

On Rubbings

Their Materiality and Historicity

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What is a rubbing? Like a block print, a rubbing is made by directly transferring a sign—be it a text or a picture—from a sign-bearing object to a piece of paper. Unlike a block print, however, what is imprinted in a rubbing is *not* a mirror image. When a print is made, ink is applied to a block, and the paper is then placed face down on it. The reversed writing or image carved on the block is thus reversed again and appears as a black imprint on a white background. When a rubbing is made, however, the paper is laid face up over an engraved object, and the ink is then applied to the paper to register the entire surface of the object; the sunken inscription or image shows up as white against a black background. No reversing of images is involved. If a print duplicates carved signs, a rubbing duplicates a sign-bearing object and converts the object from a three-dimensional entity into a two-dimensional representation.

As a two-dimensional representation, a rubbing is connected to the object through physical contact, not through an imaginary resemblance in the rubbing maker's mind. It does not "depict" an object in the way a realistic painting does. A rubbing is closer to a photograph—a metonym that draws its image directly from the object. Indeed, Roland Barthes's well-known rumination on photography can serve to characterize a rubbing:

From the object to its image, there is of course a reduction: in proportion, in perspective, in color. But this reduction is at no point a *transformation* (in the mathematical sense of the term); to shift from reality to its photograph[/rubbing], it is not at all necessary to break down this reality into units and to constitute these units into signs substantially different from the object they represent; between this object and its image, it is not all necessary to arrange a relay, i.e., a code; of course, the image is not the reality, but it is its perfect *analogon*, and it is just this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph[/rubbing].¹

As we will see, the analogical function of a rubbing is crucial to its use as a substitute for the "real"—it freezes a moment of historical time in a still image. In contrast to a photograph, however, a rubbing minimizes the physical distance between an object and its image: it is akin to a manufactured skin peeled off the object. A photograph, on the other hand, is never completed *in situ*; it emerges mysteriously in a darkroom devoid of the reality the photograph depicts. Moreover, contrary to the idea of mechanical reproduction (which photography typifies), the making of a rubbing is labor intensive and is supposed to produce images of inconsistent appearance. To a rubbing connoisseur, "even those [rubblings] made from the same blocks are never identical, their manual production making each an original work of art."² We can thus connect *rubbing* with *printing* and *photography* in a conceptual triangle. Rubbing overlaps with the other two to a certain extent, but it can never be equated with them.

Most research on rubblings has concentrated on their role in advancing traditional knowledge—classical learning, historical research, antiquarian studies, and especially the art of calligraphy. In this chapter, I focus on the materiality and historicity of rubblings themselves.

Two Kinds of Rubblings: Bei and Tie

The technique of rubbing gained wide currency in the West no earlier than the nineteenth century, when antiquarians began to use a crayon-like agent to record inscriptions and designs on tombstones and other ancient remains. But in China, ink squeezes made from engraved words and images appeared at least by the sixth century. During the following centuries, this technique gradually developed into a major means of preserving ancient engravings and transmitting famous examples of calligraphy. In the process, it gave rise to an independent art form. Rubblings were made with great care and eagerly

collected, and a large body of literature on the historical values and artistic merit of these works accumulated. Commenting on the significance of rubblings for understanding traditional Chinese culture, the early twentieth-century antiquarian Zhao Ruzhen 趙汝珍 drew this analogy: "A gentleman not knowing or understanding rubblings is like a farmer being unable to differentiate the five grains or a carpenter being unable to use a line maker."³

Knowledge about rubblings starts from nomenclature: the traditional term for rubblings, *bei tie* 碑帖, signifies a twofold classification.⁴ The character *bei* normally means "stone stele," but here it pertains to rubblings made from pre-existing engravings. *Tie* has the more specific meaning of rubblings made from blocks carved specifically for transmitting famous calligraphy (Figs. 1.1a–b).⁵ These basic definitions of *bei* and *tie* imply many differences between these two types of rubblings in terms of origins, development, purpose, and readership. *Tie* appeared much later than *bei*, and the invention of *tie* in the tenth century may be explained as a possible influence from printing. As copies of calligraphic masterpieces, *tie* became indispensable to students of calligraphy; *bei*, on the other hand, were appreciated more by antiquarians and epigraphers. A *tie*-rubbing often registers only the calligraphic brushwork carved on a block; a *bei*-rubbing is much more sensitive to marks, intentional as well as unintentional, on an object. A *tie* can be easily reprinted in a book format, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to duplicate through printing all traces of damage and decay found in a *bei*-rubbing. These differences provide valuable clues for speculating on the relationship between *bei* and *tie*, but a full discussion of this relationship would require a separate study. My discussion here focuses more narrowly on the relationship between a rubbing and a sign-bearing object, a relationship that differs markedly in *bei* and *tie*.

Beginning in the Southern Tang (923–35) or the early Song, *tie* were made in large quantities through organized efforts. Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 976–97) of the Northern Song (960–1126), for example, ordered 419 famous pieces of calligraphy in the imperial collection engraved on wood blocks; rubblings made from them were bestowed on high-ranking officials. These blocks became cracked and unusable even before the dynasty perished;⁶ in their place, the rubblings, called "Chunhua ge tie" 淳化閣帖 or "Ge tie" 閣帖 for short, became sources for new engravings. Among the several dozen such engravings made during the Song, some copied the "Ge tie"

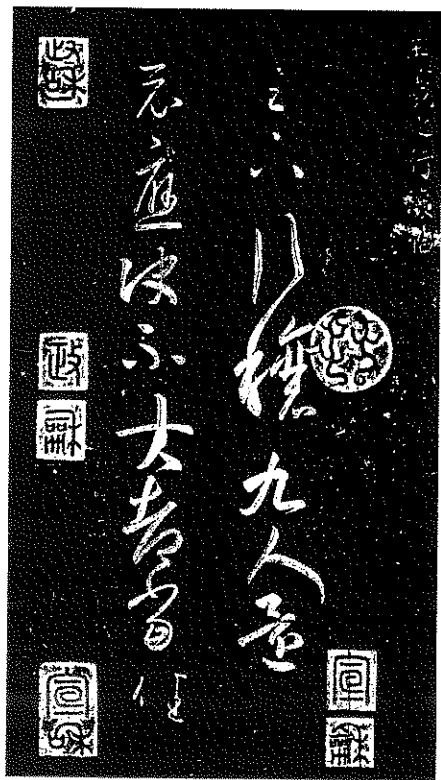
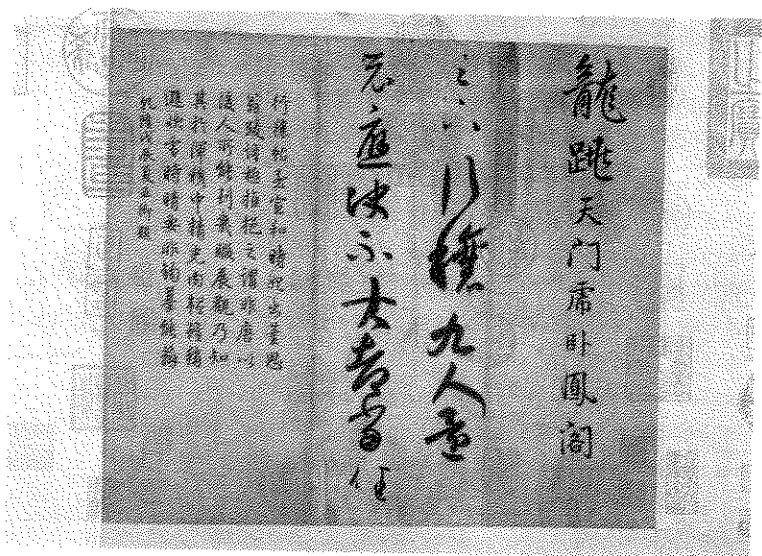


Fig. 1.1 Wang Xizhi, "Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest," Tang dynasty. (a, above) tracing copy, ink on paper, 24.4 x 8.9 cm, Princeton University Museum; (b, left) rubbing, from *Model Calligraphies from the Yuqing Studio* (*Yuqing zhai fatie*), 1614.

and inherited the title; others incorporated additional pieces and were given new names, such as Pan Sidan's 潘思旦 "jiang tie" 絳帖 or Liu Cizhuang's 劉次莊 "Xiyu tang tie" 戲魚堂帖. These "second generation" rubbings again became blueprints for new engravings, from which further rubbings were made.⁷ This chain of reproduction for the "Chunhua ge tie" has continued to the present day.

The history of a famous *tie* is characterized therefore, not by producing new sets of rubbings from the original engraving, but by the constant re-creation of engravings based on older rubbings. The lack of authenticity of *tie*-engravings is coupled with a lack of materiality. Made of wood or stone, a *tie*-block is often rectangular in shape and of limited thickness; its plain form serves the purpose of transmitting the engraved calligraphy, but the block can hardly be appreciated as a work of art in itself.⁸ In fact, traditional connoisseurs rarely described these blocks as three-dimensional objects; rather, they were interested only in the quality of the engraving as represented by their rubbings. In the reproduction of *tie*-calligraphy, therefore, these engraved blocks were shadowy transmitters between the original calligraphy and the *tie*-rubbings, and again between earlier *tie*-rubbings and later *tie*-rubbings. Their lack of materiality also explains why they never became a category of collected objects, even though by Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) times Song *tie*-blocks were extremely rare. People diligently collected *tie*-rubbings, not blocks. The Qing scholar Wu Yun 吳雲 (1811–83), for example, owned more than two hundred rubbings of different *tie*-versions of the "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection" ("Lanting xu" 蘭亭序) by the master calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (ca. 303–ca. 361); he thus proudly named his studio The Studio of Two Hundred Lanting (Erbai Lanting zhai 二百蘭亭齋). Commenting on this name, Qianshen Bai notes that Wu did not bother to specify that his "two hundred Lanting" were all rubbings: "for to Wu Yun, each rubbing was a work of art that could substitute for the original work, by then lost in the distant past."⁹ These rubbings constituted a collective history of their own. They were of course made from two hundred different engraved blocks, but the condition and whereabouts of these blocks remained largely unmentioned.

