

FOLK CRAFT HERITAGE OF CHINA

FOLK STONE LIONS



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

民间石狮 : 英文 / 张淮水编著 ; 闫威译 .

—北京 : 外文出版社, 2009

(中国民间文化遗产)

ISBN 978-7-119-05628-9

I. 民... II. ①张... ②闫... III. 狮—石雕—民间工艺

—中国—英文 IV.J314.3

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2009) 第 006883 号

出版策划 : 李振国

英文翻译 : 闫 威

英文审定 : Lisa Buckley 王明杰

责任编辑 : 杨春燕

文案编辑 : 付 瑶 刘芳念

装帧设计 : 黎 红

印刷监制 : 韩少乙

本书由中国轻工业出版社授权出版

民间石狮

张淮水 编著

© 2009 外文出版社

出版发行 :

外文出版社出版 (中国北京百万庄大街 24 号)

邮政编码 : 100037

网 址 : www.flp.com.cn

电 话 : 008610-68320579 (总编室)

008610-68995852 (发行部)

008610-68327750 (版权部)

制 版 :

北京维诺传媒文化有限公司

印 刷 :

北京外文印刷厂

开 本 : 787mm × 1092mm 1/16 印张 : 8.5

2009 年第 1 版第 1 次印刷

(英)

ISBN 978-7-119-05628-9

09800 (平)

7-E-3844 P

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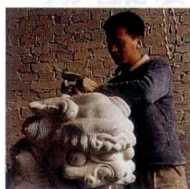
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INTRODUCTION



1. The Development of China's Stone Lion Carving and the Evolution of Its Designs

Foreign envoys brought the first living lions to China as gifts to the emperor during the first and second centuries. With the introduction of real lions, stone lion carving began to flourish in China.

Few stone lions sculpted in the early third century still exist. The stone lion in front of the Ancestral Hall of the Wu Family in Jiaxiang, Shandong Province, dating back to the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-A.D.220) is among the most time-honored stone lions in China. The one in front of Gao Yi's tomb in Ya'an, Sichuan Province is another example of the stone lions carved in this period. Most of the stone lions of the Han Dynasty have features of both lions and tigers. With a strong physique, they appear to be taking vigorous steps while holding their proud heads high. Viewed from the side, their spines are curved in a supple-looking S-shape. Their fur and mane as well as the wing-shaped features near their arms and the cloud- or flame-shaped patterns on their bodies are carved in intaglio and bas-relief.



A stone *bixie* (a legendary animal) of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) with a hole on its back, unearthed from Dianjiangtai in Ya'an, Sichuan Province.



Buddhism was introduced into China during this period, together with lion images with Buddhist connotations. And as Buddhist stories began to spread, lions gained popularity across the country. According to one tale, Buddha, riding a white elephant and escorted by lions, soared into a paradise full of blooming flowers and songbirds. As soon as he landed, he roared like a lion, "I am the sole sovereign of Heaven and Earth!" In another story, Buddha sits on a lion-shaped armchair and rests on a lion-shaped bed, and Buddha is the lion of mankind. Moreover, a Buddhist text states: "When Buddha was first sent into this world, 500 lions came from snow-capped mountains to stand watch at his gate. Lions are therefore deemed guardians of Buddha." The lion is a highly respected symbol of Buddhism. Its cultural connotations are extremely significant in the history of China's stone lion carving.

As Buddhism became integrated into the Chinese culture from the third through sixth centuries, the lion, originally a religious animal, became associated with good fortune. During this period, the lion, the *qilin* (Chinese kylin) and the Chinese dragon were regarded as special animals that could bring good luck and ward off evil.



A stone lion at the Ancestral Hall of Wu Family in Jiaxiang, Shandong Province.



Stone lions of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534) in the Six-lion Grotto, Longmen Grottoes.



