

# A mural tomb of the Northern Qi Dynasty at Shuiquanliang in Shuozhou, Shanxi

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## Abstract

From June to August 2008, a joint archaeological team excavated a mural tomb at Shuiquanliang Village in Shuozhou City, Shanxi Province. The tomb is situated about 1.5km west of the village. In the tomb, grave goods such as pottery figurines, pottery models and glazed ceramic vessels as well as many well-preserved murals were found. The tomb structure, murals, and tomb furnishings suggest that the tomb was built in the late Northern Qi Dynasty; the occupant of the tomb may have been the military commander of Shuozhou City. This excavation is very important for the study of the history and culture of Shuozhou area in the Northern Qi Dynasty.

**Keywords:** Mural tombs—Northern Qi Dynasty; Shuiquanliang (Shuozhou City, Shanxi)

## General introduction

From June to August of 2008 the Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology, Shanxi Museum and others coordinated their efforts in a salvage excavation of the Northern Qi mural tomb in Shuiquanliang, Shuozhou City, Shanxi; the removal and preservation of the murals were also begun at the time. Approximately 80sq m of murals have been recovered, and they are being restored by the Center for the Preservation of Cultural Relics of the Shanxi Museum.

The tomb is located approximately 1.5km west of the Shuiquanliang Village in the Yaozitou Township of Shuocheng District, Shuozhou City, Shanxi Province; it is about 20km northeast of the proper Shuocheng District. The site is in the eastern foothills of the Guancen Mountains, a transitional area between the hilly region and the flat plain; an undulating terrain with gentle gradients in the hills and valleys, the entire landform is tilted towards the flat plain. Most of the ground surface is covered with a top soil consisting of sandy, loose-textured and porous loess. Shuiquanliang Village is on the west bank of the Hui 恢 River. The present tomb belongs to the Fanwangsi 法王寺 Cemetery. According to the research materials, groups of tombs dating from the Han Dynasty through

the Northern Dynasties are located in the vicinity of the four villages of Fanwangsi, Shuiquanliang, Qiepo, and Liyantou; today the remains of earthen burial mounds are still discernible on the ground surface. The present-day Shuocheng District was under the jurisdiction of Zhaoyuan District, Guang'an Commandery, Northern Shuo Prefecture during the Northern Qi Dynasty. One can surmise that the group of tombs in Fanwangsi may have been the cemetery of high-ranking officials of the local militia of the Northern Shuo Prefecture under the Northern Qi Dynasty.

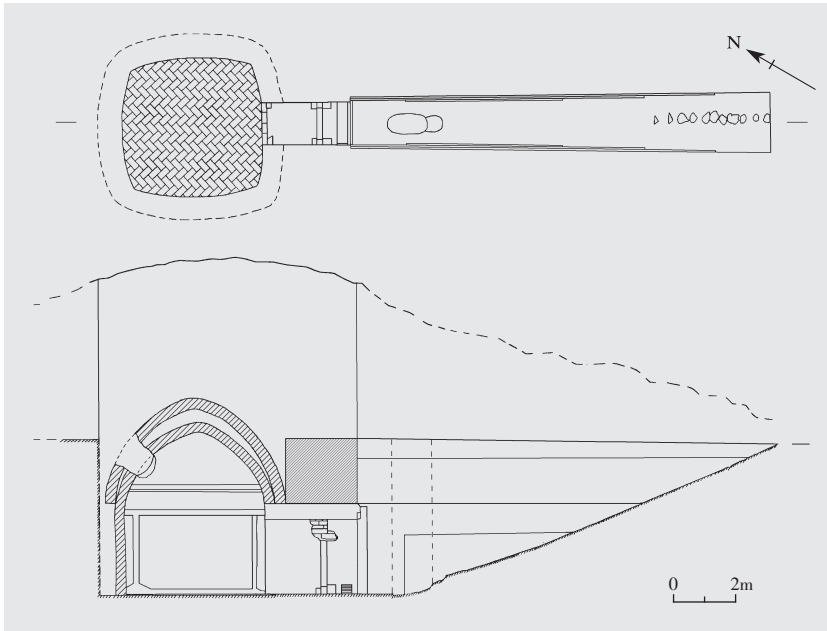
## Tomb structure and form

The tomb comprises the earthen mound, tomb ramp, passage tunnel and burial chamber. The tomb is oriented at 150° (Figure 1). The tomb mound, already crumpled into a pile of dirt with gentle slopes, is approximately 6m in height and occupying an area approximately 700sq m. As the tomb had been robbed three times, little of the grave goods remain. Tomb robbers had already made preparations for removing the murals; the blue lines that were drawn to divide the murals into sections for cutting and the gauze fabric used for reinforcing the murals before detachment still remain on the surface of the walls.

