

Unearthing China's Rich Past

by Elaine Strauss

Roughly two millennia after the first known events in Chinese history, China reached a period of unprecedented tranquility and cultivation during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) It was a golden age. The Great Wall was finished. The tenacity of Confucian philosophy and ethics was demonstrated. Art, poetry, and music flourished at the emperor's court. The invention of paper, ink, and brushes made possible the development of calligraphy. Astronomical instruments, the sundial, and the seismograph were invented. Trade and diplomacy flourished.

By the 11th century, knowledge of the Han period, eight centuries earlier, was somewhat elusive. Suddenly a burial site in northeast China, known as the Wu Family Shrines, promised to provide a key to the Han epoch. Rubbings made from carved stone monuments at the site revealed Han practices and objects. For scholars the Wu shrines became a benchmark for understanding Han civilization. Because flooding of the Yellow River covered the Han stones with silt, the rubbings commanded special importance. The burial chamber itself was rediscovered by an amateur archeologist in 1786. Since the 1980s two new chambers have been discovered. Cary Liu, curator of Asian art at the Princeton University Art Museum, was team leader for investigations into the newly-found structures during the past five years.

For the first time in 1,000 years, scholars looked at the stones, not merely at the rubbings. Some of the stones seem to have been recut and questions arose. It is no longer certain that the site can be attributed to the Wu family. Furthermore, it is no longer clear that the chambers were used as ancestral shrines. In scholarship there is no such thing as certainty.

Curator Liu has organized the findings into an exhibition at the Art Museum called "Recarving China's Past: Art, Archeology, and Architecture of the 'Wu Family Shrines,'" which runs until June 26. The name of the site has now been demoted to appearing in quotation marks. "Elegant Orchids," a concert of music inspired by the Han Dynasty, takes place at the museum on Saturday, March 26.

In an interview from his Princeton office Liu says that the word "recarving" has several layers of meaning. "There's the physical recarving: when you recarve the sto-



The Sights and Sounds of the Han Dynasty: Above, ink-on-paper rubbing, detail of stone chamber 1 of 'Wu family shrines,' mid-second century, Eastern Han dynasty, Shandong Province. Below, composer May Tchi-Chen leads a concert of music inspired by the period at the museum, Saturday, March 26, 6 p.m. 609-258-3788.

ries into the stone you recarve history." Then there is the metaphorical meaning. "Any time you tell a story you are recarving history," says Liu, adding a third meaning: "There is 1,000 years of history here. Each generation has a new recarving, a new interpretation."

The centerpiece of the exhibition is the museum's set of 19th century ink-on-paper rubbings made at the "Wu shrines." The show includes 70 objects from the Han dynasty. Liu says: "Several of the objects match things in the rubbings — dancers, animals, and utensils. We wanted to bring what happened in the Han period to life with real objects from the period."

Viewers can take a virtual tour of the archeological site at the exhibition through computer models constructed by researchers. Beginning in May an interactive version of the simulation will be available on the Art Museum's website at www.princetonartmuseum.org.

The giant catalog for the exhibit — which, at more than eight pounds, is larger and heavier than a telephone book and includes essays by 20 scholars — is devoted to showing the scholarly questions that arose from the research team's investigation, says Liu. In his preface to the catalog Liu writes, "Looking back over the past five years of research, dilemma, and toil, I must ask with trepidation, 'What have we done?'"

Liu says the researchers' original intention was to focus on the two chambers discovered since



1980. "We wanted to look at what the pictorial images described. When we tried to do background work, the more we did, the more confusing it got. It was a bit of a shock." He calls the rethinking "exciting and frightening."

Liu tells of a square rubbing that appeared in an early 20th century Japanese publication and was always associated with the Wu sites. "Nobody knew what it was," he says. "The stone was not found, but the rubbing had to come from somewhere." Liu noticed that there were crease lines in the rubbing. To him they suggested that the rubbing had been made from a column. Through a combination of luck and diligence Liu was able to track down the circular stone, which was located in the basement of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. "Once we found that stone column in Berlin, we realized that it matched the Japanese rubbings, and it all came together." On loan from Berlin, the column is on display at the exhibit.

The scholarly nature of the exhibit is manifest. Liu considers a pivotal point to be a question about objects known as *mingqa*, "brilliant artifacts," which are placed in graves. The question is whether the objects must be physically present or whether their depiction on the walls of the tombs is sufficient.

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