

# Aesthetic Study on the Han Dynasty Stone Relief Art

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## Abstract

This study aims to explore the aesthetic value of Han Dynasty stone relief art. Data collection includes high-resolution images of artworks and archival research. Data analysis is conducted using qualitative content analysis. Through an in-depth analysis of the Han Dynasty stone relief art from three aspects: carving techniques, aesthetic forms and content, the research results are summarized as follows: 1. The carving techniques of Han Dynasty stone relief art are rich and diverse, and can be divided into 6 types: intaglio, convex intaglio, ground reduction painting, bas-relief, bas-relief plus intaglio and high relief. 2. The aesthetic forms of Han Dynasty stone relief art include composition form, line application and exaggerated figure modeling. 3. The content of Han Dynasty stone relief art includes daily life and myths and legends, and there are deep implications behind these contents. In short, through the innovation of carving techniques, the richness and diversity of aesthetic forms and the multi-level expression of content, Han Dynasty stone relief art show the culture, religious beliefs and life aesthetics of Han Dynasty society.

**Keywords:** Han Dynasty; Han Dynasty Stone Relief Art; Aesthetics; Composition Form; Carving Technique

## Introduction

China's economy is developing rapidly, but the pursuit of spiritual level is lagging behind, which has led to people's neglect of aesthetics. With the improvement of material life, people's spiritual world has been neglected, and they pay too much attention to material interests, ignoring the care of the spiritual and cultural levels. When facing traditional art, contemporary Chinese aesthetics often takes a

critical attitude and lacks systematic research on in-depth and critical interpretation of traditional aesthetics. This has led to many aesthetic ideas and values of traditional art not being fully explored and inherited (Wu Ping, 2013). The modern transformation of traditional aesthetics is not enough. Although contemporary aesthetics sometimes tries to draw nutrients from traditional aesthetics, there is a lack of in-depth research and effective methods on how to transform the aesthetic values of traditional art in the contemporary context. In the context of the new era, the revival of Chinese culture has become an important issue. General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed in the report of the 19th National Congress that we should "promote the creative transformation and innovative development of China's excellent traditional culture". This sentence has pointed out the direction for the development of China's cultural construction in the future (Jie Jiangling, 2018).

As an important representative of ancient Chinese culture, Han Dynasty stone relief art contains rich aesthetic ideas and values. However, current academic research mainly focuses on the historical, cultural and religious significance of Han Dynasty stone relief art, and often ignores its intrinsic aesthetic value. This lack of research not only limits our understanding of traditional Chinese art, but also hinders the creative transformation and innovative development of China's excellent traditional culture. Given the increasing importance of cultural heritage in global art discourse, there is an urgent need to fill this research gap and provide information for the creative transformation and innovative development of the aesthetic value of Han Dynasty stone relief art in contemporary society.

## **Research Objectives**

1. To study the carving techniques of Han Dynasty stone relief art and reveal the complexity of its carving techniques.
2. To study and analysis of the aesthetic form of Han Dynasty stone relief art.
3. To study the ontent and implied meaning in the stone relief art of the Han Dynasty.

## **Literature Review**

1. Research on how the stone relief art of the Han Dynasty reflects the cultural thoughts, social life and historical background of the Han Dynasty.

1.1 Cultural Thoughts in Han Dynasty Stone Carvings Hui Wei (2016) explored the cultural thoughts of the Han Dynasty contained in the stone carvings, pointing out that the stone carvings reflected Confucianism, Taoism, and philosophical systems such as Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, especially in the funeral culture, expressing the Han people's profound understanding of life, afterlife and ancestor worship. Shi Xinyu (2023) and Zhao Shasha (2011) respectively pointed out that the stone carvings of the Han Dynasty played an important role in cultural exchanges and the dissemination of diversified ideas, reflecting the cultural interaction and integration between the Han Dynasty and the Western Regions and other places, and showing the open and inclusive cultural attitude of the Han Dynasty.

1.2 Social life reflected in stone relief art Liu Rong (2019) analyzed stone relief art from the Han Dynasty in northern Shaanxi and demonstrated the agricultural and pastoral society and lifestyle of the time. He believed that these stone relief art not only recorded the social production activities of the time, but also reflected the social hierarchy, marriage system and folk customs. Yang Lewen (2022) studied the stone relief art from the Han Dynasty in Xuzhou and demonstrated the daily life scenes of the Han Dynasty society, including traveling by carriage, banquets, farming, etc., revealing the details of the lives of ordinary people and nobles in the Han Dynasty.