Stone lions at the imperial tombs of the Southern Dynasties (420-589) near Nanjing in Jiangsu Province are masterpieces of this period. Carved from whole rocks, they are huge and heavy. These lions have long fur and small faces, with their heads high and mouths wide open. Their tongues are long enough to touch their chest, which is bulging with muscles. They have a pair of “wings” carved in relief and are covered with Buddhist decorative patterns featuring fire and clouds. In general, they create a powerful impression.



A lion relief of the Western Wei Dynasty (535-556) in Grotto No. 113, Maijishan Grottoes.



A squatting lion of the Sui Dynasty (581-618) unearthed from the ruins of the Hanyuan Hall in Luoyang, Henan Province.

Stone lions of the Northern Dynasties (368-581) are mostly found in Buddhist grottoes. Unlike those of the contemporary Southern Dynasties, stone lions of the Northern Dynasties are smaller with lifelike designs and the exotic style of the Western Regions – areas west of the Yumenguan Pass in today's Gansu Province. In addition to the three-dimensional lion sculptures, many are carved in relief. The relief of “God Standing on the Lion” on a carved tablet of the Western Wei Dynasty, one of the Northern Dynasties, in Grotto No. 133 at the Maijishan Grottoes, is typical of relief lions. Many stone lions of the Northern Dynasties are found

in grottoes at Maijishan, Yungang and Longmen. They serve as evidence that stone lion carving spread from the west to the east at the same time Buddhism gained popularity across China.

China's stone lion carving peaked during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), when tombs and sacred avenues embraced standardized designs. A sacred avenue is a boulevard in front of an ancient tomb, usually lined by stone figures and animals. While basing their work on the styles of the stone lions made during previous dynasties, Tang craftsmen did away with the mysterious, exotic features by switching to an approach that combined realism with romanticism. These artists emphasized the lifelikeness and structure of the stone lions and at the same time vividly captured their spirit. The size of the lions was also highlighted to make them look intimidating.

Many well-carved stone lions of the Tang Dynasty are still in existence today, with those at the Qianling Tomb as the most typical representatives. The Qianling Tomb



A squatting lion of the Kaiyuan period (713-742) of the Tang Dynasty at the Qianling Tomb in Pucheng, Shaanxi Province.



A stone lion of the Northern Qi Dynasty (550-577) in Beixiangtang in Handan, Hebei Province.





is located in Liangshan, Qianxian County, Shaanxi Province, with stone lions along its four sides. All of them are squatting and are more than three meters tall. Their heads are held high, their mouths are wide open and their eyes look forward. Their physiques reveal plenty of chest muscles and bulging veins in their forelegs, making them seem all the more powerful. Their bellies are tucked in and their backs are bowed. Viewed as a whole, these squatting lions look mighty, solemn, and awe-inspiring. As masterpieces of China's stone lion carving, the stone lions at the Qianling Tomb have been instrumental in the development of this form of art.

Stone lions from the ninth to the fourteenth century were made according to the Tang style, but were smaller, weighed less, and were less imposing. And yet they were more lifelike and skillfully sculpted. They were embellished with neck rings, rings and ribbons. Their pedestals were also more elaborate.



A stone lion in front of the tomb of Xiao Jing, Marquis of Wuping County of the Liang Dynasty (502-557), in Hualin Village, Ganjiaxiang, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province.

Apart from emperors' mausoleums, stone lions made during this period were found in grottoes, temples, ancestral halls, residences and gardens. They were becoming secularized and diversified, with the Buddhist, divine and imperial features of earlier stone lions less prominent and various features of the national character enhanced. By the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368), common people had begun to have access to stone lions.

Lion carving in mausoleums and Buddhist grottoes became less prevalent from the fourteenth century to the early twentieth century. With the advances in the public's aesthetic awareness and the opening up of artistic philosophy, stone lions were no longer viewed as something unique to Buddhist altars and imperial palaces but rather a special form of folk art.

The most notable feature of this period is that stone lions were used to decorate non-official buildings such as ancestral halls, guild halls, mountain passes, villages, bridges, *pailou* gateways, theaters, and houses. In some buildings, lion carvings could be found everywhere, both inside and outside. In addition to having the power to cast off evil, they were more frequently used as decorative items. For example, the Zhang Family's *Pailou* in Shanxian County, Shandong Province, is known as the "100-lion *Pailou*" for the more than 100 stone lions carved on it.

