

A NOTE ON A CHINESE STELE

By HORACE H. F. JAYNE, *Vice-Director*

It was early in an autumn evening when we were first given a glimpse of the new stele—a pellucid evening such as occurs only in Central China. The persimmons hung heavy on the trees like drops of amber among the leathery green leaves. It was not only fitting but inescapable that we should spend our first hours in Hsian examining the Pei-lin—the “Forest of Stelai”—for it is perhaps the most extraordinary assemblage of stone documents anywhere in existence and one of the great historical glories of the ancient Chinese capital.

The writer has reported earlier, in these pages, the extraordinary and successful efforts which the Chinese made to preserve their antiquities during the eight long years of warfare with Japan. It was not surprising, therefore, to find that the Pei-lin had had surpassing care. When we arrived, workmen were in many instances just finishing the removal of the great casings of adobe brick which had been built around each and every one of the thousand and more stelai that grace the Pei-lin’s halls and courtyards. Although Hsian had been bombed slightly once or twice, no explosive had struck the Pei-lin; in this instance the God of War was kindly disposed, but we could not help thinking that if the war had been prolonged even a few months the whole city, as well as this sacred historical enclosure, would have taken a handsome pasting.

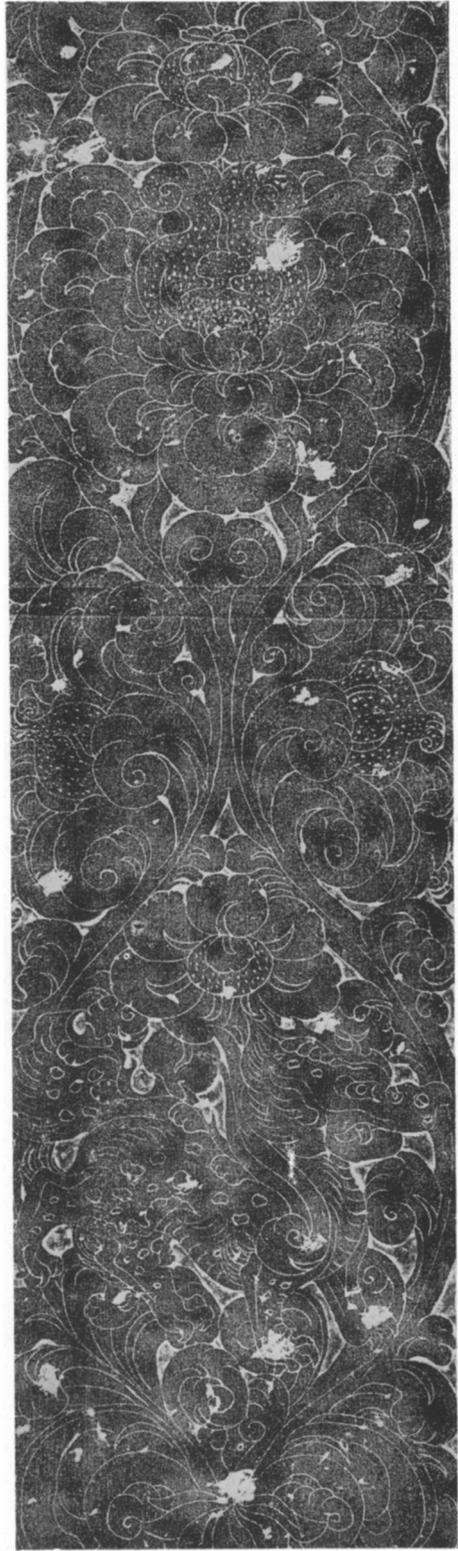
The Nestorian monument—to Westerners undoubtedly the most notable of the Pei-lin’s stelai—with the little, nervous Christian cross at its pinnacle indicating, perhaps, the insecurity of the new religion in a vast country of unbelievers, was there in its accustomed place; the lofty tablet of A.D. 736, whose carved edges are among the greatest examples of T’ang art in existence; the innumerable slabs of the classics engraved in A.D. 817; and the stele that is believed to have been carved from the original painting by the master Wu Tao-tze—all these were in their well-remembered locations just