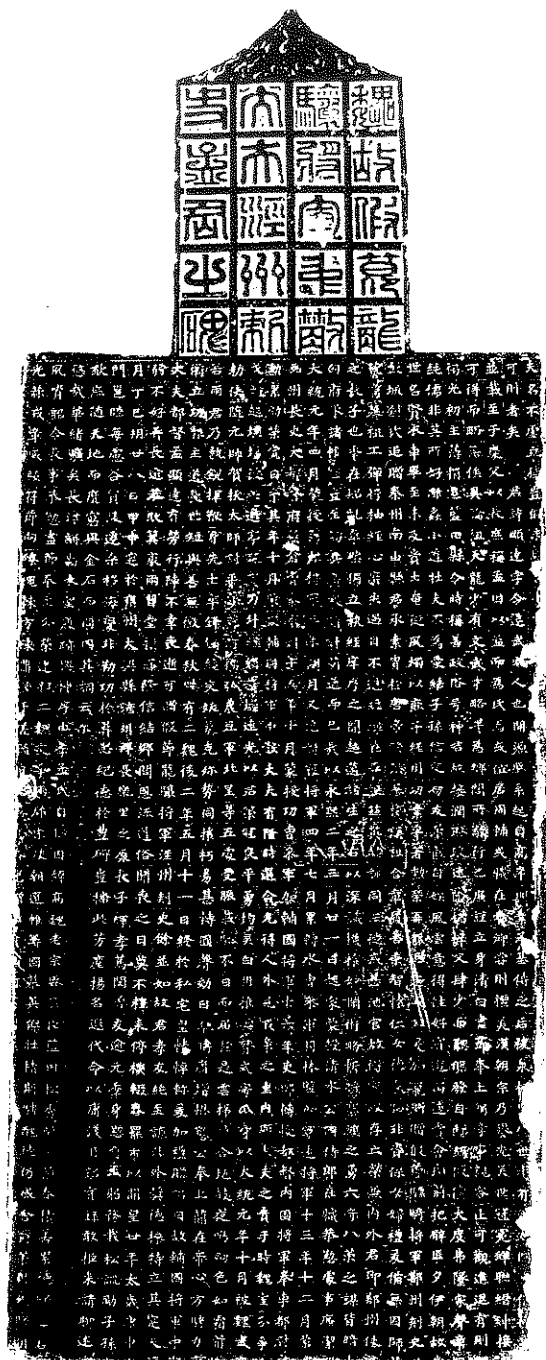
We must therefore distinguish *tie*-engravings from other sources of rubbings—bronze vessels, ancient mirrors, carved jades, lacquerwares, inkstones, and especially stone steles. The only point shared by these diverse objects



Fig. 1.2 The Forest of Steles, Xi'an. (a, above) a section of the exhibition hall; (b, opposite page) rubbing of the Meng Xianda Stele.

is that they existed before they became sources of rubbings: unlike *tie*-engravings, these objects were not created for the purpose of making rubbings, and their creation often predated the earliest rubbings by a considerable time span. Also unlike *tie*-engravings, the materiality of these objects remained strong even after they became sources of rubbings; in fact their reputation as important monuments and ritual objects was not weakened but enhanced by the circulation of rubbings. At the same time, the rubbings became their counterparts. Because a rubbing "freezes" an object at a particular moment whereas the object itself continues to deteriorate, an older rubbing is always more "authentic" than the real object. In this sense, a rubbing also becomes the nemesis of the object, constantly challenging the historical authenticity of the object by juxtaposing the present with a more reliable past.

Although any pre-existing engraving can become a source for this type of rubbing, the most typical example is a *bei*—a stele (Figs. 1.2a, b). From their invention in the first century CE, stone steles were a major means for



commemoration and standardization.¹⁰ A stele for a deceased individual commemorated his meritorious conduct in public service or, more frequently, presented a concise biography composed as the "last words" about the deceased from posterity's point of view.¹¹ The government might erect a stele to provide authoritative versions of Confucian classics or to record an event of extraordinary historical significance.¹² In short, the stele defined a legitimate site where a *consensual history*, albeit embodying a partisan view, was constructed for and presented to the public. For historians, the stele served as a major source of historical knowledge; their inscriptions provided evidence for reconstructing bygone eras.

Historical reconstruction became an important component of antiquarianism, which emerged as an influential intellectual movement during the Northern Song.¹³ Also around this time, research on ancient objects became known as *jin shi xue* 金石學, or "the study of metal and stone," because *jin* (bronzes) and *shi* (stone carvings) constituted nearly the entire corpus of materials for antiquarian scholarship. Modern scholars have paid much attention to the historical significance of *jin shi xue*, especially to its relationship with new trends in Song historiography, archaeology, epigraphy, and literati arts.¹⁴ But these discussions have generally neglected an aspect of Song antiquarianism—namely, the collection, transformation, and manipulation of historical evidence. These activities are especially important for understanding the Song notion of the stele, because, although antiquarians greatly valued steles, they did not collect them as they did ancient bronzes, jades, paintings, or books. What antiquarians sought out were the inscribed texts (and later, carved pictorial images) in the form of rubbings.

Northern Song writers mention rubbings as important commercial items.¹⁵ In the Southern Song (1127–1279), according to the *Qingbo zazhi* 清波雜誌 (Qingbo miscellaneous records), rubbings of ancient steles—most of which were located in northern territories under Jin control—were in great demand and were sold by traveling merchants south of the Yangzi River at high prices.¹⁶ Through this and other channels, antiquarians could build huge collections of rubbings of ancient inscriptions. It is said that Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–72), the first major Song collector and cataloguer of stele inscriptions, collected some 1,000 "rolls" (*juan* 卷) of ink rubbings.¹⁷ His catalogue of 1060, the *Jigu lu* 集古錄 (Record of collecting antiques), contains his comments on more than 400 rubbings, most of which were stone inscriptions. The slightly later *Jin shi lu* 金石錄 (Records of bronze

and stone inscriptions) by Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠 (1081–1129) was even more extensive: it contained rubbings of 1,900 stone inscriptions, plus Zhao's comments on 502 of them. Antiquarians like Ouyang Xiu and Zhao Mingcheng did sometimes visit steles *in situ*; but such visits were relatively rare and often limited to steles located near the places where they held office. Their real passion was finding rubbings of unknown steles in the market. Li Qingzhao 李清照, the wife of Zhao Mingcheng and a famous poet in her own right, recalled the joy of collecting such items during the early days of her marriage:

On the first and fifteenth day of every month, my husband would get a short vacation from the Academy: he would "pawn some clothes" for five hundred cash and go to the market at Xiangguo Temple 相國寺, where he would buy fruit and rubbings of inscriptions. When he brought these home, we would sit facing one another, rolling them out before us, examining and munching. And we thought ourselves persons of the age of Getian 葛天.¹⁸

The consequence of these collecting activities was profound. Each rubbing faithfully reproduced a stele inscription, but it did so by transforming the stele into a material form analogous to a printed text. When hundreds of ink rubbings were brought together in a single collection, the separate localities and physical contexts of the originals were further erased. Made from steles in different parts of China, in temples or graveyards, these rubbings were now put side by side in a catalogue, often arranged chronologically. One such floating stele would be "The Stele at the Temple of the Western Marchmount Hua" ("Xiyu Huashan miao bei" 西嶽華山廟碑; hereafter, Stele of Mount Hua), whose inscription was recorded by at least three prominent Song antiquarians—Ouyang Xiu, Zhao Mingcheng, and Hong Kuo 洪适 (1117–84)—in their respective catalogues. All three wrote comments on this stele. Ouyang Xiu's comment was the earliest and provided a basis for further cataloguing and discussion of the stele. The historical information in the comment is also indispensable for my discussion of this particular stele in the second part of this chapter.

The first part of Ouyang Xiu's comment summarizes the inscription and introduces the history of the Temple of the Western Marchmount Hua and the establishment of the stele. According to the inscription, after Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 206–195 BCE) founded the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE), he established a new sacrificial system under state patronage. His efforts were continued by Emperor Hui 惠 (r. 194–187 BCE), who ordered

local princes to offer seasonal sacrifices to mountains and rivers in the areas under their jurisdiction. Emperor Wu 武 (r. 140–87 BCE) constructed temples at the foot of the Five Sacred Marchmounts and sent officials to offer seasonal sacrifices there. But this ritual became lax toward the end of the Western Han, and when Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–23 CE) took power, he abolished this ritual altogether. The worship to Mount Hua was restored when the Eastern Han (24–220 CE) was established. Stone steles were erected in the temple, but their inscriptions had disappeared by the mid-second century. In the fourth year of Yanxi 延熹 (165 CE), the governor of Hongnong 弘農, Yuan Feng 袁逢, decided to repair the abandoned structures and restore the disrupted rituals in the temple. But before he could finish this project, he was promoted to the governorship of the Capital District. His project was completed by the new governor, Sun Qiu 孫璆.

In the second and much shorter part of his comment, Ouyang Xiu praised the value of the inscription as historical evidence. As an example, he pointed out that only this document records the name of the temple established by Emperor Wu at Mount Hua, which is absent in printed texts. For Ouyang, the conclusion was obvious: "From this instance one recognizes the importance of collecting bronze and stone [inscriptions]."¹⁹ This comment is typical of Song scholarship on ancient steles. It is essentially a textual study: the writer single-mindedly focused on the inscription and disregarded other aspects of the stele such as its material, shape, decoration, and condition. The historical information contained in the inscription was carefully summarized and became the subject of additional remarks. Ouyang Xiu's views on the Stele of Mount Hua initiated a lively scholarly discussion. Zhao Mingcheng, for example, argued that, contrary to Ouyang's statements, the temple's name was in fact recorded by Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (d. 537) in his *Shui jing zhu* 水經注 (Commentaries on the *Classic of Waterways*); what could not be found in transmitted texts were the names of the temple's gate and main hall.²⁰ Hong Kuo, on the other hand, focused on the author of the inscription.²¹ Scholars of later ages continued to debate these points and introduced new arguments. Almost all the comments written before the 1820s were collected by Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) in a lengthy article entitled "An Examination of the Han Dynasty Stele of the Western Marchmount Hua Established in the Yanxi Reign" ("Han Yanxi Xiyu Huashan bei kao" 漢延熹西嶽華山碑考).²²

What was the impact of antiquarian scholarship on the relationship between a rubbing and the original object? Ironically, the fame of a stele derived largely from the scholarly attention paid to rubbings of it, but making these rubbings unavoidably damaged the stele, because the continuous tapping by rubbing makers gradually eroded the inscription. This consequence has been the lament of almost every traditional connoisseur of ancient stone carvings. Because rubbing makers always focused on the engraved characters, the area surrounding a character is often undamaged, whereas the character itself has worn away, leaving behind a smooth depression. On a rubbing made from one such worn stele, as Ye Changchi 葉昌熾 (1849–1917) put it poetically, the words "look like a flight of white herons or flocks of white butterflies. Even if one studies the rubbing with concentrated attention, not a single brush stroke can be distinguished and not a single character can be recognized."²³

Ye Changchi summarized the "seven calamities" (*qi e* 七厄) that can afflict a stele in addition to the damage caused by war, the elements, and animals: (1) floods and earthquakes, (2) the use of steles as building materials, (3) the practice of inscribing over old inscriptions, (4) the polishing of old steles to prepare a surface for new texts, (5) the destruction of steles established by one's political enemies, (6) the making of rubbings from famous steles for social relations and superiors, and (7) the collecting of rubbings by officials and connoisseurs. Of these seven, the last two were the most serious because these were widely practiced and unavoidable: "A friend came from the Region Within the Pass (Guanzhong 關中) [i.e., the Xi'an area, where many ancient dynasties established their capitals] and told me that the loud sound of making rubbings in the Forest of Steles (Bei lin 碑林) continues day and night. How could a stele not perish (*bu wang* 不亡) [under such torture]? Although the virtuous stone [of a stele] is unyielding, how can it resist this way of making rubbings!"²⁴

Rather than a sudden event, the "death" of a stele was a long process. Ye Changchi left his poignant description:

At the beginning, only the edges of engraved characters become flat and blurred; the sharp edges of the original engraving are gone. When a stele is rubbed continuously day after day, it eventually becomes wordless, sometimes even losing its entire surface like a cicada shedding its skin. If one tries to read such a stele, even by shining a strong light on it, one finds nothing more than the stele's posthumous soul (*yi hun* 遺魂), lingering and faintly recognizable.²⁵

The irony, however, is that Ye Changchi was himself a major collector of rubbings. He began his *Yu shi* 語石 (Talking about stone) by recalling his early interest in the subject: "Whenever I found a blurry rubbing, I would try hard to figure out the damaged characters; even my students secretly criticized and openly ridiculed my obsession." Later he passed the *jinshi* 進士 examination and became an official in Beijing, but his real passion remained finding rare rubbings. In his words, "After more than twenty years of persistent searching, my collection eventually reached more than 8,000 pieces. Handling and fondling them day and night, I forget that I have become an old man."²⁶ It is difficult to believe that he did not realize the contradiction between this passion for rubbings and the "death" of steles brought about by making these rubbings. Rather, this dilemma was irreconcilable for a person like him who worried about both.

