

A Re-examination of the Periodization of Yuan-Dynasty Tomb Murals in China — A Case Study of the Yuan-Dynasty Mural Tomb at Xiatusijing, Xiaoyi, Shanxi

Wenze Du*

Shaanxi Normal University School of Fine Arts, Xi'an 710119, Shaanxi, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The periodization of Yuan Dynasty mural tombs in China has long been a vaguely defined area of study. In recent years, with the increase in tomb excavations, the chronological framework of Yuan mural tombs has gradually become clearer. This paper takes the Yuan Dynasty mural tomb at Xiatusijing in Xiaoyi, Shanxi, as a case study to re-examine the issue of periodization in Yuan tomb murals. By comparing existing periodization studies and analyzing the mural content, costumes, and tomb chamber features of this tomb, it is assigned to the early Yuan period. Furthermore, the paper proposes a four-stage periodization for Yuan mural tombs: the Mongol period, early Yuan, middle Yuan, and late Yuan. The conclusion emphasizes that the periodization of Yuan tomb murals must integrate multiple factors, including political changes, regional characteristics, and ethnic integration.

Keywords: Yuan Dynasty mural tombs; Periodization research; Xiatusijing Tomb; Art archaeology

Online publication:

1. Introduction

The Yuan dynasty was the first unified empire in Chinese history established under the rule of an ethnic minority. In a broad sense, the “Yuan period” includes both the era of the Mongol Empire (1206–1271) and the Yuan dynasty proper (1271–1368), spanning 163 years in total and commonly referred to as the Mongol–Yuan period. After the nomadic Mongols entered and ruled the Central Plains, they were influenced by long-standing social ideologies, political and economic systems, and funerary rituals of Central Plains culture, which in turn produced effects of ethnic and cultural integration. In particular, in funerary culture, Mongols gradually developed new concepts of mortuary ritual in the construction of tomb chambers, shifting from the earlier tradition of “no mound and no tree marking” toward the establishment of an “underground homeland”.

2. Existing periodizations of Yuan-dynasty tomb murals in china

From the long-term development of Chinese tomb murals, the Yuan dynasty represents a declining stage in which this

tradition gradually moved toward disappearance. Whether in tomb typology, richness of content, or the refinement of mural painting itself, Yuan tombs were far inferior to the flourishing scenes of the Han and Tang periods. Consequently, scholarly research on Yuan-dynasty tomb murals has remained relatively limited. Representative studies on the periodization of Yuan mural tombs include those by Zhang Xiaodong and Wang Xiaoyang. Zhang divides Mongol mural tombs of the Yuan into three phases: the Mongol Empire period (1213–1271), early Yuan (1271–1312), and late Yuan (1312–1368)^[1]. Here, 1213 corresponds to the first year of Zhenyou of the Jin dynasty, when the Jin court moved south; 1271 and 1368 correspond respectively to Kublai Khan’s adoption of the dynastic title “Great Yuan” and the fall of the Yuan. These dates reflect divisions driven by political change, whereas 1312 is based on the evolution of the Yuan “honoring the left” or “honoring the right” system, which in turn affected the placement of male and female tomb owners in mural compositions. Wang Xiaoyang, drawing on *An Examination of the Influence of Mongol Culture on Han People in the Yuan Dynasty*, proposes three stages: the first four khans (1206–1259), the reigns of Shizu and Chengzong (1260–1307), and the reigns from Wuzong to Shundi (1307–1368)^[2]. In the first stage, the Mongols rapidly occupied northern China and exerted strong influence on Han culture; in the second stage, the Mongol regime conquered the Southern Song and ruled the whole country, yet the deep accumulation of Han culture reduced Mongol influence; in the third stage, with the restoration of the civil service examinations and the decline of Yuan rule, Han cultural influence continued to deepen. Since Zhang’s periodization is limited to Mongol mural tombs, the following discussion likewise focuses mainly on Mongol mural tombs of the Yuan.

