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What Inscriptions do not Tell You about Themselves: Chinese Cases

Abstract: Inscriptions on stone are always more than their texts, since most people would not have been able to read them. In the Chinese context, inscriptions are highly stylized, normative texts and therefore remain largely silent about the context of their production and usage. The Chinese anecdotal record preserves at least something of the gossip and storytelling that surrounded inscriptions. This record teaches us how people complained about the excessive costs involved in producing inscriptions, conflicts about their contents, and the repurposing as well as reimagining of inscriptions after their original meaning and purpose had been lost. This article is based on accounts that stem from the early eighth until the early tenth century, when China was ruled by the Tang Dynasty (618–907).

1 Introduction

China historians tend to read stone inscriptions exclusively for their contents, overlooking the rather obvious fact that most people would have been unable to read these texts, not only because of a lack of suitable literacy for their often highly literary texts, but also because of their size and location, accumulated dirt and of course damage over time.[1] Many more steles have been lost than preserved, and this process continues until the present day. If they were not destroyed outright, steles have been repurposed in the walls of later buildings, local roads, bridges, pigsties and so on.[2] Even the common displacement of inscriptions to museums or the local Cultural Bureau is a form of repurposing, taking the object out of its original context and moving it to the limited context of historical, aesthetic or political appreciation. Nonetheless, inscriptions on stone steles can still be found today in any self-respecting religious institution (see Fig. 1).

1 Zhao Chao 2019 provides a detailed introduction to stone inscriptions. De Groot 1897, 1100–1164 is still the most concise introduction to grave inscriptions and their religious context.
2 Cf. Halbertsma 2008, 241–290.

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In this contribution I look at early evidence on the material dimensions of inscriptions, with a special focus on their fate outside of communicative service. In the process, I will have occasion to illustrate various material aspects, from the selection of a stone, the production of a text and nice calligraphy, to the final monument in the form of an inscribed stone slab or rock surface in the hills and mountains. We will learn about their communicative function, but also about conflicts around their contents and miracles surrounding them. Many of these aspects are not recorded in the inscriptions themselves, but only in anecdotal sources such as those preserved in the late tenth-century collection entitled *Extensive Records from the Period of Great Peace* (*Taiping guangji* 太平廣記). This was one of a number of compilation projects carried out during the years 976–983 in order to enhance the cultural legitimacy of the newly founded Song dynasty (960–1276).[3] Like its fellow projects, the *Extensive Records* was named after the period of compilation, which was called Great Peace or *taiping* 太平. It drew its materials from a wealth of anecdotal collections dating to the preceding centuries, which are now mostly lost. The book is organized according to topic, ranging from Buddhist or Daoist miracle stories to accounts of foreign nations and purely literary tales.

Although these anecdotes often include supernatural elements, the events and people depicted in them were all considered real and true by contemporaries. We should therefore take the term 'Records' in the title very seriously, as an expression of the compilers' intent. The stories also provide contextual information about inscriptions that we cannot obtain from the objects themselves, which tend to erase the context of their production (quite literally, as we will see) and tell us nothing about their reception after completion. Because of their chatty nature, these materials are often ignored as relevant historical sources by scholars, but precisely for that reason these materials also reflect the discourse of the social elite of the period and the way in which they talked about a broad variety of topics, in this case inscriptions on wood, rocks, and stone.[4]

Although the *Extensive Records* includes materials from the first centuries of the Common Era onwards, references to inscriptions largely stem from the early eighth until the early tenth century, when China was ruled by the Tang Dynasty

3 On these projects, see Kurz 2003. References are to the modern standard edition, but I have retained the chapter (*juan*) numbers to facilitate finding the references in other editions (including online). Since it does not affect the arguments of this article, I have refrained from providing references to the original provenance of the anecdotes.

4 Over the past three decades, a complete reevaluation of these sources has taken place, at least in Western-language research. See, for instance, Campany 1996 and Dudbridge 1995.

(618–907) and its regional successor kingdoms. This chronological distribution seems to reflect real changes in the production of inscriptions, which significantly increased with the establishment of the Tang dynasty. Robert Harrist has pointed out that prohibitions on the production of public (i.e. above ground) inscriptions in the early third century, repeated by succeeding dynasties in northern and southern China, led to a noticeable decrease in epigraphic production until the early seventh century. Only the imperial centre itself was allowed stone monuments.[5] Instead people who could afford it placed inscriptions inside the grave of the deceased (see Fig. 2).[6] This is not to say that nothing was produced at all, but at least in the capital regions of this age's fragmented China, control would have been sufficient to enforce this ban. As a result, anecdotal accounts about inscriptions before the early eighth century are relatively scarce.

