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Research on the Social Significance of the Han Dynasty Carved Dragon Pillars in Haining Tombs

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Abstract

The coiled dragon pillars found in the Han Dynasty carved stone tombs in Haining are among the earliest artistic representations of coiled dragon pillars unearthed to date. They can, to a certain extent, reflect the socio-ideological landscape of Haining during the Eastern Han period. The research involves a stylistic analysis of the unearthed coiled dragon pillars in Haining, employing methods such as image analysis, comparative studies, and typological classification. The paper initially explores the stylistic characteristics of the coiled dragon pillars in the Han Dynasty carved stone tombs in Haining. By integrating comparative studies with the Longtu pattern in Zhejiang, it analyzes the ancient social significance of dragon patterns in the Han Dynasty. Ultimately, the study speculates on the ancient and contemporary social significance of the coiled dragon pillars in Haining. This research project is closely tied to the local cultural development of Haining, and while investigating the customs and traditions of the Eastern Han period in Haining, it enriches the source materials for compiling local historical records.

Keywords: Haining, Pictorial Stone, Coiled Dragon Pillar, Eastern Han

1. Introduction

In 1973, during the expansion of the playground at Haining Middle School, a stone tomb with portraits from the Eastern Han Dynasty was accidentally discovered. This tomb showed traces of being stolen in the early years, and fewer utensils were retained; however, the stone portraits in the tombs were relatively completely preserved. In 1983, the Brief Report on the Excavation of Stone Tombs of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Haining, Zhejiang Province, written by Pan Liukun, was released through the magazine Cultural Relics. In the excavation briefing report, the utensils and relief stones unearthed in the tombs were arranged in detail, which provided early original evidence for the present study. As shown in the excavation briefing, there were eight carved dragon pillars in the tomb, which were located on the four sides of the anterior chamber of the tomb, with a pair in the middle of each wall.

In 1984, in the article *Portrait Stone of Chang'an Town, Haining*, written by Yue Fengxia and Liu Xingzhen, a special study was conducted on the tomb for the first time. Subsequently, Zhang Xiaoru from the Institute of Chinese Painting at Hangzhou Normal University conducted identification and analysis of the identity of the

owner of the tomb. It is preliminarily speculated that he was a low-level official or a powerful landlord. To date, the Stone Tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Chang'an Town, Haining, has been systematically studied by Mr. Huang Yafeng. Another scholar studied the geomantic omen and schema of this tomb and studied the schema. Five papers focused on describing the specific content of the images and rarely investigated the specific shape and social significance of the four pairs of carved dragon pillars.

This research project aims to investigate the coiled dragon pillars in the Han Dynasty pictorial stone tombs unearthed from Haining Middle School, from the perspectives of history, image studies, typology, and intellectual history. Using comparative research methods, the study will analyze the form, characteristics, and connotations of the coiled dragon pillars, with a particular focus on revealing the social significance of the dragon's image in the traditional culture of Haining.

2. The shape of the coiled dragon pillars in the Han Tomb in Haining

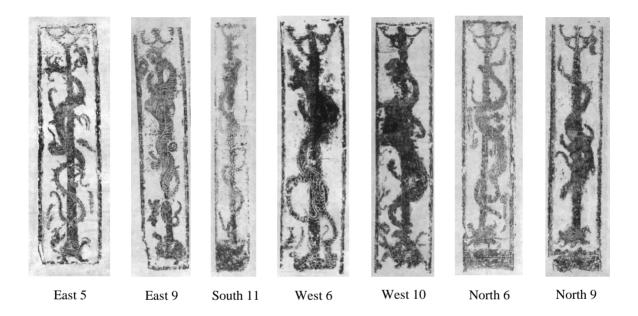
The research object of this project is located in Haining Middle School, Chang'an Town, Haining City, Jiaxing City, Zhejiang Province. According to the report on the Excavation of Stone Tombs with Portraits of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Haining, Zhejiang Province, "there are four pairs of carved dragon pillars in this tomb, which are located in areas 5 and 9 on the east wall, areas 11 and 14 on the south wall, areas 6 and 10 on the west wall, and areas 6 and 9 on the north wall. The columns are all symmetrically distributed and have similar shapes (Pan, 1983). However, the details are slightly different, as shown in the table below:

