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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Schema and Compositional Design of Kitchen Scenes in Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs: A Study Based on Classical Rules

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ABSTRACT:

As a major life-themed motif in Han dynasty stone reliefs, kitchen scenes have traditionally been interpreted as straightforward representations of everyday culinary activities in the Han Dynasty. However, these images are not merely realistic depictions but are structured according to a standardized schematic system shaped by the Confucian ritual system, funerary beliefs concerning ascension to immortality, and workshop-transmitted pattern books. Focusing on six representative kitchen reliefs from Shandong, Henan, and Jiangsu Provinces—Qianliangtai (Zhucheng), Dahuoting (Mixian), Songshan (Jiaxiang), Wulibao (Linyi), Hanwang Town (Xuzhou), and the Wu Family Shrines (Jiaxiang)—this study applies E. H. Gombrich's schema and correction theory to examine the compositional principles underlying Han dynasty kitchen imagery. The analysis investigates four dimensions of visual construction: spatial organization, motif combination, narrative sequence, and carving techniques. The findings demonstrate that these principles function as standardized compositional rules governing the arrangement of figures, utensils, and symbolic elements. The shared visual schema emerged through the combined influence of the Confucian ritual system, the funerary principle of treating the dead as if they were alive, and the intergenerational transmission of workshop design patterns. At the same time, regional variations in resources, dietary traditions, and the social hierarchy reflected in elite and commoner tombs prompted craftsmen to modify the standard schema by adding, omitting, or replacing specific motifs while preserving its essential structure. This study reconstructs the generative mechanism through which a unified visual schema developed into diverse regional variants. By shifting attention from textual interpretation to the formal organization of images, it addresses a significant gap in previous scholarship and offers a new methodological framework for understanding the visual system of Han dynasty stone reliefs. It also provides fresh insights into the representation of dietary rituals and the relationship between ritual ideology, funerary practice, and artistic production in Han visual culture.

Keywords: Han Dynasty stone reliefs; kitchen paintings; schema; classical rules; image narrative; ritual system

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Introduction

Han dynasty stone reliefs are funeral visual carriers spawned by the thick burial system of the Eastern Han Dynasty and were praised by Jian Bozan as the "illustrated history of the Han Dynasty" [1]. Existing macroscopic studies, represented by *Han Dynasty Portraits and Han Society* by Song Yanping [2], and Introduction *to Han Portrait Art* by Gu Ying [3] point out that Han portraits follow fixed creative paradigms and are constrained by rituals and workshop patterns. Monographs such as *Thousands of Years on Stone: Clothing, Food, Housing and Transportation in Han Stone Reliefs* by Zhang Congjun and *Elegance among Folk Customs* [4]*: Research on Folk Customs in Han Stone Reliefs* by Zhu Cunming examine clothing, food, and other aspects of everyday life in Han stone reliefs, demonstrating that kitchen-themed imagery is a representative category of people's livelihood and ritual images in the Han Dynasty [5]. As a supporting scene preceding banquet and sacrificial imagery, kitchen scenes are widely distributed across the principal production centers of Han stone reliefs, including southern Shandong, northern Jiangsu, and central Henan. These reliefs comprehensively depict the sequence of kitchen activities, including animal slaughter, water drawing, food preparation, roasting, cooking, and wine brewing. They serve not only as valuable visual evidence for the study of Han dynasty dietary archaeology but also as visual expressions of Confucian ritual practices and beliefs concerning the underworld.

Microscopically, current studies mostly interpret image contents from the perspectives of dietary history and funeral beliefs. Jiang Sheng proposed that kitchen paintings symbolize the "heavenly kitchen" in the underworld, serving the soul immortalization ritual of "providing food for the deceased" [6]. Wang Xiaoyang classified kitchen scenes within the visual system of the village drinking ritual described in the Book of Rites, interpreting them as visual expressions of the state's ritual order [7]. Zhong Junfeng reconstructed Han dynasty techniques of wine filtration and qu (fermentation starter) production based on evidence from kitchen imagery [8]. Although these studies have made significant contributions to the understanding of Han dynasty folk customs, ritual practices, and historical texts, they pay relatively little attention to the formal organization of the images themselves. In particular, the standardized creative logic of kitchen imagery has rarely been examined from the perspectives of visual schema, compositional conventions, and motif paradigms. As a result, the underlying principles governing the construction and regional variation of Han dynasty kitchen scenes remain insufficiently explored.