The principal term for a stone slab with inscriptions as a whole is *bei* 碑 or 'stele'.[7] This term is often used in the formal names of inscriptions and originated in the use of stone slabs as a ritual territorial marker. Other terms refer more to the text itself than the object on which it is reproduced, such as the general *ji* 記 '(to) record' and the more specific *ming* 銘 'inscription on a (smaller) object'. The term *ji* is also widely used for records on paper and other writing surfaces. The term *ming* can also be used for rock inscriptions, but even then its size is usually smaller than a 'record' or 'stele'. Inscriptions on objects with a separate usage context such as bronzes are omitted from this contribution, since they are better understood in that larger context, which can be primarily religious (Buddhist, Daoist or otherwise) or more or less secular, for instance related to economic and political processes or social ceremonies. Not omitted are inscriptions on rock surfaces in the hills or mountains, though they are particular in that they can only be seen on a pilgrimage or touristic outing – still relatively rare undertakings in this early period.[8] In traditional society, even more so than today, accessibility was not only restricted physically, but also temporally and financially. Rock inscriptions therefore usually only mattered to the small incrowd with time to spare and money to travel. Only later in imperial history did pilgrimages increase in frequency, with the result that more people had access

5 Harrist 2008, 46–50, 61–63, 235–238. The period in which Buddhist steles were largely visual with only votive inscriptions coincides with the time that inscriptions on steles were also forbidden in the north, see Wong 2004, 178.

6 See Davis 2015 on pre-Tang epitaphs.

7 Wong 2004, 15–41.

8 Harrist 2008. Cf. the contribution by Lothar Ledderose in this volume.

to rock inscriptions. Rock inscriptions in the hills or mountains are different from the usual steles at graves or religious institutions, which might not be moved easily either, but which were located at places of ongoing religious worship and were therefore visited much more regularly. All of these texts could also be circulated by means of handwritten copies, rubbings, and later even in print. We will see an example of a travelling 'transcription' in the mysterious case from the Quanzhou region, discussed further below. Contrary to rock inscriptions, steles could also be repurposed more easily, whether for a new inscription or for a totally different use as part of a building.

2 Soliciting an inscription

When a stone inscription was erected, its main purpose was to praise the living or recently deceased,[9] or some kind of divine figure, on the assumption that a stele would last over time and continue to testify. The stele also carried the names of those involved in erecting it and thus contributed to their local reputation, even if the subject of the stele had died or moved elsewhere. It might also contain some information on the person who produced the actual text, which was often commissioned by the initiator(s) from a literatus known for his excellent style and perhaps also calligraphy. An inscription was always written with the person or group who ordered the text in mind. Even an extra-human or divine figure might give an opinion about an inscription in a dream or vision. Like anecdotes, inscriptions were highly subjective texts. That the process was potentially contentious becomes abundantly clear from the anecdotal sources.

The following account gives a good example of the effort involved in producing a stele, but also the political capital that was expected from it. During the reign of Tang emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 805–820), the powerful eunuch Tutu Chengcui 吐突承璀 tried to ingratiate himself with the emperor by having an Inscription about Virtuous Government (*dezhengbei* 德政碑) erected somewhere in the Chang'an capital.[10] After the 'stele pavilion' (*beiwu* 碑屋) had been erected and the surface of the selected stone had been sanded (*molong shi qi* 磨礱石訖), he asked the emperor to request a text. This would normally have been written by someone from the Hanlin Academy, which was staffed by able

9 Ditter 2014; Choo 2015; Yang Shao-yun 2018 are excellent studies of grave inscriptions or *muzhiming* 墓誌/志銘.

10 Liu Xu 1975, *juan* 184: 4768–4769.

writers with good calligraphy, but this time an official from this very institution memorialized against it. According to him, undue praise of someone's moral calibre only made the emperor look ridiculous in the eyes of both barbarians and Chinese. The emperor then ordered the destruction of the pavilion and the disposal of the stone. The eunuch retorted that so much effort had already been made, but the emperor now ordered that oxen should pull the stele down.[11] Eulogistic inscriptions were a common practice at the time, for officials as well as emperors, so the anecdote reflects the ongoing political struggle between eunuchs and officials, rather than a sudden change in epigraphic practice. A special pavilion for the stele protected an inscription against the ravages of weather, at least as long as they lasted themselves since they were usually constructed out of wood.

