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Exploring the Historical Characteristics of Stone Carving Art in Mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties

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ABSTRACT

The stone carving art in mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties is an important part of the mausoleums of emperors and nobles, with distinct characteristics of the era and cultural value. Compared to the majestic and magnificent stone carving art in mausoleums of Northern Dynasties, the stone carving art in mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties more emphasis on formal beauty and symbolic significance, showcasing a dignified and elegant style of the era. Based on the analysis of the political, economic, and cultural background of the Southern Dynasties, this article explores the evolution of the form, carving art, and cultural connotations of the stone carvings in mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties, in order to reveal their unique position in the history of ancient Chinese mausoleum art and provide a new research perspective for a deeper understanding of artistic and cultural exchanges during the Southern Dynasties period.

Keywords: Southern Dynasties, Mausoleums, Stone Carving Art, Historical Characteristics

INTRODUCTION

The Southern Dynasties (420-589 AD) were the southern regimes during the Southern and Northern Dynasties period in China, including the Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen dynasties. Their political, economy, culture, and artistic achievements all reached a high level at that time (Butars, 1998). Among them, stone carving art, as an important component of the mausoleums of Southern emperors and nobles, not only carried the changes in the burial system, but also reflected the social structure, religious beliefs, and aesthetic orientation at that time (Fei, 2020; Ruan, 2002). Compared to the majestic and majestic stone carvings of mausoleums in the Northern Dynasties, the stone carvings of mausoleums in the Southern Dynasties pay more attention to the elegance and symbolic significance of form, presenting a refined and dignified artistic style. This unique style is not only due to the emphasis placed by the ruling class of the Southern Dynasties on mausoleum rituals, but also closely related to the development of the southern economy, the progress of carving techniques, and the integration of religious culture (Wu, 2020).

Existing research primarily focuses on the form, carving techniques, and case analysis of mausoleum stone carvings in the Southern Dynasties, while systematic exploration of their overall development and historical characteristics is relatively limited (Ji et al., 2025; Yang, 2024; Shao, 2010). Therefore, based on the social background of the Southern Dynasties, this article explores the evolution of the form, carving art, and cultural connotations of mausoleum stone carvings, in order to reveal their unique characteristics of the times and provide a new research perspective for the development of ancient Chinese mausoleum art.

The Historical and Cultural Background of Stone Carving Art in Mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties

Political Turmoil and Power Transition

The Southern Dynasties had frequent changes in political power, with the Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen dynasties



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all ending due to palace coups or external military pressure (Sun, 2007). The instability of imperial power changes affected the country's institutional construction and also led to changes in the burial system. However, compared with the Northern Wei, Eastern Wei, Western Wei and other dynasties in the north, the political system of the Southern Dynasty still relatively continued the political pattern of the aristocratic class since the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The literati of the aristocratic class controlled the court politics and had a profound influence on culture and art (Yang, 2021).

In terms of mausoleum system, the Southern Dynasties continued the relatively simple mausoleum tradition since the Eastern Jin Dynasty, and gradually enriched the mausoleum stone carving system in the development process, making it more symbolic and artistic. Compared to the northern mausoleum stone carvings that showcase the authority of emperors through tall and majestic stone figures, beasts, and pavilions, the southern mausoleum stone carvings place more emphasis on formal elegance and symbolic meaning, exhibiting different aesthetic orientations.

Economic Development and Progress in Handicrafts

The economic development of the Southern Dynasties showed a regional prosperity, mainly relying on the relatively stable agricultural production and waterway transportation in the Jiangnan region. After the Southern Migration of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, a large number of literati from the Central Plains migrated southward, bringing advanced production techniques that promoted the economic development of Jiangnan (Shi, 2019). During the Southern Dynasties period, the handicraft industry in the Jiangnan region, such as agriculture, porcelain making, textile industry, paper industry, etc., made significant progress, especially with the maturation of stone carving techniques (Qiu, 2013). The stone resources in Nanjing and Zhenjiang are abundant, and the carving skills of craftsmen are constantly improving, providing a solid material foundation for the development of stone carving art of Southern Dynasties.

