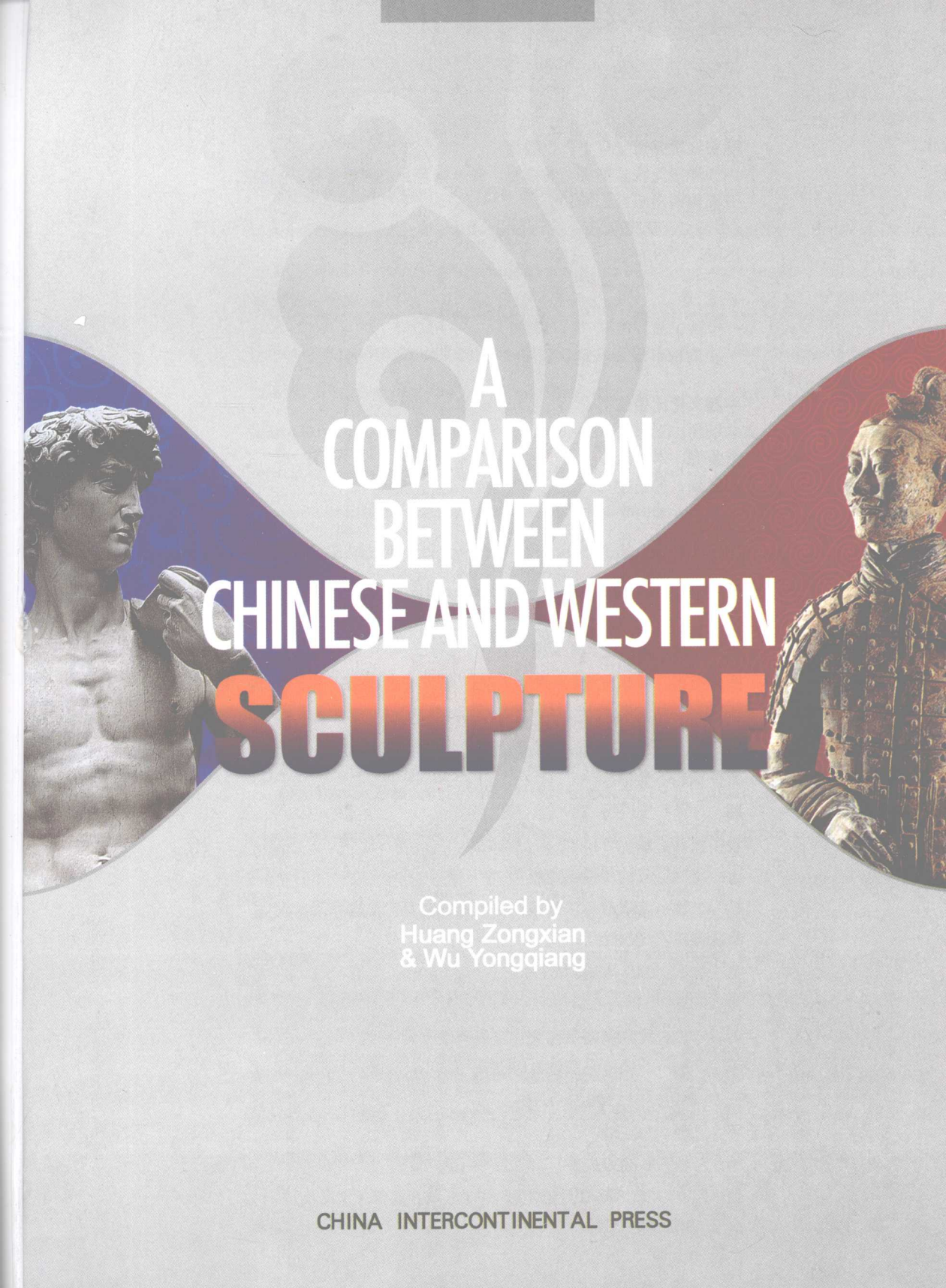


A COMPARISON BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN SCULPTURE

Compiled by
Huang Zongxian &
Wu Yongqiang



CHINA INTERNATIONAL PRESS



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A true sculpture is constructed seriously in every aspect including gesture. It freezes all those things that pertain to man and imparts to them material hardness. Rage becomes sharp and gentleness solemn. The fantastic dream that results from the strokes of a painter's brush becomes instead a hard and everlasting thought.

