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Dorothy C. Wong/Chinese Steles

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Buddhist steles—upright stone tablets carved with Buddhist images and symbols—flourished only for a short period during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Considering the enduring history of Chinese steles, which have been in use from the first century C.E. until modern times, the phenomenon of Buddhist steles represents just a brief interlude. Yet this episode offers important insights into the role Buddhism played in the history and culture of early medieval China, and into the process of adaptation and transformation by which the foreign religion was assimilated into Chinese society and became part of its civilization.

More than two hundred Buddhist steles are known to have survived, many of superb artistic quality. Ranging in height from 1 to 3 meters, these monuments are carved with votive images of Buddhist deities and graceful depictions of donors. Long inscriptions express the religious outlook of donors and indicate their social and ethnic character. The status of these steles in the history of Chinese art is equivalent to that of sculptures on Romanesque churches: they are eloquent expressions of an ardent religious faith. Their patrons included nobles and wealthy families, but most were members of devotional groups from small towns and villages across the north. Erected in temple courtyards, in village entryways, or by the roadside, Buddhist steles stood as emblems of the communities' religious, social, cultural, and territorial identities. Many of these steles rank among the best sculptures of the period. The content of the steles and the information they contain about Buddhist patronage offer invaluable historical sources for the study of the beginnings of Buddhism in China.

No comprehensive study of Buddhist steles has thus far been attempted, despite the abundance and high artistic quality of these monuments. Scholarship on Chinese Buddhist steles has been inhibited by the circumstances under which the steles have been collected and documented, and by other obstacles that the modern scholar still encounters. This book is the first comprehensive study of these Buddhist steles produced in China from the late fifth through the sixth century.

The upright stone is one of the most common art forms used in many civilizations, from the Ancient Near East to Egypt, the classical world, the Islamic lands, and Mesoamerica. The term “stele” (Gr.), or “stela” (Lat.), means a “shaft” or a “pillar,” referring to an upright stone slab, frequently inscribed or carved, used primarily as a grave marker but also for dedication, commemoration, and demarcation.¹ In very early times, the Chinese used upright stones to symbolize the

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earth spirit, a tutelary deity called She. But around the first century C.E., the dressed stone tablet called *bei* emerged as a primary symbolic form, serving funerary and commemorative functions. The use of *bei* was especially associated with Confucianism, the orthodox ideology established in the Han dynasty. Often bearing elaborate calligraphic inscriptions, *bei* were produced throughout China, and the custom survives to this day. Because of the similarity in form and function between the traditional Chinese *bei* and the steles used in the ancient world and other cultures, the translation of the term “*bei*” as “stele” is quite appropriate.

Traditional Chinese *bei* are flat stone slabs of regulated size and shape, sometimes embellished with symbols such as dragons. The content of steles is conveyed primarily through inscriptions, which are also valued as literary and calligraphic artworks. In contrast, the Indian Buddhist tradition is characterized by the abundant use of imagery—icons and pictorial narratives—to articulate its spiritual teachings. The Chinese call Buddhist images *xiang* (images), *foxiang* (Buddhist images), *zunxiang* (icons, statues), or *kanxiang* (images in recessed niches, like those in cave-chapels), and the acts of dedicating images are referred to as *zaoxiang*. The terms for Buddhist steles are “*zaoxiangbei*,” “*beixiang*,” and “*xiangbei*,” all of which mean “flat stone slabs (in the form of the Chinese *bei*) carved with images.” Traditional Chinese steles and their Buddhist counterparts, although different in content, carry the same inherent symbolism, perform comparable functions, and share similar patterns of patronage. These parallels are demonstrated by the common use of specific terms associated with both types of steles. The appropriation of the native Chinese tablet for carving Buddhist imagery thus epitomizes the close interactions between and synthesis of Indian Buddhist and indigenous Chinese traditions on many levels: religious, social, cultural, and artistic.

A difference between Western and Asian scholars in their definition of Buddhist steles should be noted. Western scholars from Édouard Chavannes to Laurence Sickman (see discussion of scholarship below) have designated two types of Buddhist sculptures as steles: the upright stone slabs similar to the Chinese *bei* in form, and the high-relief sculptures set against leaf-shaped mandorlas (see fig. 6.4).² Sickman writes:

There are two basic forms of these steles. One type is a rectangular monolith set up vertically on a low base. The top is generally rounded and sculptured with two, four, or six protecting dragons, their bodies intricately intertwined. This is an old, traditional Chinese form which reached its full development at the

end of the Han Dynasty, that is in the latter part of the second and the early third century. Such pre-Buddhist monuments were set up to carry commemorative inscriptions. When adopted by the Buddhists, the inscription was greatly contracted or omitted and the surface thus left free was treated sculpturally with niches and low-relief much as the wall of a cave-temple. . . .