The two periodizations share similarities but also differ. Wang treats 1206, when Genghis Khan founded the Great Mongol State, as the beginning of the Mongol Empire; the choice of the starting point concerns research scope rather than the criteria of periodization. The years 1259, 1260, and 1271 are close in time and all fall around the establishment of the Yuan regime, and thus can be regarded as essentially the same turning point. The key difference lies in the boundary year: Zhang uses 1312, whereas Wang uses 1307. The 1307 roughly marking the period when Mongol cultural dominance shifted toward a weaker position^[3]. Generally speaking, due to the slow speed of information transmission in ancient times, changes in the central political power often lead to a time lag in the transformation of ordinary people’s concepts regarding marriage and funeral customs. However, using dynastic collapse as a dividing line is relatively objective in historical studies and has become a broad scholarly consensus, and it is not the focus of this paper. The present study instead focuses on the marked discrepancy between Zhang and Wang—namely, the reasons and evidence for using either 1307 or 1312 to divide early and late Yuan tomb murals. With the increasing number of Yuan mural tomb discoveries in recent years, more material evidence and samples have become available, and earlier periodizations require further expansion and reassessment.

3. Defining the period of the yuan mural tomb at xiatujing, xiaoyi, lüliang, shanxi

The periodization of Yuan tombs has long been an unavoidable difficulty in scholarship. This is not only due to the limited number of excavated Yuan tombs, but also because the Yuan period involved complex ethnic interactions, political and social contexts, and changing funerary ideologies—all of which constrain period determination. Scholars have approached this issue in multiple ways: (1) political periodization based on historical stages; (2) regional divisions that split the vast Yuan territory into three or more zones; and (3) ethnic approaches that periodize mural tombs of different groups such as Mongols or Han. While each method has its rationale, they also have limitations. Therefore, this paper synthesizes these elements, taking mural content as the primary factor, using administrative divisions as the longitudinal framework and contemporaneous Yuan tombs as the cross-sectional reference, and discussing periodization based on the overall components of the tomb chamber.

As one of the earlier excavated Yuan tombs, the Xiatujing Yuan mural tomb in Xiaoyi, Shanxi, was classified as late Yuan in earlier periodizations. It served as an important example in Zhang Xiaodong’s study distinguishing early and late Yuan tomb murals, and it occupies a key position in his argument. However, through comparative analysis with Yuan

tombs excavated in recent years, this paper argues that the Xiatujing tomb should instead be assigned to the early Yuan period. Accordingly, there remains room to discuss the standard of using 1312 as the boundary between early and late Yuan mural tombs.

At present, more than 70 mural tombs from the Mongol–Yuan period have been unearthed in China. Shanxi accounts for about one-third of the national total. This is consistent with the conclusion reached by Shi Yizhen and Wang Xiaoyang, who assessed the distribution of mural tomb sites from the Han to the Qing using current administrative divisions and found a relatively high density of Yuan tombs in Shanxi through underground density measurement and comparative analysis^[4]. The research object of this paper is the Yuan mural tomb excavated in 1959 at Xiatujing, Xiaoyi, Lüliang, Shanxi^[5].



Figure 1. the north wall of the Xiatujing Yuan mural tomb

According to the archaeological excavation report, the Xiatujing Yuan mural tomb is a hexagonal, brick-built, single-chamber tomb. Its six corners and central area were constructed in imitation of timber-frame architectural forms, and murals were painted on all six walls. The chamber faces south, with the north wall as the main wall. On it is a portrait of the tomb owners as a seated couple (**Figure 1**). From the outside inward, one first sees a rolled bamboo curtain hanging under the eaves; behind it is a canopy curtain, with additional side draperies on both sides. In the center of the mural, the couple is depicted seated upright: the male owner on the left and the female owner on the right. The male wears a black hat and black boots, dressed in a yellow round-collared robe. He sits with the left side of the robe lifted to the knee, revealing the lower leg of narrow trousers; his left hand rests on his knee while his right hand holds his belt. The female wears a black hat and black boots, dressed in a pink narrow-sleeved robe with a yellow short jacket over it, seated together with the male on a bench. Two male and two female attendants stand on both sides and behind the couple. Behind them is a screen with inscriptions, though the characters are blurred and illegible. On the northeast wall (**Figure 2 left**) and northwest wall (**Figure 2 right**), yellow tent-like canopies are painted with raised corners; behind each is a low table holding food and drink utensils such as a wine pot, small jars, bowls, cups, and ladles. On the southeast and southwest walls, a short three-legged flowerpot is painted near the northern end, with green leaves and red lotus blossoms; near the southern end, a warrior is depicted—older on the southeast wall and younger on the southwest wall. Both wear black boots and black hats, dressed in yellow round-collared robes, holding ceremonial implements and facing the tomb entrance. On the south wall, flying apsaras and chirping birds are painted on both sides of the doorway, and flying birds are painted above the door.