Table 1: According to the Brief Report on the Excavation of Stone Tombs with Paintings of the Eastern Han

Dynasty in Haining, Zhejiang Province

Number	Direction	Dimensions (cm)	Image
East 5	West side of the north wall of the east ear room	Height 105, Width 26	The dragon is in the shape of a snake and a beast, with its mouth open, with horns, scales, and four legs. It wraps around the column for three and a half weeks.
East 9	West side of south wall of east ear room	Height 105, Width 21	The dragon is a combination of snake and beast, with its head held high, with horns, scales, four legs, and a thick body. It wraps around the column, with a turtle-shaped column base at the end of the column.
South 11	West side of the east column of the tomb gate	Height 118, Width 16	The dragon is a combination of snake and beast, with its head held high, with horns, scales and four legs. It wraps around the column for three and a half weeks, with a turtle-shaped column base at the end.
South 14	East side of the west column of the tomb gate	Height 118, Width 16	The dragon is a combination of snake and beast, with its head held high, with horns, scales and four legs. It wraps around the column for three and a half weeks, with a turtle-shaped column base at the end.
West 6	East side of the south wall of the west ear room	Height 107, Width 24	The dragon is a combination of snake and beast, with its mouth open, no horn, scales, and four legs. It wraps around the column for one and a half times, with a turtle-shaped column base at the end of the column.
West 10	East side of the north wall of the west ear room	Height 107, Width 24	The dragon is a combination of snake and beast, with its mouth open, no horn, scales, and four legs. It wraps around the column for two weeks, with a turtle-shaped column base at the end of the column.
North 6	West side of north wall of anterior chamber	Height 117, Width 23	The dragon is a combination of snake and beast, with no horn, scales and four legs. It wraps around the column for two weeks, with a turtle-shaped column base at the end of the column.
North 9	East side of the north wall of the anterior chamber	Height 117, Width 24	The dragon is a combination of snake and beast, with no horn, scales, four legs, and a slightly shorter body length. It wraps around the column for two and a half weeks, with a turtle-shaped column base at the end of the column.

An examination of the eight columns revealed that the L.L. columns were concentrated in the anterior chamber of the tombs and were of similar height in the east—west and north—south directions. The heights of the columns in the east—west ear chambers were 10 cm shorter than those in the north—south passage. The eight coiled dragon columns are similar in shape and are thick at the bottom and thin at the top. The lengths and thicknesses of the dragon-shaped patterns wrapped around the columns are slightly different, but they all incorporate the characteristics of snakes and beasts, revealing the state of opening their mouths and bending their necks. All the participants had four legs, some had long horns on their heads, and there were scale patterns on their bodies. The number of circles around the column varies from one to four weeks. The bases of the columns were carved in relief in the shape of a turtle. Only Coiled Dragon Pillar in East District 5 has a heavy arch. A monkey pattern hanging on a single arm is carved on the side. Although these eight carved dragon pillars are the same theme, they exhibit a free and unrestrained artistic style in terms of management position, line direction, and shape shaping.



Observing the form of the dragon coiled pillar, it can be noted that while the dragon patterns wind upwards around the pillar, there are significant gaps between the dragon's sculpted body and the pillar itself. Furthermore, the coiled dragon pillar does not serve a load-bearing function in the burial structure. Instead, it appears as a decorative column on both sides of the entrance, complementing themes of auspicious mythical creatures, chariots and horses, joyful dances, and various other motifs in a unified decorative image.

