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Author(s): Richard C. Rudolph

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Han Tomb Reliefs From Szechwan

Richard C. Rudolph

University of California at Los Angeles

Based on a lecture delivered at a meeting of the Chinese Art Society of America on 10 April 1950 at the China Institute, New York City.

THE WEST knew virtually nothing of the pictorial art of ancient China until 1881. In that year Stephen Bushell, a British civil servant, created a stir in art circles by showing to the Oriental Congress in Berlin rubbings of some second century bas-reliefs from northeastern China. They were enthusiastically received because they were the closest representations of early Chinese painting that had been found up to that time. These reliefs were on the interior surfaces of slabs used to construct offering shrines at the Wu family cemetery near the present town of Chia-hsiang^a in southwestern Shantung province. These and other Shantung reliefs of the late Han period (A.D. 25-220) have been published in full, first by the French sinologue, Edouard Chavannes,¹ and more recently by Sekino,² the Japanese archaeologist.

The following translation of a statement made by a well-known Chinese archaeologist in 1936, after the discovery of some actual Han paintings, shows the importance that he places on the reliefs in our understanding of early Chinese art.

"The position occupied by the Wu Liang^c reliefs in art: According to the literary records the beginnings of painting in our country can be traced back to earlier than the Chou and Shang periods. But paper and silk by their nature are frail and difficult to preserve, so the genuine examples that are seen today are not earlier than the T'ang (618-906). The lasting qualities of metal and stone exceed those of paper and silk, so pictures prior to the T'ang dynasty must be sought for among engravings on the former. The decorations on the Shang (c. 1766-1122 B.C.) and Chou (1122-256 B.C.) bronzes such as the monster masks, dragons, tortoises, elephants, fish, birds, man-eating animals, and hunting scenes, are all carved with consummate skill — but they belong in the category of stylized designs. Although some Han dynasty mirrors illustrate legends, . . . yet the largest of them does not

exceed a foot and only a few of these are to be seen. Han dynasty pictures that still can be seen are mostly carved in stone like those of the Wu Liang shrine, the Hsiao t'ang shan and Liang ch'eng shan^d reliefs and those of the T'eng district;^e but the Wu Liang reliefs are the outstanding ones. . . . If you carefully examine the reliefs of the Wu Liang offering shrine you will realize where our system of painting originated. . . ."³

The Shantung reliefs remained, until recent times, our principal source of information on the painting of the late Han period although bronze and pottery objects and numerous references in Han literature⁴ all contributed to the general understanding of the art of that time. Beginning in 1920, however, Japanese archaeologists opened a series of late Han tombs in Korea and southern Manchuria which provided valuable examples of actual painting in the form of murals and painted lacquer objects.⁵ These and several painted bricks from Honan added considerably to the knowledge which had been derived from the Shantung reliefs.⁶

But Han dynasty reliefs comparable to, and in some cases superior to, those in Shantung have been found in Szechwan province about one thousand miles southwest of the region where the Wu Liang reliefs were found.

When the late Paul Pelliot addressed the Chinese Art Society of America in 1945, he paid particular attention to Szechwan art of the Han period. He said: "Han sculpture in Szechwan has quite a different character from what it has in Shantung; it is more spontaneous and more alive. . . ."7 In speaking of Szechwan sculpture Pelliot was undoubtedly referring to the memorial pillars or *ch'üeh*^m of this period which were studied by the French expedition under Segalen.⁸ In addition to the remarkable sculpture found on these stelae, there is a wealth of Han sculpture in Szechwan province that was overlooked by the French expedition and has not yet been published although its existence has been known for some time.⁹

