

ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol.3 No.1 Jan.-Mar. 2025

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To cite this article: Dong Rui, “The Gender of the Image: Female Tendencies in the Unmanned Stretcher Image on Stone Funerary Beds of the Eastern Wei Dynasty,” *Art Frontier* 3, no.1 (March 2025): -, <https://doi.org/10.64212/JEGC8457>.

DOI: 10.64212/JEGC8457

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

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This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: www.artfrontier.org

Email: artfrontier2023@outlook.com

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



The Gender of the Image: Female Tendencies in the Unmanned Stretcher Image on Stone Funerary Bed of the Eastern Wei Dynasty

Dong Rui

Abstract

The stone funerary bed of the Xie family's tomb for Feng Senghui in the Eastern Wei Dynasty, Anyang features a carving of two persons transporting an empty stretcher. A nearly identical scene appears on another funerary bed of the same period, currently housed at the Shenzhen Goldstone Museum of Art. Scholarly analysis has identified this motif as an adaptation of Yuan Gu's filial piety story—a recurring theme in Han Dynasty stone engravings. Notably, the depiction diverges from textual accounts by omitting the stretcher's occupant, a deliberate artistic choice by the craftsmen. Feng Senghui, a Han-integrated noblewoman immersed in Xianbei culture, embraced indigenous traditions that reversed gender hierarchies. Her funerary bed's composition underscores this cultural fusion: while the narrative ostensibly celebrates Yuan Gu's devotion, the conspicuously vacant stretcher symbolizes the absence of masculine lineage (traditionally associated with her paternal grandfather). The juxtaposition of two male bearers and a solitary female figure reinforces the Xianbei paradigm of female ascendancy, reinterpreting Han filial conventions through a matriarchal lens.

Key Words

Northern Dynasties, stone funerary bed, filial son, Xianbei-assimilated Han

The stone funerary bed, a defining feature of Northern Dynasties burial practices, typically bore intricate carvings ranging from Sogdian cultural motifs to prevalent filial piety narratives. Scholarly decoding of these iconographic representations remains a central focus of research. A case in point is the rectangular screen-style funerary bed excavated in Anyang, dated to the Eastern Wei period (Wu Ding sixth year, 548 CE). This double-pavilion structure features twelve carved scenes on its inner walls—primarily filial tales and depictions of the tomb occupants—making it a critical artifact for understanding mortuary customs of the era.¹ Notably, the final scene on the right panel portrays an enigmatic empty stretcher, which has sparked particular interest in its symbolic significance.

A near-identical example is the Xie family's stone funerary bed for Feng Senghui, whose structural complexity mirrors cultural synthesis. Composed of four screens (two flanking each side, two frontal), the modular design is anchored by iron rivets. Each screen

bears three reliefs, totaling twelve narrative panels. When viewed left to right, the iconography unfolds as follows: three female attendants, three female attendants, and a cart (figure 1); Guo Ju burying his son, Guo Ju's mother nurturing her grandson, the female tomb owner, her male counterpart, Han Boyu, and Ding Lan carving wood to support his parents (figure 2); cavalry, and dual depictions of Yuan Gu (figure 3)—the latter including the provocative empty stretcher.

In the last original image of this stone bed, two people, one in front and one behind, are carrying a stretcher with no one in it. This is almost the same as the image on the stone funerary bed collected by the Shenzhen Goldstone Museum of Art² (figure 4). The author has identified this image as that of filial grandson Yuan Gu,³ and it is a set combination with a stone bed base dated to the fourth year of Xinghe (542 CE), with the tomb owner being Zhu Lu.⁴

Obviously, the images on these two stone funerary beds were not caused by mistake by the craftsmen, but

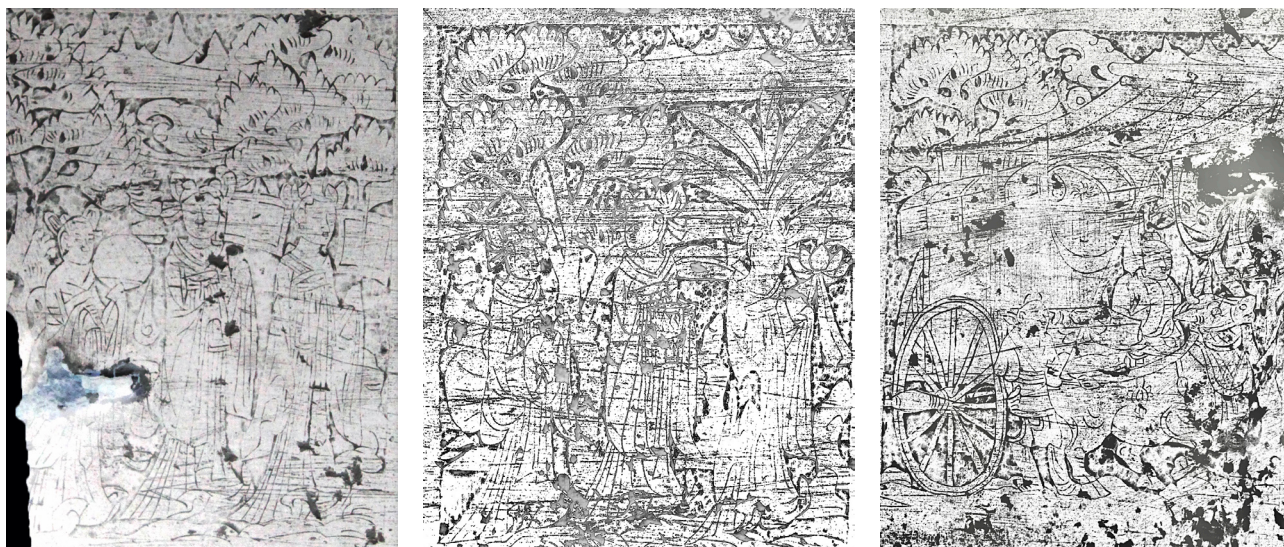


Figure 1. Left side screen panel depiction of the Xie family's stone funerary bed for Feng Senghui.

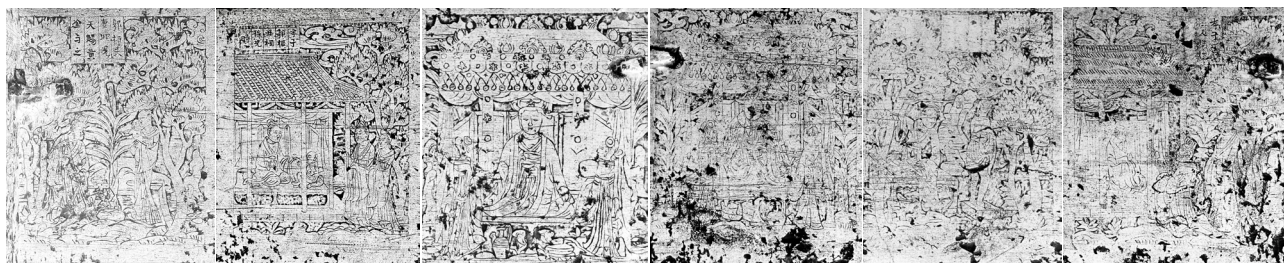


Figure 2. Middle screen panel depiction of the Xie family's stone funerary bed for Feng Senghui.

