

COMMENT ON “EXAMINING TANG AND SONG YINGTANG IMAGE HALLS FROM A CLAN SACRIFICIAL PERSPECTIVE”

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Commented Article: CHENG, Wanli. Examining Tang and Song Yingtang image halls from a clan sacrificial perspective. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp Journal of Philosophy, v. 46, n. 3, p. 229-248, 2023.

According to Cheng (2023), Chinese people have always attached great importance to ancestor sacrificial activities. Among those activities, *Yingtang*, image halls for worshipping gods and Buddhas or displaying images of ancestors, played an indispensable role in ancient China. There are rare

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<https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2023.v46n3.p249>



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research results about *Yingtang* up to now, and the four authors' research can be regarded as an extension.

“*Ying*” in *Yingtang* generally refers to the ancestor's portrait. The practice of drawing portraits originated in the Warring States Period (475 BC-221 BC), formed in the Han Dynasty (202 BC-220 AD), and was widely popular due to Buddhist customs in the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589 AD). Drawing portraits of a loved one is similar to imitating relatives by casting gold, carving wood, carving stone and sculpting clay, which aims to cherish the memory of ancestors. *Mr. Lingyang's Collection* by Han Ju-chu in the Song Dynasty concluded that it was customary for later generations to paint for an ancestor when he was alive, and the portrait was called “vivid graphics”; he would be worshipped when he died, and the portrait would be placed in the “*Yingtang*”.

Generally speaking, *Yingtang* formed in the Tang and Song dynasties (618-1279 AD), one of the transitional periods in ancient Chinese society. The aristocratic families' decline and the reintegration of social classes brought about major changes in ancestor worship activities. Under such circumstances, *Yingtang* was gradually accepted by the masses, becoming a place to worship ancestors and undertaking such functions as family sacrifices and education. The background of *Yingtang* in the Tang and Song Dynasties is involved in the article, but some confusing points still need to be clarified. The author tends to make brief supplements to the aristocratic family's decline and explains why the Tang and Song Dynasties were the major transition in ancient China.

Imperial power politics began to be practiced in the territory of ancient China since the Qin state unified the six states and established the autocratic monarchy system (221 BC). Political corruption was a common phenomenon during the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD). Bureaucrats, their students and former subordinates first formed political groups, and then, aristocratic bureaucratic families. These families not only cultivated high-ranking officials from generation to generation but also numerous literati, occupying leading positions in politics and culture. They expanded their power, and some became actual rulers of states and counties by the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD). After the wars at the end of the Han Dynasty, the imperial power withered and its control over the aristocratic families weakened. The imperial family of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 AD) even entirely relied on the aristocratic bureaucratic families' support. The emperor lost his authority to rule the country. He could only be at the mercy of the aristocratic

family. So he became a puppet in most cases. However, the concept of the supremacy of imperial power was deeply rooted in the people's hearts. Although the clan and aristocratic families coveted the imperial power and attempted to govern the country, they dared not directly use the emperor's banner, and only acted in the emperor's name in the actual society. The famous aristocracy politics in Chinese history was thus formed. China experienced a long period of division and separatism after the demise of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, and the unification of the Tang Dynasty was not completed until 618 AD. Rulers of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) were themselves the clan and aristocratic families, and the establishment of the Tang regime was inseparable from the aristocratic families' support. These rulers knew the dangers of the clan and aristocratic families controlling the government after the era of aristocracy politics. Therefore, they started to support the poor family and suppress the clan and aristocratic families to stabilize the imperial power. Emperor Taizong (626-649 AD) of the Tang Dynasty issued a decree to Prime Minister Gao Shilian and others: "if the clans and aristocratic families are not listed in the book separately, there will be no basis for them." From then on, the Clan Gazetteer mentioned by the author was compiled. According to Emperor Taizong's instructions, the Clan Gazetteer did not need to mention the decades-ago family background, but only the current family level. In this way, those aristocratic bureaucratic families with a long history and strong strength were placed on the same level as the upstarts from the poor families. The contradictions between the imperial power and the clan turned into contradictions between the old and the new aristocracy to a certain extent, thus weakening the clan's power and strengthening the imperial power. The compilation of Clan Gazetteer was strongly opposed by the clan and aristocratic family, and it did not achieve the desired effect in the early days. It was not until Tang Gaozong (649-683 AD) that Clan Gazetteer was re-edited and renamed Record of Clan Names, which completed a final and fatal blow to the stereotyped Shizu gentry-clan system described by the author.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, the political system of China underwent tremendous changes. The imperial examination system was formed and increasingly improved, which used examinations to select officials and opened up a channel for ordinary people from poor families to rise in class. Putting forward the "Tang-Song transformation" viewpoint, Japanese scholar Naito Konan believed that Tang and Song Dynasties belonged to different historical stages. In his opinion, "the Tang Dynasty is the end of the Middle Ages, while the Song Dynasty is the beginning of the Modern Age", so there are significant differences in culture, art and other aspects. The period from the Six