The second basic style of early Buddhist steles generally has a relatively large trinity or a single Buddha in high relief against a great leaf-shaped mandorla. Some of the earliest surviving steles are in this form and it may antedate the use of the more traditional Chinese monument. As will be seen, the steles with the pointed, mandorla screen are very similar to some images in gilt-bronze, and it seems not unlikely that their form derives from bronze images on a large scale which according to records were cast in the sixth century.³

The type of carvings that the Chinese call *beixiang*, *xiangbei*, or *zaoxiangbei* are stone slabs in the form of the Chinese *bei* carved with Buddhist imagery. The other type, with the leaf-shaped mandorla, has always been referred to with terms that mean “image” or “icon,” such as “*xiang*” or “*zunxiang*.” As Sickman observes, this particular type is similar to, and perhaps derived from, bronze images and altar groups. These two types of sculptures are therefore distinguished not only by form but also by function: the steles that serve commemorative functions, like Chinese *bei*, versus the images and icons that are primarily objects of worship. This book excludes study of the iconic type, focusing only on Buddhist steles associated with Chinese tablets, although there are also possible Indian prototypes for this type of Buddhist slab (see chaps. 4, 8, and 10).

The phenomenon of Chinese Buddhist steles lasted about a century. Incipient forms of Buddhist steles had already appeared in the fifth century, but the steles flourished primarily during the sixth century. By the seventh century, they had basically died out, despite lingering on in localized areas. Buddhist steles were popularly used across wide territories in the north, particularly in Shanxi, Shaanxi, Henan, and the Gansu-Ningxia region, and in Sichuan in the southwest (map 1). The phenomenon of Buddhist steles—as regards both time span and geographical distribution—must be understood against its specific historical and cultural contexts.

The period of Northern and Southern Dynasties was a time of disunion in Chinese history that has often been compared to the Dark Ages in Europe. After the fall of the Han dynasty, nomadic peoples advanced into and eventually occupied the entire northern half of China, setting up numerous petty kingdoms. The indigenous Chinese dynasty was forced to migrate south of the Yangzi River and establish



MAP 1. Geographical Distribution of Chinese Buddhist Steles. 1820 province boundary lines. “CHGIS, Version: 1.0.” Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Yenching Institute, April 2002.

court at Jiankang (present-day Nanjing). The political turmoil and mass movements of populations caused widespread chaos and disruptions to the existing social, economic, and cultural order. What resulted was a deeply fragmented society that lasted several centuries. Neither Confucianism nor Daoism—the two indigenous schools of thought—offered satisfactory answers to the current ills of the society, creating an intellectual vacuum that facilitated the widespread reception of Buddhism.

Buddhism reached China in the first century C.E., but it did not initially have much impact. It was during the period of disunion that the religion was finally able to take root and sweep through the country. It first gained acceptance among Chinese intellectuals and aristocrats who were attracted to its

complex metaphysics, otherworldly goals, array of images, and sophisticated rituals. Most emperors of the Southern Dynasties and their courtiers became devout Buddhists. In the north, the nomadic rulers were among the most ardent supporters of Buddhism. They were attracted to Buddhism because the religion provided them with a cultural identity different from that of the Chinese they had conquered, and with a universal ideology that would enable them to unify a divided society.

Under the Northern Wei dynasty, Buddhism virtually became a state religion and rapidly penetrated the northern countryside. Stronger administrative rule established by the Northern Wei also enabled the rehabilitation of social and economic life in rural communities. Under these circum-

stances, indigenous cults and practices were revitalized, and the Chinese stele became the monument of choice to commemorate the new Buddhist faith. It is no accident that the geographical territories where Buddhist steles initially flourished corresponded to the regions of direct Northern Wei administration. Throughout the sixth century, Buddhist steles were popularly used in the north to express the fervent religious faith embraced by different social and ethnic groups. As the understanding of Buddhism matured, the religion began to develop independently in China, while simultaneously absorbing new teachings introduced from India and Central Asia. The content of Buddhist steles charts these doctrinal developments as well as local cultic and stylistic preferences. Toward the end of the sixth century, the reversal of the stele to its pre-Buddhist form—namely, reliance on inscriptions rather than imagery to convey its content—heralded the consolidation of the country into the unified Sui and Tang empires. The demise of this art form was significant, in that it signaled the full integration of Buddhism with Chinese society.

SCHOLARSHIP AND METHODOLOGY

An overview of the history of collecting and study of Chinese Buddhist steles (and of early Chinese Buddhist art in general) can be divided into four broad categories: (1) traditional Chinese antiquarian scholarship, (2) Japanese and Western scholarship, (3) scholarship in contemporary China and abroad, and (4) epigraphical studies.

Chinese Antiquarian Scholarship

The earliest documentation of Buddhist steles is found in the branch of Chinese historiography known as *jīnshìxué* (the study of bronzes and stone). Originating in the Song dynasty, *jīnshìxué* developed hand in hand with the collection and connoisseurship of antiquities, spurred by the formation of imperial collections of bronzes and other antique objects.⁴ Inscriptions on stone surfaces were collected in the form of rubbings and studied for their historical and calligraphic value.