Gombrich's Core Theory of "Schema-Correction" in Art and Illusion

There is no pure realism in ancient artistic creation. Based on inherited basic schemas passed down by craftsmen from generation to generation, ancient images are partially revised according to patrons' ranks, regional customs, and stone space, and all images are constrained by invisible "Classical Rules" [9]. This theory is highly compatible with the workshop-based and modular production characteristics of Han dynasty stone reliefs. Taking kitchen paintings as the research object, this paper explores their four-layer rules of space, motif, narrative and carving, explains how Classical Rules determine the basic

schema and how regional differences lead to schema correction, constructs a complete analytical framework for the composition of kitchen schemas, and enriches the research on formal aesthetics of Han art.

Selection of Six Representative Eastern Han Kitchen Paintings as Core Research Samples

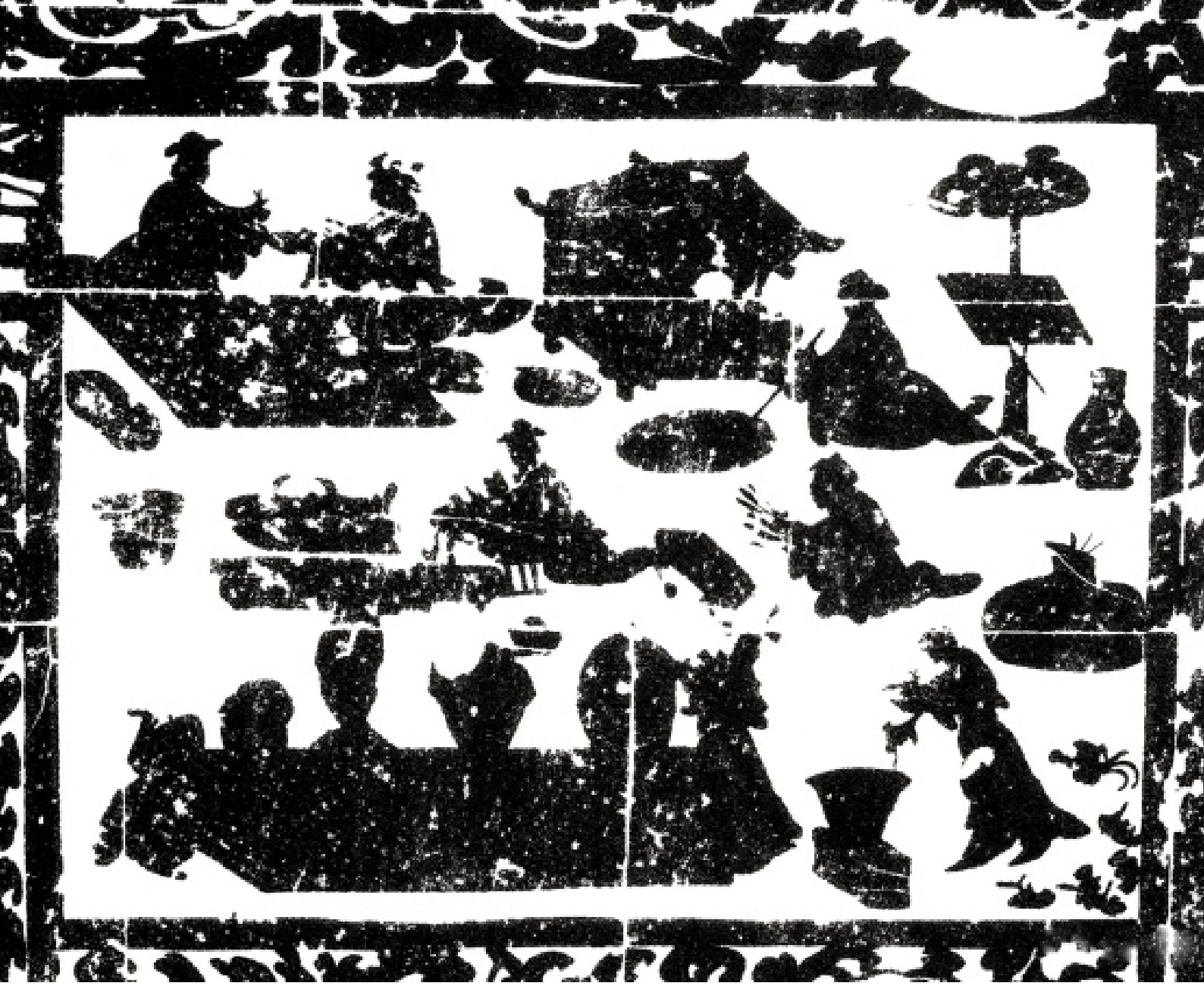
- Han dynasty stone reliefs from Qianliangtai, Zhucheng, Shandong (executed in fine line intaglio carving), depicting large-scale panoramic kitchenscenes associated with prefecture-level officials, and featuring complete sequence of roasting, cooking and wine brewing activities **(Figure 1)**.
- (2) Kitchen murals and stone reliefs of Dahuoting Tomb in Mixian, Henan (multi-layer combined banquet and kitchen scenes, composite scenes of wine brewing and food making). **(Figure 2)**.
- Kitchen paintings of small stone shrines in Songshan, Jiaxiang, Shandong (layered standard small-scale kitchen scenes, basic pattern models of Southern Shandong) **(Figure 3)**.
- Stone reliefs from Wulibao in Linyi, Shandong (specialized roasting-themed kitchen paintings with complete paradigms of roasting motifs) **(Figure 4)**.
- Stone reliefs from Hanwang Town in Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province (layered kitchen scenes of Northern Jiangsu with aquatic and terrestrial ingredient symbol systems (**Figure 5)**.
- Kitchen paintings of Wu Family Shrines in Jiaxiang, Shandong Province (simplified kitchen scenes of Confucian shrines with streamlined ritual schemas **(Figure 6)**.

