



ARTE DAL MEDITERRANEO AL MAR DELLA CINA

Genesi ed incontri di scuole e stili.
Scritti in onore di Paola Mortari Vergara Caffarelli

a cura di
Pierfrancesco Fedi e Maurizio Paolillo



The Ming Zuling Mausoleum Sculptures in Xuyi, China Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

By: Dionisio Cimorelli

[Articolo in Italiano](#)

Abstract

At the beginning of Ming Dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398), the first Ming Emperor built the great Mausoleum of Ming Zuling. The Mausoleum is located near Xuyi, in the Jiangsu Province. The site comprises 21 pairs of large stone sculptures and columns, representing animals and imperial officials, both civil and military. All the statues were covered, nearly 300 years ago, by the waters of the Hongze Lake. They had lain submerged until the 1960s when some local residents discovered them. The restoration of these sculptures began in 1976 and continued for about ten years. The restoration has integrated losses with a great deal of new parts, demonstrating the differences between Chinese and current Western conservation theory. The Mausoleum actually became a big tourist park, attracting visitors primarily from the surrounding provinces.



1. Shendao (the Way of the Spirit) that is the sacred way that leads to the sepulchral mound preceded by the hall of the sacrifices (photo by the author)

During one of my visits to the Shanghai Museum on the People's Square I went into the bookstore, looking for some publications on ancient Chinese sculpture. I found an interesting book written by Angela Falco Howard and published in London; as I was leafing through it I was struck by a photo, not a very large one and apparently not a recent one either, in which there were a series of sculptures that were all lined up one next to the other, out in the middle of the countryside.

I jotted down the name of the place where these fascinating sculptures, that I had known nothing about until that very moment, were located. Thus began what was anything but an easy search, seeing as any available information there was online was in English and quite scarce, at that. I solicited the help of my assistant/coordinator who looked for information in Chinese. Finally, we found out that the sculptures were works that had been commissioned for an important Mausoleum, called Ming Zuling, which was located near Xuyi in the central-north province of Jiangsu, about a three-hour bus ride from Nanking.

I became more and more fascinated by my research on this necropolis and its splendid statues. I also discovered that nearly all of the answers to my queries

were contained in *The Chinese Spirit Road* by Ann Paludan.

I decided that I really wanted to visit that place which, thanks to the photograph of those grand sculptures, had grabbed my interest and piqued my curiosity. I'm not sure why, but this image made me think of 1987, when I first saw the rupestrian sculptures of the Longmen Grottoes, that date from the Wei period (386-556 A.D.) in Luoyang, in the province of Henan, where thousands of small and large Buddhas are carved into the rock.

The Xuyi sculptures were created for one of the Imperial Mausoleums of China, begun in 1385 and completed in 1413; they were commissioned by the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Hongwu (Zhu Yuanzhang, 1328-1398), to commemorate his ancestors. Alas, he did not live long enough to see his great legacy completed. He, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, was buried in the most famous Ming Xiaoling Mausoleum in Nanking. Many historians consider this first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty to be among the most important in the history of China.

Contemporary scholars date the Zuling statues in the time period between 1385 and 1391, because they show no evidence of incorporating any of the innovations proposed in the Xiaoling statues that followed. Furthermore, the clothing worn by the dignitaries does not show any adherence to the new sumptuary laws that were emanated in 1391 in an effort to repress the extravagance of the imperial court.

In the early dawn of a splendidly warm autumn day in the first week of October of 2009, I set out from Shanghai and headed to Xuyi. Having spent the entire morning travelling first by train and then by bus, it was early afternoon when I arrived at the entrance gates to the Mausoleum, situated in a fairly isolated area in the middle of the countryside. At the entrance stood a large building of apparently recent construction and somewhat reminiscent of a traditional temple, with a huge portal, through which one gained access by buying a ticket. Just inside, I found myself greeted by vast gardens resplendent with trees, flowering shrubs, and walkways paved with polished dark stones that marked the way to the Mausoleum. In that instant, I experienced a very strange sensation, for this first impression was so very different from what I had felt when I saw the photo in the book at the Shanghai Museum.

