

RUBBINGS IN ART HISTORY

There are two basic types of rubbings in the history of Chinese calligraphy, those taken from a stele, *pei*, and those taken from an engraving of a *t'ieh*. The word *pei* refers to monumental stone stelae erected above ground and usually free standing, and in a broad sense to all writings engraved on stone. Inscriptions were engraved on *pei* long before the rubbing technique was devised, and *pei* continued to be erected throughout China's long history for purposes other than making rubbings.

The original meaning of the word *t'ieh* is label, note, or small paper sheet. In calligraphy the term denotes primarily handwritten pieces of informal content and of relatively small format, written by a famous calligrapher in ink on paper or silk. Engravings of *t'ieh* were made solely for the purpose of taking rubbings and thus reproducing unique examples of handwriting. Understanding the difference between *pei* and *t'ieh* is important in the understanding of the significance of rubbings in art history.

Pei

The earliest known examples of *pei* are the tablets that were erected between 219-210 B.C. by Ch'in Shih-huang-ti (r. 221-210 B.C.) to commemorate his unification of the empire. The calligraphers of the *pei* usually remained anonymous. It was only in the second half of the second century that some stelae began to be signed. Epigraphic types of script such as *chuan shu*, *li shu*, or *k'ai shu* (*cheng shu*) were most often used; only in exceptional cases does one find the cursive type *hsing shu*. The texts of these stelae commemorated political events or personages of historical importance, and thus always possessed a certain public character. Each stele is known by a name which generally contains the honorific name of the person whose deeds are commemorated and the location where the stele was erected. Often a stele has two titles — a *pei-o* above in very large characters, and a *shou-t'i* to the right of the text.

The earliest rubbings from *pei* are older than those taken from recuts of *t'ieh*. Perhaps the first stelae from which rubbings were made were the Stone Classics (*Shih-ching*). They were erected between A.D. 175-185 for the purpose of standardizing and preserving the Confucian Classics. Since paper had been developed around A.D. 100, rubbings would have been the easiest and most efficient way to promulgate the texts. There is no clear proof that this happened, but there is reference to the fact that in A.D. 143 paper had already become a popular and inexpensive material for writing.¹ By the T'ang period (618-807), the use of rubbings was widespread. An example is the "Inscription for the Hot Spring" (*Wen-ch'üan ming*), written by Emperor T'ang T'ai-tsung (r. 626-649). The rubbing was found in the caves of Tun-huang in Central Asia.²

It was a milestone in the history of calligraphy when during the period of the Six Dynasties (220-588) the interest of calligraphers shifted from *pei* to *t'ieh*. The great works of calligraphy of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) had all been stone inscriptions, but now *t'ieh* for the first time became the representative masterworks of the period. The new genre of calligraphy was developed to classical perfection by masters of the Eastern Chin dynasty (A.D. 317-420), especially Wang Hsi-chih (307-365?), and his son, Wang Hsien-chih (A.D. 344-388). Known as the Two Wangs they became the paragons of all Chinese calligraphers and their handwritten pieces set stylistic and aesthetic standards for centuries to come.

The shift of interest from *pei* to *t'ieh*, however, did not mean that great calligraphers immediately stopped writing large stone inscriptions. Especially during the T'ang dynasty, major masters, such as Ou-yang Hsün (557-641), Yü Shih-nan (558-638), Ch'u Sui-liang (596-658), and Yen Chen-ch'ing (709-785), still worked in this genre. The masters of subsequent dynasties, however, concentrated almost exclusively on *t'ieh*. Direct stone inscriptions from the hand of famous calligraphers became rare. Nevertheless, stelae continued to be erected and the writings engraved on them were distributed in the form of rubbings. Yet it was generally not the calligraphy that brought these rubbings attention, but, rather, the commemorative subjects which were considered to be of value for various historical, political, and religious reasons.

The rubbings taken from such stelae generally were on huge paper

¹T.H. Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk*, Chicago, 1962, p. 138.

²*Shodō zenshū*, Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1966-1969, vol. 7, pl. 90-95.

sheets. These sheets were often cut into a more usable size and mounted in album form. The older a rubbing, the more valuable it was because it preserved the crispness and precision of the original cuttings which time gradually eroded. Often the stones were not protected from the elements and deteriorated. Many stones were damaged and extensive taking of rubbings precipitated the process of decay. Old rubbings thus gave a better and more complete picture of the engraved text than it was possible to obtain at a later date from the stele itself.