The earliest recorded documentation of the coiled dragon pillar's style is found in Volume Twelve of the Song Dynasty's "Yingzao Fashi": "There are eight categories of carved works... The eighth is the coiled dragon pillar. Coiled dragons, sitting dragons, toothed fish, and similar. They are applied to canopies, above scripture storage pillars, coiled around precious mountains, or entwined within decorated ceilings (Cheng, Tian, Shu et al., 2024)." It can be observed that during the Song Dynasty, the coiled dragon pillar style had already achieved a certain universality, and a mature set of architectural standards had been established. However, the coiled dragon pillars unearthed from the Haining Han Dynasty pictorial stone tombs were constructed much earlier than the writing of "Yingzao Fashi," and no similar archaeological remains have been found in the Zhejiang region. Therefore, to study the stylistic characteristics and symbolic significance of the coiled dragon pillars in the Haining pictorial stone tombs, it is necessary to conduct further comparative research, considering other dragon motifs from the same period in Zhejiang and the coiled dragon pillar styles in neighboring regions.

3. Zhejiang dragon schema from the Han Dynasty

3.1. The dragon schema in stone relief

There are other dragon-shaped patterns in this tomb. Auspicious images are carved and painted on the upper level of the lintel on the north wall (Figure 1). From left to right, a white tiger marching rightward, a three-tiered potted plant, and a dragon sprinting toward the left are arranged in this tomb. Qinglong, a jumping monkey-like animal; a tianlu with its feet tilted back; an upright Golden Harvest; a phoenix spreading its wings to the left; an upright scorpion; a rosefinch standing to the left; a Tianma running to the left; and fields and auspicious plants from the left to the galloping knight. In the stone portrait, the green dragon and the white tiger face each other. The green dragon is sinuously shaped, its neck is arched, and its body is slender. The inscribed lines move elegantly, as if the dragon has descended from the fairyland. Compared with the dragon-shaped diagram on the carved dragon pillars, the two have similar shapes that are similar in height.



Figure 1: The lintel on the north wall

3.2. The dragon diagram in the bronze mirror

At the same time, the remains unearthed from Eastern Han tombs in Zhejiang Province also have dragon-shaped schemas, but they are significantly different from the carved dragon pillars in the stone tomb with Han portraits in Haining. The most common form of dragon pattern in Eastern Han tombs in Zhejiang is the theme pattern in portrait mirrors and mythical and animal mirrors. In portrait mirrors, the images of dragons and tigers are mostly combined, and they are placed in a symmetrical arrangement at both ends of the mirror button. In some portrait mirrors, the dragon image appears alone in the themed patterns, separated from the images of the East Prince, the Queen Mother of the West, and the chariots and horses, e.g., the Qinglong chariot and horse unearthed in Zhongguan Ganshan, Deqing County in 1983. Portrait mirror (Figure 2). In the mirror of divine beasts, dragon-shaped images exist in the form of four gods, and the four gods on the double-ranked mirrors of divine beasts are arranged according to their azimuths, which fully shows that the image of dragon in the mirror of divine beasts specifically points to the blue dragon in the four directions.



Figure 2: Partial view of the unearthed divine figure, chariot, and green dragon pictorial mirror from Zhongguan Ganshan in Deqing County, 1983.

In terms of shape, in the Eastern Han bronze mirrors unearthed in Zhejiang, the image of the dragon was mostly based on the body of an animal. Compared with the dragon-shaped diagrams on the carved dragon pillars, the dragon on the bronze mirror had a shorter body, with an appearance between a tiger and a lion. The neck was lengthened, most of which were in the posture of looking back and roaring; the rear of the limbs was decorated with feather patterns, showing the shape of sprinting from left to right; and the tail was slender and curled. Bronze mirrors from different regions showed great variation in the schematic expression of the same mythical beast.