The samples cover three core Han portrait areas of Shandong, Henan and Jiangsu, include three carriers of official large tombs, civilian shrines and mural tombs, and contain three forms of large panoramic paintings, small layered standard paintings and specialized roasting paintings. They can fully compare the common rules and regional corrective differences of schemas.

Definition of Core Concepts

- Classical Rules: A complete set of norms governing the creation of kitchen images. These rules comprise external formal rules (space, carving techniques) and internal content rules (motif, narrative order). They are rooted in the Confucian rituals, underworld funeral cosmology and workshop pattern inheritance traditions.
- Schema: Standardized visual modules with fixed forms and established combinational patterns that were transmitted through workshop traditions and repeatedly adopted by generations of craftsmen. These include both overall compositional schemas and individual motif schemas, such as stoves, wells, roasting furnaces, slaughtering figures, and other recurring visual elements.

Figure 1. Kitchen Paintings on Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs from Qianliangtai in Zhucheng, Shandong Province (Line drawing source: Zhang Congjun. *Thousands of Years on Stone: Clothing, Food, Housing and Transportation in Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs*. Qilu Press, July 2024, p.139). Figure provided by author.



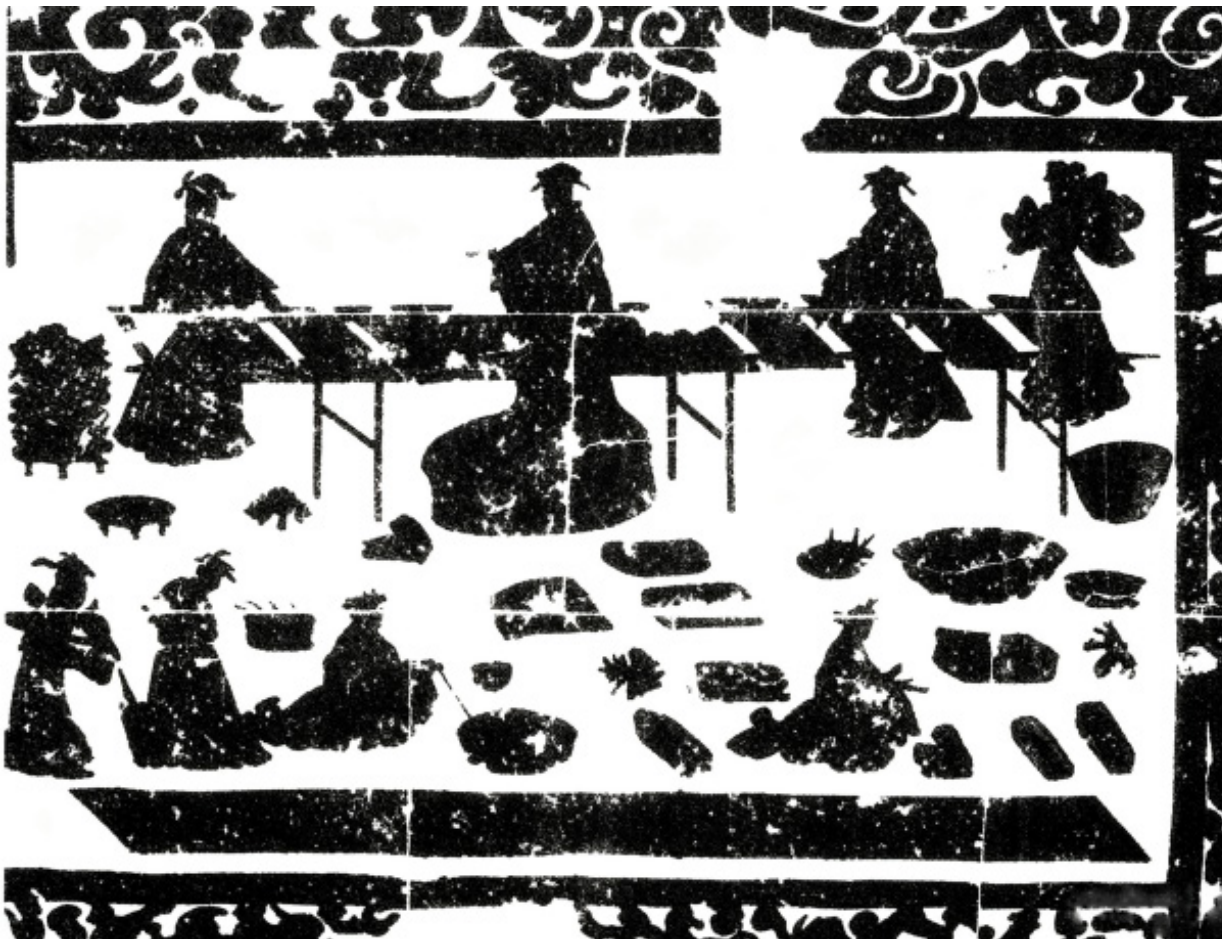


Figure 2. Kitchen Paintings from Kitchen Murals / Stone Reliefs of Dahuoting Han Tomb in Mixian, Henan Province (Image source: *Complete Collection of Chinese Han Stone Reliefs*, pp.73-74.). Figures provided by author.

Figure 3. Kitchen Paintings of Small Stone Shrine at Songshan, Jiaxiang, Shandong Province (Image source: Gu Ying. *Introduction to Han Portrait Art)*. Culture and Art Publishing House, June 2017, p.157.). Figures provided by author.

Figure 4. Kitchen Paintings on Stone Reliefs from Wulibao, Linyi, Shandong Province (Image source: Editorial Committee of *Classified Complete Works of Shandong Stone Carvings* (ed.) *Classified Complete Works of Shandong Stone Carvings Volume 7: Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs II 7.2*). Qingdao Press & Shandong Culture Audio-Video Press, April 2013, pp.226–227. Figures provided by author.

