

Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form. Dorothy C. Wong. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 244 pages. 125 B/W illustrations. \$50.00 cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-2783-0.

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The author opens her study by exploring the pre-Buddhist antecedents of the stele, emphasizing its origins in early China and its subsequent Buddhist transformations. The extended discussion of steles' remote antecedents is part of the first section of the book, Chapters One and Two. These cover over fifteen hundred years comprising the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the Qin and Han empires. This ambitious task, perhaps the most original aspect of the study, is based on the research of prominent 20th-century Western and Asian scholars.

In a nutshell, during the Shang and Zhou, upright stones called *she* were used to worship a tutelary deity, an earth god as the term implies. In imperial times, *she* worship became further institutionalized and linked to different administrative units. During the Han, this worship was taken over by local organizations, which sponsored the cult and its festive celebrations. These collective societies became a model for similar, later Buddhist associations called *yiyi*, the sponsor of Buddhist steles. Buddhist associations are a recurring leitmotif in the author's discussion, a factor which she never tires of underlining. More importantly, in Han times, these stone tablets started to be called *bei*, another term which became of common use among Buddhist communities. Pre-Buddhist stone *bei* were spread over many geographic areas, took the form of plain slabs and slabs topped with dragons, and served different functions. On Han tombs, inscriptions carved on steles were used to commemorate the deceased. Steles were also used to propagate state ideology by recording Confucian texts, (as they would later record Buddhist sutras), and, ultimately, they became political, military, and territorial emblems. In sum, Buddhist steles were the final stage of an ancient Chinese monument.

The lengthy Chapter Three, still part of the book's first section, offers a detailed account of the rise and growth of the Northern Wei dynasty, justified by the author's conviction that "the beginnings as well as the first flourishing of Buddhist steles were both legacies of the Northern Wei" (p. 43), the outcome of the felicitous collaboration of petty rulers and prominent monks. As the Northern Wei ruled over the vast area north of the Yellow River, steles took on, necessarily, different characteristics depending on where they were executed. In other words, regionalism marked their production. Henan-Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Gansu were major centers or "schools" of such production. Wong's omission of the Shandong production is perplexing since among the famous 1996 Qingzhou findings are some very fine examples of Western Wei steles which use elements like Ashoka stupa/pagodas indicative of the strains of influence extraneous to the northern plains. Equally puzzling is the

author's peculiar treatment of Sichuan steles. They are discussed at the end of the book, as a separate entity, rather than alongside the contemporary Wei dynasty's production where they belong. I shall return to this issue below.

Wong believes that the imperially-sponsored sites, Yungang and Longmen, were strongly influential in the manufacturing of inscribed steles. The Guyang Cave at Longmen played a major role. Benefiting from the pioneering research of Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio with regard to epigraphy, the author stresses the emergence of devotional societies as collective patrons of this genre. In emphasizing the role of Longmen, however, Wong ignores a large body of earlier steles executed between 440–494 C.E., that parallels exactly the Yungang production and the last years of Pingcheng, the first Northern Wei capital. Showing a Buddha (less frequently a bodhisattva) image on the front and stories of Buddha's last life on the back, as Yungang derivatives, these Shanxi inscribed steles are the earliest known. Mizuno Seiichi's study of the group is in *Chugoku no Bukkyo bijutsu* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1968, pp. 66–124).

In the second part of the book, seven chapters in all, the reader is finally introduced to steles catalogued according to their place of origin. Relying on selected examples excavated in China after 1949 and a few others from Western collections, Wong limits her discussion to the sixth century. She pays particular attention to the Shanxi-Henan school as the birthplace of this artistic form because, she considers Buddhist steles to be derivative from the Northern Wei cave temples, Yungang and Longmen, the latter in particular. Patronage, especially collective patronage of beneficent societies, social status of sponsors, iconography as a reflection of local proselytizing, and style are the parameters which she keeps throughout the inquiry of the various regional centers. Some of these factors bear, however, more weight than others. For example, while attempting to establish clear-cut regional differences, Wong several times favors iconography over style. Equal, if not more, emphasis on style would have helped the reader to grasp more readily regional distinctions. The fluid linearism forming intricate patterns uniformly displayed in Shaanxi steles or the squarish faces of Ningxia works are cases in point.

