

# The Night Banquet of Han Xizai in the Perspective of Socio-Historical Criticism

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to explore in depth the historical background, iconographic content, and its historical value and significance of Han Xizai's Night Banquet through the perspective of socio-historical criticism. The article firstly analyzes the socio-historical situation of the Five Dynasties period, especially the political and cultural background of the Southern Tang Dynasty, as well as the association between Han Xizai and the Southern Tang Dynasty royal family. Secondly, it provides a detailed pictorial interpretation of Han Xizai's Night Banquet in terms of its picture content and scene arrangement, character image and costume props, artistic style and presentation method. Finally, the historical value and significance of the painting are discussed. Han Xizai's Night Banquet not only reflects the social and political background of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, but also reveals the relationship between Han Xizai and the royal family of the Southern Tang Dynasty. With its fine brushwork style and unique narrative technique, the painting shows the prosperity of the court culture and the luxury of aristocratic life in the Southern Tang Dynasty. At the same time, the painting also has important value in art history, painting technique, cultural relics and collection history. As a precious historical document, The Night Banquet of Han Xizai not only helps to enrich our understanding of ancient history, but also enhances our appreciation of ancient art, and has certain reference value for historical and artistic research.

**Keywords:** Social-historical criticism, Han Xizai, The Night Banquet of Han Xizai.

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## 1. The Night Banquet of Han Xizai in the socio-historical context

### 1.1. Socio-historical conditions during the Five Dynasties period

The Night Banquet of Han Xizai is not only a masterpiece in the art of painting, but also a mirror reflecting the political and cultural background of the Southern Tang Dynasty. The painting was created by the court painter Gu Ma-zhong. The painting depicts the lively scene of the night banquet at the home of Han Xizai, a minister of the Southern Tang Dynasty, in the form of a long scroll. The picture is fine, with smooth lines and brilliant colors, which not only shows the luxurious life of the upper class at that time, but also reflects the complex social and historical background of the Five Dynasties period. The Five Dynasties period was a tumultuous period in Chinese history. The decline of the Tang Dynasty led to division and fragmentation, with more than a dozen regimes rising one after another, and this period is also known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. The Southern Tang was one of the stronger regimes, but it also faced threats from neighboring powers and internal power struggles. Against this backdrop, Han Xizai, as a powerful nobleman and minister of the Southern Tang Dynasty, lived a life full of luxury and pleasure, but also revealed a mentality of escaping reality. In the night banquet scene in the painting, the guests are drinking, singing and dancing, seemingly trying to escape the war and pressure of the outside world through alcohol and music. However, behind this superficial prosperity lies Han Xizai's despair over his political disillusionment and his pursuit and yearning for a life of no-holds-barred.

This painting is not only a depiction of Han Xizai's personal life, but also carries a wealth of political and cultural information about the Southern Tang Dynasty, reflecting the

unique social landscape and people's mental state of that era. During this chaotic period, people's lives were full of uncertainty and danger, while the ruling class tried to cover up this uneasiness and powerlessness through pleasure and luxury. With its fine details and vivid depictions, this work provides us with a precious perspective of the social and historical conditions of the Five Dynasties period from a close distance.

### 1.2. Political and Cultural Background of the Southern Tang Dynasty

The Southern Tang Dynasty was a secular regime during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, founded by Li Yu, who was a former Tang courtier and who had a deep affection for Tang politics and culture. Therefore, the political and cultural background of the Southern Tang Dynasty was deeply influenced by the traditions of the Tang Dynasty, and at the same time it also embodied the characteristics of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. This period was also a time of great upheaval in Chinese history, with frequent regime changes and wars. Although the Southern Tang remained relatively stable to some extent, it was also threatened by neighboring regimes. There were also different political factions and interest groups within the Southern Tang, and the struggle between these factions had an impact on the political stability of the Southern Tang.

The political and cultural context of the Southern Tang was a period of diversity and intertwining of tradition and modernity. During this period, although the politics of the Southern Tang was full of turmoil and conflicts, the culture developed unprecedentedly and became an important period of cultural prosperity in Chinese history. Especially during the reigns of Li Jing and Li Yu, many famous literati and artists emerged, and their works reflected the cultural level and aesthetic interests of the time. The rulers of the Southern Tang paid great attention to culture and education, and

implemented a series of policies favorable to cultural development. They advocated Confucianism and attached importance to cultural education and Confucian scholars, which made the cultural atmosphere of the Southern Tang relatively relaxed and free, and was conducive to cultural innovation and development, and had a wide influence in the society.