Given that an inscription was an attempt to put someone or something in a positive light, their production was a sensitive activity. In the struggle for prestige between two prominent (former) officials of the 720s, one dying official used an elaborate ploy to trick one of his political opponents into producing a eulogy for him after his death.[12] Yao Yuanchong 姚元崇 (650–721) was on his deathbed after a long and successful career. He felt that it was important to create for himself an incorruptible posthumous reputation for reasons to be suggested further below. His intention was to embarrass his rival Zhang Yue 張說 (663–730), who was known for his greediness. His sons were to display all of their father's clothes and other things of value at the ritual display of his spirit tablet, for Zhang Yue to see it when he came to make his condolence call. If he ignored it, the Yao family would be in grave trouble, probably because he might attempt to persecute them now that their main protector had died. However, if he did look at it, they should donate everything to him as a gift. At that point, they should request a 'Stele for the Spirit Road' (*shendaobei* 神道碑) from him. Once they obtained the text, they should have it immediately copied and submitted to the throne. Moreover they should have the 'stone sanded' (*longshi* 礱石) beforehand to wait for the approved inscription and then have it 'carved' (*junke* 鐫刻) at once. The family did as instructed. As expected, Zhang Yue was too greedy to ignore the gifts from Yao's sons and promised to donate an inscription for their deceased father. By the time he regretted it, it was too late since it had already been submitted for approval to the emperor. Moreover, Yao also left behind a last will that ordered his family not to hire Buddhist or Daoist ritual

11 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 164: 1198.

12 The following account is based on Li Fang 1961, *juan* 170: 1240–1241.

specialists. Most likely, giving up on expensive funerary rituals served to create a positive image for the Yao family, in the ancient tradition of ritual frugality.[13]

What the anecdote does not tell us is that Yao's sons had been involved in a corruption scandal earlier, but this additional context suggests that the combined funerary proceedings were intended to save the family from political disaster after their major source of protection had died. The unusually modest proceedings were a powerful political statement and made it much more difficult for Zhang Yue or any others to avenge themselves on Yao Yuanchong's descendants. The extant text of the inscription itself is little more than the usual panegyric, from which nobody would have guessed the difficult relationship between these two politicians.[14] What the anecdote also fails to mention is that the calligraphy of Zhang Yue's inscription was in fact done by Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (685–762, r. 713–756) himself. This would have made it completely impossible to have it changed or destroyed afterwards.[15] Interestingly, Yao Yuanchong and his descendants together built one of the richest collections of graves and grave inscriptions in Tang history.[16]

A case with a much more mundane conflict about contents involves a descendant of Yao Yuanchong, named Yao Yanjie 姚巖傑 (precise dates unknown). He was known for his literary talent, but also a propensity to drink and then misbehave. Around 874, the local official of Boyang (in modern Jiangxi) wanted him to write an inscription commemorating the construction of official buildings for a kickball field (*juchang gongyu* 鞠場公宇), a sport that involved keeping a ball in the air by kicking it with the feet.[17] He produced a text of more than a thousand characters, but when the official wanted to change one or two characters, he got extremely angry. The official did not let it go through. Because the stone had already been carved and erected (*leshi* 勒石), he now ordered the stele to be toppled and the text to be sanded away (*longqu* 磨去).[18] No doubt the official wanted a more positive assessment of his role in the project and had been severely disappointed.

In the case of Yao Yanjie it remains unstated, but given his need to support an alcohol addiction he probably composed his inscription for some kind of reward. Of one talented man, Li Yong 李邕 (674–746), it is said that he received

13 Compare Sterckx 2009, 872–878 on early arguments for frugality in ritual expenditure.
14 Dong Gao 1987, *juan* 230: 2327–2329.
15 Zhu Changwen 1098, *juan* 6: 23a.
16 Mao Yangguang 2019.
17 Vogel 2000.
18 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 200: 1502–1503. Also Li Fang 1961, *juan* 266: 2084.

gifts of more than 10,000 (no unit is given) for one inscription. Nobody made as much wealth from selling texts. On the other hand, he was also known for his unbridled corruption, and this eventually got him executed.[19] The account exhibits some ambivalence toward producing inscriptions in exchange for large sums of money, which is further illustrated by an anecdote featuring the great poet Wang Wei 王維 (699–759). One of his neighbours liked to produce 'stele grave inscriptions' (*beizhi* 碑誌) for other people, but on one occasion someone bringing the requisite amount to 'moisten the brush' (*runhao* 潤毫) delivered it to the house of the poet by mistake. He said sarcastically to the messenger: 'The great author lives over there'.[20] In fact, the production of exaggerated epigraphic eulogies had been an argument for the early third-century prohibition of inscriptions, mentioned above.

