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The Art of Infant Play in the Song Dynasty and the Reasons for Its Flourishing

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Abstract

The infant play motif is a significant theme in ancient Chinese visual arts, originating during the Warring States period and evolving through the Sui, Tang, and Five dynasties before reaching its peak in the Song Dynasty. In addition to being a common subject in painting, it also frequently appeared in tomb murals and decorative arts. The flourishing of the commodity economy, the rise of the urban merchant class, policies favoring culture over militarism, and a rich cultural heritage all played key roles in the widespread popularity of infant play imagery during the Song Dynasty, making it an artistic treasure that reflects the social life of the time and embodies idealized visions for the future.

Key Words

Infant play, shape classification, reasons for flourishing

Introduction

Infant play is a creative theme in ancient Chinese art that focuses on children as the main subject. Scholars commonly use the terms “infant play images” or “playful infants” to refer to ancient Chinese depictions of children. In *Chinese Art Atlas*, Pu Songnian elaborates on infant play as follows: “Infant play, also called playful infants, is one of the important subjects of genre painting. It evolved from the Tang Dynasty depictions of women and infants, reaching maturity in the Northern Song Dynasty. The theme often portrays children playing games or engaging with peddlers, with depictions ranging from two or three figures to hundreds, reflecting the innocent and lively aspects of children’s lives and wishing for national peace, prosperity, and the blessing of many children. Therefore, infant play images were commonly featured in New Year paintings, often pasted on screens, enhancing the festive atmosphere of the festival.”¹ As a branch of figure painting the infant play theme, once established in the Song Dynasty, spread to various forms of applied arts including ceramics, gold, silver, jade, textiles, and embroidery, becoming a significant decorative motif in these crafts. Recent archaeological discoveries have also revealed the presence of infant

play images in the decorations of Song Dynasty tombs. The widespread popularity of infant play images during the Song Dynasty was not solely influenced by painting; rather, it was the result of multiple economic, political, and cultural factors that contributed to its prosperity in this period.

1. Origins of Infant Play Art

It has been shown through existing research that the origin of the infant play imagery depicting children can be traced back to the Warring States period. For example, two Warring States period jade pendants depicting children riding beasts were unearthed in 1957 from a large tomb in Xiaotun Village, Luoyang, Henan.² During the Han Dynasty, the art of portrait bricks and portrait stones flourished, and many depictions of children appeared in tombs. An example is the silk painting from the Jinque Mountain Han tomb in Linyi, Shandong,³ where one of the panels shows a woman engaged in weaving, with a child standing by the loom, seemingly handing her something. In the *Ox Plowing* painting discovered in Suide, Shaanxi,⁴ as well as in the *Landlord Collecting Rent* mural found in Tomb 1 of the Dahuting site in Mixian,⁵ children are also depicted. In these

artworks, children generally occupy a secondary position, and their figures are not significantly differentiated from adults, with the primary distinction being their smaller size.

The infant play motif further evolved during the Three Kingdoms period, as evidenced by the lacquer plate unearthed from the tomb of Zhu Ran in Ma'anshan, Anhui. This lacquer plate, dating from the Three Kingdoms period, features a scene of two children sparring with sticks.⁶ This is the first recorded instance of a lacquer painting with children as the central theme. The upper part of the plate features mountain peaks, while the open area in front of the mountains depicts two children holding sticks and dancing. During the Wei-Jin and Northern and Southern dynasties, the creation of figure paintings entered a new stage of development. In the *Admonitions Scroll* by the Eastern Jin painter Gu Kaizhi, three children appear for the first time. Compared to the images of earlier wall paintings or portrait stones, these depictions show notable changes. In addition to extant paintings, in *Zhenguan Gongsi Huashi* (貞觀公私畫史) Pei Xiaoyuan records *Child Playing with Geese* by the Liu-Song painter Gu Jingxiu and *Children Playing with Ducks* by the Liang-Chen painter Jiang Sengbao.⁷ These literary references indicate that by the Wei-Jin period, there were already paintings with children as the main subject.

