

Introduction

When China’s Tang Dynasty collapsed in 907 C.E., the era of “Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms” ensued. One of the ten kingdoms was Shu, an area that roughly corresponds with the modern province of Sichuan, with its capital at Chengdu. Historians identify two brief periods of relative stability in China’s southwest during these turbulent times preceding the founding of the Song Dynasty, “Former Shu” (907–25) and “Later Shu” (934–65).

Our poster examines images of musicians and dancers from both Former Shu and Later Shu in two museums in Chengdu, showing how they relate to earlier images of musicians and dancers from the Tang Dynasty, particularly those in the Magao Grottoes near Dunhuang. These images in Chengdu represent musical practices in the courts of both Former and Later Shu. They demonstrate that powerful officials in both kingdoms used the images to enhance their legitimacy through emulation of the musical practices of the Tang.

Background: Music and Dance in the
Late Tang Dynasty

A large number of images at Mogao depict musicians grouped in ensembles, accompanying dancers. If these musical ensembles and dancers do indeed reflect Tang court practices, they also reflect the concept of the “Western Paradise” of Amitahba, so prominent in Mahayana Buddhism. They also appear to reflect the strong influence of music and dance from the western regions - that is, central Asia - particularly from Kuqa and Sogdia. Perhaps the most famous image of music and dance at Mogao is in Cave 112, where six musicians, arranged symmetrically, flank the dancer, who plays a *pipa* behind her neck (see fig. 1). Susan Whitfield has called this dance the Sogdian Whirl, a name that reflects the dance’s probable origins in central Asia as well as the dancers’ whirling movements.



Figure 1. Musicians and dancers depicted from Mogao Cave 112.

Conclusion

These two Chengdu museums provide the most important records of court music and dance in southwest China in the tenth century. In spite of the vacuum left by the demise of the Tang, that dynasty was still regarded as a golden age, particularly in these two Shu kingdoms. It is not surprising that the instruments displayed in the tombs of both Wang Jian and Zhao Tingyin reflect Tang practices, but particularly in the case of Former Shu “emperor” Wang Jian, there is ample reason to believe that he wanted his court to emulate Tang practices. He had been a general in the Tang army, and the fact that he was originally from Henan province, far from Shu, may have heightened his need to establish his legitimacy, ruling over a kingdom in which he was essentially an interloper. It is clear that he sought to emulate the Tang in his own reign in many respects, not just in music. For both Wang and Zhao, this was not merely a nostalgic look back to the greatness of Tang; each of these powerful men sought to promote his own political and cultural agenda.

Former Shu: The Yongling Mausoleum,
Burial Site of “Emperor” Wang Jian

Wang Jian, who ruled Former Shu 907-22, had been a Tang general in the waning years of that dynasty. He was quite familiar with Tang court practices, including music and dance. For Wang, emulating Tang court practices gave his rule in Chengdu a sense of legitimacy and grandeur.

Wang’s tomb, known as the Yongling Mausoleum, is one of very few historic Chinese tombs that is above ground. Now a tourist attraction in Chengdu, it has a statue of Wang, seated on a raised stone platform (see fig. 2). The sides of the platform are adorned with twenty-two stone carvings of musicians (see fig. 3), all of whom, like the musicians in the image above from the Mogao Grottoes, are seated, indicating a higher status than standing musicians.



Figure 2. Statue of Wang Jian seated on a raised stone platform from the Yongling Mausoleum.



Figure 3. Stone carving of a seated musician playing the *paiban* from the Yongling Mausoleum.

Like the musical ensembles depicted in the Mogao caves, those in Wang Jian’s tomb include a high proportion of percussion instruments, suggesting that the music they played emphasized rhythm as much as or perhaps more than melody. Wang’s tomb has images of two *paiban* players, who possibly served as the leaders of his instrumental ensemble. There is also a multi-tasking musician who plays the small barrel-shaped *jilougu* drum with her right hand while shaking the *taogu*, a set of three pellet drums, with her left hand. See the photograph of this musician (fig. 4), an artist’s representation of the performance (fig. 5), and a similar depiction from the Mogao Grottoes (fig. 6).



Figure 4. Stone carving of a musician playing the *jilougu* drum and *taogu* pellet drums from the Yongling Mausoleum.



Figure 5. Artist’s representation of the *jilougu* and *taogu* player from the Yongling Mausoleum.



Figure 6. A depiction of a musician playing *jilougu* and *taogu* from Mogao Cave 112.

The *yezi*, or leaf, has a potential range of an octave and a half, but as the pitch is dependent on the stiffness of the leaf as well as the tension applied to it, the strength of the breath, and the aperture of the mouth, it is difficult to control. The leaf, incidentally, is not found in the murals at Magao, but it is still in use among the Naxi of Yunnan, particularly in courting. If most of the instruments depicted in Wang Jian’s tomb can be related to instruments at Mogao, the two dancers in the Yongling Mausoleum appear to be performing, not the Sogdian Whirl, but an older dance, the sleeve dance.

Later Shu: The Tomb of Zhao Tingyin

Zhao Tingyin (883-949) was a general in the Later Shu. The Chengdu Museum holds several painted terracotta statues of musicians and dancers, approximately 2/3 life-size. These figures are among the many artifacts recently unearthed in the Longquanyi district of Chengdu, from the tomb of Zhao Tingyin (see fig. 7). Unfortunately, the ravages of time have deprived approximately half of Zhao Tingyin’s female musicians of their instrument. These women, like Wang Jian’s musicians and those at Magao, are well-appointed, with matching hairstyles and tunics, as can be seen on the *pipa* player (see fig. 8).



Figure 7. Terracotta statues at the excavation site of Zhao Tingyin’s tomb.

Figure 8. Terracotta statue of a musician playing the *pipa* from Zhao Tingyin’s Tomb.

All of Zhao’s musicians are standing, but this may not mean they are lower in status than those in Wang Jian’s tomb and those at Mogao. As a general, not an emperor, Zhao Tingyin might not have had a group of seated musicians accompany him to the grave; perhaps such an honor reserved for his sovereign, Meng Chang (919-65).

Another musician from Zhao Tingyin’s tomb has retained all of her drums—the *jilougu* resting on her left arm and the two *taogu* pellet drums on the stick she holds in her left hand—but her drumstick is missing (see fig. 9). One of two *paixiao* players from this ensemble, however, holds her complete instrument (see fig. 10). The only dancer among these figures is a female dancer, whose livery is somewhat different from that of her musician colleagues (see fig. 11). Like the dancers in Wang Jian’s tomb, she appears to be performing the ancient sleeve dance.



Figure 9. Terracotta statue of a musician playing the *jilougu* and *taogu* from Zhao Tingyin’s Tomb.

Figure 10. Terracotta statue of a musician playing the *paixiao* from Zhao Tingyin’s Tomb.

Figure 11. Terracotta statue of a dancer from Zhao Tingyin’s Tomb.

References

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