

Artistic Analysis of Song-Jin Dynasty Brick Carvings Unearthed in Gansu, China

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Abstract: Brick carvings of the Song-Jin period unearthed in Gansu represent one of the most significant decorative forms found in imitation timber-structured brick mural tombs of northwestern China. These artifacts have been discovered primarily in the eastern and central regions of Gansu Province. Their iconographic repertoire can be broadly classified into four categories: filial-piety narratives, scenes of everyday life, auspicious birds and mythical beasts, and floral motifs. Among these, themes associated with the Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars constitute the most representative subject matter, reflecting the pervasive influence of Confucian ethics. Depictions of daily activities vividly reconstruct contemporary experiences of labor, banqueting, and social interaction, while floral and zoomorphic motifs convey auspicious symbolism and popular aspirations for prosperity and well-being. From an artistic perspective, these brick carvings were produced through both molding and carving techniques. Their compositions are characterized by flexibility and diversity, while the figures and motifs combine realistic observation with expressive exaggeration. Chromatically, red and black serve as the dominant colors, often supplemented by polychrome painting. Collectively, these works exhibit distinctive aesthetic qualities marked by simplicity, spontaneity, secularization, and strong regional characteristics. Furthermore, the brick carvings embody a synthesis of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist beliefs, reflecting contemporary conceptions of life, death, the afterlife, and filial morality. As valuable material evidence, they provide important insights into the social culture, folk customs, religious thought, and vernacular artistic traditions of the Song-Jin period. More broadly, they serve as significant carriers of the historical spirit and regional cultural identity of medieval Gansu.

Keywords: Gansu; Song-Jin Brick Carvings; Iconographic Themes; Artistic Characteristics

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1. Introduction

Brick carving is a traditional Chinese art form with a long history and distinctive national characteristics. As an important carrier of the cultural traditions of successive dynasties, it constitutes a valuable component of China's folk artistic heritage. During the Song and Jin periods, tombs featuring imitation timber-structured architecture decorated with brick carvings and murals emerged as one of the most significant types of funerary architecture in China^[1]. Since the 1970s, a considerable number of pictorial bricks and brick-decorated tombs dating to the Song-Jin period have been excavated in Gansu Province, primarily in its eastern and central regions^[2]. The artistic tradition of pictorial bricks had already reached a high level of development during the Han dynasty. In the Wei and Jin periods, painted brick murals discovered in areas such as Jiayuguan,

Jiuquan, and Gaotai in Gansu exhibited rich and diverse subject matter. By the Song dynasty, however, changes in funerary customs led to a marked decline in the practice of burying figurines as grave goods. Correspondingly, brick carving, as an important decorative medium within tomb chambers, achieved remarkable artistic development and gradually formed a distinctive visual language of its own. As architectural components employed in tombs, ancestral halls, and related structures, brick carvings constitute a composite art form that integrates the expressive qualities of both sculpture and painting. The pictorial bricks unearthed from Song-Jin tombs in Gansu are characterized by a rustic simplicity and unpretentious aesthetic. Their decorative imagery reflects a transition from the relatively standardized and formulaic conventions of the Tang dynasty toward an increasingly secularized artistic orientation during the Song period. Infused with strong local cultural elements, these works embody the cultural temperament of their historical era while simultaneously expressing the spiritual values and regional identity of the communities that produced them. As such, they provide important material evidence for understanding the interaction between funerary art, social life, and local cultural traditions in northwestern China during the Song-Jin period.

2. Types and Symbolic Meanings of Song-Jin Brick Carvings in Gansu

2.1 Types of Brick Carving Themes

The decorative themes of Song-Jin brick carvings in Gansu tombs are extensive and diverse, providing valuable visual evidence of contemporary spiritual beliefs, cultural customs, social relationships, and the distinctive characteristics of the period. The principal thematic categories include filial-piety narratives, scenes of everyday life, auspicious birds and mythical beasts, and floral motifs.

