

## *On Two Paradigms of Chinese Iconology Theory*

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**Abstract:** With the development of information technology and the arrival of the era of image reading, image research has increasingly attracted the attention of the humanities. Focusing on the interpretation of image data in historical periods, the study of image historiography in history and the study of iconography in art history are undoubtedly the two most important paradigms in current Chinese academic circles. Since the two paradigms belong to different disciplines, their application is either restricted in the field of history or art, and there is a lack of communication between the two. In view of this, this paper tries to make a systematic analysis of the two image theories, and to compare their advantages and disadvantages. The iconographic theory represented by Panofsky is more systematic and complete, as it has the advantages of focusing on themes, advancing in layers, and exploring functions; while the image research methodology of image historiography is still under exploration despite the fact that academic circles have attempted to construct the subjectivity of historical images, because it has been deeply influenced by the tradition of “proving history with pictures”. Therefore, this paper argues that the iconographic theory of art history is more applicable. However, in the specific application of the iconography theory represented by Panofsky, Gombrich’s situational logic theory should be introduced as a term of limitation to restrict the relationship between image themes, and effectively focus on the association of historical backgrounds, so as to be more consistent with historical reality. This demonstrates that the two paradigms of iconography above actually have the potential to converge.

In the past two decades, with the development of information technology and the arrival of the era of image reading, the study of iconography has increasingly become a topic of high concern in the humanities in China, including art, history, literature and art, etc., all of which emphasize the value of images or the visual information of texts. However, in the current status quo, there are two paradigms in the study of Chinese iconography for image materials of a particular historical period. One is the image study of history;<sup>[1]</sup> the other is the image study of art history.<sup>[2]</sup> These two paradigms are quite different in academic orientation: the former focuses on discovering history from images, while the latter focuses on the understanding of images from history. For a long time, these two paradigms have been considered independent and incompatible in Chinese academia. Although there have been signs of the fusion of the two paradigms in recent years, when it comes to some specific issues, they still conduct research independently, lacking the required compatibility. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically sort out these two theoretical paradigms of iconography, and to analyze their advantages and disadvantages, so as to promote the organic syncretization of

the two theoretical paradigms as well as the development of iconographic theory and iconographic methods in China.

The study of images in history is also commonly referred to as image historiography. The initial goal of this paradigm was to introduce images into history and to enrich sources of historical data. For example, after a long period of accumulation in the academic circles, the image research on the portrait bricks or stones of the Han Dynasty has produced many landmark achievements. To this end, Peking University has established the Han Painting Research Institute, publishing a collection titled *Research on Chinese Han Painting*, which effectively promoted research in the field of historical images centered on Han Dynasty portrait bricks or stones. Another example is the study of *Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival*, a field that has made many important achievements over the years. Scholars have even proposed to establish the study of *Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival* as a subdiscipline of its own. However, prior research mainly regarded the subject of research as a kind of historical data, from which effective historical data could be extracted. Although this kind of research has its use, it also has a tendency towards fragmentation. The main reason for this situation is, of course, the difficulty of determining the subject matter of Qingming Shanghetu, including whether the picture is a depiction of the atmosphere of the Qingming Festival or whether Qingming was intended as a figure of prosperity. A satisfactory explanation is difficult due to the scarcity of historical material concerning its creator, Zhang Zeduan. Instead, it is the Qing repaintings of Qingming Shanghetu that have a clearer theme. For example, Shen Yuan, a court painter during the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods of the Qing dynasty, repainted Qingming Shanghetu, which not only foregrounded the work's portrayal of the atmosphere of the Qingming Festival, but also used it to express the prosperity of the Qing dynasty during the Qianlong period.

[1] Judging from recent research, this tendency towards fragmented research is still prevalent. For example, the study of Song tomb murals in Panle Village, Hancheng, Shaanxi Province has similar problems. The tomb was discovered in 2009; its north wall contains a portrait of the occupant of the tomb in the center with two groups of figures (generally called "Medicine Preparation Mural") on each side, showing that the occupant was a doctor during his lifetime. (Figure 1) The east wall contains the "Buddha Nirvana Mural" (Figure 2), and the west wall is the "Song Dynasty Zaju Mural" (Figure 3), giving insights into the occupant's life and faith. In the study of these three murals, researchers generally carried out isolated analyses and mainly focused on the "Medicine Preparation Mural" on the north wall and the "Song Dynasty Zaju Mural" on the west wall. The overall theme of these three frescoes, however, is generally ignored by the previous studies. <sup>[4]</sup>

