

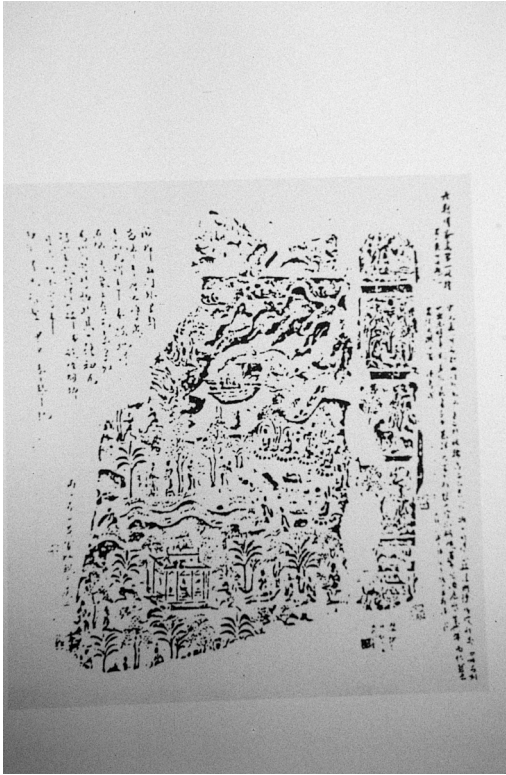
Considerations on the so-called stele of 425 at Wanfosi 萬佛寺 (Chengdu 成都, Sichuan 四川)

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The debate on the relationship between Buddhist art in the north and south of China has now lasted several decades and fresh insights or new discoveries by Chinese archaeologists continue to keep the issue in the limelight¹. Attention switches to different aspects of the question according to the interests of the scholars concerned, ranging from the origin of the mature style of Northern Wei 北魏 sculpture, on which Alexander Soper put forward the theory that the new taste was of southern inspiration, to examinations of individual formal aspects or iconographic themes, with southern finds being compared with the better known Buddhist artistic tradition in the north². The discoveries in the last decades of the past century - particularly those in the area around Chengdu - have helped to enliven the debate with new evidence, providing material useful in pinpointing the specific characteristics of

¹ For instance, interest in the problem was boosted by the discovery of the Buddhist statues of Longxingsi 龙兴寺 at Qingzhou 青州, raising several questions regarding the origin of the art of Qingzhou and its relationship to northern works and those of south-west China. On this question, see: Lucas Nickel (ed.), *Return of the Buddha*, Zürich-London, Museum Rietberg and Royal Academy of Arts, 2002.

² Alexander C. Soper, "South Chinese Influence on the Buddhist Art of the Six Dynasties Period", *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Art*, XXXII, 1960, pp. 47-112. Soper's line of thought has been developed by both Western and Chinese scholars.



[Fig. 1]

a fragment of a Buddhist stele found during the first survey of the site of Wanfosi in Chengdu in 1882 [Fig. 1]. The catalogue written by Liu Zhiyuan and Liu Tingbi in 1958 published for the first time a selection

southern Buddhist sculpture, especially from the 6th century, but leaving several questions unanswered regarding 5th-century works and the complex topic of the nature of its relationship with contemporary Buddhist art from northern China³.

Perhaps it is precisely the scarcity of 5th-century southern Buddhist sculpture that can explain the renewed interest stirred up by a work with an obscure and incomplete history: the rubbing of

³ For a survey of ancient and more recent finds of Buddhist art in southern China, see Ruan Rongchun 阮荣春, *Fojiao nanchuanzhilu* 佛教南传之路 (The Southern Route in the Spread of Buddhism), Changsha, Hunan Meishu chubanshe, 2000.

of the material found at Wanfosi between 1882 and 1954⁴. Among these was the rubbing, described as the earliest of the works found at Wanfosi and one of the oldest sculptures from the south bearing a dated inscription. The date recorded in the catalogue - in which the inscription supposedly including the date was not transcribed - corresponded to the second year of the Yuanjia 元嘉 period of the Song Dynasty 宋, i.e. 427. The rubbing seems to have been identified as belonging to the Song period, apparently on the basis of the documentary evidence of Wang Liansheng 王廉生, the author of a chronicle of the finds brought to light at Wanfosi in 1882⁵. However, according to the catalogue of 1958, Wang's record confined itself to mentioning that three fragments of sculpture were found with dated inscriptions, one of which referred to the Yuanjia period. Although all scholars have noted the discrepancy between the information provided by the chronicle - which vaguely refers to fragments of sculpture, without discussing their characteristics - and the details given in the 1958 catalogue - which confidently identifies the rubbing as coming from the fragment found in 1882 and dates it to the second year of the Yuanjia period (427) - the specimen still continues to be regarded as one of the Wanfosi finds and dated to 427⁶.