The image of dragons is constantly developing in tomb art. According to the analysis of the distribution of the images of *the Four Gods in Han Paintings* by Cheng Wanli, "From the Xinmang period to the early Eastern Han Dynasty, the images of the four gods matured, and the images of the four gods that appeared in the original combination began to be disassembled." A large number of images of the four gods on the bronze mirrors began to appear, and related inscriptions gradually increased, it can be found that in the bronze mirror, the combination of the four gods appeared earlier than the single dragon-shaped schema (Cheng, 2012). Combined with the list of green dragon shapes compiled by Cheng Wanli, the winged beasts that look back appear in the late Western Han Dynasty and the early and mid-Eastern Han Dynasty; the composite blue dragons of the snake and beast were mostly unearthed in the tombs of the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty, based on which it can be speculated that the dragon-shaped schema in the Han pictorial stone tombs in Haining was created later than the pictorial mirrors and the beast mirrors.

4. Ancient social significance of the dragon schema in the Han Dynasty

The image of the dragon has gradually changed from a powerful symbolic totem that protects humankind to a divine medium that can communicate between heaven and earth. In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the diversification of the image of dragons in the Zhejiang region also corresponded to its multiple social factors. According to the literature, the dragon-shaped schema has the following three universal social significances in the tombs of the late Eastern Han Dynasty in Zhejiang:

4.1. Fantasy about the afterlife

Qinglong is the name of a constellation and comes from the four gods popular in the Western Han Dynasty. In ancient times, the "four gods" were the name of the four directions of the stars; these words refer to the gods who guard the four directions and are related to the yin, yang and five elements. The Lunheng·Wushi written by Wang Chong of the Eastern Han Dynasty stated, "The wood in the East is also its star, the Canglong star. The metal in the West is also the white tiger, its star. The fire in the south is also in its star, the vermilion bird, and the water in the north is also in its star, the basalt. There are four essences of the four stars in the sky, who are born with the bodies of four beasts. The bloody worms take four beasts as their growth (Mei, 2000). The four gods are the product of human totem belief in ancient times and reflect people's initial understanding of the unknown world of gods and celestial phenomena at that time. In the pictorial stone tombs of the Han Dynasty, the top of the tomb was shaped like the sky, and the murals on the walls are scenes of heavens surrounded by immortals. The dragon pattern often appears in the upper layer of murals and is juxtaposed with images of white tigers, red birds, and grass jelly. It is used to express the fantasy and magnificence of the fairy world and satisfies people's beautiful imagination of the afterlife.

4.2. Tomb guarding against evil spirits

An image of a dragon is very special in tomb art. It is not only one of the four spirits (dragon, phoenix, tortoise, and lin) but also one of the four gods (blue dragon, white tiger, red bird, and basalt). In the Kuaiji area of the Eastern Han Dynasty, where the thoughts of gods and immortals were full, the dragon was not only regarded as a star but also as a very intimidating animal in the mythological world. Miao Xiyong said in *The Burial Sutra Wings-Four Beasts Sand Water*, "There are two dragons next to the body, the left and right two dragons." The sand is named dragon and tiger, which protects the acupoints of the area, prevents the wind from blowing, and embraces the sentient beings, neither forcing nor suppressing nor bending or fleeing. Therefore, the blue dragon meanders and the white tiger tames (Dong, 1990). The inscription on the Han mirror unearthed in the Echeng, Hubei, provides physical evidence for this.

4.3. The ascension of souls and people to heaven

The image of the dragon also leads the soul to the heaven in the tombs. Dragon plants have been used as mounts for a long time. The *Picture of Character Yulong* unearthed in the Changsha Bullet Library reflects the process of soul ascending to heaven with the help of dragon. In *The Tomb of the Dragon and the Tiger* in Xishuipo and