The following account takes the practice of producing inscriptions for money to its extreme, but also makes the point that truly talented authors always speak from their personal convictions, despite writing for a commission. Huangfu Shi 皇甫湜 (777–835) was well-known for his compositional talent and straight character, but also as a difficult man to deal with, prone to anger attacks and drinking, leading to considerable social isolation. Nonetheless, one of the most powerful officials of his age, Pei Du 裴度 (765–839) was somehow impressed by his brazen behaviour. In 817, Pei received huge imperial rewards for the hard-won victory over a separatist governor in the Huai River region. As a 'believer in the teachings of the Buddha' (*xin futujiao* 信浮圖教), he decided to invest his rewards in a Buddhist monastery to collect merit after all of the killing. Thereupon he visited fellow lay Buddhist and renowned poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) to request an inscription. Huangfu Shi happened to be there as well and felt insulted that he had not been asked himself. Pei Du now replied that he really wanted Huangfu's inscription, but was afraid of being turned down. After Huangfu's anger had subsided, he asked for a measure of liquor and went home. He first consumed half of it, then wielded his brush and wrote his text in one inebriated go. The text was so complicated and written in such strange characters, that Pei Du could not read it. Since Huangfu was not that famous, he decided that a bit more than 1000 strings of cash would be enough.[21] When his envoy offered this amount to Huangfu, the calligrapher exploded because he felt insufficiently appreciated. He now set forth his demands, claiming that his

19 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 201: 1510–1511. The value unit could be single bronze coins or strings containing roughly 100 coins at a time. See von Glahn 2016, 377.

20 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 255: 1987.

21 On a string of cash, see note 19 above.

composition was an act of enormous favour and asking one bale of silk for each of the roughly 3000 characters. His boast was delivered by the embarrassed envoy to Pei Du, who agreed to pay. Everybody was stunned at the time by the procession of people delivering the silk, but Huangfu received it without a shimmer of embarrassment.[22] The point, in our context, is that nobody thought that such payments were strange, only that the amount was outrageous even in those days.

Ironically, at the same time the emperor himself had ordered Huangfu's friend, the famous writer and official Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), to compose a text to commemorate the same victory over the rebels. A conflict then arose because Han Yu was thought to have been overly positive about the role of Pei Du, at the expense of the general who had won the final and decisive battle. Since the latter's wife was an imperial princess, she could complain directly with the emperor. As a result, the inscription which had taken two months to write and then put in stone was effaced.[23] Thus, an author might like to think of himself as independent, but in reality he would still be constricted by social norms and political expedience. The case of Huangfu is really the exception that proves the rule.

Stones for use as a stele had to be acquired, often under difficult conditions. In the capital cities of Chang'an and Luoyang, there definitely were professionals who took care of funerals, and this probably included the acquisition of a stone. The existence of undertaker companies is famously illustrated by the Story of Li Wa (*Li Wa zhuan* 李娃傳), in which the hero has come into hard times after dissipating all of his wealth on a courtesan named Li Wa. He joins 'a shop for inauspicious affairs' (*xiongsi* 凶肆) in order to make a living and eventually becomes a successful singer of mourning songs.[24] There may also have been specialist shops for acquiring stones, but the existence of such shops is not documented in the extant evidence. The stone slabs had to be hauled from elsewhere and sometimes over considerable distances.

The precise geographical provenance of stones still needs to be investigated, but the following account illustrates some of the problems involved. It is part of a long and highly critical discussion of general Gao Pian 高駢 (*c.* 821–887), who is best known today for his failure to subdue the devastating rebellion of Huang Chao 黃巢. This event lasted from 874 to 884 and effectively ended the aristocratic society of the preceding centuries. The account provides some

22 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 244: 1889–1890. Poceski 2018, 39–74, discusses Bai's Buddhist beliefs.

