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## The Stele of the Divine Chen-Prophecy: Historiography, Calligraphy, and Antiquarianism

### ABSTRACT:

A salient cultural characteristic of traditional China was the constant and persistent interaction with its past. This was especially to be found in scholars' examinations of ancient texts both engraved in stone and cast in bronze; also their interpretations of the literary or religious contents; and the appreciation of archaic calligraphy. The Stele of the Divine Chen-Prophecy Revealed by Heaven (Tianfa shenchen bei 天發神讖碑), produced in 276 AD, is among the ancient monuments intensely scrutinized by scholars and antiquarians from the Song through the Qing periods. This essay, which includes a transcription and annotated translation, explores the belief generally in divine prophecies and their connection to imperial rituals. It also examines the talismanic power of the bold and irregular calligraphy designed to empower visually the prophetic and political messages contained in them.

### KEYWORDS:

chen-prophecy, feng and shan rites, calligraphy, epigraphy, rubbing, antiquarianism, stone inscription, stele, evidential research, historiography

In the waning years of the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 AD) a number of unusual phenomena was reported as having occurred in the state of Wu 吳, one of the Three Kingdoms and centered generally around present-day Jiangsu province. In 275 a silver object was unearthed, and an inscription on it indicated year and month. Celebrating it as an auspicious event, Wu's last ruler, Sun Hao 孫皓 (r. 264–280), declared an amnesty and announced a new reign-era, that of Tianxi 天璽 (Heavenly Seal). Moreover, in the following year the muddy weeds that had for decades clogged Linping Lake 臨平湖 in Wu commandery 吳郡 suddenly disappeared. According to local lore, whenever the lake was clogged, there would be social chaos; when it cleared up, peace would return. Not long thereafter a small stone case appeared on the lake bank inside which there was a bluish-white stone carved with the four characters 上作皇帝 (“Ascend the throne [to become] august Thearch”). This prompted Sun Hao to proclaim once more an amnesty and a change of reign-name.<sup>1</sup> Propitious signs and talismanic objects similar to these

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<sup>1</sup> Chen Shou 陳壽 (233–297), *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982; hereafter, *SGZ*) 48, p. 1171. The three consecutive reign-names, Tiance 天冊 (275), Tianxi (276), and

have been recorded in nearly all the Chinese dynastic histories, which often narrate so as to show that unsettling political or military events preceded such revelations. During the late 270s Wu's ministers and generals began to lose the morale and will to resist the advancing armies of the Sima 司馬 regime, which had founded the Western Jin dynasty (266–317) in Luoyang, China's historical northern capital. In Wu, the attendant increase in social unrest and the overall political upheaval gave rise to a strong yearning among officials and commoners alike for divine protection, and these very often came in the form of a genre, so to speak, of political divinatory slogans and oracles, long known as *chen* 讖 (oracle-text, or prophecy).<sup>2</sup> In ancient China, auspicious omens in the form of mysterious signs or happenings were considered revelations from Heaven, because they were believed to foretell future events. Rather than being supernatural omens, however, they were viewed as more or less cosmically or logically, cum morally authorized, that is, “cosmic reactions to the ruler's virtue.”<sup>3</sup> Thus they took on a strong political tone and were deemed portentous. Interpretations of and commentaries on omens were later written down and collected into sets of literature known as *chen* and *wei* 緯 (rendered by many as “apocrypha”). Often considered together as a compound word, *chenwei* and its associated occult knowledge, significantly enough including the divinization of both Confucius and mythical, Confucian sage-kings, were influential in the complex processes that went into the legitimization of regimes and dynastic change per se, especially from the Eastern Han dynasty (25 AD–220 AD) down through the sixth century.<sup>4</sup>

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Tianji 天紀 (277–280), marked the final years of the Wu state.

A modern publication, Dongfang xuehui 東方學會, ed., *Tianfa shenchen beikao* 天發神讖碑攷, *fulu* 附錄, *xukao* 續考, *bukao* 補考 (Beiping: Dongfang xuehui, 1926; hereafter, cited as *BK*), is a reprint of Zhou Zaijun's 天發神讖碑攷, which was originally published in 1681; the 1926 reprint includes three additional essays, namely that by Wang Shi 王著 (*Tianfa shenchen bei fulu* 天發神讖碑附錄), one by Wang Zhao 汪照 (*Tianfa shenchen bei xukao* 天發神讖碑續攷), and then Luo Zhenyu's 羅振玉 *Wu Tianfa shenchen wen bukao* 吳天發神讖文補考. These four works are separately paginated, and when cited, below, the individual work reflects its pagination.

<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive study of chen-prophecies and their political implications in early-medieval China is Zongli Lu, *The Power of the Words: Chen Prophecy in Chinese Politics AD 265–618* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Tiziana Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms and Six Dynasties*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series 39 (Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 2001), foreword by Erik Zürcher.

<sup>4</sup> The importance of “*wei*” apocryphal texts is discussed in Zongli Lu, “Apocrypha in Early Medieval Chinese Literature,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (CLEAR) 30 (Dec. 2008), pp. 93–101. A study of *chenwei* texts and their role in dynastic changes in early-medieval China is also found in Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens*, pp. 56–65.

Sun Hao, known as an excellent scholar of broad knowledge and correct judgment while young, appears to have become brutal, merciless, and superstitious after taking the throne.<sup>5</sup> Seizing on the growing psychological receptiveness toward *chenwei* prophecies as an opportunity to buttress his power, he and his advisers resorted to an unusual act of political maneuvering by performing imperial rituals and, more importantly, carving in stone the various prophetic messages purported to have been revealed by Heaven. Thus in 276 Sun dispatched two high-ranking officials to Mount Limo 離墨山 in Yangxian 陽羨 county (present-day Yixing, Jiangsu province) to perform the *feng* 封 and *shan* 禪 sacrifices; he then bestowed the honorific title *guoshan* 國山 (State Mountain) on the mountain site.<sup>6</sup> This imperial order was prompted by the sighting of an unusually large cleft in a rock, about thirty meters long, that was considered a great and auspicious omen. Although the dynastic history titled *Wu shu* 吳書 does not contain any further details, we learn from later records that these events culminated in the erection on the mountain peak of a stone stele inscribed with a long text,<sup>7</sup> originally carved on the rounded surface of a stone known eventually as “Shan guoshan bei” 禪國山碑 (Stele of the Shan-Sacrifice to the State Mountain; hereafter Shan-Sacrifice Stele). It still exists today, but the inscription has all but disappeared due to the stone’s prolonged exposure to the elements. (The stele’s history is taken up in the next section.)

There were, however, early rubbings taken of the stele, which prompted various scholars to decipher many of its more than 1,000 characters.<sup>8</sup> The inscription consists of descriptions of various auspicious signs and omens, the names and titles of the officials involved in the preparation of the stele, as well as the artisans who performed the engraving. Most importantly, and of relevance to the present study, it identifies the calligrapher as Su Jian 蘇建 (3d c.), an official appointed to the prestigious court institution named Dongguan 東觀 (Eastern Li-

<sup>5</sup> See Sun Hao’s biog., *SGZ* 48, pp. 1162–63, 1173, 1178.

<sup>6</sup> In *Sanguo zhi*, it is sometimes recorded as Lilishan 離里山 (see biog. of Sun Liang, *SGZ* 48, p. 1152). It was changed to Limoshan, believed to be inspired by the legendary immortal named Limo; see Liang Zhangju 梁章鉅 (1775–1849), *Sanguo zhi pangzheng* 三國志旁證 (np: Guangya shuju, Guangxu 15 [1889]), j. 27, p. 2a–b.

<sup>7</sup> Wu Qian 吳騫 (1733–1813), *Guoshan bei kao* 國山碑考 (Shanghai: Boguzhai, 1921), p. 7; and Li Xianrong 李先榮, Ruan Shengji 阮升基, and Ning Kai 寧楷, comps., *Jiaqing zengxiu Yixing xian jiuzhi* 嘉慶增修宜興縣志 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1991), p. 521.

<sup>8</sup> The Qing philologist and epigrapher-scholar Wu Yujin 吳玉搢 (1698–1773) deciphered most of the characters, though the accuracy cannot be verified. About a century later, when Wang Chang 王昶 (1724–1806) published his comprehensive catalogue on bronze and stone inscriptions, he could only identify about half of them; see Wu Yujin, *Jinshi cun* 金石存 (np: Lishi wen Song xiang shi, Jiaqing 24 [1819]), j. 3, pp. 9a–11a; Wang Chang 王昶, *Jinshi cuibian* 金石萃編 (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin meishu chubanshe, 1990; hereafter, *JSCB*), j. 24, pp. 7a–8a.

brary). In 2012, a conference focusing on the Shan-Sacrifice Stele was held in Wuxi 無錫, Jiangsu province.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, seismologists among the thirty participants stated that the massive cleft described in *Wu shu* was caused by a large earthquake. In the third century, this extraordinary phenomenon appears to have generated a sense of urgency and an opportunity for Sun Hao to take advantage of the popular belief that such omens were cosmic responses in order to avert a dire political situation. I shall return to this imperially-commissioned stone monument and its ritual significance in more detail, later. In addition to performing the *feng* and *shan* rites in Yangxian and erecting a stele, in that same year Sun Hao sponsored another stele with an inscription near the state capital of Jianye 建業, or present-day Nanjing. Known in later historical and epigraphic records as “Tianfa shenchen bei” 天發神讖碑 (“Stele of the Divine Chen-Prophecy Revealed by Heaven”; hereafter, Chen-Prophecy Stele), the inscription has long been described as engraved on three stone fragments. Because of their prolonged outdoor location, many characters became unrecognizable before modern times, and in 1805 (10th year of the Jiaqing reign-period of the Qing) the stones themselves were destroyed in an accidental fire. Despite this unfortunate loss, however, historians and epigraphers were able to study the engraved words from earlier rubbings; from the Song dynasty (960–1279) until 1805, they could also examine the stones closely *in situ*. As a result, more than eighty percent of the original inscription (see below) have been deciphered, and the better rubbings have preserved specimens of its vigorous and archaic calligraphy. Because Sun Hao’s commission of the Chen-Prophecy Stele was not recorded in *Wu shu*, our knowledge comes entirely from the notes and commentaries of scholar-officials who served in the area encompassing the site where the stones had been kept, and by antiquarians and epigraphers working from rubbings. Through these informative and critical commentaries, the present essay explores the stele’s material disposition, its connection with the Shan-Sacrifice Stele, and, by extension, the politically powerful imperial rites called *feng* and *shan*. Concurrently, the essay examines how a bold and esoteric calligraphy had been designed to visually empower the underlying message – via a *chen*-prophecy from Heaven. The full transcription and translation of the inscribed text, to

<sup>9</sup> The conference was reported at <<http://www.eshufa.com/html/47/n-20047.html>>, accessed March, 2020. On April 15, 2018 the *Wuxi Daily* (*Wuxi ribao* 無錫日報) published a report on the preservation of the stele; see <[http://epaper.wxrb.com/paper/jnwb/html/2018-04/15/content\\_697039.htm](http://epaper.wxrb.com/paper/jnwb/html/2018-04/15/content_697039.htm)> (accessed September 3, 2020).

the extent it can be read, avail us of a deeper understanding of the political manipulation of divine prophecies in third-century AD Wu.

#### VICISSITUDES OF A STONE MONUMENT

Before Song times records about the stele were incomplete and sometimes confusing, since any information was often merely passed down from early sources without the support of verifiable evidence. The earliest information is from *Danyang ji* 丹陽記 (*Record of Danyang*), compiled by Shan Qianzhi 山謙之 (d. ca. 454). It states that on a hill in Danyang (near present-day Nanjing), a large stone boulder was found fragmented into three parts.<sup>10</sup> After Shan Qianzhi's brief note, historians seem to have forgotten about the stones, because it would not be until the Tang dynasty (618–906) that Xu Song 許嵩 (fl. 8th c.) mentioned them in his important work *Jiankang shilu* 建康實錄 (*Veritable Records of Jiankang*).<sup>11</sup> In the eleventh century, the Northern Song fiscal vice-commissioner Hu Zongshi 胡宗師 (fl. ca. 1090) visited Tianxi Temple 天禧寺 in Jiangning fu 江寧府 (present-day south of Nanjing City). There he saw the “three half-buried stones” just outside the temple compound. He identified these as the same three fragments described in early records. Motivated by his desire to preserve ancient writings, he moved the stones to a government office precinct and engraved a colophon directly on one of them. It reads:

Outside the Tianxi Temple gate there were three stone fragments, partially buried in mud. I had already suspected earlier that they might be the ones from Broken Stone Hill (Duanshigang 段石岡) on Mount Yan 巖山, [carved with an inscription] to commemorate the virtue of the Wu state in the first year of the Tianxi reign [276 AD]. Upon viewing [the inscription], indeed it was! It has been said that the calligrapher was Huang Xiang. After examining [the graphs], I concluded that this was correct. It has been 815 years [since the stele was created], and many characters have already been lost; yet some are still extant and legible. As the monks of the temple have not been taking good care of it, the inscription will surely be damaged if the stones continue to be left outdoors and subject to harsh wind and rain. I therefore arranged to have them transported by carriage to the garden behind the Transport

<sup>10</sup> Shan Qianzhi served as instructor (*xueshi*) in the court of the Liu-Song dynasty (420–479); see *BK*, p. 2b (see n. 1, above); and *JSCB*, j. 24, pp. 5–6.

<sup>11</sup> Xu Song, *Jiankang shilu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), p. 106.

Office,<sup>12</sup> where Chousi Pavilion 籌思閣 is located. Inscribed on the twenty-sixth day of the third month, sixth year of the Yuanyou reign (1091), by Fiscal Vice-Commissioner, Left Gentleman for Court Audiences Hu Zongshi.<sup>13</sup> (See figure 1.)