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the infant play motif further developed, and historical records also mention painters skilled in depicting children. According to historical accounts, the painter Zhang Xuan was particularly adept at painting infants. His extant works, such as *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* and *Lady Guoguo's Spring Outing*, feature children. However, in these two works, the representation of children is not yet entirely accurate in terms of their childish innocence and playfulness. The reason for this lies in the fact that, during this period, figure painting focused mainly on adults, and little attention was paid to the unique characteristics of children. It wasn't until the discovery of the screen painting *Double Children* from the tombs of the Zhang Xiong family in the Western Regions of Astana, Xinjiang,⁸ that the earliest known painting focused on infants as its central theme emerged. This painting depicts children with delicate facial expressions and playful body movements, marking a departure from earlier portrayals where children were miniature versions of adults.

In summary, before the Song Dynasty, the depiction of infant play was slowly developing, but it was still closely linked to female subjects and had not yet become an independent genre. Works featuring children as the

primary subject and narrating around the figure of the child itself were few. In most surviving artworks, children were merely ornamental elements in the adult world.

2. Classification of Infant Play Art in the Song Dynasty

The flourishing of the commodity economy and handicrafts in the Song Dynasty greatly contributed to the prosperity of commerce, and the great socio-economic changes promoted the process of urbanization, resulting in the emergence and growth of the civic class. As a result the development of art was influenced by civic culture, and paintings with secular themes were nourished in the fertile soil of the commodity economy and enthusiastically sought after by the public. At the same time the public's preferences for creators to provide a broader creative space and infant play theme in the customary paintings stand out, producing several outstanding infant play painters. Crafts in the fields of government and private production processes improved, and the infant play theme also became an important pattern in tomb decoration, ceramics, gold and silver, jade carving, printing and dyeing fabrics and other art mediums.

2.1 Infant Play as a Subject in Painting

In *Honglu Huatan* (《虹廬畫談》), Huang Binhong discusses a popular topic in Song Dynasty painting: "One person, two infants, three mountains, four flowers, five beasts, and six gods and Buddhas."⁹ From surviving works of the Song Dynasty, it is evident that the theme of infant play became not only an independent subject in painting but also produced some famous painters in art history. Many artists devoted themselves to creating infant play paintings, such as Su Hanchen, Li Song, Du Haier, and Liu Zongdao. They spared no effort in depicting every aspect of children's lives. The scope of their vision was no longer limited to the children of the upper-class aristocracy; urban and rural children also became protagonists in their works. A review of the depictions of infant play by Song Dynasty painters reveals two main thematic categories: one is the depiction of children's real-life activities, and the other is symbolic representation.

The depiction of real life mainly reflects bland and innocent childish fun; the first is the combination of festivals and children's games, such as Su Hanchen's (Northern Song Dynasty) *Children Playing in an Autumn Courtyard* and *Children Playing on a Winter Day*, which are now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei.



Figure 1. Su Hanchen. *Children Playing in an Autumn Courtyard*. Northern Song Dynasty, Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Xia Wenyan edited the *Tuhui Baojian* (圖繪寶鑒), and there is a detailed introduction of Su Hanchen: “Suhanchen, born in Kaifeng, learned from Liu Zonggu, he was a skilled painter of Buddhism and Taoism, with excellent figures, especially infants. When Shaoxing was restored to the official position, Xiaozong painted a Buddha statue at the beginning of Longxing, which was called the imperial edict and complemented by Xinlang. His son Zhuo can inherit his learning, Longxing Painting Academy to be an imperial decree.”¹⁰ His masterpiece, *Children Playing in an Autumn Courtyard*, depicts two children on a round stool in a courtyard playing a game of pushing a date mill, the girl pointing her right hand toward the mill as if to explain to the boy how to play, and the boy staring intently at the toy in his hand, both of them immersed in the game (figure 1). Right behind the two children is another round stool with toys,

and in the background is a towering boulder, daisies and hibiscus flowers blooming around the boulder, and huge flowers and stones setting off the children’s young, interesting life. The second is the combination of children and various kinds of plays, such as *The Puppet Show* by Su Hanchen, which is now in the Tokyo National Museum in Japan, and *A Children’s Puppet Show* by Liu Songnian of the Southern Song Dynasty, which is now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei; both take children and puppets as the theme of the paintings, expecting children to be lucky and to ward off evil spirits, and grow up healthily. In Li Song’s *Skeleton Fantasy Show*, children are shown enjoying a puppet show on a hanging wire. The puppeteer is portrayed by the artist as a skeleton, manipulating a small skeleton to perform, with a boy lying on his back in front of him to watch his performance, and a slightly older girl standing behind the boy. Behind the performer a woman who seems to be the performer’s wife is holding a baby and breastfeeding it. This theme also reflects the idea of children seeking good fortune, warding off evil, and growing up in good health. The third is the children’s life scene narrative; this kind of theme is more popular as seen in *The Salesman’s Picture*, a representative work of the painter Li Song. He was a commoner and his works do not have the general court painter’s prosperous and rich style. His infant play figures are fresh and natural, full of children’s style. Currently in the Palace Museum, Li Song’s *The Salesman’s Picture* depicts the children seeing the salesman and excitedly running over. Anchoring the lower right corner of the picture is a puppy running away, and a mother holding the youngest child in her hand while her other hand seems to be gesturing to the other children. The children behave differently, laughing and joking as they encircle the salesman, and the image conveys the innocence of the children.