23 Hartman 1986, 83–84.

24 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 484: 3987–3988.

interesting information about the hauling of stone slabs. At some point an imperial edict was dispatched to erect a Shrine for Living Men (*shengci* 生祠) for Gao Pian in Guangling 廣陵 (modern Yangzhou and then the third city of the empire) and to have a 'Eulogy in Stone' (*shisong* 石頌) carved. People were dispatched to select a slab in Xuancheng (in modern Anhui), several hundred kilometres away by water. When they reached the inspection office for the salt and iron monopolies at Yangzhou, one of Gao Pian's religious advisors secretly sent people to pull the slab with fifty strong oxen to the south of the prefectural capital during the night. He had the city wall bored through and the moat bridged to move it into the walled city. When it became light the fences around the stone slab's former location were shut as before. The advisor now claimed that the stone had been lost, but by the evening a rumour was spreading that the stones had been moved into the city by a divine being.

> 駢大驚，乃於其傍立一大木柱，上以金書云。不因人力，自然而至。即令兩都出兵仗鼓樂，迎入碧筠亭。至三橋擁鬧之處，故埋石以礙之，偽云。人牛拽不動。駢乃朱篆數字，帖於碑上，須臾去石乃行。觀者互相謂曰。碑動也。
>
> [Gao] Pian was greatly startled. He had a big wooden pillar erected next to it, in the top it was written in gold: 'It did not arrive through human force, but of its own accord'. Then he ordered the two capitals to send an armed escort, drums and music to welcome it into the Pavilion of Emerald Bamboo. When it reached a crowded place at the third bridge [Gao Pian's advisor] stranded the stone on purpose to block [the road], and falsely claimed: 'Humans and oxen cannot pull it into motion'. [Gao] Pian then wrote several characters in red seal script, pasted them on the stele, and after a while the stone could move again. The spectators said to each other: 'The stele is moving'.

The next day, however, a village hag came to the local official to complain that yamen runners had borrowed her farming ox to pull the stele, wounding its foot (or feet) by accident. People everywhere heard about it, at least according to our source, and fell over with amusement.[25] The chronicler undoubtedly meant this account to shine further negative light on a general whom he held responsible for the fall of his glorious dynasty. The account tells of the elaborate way in which a stele might be utilized in premodern image-building, including the notion that the stele of an important figure such as Gao Pian would move of itself, or rather be moved by Heaven. In that respect, the manipulation of inscriptions by Gao Pian was no different from that by the great Tang emperors, and an example by one of them will be given further below.[26]

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25 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 291: 2308 for the account and the above quotation.

26 Harrist 2008, 238–244.

3 New meanings for ancient inscriptions

Over time, inscriptions acquired meanings and functions different from the ones originally intended. Even mysterious signs that were not quite writing in our modern sense were interpreted as divine script. One example stems from the Quanzhou region, where it has continued to draw the attention of local communities as well as educated elites until today. The earliest extant account claims that it was created in the first half of the eighth century. During a conflict about the correct border with a neighbouring prefecture, the local prefect prayed for a divine sign. A terrible thunder storm suddenly broke out and created a path in the rocks that formed a perfect border, with an inscription created on the rock face in old seal script to confirm it.[27] As the following account illustrates, this interpretation did not have much of an impact on the people living next to it, who believed that they were plagued by a murderous dragon living in an unfathomably deep pool. The creature swallowed any human or animal who attempted to drink from its pool.

One early evening in 810 a thunderstorm broke loose with the force of an earthquake, after which the pool was filled up and the ground was covered in the blood of the monster. Moreover, high up on the cliff were carved 19 characters. Nobody in the prefecture was able to decipher them. They were supposedly written in the 'tadpole' (*kedou* 蝌蚪) seal script style, a term (with or without the insect radical) that was often used as a general reference to texts in ancient scripts.[28] This powerful writing had brought an end to the monster. People who had fled elsewhere now returned and the prefect named the place 'Stone Inscription Village' (*shiming li* 石銘里). Eventually the text was copied down and reached Luoyang, where it was 'deciphered' by the above-mentioned Han Yu. According to him it was a command to punish the water monster, ending with the term *jiji* 急急 that usually concludes ritual spells to command a divinity to perform a certain task. He was known for his interest in ancient inscriptions, as shown by a lengthy poem about the oldest known stone inscriptions in China, the so-called Stone Drums from Qin that had been inscribed more than ten centuries before.[29] The Quanzhou inscription is still extant on the rocks next to the pool, relabelled as 'Characters of the Immortals' (*xianzi* 仙字). In reality all of the historical explanations mentioned were wrong. The drawings are mnemonic

27 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 393: 3139–3140.