From the mid-Qing to the early Republican era, antiquarian scholarship experienced a revival, the impetus for which came from a radical change in taste in calligraphy, the most highly valued art form in traditional China. As Lothar Ledderose explains, scholars and connoisseurs had traditionally preferred the Southern style of calligraphy, whose chief expo-

nent was Wang Xizhi (303–361) and which is distinguished by its refinement and fluency. However, in the seventeenth century, due to a dearth of original works from the Southern Dynasties, scholars began to turn for an artistic alternative to the calligraphic style of the Northern Dynasties, which is characterized by forcefulness and a rugged charm.⁵ Northern Dynasties writings were abundant, and most of them were Buddhist dedicatory inscriptions engraved on steles and other stone carvings. The documentation and collecting of Buddhist steles thus had its beginnings as a by-product of the antiquarian taste for northern-style calligraphy.

During this renaissance of antiquarian scholarship in the late Qing, numerous works were published, ranging from the reproductions of rubbings to catalogues, bibliographies, notes, and commentaries.⁶ Two can be singled out for their importance in the study of Buddhist sculptures and steles: *Jīnshì cuìbiān* (Anthology of the essence of bronze and stone inscriptions, 1805), compiled by Wang Chang (1725–1806), and Ye Changchi's (1849–1917) *Yushi* (On stone, 1909).

One of the best compendia of inscriptions among late Qing antiquarian writings, Wang Chang's *Jīnshì cuìbiān* records about eleven hundred bronze and stone inscriptions from the Zhou through the Jin dynasty in the thirteenth century. Chronologically arranged by dynasty and by date, each entry includes measurements of the object, provenance (when known), bibliographies, and the author's comments. Under the Northern Dynasties section (*juan* 27 to 37), some seventy entries of Buddhist dedicatory inscriptions are recorded; none is recorded under the Southern Dynasties section. This represents one of the earliest systematic documentations of Buddhist inscriptions.

Wang also attempts to classify the inscriptions according to the forms of the objects on which they appear and their literary styles. Categories of stone carvings include images (or statues), niches (recessed niches, as in Buddhist cave-chapels), steles, rock cliffs, pagodas, sutra-pillars, and others, while literary genres include records (*ji*), inscriptions (*ming*), eulogies (*song*), commemorative inscriptions (*bei*), and so on. As a literary form, *bei* refers to commemorative inscriptions recorded on steles, such as steles commemorating the founding of temples or the meritorious deeds of individual persons. These commemorative steles, although erected for Buddhist purposes, follow the usages of traditional steles and do not always bear images. It is the category of carving known as *zàoxiāngbei*, literally “steles carved with images,” that designates the specific type of monuments examined in this book (see further discussion below).⁷

Wang's notes and commentaries make reference to previous scholarship, correct erroneous transcriptions, and study the historical and geographical information, names and titles of officials, religious and nonreligious societies, and variant forms of written characters found in these ancient inscriptions. Wang's work demonstrates the erudition of an antiquarian scholar at his best. Moreover, his compendium includes records of inscriptions that have since become further eroded and less legible. However, because Wang's scholarly interest was epigraphy, any information pertaining to the visual aspects of the stone carvings is treated as ancillary. The Buddhist imagery on the carvings is never discussed and sometimes not even mentioned. Added to this, although rubbings faithfully record inscriptions and linear engravings, they are inadequate in reproducing sculptural images. Due to these limitations, *jinshixue* scholarship only presents partial documentation of Buddhist steles as visual objects.⁸

The second antiquarian work of significance, Ye Changchi's *Yushi*, advances beyond the narrow focus of epigraphic study to attempt an empirical, comprehensive overview of the history of stone carvings in China.⁹ Ye classifies all types of stone carvings and engravings, studying their origins, terminology, historical development, geographical distribution, function, and patronage as well as the format and content of their inscriptions. In addition, he discusses the styles of calligraphy and the calligraphers.

Steles with imagery (*beixiang*) are one type of carving under the section on Buddhist imagery (*zaoxiang*, *juan* 5). However, Ye's discussion of *bei* (*juan* 3) reveals his ambivalence toward the hybridized art form of Buddhist steles. He summarizes four general rules for erecting *bei*: (1) extolling virtues (*shude*), (2) commemorating successful political and military campaigns (*minggong*), (3) recording events (*jishi*), and (4) compiling words of wisdom (*zuanyan*). These criteria, established in the indigenous Chinese tradition, became standardized in the Han dynasty, when Confucianism was established as the orthodox ideology (see chap. 2, on Han steles).

Under the first rule of extolling virtue (*de*), Ye enumerates the kinds of virtue that are worthy of celebration: sagely conduct (such as that of Confucius), loyalty, filial piety, and virtuous government. When discussing a type of stele called *gongdebei* (steles commemorating acts for the accretion of Buddhist merit), however, Ye notes that Buddhist *de* (merit, as in *gongde*) is not equivalent to Confucian *de* (virtue, as in *dezheng*), so that the Buddhist *gongdebei* cannot be classified as a *bei*. As a staunch advocate of Confucianism, Ye argues

that Buddhist, and thus foreign, elements must be rejected, thereby reaffirming the orthodoxy of Confucianism. Ye's hostility toward Buddhism was characteristic of most Chinese intellectuals of his day, who spurned Buddhist works of art as relics of old, superstitious ways. It also underscores the tension between Buddhism and native Chinese traditions during much of the religion's history in China.