The Han reliefs from Szechwan shown here are of two types, those on stone (Figs. 2-8) and those on baked pottery bricks (Figs. 9-12). The stone reliefs come from two different regions, Chiating (Loshan)ⁿ and Hsinchin.^o Chiating is on the Min River about one hundred miles south of Chengtu, the provincial capital of Szechwan. In this region there are large bluffs of red sandstone into which hundreds of caves have been carved. The local people refer to them as *man tzu tung*,^p or "caves of the barbarians," and they hold the belief that these caves were constructed by the aboriginies for dwelling purposes. There is ample evidence, however, to prove that these caves were carved by the Chinese inhabitants of this region during the late Han dynasty and were not used for dwelling purposes but were used as tombs.¹⁰

The cave-tombs at Chiating, reduced to their simplest elements, consist of a vestibule, a shaft, and a burial chamber. The vestibule or loggia ranges in size from a very small room to a rectangular chamber some 75 feet long and 15 feet

high. The facade of the vestibule, which is the face of the cliff itself, always bears some ornamentation in low relief; sometimes animals or humans are represented and very frequently tile and beam ends carved over entrances indicate a roof. There was always a conscious effort to make the vestibule appear like a tile and brick structure, and reliefs generally occur on its inside surfaces. A narrow shaft slightly over five feet in height leads from the vestibule straight into the cliff and toward the burial chamber. These shafts vary in length from about twenty feet to almost two hundred feet. Near the end of the shaft there are alcoves on either side where interments took place. In all of these tombs there are also shelves and fireplaces cut into the solid rock. The fireplaces were not meant to be used, but probably took the place of the baked pottery cooking stoves found in most Han graves. No reliefs appear on the walls of the shafts or the alcoves that open off of them. The reliefs at Chiating occur only on the unprotected facade of the vestibule or on its more or less exposed walls. They have consequently suffered greatly from the ravages of the sub-tropical climate of that region.

There are many hundreds of these burial caves in the region of Chiating, some near the river and others some distance from it. While in Szechwan last year as a Fulbright Research Scholar, I studied about two hundred of them and found all to have the same general characteristics.

It seems probable to me that we have in some of these tombs the same elements that one finds in some of the more elaborate Han tombs constructed on open ground. The animals and guardians carved on the facade or on the interior walls of the vestibule correspond to the free standing stone figures of animals and men placed before the graves. Memorial pillars or *ch'üeh* are also frequently carved at the entrances of the vestibule or of the shaft that leads to the burial chamber. These obviously repre-

sent the *ch'üeh* which were erected before tombs of prominent people, and the vestibule probably represents the offering shrine which was erected in front of tombs such as the one at the Wu cemetery. It may even be possible that the very long shafts are conscious representations of the *shen tao*^a ("spirit way") of the more orthodox tombs.

In a number of the caves inscriptions occur which are undoubtedly authentic. In all cases the dates correspond to the first and second centuries. A number of inscriptions of the same general date have also been found in similar cave-tombs near Chungking.¹¹ Early Chinese archaeologists were more interested in inscriptions than in reliefs, and this fact probably accounts for the lone reference to the caves in early archaeological literature. This occurs in the *Li shih* by the thirteenth century antiquarian Hung Kua.¹² He records a first century inscription of seventy-four characters in one of the caves which has not yet been identified.

About sixty miles north of Chiating and some thirty-five miles south of Chengtu is the town of Hsinchin, the source of the second group of stone reliefs. In this region there are also tombs carved in the sandstone cliffs but they differ very much from those at Chiating although both towns are in easy communication with each other by river. At Hsinchin the tomb shafts open directly from the face of the cliff without a preliminary vestibule. The shaft is generally very short and soon opens into real rooms. In these rooms are large stone cases carved out of solid blocks of sandstone. It is on these cases that most of the Hsinchin reliefs are found, but others occur on the stone doors which were used to block off the entrances. After the entrances were closed by the doors, they were carefully concealed. Hence the Hsinchin tombs are al-

most the opposite of those at Chiating. The stone cases referred to pose a problem which has not yet been satisfactorily solved. One is tempted to think of these cases as being sarcophagi, but this probably is not correct. In the tombs where these stone cases occur are found baked pottery coffins and these are generally of a size which does not permit the stone cases to serve as outer coffins. Moreover, the baked pottery coffin is generally covered over by a layer of pottery bricks which serves as an outer coffin. A Chinese archeologist who has made a study of this problem (based mainly on hearsay) believes that these stone cases served as containers for the effects of the deceased.¹³