I started walking and after a few minutes I reached the beginning of a long path that was meant to recreate the Shendao Spirit Way, or the sacred way leading to the sepulcher, preceded by the hall of sacrifices (Fig. 1-2). The way is lined on both sides by twenty-one pairs of monumental stone sculptures, in a north-south alignment, the principal axis for all of Chinese monumental architecture.

This type of necropolis, built during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-221 A.D.), was decorated and embellished with architectural and sculptural elements in successive dynasties. Naturally, these burial complexes were for imperial and noble families, but could also be used for particularly important generals or ministers, serving to affirm dynastic power in the territory. Periodically, ceremonies and sacrifices were held in these cities of the dead which, in the most monumental exemplars, were designed as replicas of the capital cities, with the hall of sacrifices and the burial mound representing the imperial palace and the spirit way symbolizing the great central artery traversing the city from south to north and leading to the Emperor's abode.

The Zuling sculptures represent animals such as lions and horses, as well as mythical creatures that are a fusion of several animals, like the *qilin* and winged horses; the collection also includes representations of civil servants and military officials, and there are columns as well (Figure 2). All are sculpted in a style that is inspired by that of the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties. The lion is known as the king of the jungle, representing courage, power, and good luck, and it is often seen as an apotropaic sculpture placed at entrances. The same role is attributed to the qilin, a mythical being that is a cross between a feline, a bovine, an equine, and a unicorn, representing strength, power, energy and, if placed next to the Emperor, it symbolizes rectitude and good government.

The Ming Zuling sculptures are aesthetically lighter and are sculpted with greater finesse especially compared to the best known ones in the Ming Xiaoling Mausoleum of Nanking that are more massive and less detailed. The Zuling statues still have, for the most part, all of the strength and harmony typical of Tangs along with the fine elegance of the Songs. Paola Mortari Vergara Caffarelli was among those scholars who, as far back as forty years ago, compared the Tang and Song time periods to the Italian Renaissance. In some cases, however, the decoration is richer, heavier, and more fluid, having borrowed from what Caffarelli herself defined as "Yuan dynasty Baroque" (1271-1368).

The year 1680 was marked by the Yellow River flood which created a huge lake, the Hongze, of the four largest freshwater lakes in China. It completely inundated the Mausoleum and all of its sculptures, and the entire complex remained submerged for nearly 300 years until its fairly recent discovery in the 1960s. The statues were found by local farmers who saw them emerge from the mud as the lake waters receded, following an extraordinary period of drought. In the years that followed, with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, the site remained untouched until 1976; that year marked the start of the restoration that lasted about a decade.

The photograph I saw in that book at the Shanghai Museum had probably been taken just after the statues had been restored. Seeing them, I was immediately struck by their imposing power and was mesmerized by the fascinating beauty that I find each time I see a sculpture from a distant historical period.

About halfway down the pathway, stand four tall (7-8 meters/24 feet) stone columns called *Huabiao*; they bear wide fluting which, in two of the columns, is finely decorated with carvings reminiscent of the typical Yuan-style phytomorphic decorations. These pillars not only mark an entrance, but they also bear inscribed markers that identify the dead.

While I stood admiring these ancient sculptures, I undeniably felt a certain enthusiasm and yet, I also felt somewhat disappointed for not having experienced that natural atmosphere and poetic sensation that the photograph had transmitted. Now, everything was in order and clean; the sculptures were perfectly aligned and neatly placed along the edges of a path that was only a few feet wide and paved with blackish stones, some of which were already cracked and wobbly; there were little flags and colored posters and local farmers selling souvenirs and produce; newly planted trees were all around. I was sure that all of this was pleasing to Chinese taste, while I felt that this place had lost much of its original allure. They had recreated a garden, but it was one that looked more like a theme park than an ancient Imperial Mausoleum. The atmosphere reminded me of the big Zhong Shan park in the middle of Shanghai, not far from where I lived.