It is unclear how and when the three stones were moved from Mount Yan to the temple, but probably long-term neglect caused their sinking into soft earth on the temple grounds. Hu Zongshi's action thus restored an ancient monument to historical interest after more than seven hundred years. Hu's preservationist intervention also paved the way for further investigations into the arrangement of the text on the three separate stones, its content, and its unusual calligraphic style.

During the Yuan (1279–1368) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, conscientious scholar-officials and antiquarians again had the stones moved to safe locations to avoid destruction from wars and natural deterioration. For example, in 1322 a local official named Yang Yi 楊益 found them lying on the weedy ground near his office and reported it to his superiors, who then hired workmen to move them to inside the gate of the Confucian Temple School (Miaoxue 廟學).<sup>14</sup> In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century records of Jinling 金陵, writers mostly reiterated the previous accounts, sometimes with updates on the stones' latest location. The burgeoning interest in epigraphy during the seventeenth century changed the mindset and research methods of the scholarly elite: they began to approach ancient relics with relatively more discerning eyes. This shift is clearly noticed in the accounts of the "Three Broken Stones" by Chen Yi 陳沂 (1469–1538) and Gu Qiyuan 顧起元 (1565–1628). While the former, a Hanlin scholar, merely stated that the Yuan-era Confucian Temple School was renamed Prefectural School of Yingtian 應天府學,<sup>15</sup> the latter commented further on the hybridity of the calligraphy, the stones' physical shapes, and also tried to decipher the

<sup>12</sup> The name of the office is Caotai 漕臺, which was in charge of transportation. As fiscal vice-commissioner (*zhuanyun fushi* 轉運副使), Hu's responsibility would have included supervising the transportation of tax grain. See Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P.), p. 186 (entry 1490).

<sup>13</sup> Hu Zongshi's colophon is recorded in many major studies on the Chen-Prophecy Stele, including *BK*, p. 2a, and *JSCB*, j. 24, p. 5b. It is also preserved in rubbings.

<sup>14</sup> This is recorded in Zhang Xuan 張鉉 (fl. 14th c.), *Zhida Jinling xinzhì* 至大金陵新志, cited in *BK*, p. 7b, and *JSCB*, j. 24, p. 6. Zhang served as an assistant to the commander of Jiqing circuit 集慶路 (present-day Nanjing), and his *Jinling xinzhì* is reputed to have been well-researched and its information well supported by historical documents. It was completed in 1344, with several later editions still extant; see j. 2 of his *Zhida jinling xinzhì* as rpt. in *Zhonghua shuju bianjibu* 中華書局編輯部 ed., *Song Yuan fangzhi congkan* 宋元方志叢刊 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), v. 6, p. 5755.

<sup>15</sup> This is according to Chen Yi's *Jinling shiji* 金陵世紀, cited *BK*, p. 9b.

engraved characters.<sup>16</sup> We also know more specifically that the stones were placed in front of the Pavilion for Revering the Classics (Zunjing ge 尊經閣), a library housing important editions of printed books, manuscripts, and ink rubbings. Placing the stones in close proximity to an official library facilitated the making of rubbings and the continued preservation and care of these important relics.<sup>17</sup>

Although epigraphy was already an important field of scholarly research in the Song dynasty, the fall of the Ming dynasty to the Manchus in 1644 triggered a sense of urgent need among the Chinese scholarly elite to reexamine the earlier, Neo-Confucian, orthodoxy. Benjamin Elman has written that Chinese literati who experienced the tragic demise of their homeland attributed such to “the sterility and perniciousness of recent Confucian discourse”; in order to uncover the true teachings of Confucius, they embarked on a journey to search for tangible evidence for those teachings.<sup>18</sup> The new research methodology, known as *kaozheng xue* 考證學 (evidential research), applied rigorous philological analysis of ancient texts and systematic collecting and cataloguing of artifacts, activities supported and shared by academic communities, especially those in south China.<sup>19</sup> More significantly, the economic booms in early-modern times (late-Ming through the eighteenth century) brought forth a flourishing material culture, giving incentives to scholars to participate in consumer markets through publishing activities and even commercial transactions.<sup>20</sup> Innovative studies of bronze and stone inscriptions (generally known as *jinsi xue* 金石學) resulted in the publication of a large number of catalogues, ac-

<sup>16</sup> Gu Qiyuan’s comment is in *juan 4* of *Kezuo zuiyu* 客座贅語, cited *BK*, pp. 8b–9a. *Kezuo zuiyu* is available in several reliable online sources, including <<https://zh.m.wikisource.org/wiki/%E5%AE%A2%E5%BA%A7%E8%B4%85%E8%AA%9E/04>> (accessed August 9, 2021); and <<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=197458&searchu=%E5%A4%A9%E7%99%BC%E7%A5%9E%E8%AE%96>> (accessed August 9, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Several Ming-era rubbing specimens have survived; e.g., Wang Jingxian 王靖憲, ed., *An Siyuan cang shanben beitie xuan* 安思遠藏善本碑帖選 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1996), pp. 83–87; and Feng Lei 馮磊, ed., *Tianfa shenchen bei* 天發神識碑 (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2012), introduction.

<sup>18</sup> For a succinct analysis of the impetus behind an important 17th-c. intellectual and philosophical reorientation, see Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, 2d rev. edn. (Los Angeles: U. California, 2001), pp. v–xi.

<sup>19</sup> Elman, *Philosophy to Philology*, chap. 6, especially pp. 211–14, 221–34.

<sup>20</sup> An important study of the culture of consumption in early-modern China is Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana and Chicago: U. Illinois P., 1991); chap. 4 focuses on antiquarian pursuits. For an insightful analysis of Qing antiquarianism from such new perspectives as art and science and political innovation, see Shana J. Brown, *Pastimes: From Art and Antiquarianism to Modern Chinese Historiography* (Honolulu: U. Hawai’i P., 2011), chaps. 1–3.

celerating the scholarly interest in early epigraphic materials, and in this way the Chen-Prophecy Stele received intense scrutiny.

#### THE IMPACT OF EVIDENTIAL RESEARCH

As more rubbings were circulated, a new effort was made to read the whole Chen-Prophecy Stele. Among those who took up the task was Zhou Zaijun 周在浚 (b. 1640), the eldest son of an erudite Ming scholar-official and man of letters, Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612–1672). As a publisher and book collector, Zhou Zaijun made rubbings to share with his colleagues and friends and sometimes presented them as gifts. In addition to compiling earlier commentaries and study notes, he also successfully deciphered a large portion of the Chen-Prophecy Stele inscription by stacking the three stones one on top of another. In 1681, he published his findings as follows:

Most textual sources and gazetteers consider the inscription [of the Chen-Prophecy Stele] as three texts carved on three separate stones that do not constitute a coherent piece of writing. When Mr. Sun Kaizhi 孫凱之 and I examined the stones, while looking carefully at the areas of the breaks, we could see that the continuity has obviously been interrupted because of breakage. Reading the three parts together, the complete original text could be restored, and here is my interpretation. The beginning columns are the words of the *chen*-prophecy; [the column following these constitute] the five characters *tian fa shen chen wen* – they are the subject of the stele record. [The passages] following the four characters *Tian xi yuan nian* (first year of the Tianxi reign-period, i.e. 276) are the main text [of the inscription].<sup>21</sup>

If we use the the rubbing in figure 3 as a visual guide to read Zhou's description above, referencing Zhao Liewen transcription in figure 4, we understand that Zhou was explaining what he thought to be the three components of the text. The first is the beginning columns (columns 1 to 4) – the graphs representing the prophecy itself; the second is the subject or title (*biaoti* 標題) of the inscription; and the last one (the columns following the date), is the main text.

Thus, for the first time in its long history of transmission, the engraved text was carefully read in its entirety and analyzed. Not only did Zhou Zaijun successfully decipher thirty-one more characters than had previously been known, he also attempted to use iron wires to brace

<sup>21</sup> *BK*, p. 10a.

the three stones together so it would resemble a vertical stone slab. The prevailing knowledge during Zhou's time was that the inscription was originally carved on that one large boulder found in broken form in the fifth century.<sup>22</sup> To reconstruct the three parts into an original whole, Qing antiquarians and epigraphers believed that, of the three fragments standing on the ground of the Prefectural School, the one in the center of the them was the upper portion of the original stele, and those on the east and west sides were the middle and bottom parts, respectively.

Although pre-Qing researchers had already taken note of the atypical shape of the stones erected in 276, one that was probably similar to the Shan-Sacrifice Stele (see figure 5, below), it was not until the seventeenth century that scholars began to seriously consider the physical form as an integral part of their investigation. Taking Zhou Zaijun's discovery one step further, a stone carver named Chu Jun 褚峻 (fl. 18th c.) and an epigrapher, Niu Yunzhen 牛運震 (1706–1758), published their rendition of the three stones in a 1743 work titled *Jinshi tu* 金石圖 (*Illustrated Catalogue of Bronze and Stone Inscriptions*). They prepared rubbings of the three irregular-shaped stones, one above another, and supplied information on their dimensions (height and circumference), as well as their *in situ* position on the compound of the Prefectural School, that is, middle, right, and left.<sup>23</sup> (See figure 2.) The feature of a loop-shaped handle on top of the upper stone is clearly visible. Despite this rather peculiar design, Chu and Niu utilized advanced printing technology to present a visual reconstruction of this ancient relic for the first time since historians described it in words more than twelve hundred years earlier. A skilled carver and rubbing maker,<sup>24</sup> Chu was particularly interested in the materiality of inscribed stones. The composite image in figure 2 required creating separate objects mimicking the real stones, so that rubbings could be taken to show their shapes and silhouettes. Following the guiding principles of evidential research – “seeking truth from facts 實事求是”), Chu and Niu's innovative designs and annotations opened up new avenues of inquiry regarding the function and

<sup>22</sup> BK, p. 10b.

<sup>23</sup> Niu Yunzhen and Chu Jun, *Jinshi tu* 金石圖 (1743–1795), j. 4 (unpaginated).

<sup>24</sup> Not much is known about Chu Jun. In a study of *Jinshi tu*, Zhao Chengjie 趙成杰 notes that he was skilled in carving and made a living by making and selling rubbings; see Zhao, “Wuzhi xingtai de zhuanhua: fangbei Beijing xia de *Jinshi tu* shuxie” 物質形態的轉化，訪碑背景下的‘金石圖’書寫,” *Fine Arts & Design: Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute* (2017), p. 28. See also Lillian Lan-ying Tseng, “Between Printing and Rubbing: Chu Jun's Illustrated Catalogues of Ancient Monuments in Eighteenth-Century China,” in Wu Hung, ed., *Reinventing the Past: Archaism and Antiquarianism in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Chicago: Center for the Art of East Asia, Dept. of Art History, U. Chicago 2010), pp. 250–90.

purpose of this intriguing Stele of the Divine Chen-Prophecy Revealed by Heaven.

In 1779 Weng Fanggang 翁方綱 (1733–1818), considered by many as the preeminent Hanlin scholar, visited the Prefectural School and carefully examined the three stones. He took detailed measurements and reported that the upper portion of the middle stone was in the shape of a bell, with its “stick-shaped handle” being cut off.<sup>25</sup> Since ancient bronze bells have either a stick-shaped handle (*yong* 甬) or a loop-shaped handle (*niu* 紐), Weng likely only assumed that what he saw was the former, since that part of the stone was damaged. Weng noted that many characters were recarved, and a few had already been lost, compared with those seen in old rubbings. In addition to the physical condition of the stones, he also focused on the etymology and orthography of the inscription, identifying new characters and correcting previous readings. Unlike his study of other Han stele inscriptions, however, he did not publish a transcription of the inscribed text, but agreed with his peers that the three parts were broken from one stone only *after* the text had been carved.<sup>26</sup> This assertion, which was established as the consensus interpretation since Song times, was later challenged by Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866–1940), one of the most respected modern classical scholars and authorities on Chinese epigraphy.

Luo’s broad knowledge of ancient history and paleography helped him rectify the orthographies of more characters previously misidentified, thus improving the intelligibility and coherence of the entire inscription. Citing previous records by Ming and Qing scholars who personally examined the stones, Luo reiterated the fact that each stone was rounded in shape, with broad front and rear faces and two narrow sides. The inscription was carved on the two broad faces and one narrow side; the other narrow side was left blank. As the stones had already been destroyed by his time, he used the rubbings as facsimile replicas of the inscription and gave this assessment:

The first eight columns (1–8) are on the front side [of each stone], next [the text moves to the] six columns (9–14) on one [of the two] narrow sides, and the last eight columns (15–22) are on the back. The other narrow side is blank. Because there are eight lines each on the front and back, six lines on the narrow side, I estimate that

<sup>25</sup> The Chinese phrase is: 其頂宛然鐘形截去上甬者; see Weng Fanggang 翁方綱 (1733–1818), *Liang Han jinshi ji* 兩漢金石記 (1786; hereafter, *LHJSJ*), j. 18, pp. 29b–30a.

<sup>26</sup> *LHJSJ*, j. 18, pp. 31a–32a.

the depth of each stone had been about three quarters of its width. There are eight characters in each column on the upper stone and seven characters in each column on the middle stone; the lower parts of these stones were damaged. On the lower stone, there are three characters in each column, and the stone's damage occurred along the top row of the characters.<sup>27</sup>

This keen observation and precise description of the text-inscription layout can be corroborated by a Ming rubbing in the collection of the Shanghai Library;<sup>28</sup> see figure 3, which shows the text on three separate sheets of rubbing.