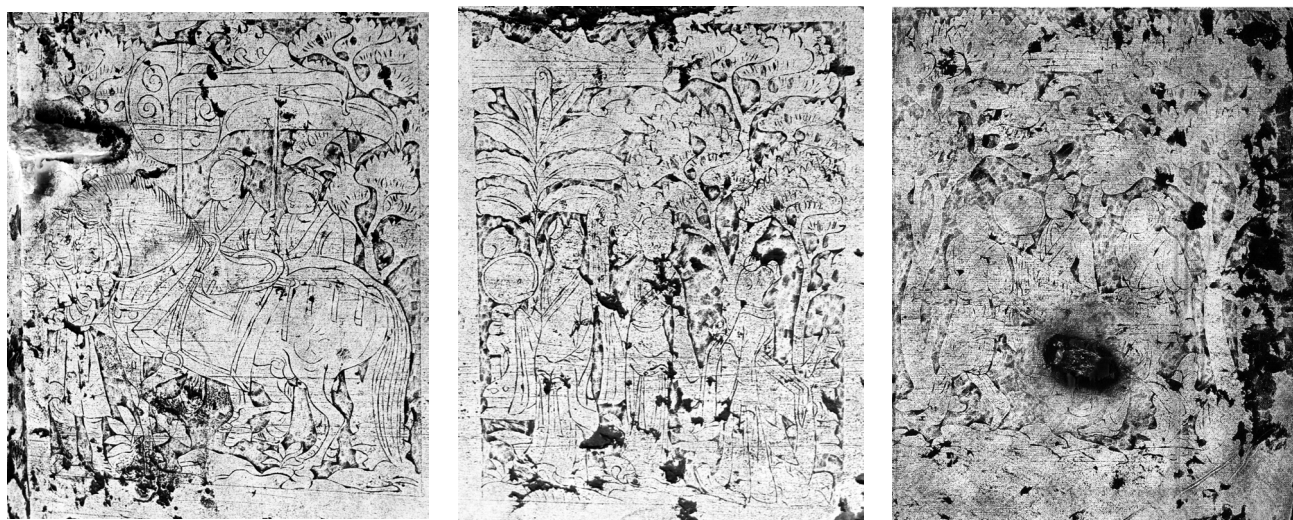


Figure 3. Right side screen panel depiction of the Xie family's stone funerary bed for Feng Senghui.

would have been deliberately done. Why did the craftsmen depict the story of Yuan Gu in this form? What

implication did they want to express? This article intends to discuss these questions.



Figure 4. Image of an empty stretcher (filial grandson Yuan Gu) on the stone funerary bed collected by the Shenzhen Goldstone Museum of Art.

1. Combinations with Original Images of Filial Piety Stories

To analyze the unique aspects of the filial piety narratives depicted on this stone funerary bed, we will conduct a comprehensive review and analysis of the images related to Yuan Gu from the Han Dynasty through to the Northern Dynasties period, aiming to identify any notable issues within them.

On the second decorative register of the Wu Liang Shrine in Jiaxiang County, Shandong Province, seventeen consecutive narrative panels unfold across the west, rear, and east walls. The sequence begins on the west wall from right to left: Zengzi's mother weaving on a loom (Zengmu throws the shuttle), Min Ziqian drops his mallet (Min Ziqian loses the hammer), Lao Laizi amuses his parents (Lao Laizi entertains his parents), and Ding Lan offers a wooden effigy (Ding Lan presents a wooden mother) (figure 5).

On the rear wall from right to left the scenes depict Han Boyu enduring a flogging (Han Boyu endures whipping), Xing Qu nourishing his father, Dong Yong selling himself into servitude to support his parents, Jiang Zhangxun, the trio of Zhu Ming, Li Shan protects

the young master, and Jin Midi pays respects to Consort Yan (figure 6). The east wall runs from right to left, and the depictions include "Three Prefectures' Filial Exemplars" (San Zhou Xiao Ren), "Righteous Deed of Yang Gong,"⁴ along with Wei Tang, Yan Wu, Zhao Xun, and Yuan Gu (figure 7).⁵ Among the seventeen images, thirteen depict filial piety narratives, while the four non-filial scenes portray "Virtuous Elder Brother" (Zhu Ming), "Three Upright Companions" (San Zhou Xiao Ren), "Paragon of Righteousness" (Yang Gong), and "Loyal Retainer" (Li Shan).

Upon careful analysis of the content of the thirteen images of the story of filial sons, we find that six emphasize the filial piety to the mother, namely, Zengzi, Min Ziqian, Ding Lan, Han Boyu, Jiang Zhangxun, and Jin Midi; five depict the filial piety to the father, namely Wei Tang, Yan Wu, Zhao Xun, Xing Qu, and Dong Yong. In addition, Lao Laizi is filial to his parents, and Yuan Gu is a story of a filial grandson. From the number of images of filial piety to the father or mother on the Wu Liang Shrine, there is no obvious gender bias, so it seems that the images of the story of filial sons in the Eastern Han Dynasty have not yet clearly expressed the directionality of filial piety to the father or mother.



Figure 5. Filial and righteous figures on the West wall of the Wu Liang Shrine

Figure 6. Filial and righteous figures on the rear wall of the Wu Liang Shrine.

Figure 7. Filial and righteous figures on the East wall of the Wu Liang Shrine.

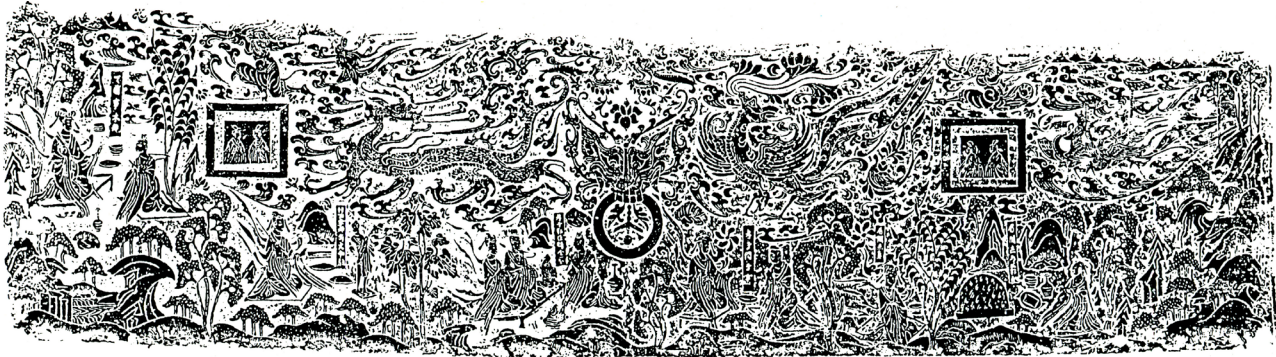
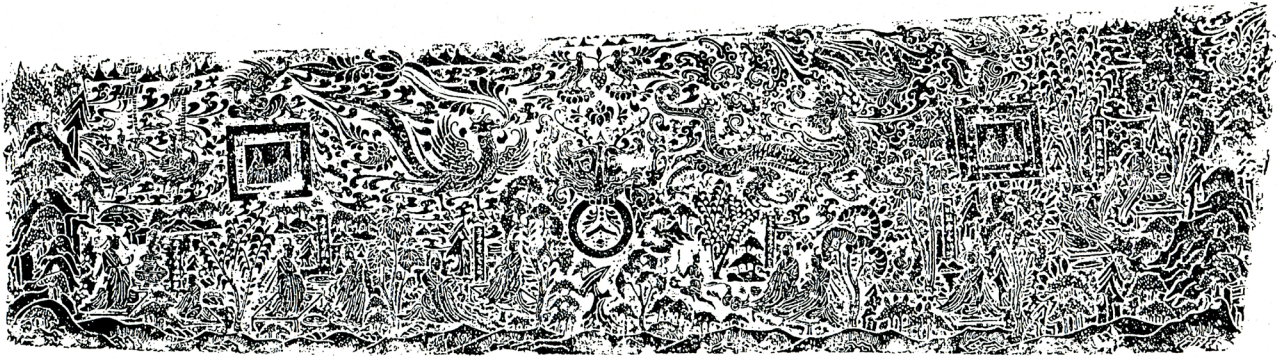


Figure 8. Left side panel of the filial piety narrative on Yuan Mi's stone coffin.

Figure 9. Right side panel of the filial piety narrative on Yuan Mi's stone coffin.