⁴ Liu Zhiyuan 刘志远 and Liu Tingbi 刘廷璧, *Chengdu Wanfosi shike yishu* 成都万佛寺石刻艺术 (Stone Carvings of the Chengdu Wanfosi), Beijing, Zhongguo gudian yishu chubanshe, 1958.

⁵ Liu and Liu, 1958, pp.3-4.

⁶ Soper, 1960, p. 107, n. 342; Nagahiro Toshio 長廣敏雄, *Rikujō shidai bijutsu no kenkyū* 六朝時代美術の研究 (The Representational Art of the Six Dynasties Period), Tokyo, Bijutsu shuppansha 1969, pp. 56-66, gives the date as 425; Audrey Spiro, "Shaping the Wind: Taste and Tradition in Fifth-Century South China", *Ars Orientalis*, XXI, 1991, p. 104, takes a more prudent stance, preferring a later date for the presumed stele: "certainly on stylistic grounds a late fifth- or sixth-century date is more tenable". In her first reference to the stele,

Should this date be confirmed, not only would the stele in question be one of the earliest dated Buddhist steles, together with the Buddh Daoist Wei Wenlang 魏文朗 stele in the north⁷, but also the earliest Chinese example of a narrative illustration on stone of the life of the Buddha, as well as one of the models for the iconography of the Pure Land, which were to appear at Dunhuang two centuries later - as several scholars have observed⁸.

The present author's reluctance to subscribe to all these records is based in the first place on the fact that the rubbing is all that remains of the presumed stele, secondly on the observation that it does not include the dated inscription and thirdly on the mysteries surrounding the rubbing's connection to the stele. In addition to these points, rather telling in their own right, I shall adduce a number of considerations regarding the iconography of the work never previously taken up by scholars, which I regard as extremely important, since they suggest a date other than the ones so far mooted.

Dorothy C. Wong, *The Beginnings of the Buddhist Stele Tradition in China*, PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1995, p. 59-73, considers a date during the Song period reasonable, but dates the rubbing to 425, rather than 427. In her recent "Four Sichuan Buddhist Steles and the Beginning of Pure Land Imagery in China", *Archives of Asian Art*, LI, 1998-1999, p. 60, she suggests that the stele might date "perhaps from the early sixth century or even the fifth century". Moreover, in the same article, Wong, p. 57, explains that the matching of the rubbing with the stele found at Wanfosi in 1882 was done "on the basis of the modern inscription written on the right side of the rubbing". Marilyn M. Rhie, *Early Buddhist Art in China and Central Asia, Vol. II*, Leiden, Brill, 2002, pp. 206-213, accepts the date of 425, spotting in the vanished work certain stylistic and iconographic innovations that it introduced in southern China.

⁷ On the Wei Wenlang stele and the problems concerning its dating, see among the more recent publications Rhie, 2002, pp. 460-472 and Stanley K. Abe, *Ordinary Images*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp. 297-313.

⁸ Wong, 1998-1999, pp. 76-77.

The fragment reproduced in the rubbing corresponds to roughly the lower half of the reverse of a rectangular stele of the type carved on all four sides, other examples of which were found at Wanfosi, but in these cases dating from the mid 6th century⁹.

