

# A Historical Perspective: A Case Study of The Night Revels of Han Xizai

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### Abstract:

This research focuses on the expressions and actions of Han Xizai, the protagonist of the famous painting *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*, from the details to the skills of the author, finding the aesthetic value behind them. The process of making comparison between Chinese court paintings and Western's gives references to study the art history and cultural differences. The literature analysis method is used to find and read relevant information, helping this paper further dig out the subtle meanings of this painting. How the artist conveyed instructions to audiences and how it shows imparity towards other court paintings are conducive in this research; The ultimate goal of this study is to give a refined analysis and shed light on the informative story in the court painting. To achieve the objective, this paper will carry out comments from scholars and critics, as well as unique perspectives from the researcher's own.

**Keywords:** History; art; court life; political painting.

## 1. Introduction

*The Night Revels of Han Xizai* is a world-famous painting by Gu Hongzhong. In general, it is not only a direct record of the luxurious life of a court member, but also a reflection of the social mentality and cultural background of the late Southern Tang Dynasty. The color is beautiful and elegant, rich in layers, and full of charm. With rigorous composition, vivid figure modeling, and smooth lines, this painting shows the unique style of figure painting of the Five

Dynasties, making it renowned as one of the most successful and famous works in the history of Chinese painting [1].

Gu Hongzhong, an ancient Chinese court painter who was good at portrait painting, also painted a portrait of Li Yu (the last emperor of the Southern Tang Dynasty), *Tour to Mount Yin*, and *Snow Village*. His portrait can be seen in Figure 1, shown as a cross-handed man observing the whole banquet. His representative skills include the use of the pen's strength and turn, flourishing color, and tracing expressions [2].



**Fig. 1 A potrait of Gu Hongzhong from The Night Revels of Han Xizai**

The painting *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* is 335.5 cm\*28.7 cm, created in the 10th century in the Southern Tang Dynasty of China, and now preserved in the Palace Museum. The whole painting is presented in Figure 2.



**Fig. 2 The Night Revels of Han Xizai**

To put the influential artwork in a longitudinal context, the copy was collected by the inner government in the Southern Song Dynasty and was once again preserved in the Yonggan period of the Qing Dynasty. The last emperor of China, Puyi, took it out when he was expelled from the palace, and it returned to the folk after World War II. Later, it was bought by contemporary painter Zhang Daqian and cherished. He then took the painting back to Hong Kong and transferred it to the mainland at a very low price, so that the treasure returned to the Forbidden City.

## 2. Analysis

Generally, the painting could be divided into five parts: lute solo, dance solo, rest between the banquet, wind ensemble, and guest engagement, shown in order from Figure 3 to Figure 7. Those five independent but also interrelated fragments of the scroll show the painter's profound and superb painting skills in shape, brush, color, and so on. This delicate painting on silk was created in the manner of traditional Chinese paintings, yet in the subject and character matter, Gu's refined technique of linking different times and locations is of great contemporary significance.



Fig. 3 Lute solo



Fig. 4 Dance solo



Fig. 5 The rest between the banquet



**Fig. 6** Wind ensemble



**Fig. 7** Guest engagement

Firstly, the story behind the creation of this extraordinarily long and informative painting is of great importance for understanding the painting, though many may have been familiar with it. The protagonist, Han, who was intelligent with a good reputation, suffered his father's death and fled to Yang Wu, one of the regimes in the southern part of China in his early years [3]. He was elbowed out and expelled because of the battle between political parties then [4]. Off court as a gifted poet, he was knowledgeable, also proficient in music, and good at painting and calligra-

phy [5]. It's worth mentioning that despite the convoluted relationship between political parties, Han did contribute to politics then, making an effort to improve the old rules and regulations of the Southern Tang Dynasty and the currency reform in the later period. At the critical moment of the restoration of the Central Plains to the northern part of the Southern Tang Dynasty, he evaluated the situation well and presented memorials to the emperor twice, both showing unique political vision and of great use [6].



**Fig. 8 Portraits of Han Xizai (left) and Li Yu (right)**

It had been several years since the new emperor Li Yu went on stage. Figure 8 provides portraits of Han Xizai and the royal master then, Li Yu. Li Yu credited Han's ability and recognized his talent, however, concerned about his menace as well. Li was suspicious of northern ministers and officers since the historical period then, also known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, was intricate and Li's country was in danger.

From Han's perspective, in addition to his monthly salary and the emperor's rewards, he had a rich family on his own. Due to his reputation for writing and famous works, the nobles, scholars, and monks in the South constantly asked him to write stone tablets with gold and silk, which became another source of his fortune. He raised Jiyues (geishas), recruited guests, and held feasts together with dances. After his wealth ran out, he still did not change. Every time entering a dilemma, he would dress up in tattered clothes and act like a blind old man, holding a one-stringed harp, knocking a board room by room to beg for food. This kind of behavior of Han Xizai intentionally caused the influence of dissolute and unworthy of reuse. In the cases of plights, he turned to Li Yu, begging for reward and money [7].

To figure out whether Han was ambitious and pugnacious despite his cover, as well as cautioning his absurd behaviors, Li Yu dispatched Gu to Han's residence and let him memorize all the activities of Han's off-court life. Based on his previous experiences, Han had already become so sophisticated that he deliberately acted as a muddleheaded guy who fell for entertainment and beauties, to prove that he had no threat to the emperor. It was also recorded in other sources that the painting was formed because Han

Xizai was renowned at that time, and Li Yu "did not want to criticize him directly", so he ordered Gu to paint the picture and give it to Han Xizai, hoping to make him feel ashamed, but Han Xizai saw it as if nothing had happened and still went on with his life [8].