Not far from the sculptures, a small bridge had been built out of marble that was given a patina to make it look more like the ancient statues that surrounded it. I found some of these to be surprisingly well preserved and I thought that it was probably due to their having been submerged in mud for three centuries. Some of the details, though, appeared to have just been sculpted; then I noticed that certain parts of the sculptures really had been newly sculpted.

Many of the works had been restored and those parts that had degraded or been lost over the years from weathering were filled in with new parts that had been attached with adhesive and cement. Other statues had not yet been completely restored (Figure 3). I found this type of restoration work to be quite different from what is the norm in Europe and different from the work that I had done for over ten years in the capital cities of central and northern Europe. The rebuilding and reintegrating of damaged parts of sculpture are practices that are more common in Northern Europe, although they are mostly used for sculptures and decorations on the outside of buildings. In contrast, in Italy now, restoration is intended to be exclusively conservative in nature, even though in the past, reintegration of losses was a common practice.

For example, in 1812 the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldesen restored the sculptures of the east and west pediments of the Temple of Aphaea by adding Neoclassical style integrations, whereas the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova refused to touch the marble statues of the Parthenon.

Another characteristic of European restoration is that the original work is not altered during the repair process; so, the intervention must be the least invasive possible and, at the same time, must be reversible. The part that is to be integrated must adapt perfectly to the shape of the original broken or chipped piece and, should the need arise, it must be possible at any time to return the sculpture to its original pre-restoration state. Furthermore, in Northern Europe, the reintegration must be identical to and in the same style as the original; thus, the sculptor must avoid any interpretation or attempt at making improvements. Nowadays, it is very common in Italy to protect statues with a particularly high artistic value by putting a copy of it on display and preserving the original in a protected environment such as a museum.

In Xuyi I found obvious cut marks due to the reintegration of parts that had been damaged by time. The decorations and other types of details that the centuries had worn away were newly sculpted on the original surfaces; thus, the original form is forever lost. In some places, the reintegration of losses was done by using small fragments of stone that were glued on, one next to the other, with mastic and simple cement (Figure 4), instead of using a single chunk of stone and attaching it with more suitable adhesive for this type of restoration. From the perspective of an Italian sculptor and restorer all of this created a rather odd effect. Looking at some of these statues, one no longer had the feeling of being in the presence of works sculpted over six centuries ago, but rather, of seeing something that had just come out of a sculptor's studio (Figure 5). In 1985 Federico Zeri once said, in a conversation about art, "Time destroys, time damages, but never as much as bad restoration."



5. Sculptures that seemed to have just come out of a sculptor's workshop (photo by the author)

The stone that had been used to sculpt the statues was full of cracks and apparently easily chipped and dry which, at first glance might seem unsuitable for that type of sculpture so rich in detail and decorative elements, but the fine detail of the decorations proved just the contrary.

The lion statues are in the traditional Chinese position, seated with an expression that is strong but not aggressive. They stand guard over the Emperors who are buried there. The horses, 2.65 meters (nearly 9 ft.) tall are called "Horses from the sky" (Figure 6) and they carry a saddle on their back (Figure 7). It is richly decorated with finely carved details, with clouds surrounding Buddhist swastikas next to imperial symbols like the dragon and the phoenix which, when placed side by side, represent love and both the emperor and the empress. Two of the horses have clouds sculpted underneath their bellies, primarily for support, to hold up the massive weight of the upper body which could not have rested on the animals' legs alone. The other two horses are placed next to a groom who is standing and holding the animals'

reins. These statues were sculpted out of a single block of stone and, in this case, the animals do not have the cloud support under their bellies like the others do because the groom provides the needed support. Here again, the legs alone could not have borne all the weight. This is an old technique that dates back to Ancient Greece, used by sculptors to support the naturalistic and slim, standing marble figures which were sculpted next to tree trunks or drapes. This can be seen in the Doryphorus of Polycleitus, the Discobolus of Myron, in Hermes and the Infant Dionysus of Praxiteles, etc.