On the south side of the tomb is the tomb ramp, a long and narrow sloping path that is an earthen dugout with a length of 13.5m and a gradient of 25°. This tomb ramp is wider at the top and narrower at the bottom, wider on the south side and narrower on the north side. The south side is 1.94m wide, the north side is 1.64m wide, and the deepest part is 5m below ground level. The lateral walls descend straight down with the exception of two areas where the walls were indented into two narrow ledges. The walls bore the marks of digging tools. At the bottom of the tomb ramp near the entrance are eleven shallow foot holes.

The passage tunnel is constructed with bluish bricks and it is slightly narrower than the tomb ramp. It is 2.86m long, 1.36m wide, and the elevation is 2.4m. The walls are built by laying bricks in a pattern of three courses of horizontal bricks alternating with one course of vertical bricks, while the ceiling is built by placing bricks in a pattern of two horizontals alternating with two verticals. The south entrance is sealed with bricks; only two courses of bricks remain, indicating that the bricks were arranged in a Λ-shaped pattern.

On the south side of the passage tunnel is the tomb entrance; it comprises the door frame, threshold, door bearing stones and double door leaves, all fashioned out of yellow sandstone. As the architrave of the entrance had



**Figure 1** Floor plan and longitudinal section of the tomb.



**Figure 2** Tomb chamber ceiling (NW–SE).

been stolen, only the fan-shaped empty space remains. The door frame is 1.5m in height and the threshold is 1.02m long. Underneath the door frame and threshold is a door bearing stone at either end. The top of the door bearing stone is carved into the shape of a squatting beast with a head very much like that of a lion; the details of the head and shoulders are further outlined in ink. The two stone door leaves have collapsed into the passage tunnel. The obverse of the stone entrance looks symmetrical and tidy; three rows of door nails are drawn in ink lines, each row with five nails each of which is 7cm in diameter. Where door knockers used to be located are now only square-shaped holes surrounded by traces of rust left by the ring-shaped iron door knockers, each with a diameter

of 0.2m. The door leaves are 1.57m tall and 0.56m wide. The lateral walls flanking the door frame have square-shaped holes that must have been used as sockets for fitting the wooden bolt when the tomb door was sealed.

The burial chamber is a single brick chamber with a domed ceiling. The floor has the square plan with curved sides, each side measuring 4.5m long. The ceiling dome has two layers; the inner layer is elevated 5.3m from the ground, and the outer layer is elevated 6.38m from the ground. The tomb walls are constructed with bricks arranged in a pattern of three courses of horizontal bricks alternating with one course of vertical bricks, reaching an elevation of 2.9m, and from there the springing of the inner and outer layers of the double domed ceiling begins. The inner dome continues the convergence of the tomb walls towards the center, and it is constructed by building up concentric rings of bricks, arranged horizontally with the short ends facing out, and the apex is covered with four overlapping bricks. The outer dome is a layer constructed outside the inner dome, and it is built up with bricks arranged in an alternating pattern of three courses of horizontal bricks with one course of vertical bricks in the lower section, while the upper section is constructed by building up 30 concentric rings of bricks, placed horizontally with the short ends facing out, and the apex is covered with five overlapping bricks. The exterior of the inner domed ceiling is coated with a layer of red clay that is approximately 1cm thick, and on top of this is another layer of yellow

clay that is approximately 40cm thick. The space between the two domed ceilings is not completely filled with clay (Figure 2).

The type of bricks used in this tomb is a rectangular brick that is bluish grey in color, 33.5 to 34.5cm long, 16 to 17cm wide, and 4.2 to 5cm thick. The surface of the brick has stamped cord pattern. As it is fired at a low temperature, the brick is relatively soft.