Luo Zhenyu's most interesting theory was that the inscription was carved on already fragmented parts, not on the one large, unfragmented stone. He argued that since the rows of characters near the damaged areas on the lower part of the middle stone and the upper part of the lower stone are aligned, the text must have been carved separately. If that had not been the case, the rows would not have been so flush near the areas of the breakage. This theory can in fact be supported by an important phrase in the inscription itself, which stated that the characters were carved "on several stones 在諸石上" (see the transcription and translation in the next section). He did not speculate about why Sun Hao and his officials would inscribe divine omens on fragments of a large stone. In view of what we know today – that the three stones could be stacked up into a larger boulder and the inscriptions could be read as one continuous text, it is reasonable to deduce that the original stone had already been selected for the inscription before it was broken.<sup>29</sup> Using a Qing-era official measure-standard, Luo calculated that each stone was about two *chi* 尺 (66 cm) thick, which was quite different from the upright stone steles most commonly used in the Han dynasty, usually cut to a thickness of less than 33 cm.<sup>30</sup>

This type of attention to the physical and formal details of the now-lost inscribed stones, a trend already commonly observed in antiquarian research by scholars a generation before him, demonstrates Luo's systematic application of a broad knowledge in the material arts

<sup>27</sup> Luo, *Bukao* (see n. 1, above), p. 3b. See Also Luo Zhenyu, *Luo Zhenyu xueshu lunwenji* 羅振玉學術論文集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), vol. 1, pp. 544-46.

<sup>28</sup> Feng Lei; see n. 17, above.

<sup>29</sup> A severe earthquake in 276 could have been the cause of the damage, i.e., breaking the boulder into three fragments. As scholars have learned (n. 9, above), a large cleft in a rock near Yixing (Yangxian, 3d c.) was caused by an earthquake. As shown in a Google Map image (fig. 6), the distance between Nanjing and Yixing is only about 127 km (79 miles).

<sup>30</sup> Luo, *Bukao*, p. 4a; idem, *Luo Zhenyu xueshu*, p. 546.

of ancient China. Having served briefly as a bureaucrat in later period of Qing government, he identified himself as an *yilao* 遺老 (left-over, or remnant loyalist) after the 1911 revolution. Disillusioned with institutional efforts in the preservation of cultural properties, he decided to pursue a career as a private scholar. Luo became a collector, an art dealer (with the Japanese as his primary clients), a publisher, and an educational reformer; indeed his biography was so colorful and full of controversies that historians have devoted research to his overall contribution to Chinese archaeology and cultural developments in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> Luo was generally credited with spearheading a new focus for the historiography of ancient China, namely *guqiwu xue* 古器物學 (artifact studies). As Shana Brown has written, “Luo pursued previously taboo or unfashionable materials; starting in 1907 he began to collect funerary objects,”<sup>32</sup> as he believed that all grave goods had their historical or archaeological value. This may have been the reason why in his comments he mentioned the similarity between the style of writing for spells and omens carved on *bianshi* 窆石 (funerary stones used to lower coffins), and that of the inscription on the Chen-Prophecy Stele.<sup>33</sup> Despite this, he believed the funerary stones differed in physical form from the latter. Clearly Luo applied the principles of evidential research by focusing squarely on a correct deciphering of the orthography, this being a marked departure from his Song and Ming predecessors. He retrieved a total of 229 characters, including 199 full graphs and 26 partial but still-decipherable graphs, as well as 4 incomplete and undecipherable graphs. He proudly proclaimed that while Zhou Zaijun was the first in a succession of scholars who read the inscriptions on three stones as one continuous text, when it comes to recognizing that the inscription was originally carved on three already-separated stones, one laid upon another, “I am the first one!” To make the text available to a wider audience, he instructed his son Luo Fuyi 羅福頤 (1905–1981) to transcribe the text in the original script, and published it with outline drawings of the three stones for clear reading.<sup>34</sup> To enhance its legibility, in 1889 a late-Qing scholar,

<sup>31</sup> Among recent studies of Luo Zhenyu are Brown, *Pastimes*, chap. 6; Yang Chia-ling and Roderick Whitfield, *Lost Generation: Qing Loyalists and the Formation of Modern Chinese Culture* (London: Saffron Books, 2012); and Wang Zhenghua 王正華, “Luo Zhenyu de shoucang yu chuban: ‘qiwu,’ ‘qiwuxue’ zai Minguo chunian de chengli” 羅振于的收藏與出版, ‘器物,’ ‘器物學’ 在民國初年的成立, *Guoli Taiwan daxue meishushi yanjiu jikan* (September 2011), pp. 277–312.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, *Pastimes*, p. 108.

<sup>33</sup> Luo, *Bukao*, p. 3b; Luo, *Luo Zhenyu xueshu*, p. 545.

<sup>34</sup> See Shimonaka Yasaburō 下中彌三郎 and Shimonaka Naoya 下中直也, eds., *Shodō zenshū* 書道全集 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1954–1968) 2, p. 33.

Zhao Liewen 趙烈文 (1832–1894),<sup>35</sup> transcribed the inscription in its original arrangement in his own articulated standard script form.<sup>36</sup> (See figure 4.) This transformed version, complete with Zhao’s careful notations on the missing and partially visible graphs and the number of characters on each stone, crystalized the scholarly efforts over centuries to unravel a mysterious ancient Chinese stone inscription.

#### DOCUMENTING THE PROPHECY

Although Chinese scholars since Song times have attempted to decipher the inscription on the Stele of the Divine Chen-Prophecy Revealed by Heaven (that is, the Chen-Prophecy Stele), its fragmented condition and esoteric content prevented a full transcription even before the original stones were destroyed in the 1805 fire, as mentioned. As a result of that loss, the inscription now exists only in the form of rubbings of varying quality, and has come to be valued for its distinctive calligraphy much more than for its actual content. The following, punctuated, transcription largely follows Luo Zhenyu’s reading; I have also incorporated explanations of numerous points in the inscription provided by Yu Feng 俞豐, an expert on ancient Chinese epigraphy.<sup>37</sup> Readers might also use Zhao Liewen’s transcription as seen in figure 4 for reference.

As discussed above, the text of the inscription Sun Hao commissioned in 276 was carved on three separate stone fragments that had once been whole. When stacked vertically, the combined surface accommodated continuous vertical lines of text of up to eighteen characters in length, with each character approximately eight to ten centimeters high. Columns 1–4 of the inscription are thought to be what remains of the prophetic *chen* words, as deciphered by the officials sent by Sun Hao (see below); line 5 (the five characters *tian, fa, shen, chen, wen*) is

<sup>35</sup> Zhao Liewen came from a family of Qing scholar-officials, but he did not succeed in the civil service examinations. Because of his classical education and knowledge of history, in 1855 he was recommended to serve in the Xiang Army under the command of Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811–1872), who led the fight against the rebels of the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864). Zhao’s biography is available at <<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%B5%B5%E7%83%88%E6%96%87>> (accessed August 19, 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Published in Feng, *Tianfa shenchen*, pp. [5–6]; and Shanghai tushuguan 上海圖書館, ed., *Hanmo guibao: Shanghai tushuguan cang zhenben beitie congkan*. Di 7 ji 翰墨環寶, 上海圖書館藏珍本碑帖叢刊. 第7輯 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2021), pp. 7–8.

<sup>37</sup> Yu Feng’s commentaries on the text of the Chen-Prophecy Stele is in Feng Lei, *Tianfa shenchen*, unpaginated endnotes. For another epigraphic and textual study of the Chen-Prophecy Stele, see Shao Mingsheng 邵茗生, “Ji Song ta Sanguo Wu Tianfa shenchen bei” 記宋拓三國吳天發神讖碑, *WW* 4 (1966), pp. 16–17.

the subject and title of the stele, which Zhou Zaijun also explained in his 1681 study; and lines 6–22 (line 19 is entirely blank) constitute the main text of the stele that chronicles efforts by the officials to decipher the *chen*. As can be seen in Zhao Liewen's transcription (see figure 4), however, wear and damage resulted in the degradation or total disappearance of numerous characters (especially along the horizontal joints of the stones). In some cases, scholars were able to reconstruct missing characters on the basis of partial traces; in others, they have adduced characters on the basis of context, despite all traces of the originals having disappeared.<sup>38</sup>

[Lines 1–4]

上天帝言天

On high, the Heavenly Thearch speaks of  
Heavenly affairs.

下步于日月

Below, he treads upon the Sun and Moon.

帝曰：大吳一[統]萬方。甲午丙日，[ ][ ][ ][ ]。

The Thearch saith: the Great Wu unifies the  
myriad directions. On the *bing* day of the  
*jiawu* year ...

才仁中平，予[ ]人元。示于山川，[ ][ ][ ][ ]。<sup>39</sup>

[With] talent and benevolence, giving ... to  
humanity and all fundamentals [and]  
manifesting in mountains and streams ...

[Line 5]

[On the right are the] words of a Divine Chen-Prophecy Revealed  
by Heaven. 天發神讖文

[Lines 6–9]

On the sixteenth of the seventh lunar month that began on the *jiyou* day, during the first year of the Tianxi [Heavenly Seal] reign-period [276 AD]... The [ ]*wu* Leader of Court Gentlemen [was dispatched] to Danyang to [decipher the] graphs [that had naturally been carved] in the mountains. Guang examined them and [realized that] this was [a] *chen*-prophecy [from] Heaven. There were many [characters that] Guang could not decipher, but twelve char-

<sup>38</sup> In preparing the English translation I received much assistance from David M. Kamen, who drafted the original translation.

<sup>39</sup> In the transcription, empty square brackets [ ] indicate the positions of characters thought by Luo Zhenyu to have existed originally, but which did not get picked up in the extant rubbings. Reconstructed characters as adduced by Luo Zhenyu, Yu Feng, or the original translator, Kamen, are shown in square brackets, e.g. [陽]. Punctuation has been added by the present author.





research,<sup>41</sup> *chen*-prophecies were enigmatic writings thought to convey subtle messages about the future of a political figure or an institution. Prophecies, mysterious appearances of omens and signs, and predictions based on metaphysical-astronomical cycles and numbers were especially widespread in times of political crisis and social unrest. In the six decades of the Three Kingdoms, the states of Wei, Shu, and Wu were frequently at war with one another. The military confrontations created an opportunity for the political and social rise of the Sima clan, who in 266 established a new regime, the Western Jin dynasty. By the 270s it had already gained control of the former Wei and Shu territories and was advancing aggressively towards the Wu in the south. This dangerous situation became the breeding ground for the spread of omens and portentous signs. It was no wonder that Sun Hao was compelled to accept and respond to notices of *chen*-prophecies in an attempt to quell the fear and anxiety of ministers and subjects. Nonetheless, the Wu succumbed to the Western Jin army in 279–280, ending the brief era of a tripartite China.

In their comments and observations, later scholars were quick to point out this irony – the pronouncement of Wu sovereignty, but then their profound loss to the Western Jin. The famous Northern Song epigrapher Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠 (1081–1129), for example, condemned the stele’s words as fallacious speech 妖言, noting:

Sun Hao changed the reign name eight times, of which six were influenced by auspicious occurrences. Yet because he could not maintain proper administrative order, he still could not save his country. Falsely using strange phenomena as portents and falsely presenting them as a Mandate of Heaven – it is quite fitting that he did not end well!<sup>42</sup>

It is unclear whether Zhao actually traveled to the Prefectural School in Jinling 金陵 (Nanjing) to examine the stones and study the inscription. He referred to the stele simply as the “Broken Stele from the First Year of the Tianxi Reign-period of the Wu State (Wu Tianxi yuannian duan bei” 吳天璽元年斷碑), and his commentary only mentions a few isolated passages in the text. Song epigraphers did not read the inscriptions engraved on the three stones as a continuous text, and Zhao voiced his negative opinions based only on such words as “*chen*-prophecy from Heaven 天讖” and “mostly undecipherable 多不解.” Like

<sup>41</sup> Lu, *Power of the Words*, pp. 13–24, 86–92.

<sup>42</sup> Wang, *Xukao* (see n. 1, above), pp. 2a–2b. See also Zhao Mingcheng, *Songben jinshi lu* 宋本金石錄 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), j. 20, p. 464.

most Song commentators and literati scholars, he did not seem to show much interest in the calligraphy of the engraved characters, which could be due to the paucity of good rubbings. Their comments and criticisms seem to have mostly followed those in previous records, and reflected the general Song Neo-Confucian ideal of social and personal harmony in consonance with the cosmic order.

As the relic became further removed from its original time and space, Song antiquarians also began to contemplate it with a feeling of poetic nostalgia, seeing the fragmentation of the monument as a symbolic reminder of the shattered state of the Chinese empire during the Three Kingdoms period. However, it was also a time best remembered for heroic adventurism and brilliant strategic maneuvering. As we know very well, the stories of a few courageous men contending for territorial control from that era inspired romanticized novels and dramas in later dynasties, most famously the early-Ming *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義). Its sentiments were however already present in Song times. One among hundreds of writers so moved was the poet Yang Bei 楊備 (fl. 1040s), who while serving in Jinling wrote poems about ancient ruins, cultural sites, and temples he visited. In one of them he described the disturbing sight of the half-ruined stones of the Chen-Prophecy Stele, evoking a deep emotion of melancholy:

The old stele commemorating the virtue of the Sun clan of Wu, is  
now buried amongst coiling dragons and crouching turtles.<sup>43</sup>

What a sad sight that the monument exists as three [broken]  
fragments, as if it were still the period of the tripartite division.<sup>44</sup>

By the thirteenth century, the monument seemed to have fallen into anonymity; furthermore, it was known simply as the Stone in Three Sections (*Sanduan shi* 三段石); scholars also paid very little attention to the inscription.<sup>45</sup> When Ming and Qing scholars began to travel to ancient sites, collect rubbings and artifacts, and study both the materials and inscriptions as part of their antiquarian pursuit and quasi-archeological investigations, the morally driven and fatalistic views of earlier political times gradually subsided. As they scrutinized the fragmented Wu stele, they began to wonder about the monument's revealing deep connections with a time-honored imperial rite – that

<sup>43</sup> This refers to the form of traditional ancient Chinese stone slabs carved with coiling dragons on top and a crouching turtle at the base.

