

Article

The Screen in Fresco Paintings: A Study of the ‘Screen-Style Frescoes’ in the Temples of Gaoping County in China

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Abstract: Screen-style frescoes, found in the temples of Gaoping County, Shanxi Province, China, and originating mostly from the Qing Dynasty, present a unique painting form. Folk artists not only painted the screen, a common object in everyday life in ancient China, on the wall surfaces, but also created a variety of paintings inside the screen panels, whereby the viewer sees a painting within a painting. This article, based on multiple field trips, aims to analyze screen-style frescoes in terms of their locations, styles, and unique artistic characteristics such as subject matter, color usage, and brushwork. By studying the influence of literati paintings from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the author also reveals the aesthetic transition from religious scenes to secular life as presented in the temple frescoes in ancient Gaoping County.

Keywords: screens in fresco paintings; screen-style frescoes; temples in Gaoping County; painting form; literati painting; secularization

1. Introduction

The screen, as a common type of furniture and architectural element in ancient China, serves the multiple purposes of shielding from the wind; partitioning interior spaces, most often to create privacy; and functioning as both a painting medium and a decorative artwork (Wu 2009). Mural paintings of the screen have been primarily found in tomb chambers and grottoes dating back to the Han Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, and the period of Northern and Southern dynasties in China. They have been mainly studied in the context of tomb frescoes, grotto frescoes, and as artifacts considered in terms of their images, symbolic meanings and styles. Attention has also been given to the sources of style, structural characteristics, and the subject matter of the paintings that decorate such screens. Little attention has been paid, however, to mural paintings depicting screens on temple walls (Qiu 2012).

This article is the result of multiple field trips to Gaoping County, Shanxi Province, during 2013–2014 to study the mural paintings of screens on the region’s temple walls. Careful evaluation of these murals reveals that the area has a large number of high-quality, well preserved paintings of the screen characterized by a wide variety of painting styles and subject matter. A map of the temples in the region is given in Figure 1. This article, based on a comprehensive study of these paintings, aims to unveil their content, philosophical background, and artistic characteristics and lay the foundation for future studies.