Another category is symbolic paintings. Under the influence of the social background of auspicious cultural development and prosperity, themes of the infant play painters of the two Song dynasties will often be children with auspicious symbols of plants, animals, artifacts, etc. in the same picture. Good examples in the National Palace Museum in Taipei are Su Hanchen’s *Kaitai Painting*, and anonymous paintings from the Southern Song Dynasty such as *One Hundred Playing in the Spring*, *Assaulting the Jujube Tree* and so on. This will be realism and romanticism mingled with the theme of the painting, so that the two Song Dynasty infant play in the allegory has a source of reality, beyond the reality, the romantic ideal of the interest. The painting *One Hundred Playing in the Spring* depicts one hundred



Figure 2. *Child-Rearing Painting*. Northern Song Dynasty, Dengfeng Heishangou Mural Tomb.



Figure 3. *Children Playing Puppets*. Song and Jin dynasties, Dengfeng Wangshang Mural Tomb.

children playing, vividly depicting a lovely image of children and their childhood lives. The work depicts children dancing with lions, playing music, performing shadow plays, and flying kites during the Chinese New Year festivities. Many of the vivid scenes contain auspicious symbolism including kite flying, which in ancient times symbolized the dispersal of bad luck and evil spirits, and the interaction between a baby and a unicorn, which implies the beautiful legend of "the unicorn giving away a son." In addition, the picture also shows cultural and artistic activities such as qin, chess, calligraphy, and painting, revealing the deep hope for the overall development and talent of future generations. The hundred children picture carries a unique cultural connotation in traditional Chinese culture. As the word Bai means many or infinite, Bai Zi naturally implies endless progeny, which is a masterpiece celebrating the traditional concept of having many children and good fortune.

Thus, it is evident that Song Dynasty painting had entered a mature phase, with the techniques and content of infant play paintings reaching a high standard. Professional painters emerged, exhibiting refined skills and a variety of themes, making the Song Dynasty the

unquestionable peak period for infant play art.

2.2 Infant Play in Funeral Decorations

Funeral decorations with infant play images decorated tombs with children as carriers for murals, in brick carvings, and in sarcophagus line carvings mainly distributed in Henan, basically during the late Northern Song Dynasty.

First, there are tomb murals. In August 1999, a Song Dynasty mural tomb was discovered in Heishangou, Dengfeng City.¹¹ On the northeast wall of the tomb chamber, there is a child rearing painting (figure 2). The tomb is dated to the fourth year of Emperor Zhezong's reign during the Shaosheng period. The mural shows a curtain, under which two women, one on the left and one on the right, are each holding a child and playing with them. The woman on the right holds the child in her left arm, while her right hand holds a snack to amuse the other child. The child is wearing a red flower-patterned small robe, with a necklace and holding a peach of immortality. The woman on the left stands, holding the child's hands while the child reaches forward for the snack, dressed similarly. In 1994, another mural tomb was discovered in Liu Bei, Dengfeng,¹² with a mural with

the theme of attending to the child on the southeast wall. The scene depicts a maid on the left and a woman on the right holding a baby in her left arm. Behind them are a water basin and a basin stand, with a white towel draped over the stand. Additionally, in 1982, seven colorful murals of the hundred children playing theme were discovered in a Song tomb in Chengnan Zhuang, Dengfeng, dating to the mid-Northern Song Dynasty.¹³ These murals depict children playing among peony flowers, lotus flowers, and other plants. Wang Shang Mural Tomb was discovered in Dengfeng City in 1993,¹⁴ with the southeast wall depicting three maids and a young child holding a puppet toy (figure 3).

