Therefore, the authors set the task to systematize and supplement information about the mural painting of the Han period; to highlight its features and main plots; to prove the originality of its performance with a comparison with the technique of execution and subjects of mural painting among other

peoples and confirm its decisive role in the formation of stylistic imagery of Chinese art in subsequent centuries. In addition to influencing art, traditional beliefs also influenced such a specific area of Chinese culture as landscape design; thus, some similarities are observed in the subjects of paintings and landscape paintings and the names of pavilions in the gardens. Basing on the analysis of the source base and the preserved samples, the authors determined the specifics of the compositional construction, plots and coloristic of the paintings of the Han period and figured out the features of their implementation. There are certain semantic and plot analogies between the old

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Chinese funerary mural and a similar ancient Egyptian funerary mural, which is noticeable when comparing both burial cults and beliefs in the afterworld and the supernatural. The earliest period of Chinese mural painting was during the Han Dynasty (Western Han and Eastern Han), with the capitals in the cities of Chang'an and Luòyáng. The Han period is considered a period of economic, technical, cultural and artistic progress and prosperity when the emperor ruled the state relying on officials and feudal lords. Legislative policy, traditions, education system and art based on a combination of philosophical doctrine and ethics of Confucianism and Taoism. It was during the Han period that the scholar Dong Zhongshu combined the canons of Confucianism with the theory of the five elements and the cosmogonic cycles of yin and yang. If we characterize in general the cultural and artistic features of the Han era, then this is primarily the development of monumental art (painting and sculpture); the desire to create a unity of style that took place against the background of the unification of the country and development of culture. It is proved that the art and architecture of the Han era made a significant impact on the further development of Chinese culture and on the cultural and artistic development of Japan, Korea, Mongolia, which at an early stage directly perceived the artistic and cultural preferences of the Celestial Empire.

The art of the Han Dynasty was based on the previous art traditions of 500–300 BC, but its notable innovation lies in the expansion of the figurative methods of the art of the past with its inherent symbolism and laconism; it also has a stability of metaphorical means due to the presentation of real-life scenes (famous historical events, the life of aristocrats and commoners). So, the main feature of the mural painting of the Han era is its noticeable realism, even in the depiction of religious or mythological subjects. Another sign is the combination of real people and mythical and afterworld creatures in one image, testifying to the preservation of a close connection with the beliefs of past centuries in the Han period.

Based on the excavations of tombs of the Western Han era, the authors determined the plot compositions of the oldest samples of burial murals and the technique of making murals on a white primer with the outline of lines (the main one is a line, a linear image, and not a painted fragment).

Despite the difference between the social strata of the population, they were all united by a shared faith in the supernatural—the existence of a host of deities, spirits, immortals and demons, the search for achieving immortality was widespread. Social structure and family life were also under the influence of Confucianism. Together, all external factors influenced the imaginative burial system of Han period murals.

Today, there are 30 known tombs with a total of 1,500–2,000 frescoes.

## MAIN PART

### Materials and methods

The specificity of the chosen research topic determined the selection of scientific methods. The main methods were: historical analysis, comparative analysis, the analytical method, the graph-analytical method, which were supplemented by iconographic sources. The factors that influenced the formation of stylistic and figurative features of Han murals were analyzed via historical analysis; images of tombs were analyzed using analytical and graphical-analytical methods; murals of various tombs and different periods, murals of Ancient China and Ancient Egypt, as well as the contemporaneous belief system were compared using comparative analysis.

The authors analyzed the sources that were directly connected with the art and cultural life of the Han period; with the system of beliefs and worldviews; as well as with their influence on the formation of art and architecture in China in general. In particular, the legends of immortals have been embodied in landscape paintings of traditional Chinese landscape design since ancient times, and images of sacred animals and creatures became popular in décor during the reign of various dynasties; a peculiar religious meaning was attributed even to a merely functional layout.

General issues related to the art of China were discussed by N. Vynogradova,<sup>1</sup> M. Kravtsova,<sup>2</sup> Zhang Anzhi.<sup>3</sup> Chen Yaoting<sup>4</sup> analyzed the hierarchy of Chinese Taoism; Cao Yue<sup>5</sup> conducted a comparative analysis of Taoist frescoes in China and religious frescoes in Eastern Europe.

