

From ancient tomb murals: The flat and pointed mouths of horse

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Abstract: Han dynasty literature records that the ancient sage Gao Yao's "horse mouth symbolizes utmost sincerity," using the flat and square shape of the horse's mouth to represent judicial fairness and justice. In reality, as well as in ancient murals, the depiction of horse mouths is predominantly flat. However, the Tang dynasty art historian Zhang Yan yuan mentioned in "Records of Famous Paintings" that "ancient paintings depict pointed horse mouths," which is quite rare. For example, in the murals of the tomb of Jiu yuan Gang in Xin Zhou, the horse mouths are all pointed.

Keywords: horse mouth, flat, pointed, Jiu yuan Gang

1. Introduction

In the culture and art of ancient China, animal images were often endowed with specific symbolic meanings to express certain moral or spiritual connotations. The horse, as an important partner in human civilization, occupies a place in ancient art, not only because of its significant role in transportation and warfare, but also because its unique physical characteristics have been endowed with rich cultural connotations. In the "Huainanzi: Xiu Wu Xun," the association of Gao Yao's image with the horse's mouth provides us with an interesting perspective to discuss the relationship between ancient cultural symbols and real images. This article will explore the symbolic connection between "Gao Yao's horse mouth" and "utmost sincerity" through the analysis of ancient murals, documentary records, and artistic shapes, as well as how this symbol was understood and passed down in ancient society.

2. Gao Yao and the horse's beak: A symbol of ancient judicial justice

In the Western Han Dynasty, Liu An, in his work "Huainanzi · Xiu Wu Xun," stated: "Gao Yao had a horse's beak, which is called the utmost sincerity. He adjudicated cases clearly and understood human emotions." [1] Gao Yao was an ancient sage, reputed to be a minister of Shun, in charge of the judiciary, which is equivalent to today's judges. "Gao Yao had a horse's beak, which is called the utmost sincerity." In vernacular terms, this means that Gao Yao's mouth was shaped like a horse's mouth, symbolizing his integrity and fairness. But why is a mouth like a horse's beak associated with "utmost sincerity"? The original annotation explains, "If the beak is like a horse's mouth, then the words spoken are not empty, hence it is called 'utmost sincerity'." [2] Such an explanation still does not clarify the connection between a horse's beak and sincerity. Historical records do not provide a clear answer, but perhaps the reason can be found in the characteristics of a horse's beak.

Gao Yao was one of the "Four Ancient Saints" of ancient times, along with Yao, Shun, and Yu, and was revered as the ancestor of Chinese judiciary. The most important pursuit of the judiciary is fairness and justice. Today's judicial institution logos all contain a balance scale, such as the logo of the People's Court of China (Figure 1), which uses a balance scale as the central expression of the image, symbolizing the absolute fairness sought by both parties in legal proceedings, consistent with the standard of balance of the scale itself. As a judicial official, Gao Yao's judgments must also conform to this principle of fairness and

justice, which coincides with the relatively flat image of a horse's beak (Figure 2). Ancient tomb murals often depict the image of horses, especially tomb murals from the Eastern Han Dynasty, which frequently show images of carriages and horses (Figures 3, 4, 5, all from the Helin Ge' er Eastern Han Dynasty tomb murals). The image of the horse in the tomb corridor mural of the Northern Qi Lou Rui tomb is even more distinct, almost entirely flat (Figure 6). However, the Tang Dynasty art historian Zhang Yan yuan, in his "Records of Famous Paintings," mentioned "the ancient horse's beak was pointed" (Figure 7), which seems to contradict the image of horses we see in reality and in murals. So, is Zhang Yan yuan's record incorrect? In fact, not at all; there are indeed images of "pointed horse beaks" in ancient artistic shapes. The horse's beak in the "War Horse" mural brick from the Southern Dynasties tomb in Deng Zhou Xue Zhuang, housed in the Henan Museum (Figure 8, a part of the mural brick), already shows a pointed shape, perhaps due to the influence of the "slender and pure image" of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Apart from the relief-like mural bricks, there have been no examples of "pointed horse beaks" seen in previous tomb murals. In recent years, the newly excavated Xin Zhou Jiu yuan Gang Northern Dynasties late period mural tomb [3] has murals on both sides of the tomb corridor that can be divided into four layers from top to bottom, among which the second layer is the largest scale "Hunting Picture" existing in ancient China. The picture focuses on depicting scenes of people riding horses through the mountains and forests, drawing bows and hunting, with more than 10 horses depicted, either walking or running, each with a different appearance, but all with pointed horse beaks, and none with flat horse beaks (Figures 9, 10, local of Jiu yuan Gang mural tomb "Hunting Picture"), similar to the horse beak in the "War Horse" mural brick from the Southern Dynasties tomb in Deng Zhou Xue Zhuang, proving that Zhang Yan yuan's record is not false.