In each chapter, the choice of representative steles is limited to four, often illustrated poorly. The Shanxi school examples are based on their arrangement and shape. She deals with the following four items: a thousand-buddhas stele, Northern Wei ca. 500–510, in the collection of the Shanxi Provincial Museum that shows a Buddha triad enclosed in a niche embedded in rows upon rows of tiny seated Buddhas; a four-sided stele, a pillar-like construction, surmounted by intertwined dragons, dated to Northern Wei 520, in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; a well-known dragon stele, dated Northern Wei 529, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and lastly, a Northern Wei 534 stele, in the Shanxi Provincial Museum, a work Wong labels as a "Funerary Stele" on account of its inscribed eulogy of the deceased Cheng Zhe. To illustrate the Henan school, Wong

switches from format to iconographic content, and solely uses steles with Maitreya images. I find this choice rather equivocal since the cult of Maitreya was by no means restricted to Henan alone, but was popular in several other regions, such as Shaanxi and Sichuan. Shaanxi steles' chief characteristic is their Daoist content. Besides entirely Buddhist steles, one encounters purely Daoist or hybrid Buddhist-Daoist works. Shaanxi stele inscriptions indicate, moreover, ethnic strains, the patrons being members of indigenous clans or tribes. This latter feature is present also in Gansu and Ningxia steles. Concerning Gansu, Wong reiterates the importance of cave temples as innovative centers, in this case Maijishan. A number of beautifully executed late-Wei steles with rich iconographies were stored there in Cave 135.

Although the primary interest of this study is in Northern Wei steles, the production of Ningxia Province and the monumental complex steles executed in Henan, discussed in Chapter Nine, concern Northern Zhou and Northern Qi styles, respectively. In her analysis, there is a noticeable disparity between Wei dynasty steles and those postdating 550. Northern Qi and Northern Zhou works are cursorily discussed. The Northern Zhou examples are very limited, not to speak of the total absence of Sui steles. Thus, in presenting the no longer extant, monumentally complex Henan Northern Qi stele, which is dated 570–71 and was once in the Shaolinsi, Wong stresses advancements in Mahāyāna doctrine visible in its iconography and pays uncommon attention to its very long inscription. Judging from the other examples included in Chapter Nine, the reader could erroneously assume that all Northern Qi steles shared such characteristics. On the contrary, the situation is far more complex. A distinctive group of beautiful Northern Qi marble steles executed by Hebei workshops centered in Dingzhou, using an unprecedented perforated technique, opens a totally different vista on Northern Qi style and iconography. Dingzhou steles are, however, inexplicably omitted.

Notable weaknesses of this inquiry include the rigid compartmentalizing of regional schools and the failure to consider the fluid interaction of regional styles and contents. When studying Sichuan steles in Chapter Ten, the author should have paid attention to the simultaneity of two very different styles—the Southern Liang (502–557) and the mature Northern Wei and its epigones—that ran parallel to each other during the first half of the sixth century, in the Southwest and North of China, respectively. Important questions could have been raised, such as the origin of two antithetical aesthetic choices (Northern and Southern styles), the likelihood that Sichuan production reflected the taste of Jiankang (modern Nanjing) which politically administered the Southwest, the very likely influence of India Gupta art received through the maritime route, and, finally, the possible influence of a Southern (Sichuan) style on the formation of Northern Qi. These issues should have been incorporated in those Wong raises: the steles as repositories of novel beliefs—devotion to Amitāyus and Maitreya and their Pure Lands—themes which antedated

similar ones developed later in the northern plains, as well as the emergence of a landscape governed by the law of perspective.

As the first attempt in a Western language to analyze the sixth-century production of this genre in terms of content and style, Wong's *Chinese Steles* is a welcome and accessible book, in spite of the shortcomings indicated above. The complexity and vastness of the evidence at hand help explain both the strengths and weaknesses of this work. As a positive aspect, I indicate her valuable inquiry into the rise and evolution of steles, a monument rooted in ancient China's rituals. Also commendable are her summaries of the very intricate historical events of the Nanbeichao period (317–589) and her analysis of Indian Buddhism's adaptation and evolution in Medieval China.

A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariprcchā). Jan Nattier. Studies in the Buddhist Traditions. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003. xvi + 383 pages. \$24.00 paper, ISBN 0-8248-3003-2.

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Jan Nattier's work is always stimulating and instructive not only to Western but also to Japanese scholars of Buddhism. This book is no exception. This is a study and an annotated English translation of the *Ugrapariprcchā* (hereafter, *Ugra*), one of the most important early Mahāyāna sutras. In this work, Nattier sheds new light on the bodhisattva figure.

Since Buddhism, particularly Mahāyāna Buddhism, first took firm root in Japan, the origin of the Mahāyāna has been widely debated. In his attempt to discover these origins, Akira Hirakawa, one of Japan's most eminent Buddhist scholars, suggested that "Mahāyāna arose not within a traditional monastic environment, but in lay-centered communities of bodhisattvas who congregated at stūpas" (p. 89). For the time, it seemed as if his theory offered a solution to this long-discussed, knotty question, and it was widely accepted. However, in the last twenty years it has been questioned by a younger generation of scholars, both Eastern and Western, in attempts to understand the origins of the Mahāyāna within the context of traditional monastic Buddhism. Nattier's research challenges us to rethink Hirakawa's theory.

This book consists of two parts: Part One is a study and analysis of the *Ugra*, and Part Two, an annotated English translation. I will first introduce the translation portion of the text. As is the case with most Mahāyāna sutras, no Indian language ver-