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Sogdian Stone Coffins In China

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Abstract: The tombs constructed by the Sogdians who arrived in China during the early medieval period are of great significance for studying their history. These tombs provide extensive information about the Sogdians' life, religion, and commercial activities in China. Many Sogdian-related tombs have been discovered in China; however, a large number of them were found partially destroyed, without inscriptions, or with faded imagery. Therefore, the tombs of Shi Jun (史君) and An Jia (安伽) from the Northern Zhou (北周) period, Kang Ye (康业) and Yu Hong (虞弘) from the Sui (隋) dynasty, the tomb discovered in the Tian Shui area from the Northern Dynasties period, as well as a Northern Dynasties stone tomb with elements of Zoroastrian art preserved in the National Museum of China, are especially valuable due to their archaeological and artistic completeness, which facilitates detailed analysis. These tombs play a key role in understanding both the history of the Sogdians in China and the cultural exchange between China and the West. A common feature of all these tombs is the presence of stone tombs called "shítáng" (石堂), meaning "stone-built tomb" or, in Sogdian, "house of the gods" (石头做的坟墓(众神的屋子), shítou zuò de fénmù (zhòngshén de wūzi)). The stone sarcophagi depict scenes of daily life, religious ceremonies, music, dance, banquets, travel, hunting, mythical beings, and miraculous events. Among the shared characteristics of the above-mentioned stone tombs, one notable motif is the depiction of dance.

Keywords: Shi Jun, An Jia, Kang Ye, Yu Hong, Tian Shui, Taiyuan, Northern Zhou, Sui and Tang dynasties, "house-shaped stone sarcophagus" (房屋形石椁, fángwū xíng shíguǒ).

Introduction: The Sogdians were among the most famous trading peoples along the Silk Road in their time. Their inclination toward commercial activity was closely linked to their important geographical position at the crossroads between East and West. As intermediaries, the Sogdians played a major role in the economic and cultural exchanges between these two regions.

The Jiu Tangshu (Old Book of Tang) describes this in detail as follows:

"When a son is born, they place a bit of rock sugar in his mouth and some glue on his palm — this is done with the wish that, when he grows up, his words will be sweet and money will stick to his hands like glue. Their custom is to study the Khwarazmian script. They are skilled in trade and will argue even over a profit of one dirham". This description vividly illustrates how deeply ingrained the Sogdians' natural trading spirit, pursuit of profit, and developed economic mindset were [10, p. 15]. This shows that the Sogdians had been engaged in trade since ancient times, and that Sogdian boys, in particular, were accustomed from a young age to learning the art of commerce.

During the Sui and Tang periods, the social status of Sogdian immigrants living in Luoyang was highly diverse — among them were merchants, officials, monks, female entertainers, slaves, and others, meaning that they could be found in almost every stratum of society. Merchants made up the largest group. In the Sui and Tang periods, Sogdian trading caravans were among the most active economic organizations along the Silk Road. The activities of Sogdian merchants in Luoyang extended across a vast area — from Luoyang to Xi'an (Chang'an), as well as along trade routes reaching Hebei, Mongolia, Gansu, and Central Asia. Among them were also very wealthy merchants [11, p. 142].

During the Tang dynasty, the Sogdians living in Luoyang were mostly descendants of Sogdians who had migrated there since the Northern Dynasties period. Their origins were diverse, as were their occupations in

Luoyang, though merchants constituted a relatively large portion of them [12, pp. 34–40]. At present, around 60 epitaph stones belonging to members of the Sogdian community have been discovered in Luoyang, making it the region with the highest number of such finds to date.

The Sogdians came from Central Asia to the Hexi Corridor, and from there through Longyou to the capital Chang'an and into the interior regions of the Central Plains. Current data indicate that Hexi and Chang'an were the main settlement areas of the Sogdians. In these regions, even prominent local families of Sogdian origin had formed. However, in the Longyou region, which lies between them, both historical records and excavated artifacts are relatively scarce [13, pp. 33–40]. Based on the available sources, extensive information about the Sogdians' life, religion, and commercial relations in China can be obtained primarily from their tombs. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the number of Sogdian tombs discovered in China increased significantly compared to those from the Northern Dynasties period.