Second, there are brick carvings. In 1965, a Song tomb was discovered in Shangcai, Zhumadian, Henan.¹⁵ The tomb, dating to the late Northern Song Dynasty, has a child rearing image in a brick carving on the southern wall. In the carving, a middle-aged woman is holding a child in her arms, standing in front of a square table. On the table is a mirror stand, and the child faces a copper mirror on the stand, playing with it, while the child's reflection appears in the mirror. In 1981, another tomb was discovered in Yunyang, Nanzhao, Henan,¹⁶ with a brick carving depicting children playing with puppets (童子戲傀儡) on the upper middle section of the second wall. This tomb is also believed to date to the late Northern Song Dynasty. Puppet plays, a popular form of folk entertainment during the Song Dynasty, were not only for amusement but also to drive away evil. Zhangtou puppets (仗頭傀儡) were mounted on a vertical rod, and a small stage was used where the puppeteer would manipulate the puppets. According to *Dongjing Menghua Lu*, it was noted: "Ren Xiaosan, a puppet performer. Every day at five o'clock, a small play is performed in the alley, so if you're late, you'll have to miss it."¹⁷

Last, there are stone coffin line engravings. In 1964, a stone coffin with image carvings was discovered in Luoyang from the Northern Song Dynasty, belonging to the tomb of Zhang Jun.¹⁸ The coffin lid is decorated with large, intertwined peony patterns, interspersed with children climbing branches and riding beasts. In 1982, a Song tomb was discovered in Wenxian, Henan.¹⁹ On the lower part of the partition door, there is a carving depicting the combination of a pomegranate and immortal children. The central image shows a pomegranate being split open, with two immortal children on either side, riding on floral branches and holding flower branches in their hands. Pomegranates symbolize many children and, together with the immortal children, they convey the auspicious meaning of "many children, many blessings."

The tombs from this period that exhibit infant play imagery are fewer compared to other forms of art. The themes mainly combine children with auspicious symbols, such as peonies, lotus flowers, and pomegranates. Other common themes include child rearing and attending to children, illustrating the role of women in caring for children in domestic life. Additionally, there are depictions of children's toys, such as the zhangtou puppet.

2.3 Infant Play in the Applied Arts

The influence of the infant play motif from the Song Dynasty on decorative arts is profound, and examples of this motif can be found in Song-era ceramics, metalwork, jade, and dyed fabrics.

First, in ceramics the decoration of infant play scenes saw significant development, largely due to the prosperity of kilns across various regions of the Song Dynasty. The production scale and technical advancements in porcelain were notably superior to those of previous periods. Among the ceramics of the Cizhou, Yaozhou, and Jingdezhen kilns, the infant play motif is one of the most commonly used themes. Notably, Cizhou kiln's porcelain pillows are particularly famous. One such example is the porcelain pillow with a motif of an infant holding a lotus, discovered in Cizhou kiln excavations.²⁰ The pillow is oval-shaped, with two sets of borders, the outer set consisting of two elliptical lines and the inner set shaped like the head of a ruyi. Between these lines and the ruyi heads, four line patterns are drawn. The central image depicts a child sleeping on a bench, dressed in floral clothing, with the buttons of his clothing undone. He is sitting cross-legged, supporting his head with his left arm, while holding a large lotus leaf in his right hand. The lotus leaf hangs down, suggesting that the child is already in a peaceful sleep (figure 4). Other porcelain pillows unearthed from the Cizhou kiln, such as the white-ground black-flower infant play pattern pillow, the infant play kite pillow, and the porcelain pillow with the image of a child playing ball, all feature similar themes, depicting children in playful scenarios. In addition to pillows with infant play motifs painted on their surfaces, there are also child-shaped pillows, where the child's body forms the shape of the pillow itself, such as a piece from the Northern Song Dynasty Ding kiln—a white glaze rectangular children's pillow, lying on the seat of a smiling child, the child's arms around the head, the back of the concave curve as the pillow surface, with the legs crossed around. Infant play motifs are not limited to these types of pillows but are also found on various everyday household items. For example, in the Palace



Figure 4. Baby holding a lotus flower, porcelain pillow, Yaozhou kiln, Northern Song Dynasty, Museum of the King of the Southern Han Dynasty, Beijing, China.