In the first segment, the lute solo, there were five women and seven men. Han Xizai sat on the bed with the young official in red robes. The other male guests wore limp feet. Although these figures can't be specified one by one, there is a specific description on the inscriptions of the painting: "Chang drinks with Dr. Chen Zhiyong, protege Shu Ya, Wei Zhu, Number One Scholar Lang Jie, and deputy Professor Li Jiaming." Li's sister pressed the Huqin, the male drummed, and the female Wang Wu Shan danced. Many of these people were Han Xizai's acquaintances, but weren't appointed by court. For instance, it was recorded that Li Jiaming often criticized the court in the form of scherzo-style.[9]

In the dance solo part, Han Xizai took off his robe, rolled up his sleeves and danced for the green waist. The green waist, also known as Liu Yao, is a traditional Chinese dance whose rhythm is from slow to fast, and the dance itself is light and soft. The dance became popular in the Tang Dynasty. Its existence in the painting echoes with the quote from the poet Bai Juyi: She lightly plucked, slowly stroked and twanged loud; The song of "Green Waist" after that of "Rainbow Cloud".

At this time, the musical activities of the dinner party began to enter the peak, which is also the climax of the scroll structure. The guy with a beard besides Han was the deputy Li Jiaming, and the one in red was Lang Can. It's recorded that Han Xizai had once told Monk Dao Ming

the intention of the dinner: “I do this to avoid being the prime minister.”[9].

The section of rest between the banquet mainly describes the scene of a break and the characters in the scroll were arranged loosely. Han Xizai, surrounded by the maid, lay on the couch in the interior, washing his hands while talking with the maid, so that the atmosphere becomes soothing [9].

What the author wanted to convey was elicited from the plots that were arranged around the central character Han Xizai step by step, from listening to the performance, to beating the drum himself, enjoying the solo dance, until the end of the banquet, each occasion with tight eyebrows, heavy thoughts, pensive mood. These formed a strong contrast with the cheerful night banquet scene.

Gu used a common technique usually seen in Chinese works that he arranged the characters appeared in Han's feast in different periods all together, despite time and location. Magically, the painting isn't a mess. Instead, it's full of sequential logic and one could figure out what was happening. The scenes of the work are neat and organized, using byobus (a screen to conceal what's behind it) to divide separate scenes. The lines are fine and smooth, the composition is imaginative, and the colors are gorgeous and elegant. The use of pen and ink in different images is varied, especially the color is rich and harmonious, and the plain makeup of the beautiful women is in sharp contrast to the dark-color clothes of the male guests.

### 3. Discussion

From the painting, the whole banquet was immersed in the atmosphere of extravagance and money, suggesting that Han was disappointed in his court life. This lonely sorrowful mood, in turn, strengthened the pursuit and yearning for a clean political environment and his longing for the emperor's trust. In total, as a representative painting of the Southern Tang Dynasty, the *Night Revels of Han Xizai* depicts the night banquet scene of the aristocratic class at that time, which vividly reflects the social life and cultural atmosphere of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. The painting is rich in details, and a complete story is connected through five different scenes, each scene is lively, showing the daily activities such as singing and dancing, talking, and resting during the banquet. This kind of subject matter was not common in the Sui and Tang Dynas-

ties or earlier periods, as art at that time focused more on religious, official, and historical themes and less on depictions of everyday life. However, in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, with economic prosperity and social development, people's basic survival problems were solved, and social concerns began to shift. People began to pay more attention to their quality of life and spiritual pursuits and gave higher value to the enjoyment of this world and worldly happiness. This change is also reflected in art, painters began to turn their attention to the lives of ordinary people, to capture daily life, thus producing more themes closely related to real life. The *Night Revels of Han Xizai* was created in such a social background. It is not only an aimed painting for the emperor but also a witness to the social and cultural transformation at that time. The characters in the picture are no longer distant gods and saints, but real people around them, and their joys and sorrows have become the material of the painter's pen [9]. Such works are closer to the aesthetics and emotions of ordinary people and are more welcomed by society at that time. Through the appreciation of this painting, the audience could not only appreciate the superb skills of ancient artists but also grab an insight into the profound changes in social culture during that specific period, just like using a camera to capture one moment together with its past and future.

Chinese aesthetic taste is different from the Western tradition. Chinese painting reflects the inner world in an abstract and illusory way, emphasizing lyricism and advocating free and easy freehand style. While the West pursues rational and intuitive depiction of the real world, emphasizing realism and advocating visual reality [10]. In comparison to many Western artworks or paintings by individual Chinese artists, the message of Gu's work is based on his role, mainly focusing on what the emperor wanted to know. However, even if it's a political painting for sure, there must be some details that act as proofs of the author standpoint, like eclipsed cues that hide under the surface. Since the painter also understood the situation of the Southern Tang Dynasty and the protagonist's difficulties himself, he depicted his gloomy and unhappy expression in the background of the night banquet from Han's perspective, which can be seen in Figure 8, detailed the protagonist's fierce struggle under the complex court condition at that time, and deepened the connotation of the work.



**Fig. 9 Han's subtle expressions**

#### 4. Conclusion

The result of this study is the appearance of the storyline in *the Night Revels of Han Xizai*. From eliciting the historical background of this artwork, this study analyzes how the techniques and choices of Gu Hongzhong correspond to the theme of this court painting. It's a detailed introduction to the painting itself, giving future studies a fundamental review of the painting's features and primary meanings. To put the understanding of this painting further, future studies could expand to compare the painting with Western paintings in the same period, or Chinese court paintings later in Qing Dynasty, to figure out *the Night Revels of Han Xizai's* significance in both art and history fields.

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