Art as a philosophical category and the role of art in the restoration were analyzed by M. Orlenko and Yu. Ivashko.<sup>6</sup> The specifics of landscape design in China as based on local philosophical, ideological and religious concepts and its connection with painting and art in general, were investigated by M. Dyomin, M. Orlenko, Yu. Ivashko, D. Kuśnierz-Krupa, D. Chernyshev, A. Dmytrenko, T. Kuzmenko and Chang Peng.<sup>7</sup> In particular, their publications emphasized that just as the ideal world was depicted in traditional Chinese paintings, the absolute image of the Garden of Eden was created in landscape design, in which everything was as perfect as possible, each element had a particular symbolic meaning. It was especially true for the placement of small architectural forms—pavilions in a natural environment, the location of which was carefully chosen, and the landscape or some event or poem determined the name of the pavilions.<sup>8</sup>

### Beliefs as a key to understanding mural art

The key to understanding those murals of the Han period is an analysis of the worldview and religious beliefs of the population when there was a practice of sacrificing the dead, and the world was considered inhabited by good and evil otherworldly beings.<sup>9</sup> Families of the Han period brought ritual sacrifices, including animals

and products, not only to deceased ancestors but also to deities and spirits to appease them.

The appearance of mystical and religious images in the tombs of the imperial family was because the emperor was, in fact, the highest cult minister on earth and was obligated to perform religious sacrifices to the sky, and the deities and spirits of mountains and rivers. At the times of the Han Empire, there was an idea of an inextricable connection between the three heavenly and earthly kingdoms, the unity and opposition of the elements of yin and yang, the moon and the sun and five primary elements: wood (mù 木), fire (huo 火), earth (tu 土), metal (jin 金) and water (shui 水). This theory of the five basic elements was transferred to the system of human internal organs, five flavors and even feelings.

The era of Han is a period of the cult of immortals and immortality, which would be later embodied in one of the widespread techniques of Chinese landscape design—"one lake, three mountains." The legend about the immortals who sit on the mountains gave the name to small architectural forms—pavilions. Similarly, the preservation of faith in the immortal and conscious materialization of this theme in landscape design and architecture of small forms is due to the fact that both the emperor and the official sought in this way to obtain their own immortality.

After 65 AD, Buddhism entered the territory of China and traditional mythological narratives were supplemented with religious Buddhist ones.

The belief in the afterlife in the Han era changed over time, including in the beliefs of demons as manifestations of the spirits of the dead, sending diseases to the living. They had to make sacrifices to the spirits, and if the oblation was accepted, they expected success, on other occasions, the spirits could cause harm. In Western Han (between 206 BC and 25 AD), the attitude towards the dead was more positive, as can be seen from tomb inscriptions, but in Eastern Han (25–220 AD) the spirits of the dead were feared as messengers of misfortune.

The funeral cult was a significant aspect of Han period life. Traditionally, artists decorated the brick and stone walls of tombs with paintings and carved reliefs, and these images played not aesthetically pleasing, but a sacred role, helping the deceased on the way to the afterlife. Egyptian burial wall paintings played the same part.

Here it is worth drawing analogies with the funeral cult in Ancient Egypt when it was believed that in the afterlife the deceased also needed to eat, drink, dress, and also required servants to perform work. Many clay figures of servants were found in Chinese tombs—analogue to the Egyptian ushabti. Just as in Egypt it was believed that a person has a threefold nature—ba ("pure spirit, soul"), ah (closely connected with the body) and ka ("guardian spirit," "sacred double"), the Han Chinese believed that a person has a dual nature: a spirit-soul (hun 魂) and a body-soul (ro 魄). The spirit-soul transferred after death to the paradise of the immortals, and the body-soul

required food, drink, clothing until all the rituals necessary for the deceased were carried out. Both natures merged during the burial ceremony (Zhao hun—fu ro 招魂復魄).

In some burial vaults, there were plots associated with the images of the "heavenly world" with the mythical owners Fushi and Nueva, combined with drawings of the sun and the moon, the goddess Sivanmu, around which sacred animals were depicted.<sup>10</sup> The four animals were symbols of the Four Spirits, although gradually purely mythological plots were supplemented with real ones, for example, "Confucius Visits Lao Tzu."