Because of this, the coherence of these three murals in the tomb is neglected. In other words, although this type of research can enrich the sources of historical materials, its lack of theoretical integrity results in inadequate comprehensiveness. In recent years, historians have begun to put much emphasis on the subjectivity of images, trying to seek historical truth from the images themselves. Wang Jiahua proposes three primary methods: the description and analysis of the subject itself, i.e., the description and analysis of the form and content of the work itself; the reconstruction of context and interpretation of meaning, i.e., to combine images with written materials in order to make a reasonable interpretation of the specific background of the production and transmission of the image; and the integration of image and text as well as the introduction of image into history, i.e., using historical records to determine the accurate time of images in history. However, Wang is also questioning whether images can be taken as the subject of historical interpretation: "It is plausible that images can only function as supplements to historical texts in historical research". [2]

The iconographic study of art history, also known as iconography, was founded by the German scholar Wahlberg. By defining the goal of modern iconography as the presentation of human life in motion, [3] Wahlberg gave iconography a strong humanistic bent. As the successor to Wahlberg, Panofsky's main contribution to the field was the systematization of the methods of iconography

and the establishment of three levels of research methods. The first level is to carry out pre-iconographic description, and to determine those factual and expressive themes by observing the form and content of images, that is, “the theme of primacy or nature”. The second is the interpretation of iconography by observing the details of the images and by comparing them with the original texts, so as to look for those “worlds of specific themes or concepts expressed by images, stories and allegories”, that is, “the secondary or programmatic theme”. The third one is the interpretation of iconography through investigating the relationship between the *Zeitgeist* and the image, so as to seek the “internal meaning or content” of the image, which Panofsky calls, the “symbolic value” [4]. Gombrich agrees with Panofsky’s framework of three levels of analysis in general, but he reforms the method and scope of the third level of image interpretation. In Gombrich’s view, Panofsky represented a contentious German tradition in art history, a tradition which dates back to Hegel’s philosophy of history, which tended towards concepts such as *Zeitgeist* and national spirit, regarding the art, philosophy, etc. of an era as an expression of these concepts. “As a result, each era is regarded as a whole that includes everything”. [5] Gombrich thus conceives of art as essentially personal, the creation of which is primarily attributable to psychological factors. [6] As such, the exegesis of the meaning of a given work of art ought to begin from the artist. He claims that the meaning of a work is the meaning the author intended to convey and that all the interpreter has to do is to determine the author’s intention to the best of his or her ability. [7] On these grounds, he borrowed Karl Popper’s theory, introducing the concept of contextual analysis, so as to guide a logical interpretation of the intrinsic meaning of an image. Contextual analysis, also translated as contextual logic, is concerned with individuals in a particular context rather than with a nation, a historical era, or a class. In other words, Gombrich advocates an endogenous interpretation of images based on the author’s own experience, rather than an extrinsic interpretation that lacks logical connections. He asserts that “there is really no such thing as art, only artists.” [8] Therefore, the core contention lies in how to view the relationship between image and the times: if images are thought of as the product of individuals, the endogenous tendency of interpretation is inevitable, while the association of the image with extrinsic historical context is unacceptable. If the image is conceptualized as a product of the times, the opposite is true. At first glance, it appears that no one is immune to the influence of their times; this view is, no doubt, the more widely accepted one. The sociology of art as advocated by Hauser emphasizes the influence of the times on the individual, advocating the holistic nature of art and life.[9] However, what Gombrich really means is that since the influence of a certain age on the image creator has been concentrated in the image, there should be no excess correlation beyond the image itself. This perspective is undoubtedly helpful in overcoming broad associations and over-interpretation of images. This understanding is close to Victoria Alexander’s assertion that, although the influence of period factors such as race, gender, and class on art is ineluctable, the emphasis of research ought to be on the interactive nature of the period and art, rather than a one-way influence. [10] In other words, the symbolic value of the third level must be combined with contextual logic as a means of control to avoid over-interpretation of a specific historical context. By abandoning the pursuit of the *Zeitgeist*, image interpretation actually signals a revival of endogenous interpretation, with the symbolic value of the third level being transformed into the interpretation of the value theme of the image, which best reflects the author’s own intention. Combining the iconographic methods of Panofsky and Gombrich, a sequence of priorities can be established: natural theme—programmatic theme—value theme. If this paradigm is adopted, much of traditional iconographic studies needs to be reexamined. For example, the aforementioned research on the murals of the Song Dynasty tombs in Panle Village, Hancheng, needs to consider the three murals as a whole. These three images are superficially different, but are in fact closely related. Of these, the “Nirvana of the Buddha”, which has received relatively little academic attention, is particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, extant Buddhist wall paintings