<sup>44</sup> Yang Bei's poem is quoted in Zhang Dunyi 張敦頤, *Liuchao shiji bianlei* 六朝事蹟編類 (China: Baozhang ge, Guangxu 13 [1887]), j. 8, pp. 1a–b.

<sup>45</sup> These include Zhu Mu 祝穆 (13th c.), *Fangyu shenglan* 方輿勝覽 (1239); and Wang Xiangzhi 王象之 (js. 1196), *Yudi beimu* 輿地碑目 (1227); both cited in *BK*, p. 7a.

of offering sacrifices to Heaven and Earth for the purpose of receiving the Mandate of Heaven.

#### INTERSECTION OF THE TRADITIONAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL

When the late-Ming scholar and calligrapher Guo Zongchang 郭宗昌 (d. 1652) examined the rubbings taken from the Chen-Prophecy Stele, he echoed Zhao Mingcheng's high-minded judgments, as we saw above. Guo characterized the engraved words as "written on a cow's belly" (*niufu shu* 牛腹書). This implied that its contents were spurious and its script form was distasteful. He considered the Three Kingdoms-era emperor Sun Hao to have been indulgent of superstition – thus showing moral weakness; he interpreted the unusual calligraphy as an indication of moral decline, and thereby pointing to Sun's downfall. The reason for such sharp criticism in part was due to the traditional view that official, political writing should be executed in a style that carried deep connections with accepted ritual proprieties. The high benchmark Guo cited were the so-called Qiyang stones 岐陽石, which he considered the most elegant of all ancient writings, displaying as they did the highest level of propriety.<sup>46</sup>

The Qiyang stones were ten large boulders first discovered in the early-seventh century in a field near Mount Qi 岐山, in Baoji, Shaanxi province. Resembling the shape of drums, they have been popularly known as the Stone Drums, and their roughly finished rounded surfaces are inscribed with hymns that celebrated hunting and fishing activities in the Qin state in the time of the Zhou dynasty (about 1050 BC–256 BC).<sup>47</sup> Datable to the fifth or fourth century BC, that is, early in the Eastern Zhou period (770 BC–256 BC), these inscriptions are usually classified as the large-seal script (*dazhuan* 大篆), an archaic form of writing often seen cast on ritual bronzes or engraved on stones and rocks. Guo Zongchang contended that the writing of the Chen-Prophecy Stele

<sup>46</sup> Wang, *Xukao*, p. 6b. See also Guo Zongchang 郭宗昌, *Jinshi shi* 金石史 (Shanghai: Gushu liutongchu, 1921), j. 1, p. 13a–b. A deep study of Guo's scholarship and contribution to epigraphy can be found in a master's thesis by Zheng Lu 鄭璐, "Ming Guo Zongchang ji qi *Jinshi shi yanjiu*" 明郭宗昌及其金石史研究 (Jilin: Jilin University, 2008), available at CNKI: <<http://cdmd.cnki.com.cn/article/cdmd-10183-2008064150.htm>>

<sup>47</sup> The most comprehensive study of the Stone Drums in English remains that of Gilbert L. Mattos, *The Stone Drums of Ch'in* (Nettetal: Steyler, 1988). Brief discussions of the Stone Drums can be found in Tsuen-Hsuei Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk* (Chicago: U. Chicago P., 2004), pp. 70–73, and Robert E. Harrist, Jr., *The Landscape of Words: Stone Inscriptions from Early and Medieval China* (Seattle and London: U. Washington P., 2008), pp. 45–46. These important early Chinese stone monuments are now displayed in the Stone Drums Hall of the Palace Museum in Beijing.

deviated from the orthodox *dazhuan* script, effectively disqualifying it as a ritual object.

Not all Ming scholars took such a semiotic approach via its role in ritual: some considered the narrativity of the text and the physicality of the stones. Gu Qiyuan, mentioned earlier, remarked that the literary format of the inscription, especially the listing of the officials and workers involved in making the stele, followed that of the so-called Qin Stones.<sup>48</sup> These are the stones inscribed with political panegyrics that the First August Emperor of China, Qin Shihuangdi (r. 221–210 BC), sponsored between 219 and 210 BC as part of his tours of inspection to newly conquered eastern territories. Sima Qian's 司馬遷 *Shi ji* 史記 mentioned seven such inscriptions, but except for a very few fragments based on later recuttings, most of these by now have disappeared. But in the Ming epigraphers would have been able to compare the "Stele of the Chen-Prophecy" with the Qin Stones, which included supplemental texts added in 209 BC by Shihuangdi's son, the Second Emperor of Qin, namely Ershi 秦二世 (r. 210–207 BC). These records provided the names of the officials who had originally accompanied his father to the mountain sites,<sup>49</sup> a special point of reference in Gu's commentary. Rubbings or drawings of the Qin Stone's inscriptions made in later times have survived, treasured as calligraphic paradigms for their small-seal script (*xiaozhuan* 小篆) attributed to the prime minister Li Si 李斯 (d. 208 BC). That newly standardized form of writing was established as part of the institutional programs led by Li Si after the father, Qin Shihuangdi, unified the various regions of China.

Of the seven stones sponsored by Qin Shihuangdi, the one on the summit of Mount Tai 泰山, in Shandong province, is of the greatest importance, since it marked the culmination of the highly revered imperial *feng* and *shan* rites.<sup>50</sup> According to ancient Chinese tradition, sage-kings of high antiquity had offered the *feng* sacrifice to Heaven at the peak of Mount Tai and the *shan* sacrifice to the spirits of the Earth at the foot of Mount Tai, or other lesser hills. Through a series of choreographed ritual acts, the sovereign announced his achievements to Heaven and

<sup>48</sup> See n. 16, above.

<sup>49</sup> Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk*, pp. 73–74; Harrist, *The Landscape of Words*, p. 223; Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> My brief summary of the *feng* and *shan* rites is based on Stephen Bokenkamp, "Record of the Feng and Shan Sacrifices," in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Religions of China in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1996), pp. 251–53; Harrist, *Landscape of Words*, pp. 221–24. A comprehensive literary analysis of the inscriptions associated with the first emperor's tours of inspection is contained in Kern, *Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang*.

Earth and asked for their blessings, hence receiving the granting of the Mandate of Heaven to begin a new dynastic rule or a legitimize a newly ascended ruler of a continuing dynasty. Qin Shihuangdi's *feng* and *shan* rite in 219 BC was the first that was verifiably documented in Chinese historical records.<sup>51</sup> This was because later emperors did not always consider themselves worthy of this solemn rite, or because their ministers would advise against it. As with most ancient inscribed stones, such as the Stone Drums, the Qin stone on Mount Tai was a rough-finished, rounded boulder of unequal width on its four sides. Shihuangdi's inscription covered three of its four sides, with Ershi's supplement on the remaining side. In 1740 the stone was destroyed in a fire, but two fragments containing about ten characters from Ershi's supplemental inscription have survived,<sup>52</sup> and they constitute some of the earliest surviving imperial writings from ancient China.

The relevance of the *feng* and *shan* rite to this study is that during the ritual performances, auspicious signs were expected to emerge in order to signal the sovereign's acceptance by Heaven and Earth. According to an eyewitness account, when Liu Xiu 劉秀 (the first emperor of the Eastern Han dynasty; r. 25–57 AD) performed the rite in 56, propitious vapors appeared in the sky.<sup>53</sup> Auspicious omens, taken as a priori approval from Heaven, therefore, became both the justification and prerequisite for conducting the rite. Facing imminent defeat by the Western Jin army in the 270s, Sun Hao must have been desperately seeking relief and comfort from occult signs. One of the consequential outcomes was the Yangxian officials' omenistic claim for the large rock cleft, which as we noted, above, led to the performance of the *feng* and *shan* rites on Mount Limo, followed by an imperial title as Guoshan given the spiritually-laden mount. We have no detailed information on the ritual performance conducted by Dong Chao 董朝 and Chou Chu 周處 (236–297) on Sun Hao's behalf, as recorded in the standard-history

<sup>51</sup> According to Bokenkamp ("Record of the Feng and Shan Sacrifices," p. 251), there were only six such performances in all of Chinese history. See <<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%81%A6%E7%A6%85>> (accessed September 24, 2020). Since Sun Hao did not offer his *feng* and *shan* sacrifices specifically at Mt. Tai, later historians did not consider them official.

<sup>52</sup> Shanghai shuhua chubanshe 上海書畫出版社, ed., *Qin keshi sanzong: Taishan keshi, Langyatai keshi, Yishan keshi* 秦刻石三種, 泰山刻石琅琊台刻石嶧山刻石 (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> An official named Ma Dibo 馬第伯 participated in the rite in 56 AD, leaving detailed descriptions of the settings, meanings of the performance, and supernatural responses. A translation of the record can be found in Bokenkamp, "Record of the Feng and Shan Sacrifices," pp. 253–60.

treatment of Sun's kingdom – the above-mentioned *Wu shu*.<sup>54</sup> What we do know is that the material remains – the Shan-Sacrifice Stele, a large stone with a long inscription wrapping around its rounded surface – have survived. The stone stood in the open on the original mountain site in Yixing 宜興 (today's Yangxian) until 1764, when a pavilion was built to protect it from further exposure to the elements. A replica of the stele was made later, and visitors today can view it in the Wuxi Museum.<sup>55</sup> (See figure 5.)

Ming and Qing historical and antiquarian studies have made it clear that Sun Hao modeled his ritual programs of 276 after those of his Qin and Han imperial predecessors. Using the Yangxian official's report of an auspicious sighting as a pretext, he sponsored a *feng* and *shan* rite and had a commemorative document inscribed on an irregularly-shaped stone. Since the legitimate *feng* sacrifice had to be conducted on the summit of Mount Tai, inaccessible at the time, only the stone for the *shan* sacrifice was erected on the peak of the newly declared State Mountain. However, unlike the tetrasyllabic verses celebrating the moral conduct of sage rulers carved on Qin Shihuangdi's stones,<sup>56</sup> the Shan-Sacrifice Stele lists more than 1,000 appearances of auspicious signs and omens, such as white deer, multicolored phoenixes, sweet dew, and stone seals, to name just a few.<sup>57</sup>

For unclear reasons, in the same year Sun Hao next commissioned the stone stele that is the subject of the present paper – the Chen-Prophecy Stele. The pretext for it was the purported appearance of a divine, written prophecy. As we have seen, this text was considerably shorter than that of the 276 AD stele connected with the *feng* and *shan* rite, but its message was the same: the Great Wu was destined to unify the empire. The three stone fragments of the Chen-Prophecy Stele, when stacked up, also took the shape of a rounded boulder similar to the one used for the Shan-Sacrifice Stele, as well as the Stone Drums

<sup>54</sup> As the grand minister of works (*da sikong* 大司空), Dong Chao likely oversaw the physical preparation of the ritual performance and the production of the stone and inscription. Zhou Chu 周處 (236–297), as chamberlain for ceremonials (*taichang* 太常), would have been in charge of the ceremony itself.

<sup>55</sup> Tang Yunjun 唐云俊 and Shu Youchun 束有春, eds., *Jiangsu wenwu guji tonglan* 江蘇文物古蹟通覽 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000), pp. 224–25. See also <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guoshan\\_Stele](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guoshan_Stele)> (accessed June 6, 2020). The site of the original stone is now part of the Shanjuandong 善卷洞 Scenic District near Yixing. According to a visitor's blog, the stone is housed in a building and inaccessible to the public; see <<https://kknews.cc/zh-my/travel/5xl4n6k.html>> (accessed March 19, 2020).

<sup>56</sup> See Kern, *Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang*, pp. 17–23.

<sup>57</sup> Wu, *Guoshan bei kao*, corrects erroneous readings of earlier studies and provided a new transcription of the Shan-Sacrifice Stele. When Wang Chang published his epigraphic compendium in 1805, many characters had already been lost; see *JSCB*, j. 24, pp. 7a–10a.

and the Qin stone on Mount Tai. This type of commemorative stone, known as a *jie* 礪 (rounded boulder), was a common material and format for inscriptions before the Han dynasty.<sup>58</sup> Adhering to such a convention suggests that Sun Hao attempted to emulate the highly-esteemed imperial rite featuring stone inscriptions, in hopes of turning the political tide to his favor.

To recapitulate, *Danyang ji* was first to mention the existence of “a large boulder broken into three parts” on Mount Yan. Later records indicate that Mount Yan was in fact in Moling county 秣陵縣, where emperor Xiaowu 孝武 (453–464) of the Liu-Song dynasty (420–479) was buried.<sup>59</sup> This information tells us that before their removal to the Tianxi Buddhist temple where Hu Zongshi found them and moved them again in 1091, the three stones were located in a hilly area in present-day Niushoushan 牛首山 Scenic District, twenty-five km south of the Nanjing city center. They had been moved a few more times, but were always within the jurisdiction of a bureaucratic office, and under the supervision of officials working in the capital. The inscription does not mention the geographic location of the rock where the *chen*'s prophetic words appeared, only that Sun Hao sent his officials to decipher the characters. Judging by the short distance between Niushoushan and the city center, the rock with the omen and the stones bearing the inscription commissioned by Sun Hao were mostly likely in the same vicinity. The mountain site in Yixing, where the Shan-Sacrifice Stele was erected and is still standing today, is located about 127 km (79 miles) southwest of Nanjing, according to Google Map image (figure 6). The distance between the two Sun-commissioned steles may be best understood in terms of their respective site-specific choices; one had to be erected near the State Mountain where the *feng* and *shan* rite was performed, and the other near where the *chen*-prophecy words appeared. Their production would have been supported by a considerable amount of manpower and financial resources. Considering the political and possibly economic distress at the time, what other impactful reason might there have been for undertaking these major projects?