As attested by Ye Changchi and other scholars, from the Song to the Qing, most ancient steles were left in their original locations. Even though an increasing number were removed to public places such as Confucian academies in cities and towns, these examples were hugely outnumbered by the unprotected ones. This situation was especially true during the Song. Scholars have traced the beginning of the famous Forest of Steles to the late Northern Song, when Lü Dazhong 呂大忠 (d. ca. 1066) moved a set of Tang "stone classics" and other ancient steles to the Confucian Academy in Xi'an in 1087.²⁷ But at that point the forest contained only 43 items, and most of them were concerned with Confucian learning and the academy itself.²⁸ In other words, this collection began not for the general purpose of preserving ancient steles but for the particular agenda of promoting Confucian scholarship in a specific institution. We can therefore understand why only 6 of the 400 stone inscriptions recorded in Ouyang Xiu's *Jigu lu* and only 22 of the 1,900 stone carvings collected by Zhao Mingcheng derived from the Forest of Steles.²⁹

As mentioned above, in contrast to a tie-engraving, an ancient stele already had a long history before it attracted the attention of antiquarians, and it retained a strong sense of materiality even after it became a source of making rubbings. But a stele's history is by no means straightforward, and its materiality, as demonstrated by Ye Changchi, must serve as the precondition for its unavoidable decay and destruction. It seems unthinkable that a heavy stone stele is more ephemeral than an ink rubbing on paper. But this is true. A rubbing has a definite temporality: its imprint attests to a single moment

in the history of a stele—a particular condition of the stele that can never be repeated.³⁰ An extant rubbing is always more authentic than the stele because it has outlived the stele that existed when the rubbing was made. Connoisseurs always try to find an earlier and thus more truthful appearance of the stele in an old rubbing.³¹

The objecthood of a stele can therefore never be embodied by a single image; rather, it must be realized in the struggle between its survival and its destruction as an object. The final destruction of a stele does not necessarily stop this struggle, however, because its objecthood can be transferred to a replacement. Many steles were made to replace older ones, which had finally vanished into oblivion.³² What a new stele perpetuated was not only the material existence of the old stele but also the cycles of its birth, death, and rebirth. This aspect of a stele's objecthood can again be demonstrated by the Stele of Mount Hua. According to its inscription (as summarized in Ouyang Xiu's comment), this stele was created in 165 CE to replace older ones, whose "inscriptions had all worn away and disappeared" by the mid-second century. Some 900 years later, this second-century stele was rediscovered by Song antiquarians. Natural elements and human defacement must have left their mark on this stele, although the rubbing in Ouyang Xiu's collection still allowed "a complete reading of the inscription." As I discuss in the next section, one such rubbing still exists, but two other extant rubbings point to different—and later—moments of the stele.

This stele was finally destroyed by an earthquake in the thirty-fourth year of the Jiajing 嘉靖 era (1555) during the Ming dynasty.³³ This tragedy did not terminate the stele's life cycle, however: a number of replacements were made on the basis of the surviving rubbings. After one of these rubbings, the "Siming" 四明 version (Fig. 1.3), entered the collection of Ruan Yuan in the early nineteenth century, for example, Ruan Yuan fashioned his own Stele of Mount Hua based on this rubbing and placed the stele in his clan's school, along with two other "replacement" steles based on two other rare rubbings in his collection.³⁴ Ruan Yuan's new Mount Hua stele faithfully duplicated the "Siming" rubbing, including all the damage this rubbing registers. Ouyang Xiu's comments on this stele were also inscribed on this new stele in a different script (Fig. 1.4). At Ruan Yuan's encouragement, two of his former students, Lu Kun 廬坤 and Qian Baofu 錢寶甫, erected another Mount Hua stele in the Temple of the Western Marchmount Hua in Shaanxi (Fig. 1.5).

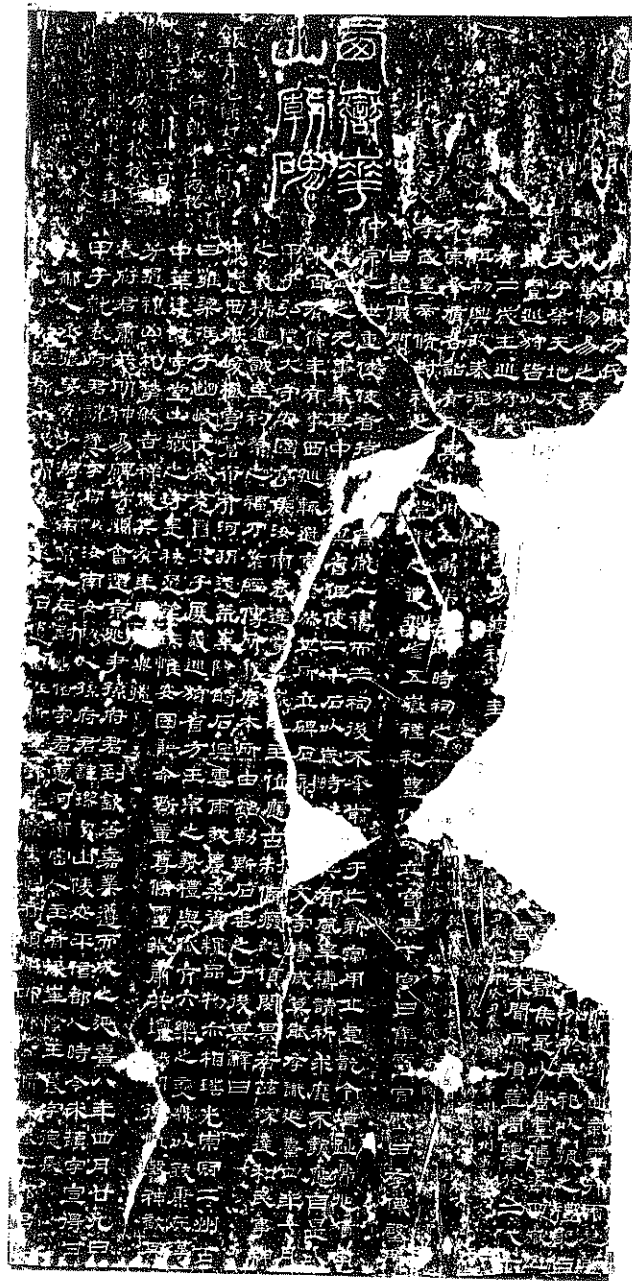


Fig. 1.3 The "Siming" rubbing of the Stele of the Western Marchmount Hua. 175 x 84.8 cm. The stele was made in 165 CE. The rubbing dates to the mid-Ming dynasty.



Fig. 1.4 Rubbing of a reconstructed Stele of the Western Marchmount Hua, established by Ruan Yuan in 1809 in his clan school in Yangzhou.



Fig. 1.5 Rubbing of a reconstructed Stele of the Western Marchmount Hua, established by Lu Kun and Qian Baofu in the early nineteenth century in the Temple of the Western Marchmount Hua.

This stele omitted all later damage and reconstructed the second-century original. Standing in the temple, this nineteenth-century stele functioned as a surrogate or impersonator. Visitors went to visit it “as if” they were going to visit the second-century stele. Without exception, these visitors recalled the vanished original when commenting on the stele they saw. One of these visitors was Ruan Yuan himself, who visited the site in 1834 with some well-known official/scholars. He ordered an additional inscription to be engraved on the stele. This inscription included a couplet composed by his fellow visitors Jin Zhao 金釗 and Liang Zhangju 梁章鉅: “[Seeing] this ‘stele within a stele,’ / we realize what past and present means” (*beizhongbei, zhigujin*; 碑中碑, 知古今).

It is difficult to form a stable image of the Stele of Mount Hua: a number of steles have shared this name, and even the one erected in 165—commonly considered the “original”—was itself a replacement and is known only through three different rubbings. The Stele of Mount Hua highlights a series of contradictions or paradoxes shared by ancient steles as sources of rubbings. A stele is made of durable stone and has an imposing, monumental appearance; yet a stele is ever-changing, vulnerable to natural elements and human destruction. A stele can be defined as an object made of a specific material, but its objecthood is often constructed by multiple events, including the notion of an elusive original and the creation of later replacements. A stele is an important source of historical knowledge because of its inscription; however, the practice of reproducing the inscription in rubbings inevitably destroys the stele’s physical integrity and undermines its historical authority. These paradoxes contradict the “punctuation function” of a rubbing, which, as mentioned earlier, always registers a particular and precise moment of a stele. As we shall see below, it is precisely this punctuation that has made rubbings a unique subject of historical scholarship. As a background for that discussion, I first inventory the physical properties of a rubbing. In so doing, my focus shifts from the materiality and historicity of the stele to the materiality and historicity of the rubbing.

Properties of a Rubbing

The material and visual properties of a rubbing include not only the imprint it bears but also its material, its mounting style, its colophons and seals, and, if the rubbing is an old one, the physical changes it undergoes during trans-

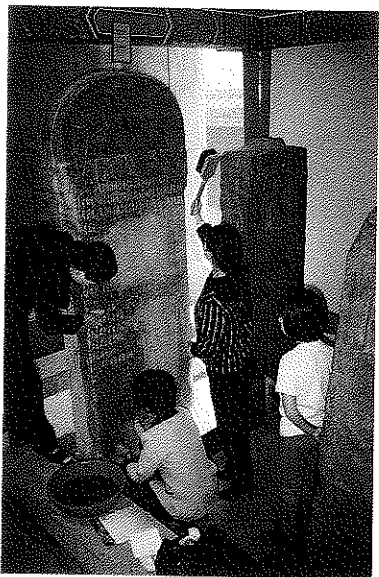


Fig. 1.6 Workers in the Lintong Museum, Shaanxi, making a rubbing from an ancient stele. 2000. Photograph by the author.

mission. To investigate these properties, we must know precisely how a rubbing is made. Generally speaking, the production of a rubbing consists of four basic steps.³⁵ The first is to prepare the object from which the rubbing is to be made. For an old stone stele, the rubbing maker would first rid the surface of dirt and moss and pay special attention to the engraved words and decoration, using a pointed bamboo pick to clean every sunken line. He or she should, however, never leave marks on the stone with the cleaning tools and should avoid excessive restoration. The idea is to preserve the stone's present and "natural" condition as much as possible, including damage and traces of age.