### Grave goods

As the tomb had been robbed multiple times relatively few grave goods have survived, and they are mostly in the form of broken and incomplete fragments. Besides

pottery figurines and glazed pottery vessels, there are a few wooden structural components and iron nails that are probably part of the fittings of the canopy frame over the coffin.

**Pottery figurines.** Most of them have a white slip and painted designs in color (Figure 3:1–8).

**Glazed pottery vessels.** Most of them are sherds. The matrix is porous and fired at low temperature. The color of the glaze is not evenly distributed, and the standard of craftsmanship is not high.

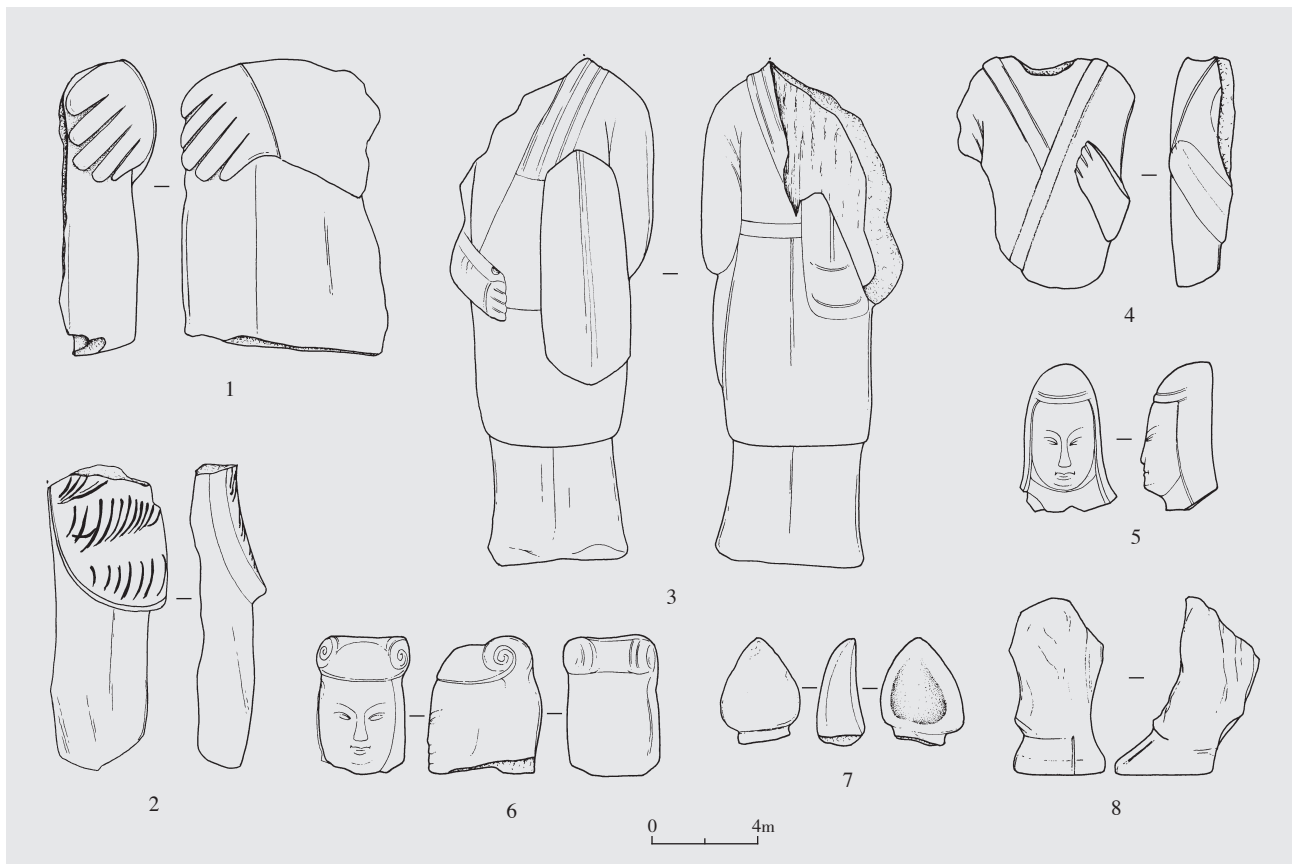
## The murals

The surface of the tomb walls are coated with a layer of plaster that is 3 to 5cm thick, and the murals are applied directly on top. The layer of plaster is tightly bonded with the brick wall and there is no other foundation layer in between. The murals can be divided into two parts: those in the passage tunnel and those in the tomb chamber, and most of them are well-preserved.