Among these, filial-piety narratives constitute one of the most frequently represented decorative subjects in Song-Jin tomb brick carvings from Gansu. Most are derived from stories associated with the Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars, a canonical collection of moral narratives promoting Confucian virtues. Based on the nature of the protagonists' deeds, these images can be classified into themes of filial support, filial devotion in daily life, filial mourning, and fraternal piety. Representative subjects include Liu Mingda Demonstrating Filial Piety, Wang Xiang Lying on Ice, Guo Ju Burying His Son, Meng Zong Weeping before Bamboo, Lu Ji Concealing Oranges in His Sleeve, Lady Lu Yi Sacrificing Her Child to Save Her Nephew, Dong Yong Selling Himself to Bury His Father, and Ding Lan Carving a Wooden Effigy to Serve His Parents. A notable example is the brick carving depicting Liu Mingda Demonstrating Filial Piety (Figure 1), excavated from a Jin-period tomb at Jianxia Gorge in Qingshui County, Gansu. The left brick portrays the scene in which an official purchases Liu Mingda's child: a mounted man holds an infant in his arms while an attendant stands before the horse. An accompanying inscription reads, "The official purchases Liu Mingda's son." The right brick illustrates the moment when Liu Mingda sells his child and his wife desperately calls after him. The male figure gathers money in the fold of his garment, while the woman reaches out to restrain him, clutching the child and expressing profound grief and reluctance. The inscription identifies the scene as Liu Mingda Demonstrating Filial Piety. Together, the paired images vividly narrate the core episode of a family forced by poverty to sell a child in order to support an elderly mother, emphasizing the Confucian ideal of sacrificing personal affection for filial obligation. The animated gestures and emotionally charged interactions of the figures effectively convey the moral and emotional intensity of the story. Another representative example is the pictorial brick depicting Dong Yong Selling Himself to Bury His Father, excavated from a Song-period tomb in Longxi County, Gansu. The scene portrays Dong Yong's self-sacrifice to provide a proper burial for his father and the subsequent assistance of a celestial maiden. The composition centers on a kneeling male figure with hands clasped in respectful salutation as he bids farewell to a heavenly maiden standing upon auspicious clouds. Executed through a combination of incised lines and low relief carving, the image is compositionally concise yet highly expressive. Its visual narrative underscores the moral message that exemplary filial conduct can move the heavens and that virtuous deeds ultimately receive divine recompense. As a symbolic medium for proclaiming the filial virtues of the tomb occupant, filial-piety imagery occupied a central place in the funerary visual culture of Song-Jin Gansu. Beyond its didactic function, such imagery embodied contemporary aspirations for familial harmony, social stability, and moral reward in both the earthly realm and the afterlife, thereby serving as a significant expression of the ethical and spiritual values of the period.

The category of everyday-life imagery encompasses a wide range of subjects, including rice pounding, grain milling, horse

leading, pig herding, camel driving, banqueting and musical entertainment, as well as representations of warriors and court ladies. Representative examples include the low-relief Mill-Grinding Scene and Rice-Pounding Scene excavated from a Jin-dynasty brick-carved tomb in Anding District, Dingxi, Gansu Province^[3]; the pictorial bricks depicting Hunting Departure and Successful Hunt unearthed from the Jianxia Tomb in Qingshui County; the brick reliefs of Woodcutter, Sheng Player, Drummer, and Male Attendant Leading a Horse from the Jiawan Tomb in Qingshui County; the pictorial bricks of Master and Servant, Camel Leading, and Horse Leading from the Song-period tomb at Houjiacha Village, Bazhu Township, Huan County; and the images of Two Figures Pounding Rice, Two Figures Grinding Grain, and Woman Opening a Door excavated from the Suwa Tomb in Qingshui County^[4]. A representative example is the low-relief Mill-Grinding Scene (Figure 2) discovered in a Jin-dynasty brick-carved mural tomb in Anding District, Dingxi. The contours of the figures and millstone are delineated with ink lines, and both figures are depicted frontally. The figure on the right wears a light-blue round-collared robe paired with straight-legged trousers, while the figure on the left is dressed in a red cross-collared garment and a long skirt. The costumes are rendered with remarkable clarity, and the contrasting color scheme enhances their visual impact. Together, these elements provide a vivid and realistic representation of labor practices and vernacular dress characteristic of Jin-period society. Another notable example is the painted relief brick Woodcutter (Figure 3) from the eastern wall of the Jiawan Tomb in Qingshui County. In the composition, a bundle of firewood is positioned before the woodcutter, whose head inclines forward while both hands gesture before his chest. The animated posture and expressive demeanor vividly evoke a scene of everyday commercial exchange. Executed using a recessed-ground intaglio technique, the image employs bold and deeply incised lines to articulate anatomical and costume details. These contour lines not only distinguish the figure from the background but also clearly define the head, headdress, facial features, limbs, and firewood burden. The carving is economical in execution yet highly effective in conveying character and movement. Similarly, the pictorial brick Woman Opening a Door from the Suwa Tomb in Qingshui County depicts a vermilion-lacquered gate partially ajar. A woman leans outward from within the doorway, her shoulders and arms slightly inclined. Her left hand rests upon the doorframe, while the long sleeves of her garment fall naturally downward. The drapery lines follow the elongated contours of the body, producing a sense of graceful movement. Although the facial features are rendered with considerable brevity, they successfully convey the woman's restrained and modest demeanor. These scenes of everyday life constitute vivid visual reconstructions of the domestic world associated with the tomb occupants. They reflect the traditional gendered division of labor in which men engaged in activities outside the household while women managed domestic affairs. At the same time, they document a broad spectrum of social practices during the Song and Jin periods, including hunting, livestock husbandry, musical entertainment, and theatrical performances. Collectively, these images are imbued with a strong sense of secular realism, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences, social customs, and cultural values of contemporary society.