After the stele is washed and dried, the rubbing maker affixes a piece of paper to the stele, often with a light, water-based adhesive.³⁶ The rubbing maker either applies the adhesive on the stele and then spreads the paper over it or wets the paper with the adhesive and then spreads it on the stele. In either case, he uses a large "palm brush" (*zong shua* 棕刷) to spread the paper smoothly, eliminating wrinkles and folds (Fig. 1.6). Once this is done, the rubbing maker uses smaller brushes to tap the paper-covered surface over and over, forcing the damp paper to "sink" into every sunken part, whether it is a carved line or a fissure. To avoid damage to the paper, the

tapping movement should be gentle and persistent. Ideally, the paper will register the minutest rise and fall of the stone's surface.

The next step is *shang mo* 上墨—"to apply ink" to the paper. The rubbing maker moistens large and small *mo bao* 墨包, or "ink pads," with wet ink and lightly taps the paper with them, gradually accumulating layers of ink till the desired darkness is reached. He normally starts from the edge of the stele or other empty areas, and gradually moves to the engraved parts. A careful rubbing maker never rushes the process, because excessive ink on a pad is destined to create an ugly mark and blur the outline of a character or an image. After *shang mo* is completed, the rubbing is immediately removed from the object. Since the paper becomes wrinkled and stiff when it dries, the last step in making a rubbing is to mount it into a presentable form, either on a scroll, in an album, or as a single sheet with a thin paper backing.

Although these four steps are mandatory, they can be done carefully or rushed. Consequently the quality of rubbings varies enormously. As Ye Changchi wrote in *Yu shi*:

In Shaanxi and Henan one finds all sorts of temple steles and tomb tablets exposed in the wilderness. They are mottled by moss and lichen, blown by strong wind, and baked under the sun. Using rough paper and coal-ink, several dozen rubbings are made from one stele in a single day; the thud of pounding can be heard nonstop. How can a rubbing made this way be any good? But if one washes the stele so that it is sparkingly clean and uses paper of superb quality, and if one spreads the paper smoothly on the stele with a cotton pad and lightly taps it over and over with a brush, then all the characters and carvings, even the most delicate, are easily registered on the rise and fall of the paper. A rubbing made this way naturally captures the spirit of the stele.³⁷

For Ye Changchi and other traditional scholars of stone carvings, rubbings were distinguished by their material and technique, but most important by the quality of their imprints, which should be precise and delicate, capable of conveying the "spirit" of the engraved object. As collectors and connoisseurs, they often wrote next to or even on a rubbing, commenting on its origin, history, condition, and significance. Like the colophons accompanying a traditional handscroll or hanging scroll painting, such messages would become part of a rubbing: they changed the rubbing's physical appearance and supplied a layer of exegesis bridging the rubbing and the onlooker.³⁸ In addition to this premeditated human intervention, a rubbing

can also be altered by natural elements and accidental events. An old rubbing thus often shows not only the erosion of the original stone but also damage to the rubbing itself over its long transmission.

All these signs and marks—those derived from the original stele and those accumulated later—seem to be intermingled in a rubbing in an undifferentiated manner. But to a rubbing connoisseur, these elements appear in clearly defined historical strata and interact with one another in specific ways. To demonstrate this, I will focus on a single work: the “Siming” version of the Stele at Mount Hua (Fig. 1.7).³⁹ As noted above, rubbings of this stele were collected and studied by Song antiquarians, and this particular rubbing was owned by Ruan Yuan in the nineteenth century and became the model for a number of new Mount Hua steles.

Well known to calligraphers and antique connoisseurs for the past three hundred years, this rubbing is rectangular in shape, fairly large (174 cm long by 85 cm wide), and mounted on a hanging scroll. Numerous colophons are written on the silk mounting surrounding the rubbing. The rubbing itself is a “negative” of the stele; the characters of the inscriptions appear in white against an inked ground. There are two kinds of inscriptions: those from the original stele and those added to the scroll. The original inscription includes the stele’s title and a lengthy text underneath it. The title consists of six large “seal script” (*zhuan shu* 篆書) characters; the main text is written in an elegant “clerical script” (*li shu* 隸書). The inscription tells that the stele was erected in the eighth year of the Yanxi reign during the Eastern Han, or 165 CE. The inscription is unique among Han steles in identifying several individuals responsible for the making of the monument: an official purchased the stone, a secretary wrote the inscription or supervised its compilation, and one or two masons engraved the inscription.⁴⁰ Beside this second-century text, the rubbing also has several inscriptions written in “standard script” (*kai shu* 楷書), a calligraphic style invented after the Han. These include the short passages on either side of the stele’s title, which record the visits of some prominent Tang officials in 829 and 830. Another passage, squeezed between the first two paragraphs of the original inscription, was added to the stele in 1085 by a Song courtier, who represented the emperor at a sacrifice to the sacred mountain that year.

These inscriptions, whether original or later, are texts with definite literary meaning. They are distinguished from other marks on the rubbing,

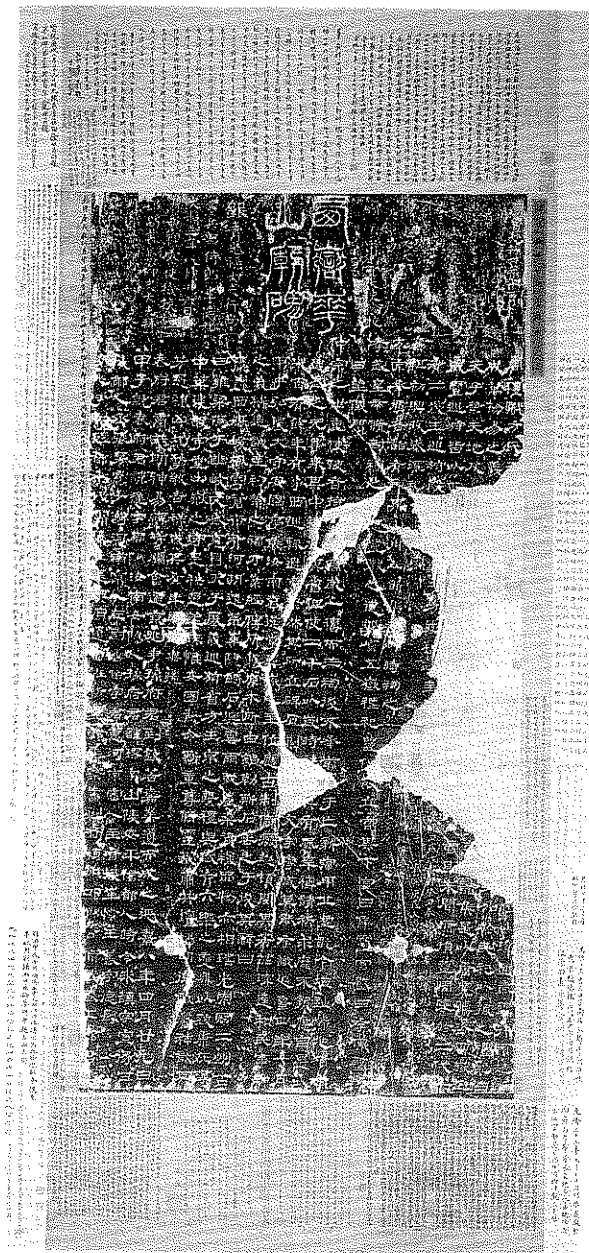


Fig. 1.7 The present appearance of the “Siming” rubbing of the Stele of the Western Marchmount Hua, with seal impressions and colophons. Palace Museum, Beijing.

which show damage that the stele suffered over its long history and hence register the passage of time. Some irregular "empty" areas on the rubbing reveal that by the time the rubbing was made in the mid-Ming dynasty, the stele had lost a large piece on the right and several smaller pieces in the middle.⁴¹ Chips and scratches are everywhere, especially around the edges. But again, damage *in* the rubbing should be distinguished from damage *to* the rubbing. This second kind of damage is exemplified by the six white spots spaced evenly in two vertical rows. Clearly, before the rubbing was mounted, it had been folded for a long time into a rectangular shape of about 60 by 40 centimeters; the corners of this rectangle were subject to wear over these years. Interestingly, some of these white spots (as well as other "empty" areas in the rubbing) are "filled in" by red impressions of collectors' seals. The placement of these marks was intentional: stamped in these locations, the seal impressions would, it was hoped, prevent possible "restorations"—a common practice of forgery designed to give the rubbing an earlier date (and hence higher commercial value). The stamps thus protect the historical integrity of the rubbing; but in so doing they also changed the rubbing's appearance.

Finally, more than thirty collectors, connoisseurs, and scholars wrote colophons and stamped their seals on the silk mounting that frames the rubbing. To read these colophons in sequence is to reconstruct a history of the rubbing's collecting and viewing. These texts reveal that the rubbing changed hands frequently from the mid-Ming onward.⁴² Ruan Yuan acquired the rubbing in Hangzhou in 1808 and mounted it as a hanging scroll. This explains why the colophons on the scroll are dated from 1810 to 1814: they resulted from the occasions on which Ruan showed this newly acquired treasure to important scholars and connoisseurs of his day and invited them to inscribe the scroll.⁴³ These early colophons are found close to the rubbing, on a piece of silk mounting that has darkened considerably. Fresher pieces of silk have been added to the top and the two long sides of the scroll, and all bear colophons written after 1826. The scroll was therefore remounted not long after its first mounting. A colophon by Ruan Yuan explains the reason for this seemingly unnecessary act. In 1826 he took this precious rubbing with him when he traveled to the southwest. During the journey the rubbing fell into a river and became mildewed; so he had to hire local craftsmen to restore the scroll immediately.

To summarize, the signs and marks that this rubbing bears register six kinds of information in two general categories, *inscription* and *damage*:

Inscription:

- Original stele inscription dated to 165 CE;
- Additional inscriptions on the stele dated to 829, 830, and 1085;
- Colophons and seals that have been added to the rubbing (and on its mounting) on various datable occasions since 1810.

Damage

- Damage to the stele from the time of its establishment to the time when the rubbing was made (mid-Ming);
- Damage occurring to the unmounted rubbing before it was first mounted in 1810;
- Damage and aging of the mounted rubbing after 1810.