The tombs in both areas were also stocked with typical Han grave goods. Some, though not many, bronze objects such as mirrors and vessels have been found. Pottery objects—figurines of animals and people, model houses and vessels—have been found in great quantity. Refugees have lived in the tombs in recent times so it is not unusual to find modern sherds intermingled with fragments of Han pottery.

Besides these two sources of Han dynasty reliefs in Szechwan, a large number can also be found on baked pottery bricks which were used in tomb construction. The bricks which are found in the sandstone tombs generally bear a simple geometric pattern and are of no great value as far as the pictorial art of this period is concerned. But larger bricks used for the construction of underground tombs frequently are decorated with very beautiful scenes which throw considerable light on the art of this time. There is a great contrast between the freely conceived reliefs on these Szechwan tomb tiles and the stylized and frequently very stiff intaglio designs on the Honan tiles which were duplicated by means of wooden dies.¹⁴

The reliefs illustrated here are only a cross-section of the collection of some two hundred examples of Han pictorial art from Szechwan

formed by Professor Wen Yu of Chengtu and myself.¹⁹ But even these few illustrations can serve as a basis for some general comparisons

between the Shantung and Szechwan reliefs of the second century.

There are several differences in the relief-making techniques of the two regions, but the most obvious is that Szechwan sculpture is in much higher relief than most of that in Shantung. Nevertheless the cave reliefs in Szechwan, with a few exceptions, are all in low relief, rarely exceeding one-half of an inch. A more important difference is the lack of organization in the Szechwan scenes. Reliefs are frequently scattered about the walls of a large vestibule with little or no relation to each other. But the scenes in the Wu reliefs are well integrated, carefully planned, and conceived on a grand scale. Much of this difference may be due to the fact that the Wu shrines were planned and erected at a specific time for certain people while this was not always the case in Szechwan. There is reason to believe that some of the Chiating vestibules originally were made larger than necessary with

an eye to future use; and sometimes a small vestibule was enlarged at a later date to accommodate more shaft openings. In many of the vestibules the walls have been smoothed and divided into rectangles for future reliefs which did not materialize. The open background and space between figures on the reliefs in Szechwan make it obvious that the principle of *horror vacui* did not have the popularity with the artists there that it had with those in Shantung. Moreover the Szechwan figures are generally not so stylized as their northeastern contemporaries, nor are they placed in such formalized settings. Most Szechwan scenes representing action have a more dynamic quality than parallel scenes in Shantung. These last aspects of the Szechwan reliefs seem to substantiate Pelliot's contention, based on other material, that "Han sculpture in Szechwan has quite a different character from what it has in Shantung; it is more spontaneous and more alive. . . ."