In addition to narrative and genre scenes, Song-Jin tomb brick carvings in Gansu frequently feature auspicious birds, mythical beasts, and decorative floral motifs. Common subjects within the category of auspicious fauna include galloping horses, running deer, deer carrying peonies, deer bearing lotus blossoms, immortal cranes amidst auspicious clouds, auspicious sheep and sacred deer, elephants, and lions. The spatial distribution of these motifs generally follows a fixed decorative scheme: celestial phenomena, auspicious beasts, and avian imagery are typically positioned in the upper sections of the tomb chamber, forming an iconographic zone associated with heavenly blessings and auspicious omens. A representative example is the pictorial brick Elephant excavated from a Song-period tomb at Houjiacha Village, Bazhu Township, Huan County, Gansu. The image depicts a standing elephant with upward-curving tusks and a downward-hanging trunk, while its hind legs appear to be pushing backward with force, creating an impression of latent movement and vitality. Another example is the pictorial brick Standing Deer from the same tomb. The deer is shown amidst flowering plants and grasses, seemingly grazing on leaves and blossoms, thereby conveying a tranquil and harmonious natural atmosphere. Most brick carvings depicting auspicious birds and animals were executed in relief, with the figures projecting prominently from the brick surface. This sculptural treatment enhances their volumetric quality and endows the animals with a strong sense of physical presence. Plant motifs constitute another important category of tomb decoration. Frequently represented subjects include peonies symbolizing wealth and prosperity, chrysanthemums associated with reclusion and scholarly virtue, lotus flowers embodying purity

and moral integrity, as well as scrolling floral vines, curling foliage patterns, grapes, and pomegranates. These auspicious botanical motifs reflect the tomb occupants' aspirations for a prosperous and harmonious life while simultaneously expressing refined aesthetic tastes and cultural aspirations. Such images were generally placed in the lower sections of the tomb chamber, where they formed a decorative counterpart to the celestial and animal imagery above. Representative examples include the pictorial bricks Scrolling Grapevines, Intertwining Floral Scrolls, Grapes and Peonies, and Child Climbing a Lotus excavated from the Jin-period Jianxia Tomb in Qingshui County; the images of Peony, Chrysanthemum, and Scrollwork Pattern from the Song-period tomb at Houjiacha Village, Huan County; and the brick carvings Artificial Rock and Lotus Motif, Vase with Flowers, and Cut-Peony Branch from Jin-dynasty brick-carved tombs in Linxia, Gansu^[5]. The floral motifs are rendered in a wide variety of forms and compositional arrangements. Blossoms unfold gracefully across the pictorial surface, while the carved layers create a rich sense of depth and visual rhythm. The compositions range from dense and elaborate to restrained and simplified, and each motif displays distinctive formal characteristics. Technically, these decorative bricks were generally carved directly after the bricks had been fired. The relief elements rise prominently above the surface, producing a strong three-dimensional effect and demonstrating an advanced capacity for spatial representation. Through the integration of symbolic imagery and sculptural craftsmanship, these decorative motifs transformed the tomb chamber into a visual environment imbued with auspicious meaning and aesthetic refinement.

