

DOCTORAL THESIS IN BRIEF

LÊ TẠO. *Traditional stone carving and sculpting art in Thanh Hoá (the XVth-XVIIIth centuries)*

Speciality: Theory and History of Fine Arts

Code: 62212001

In the humankind's history of civilization, from the early periods, many nations used stone to build palaces or religious works, to sculpt and carve mystical statues.

In Vietnam, only until the XIth century, which marked the independent Đại Việt, saw sizeable works built with stone substance. In the late XIVth and early XVth centuries, stone carving and sculpting arts of Việt people embraced new spirits. Hồ Dynasty's citadels in Vĩnh Lộc district, Lam Kinh palace in Thọ Xuân district, or individual castles of dukes and Trịnh Lords built in the XVIIth-XVIIIth centuries are magnificently sizeable works with diverse and enriched contents. They demonstrate a sort of arts on special materials, becoming precious cultural heritages of the country. The substance itself on the one hand is original and irreplaceable, the works on the other present cultural, historical and ideological aspects of the contemporary society. Only if we properly orchestrate the research, collection, assessment of artistic and cultural values of these works, can the preservation and

promotion of traditional cultural values be successful.

Stone architectural works built in the XVth-XVIIIth centuries are mainly located in Thanh Hóa with various forms. Doing research and making assessment on the real status and values of the stone carving and sculpting arts is a necessary exercise in order to promptly assist the preservation and promotion of the national traditional culture in the new period in line with the *Law on Cultural Heritage* No.09/2001/L-CTN on 12 July 2001. Thus, the author selected the theme *Traditional stone carving and sculpting arts in Thanh Hoa (in the XVth-XVIIIth centuries)* for his doctoral dissertation, attempting to make the public awareness clear on the *Stone carving and sculpting arts in Thanh Hoa (in the XVth-XVIIIth centuries)*. The author considered the stone carving and sculpting arts a cultural phenomenon, a sort of arts with uniquely remarkable features embracing the imprints of a certain historical period. He also construed the reasons, developmental conditions, fundamental characteristics of every single stone carving and sculpting type as well as the relationship, role of stone carving and sculpting in traditional architecture. Still, he analyzed, made comparison with the stone carving and sculpting arts employed in other localities in different periods with a view to pointing out the

salient features of the outstanding values of the stone carving and sculpting arts in Thanh Hóa in respect of scope, artistic patterns, cultural and ideological values (in the XVth-XVIIIth centuries). According to the author, the stone carving and sculpting arts in Thanh Hóa in the XVth-XVIII centuries have contributions to the overall fine arts of the country.

Apart from the introduction, conclusion and annexes, the dissertation composes four chapters (spreading over 200 pages).

Chapter 1, *Background of the traditional stone carving and sculpting arts in Thanh Hóa*, describes major features of geographic, historical, social characteristics of Thanh Hóa in the XVth-XVIIIth centuries. Thanh Hóa holds a relatively special geographic position in the course of Vietnam's development history. It was the habitat of ancient Việt people for thousands of years B.C, an off-fence area as well as the base for geographic expansion Southward by the Việt people during such periods as Lê Sơ and Lê-Trịnh.

In the Lê Sơ period, Thanh Hóa became the centre of the anti-Ming resistant war, beginning with the fighters for justice led by General Nguyễn Chích to the Lam Sơn uprisings led by Bình Định Vương or Thuận Thiên (the Heaven's Will) Lê Lợi with legendary stories. *The stone carving and sculpting arts in Lam Kinh (in the XVth century) had a deep imprint of the spirit of the "holly war" and became a standard and a typical feature of culture during the Lê Sơ*

period.

In the Lê-Trịnh period (the XVth-XVIIIth centuries), Thanh Hoa saw political events of the country. In 1533, a restoration movement of the Lê Dynasty as well as the conflicts between Trịnh-Mạc Lords took place. In 1592, King Lê Trang Tông re-occupied Đông Đô capital citadel where had started with reigns of Lê kings and Trịnh-Nguyễn Lords. This period was marked with the most cultural events and imprints in the country's history.