the Origin of the Four Elephants, Li Xueqin proposed that riding a dragon and a tiger is the way and means of ascension to heaven (Zeng & Liu, 2007). The three groups of clam shell sculptures with dragon and tiger patterns on and around tomb No. 45 in Xishuipo, Puyang, and Henan suggest that dragon and tiger were put in the tombs as tools for souls to ascend to heaven as early as the Yangshao Culture Period. This concept is recorded in Baopuzi-Zaying by Ge Hong of the Jin Dynasty: "If you can ride a ride, you can travel around the world, regardless of mountains and rivers. There are three ways to ride a ride: one is called the dragon's ride, and the other is called the tiger's ride and the third is Luyu." In Taoist culture, dragon, tiger and deer are the mounts that carry people to the sky and to the earth. However, when these images were placed in the tomb, people were more likely to help people eliminate the shackles of the body, guide the ascension of the soul, and reflect the divinity of the person riding it.

5. The Social Significance of the carved dragon pillars

The ancient social connotation of the abovementioned dragon diagram is also reflected in the Beautiful Dragon Column in the stone tomb of the Han Dynasty in Haining. In addition, the carved dragon pillars in the stone tombs of the Han Dynasty in Haining have unique modern social significance.

5.1. The ancient social significance of the Lehman Pillar

5.1.1. Construction of a celestial scene

Coiled Dragon Pillars in the stone tombs with Han portraits in Haining are located in the middle, south, and northwest directions of the tombs, and they are located in the middle of the wall; therefore, they cannot refer to a specific orientation, and the meaning of Coiled Dragon Pillar as a symbol of orientation can be ruled out. On the upper level of the north wall of the front room, there are relief carvings of animals such as green dragon, white tiger, red bird, and phoenix, which clearly indicate that the murals have the function of describing scenes of the fairy world. The carved dragon pillars distributed around them seemed to vividly show the lively scene of the heavens constantly attracting souls.

5.1.2. Tomb guarding against evil spirits

In the tomb, four pairs of coiled dragon pillars are intricately carved and painted, tightly affixed to the walls of the burial chamber. The design intention bears resemblance to the common depiction of "Two Dragons Playing with a Bi Disc" found in Shandong, Northern Jiangsu, and other regions. In the context of the "Two Dragons Playing with a Bi Disc," the homophonic character "辟" is used, symbolizing warding off evil and guarding the entrance. Similarly, the coiled dragon pillars in the Haining Han tombs are positioned against the walls, and the homophony between "壁" (wall) and "辟" can be further extended to convey the notion of averting evil. Additionally, a pair of coiled dragon pillars stands on both sides of the southern wall at the entrance of the tomb chamber, serving a distinct deterrent effect on those entering the burial space and fulfilling the functions of guarding and overseeing the tomb.

5.1.3. Connect and communicate with the world

On each wall, Coiled Dragon Pillars are in a gesture of hovering upwards, and they appear in pairs. A similar schema also appeared in the silk paintings. The silk painting unearthed from Mawangdui Tomb No. 1 (Figure 3) completely depicts scenes of the fairy world, the human world, and the lower realm, with an image of two dragons piercing a wall running through it. The dragon's tail extends to the bottom of the picture, the dragon's head looks up at the Heavenly Gate, and the dragons' bodies meet in the jade disc. The two dragons seem to become the sedan chair for the tomb owner to ascend to heaven and fly toward the Tianmen. The schema structure in the Diagram of Two Dragons Wearing the Bicycles is highly similar to that of Coiled Dragon Pillars in the Haining Han Tomb (Figure 4), except that the jade bib between the two Coiled Dragon Pillars was replaced by a concrete door, both constructing a This structure shows the imagination of the owner of the tomb flying to the heavenly gate by double dragons.



Figure 3: Part of the silk painting in Mawangdui Tomb No. 1

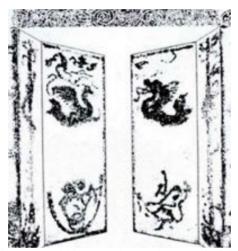


Figure 4: Part of the stone rubbings on the southern wall of the Haining Han Tomb

However, although the traditional impression of the dragon in today's society is that of a symbol of imperial power, the dragon has the mystery and sanctity that transcends class. However, the embroidering of dragon patterns on yellow robes began to occur during the Ming Dynasty. Previously, the dragon pattern was not monopolized by the royal family. Therefore, using the carved dragon pillars in the tomb as evidence to speculate on the identity of the tomb owner is not in line with the social background of the Eastern Han Dynasty.