DESCRIPTION OF ILLUSTRATIONS

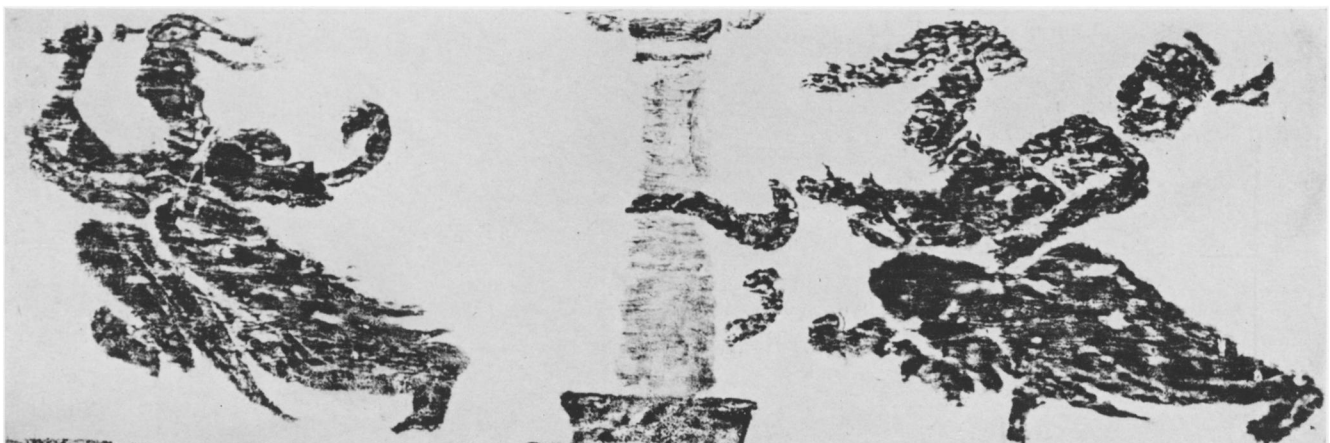


Chiating stone reliefs:

Fig. 1 A wood-block reproduction of a scene on the Wu Liang slabs in Shantung. This scene portrays the attempted assassination of Ch'in Shih Huang Ti by Ching K'o.¹⁵ On the left the emperor is fleeing from the attacker who has been seized by the king's physician. Although this situation calls for action, the figures are stiff and rather formalized.

Fig. 2 25 x 166 in. A Chiating relief depicting the same incident, although suffering from weathering, shows strength and spontaneity in the figures of the fleeing emperor and in the struggling men. The figure of Ch'in Wu-yang^v crouching before the box containing the head of Fan Yü-ch'i^w in *Fig. 1* occurs also in the Chiating scene but is not included here because this element is placed slightly behind the struggling men. A second Chiating relief shows an almost identical scene.

This attempted assassination is described in the *Shih chi*,^x the famous history which was completed in the first century B.C. Even if the Shantung and Szechwan artists had this work before them, it is doubtful if they would have attained such coincidence between their drawings of this episode. For example, three different versions occur on the Wu slabs, and although the *Shih chi* account does not say that Ch'in Wu-yang crouched before the box, nevertheless he is shown in conjunction with the box in all three Shantung scenes and in one of the Szechwan versions. Possibly one served as an inspiration, directly or indirectly, for the other,¹⁶ or alternatively all scenes stem from a common origin.



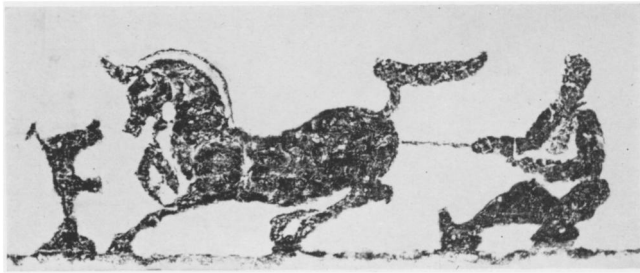


Fig. 3 20 x 55 inches. A man trying to control a horse by means of a rope. A great deal of action and animation is shown in both the man and the horse which seems to be shying at or attacking some unrecognizable object in front of him.