### 1. The passage tunnel

The vaulted ceiling of the passage tunnel has a depiction of stylized cloud designs, drawn in black outline

and sparingly filled in with a color wash of red ochre. The lateral walls depict civil officials, honor guards and mounted troops. On the west wall outside the stone door frame is the portrait of a door guard donning a black cloth cap. His plump face is delineated in fine detail. Wearing a long robe with a standup collar and a front opening that overlaps from the right, his hands are folded together and hidden inside the wide sleeves, and seem to be leaning on top of his sword; the lower torso and feet are not legible (Figure 4). Inside the door frame are portraits of two honor guards bearing swords. They wear black cloth caps with long scarves, long robes with round collars and narrow sleeves, and their hands, hidden inside the sleeves, are folded together and appear to be leaning on top of the swords. Black leather belts are tied around their waists, their trousers are close-fitting, and their black boots have low legs. Their faces are round and plump. The person on the south side is turning his head to the back as if talking to the next person. The portraits of the door guard and honor guards seem to be slightly larger in proportion. In the remaining space of the mural is a depiction of three groups of mounted troops proceeding from the north to the south as seen from a distance. The east wall of the



**Figure 3** Pottery figurines.

1. Figurine of warrior with shield (Y6); 2. figurine of warrior (Y15); 3. figurine of warrior with shield (Y4); 4. figurine of an attendant (Y11); 5. figurine head wearing a hood (Y17); 6. figurine head wearing a hood with a rolled up skirt (Y19); 7. tomb guardian beast (Y16); 8. fragment of leg and hoof of a beast (Y22)

passage tunnel depicts a similar subject as that on the west wall; thus, the two walls are almost symmetrical in composition, except that on the east wall, the mounted troop is proceeding from the south to the north (Figure 5).

2. The tomb chamber, subdivided into the ceiling and the four walls respectively

The murals in the tomb chamber are divided into three zones from top to bottom. The top zone depicts the sky map. The domed ceiling is painted uniformly in dark gray color to signify the infinite space of the sky. The Silver River (Milky Way) flows across the sky from the southwest to the northeast, and inside the river are fine fish-scale patterns representing waves in the water; on either side of the Milky Way are white, round dots signifying the stars. On the eastern side of the ceiling is the image of the Sun with Gold Crow in the center, on the western side of the ceiling is the image of the Moon with the Lunar Hare stirring elixirs and the Toad in the center (Figures 6 and 7).

Below the sky map is the depiction of the Four Supernatural Beings, and on each of the four directions are the representations of Green Dragon, White Tiger, Scarlet Bird and Somber Warrior, respectively. Between the Four Supernatural Beings are depictions of divine beasts. Be-

tween the Four Supernatural Beings and the divine beasts large billowing clouds are drawn in ink outline and partly filled in with shades of red ochre color wash (Figures 8 and 9).

Below the Four Supernatural Beings is the ring of the Duodenary Series represented by imageries of the Twelve Zodiac Animals. In the middle of the north wall is Rat, and following the clockwise direction, in order, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Ram, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig. The heads and tails of the animals are linked to suggest a counter-clockwise direction (Figures 10 and 11).

A dark gray sky background forms the natural boundary between the sky map and the images of the Four Supernatural Beings. The middle zone of the Four Supernatural Beings with the Duodenary Series is separated from the bottom zone of the murals by a band painted in red ochre.

In the bottom zone of the north wall is a scene of a couple presiding over a banquet. The center of the scene shows the tomb occupant husband and wife sitting on a seat under a canopy. On either side of them as well as outside the canopy are male and female musicians and at-



**Figure 4** Portrait of the door guard on the west wall of passage tunnel.



**Figure 5** Portrait of the honor guard on the east wall of passage tunnel.



Figure 6 Mural on tomb chamber ceiling.