The prosperity of stone carving art during the Southern Dynasties was not only reflected in mausoleum stone carvings, but also flourished in areas such as Buddhist statues and inscriptions. The improvement of stone carving techniques has made the stone carvings of mausoleums in the Southern Dynasties more prominent in terms of vitality and dominance, such as the mane, claws, and wings of stone beasts on the Shinto path, which have powerful shapes and smooth lines, fully reflecting the superb craftsmanship of craftsmen in the Southern Dynasties period.

The integration of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism

Buddhism developed rapidly during the Southern Dynasties period, and the ruling class revered Buddhism and vigorously promoted Buddhist thought (Jiao, 2014). Starting from Emperor Wu of the Liu Song Dynasty, successive emperors of the Southern Dynasties actively supported the dissemination and development of Buddhist culture. The most prominent one is Emperor Wu of Liang, who sacrificed himself multiple times to enter temples and also presided over the translation of Buddhist scriptures, making the Southern Dynasties an important center of Buddhist culture. The widespread dissemination of Buddhist culture greatly influenced the artistic style of the Southern Dynasties and was reflected stone carvings in mausoleums. The influence of Buddhist culture is mainly reflected in the decorative patterns of mausoleum stone carvings, such as lotus flower patterns often carved on stone pillars, symbolizing the purity and purity of Buddhism.

In addition, the influence of Taoism was also very extensive among the literati class in the Southern Dynasties. Taoism emphasizes the idea of immortality and ascending to immortality, and the stone beasts in the mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties fully reflect Taoist philosophy (Dong, 2014). The stone beast symbolizes both guarding the mausoleum and exorcising evil spirits, as well as embodying the mausoleum owner's longing for immortality during their lifetime (Niu, 2017). Although the influence of Confucianism in the Southern Dynasties was not as strong as in the Eastern Han, Wei, and Jin dynasties, Confucianism still had some infiltration in the burial system. The stone carvings of mausoleums in the Southern Dynasties maintained the dignified and elegant style of Confucianism as a whole, while the inscriptions on stone tablets followed the norms of Confucian ritual, balancing artistic and ceremonial elements.





The Influence of Cultural Exchange between the Northern and Southern Dynasties

Despite the long-term political opposition between the Southern and Northern Dynasties, cultural exchanges did not cease, and the prosperity of Buddhist grotto sculpture art in the north had a certain impact on the stone carvings of the Southern Dynasties. For example, although the carving styles of Yungang and Longmen Grottoes in the Northern Wei Dynasty were more vigorous and powerful, their expression techniques of Buddhist themes influenced the development of southern Buddhist art. The stone carvings of mausoleums in the Southern Dynasties also absorbed elements of northern Buddhist carving in some decorative patterns.

On the other hand, the stone carvings of mausoleums in the Southern Dynasties, while inheriting the elegant and beautiful style since the Eastern Jin Dynasty, maintained the soft characteristics of southern culture. Compared to the majestic and magnificent stone carvings of the Northern Dynasties, the Southern Dynasties stone carvings pay more attention to the use of curves and the refinement of decoration, making the overall visual effect more Southern style.

In addition, calligraphy art experienced unprecedented development during the Southern Dynasties period, and calligraphy masters such as Zhong Yao and Wang Xizhi greatly influenced the style of stone inscriptions (Wang, 2003). Calligraphy art gradually transitioned from clerical script to regular script during the Wei and Jin dynasties. Tombstone inscriptions often use elegant and smooth clerical or regular script, making them not only of great historical value but also an important carrier of calligraphy art.

The Characteristics of the Southern Dynasties and the Development of Stone Carving Art in Mausoleums

Southern Song Dynasty (420-479): Initial Formation of Stone Carvings in Mausoleums

The Southern Song Dynasty was the pioneer of the Southern Dynasties, inheriting the political system of the Eastern Jin Dynasty and establishing relatively stable rule in the Jiangnan region.