Qing-period antiquarian methods again offer valuable insights. In the reduced-size rubbings of the three stones published in Chu Jun's and Niu Yunzhen's *Jinshi tu*, for example,<sup>60</sup> as discussed above, there is a distinctive loop-shaped handle atop the first stone (see figure 2). This faithful rendition reflected the trends in Qing evidential research

<sup>58</sup> Tsien, *Written on Bamboo and Silk*, p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), *Song shu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974) 6, p. 135.

<sup>60</sup> See n. 23, above.

that placed the physicality and materiality of ancient monuments and artifacts on a par with the inscribed words. Chu Jun's contemporary, the poet and painter Wang Shi 王蓍 (fl. 1677-1700), spent one month cleaning away the mud and dirt that had covered the intaglio carvings, revealing the looped handle. The shape of the stele when the stones stacked up, he wrote, "resembled a bell."<sup>61</sup> Although Zhou Zaijun,<sup>62</sup> in addition to Weng Fanggang (mentioned earlier), both made the same observation, Wang Shi argued further that Sun Hao might have intended to erect a pair of stones, one representing a bell and the other, namely the Shan-Sacrifice Stele, a drum. Indeed, in several accounts, the latter has been described as in the shape of a bin or a drum.<sup>63</sup> Since bells and drums cast in bronze were part of the paraphernalia used in court rituals, of which music was an essential component, fashioning the two steles after the shapes of such objects may indicate that Sun Hao and/or his advisers were aiming toward a ritual-based function that could help his goal of retaining political power.

The physical comparability of the two monuments supports such a deduction. The still-extant stone (Shan-Sacrifice Stele) is 2.35 meters high and with a circumference of 3.3 meters. According to Weng Fanggang's careful measurement of the three stones of the Chen-Prophecy Stele when it was in the Prefectural School of Nanjing, the combined height was 2.48 meters with a circumference between 2.11 to 2.74 meters.<sup>64</sup> Such similar dimensions for the two steles are strong evidence that the Wu court workshop followed the ancient tradition of erecting *jie* stones with inscriptions that wrapped around their rounded surfaces, as well as their use in documenting ritual and political activities. Despite the shared origin of the two steles, however, fate seems to have determined very different paths for them. The intended "Drum Stele," namely, our *Guoshan bei* (Shan-Sacrifice Stele), is housed in a protective building as a cultural relic; its more than 1,000 inscribed characters have all but disappeared as a result of the stone's prolonged exposure to the elements. The intended "Bell Stele," our Chen-Prophecy Stele, though having completely perished, enjoys a certain kind of immortality in reincarnated form, thanks to its bold and vigorous calligraphy. The unique script form may have been the singular motivating factor for its removal from Mount Yan to a Buddhist temple and then a government

<sup>61</sup> Wang Shi, *Fulu*, p. 1a-b.

<sup>62</sup> *BK*, p. 10b.

<sup>63</sup> *LHJSJ*, j. 18, p. 22b; Li Xianrong et. al, comps., *Jiaqing zengxiu Yixing xian jiu zhi*, j. 1, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup> *LHJSJ*, j. 18, pp. 29b-30a.

compound, where rubbings in ink and paper had been procured and preserved as works of art. Mounted as a handscroll, a hanging scroll, or cut into a book-size album, the black-and-white impressions of the engraved characters heighten their powerful brushwork and stylistic audacity.

#### CALLIGRAPHY AS TALISMAN

The archaic and yet unorthodox script form of the Chen-Prophecy Stele still exudes a mysterious aura that astonishes students of Chinese art history and calligraphy, who are more attuned to a relatively orderly style used for many ancient stone inscriptions. As already noted, rubbings from the three stone fragments had been made as early as the Song period, if not earlier, making samples of its calligraphy more accessible for visual examination and appreciation. Epigraphers since the Ming began to shift their scholarly interest from the historical circumstances of commissions and moral critiques to calligraphy. As the artistic value of the inscription began to grow considerably in the late-Ming, high-quality rubbings were circulated and treasured among the socially privileged literati and government officials. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ink rubbings, some already centuries old, became considered as rare artifacts themselves, thus replacing stones as the focus for scholarly and collecting interests. Lin Tong 林侗 (1627–1714), an enthusiastic collector of antiquities, reported that he received two rubbings from a friend who went to Jinling on an official trip, and the local magistrate later sent him six more pieces. His extraordinary good fortune incited an envious outpouring from his friend Pan Lei 潘耒 (1646–1708), who moaned: “I was born and grew up in the Jiangnan region, and after longing [for rubbings of the Chen-Prophecy Stele] for almost sixty years, I still have not been able to [obtain any]. How unfair that your book trunk is full of them!”<sup>65</sup>

The robust writing style of the 276 stele has since Tang times often been attributed to Huang Xiang 皇象 (3d c.), known as one of the “Eight Talents of Wu,” a group famous for outstanding arts, crafts, and technical fields such as geomancy and physiognomy.<sup>66</sup> According to the Northern Song scholar-official and calligrapher Huang Bosi 黃伯思 (1079–1118), Huang Xiang was reputed to have excelled in several

<sup>65</sup> Despite his disdain for the content of the inscription, Lin Tong kept several rubbings. He considered its calligraphy simple and unadorned (*jianpu* 簡樸), with a strange and archaic (*qigu* 奇古) character form; see Lin Tong 林侗, *Laizhai jinshi kao* 來齋金石考, cited in Wang, *Xukao*, p. 7a–b.

<sup>66</sup> *SGZ* 63, pp. 1421–26.

styles of calligraphy. However, his authentic pieces were already quite scarce in the eleventh century, when Huang Bosi wrote;<sup>67</sup> therefore Huang Xiang's role in writing the text of the inscription was at most a conjecture. Others believed Su Jian, a director in the Eastern Library and posted as an envoy of the court gentlemen (*Dongguan lingshi lixin zhonglangjiang* 東觀令史立信中郎將), was the calligrapher. This attribution is based on two pieces of evidence. First, Su Jian was listed as the official who “brushed 蘇建書” the text of the Shan-Sacrifice Stele;<sup>68</sup> second, the above-stated office title in the Eastern Library also appeared at the end of the Chen-Prophecy Stele. However, since the name following that title had been long lost, such a deduction remains unverifiable.<sup>69</sup> The aesthetic value and the semantic significance of the writing, however, are not diminished by the author's anonymity, because the form of the bold and vigorous brushwork is intrinsically compelling. The large characters, each measuring about 6 cm high and 5 cm wide, were executed with broad and thick strokes, which makes it likely that they were carved deeply into the stone surface. Their plasticity and architectural force are vividly displayed even in two-dimensional rubbings. Sometimes bound as a portable book (figure 7), the repackaged writing invites reflections on such different media as *chen* literature, talismanic calligraphy, and stone carving created during stressful political times during early-medieval China.

Art historians and epigraphers often comment that the Chen-Prophecy Stele displays characteristics of both seal and clerical (*lishu* 隸書) script-forms. The former was most commonly used for ancient bronze and stone inscriptions, such as the Stone Drums and the Qin stone on Mount Tai, discussed above (see figures 5 and 6). The clerical script, a more refined and streamlined development rising from the need for speedy writing in bureaucratic tasks, was widely adopted by the Han state for stone inscriptions and manuscripts. It is typically rendered with elongated strokes, such as those displayed in a rubbing of the Eastern Han *Shi Chen bei* 史晨碑 (*Stele by Shi Chen*) (figure 8).<sup>70</sup> The

<sup>67</sup> Huang Bosi 黃伯思 (1079–1118), *Dongguan yulun* 東觀餘論 (Shanghai: Hanfenlou, 1922), j. 1, pp. 5a–6a. The work Huang praised was titled *Wenwu tie* 文武帖, a verse composed by the Eastern Han official Gao Biao 高彪; it admonished officials on proper moral conduct. However, later copies indicate that Huang Xian transcribed the verse in the *zhangcao* 章草 style, which is a cursive form of the clerical script and not the seal script used in the Chen-Prophecy Stele.

<sup>68</sup> Though now missing, due to surface deterioration, the phrase “Su Jian shu” was visible in earlier rubbings; see commentary in *LHJSJ*, j. 18, p. 26a.

<sup>69</sup> *LHJSJ*, j. 18, p. 32b. Modern scholars disregard either the Huang Xiang or the Su Jian attribution; see Shao, “Ji Song ta Sanguo,” p. 15.

<sup>70</sup> The rubbing was made in the 19th c., and is now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art: <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/36445>> (accessed July 5, 2020).

horizontal and diagonal strokes are typically extended with thickening triangular endings, adding a touch of ornamental grace to the square characters. The different ways that “*chen* 臣” was written, comparing *Stele by Shi Chen* and the Qin stone, aptly illustrates this stylistic difference between *lishu* and *zhuanshu* – the brush strokes of the former are angular and discharged while the latter rounded and restrained. However, the writing in the Chen-Prophecy Stele is unlike most early seal-script stone inscriptions, mostly due to the brushstrokes’ seemingly incongruous angularity and pronounced sharp endings. Such calligraphic aberrance has the effect of complicating visual reception, especially if we examine them in the context of third-century stone engravings. The elongated steely strokes may have been the reason scholars in the past sometimes described the script as a seal and clerical hybrid.<sup>71</sup> However, close examination reveals that its orthography is that of the seal script rather than the clerical script.

As table 1 shows, Chinese characters underwent a noticeable orthographic transformation from the seal to the clerical script form, probably during the Eastern Zhou and on through the Han dynasties. It also shows that the differences between the clerical and the regular scripts are mostly stylistic. To write out the text for the Chen-Prophecy Stele, the calligrapher faithfully adhered to the orthographic principles of seal script. But he wielded his brush with powerful movements that gave each stroke a heavy squarish beginning and sharp ending, in clear contrast to the uniformly rounded strokes used in earlier seal-script stone carvings. Although there are two types of seal script – the *dazhuan* in pre-Qin writings and *xiaozhuan* after the Qin, their differences were stylistic, with only minor structural variations. The *dazhuan* characters, exemplified in bronze inscriptions and the Stone Drums, have dynamic and varied strokes (figure 9), while those of *xiaozhuan* are relatively uniform in size and stroke weight (figure 10). The characters of the Chen-Prophecy Stele, on the other hand, were executed in ways that conformed neither to the large nor small seal-script, prompting Guo Zongchang to voice his stern condemnation. Their orthography, as seen in table 1, is that of the seal script (2d column) rather than the clerical script (3d column). The elongated and tapering stroke endings have probably also given rise to the descriptive term *xuanzhen zhuan* 懸針篆 (“hanging-needle seal-script”) to characterize it.

<sup>71</sup> With the exception of Weng Fanggang, who firmly argued that the writing was in the seal, rather than the clerical, script; see his *LHJSJ*, j. 18, p. 32b.

Although a Tang-period lexicon first mentioned the term *xuanzhen zhuan*,<sup>72</sup> the elegant style may have already been adapted to inscribe on bronzes as early as the Warring States period (475–221 BC). One notable example is the long inscription on a large iron-footed bronze tripod excavated from the tomb of king Cuo 聾王 (r. 327–309 BC) of the ancient state of Zhongshan 中山國, in Hebei province.<sup>73</sup> The 469 characters were skillfully cast on the exterior surfaces of its lid and body (figure 11),<sup>74</sup> displaying taut thread-like stroke lines. Short decorative strokes were added to certain characters, and elongated vertical and diagonal strokes have smoothly tapering endings. According to the modern scholar Wu Xiaolong, from the sixth through the fourth centuries BC, bronze inscriptions manifested a trend towards beautification and ornamentation. He argues that the calligraphic style of the Zhongshan state was probably chosen by king Cuo himself to “construct a visual image that embodied the strength and qualities of himself and his regime.”<sup>75</sup> Unlike most Warring States bronze inscriptions cast on the vessel’s interiors, the one on the king’s tripod appears on the exterior, which was likely designed to invite public viewing and to project power and aristocratic elegance through the sheer visual beauty of its calligraphy.

It is natural that royal elites favored ornamental writings on the luxurious artifacts they commissioned or had made in their honor; the types and degrees of the embellishment became so flamboyant that they sometimes masked the writings’ verbal function. The two inlaid bronze jars excavated from the tomb of Liu Sheng 劉勝 (ca. 154–113/112 BC), king Jing of Zhongshan 中山靖王, in Mancheng 滿城, Hebei province

<sup>72</sup> See Xu Jian 徐堅 (659–729), *Chuxue ji* 初學記 (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1972), vol. 2, j. 21, p. 13a.

<sup>73</sup> Hebei sheng wenwu yanjiusuo 河北省文物研究所, ed., *Cuo mu: Zhanguo Zhongshan guo guowang zhi mu* 聾墓, 戰國中山國國王之墓 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1996), pl. 3.