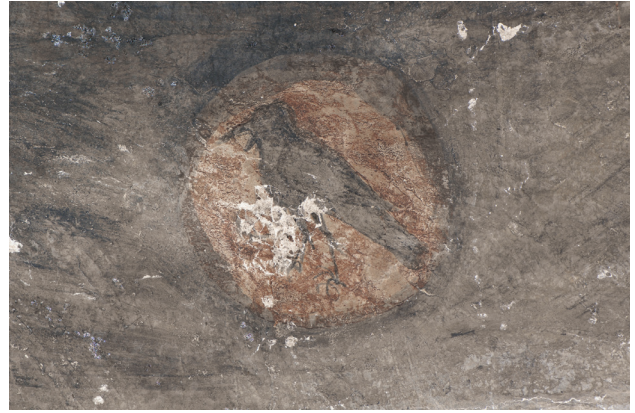


Figure 7 Mural on the east section of tomb ceiling.

tendants (Figure 12).

The structure of the canopy is similar to a kiosk with a hipped roof over the front hall. There are two supporting columns at either end of the facade, linked horizontally by an architectural component that looks like an architrave. At both ends of the main ridge of the roof as well as on top of the supporting columns are structural components that look like owl tails; they are yellowish orange in color. Decorating the main ridge of the roof and the architrave are round balls and feather-like ornaments.

A square couch is placed in the middle of the floor under the canopy. Covering the couch is a woven material that seems to be a black carpet with yellow fur, and the skirt hanging down the front is decorated with symmetrical designs of large flowers and leaves. The tomb occupant couple are sitting atop with the male to the left of the female; behind them is the seat screen, an unadorned panel set in a square black frame. Both tomb occupants have similar sitting poses and wear nearly identical garments. For example, the female is sitting up straight, her hair is styled into a chignon like a flying bird, her face is plump, and her short, thick eyebrows are shaped like the “—” character. Her eyes are looking straight forward, the ridge of her nose is high and straight, her lips are red, and her countenance is solemn. As inner garment she wears a tunic with round collar and narrow sleeves, and draped over her shoulders is a short jacket made of black leather; as lower garment she wears a loose robe with a pattern of red horizontal stripes. Held sideways in her right hand is a multi-lobed cup. Her left sleeve is relatively long, and her left hand, hidden inside the sleeve, is placed on her knee. Judging from the sitting posture, one can conclude that her legs must have been folded in front of the body in a seated position. The male tomb occupant wears a head scarf with the scarf ends folded up, and his eyebrows are delicately arched. As the areas of the face, neck and shoulders are damaged, his inner garment and the object held in his right hand cannot be known.

Displayed in front of the couch are all kinds of food in the shape of long strips, flat slices or tiny balls that are placed neatly and festively in the long stemmed bowl

or on the platter with a flat bottom. To the left of the male tomb occupant are male musicians and attendants, seven figures in all. Two attendants stand close to the seat inside the canopy, and only the upper torso of one of them is visible. Shown in frontal view, this figure dons a wavy-shaped hat, and strings are tied into a knot under his chin; his robe is long with an opening in front that overlaps from the right. He seems to be holding a writing brush-like object in his hand. Outside the canopy is an attendant carrying with both arms raised parallel to the ground a stemmed tray, and in the middle of the tray a high-footed cup with flared mouth is placed. To his left are two musicians wearing soft head scarves, long robes, fitted trousers, and leather belts around their waists. One figure is holding a wind pipe instrument in his left hand and turning his head to look behind him, the other figure is hauling over his right shoulder a large harp while his left hand seems to be playing the musical instrument. To his right are two attendants, the one in front does not have a head scarf, his black hair is rather long, and he is clasping close to his chest a sword with both hands. The sword has a scabbard decorated with alternating black and white bands, and the pommel has a tassel. The figure standing in the back wears a soft head scarf, under his chin are strings tied into a knot, and the only visible part of his long robe is the overlapping opening in front; turning his body sideways he seems to be looking behind him. His left hand is holding what appears to be a long, thin stick that is slightly thicker at the tip; the stick also has a pattern of bamboo joints (Figure 13).

To the right of the female tomb occupant are female attendants and musicians, five figures in all. Inside the canopy are two female attendants all turning sideways to face the female tomb occupant. Their hair is styled into chignons shaped like flying birds, and they wear long garments with narrow sleeves and front openings that overlap from the right; their hands, hidden inside the sleeves, are joined together and placed over the abdomen. Outside the canopy are musicians either holding the harp close to the chest or clasping the wind pipe instrument with both hands.