During the Southern Song Dynasty, rulers mostly relied on the power of the aristocracy, and the political characteristics of the aristocratic class since the Eastern Jin Dynasty were still retained by the upper echelons of society. In this context, the stone carvings of mausoleums in the Southern Song Dynasty reflect obvious cultural characteristics of the aristocracy, emphasizing the ceremonial and symbolic significance of mausoleums. During this period, the stone carvings in mausoleums had initially established the system of "Shinto stone carvings", which involved setting up stone beasts, stone pillars, and stone tablets on both sides of the Shinto (Shang, 2023). The Southern Dynasties inherited the burial system of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, but began to display the unique and graceful style of stone animal carving in the Southern Dynasties. For example, the stone beasts in front of the mausoleum of Emperor Wu of Song, Liu Yu, are more decorative and have smoother lines compared to the Eastern Jin Dynasty, and have already formed the embryonic form of stone carving art in the Southern Dynasties (Guo & Zeng, 2024). During this period, the stone beast images were still relatively primitive, with heavy and heavy forms and rough carving techniques. However, one can already feel the trend of Southern Dynasties stone carving towards dignity and beauty.

Southern Qi Dynasty (479-502 AD): Further development of stone carvings in mausoleums

Although the Southern Qi Dynasty had a relatively short reign, it achieved certain development in economy and culture, laying the foundation for the further maturity of stone carvings in mausoleums. The rulers of the Qi Dynasty were relatively pragmatic, attached great importance to national governance, and had a relatively stable social economy, which further improved the stone carving art in mausoleums.

The Southern Qi Dynasty inherited the political system of the Song Dynasty, while the rulers were relatively frugal. The size of the mausoleums was generally reduced compared to the Song Dynasty, but the artistic style of stone carvings in mausoleums became more exquisite. The Shinto stone carvings of this period still retained the basic form of the Song Dynasty, but their layout was more orderly, and the arrangement of stone beasts was more symmetrical. In addition, lotus patterns began to appear on the sacred pillars of mausoleums,



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reflecting the infiltration of Buddhist art into mausoleum culture. Compared to the Song Dynasty, the stone carving techniques of mausoleums in the Qi Dynasty were more mature, with smoother lines and more exquisite overall shapes. For example, the carving of details such as the mane and claws of stone beasts is more delicate, and the carving craftsmen have already mastered a high level of artistic expression. In addition, the calligraphy style of the stone tablet is more beautiful, showing the trend of the development of calligraphy art in the Southern Dynasties.

Southern Liang Dynasty (502-557 AD): The Mature Period of Stone Carving Art in Mausoleums

The Southern Liang Dynasty was the peak period of cultural development in the Southern Dynasties. Emperor Wu of Liang believed in Buddhism and had a high level of cultural and artistic prosperity. During this period, the stone carving art in mausoleums reached a high level of maturity, forming a typical style of stone carving art in mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties (Wang, 2022).

Emperor Wu of Liang's reverence for Buddhism greatly influenced people's social life. This influence is also reflected in stone carvings in mausoleums, such as the use of Buddhist reliefs with lotus patterns on stone pillars of Shintoism. In addition, the image of stone beasts is softer and the lines are smoother, which is clearly influenced by the style of Buddhist statues. During this period, the stone carvings in mausoleums tended to mature, and the arrangement of stone beasts, stone pillars, and stone tablets became more standardized (Fu, 2020). For example, the Shinto stone carvings in front of the mausoleum of Xiao Xiu, the younger brother of Emperor Wu of Liang, demonstrate the solemnity and majesty of royal mausoleums. The stone carving craftsmanship of the Liang Dynasty has reached a high level, with delicate carving and lifelike stone animal shapes, reflecting the pursuit of exquisite stone carving art in the Southern Dynasties.

Southern Chen Dynasty (557-589 AD): Simplification and Reform of Stone Carvings in Mausoleum

The Southern Chen Dynasty was the last dynasty of the Southern Dynasties, with relatively turbulent political power and economic decline. Therefore, stone carvings in mausoleums tended to simplify in style, but still maintained the basic characteristics of stone carving art of the Southern Dynasties.