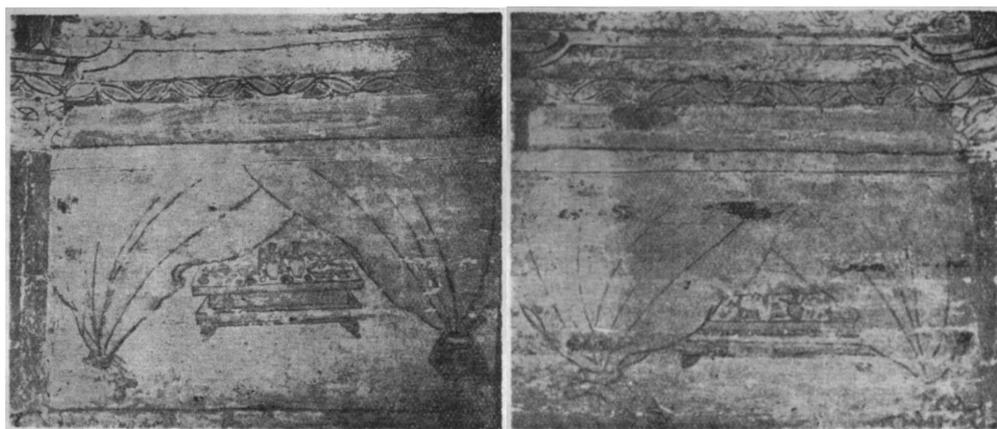


Figure 2. the northeast and northwest walls

The rolled bamboo curtain in the main-wall portrait of the tomb owners is extremely rare among Yuan mural tombs, yet it is common in Jin-dynasty tombs. Examples include the Jin tomb M5 at Fenyang, Lüliang, Shanxi^[6], the Jin mural tomb at Xiayang Village, Wenxi County, Yuncheng, Shanxi^[7], and the Jin tomb at Shangyuan, Wenxi County, Yuncheng, Shanxi^[8], all of which feature rolled bamboo curtains. The female owner's clothing is almost identical to that of the female figure in the "Seated Couple" mural on the north wall of the Yuan mural tomb at Yuanbaoshan, Chifeng, Inner Mongolia (Figure 3)^[9], both consisting of a short jacket and a narrow-sleeved robe, reflecting a typical Jin-dynasty legacy. During the rule of the Jurchen in the Jin dynasty, there were policies such as "prohibiting the people from wearing Han clothing, and ordering hair shaving; those who did not comply were executed"^[10], which forced many Han people in the north to imitate Jurchen or Mongol braided hairstyles and "barbarian" dress. After the establishment of the Yuan, such coercive policies no longer existed as in the Jin. In addition, the footwear of the male owner is highly similar in both tomb murals, though the positions of the male and female figures differ. In the Xiatujing mural, the couple is seated with the male on the left and the female on the right. According to Zhang Xiaodong's periodization, tombs with the male owner on the left should date after 1325, i.e., the late Yuan period. Yet the Yuanbaoshan mural tomb in Chifeng is considered early Yuan. Another tomb excavated at the same time as the Xiatujing tomb is the Liangjiazhuang Yuan tomb, where a land-purchase deed dated to the first year of Dade (1297) was found. Archaeologists inferred that the two tombs share similar styles and were likely contemporaneous; Wang Xiaoyang also classified the Xiatujing tomb as early Yuan.