Figure1: Liu Mingda Demonstrating Filial Piety. Brick relief excavated from the Jianxia Tomb, Qingshui County, Gansu Province.



Figure2: Mill-Grinding Scene. Low-relief brick carving excavated from a Jin-dynasty brick-carved mural tomb in Anding District, Dingxi, Gansu Province.



Figure3: Woodcutter. Pictorial brick excavated from the Jiawan Tomb, Qingshui County, Gansu Province.



2.2 Symbolic Meanings of Brick-Carved Motifs

The brick-carving art of Song-Jin Gansu originated from everyday life while embodying a profound aesthetic principle grounded in the dynamic interplay between the real and the imagined. These carvings possess not only independent artistic and decorative value but also form an integral part of the overall architectural composition of the tomb. Rich in quotidian charm and imbued with auspicious symbolism, they vividly articulate the hopes, aspirations, and emotional investments that bereaved families projected onto the funerary space.

The decorative system of Song-Jin imitation timber-frame tombs in Gansu employed the artistic principle of the mutual generation of *xu* (the intangible, imagined, or implied) and *shi* (the tangible, visible, or actual). Through brick-carved ornamentation, the four walls of the tomb chamber were transformed into representations of architectural exteriors, creating what was essentially a symbolic courtyard environment. This visual strategy emphasized the coexistence of reality and imagination, seeking not only to capture the physical appearance and inner vitality of represented objects but also to convey emotional resonance and cultural meaning. By transforming concrete forms into suggestive realms of imagination and extending finite spatial structures into conceptually infinite worlds, the decorative program pursued an aesthetic ideal in which subjective emotion and objective representation achieved a heightened state of unity. The production and iconography of these brick carvings were profoundly shaped by the religious beliefs, ethical values, and social norms of medieval Chinese society, particularly those associated with filial piety, ancestor veneration, and conceptions of life and death. Within this cultural framework, the carvings provided tomb occupants and their descendants with a sense of emotional fulfillment and aesthetic satisfaction through the experiential fusion of self, object, memory, and belief. As a result, the funerary environment transcended its material function and became a space imbued with a powerful poetic and spiritual atmosphere. The symbolic spatiality created within the tomb chamber served to accommodate a wide range of idealized aspirations concerning the afterlife. Through carefully orchestrated decorative imagery, the tomb was transformed into an imagined realm in which the deceased could continue to inhabit a familiar, harmonious, and prosperous environment. This mode of representation reflects a longstanding Chinese aesthetic tradition that employs the dialectical relationship between the real and the imagined to construct artistic conception (*yijing*). In the context of Song-Jin funerary art, such principles found material expression through brick carving, enabling the living to project emotional consolation and spiritual expectations onto the tomb space. In doing so, the decorative program not only offered symbolic reassurance regarding the deceased's final resting place but also provided psychological comfort and emotional stability for those left behind.

The construction of an expansive subterranean dwelling through the aesthetic principle of the interplay between the real and the imagined, the harmonious arrangement of diverse brick-carved images, and the psychological reassurance generated through symbolic representation were all directed toward the realization of specific funerary beliefs and cultural ideals. The symbolic meanings embedded within these decorative programs, as well as the relationships among individual motifs, reflect the complex structure of popular religious beliefs in Song-Jin society. These visual expressions integrated the Confucian ethic of filial piety and ancestor remembrance, the Buddhist doctrine of karmic causality and rebirth, and popular Daoist conceptions of spirits, immortality, and the supernatural. Consequently, the afterlife world depicted within the tomb chamber may be understood as a projection of the idealized vision of life imagined by ordinary people during the Song period. The widespread appearance of brick-carved filial-piety narratives in Song-Jin tombs of Gansu is closely related to the flourishing of Neo-Confucian thought during the Song dynasty. Equally significant was the widespread acceptance among the populace of a syncretic worldview integrating Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. This ideological synthesis incorporated Confucian advocacy of filial conduct, Daoist aspirations toward transcendence and immortality, and Buddhist teachings concerning karmic retribution. It was further reinforced by official state policies of the Northern Song government, which actively promoted filial virtue as a cornerstone of social order. Within this context, depictions of filial exemplars functioned as visual substitutes for written eulogies. Rather than relying solely on commemorative inscriptions, tomb patrons employed these narratives to signify that the deceased embodied the virtues celebrated in such stories. The images thus served both as posthumous praise of the tomb occupant and as symbolic evidence of the moral merit believed to facilitate spiritual transcendence and entry into a blessed afterlife. Auspicious motifs likewise operated as visual omens of prosperity, protection,