**Figure 8** Green Dragon—one of the Four Supernatural Beings, mural on tomb ceiling.



**Figure 9** Scarlet Bird—one of the Four Supernatural Beings, mural on tomb ceiling.



**Figure 10** Hare—Twelve Zodiac Animals, mural on tomb ceiling.



**Figure 11** Horse—Twelve Zodiac Animals, mural on tomb ceiling.



**Figure 12** Mural on the north wall of tomb chamber.

The west bottom corner of the north wall has a depiction of a flowering plant with symmetrical foliage in ink outline.

The east wall has a mural depicting mounted horsemen and honor guards. At the center of the picture is a magnificent, tall, pale red horse; the horse's head is slightly lowered, the horse's mane is full and dense, and tied beneath its head is a large tassel. The horse's front legs are straight while the hind legs are slightly bent, and the horse's tail is hanging down; it is outfitted with a complete set of saddle and bridle as well as a black mud guard and light gray saddle pad. In front of the horse is the line of six honor guards. With the exception of one figure who is blocked by the horse's head from view, they all wear soft head scarves, narrow-sleeved long tunics with round collars or front openings with the right side overlapping the left, narrow trousers, leather belts around the waists, and shoes that are either black or white in color. The first two figures are holding long lances, and around the handles below the lance blades are wrappings made of tan colored fabric. The third figure holds a spittoon with both hands, and he is turning his head to looking at the horse behind him; his soft head scarf is not like that of the others as it is rolled up and tied into a knot. The fourth figure is wielding with his right hand a feather fan, the fifth figure is slightly bending his right arm, his hand hidden inside the sleeve, while his left hand is grasping the reins of the horse. The upper torso of the sixth figure is blocked by the horse from view, but it can be surmised that he must be holding the square-shaped canopy over the horse head. Behind the horse are two attendants. One has black hair and curly beard, but most of his body is blocked from view by the horse; the other figure following closely behind is walking ahead with big steps as he is carrying over his left forearm, raised parallel to the ground, an article of clothing (Figure 14). Behind these two figures, in the far distance, are two cavalry lines each of which consists of six figures, six horses, and five flags with triple pennants (Figure 15). Diagonally below this scene is a line drawing of a flowering plant with symmetrical foliage. The mural is showing the procession of attendants, horses, etc. making their way steadily from south to north.

The mural on the west wall depicts a bullock cart in a procession. In the middle of the picture is a bullock cart making its way towards the south; the arched canopy is light yellow in color, and there are awnings projecting from the front and back. The awning in the back has hanging ornaments such as knotted black strings and other objects that cannot be identified. The carriage compartment is black, the front has a window with vertical grills, and the back has drawn black curtains that hang down from the carriage almost to the ground. The cart wheels are light yellow in color, and at each end of the front of the carriage compartment are tall vertical posts with hooks on top.

At the driving shaft is a strong and robust tan ox flanked by an animal driver on either side, each having the features of a foreigner with black hair and curly beard.



**Figure 13** Detail of the mural on the north wall of tomb chamber.

The animal driver to the left of the ox is leaning his upper body backwards, his legs bent with the shanks splayed apart, and raising both arms parallel to the ground he seems to be exerting all his strength in pulling the reins towards the back. Only the head and upper torso of the animal driver to the right are visible. The two animal drivers are facing each other, mouths ajar, and are working together to control the tan ox. The left front hoof of the ox is standing upright on the ground while the right front hoof is lifted up; slightly raising its head the ox is gazing intently at the back. Wrapped around the carriage shaft on the left is a type of woven material such as a curtain for the carriage (Figure 16).

Behind the bullock cart are female attendants, a total of five figures. They all have their hair styled into chignons shaped like flying birds; the second figure behind the cart wears a *liangdang* jumper and long skirt and holds a round fan in her left hand, the other four figures wear long robes with front openings that overlap from the right, and their hands, hidden inside the sleeves, are folded together and placed over the abdomen. Standing upright between the second and third figure is a parasol with a square-shaped cover. The cover has a protruding top and fold-



**Figure 14** Mural on the east wall of tomb chamber.



**Figure 15** Detail of the mural on the east wall of tomb chamber.



**Figure 16** Mural on the west wall of tomb chamber.

down rim; at each of the four corners of the rim are ornamental strings tied into butterfly knots (Figure 17).