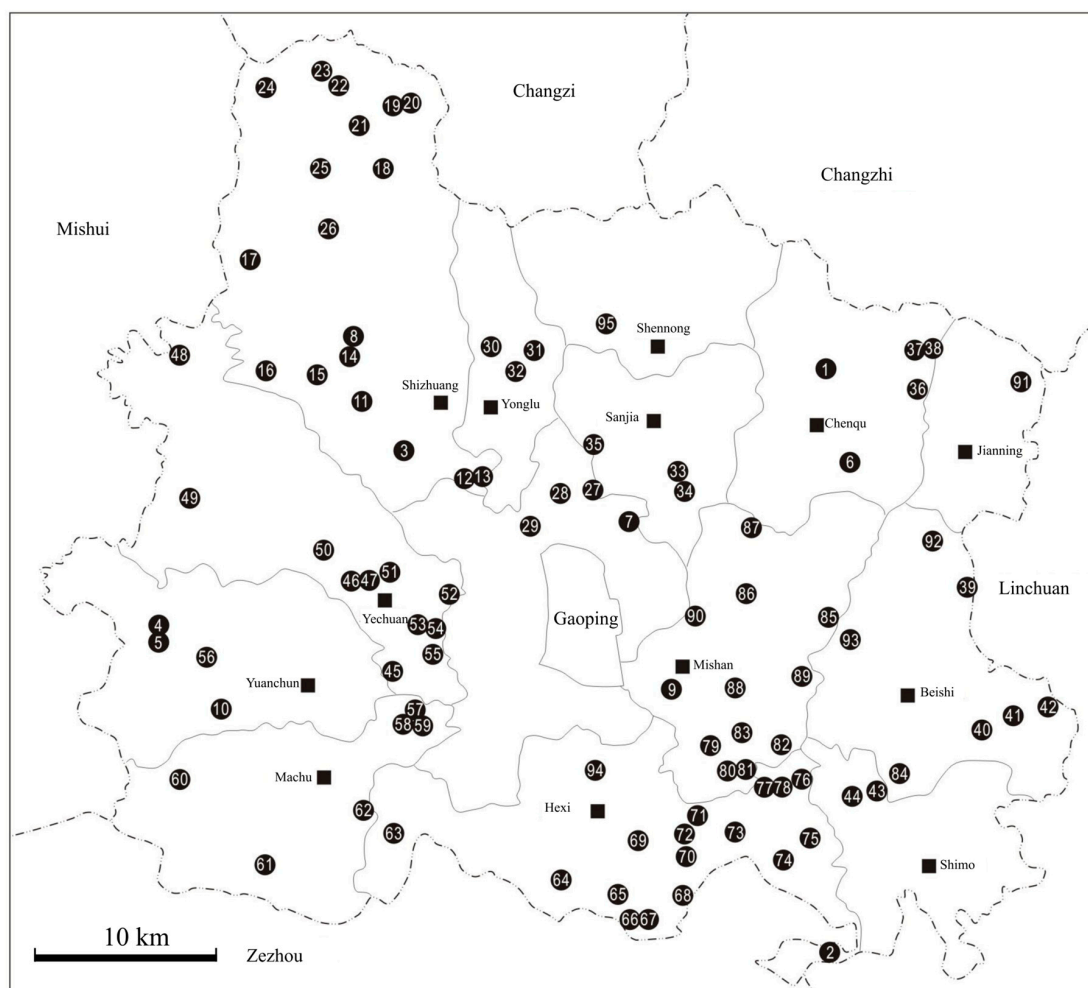


Figure 1. A distribution map of the extant frescoes in the temples of Gaoping County.

Tomb and grotto frescoes differ from county primarily in their object of painting: they take the screen itself as their depicted object, and feature realistic depictions of the entire screen on the walls, including its frame and panel paintings. Realistic treatments of the screen's panel structure and style, picture content on screen panels, spatial position, and perspectival relations in combination with the spatial arrangement of actual temple statues—which are often found in front of these paintings—present the viewer with the illusion that the mural paintings are real screens. For the purpose of this article, the author would like to group such paintings, located in the Gaoping area, under the name 'screen-style frescoes'. By delineating realistic paintings of the screen on wall surfaces and incorporating its spatial relations to the temple architecture and statues, painters of such screen-style frescoes successfully create a unique painting form based on visual translation.

2. Current State of the Extant Screen-Style Frescoes

With the exception of two works identified as from the Ming Dynasty, almost all the frescoes date back to the Qing Dynasty. More specifically, their dates of origin span from 1596 in the late Ming Dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, with the highest amount created during the reigns of Emperors Qianlong (1735–1796) and Daoguang (1820–1850).

The screen-style frescoes are widely found in many Buddhist and Daoist temples in Gaoping County. In large temples, they appear in the main hall, the wings, and the side hall, whereas in small temples they are often seen in only the main hall.

The position of the walls often determines the types of screens painted on their surfaces. While the seated screen often appears on side walls, the folding screen and the hanging screen tend to show up on the back wall of the temple halls. To be more specific, the folding screen shaped like a staple is painted on the back wall, along with one to two panels on each of the side walls (Figure 2). The hanging screen, shaped as a straight line, is found on either the back wall or in an equal number of panels on each of the two side walls (Figure 3). The folding screen is frequently found on the back wall in the shape of a wave (Figure 4). The seated screen is usually painted on either the back wall or the side walls (Figure 5).



Figure 2. Part of 12-panel folding screen, within the green dashed lines, in the Guandi Temple in Ducun Village, Hexi Town (No. 64 in Figure 1).



Figure 3. Hanging screen depicting ladys in the Xianggu Temple in Shangdongfeng Village (No. 51 in Figure 1).



Figure 4. A folding screen painted on the back wall of the west wing of Xuanwu Temple in Xilimen Village, Hexi Town (No. 67 in Figure 1).



Figure 5. A single-panel seated screen in the Guandi Temple in Hedong Village, Mishan Town (No. 84 in Figure 1).