- Schema-Correction: Within Gombrich's theoretical framework, Classical Rules establish the universal foundational schema of Han dynasty kitchen imagery. Variations in tomb hierarchy, regional dietary traditions, stone dimensions, and patrons' requirements prompted craftsmen to modify this shared schema by adding, omitting, rearranging, or transforming motifs, thereby producing distinctive regional variants while preserving the underlying compositional structure.

Figure 5. Kitchen Paintings on Stone Reliefs from Hanwang Town, Xuzhou (Image source: Li Fen. *Plastic Arts of Han Dynasty Stone Carved Portraits in Xuzhou*). China University of Mining and Technology Press, November 2018, p.49.). Figures provided by author.

Figure 6. Kitchen Paintings of Wu Family Shrines in Jiaxiang, Shandong Province (Image source: Zhu Cunming. *Elegance among Folk Customs)*. SDX Joint Publishing Company, January 2019, p.327.). Figures provided by author.

1. The Four-Layer Basic Rule System of Kitchen Paintings

Derived from a civilization based on an agricultural economy, abiding by natural laws became the basic principle for ancient Chinese people to construct social order and all things. The Classical Rules not only guided farming to follow solar terms, but also dominated all social practical activities, and kitchen paintings. Thus, Han dynasty kitchen imagery became the practice carrier of the ideal underground homeland of the Han people [10]. As the underlying constraint for the generation of kitchen schemas, Classical Rules are divided into spatial layout rules, motif combination rules, narrative sequence rules, and carving technique rules. The four-layer norms jointly form the common basic framework of all kitchen images.

1.1. Spatial Layout Rules

Spatial layout rules determine the ritual spatial order of layering and partitioning. In accordance with the vertical spatial rule of "heavenly world—human world—underworld" in Han tombs and shrine images, kitchen scenes [11], as the supporting part of human sacrifice rituals, are fixedly arranged in the middle layer of the picture (chariot and horse scenes in the lower layer, immortal beasts in the upper layer), forming a universally applicable layered layout rule nationwide. The layered rules are subdivided into vertical layering, horizontal partitioning, and scattered perspective rules.