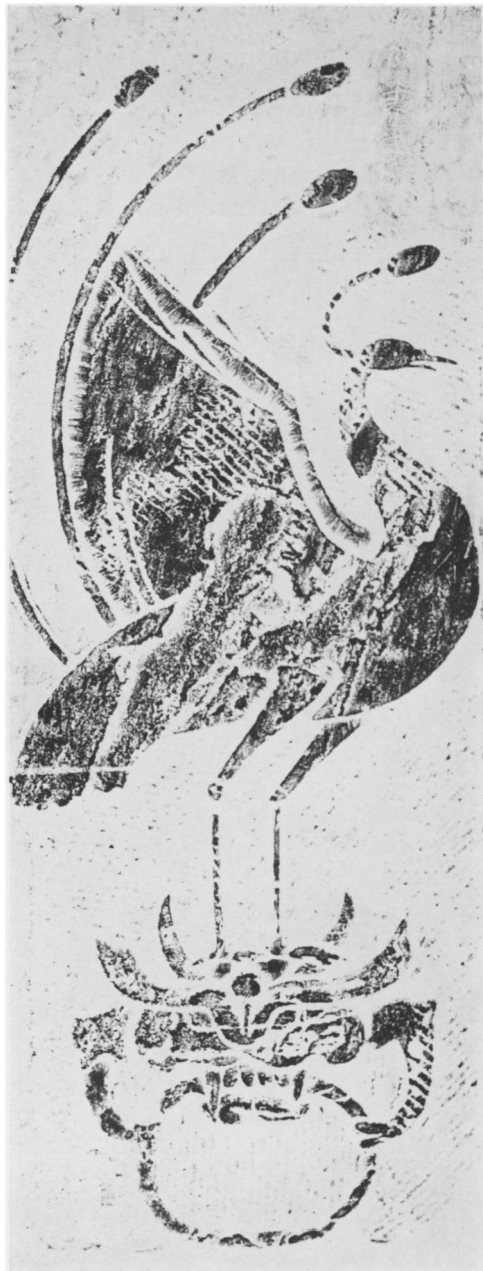


Fig. 4 36 x 53 inches. This magnificent leaping tiger has rudimentary wings and apparently represents a guardian of the tomb.

Hsinchin reliefs:

*Fig. 5 26 x 64 inches. One leaf of a double-leaved door, typical of the kind that was used to block the entrances to the Hsinchin caves. These doors have vertical pivots on the outside corners similar to modern Chinese doors. The other leaf bears an almost identical scene and the two birds face each other when the door is shut. Many of the Hsinchin doors are decorated with this motif, but this is one of the best specimens that I have seen. The mask and ring is similar to those which developed from *t'ao t'ieh* and are frequently seen on bronze vessels of the Han period. The ring on these vessels sometimes served as a real handle but here, of course, it is merely symbolical. This mask is rather exceptional in that the ring is being held both in the monster's mouth and by his three-clawed paws.*



Fig. 7 18 x 34 inches. A stone slab showing a woman sitting with legs under her. This stone has a peg at the top which was inserted in a hole in the roof of the shaft in order to block the entrance. The inscription reads: "The filial daughter-in-law, Lady Chao, whose style name is Yi-wen." A corresponding scene has portraits of father Chao and his son. The inscription near the father states that his given name is unknown, indicating that he was of humble origin. But the names of his son are given and it also states that he was an official.

Fig. 6 Photograph of a door composed of two leaves measuring 52 x 68 inches. The pivots by which the doors are mounted, not always apparent in rubbings, can be seen at the top edges. The masks are similar to the one shown in the rubbing in Fig. 5, but the one on the right is unusual because it has a heavy beard. Masks of the same general type have been found on Han textiles in Central Asia by Stein.¹⁷