A stone funerary bed screen in New York, composed of four stone slabs, has three images on each slab. The order of the images from left to right are the ceremonial procession, ox cart, and Guo Ju; Yuan Gu, Wang Ji, and female tomb owner; male tomb owner, Dong Yong, and Ding Lan; Cai Shun, carriage, and ceremonial procession.⁶ There are six images of filial sons in this stone funerary bed, except for the image of Yuan Gu, and the remaining five images are of filial sons Guo Ju, Wang Ji, Ding Lan, Cai Shun, all of whom show filial piety to the mother, and only Dong Yong who shows filial piety to the father.

The story of filial sons on the Yuan Mi stone coffin has a total of twelve images, with ten filial sons. According to the order from the foot block to the head block, the left side image has Bo Qi, Bo Qi, Dong Yong, Lao Laizi, Shun (舜), and Yuan Gu (figure 8); the right side image has Ding Lan, Han Boyu, Guo Ju, Min Ziqian, Mei Jian Chi, Mei Jian Chi (眉间赤)⁷ (figure 9). There are five stories of filial piety to the mother, namely, Lao Laizi, Min Ziqian, Guo Ju, Han Boyu, and Ding Lan, and four stories of filial piety to the father, namely, Shun, Bo Qi, Dong Yong, and Mei Jian Chi.

The stone funerary bed, once in the collection of C.T. Loo (Lu Qinzhai) is now housed in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Xu Jin reconstructed its configuration,

identifying a layout of three narrative panels on each lateral screen and six panels on the central screen. The sequence, arranged from left to right, comprises the left screen (figure 10): Yuan Gu (repeated twice), and ox cart; the central screen (figure 11): Ding Lan, Cai Shun, Lao Laizi, Dong Yong, and Shun (repeated twice); and the right screen (figure 12): saddled horse and Guo Ju (repeated twice).⁸

The narrative cycle features seven distinct filial piety stories, categorized as follows: with the exception of Yuan Gu, filial sons serving fathers—Dong Yong (selling himself into servitude to bury his father) and Shun (twice depicted, enduring filial trials for his father); filial sons serving mothers—Ding Lan (carving a wooden effigy for his mother), Cai Shun (gathering wild plums for his mother), Guo Ju (twice depicted, burying his son to conserve rice for his mother); and filial son serving both parents—Lao Laizi (entertaining his elderly parents).

The stone funerary bed of the filial son from the Northern Wei Dynasty, housed in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in the United States, features carvings on both sides. Proceeding from the foot block to the head block, the left side depicts (Ju) Wei, Cai Shun (figure 13) and Dong Yong (figure 14); the right side depicts Yuan Gu, Yuan Gu, Guo Ju (figure 15) and Shun⁹ (figure 16).



Figure 10. Left panel of the stone funerary bed screen (Lu Qinzhai Collection). The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 11. Central panel of the stone funerary bed screen (Lu Qinzhai Collection). The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 12. Right panel of the stone funerary bed screen (Lu Qinzhai Collection). The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The image labeled “Wei” illustrates the story of the Red Eyebrows Army (Chimei Jun) and Wang Lin.¹⁰ Among these the filial piety stories include two for serving mothers, Cai Shun and Guo Ju, and two for serving fathers, Shun and Dong Yong. Wang Lin, styled Ju Wei, was from Runan commandery in the Eastern

Han Dynasty. When he was in his teens, his parents both passed away. Due to the chaos in the world, people were fleeing, but only Wang Lin and his brothers stayed by their parents’ graves, weeping incessantly. Wang Lin’s younger brother, Wang Ji, once went out and encountered the Red Eyebrows Army, and was about

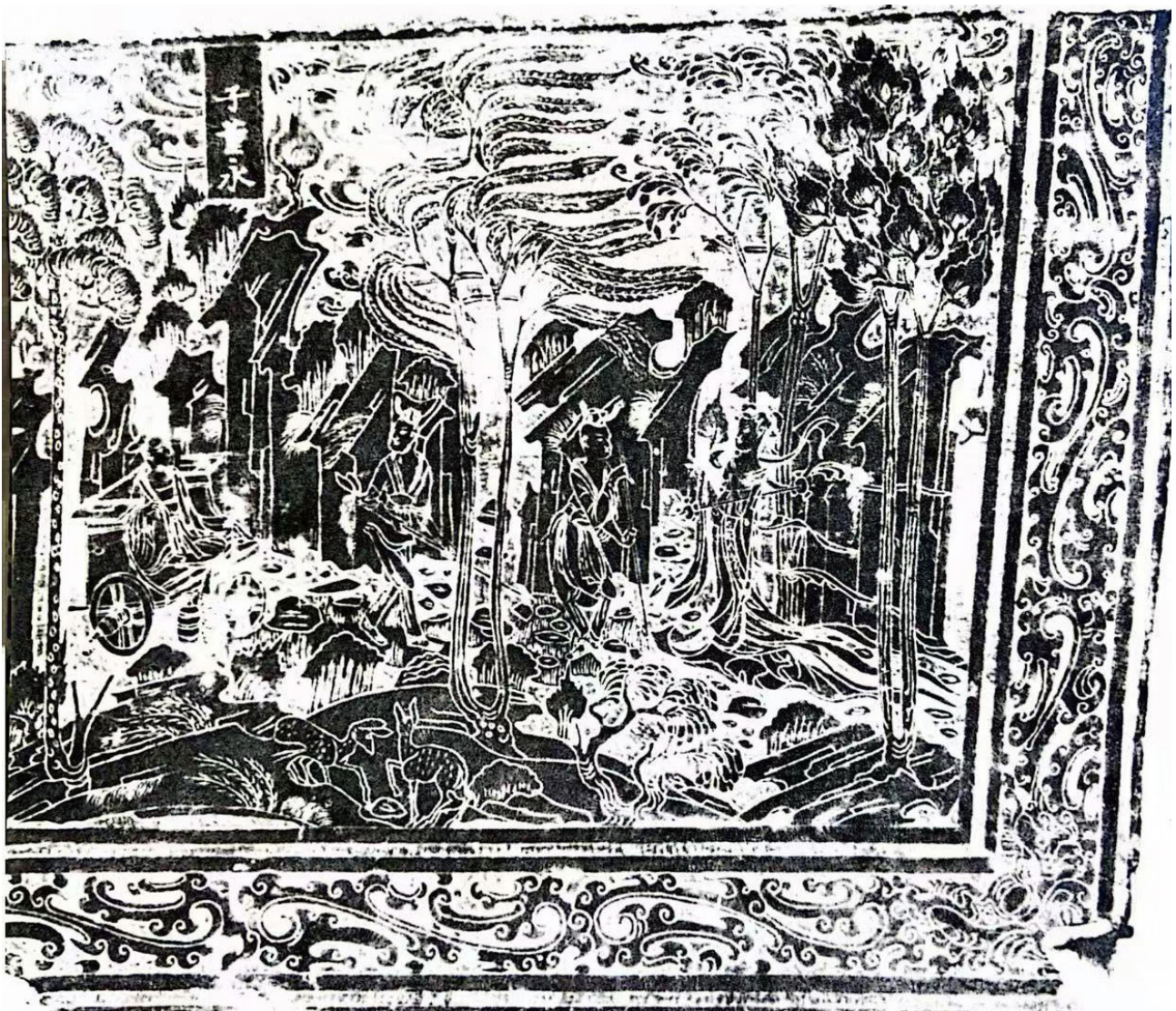
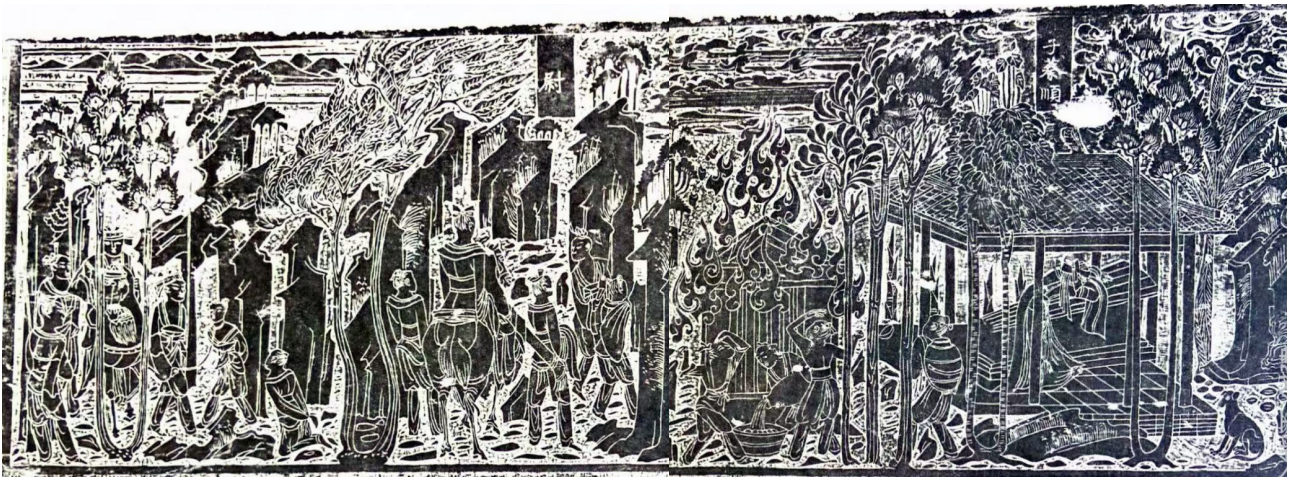