<sup>74</sup> In his comprehensive study of the Zhongshan state bronze vessel under discussion, Wu Xiaolong used the word “incised” to characterize the method by which the inscription was produced; see Wu Xiaolong, *Material Culture, Power, and Identity in Ancient China* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge U.P., 2017), p. 150. However, scholars in China have debated that characterization, especially as to whether the inscription was engraved/incised or cast on the vessel. A researcher at the Hebei Provincial Museum, Hao Jianwen 郝建文, believed the characters were first carved on a mould with a fine instrument, before being cast in bronze. As a photographer employed by the Hebei Provincial Museum, Hao has had many opportunities to closely study the vessel’s surface, which shows lateral pressure ridges visible along many strokes. These ridges, Hao argues, were the results of pressing the instrument on the soft mould. He also notices the very faint boundary lines that appear to have been grid lines for aligning the characters in each column. I am in agreement with his assessment, and grateful that Mr. Hao shared his photography with me. His article is available at two website sources: <[https://www.sohu.com/a/256501363\\_503033](https://www.sohu.com/a/256501363_503033)> (accessed July 7, 2020); and <<https://kknews.cc/culture/qozo3mr.html>> (accessed July 7, 2020).

<sup>75</sup> Wu, *Material Culture*, pp. 168–69.

exemplify this aesthetic preference. In each vessel, a text celebrating the joy of wine covers the decorative bands on the jars' bulging bellies and lids (figure 12). The seal-script characters in gold and silver inlay have curvilinear lines with added curls, hooks, birds, and fish images, imbuing the cast characters with an aspect of extravagance. François Louis has argued that such an ornamental design, when considered together with the content of the inscription, served a ritual purpose pertaining to Liu Sheng's epicurean lifestyle. The design also offered the prospect of sensual pleasure in the king's afterlife, when the objects were interred in his tomb.<sup>76</sup> So much more flamboyant than what is seen in the Chen-Prophecy Stele (see the selected characters in table 2), the Liu bronze jar decorative writings seem to visually transform the regularized seal-script characters; they must have solicited responses at that time beyond the intended message in the writing. The almost outlandish style was akin to encryption, as it not only dazzled the eye but also invited responses of awe and disbelief, as in magic tricks.

The scholar who brushed the text to be engraved on the three stones of the Chen-Prophecy Stele was no doubt a skilled calligrapher who worked at the highest cultural institution of the state, the Eastern Library, which had had connections to well-known calligraphers starting back in Eastern Han. He would have been quite familiar with the script that had long been established as the authoritative form of commemorative writing. The same script was also used for the Shan-Sacrifice Stele, but there the characters were uniformly placed within a slightly elongated invisible grid (figure 13), and the strokes of even thickness were carefully executed in a manner similar to that of the Stone Drums and Qin stone inscriptions. To achieve such controlled brushwork, the writer had to keep the tip of the brush firmly placed in the center of the stroke, a technique known as *cangfeng* 藏鋒 ("concealed tip"), lifting the brush slowly upon completing each stroke.<sup>77</sup> This type of brush movement is not unlike a choreographed ritual performance, guided by the principle of stability and conformity. Conversely, as if to respond to the mysterious power of the *chen* (prophetic) words, the anonymous calligrapher from the Eastern Library of the Wu state maneuvered his brush to lengthen and extend the downward strokes. The sharp endings had to be executed by tilting the brush, thereby exposing

<sup>76</sup> François Louis, "Written Ornament—Ornamental Writing: Birdscript of the Early Han Dynasty and the Art of Enchanting," *Ars Orientalis* 22 (2003), pp. 16–17.

<sup>77</sup> The special brush techniques involved in writing seal- and clerical-script calligraphy are elucidated in Bai Qianshen, *Yü gu wei tu he Juanjuan favu* 與古爲徒和娟娟髮屋 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2016), pp. 69–83.

the tip of the brush, known as *loufeng* 露鋒 (“exposed tip”). Moreover, to anticipate the characters to be transferred onto the stone surface using sharp carving tools, the calligrapher also began each stroke by pausing and pressing the brush to create a wedge-shaped form. The contrast between angular beginnings and sharp endings of chisel work, as a result, seems, in my opinion, to upset the stability and balance of the characters per se, leading to visual ambiguity and surprise. Such unseemly incongruity may have caused scholars to express uncertain terms regarding the calligraphy of the Chen-Prophecy Stele.

Although the thread-like (hanging-needle) stroke was not a third-century AD invention, as I have argued above, the powerful effect of the Chen-Prophecy Stele is reinforced by the scale and angularity of the characters. Their sharp corners definitively replaced the rounded ones seen in seal-script writings commonly employed for pre-Qin ritual or commemorative stone monuments. When the text was first carved on the stones, the freshly chiseled graphs with their broad exaggerating stroke-lines must have generated quite a strong reaction tinged with admiration and puzzlement. The authority carried by the imperially sponsored writing, and the orthodoxy of the seal script, would almost be simultaneously challenged by the mystical nature of the prophecy and the irregularity of the brushwork. Both the content and style of the writing effectuated Sun Hao’s call for divine protection. Although it cannot be certain to what extent he was involved in the choice of the script form, he quite possibly witnessed the execution of the carving at a regional or court workshop. History ultimately judged the veracity of the prophecy, but it was plausible that in the year 276 it was the belief in the *chen*’s magical power that informed such unusual calligraphy. Like later Daoist charms and spells that used composite characters as a visual medium to communicate with the spirits,<sup>78</sup> the bold and dynamic calligraphy brushed by the Eastern Library official was at once artistic and talismanic.

Analyses of the so-called birdschrift seals that have been excavated in the Hunan region point to their source of inspiration for the ornamental language of the Liu Sheng vessels as coming from the south.<sup>79</sup> Archeological evidence suggests that the origins of the elegant script of the king Cuo bronze inscriptions, discussed above, can be traced to the ancient Chu kingdom, situated generally in Hunan and Hubei provinces.<sup>80</sup> Interpreting the calligraphy of the Chen-Prophecy Stele in terms of culture and geography, art historian Wang Jingxian 王靖憲 (b.

<sup>78</sup> Louis, “Written Ornament,” p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>80</sup> Wu, *Material Culture*, p. 168; Francois, “Written Ornament,” pp. 23–27.

1928) argues that as early as the Warring States period, the influence of decorative writing from Chu was prevalent in the Yangtze River region, where the Wu state was located.<sup>81</sup> Recent discovery of a set of twenty-six bronze chime-bells from a Chu-area tomb in Xichuan 淅川, Henan province, offers more insights into this connection. Inscribed on the central panels of seventeen of the twenty-six bells is a text (see figure 14) stating that the bells were made in ca. 550 BC for a grandson of a Chu king.<sup>82</sup> The archaic orthography and elongated characters recall those of king Cuo's inscriptions, though the Xichuan writings display less ostensibility and more uniformity. While later art historians have employed "hanging-needle" to describe a special thread-like writing, such a style was already used for Eastern Han stele heading-texts in the second century AD.<sup>83</sup> Brush manipulation for special visual effects is a universal calligraphic practice; in ancient Chinese epigraphic writing, variant seal-script designs served not only to distinguish headings from main texts, but also as vehicles for delivering special messages and divine power, as scholars have opined. Carving characters with tapering and sharp stroke endings on stone surfaces was understandably easier than casting them in bronze, especially if the person who brushed them already produced a clearly distinguishable style in the original work. The calligrapher of the Chen-Prophecy Stele would have consciously wished to use a bolder and more flamboyant calligraphy as an artistic agency to convey the potency of the prophecy, forcefully and magically.

#### EPILOGUE: THE MODERN ANTIQUARIAN GAZE

Ironically, the writing on the three stones that was mocked by Song Neo-Confucian scholars as "scribbles on a cow's belly" became, in the eyes of Qing antiquarians, an unusual display of vigor through its archaic spirit. Their new methodologies in epigraphy and paleography exerted much influence on both the practice and appreciation of calligraphy.<sup>84</sup> This was a natural concomitant of the late-Ming and Qing

<sup>81</sup> Wang, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao*, p. 40.

<sup>82</sup> Yang Xiaoneng, *The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology: Celebrated Discoveries from the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1999), pp. 272–75. Depending on the size of the bells, some feature a complete version of the text, while others feature one-half, one-third, and one-quarter of the text (n. 6, p. 274).

<sup>83</sup> Such as those seen in the Stele of Jing Jun 景君碑 and the Stele of Yin Zhou 尹宙碑, both dated to the Eastern Han period. In particular, the latter's two seal-script characters in the heading, *cong* 從 and *ming* 銘, display prominent hanging-needle strokes very similar to those seen in the Chen-Prophecy Stele.

<sup>84</sup> See Amy McNair, "Engraved Calligraphy in China: Recension and Reception," *Art Bul-*

evidential research, which, much like the European breakthroughs in textual analysis (consider the line of influential scholarship, from Erasmus, early on, to Valla to Scaliger and beyond), emphasized the use of epigraphic materials, commentary, private letters, and much more as potentially authentic sources in the correcting of interpretational errors, and verification of historical events. Chinese scholars as well examined not only the intellectual content of texts but the relevant aesthetic and material contexts. Such an approach gave birth to the so-called Epigraphic School of Chinese calligraphy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; its proponents deliberately turned to bold and unadorned stone inscriptions like these ones from third-century Wu for sources of inventive calligraphic line and execution.<sup>85</sup> Using ink and brush and with the intention to create original works on paper, artists endeavored to emulate jagged and rough-edged characters carved on hard materials. Many even tried to reproduce the blunt and uneven brushstrokes caused by lithic cracking and erosion. The latter features were clearly visible in rubbings, and appealed to the Epigraphic School enormously.

One of the most innovative artists of the School was the calligrapher, seal carver, and painter Jin Nong 金農 (1687–1764), who fashioned a unique style inspired by the Chen-Prophecy Stele. As a long writing situated below an inked image of bamboo branches shows (figure 15), the square characters are placed in orderly fashion within lined grids, executed with block-like strokes in irregular thickness.<sup>86</sup> The original piece of brushed calligraphy on paper that was the template used for carving the three stones in 276 would have looked very much like Jin Nong's work, albeit in the seal script then prevalent. Its framework of columns and rows of characters were carefully aligned. In Jin Nong's calligraphy, there is a noticeable contrast between the broad and firm horizontal strokes and thin and wiggly vertical ones, and with the consistently prominent hanging-needle feature. He also broke the "character within a square" monotony by extending his diagonal strokes across the entire character space and across the grid

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*letin* 77.1 (1995), pp. 106–14. A thorough examination of the intellectual trend that fostered the development of epigraphic calligraphy in the early-Qing period is in Qianshen Bai, *Fu Shan's World: The Transformation of Chinese Calligraphy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), pp. 153–62.

<sup>85</sup> See Bai, *Fu Shan's World*, pp. 260–62. A succinct account of the Epigraphic School of calligraphy can be found in Shi-ye Liu, "In Pursuit of Authenticity: The Epigraphic School of Chinese Calligraphy," <<https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2014/epigraphic-school>> (accessed July 26, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> A brief discussion of Jin Nong's calligraphy is in Robert E. Harrist and Wen Fong, eds.,

lines; these strokes strike one as wind-swept vines, fluttering at an angle off their trees. Jin Nong's calligraphy is known as *qishu* 漆書 ("lacquer writing"); this is because he adapted the shape of the flat-edged brush artisans used to apply lacquer. However, he wrote his characters in clerical script, rather than the seal script used for the Chen-Prophecy Stele. As table 1 shows, the orthography of the clerical and seal scripts is quite different, with the clerical script closer to the standard script prevalent in Jin Nong's time.

The result of Jin Nong's creativity was an art of writing more chiseled than brushed; it eliminates the roundness and graceful linearity associated with a soft animal-hair instrument. Although he never served in government posts, Jin Nong won much praise from his contemporaries, who admired his artistic versatility and knowledge in classical scholarship. He pursued a broad network, spending much time traveling and socializing with artists and Buddhist monks, as well as pursuing epigraphic studies. His innovation – the blending of stone carving and brush writing – not only injected fresh energy into an important and time-honored literati tradition, but also immortalized the arcane, divinely prophetic stone engraving from a cultural milieu removed by many centuries.<sup>87</sup>

The overall historiography of the Chen-Prophecy Stele provides a story of the branchings and evolutions, as well as occasional sharp divergences, of Chinese scholars' relationship with their country's remote past. While their commentaries routinely referenced the monument's association with early-medieval Chinese political ritual performance (the *feng* and *shan* rites) and its religious beliefs (in this case a divinely delivered *chen*-prophecy), their critical views were nonetheless shaped by the moral standards and attitudes of their own times. The varied responses to what the stele represented echo David Lowenthal's observation, summed up in the title of his book *The Past Is a Foreign Country*.<sup>88</sup> Although his wide-ranging studies concern the Western world after the Renaissance, the desire to make the past more meaningful and accessible through literary and antiquarian critique is universal.<sup>89</sup> In China,

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*The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliot Collection* (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1999), pp. 192–93.

<sup>87</sup> For an analysis of Jin Nong's calligraphy in the political and ethno-cultural context of the Qing dynasty, see Jonathan Hay, "Culture, Ethnicity, and Empire in the Work of Two Eighteenth-Century 'Eccentric' Artists," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 35 (Spring 1999), pp. 201–23.

<sup>88</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1985).

<sup>89</sup> A notable such measure is the rebuilding of the Ancient Library of Alexandria in Egypt,

the third-century stele through most of its life existed in Nanjing as three broken stones inscribed with enigmatic words, and its cultural value rose and fell over fifteen centuries of successive dynasties. Its “past,” in fact, was an aggregation of many pasts, each through the lens of Chinese scholar-officials’ ideas and ideals about how antiquities and history should be appropriated, assessed, and remembered.

In contrast to the many relics and monuments studied by Lowenthal, however, the physical condition of the three stones of the Wu state did not change much from their birth in 276 to year 1805, despite their being broken into three parts; and they had been in the same location for almost 800 years. What had been the subject of shifting criticisms were the words carved on them, as well as the archaic script form used to write them. When the educated elite of the Song dynasty first pursued their epigraphy, their efforts were aimed mainly at retrieving and documenting ancient records. Later on, Qing scholars took a more holistic and pragmatic approach to antiquities, embracing the empirical basis behind textual criticism, and they were increasingly aware of certain objects’ ritual functions in early China.