Museum there is a Yaozhou kiln green glaze printed lotus bowl with children playing and a Jingdezhen kiln green and white glaze carved infant play pattern bowl—these show the different kilns' interpretation of the infant play pattern. With the Yaozhou kiln green glaze incised infant play pattern bowl, the bowl inside the carved infant play lotus decoration has an obese baby, neck collar, two wrists each wearing bracelets, a lively and lovely image of the child placed between the lotus;²¹ it is an infant play pattern of lively innocence and a calm and elegant combination of kilnware that is unique. Another is pure white as snow, with blue and white glaze in an incised baby play pattern bowl; the glaze is white and flawless, glistening and glossy, decorations are visible, there are smooth and delicate lines, and through the light there is a kind of hidden hazy beauty.²² Inside the bowl, two infants are playing beside the lotus flower, the glaze color is light and the pattern is graceful, forming a visual effect

of warmth and whiteness. Therefore, the theme of infant play has been integrated into the objects of daily life and has become a common aesthetic hobby in society.

Second are gold and silver which were also very widely used with the infant play pattern, including gold and silver jewelry, bedding, tableware, and other forms of vessels. In the Guanfu Museum there is a birds and flowers infant play pattern on a gold hair comb; for the semi-circular, the back of the comb in the middle of the burin is engraved with two babies, the babies are entwined with flowers and birds around the cluster, and the periphery uses a bead pattern outline. Similarly, gold hairpins and earrings discovered in Songjiang District, Shanghai,²³ such as a peony and child gold hairpin and lotus holding child gold earrings, also focus on infants, enhanced by beautiful depictions of peonies and lotus leaves. The Southern Song burin silver smoker unearthed in the underground palace of the Tianfeng Pagoda in



Figure 5. Child holding a lotus flower, carved white jade, Song Dynasty, Shanghai Museum, China.



Figure 6. Three children holding a lotus flower, carved reticulated white nephrite pendant, Song Dynasty, National Museum of China.



Figure 7. Xixia infant play lotus print fabric, Western Xia, from Feng Haiying and Li Yuehua, "Appreciation of a Western Xia silk sericite with a lotus motif and a baby show," *Collecting*, no. 2, 2019.

has a theme of infant theater: dancing, drumming, cuju, pouncing on butterflies, hitting the clapperboard, pouncing on butterflies. A silver child picking lotus inscription plate has the plate hammered into a lotus flower with concentric circles divided into three parts: the lotus heart engraved with an inscription, the middle circle with the child picking lotus motif, and the outer circle with the lotus petals, making the entire object poetic in form.

In terms of jade, the aesthetics of Song Dynasty jade were influenced by painting, and the subject matter exceeded the scope of the previous generation, especially with the infant play drawing to make the shape of jade secular, and jade carvings of children were very common. Children were frequently depicted holding a lotus, climbing branches, dancing, etc., and the jade items were mainly for wearing, such as pendants, ornaments and for other purposes. The number of surviving children holding a lotus is relatively large, with single and double children being the most common. The white jade child holding a lotus flower, now in the Shanghai Museum, is 7.3 cm high and carved in the round, with a peach-shaped hairstyle, eyebrows like a figure of eight, two curved lines for the eyes, a small mouth, bracelets on the wrists, wearing a long vest with

Ningbo²⁴ has a lid divided into six zones, each of which

narrow-sleeved undergarments and a shoulder sash that wraps around the armpits, and in his left hand he holds a lotus flower and raises it above his head while his right hand holds on to the vase (figure 5). In the National Museum is a reticulated white nephrite carved with three children holding a lotus flower pendant, the three of them standing on lotus seats and one of them holding a lotus branch over his shoulder with the lotus blossoming above his head. On the back are two children, one holding up a budding lotus branch and the other holding one of the branches high in the air (figure 6). This unique three-child jade carving is a rare example from the Song Dynasty and shows the widespread popularity of child figures in Song Dynasty jade carving, especially those holding lotus flowers. Song Dynasty jade carvings of children were widely favored, with the lotus holding child theme being the most prevalent. The *Dongjing Menghua Lu* records: "A few days before the Qixi Festival, the market is filled with carts and horses, and the streets are crowded with people. The unbloomed lotus leaves are folded, and many people use them to make double-headed lotus charms for fun, taking them home with them. Children must buy new lotus leaves to hold, which adds to the pleasure of their play."²⁵ Thus, the lotus-holding theme reflects daily life and represents the evolution of Song Dynasty jade culture towards secular subjects.

