

THE IMPORTANCE OF INK-IMPRINTS

In China, *Chin-shih-hsüeh* 金石學 (studies of metal and stone engravings) is a special branch of formal study which began in the Northern Sung in the eleventh century. The term *chin-wen* 金文 (metal inscription) primarily refers to the inscriptions on bronze ritual vessels. Through archaeological discoveries in the twentieth century and the wider interest of international scholars, studies on bronze inscriptions, as well as on *chia-ku-wen* 甲骨文 (divination inscriptions from oracle bone and shell), have advanced substantially. Chinese scholarship on stone engravings was extensive during the classical period and, while a large amount of literary and epigraphic material from this period survives, during the twentieth century research on this subject has been scarce.

The earliest stone monuments found in China are round boulders called *chieh* 石碣. A few of this type without inscriptions are still standing, and it has been claimed that dates of these monuments go back as far as the legendary kings of Shun and Yu in the third millennium B.C.¹ During the late Chou period, when production of ritual bronze vessels with inscriptions declined, inscribed stones began to appear.

The first group of inscribed stone monuments known to us is the set of 10 stone drums (entry 77) dated eighth century B.C. Following these, the Ch'in dynasty (221-207 B.C.) marked the beginning of the inscribed stelae, perpetual memorial monuments called *pei* 碑. These are large rectangular stones standing upright like poster columns with flattened front and back for inscriptions. During the Ch'in empire such commemorative stelae were erected in honor of the emperor and were located at famous mountain sites visited by

¹The character *chieh* 且 of the Shang period, indicating a standing tablet, means "forefather." It is interpreted by B. Karlgren as a phallic symbol. With an altar-table as a radical it becomes *tsu* 祖, meaning "ancestor."

him. On the stelae were inscribed the newly mandated official script, small-seal, written by his loyal ministers (entry no. 78).

In the Han period (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) stone monuments had a wider purpose and took various forms. By the later Han, the production of stelae increased greatly. They were dedicated to Confucianism and its ceremonial rites, and commemorated important national events and other ritual functions. There were also stelae in honor posthumously of noted individuals; these generally had a long epigraph or obituary in memory of the person deceased. Although very few signed stelae appear from this period, the quality of the literary content, the handsome calligraphy, and the excellence of the engravings show that Han stelae were made by outstanding artists.

Later, between the fourth and ninth centuries, when smaller tombstones were preferred, writers and artists began to sign their names on the engraved stones. At about the same time, from the fifth century onward, Buddhism spread widely in China and comfortably adopted the custom of engraving on stelae.

Of utmost importance in the history of ink-imprints was the improved quality and quantity of paper in the Later Han (A.D. 25-220). It was then realized that paper could be used to make reproductions from the engravings.

Ink-imprints (*t'o-pen* 拓本) are commonly called rubbings or ink-squeezes. Because this is a duplicating technique on stone, it may be considered a prototype of lithography. In China it is referred to as *mo-t'a* 摹榻 (copy by tapping). Instead of the stone being pressed on paper, however, the reverse is done — the paper is pressed on the stone. The traditional Chinese method is to moisten lightly a sheet of paper made from the cortex of the mulberry tree, or from bamboo pulp. This is a tissue-thin paper that is strong and highly absorbant. The moistened paper is then spread over the surface of the engraved object and gently forced into all the incised areas with a broad brush. A flat pad, generally made of loosely woven cloth with a piece of cotton tied inside, is then soaked with just the right amount of black ink and evenly tapped all over the paper. The higher surface which the pad has touched turns black while the incised part remains white. When the ink is dry, the paper is peeled off, giving a positive impression. This is called the wet-method.

The process of stone engraving, especially in the case of model-

writing (*fa-t'ieh* 法帖), is a fastidious craft. The valuable original handwriting must be copied by an expert. The trace-copies of the T'ang and Sung periods were made under imperial patronage and by the master calligraphers of the time. The stone engravings that resulted from the work of these calligraphers are among the finest in existence, as they are specimens chosen specifically as models for students of the art.

For making the engraving itself, the trace-copies were written in black or vermilion-red ink (*shu-tan* 書丹). After pasting the trace-copy on the stone or wood, the engraver would cut through the trace-copy into the surface of the material, striving to achieve the greatest possible accuracy. Very often, every participant in the process — the person who copied the work, the skilled engraver, and the conscientious supervisor — signed his name alongside that of the original artist.

Under the Han Emperor Ling, the minister Ts'ai Yung proposed that an official edition of the Seven Confucian Classics be engraved on stone. The intention was to rectify erroneous transmissions which had crept into the many hand copies of these classics. Twenty stelae were therefore completed under imperial sponsorship between A.D. 175 and 185, and 48 more stelae were carved under the Wei regime of the Three Kingdoms period from A.D. 240 to 248.

This may have promoted the use of ink-imprints for scholarly reproductions, for we know as a fact that artists such as Wang Hsi-chih (A.D. 303-379) and Ku K'ai-chih (ca. A.D. 334-406) were skilled at copying and had traced the works of older masters for stone engravings. This skill not only encouraged the process of print-making (which in turn made possible the preservation of handsome calligraphy and pictorial art), but it also served as a means of education. Eventually, it inspired wood engravings and led to the invention of movable type. The development of paper and printing were important contributions to world civilizations.

Since the T'ang and Sung periods, Chinese stone engravings have been held in great esteem. As the earlier engraved stones were lost or badly damaged, new stones were carved from the ink-imprints; famous works were copied many times over. Dealing with the many editions became a realm of specialized knowledge. Early ink-imprints were regarded as highly as manuscripts by connoisseurs. Old imprints from T'ang and Sung stones became precious rarities. Metal and stone engravings, calligraphy, and painting (*chin-shih-*

shu-hua 金石書畫) had become a united quartet. To the artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these media formed a single body of visual art study.

Now, with the publication of this catalogue, Field Museum will become a major center in the United States for the study of Chinese ink-imprints, as today these again are recognized as valuable tools for research into Chinese historical documents, literature, and art.

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