- Vertical Layering Rules. In shrine-style kitchen imagery, such as the reliefs from Songshan and the Wu Family Shrines, the composition is strictly organized into three vertical registers. The upper register depicts the celestial realm of the King Father of the East and the Queen Mother of the West, the middle register presents kitchen activities alongside music and dance performances, and the lower register portrays chariot-and-horse processions. By contrast, large independent kitchen reliefs from elite tombs, such as those at Zhucheng, omit the celestial register while retaining a clear internal vertical organization. Fresh ingredients, including fish, rabbits, and poultry, are depicted in the upper section; slaughtering, butchering, and roasting occupy the middle section; and water drawing, wine filtration, and storage vessels are arranged in the lower section [12]. This hierarchical organization corresponds to the sequential process of storage, preparation, cooking, and brewing, with the vertical spatial arrangement functioning as a visual timeline that establishes a standardized compositional convention.
- Horizontal Partitioning Rules. The horizontal picture follows the fixed order of "water source on the left, cooking stove on the right, and work in the middle." Wells, water vats and servants drawing water are regularly placed on the left side of the composition. The central area is devoted to food-processing activities, including butchering, chopping, and dough preparation, while stoves, roasting furnaces, and cooks tending the fire occupy the right side. Areas for wine filtration are typically located in the lower-left corner of the composition. Together, these recurring spatial arrangements establish a stable functional division of horizontal space that reflects the standardized organization of kitchen activities in Han dynasty imagery [13].

- Scattered Perspective Rules. All kitchen paintings uniformly adopt the unique Han scattered perspective, abandoning single-point depth vision and combining front view, top view, and side view: utensils are presented in top view to show outlines (basins, urns, tables), figures in side view to display movements, and stoves in front view to reflect structures. Fixed by craft inheritance, this perspective rule distinguishes Han kitchen paintings from later paintings, aiming to fully display all ritual food utensils and procedures, prioritizing the transmission of ritual information over visual realism [14].

1.2. Motif Combination Rules

Motifs of kitchen paintings are standardized visual modules derived from ritual demands, rather than random depictions. Fixed combined modules are formed according to the necessary process of sacrificial feasts, and are divided into four basic motif groups. All kitchen paintings are composed of combinations selected from the motif library, constituting motif rules.

- Water Drawing and Storage Motif Group: Well frames, windlasses, large water vats,shallow basins are essential water sources for cleaning and steaming ritual food, appearing in almost all kitchen paintings as standard basic motifs.
- Slaughtering and Sacrifice Motif Group: Pigs, sheep, dogs, fish, birds. The *Book of Rites* stipulates that grand sacrifices and minor sacrifices take cattle, sheep, pigs, and dogs as sacrificial animals, and the images strictly match the ritual ingredients. Southern Shandong and northern Jiangsu focus on pigs and dogs, while the central plains Dahuoting area features more cattle and sheep. These are only regional corrections with unchanged core motif categories [15].
- Cooking and Processing Motif Group: This motif group includes cutting tables, kitchen knives, large stoves,cauldrons and steaming vessels, skewers and roasting furnaces. The two roasting-themed paintings from Zhucheng and Linyi completely retain the linked motifs of "cutting meat—stringing skewers—fanning fire—roasting," forming a fixed paradigm of Han banquet roasting.
- Brewing and Storage Motif Group: This motif group includes wine filtering racks, cloth bags, fermentation pottery urns, multi-joint wine altars, corresponding to the preparation of ritual wine in township drinking ceremonies [16]. The storage altar area at the bottom left is a fixed-position motif. The rules require that at least three of the four motif groups must appear simultaneously; small civilian shrines can simplify and reduce motifs, while noble large tombs (Zhucheng prefecture-level tomb) fully include all four groups. The richness of motifs directly corresponds to the tomb owner's rank, forming a visual rule of distinguishing status by motif quantity.

The internal narrative of kitchen paintings strictly follows the linear sequence of "ingredient acquisition—slaughtering and segmentation—cooking and roasting—wine brewing and storage." This is determined by the sacrificial ritual process and cannot be reversed, forming the narrative sequence rules.

1.3. Narrative Sequence Rules

The internal narrative of kitchen paintings strictly follows the linear sequence of "ingredient acquisition—slaughtering and segmentation—cooking and roasting—wine brewing and storage," which is determined by the sacrificial ritual process and cannot be reversed.