The main image, on which scholars have concentrated their attention, occupies the entire surface of the reverse of the stele. Although the scenes have not been identified with absolute cer-

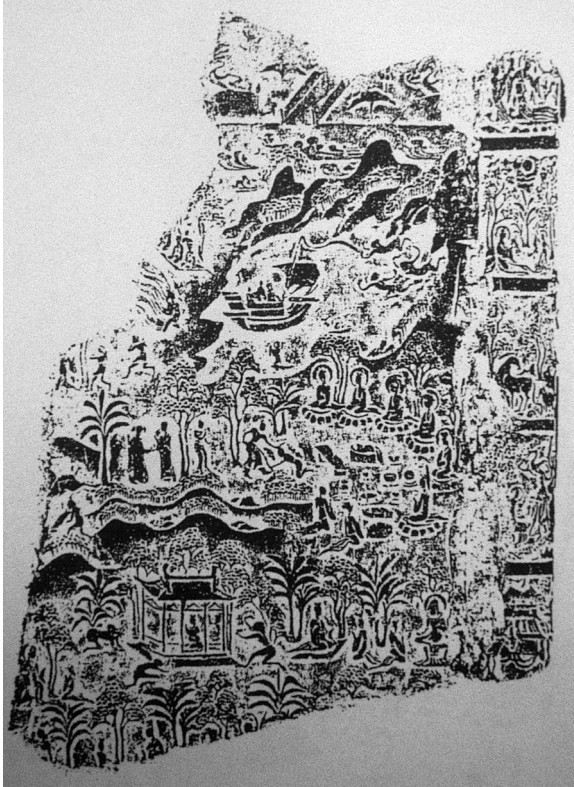


[Fig. 2 a]

tainty, the conventional view is that they are based on the theme of the Pure Land, an iconographic subject which was developed during the course of the 6th century in at least three different areas in China¹⁰. On the other hand, the scenes on the rectangular panels carved on one

⁹ See, for example, the two steles published in Tokyo National Museum, *Chūgokukokuhōten* 中国国宝展 (Treasures of Ancient China), Tokyo, Asahi Shimbun, 2000, figs. 119-120.

¹⁰ According to Wong, 1998-1999, p. 76.



[Fig. 2 b]

of the sides of the stele have been identified but neglected in the general discussions of the sculpture¹¹ [Fig. 2 a/b]. Starting from the top, the images have been interpreted as episodes in the life of the Buddha, depicting the birth, Asita's interpretations of the signs on the infant's body, the parallel births and the first

meditation¹². The silence surrounding these images seems rather surprising, especially since, contrary to what has been claimed, representations of the life of the Buddha are not at all "a common theme in

¹¹ Given the poor condition of the rubbing as published in the catalogue of 1958 (fig. 2a), this reproduction is here complemented by the reconstructed image published in Nagahiro, 1960, fig. 9 (fig. 2b).

¹² The interpretation of the subjects is by Yang Hong, as reported by Wong, 1998-1999, p. 78, n. 11 and is followed by Wong and also by Rhie, 2002, pp. 210-211.

early Buddhist art"¹³, or at least not a frequent subject on early 5th-century Chinese stone steles. The first representations of episodes from the life of the Buddha on steles to have survived date from the mid 5th century and all come from the mandorla-shaped steles in northern China¹⁴. For some of the episodes at least, these works provide excellent illustrations of the characteristics of the iconographies of the life of the Buddha and the changes they underwent during the 5th and 6th centuries and provide good terms of comparison for the illustrations found on the rubbing of 425.

The first scene depicts the birth of Siddhārtha, represented by the image of Māyādevī at the centre of the panel assisted by a female figure (Mahāprajāpātī?) supporting her arm, while with her left hand she probably grips a branch of the tree that can be made out behind the two women [Fig. 3 a/b]. Māyādevī's body seems to be leaning slightly towards the right of the panel and is facing in the same direction, while the infant Siddhārtha emerges from the wide left sleeve of her robe. This detail is very important for the iconographic analysis and dating of the work. In the earliest version of the birth found in China the general composition is faithful to the Indian iconography, although there are fewer details and these are depicted according to Chinese taste. The debt owed to the Indian tradition can be seen above all in Māyā's position and in the baby's emergence from her side: a version typical of the earliest works from the north, including the reliefs on the steles of 455 and 457¹⁵. The preference for portraying the birth from Māyā's side

¹³ Wong, 1998-1999, p. 57.