28 Loewe 1993, 381. For other references to this script, see Li Fang 1961, *juan* 19: 132–133; *juan* 206: 1573; *juan* 209: 1602; *juan* 231: 1773; *juan* 389: 3106; *juan* 472: 3884.

29 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 392: 3130. On the Stone Drums and Han Yu, see Mattos 1988.

pictographs, and without the now lost oral traditions that once accompanied them, they cannot be 'read' in the same way as ordinary writing.[30]

Strange scripts could inspire remarkable stories about their provenance. On a peak high up on the famous Mount Lu in modern Jiangxi, many hundreds of meters above sea-level, the legendary King Yu had once moored his ship when he was taming the floods covering the realm. There was even a rock with a hole in it that had been used by him to tie up a cable. This taming of the floods is thought to have occurred over four millennia ago and belongs to the core narratives of Chinese mythology. People believed that at that time a text in tadpole script had been inscribed on the top of the mountain. It was still visible 'today', as reported by our early tenth-century source.[31] The inscription continued to fascinate later scholars as a witness to ancient times that to them were completely historical. In reality the tadpole script probably originates in the Cloud Seal Script (*yunzhuan shu* 雲篆書) from Daoist tradition. The most famous such inscription in fact originally stood in a Daoist temple on Mount Heng (see Fig. 3).[32]

When a stele had lost its relevance or literally lost its inscription due to the impact of the elements, it could be sanded and reused.[33] This was not entirely without risk, as discovered by the famous True Lord Xu 許真君 (or Xu Xun 許遜, 239?–374?), when he repurposed a faded inscription for his belvedere (*guan* 觀), as Daoist religious institutions are usually known. The long-deceased author of the original inscription then went to an underworld agency to start a posthumous lawsuit. Only by having a new stele carved with the old inscription and carrying out a large 'Water and Land ritual' (*shuilu dajiao* 水陸大醮) for the original author could a worse fate be averted.[34] The story stems from a collection by the Daoist political advisor, writer and ritual specialist Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933). It creates Daoist antecedents for a then still recent ritual invention that definitely was of Buddhist origin, the so-called 'Water and Land Gathering' (*shuiluhui* 水陸會) that provided hungry ghosts with the merit needed for a successful rebirth.[35] For those who believed, it proved the Daoist connection of this ritual and warned about the dangers of reusing old steles.

30 Yang Qinglin 2009. This dissertation also contains illustrations.
31 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 397: 3181. See Dudbridge 2013, 75–76.
32 Wang Chang 1805, 2 *passim*. Chaves 2013.
33 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 392: 3131–3132.
34 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 72: 452–453.
35 Stevenson 2014; Verellen 1989.

Since inscriptions were often buried in the ground on purpose as part of a grave complex, or more or less by accident as a result of neglect, it is no surprise that people stumbled across them during various kinds of groundwork.[36] In such cases, people had a hard time providing a cogent interpretation. Of course, we generally only learn about those cases where the interpretation eventually proved to be correct. In 827 a stone was found during the digging of a city moat. It carried the text 山有石，石有玉。玉有瑕，即休也, meaning 'the hill (or mountain) has a stone, the stone contains a piece of jade, the jade has a flaw, this is auspicious (*xiu* 休)'. At first the inscription was read as an auspicious sign, but later a new interpretation made more sense, explaining the word *xiu* in its other meaning of 'stopping'. It was now interpreted as a prediction of the fate of the official who received this stone, whose family-line died out a few years later with his death.[37] In this way the find of the inscription could provide meaning to his death and the family's sad fate, by proclaiming all of it divinely ordained.