In the eighteenth century the attitude toward stone inscriptions changed radically. Intensive archaeological and epigraphical studies spurred a new interest in the very style of the writing itself. This, in turn, had a decisive influence on calligraphic practice and led to a major revival movement of old styles. Special attention was given to those stelae that had been written in the northern part of China between the third and sixth centuries A.D. — exactly the period when the art of the *t'ieh* rose in the south.

Because of the political and cultural division in China during this period, the style of the northern stone inscriptions had developed independently from those in the south. In the opinions of calligraphers and theoreticians of the new movement in the eighteenth century, the stelae of the north offered an artistic alternative to the Wang Hsi-chih tradition. Not only did they discover in these inscriptions an aesthetic value that had largely gone unnoticed so far, they also claimed that the style of the stone inscriptions was more authentic than the style of the Chin masters' tradition which had been modified in the process of constant copying. The late Ch'ing dynasty masters called their own movement *pei-hsüeh* (school based on stelae) and contrasted it with what they labelled *t'ieh-hsüeh* (school based on *t'ieh*).

T'ieh

T'ieh are not as old as *pei*. The earliest examples date only from the Chin dynasty (A.D. 265-420), although it is known from literary sources that they existed before that time, and that they were appreciated as works of calligraphy as early as the first century A.D. *T'ieh* are mostly letters or personal notes, written with brush and ink on paper or silk, and therefore informal types of script, such as *hsing-shu* and *ts'ao-shu*, were generally used. *T'ieh* are not interesting primarily for their text, but because they were written by

famous calligraphers. In order to identify these pieces, two characters were usually taken out of context from the beginning line and used as a name.

The earliest *t'ieh* from which stone-cuts were made, were hand-writings of Wang Hsi-chih. The second T'ang emperor, T'ai-tsung, who played a decisive role in the promulgation of the Wang tradition, had Wang Hsi-chih's magnum opus, the *Lan-t'ing hsü* (entry 814), cut in stone. He also distributed the *Shih-ch'i t'ieh*, a collection of Wang's *ts'ao-shu* pieces to the "Institute for the Propaganda of Culture" (*Hung-wen kuan*), where young aristocrats of the metropolis studied the art of calligraphy.

The subsequent history of this type of rubbings is also closely related to the development of the Wang tradition. One of the most influential recuts of the T'ang dynasty was the *Ta-T'ang San-tsang sheng-chiao hsü* (Preface to the Holy Teachings of Hsüan-tsang San-tsang from the Great T'ang Dynasty) (entries 624, 871), better known as *Chi-Wang sheng-chiao hsü* (Preface to the Holy Teachings compiled from Characters Written by Wang Hsi-chih). The text of this piece had been composed by T'ang T'ai-tsung in 648 as a eulogy to the works of the great monk and pilgrim Hsüan tsang (ca. 596-664). By order of the third T'ang emperor Kao-tsung (r. 649-683), the monk Huai-jen, who was a distant descendant of Wang Hsi-chih, copied each character in the text from one of the many works by Wang Hsi-chih in the imperial collection. The entire copy then looked as if it were based on an original work in Wang Hsi-chih's own hand. In 672 Huai-jen's work was cut into stone, and this stele remains today in the Forest of Stelae (*Pei-lin*) in Sian.³ Although it was not written by Wang Hsi-chih himself, the *Chi-Wang sheng-chiao hsü* became one of the most influential works of the Wang tradition. Not only was it one of the first *t'ieh* to be cut into stone, but it was also the longest piece of Wang Hsi-chih's "hand-writing." It consisted of 1,904 characters, many of which are not found in the *Lan-t'ing hsü* and other famous pieces. To a student of Wang Hsi-chih's style, the *Chi-Wang sheng-chiao hsü* offered the greatest repertoire of forms.

Rubbings of the T'ang dynasty were primarily taken from one example of calligraphy. In the tenth century, however, a new type of

³The works at the *Pei-lin* have been presented in a monumental publication edited by Yasushi Nishikawa, *Saian hirin*, Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1966.

rubbing gained prevalence: works of various masters were engraved into a series of stones, and rubbings from them were then mounted together in albums, often consisting of several volumes. Such collections were first compiled in the Southern T'ang dynasty (937-976), but not much is known about these early compendia and perhaps no rubbings have survived.