Figure 1



Figure 2

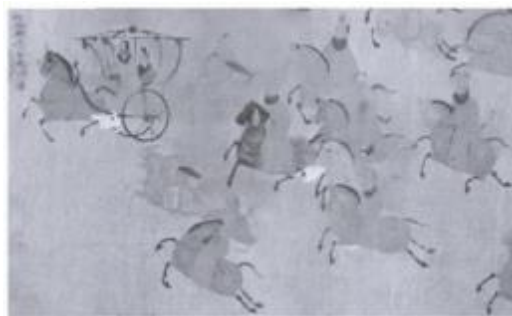


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

3. The image of horse's mouth and the symbol of ancient judicial justice

The image of a horse's mouth in reality is relatively square and flat, which has been expressed in murals since the Han Dynasty, and has been extended in Han Dynasty documents such as "Huainanzi" and "Bai Hu Tong" as a symbol of the fairness of the ancient sage Gao Yao who was in charge of the judiciary. In addition to Han Dynasty murals, the image of a flat-mouthed horse is also commonly seen in murals from later periods. However, the situation of "ancient paintings with pointed horse mouths" mentioned by Zhang Yan yuan, a Tang Dynasty art historian, in "Records of Famous Paintings" is quite rare. For example, in the murals of the Jiu yuan Gang Northern Dynasties tomb in Xin Zhou, the horse mouths are all pointed, confirming Zhang Yan yuan's records are not mistaken.

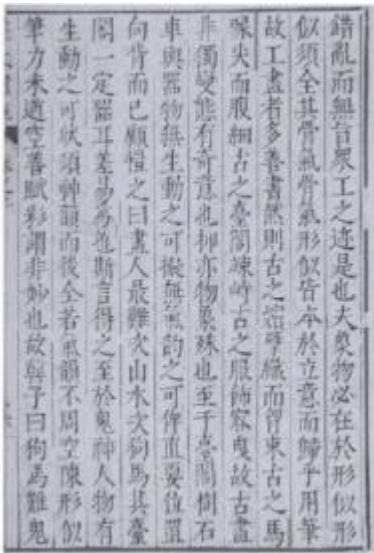


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

4. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of ancient murals, documentary records, and artistic shapes, we can see that the symbolic connection between "Gao Yao's horse beak" and "utmost sincerity" is not baseless, but has a profound cultural foundation and historical origins. The flat and straight image of the horse's mouth was endowed with the symbolic meaning of fairness and justice in ancient art, a symbol that is concentratedly reflected in the image of Gao Yao. From Han Dynasty murals to Tang Dynasty documentary records, from tomb murals to portrait bricks, the changes in the image of the horse's mouth not only reflect the evolution of artistic styles but also demonstrate the pursuit and respect for the values of fairness and justice in ancient society. The inheritance and development of this symbol not only enrich our cultural cognition but also provide valuable moral insights for modern society. Through such research, we can not only better understand ancient culture but also draw wisdom from it to provide reference and inspiration for the development of modern society.

5. References

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