墓主人对坐图 幅宽2.43、高0.94米
内蒙古赤峰市元宝山元墓壁画

Figure 3. the north wall of the Yuan mural tomb at Yuanbaoshan, Chifeng, Inner Mongolia

In Xue Yuxiao's article "*A Study on the 'Kai Fang Yan' (Banquet) Imagery in Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan Tombs*"^[11], the characteristics of seated-couple murals from the late Jin to early Yuan in this region are summarized as follows. In terms of furniture and objects, there appear square tables with curved legs and round-backed chairs, with simplified tabletop arrangements. Bamboo curtains are frequently hung, while canopy curtains are rare and screens are basically absent. In terms of figures and dress, the male owner generally wears a footless futou cap and a round-collared robe tied with a belt. The female owner generally has a high bun and wears a narrow-sleeved, front-opening long garment with Jurchen features, sitting sideways with sleeves folded. One male servant and one female servant stand behind the male and female owners respectively, dressed similarly to the tomb owners. Although the banquet scene at Xiatujing largely matches these late Jin-early Yuan features, two notable differences cannot be ignored: the presence of a screen in the tomb and the absence of a table, which was common in this period. In late Yuan tombs, the table between the tomb owners is often omitted, and screens become common furniture elements; however, late Yuan male owners more often wear round, wide-brimmed hats and are less frequently depicted in round-collared robes.

From a regional perspective, Shanxi was under Jin rule for more than a century. Jin Dynasty tomb murals draw from three distinct traditions: the Northern Song, Liao, and Jin. In the Central Plains, Jin tombs often display features of former Northern Song territory, typically using single-chamber tombs with imitation timber structures, and with hexagonal or octagonal plans being most common. Shanxi, where many Yuan tombs have been excavated, was an important gathering place for Han people during the Jin. The Xiatujing Yuan tomb retains Jin-dynasty legacies in tomb form, mural content, and stylistic features, yet it also contains some stylistic traits typical of late Yuan tombs, such as the screen. Therefore, it is inferred that its construction date is slightly later than the late Jin-early Yuan transition, but does not exceed the early Yuan period. Accordingly, the archaeological speculation that it may date around 1297 should be close to its actual time. The difference in the placement of the male and female tomb owners compared with contemporaneous tombs may also reflect the influence of Jin-era conventions. For example, the Yuan mural tomb at Hongyu Village, Xing County, Shanxi, has a clear construction date of 1309. Although the tomb owners were Han and thus do not meet Zhang Xiaodong's criteria for Mongol tomb periodization, the high similarity between the two tombs in dress, objects, owner placement, form, and region cannot be ignored; in both cases, the couple is depicted with the male on the left and the female on the right. This indicates that although the placement of male and female figures is closely related to the "honoring left/right" ritual system of the period, it cannot serve as a decisive criterion on its own.

4. Re-periodizing Yuan-dynasty tomb murals

Yuan tomb murals generally present two stylistic categories: (1) "distinctly Han-style" murals, and (2) "minority styles integrated with Han traditions". The former often features local religious themes or mural programs expressing reclusion and attachment to landscapes, whereas the latter reflects an increasing degree of Sinicization over time. In periodization studies, Zhang Xiaodong treats ethnic affiliation as a prerequisite and distinguishes Mongol tomb periodization from Han tomb periodization, while Wang Xiaoyang proposes a unified periodization for Yuan mural tombs. This paper supports a unified periodization regardless of ethnic affiliation: on the one hand, Yuan Dynasty culture learned from Han culture; on the other hand, intermarriage between Mongols and Han also contributed to the integrated style seen in the latter category. In current classifications of Yuan mural tomb ethnicity, scholars generally divide tombs into Han and Mongol types. However, Yuan institutions clearly indicate the existence of other minority groups such as the "Semuren" (Central and West Asian peoples), meaning that ethnic classification still requires multi-dimensional investigation and judgment.