As mentioned above, *inscriptions* result from intentional human acts; most *damage* results from unpremeditated natural causes and signifies the passage of time. What we find in the rubbing is therefore a twofold process: on the one hand, the layers of *inscriptions* testify to a continuous effort to bring the stele into the present—to revitalize its meaning and to reframe it within current intellectual trends; on the other, the layers of *damage* always point to the past and always blur inscriptions—hence they qualify the stele as a historical relic. The branch of historical scholarship that takes both *inscription* and *damage* as its subject is rubbing connoisseurship.

Rubbing Connoisseurship

This section elaborates on a point made above: compared with a stele that is both timeless and ever changing, a rubbing has a definite temporality because it registers a single moment in the history of a stele that can never be repeated. This historical punctuation constitutes the basis of *bei tie jianding* 碑帖鑒定, or rubbing connoisseurship. The degree of familiarity with the materiality and historicity of a particular rubbing determines the expertise of a rubbing connoisseur.

But what is rubbing connoisseurship? First, it is related to, but differs fundamentally from, three other intellectual practices, all of which deal with rubbings but emphasize them as sources of information. Initiated during the Song with the rise of *jin shi xue*, these three practices are concerned with (1) history, (2) epigraphy, and (3) calligraphy. Ouyang Xiu's comments on the Stele of Mount Hua demonstrate a strong interest in history; his detailed narrative deals with the worship of this sacred mountain and the value of this inscription as a unique source for historical research. Epigraphic studies of rubbings investigate the various styles and forms of written characters.

Zhao Mingcheng's remarks on the Stele of Mount Hua, for example, discuss the interchangeability of three characters, *zhi* 職, *zhi* 識, and *zhi* 誌, in ancient writings.⁴⁴ A similar discussion of "loan characters" (*jiajie zi* 假借字) can also be found in Hong Kuo's comment on this stele.⁴⁵ In other cases, these Song antiquarians remarked on the aesthetic value of ancient inscriptions. One such example is Zhao Mingcheng's views on the Wu Liang Shrine 武梁祠: while declaring the shrine's famous bas-relief carvings to be "simple and unadorned," he judged that their accompanying inscriptions were "exquisite and elegant and could serve as models [for practicing calligraphy]." ⁴⁶ The lofty position of the Stele of Mount Hua in the history of calligraphy was firmly established by the early Qing scholar Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629–1709), who concluded in 1700 after comparing various Han dynasty calligraphic styles:

Only the inscription of the Stele of Mount Hua of the Yanxi era is characterized by both regularity and flexibility and shows deviation as well as unison. It incorporates the strength of all three styles and should be judged the first among all Han clerical writings. Until today I had only seen a single rubbing of this stele, but it was blurry and much damaged. Now this rubbing in the collection of Mr. Xipi 西陂 is unusually complete. Reading it over and over, I am completely overwhelmed by its extraordinary power.⁴⁷

It is easy to see how these various discussions of rubbings could enrich broader disciplinary inquiries—general historical studies, the style of epigraphic research known as *xiao xue* 小學, and the history of calligraphy. But rubbing connoisseurship is different, and its specific goals and agendas should not be dismissed because of its usefulness for these disciplinary inquiries.⁴⁸ Simply stated, the purest form of this scholarship is the study of rubbings alone, freed from the original stones on the one hand and from the content of imprinted words or images on the other. In other words, rubbing connoisseurship is a branch of scholarship that takes rubbings as its sole subject as well as its enclosure.

The self-inclusiveness of rubbing connoisseurship implies that the history it discovers or constructs has little to do with a broader, external reality, whether this reality is about society, religion, language, or art. Nor does a rubbing connoisseur attempt a general history of the rubbing—what he constructs are numerous "micro-histories," each focusing on a series of rubbings that are ultimately linked to a single, original, and often elusive object. He arranges these rubbings into a chronological sequence by determining their

relative positions. (In the process he also eliminates copies and fakes.) This purpose requires him to derive evidence from a rubbing itself—from its paper, ink, seals, and colophons, but most important from its imprint, whose minute differences from other related rubbings reveal the changing physical condition of the original object. In these differences he sees gradual erosion or decay or a sudden splitting or collapse of the object. His findings thus provide the sense of "events" or "happenings" necessary for a historical narrative. Perhaps unique to all scholarly practices, therefore, the principal technique of rubbing connoisseurship is to detect traces of ruination, and its chief accomplishment is to construct a sequence of ruins.

I first formulated this notion of rubbing connoisseurship while watching Mr. Ma Ziyun 馬子雲 (1903–86), a colleague 42 years senior to me, working in our shared office in the Division of Bronze and Stone in Beijing's Palace Museum. At that time—it was around the end of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1970s—Mr. Ma was regarded as the finest surviving rubbing maker and the most knowledgeable connoisseur of old rubbings in the country. As a rubbing maker, he was particularly well known for making *quanxing ta* 全形拓 or a "rubbing of a complete shape," in which a three-dimensional image of a bronze vessel or a stone sculpture is achieved not through painting or photography but through the painstaking effort of making a rubbing from a round object.⁴⁹ As a connoisseur of old rubbings, Mr. Ma's main method was to diagnose minute but finite physical changes in an inscribed object by comparing rubbings made from it at different times. Among the changes he looked for were a peeling surface, a missing character or stroke, a widening crack or cleavage, any signs of wear and tear, and the changing shape and increasing dimensions of a *shi hua* 石花 (literally "stone flowers"; a *shi hua* is the patterned substance of a calcium compound that grows slowly on the surface of a stone monument). One day he pointed to the impression of a *shi hua* on a Qianlong rubbing of the "Stele of Sacrificing to Mount Sangong" ("Si Sangongshan bei" 祀三公山碑), and told us that it was absent in another rubbing of the same stele with a Kangxi period seal on it; the stone flower must therefore have grown to about two *cun* wide over some ninety years from the 1680s to the 1770s. This and other observations became the basis for a book called *Bei tie jianding* (Rubbing connoisseurship), which his student Shi Anchang 施安昌 compiled and published seven years after his death. In this massive compilation of 1,200 entries, each entry provides a micro-history of a sequence of rubbings.⁵⁰

Considered a milestone in his scholarship, Mr. Ma's discussion of the Stele of Mount Hua is a detailed comparison of three surviving rubbings of the stele.⁵¹ The first is known as the "Changyuan" 長垣 version because its earliest recorded collector was Wang Wensun 王文蓀 from Changyuan (present-day Shangqiu 商丘 in Henan). The second is called the "Huayin" 華陰 or "Guanzhong" 關中 version because it was first owned by Dong Yunju 東雲駒 and Dong Yunchu 東雲雛, two brothers from Huayin in Shaanxi. The third version is the "Siming" version, which we have studied in detail (see Fig. 1.7). The "Changyuan" rubbing is unquestionably the earliest, because it shows the complete text of the 165 CE inscription as transcribed by Hong Kuo in his 1166 *Li shi* 隸釋 (Interpreting clerical writings). Mr. Ma found 58 characters in this rubbing that show traces of damage. Possibly made in the mid-twelfth century, this rubbing thus registers the consequence of the stele's physical changes during the millennium since the mid-second century (Fig. 1.8a).

A more important discovery by Mr. Ma concerns the relationship between the "Huayin" version (Fig. 1.8b) and the "Siming" version (Fig. 1.8c). Arguing against the popular opinion that these two rubbings were made around the same time, he demonstrated convincingly that they are very different in date. Compared to the "Changyuan" version, both rubbings show major damage to the stele in the middle-right portion, a damage which caused more than a hundred characters of the inscription to be lost (see Fig. 1.7). But Mr. Ma also found at least 60 characters in the "Siming" version that show additional damage in comparison to their equivalents in the "Huayin" version. For example, in the imprints of the stele's title (Xi Yu Hua Shan Miao Bei 西嶽華山廟碑) in the two rubbings:

"Huayin" version: The characters are intact.

"Siming" version: The character "xi" 西 is damaged on the left; the crack continues to the space below the character. The "quan" 犬 radical at the right side of the character "yu" 嶽 shows slight damage in its last stroke. Further damages are found in the strokes of the character "shan" 山, the left diagonal stroke of the character "miao" 廟, and the upper right and left corners of the character "bei" 碑.⁵²

These and other discrepancies between the two rubbings convinced Ma Ziyun that they must have been made at different times and represent two widely separated moments in the history of the stele. Neither had been made during the Song as Ruan Yuan insisted. Instead, the "Huayin" version

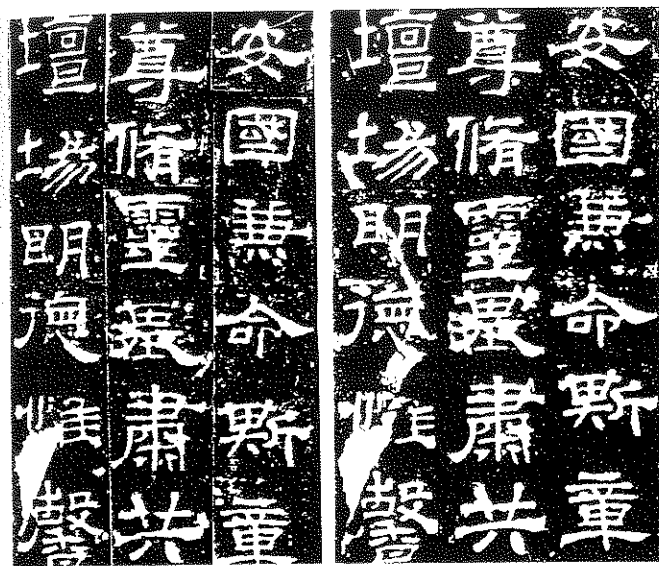


Fig. 1.8 Sections of three early rubbings of the Stele of the Western March-mount Hua:
(a, above left) "Changyuan" rubbing, Song dynasty;
(b, above right) "Huayin" rubbing, late Yuan or early Ming;
(c, to left) "Siming" rubbing, mid-Ming.

should be dated to "some time from the Yuan to the Ming," and the "Siming" version was most likely made in the mid-Ming.⁵³ These new dates were not the only consequence of this exercise of rubbing connoisseurship, however. Mr. Ma's purely technical study raises questions about the intention behind the original dating. Checking historical records, we find that this dating was first proposed by Ruan Yuan, the owner of the "Siming" version in the early nineteenth century, and was agreed to by Zhu Xigeng 朱錫庚, the then owner of the "Huayin" version.⁵⁴ It seems clear that Ruan was motivated by the desire to promote the "Siming" rubbing in his collection, and that Zhu Xigeng did not dare to disagree because of Ruan's political power and status.

This case challenges the purely technical nature of rubbing connoisseurship and suggests the need for a sociological investigation of this scholarly tradition. But for the purposes of this section, let us focus on some general practices of a rubbing connoisseur. One thing striking about Mr. Ma's discussion of a rubbing is his total lack of interest in the content of the inscription. In fact, he never perceived and described an inscription as a readable text; what he saw were always individual characters and strokes. Moreover, his interest in characters and strokes had nothing to do with their original forms, not to mention their literal meaning or aesthetic value. His microscopic vision was instantaneously attracted by the *damaged* parts of a character or a stroke. The subject of his reading was therefore never the cultural phenomenon of writing, but only nonliterary signs—fissures, cracks, fractures—that displayed human agency or Nature at work to destroy writing.