1.3 Historical Background of Funeral Rituals and Stone Portraits Song Weijian and Wang Xiaoling (2022) explored the function of stone portraits in funeral rituals, pointing out that the stone portraits of the Han Dynasty were not only used to decorate tombs, but also to continue the life of the deceased, express religious beliefs, and dispel the fear of death. When studying the stone portraits of the Wu Family Ancestral Hall, Guo Bingli (2006) emphasized the importance of these stone portraits in recording historical events and stories, and that they became important documents for studying the history of the Han Dynasty.

## 2. Research on the aesthetics of Han Dynasty stone relief art

2.1 Image modeling and aesthetic expression Wei Jianming and Hu Chongzhi (2017) explored the image modeling in Han Dynasty stone relief art, pointing out that its artistic style combines reality and mythology through exaggeration and deformation to express rich artistic conception. This modeling technique not only reflects the aesthetic pursuit of the Han Dynasty, but also conveys the profound connection between man and nature, gods and society.

2.2 Regional style and artistic expression Yin Dongyun (2022) and Shi Xinyu (2023) studied the artistic characteristics of Han Dynasty stone relief art in different regions. The Han Dynasty stone relief art in Xuzhou and northern Shaanxi have their own characteristics: the stone relief art in Xuzhou are known for their rough and bold style, while the stone relief art in northern Shaanxi pay more attention to decorativeness and the expression of myths and legends. Wang Jie (2023) analyzed the agricultural, pastoral and hunting cultural patterns in northern Shaanxi, showing the regional characteristics of the local artistic style.

Through the above literature review, it can be seen that although the research on the culture, history and art aesthetics of Han Dynasty stone relief art has made some progress, it is not specific and in-depth enough in the in-depth exploration of the aesthetic value of Han Dynasty stone relief art, and the research on the aesthetic form, carving technology, and content of Han Dynasty stone relief art is not systematic enough, so this study can fill the gap in this research field.

## **Research Methodology**

### **1. Data Collection**

Data collection is done through various channels:

Interviews: The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed for analysis. These interviews focused on the specific techniques of Han Dynasty stone relief art and the meaning of the works' content.

Artworks: Capture and collect high-resolution images of Han Dynasty stone relief art, along with detailed descriptions from experts. These images are used for visual analysis to determine artistic techniques, artistic forms, and allegorical meanings.

### **2. Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. This process involved coding the visual elements of Han Dynasty stone relief artworks to identify recurring themes and patterns. The analysis was guided by the research objectives, focusing on: the content and aesthetic concepts of Han Dynasty stone relief art. The forms and techniques of Han Dynasty stone relief art.

### 3. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study is based on the Chinese contemporary aesthetics theory of Chinese scholar Mr. Ye Lang, which divides works of art into three levels: artistic techniques, artistic form and content:

Techniques: Includes philosophical and aesthetic concepts derived from Han dynasty stone relief art, such as the idea of “harmony between man and nature,” and how contemporary Chinese artists interpret and reimagine these concepts.

Art Form: This section explores the visual and structural elements of Han dynasty stone relief art, including the use of line, compositional techniques, and narrative structure, and their influence on the form and style of contemporary Chinese artworks.

Artistic Techniques: Focus on the specific methods and techniques used in Han Dynasty stone relief art, such as what kind of carving technique is used on what kind of stone.

## Research Results

### 1. Carving techniques of Han Dynasty stone relief art

As one of the treasures of ancient Chinese art, the carving techniques of the Han Dynasty stone relief art reached a very high level at that time. On the basis of inheriting the skills of their predecessors, the craftsmen of the Han Dynasty continued to innovate and develop, forming a unique and rich carving technique. The following is a detailed description of the carving techniques of the Han Dynasty stone relief art from multiple aspects.

#### 1.1 Rough surface intaglio engraving

Yin-line engraving, in simple terms, is to use stone engraving tools to express objects by engraving on the stone. Because the engraved lines are sunken in the stone, it is called Yin-line engraving (Figure 1). Yin-line engraving is the main artistic method of modeling stone relief art in the Han Dynasty. Yin-line engraving is concise and accurate, and it creates rich and moving pictures with extremely simple modeling methods.