—— Charles Baudelaire



Chapter I: Sino-Western Sculpture and Culture

The sculptures of China and Western countries are the results of two different types of civilization. China belongs to the continent of East Asia, where high mountains, trackless deserts and uncharted oceans isolated it from other civilizations for many hundreds of years. Although East and West were connected by means of the ancient “Silk Road”, such influences as there might have been were diluted by the fact that, as travel was slow, ideas and their interpretations underwent many transformations and reinterpretations from country to country. The well-known story of the Tang Dynasty monk Xuanzhuang, who journeyed westwards in his search for sutra books, is a neat metaphor for the potential difficulties that may be encountered in Sino-foreign cultural exchange.

SINO-FOREIGN CULTURES: STABILITY AND PROGRESS

Generally speaking, the export of civilization from ancient China to western countries was greater than that of those same countries to China. In successive decades, Zhang Qian was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Occident, and Zheng He led a voyage to the empires of the west, thus indicating that the Chinese Empire desired to exhibit its achievements in civilization to “the wild people of the western places”. Prior to the 1850s, when the western powers entered China by military force, China had been a typical ancient society, self-sufficient and content to develop its own history and civilization according to an internal schedule.

Due to lack of external influence, Chinese culture became extremely stable and confident in itself; such foreign influence as might intrude, swiftly wilted in its power to influence the more highly-developed Chinese culture, which itself proved to be extremely compatible with the taste of the outside world. During the period of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534), it was more than a hundred years from the construction and decoration of the Yungang Grottoes to that of the Longmen Grottoes, and yet the traces of western influence on the Buddhist art over this period is negligible.

It was probably an indifference to the art of navigation that prevented China from having a smooth exchange of culture with the outside world. During the period when

European culture was penetrating into the East through India and Central Asia, the enormous extra distance and time required to adequately explore China meant that the western cultures remained a relatively unknown quantity.

From the Northwest to the Central Plains, we can see quite clearly that Buddhist sculpture penetrated step by step and gradually influenced successive local styles. From Kizil to Dunhuang, and from thence to Yungang and then Longmen, the evolution of a Buddhistic style of sculpture illustrates an exotic cultural progression. We can clearly observe the declining of western style and the advance of that of the East. In such a way, China independently developed its own culture and art with little interference from the outside world. Not, however, like the art of ancient Egypt, that resisted change by isolating itself from the outside world for 3000 years. China embraced great changes from within, and managed to form a complete aesthetic with distinctive ethnical characteristics.

The German historical philosopher Spengler claimed that any independent culture has its primary symbol, such as the statuary of antique Greece, the pyramids of ancient Egypt or the Gothic architecture of Northern Europe. In light of this, we can perhaps identify the cultural symbol by means of straightforward observation. Thus, the difference between Chinese and western sculptural art may also provide a visual clue to reveal the difference between Chinese and western cultures.

Western art is based on that of ancient Greece. In the world outlook system of the latter, people believed that object is opposite to man and subjective is distinct from objective; the universe is the first object to be recognized by man; "truth" is the ultimate aim of culture; all of which combines to encourage an objective understanding of nature and a rational interpretation of law. Ancient Greeks

believed that the principles of the universe could be equated with a harmony of numbers, i.e. “all things are included in one”. Everything in the world changes statically and stays constant dynamically. Man is a microcosm of the universe and is but an imitation of a higher reality. Therefore, man’s body becomes a visual representation of the internal order of the universe. The sculptures delineating Greek gods are no more than an ideal representation of man, the difference between man and god being simply the difference between individuals and the overall ideal, as systemised by the mythological doctrine of “anthropomorphism”. In this case, we see that the philosophical principle of “harmony” becomes also the rule of aesthetics. The rationalist western classical aesthetics thus began.

The philosophy of ancient Greece, as developed in combination with Christian theology by Plotinus and Aurelius Augustinus, the leading Neo-Platonists of ancient Rome, was generalized into a system of transcendentalism, influencing not only the theological rationalism of the Gothic period but also exerting a profound influence on the European rationalist philosophy ten centuries later. From it, as a natural progression, we reach the ideas of Leibnitz and the theory of “predetermined harmony” as put forward by Wolf.

Aesthetics, as an independent subject, was formulated against this philosophical background. Surely we can say that Baumgarten's famous definition - beauty is perfection - refers to the natural, harmonious profile of universe. Although he defines it with the attribute “perceptual”, we already know from Descartes that the so-called “perceptual perfection” held by the rationalists is dependant upon “mutual induction” between similar subjects and objects. Without improvement of objects, perceptual knowledge would lose its foundation. Therefore, the traditional mainstream aesthetics of the West, as revealed by Hegel, is held to be objective, with

a no less than scientific basis. In other words, both art and science are utilised in our desire to understand the nature of the universe: science allows us to know the world, while art offers our means of representing it.