But when he shifted his eyes to the colophons accompanying a rubbing, he changed his reading method abruptly and treated them as historical documents with intrinsic meaning. These colophons, written by successive collectors and viewers of a precious rubbing over a long period, often contain valuable information about the rubbing's production and transmission. Some colophons provide lengthy comparisons of a rubbing to related ones. Thus, although antiquarian catalogues since the Song have regularly inventoried and discussed stone carvings, these colophons are more directly concerned with rubbings themselves; they constitute a large body of texts on rubbing connoisseurship. The three rubbings of the Stele of Mount Hua, for example, are accompanied by a total of 145 colophons (64 on the "Changyuan" version, 48 on the "Huayin" version, and 33 on the "Siming" version). The book-like album format of the first two rubbings especially allowed

various connoisseurs from the early Ming to the late Qing to append their writings—some of them full-length handwritten articles—to the rubbings. Mr. Ma's reconstruction of each rubbing's history was largely based on these texts, and his arguments about a rubbing's date also responded to previous proposals made by the colophon writers. To him, therefore, these colophons both provided historical information and constituted a scholarly tradition which he followed and reacted to.

It is possible to summarize Ma Ziyun's scholarship as a simultaneous construction of three separate histories: (1) a history of a decaying object, (2) a history of making rubbings from this object as a process of cultural production, and (3) a history of rubbing connoisseurship as the continuation of an intellectual tradition. The first kind of history, however, was not his purpose and only implied in the other two. A close reading of his writings reveals that he was, in fact, uninterested in any real object as the source material of rubbings. He was preoccupied only by what he could find in a rubbing. This is also what I remember of him: day after day, he surrounded himself with piles and piles of mounted and unmounted rubbings. I cannot recall a single occasion on which he visited an ancient site as a rubbing connoisseur—he visited ancient monuments only as a rubbing maker.

This is puzzling, because, as mentioned earlier, the practice of rubbing connoisseurship rests entirely on an acute awareness of the changing physicality of an object. But to Mr. Ma, such changes served only as an unspoken premise for his evaluation of rubbings; he could never bring himself to turn a precious rubbing into a piece of evidence for studying an object. All 1,200 case studies in his *Bei tie jian ding* are micro-histories of rubbings, not micro-histories of carvings. We may thus borrow the concept of the "archive" to characterize the three principal roles of rubbings in the making of these micro-histories. First, like archives, a series of rubbings designates "an organized body of documents" structured and preserved by a person or an institution. Second, a series of rubbings provides material proof or evidence for a "history, a narrative, or an argument." Third, like archives, rubbings have detached themselves from the original object to gain an independent objectivity.⁵⁵ For this last point, which implies the separation of documents from monuments, Paul Ricoeur has noted a parallel situation in European history:

The development of positivist history at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century marked the triumph of the document over the monument. What makes a monument suspect, even though it often is found *in situ*, is its obvious final-

ity, its commemoration of events that its contemporaries—especially the most powerful among them—judged worthy of being integrated into the collective memory. Conversely, the document, even though it is collected and not simply inherited, seems to possess an objectivity opposed to the intention of the monument, which is meant to be edifying. The writings in archives were thus thought to be more like documents than like monuments.⁵⁶

Although differing in intention and historical situation, a similar “triumph of the document over the monument” started in China with the rise of antiquarianism during the Song and is best realized in rubbing connoisseurship. Ricoeur’s analysis of the “objectivity” of archives independent from monuments also helps us understand a seemingly strange feature of Mr. Ma’s writings on rubbings: they give no account of the stone carvings from which these rubbings were made, even though many still exist, sometimes right in the Palace Museum where Mr. Ma worked. The reason is simple: compared to its rubbings, a stone carving is always both too old and too new. It is too old because it has long lost its original appearance and is no longer useful for an empirical, scientific observation. It is too new because it is still changing: one must always assume that it has deteriorated further since the last rubbing was taken from it. A carving is therefore always “inferior” to its rubbings as historical evidence.

Predictably, this notion of a rubbing’s objectivity encourages the construction of its objecthood. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the physical features of a rubbing: made of a particular type of paper and ink, it is also mounted into a specific format for viewing and preservation. These physical features of a rubbing formed an alternative focus of Mr. Ma’s observation in addition to his interest in a rubbing’s imprint. His eyes shone when he saw a rubbing of superb quality. He touched it lightly here and there and occasionally brought it close to his face to smell it. He would praise the texture of its paper, the quality of its ink, and the artistry of its mounting; and would sum up his observation with a single defining phrase. It was then I heard, along with a dozen or so other such definitions, “cicada-wing rubbing” (*chanyi ta* 蟬翼拓) and “black-gold rubbing” (*wujin ta* 烏金拓). Later I learned that these terms come from a standard vocabulary of rubbing connoisseurship, each pertaining to a particular style, technique, and tradition in rubbing making. A “cicada-wing rubbing,” for example, is a type of rubbing in which light ink is applied evenly to an extremely thin, silk-like, and slightly yellowish piece of paper; its delicate material and imagery reveal a re-

finer, literati sensibility. The “black-gold rubbing” was invented in the early Qing court. Imprinted on a piece of pure white “peach-blossom” paper (*taohua zhi* 桃花紙), the shining, black-ink impression generates a visual effect that is at once striking and commanding.

A rubbing is therefore not simply a shadowy “reference” to an inscribed object or a conventional “document” offering a textual proof; rather, it has acquired its own material substance, artistic style, and aesthetic tradition. A rubbing’s materiality is further substantiated by the practice of mounting it in a particular format. Among the three surviving rubbings of the Stele of Mount Hua, for example, only the “Siming” rubbing is an “uncut version” (*zhengzhuang ben* 整裝本), which shows the entire inscription on the surface of the stele (see Fig. 1.7). The other two are “cut versions” (*jianzhuang ben* 剪裝本), a rearrangement of the inscription into a book-like album (Figs. 1.8a, b). To transform an uncut rubbing into such an album, the mounter first adds a thin backing to the rubbing and then cuts it up into vertical strips, each containing one column of the text. He then cuts these strips into shorter ones and arranges them on each page of the album, omitting the “empty” part left by the damaged sections on a stele.⁵⁷ A “cut version” thus results from re-editing and redesigning and conveys even less of the original object. Confronting the “Huayin” rubbing, a viewer would have no idea that the stele was severely damaged and the text is incomplete, because all the missing spaces on the stele have been omitted and the characters are connected smoothly in continuous columns. In other words, this rubbing presents an incomplete text in the form of a complete literary composition. But it is this version that won the highest praise from Mr. Ma (and other connoisseurs) for its “most exquisite” visual effect.⁵⁸

Having acquired its own materiality and objecthood, a rubbing is conceived as a *wu* 物, or a “thing,” and is further associated with the concept *yi wu* 遺物, or “leftover thing.” In ancient Chinese, the term *yi wu* often refers to possessions left behind by either a dead person or a defunct dynasty. But generally speaking, any object that points to the past is an *yi wu* because it is a surviving portion of a vanished whole; by arrangement or accident, it has been severed from its original context to become part of contemporary culture. An *yi wu* is thus characterized both by pastness and contemporaneity: it originated in the past, but it belongs to the here and now. An *yi wu* often shows signs of damage: its incompleteness guarantees its authenticity and becomes a stimulus for either poetic lamentation or historical reconstruction.

Rubbings not only constitute a particular kind of *yi wu* but also epitomize the essence of *yi wu*. A rubbing can be a "leftover thing" of (1) an object, (2) a rubbing collection, and (3) a former self; it can therefore confirm its potential as an *yi wu* three times. First, every rubbing of a stele is by definition a "leftover thing" of the stele: it is the skin of an object that has been pulled off the object's body. As such, it always registers a vanished past; yet at the same time it generates ongoing artistic and intellectual activities and interests. Second, a large group of rubbings accumulated by a devoted antiquarian was always considered a collective body of objects. None of the large collections of rubbings established from the Song to Qing has survived intact. All have suffered from personal or national tragedies. The rubbings were dispersed and destroyed; the leftover ones have become *yi wu* of the collectors and their collections. This transformation of rubbings from collectable *wu* to posthumous *yi wu* is the subject of accounts by a number of rubbing collectors, who watched their beloved collections disappear before their own eyes. Ye Changchi, for example, described his despair in abandoning the 8,000 rubbings he had spent twenty years accumulating, a decision he had to make when he fled the capital during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900.⁵⁹ But the most moving account of such an experience is found in Li Qingzhao's "Afterword" to her husband Zhao Mingcheng's rubbing catalogue.

Above I cite a paragraph from this text, which describes the joy Li Qingzhao and Zhao Mingcheng shared when they began to collect rubbings of ancient inscriptions and other texts. The joy of gathering soon gave way to the burden of *things* having been gathered, however. The collection demanded great care; consequently "there was no longer the same ease and casualness as before." Then the war between the Song and the Jin broke out. When Zhao Mingcheng heard it, "he was in a daze, realizing that all those full trunks and overflowing chests, which he regarded so lovingly and mournfully, would surely soon be his possessions no longer." But he died before the collection completely dissolved. Li Qingzhao was entrusted to watch over the remaining items, which still included, among other things, two thousand rubbings of bronze and stone inscriptions. Her effort to protect them was in vain: the bulk of the collection was reduced by burning, plundering, and robbery, until all that remained were "a few volumes from three or so sets, none complete, and some very ordinary pieces of calligraphy." These were indeed the ruins of a once great collection of historical data.

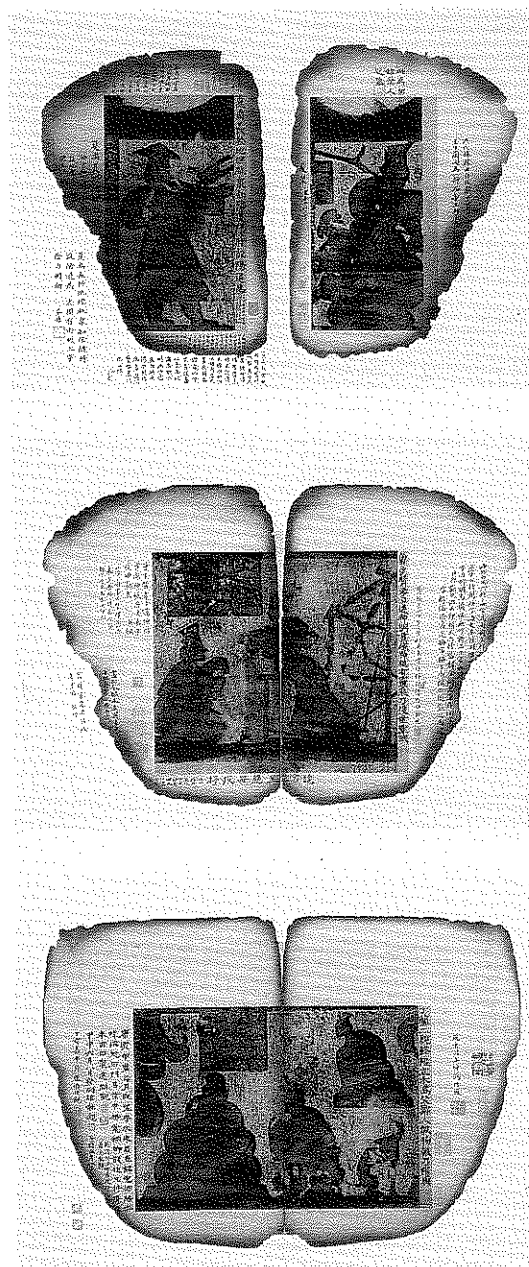


Fig. 1.9 Fragments of an early rubbing of the Wu Liang Shrine carvings. The carvings were made in 151 CE. The rubbing dates to the Song dynasty. Palace Museum, Beijing.