Figure 13. Left side of the Northern Wei Dynasty filial son stone coffin, Wang Lin (Ju Wei) , Cai Shun image.

Figure 14. Left side of the Northern Wei Dynasty filial son stone coffin, Dong Yong image.



Figure 15. Right side of the Northern Wei Dynasty filial son stone coffin, Yuan Gu, Guo Ju image.

Figure 16. Right side of the Northern Wei Dynasty filial son stone coffin, Shun image.

to be eaten by them. Wang Lin bound himself and requested to die before Wang Ji. The Red Eyebrows soldiers took pity on them and released the two brothers. This story is not a filial piety story, but rather a story of a righteous man.

Among the filial son story paintings on the stone funerary beds or stone coffins from the Northern Wei Dynasty period, which are combined with the story of the filial grandson Yuan Guo, we cannot conclude from the content of the paintings that the filial son stories with



Figure 17. Tian A'She stone funerary bed, left side screen Cai Shun image.

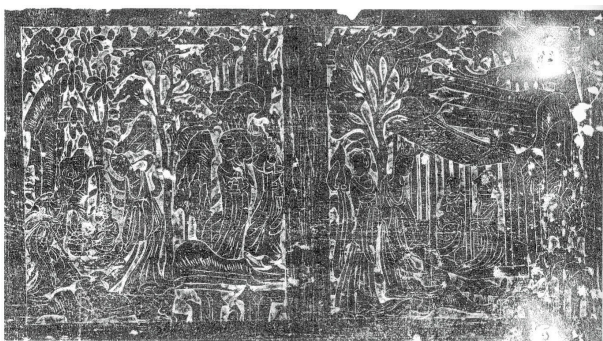


Figure 18. Tian A'She stone funerary bed, left side screen Guo Ju image.

images of the filial grandson Yuan Guo have a feminine gender tendency, although the content of showing filial piety to the mother is more than that to the father.

However, in the process of sorting out the materials, we found that in the late Northern Wei Dynasty there is a clear chronological record of stone funerary beds and stone coffins with images of the story of Yuan Gu, and the tendency to show filial piety to the mother is very strong.

The stone funerary bed of Tian A'She (527 CE), in a private collection in Taiwan, is composed of four stone slabs with three paintings on each slab. From left to right, they are: Cai Shun (figure 17), Guo Ju, Guo Ju (figure 18); female attendants traveling, ox cart, female tomb owner (figure 19); male travelers, saddle and horse, female attendants traveling (figure 20); Yuan Gu,

Yuan Gu, Yuan Gu¹¹ (figure 21).

On the Tian A'She stone funerary bed, the images of the filial son stories, except for Yuan Gu, Cai Shun and Guo Ju, all show the content of showing filial piety to the mother; there are no images showing filial piety to the father on this stone funerary bed.

The front panel of the Northern Wei Cao Lian stone coffin (528 CE) is carved with double doors in the center, with two guardian figures on the outside. The back panel is a warrior riding the black tortoise (Xuanwu 玄武). The upper part of the left and right sides is painted with images of characters riding dragons to heaven. In the middle lower left of the left side is Yuan Gu, and on the right is Cai Shun (figure 22); in the middle part of the lower left of the right side is Guo Ju, and on the right is Han Boyu¹² (figure 23). The filial son stories on this stone funerary, except for Yuan Gu, are all about showing filial piety to the mother.

In the Northern Wei late-period stone funerary beds and coffins with explicit dating, paired with the Yuan Gu narrative, all filial piety motifs (except Yuan Gu) depict sons honoring their mothers. Do the Tian A'she stone funerary bed and the Cao Lian coffin tend to filial devotion to biological mothers? A brief analysis follows.

Based on the inscription on the central foreleg of Tian A'she's funerary bed, both Tian A'she¹³ and Cao Lian¹⁴ were Han Chinese officials in the Northern Wei government. Cao Lian, a descendant of Cao Cao (Emperor Wen of Wei), held a prominent position and died in the Heyin Massacre in 528 CE. His funeral adhered to Northern Wei official protocols. This leads us to infer that Tian A'she and Cao Lian, both Han Chinese, were buried according to Xianbei (Northern Wei) customs.

Next, we examine the issue of the unmanned stretcher on the Xie family's stone funerary bed for Feng Senghui and the Zhu Luo funerary bed (Shenzhen Goldstone Museum of Art). As previously analyzed, the Xie Family's funerary bed for Feng Senghui displays a clear bias toward filial sons honoring their biological mothers. We now turn to the Zhu Luo stone funerary bed. This funerary bed features four screen panels, each with three narrative reliefs. Arranged from left to right there are: three handmaidens, ox cart, female noble's procession (figure 24); Wang Ji, Lao Laizi, female tomb occupant, male tomb occupant, Guo Ju, Guo Ju (figure 25); four attendants (figure 26); saddled horse (figure 27); Yuan Gu (figure 4).

However, why are the images of the story of filial grandson Yuan Gu on these two funerary beds depicted in the form of an unmanned stretcher? Why did they make such a change?



Figure 19. Tian A'She stone funerary bed, front left image.

Figure 20. Tian A'She stone funerary bed, front right image.

Figure 21. Tian A'She stone funerary bed, right side screen Yuan Gu image.

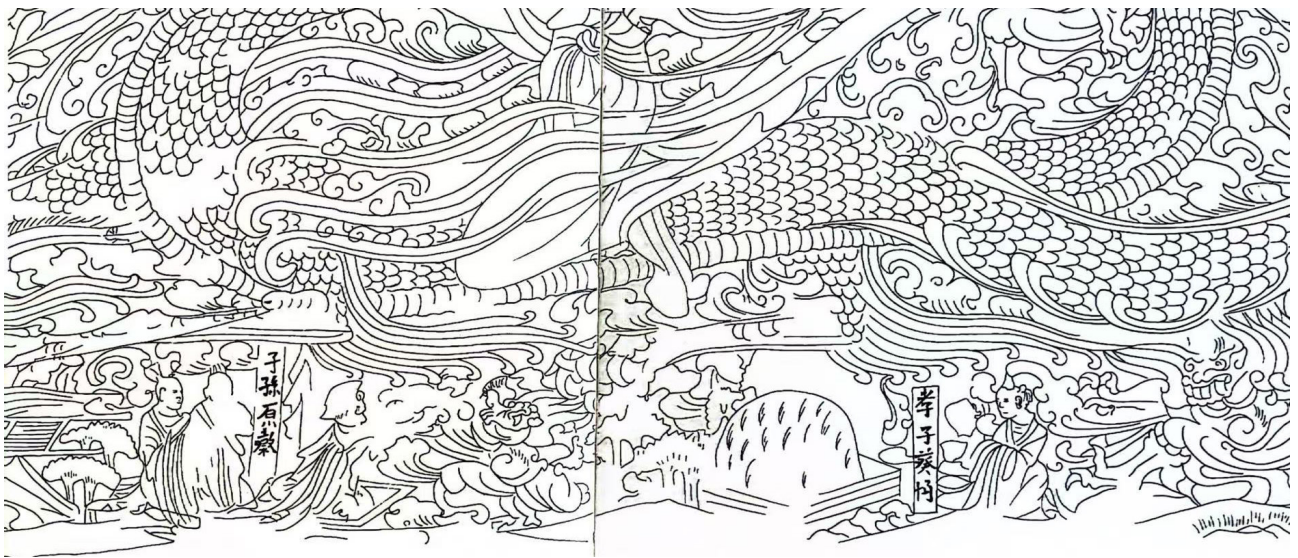


Figure 22. Filial son story image on the left side of Cao Lian stone coffin.