All changed after the 1805 fire obliterated the stones’ material remains, with the result that reproductions of the engraved characters, the inked rubbings, became valuable surrogates. Artists eventually invested their energy more and more into looking at and trying to emulate the vigorously chiseled characters from dramatically laden moments in the past. Naturally, the longer one gazes at the odd graphic forms, now appearing as white graphs revealed against ink-black background (figure 16), the more one can feel compelled to seek out semantic meanings in the text, plus the historical context of the inscription’s moment of creation. Perhaps because of the absence of the material remains – those Wu stones, rather than taking the moral or exegetical approach of their Song and Qing predecessors, a few modern antiquarians have even taken to the poetics of inscriptions. In 1898 the eminent literatus calligrapher and painter Wu Changshuo 吳昌碩 (1844–1927) made a special trip to Yangxian to visit the Shan-Sacrifice Stele. Inspired by the stone’s unusually rotund body and rough contour, he wrote a long poem, comparing the style of its calligraphy to that of the Chen-Prophesy Stele.<sup>90</sup> By this time the latter had already been destroyed, and the

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see Alexander Stille, *The Future of the Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), chap. 9.

<sup>90</sup> The poem is published in Wu Dongmai 吳東邁, ed., *Wu Changshuo tanyilu* 吳昌碩談藝錄 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 2017), p. 140.

characters carved on the rotund stone he visited were hardly legible, but Wu's interest was more than just in "reading." Following in the footsteps of so many Qing antiquarians before him, he took a special *fangbei* 訪碑 ("seeking steles") to satisfy his desire to view the physical remains of one of the paired stone monuments commissioned by Sun Hao, and perhaps more importantly, to study its calligraphy. In a similar way to the Latin letter forms used in Roman inscriptions, seal-script characters represent the cultural and aesthetic quintessence of China's antiquity. Indeed, as the foremost seal-script calligrapher of his time, Wu Changshuo mentioned Su Jian, who was credited as the calligrapher of the Shan-Sacrifice Stele. (As mentioned above, many scholars believed Su Jian also brushed the original text for the Chen-Prophecy Stele.) Acknowledging an "addiction" to antiquities (*pigu* 癖古), Wu lingered for three days and nights, caressing the stone's weathered and cracked surface and lamenting its fading words. And he wept.

Regarding Sun Hao, Wu Changshuo's poem echoed generations of his forebears by contrasting the ill-fated throne of Wu to the grandeur of the Qin and Han emperors. Wu also invoked the venerable *feng* and *shan* rites to highlight the historical significance of the two steles Sun Hao sponsored in 276, and expressed his own wish to one day ascend Mount Tai himself and visit the Qin Stone.<sup>91</sup> But he probably never had the chance, as China was entering one of the most turbulent periods in its history, facing natural disasters, social unrest, and particularly a series of debilitating military confrontations.<sup>92</sup> Sensitive and cognizant of their homeland's rich cultural heritage, and in the hope of safeguarding and preserving its ancient artifacts as much as they could in such critical times, late-Qing antiquarians, educators, and intellectuals amassed large collections of antiquities and applied new methodologies to study and catalogue them.<sup>93</sup> In the early-twentieth century, with the

<sup>91</sup> The four sentences (Wu, *Wu Changshuo*, p. 140) referencing the *feng* and *shan* rites are: "立碑四載吳祚移，秦皇漢武安可希。嵩岱封禪碑尤奇，何時更躡青雲梯" ("Four years after the erection of the stele, the Wu throne was removed; [Indeed] it was not at all easy to strive for the [high accomplishment] of emperors Qin Shihuangdi and Han Wudi. The stones [commemorating] the *feng* and *shan* rites at Mt. Song and Mt. Tai must be even more spectacular and rare; when would [I] be able to step on the ladders of blue clouds [to see them]?" ) Although Wu Changshuo mentioned both Mt. Song and Mt. Tai, the only recorded *feng* and *shan* rites conducted at Mt. Song (also known as Taishishan 太室山 or Shaoshishan 少室山), in Henan province, were in 696 by empress Wu of the Tang dynasty.

<sup>92</sup> The most devastating was the protracted civil war known as the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), which caused about 20 to 30 million deaths. In the international arena, the Qing court was forced to open several treaty ports for trade with Western countries, following the two Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860).

<sup>93</sup> For an informative study of the collecting activities of late-Qing scholar-collectors, particularly Wu Dacheng (1835–1902), see Qianshen Bai, "Antiquarianism in Time of Crisis: On

overthrow of China's two-thousand-year-old imperial governance, and scholars' growing interest in Western-style historiography, the epistemology of evidential research changed as they adopted a new worldview and scientific methodology.<sup>94</sup>

The expansion of capitalism and markets has helped push the collecting and circulation of antiquities into a commercial activity.<sup>95</sup> This trend has only accelerated, as rapid economic development in China has propelled growth in recent decades. Categorized as rare historical and artistic treasures, the best specimens of the old rubbings that were created directly from the three stones before 1805 have entered a number of museums and libraries. Various recensions of rubbings taken from engravings based on earlier rubbings may still be in private hands,<sup>96</sup> but those of good quality with prestigious provenances eventually become known to the public, often by way of auctions.<sup>97</sup> Today, professionally trained curators of libraries and museums, as well as for-profit auction houses, have largely assumed the role of custodians of China's cultural relics. As zealous treasure seekers and collectors mull over old rubbings, their antiquarian journey back to the year 276 could be as perplexing and exciting as the Chen-Prophecy Stele was enigmatic and wonder-provoking.

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the Collecting Practices of Late-Qing Government Officials, 1861–1911,” in Alain Schnapp, ed., *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), pp. 386–403. See also Brown, *Pastimes*, pp. 51–72.

<sup>94</sup> The evolution of evidential research and antiquarian scholarship roughly from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries is explored in Q. Edward Wang, “Beyond East and West: Antiquarianism, Evidential Learning, and Global Trends in Historical Study,” *Journal of World History* (Dec. 2008), pp. 489–519.

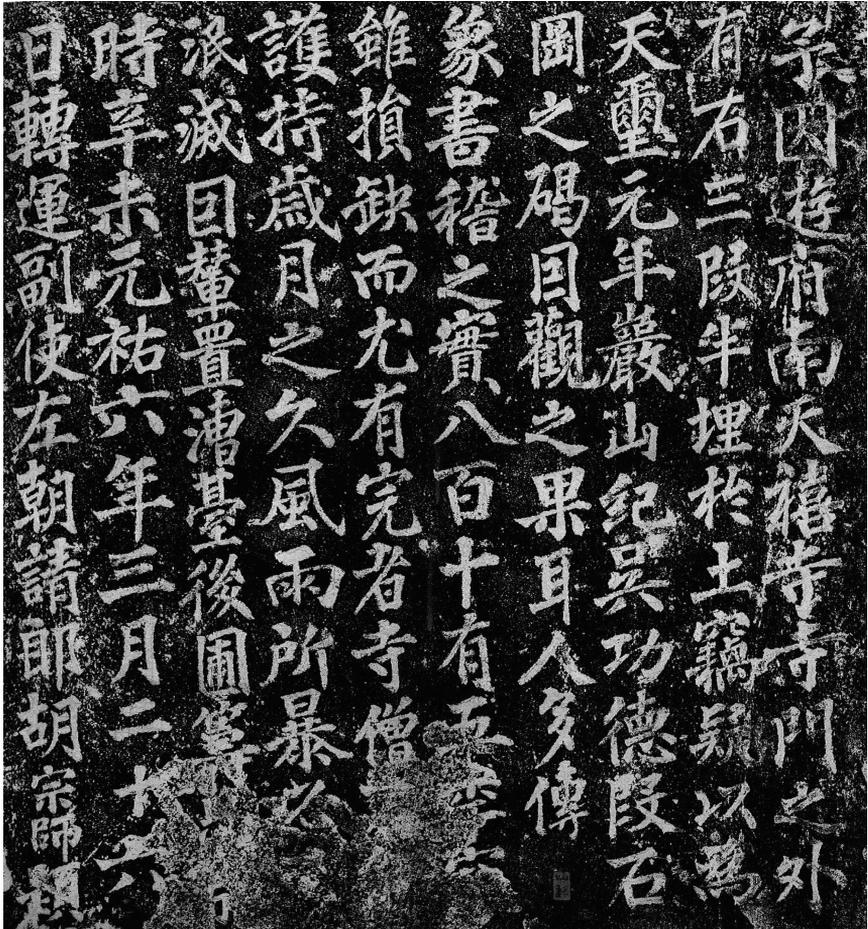
<sup>95</sup> Luo Zhenyu, mentioned earlier, became an art dealer many of whose clients were Japanese; see Brown, *Pastimes*, pp. 103–20. Wu Changshuo also worked as a professional artist, selling paintings and calligraphy for a living in Shanghai. Wu was also active in the circle of Japanese art collectors and dealers; see Aida Yuen Wong, *Parting the Mists: Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-style Painting in Modern China* (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies: U. Hawai'i P., 2006), pp. 77–99.

<sup>96</sup> A list of new engravings based on earlier rubbings of the Chen-Prophecy Stele can be found in Shao, “Ji Song ta Sanguo,” p. 21.

<sup>97</sup> E.g., a Ming rubbing of the Chen-Prophecy Stele and another Ming rubbing of the Shan-Sacrifice Stele, both belonging to the famed collector Zhu Yi'an 朱翼龠 (1882–1937), were donated to the Palace Museum in Beijing. They have been published respectively as *Ming ta Tianfa shenchen bei* 明拓天發神讖碑 (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2015), and *Ming ta shan guoshan bei* 明拓禪國山碑 (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2015). A Ming rubbing of the Chen-Prophecy Stele, formerly in the collection of Tianfanglou 天放樓, the studio name of Zhao Liewen, is now in the collection of the Shanghai Library. (See n. 35, above, for Zhao Liewen). See also Shanghai tushuguan, ed., *Shanghai tushuguan cang shanben beitie*, vol. 1, pp. 76–84.

*LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS*

- BK*        Zhou Zaijun 周在浚, *Tianfa shenchen beikao* 天發神讖碑攷  
*JSCB*     Wang Chang 王昶, *Jinshi cuibian* 金石萃編  
*LHJSJ*    Weng Fanggang 翁方綱, *Liang Han jinshi ji* 兩漢金石記  
*SGZ*      Chen Shou 陳壽, *Sanguo zhi* 三國志



*Figure 1. Colophon by Hu Zongshi, 1091*

*Ming-era rubbing. Shanghai Library. After Feng Lei, ed., Tianfa shenchen bei (cited n. 17), p. 3.*



Figure 2. Chen-Prophecy Stele

Rubbing of Chu Jun's explanatory reconstruction. After Niu and Chu, *Jinshi tu* (cited n. 23), vol. 4 (unpaged).