Nevertheless, the nomenclature and cataloging system established by Wang and others formed the foundation of later antiquarian scholarship in China and Japan, as exemplified in works such as *Fanjiang zhai jinshi congkao* by Ma Heng (1881–1955), the first director of the Palace Museum in Beijing. Ma's work summarizes the achievements of the antiquarian tradition and provides the classificatory system that has had a profound influence on modern Chinese archaeology and art historical studies.¹⁰

The compilation and study of stone inscriptions continued well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. An important contemporary compendium is Yan Gengwang's *Shike shiliao congshu* (Anthology of historical sources from stone inscriptions, 969 *juan*, 420 vols., 1966) and its addendum, *Shike shiliao xinbian* (30 vols., 1977–1982), which Yan also compiled. In the last few decades, institutions that own vast collections of rubbings have also begun to edit, photograph, and publish their holdings. Beijing Library published its collection, in one hundred volumes, from 1989 to 1991 (*Beijing tushuguan cang Zhongguo lidai shike taben huibian*), while the Academia Sinica in Taipei issued the first volume on rubbings of Buddhist inscriptions in 2002 (*Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo zang Bei Wei jinian fojiao shike tuoben mulu*). There are also efforts to prepare these rubbings for publication in electronic formats.¹¹

Japanese and Western Scholarship

From the late nineteenth century through the two World Wars, Japanese and Western scholars conducted preliminary surveys of Chinese art, including many Buddhist monuments and cave-temples. The political and social turmoil of this era also created opportunities for the collecting of Chinese art overseas.¹² Many works of Chinese Buddhist sculpture and steles found their way into Japanese, European, and North American museums and some private collections. Contacts with China during this period and the later access to these monuments in overseas collections generated new research abroad.

Two early Japanese surveys of special significance in the

study of Chinese Buddhist art are Ōmura Seigai's *Shina bijutsushi: chōsōhen* (A history of Chinese art: Sculpture volume, 1915–1920), and Tokiwa Daijō and Sekino Tadashi's *Shina bukkyō shiseki* (A history of Chinese Buddhist monuments, 6 vols., 1925–1931). In general, Japanese scholars' understanding of Buddhism and their sympathetic attitude toward the religion led to a greater understanding of the significance of Buddhist artworks. The authors of these volumes were not only knowledgeable in Chinese history and culture but also informed in Buddhism, the study of which flourished during the late Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–1926) eras.¹³

In *Shina bijutsushi: chōsōhen*, Ōmura combines Chinese antiquarianism with Japanese Buddhist scholarship to reconstruct the history of Chinese sculpture. The materials are presented chronologically, with further classification by material, function, and religion. After each section Ōmura summarizes the types of images, materials, iconography, and information on patronage. Some of Ōmura's observations are insightful, including his discussion of the origins of the *yiyi* Buddhist associations frequently recorded on Buddhist steles (see chap. 3). The volume records some twelve hundred literary references and twenty-six hundred inscriptions, and is accompanied by a visual chronology of the objects in photographs and rubbings. Alexander C. Soper calls Ōmura's work "an anthology of Chinese sources." Soper translated a large portion of the records into English, adding his own study and interpretations, in *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China* (1959).

In Tokiwa and Sekino's survey, Buddhist sites and monuments are arranged according to their geographical locations. Imbued with a sense of Buddhist piety, the authors embarked on their archaeological expedition to record the Buddhist monuments in China as a quest for the Japanese Buddhist heritage, faithfully researching and documenting the history of each locality, accompanied by ample photographs. The site-based survey includes the study of Buddhist temples that still have steles *in situ* and is valuable for contextual studies of these monuments. Slightly later than these two Japanese scholars, Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio undertook surveys of Chinese Buddhist cave-temples that included Xiangtangshan (1937), Longmen (1941), and Yungang (1951–1956).

After World War II, Japan's contact with China diminished and Japanese scholars' interest in Chinese Buddhist art waned. Some scholars, however, continued their efforts. Most noteworthy is Matsubara Saburō, whose *Chūgoku bukkyō chōkokushi kenkyū* (A history of Chinese Buddhist

sculpture, 1961) is a compendium of Chinese Buddhist sculptures furnished with both literary documentation and good-quality photographs. Matsubara also applied formal analysis in Western art historical studies to the study of Chinese Buddhist sculpture, especially in the formulation of regional and period styles (see below). A new edition of Matsubara's work, *Chūgoku bukkyō chōkokushi ron* (A study of the history of Chinese Buddhist sculpture, 4 vols.), was published in 1995. It incorporates recently published materials from China and remains a useful sourcebook.

