
In Life and in Death: the Image of the Deceased in the Koguryo Painted Tombs (4th-7th centuries AD)

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The painted tombs of the ancient kingdom of Koguryo (37 BC-AD 668), located today in northeast China and in North Korea not only bear a rare and early testimony to a painting tradition in East Asia, but they also offer a unique glimpse into the lives, religious beliefs and concerns in funerary matters of the people inhabiting these regions during the 4th to 7th centuries AD. The tombs are found scattered on both sides of the Yalu river, mainly in Ji'an, Jilin province and in Huanren, Liaoning province, in China, and in the vicinity of Pyongyang, Nampo and South Hwanghae province in North Korea. Out of a few thousand tombs ascribed to this kingdom, about 120 painted tombs have been discovered so far. They are believed to have been made for the local elite of that time, including kings, aristocrats and high officials. Only two tombs were identified thanks to a funerary inscription dating them to the mid-4th century (Anak n°3, AD 357) and to the early 5th century (Tokhung-ni, AD 408).

The tombs of the elite were built and decorated with colourful paintings to emulate an underground dwelling for the deceased's life after death. Wooden pillars were painted at the corners of the rooms as well as various living quarters of the household (pavilions, kitchen, stables for animals, etc.). It is believed in East Asian funerary traditions, that after death, the spirit separates between a "physical" spirit remaining in the tomb, and a "spiritual" one that is taken on a journey to the afterlife. The wall paintings are endowed with a narrative quality where the deceased is represented multiples times, sometimes with his wife, in various stations in his past "terrestrial" life on the walls of the tomb chamber. His afterlife is represented on the ceiling of the tomb that signifies the celestial realm.

In the Tokhung-ni double-chamber tomb, dated to the early 5th century, one can further distinguish a separation between the "public space" where the deceased is represented in his official duty as a local governor in the front chamber, and the "private quarters" of the household in the back chamber.

In addition, several auspicious cosmological imageries were positioned in specific locations inside the tombs in order to call on the protection of the deceased's spirit and to ensure his safe journey to the other world. Among the most salient ones are: the four guardian animals protecting

the cardinal directions (the Black Warrior of the North, the Red Bird of the South, the Green Dragon of the East and the White Tiger of the West; the funerary “portrait” of the deceased is always positioned on the North wall that is the realm of the dead in burial context. He is under the protection of the Black Warrior and the Northern Dipper Constellation. The Green Dragon and the White Tiger were in addition known to be the two celestial animals leading the way and guiding the deceased in the afterlife; the sun (East wall) and the moon (West wall), and constellations of stars; flying immortals and the Northern Dipper and Southern Dipper constellations.

On the tomb layout of Yaksu-ri, one can see the orientation of the four guardian animals protecting the cardinal direction on the walls of the burial chamber where the coffins of the deceased would be laid. They form a circular movement counter-clockwise as if they were protecting the spirit of the deceased. In addition, a secondary movement can be seen: the Green Dragon of the East and the White Tiger of the West stand out as a pair, oriented the same way, heading toward the South, that symbolizes the gate to the afterlife.

The Northern Dipper and Southern Dipper constellations carry a special significance in Koguryo funerary art. They have the unusual feature of being represented on the ceiling of the tombs facing each other on a much larger scale than the other constellations. The conspicuous presence of the Northern Dipper in a funerary context has been explained as this constellation's embodiment of the establishing of all order in the Universe. As to the religious significance of the Southern Dipper in a funerary context, it appears that it served an auspicious function as well. For instance in the *Shangqingjing* (“Scriptures of Highest Clarity”) by Yang Xi (AD 331-386) from the Eastern Jin period (AD 316-420) it is stated that the division in charge of prolonging life is located in the Southern Dipper.

With the arrival of Buddhism to Korea through the kingdom of Koguryo in the late 4th century AD, we begin to see new elements appearing in the tombs’ decor reflecting the newly imported foreign religious beliefs, such as the idea of rebirth in the Buddhist paradise. Among these new elements there are: Buddha and bodhisattva figures, new-born souls emerging from lotus flowers, and flying immortals. One painted Koguryo tomb stands out as it is the earliest known painted Buddhist imagery in a funerary context, the Changchuan tomb n° 1 located in today’s Ji’an region of Jilin province of China. The tomb is dated to the mid-5th century AD, based on the iconographical study of the Buddhist elements and on the tomb construction type. The Buddhist scenes thus offer us a rare insight of early northeastern Buddhism. This double-chamber tomb displays a unique composite iconography where genre scenes mingle with Buddhist elements and cosmological thinking, including the images of the four guardian animals. Although the animals are correctly laid out spatially in connection with one another (left Dragon, right Tiger and front Birds) they do not accord with their traditional geographical direction since the tomb is aligned on an east-west axis with the entrance to the tomb on the west side.

Eight bodhisattvas (four on each of the North and South wall) whose heads are surrounded by aureoles, are standing on lotus pods and are turned toward the main figure of this Buddhist

assembly, the Buddha that is depicted at the centre of the ceiling (East wall) and above the doorway leading to the burial chamber. It is the earliest known painted representation of a Buddha figure in a tomb in northeast Asia. He is sitting on a lion throne and is surrounded by an oval-shaped mandorla. Two figures are kneeling on the right side of the Buddha in a gesture of homage. They are followed by two attendants. Two figures, a male and a female (perhaps the deceased couple), each carrying an umbrella, are standing on the left side of the Buddha and they are followed by an attendant. The remaining space is filled with clouds, lotus buds, flying apsaras and new-born lotus spirits.

The bodhisattva figures depicted in the Changchuan tomb n°1 are in fact the identical painted representation of traditional bodhisattva figures that were represented in numerous contemporary Buddhist votive sculptures in East Asia. It can be seen in this way in this Liang dynasty bodhisattva sculpture dated to the early 6th century AD. According to Qiang Ning, the eight bodhisattvas are believed to guide the deceased believers of the Bhaiṣajya-guru cult to the Western Paradise of Amitabha where they “would be reborn in lotus flower”. However, the earliest representations of the Bhaiṣajya-guru sutra are found in Sui dynasty (AD 581-618) caves at Dunhuang in western China. The Changchuan tomb n°1 is dated to the 5th century AD based on stylistic consideration of the Buddha figure and his Sumeru-type of throne, and as such, could well be one of the earliest painted representations of the eight bodhisattvas. Another scene in the Changchuan tomb is reminiscent of an identical representation in the Northern Wei period Buddhist cave n°10 of Yungang, at Datong, in Shanxi province, in China: the kneeling figure on the right side of the Buddha who is bowing in a gesture of homage. These elements point to transcontinental exchanges and diffusion to Korea of elements of northern Buddhism in particular that of the Northern Wei dynasty (AD 386-534) who commissioned the Buddhist caves at Yungang, and with which the Koguryo kingdom exchanged numerous envoys.

In conclusion, we have seen how the ancient Koguryo people depicted themselves in a funerary context _ through scenes reflecting the lifetime achievements and the social status of the deceased _ and also, their concern for a safe journey in the afterlife through the use of auspicious cosmological imagery. Through the newly introduced foreign religion of Buddhism, new decorative Buddhist elements were incorporated in the iconographical programme of the tombs from the 4th century AD onward. The latter fact, together with the use of similar decorative features in the Koguryo tombs and at the sites of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (AD 420-589), in particular the Buddhist caves of northern China, is an additional testimony to the cross-cultural contacts and exchanges between these various kingdoms throughout the 5th and 6th centuries AD in northeast Asia.