Figure 23. Filial son story image on the right side of Cao Lian stone coffin.

Taking the Wuliang Shrine as an example, we find a discrepancy between the story of Ding Lan as recorded in the *Biography of the Filial Son* and Cao Zhi's "Lingzhi Chapter" and the inscription found within the shrine itself. According to the aforementioned sources, Ding Lan is said to have carved a wooden statue of his mother. However, the inscription next to Ding Lan's portrait in the Wuliang Shrine clearly states that he carved a wooden statue of his father (figure 28). This presents a clear contradiction that warrants further

examination.

In the records of the Han Dynasty, Jin Midi painted the portrait of his deceased mother in the Ganquan Palace. "Jin Midi's mother taught her two sons with great discipline, and was praised by the emperor. When she died of illness, the emperor ordered a portrait of her to be painted in the Ganquan Palace, with the inscription 'Yanzhi (a title for royal consorts of the Xiongnu people) of the Xiutu King' (休屠王閼氏)." ¹⁵ However, the portrait of Jin Midi that was worshipped at the Wuliang



Figure 24. Image of left side screen panel from the Zhu Luo stone funerary bed in the Shenzhen Goldstone Museum of Art.

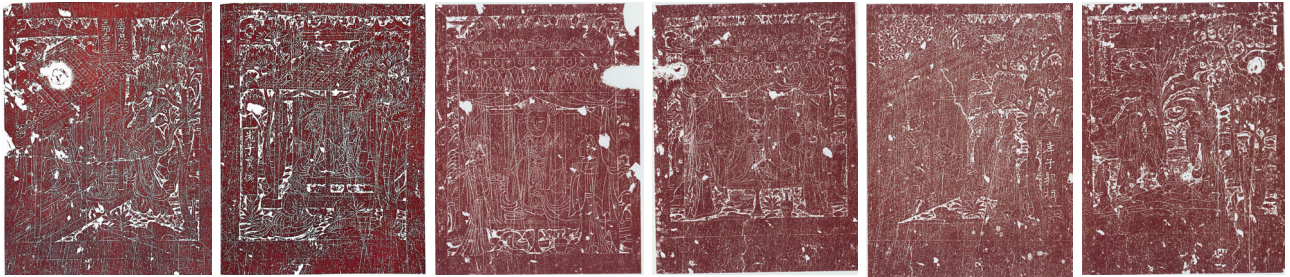


Figure 25. Image of middle screen panel from the Zhu Luo stone funerary bed in the Shenzhen Goldstone Museum of Art.



Figure 26. Image of four attendants from the Zhu Luo stone funerary bed in the Shenzhen Goldstone Museum of Art.



Figure 27. Image of saddled horse and horsemen from the Zhu Luo stone funerary bed in the Shenzhen Goldstone Museum of Art.



Figure 28. Ding Lan carves a wooden figure for his father, Wuliang Shrine.

Shrine was titled ‘Xiu Tu Xiang’ (休屠像) and ‘Qi Du Wei’ (骑都尉), apparently depicting his father (figure 29).

Wu Hung points out: “In this scene and the portrait of the filial son Ding Lan, the designer of Wu Liang Shrine deliberately changed the identity of the deceased from female to male.”¹⁶ Wu Hung believes the reason for this change is that “Wu Liang’s choice covers the entire range of a man’s social relationships, including parents, brothers, friends, and masters, and these images are basically arranged in chronological order. On one hand, he hopes that all these factors can be reflected in the images; on the other hand, he also clearly requires his descendants to follow these historical models, never forgetting their deceased father while devoting themselves to serving their mother.”¹⁷

The Wu Liang Shrine was constructed to honor Wu Liang, who not only lent his name to the structure but also actively participated in its design during his lifetime. The portraits housed within the shrine serve as a reflection of Wu Liang’s personal ideologies and

the historical perspective of the Han Dynasty. It is plausible to surmise that Wu Liang himself advocated for the substitution of Ding Lan’s and Jin Midi’s mothers’ images with those of their fathers in the artistic representations. Consequently, this indicates that in the Han Dynasty, there existed precedents for altering the content of filial son portraits to align with individual preferences or requirements.

This phenomenon of artistic modification is further corroborated by evidence from the Northern Wei Dynasty’s stone funerary beds. Within the stone funerary bed attributed to Tian A’She (527 CE), which forms part of the esteemed collection of the Taiwanese connoisseur Zhang Huan, two distinct instances of modification have been identified.

The first modification manifests on the left-hand side of the frontal screen. This screen, initially adorned with incised lines, underwent a transformation wherein the right half was ground away, subsequently enabling the carving of a third image using a reduced relief technique. This image portrays a female tomb occupant seated



Figure 29. Jin Midi's Image at Wu Liang Shrine.

cross-legged upon the funerary bed. Notably, while the rest of the stone funerary bed is also embellished with incised lines, the depiction of the female tomb occupant stands in stark contrast, both in style and thematic coherence, to the imagery found on the left side and across the entirety of the stone funerary bed (figure 30).

The second notable modification pertains to the first image in the original series, which depicts filial grandson Yuan Gu on the right-hand screen. In this particular scene, the original narrative shows Yuan Gu's parents carrying their grandfather on a stretcher, with the father positioned in front and the mother behind. However, upon closer inspection, we discern that the individual seated on the stretcher is not a gaunt elderly man, but rather a willowy woman elegantly attired in a flowing one-piece long gown (figure 31).

The epitaph engraved on this stone funerary bed

reveals that the deceased interred within is Tian A'She. An examination of the modification marks on the stone funerary bed suggests that the artisans undertook these alterations after the initial carvings were completed. Yet, a striking observation is that the images adorning the stone funerary bed solely feature the frontal portrait of the female tomb occupant, conspicuously omitting any representation of the male tomb occupant. Were it not for the presence of the epitaph, we would unequivocally assume the tomb's occupant to be female. Nevertheless, the epitaph leaves no room for ambiguity, explicitly stating the identity of the deceased. Furthermore, the original image of the filial grandson Yuan Gu, where the grandfather seated in the stretcher was replaced with a female figure, serves to accentuate the pronounced feminine characteristics of this stone funerary bed.

Given that this stone funerary bed was not unearthed



Figure 30. Front left screen of Tian A'She's stone funerary bed.



Figure 31. Depiction of filial grandson Yuan Gu on Tian A'She's stone funerary bed.

through scientific excavation methods, we remain uncertain as to whether the remains discovered at the time pertained solely to Tian A'She or if they included those of both husband and wife. It is evident, however, that this stone funerary bed was meticulously crafted to construct a predominantly female-centric space.

Unlike the Tian A'She stone funerary bed, the stone funerary bed for Feng Senghui of the Xie family was modified in the content of the images during the design. After the modification, the overall layout of the image presented a complete female characteristic. An empty stretcher suggested the absence of a woman, and a standing woman next to the stretcher further strengthened the theme of femininity. Thus, the entire image matched the theme of filial sons serving their mothers created by Guo Ju, Ding Lan, and Bo Yu. That is to say, after the relatives of the tomb owner requested the craftsmen to make the modifications, the images on this stone funerary bed created a female theme that exactly matched the female identity of the tomb owner.