5.2. The significance of the carved dragon pillars in modern society

5.2.1. It is speculated that the buildings in Haining in the Eastern Han Dynasty already had the shape of dragon columns

The forms of ancient tomb art were often further processed and deformed on the basis of real-life reference to artworks. "Death is like life" between people. Most underground tombs are part of the component forms that imitate the long-term aboveground residence of the owner of the tomb, and it is rare that aboveground buildings imitate the tombs in the opposite direction. Accordingly, it can be speculated that the style of the carved dragon pillars in the stone tombs of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Haining was the imitation and reproduction of similar decorative patterns on the columns of the local ground buildings in Haining during the Eastern Han Dynasty; that is, the carved dragon pillars already existed in the actual buildings of Haining in the Han Dynasty. The basic rudiment, or the similar wood architectural style with relief-covered decoration on the column shaft, was later used for reference in the construction of tombs in the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty.

5.2.2. Explore the cultural exchanges between Haining and the North in the Eastern Han Dynasty

The shape of Coiled Dragon Pillar in the stone tombs of the Han Dynasty in Haining is obviously unique, and there is no similar tomb art form in other parts of Zhejiang. In the Xuzhou Han Dynasty Stone Art Museum to the north of Haining, a stone pilaster from the Han Dynasty is preserved. On the body of the column, two dragons stand facing each other in a style similar to that of the carved dragon pillars but with a relatively rough shape. In 1992, a stone central column very similar to Coiled Dragon Pillar in Haining was excavated from a tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty in Tongshan County, Xuzhou. The image of the Panlong was carved in the bas-relief on the stubby column. Further north, stone pillars with reliefs of animals were also discovered in stone tombs of the Han Dynasty in Linyi, Pingyin, Tai'an, Jiyang and other places in Shandong, and the images were wound in a manner similar to that of the carved dragon pillar. According to Liu Guan, "In the brick and stone chamber tombs of northern Jiangsu and Shandong in the Eastern Han (middle and late period), the basic method of relief carvings of dragon columns had clearly appeared, but the specific decorative images and themes were not uniform, and the molding process was also unstable; therefore, it should still be in the relatively diversified early embryonic stage (Liu, 2021). The tubb art form of the Beautiful Dragon Column appears mainly in northern Jiangsu and Shandong, and some tombs were earlier than the Haining Han Dynasty Stone Tombs. The author speculates that the shape of the beautiful Dragon columns in the pictorial stone tombs in Haining or in its cultural and trade exchanges was influenced by the neighboring northern region and then recreated in combination with local totem worship.

6. Conclusion

In summary, tomb art is an important part of traditional Haining culture. Studying the shape and social significance of the Beautiful Dragon Column in the stone tomb of the Han Dynasty can shed light on local dragon culture, the concepts of life and death, and funeral etiquette and customs in Haining during the Eastern Han Dynasty. This study provides direct supporting materials and relevant physical information for modern people to use to trace the architectural styles of Haining before the Han Dynasty.

In addition, this study, through comparative research, has found the possibility of integration and reconstruction between the coiled dragon pillar styles in the Eastern Han tombs in Haining and the dragon pillar styles in some areas of Northern Jiangsu and Shandong. However, this speculation is solely based on the visual and stylistic similarities of the coiled dragon pillars, lacking direct and robust supporting materials. Further exploration is needed by delving more deeply into relevant textual materials and archaeological artifacts. The author presents this paper as a preliminary contribution, hoping to stimulate scholarly attention to the study of coiled dragon pillars.

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