and good fortune. Images derived from everyday life not only documented contemporary social practices, including clothing, food production, domestic labor, transportation, and entertainment, but also contributed to the creation of a symbolic domestic environment within the tomb. In this sense, the tomb chamber was transformed into a perpetually sustaining household space, ensuring that the deceased would continue to receive material and spiritual provision beyond death. The figures, animals, floral motifs, and other decorative subjects represented in Song-Jin tomb brick carvings emerged through the creative fusion of long-established funerary iconographic traditions with the vibrant popular culture and artistic practices of the Song period. Characterized by concise compositions, refined craftsmanship, and a distinctive capacity to animate still imagery with emotional warmth, these carvings visually articulated the belief that filial devotion would ultimately be rewarded with blessings and moral recompense. More broadly, the decorative program of the tomb reflected the spiritual and cultural values of the society in which the deceased had lived. By commemorating both the virtues of the tomb occupant and the filial devotion of descendants, these images expressed a deeply rooted aspiration for divine favor, familial continuity, and enduring well-being across both the earthly and transcendent realms.

3. Artistic Characteristics of Song-Jin Brick Carvings in Gansu

3.1 Flexible Brick-Carving Techniques and Compositional Design

The production of Song-Jin tomb brick carvings in Gansu primarily employed two techniques: molding and carving. The molding method involved impressing designs onto unfired brick bodies through stamping and reverse-mold casting processes, after which the bricks were fired. The carving method, by contrast, consisted of directly incising or sculpting motifs onto the surface of fired grey bricks. Most brick carvings are executed in relief (*yangwen*), although examples combining *intaglio* (*yinwen*) and relief techniques are also common. In addition to plain decorative bricks, painted pictorial bricks constitute another important category within the corpus.

Molded pictorial bricks were produced by first creating carved molds containing the desired imagery. Brick bodies were then pressed from these molds and fired, after which painted decoration was applied. The recessed forms and incised contour lines of the mold were transferred onto the brick surface, creating a visual effect that combined raised shallow relief with engraved linear details. This process endowed the images with both structural solidity and refined ornamental richness. The Jin-dynasty brick-carved mural tomb in Anding District, Dingxi, Gansu, provides a representative example of molded and painted brick decoration. In this tomb, the interior surfaces were first coated with a white lime ground before pigments were applied according to the thematic content of individual images. Brick panels depicting scenes such as Yuanjue Admonishing His Father, Weeping at the Tomb upon Hearing Thunder, Pagoda-Building and Sacrificial Worship, and the Mill-Grinding Scene belong to this category of molded and painted pictorial bricks. The Mill-Grinding Scene (Figure 2) exemplifies the artistic qualities of this technique. The figures and millstone are outlined with black ink lines, and both individuals are represented frontally. The figure on the right wears a light-blue round-collared robe over straight-legged trousers, while the figure on the left is dressed in a red cross-collared upper garment paired with a long skirt. The forms are rendered through fluid carved lines and a highly generalized visual language. In both stylistic conception and execution, the work draws upon the expressive traditions of Chinese painting and folk paper-cutting art. The carving marks possess a simple yet powerful quality, achieving a successful synthesis of outward appearance and inner vitality. The stylistic characteristics of these brick carvings bear close affinities to Song-dynasty pictorial aesthetics, particularly in their emphasis on graceful contours, naturalistic representation, and visual elegance. Through sophisticated realism and highly accomplished carving techniques, artisans effectively integrated the expressive strengths of painting and sculpture into a unified artistic medium. The resulting images possess considerable visual vitality and emotional resonance, exemplifying the distinctive aesthetic achievements of Song-Jin brick-carving art in Gansu. As such, they may be regarded as outstanding examples within the broader tradition of medieval Chinese funerary brick sculpture.