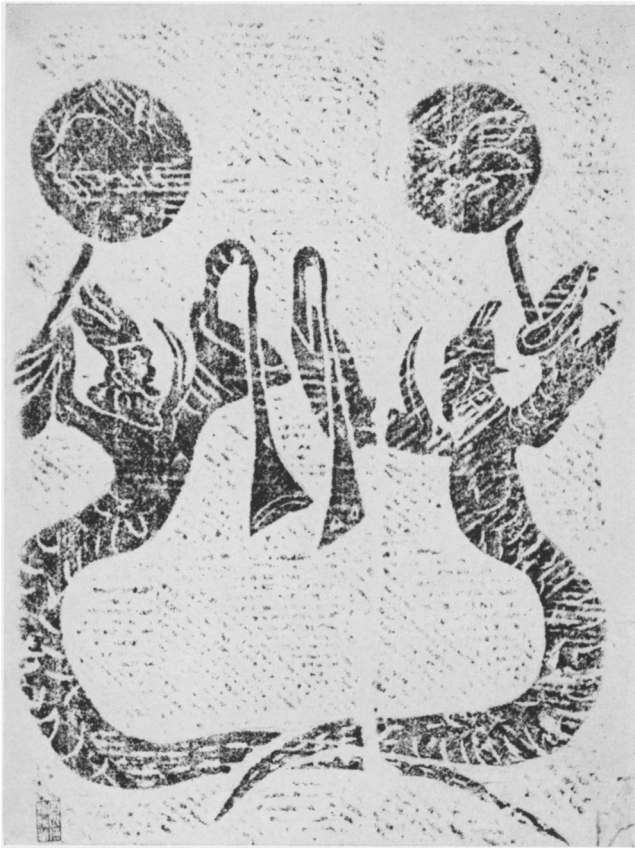


Fig. 9 18 x 16 inches. Four musicians, jugglers, and dancers. Action is very well portrayed both by the jugglers and the whirling dancers.

Fig. 8 23 x 24 inches. Two mythological creatures with human heads and arms but with serpent-like bodies. The one on the right is holding up the sun symbolized by a crow on the disk. The one on the left is holding the moon. The design in this disk is unclear but it appears to be the cassia tree and hare rather than the toad which is often used as a moon symbol. These creatures must represent Fu Hsi and his consort Nu Kua. They are frequent subjects in early Chinese art and occur several times in the Wu reliefs. The usual representation of these two beings shows Fu Hsi holding aloft a square and Nu Kua holding a compass.

Rubbings from tomb tiles:

Fig. 10 18 x 26 inches. A high-wheeled chariot containing two men followed by a rider. The border at the top is filled with a dragon-cloud design similar to those found on the Kao I funerary pillar (A.D. 209).¹⁸

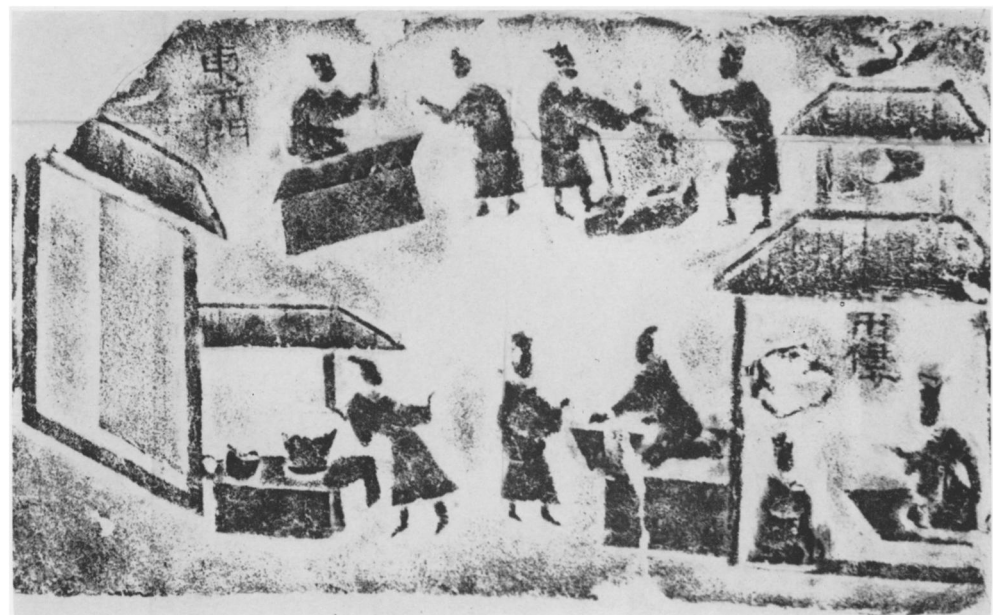




Fig. 11 16 x 10 inches. Two archers mounted on splendid horses with cropped manes. Bow and quiver can be seen projecting backward from the left side of each man.