Mural painting of burial tombs was a separate direction of Chinese painting. In general, the Chinese paintings belonged to one of two directions: Gongbi (工笔, pronounced /gong-bee/), literally 'working pen,' with detailed images and outlining them with clear lines), and Xieyi (写意, pronounced /shyeh-ee/: "writing," meaning "freehand," with conventional images and blurred figures). There was a prevalence of portrait images in China from ancient times; namely from between the fifth and third centuries BC, when the emperor, famous philosophers, military leaders and statesmen were depicted. It led to a definite figurative system of portrayed faces with equanimity and without emotion, since the expression of emotions was considered a trait of commoners.

### Specific features of Han murals

During the Han Dynasty, mural painting was the privilege of the ruling class, but artists and stone carvers could advise the client.<sup>11</sup> The social status of artisans was higher than that of merchants; they were allowed to wear expensive clothes, ride a horse and hold public office, especially, if one was a recognized artist.

Artists also belonged to artisans, and sometimes even civil servants engaged in painting (for example, the official Tsai Yu, at the request of Emperor Ling, painted portraits of famous officials and military men).

Burial murals have survived in tombs in Henan, Shanxi, Shandong, Hebei provinces.<sup>12</sup>

The decoration of tomb walls combined murals and reliefs. They were polychrome murals depicting genre and mythological scenes—both well-known historical, and religious and mythological events, and direct events related to the public and private life of the deceased. In such cases, realistic images of people who are engaged in some activity, at rest or while talking appear in the murals. Exquisite feminine images became traditional, depicting good, magnificently dressed ladies with fascinating hairstyles). The burial mural of a couple depicts a woman holding a bird and a man with a boat, the moon, the sun and other symbolic images, which in the allegoric form pictured a happy afterlife in heaven.

An analysis of the plots indicates their diversity, including fantastic images, that is seen in the examples of the murals of the tomb of a man named Bu Qianqiu and his wife, opened in 1976 in Luoyang city in Henan