The ancient Greeks were wise in both thought and observation, as symbolized by their principle god Apollo. They used their wisdom to enlighten themselves and those around them, profoundly and tranquilly, and placed internal order side by side with intellect. People learned to do without anxiety or perplexity. The serious, yet calm, nature of Greek sculpture indicates to us that the Greek people themselves enjoyed a similar disposition. They placed themselves in a simply-ordered, clearly-orientated tridimensional space into which fear and irrationality were not admitted.

Christian theology, however, tore down the walls of this Greek contentment and construed in its place a narrow cell whose name was “original sin”. It took the Renaissance to once again free man’s soul and offer a return to self-consciousness and the desire for intellectual exploration. Since then, people have had to understand the world in order to command it. As voiced by Shakespeare through the medium of one of his characters, “man is the god of everything”!

We can actually obtain a premonition of the rising of the modern spirit of the West from the sharply-steepled Gothic cathedrals rising up into the sky. Their harmonious combination of height, light and symmetry replaced the bulky and enclosed style of Romanesque churches. Their theological purpose, expressed architecturally, was to grant men the freedom to explore the unknown world. Against such a background the image of a man of wisdom was vividly portrayed in sculpture. A fine example can be found in the French city of Rheims, whose gothic majesty contrasts most strongly with the archaic sculptures of Greece, themselves the work of those who had disengaged themselves from vulgar superstition. And yet

for us it is Rheims cathedral that speaks of life.

In the Dark Ages most sculptures were embossed on church buildings. Roman churches were overadorned with graven images of sinful souls in abandonment. During the Gothic period, however, church sculpture gradually developed into a newer and more sophisticated style. Bodies were complete; limbs more roundly defined; and heads could be affixed to necks without the necessity of outside support. With this gradual resumption of carving in the round, we begin to feel that man is escaping from the world of gods, and what remains is only a steadily weakening tie between the images of sculpture and the tenets of the church. They now confront an endless space, where only human rationalism can continue the voyage.

The Europeans who had broken away from the confines of the Dark Ages were no longer satisfied to silently contemplate the perfect, tranquil universe as described in ancient Greece. They desired to know the infinite. In fact, the image of Faust as interpreted by Goethe was current well before the 18th century; he was already there in the works of such artistic greats as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci during the Revival of Learning in Italy. Rembrandt utilised a canvas without boundaries, while Bernini presented, through his sculptures, the charm of an unknown world, with all its stormy contrast of dark and bright. All this comes reaches its apotheosis in the pact between Faust and Mephistopholes. Although Faust concludes with the final outburst, "Ah, so good, a moment longer please!", we, as observers of the drama of European art, know that it is merely the end of the first act.

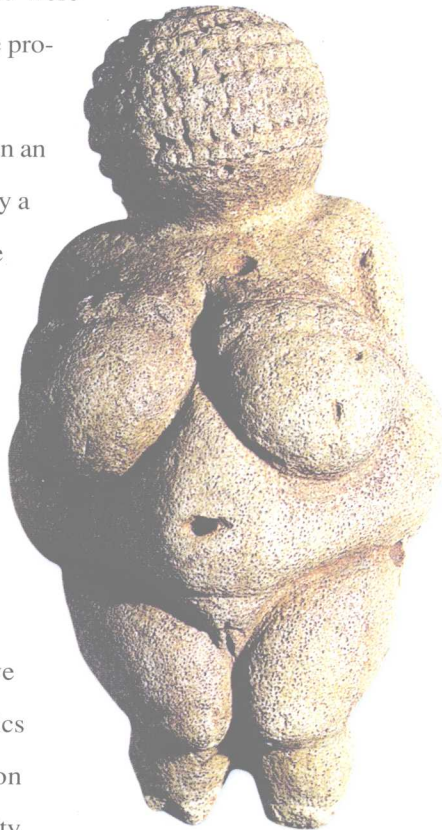
“MODELING OF CLAY” AND “CARVING OF STONE”

When looking at the relics, we observe a significant time difference between the prehistoric sculptures of China and those of Europe. In the late Paleolithic age, twenty or thirty thousand years ago, sculptures of animals and naked women, modelled from life, were being carved in Europe. These sculptures, along with the cave paintings of the same age, provide us with the evidence that early European art had undergone an extended period of naturalism. However, China has left us nothing comparable in its own sculptural development. On the contrary, when the naturalist prehistoric style was declining in Europe, it flourished in China. For example, the female head sculpture unearthed from Gaositou, Li County, Gansu Province, is in the Banpo style belonging to Yangshao Cultural Period. Her thick neck, fleshy face, a tress of hair tied up on her head, and the bores in her earlobes, were made with great delicacy. The red clay kettle excavated from Luonan, Shaanxi Province, is also of Yangshao Cultural Period. The kettle's mouth has been molded into a girl's head, which she lifts up slightly, seeming to hold her breath as though attracted by something. These works demonstrate the true intention of primitive artists. We can also see, at the same time, that Chinese sculptures of the Neolithic era were in some respects repeating those of the Paleolithic period in Europe.