**Figure 1** "Sishui Laoding" (partial) shows the carving technique of rough surface intaglio engraving

Source: Photographed by the researcher (2023)

### 1.2 Convex surface engraving

Convex incised line engraving is to first process the stone to be relatively flat, and then reduce the "background" outside the image, so that the image is naturally preserved and protrudes from the picture, and then the details of the image are depicted with incised line engraving. Therefore, it is also called "reduced ground incised line engraving" (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** The Sun Bird shows the carving technique of convex intaglio with a chiseled background

Source: Photographed by the researcher (2023)

### 1.3 Subtractive painting

The subtractive painting method refers to reducing the "painting ground" outside the image to make the image stand out, and then using ink lines or colors to outline the flat image. Subtracting the ground is a pure sculpture method, while using a brush to apply color on a flat stone is an authentic painting method. Most of the Han Dynasty stone relief art in Suide, Shaanxi (Figure 3) are unique in

the world of Chinese Han Dynasty stone relief art because they take into account both sculpture and painting.



**Figure 3** Images of Queen Mother of the West and King Father of the East, Nuwa and Fuxi in Suide, showing the subtractive painting and carving techniques

Source: Photographed by the researcher (2023)

#### 1.4 Relief Sculpture

Relief sculptures can be categorized into two types: low relief (bas-relief) and high relief. In low relief, the stone surface is first flattened, then the "background" around the image is reduced, and finally, the image is carved on the protruding stone surface using a technique that creates volume transitions and variations in elevation. Although the protrusion may be only a millimeter or two, it creates a vivid and distinct impression of depth and form (Figure 4). High relief, on the other hand, has much more pronounced volume changes, falling between low relief and full-round sculpture.

Additionally, a form known as intaglio-incised low relief was developed. In this technique, the image is first raised from the background, then further refined using low relief methods, followed by intaglio engraving to outline the image's key features. The principle behind this is similar to that of flat intaglio engraving, but applied to a raised surface with varying depths.



**Figure 4** A carriage and horse travel (partial) showing the bas-relief technique

Source: Photographed by the researcher (2023)

## 2. The aesthetic form of Han Dynasty stone relief art

### 2.1 The composition art of Han Dynasty stone relief art

The composition techniques used in Han Dynasty stone relief art showcase a sophisticated approach to organizing visual elements, allowing for both narrative complexity and aesthetic beauty. The layered composition method provides depth and hierarchy, structuring images in a way that reflects the social order of the Han Dynasty. Screen-style and film-like compositions further contribute to the visual storytelling by organizing scenes into distinct yet interrelated segments, while repetition and peculiarity create a rhythmic balance between uniformity and focus on key elements. The strategic use of white space highlights the subjects while creating a sense of spatial depth, and symmetrical compositions provide visual harmony, making these works not only rich in content but also pleasing to the eye. Together, these methods reveal the Han Dynasty's artistic ability to convey intricate narratives with clarity and order (Table 1).

**Table 1** summarizes the various composition methods and characteristics of Han Dynasty stone relief art.

| Composition                           | Manifestation   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Layered composition                   | Dividing the picture into multiple horizontal levels to display different content or plots is often used to present complex narratives.                     |
| Screen-style composition              | Dividing the picture into three parts achieves a balanced and unified artistic effect, often used to depict different scenes.                               |
| The Nine-grid Grid and Its Derivative | Divide the picture into small squares with a length and width of three units each and arrange them neatly to achieve the overall unity of the picture.      |
| Composition Methods                   |   |
| Film-like composition                 | Rectangular images similar to movie films are arranged up and down to create a sense of rhythm and visual guidance.   |
| Repeat and Specificity                | Highlight key themes and enhance visual interest by contrasting repeated and distinctive elements.  |
| Number of entities and white space    | Balance the number of subjects and blank space in the picture to create a harmonious visual effect and emphasize the combination of movement and stillness. |

| Composition             | Manifestation   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Symmetrical composition | It expresses harmony and balance through symmetrically arranged elements and is often used to express the balance between static and dynamic. |

## 2.2 Superb Line Expression Language

The artistic form of the Han Dynasty stone relief art is highly unique, especially under the difficulty of carving on stone, the artist showed extraordinary creativity. Carving delicate lines on hard stone requires extremely high skills and patience.