Carved pictorial bricks employed a variety of carving techniques in a flexible manner to represent their subjects with clarity, economy, and expressive force. Examples from the Jianxia Tomb in Qingshui County, Gansu, including Intertwining Floral Scrolls, Grapes and Peonies, and Liu Mingda Demonstrating Filial Piety (Figure 1), demonstrate a high degree of technical proficiency and artistic vitality. Executed directly on the surfaces of fired bricks, this method produced relief images with

pronounced projection, endowing the compositions with a strong sense of volume and spatial presence. In addition to relief carving, Song-Jin tombs in Qingshui County preserve another distinctive type of pictorial brick that combines flat carving with incised-line engraving. In this technique, all areas outside the external contours of the represented object are cut away, while the forms themselves are primarily defined through engraved contour lines. As a result, the depiction of pictorial depth is deliberately minimized, and the subjects are generally rendered in close-range views. The visual effect resembles that of a silhouette, producing an aesthetic characterized by concise yet evocative forms, natural compositional harmony, and an understated elegance. A representative example is the pictorial brick Woodcutter (Figure 3) excavated from the Jiawan Tomb in Qingshui County. This work employs a recessed-ground intaglio technique, whereby the background surrounding the woodcutter and his bundle of firewood is carved away, while bold and deeply incised lines define the figure's facial features, bodily form, and the firewood itself. The composition largely dispenses with the representation of spatial depth, instead presenting the subject in a foreground-oriented format. Despite its simplified treatment of space, the image conveys a vivid sense of life and movement. The robust carving, economical use of line, and direct visual expression together create a figure that is at once archaic in character and remarkably animated, exemplifying the distinctive artistic language of Song-Jin engraved brick reliefs in Gansu.

From a compositional perspective, the design of pictorial brick carvings was significantly shaped by the physical format of the bricks themselves. Rectangular and square compositional frameworks predominated, with specific arrangements selected according to both the architectural requirements of the tomb chamber and the narrative or symbolic content of the image. As a result, the compositions exhibit rigorous organization, clear hierarchical structure, and a strong sense of visual fullness. The pictorial brick carvings of Song-Jin tombs in Gansu display remarkable compositional diversity, including horizontal parallel arrangements, diagonal alignments, vertically layered compositions, hierarchical zoning structures, and bird's-eye-view perspectives. A representative example is the pictorial brick Wang Xiang Lying on Ice from the Jin-period Jianxia Tomb in Qingshui County, Gansu. This work employs a bird's-eye compositional perspective. Wang Xiang is depicted lying bare-bodied upon an ice surface rendered with undulating wave patterns, which extend continuously across the entire pictorial field. Through a vertically layered compositional strategy, a basket is placed above the figure, while two plump carp are depicted below. This arrangement vividly narrates the celebrated filial-piety story of "lying on ice to obtain carp," integrating multiple symbolic elements into a coherent visual structure and enhancing the dramatic expressiveness of the scene. Another notable example is the pictorial brick Musicians and Entertainers (Sanyue Tu) (Figure 4), excavated from the Song-period Wangjia Xinyao brick-carved tomb in Qinzhou District, Tianshui, Gansu^[6]. The composition portrays four female musicians engaged in performance, respectively playing a drum, chime stones, a sheng mouth organ, and wooden clappers. The performers are adorned with delicate cosmetic decoration, while their facial expressions, bodily gestures, and postures are rendered with notable individuality. Their costumes and musical instruments are depicted in rich and elaborate detail. The composition combines expressive freedom with structural flexibility, breaking away from the constraints of realistic spatial scale. Objects situated at different distances and orientations are arranged upon a single pictorial plane, allowing figures and events from different spatial and temporal contexts to coexist within one unified image. This compositional approach highlights the exceptional freedom with which Song-Jin brick-carving artists conceived and represented notions of space and time. The widely distributed "door-opening" motif found in Song-period tombs further exemplifies this artistic principle. A representative example is the brick carving Woman Opening a Door from the Suwa Tomb in Qingshui County. The image depicts a pair of doors partially opened, through which a woman extends the upper half of her body. By employing the aesthetic principle of the interplay between the real and the imagined, the tomb artisan uses the half-open doorway to suggest the existence of a vast space beyond the visible image. This visual strategy effectively conveys the intentionality and imaginative freedom characteristic of traditional Chinese artistic expression. The partially opened door functions as a symbolic threshold connecting the virtual space created within the imitation timber-frame brick-carving program to the viewer's real spatial environment. Through this device, the composition successfully integrates represented and implied space, resulting in an overall visual arrangement marked by unity, coherence, and harmony. Such treatment vividly demonstrates the distinctive aesthetic qualities of Song-Jin brick-carving art in Gansu, particularly its sophisticated use of

symbolic space and its capacity to transcend the limitations of physical representation.