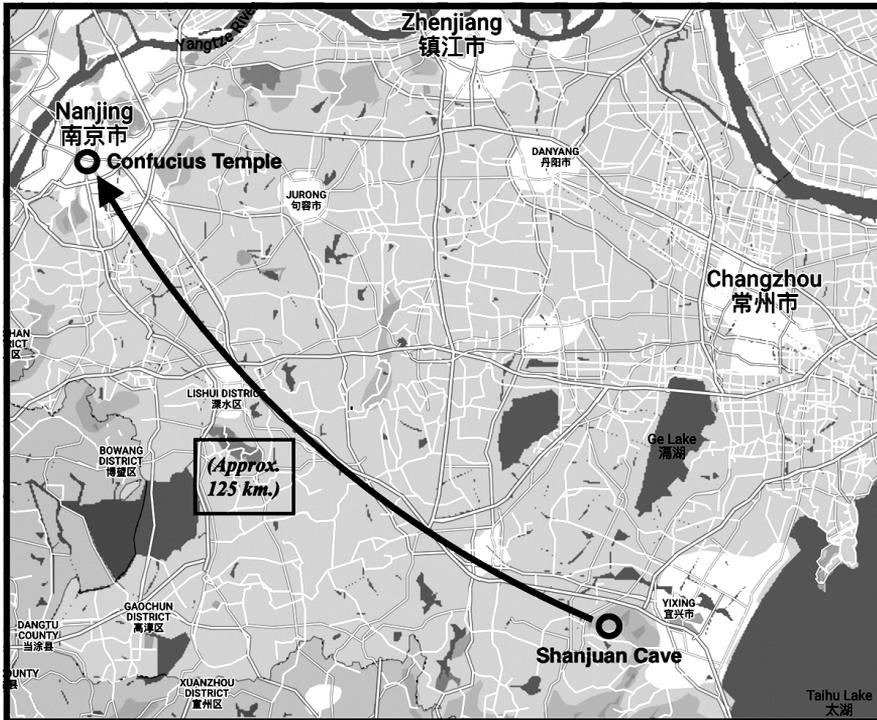




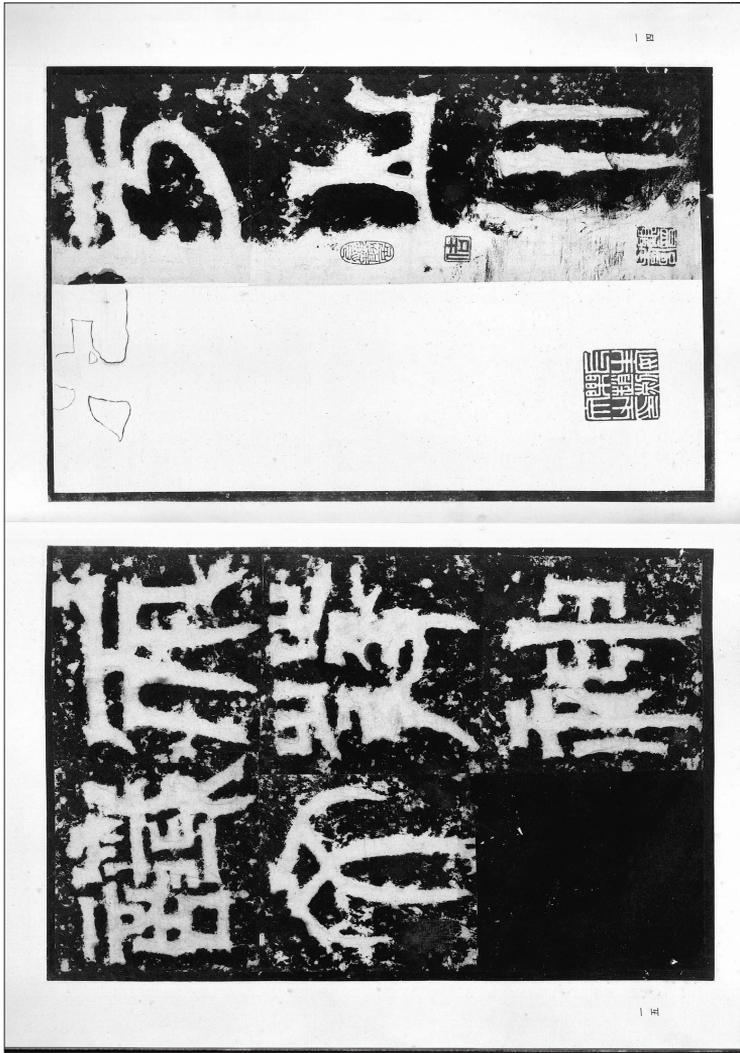


*Figure 5. Replica of the Shan-Sacrifice Stele*

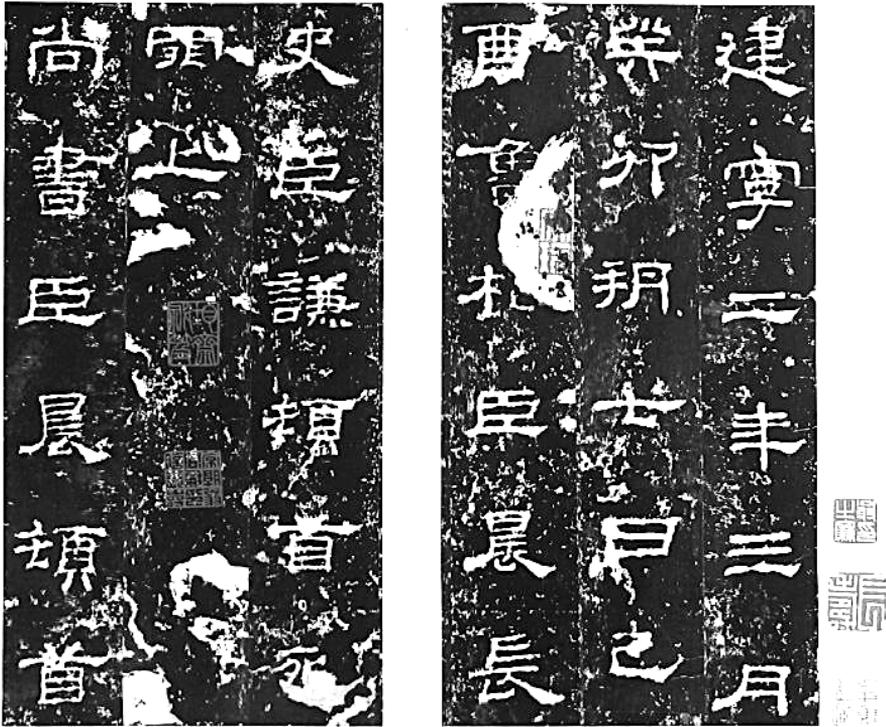
Wuxi Museum. After <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guoshan\\_Stele](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guoshan_Stele)>, accessed June 6, 2020.



*Figure 6. Distance between the Confucian Temple and Shanjuandong, in Nanjing. Former is where the three stones of the Chen-Prophecy Stele were installed before 1805; latter is where the Shan-Sacrifice Stele is located. Map based on a Google Map image in the public domain.*



*Figure 7. Rubbings of the Chen-Prophesy Stele Bound as a Book*  
A view of two pages from the book, in the collection of Shanghai Library. After Shanghai tushuguan, Hanmo guibao, pp. 14-15. They show characters that were first cut from a rubbing of the Chen-Prophesy Stele, then rearranged and remounted as separate pages of the book. We see the outline of a partial character in the blank area of the right-hand page. It was probably made by the original collector of the rubbing, whose seal is also visible below it.



*Figure 8. Stele of Shi Chen*

*Qing-era rubbing. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wan-go H. C. Weng, 1992. Accession Number: 1992.166.2a-ff.*



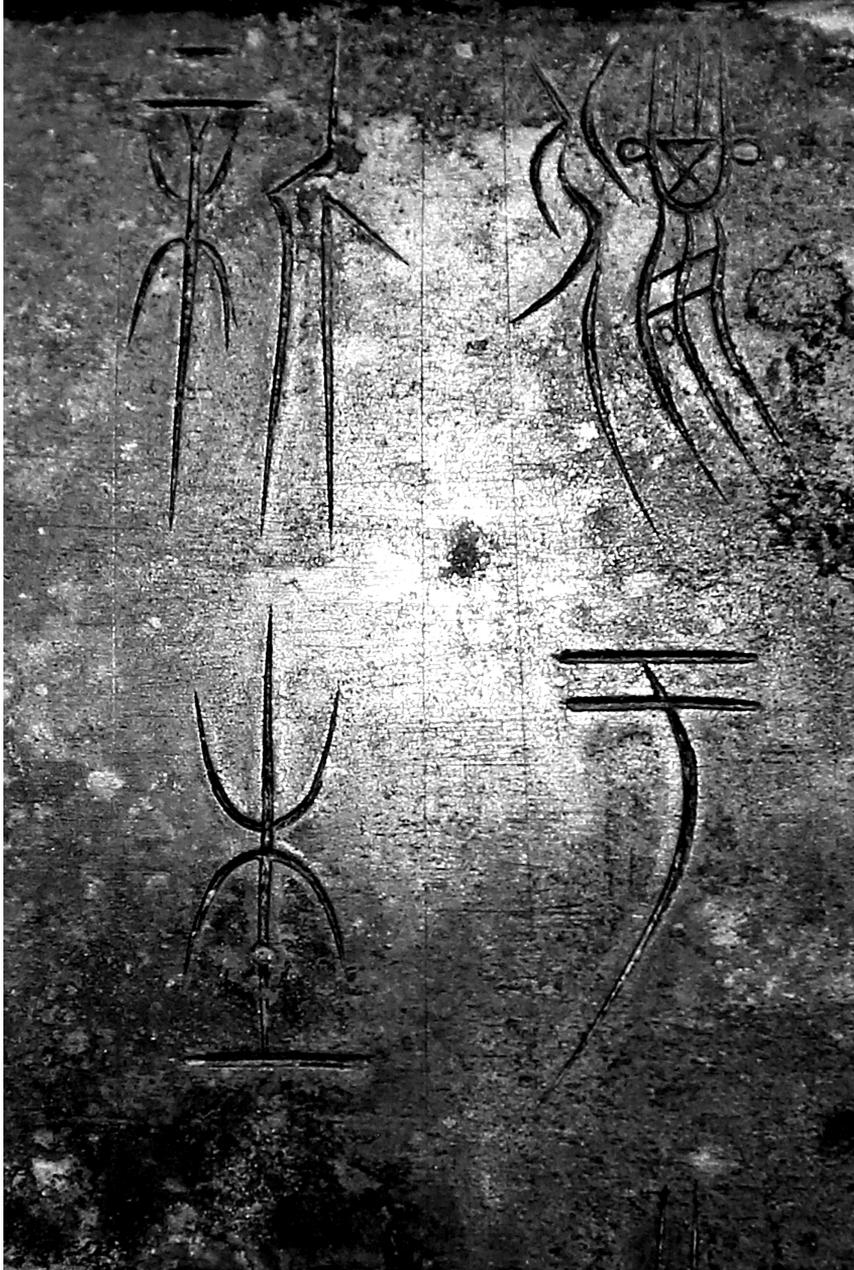
*Figure 9. Inscriptions on the Stone Drums (Eastern Zhou)*

*Ming-era rubbing. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wan-go H. C. Weng, 1992. Accession Number: 1992.166.1a, b.*



*Figure 10. Stone Inscription on Mt. Tai, 210 BC; Detail*

*Qing-era rubbing. After Zhongguo guojia tushuguan 中國國家圖書館, ed., Zhongguo guojia tushuguan beitie jinghua 中國國家圖書館碑帖精華 (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2001), vol. 1, p. 5.*

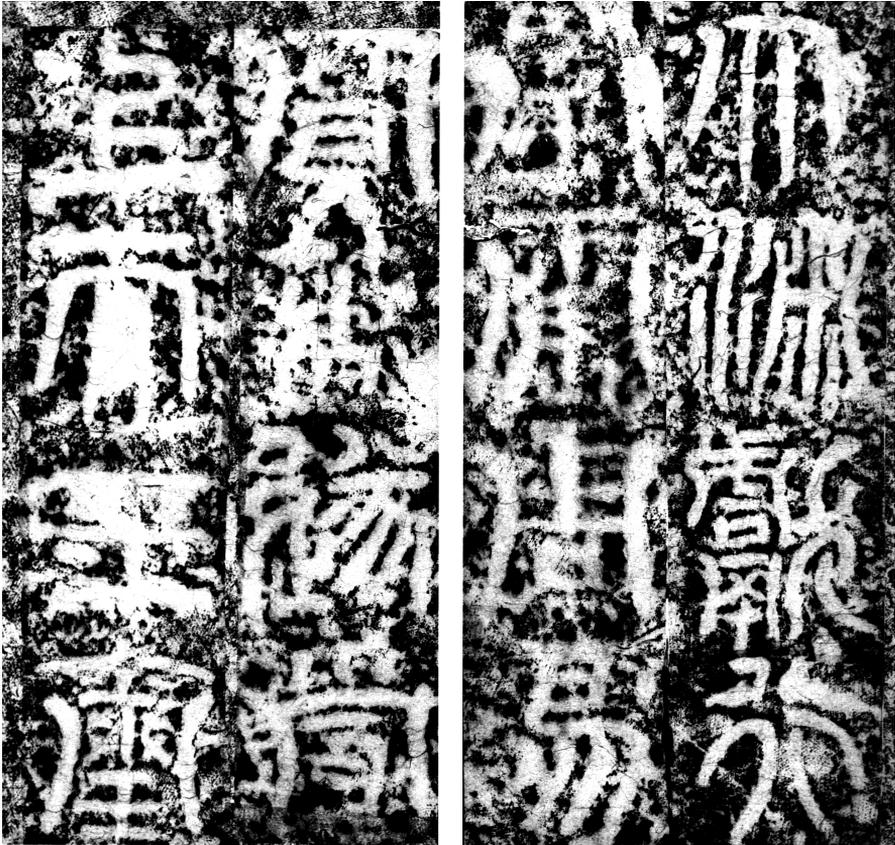


*Figure 11. Inscription on the Iron Tripod Excavated from Tomb of King Cuo  
(r. 327-309 BC)*

*Detail of inscription cast on the exterior surface of tripod. After <[https://www.sohu.com/a/216559921\\_503033](https://www.sohu.com/a/216559921_503033)>. Accessed October 7, 2020, with author's permission.*



*Figure 12. Bronze Hu Jar with Bird-script Design; Detail  
From tomb of Liu Sheng (ca. 154 BC-113/112 BC), Mancheng, Hebei. After Yang,  
Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology (cited n. 82), p. 398.*



*Figure 13. Shan-Sacrifice Stele; Detail*

*Ming-era rubbing. After Liu Zhengcheng 劉正成, ed., Zhongguo shufa quanji 中國書法全集 (Beijing: Rongbaozhai chubanshe, 2007), vol. 10, p. 81.*



*Figure 14. Inscription on Chu Bronze Chime-Bell (ca. 550 BC)*

*From Tomb 2, Xiasi, Xichuan, Henan province. After Yang, Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology, p. 274.*





Figure 16. *Chen-Prophecy Stele; Detail Ming-era rubbing. After Liu, Zhongguo shufa quanji, vol. 10, pp. 64-65.*

*Table 1. Comparison of Orthography and Calligraphy*

Key:

TFSC= Stele of the Chen Prophecy (“Tianfa shenchen bei” 天發神識碑)

SS= Seal script (*zhuanshu* 篆書)

CS= Clerical script (*lishu* 隸書)

RS= Regular script (*kaishu* 楷書), or Standard script

JN=Jin Nong 金農 (1687-1763)

| CHARAC-<br>TERS | TFSC  | SS  | CS  | RS  | JN   |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|--|
| 行               |    |    |    |    |    |
| 李               |    |    |    |    |    |
| 尉               |   |   |   |   |   |
| 字               |  |  |  |  |  |
| 書               |  |  |  |  |  |

*Table 2. Selected Ornamental and Graphic Characters*

From inscriptions on hu jar from tomb of Liu Sheng ("LS," below) and from "Stele of the Chen Prophecy" ("TFSC"). Sources: Louis, "Written Ornament" (cited n. 76, above), fig. 4; for the LS column; and Feng, ed., Tianfa shenchen bei (cited n. 17, above), unpagged; for the TFSC column).

CHARACTERS  
IN REGULAR  
SCRIPT

LS

TFSC

於



佳



梅



儀