The epoch-making undertaking in this genre was the compilation of the *Ch'un-hua Pi-ko t'ieh* (entries 1324-1431) under the imperial patronage of Sung T'ai-tsung in 992. Named after a pavilion in the imperial palace, the *Ch'un-hua Pi-ko t'ieh* was the most comprehensive collection of rubbings made thus far. Following the example of T'ang T'ai-tsung, Sung T'ai-tsung also favored the Wang tradition. Half of the collection's 10 volumes contain works of the Two Wangs. Rubbings from the *Ch'un-hua Pi-ko t'ieh* and recuts made of it were circulated widely and their influence on the practice and history of calligraphy was profound.

The early collections of rubbings were, as far as we know, all produced under imperial patronage. By the eleventh century, however, stone-cuts were also manufactured on private initiative. Through the writings of Mi Fu (1052-1107), for example, we know that it was quite common practice among collectors of his time to have precious works of calligraphy from their collections cut into stone. Mi himself also had such stone-cuts made of three Chin masters' works in his possession, which he treasured most.

In later times the size of these privately sponsored rubbing collections grew and some of the Ming dynasty compendia rival the *Ch'un-hua Pi-ko t'ieh* in scope and quality. Among them are editions that were supervised by such eminent connoisseurs as Wen Cheng-ming (1470-1559) (the *T'ing-yün kuan fa-t'ieh*) and Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636) (the *Hsi-hung t'ang fa-t'ieh*). In the Ch'ing dynasty one finds again many privately edited rubbing collections and also the last great imperial compendium, the *San-hsi t'ang fa-t'ieh*, which was produced under the auspices of the Ch'ien-lung emperor (r. 1736-1795).

Some of the rubbing collections that appeared after the *Ch'un-hua Pi-ko t'ieh* consisted largely of recuts of parts of this great compilation, but often the subsequent collections included additional works by later masters whose calligraphy grew to be accepted and appreciated as stylistic models. One such example is the "Four

Great Masters of the Sung Dynasty.”⁴ One also finds specialized collections that are devoted to a single master, a certain geographical region, or a certain period of time.

Although most of the rubbing compendia contained some works that were hard to find elsewhere, their content differed less than might be expected. They mainly reproduced samples from the canon of works that had come to be regarded as classical models, and among which the pieces by Wang Hsi-chih were the most numerous. The value of a rubbing collection thus was not primarily judged by its content but by the reliability of the particular versions that had been chosen to be recut and by the technical quality of the recut itself.

Even in the earliest collections one finds that comments on the various pieces written by later connoisseurs, official titles of the calligrapher, and the name of the *t'ieh* were also cut into stone. In the course of time these secondary parts became longer and more elaborate. In later collections a famous piece is often preceded and followed by colophons, and sometimes copies done by later calligraphers are also included. Often the collectors' seals are cut into stone as well. This illustrates the increasing tendency toward intellectualization and sophistication in the practice and appreciation of Chinese calligraphy.

The major function of collections of rubbings was to serve as models for would-be calligraphers. Because most of the classical prototypes had been lost in the course of time and because only a few individuals had access to the collections where the remaining originals and good handwritten copies were kept, rubbings became the most common source of knowledge regarding early masterpieces. Such rubbings were used by everyone who studied calligraphy, and that meant every member of the educated elite. As these compendia contained pieces by different masters, the student had two choices: he could select one master (or even one piece) as his model or he could copy many different masters' styles and eventually synthesize them into a style of his own. Developing an individual style, of course, was what every calligrapher with artistic ambition strove for in accord with the age-old aesthetic demand that an artist, albeit staying within the boundaries of the tradition, still must transcend his models.

⁴They are Ts'ai Hsiang (1012-1067), Su Shih (1037-1101), Huang T'ing-chien (1045-1105), and Mi Fu (1052-1107).

Since rubbings were the most influential device in the transmission of the styles of famous calligraphic works, the question of how accurately they preserved the appearance of the original handwriting is crucial. It cannot be denied that a well-executed stone-cut renders the shapes of the brush strokes amazingly well. It is fascinating to observe the meticulous skill that is evident in fine incisions. Even irregular blank spots within a stroke and erratic traces of single hairs can be transferred onto the stone. (See illus. 747.)