The screen-style frescoes account for 57.8% of all the mural paintings discovered in Gaoping so far. This ratio is between screen-style frescoes and all frescoes discovered so far. As the ineligible screen-style frescoes are not counted, screen-style frescoes actually account for a larger percentage of all frescoes. They represent almost all of the styles of real screens originating from that historical period, including the seated screen, folding screen, and hanging screen. The number of screen panels among the various works are 1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16. Of all the screen-style frescoes, the largest group consists of the 12-panel folding screens, while the second largest group comprises even-numbered-panel folding and hanging screens. The number of seated screens is relatively small.

The screen-style frescoes in Gaoping temples focus on the screen as their depicted object. The screen, besides being a piece of furniture, is itself a medium of painting by providing the painter with an ideal surface. Moreover, the screen has also served as a subject of painting, and is in fact among the most popular images presented in paintings since the beginning of the Chinese art history. In traditional Chinese paintings that incorporate the screen as part of the picture, artists not only vary the screen styles in accordance with the specific spatial environment in which their characters are found, but also take the depicted screen itself as an important painting surface by portraying subjects that fit in with the whole picture. A large quantity of Chinese paintings featuring the screen that came from almost every dynasty have survived (Liu 2011) (Figures 6 and 7). In addition to its physical functionality, the screen in such paintings constitutes both a medium of painting and an object of representation. The image of the screen featured in the screen-style frescoes in Gaoping temples serves the dual purpose of being both the object and medium of painting as well.



Figure 6. Zhou Wenju (Five Dynasties) *Playing Chess beside Double Screen*. Ink and colors on silk. (70.5 × 40.3 cm) Palace Museum Collection, Beijing.



Figure 7. Ding Guanpeng (Qing Dynasty). *Emperor Qianlong Appreciating Antiques in front of His Own Portrait*. Ink and colors on silk. (76.5 × 147.2 cm). Palace Museum Collection, Beijing.

As the primary object portrayed in these frescoes, the screen alludes to the wall, which functions as the medium of mural paintings, in that both the wall and the screen function as not only a utilitarian architectural element but also a medium of painting. That is to say, in these screen-style frescoes, the screen, as the depicted object, serves as a mirror image or metaphor of the wall, which is the medium on which the screen is represented. In its role as the medium of painting in these frescoes, the screen, with the pictures painted on its panel(s), refers to the statue placed in front of it to present the viewer with meanings reflecting their thoughts and emotions, as the paintings on the screen itself are often purposefully created to associate with the statue. Given that the religious statue is itself an integral part of a Buddhist or Daoist temple structure, the architectural relationship between the screen and the statue amounts to a third aspect of the spatiality of the screen painted in these frescoes, aside from being an architectural element itself and its relationship with the wall.

3. The Method of Painting

In terms of the subject matter, these screen-style frescoes abandoned the traditional Buddhist and Daoist religious themes, and embraced secular subject matter characterized by *imagery intended to convey meaning, and meaning intended to be of good fortune*. By adopting a wide range of secular symbolisms, metaphors, and puns, these frescoes present the viewer with lively, bright, and beloved pictures representing secular life and folk traditions. Their subject matter includes three main categories. The first category focuses on portrait painting, featuring people with different occupations (the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer, and the scholar), literati in gatherings, and mythological characters. The second category is flower-and-bird paintings, which feature the 'Three Friends of Winter' (the pine, bamboo, and plum) and flowers from the four seasons. In this category, auspicious patterns are also often seen, such as two magpies perched on a plum tree and bamboo branches, or a couple of mandarin ducks swimming around lotus flowers, or a phoenix bird playing among peony flowers, and egrets alighted on lotus flowers. Last but not the least, mountains and water paintings often feature landscapes from the four seasons and hermits dwelling among mountains and rivers (Figure 8).



Figure 8. A folding screen depicting human figures, mountains and rivers, and flower and bird in the Yandi Temple in Jiaohu Village, Hexi Town (No. 60 in Figure 1).