- First narrative layer (top of the picture): Fresh and preserved meat, together with aquatic products, are suspended from racks, representing the initial stage of ingredient storage and preparation in the kitchen production sequence.
- Second narrative layer (middle of the picture): The middle register depicts animal slaughtering, meat cutting, and dough kneading, corresponding to the primary stage of food preparation and ingredient processing in the kitchen production sequence.
- Third narrative layer (right of the picture): The right register depicts stove cooking and furnace roasting, representing the stage of cooked food production and the culmination of the narrative sequence of food preparation.
- Fourth narrative layer (bottom left of the picture): The lower-left register depicts water drawing, wine filtering and utensil storage, corresponding to wine preparation and collection. The Zhucheng kitchen painting perfectly implements the sequence rules: the top is full of hanging fish, turtles, rabbits and birds. The middle register depicts numerous servants engaged in butchering meat and preparing fish, while a separate area in the upper-right section illustrates the complete roasting process. The lower-left register is devoted to wine filtration and vessel filling. Even the more simplified kitchen relief at the Wu Family Shrines preserves the same sequential organization, with ingredients displayed in the upper register, food preparation in the middle register, and storage activities in the lower register. This consistency demonstrates that narrative sequence constituted a fundamental and enduring compositional principle governing the construction of Han dynasty kitchen imagery.

1.4. Carving Technique Rules

Carving technique rules are regional fixed technical specifications. Different Han relief producing areas have formed exclusive carving norms that directly determine the line and relief texture of schemas.

- Southern Shandong (Zhucheng and Jiaxiang): Kitchen reliefs from southern Shandong are characterized by fine-line intaglio carving, in which figures, utensils, and architectural elements are rendered with uniformly incised, fluid lines. This carving technique is well suited to large-scale panoramic kitchen compositions, allowing craftsmen to depict complex scenes containing numerous figures, utensils, and sequential activities with visual clarity. It is exemplified by the stone reliefs from Zhucheng.
- Northern Jiangsu (Hanwang Town, Xuzhou: Kitchen reliefs from northern Jiangsu employ shallow relief carving, in which figures and objects are rendered in low relief with deeply incised outlines. This technique creates subtle variations in depth, enabling craftsmen to distinguish principal from secondary elements through the layered projection of figures, utensils, and food ingredients.

- Central Plains (Dahuoting, Mixian): Kitchen imagery from the Central Plains adopts techniques characteristic of tomb mural painting, combining ink outlines with red ochre and yellow ochre mineral pigments. Layered areas of colour are used to distinguish kitchen scenes from banquet scenes, creating a clear visual hierarchy within the composition. These technical conventions were transmitted through local workshop traditions, enabling craftsmen within the same region to adhere to a shared set of artistic standards. As a result, workshop inheritance served as a principal mechanism shaping the regionalization of visual schemas in Han dynasty kitchen imagery.

2. The "Standard Schema" and Regional Correction of Kitchen Painting Schemas

Based on the four-layer rules, Han craftsmen formed a universal standard kitchen pattern (basic schema), on which craftsmen in various regions made "corrections" to form differentiated regional variants, which conforms to Gombrich's "schema-correction" theory [17].

2.1. Universal Basic Standard Kitchen Schema (Jiaxiang Pattern of Southern Shandong)

The small shrine kitchen paintings of Songshan and Wu Family Shrines in Jiaxiang are the purest embodiment of universal national standard schemas. They adopt a vertical three-layer layout: a small number of hanging ingredients on the upper layer, wells and stoves arranged left and right on the middle layer with 2-3 cooks cutting and cooking, and 2-4 wine storage pottery urns at the bottom. The four motif groups are complete but streamlined in scale, with the number of figures controlled within ten. The standard intaglio carving technique of southern Shandong is adopted. This pattern is the most widely circulated, directly applied to most small and medium-sized civilian shrines in Shandong and northern Jiangsu, fully complying with the four-layer rules of space, motif, and narrative, with only minor scaling of object proportions according to stone size without structural changes [18].

2.2. Schema Correction of High-Rank Tombs

The panoramic expansion of the Qianliangtai tomb in Zhucheng is a typical case of rank-based correction. The tomb owner was a prefecture-level senior official [19], and the kitchen schema of his tomb is comprehensively expanded and corrected on the basis of the standard schema:

- Spatial Correction: The top heavenly layer is cancelled, and the entire stone surface is expanded into a full kitchen space, with vertical layers expanded from four to six and multiple parallel working areas arranged horizontally.
- Motif Correction: Complete linked roasting motifs and large-scale wine brewing procedures are added. The number of figures increases to more than forty, subdivided into more than ten types of work including water drawing, firewood chopping, meat cutting, skewer stringing, fire fanning and wine filtering.

- Narrative Correction: The roasting process is independently set as a special narrative area, highlighting the ritual connotation of noble banquet roasting.
- Technique Correction: Inheriting the intaglio rules of southern Shandong but with finer lines and enlarged object sizes to adapt to the 1.51-meter-high large stone surface. The underlying framework of Classical Rules remains unchanged, only with upgraded content scale, which is the universal correction logic of upper-class noble tombs.