Regarding the periodization of Yuan tomb murals, Qin Dashu proposed in studies of Yuan tombs that Yuan funerary culture can be divided into three phases: the Mongol period, the founding of the Yuan, and the fall of the Yuan, which is broadly consistent with earlier studies of Yuan mural tombs. Yet for the transitional division between the founding and the fall of the Yuan, Qin placed it between the Zhida and Yanyou reign periods (1308–1320) due to differing regional development processes^[12]. With the continuous discovery of Yuan mural tombs in recent years, the number of tombs

dating to this transitional phase has increased, such as the Xiatujing Yuan tomb in Xiaoyi (1297), the Tuanli Village Yuan mural tomb in Miyun County, Beijing (1309), and the Hongyu Village Yuan mural tomb in Xing County, Shanxi (1309). This group of tombs combines regional legacies from previous dynasties while also demonstrating the distinctive vitality of Yuan funerary art. It presents a mature, integrated style of ethnic fusion that differs from the early Yuan, and it is also distinct from the decline seen in the late Yuan, representing a peak stage in the development of Yuan tomb murals. Therefore, this paper proposes a more refined periodization building on previous scholarship, dividing Yuan mural tombs into four phases: the Mongol period (1206–1271), early Yuan (1271–1308), middle Yuan (1308–1320), and late Yuan (1320–1368).

The political, cultural, and social development of the Yuan dynasty unfolded within a long-term complex environment, resulting in tomb mural styles shaped by a mixture of contemporary society, historical legacies, and ethnic integration. Consequently, in determining the periodization of Yuan tomb murals, one should not rely on a single criterion. Instead, the tomb chamber should be situated within its regional historical context, and objects in the murals that embody period style should be compared longitudinally in order to reach a comprehensive judgment on the period of Yuan mural tombs.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Zhang XD, 2011, A Periodization of Mongol Mural Tombs in the Mongol–Yuan Period. *Huaxia Archaeology*, (02): 106–113.
- [2] Wang X, 2018, *A Historical Study of Chinese Tomb Chamber Murals*. Science Press, 279–298.
- [3] Li ZA, 2009, A Study on the Influence of Mongol Culture on the Han Chinese in the Yuan Dynasty. *Historical Research*, (01): 24–50 + 190.
- [4] Shi Y, Wang X, 2023, A Spatial Study of the Relics of Chinese Tomb Murals. *Religions*, 14: 166.
- [5] Xie XG, 1960, Preliminary Report on the Excavation of Jin- and Yuan-Dynasty Tombs at Xiatujing and Liangjiazhuang, Xiaoyi, Shanxi. *Archaeology*, (07): 57–61 + 11–15.
- [6] Ma S, Duan PT, Wang J, et al., 1991, Preliminary Report on the Excavation of a Jin-Dynasty Tomb in Fenyang, Shanxi. *Cultural Relics*, (12): 16–32 + 103–105.
- [7] Yang FD, 1986, Jin-Dynasty Brick-Carved and Mural Tombs in Wenxi County, Shanxi Province. *Cultural Relics*, (12): 36–46 + 105–106.
- [8] Xu GJ, 2012, *Complete Collection of Unearthed Chinese Murals, Vol. 2: Shanxi*. Science Press, 191.
- [9] Xiang CS, 1983, A Yuan-Dynasty Mural Tomb at Yuanbaoshan, Chifeng City, Inner Mongolia. *Cultural Relics*, (04): 40–46 + 97 + 102.
- [10] Li XC, 1988, *Chronological Record of Events since the Jianyan Reign, Vol. 28*. Zhonghua Book Company, 560.
- [11] Xue YX, 2007, A Study of the “Kaifang Banquet” Motif in Tombs of the Song, Liao, Jin, and Yuan Periods (Doctoral dissertation, Sichuan University), 40–48.
- [12] Qin DS, 2004, *Archaeology of the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties*. Cultural Relics Press, 226–227.

Publisher's note

Whoice Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.