

Persia's Influence on the Stone Art of the Han Dynasty

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Stone was a familiar material in architecture and sculpture for Chinese people since the Stone Age. However, it can be noticed that the stone art of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.) displayed a new phenomenon. In the pre-Han period, comparing to wood and clay, stone was the least popular, and stone sculptures were small in size. In the Han period, the situation changed: stone became commonly used; the stone sculptures were produced in a monumental size. However, the rise of stone's role mainly occurred in the construction of tombs. This paper is aimed to study the provenance of the motivations causing the phenomenon to occur, and the stone's meaning in this context.

Some scholars proposed the phenomenon was related to the contact with India, but the author believed that it should be involved with the contact with Persia. China in the Han time contacted both India and Persia through the Silk Road. Both were famous for their stone culture. Nevertheless, the former used stone mainly in religious purposes such as constructing temples and sacred images while the latter mainly in tombs. The Han Dynasty's stone culture was similar to the latter one. Moreover, the works' styles in the early Han period do not show any link with the Indian art. Thus, the motivation should have been derived from Persia.

All Han people expected their spirits after death to travel to the land of Xiwangmu, enjoy the eternal bliss and become immortal. According to some Chinese contemporary accounts, Han people believed her land was located in Persia. Therefore, the Chinese might have believed the construction of stone tombs practiced in Persia, would send them to this blissful land. Furthermore, eternity and immortality were the most important concept of ancient Chinese people toward the life after death. Thus, stone, a durable material, can denote these concepts.