2.3. Regional Custom-Based Correction

- Wulibao in Linyi (Specialized Roasting Correction): Influenced by the coastal dietary tradition of roasted foods in southeastern Shandong, this regional schema modifies the standard compositional model by reducing the emphasis on wine-brewing and large-scale slaughter motifs while placing roasting at the centre of the composition. The imagery presents the complete roasting sequence—including meat cutting, skewering, fanning the fire, and roasting over the furnace—as the dominant visual theme. Although the relative prominence of individual motifs is adjusted, the underlying spatial organization and narrative sequence remain unchanged, demonstrating that only the motif weighting within the standardized schema is modified.
- Hanwang Town in Xuzhou (Northern Jiangsu Aquatic and Terrestrial Ingredient Correction): Located in the water-rich area of northern Jiangsu, the schema greatly increases aquatic motifs such as fish and wild waterfowl, fills the top layer with aquatic products, and reduces the volume of terrestrial livestock. The carving technique is replaced with the shallow relief rule of northern Jiangsu, while the spatial layering and sequence logic still follow universal norms, with only replaced ingredient combinations.
- Dahuoting in Mixian (Central Plains Mural Ritual Correction): Adopting tomb mural carriers in the central plains, it breaks the limitation of single stone slabs, adopts a multi-layer horizontal long scroll, adds the linked schema of "kitchen—music—banquet," visually connects kitchen scenes with upper guest banquets, and strengthens the complete narrative of township drinking rituals. The carving technique is replaced with colored painting and filling, while the vertical spatial layering rules remain unified.

2.4. Simplified Correction (Civilian Shrines of Wu Family Shrines)

Constrained by the limited size of the stone surface and the financial resources of the patrons, small stone shrines such as the Wu Liang Shrine employ a strategy of deletive correction. Complex wine-brewing motifs are omitted, the number of figures is reduced, and only three core motifs—wells, stoves, and slaughtering scenes—are retained. The original three-register vertical composition is compressed into two registers, simplifying the narrative to two principal stages: meat storage and cooking. Nevertheless, the fundamental horizontal partitioning and vertical narrative sequence remain intact. This demonstrates that, despite substantial simplification, the underlying Classical Rules governing the composition of Han dynasty kitchen imagery were consistently preserved.

3. Generative Roots of Kitchen Painting Schema Rules

The four-layer rules are not spontaneous aesthetic creations of craftsmen, but jointly shaped by three forces: Confucian rituals, underworld heavenly kitchen beliefs, and workshop production modes [20].

3.1. Ritual Norms: Institutional Root of Kitchen Rules

The Book of Rites·Township Drinking Rituals and *The Book of Rites·Neize* fully stipulate the ingredients, cooking procedures and water utensils for sacrifices and banquets, and these ritual procedures are directly transformed into the spatial and sequence rules of images.

- Ritual food requires prior water cleaning, hence the fixed well frame motif on the left of images.
- Sacrifices need cattle, sheep, pigs and dogs as sacrificial offerings, establishing the standard status of slaughter motifs.
- Banquets require ritual wine, forming the fixed wine filtering and storage area at the bottom.
- Kitchen preparation precedes banquets; hence, kitchen scenes are fixedly arranged in the middle layer of tombs with guest sacrifice areas in the upper layer. The spatial layering, partitioning, and sequence of images are essentially the two-dimensional visual translation of ritual procedures, and Classical Rules are the visual presentation norms of rituals.

3.2. Underworld Heavenly Kitchen Belief: Spiritual Core of Rules

The belief of "heavenly kitchen providing food for the deceased" proposed by Jiang Sheng is the underlying spiritual demand for complete and systematic kitchen paintings. Han people believed that the souls of the deceased needed infinite delicacies provided by the heavenly kitchen in the process of underworld refinement and immortalization. Kitchen paintings are not copies of mortal kitchens, but visual symbols of the immortal heavenly kitchen. Therefore, the rules require a complete presentation of the whole kitchen process rather than a single stove scene. Even small shrines must retain the core motifs of water drawing, slaughtering and cooking to ensure sufficient dietary supply for the deceased in the underworld, and beliefs constrain the minimum standard of motif combinations.

3.3. Han Workshop Pattern Production: Material Carrier of Rules

The mature commercial workshop system of Eastern Han stone reliefs enabled craftsmen to inherit complete standard patterns including spatial, motif, and carving rules through oral teaching and hand passing, greatly reducing carving costs and realizing batch production. Workshops in different regions formed exclusive technical corrections (intaglio,

relief, mural), while noble orders expanded and enriched standard patterns, forming the production mode of "universal rules + hierarchical correction," which serves as the material basis for the cross-regional unification of the schema system [21].