The rule of the Chen Dynasty was relatively short, and the regime was constantly threatened by the Northern Zhou and Northern Qi, so the rulers did not attach as much importance to tomb stone carvings as previous generations. Meanwhile, due to economic constraints, the scale of tombs is relatively small, and stone carving art is relatively simplified. The calligraphy style on the stone tablets during this period still maintained the unique handsome characteristics of the Southern Dynasties, demonstrating the continuity of Southern culture. Compared to the exquisite carvings of the Liang Dynasty, the stone carvings in mausoleums of the Chen Dynasty have a significantly simplified style, with more concise lines. The carvings of stone beasts no longer pursue decoration too much, but pay more attention to practicality. However, even so, the stone carvings of the Chen Dynasty still maintained the beautiful style of stone carving art of the Southern Dynasties , laying a certain foundation for the stone carving art in mausoleums of the Sui and Tang Dynasties.

The Characteristics of the Era of Stone Carving Art in Mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties

Regular form and strong sense of ceremony

The Southern Dynasties continued the burial system since the Eastern Jin Dynasty. In order to highlight the prominent position of the tomb owner, the stone carvings on both sides of the Shinto strictly followed the principle of symmetrical arrangement, placing stone beasts, stone pillars, and stone tablets in sequence, forming a complete ceremonial space. The stone beasts are arranged in pairs and have the functions of warding off evil spirits and guarding the mausoleums; The stone pillars stand tall and upright, adorned with exquisite elements such as lotus flowers and dragon patterns, symbolizing the path to the celestial realm; The stone tablet not only records the information of the mausoleum owner, but also carries the essence of calligraphy art from the Southern Dynasties period. This strict and orderly spatial layout and carefully designed arrangement make stone carvings of mausoleums both culturally valuable and symbolic of ritual norms and authority.

During the Southern Dynasties period, although the political power in the south was in turmoil for a long time,



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the construction of the burial system remained relatively stable. The burial regulations of the royal family and nobles were very fixed, highlighting the ruling class's emphasis on ritual norms at that time (Zhang, 2021). The ruling class of the Southern Dynasties attempted to maintain the dignity of royal power and strengthen social hierarchy by strengthening the mausoleum system.

Exquisite Carving Skills and Delicate Decorative Patterns

The craftsmen of the Southern Dynasties were skilled in using delicate techniques and simple, smooth lines to express the graceful and refined style of stone carvings. Compared to the stone beasts of the Northern Dynasties, the form of the stone beasts in the Southern Dynasties is more vivid. The carving of their flying wings, mane, claws and other parts is very detailed, demonstrating the superb carving level of the craftsmen. Especially during the Liang Dynasty, the carving of stone beasts reached its artistic peak, with dynamic body movements and facial expressions that appeared more vivid and full of spirit..

The carvings of stone pillars and tablets also demonstrate elegant decorative qualities. The text structure on the monument is rigorous, mainly in regular script or clerical script, with strokes flowing smoothly, reflecting the superb calligraphy art of the Southern Dynasties. The carved patterns on the stone pillars are mainly lotus patterns, dragon patterns, and mythical creatures, showing obvious religious and cultural connotations. These decorations not only enhance the artistic appeal of mausoleums stone carvings, but also reflect the high attention paid by the ruling class to mausoleum art during the Southern Dynasties. Under the atmosphere of pursuing elegant carving, the stone carving art in mausoleums of Southern Dynasties gradually formed a unique style centered on dignity and elegance, laying a solid foundation for future mausoleum stone carving art.

Religious Art Characteristics under the Integration of Buddhism and Taoism

During the Southern Dynasties, Buddhism was very prevalent, especially during the reign of Emperor Wu of Liang. Buddhist culture was pushed to the center of social life, and its influence penetrated into politics, culture, and even people's daily lives (Sun, 2024). This religious atmosphere has also profoundly influenced the form and style of stone carving art in mausoleums. The influence of Buddhist art is mainly reflected in decorative patterns, such as lotus flower patterns often carved on stone pillars, symbolizing the Buddhist concept of Pure Land. The integration of Buddhist culture has endowed the mausoleum stone carvings of the Southern Dynasties with not only historical and cultural value but also religious significance, reflecting the faith in Buddhism and the mausoleum owners' aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land.