Painters of these frescoes displayed mastery of the brush and ink. Through variation in their approaches, both free-style paintings with broad strokes and realistic paintings with the fine brush were created. These fresco paintings also bespeak a pervasive influence by literati paintings in terms of line arrangements and brush stroke techniques, including horizontal coloring, different methods of applying washes, the texturing technique, dotting, and the non-outline method. The brushes were executed in a brisk and free manner. A combination of straight and curved lines was used. For example, human figures are effectively presented with vivid features and distinct manners fitting their stories and personalities: they appear in domestic settings with a table or a curio shelf in the background, or in outdoor surroundings such as a building or natural scenery. The frescoes also demonstrate the painters' attention to detail, with subtle parts of the figures or primary subjects meticulously treated, for instance, the folds of clothes on a human figure are deftly handled to show layers. With respect to the composition of the paintings, the frescoes also display influence from the literati paintings in the use of blank space, poetry lines, and ink stamps to imitate the latter's integration of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and stamps within a work of painting.

In the aspect of color, colors derived from natural mineral pigments were used, such as ink black, azurite blue, mineral green, ocher, and burnt sienna. Ink and wash were mostly used in painting landscapes, whereas the color scheme of blue and green were employed in the frescoes' frame decoration. The frescoes are framed on their four sides with more curly grass patterns than flower clusters. Through the use of geometrical shapes, well-trimmed decoration patterns, and bright colors, the frame design of the frescoes resembles that of religious paintings while differing greatly from royal frescoes created by court painters (Zhu 2014).

The painters of the Gaoping temple frescoes varied in their painting skills. While the high-quality paintings are comparable to court-style or un-outlined ink-and-wash paintings, the low-quality paintings betray underdeveloped skills and hasty work, reflecting a kind of casualness often characteristic of works done by folk painters. Nevertheless, the very lack of deliberate elaboration, a trait observed of these frescoes in general, leaves these paintings with the artistic merit of excelling in natural beauty, which is an aesthetic ideal in traditional Chinese art. As exemplified by lotus flowers in one Chinese poem: growing out of clear water and rid of any decoration, the lotus flower stuns with its natural form (Peng 1986, p. 400). Such rough-hewn beauty displayed by the fresco paintings, resembling that achieved on Xuan paper, a kind of rice paper traditionally used in Chinese art, further demonstrates the impact of literati paintings that were widely practiced during Ming and Qing Dynasties (Figure 9).



Figure 9. An ink-and-wash seated screen in the East Temple in the Dongjinzhai Village, Shimo Town (No. 36 in Figure 1).

4. Historical Factors in the Production of the Screen-Style Frescoes in Gaoping Temples

By the Qing Dynasty, mural paintings had already fallen into decline. A large number of folk painters took over the task of producing mural paintings on the Buddhist and Daoist temple walls in remote towns and villages. Mostly from the lower class, some of these painters showed insufficient cultural education. For example, wrong characters appear in the ink inscriptions of some frescoes, like the lines “Li Bai loves goose; Yu Boya *searches for* (plays) the peptachord; Su Dongpo likes *copper* (the phoenix tree); Wu Daozi paints the dragon” inscribed on one fresco (Words in italics here stand for the wrong characters used, whereas words in parentheses are the correct ones that should have been used). Anyone with a rudimentary education would not write household names like Li Bai and Wu Daozi incorrectly: wrong homonyms were used in their names. However, such errors did not hold back the painters from delivering works of art.

Grounded at lower social levels, the folk artists differed from court painters as well as literati painters. Court painters, tasked with presenting the grand achievements and luxurious life styles of the emperor and his renowned generals and ministers, had to submit their individual personality and aesthetic interest to the constraints of their job, which was serving a fixed group of audience. By employing the most finely made art supplies and elaborating on every detail in a careful and neat manner, court painters tended to create works possessed with strong visual effect, often characterized by resplendence. Folk painters, at the other end of the spectrum, were more concerned with expressing the ordinary people’s thoughts and feelings. By borrowing their subject matter from popular literature, folk traditions, historical events, local customs and practices, and integrating techniques of traditional folk art—such as wood engravings, paper cutting, and shadow play—folk painters proved to be more versatile and flexible in terms of the content and style of their artistic representation. As a result, their paintings are more closely related to secular life.