The tombs of Sogdians in China have mainly been found in the northeastern, central, and central-western regions. The identification and discovery of Sogdian tombs and burial artifacts in northern and northwestern China have sparked considerable scholarly interest and debate regarding the presence and status of these peoples in China during the Northern Qi, Northern Zhou, Sui, and Tang dynasties (from the second half of the 6th century to the mid-7th century CE). As individuals, they selectively adopted various Chinese burial customs [8, p. 1]. For example, many inscriptions left by Sogdians have been discovered in the Longmen Grottoes, and more than 60 epitaphs belonging to Sogdians from the Tang period have been found. These tombs show that the Sogdian immigrants in Luoyang were divided into two groups: the first were those who had come during the Han, Wei, and Northern Dynasties periods and their descendants; the second were those who arrived during the Sui and Tang dynasties. For instance, the epitaph of Kang Po (康婆墓志), dated to the first year of Shangyuan (674) in the reign of Emperor Gaozong of Tang (高宗), records that his ancestors had come to Luoyang during the Northern Wei period. Similarly, the epitaph of An Bei (安备墓志) from the ninth year of Sui Kaihuang (589), those of An Jing (安静墓志) and Kang Zixiang (康子相墓志) from the second year of Tang Xianqing (657), all indicate that their families had migrated to Luoyang during the Northern Wei dynasty. At the same time, the epitaph of Kang Dun (康敦墓志), written in the third year of Chuigong (687) under Emperor Ruizong, traces the family's origins back to the Western Jin period. The epitaphs of An Shi (安师墓志) from the third year of Longshuo (663) under Gaozong, Kang Da (康达墓志) from the second year of Zongzhang (669), and An Lingjie (安令节墓志) from the first year of Shenlong (705) under Emperor Zhongzong, all trace their ancestry back as far as the Eastern Han period. Other Sogdians who migrated to Luoyang during the Tang dynasty are also known. For example: the epitaph of An Yan (安延墓志) from the fourth year of Yonghui (653) under Gaozong; that of Kang Liumai (康留买墓志) from the first year of Yongchun (682); Shi Duo's epitaph (史多基志) from the seventh year of Kaiyuan (719) under Emperor Xuanzong; Kang Xian'ang's epitaph (康仙昂墓志) from the ninth year of Tianbao (750); and He Cheng's epitaph (何澄基志) from the eighteenth year of Zhenyuan (802) under Emperor Dezong. All of these record that their families had migrated to Luoyang during the Tang dynasty. Moreover, the epitaph of An Huai (安怀墓志) from the second year of Changshou (693) under Empress Wu Zetian states that his family came to Luoyang during the Sui dynasty: "His father, due to his official duties, came to Luoyang and settled here." [9, p. 140].

In China, many tombs belonging to Sogdians have been discovered; however, most of them were found partially destroyed, without inscriptions, or with their images faded. For this reason, the tombs of the Sogdians An Jia (安伽), Shi Jun (史君), and Kang Ye (康業), discovered on the Longshou (龙首) Plain in China, as well as those found in Tianshui and Taiyuan, are particularly valuable for study due to their archaeological and artistic completeness, which facilitates analysis.

Study of the Site

1. The tomb of Shi Jun, dating to the Northern Zhou (北周) period, is located in the Daminggong (大明宫) township of the Weiyang (未央) District, Xi'an (西安) City, on the eastern side of Jingshang Village. It lies approximately 6.6 kilometers southeast of the ruins of Chang'an (长安), the ancient capital of the Western Han (西汉) dynasty, and about 1.6 kilometers north of the Daminggong Palace ruins from the Tang period [1, p. 11]. The fact that this tomb is only 2.2 kilometers away from the Northern Zhou–period tomb of An Jia (安伽墓) and has a similar structure suggests that it also dates to the Northern Zhou dynasty [1, p. 25].

On August 20, 2003, several small stone fragments and an oval-shaped stone measuring 13 × 6 × 0.5 cm were

unearthed from the soil. When the fragments were assembled in the laboratory, a deeply carved Chinese inscription was found on the surface. The inscription read:

"The stone tomb of Shi Jun, Sabo (Sogdian prefect) of Yuanzhou during the Great Zhou period." [1, p. 27].