Figure 4: Musicians and Entertainers (Sanyue Tu). Pictorial brick excavated from the Song-dynasty Wangjia Xinyao Tomb, Qinzhou District, Tianshui, Gansu Province.



3.2 A Modeling Approach Combining Realism and Exaggeration

From the historical development of pictorial bricks, the stylistic features and formal characteristics established by Han-dynasty pictorial bricks exerted a profound influence on later artistic traditions. The modeling approach employed in the Song-Jin pictorial bricks from Qingshui County, Gansu, demonstrates a continuity with the Han artistic tradition. Their visual language combines naive realism with deliberate exaggeration. Rather than pursuing strict verisimilitude, these works seek to capture subtle gestures and fleeting emotional states, thereby expressing a form of rustic aesthetic beauty that represents a particular artistic choice for conveying an idealized world. This aesthetic tendency is related not only to the artistic values embedded in Chinese visual culture since the Qin-Han and Sui-Tang periods, but also to the traditional concept of artistic representation that privileges imagery and expressive intent over meticulous imitation. For example, the Two Women Weeping scene from the Jiawan Tomb in Qingshui County, Gansu, depicts two women concealing their faces with their sleeves and shedding tears while wearing cloth skirts. The brick-carved figures are accurately rendered and vividly expressive, effectively conveying the sorrow of mourners lamenting during a funeral procession. Another example is the Two Figures Pushing a Millstone pictorial brick excavated from the Suwa Tomb in Qingshui County, Gansu. The millstone support is rendered in a concise yet forceful manner. On either side of the millstone stand two women, each holding a milling lever against her abdomen while bending forward and stepping outward. Their hair is arranged in double buns; they wear short upper garments and pleated skirts. With only a few incised lines, the artisan successfully delineated the image of women operating the millstone. The overall composition is archaic and unadorned, employing either bold and vigorous or deliberately rough and primitive techniques to evoke a sense of original aesthetic vitality marked by rugged simplicity and ancient grandeur.

The pictorial brick carvings in Song-Jin tombs of Gansu are not characterized by precise proportional rendering or meticulous attention to detail, nor do they rely on dense and intricate linear patterns. Instead, they emphasize simplicity, conciseness, and refinement in form, while exhibiting qualities of naïveté, rusticity, and exaggeration. These features evoke an aesthetic of sincerity and unadorned simplicity. Executed with considerable technical proficiency and strong decorative appeal, the works possess heightened expressive power and are rendered in a comparatively freehand and unrestrained manner. Formally, the compositions demonstrate a well-ordered interplay between movement and stillness, as well as between density and openness. Robust and forceful straight lines alternate with soft and full-bodied curves, creating a visual effect that is both highly structured and richly varied. Through vivid, fluid, and dynamically modulated lines, brick-carving artisans conveyed a unified and profound artistic beauty. Within seemingly ordinary ornamental motifs, one can discern aesthetic connotations of elegance, prosperity, and auspiciousness, reflecting the plain yet refined artistic character of brick carving^[7]. The iconographic repertoire of Song-Jin brick-carving art is remarkably diverse, and its pictorial compositions are often arranged in layered and

overlapping structures. Nevertheless, the overall visual organization remains coherent and integrated, achieving complexity without disorder. The images are generally characterized by smooth forms and a unified compositional order, while their figures frequently assume rotational and flowing postures, embodying a sense of vitality and animated life.