Dynasties (222-589 AD) to the mid-Tang Dynasty was the most prosperous era of aristocracy politics. The political power only belonged to the aristocrats, and only those born into aristocratic families could hold high-ranking official positions. Aristocracy politics declined during the transitional period from the end of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) to the Five Dynasties (907-979 AD), which provided more opportunities for the common people to move upwards. Holding higher official positions no longer depended on family background, but they were selected and appointed by the emperor. Economically, after the mid-Tang Dynasty, the Tripartite Tax System (the tax system consisted of three components, namely the field tax, household tax and labor *corvée*) collapsed and was replaced by the Twice-Taxation System. The common people got rid of their status as tenant farmers and were no longer bound to the land. In the Song Dynasty, the government no longer intervened in land distribution, the common people had the freedom to dispose of land harvests, and their private property rights were strengthened. Correspondingly, culture and art have gradually shifted from serving the aristocrats to catering to the common people's interests, and the art forms are freer. In the aristocratic era from the Six Dynasties (222-589 AD) to the middle of the Tang Dynasty, the people were regarded as slaves by the nobles as a whole. In the Tang and Song Dynasties, the people were finally liberated from the nobles. Naito Konan's specific views may be biased, and there is great controversy in academic circles. However, the great changes between the Tang and Song Dynasties are recognized, and the rise of the *Yingtang* for family sacrifice is also directly related to it.

The name *Yingtang* first appeared in the Tang Dynasty, which may have benefited from the long peace of the Tang Dynasty. People did not need to avoid wars and had relatively stable living conditions, so they could establish fixed commemorative or sacrificial places. Most *Yingtang* in the Tang Dynasty were used for religion. The relationship between the royal family and Taoism in the Tang Dynasty was very close. The development of Taoism received great support from the royal family, and even numerous *Yingtang* were set in Buddhist temples, receiving extraordinary courtesies. There was also a raft of *Yingtang* buildings in Buddhist temples. Many examples are cited in the article to illustrate this point, for example: "When Chan Master Yuangui passed away [...]", "[...] a stupa was erected on the eastern side of the mountain and an image hall was built at the temple." and "Chan Master Fakong's image hall at Anguo Temple and Chan Master Jianxuan's image hall at Shiquan Temple."

Another important function of *Yingtang* in the Tang Dynasty is to commemorate a certain person, who may be a famous one in the previous generation or maybe the object of admiration or sympathy for the builder. Some commemorative *Yingtang* were built during the lifetime of the commemorative object, and some were built after the commemorative object died. Since the Han Dynasty in China (202 BC - 220 AD), there has been a practice of erecting shrines for living people who are often officials with benevolent wisdom. However, the Tang Dynasty had relatively strict restrictions on the establishment of ancestral halls or monuments for officials with benevolent wisdom. According to the *Tanglü Shuyi*, the penal law code of the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), those who presumptuously let others erect shrines or steles for officials with benevolent wisdom will be punished with hard labor. The establishment of *Yingtang*, instead of shrines or monuments, may be to circumvent this decree. Finally, the *Yingtang* in the Tang Dynasty was also occasionally used to worship ancestors. It is recorded in the *old book of the Tang* that some officials moved to new houses, and the ancestral tombs or family temples could not be moved, so the *Yingtang* was built in the new house to facilitate ancestor worship. However, this function of the *Yingtang* was criticized by the people at that time, and it was not widely popular in the Tang Dynasty (WU, 2020, p. 150).

After the Five Dynasties (907-979 AD), the Zhao and Song Dynasties once again completed the unification. At that time, social politics, economy and culture have undergone great changes. The aristocracy was gradually declining, various systems that symbolized their status also declined, and the bureaucratic class newly born from the imperial examination system gradually took over the dominant position. From the perspective of the origin, the family temple system of the aristocratic class is a kind of aristocratic system that has been passed down from ancient times, which is also closely related to the knighthood system. Ordinary people, other than nobles, are not allowed to set up family temples. These regulations undoubtedly hinder the emerging classes from offering sacrifices to their ancestors. Therefore, the bureaucrats of the Song Dynasty came up with a compromise method that “ordinary people have no rights to set up temples but *Yingtang*”. The method allowed ordinary people without official ranks to build *Yingtang* to worship their ancestors, and *Yingtang* also became popularized in folk sacrifices in the Song Dynasty.

The transformation of the Tang and Song dynasties led to the rise of the civilian class, and the so-called “downshifting of the etiquette system” occurred

in terms of sacrificial etiquette. *Yingtang* lacked the support of traditional etiquette texts, so it also severely criticized and arouse a lot of controversies. For example, Cheng Yi, a great Confucian in the Northern Song Dynasty, pointed out that “*Ying* cannot be used during sacrifices... If *Ying*, the portrait used in worship, is used for sacrifices, the portrait must be completely similar to the worshipped person, not even an extra beard. If there is an extra beard, it will be someone else”. In addition, the family *Yingtang* is supposed to be specially used to worship ancestors, and people having no blood relationship with the family cannot be worshipped objects. The family *Yingtang* is inevitable to be influenced by the religion *Yingtang* and the memorial *Yingtang* due to the inexplicable relationship among them. Therefore, the worshipped objects in the family *Yingtang* sometimes go beyond the scope of the family blood relationship. Further, many *Yingtang* were located in residences. Problems of ownership and use often arose in the propagation of the family branch, setting a rather high threshold for the further popularization of the etiquette system to ordinary people. The contradictions induced by these “transitional” phenomena in the use of portraits to worship in the Song Dynasty also paved the way for further changes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Fund projects: The general project of philosophy and social science research in Jiangsu colleges and universities in 2022, “The evolution and collation of art images with plague theme and the study of contemporary value” (2022SJB0035); Primary Ecological Wood Print-Neiqiu Paper Horse Design Art Heritage Research (Item Number:18YJC760070).

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Received: 12/03/2023

Approved: 16/03/2023