

Zhao Wenbing

CHINESE SCULPTING

History Through Centuries of Sculpting

*Translated by Wang Wenliang, Kang Jian
Han Huizhi & Xiao Ying*



CHINA
INTERCONTINENTAL
PRESS

Cultural China Series

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Foreword

Emerging from one of the oldest civilizations, Chinese sculpture has thrived for thousand of years. As time moves and culture evolves, Chinese sculpture has also taken different paths in different regions and cannot be easily categorized into a few types. Chinese sculpting did not evolve in a single path and style does not stay the same. It grows as times change and culture evolves.

More impressionable than painting, the development of sculpture is often closely allied to the historical context. The life of sculptural arts is typically bound with the prosperity of the country.

Take Chinese sculpture as an example. Sculptures characterized by stateliness and ritualism emerged during the Shang and Zhou dynasties (1600–221 BC); pieces full of majesty and cohesion surfaced during the Han (206 BC–AD 220) and Tang (618–907) dynasties; the Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern dynasties (265–589) produced Buddhist images full of religious influence and spirituality; pieces from the Song Dynasty (960–1279) are exquisite and moderate; while the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911) produced colorful and secular sculptures.

Chinese sculptural art first emerges in the Neolithic Age (10000–4000 BC). The simplest sculptures correlate closely with early witchcraft, such as the stones arrangement and clay and pottery sculptures representing women found in graves of primitive man. They show a relationship between the sculptures and the beliefs of primitive man. Moreover, such sculptures



are also practical in a sense. They were generally made of clay, jade or stone and their form combines human-shaped figures and wares. Some pieces are large wares while others are small sculpture. Regardless, these sculptures displayed the primary nonrepresentational characteristics of Chinese sculpture.

Bronze casting techniques gradually replaced potting techniques. Bronze sculptures are dominant during the slavery societies. Similar to primitive society, the sculptural arts of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC) began to take shape. Works from this era are rare. Bronze sculptures were mainly used to strengthen spiritual beliefs during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, when the belief in ghosts and deities and compliance with a ritualistic system were popular. Ferocious and formidable bronze sculptures from the Shang and Zhou dynasties generate a sense of pressure. Artistically, the most important achievement was the highly ornamental patterns of such sculptures, reflecting in exquisite bronze casting and their unique expression of the shape-making language of the Chinese.

The idea of China as a universal underlying concept started during the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), which produced breathtakingly brilliant sculpture. The most significant achievement is the Terra-Cotta Warriors and Horses in the Mausoleum of Emperor Shihuang. The magnificent sculptures have a lot of spirit while fully displaying unique Chinese techniques and the ambition of the Qin Dynasty.

Following the excellent techniques of the Qin Dynasty, sculptural arts of the Han Dynasty show new styles and themes—the romance and humanity of the culture of the Chu Kingdom and the grand features of the culture of the ancient northern people. The former style is mainly demonstrated by pottery sculptures such as the Women Dancer and the Story Teller. The latter is shown on large stone sculptures including the stone carvings in front of the Tomb of Huo Qubing.



Buddhism was introduced to China from India during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) and became popular among both emperors and common people during the Wei and Jin dynasties (265–420) due to the prosperity of metaphysics and the loss of influence of Confucianism and Taoism. The development of the religion led to an increasing number of Buddhist images, a factor that was also influenced by social unrest, regime change and the hard life during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589). Large works in grottoes and the construction of Buddhist took Chinese sculpture into a new important stage. The Buddhist statues in the Gandhāra style were prevalent in the early stage of Chinese sculpture, which was influenced directly by Buddhist statues in India. Before long, the local Chinese culture adopted similar styles and Buddhist statues with Chinese characteristics emerged gradually.

Grottoes construction started during the fourth century and thrived between the fifth and the eighth centuries (between the Wei and Jin dynasties and the Tang Dynasty). The quantity and scale of the Buddhist statues grew despite a movement to exterminate Buddhism during that period. After the eighth Century, enthusiasm for grottoes started ebbing away as culture evolved, regimes changed and temple construction thrived. Many grottoes and Buddhist statues still in evidence today were made between the fourth and eighth centuries. The Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang (Gansu), Maijishan Grottoes in Gansu, Yungang Grottoes in Datong (Shanxi) and Longman Grottoes in Luoyang represent the key sculptural styles of the time. Such grottoes preserve the transforming styles and characteristics of Chinese sculpture between the Wei and Jin dynasties and the Tang Dynasty.

As time progressed, Buddhism became more integrated with Chinese culture and beliefs. There has also been reciprocal influence among Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. The



colored sculptures in Jin Temple (Shanxi) and Dazu Stone Carving in Sichuan fully embody the combination of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. It is during this time that Buddhist statues display a change from the stiffness and alienation in the primary stage to calmness and maturity after combination with various kinds of culture.