### 1.3. Han Xizai's association with his Southern Tang royal family

Han Xizai was an important official during the reign of Li Yu, the later lord of the Southern Tang Dynasty. He was a nobleman from the north who fled to the Southern Tang Dynasty due to the war and was retained by the Southern Tang court. Han Xizai was a talented scholar who was good at music, calligraphy and painting. He held important positions in the court of the Southern Tang Dynasty and was highly appreciated and trusted by Li Yu. However, the relationship between Han Xizai and Li Yu did not always go smoothly. Han Xizai's outspoken character often contradicted Li Yu, which made Li Yu both appreciative and defensive towards Han Xizai. The conflict between them also reflects the political struggle within the Southern Tang court, which became increasingly intense against the backdrop of a weakening state and the rise of the Song dynasty in the north, and the relationship between Han Xizai and Li Yu was affected by this struggle. The background to the creation of *The Night Banquet of Han Xizai* reveals the complexity of this relationship, with some sources suggesting that Li Yu, in order to learn about Han Xizai's real life, sent Gu Ma-zhong to infiltrate his home to secretly observe and return the work. The painting shows scenes of a night banquet with pipa playing, dancing, and laughter at the banquet. These scenes reflect Han Xizai's private life, but also show his position and influence in the court. Through this painting, we can get a glimpse of the political struggles, power relations, and cultural life within the court during the Nantang period.

## 2. The Image Interpretation of Han Xizai's Night Banquet

### 2.1. Content and Scene Arrangement

"Han Xizai's Night Banquet" takes Han Xizai hosting a banquet at home as the main scenario, and is divided into five scenes according to the different scenes of the banquet, namely, "Pipa Playing", "People Watching the Dance", "Resting Between Banquets", "Pipe Music Ensemble" and "Sending Guests Away at the End of the Banquet", showing a complete banquet. The five scenes of "Pipa Performance," "Dancing with the People," "Rest between Feasts," "Ensemble of Pipes and Music," and "Sending Off the Guests at the End of the Feast" show the complete process of a banquet. In terms of spatial differentiation and progression, the author skillfully uses screens and couches to differentiate space and time, so that each scene is independent and yet related to each other.

In the first scene of the pipa performance, Han Xizai and his guests are listening attentively to the pipa performance, and the artist depicts the moment when the performance has just begun, when the atmosphere of the whole audience is focused on it through heavy ink and color. But only Han Xizai's eyes fluttered, frowning slightly, as if there is something on his mind, in stark contrast to the rest of the audience. In the second scene, Han Xizai is playing a drum

with both hands for the guests, and a young man next to him is also playing the board. In this scene there is also the monk De Ming, his eyes fluttering and confused, his body also slightly arched, humbly bowed his head, his eyes have not left in Han Xizai, so he seems out of place in the crowd of people enjoying the kabuki. The third section is the rest between banquets, the picture presents the rest scene between banquets, with different figures and postures, vividly showing the guests sitting or standing, talking and resting. The fourth section is a wind and music ensemble. Han Xizai is sitting on a chair, holding a fan in his hand, in a natural state. In front of him, five players are playing the flute and vertical pipe. In the fifth section, Han Xizai personally sends off his guests at the end of the banquet, showing the bustle at the end of the banquet and the contented departure of the guests.

Throughout the painting, Han Xizai is depicted throughout, showing his hospitality as a host and the cheerful atmosphere of the banquet through the depiction of different scenes. The layout of the scene is very distinctive, with the screen dividing the picture into five parts, each of which is independent and interrelated. Such a layout not only increases the sense of hierarchy in the picture, but also enables the viewer to gradually understand the process of the banquet and the characters' personalities with the transition of the picture. It is easy to see from the picture that the artist Gu Ma-zhong is highly skillful in painting, and he depicts all the characters in the picture vividly with his exquisite art skills. Especially the main character Han Xizai's expression is out of place in the joyful atmosphere of songs and dances around him, which also highlights his contradictory and entangled psychology, and the bad atmosphere of pleasure-seeking and corruption of the officials of the Southern Tang Dynasty at that time. In terms of color, the artist used rich color contrast and delicate rendering, making the picture both colorful and deep. The splendor of the characters' costumes, the delicacy of the artifacts, and the layout of the scene all reflect the luxury and delicacy of the aristocrats' life during the Southern Tang Dynasty.