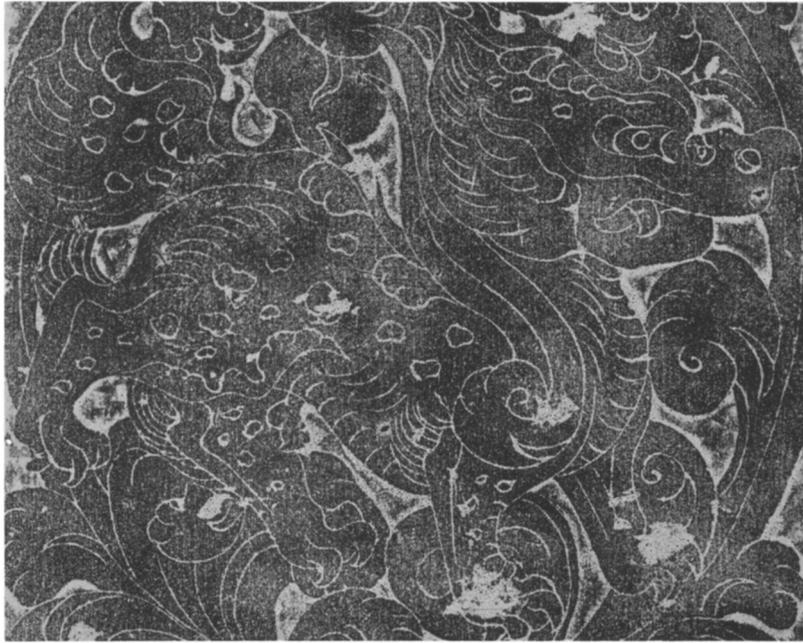
as the writer had seen them twenty-odd years ago. An autumn evening always breeds nostalgia, you will say, but, nostalgia aside, the Pei-lin still seemed to contain the most moving records of Chinese art to be found anywhere in the Flowery Kingdom.

My colleague Wang Shih-hsiang and I had already spent several hours within the noble enclosure of the Pei-lin feasting ourselves on familiar things when the kindly old curator nudged us and suggested that we might like to see some of the “new finds” that had come to his museum. Of course we were eager to see them. He led us then to the rear of one of the lesser buildings and showed us a parade of stone fragments lined up on a narrow terrace—fragments of statues, details from bridges and pagodas, everything mixed indiscriminately. A plague indeed on the dusk and on the necessity of our boarding a plane for Peking on the morrow. Here was a cache of new material deserving at least a fortnight’s examination and a year’s research.

“Almost all of these,” said our companion, “have come to us through the efforts of your honorable countrymen in building airfields in this vicinity. They ploughed through sacred burial grounds—though the cause was worthy—and unearthed many relics of the past. Where possible we have brought them to the Pei-lin, so that they may be studied by scholars and give enjoyment to the public.” This is a paraphrase of the curator’s little speech, but it conveys the idea truthfully, the reason for the assemblage of objects on the narrow terrace.

Among the *disiecta membra* discovered in the conglomeration of objects brought in from the air excavations was a great stone stele, which seemed to me particularly beautiful. Its interest as a document in the long expanse of Chinese art is perhaps small, but it adds nevertheless a building block of no mean importance to our knowledge of T’ang decoration. With an infinite amount of cajoling we induced the lo-





cal rubbing-maker to produce a rubbing of the one exposed edge of the stele, and this is here illustrated, divided, because of *Bulletin* space requirements, into two parts. We were unable to persuade the curator to turn the stele over. It had been placed with one edge hard against the wall of the building and the obverse flat on the platform; hence only its upper face and one edge were discernible.

The customary inscription on the upper face of the stele revealed no date; no doubt it occurred at the end of the inscription on the hidden obverse, as is usual in such stelai. The stele's crest had the intricately entwined dragons characteristic of virtually all known Chinese monuments from the Six Dynasties down to recent years. Our curator said that no base had been reported found with the stele, but if there had been one it would doubtless have been a massive turtle with a slot in its back to hold the piece upright.

Actually, it was not necessary to read the inscription in order to establish a pretty accurate approximation of the date. The technique, characterized by a very tight and compressed treatment of flowers and foliage, and the overall handling, are extremely similar to other monuments at the Pei-lin and in many Euro-

pean and American collections, suggesting, indeed, products from a single atelier. The ogival treatment is almost certainly descended from the *vins rinceaux* motif of early T'ang, and therefore derived from the West, but in this panel it is no longer free and easy, like the designs from earlier stelai. The elements of the design are crammed in. Indeed, one feels that the duck in the second oval and the kylin in the fourth are afterthoughts in the design, which gains its loveliness from the exuberance of the flowers and the foliage surrounding them. This *horror vacui* is less felt in decorated edges of early T'ang stelai, but it is invariably present in later incised panels.

I did not see the other side of the stele, nor have I any exact knowledge of the dating of its dedicatory inscription. But if, when the stone is turned over and the truth is revealed, the monument dates far from A.D. 800, I shall indeed be crestfallen. Yet whenever the present writer gets involved in minutiae of dating and provenance and the like he particularly wants to attest that these factors mean little, set against the sheer beauty of the things under consideration, and he conceives that the rubbing of this stele edge is to be numbered among the fine designs of its epoch.