¹⁴ Examples are the steles of 455, 457 and 471 in Jin Shen 金申, *Zhongguo lidai jinian foxiang tudian* 中国历代纪年佛像图典 (Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Dated Images), Beijing, Wenwu chubanshe, 1994, figs. 13, 14 and 21, respectively.

¹⁵ Jin, 1994, fig. 14.

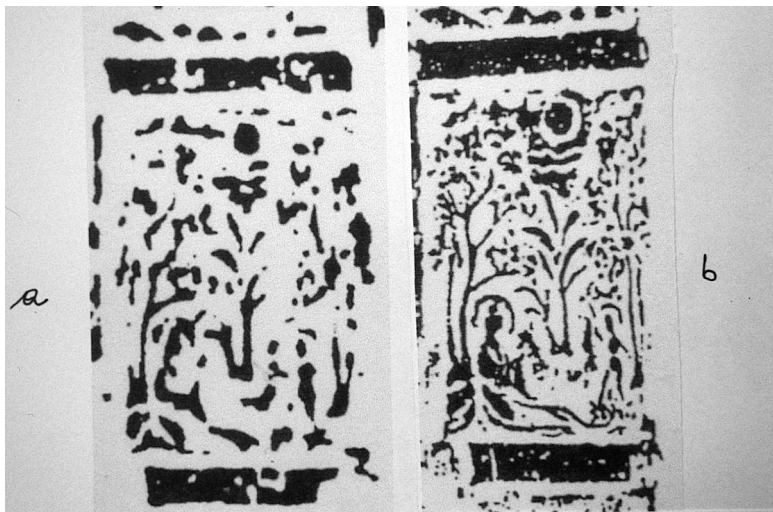


[Fig. 3 a/b]

seems to be independent of the type of dress she wears. While in most 5th-century representations Māyādevī is shown wearing the so-called "Xianbei-dress", the typical robe worn by nomadic peoples in the region, in at least one representation of the birth, dated 471, she is attired in the characteristic Chinese wide-sleeved robe, but continues to give birth through her side. So this iconography persists throughout the second half of the 5th century, both on the steles and for example on the walls of cave VI at Yungang 云刚. The iconography of Māyādevī in Chinese dress giving birth through the sleeve becomes popular only in the 6th century, as can be seen in the Longmen 龙门 reliefs¹⁶, or in certain steles from different parts of the northern part of central China¹⁷.

¹⁶ See, for example, two reliefs in the Guyangdong. For the images see Longmen wenwu baoguan suo 龙门文物保管所, *Longmen shiku* 龙门石窟 (Longmen Caves), (no place), Wenwu chubanshe, 1978, figs. 34, 36.

¹⁷ There are a few examples from steles; see one from a stele dated 546 in Oswald



[Fig. 4 a/b]

While this change does nothing to alter the meaning of the episode, which retains the sense of the extraordinary nature of the event, it nonetheless reveals the sinicization undergone by the episode, which would henceforth always be represented in this manner. And the illustration to be found on the Chengdu rubbing corresponds precisely to this iconographic model.

The interpretation of the following episode has concentrated on the seated figure on the left of the panel, described as the fortune-teller Asita seated at the foot of a tree and studying the characteristic marks on the body of the infant Siddhārtha, who is depicted "standing with the halo"¹⁸, according to proposed readings [Fig. 4 a/b]. Actually, in

Sirén, *Chinese Sculpture from the Fifth to the Fourteenth Century*, Bangkok, SDI Pubs., 1998 (1925), vol. I, pls. 185.

¹⁸ D. Wong, 1998-1999, p. 78, note 11. Rhie, 2002, p. 211, agrees and describes the

the iconography of the episode of Asita's fortune-telling, the soothsayer is seated before Siddhārtha's parents holding the newborn baby in front of him while, he carefully studies the marks he finds on his body and there is no recorded example in China of the child being represented standing upright in front of the fortune-teller¹⁹. In the Chengdu image, Siddhārtha is portrayed as a small boy with a halo standing with his legs slightly apart, his right arm pointing upwards and his left downwards in the pose developed during the late 5th century to denote the episode of the seven steps. The Gandhāran iconography of the seven steps does not have any distinguishing features other than the portrayal of the child in the standing position, either with his arms by his side or with his right hand in *abhayamudrā* and in some cases with his right leg slightly advanced, as if to suggest a step has been taken. In the earliest Chinese representations - such as the stele of 455 - the iconography of the seven steps preserves the vaguely undefined character of the Indian versions, with the child shown standing with his arms by his side. This position may refer either to the seven steps or to the scene of the ritual bath, in which Siddhārtha is in the same pose but accompanied by divine figures performing the *abhiṣeka*. And it is the absence of these that suggests the image is intended to

image as "a scene of a figure kneeling in the lower left corner and probably the standing infant Buddha at the right (possibly the scene of the astrologer foretelling the Buddha's future)".