Besides a belief in Buddhism, emperors of various dynasties also attached great importance to the construction of their tombs. Many important sculptures outside of tombs have been found since the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 25). The stone beasts outside of a tomb from the Eastern Han Dynasty best embody the spirit of the time. The basic forms of tombs were well established by the Wei and Jin dynasties. The scale of tombs reached the top during the Sui and Tang dynasties (581–907). Some sculptures imitated lucky animals that could protect people against evil spirits, such as stone beasts, *tianlu* (an animal with a single horn) and *bixie* (which has two horns). These became symbols of dynamic spirits and were placed in imperial tombs construction after the Wei and Jin dynasties.

The pottery tomb figurine is also a profound and important part of Chinese sculpture. Various pottery tomb sculptures and sculptural beasts—from the terra-cotta warriors and horses of the Qin and Han dynasties to the tri-color glazed pottery of the Tang Dynasty—embody the characteristics of times. Regime changes and evolution of culture are also obviously integrated into sculptures of each time, such as the elegant bone and clear appearance of Wei and Jin Period pieces and the plump beauty of samples from the Tang Dynasty.

Chinese sculpture began to decline during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Generally speaking, even religious sculptures became mediocre. In spite of that, some great masterpieces appeared, especially painted clay sculptures. The Shuanglin Temple in Pingyao and the Qiongzhu Temple in Kunming have in their



collections some of the most brilliant clay sculptures from the Ming and Qing dynasties. The Shuanglin Temple is famous for the Guanyin and Weituo statues and more than 2,000 vivid figures. The Qiongzhu Temple is known for the 500 Arhat statues, a perfect combination of religious and secular art. The development of painted clay sculptures was connected to the prosperity in arts and crafts during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

As one of the key art categories, classical architecture is closely related to the sculptural arts. Architectural styles and art forms change a lot from the Qin and Han dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties. Although the splendid palaces from the Qin and Han dynasties have turned to ashes, the eaves tiles and big hollow bricks still display the power of the mighty Qin. The eaves tiles decorated with four patterns associated to four deities and Chinese characters along with stone sculptures are representative sculptural achievements of the Han Dynasty and define the stylistic progress of style Chinese sculpture.

The architectural sculpture on palaces from the Sui and Tang dynasties show the cultural inclusion and confidence of the times. The Great Wild Goose Pagoda in Xi'an, a well-preserved Buddhist pagoda, is truly the best of the line carving works from the Tang Dynasty. Architectural sculpture during the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368) is a mirror of the culture and the national strength of the times. Sculptures often have strong outlines but lack of spirit and cohesion. The architectural relics from the Ming and Qing are profound. The Imperial Palace in Beijing represents the level of achievement of architectural sculpture. It pays equal attention to ornamental and practical functions and is more exquisite than examples from previous dynasties.

Sculptural examples from folk architecture are also very prominent and mainly include brick sculptures and the woodcarvings, which are close to the folk culture. The smart “*Muhura*” and simple “*Big Afu*” are full of vitality of folk life.



Entering the 20th century, the traditional religious sculpture was in a declining stage in China. Although the small-sized folk sculpture was still flourishing, it failed to become the mainstream. Since the Xinhai Revolution (1911), the art of Chinese sculpture has made distinctive changes and development. The introduction of Western way of sculpturing was accepted by some of the new-type fine arts schools. The European classic and academic way and concept of sculpture gradually grew in China. From around the May 4th Movement in 1919 to the 1930s, more young people went to learn sculpture in the West. After these people returned home, most were engaged in the education of arts. Their efforts promoted the development of modern sculpture in China.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, great changes have taken place to the sculptural art. Different fine arts colleges and universities set up sculpture department and sent students to study in the Soviet Union. Between 1940s and 1970s, there appeared a serial sculptural works that were full of revolutionary passion and the Soviet Union influence. These works not only had great changes in the way of sculpturing, but more importantly, their changes in the form reflected the formation of a new political stand and value. To date, China's modern sculpture arts show various schools and concept, reflecting a pluralistic society and culture from one aspect.

Chinese sculptural arts developed their own style over time and managed to display aesthetic features and cultural concepts unique to ancient China. The development of Chinese sculpture parallels the history of the ancient Chinese culture and aesthetics. It is a visible witness to the cultural fusion and exchanges between the Hans and other ethnic groups as well as between China and foreign cultures.



Beginnings of Chinese Sculpture

Pottery and Jade Sculptures

in Primitive Times



Chinese sculpture is one of the oldest art forms in the world. The oldest examples date back to the Neolithic Age. Advances in archaeology have led to the discovery of older pieces. During the 1990s, an 8,000-year-old stone sculpture of a dragon, which is around 20m in length, was unearthed. It is believed to be the earliest large stone sculpture ever discovered in China.