Finally, printed and dyed fabrics also made extensive use of infant play as a decorative theme. Textile technology continued to develop during the Song Dynasty with official textile institutions such as the Zhiluo Yuan and Chang Yuan set up in various places, and private workshops also developed and grew. In 1973, a golden peony and lotus child aya was unearthed from a Song tomb in Hengyang, Hunan Province, showing a child grasping the entwined branches of a lotus flower in a climbing position, surrounded by entwined lotus flowers, entwined peonies, and other floral motifs.²⁶ Under the influence of Song culture, the border areas of Liao, Xixia also had child pattern textiles, excavated in Helan Xian, Ningxia, and Baisikou Shuangta of the Xixia had infant playing lotus print fabrics with the child wearing a belly-band, a collar bracelet, holding a flower stem in both hands for the flying model, and flower stems from behind like a ribbon flying²⁷ (figure 7)—the child hairstyle clearly has national characteristics. The whole set of modelling consists of a variety of patterns such as children, floral patterns, jointed beads, etc. The complex patterns are methodically displayed on the fabric, reflecting the high level of textile technology in Western Xia. This fabric has some connection with the Song Dynasty in pattern and color, but the shape shows the integration of the national characteristics.

3. Reason for the Flourishing of Infant Play Art in the Song Dynasty

The appearance of infant theater in all kinds of artistic creations during the Song Dynasty suggests that this type of subject was not only favored by the literati and scholarly classes but was also popular among the general public, reaching a period of prosperity in ancient China which may have been due to the combined results of economic development, political orientation, and the development of cultural practices.

3.1 Socio-Economic Drivers

The prosperity of the commodity economy in the Song Dynasty promoted the development and progress of handicrafts, agriculture, industry, and commerce, and the social and economic changes led to the rise of the citizen class. While the material level was raised, the demand for spiritual civilization also grew, and this social background provided fertile soil for the prosperity of culture. On the one hand, the love and attention from the upper class towards art were of great importance in the development of art, and the establishment of the Hanlin Painting Academy and its recruitment system provided opportunities for folk painters to work in the Academy. The life experience of the painters from the lower class influenced the painting style of the Academy, giving their works a tendency to be more secular and closer to the people's lives and aesthetic interests; therefore, the art and the lives of the people were closer to each other. Customary painting is a significant feature of the culture of the people during this period, which involved all aspects of people's lives, and the contents were in line with the public aesthetics of the time and fit with the lives of the people, making the artworks very popular. The theme of infant play in customary paintings is even more outstanding; its content is lovely with a good meaning so that it could be spread from paintings to a large number of objects in people's daily lives and tomb decorations, embodying the people's desire for a better social life.

At the same time technological advances in commerce and handicrafts provided technological support for artisans to innovate patterns, so as the economy developed all types of artifacts, whether porcelain, textiles, gold or silverware, were featuring new expressive content in different industries in various regions and institutions through the creation of infant play figures and different ways of expression. These craftsmen and painters influenced and inspired each other. In addition, infant play drawings catered to secular aesthetics, and their life-like expression received public attention and had a place in the process of commercialization.

3.2 Politically Driven Factors

In Wang Zengyu's *An Introduction to the Population of the Song Dynasty*, it is said that since the beginning of the Song Dynasty there were 181 imperial heirs, not counting the two sons of Du Zong, who died in the war, and there were eighty-two premature deaths, accounting for more than forty-five percent of the total number of imperial heirs.²⁸ During the two Song dynasties, there were constant wars and turmoil, and the population declined sharply in this turbulent environment. After the Southern Crossing, there were incessant natural disasters and wars, coupled with the tightening of the area of arable land, so that ordinary families were unable to raise newborns, and the phenomenon of abandoning babies was severe. In the *Song Huiyao* (《宋會要》), it is written that in the southeastern states "if there were too many boys, they would kill the boys; if there were too many girls, they would kill the girls."²⁹ According to historical data after the Southern Song Dynasty this phenomenon became more and more serious, and with the social environment of internal and external problems the government also set up a special Ci You Bureau and other institutions to adopt abandoned babies—according to statistics each year, to adopt more than 20,000 babies—but it was still no help. Therefore, the prevalence of infant theater could be the government intentionally trying to curb people from the habit of killing children.