Over time, the stone slabs carrying inscriptions would break down until only fragments remained, but even they retained some kind of numinous aspect. The monks of a Buddhist monastery in Xiangyang (in the north of modern Hubei) explained the sudden appearance of a turtle that was several feet high in their newly expanded pool, by referring to an old and fragmented inscription for a previous monastery nearby. This text supposedly said that the pool was inhabited by a 'numinous turtle' (*linggui* 靈龜) that was three and a half feet long. It appeared every year in spring and hid in the winter; it even followed the monks to their hall and would eat at the appointed times. Because of the turtle's appearance, the old fragment was erected again.[38] Now almost extinct, turtles of this size were once common in the Yangzi River region. The emphatic mention of the broken inscription in combination with the turtle suggests an additional aspect, since larger inscriptions are traditionally erected on top of the shield of a giant turtle. Once the stele toppled over, the turtle was often all that remained (see Fig. 4). The connection is made explicit in the following story from Linyi in Shandong. Here a grave inscription has been lost, and only a stone turtle remained. In the first half of the fourth century, the turtle had supposedly taken

36 For some examples, see Li Fang 1961, *juan* 157: 1126–1128; *juan* 390: 3115–3116; *juan* 455: 3713–3716; *juan* 472: 3886–3887.

37 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 392: 3132. Another example in Li Fang 1961, *juan* 392: 3131. According to Li Fang 1961, *juan* 366: 2913, all steles in the capital of the state of Min toppled over in the year 944, which was taken later to have presaged the fall of the kingdom in the next year.

38 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 472: 3886–3887.

its inscription and entered the water. He would come out covered in duckweeds. One day someone observed the turtle entering the water and shouted at it. The startled turtle ran away, and the stele was broken off.[39]

4 Divine encounters and inscriptions

Over time inscriptions would become a common feature of local religious institutions, down to the lowest village temple.[40] Before the eleventh century, however, this was still unusual. The following case is something of an exception to this rule. Here a deity even explicitly requested to be remembered.[41] A local official in Yongqing County in Fangzhou (modern Hubei) arrived in what was a desolate county seat in the hills. He and his younger brother who was visiting him stopped at a dilapidated temple, which still had statues, but no 'gate boards or signs' (*menbang paiji* 門榜牌記). He inquired with the local clerks, but they could only tell him it was the Great King of Yongqing. Thereupon his younger brother had an encounter with the deity in his dream, which clarified matters.

> 神曰。我名跡不顯久矣。鬱然欲自述其由，恐為妖怪。今吾子致問，得伸積年之憤。我毗陵人也，大父子隱，吳書有傳。
>
> The deity said: 'My name and accomplishments have long been forgotten. In my sadness I had wished to explain the details myself, but I was afraid of haunting [people by possessing them]. Now [you] have made inquiries, and I have obtained [the possibility of] stating my frustrations of many years. I was a man from Piling[42] 毗陵, I cannot disclose who was my grandfather but he has a biography in the Book of Wu.[43]

The deity explained in great detail how he was called Guo 廓 (perhaps a scribal error for Guo 郭) and had been ordered by the Emperor on High (*shangdi* 上帝, the highest deity) to get rid of evil creatures in the region, such as tigers and an evil dragon. Local people had erected a temple for him and 'incorrectly' (according to the deity, or rather the younger brother's dream) called him a 'White Tiger

39 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 274: 2970.
40 Hansen 1990, 14–16.
41 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 307: 2431–2432.
42 Modern Changzhou in Jiangsu.
43 The Book of Wu (*Wushu* 吳書) is part of the *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi* 三國志), a dynastic history of the third century. No such ancestor could be found in this source.

Deity' (*baihu shen* 白虎神, nothing further is known about this deity). He now requested the younger brother to correct this view, which the man did by reporting to the person in charge of Xiangyang (in the north of modern Hubei). The younger brother now wrote a corrected version of the deity's provenance on wooden boards and placed them in the temple. Because it came to be covered with dust and soaked by rain, the writing was about to disappear. Luckily another official had a stone carved in the temple in 852 and the deity's rectified account continued to be preserved.

This story also tells us something else that is not often mentioned, but may have been quite common. Apparently, first a version of the miraculous events was written down on a wooden tablet. The much more expensive stone version was produced only later – and subsequently lost as well. As a final note on the supposedly mistaken identity of the cult, it is entirely possible that the cult originated in the worship of a white tiger and developed later into one for the figure who defeated the tiger. Once upon a time, different members of the cat species were omnipresent in China, and the history of human expansion into the forests and hills, such as Yongqing County, is also the history of the extinction of big felines. The hagiography of this deity seems to reflect this development from acceptance through worship to eradication.