In addition, Taoist culture also had a huge influence on the aristocrats of the Southern Dynasties, especially in the art of mausoleum stone carvings, where Taoism expressed its thoughts through the image of stone beasts (Sun, 2017). For example, in the stone carvings of mausoleums in the Southern Dynasties, stone beasts such as Bixie and Tianlu not only guard the mausoleum but also express the auspicious ideas advocated in Taoist thought, symbolizing the high status of the mausoleum owner and the desire for immortality. It can be said that the stone carving art of mausoleums in the Southern Dynasties is a product of the integration of Buddhist and Taoist ideas. The integration of religious and cultural elements has made the stone carving art in mausoleums of Southern Dynasties more abundant on a spiritual level. It not only demonstrates the mausoleum owner's belief in religious culture, but also reflects the coexistence of diverse cultures in the Southern Dynasties.

Dignified and Elegant Forms Styles in the Interaction of Northern and Southern Cultures

During the Southern and Northern Dynasties period, despite the prolonged confrontation between the two dynasties, cultural exchanges never ceased, and the artistic style of the north to some extent influenced the stone carving art of mausoleums in the Southern Dynasties. But this influence did not directly copy the carving style of the Northern Dynasties, but rather inspired Southern craftsmen through the interaction between the north and south, who were exposed to the sculptural style and decorative techniques passed down from the north. For example, the stone carving art of mausoleums in the Southern Song and Qi dynasties still retained the traditional regulations since the Eastern Jin dynasty in terms of form. But in terms of carving style, the stone beasts present a more heavy and ancient body shape, which is similar to the prevailing trend of northern



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grandeur at that time. However, the overall style of tomb mausoleum carving art in the Southern Dynasties was still dominated by soft lines and dignified expressions, and did not fully converge with the North.

The stone carving art in mausoleums of Southern Dynasties not only absorbs excellent foreign cultures, but also always retains the characteristics of local culture in the Jiangnan region. For example, the stone carving art of mausoleums in the Southern Dynasties pays more attention to the carving of details. The stone beasts have vivid expressions and smooth postures, and the exquisite carving reflects the reverence of Southern literati for traditional culture. In addition, the calligraphy art of the Southern Dynasties was also highly developed. Compared with the vigorous and powerful inscriptions in the North, the inscriptions in the South were more elegant and dignified. The mutual integration of northern and southern cultures has led to the absorption of some excellent connotations of northern culture in the stone carving art in mausoleums of Southern Dynasties, and the development of a unique dignified and elegant forms style in the south, ultimately, a distinctive stone carving art system reflecting regional characteristics took shape in the mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties (Qian & Song, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The stone carving art in mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties inherited the burial system of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, with stone beasts, stone pillars, and stone tablets as the core elements, forming a unique ritual space that highlights the high status of the mausoleum owner and the authority of the feudal ritual system. The stone carving art in mausoleums of Southern Dynasties pursues smooth lines and delicate depictions in carving techniques. The details of stone beasts such as mane, wings, and claws are highly emphasized, and the decorations on stone pillars such as lotus flowers, dragons, and mythical creatures highlight a strong religious color. The dissemination and development of religious culture during the Southern Dynasties, as well as the interaction and integration of northern and southern cultures, gradually formed a dignified and elegant forms style of stone carving art in mausoleums, providing a paradigm for later stone carving art in mausoleums.

In recent years, with the rapid development of technology, digital technology has become an essential means in the protection of cultural heritage. Technology companies, university teachers and students actively use technologies such as 3D scanning and panoramic photography to conduct high-precision digital collection and archiving of the stone carving art in mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties. They also through virtual reality and augmented reality technology, audiences can engage with the artistic beauty of these mausoleum carvings in an immersive manner, without the need for physical presence. In addition, the digital resources of the stone carvings in mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties have been widely used in fields such as university teaching, museum exhibitions, and cultural and creative products, achieving a deep integration between cultural heritage and modern communication methods. The stone carving art in mausoleums of the Southern Dynasties is no longer just a witness to history, but has also become an important source of inspiration for modern cultural innovation.

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