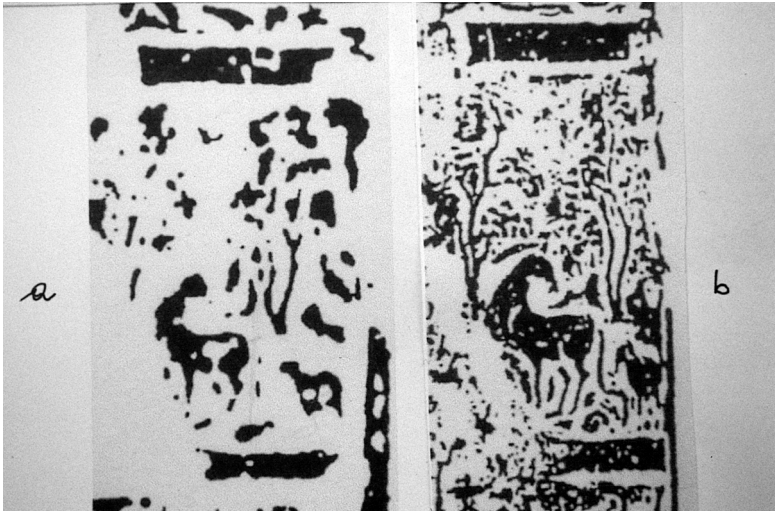
¹⁹ The iconography of the seated hermit with the newborn Siddhārtha in his arms is derived from Indian models and is found in several Gandhāran representations. See Wladimir Zwalf, *Gandhāra Sculpture*, London, British Museum Press, 1996, vol. I, pp. 155-6 and vol. II, pl. 158. For Chinese representations of the same episode, see for example, Mizuno Seiichi 水野精一 and Nagahiro Toshio 長廣敏雄, *Yün-kang (Unkō sekkutsu) 雲岡石窟*, Kyoto, Kyoto daigaku jimbun kagaku kenkyusho, 1951-56, vol. III - Plates, pl. 176B.

represent the seven steps rather than the ritual bath²⁰. The mist of ambiguity surrounding the early representations of this episode in China begins to be dispersed in the very next images: three steles in particular, dating from 457, 461 and 471, seem to mark the stages in the development of the iconography of the seven steps, which were to attain a clear identity by the end of the 5th century²¹. In the first of these steles the two scenes of the seven steps and the ritual bath are already distinct, with the scene of the seven steps showing Siddhārtha standing but depicted in half-profile to suggest movement, and his right hand in *abhayamudrā*. The iconography becomes clearer still in the stele of 461, where Siddhārtha is shown once again in half-profile, but with his left arm pointing skywards and his right folded. The stele of 471 epitomizes the final iconographic formula, in which the bodhisattva is clearly depicted with his legs apart and in the act of taking a step, with one arm stretching upwards and the other pointing down: a position probably derived from the phrase found in the earliest written lives of the Buddha translated into Chinese, which reads, "I alone am Lord between heaven and earth"²². Once again, this is exactly the position Siddhārtha assumes in the Chengdu rubbing. On the other hand the figure on the left-hand side of the panel remains hard to identify. It could be Asita examining the signs on the baby Siddhārtha, which the ascetic possibly holds in his arms. However, the absence of other details, such as the figure of Śuddhodana, and the fact that it is virtually impossible to pick out the figure of Asita properly makes it difficult to put forward a confident reading of the image.

²⁰ For Gandhāran representations of the ritual bath, see Zwalf, 1996, vol. I, pls. 152-53.

²¹ See Jin, 1994, figs. 14, 80 and 21, respectively.

