

# The Physical and Conceptual Space of the Murals in Chinese Tang Dynasty Tombs

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**Abstract:** *While a fresco is confined by the wall it is painted on, its content has the potential to expand the visual space of an enclosed building infinitely. In contrast to text, painting can create a dynamic interplay between visual and conceptual space by layering different levels of space. Tomb paintings are a unique form of art that combine the physical limitations of their surroundings with abstract concepts and human thought. The mural in the chamber creates a unique physical space that is both a representation of its own space and a conceptual space that combines with human thought. This space represents the intersection of the real and the virtual, the finite and the infinite, and symbolizes heaven, earth, the universe, and all things. This paper focuses on the Tang tomb paintings and examines their spatial development. Specifically, it investigates how these paintings have played a crucial role in expanding the concept of perceptual space by expanding the physical space depicted in the artwork. When examining ancient wall paintings or creating art in modern times, it is crucial to take note of the way pictorial space intersects with real space, as demonstrated in wall paintings. It is important to comprehend the distinctive conceptual significance of wall paintings which is based on the physical space they occupy.*

**Keywords:** *developmental inheritance, physical space, conceptual space, virtualization, reality*

## 1. The Spatial Development of the Tang Tomb Murals

The Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) was a period of prosperity in the development of Chinese tomb murals. During this period of unprecedented prosperity for the Tang dynasty, political factors had a significant impact on the prosperity of tomb murals. Most of the remains of tomb paintings have been unearthed in the tombs of the nobility, mainly in the capital. The relatively mature tomb construction techniques of the Tang dynasty also left a rich and valuable archive of tomb paintings.

The spatial development of the tomb murals showed the characteristics of the inheritance in the Tang dynasty. Over time, the tomb murals transformed from representing divine space to depicting real space. Before the Qin dynasty (221 - 207 BC), the royal family often decorated their tombs with a large number of magnificent paintings, mostly depicting the auspiciousness of life and death, gods and spirits, and the culture of heavy burial prevailed for many dynasties. From the beginning of the Han dynasty (202 BC - 220 AD), the content of tomb paintings evolved to include scenes of the sky, animals, people and social life. According to Professor Wang Xiaoyang from Southeast University, during the Han dynasty in China, deities were depicted in large numbers and were given prominent placement in tomb architecture. The belief in these deities provided a structure for the transformation of life and a rebirth. However, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 AD), there was a decline in the number of deity images and their placement became less significant. This trend indicates a shift towards the symbolization of deity images. Then during the Tang dynasties, the tombs of previous dynasties were used as a foundation for new styles. An example of this is the tomb of Princess Changle from the early Tang dynasty, which features a divided layout. The tomb passageway's two walls are adorned with Chinese sacred animals, including the green dragon, white tiger, and the figure of honor guard. The painting of male attendants are positioned outside the tomb doorway, while female attendants are inside holding objects. The doorways above the first and second passageways are painted, and the tomb chambers' ceiling paintings depict shadow-painted wooden buildings and heavenly images. The practice of dividing mural space into columns can be traced back to the Eastern Han and the Northern and Southern periods. The green dragons and white tigers located at the front of the tomb passage originated from southern China and were a popular motif in the Ye city area during the late Northern Dynasty. Additionally, the practice of painting rituals on both walls of the tomb passage is a remnant of the high-profile tomb murals of the Northern Dynasty. The early Tang tomb chambers exhibit a distinct influence from the previous dynasty's style, as

seen in the 'divine' character of the murals. The content of the murals is supported by the inclusion of images of deities. And by the height of the Tang Dynasty, the mural space underwent a significant transformation from being a 'divine space' to a 'real space', thanks to the prosperous economic life of the time. As a result, tomb murals began to prominently feature real-life themes, reflecting the changing attitudes towards art and life during this period. Wang says, "the murals in tomb architecture from Tang dynasty onwards no longer included transitional accounts of the transformation of life and death. Instead, they directly depicted real life through images. This shift towards realism is reflected in the increasing realism seen in tomb chamber murals." The tomb of Princess of Yongtai is a prime example of Tang tomb paintings. The front and back channels of this tomb are adorned with intricate paintings of figures, flowers, and rock gardens. These depictions vividly capture the courtyard scene on both sides of the gallery, allowing the viewer to feel as though they are actually present in the space. This mural not only depicts real-life scenes in its content, but also utilizes a technique that seamlessly transports these scenes into the virtual space of the artwork. In a space that encompasses a complete system of gods and reality, the soul of the tomb owner finds shelter in the newly established divine realm. At this point, the space of Tang tomb paintings has essentially completed the legacy of the chamber paintings of the previous dynasty and formed a unique style of the era (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The mural in the tomb of Princess of Yongtai

## 2. Physical space in the Tang tomb murals

Mural painting is distinct from easel painting in that it utilizes the wall of the building as its canvas. This allows for the creation of thematic groups of frescoes, enclosed within the building's walls. Unlike individual paintings on a wall, tomb paintings are designed to take into account the orientation of the entire space, with specific paintings placed on different walls depending on their orientation.