2. Another important tomb is that of An Jia (安伽), located on the northern outskirts of Xi'an City, approximately 300 meters northwest of Kangdizhai (炕底寨) Village in Daminggong (大明宫) Township, Weiyang (未央) District [3, p. 1]. The tomb of An Jia is a distinctive monument from the Northern Zhou period. It differs fundamentally from other tombs of the same era. Although it follows the standard structural layout of Northern Zhou tombs, it stands out in several respects: The passageway and tomb walls are built of brick, which is rarely seen in other tombs of the period; No simple pottery figurines were found, meaning that burial goods associated with daily life were absent; The skeleton of the tomb owner was found in a disordered position, with bones scattered along the passageway; The main chamber of the tomb is luxuriously decorated, with a stone couch at its center, gilded and adorned with colorful ornaments; The tomb walls are painted with twelve magnificent murals depicting the owner's life filled with wealth and glory. This discovery has provided new insights into the burial practices and social stratification of the Northern Zhou period [3, pp. 4–5]. The principal features of An Jia's tomb are as follows: it is oriented north to south, with a total length of 35 meters and an axis of 180°. The tomb consists of seven main parts: a long sloping passageway, five open courtyards (tianjing), five connecting corridors (guodong), two brick-sealed doors, one stone door, one passageway, and a single brick-built burial chamber [14, p. 149].

3. In 2012, a Japanese collector, Mr. Horinai Noriyoshi (堀内纪良, Kūnèi Jìliáng), donated to the State Administration of Cultural Heritage of China (国家文物局, Guójiā Wénwù Jú) a stone chamber dating to the Northern Dynasties period that features elements of Zoroastrian art. The artifact was subsequently transferred to the National Museum of China (中国国家博物馆, Zhōngguó Guójiā Bówùguǎn).

Following an expert evaluation conducted by Sun Ji (孙机) and Yang Hong (杨泓), members of the National Cultural Relics Appraisal Committee (国家文物鉴定委员会, Guójiā Wénwù Jiàndìng Wěiyuánhuì), the relic was recognized as a unique masterpiece of medieval art. The National Museum named this artifact the "house-shaped stone sarcophagus" (房屋形石椁, fángwū xíng shíguǒ). Such sarcophagi were constructed by Sogdians (粟特人, Sùtè rén) who had migrated to China during the Northern Dynasties period and were used for the burials of aristocratic leaders of Sogdian descent. Inscriptions discovered in the tomb of Shi Jun (史君) in Xi'an refer to these house-shaped stone chambers as "shítáng" (石堂), meaning "stone tomb," or in Sogdian terms, "a tomb made of stone (the dwelling of the gods)" (石头做的坟墓（众神的屋子）, shítou zuò de fénmù (zhòngshén de wūzi)). The discovery of such tombs indicates that the Sogdian aristocracy who settled in China preferred to reside—after death—in architecturally elaborate stone structures [4, p. 71].

4. In April 2004, during construction work for the Shanglinyuan (上林苑) residential complex in northern Xi'an, the Xi'an Institute for Cultural Heritage Protection and Archaeology (西安市文物保护考古所, Xī'ān shì Wénwù Bǎohù Kǎogǔ suǒ) excavated a tomb dating to the Northern Zhou period. The tomb belonged to Kang Ye, a native of Kang (康国, Kāngguó) — a state within the historical region of Sogdiana. Inside the tomb, an elaborately decorated stone couch (围屏石榻, wéipíng shítà) was found, featuring refined engravings and rich thematic content. An epitaph was also discovered, notable for its elegant calligraphy and detailed inscription. This tomb serves as a valuable source for studying cultural interactions between East and West during the Northern Zhou period, as well as the ancient Chinese arts of painting and calligraphy [5, p. 14].

The passageway of Kang Ye's tomb is located on the southern side of the burial chamber. Because its lower section is sloped, excavators initially hypothesized that it once included a long sloping passageway, an open courtyard (tianjing, 天井), and a connecting corridor (guodong, 过洞) [14, p. 149]. As a result, the structural layout of Kang Ye's tomb was found to closely resemble those of the An Jia and Shi Jun tombs.