²² *Xiuxing benqi jing* 修行本起经, T. 184, p. 463, c14.



[Fig. 5 a/b]

The scene on the third panel depicts the episode of the parallel births: the births which occurred at the same moment as Siddhārtha's entry into the world [Fig. 5 a/b]. The first instances of the depiction of this subject in China come from the early 6th century and are mostly from the region of Henan 河南, where the subject seems to have been particularly popular²³. In 6th-century representations the theme of the parallel births always features the mare and foal pair, reminiscent of

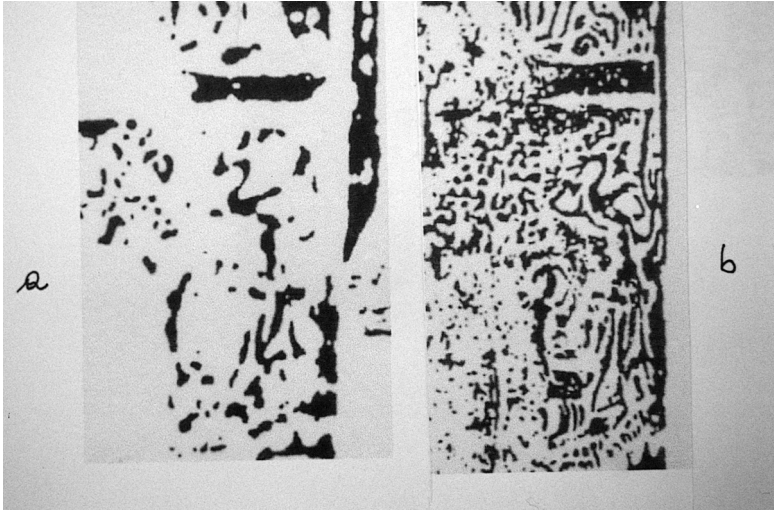
²³ The claim that the parallel births are not represented in China before the 6th century is supported by the fact that in Central Asia the theme appears in Kizil in cave 110, dated between the late 5th and early 6th century, while it does not figure among the images in cave 76, dated to the late 4th century, which also depict scenes from the life of the Buddha, as in cave 110. For the images in caves 76 and 110, see *Zhongguo meishu quanji* 中国美术全集, Huihuabian 繪畫編 (Painting) vol. 16, 1989, Beijing, Wenwu chubanshe, figs. 55-56 and *Zhongguo shiku* 中国石窟 (Chinese Caves). *Kezier shiku* 克孜尔石窟 (Kizil Caves), vol. III, 1997, Beijing, Wenwu chubanshe, fig.194.

Gandhāra and alluding to the birth of Kaṅṭhaka, Siddhārtha's future horse, while artists were evidently freer to experiment with other combinations to suggest different parallel births, one of the most frequent being a reference to Siddhārtha's future groom Chandaka²⁴. The image reproduced in the Chengdu rubbing includes only the mare and foal pair, although the latter is being fed by its mother in the same way as in all similar scenes from Henan²⁵, and overlooks all details concerning the other parallel births, which play an important part in the iconography of this scene in images from the north.

As for the fourth panel, it has been suggested that the presence of a figure seated in meditation under some trees (in the stance of the pensive bodhisattva) in the image represented on the left-hand side of the panel should be taken as a reference to the first meditation [Fig. 6 a/b]. Although the condition of the rubbing too leaves more to the imagination than to rational interpretation, a few reasonably decipherable details may perhaps provide further clues as to the content of the image as a whole. A fantastic creature, with clearly discernible paws and an s-shaped neck, can just be made out in the top right-hand corner of the panel. Its rampant stance and what can be made out of its appearance, suggests this might be a dragon with one or more heads looming over the haloed head of a figure roughly in the centre of the composition. Similar iconographic characteristics can be found in rep-

²⁴ For Chinese representations of the parallel births and their characteristics, see Nicoletta Celli, "Notes on Buddhist Iconography: Two Episodes in the Life of the Buddha in Medieval Chinese Sculpture", *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, XXXIX, 3, 2000, pp. 369-382.