Chinese pottery sculptures first peaked during the Neolithic Age. By then, people had mastered potting techniques. Most sculptures from the time are made from pottery, wood, stone or bone and represent human and animal forms. Preserved sculptures are mostly pottery or jade. Similar to primary stage works from other civilizations, those vivid sculptures were made mainly to meet the needs of witchcraft and hunting. They clearly display the early abstract characteristics of China's formative arts. People understand the sculptural outlook of that period mostly from archaeological discovery. Each find helps better understand that ancient civilization and make the ancient sculptural outlook clearer.

Pottery sculptures in primitive times

Primitive pottery sculptures were made soon after the emergence of potting techniques. They had mostly practical functions. The "pottery pot" is most common. It is often designed with a human face or human head on top, or it is shape like an animal. In fact, such designs are also very common in other early cultures, such as ancient Persia and India. In ancient China, pottery sculptures fell into one of three types: overall animal images; circular or relief



Pottery boar-shaped cooker, the Neolithic Age.

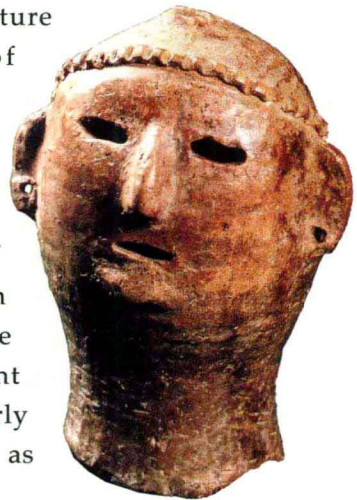


sculptural ornaments in animal or human form as part of an article (such as the cover, knob and surface); and single animal or portrait sculptures like nude female sculptures or shaped like a hand. The last usually had obvious primitive religious and witchcraft features.

Pottery figure sculptures

The famous neolithic Chinese pottery includes pieces from the Yangshao, Majiayao and Dawenkou cultures. Many excellent ornamental sculptures have been well preserved, including a lively 12.5-cm pottery piece of a maiden's head unearthed in Gaositou, Lixian County, Gansu Province. It is made of orange yellow clay by means of simple techniques. It belongs to the Banshan branch of the *Yangshao* culture and it is often mentioned in university courses of the history of Chinese arts. The features of the face are simple, with three hollow ovals representing the eyes and mouth. Her ears and nose are also simple. Her face is fruity and her air is relaxed and full of pleasure. The sculpture gives the impression of sincerity and simplicity. At the top of her head there are thin ornamental ribbons similar to plaits, which reflect the everyday life of those early people rather than strong religious features. The head is not an independent sculpture work. It is cleverly done, with circular carving as part of the mouth.

The unique quality of pottery



Pottery maiden's head, the Neolithic Age.

Yangshao culture

Yangshao culture (5000 BC–3000 BC), one of the key examples of matriarchal society in China, was first found in *Yangshao* Village, Mianchi County, Henan Province, hence the name "*Yangshao* culture." The culture left behind some pottery decorated with dark red or black patterns on orange-red or red-brown backgrounds. These are outstanding examples of painted pottery in China's Neolithic period. As a result, it is also known as the "Painted Pottery Culture."



designed with a sculpted figure of a human head is visible on another masterpiece of Banshan type in *Yangshao* culture, which is a pot with a mouth in the form of a head. The pot was unearthed in Luonan, Shaanxi. It is a well-preserved 23cm pot of red clay with a sculpture of a human head. The eyes and mouth are also hollow holes. The hollow-out work leaves behind some shadows that enhance the expressive forces of the sculpture and produces an open feeling of “enlightenment” and “ventilation” bringing the sculpture to life.

The *Yangshao* culture left behind many similar works. The sculpture of a human face unearthed in Chajiaping, Tianshui City, Ganshu, is also the top of a mutilated piece of pottery. The life-size female face is part of a large 25.5cm high and 16cm wide article. She has a narrow and flat forehead, beautifully thin, long eyebrows and light eyeholes, reflecting oriental beauty. Her eyes are small and her nose bridge straight. Her cheekbones are prominent and her face wide. She is smiling, with her lips slightly parted. She is a typical Asian feminine image. This type of sculpture, with apparent sexual features, is probably linked to popular goddess worship. Such worship wasn't ferocious or strict but full of the warmth of living and the pleasures of life. The sculpture is very different from the religious images that surfaced during the slavery society. Those ferocious and intimidating images are discussed in the following chapter.



Pottery human face, the Neolithic Age.