Among the early Western scholars of Chinese art, Édouard Chavannes was as learned in sinology and Buddhism as were his Asian colleagues. His *Mission archéologique dans la Chine septentrionale* (13 vols., 1913) includes a survey of Buddhist temples and cave-chapel sites. Victor Segalen, another French scholar, documented many stone steles and monuments from the Sichuan region with Gilbert de Voisins and Jean Lartigue in *Mission archéologique en Chine, 1914–1917* (2 vols., 1923), which is especially valuable for the study of Han steles. Scholars trained in Western art historical methods also introduced formal analysis to the study of Chinese art, notably Osvald Sirén, in his *Chinese Sculpture from the Fifth to the Fourteenth Centuries* (4 vols., 1925). Sirén presents the development of Chinese sculpture in a geo-chronological framework, using known dated pieces as anchors. With the theoretical premise that there are distinct successive stages in the evolution of style, Sirén maintained that stylistic analysis would enable him to assign pieces of unknown date and provenance to their relative positions within this sequence. His survey also documents a significant number of Buddhist steles. Other scholars who have applied formal analysis to the study of Chinese Buddhist sculpture include Leigh Ashton (1924), Alan Priest (1944), Harry Vanderstappen and Marilyn Rhie (1965), and, more recently, Marilyn Rhie (1999–2002).

The collecting and display of Chinese Buddhist steles in overseas collections provided new opportunities for the detailed study of these monuments. Two early exemplary works in this genre are Chavannes' *Six monuments de la sculpture chinoise* (1914), which includes discussion of two steles, and Perceval W. Yetts' *The George Eumorfopoulos Collection*, Vol. 3, *Buddhist Sculpture* (1932), which contains detailed study of a Buddhist stele and a brilliant essay on the beginnings of Buddhist art in China. Because of their broad-based training, both authors were able to combine their encyclopedic knowledge in sinology and Buddhism with an acute sensitivity to the stylistic aspects of the sculptures.

By means of thorough study of the inscriptions, these scholars examine issues such as folklore, Buddhist iconography, and the religious sentiments and social background of donors. This comprehensive approach enabled these scholars to reconstruct the historical, religious, cultural, and social contexts of individual steles, and their works have set the standard for such studies.

Some thirty monumental Buddhist steles in European, North American, and Japanese collections have been published in monographs and catalogues and are well documented in photographs.¹⁴ Because of the stagnation of scholarly exchange in the several decades after Communist rule began in China in 1949, however, the study of Buddhist steles (and Buddhist art in general) abroad has until recently been limited to catalogue entries and analyses of individual pieces, or to brief discussions in surveys of Chinese Buddhist sculpture. Necessarily taken out of context, these steles have been treated without relation either to their original environment or to one another.

Though the study of Chinese Buddhist art languished, the fields of Chinese painting and bronzes flourished, and the methodologies adopted by Western scholars of Chinese art have ranged from formal analysis to contextual studies, reflecting current debates in art historical studies.¹⁵ These diverse approaches, apparent in the works of the prewar generation of scholars discussed earlier, are also evident in studies of Buddhist art undertaken in the postwar era. The formalist approach, whose chief exponent is Heinrich Wölfflin, is concerned with the intrinsic life of the form and the problems of dating and chronology.¹⁶ This theoretical paradigm is vigorously pursued by Max Loehr, who maintains that “the image is not a mere symbol of doctrine, but a work of art possessing an inner dimension of its own, unconditioned by its assigned meaning and function.”¹⁷

The contextual approach, aligned with the theory of iconology proposed by Erwin Panofsky, corresponds to an emphasis on sinological and textual studies upheld by many early scholars who had those kinds of training.¹⁸ A specific branch of the contextual study of Buddhist art is iconography, which identifies the meaning of motifs and images in relation to Buddhist texts, and this area of research has yielded many monographs and articles both in Asia and in the West.¹⁹ In his overarching discussion of Buddhist art in Asia, Dietrich Seckel considers Buddhist works of art expressions of the “ecumenical unity” of the Buddhist spirit, insisting that they are not meant to be enjoyed because of their aesthetic values but are primarily intended “to hold religious

meaning and to serve Buddhist ritual, edification, and salvation.”²⁰

In the surveys of Chinese/Asian art undertaken in the postwar era, including Laurence Sickman and Alexander C. Soper’s *The Art and Architecture of China* (1956, 3rd ed. 1968), Sherman Lee’s *A History of Far Eastern Art* (1964, 5th ed. 1994), and Michael Sullivan’s *The Arts of China* (1973, 4th ed. 1999), the authors seldom adhere strictly to any particular theoretical model but combine formal analysis in varying degrees with contextual studies in history, Buddhism, and archaeology. This methodological strategy recognizes the development of Buddhist art in China as neither a linear development nor as homogeneous, thereby reconciling the extreme positions of the “extrinsic” impact of contextual factors and foreign influences versus the “intrinsic” development of style, or, in George Kubler’s phrase, “the existential dilemma between meaning and being.”²¹

Scholarship in Contemporary China and Abroad

During the first few decades of Communist rule in China, the study of Buddhism and Buddhist art suffered a major setback because of the regime’s antireligious policy. The field of archaeology, however, received state support and flourished because excavated artifacts could be employed to substantiate the Marxist theory of dialectic materialism in historical evolution. Beginning in the 1980s, when the government’s policy on scholarly and cultural activities gradually relaxed, research on Buddhist art resumed, leading to the current revival of interest. Initial efforts focused on the documentation of major cave-temple sites, which are relatively free of the nagging question of forgeries that plagues most areas of Chinese art. A landmark of the renewed scholarly endeavors is the Sino-Japanese publication of the *Chūgoku sekkutsu* (Chinese Buddhist cave-temples) series (17 vols., 1980–1990; the Chinese edition, *Zhongguo shikusi*, was published 1981–1998).