Archaeologists have recently made an intriguing discovery in the tomb of Han Xiu, a Tang dynasty chancellor, located in Guozhuang village, Xi'an. Chinese divine beasts and landscape paintings on the north wall of the tomb appear to contain a mystery regarding their spatial orientation within the chamber. Upon comparison with the wall paintings in the east, west, north, and south tombs, a visual link has been revealed. Li Xingming, a professor at Fudan University's Institute of Literature and History, believes that there is a clear connection between the spatial configuration of this form and the 'cosmic model' found in Chinese philosophy (Figure 2). He observes that the form intentionally incorporates cosmic images or symbols, which establishes a fitting relationship to the universe. The tomb architecture's specific spatial structure reflects an ancient, straightforward, and rational understanding of the cosmos. Simultaneously, it also implies the fundamental philosophical outlook of Taoism [1]. Another prime illustration can be found in the tomb of Prince Yide during the Tang dynasty. This mural space is partitioned into three sections, namely the inner, middle, and outer areas. This division is based on the content and spatial rhythm of the images. The outermost section of the tomb passage portrays a ceremonial scene, complete with dancing flags (Figure 3). The mural's architecture is meticulous, featuring pavilions depicted in both elevated and overhead views that correspond to the city walls and distant mountains. This creates a visual effect that is similar to the focal perspective found in traditional European paintings, drawing the viewer's attention from far to near. The central section of the painting depicts male and female attendants enjoying

carriage rides, which accurately reflects the scene and the vibrancy of life. The heart of the tomb interior serves as the final dwelling place for the tomb owner after death. The dome boasts a celestial image, while the surrounding walls display attendants, and the top of the ceiling features floral motifs. The murals depict various scenes from different periods, including political events, hunting, feasting, and cooking. Romantic and unrealistic scenes are interspersed with grand and realistic ones, creating a diverse and captivating display. These decorations reflect not only the noble life of the owner during their time on earth but also the imagined construction of the afterlife. When viewed from a certain picture, the frescoes exhibit a sense of spatial arrangement within the picture. This arrangement is often depicted as a two-dimensional, flat space that portrays a particular scene. However, looked from the entire group of murals, there is no strict causal relationship between the various murals, which are distributed in different architectural spaces. The frescoes utilize the physical structures of the walls, beams, and ceilings of the doorways to enhance the image and create a lifelike representation of the scene. The ritual processions on the walls are depicted on a scale almost identical to real-life objects and are surrounded by painted auspicious clouds, giving the impression of walking on the path to heaven. Whatever the shape, orientation or artistic appearance of the space in which the mural is located, the space to which each mural is attached provides an innate media basis for its creation, due to the unique spatial characteristics of each location. The murals found in the Tang tombs demonstrate the expansion of the boundary between internal and external physical space. The walls act as a separation between the internal and external worlds while the murals serve as a medium of communication between the two. This connection between inside and outside is made possible through the use of murals. The creation of space is a result of the interplay between the walls on which the frescoes are attached and the architecture of the space. This intertextual relationship between the whole and the parts leads to an extension and counterpoint that enhances the overall aesthetic experience.