Fig. 12 18 x 10 inches. A market scene. Apparently the entrance to this market place is through the two story building in the lower right corner. This is marked with the two characters *shih lou*² "market tower" and two people, probably bartering, are on the ground floor. There is an unidentifiable object apparently suspended from the beams of the top roof; this object seems to be cylindrical and may be a drum, indicating that this

structure was also used as a drum tower. A large bird is perched on the uppermost tiled roof. The open area of the market is occupied by three pairs of people buying and selling various goods. A restaurateur is shown beside his covered stove in the lower left corner. At the left end of this brick is shown a large double leafed gate; the three characters above it, *tung-shih men*,^{aa} indicate that this is the "east market gate."



FOOTNOTES

1. Edouard Chavannes, *La sculpture sur pierre en Chine au temps des deux dynasties Han*, Paris, 1893 and *Mission archéologique dans la Chine septentrionale*. I, 1, *La sculpture à l'époque des Han*, Paris, 1913. (*Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, xiii, 1)
2. Sekino Tei, *Shina santōshō ni okeru kandai jumbo no hyōshoku*,^b Tōkyō, 1916.
3. Jung Keng, *Han wu liang tz'u hua hsiang lu*,^f Peiping, 1936, vol. 2, 37a-b.
4. *Chung kuo hui hua shih*,^g Shanghai, 1936, vol. 1, 15-24, perhaps gives the most complete list of such references.
5. A tomb excavated at Liao-yang in southern Manchuria in 1920 had polychrome murals showing ceremonial feasts, people, horses, chariots, and buildings, but were in a poor state of preservation. The tomb was later moved to the Port Arthur Museum and the main paintings are said now to be beyond recognition, but careful descriptions and sketches have been made of them (Hamada Kosaku, *Tōa kōkōgaku kenkyū*,^h Tōkyō, 1943, 421-427, and Yagi Jōzaburō, *Manshu kōkōgaku*,ⁱ Tōkyō, 1944, 287-326). In 1925 the tomb of one Wang Hsü in the ancient Chinese military colony of Lo-lang, Korea, yielded a number of painted lacquer objects which, by their inscriptions, had been manufactured in Szechwan. One lacquer tray dated A.D. 69 bears a painting of Hsi Wang Mu and its peculiar iconography is frequently encountered on Szechwan bricks of the Han period. (Harada Yoshito, *Lo-lang*,^j Tokyo, 1933.) In 1931 some interesting murals were discovered in a Han tomb in southern Manchuria (Mori Osamu, *Ying-ch'eng-tzu*,^k Tōkyō, 1934), and in the following year an important object in the form of a painted basket was found in a Han tomb in northern Korea. Panels on the basket bear paintings of ninety-four individuals done in colored lacquer which give evidence of the high development of Han figure painting (*Rakuro saikyo tsuka*^l compiled by the Chosen Koseki Kenkyū Kwai, Seoul, 1934).
6. A brief but very good survey of Han painting for the time it was done (1932), and the only one that takes into account all of the actual paintings then known, is Hamada's "Kandai no kaiga ni tsuite," in *Ying-ch'eng-tzu*, 39-44. This has been translated by William Acker as "On the Painting of the Han Period," in *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, vol. i, 33-44.
7. *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, vol. 1 (1945-46), 23.
8. Victor Segalen, Gilbert de Voisins, Jean Lartigue, *Mission archéologique en Chine*, Paris, 1923-24. See also Segalen, "Premier exposé des résultats archéologiques obtenus dans la Chine occidentale," *Journal Asiatique*, Ser. 11, vol. 6 (1915), 281-306.