The methodological approaches undertaken by mainland Chinese scholars emphasize typology, quantitative analysis, and iconography—essential steps toward establishing a chronology, a classification system, and the identification of subject matter. The leading scholar is Su Bai, whose meticulous work and close reading of historical sources enabled him to revise the chronology of the Yungang cave-chapels established by Mizuno and Nagahiro half a century earlier.²² Su exerts much influence in the field, as many of the students he trained at Beijing University now hold leading positions in research institutes and museums across the country. The pre-

mier institution is the state-funded Dunhuang Research Academy; staffed with a team of research scholars, the Academy holds regular conferences and publishes its own journal.

Cultural and scholarly exchanges between China and other countries have resumed since the 1980s. Joint efforts in major publications, exhibitions abroad, and international conferences are all venues that have stimulated interest and advanced scholarship in Chinese Buddhist art.²³ These efforts have resulted in the fine-tuning of chronology, thematic studies, patronage research, and cross-cultural and interdisciplinary endeavors, as well as the application of postmodern theories and literary criticism. More recently, a number of Buddhist scholars have examined the role of Buddhist images and artifacts in ritual contexts, favoring anthropological and ethnographical theories as models of inquiry.²⁴

Amid these advances in Buddhist art studies in the last two decades, Buddhist steles still have not received sufficient attention, although there is now more documentation of these monuments and a brief descriptive account in Wang Ziyun's *Zhongguo diaosu yishu shi* (A history of the art of Chinese sculpture, 1988). Buddhist steles are found in scattered locations, many in remote regions, and are then moved to local museums. Initial reports are published in archaeological journals. These accounts give basic information about the objects, and the accompanying photographs (if any) are usually poor in quality. Only selected monuments have been published in color in major anthologies and catalogs.²⁵ The poor condition of many steles, in fragments or badly eroded, renders them less valuable for thorough investigation. Thus far the Shaanxi group of steles has received greater scholarly attention because of the concentration of more than a hundred steles in that particular region and because of their strong currents of mixed Buddhist-Daoist and Daoist content (see chap. 7).

Inscriptional Studies

Although epigraphy is a legacy of antiquarian scholarship, the richness of inscriptions as original source materials is undisputed. The vast corpus of inscriptions on stone steles and other kinds of carving, both traditional and Buddhist, has supported historical, religious, and, more recently, sociological and ethnological research. The Dutch scholar J. J. M. de Groot was among the first Westerners to draw attention to the significance of funerary and commemorative steles in traditional China, in his magisterial *The Religious System of*

China (6 vols., 1892–1910). Patricia Ebrey (1980) used Han stele inscriptions as primary sources to study the social history of Han China, especially the social network of local elites. Martin Kern (2000) recently published his study of the inscriptions of Qinshihuang's imperial steles as a literary genre and as ritual texts.

Buddhist inscriptions no doubt offer some of the most valuable sources for studying Buddhist beliefs and practices. In fact, the existence of the Buddhist associations called *yi* or *yiyi* became known primarily through inscriptions on Buddhist steles, which provide firsthand information for understanding these grassroots religious organizations. With their interest in Buddhism and familiarity with Chinese sources, Japanese Buddhist scholars were pioneers in drawing on inscriptions to study Buddhism. In addition to Ōmura, Tsukamoto Zenryū discussed the character of Northern Wei Buddhism based on his analysis of inscriptions in the Longmen cave-chapels; he analyzed the donors' religious beliefs, their social background, and the motivation for their dedication (*Shina bukkyōshi kenkyū: Hoku-Gi hen*, 1942).

Others have similarly employed inscriptional information to investigate the social and economic impact Buddhism had on Chinese society, including Yamazaki Hiroshi (1942), Naba Toshisada (1974), and the French scholar Jaques Gernet (1956). Analyzing the inscriptions of the Shaanxi group of steles, the Chinese historian Ma Changshou (1985) examined the social and ethnic background of the Buddhist patrons in the Guanzhong plain in the sixth century. Zhou Zheng (1985, 1990, 1992) and others analyzed the historical information contained in individual stele inscriptions. Younger scholars from Taiwan (Liu Shufen, 1993) and mainland China (Hou Xudong, 1998) continue to mine the rich resources of Buddhist inscriptions. These studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of Buddhism in the early medieval period. Nonetheless, epigraphical studies cannot replace comprehensive studies of Buddhist steles that also take into account the visual character of these monuments.

