

Super-sized Tombs of the Five Dynasties Period

Zhang Xiaozhou, Cultural Relics Publishing House

The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period was a time of disorder and disunion, when warfare and calamity were rife. This state of affairs was the result of the increasing regional division of at the end of the Tang. The fifty-some years from the fall of Tang to the establishment of the Song is a period that has generally received negative reviews from scholars in the past.

In the realm of China as a whole the tombs of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period that have been discovered are not many, but they are distributed over a very wide area including the north-central plain, the Sichuan, Zhejiang-Jiangsu, and southern regions. The proof that these tombs are of the period is in the epitaphs discovered inside them whose inscriptions confirm the identities of their occupants and the dates of the burials. These people were recorded in history books and were extremely important people of the time. On this basis we know that most of the tombs of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period are large or super-large scale tombs. Not only are they large in size, but they are also of a high standard. The tomb occupants were mostly royal personages or important officials.

The earliest discovery of a tomb from this period was the excavation in 1942-43 in Chengdu Sichuan of the tomb of Wang Jian, but its formal excavation report was published in 1964. The earliest archeological report published was that of the two Southern Tang royal tombs in 1957. According to the published material, the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms tombs with formal archeological reports include the Later Tang tomb of Li Maozhen; The Later Zhou tomb of Feng Yun; the Later Liang tomb of Wang Chuzhi; the Later Shu tombs of Meng Zhixiang, Zhang Qianzhao and Sun Hanshao; the Wuyue royal family tombs of the Qian family; the Min tombs of the king Wang Shenzhi and his wife, and of Liu Hua; and the Southern Han royal burials of the Liu family. Because of the wide distribution of these tombs and the different social positions of the deceased, the design and appearance show individual characteristics. However, the influence of the Tang empire could not be erased. Even though each had its own design concepts, as a whole they preserve underlying remnants of this model. Therefore these burials of different regions which had been divided into different kingdoms had their own distinguishing characteristics, but at the same time they had similar features.

The central plain was the heartland of the Tang empire. In this region the large tombs preserve more Tang characteristics. In both three-chambered and two-chambered tombs the division between the chambers is very marked. They are connected by rather narrow corridors, clearly deriving from the construction of large Tang tombs. In addition the decoration of the interior, aside from the mural paintings, has increased elements of three-dimensional ornament carved in brick and stone, mainly figures of musicians and attendants and also sedan-chair porters. In this region burial chambers constructed of stone also appeared. The form of the stone tombs is comparatively simple and consists of a main chamber or two chambers. It seems from

the available material that that the occupants of the tombs with stone construction were people of higher rank.

Of the four Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms tombs discovered the area of Shu, two were burials of emperors, and the other two were high military officials. The Wang Jian and Meng Zhixiang tombs are constructed of stone while the Zhang Qianzhao and Sun Hanshao were of brick. In form the Wan Zhang And Sun burials are similar in form with three chambers in a line from front to back. The Meng Zhixiang burial has a horizontal layout with central, right and left chambers, a unique design in this period. All four tombs have mural paintings, but they are not well preserved. The ornate carving of the stone funerary couches are important features. From the material in Sichuan it is apparent that status of the occupants of stone tombs was higher than those of the brick tombs.

The two royal tombs of the Southern Tang both have three chambers, front, middle and back, with small side chambers. The funerary couch is set into the rear wall of the innermost chamber. The front and middle chambers of Li Bian's tomb are constructed of brick, while the back chamber is of stone. The tomb of Li Ling is entirely of brick. The walls imitate wood construction and have polychrome painting.

The Wuyue kingdom royal tombs discovered in Hangzhou and Lin'an are of two types of design: 1] brick tombs with front and rear chambers with multiple side chambers and small niches and a boat-shaped rear chamber with no brick funerary couch—like that of Qian Kuan (Lin M23), Lin M21, Aolin M22. 2] brick tombs with an additional an outer coffin constructed of stone, like those of Qian Yuanguan (Hang M27), Qian Yuanwan (Lin M20), Wu Hanyue (Hang M26). The Qian Yuanguan tomb is three-chambered and the other two have two chambers. From the evidence, the burials with the additional stone outer coffin were for occupants of higher status than those constructed only of brick, and the three-chambered tombs were occupants of higher status than the two-chambered tombs. Furthermore paintings of the star constellations on the ceiling of the cave also indicated higher status.

The tomb of the King of Min in Fuzhou, of Wang Shenzhi and his wife and that of their daughter-in-law Liu Hua were very similar and were placed in a family cemetery in rows. The tomb chamber was constructed of granite and is tubular in shape. The tombs of the Southern Han known from the three that have been excavated were constructed of grey bricks and are cylindrical in shape. The length is around ten meters. There is no great difference in status between three-chambered and two-chambered tombs.

A survey of the tombs of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period reveals that the fall of the Tang dynasty had a great impact on the regions. Burials did not follow the old system, and local rulers could construct tombs according to their desires. However the smaller kingdoms were limited in resources and ruled only for a brief period. Under these circumstances the simpler and sturdier stone chambers were more feasible. Therefore the tombs with long tubular design and small side chambers or niches became the mainstream in various regions and were the choice of the people in high positions.