The image of an empty stretcher on the screen of Zhu Luo's stone funerary bed is more refined than that in the Xie family's for Feng Senghui, and dates earlier. There is a possibility that they were made by the same craftsmen or came from the same workshop.¹⁸ From the inscriptions, Zhu Luo should be male, but the image

of the filial grandson Yuan Gu in the Zhu Luo stone funerary bed also clearly suggests the absence of a male. The Zhu Luo stone funerary bed, as a male-used stone furniture, also suggests the feature.

The above analysis shows that the image of the filial son in the Xie family's stone funerary bed for Feng Senghui deliberately creates a theme dominated by women. The story image of the filial grandson Yuan Gu is combined with other images that represent filial piety for mothers, possibly because this image can not only directly replace the grandfather of Yuan Gu in the image with a female, but also directly remove the grandfather of Yuan Gu from the stretcher, which can clearly express the theme of women. In other stories of filial piety, there is no direct and clear expression of the original story of Yuan Gu without modification. So, what is the reason for creating this female theme? We can further analyze it through the burial customs of this tomb.

2. The Phenomenon of Female Respect and Male Subordination in Northern Dynasties Burial Customs

In Feng Senghui's Tomb of the Xie family, an engraved

tomb brick was excavated, bearing the inscription “Wuding Sixth Year, Second Month, Twenty-Fifth Day, Xie Family’s Feng Senghui’s Memorial” (figure 32). The skeletal remains on the south side lay in a supine position with extended limbs, arranged in an orderly manner. In contrast, the bones on the north side exhibited a downward tilt of the head and were in disarray, suggesting a later relocation. Osteological analysis revealed that the northern skeleton was male, approximately fifty years of age, while the southern one was that of an adult female. Firstly, as a joint burial, the female was positioned on the outer edge of the funerary bed, the primary area for receiving offerings, indicating a higher status for women than men. Secondly, the tomb brick’s inscription, which exclusively featured the name of the female tomb owner, represents a unique find among Northern Dynasties tombs. Therefore, these burial practices offer insights into the cultural norms of the time.

This securely dated tomb, bearing explicit identification of its occupant, contains a brick inscription of relatively brief content that nevertheless offers crucial evidence for establishing both the tomb’s chronology and the ethnic identity of its interred. The inscription prominently identifies the deceased as the Xie family’s Feng Senghui, a formulation requiring philological analysis to clarify the nomenclature structure and ethnic implications.

The Sui Dynasty Epitaph of Lady Shisun, Wife of the Cheng Clan (成氏故士孫夫人墓誌), unearthed in Anyang, provides crucial evidence for interpreting the meaning of the phrase “Xie Shi Feng Senghui” (謝氏馮僧暉). According to research by Zhou Xiaowei and Zhou Qian,¹⁹ the subject of the Cheng Clan epitaph was Lady Shisun, whose husband belonged to the Cheng family. Lady Shisun originated from the northern area of Jingchuan County in modern Gansu Province, though her husband’s regional prominence remains unspecified. Comparatively, the phrase “Xie Shi Feng Senghui” only omits the optional character “gu” (故) indicating that the tomb occupant was named Feng Senghui with a husband from the Xie family.

Having clarified the identity of the tomb owner and her husband, we should further determine the ethnic background of the Xie and Feng clans — were they Hu people or Han people? We first judge based on the burial method of the tomb owner. Both skeletons were directly placed on the stone funerary bed without any coffin or coffin case. This burial custom of directly placing the deceased on the stone funerary bed can be traced back to the Pingcheng era of the Northern Wei Dynasty. In 2010, in Yanggao county, Datong City, Shanxi province, the



Figure 32. The inscription brick from Xie family’s tomb for Feng Senghui.

tomb of Yuchi Dingzou (457 CE) was excavated, with a stone funerary bed placed inside a house-shaped stone coffin and a single skeleton placed on the stone funerary bed, without any trace of a coffin.²⁰ In 1957, in Quwo county, Shanxi province, the tomb of Northern Wei Li Shen and his wife (499 CE) was excavated, with two skeletons on a brick funerary bed, without any trace of a coffin.²¹ In 1988, in the southern suburbs of Datong, the Northern Wei tomb M112 was excavated, with a stone funerary bed without a wooden coffin, and the skeleton was relatively well-preserved.²² In 2001, three stone funerary beds were unearthed at the Northern Wei tombs group M14 in Qili Village, Datong. No wooden burial utensils were found on these funerary beds — only rectangular lime pillows remained.²³ In 1991, the tomb of Xie Poren (謝婆仁) from the Western Wei period (551 CE) was discovered in Xianyang City, with human remains found in the middle of the tomb chamber, also without any burial utensils.²⁴

Regarding the three Northern Wei tombs with stone funerary beds in the Shanxi region mentioned above, none of them contained coffins for the deceased. Furthermore, the tomb of Xie Poren not only closely follows the era of the Xie Family’s tomb for Feng

Senghui but also shares the same Xie clan lineage. Such cases have not been observed in the tombs of Han people or other regions. Therefore, the practice of directly placing the deceased on the funerary bed likely originates from the burial customs of the Xianbei nomadic tribes.

Additionally, the epitaph bricks unearthed from the tombs are also significant evidence. Long rectangular bricks inscribed with the name and date were found in the tomb. This burial custom is one of the characteristics of the Xianbei people. In 2006, during the construction of a new rural area in Shaling, Datong City, Shanxi Province, there were twenty-six Northern Wei tombs discovered. Tombs M22, M23, and M24 are all single-chamber brick tombs with rectangular sloping passages, and each had an epitaph brick unearthed from the backfill soil in front of the sealed tomb gate.²⁵

In 2007, the Wei Xianyu (529 CE) and Wei Shu (571 CE) family tombs from the Northern Wei and Northern Zhou periods were excavated at Duling West Road in Weiqu Town, Xi'an City. Notably, an epitaph brick was found in the passageway of the Wei Xianyu tomb, while a complete epitaph was placed in the passageway at the entrance of the Wei Shu tomb.²⁶ Another three Wei family tombs from the Northern Wei period discovered in Weiqu Town in 2001, including those of Wei Huihe (533 CE) and Wei Qian (534 CE), had their epitaphs located inside the tomb entrance.²⁷ This situation seems to indicate that around the third decade of the sixth century, the practice of burying epitaph bricks outside the tomb gradually shifted towards placing epitaphs inside the tomb chamber. Thus, the custom of burying epitaph bricks in the passage may have emerged during the Northern Wei period as part of the Sinicization process and has been maintained since then.

From the perspective of burial furnishings, the screen-surrounded stone funerary bed was not a traditional Han burial furnishing. Stone funerary beds can be divided into two types: those without screens and those with screen-surrounded stone funerary beds. The screen-surrounded stone funerary beds appeared after the Northern Wei moved their capital to Luoyang, while the plain stone funerary beds were more popular during the Pingcheng era of the Northern Wei. Wang Yanqing believes that the symbolic meaning of the screenless stone funerary beds found in Pingcheng might have represented the hearth or kang (a heated brick bed) in northern households during the Northern Wei period, especially those in square-shaped tombs from the later Pingcheng period, where brick-built funerary beds occupied half of the tomb chamber, resembling a kang.²⁸ Wei Zheng supports this view.²⁹ However, why

were stone funerary beds used instead of kang? Zheng Yan suggests that the tomb chamber serves as the underground living quarters for the deceased, representing a concrete visual form of a “home.” In the minds of people at that time, the deceased needed chambers and beds just as they did in life, and the dead continued various lifelike activities within the artist’s imagination.³⁰

So, during which phase of the Northern Wei’s relocation to Luoyang did the screen-surrounded stone funerary beds appear? We can analyze this question based on the dated stone burial furnishings from the Northern Wei period. There are only two known examples: one is the stone funerary bed from the tomb of Kuang Seng’an, dated to the fifth year of Zhengguang (524 CE), housed in the Kubo So Memorial Museum in Izumi City, Osaka Prefecture, Japan, though its exact provenance is unknown;³¹ the other is the stone funerary bed from the tomb of Tian A’she from Qingzhou Pingyuan Commandery, dated to the third year of Xiaochang (527 CE).³² Other stone burial furnishings are mostly stone funerary beds and house-shaped stone chambers, such as the Yuan Mi stone coffin (524 CE), Qin Hong stone coffin (526 CE), Ning Mao stone chamber (527 CE), Yuan Rong stone coffin (528 CE), Gou Jing stone coffin (528 CE), Yuan Wen stone coffin (532 CE), Wang Yue stone coffin (533 CE),³³ and the newly discovered Cao Lian stone coffin (528 CE).³⁴ It was observed that stone coffins appeared more frequently during the reign of Emperor Xiaoming (reigned 516-527 CE) and afterwards, but were less common in high-status tombs. This concentrated appearance must reflect a trend at the time.