Most of the images in the Han Dynasty stone relief art are based on curves, especially the outlines of people and animals, which have almost no sharp or sudden turns. The use of curves makes these images appear solid and powerful, full of movement and change. These curves not only show the majestic style of the Han Dynasty stone relief art, but also bring a strong visual tension and sense of movement, as if giving the picture a musical rhythm, as shown in Figure 5.



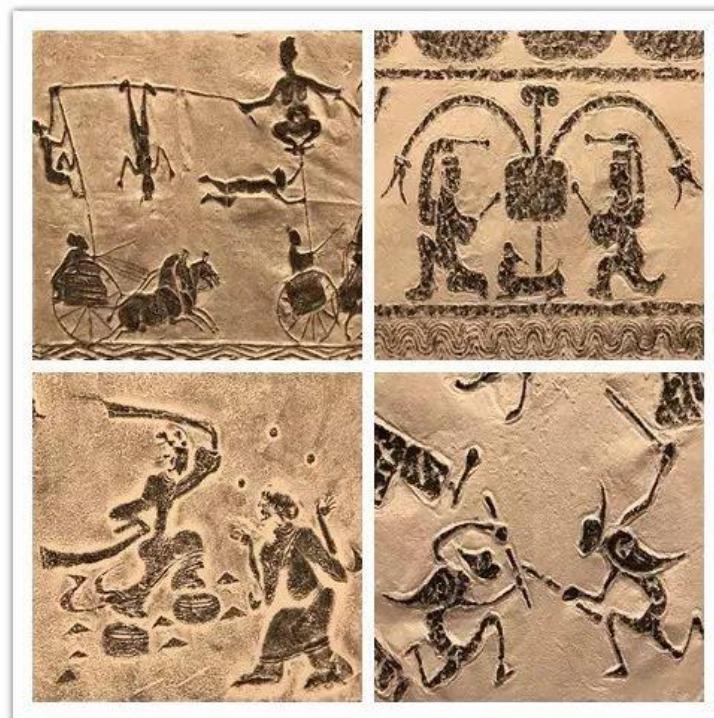
**Figure 4** Ox (rubbing) shows the smooth contour lines of the image

Source: provided by a personal collector (2023)

## 2.3 Modeling method

The artistic shock of the Han Dynasty stone relief art is largely due to the artistic treatment of exaggeration and deformation. The artistic treatment of exaggeration and deformation in the Han Dynasty stone relief art (Figure 5) is often reflected in the exaggeration of the proportions of the image, the use of "unconventional" techniques to "randomly" process some of the shapes of the image, in order to achieve a certain visual effect, to express the author's extraordinary aesthetic taste and artistic expression ability. This deformed beauty reflects the subjective re-creation of natural forms by Han

Dynasty artists and embodies an artistic pursuit that transcends reality, aiming to enhance visual impact and artistic expression through deformation and exaggeration.



**Figure 5** "Game Picture" (rubbing) shows the exaggerated and deformed images in the Han Dynasty stone relief art

Source: provided by a personal collector (2023)

### 3. The content and implied meaning in the stone relief art of the Han Dynasty

#### 3.1 The beauty of everyday life

The scenes of family life are common in the stone relief art of the Han Dynasty, showing strong family affection and family values. The scenes of family members together, such as ancestor worship, banquets, and labor, symbolize the harmony of the family and the bond of family affection. These scenes reflect the importance that Han Dynasty society attached to family ethics and family unity.

The Weaving Picture (Figure 6) depicts a weaving scene, with four women busy adjusting and spinning silk. They skillfully operate the loom, winding the yarn into neat silk balls and hanging them under the ram. This scene vividly reproduces the daily hard work of women in the Han Dynasty. In the social division of labor, women shoulder important responsibilities of weaving and housework. In the picture, a weaver girl even turns around and picks up her baby while working, preparing to feed her at the loom. This detail not only shows the hard work and busyness of women's labor, but also reflects

their important role in the family, taking into account the dual responsibilities of work and childcare. The two phoenixes on the pavilion are auspicious objects, symbolizing good fortune and happiness. This detail embodies the Han people's pursuit of a better life and their belief in auspicious symbols. As a spiritual bird in traditional culture, the phoenix gives the whole work a deeper meaning, suggesting that this building and the people in it will be protected and blessed. The human labor and the wind bird representing the gods of heaven form a harmonious picture, which also reflects the spirit of "harmony between man and nature" advocated by Taoists in the Han Dynasty.