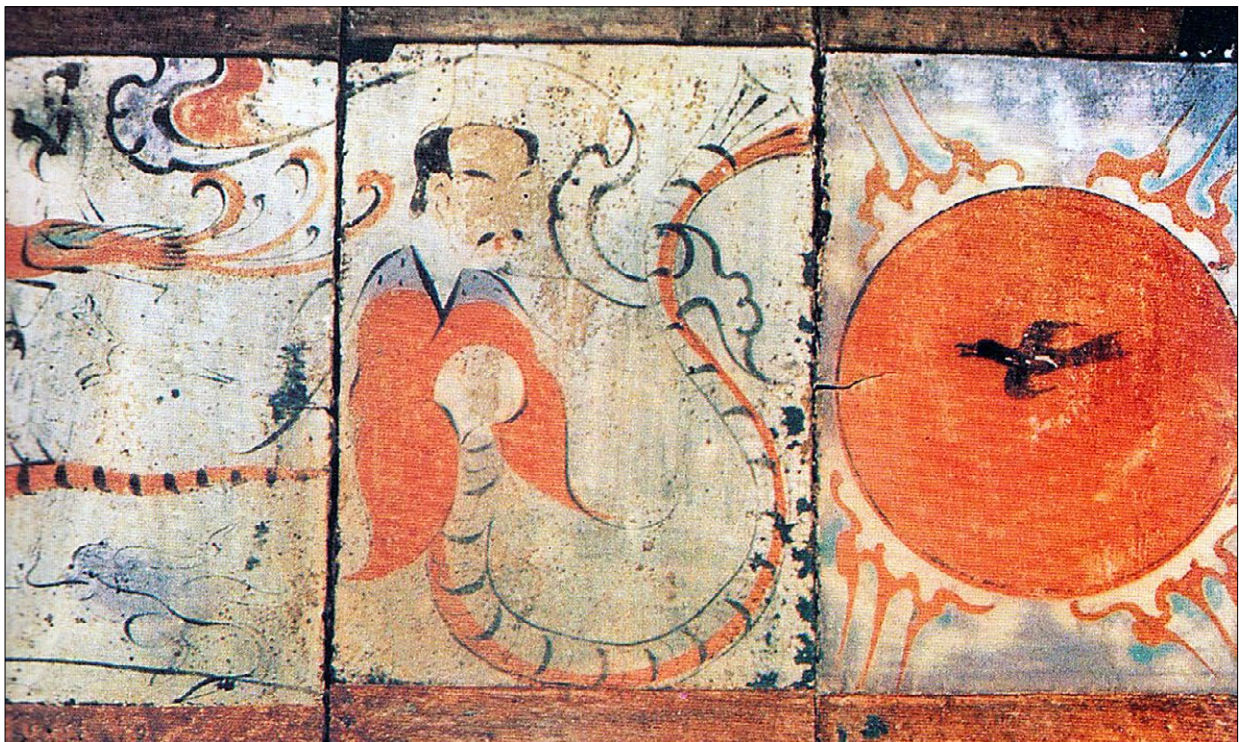


Fig. 1. Mural painting of a fragment depicting a winged serpent-man—a heavenly deity—and a raven against the background of the Sun.

province, dated from about 86–49 BC. This tomb is a confirmation of the fact that the decoration of the walls with murals was widespread among the aristocratic elite at that time. Fresco murals were painted outside, not in the tomb, with animal hair brushes fixed on bamboo or wooden sticks on the surface of hollow brick slabs, which acted as a primed white base, on which polychrome paintings were painted according to the pattern but, in general, such fragments with paintings were collected in one image already in the middle of the burial and were located in the upper part of the

burial chambers. Artists made paints from a mixture of animal and vegetable fats, ground minerals and special glue.

This technique was explained by the need for painting with a sufficient amount of light and the complexity of painting the ceiling straightforwardly in a dark tomb since the main subject was located precisely on the ceiling.<sup>13</sup> All of the images in Bu Qianqiu's tomb are composed of twenty hollow brick slabs, each numbered from east to west. Each numbered brick has a specific plot, for example:

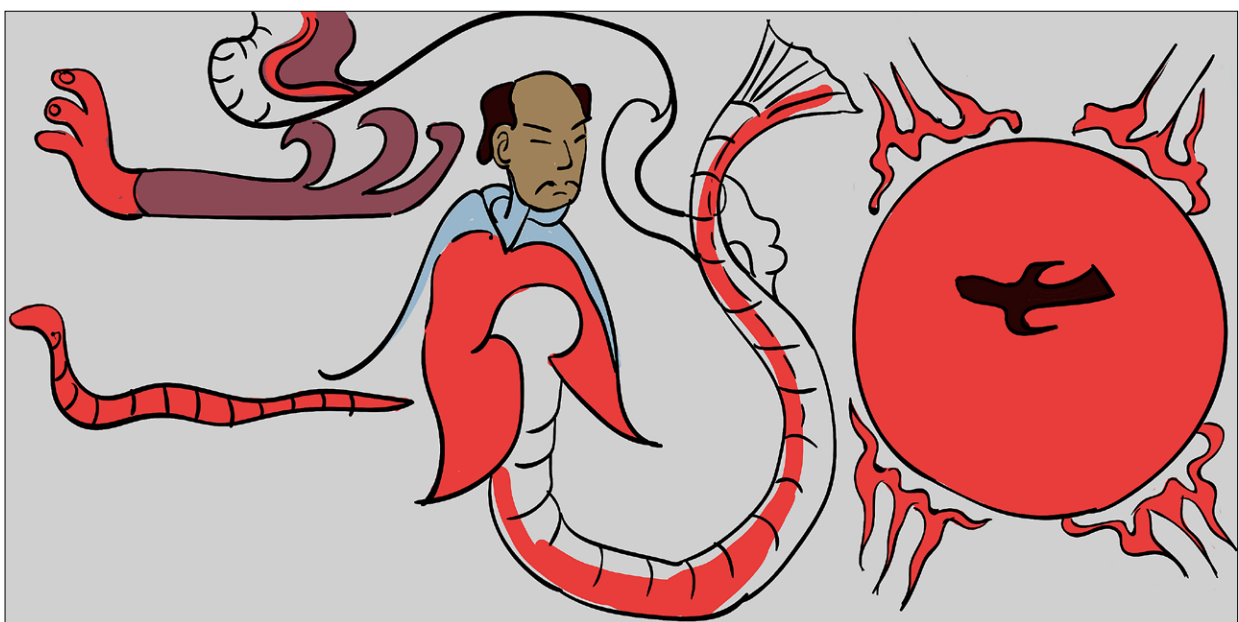


Fig. 2. Graphic reconstruction of mural painting, 2020; painted by D. Yang.