At the same time, the political orientation of emphasizing literature and suppressing the military in Song Dynasty society made culture and education receive unprecedented attention, the people at the bottom of the hierarchy had a ticket to the upper class through the imperial examination system, the reform of the imperial examination system greatly enhanced the motivation of the classes to study, and the education of children became the consensus of the society.

The Song Dynasty, from top to bottom, promoted school education, and the rationalists paid special attention to primary education. Zhu Xi was one of them, and he put forward many constructive views on education, writing the "Analects of Confucius" "Primary School" and other teaching materials. Wang Yinglin paid more attention to primary education, and he wrote *Mengxun* (《蒙訓》), *Xiaoxue Fengyong* (《小學諷頌》), *Xiaoxue Zuzhu* (《小學組珠》), *Xingshi Jijiu Pian* (《姓氏急就篇》), *Buzhu Jijiu Pian* (《補註急就篇》), *Three Character Classic* and other primary school textbooks.³⁰ Children enjoyed the love and attention of society as a whole and naturally became objects of artistic expression.

3.3 Influence of Cultural Customs

At the birth of a child, there are rules about removing the umbilical cord and moxibustion fontanel, and at the full moon of the child a big child washing party is organized for the child with family and friends coming over to support the ceremony, and the rituals of enclosing the basin, stirring up the basin and adding to the basin are held for the child. Married women would grab the jujube in the basin and eat it, signifying the birth of a boy. The child's hundredth day and first birthday are celebrated, and at the time of the first birthday various items are placed for the child to choose from, foreshadowing the child's ambitions in life. These ceremonies demonstrate the importance placed on the birth of a child and the continuation of the family line. Particularly, the desire for a male heir was deeply embedded in custom.

In *A Compilation of Chicken Ribs* (《雞肋編》), Zhuang Chuo mentions "the Chuan Tian Festival (穿天節) on the 21st of the first month in Xiangyang, where women would seek out small white stones with holes to wear as a talisman for having a son."³¹ It can be imagined that this activity of piercing stones was also a custom of Song women to pray for the birth of a child, and it is obvious that the importance of having children permeated all social life. Men can reproduce and protect the family and the country, so the number of boys in the infant play picture is more than girls, and more children symbolize the prosperity of the family and the continuity of the family, which is the intuitive pursuit of the gender of the newborn. Additionally, both the *Menghua Lu* and *Mengliang Lu* record the custom of Mohele, which is also known as Mohouluo and Moheluo, and is a toy in the shape of a baby made of earth or wax, as well as wood, with clay figurines being the most common. Its origin is related to Buddhism, and for men it also means auspicious and desirable. In the minds of the Song people, babies symbolized fertility and good fortune, while children were also regarded as auspicious objects capable of warding off disasters and bringing happiness and well-being. The Song Dynasty valued children not only out of love for them, but also because of their importance to society in that era, with offspring being a symbol of a thriving population and social stability.

4. Conclusion

As can be seen from the above, the Song Dynasty infant play theme in painting, tomb murals, and arts and crafts became more common, and the widespread popularity of this theme in Song Dynasty society was not only about the need for artistic creation, but also about the social economy, politics, culture, and other factors of the

time which played a role in the results. Song Dynasty infant play art had a fresh and simple approach full of children's expressions, vividly showing the life scenes and game activities of ancient children, and reflecting people's aspirations and prayers for a better life. Therefore, the prosperity of Song Dynasty infant play art was not only an important phenomenon in the history of art but also a vivid portrayal of the social and cultural prosperity and development of the Song Dynasty, which left a rich cultural heritage and valuable spiritual wealth for future generations with its unique artistic charm and rich cultural connotation.

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宋代的“嬰戲”藝術及其興盛原因

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摘 要: 嬰戲是中國古代一類廣為流行的繪畫題材, 從戰國起源開始, 歷經了隋唐、五代的演變, 在宋代迎來了鼎盛發展, 其不僅作為繪畫中常見的題材內容, 在墓室壁畫、工藝美術等創作中也經常見到。宋代商品經濟的繁榮、市民階層的崛起、重文抑武的政策導向以及深厚的傳統文化底蘊共同推動了嬰戲圖的流行, 使之成為反映宋代社會生活、寄托美好願景的藝術瑰寶。

關鍵詞: 嬰戲圖; 分類; 興盛原因