9. Segalen mentioned the reliefs in the Szechwan caves, especially in the Chia-ling region, and some of them were included in photographs of cave entrances, but no systematic study of the reliefs was made by the French. The first westerner to record the existence of reliefs in the Szechwan area was probably E. C. Baber in his *Travels and Researches in the Interior of China*, London, 1886. D. C. Graham, "The Ancient Caves of Szechwan Province," *Proceedings of the United States Museum*, vol. 80, art. 16 (1932) first established the date of the cave reliefs by comparing some of them to similar scenes on the dated Han memorial pillar at Ya-chou. Although he had not visited the site, eight rubbings of Hsinchin reliefs were published by F. S. Drake, "Sculptured Stones of the Han Dynasty," *Monumenta Serica*, VIII (1943), plates X, XI and pp. 302-308. The first scientific study of the reliefs near Chiating was made by Wolfgang Franke in "Die Han zeitlichen Felsengraeber bei Chia-ting," *Studia Serica*, 7 (1948), 19-39. Printing limitations unfortunately allowed only inaccurate reproductions of several reliefs.
10. T. Torrance, "Burial Customs in Sz-chuan," *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 41 (1910), 57-75; C. W. Bishop, "The Problem of the Min River Caves," *Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, 10 (1926), 46-61.
11. Shang Ch'eng-tso, "Ssu-ch'uan hsin chin teng ti han yai mu chuan mu k'ao lüeh," *Chin ling hsüeh pao*,^r 10 (1940), p. 2.
12. Hung Kua, *Li shih*,^s ch. 13, pp. 9b-10b (*Ssu pu ts'ung K'an* ed.) Minor notices in travel accounts occur before this date.
13. Shang Ch'eng-tso, *op. cit.*
14. See illustrations in W. C. White, *Tomb Tile Pictures of Ancient China*, Toronto, 1939.
15. *Shih so*,^u ch. 3. The wood-block illustrations of the *Shih* so do not always do justice to the original relief, but in this case there is little injustice. It has been chosen to illustrate this scene because it is clearer than rubbings of the original.
16. In this connection it may be worth noting that Szechwan art goods in the form of lacquer painted utensils have been found in first and second century tombs to the north of Shantung. These objects may have arrived there by stages, but since the dates cover a broad period well established communication between these two areas is indicated. Beginning with three early Han lacquer pieces dated 85 B.C., Umehara describes and illustrates over thirty dated Szechwan lacquers found in Han tombs in Korea. See his *Shina kandai kinenmei shikki zusetsu*,^x Kyoto, 1943.
17. Sir Aurel Stein, *Innermost Asia*, Oxford, 1928, III, pls. XXXVII, XL. These Han textiles show a bandy-legged, three-clawed monster closely related to those on the Hsinchin doors. See also Schuyler Cammann, "Tibetan Monster Masks," *Journal of the West China Border Research Society*, Series A, 12 (1940), 11-16.
18. Segalen, *op. cit.*, pls. XLVII, XLVIII. I am indebted to Mr. Laurence Sickman for pointing out this similarity.
19. One hundred of them will be included in our forthcoming work, *Han Tomb Art of West China*, now being published by the University of California Press. Limitation of space in the present paper has prohibited lengthy description and documentation of the illustrations included here.

CHINESE ADDENDUM

- a 嘉祥
b 關野貞, 支那山東省に於ける漢代墳墓の表飾
c 武梁
d 孝堂山, 兩城山
e 滕縣
f 容庚, 漢武梁祠畫像錄
g 中國繪畫史
h 濱田耕作, 東亞考古學研究
i 八木獎三郎, 滿洲考古學
j 原田淑人, 樂浪
k 森修, 營城子
l 樂浪彩篋冢
m 關
n 嘉定(樂山)
o 新津
p 蠻子洞
q 神道
r 商承祚, 四川新津等地漢崖墓磚墓考略, 金陵學報
s 洪适, 隸釋
t 秦始皇帝, 荆軻
u 石索
v 秦武陽
w 樊於期
x 史紀
y 梅原末治, 支那漢代紀年銘漆器圖說
z 市樓
aa 東市門