4. Artistic and Historical Value of Kitchen Painting Schema Rules

4.1. Formal Aesthetic Value

The systematic analysis of the four-layer rule system of kitchen paintings proves that the Han Dynasty had formed a complete set of standardized production paradigms for narrative images, constituting an early standardized design model of Chinese narrative art [22]. The rule system followed by kitchen paintings confirms that Eastern Han craftsmen established mature and systematic visual narrative norms, which predated the brush and ink traditions of landscape and figure paintings after the Wei and Jin dynasties. The layered and orderly spatial layout, coherent linear sequence, and freely collocated modular motif combinations jointly build a logically rigorous narrative image production system. This conclusion corrects the previous cognition that Han portraits are spontaneous folk art, clarifying that Han paintings are not casual folk graffiti, but ritual art relics adhering to strict visual design rules for funeral and sacrifice purposes. It effectively fills the research gap of the formal aesthetic system of Han images in China and provides a key early case for sorting out the stylized development of ancient Chinese images.

4.2. Dietary Archaeological Value

Standardized motifs shaped by Classical Rules provide solid image support for restoring the shape of Han kitchen utensils, ingredient pedigree, and cooking procedures. Stable stylized forms of well frames, steam cauldrons, roasting furnaces, and wine filtering cloth bags can be mutually verified with unearthed archaeological relics; the complete and coherent roasting procedure motifs are important visual evidence of early roasting techniques in China. Meanwhile, the ingredient motif differences formed by regional schema corrections have high research value: images in southern and northern Shandong mostly feature dogs and pigs, the central plains are dominated by cattle and sheep, and water-rich northern Jiangsu is full of aquatic products such as fish and wild ducks, intuitively reflecting the local product resources and dietary customs of various regions and clearly presenting the regional differentiation of northern dietary culture in the Han Dynasty.

4.3. Funeral Ritual Value

The complexity and simplicity rules of kitchen painting schemas are highly bound to tomb owners' ranks, which can serve as effective visual criteria for tomb dating and identity identification. Panoramic multi-layer kitchen images with numerous figures and complete procedures are mostly unearthed from senior official tombs [23]; simplified two-layer images with only core motifs are mostly found in civilian shrines. The combined long-scroll composition of kitchen, banquet, and music scenes is basically concentrated in large noble

mural tombs. The hierarchical visual system formed by kitchen schemas expands the analytical path of traditional tomb archaeology and opens up a new research dimension for clarifying the social class structure and funeral hierarchical norms of the Han Dynasty and constructing a tomb image class identification system.

Conclusion

Through the dissection and analysis of the four-layer rules of space, motif, narrative and carving of Han kitchen paintings, this paper clarifies that Han kitchen paintings are not random sketches of real life, but standardized schema systems strictly constrained by multiple norms and with complete design logic. Among them, spatial layering and partitioning rules build the basic framework of images, dividing the visual levels of heaven, human and underworld; motif combination rules define the essential visual modules of kitchen work and distinguish tomb grades through standardized utensils and sacrificial objects; sequence rules fix the narrative order of ritual food from storage to brewing without random reversal; carving technique rules form differentiated line and relief styles inherited by regional workshops, directly distinguishing the Han portrait schools of Shandong, Henan and Jiangsu.

The whole rule system has dual underlying foundations. Externally, it relies on the teacher-inherited stone relief pattern model of the Han Dynasty to realize cross-regional popularization; internally, it is rooted in the Confucian township drinking and sacrificial rituals and the underworld immortalization belief of heavenly kitchen food supply. Based on the universal standard pattern, Han craftsmen made three types of schema corrections according to tomb owners' status, local products and stone carriers: expansion and embellishment for high-rank tombs, deletion and simplification for civilian shrines, and ingredient motif replacement for water-rich/inland regions, which fully verifies Gombrich's "schema-correction" ancient art creation theory [20].

Previous academic studies mostly interpreted the dietary and funeral connotations of kitchen images based on documents, long ignoring the independent formal rules of images themselves. Taking Classical Rules as the core framework, this paper breaks away from the single perspective of textual research, confirming that kitchen paintings are ritual art products serving underworld sacrifices and following complete visual design norms, rather than simple copies of mortal kitchens. This four-dimensional rule analytical framework has universal scalability, which can be applied to other Han painting themes such as chariot and horse, music and dance, farming to build a full-coverage schema research system. It can further explore the symbiotic relationship between Han visual design thinking and traditional ritual and music civilization.

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