In another striking story, the previously mentioned Emperor Xuanzong visited Mount Hua 華山 (in modern Shaanxi), the most western of the Five Great Mountains (*wuyue* 五嶽) that mark the territory of the earliest Chinese states in the Yellow River confluence. It was part of a large propaganda campaign of visiting the great mountains of his realm to offer sacrifice and leave his imprint there in stone. He saw the deity of the mountain who welcomed him, but nobody in his retinue shared this vision. Only a female medium saw the deity as well, with a red hat and in purple clothes, welcoming the emperor. He ordered her to command the deity to return to the temple. When he also arrived he saw the deity again and once more the emperor and the medium were the only ones who saw him. He then wrote a stele inscription in his own calligraphy to express his respect and surprise. The stele was reputed to be over 50 feet high, one fathom wide, and 4 to 5 feet thick, ranking as the biggest stone stele in the empire.[44] The largest part of the stele with the actual inscription on it was already destroyed during the rebellions of the late ninth century, before subsequent enthusiasts about old inscriptions and calligraphy from the eleventh century onwards could make a rubbing. Only parts of the damaged

44 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 283: 2257–2258.

pedestal with some inscribed drawings still remain on the mountain today, testifying to its former size.[45]

A few decades after Emperor Xuanzong, a lowly soldier passed by the Shrine of the Marchmount (*yueci* 嶽祠) at the same Mount Hua. Stark naked and drunk with sacrificial liquor, he offered a prayer expressing his frustrations about his career. He slept off his stupor in the 'stele hall' (*beitang* 碑堂) during daytime, where he was visited by the deity in a dream and was predicted a high office. Of course, he only found out that it was true towards the end of his life when he was about to be executed as a rebel in 784, but had indeed reached the predicted office.[46] The story shows that such a building was an extension of the temple, allowing the deity to visit a lowly soldier and predict his career – even though it would have been more useful to warn him not to join any rebels.

5 Concluding comments

This article has not dealt much with the intrinsic value of stone inscriptions as historical evidence, which at least in Western research is still a relatively understudied topic, not least because they can be hard to read, whether literally on the original stone, linguistically in terms of prose and poetry, or contextually.[47] Instead, the article has focused primarily on the stone inscription as a social, political, and religious phenomenon in itself. The anecdotal material reveals a dimension that we cannot learn from the eulogistic texts themselves, ranging from conflict and embarrassment during their production, to different kinds of unintended use, decay, destruction, and reuse for other purposes. Things may sometimes have happened differently from the way that they are described in these anecdotes, but this is certainly how educated elites at the time thought about the production and later fate of inscriptions. Many people were involved in their production, from the stone masons who hewed out a suitable piece of rock to manufacture a stone slab with an appropriate surface, the transporters of the slab to its eventual location, the producers of the text and the calligraphy (which might be different persons), the stone carvers, and of course the family or community which had ordered and financed the whole enterprise. Potentially, only the producers of the text and calligraphy were literate and usually only

45 *Huayin xianzhi* 1788, *juan* 16: 45a–46b.
46 Li Fang 1961, *juan* 304: 2410–2401.
47 Brown 2008.

they were literate enough to appreciate the often very ornate and contrived texts. It is also this aesthetic aspect that interested later collectors the most and still does today.

Over time many inscriptions have been removed from their original context, a process that is still going on today in the interest of local construction projects. Often we only have a transcription or rubbing of the text on the front, without the ornamentation or the inscription on the back, or in some cases even the sides. Lots of non-textual information has thus been lost, and the anecdotal literature is one way of creating a richer context than the texts themselves could ever provide.

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Fig. 1: Inscriptions as part of a larger religious landscape in a Buddhist monastery located on Mount Wutai in Shanxi province. Photograph by the author, July 2016.

Fig. 2: A Tang grave inscription; collection Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada. Creative Commons license <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Epitaph_for_Mei_Duan_and_his_wife,_Lady_Hu,_China,_Anyang,_Tang_dynasty,_713_AD,_limestone_-_Royal_Ontario_Museum_-_DSC03583.JPG>.

Fig. 3: Tadpole inscription ascribed to King Yu from the mythical Xia 夏 dynasty (its dates are sometimes given as circa 2070 to circa 1600 BCE) taken from a Daoist temple on Mount Heng (in Hunan province), then lost and since reinscribed on a modern stone in a modern pavilion. Creative Commons license <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:大禹陵岣嶁碑.JPG>.

Fig. 4: Inscriptions on turtles or other mythical animals with shields preserved in the Temple for the Deity of the Saltpond near Xiezhou in Southern Shanxi. All steles have been toppled (probably in the late 1960s) and were restored more recently. Photograph by the author, May 2007.