*Figure 2: The mural in the tomb of Han Xiu*



*Figure 3: The mural in the tomb of Prince Yide*

### 3. Conceptual space in the Tang tomb murals

In fresco paintings, the conceptual space is frequently used as a metaphor for real space. According to Professor Wu Hung from the University of Chicago, it is the image that creates the space, rather than the other way around. In other words, the space exists within the image itself [2]. The Tang tomb murals reflect the process of constructing a conceptual space, combining both the virtual and the real, and its content showcases a mix of real scenes depicted as well as real scenes reflected in the virtual space. In the tomb murals, the chamber is also known as the 'underworld', where the tomb owner's life after death is virtually depicted. The tomb serves as a space where the real and virtual worlds converge. This idea is also reflected in frescoes, as noted by Chinese painter Wang Ximin. The content of frescoes serves as a representation of real life in society, while also existing as a conceptual space influenced by philosophical concepts like space-time and the five elements of yin and yang [3]. For instance, the tomb of Princess Changle, located in the Shaanxi region, features a painting of a carriage and horse amidst the clouds. The positioning of the drawing of the carriage and horse within the tomb creates a sense of immersion for the viewer, while the depiction of the clouds suggests the beauty of the tomb owner's soul as it journeys towards heaven. In the poet Wang Yanshou's Fugue of the Hall of Lu Ling in the Eastern Han Dynasty, a scene is described that depicts the entirety of heaven and earth, including various plants, creatures, gods, and spirits. The painting showcases a myriad of colors and forms that are anchored within the picture, creating a unique and diverse composition (Figure 4). Each element is depicted with attention to detail, showcasing their individual shapes and forms, and conveying their true essence through twisting and turning movement [4]. These images of the murals of Tang dynasty tombs collectively allude to the imaginative realm of the Great Void, which is the conceptual world of the gods and goddesses. This conceptual space is a representation of real-world events, imagined and presented through images. These images create a virtual space that expands beyond the physical chamber, while simultaneously concealing the ritual processes that generate a sacred atmosphere for the soul's journey.



Figure 4: The mural in the tomb passage of Princess Changle

The conceptual space is also reflected in the wall paintings of Tang tombs in simple images of life. Take, for instance, the tomb of Wang Gongshu from the Tang Dynasty, where a beautiful bunch of peonies is painted in the middle of the northern wall. On either side of the peonies, there are plants, and at the bottom, two geese stand in a realistic and mature way, as if it were a corner of a courtyard in real space. The tomb of Prince Zhang Huai features a lively polo scene depicting several noblemen galloping and playing. In her poem 'Playing Polo', Tang poetess Yu Xuanqi vividly depicts the game of polo: the wooden ball is struck with such force that it resembles a shooting star, and the sound of the sticks hitting the ball is likened to the sound of people arguing incessantly. When there are no obstructions, the player can hit the ball at will, but hitting it over a covered fence proves to be a challenge. In this murals, the figures and horses are depicted with vivid lines, with the horses on the left appearing to be in a running position. The scene has a flowing rhythm, creating the illusion that the horses are about to break out of the space and gallop away. These murals suggests that the divide between reality and the virtual is not a strict dichotomy, as previously posited by European scholars. Rather, it is a virtual realm that is constructed based on reality, and this virtual space serves as an elevated version of real space. Consequently, the space depicted in tomb murals holds a more profound significance than the mere conceptual space portrayed. It represents an infinite realm beyond the confines of our current reality, transcending life and death. The mural and its surrounding space coalesce to create a cohesive and

immersive conceptual space. Specifically, the Tang dynasty tomb murals serve as a highly effective virtual representation of physical space, offering a valuable point of reference for future generations of tomb murals.



Figure 5: The mural in the tomb of Wang Gongshu

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper examines the spatial representation of Chinese Tang tomb murals through three different paths. The first path focuses on the spatial development of Tang tomb murals, using time clues. The second path explores the joint role of murals and physical space. The third path looks at the composition of spatial clues embodied in the images in the murals. By taking a holistic approach, this paper provides a comprehensive understanding of the spatial implications of Tang tomb murals.

Through their metaphorical organization of images, the frescoes construct virtual spaces on the walls that exist parallel to and separate from the real world, but not entirely disconnected from it. This spatial separation is not meant to create a tangible distance between the viewer and the image. Rather, it invites the viewer to enter the image through this gap. The spatial representation in the tomb paintings can be viewed as a "continuation of the fragment" and a "freeze-frame" in a film. While the physical space of a fresco is confined to the wall it adorns, its content has the potential to expand beyond its physical boundaries, creating an infinite visual space within the enclosed building. The mural in the chamber creates a unique physical space that is both a representation of its own space and a conceptual space that combines with human thought. This space represents the intersection of the real and the virtual, the finite and the infinite, and symbolizes heaven, earth, the universe, and all things. In contrast to text, painting has the ability to layer various levels of space, resulting in a dynamic interplay between visual and conceptual space. Tomb paintings are a unique art form that blend physical and conceptual space, reflecting the complexity of human thought. The tomb murals contain various images that serve as narratives and extensions of the intended message, which are meant to be perceived visually by the viewer. The term 'extra-painting' does not refer to the original meaning of the painting, but rather to supplementary images that convey additional meaning within an infinite space. When examining ancient wall paintings or creating art in modern times, it is crucial to take note of the way pictorial space intersects with real space, as demonstrated in wall paintings. It is important to comprehend the distinctive conceptual significance of wall paintings which is based on the physical space they occupy.

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