No. 1 – a winged snake among fog and clouds;  
No. 2 – a crow flying against the background of a large image of the Sun with flames around (Fig. 1, 2);  
No. 6, 7, 8 – white tiger, grinning and running against the background of clouds;  
Nos. 9 and 10 – a peacock that looks like a mermaid;  
No. 20 – clouds.

In the places where the walls meet the ceiling, there was a fresco made of five hollow brick slabs. In the center, one can see a sitting dressed bear around which there are clouds, under it a white tiger and a dark green dragon, grinning at each other. Such images of predatory animals were supposed to be the guards of the soul of the deceased on the way to paradise. Closer to the foreground, a fairy-tale prince with a human head and bird feathers was depicted, who spread his wings before flight—a symbolic angel, the guide of the soul to heaven. The theme of the rectangular fresco on the ceiling is reminiscent of the subject composition of the Mawangdui silk funeral blanket, which also depicts the soul's journey to paradise.

Despite the relatively small number of images in the tomb, they became a real breakthrough in terms of imagery, composition and pictorial techniques. As can be seen from the example of the murals of Bu Qianjun's tomb, the deity is not depicted there, and this later became a model for later Han frescoes. But the central theme was the Duality and the Five Primary Elements, although animistic images of dragons, white tigers and peacocks remained. In the Han period, animistic pictures acquired a different religious meaning and symbolized the Four Spirits and the four cardinal points (a dark green dragon, a white tiger, a bright red peacock, a turtle with a snake).

The innovation of the Bu Qianqiu fresco is also the rejection of the canonical pattern and the use of vivid lines, conveying the dynamism of the figures with their outlines and width, the use of bright red to cover large and small fragments, often next to black outline lines.<sup>14</sup> The faces and arms of the figures were painted light brown, and the clothes were modeled with light green and purple strokes. Colored lines and spots could come close to black or recede from them. It is believed that it was this romantic style of mural painting that became the forerunner of the traditional Chinese technique of depicting human figures.

Even earlier, namely in 1957, in the vicinity of Luoyang, a Han period burial, dated 48–7 BC, was discovered, which was dated to a later time than that of Bu Qianqiu. Despite geographical proximity and belonging to the same era, these burials differ in their fresco painting. The later tomb showed the changes that took place in the fresco murals. For example, a prefabricated mural of 12 hollow bricks depicts only the moon, the sun and stars, where the sun and the moon are at the edges of the fresco, and the stars are surrounded by clouds. The interior combines painted and empty planes. Numerous vivid images adorn the top of the wall that divides the front and back chambers

of the tomb and the top of the back wall. The fresco on the front surface of the partition is composed of two parts. The upper part consists of three hollow bright polychrome brick slabs. The lower part, corresponding to the horizontal beam, is also formed of hollow brick slabs whitewashed with lime. The fresco of the lower part has a length of 206 cm and a width of 25 cm. It depicts a multi-figured, somewhat exaggerated composition of 13 people, which illustrates the famous legend of the two peaches, which caused the death of three warriors of Prince Jinghong with Qi, known in the Chronicle of Yanji. Significantly, this legend has something in common with the fable of the judgment of Paris, since the prince, who wanted to get rid of the vain warriors, gave only two peaches to three soldiers for the worthiest of them, and that was why the warriors killed each other.

The middle of the central part is occupied by the image of a giant bear on a vertical hollow brick. An immortal with jade in his hands is portrayed on both sides of the bear's head. An animal with a cat's face and a human body is drawn between the bear's head and the jade; under the bear—there are bright red turtles and snakes; above it, there is a peacock; on the left and right sides—dark brown dragons and white tigers. The upper left corner is adorned with an ochre red leopard, and the upper right corner features a green monkey. Similar images decorate and triangular hollow bricks. In the center of the images, on triangular bricks, there is a jade stone in the sky, for which black and white bears are fighting. A yellow deer is depicted above the black bear, in the lower part of the fresco, there is a supernatural creature with a human head and the body of an animal, which is chasing a horse.