**Figure 1.** The Night Banquet of Han Xizai  
(Image source: Shenzhen Design and Art Union)

### 2.2. Characterization and Costume Props

In terms of characterization, through the fine depiction of Han Xizai and his guests, Gu shows characters with different identities and personalities. As the central character of the scroll, Han Xizai's image has the characteristics of portrait painting, his face is handsome, and his demeanor reveals a

kind of transcendence and aloofness. Although he is in the midst of the prosperous and noisy night banquet, he seldom smiles on his face, and this kind of contrast profoundly reveals his inner depression and bitterness. Han Xizai's gorgeous costumes, fine outlining, especially the rich beard and eyebrows on his face, all show the artist's exquisite skills. The guests around Han Xizai in the picture have different attitudes, either listening attentively to the singer playing, or watching Han Xizai appreciatively beating the drums, each person's expression and action are unique, no repetition, no rigidity, and fully demonstrates their different personalities and emotions. The singing girls and dancing girls in the painting are also vivid, sitting or standing, with elegant postures and vivid expressions. Especially the dancers, when Han Xizai beat the drums, their posture and expression are depicted with great dynamism, and it seems that the rhythm of the drums and the lightness of their dance can be heard.

The costumes of the figures in the painting, ranging from the ornate costumes of the officials to the simple costumes of the attendants, have all been carefully designed and depicted. The costumes of the female figures, in particular, are not only colorful but also varied, and the aesthetic tendency of aristocratic women at that time can be seen from their clothes. In the costumes, color plays an important role, which can reflect the identity characteristics and social status of the characters. In Han Xizai Night Banquet, the costumes of the female characters use red, stone green, stone green and other intermediate colors, while the costumes of the main character Han Xizai use black, yellow, white three positive colors, the picture contrasts strongly and vividly. Including the picture repeatedly appeared many different identities of the characters, but in the artist's pen, each character's portrayal is not the same, the character dress color is also more elaborate, through the color arrangement to achieve the effect of distinguishing the master-slave relationship. For example, in the fourth section of Han Xizai alone enjoying the music scene (Figure 2), light colors are the main, supplemented by bright colors. While the women are wearing brightly colored flowery clothes and skirts, Han Xizai is wearing a white shirt and sitting on a black chair with his chest exposed, forming a sharp contrast between the two, which also reveals the difference in social status and identity between the two. (Figure 3 and 4) the second paragraph of Han Xizai drumming, Wangwushan dance and the fifth paragraph of the farewell, Han Xizai head wearing a black hat, wearing a yellow robe, lined with white, tied with a white belt, around the maids of honor are wearing red, stone green or stone green dress as a foil, so as to show the main character and the guests, the relationship between the attendants, highlighting the status of Han Xizai. The whole volume of the protagonist Han Xizai's coloring is quite attentive, using black, yellow and white, these three colors are positive, is a symbol of the status of the noble.



**Figure 2.** Part of Han Xizai's Night Banquet - Wind Ensemble  
(Image source: Chinese painting study material)



**Figure 3.** Part of Han Xizai's Night Banquet - Crowds Watching the Dance  
(Image source: Chinese painting learning materials)



**Figure 4.** Part of Han Xizai's Night Banquet - Seeing Off  
Guests at the End of the Banquet  
(Image source: Chinese painting learning materials)

The beautifully patterned screens, beds, couches, tables and chairs in the scrolls have clean, smooth lines that are both functional and decorative. In the paintings, the screens and other furniture are used as tools to separate but link the images. In the scene of "Pipa Performance", there are furniture such as a three-walled screen-type Lohan bed, a seating pier, a knife and toothboard flat-topped case, a backrest seat, and a screen. The main character Han Xizai is sitting on the three screen Lohan bed is a combination of screen and Lohan bed, screen framed with landscape paintings, compared with other ordinary Lohan bed is more distinctive. As well as the screen more frequently appear in the pier, it is lightweight and compact and easy to carry. Seated pier is mostly wooden, stool surface will sometimes be decorated with marble, embellishment. Wine cups, bowls and plates, musical instruments and other utensils are depicted in great detail, and the shapes and materials of the wine cups and bowls and plates reflect the level of craftsmanship and living habits at that time. Musical instruments such as pipa and drums also reflect the importance of music in banquets. The figures in the scroll also wear various accessories, such as crowns, earrings, necklaces, etc. The styles and materials of these accessories also reflect the fashion and aesthetics of the time. The costumes and props in Han Xizai's Night Banquet are not only rich in variety but also finely depicted, providing precious visual information for the study of the material culture and aesthetic interests of the Southern Tang Dynasty. Through the details of these costumes and props, we can get a glimpse of the social hierarchy, craftsmanship level, and people's lifestyles at that time.