The influence of wide-spread literati paintings during Ming and Qing Dynasties, on the other hand, refined the folk painters’ aesthetic sensibility and equipped them with more means of artistic expression, and, consequently, the mural paintings at the latter’s hands are enriched with literary allusions, aesthetic theories, and modes of representation characteristic of literati paintings. Literati painters during the Qing Dynasty depicted a wide range of subject matter, and their works—whether portraying human figures, landscapes, flowers and birds, or folk traditions—display ingenious conception and flexible use of the brush and ink. Moreover, their paintings often present a fresh and bright style and appealed to by both the high- and lowbrows ([Brown 2014](#)). Among literati painters, the ‘Four Wangs’ of early Qing Dynasty (four painters named Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Yuanqi, and Wang Hui) were highly esteemed by the ruling class. Their style of painting exerted strong impact on popular arts as well, and pushed folk painters to switch to new subject matter and ways of representation. In addition, the influence of literati paintings on screen-style frescoes also comes from the fact that some lower-level literati painters, when in financial strains, took on jobs of painting such frescoes themselves to supplement their income earned from selling paper or silk paintings. As the general economic boom during the early Qing Dynasty created a high consumer demand for paintings, these literati painters often worked with haste on fresco paintings. However, their highly-skilled techniques and stereotypical styles set a higher standard for folk painters and helped improve the overall quality of fresco paintings ([Cahill 2012](#)). As a result, folk artists broke away from the previous mainstream of producing religion-related fresco paintings restrained by rigid modes of painting, exclusive use of bright colors, and narrow choices of subject matter, and turned to creating paintings more varied in content and style. That is to say, following the changed tide of the mass aesthetic interest, folk artists accomplished their artistic transition from the astringency of the craftsman to the free-hand style of literati painters.

Another factor contributing to the stylistic features of the screen-style frescoes lies in the mimicry of the physical screen and the hanging scroll format. The screen-style frescoes were painted on temple walls in imitation of the real screen in terms of the location, number of panels, frame measurements and style, and decorative paintings on screen panels. Screen-style frescoes offer an effective solution to

the problems that come with real screens, such as vulnerability to fire and physical damage, high cost, and the use of space. Moreover, those placed in front of the religious altars and statues create an illusion of the real screen by replacing the latter's place as a decorative or explanatory background scene.

There are many other examples of the trompe l'oeil effect, which is more common in mural paintings in the West than in China, achieved by these screen-style frescoes. For instance, paintings of four- or six-panel folding screens simulate the perspectival relationships of those real screens when partially folded (Figure 10). Paintings of the staple-shaped screen utilize the two side walls, which are vertical to the main wall and each painted with a single panel or a set of screen, to add the physical third dimension and thereby the semblance of the real screen. The exactness of the frescoes' replication of real screens is corroborated by artifacts of the latter, such as the two 12-panel antique screens located in the front- and backyard playhouses of the Chengtang Temple in the Kangying Village of the town of Macun. Those two screens share the same measurements and ratio, spatial arrangement, and painting techniques as paintings of such screens on temple walls (Figure 11). Another example that illustrates the painters' meticulous effort to reproduce a real screen is the deliberate portrayal of the hooks on top of hanging scrolls and the hinges of folding screens on the frescoes.