The pottery figure of a “pregnant woman”, discovered amongst the ruins of a

sacrificial site of the Hongshan Culture of the New Stone Age, in Dongshanzui, Liaoning Province, seems almost to us like a rebirth of the “Harvest Mother”. We know that, tens of thousands of years ago, the symbol of procreation was very popular in Europe. By simply comparing the “pregnant woman” with the Austrian Mother God Image, the following conclusion can be drawn: the worship of reproduction was always a subject of primitive culture. This is because they wished to have more people in their tribes, and were intensely curious about the reproductive processes of the world around them.

It is hard to tell the difference between an American cat and a Chinese cat purely by a comparison of their behavior. By the same principle, we can make an anthropological assumption, since primitive people were much the same in regard to their living conditions, desires and social relations; in other words, the differences between the primitive cultures of different parts of the world are less great than their similarities. Primitive cultures tend to exhibit the characteristics of convergence. If such an assumption could, in a sense, reflect the cultural reality of early people, we may be emboldened to guess that China does not have an absence



Statue of the Prehistoric Goddess

Made of limestone, it is 11 cm high. It was created in Europe in the late Paleolithic Period. It is now kept in Vienna Natural History Museum.

of naturalist Paleolithic sculptures, but they merely have not been found yet. The period when sculptures began to appear in China may be earlier than we know.

Although a convergence of primitive cultures is assumed, we notice still, however, that the materials used for sculpture were, since the prehistoric period, habitually different between China and the West: stone was preferred in Europe, whereas in China it was clay. Therefore, the relics of the West are mostly composed in stone, but we discover mainly clay and pottery sculptures in China. The preferential difference between stone and clay is, as may be guessed, not simply a question of technical difficulty. If this were the case, then how could we explain how the hard jade stones were so much favored by Chinese carvers? Instead, we would gain a firmer understanding of Chinese clay-based sculpture by appreciating the Chinese ancient's attitudes toward the external world and their fate within it. Soil is the skin of our planet Earth. It is bestowed with life according to the special concept of Chinese people regarding life. At the same time, carvers have transmuted intangible life into something material. Such images come from the same source of people, animals, the earth and the mountains. As was said by Zhuangzi, "It can be demonstrated by contrasting a stem of grass with a mighty column, an ugly face against one of beauty, and by a whole series of strange things such as broadness, changes, cunning and peculiarity. But these are connected to one another and become integral under a general principle".^①

The selection of building materials usually reflects the way of living and aesthetic taste of a nation. The reaches of the Yellow River and the Yangtze River, as the birthplaces of Chinese civilization, are naturally different in geological conditions, but earth and wood are selected and used as building materials in both these two places. This is closely related to living conditions and means of survival.

China was a civilized ancient country based primarily on farming. People had a profound relationship with land and plants. Therefore, it is natural that they would focus on building their dwellings with the earth and wood that were readily to hand. This led to the development of traditional Chinese architecture, based from its very beginning on structures of earth and wood, and had also an impact on the selection of carving materials. Earth and wood are soft, mature and delicate in texture, and these characteristics are in accordance with the desire of Chinese people for gentleness, peace and affinity with nature. But buildings constructed from these materials, to say nothing of sculptures and models of pottery clay, were continually subject to the damage caused by time and war. For this reason, many magnificent Chinese buildings of ancient times have been lost to us.

Ancient Greece and Rome were the birthplaces of western civilization. These two regions contain more mountains than plains, an irregular topography, and short rivers. Though loose in soil, stone materials are abundant. There are widely spread deposits of limestone and marble in both countries. The rocks were used locally to build houses and then to carve sculptures. The cool, hard stone found in these parts of the world may be considered as ideally suited to westerners in terms of their more rational and objective spirit.

Meanwhile, westerners preferred to use stone for sculpture, probably because they desired to counterbalance the natural world. Michelangelo says, "Carving activity is to liberate the life confined within a piece of stone....Artists should remove the useless parts of marble." As an expression of the artistic credo, it pretty well covers the whole concept and responsibility of the western imagination, does it not? In terms of European culture, human history is a process in which man is struggling with the world and yearns to be independent. People have established