### 2.3. Artistic Style and Expression Methods

The art style of Han Xizai Night Banquet is fine and realistic, with various methods of expression. Through the careful depiction of characters, scenes and colors, it shows the

social landscape and the inner world of the characters in the Southern Tang Dynasty, and its art style and methods of expression have high artistic value and historical significance.

The Night Banquet of Han Xizai adopts a fine brushwork style, with delicate and smooth lines, rich and harmonious colors in the picture. Gu employed superb brushwork techniques such as outlining, rendering, and splashing colors, making the picture both rigorously structured and vividly chiaroscuro. Despite the decorative nature of the painting, Gu strove for realism in depicting the figures and scenes, trying to restore the real scene of the night banquet at that time. This spirit of realism is rare in ancient Chinese paintings, reflecting the artist's skill and deep observation of real life. In terms of spatial layout, the picture adopts the form of a long scroll, which is divided into five scenes, such as listening to music, watching dance, taking a rest, blowing cleanly and seeing off the guests, etc. Each scene is both independent and interconnected, forming a coherent whole. Gu masterfully uses the screen and other elements to separate and connect the different scenes, making the picture have a sense of hierarchy without losing the coherence. The characters in the scroll are vivid and vivid, showing their different personalities and emotions through the fine depiction of their demeanor, movements, and costumes. Especially the protagonist Han Xizai, with his handsome face and indifferent demeanor, contrasts sharply with the merriment of the other guests, deeply revealing the complexity of his inner emotions. The use of color is very elaborate, with both splendor and elegance. The harmonious color combination not only highlights the three-dimensionality of the characters, but also creates a lively atmosphere of the banquet. In different scenes, the use of color also has its own focus, such as listening to music scene to warm tones, while blowing the scene is dominated by cold tones, through the contrast and change of color, enhance the expressive power of the picture.

### 3. The Historical Value and Significance of Han Xizai's Night Banquet

Han Xizai Night Banquet is not only a work of art, but also an important material for the study of ancient Chinese social history. In the field of art, it has a very high historical value and significance. In terms of artistic expression, Gu Mazhong skillfully combined realism and expressionism in The Night Banquet of Han Xizai, which not only realistically reproduced the banquet scene of that time, but also expressed his deep understanding of the inner world of the characters through their demeanor and movements. This combination provided new techniques and artistic concepts for later generations of figure paintings. The scroll shows a dynamic banquet process through the change of scenes and the activities of the figures. This interaction between scenes and figures enhances the narrative and dramatic nature of the picture, providing a new narrative mode for ancient Chinese painting. In terms of artistic technique, The Night Banquet of Han Xizai is famous for its fine brushwork. Gu's use of line, color mixing, and detailing have all reached a very high level. The treatment of color and light and shadow is very characteristic, through the contrast of warm and cold colors, light and dark changes, creating a rich visual hierarchy and three-dimensional sense. As a precious historical document, the historical value of Han Xizai's Night Banquet is not only reflected in the reflection of the social and historical

background of the time, but also in the rich information on the study of characters, banquet culture, art history, painting techniques, as well as the history of cultural relics and collections.

### 4. Conclusion

The Night Banquet of Han Xizai vividly reflects the social landscape and aristocratic life of the Southern Tang Dynasty, and provides us with intuitive information for the study of the history and culture of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. The historical background behind the painting involves the political turmoil and cultural prosperity of the Southern Tang Dynasty, reflecting the interweaving of politics and culture. Through the analysis of the paintings, we can have a glimpse of the social landscape, political background, characterization, and banquet culture of the time. At the same time, the painting also has important value in art history, painting technique, cultural relics and collection history. Therefore, the study of Han Xizai Night Banquet not only helps to enrich our understanding of ancient history, but also helps to improve our appreciation of ancient art, and further promotes the development of China's history and art research.

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