Literary records and archaeological excavations indicate that stone burial furnishings were not considered high-status items; their use in the tombs of Northern Wei emperors and high-ranking nobles was rare. Zheng Yan noted that Fengzhongli, north of Luoyang’s Taishi market, specialized in producing “funerary goods and various coffins,” most of which were made of wood.³⁵ This suggests that stone funerary beds and stone coffins were not high-status burial furnishings since no cases of their use have been found in the excavated imperial tombs of the Northern Wei. Xu Jin argues that stone coffins rank higher than stone funerary beds³⁶, citing the example of Yuan Wei, a sixth-generation descendant of Emperor Daowu, who was buried in a stone coffin.³⁷ According to Tang Dynasty’s Duan Chengshi’s *Youyang Zazu*: “During the Northern Wei period, there was a custom of lavish burials, with thick and tall coffins often made of cypress wood, adorned with large copper rings on both sides. Regardless of rank or wealth, all used

white oil-covered canopies, plain mourning vehicles, and solemn processions with drums. The weeping resembled that of the Southern Dynasties, with continuous dirges without interruption, slightly different from those in the capital.³⁸ Therefore, high-status burials still preferred wooden coffins.

As for the joint tomb of the Xie family's Feng Senghui, only the female occupant's name was inscribed on the epitaph brick, while the male remains were placed inside the stone funerary bed. This maternal dominance over the paternal reflects what Luo Xin refers to as the "Hengdai legacy" before the Northern Wei moved their capital to Luoyang. Heng and Dai refer to the regions under the jurisdiction of Hengzhou and Daizhou, i.e., the Inner Asian steppe society customs within the Pingcheng area, where women held strong and active roles in family and social affairs.³⁹ *The Yanshi Jiaxun* by Yan Zhitui of the Northern Qi Dynasty records that people in the Yecheng region still retained many customs of the Xianbei people from the Northern Wei period: "In Yecheng, it was customary for women to manage households, engage in legal disputes, make visits, and even seek official positions for their sons or defend their husbands' rights. Is this not the legacy of the Hengdai era?"⁴⁰

Based on these materials, it appears that in Xianbei burial customs, women generally held a higher status than men. The placement of the epitaph brick, human remains, and the content and layout of the stone funerary bed carvings in Feng Senghui's tomb all reflect this female-dominant characteristic.

3. The Retreat to Nomadic Culture by the Eastern Wei Rulers

So, in this tomb, which of the Xie and Feng couple is Han Chinese, and who is of nomadic origin? Or rather, in this joint burial, were the Xianbei people influenced by Han cultural factors? Or was it a retreat to nomadic culture after the failure of Sinicization?

The Xie clan's ancestral home is in Yangxia, Chenjun commandery (present day Taikang county, Henan province). Chenjun commandery was established during the Qin Dynasty and abolished during the Western Jin period. After the Wei and Jin dynasties, prominent families from this region used "Chenjun" as their ancestral title. The Xie clan that migrated south to Jiangnan during the Eastern Jin gradually became one of the most powerful aristocratic families.

The Feng clan's ancestral home is in Xindu County, Changle Commandery (present day Jizhou City, Hebei

province). Empress Dowager Feng Wenming of the Northern Wei came from this lineage; she was the granddaughter of Feng Hong, the ruler of Northern Yan, who was the brother of Emperor Feng Ba of Northern Yan. Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei, Tuoba Hong, was Empress Dowager Feng's adopted son, which allowed her to avoid the traditional practice of "mother dies when son ascends." Archaeological discoveries of Northern Wei Feng clan epitaphs can trace the clan's origins. In 1920, the fifth year of Zhengguang (524 CE) *Yuan Yue's Concubine Feng Jihua's Tombstone* was unearthed in Luoyang. She was the niece of Empress Dowager Feng Wenming and the eighth daughter of Grand Tutor Feng Xi. Her great-grandfather, Feng Hong, was the Emperor of Northern Yan, and her grandfather, Feng Lang, was King Xuan of Yan.⁴¹ In 1929, from the second year of Yong'an (529 CE) *Yuan Duan's Wife Feng Clan's Tombstone* was found in Luoyang, identifying her as the granddaughter of the King of Yan and the second daughter of the Governor of Yanzhou.⁴² From the fifth year of Wuding (547 CE) *Yuan Cheng's Concubine Feng Linghua's Tombstone* was unearthed in Anyang, identifying her as the fifth daughter of Grand Tutor Changli Wuwang.⁴³ In 1912, a tombstone from the sixth year of Wuding (548 CE) for *Yuan Yanming's Concubine Feng Shi's Tombstone* was discovered in Cixian county, Hebei province, identifying her as the younger sister of the Empress of Eastern Wei.⁴⁴ A tombstone from the fourth year of Tianbao (553 CE) for *Gao Yan's Concubine Feng Suoluo's Tombstone* was unearthed in Anyang, identifying her as the fifth-generation descendant of Feng Xi.⁴⁵ Another tombstone from the sixth year of Tianbao (555 CE) for *Feng Jun and His Wife Yuan Zhiguang's Tombstone* was found in Anyang, identifying Feng Xin as a native of Changle Xizu and the grandson of Feng Xi.⁴⁶ Lin Shengzhi believes that the Feng clan of Northern Yan were Han Chinese who had been assimilated into the Xianbei during the fourth century.⁴⁷

The location where Feng Senghui's tomb was excavated is close to other Feng clan family tombs in Anyang, suggesting that Feng Senghui likely came from the Feng clan of Changle, representing fully assimilated Han Chinese who had adopted Xianbei customs, differing from traditional Han burial practices in Central China.

After the Northern Wei established their capital in Pingcheng, the dominant ruling ideology was Buddhism rather than traditional Confucianism. However, to strengthen control over the Han population within their conquered territories, they had to adopt the administrative systems of the Central Plains dynasties.

To adapt to the transition from nomadic governance to state administration, the Tuoba clan borrowed the dual administrative model from the former Yan. Under this system, Han officials managed the Han populace, while non-Han tribal populations and military affairs were managed by another department. This model proved highly effective for the Tuoba clan⁴⁸.

The Northern Wei emperors reinforced their identification with Han culture by prohibiting intermarriage between the royal and noble families and the Xianbei people. Emperor Wencheng of Northern Wei, Tuoba Jun, issued an edict in 463 CE stating: “From now on, members of the imperial family, mentors, dukes, marquises, and commoners shall not marry artisans, performers, or those of lowly status. Violators will be punished.”⁴⁹ In the second year of Taihe (476 CE), Emperor Xiaowen issued another edict: “Furthermore, members of the imperial family, nobles, and commoners should not marry those who are not of their own kind. The previous emperor personally issued a decree to prohibit this, but the people have become accustomed to it and have not changed. I am now enforcing the old laws and regulations, adhering to previous decrees, and enshrining them in law, making them permanent standards. Violators will be punished according to the regulations.”⁵⁰ In the seventeenth year of Taihe (493 CE), he further decreed: “Moreover, households of servants and laborers shall not marry commoners.”⁵¹ The fact that the Northern Wei emperors issued three edicts prohibiting intermarriage within the same clan indicates that such marriages were still prevalent at the time, suggesting significant resistance from the nobility to the Sinicization policies. On the other hand, after these prohibitions were issued, marriages between the Xianbei and Han people likely became more common. From this, we can infer that Feng Senghui’s husband, Xie, was probably a Han Chinese from the Central Plains.