And as ruins they invoked memory and melancholy, as Li Qingzhao wrote toward the end of the "Afterword":

Nowadays, when I chance to look over these books, it's like meeting old friends. And I recall when my husband was in the hall called "Calm Governance" in Laizhou, . . . every day in the evening when the office clerks would go home, he would do editorial collations on two *juan* and write a colophon for one inscription. Of those two thousand items, colophons were written on five hundred and two. It is so sad—today the ink of his writing seems still fresh, yet the trees by his grave have grown to an armspan in girth.⁶⁰

Not a single rubbing from Zhao's collection still exists. The few surviving Song rubbings have become ruins of their former selves. Hence lies the third significance of a rubbing as an *yi wu*. The burned pieces in Fig. 1.9, which are what is left of the only Song rubbing of the famous Wu Liang Shrine carvings, register multiple layers of history—the image created in the Han, the imprint made in the Song, the burning in the late Qing, and numerous colophons written before and after the fire. This history is the article that Ma Ziyun published in 1960.⁶¹ This time, he studied not only the damage to the carvings (as demonstrated by the rubbing's imprint) but also the damage to the rubbing itself (as documented by the traces of burning). Based on the last colophon written before the burning (because it was partially destroyed by fire), he was able to date this accident to some time after 1849.⁶² Today, this rubbing is ranked a national treasure, although even in its undamaged state it only represented a very small portion of the Wu Liang Shrine images, and even though this small portion of the images has been severely damaged.⁶³

Made of thin and fragile paper, a rubbing could easily be destroyed or ruined—torn, scratched, mildewed, burned, or eaten by insects. The materiality of a rubbing thus enables it to display most sensitively the vulnerability of a manufactured object to natural or human destruction: in a "ruined" rubbing, an eroded carving is damaged for a second time.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Form*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), p. 5.
2. Qianshen Bai, "The Artistic and Intellectual Dimensions of Chinese Calligraphy Rubbings: Some Examples from the Collection of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth," *Oriental Arts* 30, no. 3 (Mar. 1999): 83.
3. Zhao Ruzhen 趙汝珍, *Guwan zhinan* 古玩指南 (A guide to antiques) (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1984), chap. 12, p. 6.
4. For example, Zhao Ruzhen (*ibid.*, chap. 12, p. 1) explains: "The term *bei tie* people use nowadays does not mean an original stone stele or a stone carved with a piece of calligraphy but pertains to the rubbings from such stones."
5. For recent discussions of *tie*, see Amy MacNair, "The Engraved Model-Letters Compendia of the Song Dynasty," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114, no. 2 (Apr.–June 1994): 209–25; *idem*, "Engraved Calligraphy in China: Recession and Reception," *Art Bulletin* 160, no. 1 (Mar. 1995): 106–14; and Bai, "Artistic and Intellectual Dimensions of Chinese Calligraphy Rubbings."
6. It is said that Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–26) made a set of new rubbings of famous calligraphy in the imperial collection because the old blocks had cracked. A story relates that the original blocks resurfaced in the Ming court and were smuggled out by a certain Sun Zhonghan, who then made a few sets of rubbings from the blocks. See Zhao Ruzhen 趙汝珍, *Gudong bianyi* 古董辯疑 (Clarifying doubts about antiques) (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1989), chap. 3, pp. 8b–9a. But this story is full of holes. It is more likely an invention of later forgers of "Chunhua ge" rubbings, who could thus claim that their rubbings were made from the "rediscovered" original blocks.
7. For these and other copies of the "Chunhua ge tie," see Zhao Ruzhen, *Gudong bianyi*, chap. 3.
8. Even when on occasion engraved blocks were built into a wall for display, they appear as flat pages from a book. What is displayed is not the blocks as independent art objects but the engraved calligraphy.
9. Bai, "Artistic and Intellectual Dimensions of Chinese Calligraphy Rubbings," p. 83.
10. Traditional scholars hold different opinions about the origin of the stele. Based on abundant archaeological evidence, however, we can safely date the earliest steles to the first century CE and link their appearance to the beginning of stone monuments in China. See Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 121–42; and Zhao Chao 趙超, *Zhongguo gudai shike gailun* 中國古代石刻概論 (A general discussion of stone carvings from ancient China) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1997), pp. 11–13.

11. For a brief introduction to this type of stele inscriptions, which are called *ming lei* 銘來, see Wu, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture*, p. 222. For analyses of actual stele inscriptions and their social roles, see *ibid.*, pp. 217–23; and Patricia B. Ebrey, "Later Han Stone Inscriptions," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40, no. 2 (1980): 325–53.

12. The most important examples of this kind of steles are those engraved with standardized versions of Confucian classics issued by the governments of different dynasties. A large body of scholarship is devoted to these "stone classics." For a concise introduction, see Zhao Chao, *Zhongguo gudai shike gailun*, pp. 20–25.

13. Even before the Northern Song, there had long existed a tradition of using stele inscriptions as valuable sources for historical information. Li Daoyuan, for example, recorded more than 100 Han dynasty stone carvings and close to 20 Northern Wei steles in his *Shui jing zhu* (Commentaries on the Classic of Waterways). Yang Xuanzhi cited more than 20 Buddhist steles at Luoyang in his *Luoyang qielan ji* (Records of Buddhist monasteries at Luoyang). A number of other scholars in the Northern and Southern dynasties, such as Yan Zhitui, Jiang Shi, and Liu Yao, also derived information from stele inscriptions in their historical writings. The systematic study of stone inscriptions began only in the Northern Song, however.

14. For examples, see R. C. Rudolph, "Preliminary Notes on Sung Archaeology," *Journal of Asian Studies* 22 (1963): 169–77; Kwang-chih Chang, "Archaeology and Chinese Historiography," *World Archaeology* 13, no. 2 (1968): 156–69; Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 38–49; Xia Chaoxiong 夏超雄, "Song dai jin shi xue de zhuyao gongxian jiqi xingqi de yuanyin" 宋代金石學的主要貢獻及其興起的原因 (The rise of Song antiquarianism and its major contributions), *Beijing daxue xuebao* 北京大學學報 1982, no. 1: 66–76; and Robert E. Harrist, Jr., "The Artist as Antiquarian: Li Gonglin and His Study of Early Chinese Art," *Artibus Asiae* 55, no. 3/4 (1995): 237–80.

15. See Quan Hansheng 全漢升, "Bei Song Bianliang de shuchu maoyi" 北宋汴梁的輸出貿易 (Imports and exports in Bianliang during the Northern Song), *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* 8, no. 2 (1939): 189–301.

16. Zhou Hui, *Qingbo zazhi* (1192). See Rudolph, "Preliminary Notes on Sung Archaeology," p. 175.

17. The effort to collect and compile stone inscriptions began long before the Song. Emperor Yuan of the Liang 梁元帝 (r. 552–54), for example, compiled a large work called *Bei ying* 碑英 (Gems of steles). During the Five Dynasties period, a person named Wang Fu collected rubbings of more than 3,000 stone inscriptions and compiled a catalogue of them. Both books, however, were lost long ago, and we know little about their contents.

18. Translation from Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 82. See *ibid.* for a complete translation and an excellent discussion of this important document. "The age of Getian" refers to a mythical utopian period in China's pre-history.

19. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, *Jigu lu bawei* 集古錄跋尾 (Colophons from the Records on Collecting Antiques), in *Shike shiliao xinbian* 石刻史料新編 (A new compilation of historical materials on stone carvings) (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chubun, 1957), Mount Hua.

20. Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠, *Jin shi lu* 金石錄 (Records of bronze and stone inscriptions), in *Congshu jicheng* 叢書集成 (Collected collectanea), no. 212 (Changsha: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937), Mount Hua.

21. Hong was addressing a point made earlier by Ouyang Xiu's son, Ouyang Fei 歐陽棐, that the inscription states that it was written by Guo Xiangcha 郭香察. Hong cited other sources to prove that the person's name was Guo Xiang 郭香, and he did not write but only "supervised" (cha 察) the text's compilation. A comparison of the inscription and the standard history also led Hong Kuo to discover some discrepancies with regard to Yuan Feng's official career.

22. *Congshu jicheng xinbian* 52, pp. 113–29. Hong Kuo 洪适, *Li xu, Li shi* 隸續, 隸釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), pp. 25–27.

23. Ye Changchi 葉昌熾, *Yu shi* 語石 (Talking about the stone) (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999), p. 264; translation based on R. H. van Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur* (Rome: Is. M. E. O., 1958), pp. 92–93.

24. Ye, *Yu shi*, p. 251.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

27. As Lu Yuan 路远 (*Xi'an Beilin shi* 西安碑林史 [A history of the Forest of Steles in Xi'an] [Xi'an: Xi'an chubanshe, 1998], pp. 67–69) discusses in great detail, the Forest of Steles actually started much earlier.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 67–106.

29. See *ibid.*, p. 71.

30. One possible exception is the carvings of the Wu Liang Shrine. These carvings were studied by Song antiquarians based on rubbings made from them. But the carvings were buried again and only rediscovered by Huang Yi 黃易 in 1786. When Huang made rubbings from the rediscovered stones, he claimed that because the stones had remained unchanged during these years, "these new rubbings are Song rubbings" (see Huang Yi, *Xiaopenglai ge jin shi wenzi* 小蓬萊閣金石文字 [Bronze and stone inscriptions from the Xiaopenglai Pavilion] [Shimoxuan, 1834]). But as Ma Ziyun 馬子雲 ("Tan Wu Liang Ci huaxiang de Song ta yu Huang Yi taben" 談武梁祠畫像的宋拓與黃易拓本 [On the Song rubbings and Huang Yi's

rubbings of the pictorial carvings on the Wu Liang Shrine], *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* 故宫博物院院刊, no. 2 [1960]: 170-77) has argued, the imprints in Huang Yi's rubbings differ from those in a Song rubbing of the shrine preserved in the Palace Museum. It is possible that the stones were not reburied till the Yuan dynasty, because it is recorded that in 1344, a flood destroyed the shrine and other stone monuments in the Wu family cemetery (see Wu, *The Wu Liang Shrine*, p. 329).