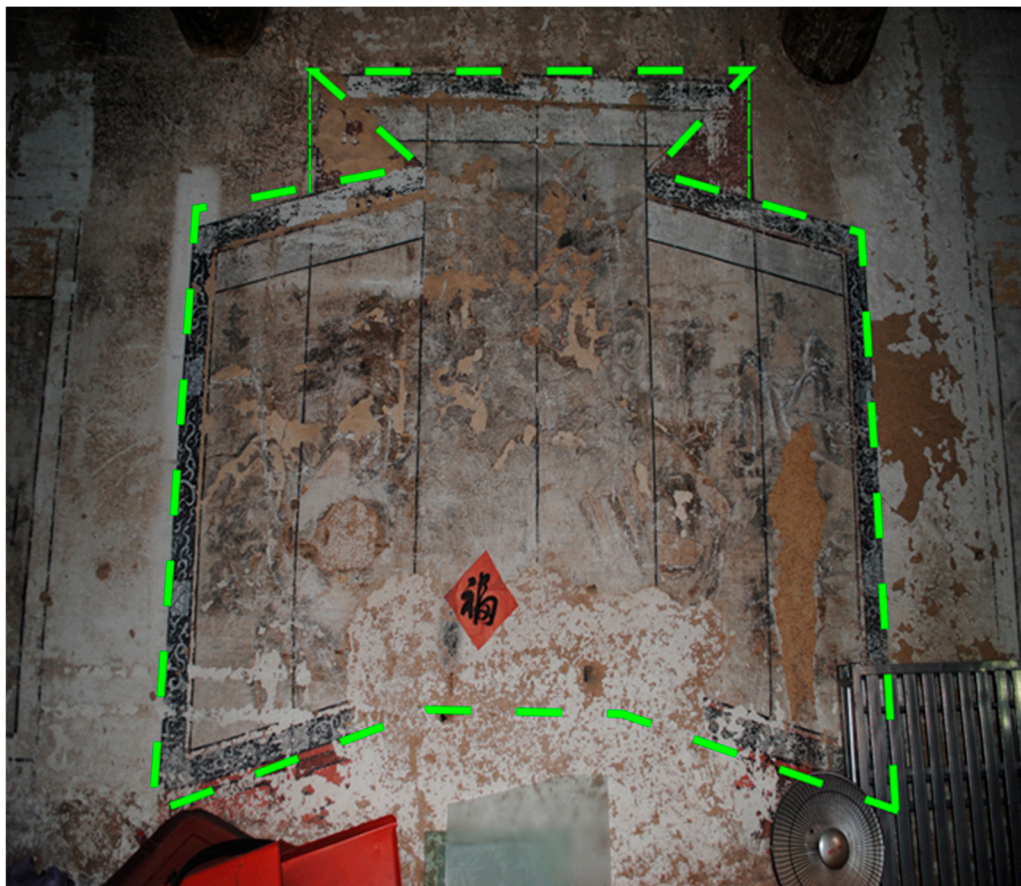


Figure 10. A 6-screen folding screen in Guandi Temple in the Nanyang Village, Yechuan Town (No. 44 in Figure 1).



Figure 11. A screen relic in the backyard playhouse of the Chengtang Temple in the Kangying Village, Macun Town (No. 55 in Figure 1).

5. Conclusions

Screen-style frescoes in the temples of Gaoping County epitomize the secularization of Qing-Dynasty mural paintings due to its large quantity, pervasive presence, good artistic value, as well as the variety of its subject matter and modes of representation. The screen-style frescoes in Gaoping temples achieve the trompe l'oeil effect by creating paintings (those depicted on screen panels) within a painting (the overall screen structure). However, they differ from traditional Western mural paintings in the painting techniques used. Western mural paintings accomplished the optical illusion of real objects or scenes by strictly adhering to perspective drawing methods and utilizing color, light, and shadow gradients (Duvernoy and Mele 2017). For example, in Leonardo da Vinci's famous mural painting, *The Last Supper*, the principles of perspective drawing were utilized to position Jesus' head at the painting's focal point, which is further extended to what lies beyond the window behind Jesus. The use of light and shadow gradients leads the viewer to both take in the supper scene at the foreground and dwell on the distant. Such painting methods create in the viewer the visual and psychological illusion that he or she is partaking of the supper together with Jesus and his disciples. The screen-style frescoes in Gaoping temples, however, do not rely heavily on perspectival relations, as every screen panel in the frescoes presents an individual picture; moreover, colors were applied evenly, with no use of light and shadow gradients. The screen featured in the frescoes look like real screens in terms of positions, panel number, measurements, styles, and decoration. Under the influence of literati paintings, folk painters found freedom in searching for secular content and forms to express their individual aesthetic values. The imitation of artworks like scrolled paintings and real screens, commonly seen in everyday life, registers the architectural and aesthetic features of village temples in the southeastern part of Shanxin Province during Qing Dynasty. The screen-style frescoes made in that period played the role of conveying various aspects of the secular life—including trends of social thoughts, arts, and folk customs—rather than functioning as a channel for delivering religious messages.

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