Many small stone lions from this period have been preserved. They are mostly used as architectural accessories on buildings, on everyday items, as home interior



A walking lion of the Wuzhou period (690-705) of the Tang Dynasty at the Shunling Tomb in Xianyang, Shaanxi Province.



A walking lion of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) at the Yongdingling Tomb in Gongxian County, Henan Province.



A stone lion of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) at the Yongyuling Tomb in Gongxian County, Henan Province.



A stone tiger of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) at the sacred avenue of the imperial mausoleum in Fengyang, Anhui Province.



A stone lion of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) at the Xiaoling Tomb in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province.



A stone sculpture of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) featuring Manjusri, Bodhisattva of Keen Awareness, riding a lion in Grotto No. 2, Maijishan Grottoes, Gansu Province.



decorations, as ornaments, toys, and as characters in folk culture shows. Stone lions on top of the hitching posts in Weibei, Shaanxi Province and on the baby stones in regions along the Yellow River in Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces are outstanding examples of small stone lions.

In general, stone lions of this period were well conceived, delicately carved, and finely embellished. They gained increasing popularity as symbols of good fortune. Stone lions in the Republic of China (1912-1949) were made in the same style as in the previous era. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, especially since the country's economic and cultural development of the 1980s, China's stone lion carving has reached an unprecedented level in terms of innovation, use and commercialization.

II. Stone Lions and Folk Culture

Stone lions, as carriers of Chinese folk culture, convey ordinary people's true feelings about life.

"Baby stones" are small stone sculptures popular in regions along the Yellow River in Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces, mostly carved in the shape of lions. Residents in the region, especially those in rural areas, believe that children under age 12 are emotionally immature and therefore should not be allowed to be frightened, or harmed by evils. So parents carved lions for their children to protect their souls.



A hitching post in Shanxi Province.

In northern Shaanxi Province, the head of the family traditionally begins to carve a stone lion for a soon-to-be-born child. The baby stone must be sculpted in exactly 100 days with great care. The carving should begin on the night of the first day and finish on the night of the 100th day, when the stars come out.

Residents in Shanxi Province, however, usually do not make baby stones by themselves, but buy them at rural fairs. Produced by lifelong craftsmen, baby stones in Shanxi Province are more finely crafted than those in Shaanxi Province.

On the third day after a baby is born, its parents tie its wrist or ankle to a small stone lion, using a piece of red thread, believing the stone will protect the baby's soul from evil. The child keeps the stone for 12 years, and every year the same ritual is performed on the child's birthday and important festivals.

Stone lions are also used for non-governmental buildings. As features of design they help convey the basic



A gate-corner lion sculpture in Shanxi Province.

philosophy of Chinese residential architecture. For example, architects often use stone lions and *shigandangs* together. A *shigandang* is a large rock usually put at the entrance to a village or by a street to ward off evil and bad luck. It is a common belief that *shigandangs* guarded by stone lions have twice the power to do the job.

In ancient times a pair of stone lions was usually set outside the gates of every high official's residence. As they look out onto the world from their post, the male lion is on the left with his right paw resting on a ball, symbolizing power. The female lion is on the



A baby stone in Shanxi Province.





right with her left paw fondling a cub, symbolizing thriving offspring. The stone lions were used to indicate the ranks of officials by the number of curls in their mane.

The houses of top officials had lions with 13 curls and the number of curls decreased by one as the rank of the official went down a level. In ancient times, Chinese officials were ranked from first to ninth, according to their power and status. Officials below the seventh tier were not allowed to have stone lions in front of their houses; otherwise, they would be accused of breaching convention. Abiding by this feudal custom, even rich merchants usually did not place stone lions at their gates to distinguish themselves from officials.



A gate lion.



A sculpture featuring a Hui man and a lion, in Zhaokang Village, Xiangfen, Shanxi Province.