31. This relationship between a rubbing and a stele reminds me of Roland Barthes's (*Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. R. Howard [New York: Hill and Wang, 1981], p. 12) discussion of the relationship between his photographic portrait and himself: "What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) 'self'; but it is the contrary that must be said: 'myself' never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and 'myself' which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, 'myself' doesn't hold still, giggling in my jar: if only photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing." It is interesting to imagine oneself in the place of a stele, as the source of "motionless" and "stubborn" rubbings.

32. For a useful list of famous steles "reproduced" in later ages, see Ma Ziyun 馬子雲 and Shi Anchang 施安昌, *Beitie jian ding 碑帖鑒定* (Connoisseurship of rubbings) (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 1993), app. 2, pp. 477-82.

33. There are different theories about the destruction of the stele. Here I follow a record by Gu Yanwu 顧炎武. For these theories, see Shi Anchang 施安昌, *Han Huashan bei tiba nianbiao 漢華山碑題跋年表* (A chronicle of colophons on rubbings of the Mount Hua stele) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1997), p. 37.

34. One day Ruan Yuan found a hundred-year-old landscape painting by Wang Yuanqi 王元祜 (1642-1715) and thought that the painted scenery looked like the site of the steles. Inspired by this resemblance, he commissioned a painter to add the images of the three steles in the painting and wrote a long poem on the painting to record the event; see Ruan Yuan 阮元, "Han Yanxi Xiyue Huashan bei kao" 漢延熹西嶽華山廟碑考 (An examination of the Han dynasty stele of the Western Marchmount Hua established in the Yanxi reign); reprinted in *Congshu jicheng xinbian 叢書集成新編* (A new edition of collected collectanea) (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban, 1985), 52: 121.

35. For the most detailed introduction in English to the techniques of rubbing, see Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art*, pp. 86-101.

36. Traditionally the two major ways of making a rubbing were called the "wet method" and the "dry method." But most rubbing makers in China today employ only the wet method. The most popular adhesive is made by soaking *baiji* 白芨 root

(*Hyacinth bletilla* tuber) in clean water. For an introduction to the "dry method," see Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art*.

37. Ye, *Yu shi*, p. 264.

38. See Wu Hung, *Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), pp. 29-48, for a discussion of the relationship between textual references and a painting and the suggestion that colophons in a painting constitute an "internal textual enclosure" for interpreting the painting.

39. See Palace Museum, *Gugong bowuyuan 50 nian rucang wenwu jingpinji 故宫博物院 50 年入藏文物精品集* (Selected gems of cultural relics—collected in the Palace Museum in the past 50 years) (Beijing: Forbidden City Press, 1999), pl. 390, p. 342.

40. About the writer of the inscription, there are two different opinions based on different readings of a phrase in the inscription: "Guo Xiangcha shu" ("Guo Xiangcha wrote [the inscription]") or "Guo Xiang cha shu" 郭香察書 (Guo Xiang supervised the writing [of the inscription]); see note 21 to this chapter. For a detailed study of this inscription, see Ma Ziyun 馬子雲, "Tan Xiyue Huashan miao bei de sanben Song ta" 談西嶽華山廟碑的三本宋拓 (On three Song rubbings of the stele at the Temple of the Western Marchmount Hua), *Wenwu* 1961, no. 8: 31-35; and idem, *Xiyue Huashan miao bei 西嶽華山廟碑* (The stele at the Temple of the Western Marchmount Hua) (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1992).

41. The rubbing has been dated variously to the Southern Song, Yuan, and Ming. Ma Ziyuan first dated it to the end of Southern Song or the early Yuan, but changed his opinion later to the middle Ming. Here I follow his later dating. See Ma, "Tan Xiyue Huashan miao bei de sanben Song ta," p. 31; and Ma and Shi, *Beitie jian ding*, p. 50.

42. This rubbing earlier belonged consecutively to three Ningpo 寧波 collectors: Feng Xi 豐熙, Quan Xieshan 全謝山, and the Tianyi Pavilion 天一閣 of the Fan family. Qian Dongbi 錢東璧, a son of the famous official and scholar Qian Daxin 錢大昕, obtained it in 1787.

43. For a summary of these events, see Shi, *Han Huashan bei tibao nianbiao*.

44. Zhao Mingcheng, *Jin shi lu*.

45. Hong, *Li xu, Li shi*, pp. 25-27.

46. Zhao Mingcheng, *Jin shi lu*, cited in Shi, *Xuezhai zhanbi*, pp. 47-48.

47. Zhu Yizun's colophon on the "Changyuan" rubbing of the stele.

48. The most important contribution of rubbing connoisseurship to these disciplinary inquiries is the dating and authentication of old rubbings.

49. This conversion of a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional image must have had special appeal to him. It was said that as a young man he traveled several hundred *li* alone to visit those stone sculptures at the tomb of Huo Qubing 霍去病, from which he made eleven monumental "rubbings of complete shapes."

Later, he recalled that when he first entered the trade, no one would disclose to him how to make such rubbings. So he taught himself and demonstrated his mastery of this technique with a rubbing of Guo Ji Zi Bo pan 虢季子伯盘—a five-foot-long bronze basin that a modern scholar has declared to be an eighth-century BCE bathtub. This rubbing took Mr. Ma two years to complete. See Ma and Shi, *Beitie jian ding*, "Preface," p. 1.

50. An example of this kind of micro-history is his study of the Kong Zhou stele dated to the Eastern Han. I translate this short article here in full because it best demonstrates the style of Ma Ziyun's scholarship.

The Stele of the Kong Zhou 孔宙, the Commandant of Taishan 泰山: [The main inscription on this stele is] written in the style of clerical script. Those on the front side are arranged in 15 columns, each consisting of 28 characters. On the back, five characters written in the style of seal script appear above 21 columns [of names] arranged in three horizontal rows. On the stele's "forehead" [bei'e 碑額] are nine sunken characters in the style of seal script, which reads "An Eulogy to Kong Zhou, the Han Chief Commandant of Taishan." It is dated to the seventh month, the seventh year of the Yanxi reign (164), and is now in Qufu, Shandong.

In an early Ming rubbing of the inscription, the last stroke of the "kou" 口 radical in the lower part of the character "gao" 高—a character in the phrase "fan bai yang gao" 凡百仰高—is undamaged, and a space about half an inch wide still remains between the character and the [lower] edge of the stele. In a late Ming rubbing, more than half of the character "ci" 辭 in the phrase "qi ci yue" 其辭曰 in the tenth column still remains, and the upper-right part of the character "pa" 巴 in the phrase "shu mo" 巴歿 in the fourteenth column is still visible. Down to the Kangxi and Qianlong periods during the Qing, the character "xun" 訓 in the phrase "jia xun" 家訓 in the first column is still separated from a nearby *shi hua*, the character "ci" 辭 still has its upper part, and the character "mo" 歿 is only slightly damaged on the left half. In rubbings made after the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods, however, not only are all these characters seriously damaged, but other characters have become blurred and lost their spirit. (Ibid., p. 46)

This passage contains a mistake: the title of the stele consists of ten characters, not nine; and its wording differs from that cited by Ma Ziyun.

51. Ma, "Tan Xiyue Huashan miao bei de sanben Song ta." An abridged version of the article can be found in Ma and Shi, *Beitie jian ding*, pp. 49–52, but here the rubbings are given different dates. There is another old rubbing of the stele, conventionally known as the Shunde 順德 version. Mr. Ma did not pay much attention to this version.

52. Ma, "Tan Xiyue Huashan miao bei de sanben Song ta," p. 33.

53. Ma and Shi, *Beitie jian ding*, p. 50. But in an earlier article on the three rubbings, he dated the "Siming" version to "the end of the Southern Song or the beginning of the Yuan"; see "Tan Xiyue Huashan miao bei de sanben Song ta," p. 32.

54. After Ruan Yuan acquired the "Siming" version in 1808, he made an appointment in 1810 with Zhu Xigeng, the owner of the "Huayin" version, to compare the two rubbings in Beijing's Dragon Spring Monastery (Longquan si 龍泉寺). According to a colophon Ruan wrote afterward on his "Siming" version, he and Zhu "spent a whole day comparing the two rubbings [and concluded that] they were made at the same time [during the Song]." His opinion was shared by Zhu Xigeng, who confirmed it in a long colophon he inscribed in 1811 on his own "Huayin" rubbing. This conclusion was then repeated by all rubbing connoisseurs for the next 150 years. This view is suspicious, however, because the two rubbings differ considerably, as Mr. Ma convincingly demonstrated in his 1961 article. Nevertheless, the two men's comparison of the rubbings allowed Ruan Yuan to rank the "Siming" version the second among the three surviving rubbings of the stele. This ranking then provided a basis for his lengthy essay "An Examination of the Han Dynasty Stele of the Western Marchmount Hua of the Yanxi Era."

55. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 3: 116–19. All the quotations in this paragraph are from this part of Ricoeur's highly original book.

56. Ibid., p. 118.

57. For a detailed introduction to these two methods, see Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art*, pp. 94–95.

58. Ma, "Tan Xiyue Huashan miao bei de sanben Song ta," p. 32.

59. Ye, *Yu shi*, "Preface," p. 11.

60. Li, *Jin shi lu houxu*; trans. from Owen, *Remembrances*, p. 82.

61. Ma, "Tan Wu Liang Ci huaxiang di Song ta yu Huang Yi taben."

62. Ibid., p. 171.

63. The Wu Liang Shrine was rediscovered by Huang Yi in the late eighteenth century, but Huang never published images of the excavated stones. Instead he published, with great excitement, his tracing copy of the Song rubbing (which he willingly called a Tang version). This rubbing was prominently displayed in an exhibition in the Palace Museum in conjunction with the fiftieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

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Disappearing Verses

Writing on Walls and Anxieties of Loss

Judith T. Zeitlin

Ink traces beside the courier station dissolve in the mountain rain; tearstains on the wall are obscured by clouds over the pass. If we say, "This is none of your business," or "What has this got to do with me?" and make no effort to collect this verse, then we will have allowed it to perish forever.

—Wu Qi 吳琪 (1619–94)

What Are Tibishi?

This chapter is about a category of traditional Chinese poetry called *tibishi* 題壁詩—poems written on walls. Although it is tempting to translate *tibishi* as "graffiti poetry," in fact, the two are essentially different. Graffiti are generally understood to be a form of defacement, to compromise the integrity and value of the public surfaces on which they appear. For this reason, Susan Stewart has argued in an essay on graffiti as crime and art, "It is interesting to see how graffiti becomes dirt once we consider, in the mode of much recent cognitive anthropology, that dirt is something in the wrong place or the wrong time."¹ To use Mary Douglas's famous definition of dirt as "matter out of place,"² graffiti might then be defined as "writing out of place"—as inappropriate scrawls, trivial and destructive. There is some support for this view in Chinese sources as well. A Han dynasty inscription on the An Guo 安國 shrine (151 CE) appeals to passing herdboys not to scribble on the shrine, threatening them with curses if they do so, and almost a

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