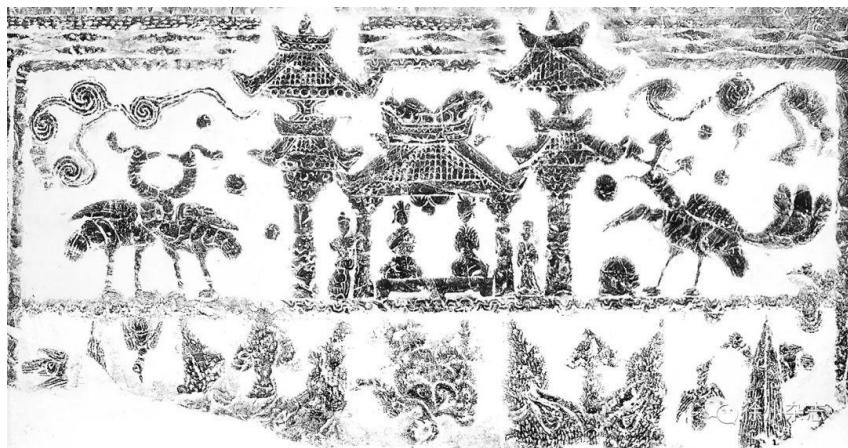


Figure 6 Rubbing of Textile Diagram

Source: provided by a personal collector (2023)

### 3.2 The Beauty of an Ideal World

This painting, “The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl Meeting” (Figure 7), was unearthed from a small tomb in Zhangxu, Suining County. In the center of the painting is a pair of towering gatehouses, symbolizing the legendary “Heavenly Gate” or “Heavenly Palace”. This description echoes the “Heavenly Palace” in the myth of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, symbolizing the ferry crossing over the Milky Way that separates the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl. It implies the meeting of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl and praises free love. It also embodies the Taoist idea of “harmony between man and nature” and shows the integration of myth and reality in Han Dynasty art. Images of the Emperor of Heaven and gods are common in Han Dynasty relief stones, reflecting the importance that people in the Han Dynasty attached to religious beliefs and symbolizing the worship of gods and the awe of the order of the universe.



**Figure 7** The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl meet

Source: provided by a personal collector (2023)

The stone relief art of the Han Dynasty shows its unique cultural depth through the use of symbols and allegorical meanings and conveys rich ideological connotations with the help of specific image symbols. This art form shows a grand and majestic momentum, reflecting the lofty ambitions and broad minds of the people of the Han Dynasty. This momentum is not only reflected in the scale and layout of the works, but also in its magnificent content. Artists pay attention to harmony in their creations, and their works often present a romantic style, successfully achieving the artistic effect of blending scenes, making the pictures both realistic and vivid, and full of ideal beauty.

## Discussion

The results of this study emphasize the intricate artistry and profound cultural significance embedded in Han Dynasty stone relief art. This art form not only showcases technical expertise but also reflects the broader philosophical, social, and cultural values of the Han Dynasty. The discussion highlights three key aspects: the artistry of the techniques, the fusion of form and content, and the need for further aesthetic exploration.

1. Artistry of Techniques The carving techniques employed in Han Dynasty stone relief art were highly diverse and innovative, showcasing the artisans' exceptional skills. Techniques such as intaglio, bas-relief, high relief, and ground reduction painting created multi-dimensional works of art that conveyed emotions, ideas, and narratives within a limited space. These techniques were more than mere craftsmanship; they were used as a medium to express cultural values and emotional depth. For

instance, the precise use of intaglio and relief enabled artisans to depict complex emotions and movements, providing a vivid portrayal of life during the Han Dynasty. This technical mastery underscores how the artisans of the time used their craft to communicate stories and philosophical ideas, elevating the stone reliefs from decorative objects to sophisticated works of cultural expression.

2. Fusion of Form and Content The Han Dynasty stone reliefs are notable not just for their technical artistry, but for the way they seamlessly integrate form and content. The various composition styles—such as layered composition, screen-like composition, and film-strip composition—reflect both the visual aesthetics and the social and philosophical structures of the time. These composition methods not only enhance the visual appeal but also embody the hierarchical worldview and harmony between humans and nature that were central to Han Dynasty thought. The art captured themes from everyday life to spiritual and religious beliefs, with the formal composition providing structure and order to complex narratives. The relationship between form and content in these works reflects the Han people's deep understanding of social order, cosmological beliefs, and their place in the natural world, adding an intellectual layer to the aesthetic beauty of the reliefs.