In the open space above the ox's head is a depiction of a line of five mounted honor guards hoisting five flags with triple pennants. The horses are walking in random fashion, and one of the honor guards is turning his head as if carrying on a conversation with the one behind him. In the open space below the front hoof of the ox is a depiction of a flowering plant with symmetrical foliage drawn in ink outline style.

The mural on the south wall consists of two symmetrical compositions of musical performances flanking the entrance. Two musicians are standing side by side with their upper bodies facing one another, each wielding a long horn at an angle so that it intersects with the other at the top. Both wear soft head scarves, and under their chins are strings tied into a knot. They are clad in long robes with round necklines and narrow sleeves that are either pale red or reddish ochre in color, fitted pants, leather belts around their waists, and on their belts are round ornaments. Their feet are shod in black boots with low legs. The upper part of the scene shows billowing clouds in red ochre (Figure 18).

## Conclusions

Based on the style of the tomb, the grave goods and murals, one can assume that the tomb can be dated in the later Northern Qi Dynasty, and that the tomb occupant is a high-ranking military commander of Shuozhou Prefecture.

The tomb is located in the Fanwangsi Cemetery. Historical records concerning the circumstances of Shuozhou under the Northern Qi Dynasty are sparse, and few remains from the Northern Qi have been excavated. This tomb is the first scientifically excavated Northern Qi tomb in the vicinity of Shuozhou and accordingly, it is of great value to the study of the history and culture of Shuozhou under the Northern Qi Dynasty.

The sloping tomb ramp, passage



tunnel, square brick chamber with curved side walls are frequently found in Northern Qi brick chamber tombs, but the double vaulted ceiling has not been encountered in the archaeology of Northern Dynasties burials to date. The greatest find is the large-scale and well-preserved murals; the composition, theme, content, etc., of the murals are similar to the high-ranking tombs of Lou Rui 娄睿 and Xu Xianxiu 徐显秀, clearly indicating the influence of Jinyang burial customs at the time; meanwhile, the use of a relatively simple technique is an indication that the murals also have their own character.

The use of bands drawn in red ochre to separate the imageries of the sky map, Four Supernatural Beings, Duodenary Series, etc., is a succinct way of underlining their independent themes. The murals in the four walls are clearly divided into discrete scenes, and there are relatively few figures in each scene. The relatively lower ranking of the tomb must have been the reason for the relatively simplistic mode of expression.

The painting technique of these murals is clearly inferior to that of the murals in Lou Rui and Xu Xianxiu's tombs, but it also has its own stylistic character. First, the tomb occupants, door attendant and other main characters in the passage tunnel are painted in a more refined style while the drapery folds of the attendants, musicians and others, with the exception of the careful delineation of the facial features, are painted in a relatively stiff manner; hence, they are not the work of a single artist. Second, figures of lower social statuses, such as attendants, musicians, cavalymen and honor guards seem to have been completed by many different people, involving a division of labor, collaboration and production line. The artists with superior skills would use a stiff stylus to draw the outlines of the facial features of the figures, including such details as the knots of ties under the chin, etc., followed by other artists who would paint the four limbs of the figures, the drapery folds, and then fill in the color. Third, due to the restriction of the tomb's ranking and other factors, there are no depictions of large scale processions of honor guards in the tomb ramp; instead, in the murals of the tomb chamber and pas-



Figure 17 Detail of the mural on the west wall of tomb chamber.



Figure 18 Mural on the south wall of tomb chamber.

sage tunnel are representations of mounted cavalymen and honor guards in groups of five or six figures as distant views to fill in empty spaces, and they are clearly shown as subservient to the main figures.

### Postscript

The original report was published in *Weiwu* 文物 (Cultural relics) 2010. 12: 26-42 with 24 illustrations. The author is Liu Yan 刘岩, Zhang Huimin 张慧敏, Huo Baoqiang 霍宝强, Sun Wenjun 孙文俊. The abridged version is prepared by Liu Yan and translated into English by Judy Chungwa Ho.