5. In June 1982, during construction work carried out by the Tianshui (天水) City Water Supply Project Administration in the Shimaping (石马坪) area of the city center, an ancient tomb was discovered. The Tianshui City Cultural Center promptly initiated archaeological investigations. The tomb was located on Wenshanding Hill (文山顶) in the Shimaping district of Tianshui, approximately 1 km from the city center, and was oriented toward the north [6, p. 46]. Although the inscription on the epitaph was covered with sand and therefore illegible—making the identity of the tomb

owner unknown—the structure of the burial chamber and the exquisite carvings on the stone couch indicate the high social status of the deceased. The carvings were delicately executed and rich in subject matter, decorated with red pigment, and gilded on the exterior. These features suggest that the tomb belonged to a person of considerable rank and prestige [6, p. 54].

6. In early July 1999, Wang Qiusheng, a resident of Wangguo Village in Jinyuan District, Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province, discovered an ancient structure while leveling a road south of the village. About 15 centimeters below the surface, he encountered a hard stone slab. Continuing to excavate along its edges, he revealed a small stone building with a roof resembling a house. Expanding the excavation, it became clear that this stone house was enclosed by nearly square brick walls, forming an ancient brick-chambered tomb. It was soon determined that the tomb contained a stone sarcophagus constructed in the style of wooden architecture. Later, based on an epitaph found inside, the tomb was identified as belonging to the Sui dynasty. It housed the remains of Yu Hong and his wife. According to the inscription, Yu Hong was buried in the 12th year of the Kaihuang era (592 CE), and his wife was interred beside him in the 18th year of Kaihuang (598 CE). The material and form of the stone sarcophagus are particularly unique, with both its interior and exterior surfaces adorned with sculptures and richly colored paintings. The themes of these images are highly diverse, showing strong stylistic affinities with ancient Persian and Central Asian art. This discovery provides valuable material for studying the Silk Road and the cultural exchanges between East and West. Excavation began with the tomb passage, followed by the cleaning of the burial chamber. By July 26, the tomb had been fully excavated. The finds included: a white marble stone sarcophagus, epitaphs belonging to Yu Hong and his wife, stone figurines, fragments of ceramic statuettes, human skeletal remains, fragments of pottery vessels, bronze coins, and over one hundred other artifacts [7, p. 1].

As one scholar noted: “The tomb system of the Northern Dynasties was directly inherited and developed from that of the Wei and Jin periods; the Wei–Jin system, in turn, derived from the Qin and Han traditions. The Sui–Tang tomb systems were based on those of the Northern Dynasties. This evolutionary continuity is clearly reflected in the development of funerary customs.” [14, p. 149]

METHODS

This study is based on the examination of stone sarcophagi associated with the Sogdians from the periods of the Northern Wei, Northern Zhou, Sui, and Tang dynasties in China. The primary subjects of analysis include the stone sarcophagi of individuals such as Shi Jun, An Jia, Yu Hong, and Kang Ye. Through the study of the reliefs, religious scenes, depictions of clothing, music, rituals, and daily life, the research aims to reveal the shared characteristics among these tombs.

As research materials, this study employs archaeological excavation reports, museum collections, and data published in scholarly journals such as Wenwu (Cultural Relics), Kaogu (Archaeology), and Shaanxi Kaogu (Shaanxi Archaeology).

The research applies iconographic and iconological analysis, archaeological contextual analysis, and a source-critical (textual) approach. Through the analysis of relief scenes and religious symbols, the study identifies similarities in visual traditions and cultural interactions between China and Central Asia.

RESULTS

After arriving in China from Central Asia, the Sogdians adopted the name of their homeland as their family surname. This practice is clearly reflected in the epitaph inscriptions discovered in their tombs.