3. Need for Further Aesthetic Research While much research has focused on the historical and technical aspects of Han Dynasty stone reliefs, their aesthetic value has often been overlooked. The intricate compositions and detailed carving techniques suggest that these artworks were created with a deep understanding of form, balance, and beauty. This study reveals that the aesthetic dimension of Han Dynasty reliefs warrants deeper investigation. By studying these reliefs from an aesthetic perspective, scholars can gain insights into the ancient Chinese conception of beauty, the role of art in expressing social and philosophical ideas, and the relationship between artistic form and content. The reliefs offer rich material for aesthetic analysis, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of ancient Chinese art and its significance in both cultural and philosophical contexts.

In summary, Han Dynasty stone relief art stands as a remarkable example of the interplay between technique, aesthetics, and cultural meaning. Its innovative carving techniques, coupled with the harmonious blend of form and content, reflect the philosophical and social values of the time. There remains significant potential for further research into the aesthetic principles underlying these works, providing new perspectives on ancient Chinese art and its lasting impact on contemporary aesthetic studies.

## Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of the carving techniques, artistic form beauty, and content and meaning of Han Dynasty stone relief art, this study has drawn the following conclusions:

**Exquisite and diverse carving techniques:** The carving techniques of the Han Dynasty stone relief art demonstrate the high artistic and technical achievements of the Han Dynasty craftsmen. The techniques are diverse, including rough surface intaglio, convex surface intaglio, ground reduction painting, bas-relief and high relief, etc. Each technique not only creates a multi-layered three-dimensional effect visually, but also enhances the emotional expression of the image, allowing the picture to show rich narrative and emotional tension in a limited space.

**Complexity and innovation of formal beauty:** The composition of the Han Dynasty stone relief art is complex and innovative. Whether it is layered composition, screen composition or film composition, the craftsmen of the Han Dynasty were able to cleverly organize the content of the picture and maintain visual order and narrative levels. In particular, the smooth use of line language adds movement and rhythm to the picture, showing the craftsmen's deep understanding of the beauty of artistic form.

**Depth and diversity of content and meaning:** Han Dynasty stone relief art not only record historical events and daily life, but also contain profound cultural and philosophical connotations. The pictures show the unique understanding of the Han people on family, society, nature and the universe by expressing myths and legends, religious beliefs and the concept of harmony between man and nature. Its content and meaning reflect the pursuit of eternal life, natural harmony and social order in Han Dynasty society, and have important cultural symbolic significance.

As a symbol of the art and culture of the Han Dynasty, the stone relief art of the Han Dynasty demonstrates outstanding carving techniques, rich artistic form beauty, and profound content and meaning. It is not only a mirror image of the social culture of the Han Dynasty, but also a culmination of ancient Chinese aesthetic thought. In-depth research on the aesthetic value of the stone relief art of the Han Dynasty not only provides rich research materials for modern aesthetics, but also injects new inspiration into contemporary art creation. Therefore, in-depth exploration of the aesthetic value of the stone relief art of the Han Dynasty can not only make up for the shortcomings in current aesthetic research, but also provide important cultural references for the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese art in the contemporary era.

## Suggestions

### 1. Theoretical suggestions:

Future research should pay more attention to the style differences of Han Dynasty stone relief art in different regions and the cultural and economic factors behind them. Regional differences are not only reflected in carving techniques, but may also reflect religious beliefs, social structures and craft traditions in different regions. By comparing and studying these regional differences, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural diversity of Han Dynasty society.

When interpreting the cultural symbols of Han Dynasty stone relief art, we should introduce more historical documents and archaeological data of the time, and combine them with image analysis to further reveal the social and cultural connotations behind the images. In particular, regarding the expression of the idea of "harmony between man and nature", future research can conduct multidisciplinary cross-disciplinary research from the perspectives of religion, philosophy and social structure.

### 2. Application suggestions:

In terms of cultural heritage protection and display, the artistic and cultural value of Han Dynasty stone relief art should be more widely disseminated. Museums and archaeological institutions can combine modern scientific and technological means, such as 3D scanning and virtual reality technology, to vividly present the details and cultural connotations of Han Dynasty stone relief art to the public, thereby enhancing their educational function and artistic appeal.

Through the above suggestions, future research and applications can better inherit and carry forward the valuable cultural heritage of Han Dynasty stone relief art and promote their further development in academic research and artistic creation.

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