Over time, the colors in the central and lower parts of the fresco have lost their clear outline. The color palette is more varied than that of Bu Qianqiu. The used colors are bright red, ochre red, purple, dark blue, light yellow, light brown and light green.

In some cases of murals of the Han times, a drawing of the outline of the depicted object appears, but the line remains central, and the color only complements it.

A characteristic feature of mural painting in Henan in the Henan province is its dynamism, conveyed through the gestures of the figures depicted, but the background space for the images is not filled with anything, and the scattered images make a long line.

Means of figurative expression are used in the paintings in Luoyang in the Liaodong province. These murals are characterized by dynamism and a closeness of composition. Scenes of aristocratic life, entertainment, travel and celebrations became the subjects of the murals in Laoyan. The image of a ceremonial exit became a traditional subject of Laoyan murals. Luoyang's murals were aimed primarily at a vivid reflection of the life of the aristocracy, while using the figurative means of the past and adding their individuality of the creative manner.



Fig. 3. Dancers and Musicians mural painting in the tomb of Helinge'er Han (the Eastern Han Dynasty, Helinge'er district, Hohhot at Horing'er [Helinge'er 和林格爾] in Hohhot [Huhehaote 呼和浩特].

In Henan murals, the composition has the character of a frieze, but in Luoyang murals, figures are located throughout the entire image field. In the traditional Luoyang storyline *Parade Departure*, the dynamism is emphasized with the help of composition, outlines of figures and colors. According to tradition, the central place of the composition, around which the plot itself unfolds, is occupied by the cart of an aristocrat surrounded by his retinue, and the movements of both people and horses are conveyed with intentional exaggeration, in order to show mobility. The horses either stand on to the hind legs, or turn their heads as if they want to throw off the rider. Attention to the drawing of details became a hallmark of Luoyang's plot—the axes of the cart, hairstyles, clothes, horse armor. The same attention to detail became a common feature of Han murals. A general characterization of Han period murals would be as follows:

- despite not dealing away with the figurative and artistic means of the past, they sought new forms of artistic expression;
- they moved away from conventional symbolism towards realism;
- the person became the central theme of the mural;
- despite the attention to the drawing of details, the actuality of gestures and the transferring of movement, a system for the presentation of inner human emotions was not developed, therefore, along with the detailing of clothes, horses and carts, people's

faces were portrayed as without emotion and in a schematic manner.

The last period of the Han Dynasty, namely the Eastern Han Dynasty, was distinguished by the spread of the use of decorated stone slabs and hollow bricks. The frescoes of the Eastern Han period increased in scale and their plots were limited to the theme of the Four Spirits, as well as scenes from the earthly life of the deceased. The topic of the soul's journey to paradise practically disappeared, which indicates the domination of realistic images over afterworld mystical and religious ones with hidden meaning (Fig. 3, 4).

### Conclusions

There are several types of plots of the murals of the tombs of the Han period:

- 1) the image of rural labor, gardens, grazing, hunting, reflecting the activities of servants and workers in the estate of the deceased owner;
- 2) reflection of the social status of the owner of the tomb, their image with subordinates or superiors, during travel or hostilities;
- 3) the privacy of the owner of the tomb shrine, banquet scenes, playing music, dancing;
- 4) historical figures—exponents of Confucian ethic—as examples of moral qualities for the owner of the tomb—sages and philosophers of antiquity like Confucius, Lao Tzu and Duke Wen of Zhou,



Fig. 4. Graphic reconstruction of a mural painting, 2020; painted by D. Yang.

- the righteous Jing Ke and Wu Zixu, as well as relatives—Ding Lan and Tsiu Hu;
- 5) mythological plots with creatures of heavenly rulers, fairies, birds and animals, personifying the heavenly world, good and evil creatures;
  - 6) images symbolizing the positive fusion of heaven and man—unicorns and deities;
  - 7) symbols of the four celestial constellations in the form of four animistic deities, as well as luminaries—the sun, moon, stars and clouds.

Such images covered the walls, ceiling and doors of the tomb. There were images of dancers and musicians, warriors on chariots, women dressed in expensive clothes.