²⁵ It is worth observing that in the reconstruction of the rubbing published in Nagahiro, 1969, fig. 9, the animal on the right of the panel is reconstructed as a baby elephant, while in the original it can be clearly seen that it is in fact a foal, especially when compared to the adult animal further left.



[Fig. 6 a/b]

representations of the episode of the ritual bath, in which many-headed rampant dragons often figure as agents of the *abhiṣeka*, especially in the 6th century. Viewed in these terms, the figure at the centre of the scene might be the baby Siddhārtha represented on the characteristic pedestal that appears in the images of the ritual bath, while he is bathed in the water pouring out of the dragon's mouths. It can be observed in support of this hypothesis that the episode of the ritual bath would fit much better in the sequence of representations, since this episode generally follows those of the seven steps and the parallel births. Moreover, there is an image which is extremely close to that on the rubbing on another rectangular stele from the Wanfosi group, dating from the 6th century, with episodes from the life of the Buddha carved on rectangular panels on the sides²⁶. The scene bearing strong similari-

²⁶ Tokyo National Museum, 2000, fig. 120.

ties to the rubbing is the third of the panels still visible on the right-hand side of the stele: two trees frame the scene, in which the infant Siddhārtha in the stance typical of the seven steps found earlier stands next to two other figures. Above them and facing Siddhārtha hangs what seems to be a dragon matching the one on the rubbing. Since on this stele too this image with the dragon follows the scene of the seven steps, which is extensively represented in the previous panel above, it seems highly likely that both on the rubbing and on the stele the episode represented is the ritual bath rather than the first meditation.

In the light of these observations, accepting the date of 425 (or 427) for the vanished Chengdu stele would mean recognizing in a single specimen - the earliest known with carved images of the life of the Buddha - four iconographies represented in the modified form which became popular in the 6th century, without there being any sign to the south of representations of the life of the Buddha prior to the rubbing, far less any iconographic developments of the episodes considered.

Moreover, it would have to be acknowledged that two traditions - the northern, dating from the mid-5th century, and the southern, represented exclusively by the rubbing of 425 - developed identical approaches at different times for the same episodes (the birth, seven steps, parallel births and ritual bath). Or else, it must be supposed that the iconography of the south spread to the north, where it led to changes that became apparent at different times. In other words, this line of reasoning would mean that in the north the new iconography of the infant Siddhārtha issuing from the sleeve appeared only in the early 6th century, that the iconography of the seven steps spread in the last quarter of the 5th century and that the parallel births and the image of the ritual bath with the dragon suspended in the air were introduced in the first decades of the 6th century.

In order to resolve the problem of dating, it might be useful to observe that the type of stele represented on the rubbing matches the steles that have survived from Wanfosi, dating from the mid-6th century, in both shape and iconographic composition (especially the side panels). By contrast, the only steles dating from the late 5th century found at Wanfosi display formal and iconographic characteristics that are markedly different from the work in question.

In conclusion, if we consider the fact that there are no other representations of the life of the Buddha of southern Chinese origin in the 5th century, that the development of the iconographies of the life of the Buddha is clearly recorded in specimens from the north during the course of the late 5th century and that the formal and iconographic characteristics of the stele revealed on the rubbing match at least other specimens from the 6th century, rather than those of the 5th century, a date for the stele in the region of the early 6th century seems more realistic, even if the rubbing is all that remains. This scenario also suggests that the stele's illustrations were inspired by the northern tradition as regards the theme of the life of the Buddha, the iconographic treatment of which is typical of the approach found in the 6th century, apart from some slight uncertainties.

So, although there is no reason to doubt that a fragment of sculpture dating from the Yuanjia period was indeed found in Chengdu in 1882, the assumption that the rubbing was taken from this same Wanfosi stele seems wholly arbitrary, while the claim on the sole basis of the rubbing, dated 427, that it is one of the earliest known dated Buddhist stele is unwarranted and misleading, since it flies in the face of the meaning of the images. Furthermore, redating the work to the first half of the 6th century would also provide a better match with Pure Land iconography, which would otherwise seem to make a premature appearance in an early-5th century work, in spite of the philosophical

premises in contemporary southern Buddhism²⁷.

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²⁷ This topic has been amply examined by Wong, 1998-1999, pp. 62-70.

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