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## Evolution and Disappearance of Tomb Sculptures of “Four Gods”:

### The Changes of the Underworld in Tang China (618-907 A.D.)

A group of sculptures named “Four Gods” (Si Shen, 四神) from the literature of the Tang Dynasty 唐代, which consisted of a pair of hybrid beasts and a pair of warriors, were put in a tomb to protect the dead in the Tang era. The sculptures were spirit articles (Mingqi, 明器) which were portable objects particularly designed and produced for burial. The sculptures were popular during that time and had been developed different images. Nevertheless, the popularity of them declined expeditiously since the middle period of the Tang Dynasty, and they were abandoned eventually. The sculptures belonged to ritual art which could be seen as a reflection of collective cultural values. Their evolution and disappearance indicate that there were changes in the belief of the afterlife. Three aspects will be covered in this research: the changing cultural meanings of the evolution of the sculptures’ images; the relationship between the evolution of the sculptures and the changes in the content of the tombs, and the reason for the disappearance of the sculptures.

The major methodological approach is to examine and compare historical and archaeological materials over a broad period of time, from the Six Dynasties 六朝 (220-589A.D.) to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms 五代十國 (907-979 A.D.). Studies of the change of material culture should not be restricted by the historical divisions; they rather should focus on the cultural period. The funerary culture of the Tang could date from the Northern Dynasties at the earliest to the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms at the latest. We will thus understand the origin and extension of its funerary culture, and will be able to reconstruct the political, social and religious contexts for the “Four Gods” sculptures.

Typology classification of the sculptures is vital in this research and should be done before having further analysis. Moreover, it is necessary to take notice of the distribution of them; there were different tomb content and images of the sculptures discovered in different regions. The sculptures found in Tang tombs will be re-arranged according to their exact dates and locations based on the previous research results of the typology classifications in order to obtain a clearer view on their evolutions and also the logic of their distributions.

Indeed, burial is an important topic in Chinese art and archaeology. Spirit articles, which were an essential part of ancient Chinese burials, have been receiving attention from



researchers in recent years. The tomb guardian sculptures of the Tang period are a popular topic for Chinese student researchers, however, current research mostly focuses on the aspect of typological classifications and fails to develop discussions in a wider context. I thus try to pursue a new direction of research in the sculptures, making them a promising topic to explore.

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