from the Song dynasty are rare, and only those from the Kaihua Temple in Gaoping, Shanxi, offer a contemporary glimpse of the genuine nature of Song Buddhist wall painting.[11] On the other hand, the “Nirvana of the Buddha” in the Song tomb of Hancheng is extremely rich in connotation and artistic tension. In terms of content, the whole picture shows the Buddha in Nirvana, consistent with the narrative recorded in the Buddhist scriptures. However, in the image, a man extends a hand to touch the Buddha’s ankle, appearing to recreate the story of the great disciple Gautama worshipping the Buddha’s feet. However, his ethnically Chinese appearance and clothing, his calm physician’s demeanour, and his use of the pulse-gathering technique (ancient Chinese pulse-gathering included the foot pulse) are very different from the non-Chinese appearances, monkish dress, and grief-stricken expressions of the surrounding disciples. It is reasonable to suspect that this is the occupant of the tomb painting himself into the painting, witnessing the Buddha’s Nirvana as a doctor. This arrangement, while expressing his own superior medical skills, also forms a link with the scene on the northern wall where the occupant is instructing a maker of medicine. The image presents itself as open and confrontational, a far cry from earlier images of the same religious subject matter which adhered strictly to Buddhist texts. [12] This aspect of the image also jars with the usual academic assumption that Buddhist art of the Song dynasty had moved towards restraint and introversion. [13] Accordingly, it appears that the three images are very rich in connotation and closely related, and have shared thematic concerns. In this example, the analysis of the image was conducted according to the paradigm of the three levels of iconographic analysis described above, the natural theme of the murals was explored first, followed by the programmatic theme, according to the relevant texts, followed by the value theme. Based on the above analyses, the original intention of the arrangement of these three murals in the tomb can be approached. According to the available information, the programmatic theme of the tomb murals is likely to be medicine. Among them, the north wall shows the study and production of medicine; the “Buddha Nirvana Mural” on the east wall shows how Buddha offers the world the medicine to cure all sufferings in the way of death. Though there is a lack of biographical evidence concerning the mural on the east wall, the scene of social dispute that it depicts can be interpreted as a dramatization of the Chinese idiom “good medicine tastes bitter”, a term associated with conciliation. Only in this way can it conform to the overall norm of iconography. Of course, to understand the true meaning of this group of images historically requires extensive historical support and the evaluation of the broader context of the period, namely the actual state of Song society in the context of the changes in the Tang and Song dynasties. In this way, the interaction between art and society can be understood and ultimately distilled into a plausible pictorial theme. Recently, there has been some research that has given attention to the Song Tomb in Panel Village using the aforementioned methods of analysis. Jeehee Hong and TJ Hinrichs used pictorial theory to analyse the wall paintings of the Song tomb in Hancheng as a whole, arguing that the three wall paintings in the tomb express the fundamental questions of life and death from the point of view of a doctor. In this regard, although their final conclusion seems rather simplistic, the analytical paradigm is undoubtedly well-founded and worthy of affirmation.

Based on the above analysis, the theories and methods of historical image research are still under exploration, and it is still doubtful whether images can become the main body of historical interpretation. However, to take a step back, even if the emphasis on images is ultimately to introduce image into history; it is still necessary to introduce history into image in the first place in order to achieve this goal. This requires the prioritizing of the image as the main resource and the placing of historical data as subordinate to the image. Only on this basis can the historical value of images be brought into full play. From this perspective, the iconographic methods of art history is undoubtedly more preferable than the historiographical one. On the one hand, it establishes a relatively comprehensive framework, and proposes actionable methods for image analysis; on the

other hand, it establishes boundaries for image interpretation to prevent over-interpretation. In this way, the interpretation of historical images can be well-grounded and effectively focused, rather than being associated with a wide but vague range of historical contexts. In other words, with Gombrich's revision, iconography theory may be the solution to the problematics of contemporary historiography. From a long-term perspective, the two paradigms discussed in this essay have the potential to merge. Of course, we hope to see the fusion of the two paradigms of iconography, which will undoubtedly promote the in-depth interpretation of Chinese historical image materials.

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## Appendix



Figure 1: The Tomb Owner Murals of the Song Tombs in Hancheng



Figure 2: The Buddha Nirvana Murals of the Song Tombs in Hancheng



Figure 3: The Zaju Mural of the Song Tombs in Hancheng