Many similarities were noted between the cult of the afterlife in Egypt and China of the Han dynasty. In both cases, wall paintings depicting the earthly life of the owner and his family, gods and servants were made.

Analysis of the compositional and plot construction of murals of the Han era makes it possible to determine the following characteristic features: the conventionality and maximum laconicism of the image combined with a limited color palette; the distribution of drawings of half-humans, half-animals, fantastic creatures; a schematic representation of people without drawing faces and costumes, pictures of leisurely scenes—singing and dancing; the dominance of red combined with black, white and ochre. In tombs of famous military figures, there were more

complex plot compositions depicting travelling officials, chariots and horse riders.

Despite the fact that the painting canons known later were not yet developed, contemporaneous artists were able to innovate plot transmission, express the individualism of the images, and displayed an attention to detail. The murals of burial tombs of that time still retain a powerful connection with the mystical and animistic paintings of previous centuries (images of sacred animals, including animals, expressing the four cardinal points or acting as guardian spirits of the soul on the way to paradise, pictures of fantastic creatures and spirits). However, the features of realism became increasingly visible in them, expressed in the gradual replacement of mystical plots with realistic ones. The peculiarity of the mural painting of the tombs of the Han era is that unlike, say, the frescoes of Kievan Rus were stationary, integral and were made on-site on wet plaster. The Han mural was essentially prefabricated and consisted of separate fragments painted on hollow previously prepared bricks and stones, which were numbered and, already painted, were installed in the right places in the tombs.

Unlike the ancient Egyptian burial murals, which were stationary, integral, executed according to clear canons, the figures were depicted partly in profile, partly in full face and static, the painting was performed according to preliminary markings, the ancient Chinese murals of the Han era were more conventional, assem-

bled from many independent plot fragments. They are often abstract, sometimes with blurred image contours, and in realistic plots, poses are exaggerated to display movements, but the face, in contrast to the murals of Ancient Egypt, remained schematic. Han wall painting testifies to the fact that it reflected not only native subjects but also externally borrowed mythological ideas, noticeably in the commonality of certain subjects with

other countries. It is believed, that it was in the Han era that a breakthrough occurred from the entirely mystical worldview towards realism and an understanding of the importance of the role of man in the world around him, and although Han mural painting could not get rid of the strong dependence on mysticism of previous centuries, it laid the foundations for original Chinese painting and means of truthfully depicting the surrounding world.

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## Abstract

The influence of external and internal factors on the formation of the figurative language of the burial murals of the Han period has been analyzed. The ancient Chinese burial murals in the tombs of the Han era are known much less than traditional Chinese painting and architecture. Therefore, using the methods of historical analysis, comparative analysis, the analytical method and graph-analytical method, the influence of the worldview and religious ideas of the Han period on the figurative language of the murals of tombs was determined, and the main plot compositions and descriptions of typical performance techniques were listed. The specificity of the frescoes of the Han period was that they were composed of individual details—hollow bricks or stone slabs painted outward on a white base. They were numbered and installed in the appropriate places. It is believed that it was the funeral frescoes of the Han era that became an innovative breakthrough in painting towards a realistic, rather than fantastic and mystical, depiction of the world.

## Streszczenie

W artykule przeanalizowano wpływ czynników zewnętrznych i wewnętrznych na kształtowanie się języka figuratywnego malowideł funeralnych z okresu dynastii Han. Starożytne chińskie ściennie malowidła funeralne w grobowcach z epoki Han są znacznie mniej znane niż tradycyjne chińskie malarstwo i architektura. W związku z powyższym za pomocą metod analizy historycznej, analizy porównawczej, metody analitycznej i metody analityczno-graficznej określono wpływ światopoglądu i idei religijnych okresu dynastii na język figuratywny malowideł grobowców, tematykę głównych kompozycji i opisy. Wymieniono także typowe techniki wykonawcze. Specyfika fresków z okresu dynastii Han polegała na tym, że składały się z pojedynczych elementów – cegły drążonej lub kamiennych płyt pomalowanych na zewnątrz, na białej podstawie. Zostały one ponumerowane, a następnie zainstalowane we właściwych miejscach. Uważa się, że właśnie freski pogrzebowe z epoki Han stały się przełomem w malarstwie w kierunku realistycznego, a nie fantastycznie mistycznego odzwierciedlenia świata.