Since its establishment, the Northern Wei began the process of Sinicization, but this process was fraught with difficulties, especially given the strong resistance from the Xianbei aristocracy. In terms of tomb structures and burial furnishings, most of the Tuoba nobles and officials maintained Xianbei burial customs. Even after the Northern Wei moved their capital to Luoyang, the struggle between Sinicization and Xianbeification continued. Thomas Barfield, in his study of Northern Wei history, noted that the Heiyin Incident in 528 CE, orchestrated by Erzhu Rong, “swept away the Han-style governing institutions of the Northern Wei. Soon after, Luoyang was abandoned, and the Northern Wei split into the Western Wei (Northern Zhou), which upheld Xianbei traditions, and the Eastern Wei (Northern Qi), which

had more Han characteristics.”⁵² However, the reality was quite the opposite. Based on images found on stone funerary beds from the Northern Dynasties, stone funerary beds unearthed in Xi’an do not feature filial piety stories, while those found in Luoyang and Anyang commonly depict such stories, contradicting Barfield’s assessment. Moreover, examining tomb structures, tombs from the Western Wei and Northern Zhou mostly followed the square structure of the Han and Jin dynasties, whereas those from the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi more often reflected Xianbei circular structures. In reality, the Western Wei and Northern Zhou continued to uphold sinicized customs, while the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi returned to Xianbei traditions.⁵³ As pointed out by Chen Yinke, “The abnormal situation in the Northern Qi arose because its establishment relied on the Six Garrisons soldiers, who, as a group maintaining Xianbei traditions, opposed the Hanified civil official groups in Luoyang. The uprising of the Six Garrisons was a reaction against Emperor Xiaowen’s Sinicization policies, manifesting itself in the Xianbeification of the Northern Qi.”⁵⁴ Through this analysis, we can conclude that the trend towards Xianbeification had already begun during the Eastern Wei period.

The promotion of Confucian culture by the Northern Wei was primarily driven by the needs of governance. The Xianbei tradition of killing the mother when the son is designated heir was still practiced among the ruling class. As the mother of Emperor Xiaoming (Yuan Xu), Consort Hu should have been executed after Yuan Xu was named crown prince. In order to save her own life, Empress Dowager Hu needed to find a way to abolish this tradition. At this point, the Confucian concept of filial piety became the perfect ideological tool, used to emphasize the importance of mothers and promote the tradition of respecting one’s mother, thus paving the way for the abolition of the mother dies when the son becomes heir system.

Confucian culture not only aligned with the Xianbei rulers’ need to construct their own political order but also responded to their demand for establishing a clan-based social structure. After the Northern Wei established its capital at Pingcheng, Confucianism gradually became integrated into Xianbei culture. The marriage between the Xie and Feng families can be seen as a union in which the Feng family—a Han Chinese family that had become fully Xianbei in customs and status as aristocrats—married into the Xie family, who were Han Chinese from the Central Plains. This resembles the saying: “Swallows that once nested in the halls of kings and nobles now fly into the homes of

commoners.”

As a tomb built under Xianbei rule, the burial practices first followed Xianbei traditions, and only secondarily incorporated Confucian elements as cultural embellishment. The stories of exemplary filial sons are narratives centered on Han Chinese values. For the people of the Northern Dynasties, who identified with Xianbei culture, these stories could not be directly adopted without modification. This shows that during the period from the establishment of Pingcheng as the capital to the reign of Emperor Xiaowen, there was no widespread consensus within the Northern Wei bureaucratic system regarding Sinicization; many resisted it and remained attached to Xianbei traditions.

Moreover, the fact that a stone funerary bed screen currently housed at the Shenzhen Goldstone Museum of Art bears an almost identical image of the filial grandson Yuan Gu being carried in a unmanned stretcher on men's shoulders suggests that during the Northern Dynasties, it was common practice for craftsmen to modify traditional Han Chinese iconography according to Xianbei customs. This further confirms that such adaptations were not exceptional, but rather part of a broader cultural trend.

In the filial son story depicted on the Xie family's stone funerary bed, there appears to be a surface-level indication of Sinicization among the Xianbei people. However, once we understand that the theme of the image portrays the Xianbei custom of female dominance over males, it becomes clear that this is not an example of Xianbei Sinicization but rather a cultural practice reflecting a retreat to Xianbei traditions after the Northern Wei split, showcasing a fusion of Han and Xianbei cultures in burial customs.

The artisan's deliberate depiction of Yuan Gu's mother beside the empty stretcher serves to highlight the absence of male characteristics, symbolized by the unoccupied stretcher bearing Yuan Gu's grandfather. This design ensures that the imagery on the stone funerary bed conveys the theme of maternal dominance over males, embodying the Xianbei tradition of female supremacy. This indicates that the Sinicization policies implemented after the Northern Wei moved their capital to Luoyang disintegrated following the empire's fragmentation. The Eastern Wei accelerated its return to Xianbei traditions, a regressive trend against historical progress, ultimately leading to its downfall.

4. Conclusion

Feng Senghui likely came from the prestigious Feng

family of Changle, whose status far exceeded that of the Xie family. As someone who “married down” into the Xie family, Feng Senghui would have held a significantly higher position within the household. Throughout this tomb, various aspects reflect Xianbei cultural customs.

First, despite epitaphs being common among sinicized Xianbei by the third decade of the sixth century, this tomb reverted to using epitaph bricks typical of earlier Xianbei practices over a decade later.

Second, the fact that the male remains were relocated suggests that Feng Senghui died long after her husband, indicating she was not buried alongside him initially but instead had his remains moved to join her in the tomb, placing his bones inside the inner side of the stone coffin bed.

Third, only Feng Senghui's name is inscribed on the epitaph brick, with only the surname of her husband's family mentioned, further emphasizing the absolute dominance of women within this household.

Through the analysis of this stone funerary bed imagery, it is evident that the sinicized Xianbei and Han people living in the Yecheng region of the Eastern Wei, despite their Han ancestry, had largely assimilated into Xianbei cultural practices. On one hand, they absorbed Han culture, but under the rule of the Eastern Wei, which was dominated by nobles clinging to Xianbei traditions, they did not continue the Sinicization policies. Instead, they regressed to traditional Xianbei customs. This regression, driven by the ruling class's adherence to old Xianbei ways, ultimately contributed to the decline and fall of the Eastern Wei.

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This article is a phase research achievement of the National Social Science Fund Art Project “Research on the Murals in Tombs Along the Great Wall from a Cross-Cultural Perspective” (Project Number: 23BF099).

Editor: Liu Ge

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图像的性别：东魏石棺床中无人肩輿图像的女性主题

董睿

摘要：安陽出土的東魏謝氏馮僧暉石棺床圍屏中兩人抬著無人的肩輿圖像，在深圳金石藝術博物館藏的東魏石棺床上也有同樣的圖像，據考證圖像的內容為孝孫原穀故事。漢代以來石刻中孝子故事畫像與文獻不合的現象很常見，東魏時期將孝孫原穀故事刻畫成無人的肩輿圖像，是工匠刻意進行的改動。馮僧暉是鮮卑化的漢人，其葬俗中體現了鮮卑文化中女尊男卑的習俗。謝氏馮僧暉石棺床中的孝孫原穀故事中，兩位男子抬著無人的肩輿，一位女性站在肩輿右側，其意圖在於以無人的肩輿表達原穀祖父體現的男性特徵的缺失，使得這座石棺床的畫像傳達出母性地位高於男性的特徵，從而使整個石棺床畫像體現鮮卑文化中女尊男卑的主題。

關鍵詞：北朝；石棺床；孝子；鮮卑化漢人