BUDDHIST STELES AS WORKS OF ART

This book represents the first systematic investigation of Buddhist steles as a group, as a unique art form. My goal is twofold: first, to investigate the origins, flourishing, and demise of this art form; and second, to understand these monuments in their historical, religious, cultural, social, and artistic contexts.

It appears that the phenomenon of Buddhist steles is analogous to the biological model of birth, growth, and decay, although I am not suggesting that such a model is universally applicable to every art form. This being so, steles provide a fascinating opportunity to reexamine the relationship between form and meaning in religious art. First, it seems that form follows function. The need of the Chinese Buddhists to commemorate their religious faith predisposed them to choose a pre-Buddhist form customarily used for commemoration, namely, the *bei*. Second, the new form acquired additional meaning from the borrowed form, since Buddhist steles have the same symbolism—and similar functions and patterns of patronage—as their traditional counterparts. In their most fundamental usage, stone steles are emblems of identity that embody the religious, social, cultural, and territorial identity of their users, who include those honored with steles, the patrons of steles, and the steles' audience or viewers. Through steles, these users articulated their aspirations, projected their ideals, and constructed notions of identity in a public manner.

The possession of steles also enabled their users to broadcast as well as negotiate their own status. As a ritual object and a public monument, the stele was not only a visual channel through which changing ideological and religious beliefs were expressed but also a potent symbolic form employed in the display and transference of power. Considering the common use of stone slabs in many cultures, this study of traditional Chinese *bei* and their Buddhist adaptations contemplates subjects that transcend the steles' own time and place, thus entering the larger discussion of the nature of symbolic forms. To use Ernst Cassirer's definition, the creation of symbolic forms enables humankind to "understand and interpret," "articulate and organize," and "synthesize and universalize" the human experience. It is a process by which the energies of the human spirit produce forms (be they language, art, myth, and religion) within a symbolic universe, thereby transforming reality (or truth) into material existence.²⁶

While focusing on a unique type of Buddhist monument, this book also addresses larger issues in the study of the history, culture, religion, and society of early medieval China. Previous works either list the monuments chronologically or study individual monuments in isolation, whereas here the known corpus of Buddhist steles is arranged according to broad chronological and regional groupings. Within each section, thorough analyses of selected steles explore the nexus of complex issues that surround this art form, from cultural

symbolism to the interrelations between religious doctrine and artistic expression, economic production, patronage, and the synthesis of native and foreign art styles. Because of their known dates and provenances, Buddhist steles provide the most concrete and thorough evidence of the chronology, iconography, and regional styles of early Chinese Buddhist art, supplementing current scholarship on Buddhist cave-temple sites and individual sculptures.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS STUDY

Because a discussion of pre-Buddhist steles sets the stage for this study and is crucial to understanding the significance of the later adaptation of this symbolic form, Part I traces the ancient roots of the Chinese stele tradition and investigates the process by which Chinese steles became adapted for Buddhist use. Chapter 1 begins with an etymological study of several key terms shared by both traditional Chinese and Buddhist steles, terms that shed light on the inherent meaning of steles as symbolic objects and their associated practices. Using textual sources and archaeological evidence, it investigates the meanings of these terms in their historical and cultural contexts, and how these meanings evolved as the society, political structure, and cultural and religious beliefs underwent major changes.

One of the most ancient terms is "She" (the earth god), which is sometimes symbolized by an upright stone. With the transition of the feudalistic society of the Shang and Zhou dynasties to the imperial bureaucracy of the Qin and Han dynasties, the worship of She became institutionalized. "Yi" (town) and "li" (hamlet) designate the basic units of rural communities; by extension, "yishe" and "lishu" were the local religious and social organizations associated with the worship of She. These *yishe* and *lishu* became models for the later Buddhist devotional societies, called *yi* or *yi*, that were the chief patrons of Buddhist steles (a subject examined in chap. 3).

Of later origins are the terms "li" (ritual) and "bei" (stele), which came from a separate cultural tradition. *Li* governed the conduct of *junzi* (the noble ruler), both being principal tenets of Confucianism, while *bei* referred to wooden poles or stone pillars used as spatial markers and as symbols of status in ritual ceremonies in pre-Han times. As such, *bei* were used symbolically to enact the principles of ritual, specifically the ritual conduct of the ideal ruler.

Chapter 2 investigates the rise of *bei*, which now desig-

nate stone steles, in the latter part of the Han dynasty. Of regulated size and shape, steles served a variety of commemorative functions and became a main carrier of ritual inscriptions. Funerary and immortality cults, an increasing emphasis on the individual, and the preference for stone as a medium for ritual inscriptions were among the principal reasons this occurred. Most importantly, the adoption of Confucianism as the orthodox ideology and the concomitant rise of the *shi* (scholar-official or literati) class contributed to the emergence of steles as a principal symbolic form. Chapter 2 also explores how the *bei* served as a vehicle through which individuals or collective groups expressed their constructed notions of identity publicly.