In spite of the technical virtuosity that could be attained, however, rubbings often do not represent the original as faithfully as would ideally be possible because many of the stone-cuts were not based upon the original writing, but upon handwritten copies of early rubbings. The original classical masterworks all but disappeared long ago. For example, there is no authentic sample of the handwriting of the Two Wangs extant today. The early rubbings have also perished, as did the stones from which they were taken. Save for a few exceptions, such as that found at Tun-huang, the earliest rubbings today date from the Sung dynasty and these are also quite rare (entries 270, 578, 661, 814). Moreover, most often the works that served as the basis for stone-cuts are not known and their authenticity can therefore not be verified. Even the reliability of the early *Ch'un-hua Pi-ko t'ieh* was seriously challenged soon after its appearance. Mi Fu and Su Shih, among others, criticized the selection of pieces in this most influential of all compendia, charging that it included many errors and even falsifications.

The chain of copying could not help but produce modifications. If one compares different rubbing versions of the same piece, one will always find smaller or greater stylistic differences between them, but the exact style of the prototype can no longer be ascertained. This is the point where the *pei-hsüeh* of the eighteenth century claimed superiority. Because it used rubbings from stone stelae that were still extant at the time, there was no question about authenticity of style. This is not the place to investigate the arguments concerning the *pei-hsüeh*, which were a major topic of discussion in calligraphy criticism of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, but attention should still be drawn to one fact: although the *pei-hsüeh* rightly pointed out that in the process of transmission of the *t'ieh* their styles had constantly been changed, it must be acknowledged that it was these very modifications which offered

the possibility for continuous new stylistic explorations and developments through the centuries.

The connoisseurship of rubbings is one of the most complicated fields in the study of Chinese art. Traditional Chinese connoisseurs have devoted much effort to this problem and made detailed comparative studies of rubbings that were taken from the same stone at different times, thereby allowing them to trace the process of deterioration. However, difficulties remain. For example, it can be very tricky to differentiate between those rubbings taken from the same stone at different times and rubbings taken from a good recut of this stone. Furthermore, the stylistic differences that exist between several versions of one prototype are of little help in the dating of these versions because the very purpose of manufacturing a stone-cut is to preserve the appearance of the model in a form that remained unaffected by the change of time. Stylistic differences, therefore, have little artistic significance. If one has to determine the age of a particular rubbing, say, Wang Hsi-chih's *Lan-t'ing hsü*, one is likely to rely mainly on such criteria of traditional connoisseurship as the color of the ink, the quality of the paper, and the impression of the collectors' seals, rather than on the style of the handwriting itself.

Rubbings were also used in fields other than calligraphy. Following the example of stone-cuts of famous *t'ieh*, noted paintings were also reproduced in this way. This, however, was a very late development and its art historical importance is in no way comparable to the crucial role which rubbings played in the history of calligraphy. Because it is difficult to render greyish tones and ink washes in a rubbing, those paintings with calligraphic qualities, such as bamboo and plum paintings, were most successfully cut into stone. A work which deserves special mention is "Mr. Chou's Painting Forest" (*Chou-shih hui-lin*), which was published between 1580-1589. It contains reproductions of paintings from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, and thus is a forerunner of woodblock copybooks like the famous "Mustard Seed Garden" of the seventeenth century.

Another late application of the rubbing technique was made in the field of archaeology. Rubbings proved especially useful in the study of the bronze vessels of antiquity because they could clearly reproduce the inscriptions often found at not easily seen places, such as the inside of a vessel or the underside of vessel handles. Rubbings also could be effectively used to reproduce the relief

ornamentation on the outside of such vessels. At least since the eleventh century large stone reliefs from Han dynasty tombs have been reproduced and made known through rubbings. Indeed, it is in the service of archaeological studies that the technique of taking rubbings still plays an important role today, be it in the reproduction of the characters on oracle bones, or the intricate patterns of bronze décor, or of the inscriptions and incised decorations on Buddhist stelae. In all these and in many other instances, rubbings can reproduce the design more clearly than is possible with photography. However, photographic reproduction has almost entirely replaced rubbings as copy books for calligraphers. The chain of constant recuts has therefore nearly come to an end. Still it is this very technique of photography which today makes available to everybody the immense wealth of information that a great collection of rubbings such as the present one represents.

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