1. The inscriptions in the stone chamber of Shi Jun provide important information about the life of the tomb owner. Shi Jun’s Sogdian name was Wirkak, and he was born in a place referred to in his time as the “Shi state”, corresponding to the present-day city of Kesh (Shahrisabz) in Uzbekistan. Later, after moving to Northern China, he served as a state official overseeing the community of Sogdian immigrants in Liangzhou (present-day Gansu), and for this reason he was granted the title of Sabao. Shi Jun’s wife, Lady Kang, had the Sogdian name Wiyusi and was born into a family of the Kang state dynasty, originating from Samarkand, Uzbekistan. She was born in Xining (present-day Qinghai, China), where she later married Shi Jun. Subsequently, they moved to Chang’an, the capital of the Western Wei and Northern Zhou dynasties. Shi Jun and his wife passed away in 579 CE and were jointly buried in 580 CE on the eastern outskirts of Chang’an. The reliefs in Shi Jun’s stone chamber provide a more detailed depiction of his life. On the exterior walls of the stone chamber, there are eleven vertical panels distributed along the west (W), north (N), and east (E) walls. These panels are divided into two main thematic groups: one related to religious ceremonies and divine powers, and the other depicting secular life. The religious scenes (W1, N5, E1-3) feature deities, ritual ceremonies, mythical creatures, and miraculous events, while the other panels (W2-3 and N1-4) are dedicated to scenes of daily life, including banquets, receiving guests, and travel [2, pp. 27–28]. In

particular, the first, second, and fourth panels on the north wall, as well as the first panel on the east wall, depict banquet scenes. In the first north-wall panel, Shi Jun is shown wearing a crown, a long, narrow-sleeved robe with a rounded collar, and narrow trousers, seated side by side with his wife, Lady Kang, on their knees, hosting guests.

The male attendants at the banquet wear a futou (幞头) on their heads, white rounded-collar, wide-sleeved tunics, belts at the waist, and black leather boots on their feet. According to the Jiu Tangshu – Yufu zhi, this attire is called changfu (常服) or yanfu (宴服)—that is, banquet clothing. The term yan refers to a banquet; such clothing was worn by officials during daily meetings and formal hospitality, but was prohibited in religious ceremonies or major state assemblies [15, p. 60]. Additionally, the imagery in Shi Jun's chamber shows strong similarities with depictions of the life of the Buddha. While the earliest reliefs include Zoroastrian motifs, later panels feature an increasing number of Buddhist elements. The reason for this shift requires further research before any definitive conclusion can be drawn.

2. The door carvings of the An Jia tomb are predominantly realistic depictions, most of which represent Zoroastrian religious ceremonies. On the front stone screen, there are a total of six panels, arranged from left to right as follows: music and dance scenes, banquet and hunting scenes, indoor banquet scene, host and guest meeting, outdoor banquet, and trade and travel scenes [3, p. 25]. The reliefs on the stone couch of An Jia's tomb center on the banquet of An Jia and his wife, depicting scenes such as drinking wine outdoors, banqueting and watching dances with a Turkic chieftain in a vineyard, and similar festivities.

The Sogdians played an important role not only as merchants but also as diplomats and cultural intermediaries, and their influence was decisive in the relations between the Turkic Khaganate and the Tang dynasty [16, p. 101].

3. The stone sarcophagus returned by Japan belongs to an unknown individual, though it may be associated with An Lushan, as the depictions reflect similarities to his life. For example, in the work "Activities of An Lushan" (安禄山事迹, Ān Lùshān shìjì), it is recorded that after An Lushan became the military governor of Youzhou (幽州), he conducted a ceremony of homage involving many people from different ethnic groups in Fanyang (范阳) [4, p. 81].

According to the New Book of Tang (新唐书, Xīn Táng shū), while An Lushan ruled in Fanyang (范阳), he secretly sent nomadic merchants on various routes, from whom he received millions in wealth annually. During large gatherings, An Lushan would sit on a high dais, burn incense, and display rare and precious objects, while hundreds of nomads attended to him. He received the merchants, offered sacrifices, and female diviners played drums and danced in front, symbolically elevating him to divine status. By sitting on the high dais, An Lushan compelled the nomads to pay homage and presented himself as a Zoroastrian deity. Undoubtedly, this was a grand and exuberant assembly. The historical record that "groups of nomads continuously prayed, recited prayers before the fire, and swore oaths" corresponds closely to the illustrations in this stone hall, confirming their alignment with historical reality [4, p. 82]. Such similarities suggest that the stone sarcophagus may belong to An Lushan, although the absence of information about its exact discovery location means this identification remains tentative.