Chapter 3 examines the origins of Buddhist devotional societies and the first use of the stele form for Buddhist purposes. It begins with the historical background of the Northern Wei, the strongest nomadic empire of this period. The cultural policies of the Northern Wei dynasty had a direct impact on the rise and flourishing of Buddhist steles. In implementing Chinese-style administrative bureaucracy, the Northern Wei began social and economic rehabilitation following the long period of turmoil and warfare after the fall of the Han dynasty. The adoption of Buddhism as a state religion by the Northern Wei provided a universal ideology for a fragmented society, transcending ethnic and social differences. It also facilitated the spread of the Buddhist faith to the northern countryside. In the process, ancient religious practices and community-based religious organizations were revitalized. Modeled after the ancient *yishe* and *lishu*, Buddhist devotional societies called *yi* or *yiyi* emerged.

Chapter 3 also discusses the flourishing of Buddhism and Buddhist art under the Northern Wei, as the faith reached a mature phase in this period. With imperial patronage, Buddhist art thrived and a uniform artistic and iconographic idiom emerged. Under these favorable conditions, it is not surprising to find that the first documentation of Buddhist devotional societies and the earliest Buddhist use of the Chinese tablet can be linked to two major Buddhist cave-temple sites of the Northern Wei period (Yungang and Longmen, respectively) in the last two decades of the fifth century. Once the Chinese tablet was converted to Buddhist content, the stage was set for the widespread use of Buddhist steles in the sixth century.

Part II is devoted to the phenomenon of Buddhist steles in the sixth century. Chapter 4 gives an overview of Buddhist steles, including their typology, spatial contexts, purposes of

donation, patronage, and production. It also examines possible Indian prototypes and the use of steles in other parts of the world. Chapters 5 through 10 examine individual groups of steles arranged according to their general chronological and regional developments.

The production of Buddhist steles in the sixth century can be divided into two phases: the phase of initial flourishing (c. 500–530), and the mature phase (c. 530–600). During the initial phase, Buddhist steles flourished in regions directly under the Northern Wei administration: Shanxi, Henan, Shaanxi, and the Gansu-Ningxia region. Chapters 5 through 8 examine these four regional schools individually. Although the Buddhist steles from this period exhibit the uniform idiom of late Northern Wei Buddhist art, they also display distinct regional characteristics in style, iconography, and patronage patterns. Because many steles are similar to each other and the inscriptions follow formulaic expressions, I examine in detail selected examples that best represent the full range of types as well as the major issues and developments in form, iconography, style, and patronage.

The steles from Shanxi are examined in chapter 5. Most closely associated with the power base of the Northern Wei and the type-site of Yungang, the Shanxi steles reveal a wide range of forms, including the monumental type that emerged at the end of the period.

Chapter 6 focuses on Maitreya steles from the Henan region. The messianic cult of Maitreya, the Future Buddha, reached a peak from the late fifth to the early sixth century; Longmen, the second Northern Wei type-site in Henan, bears witness to the popularity of Maitreya as a devotional deity. The significant number of Maitreya steles, some of which are also of the finest quality, attests to both the religious and the political and social significance of this cult.

Chapter 7 shifts the focus to a large group of steles from the Shaanxi region. What distinguish the Shaanxi steles are the strong currents of mixed Buddhist and Daoist ideas and the marked presence of ethnic nomads among their patrons.

Chapter 8 examines a relatively small group of steles from the Gansu-Ningxia region, the majority of which are from the Maijishan cave-temple site. Without inscriptions and records of patronage, the Maijishan steles exhibit fewer features associated with traditional Chinese steles, suggesting a possible foreign source for these slabs and their function as devotional objects in cave-chapels.

By the middle of the sixth century, the regional differences of northern steles had diminished. Chapter 9 studies the pre-

dominant form of monumental complex steles that emerged in the central plains of Shanxi, Henan, and Shaanxi provinces in the middle to the second half of the sixth century. It also discusses Buddhist commemorative steles, a harbinger of the new trend in the seventh century and of the demise of the sixth-century form that emphasizes imagery.

Chapter 10 is devoted to southern steles from Sichuan, which represent a distinct tradition. Unlike their northern counterparts, which present Buddhist icons in recessed niches, Sichuan steles contain pictorial reliefs with landscape elements that draw on local artistic conventions to represent Buddhist teachings. Among the Sichuan reliefs are some of the earliest images of the Pure Land, which are important to understand-

ing the devotional cult of Amitābha Buddha and the rise of the plethora of Pure Land paintings in the Tang dynasty.

In investigating the origins of both pre-Buddhist and Buddhist steles in China, and in charting the developments of Buddhist steles as an art form, this book closely examines both Buddhism's dialogues with native traditions and the processes by which Buddhism was assimilated into Chinese culture and society and became part of its civilization. In the course of these interactions and mutual adaptations, the Chinese artistic idiom was enriched and transformed, planting the seeds for major achievements in figural and landscape arts in the ensuing Sui and Tang periods.