3.3 Color Expression Integrating Symbolism and Ornamentality

The painted brick-carved tombs of the Song-Jin period in Gansu were primarily constructed in imitation of timber-frame architecture. In addition to unpainted brick carvings, many examples combined brick carving with polychrome painting, with colors applied to figures' garments, facial features, and background elements. This decorative mode integrated relief carving and painting, employing different color schemes for different subject matters. Characterized by brilliant coloration and intricate craftsmanship, these works exhibit a rich decorative effect. The principal coloring techniques included outline-and-fill painting, shading, contour drawing, stippling and tinting, and freehand application of color, all of which contributed to the creation of a splendid and vividly colored underworld realm. The color palette of the brick carvings consisted primarily of yellow, red, cyan, green, blue, black, and white. Among these, black and red were most frequently employed in decorative programs. Within the color psychology of early communities, red and black occupied a dominant position^[8].

In the Song-period tombs of Qingshui County, Gansu, brick carvings were predominantly supplemented with painted decoration. Strongly contrasting colors were extensively employed in pursuit of a sumptuous visual effect. The symbolic and decorative functions of color were integrated into the interior space of imitation timber-frame tomb chambers^[9], enhancing the multiple layers of meaning conveyed by the funerary environment and representing the idealized otherworld envisioned by the tomb occupants. The Song tombs of Qingshui County were dominated by black and red tones, complemented by other colors to express contemporary understandings of "death" and "rebirth." This chromatic scheme was closely related to the traditional Chinese aesthetic concept of the "Five Colors." Ancient people incorporated diverse natural and social phenomena into a cosmological framework associated with the five colors. Consequently, color became linked to time and space and corresponded to specific directions, generating a sense of protection within the enclosed interior space. Auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, safety and danger, were thus associated with particular colors. For tomb builders and occupants, color provided not only visual satisfaction through decorative effects but also psychological comfort and hope through the concepts of death and rebirth symbolized by red and black. Another example is the Jianxia Tomb in Qingshui County, Gansu. Constructed with a vaulted ceiling, the tomb chamber is decorated with alternating red and black banded patterns extending around the interior. Between these bands are motifs of auspicious clouds, phoenixes, and arhats rendered in red and black. Red serves as the dominant color throughout the chamber. The interior color scheme is rich yet harmonious, characterized by bold application and strong contrasts between warm and cool tones. Color and subject matter are integrated in a natural and harmonious manner, endowing the overall architectural appearance with a sense of brightness, vitality, and magnificence^[10].

The polychrome brick carvings of Song-Jin tombs in Gansu employed corresponding color-matching strategies according to architectural spatial forms and mural themes. The principal colors included ochre red, blue, black, yellow, and white. The coloration of human figures varied according to the identity, social status, and gender of the individuals depicted, utilizing monochromatic schemes, dark tones, or combinations of three or more colors. In the representation of human figures, color was applied through both relatively realistic modes of expression and naturally expressive ink-line delineation. The colors used for animals, flowers, and birds exhibit a strong decorative quality and primarily serve to reinforce the symbolic meanings embedded within the tomb murals. Through the integration of figural representation and symbolic significance in both imagery and color, as well as the harmonious arrangement of visual elements such as imitation timber-frame architecture, filial piety imagery, and ornamental motifs, expectations and aspirations for the otherworld were visually articulated. By means of artistic imagination, visual language, and chromatic symbolism, these funerary images constructed an envisioned future of the posthumous world.

Conclusion

The art of Song-Jin brick carving in Gansu is inseparable from the region's long-standing tradition of sculptural art and was profoundly influenced by the aesthetic culture of its time. It not only embodies the aesthetic psychology of contemporary society but also reflects the profound cultural heritage of the Song-Jin period. Characterized by ingenious conceptualization,

full and balanced compositions, vivid imagery, exquisite craftsmanship, and brilliant coloration, Song-Jin brick-carving art exhibits aesthetic qualities of unity, harmony, ornamentality, regional distinctiveness, and refined elegance. Compared with earlier periods, the themes represented in these tombs reveal a gradual decline and eventual disappearance of concepts centered on the worship of deities. Instead, they increasingly focus on depicting the tomb occupants' daily lives, leisure activities, and domestic experiences. Artistic production in any historical period does not emerge or develop in isolation; rather, it evolves through processes of inheritance, adaptation, and innovation, serving as an objective reflection of the prevailing ideological consciousness of its age. The rich and diverse imagery carved and painted on Song-Jin brick carvings in Gansu provides a relatively comprehensive representation of the spiritual world, social relationships, and material life of the people of that period, thereby reflecting the distinctive characteristics of the era.

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Conflict of Interests

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