Thanh Hóa has a diversified culture, with a clear division into three topological areas (mountainous, midland and coastal). Particularly, with Mã (Horse) river system and spacious estuaries (Lạch Bạng, Ghép, Lạch Sung, Lạch Trường, etc.), this land is seen as a holly place that gives birth to talent personalities, fully enriched with folk culture and legends. *Those concerted characteristics laid the premises for the formulation and development of the traditional stone carving and sculpting arts in Thanh Hóa.* Additionally, Thanh Hóa is a stone outsourcing area and has villages involved in the traditional stone carving and sculpting exercise that started from the pre-historical period. Thanh Hóa is also known for bronze items in the Đông Sơn era, vestiges of "divine stone" worship on "Cổ Giải" mount pick, "Trống-Mái (Hen-Cock)" mount, "Vọng Phu (Wife waiting for husband)" mount, etc. There remain the stone carving and sculpting villages that were formed in the Lý Dynasty in An Hoạch (Đông Sơn) area. Many areas in

Thanh Hóa blessed with precious stones have been recognized in historical literature. Magnificently, stones therein have various colors and patterns. All of these characteristics represent the aesthetic and plastic ability and sense of Cửu Chân people that was formed for ages.

The stone carving and sculpting arts in Thanh Hóa (in the XVth-XVIIIth centuries) result from the national traditional arts, at the same time profoundly reflect historical impacts, reciprocal influence in the communication with other localities and periods, presenting visibly the spirit as well as cultural style of the people at the time.

In Chapter 2, *The traditional stone carving and sculpting arts in architecture (in the XVth-XVIIIth centuries)*, the author focused his studies on certain specific stone-carved or sculpted objects in such architectural sites as Lam Kinh palace, Hồ Dynasty's citadel, communal houses, temples, pagodas, etc. Based on such studies, he made some remarks: due to the unique characteristics of the substance, each stone-carved or sculpted object is both a component of the architecture and an independent masterpiece, decorating the surface of the work, being an outstanding point and defining the scope as well as planning of the structure, forming a master space of the architecture. On the other hand, the stone-carved or sculpted objects embrace special cultural values, representing the spiritual aspirations

through, for instance, "sacred symbols" in religious and beliefs structures, and at simultaneously exposing a certain content of ideology and culture of the contemporary society.

In Chapter 3, the author studied *the arts of carving and sculpting human and animal statues* through different periods. They include, for example: human statues in the Lê Sơ period in the XVth century and in the Lê-Trịnh period in the XVth – XVIIIth centuries, clay statues, or animal statues like the dragon statues (round-shape configuration) in the XVth century in Lam Kinh, Kính Thiên (Heaven) palace in Hanoi, and other animal statues. The author drew some remarks: the arts of carving and sculpting human and animal statues in Thanh Hóa (in the XVth – XVIIIth centuries) commenced in Lam Kinh and flourished in mausoleums, tombs of dukes and lords as well as in temples. Human and animal statues during this period are more often associated with religious and beliefs structures. Three unique characteristics of this period are as follows: *firstly*, the carving and sculpting style is deeply imbedded with spiritual elements, simplified, "symbolic", and non-descriptive. An example, among other, is the Mandarin statues in the king's audience at the tombs of Lê kings in Lam Kinh (in the XVth – XVIIIth centuries); *secondly*, the carving and sculpting style is of profoundly folk character, for example the statues at Nguyễn Văn Nghi's mausoleum, Quận Châu (in the XVIIth century); and, *thirdly*, it is an exaggerative mixture of descriptive and

decorative elements, for instance the statues at Mãn Quận Công, Bái Lăng, Hoàng Giang mausoleums or Voi (elephant) temple.

Chapter 4 discusses *the arts of carving and sculpting steles and worship objects*. Stele carving and sculpting is a special art. Stone steles were made in the early periods and concentrated in Thanh Hóa, particularly in the XVth – XVIIIth centuries. There are different types of steles that have remarkable values and standard characteristics nationwide. For example, there are steles in arc shape, representing for the sky (like *Vĩnh Lăng steles*), or steles with palate (like *the steles recognizing the contributions made by Lê Dynasty's Generals*), etc. In the XVth century, the arts of carving and sculpting human and animal statues were primitive and simple as compared with Vĩnh Lăng sophisticated steles. Entering the XVIIth century, human and animal statues, worship objects, steles in Lê Thời Hiến, Nguyễn Văn Nghi mausoleums were carved and sculpted in a more consistent and sophisticated

manner. From the XVIIIth century onward, human and animal statues were more subtly carved and sculpted, while steles and worship objects were more simplified as compared with those in the earlier periods.

The arts of carving and sculpting stone steles and worship objects in Thanh Hóa in the XVth – XVIIIth centuries were remarkably recognized across the country per se their quantity and quality. Various stone steles during this period are of standard and foundational characters. It could deem the arts of carving and sculpting steles in Thanh Hóa as the height of techniques and sophistication in using stone in Vietnamese fine arts.

The dissertation was successfully defended before the State-level Dissertation Examination Board in the Institute of Culture-Information, in 2007.

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