7. Saddle with very fine engraved decorations (photo by the author)

The four horse statues are preceded by and alternated by three pairs of statues of cavalry officers, followed by four civil servants, four military officers, and four

eunuchs, all of which are approximately three meters (about 10 ft.) tall.

The expression on the face of the civil servants is serene and they don a soft and simple but thick overgarment with wide sleeves; some of the detailing reminded me of the sculpted draping done by fourteenth-century Italian sculptor Jacopo della Quercia (1374-1438) who lived in the same time period.

On some of the statues I could discern certain clothing details that had been very elegantly sculpted; for example, belts and ribbons in barely one centimeter relief (0.39 in.) are shown on top of a thick garment that is just as finely chiseled in scant millimeters, to show the luxurious court apparel of that period (Figure 8).

The statues of the military officers are even more detailed and elaborate. They are wearing a cloak over their massive armor which, at that time, was made of metal plates in the form of the Chinese character Shan (for 'mountain'; this explains the name *shan wen kia*), or in the form of a three-point star. Their headdress is a helmet with side wings and a central hole in the top, from which three long queues were drawn through to hang down the back; the men wore a long beard and moustache that hung down to their chest. Their hands rest on a large heavy sword. This type of armor, which testified to the high rank of the officer, was customarily worn during the Tang dynasty and up until the Ming dynasty.

The presence of eunuchs confirms once again that the Zuling statues were erected in the early years of the dynasty, before Emperor Hungwu decreed that they should not be part of the governing administration. The eunuchs' faces are round and hairless. They are wearing a dignitary's hat and don an overgarment with long narrow sleeves that hide their hands crossed over their chest. Their body position, garments, and head covering are reminiscent of some statues of officials seen at Eastern Han tombs.

At the end of the statue-lined path, I could see the remains of some buildings such as the Dragon and Phoenix Gate and the Hall of Sacrifices with the burial mound; some of these are still underwater.

In conclusion, this interesting trip to the Ming Zuling Mausoleum in Xuyi was an opportunity to admire, once again, the beauty of ancient Chinese sculpture and, in some cases, the opposite view of China as regards the conservation of its history. For years I have asked myself: "Do the Chinese really have a view and conception of historical conservation that is so different from ours, or is it that theirs is not yet as expert and mature but will, in time, draw closer to the Western approach, as has been seen on other occasions and in other circumstances?"

References

D. CIMARELLI, Il mio percorso artistico, in «Volando - Feixiang, Shanghai International Studies University», 5 (2005), p.42, trad. cin., p.38.

D. CIMARELLI, Sculture e Disegni, Cultural Section of Consulate General of Italy in Shanghai, Shanghai 2005.

E. N. DANIELSON, The Ming Ancestor Tomb, in «China Heritage Quarterly», 16, (2008).

Enciclopedia Treccani , www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/restauro/ (2.3 Scultura).

A. FALCO HOWARD, Chinese Sculpture, Yale University Press, London 2006.

LIU YUCAI, Ming Zuling shike xifu (Restauro delle sculture in pietra di Ming Zuling), in «Jiangsu Kaogu Xuehui», 5 (1982), pp.. 11-15.

P. MORTARI VERGARA CAFFARELLI, «Cina», in M. BUSSAGLI, Architettura Orientale, Electa editrice, Milano 1973, pp.. 293-360.

A. PALUDAN, The Chinese Spirit Road, Yale University Press, New Haven & London 1991.

RUAN RONGCHUN, Lun Mingdai Zuling Xiaoling shendao shike zhi shidai (Discussione sulla datazione delle sculture in pietra delle vie dello spirito di Ming Zuling e Xiaoling), in «Kaogu Yu Wenwu», 2 (1986), pp.. 88-92.

F. ZERI, Dietro l'immagine, Neri Pozza editrice, Vicenza (1999).

ZHANG ZHENGXIAN, Ming Zuling, in «Kaogu», 8 (1963), pp. 437-441.

[Web Link](#)