4. Although frescoes were painted on the walls of Kang Ye's tomb, they have been seriously damaged, leaving only the outlines of the images visible. A decorated stone couch is located near the north wall of the tomb chamber, and at the entrance of the chamber, there is a single tomb epitaph [5, p. 14]. The wall paintings were mainly located along the corridor and the four walls of the tomb chamber. Initially, a white lime layer was applied to the walls, and the paintings were painted directly onto this layer. However, due to the tomb chamber being filled with clay and sand, the lime layer and wall paintings have been almost entirely lost, leaving only the linear borders between the paintings visible. Each wall contains four panels, separated by red lines [5, p. 17].

5. Based on the content of the stone screen paintings preserved in Tian Shui, their style, architectural elements, human figures, musical instruments, and composition, this tomb is believed to be associated with the Sogdians. Its upper chronological boundary is estimated to correspond to the Sui dynasty, while the lower boundary belongs to the early Tang dynasty. The discovery of this stone sarcophagus provides a valuable source for studying Sogdian architecture, painting, music, clothing, and daily life customs.

6. The stone covering of Yu Hong's tomb contains a total of 54 independent carved images. The content is very rich, including depictions of banquets, music and dance, hunting, wine-making, domestic life, and travel, among others. The clothing, utensils, musical instruments, dances, plants, and especially distinctive headwear and banners resemble traditional forms from Central and Western Asia. Some images are also related to Zoroastrianism [7, p. 95].

There are notable similarities in the depictions across these stone sarcophagi, one of which is the representation of dance. For example, both screen panels of the An Jia (安伽) stone bed depict a dancer during a drinking ceremony. The two dancers—on the first and last panels of the back wall—wear belted tunics, trousers, and boots, and are shown performing the same movement, bent forward with their hands touching each other [17, p. 217].

In the first panel on the north wall of Shi Jun's stone house, two dancers are depicted under a vineyard during a banquet scene. They are seated, side by side with their backs to each other, raising their hands, which are intertwined. Above them are groups of men, below them groups of women, each including distinct musicians [17, p. 218].

At the National Museum in Beijing, another decorated stone house with an unknown provenance features two pairs of dancers on its walls. The first pair is shown on the front wall to the left of the tombstone doorway, dancing in front of a seated group of men, accompanied by musicians. The second pair is depicted on the back wall, behind seated men in front of the main banquet scene. In both cases, the dancers are presented symmetrically: facing each other, bodies bent forward, one leg bent and lifted (as if in mid-jump), with hands raised and intertwined. Like the accompanying musicians and men, the dancers have curly hair, wear belted tunics, trousers, and boots, with small daggers hanging from their belts [17, pp. 219–220]. These dancers may represent performers of the hutengwu (胡腾舞), a dance mentioned in Chinese written sources. Hutengwu, meaning "Hu leaping dance," was typically performed by male dancers and focused on jumping movements. There is a direct connection between Hu male dancers and ancient Iranian dancers depicted in Gandhara, Hellenistic and Parthian-period Near East, and Classical Greece in the "Persian clapping" pose [17, pp. 224–225].

CONCLUSION

A large number of Sogdian tombs have been discovered in northeastern, central, and central-western China, but most of them are in a ruined state. The identification of Sogdian tombs and funerary artifacts in northern and northwestern China has generated significant scholarly interest regarding the condition of these peoples during their time in China. Among the Sogdian tombs, the study of six stone sarcophagi is particularly valuable. The depictions on these stone sarcophagi show numerous similarities, one of which is dance. Additionally, analysis of the tombs reveals that the Sogdians brought their writing, religion, and customs into Chinese society. The Sogdians who migrated to China stood out due to their noble family backgrounds, economic status, political positions, and social prestige. They held high social status, while the second-generation Sogdians often grew up in central regions of China, giving them the opportunity to become closely acquainted with Chinese culture and traditions. This process, in turn, strengthened their positive attitude toward Chinese culture, and they actively adopted it. All of this is reflected in various wall paintings and statuettes associated with the Sogdians.

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