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The Wang Ziqiao Stele

It is well known that religious Taoism flourished in the first centuries of the Christian era in China and a good deal of scholarly work has been done to describe it. But, aside from a few pregnant remarks by Maspero¹ and an excellent book by Anna Seidel on the deification of Laozi², the relations of Taoism with the state and with the élite have been practically ignored, all the interest being focussed upon the popular, unofficial movements, the Yellow Turbans or the Taiping jing. It is the aim of this paper to present and translate a short inscription that describes the establishment of an official cult to a Taoist saint in A. D. 165. The inscription is fairly well known to specialists, but, to my knowledge, it has never been studied or translated before.

The inscription is called "Wang Ziqiao bei" 王子喬碑 or "Xianren 仙人 Wang Ziqiao bei" and describes the apparition of the immortal Wang Ziqiao at the tomb next to which it was erected. There was a historical personage named Wang Qiao, a near homonym of the immortal, who lived under Emperor Ming (A. D. 58–75), about a century before the stele was erected, but I do not believe he has anything to do with this stele. Wang Qiao came from Hedong (present Shanxi), and his tomb was in Ye 葉 (central Henan, about two hundred km to the east of the Wang Ziqiao stele). It is true that he was identified, at the end of his biography in the *Hou Hanshu*³, as an incarnation of the immortal Wang Ziqiao, but his place of origin,

¹ See, for example, Henri Maspero, *Le taoïsme et les religions chinoises*, Gallimard, Paris, 1971, pp. 463–466.

² Anna K. Seidel, *La divinisation de Lao tseu dans le taoïsme des Han* (Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Vol. LXXI), Paris 1969.

³ Hou Hanshu 82, p. 2712 of the Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1973 ed.; good translation in Ngo Van Xuyet, *Divination, magie et politique dans la Chine ancienne*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1976, pp. 86–87, where Ye is romanized as „Che" (should be „Chö"), an old reading of the character.

Hedong, and his tomb were both so far from this stele, which was said to be located on the site of the Wang Ziqiao family tomb, that I believe he has nothing to do with the events described on it.

The stele was erected north of the city of Meng 蒙 (northeast of the present Shangqiushi 商丘市, Henan, near the Shandong border). Some three and a half centuries after it was erected Li Daoyuan 麗道元 (d. 527) saw it there.⁴ He does not tell us the name of the author of the inscription, but it appears in the works of Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133?-192) who was without doubt the greatest of the earliest writers of stele inscriptions.⁵ Thirty inscriptions attributed to him are still in existence⁶ and two were thought of high enough literary merit to be included in *Wenxuan* 58. The form used is typical of Cai Yong's other inscriptions, except that he is not interested here in writing a eulogy of Wang Ziqiao, only in describing the history of the tomb, the circumstances surrounding the apparition of the immortal, and the unofficial and then official ceremonies that took place at the site and turned it into a Taoist shrine. The trimeter verses that follow and recapitulate the prose are also typical of Cai Yong's inscriptions, although he usually prefers tetrameters.⁷

Wang Ziqiao's hagiography in the *Liexianzhuan* 列仙傳⁸ calls him a prince of the Zhou dynasty which may account for the fact that some versions of the inscription begin with the words, "the prince, *wangsun* 王孫, Ziqiao".⁹

⁴ *Shuijingzhu* 水經注 23, p. 64 of the Guoxue jiben congshu edition Commercial Press, (Shanghai 1936).

⁵ „From the Latter Han, when stele inscriptions appeared in great number, no one has written inscriptions with more trenchancy than Cai Yong”, Liu Xie, *Wenxin diaolong* 12.

⁶ And can be found in Yan Kejun 嚴可均, *Quan shanggu sandai Qin Han sanguo liuchao wen*, *Quan Hou Hanwen* 75-79 (Zhonghua shuju, Peking 1958).

⁷ Two exceptions, also in trimeters, can be found in *Quan Hou Hanwen* 75, p. 8a, and 76, p. 6a.

⁸ Translation in M. Kaltenmark, *Le Lie-sien tchouan*, Centre d'Etudes Sinologiques de l'Université de Paris, Peking 1952, pp. 109-114.

⁹ The text of the inscription presents considerable problems that I have not always had space enough to discuss in the notes. Aside from the editions mentioned in notes 3 and 6, I have consulted the *Shuijing zhushu* 疏 (Zhongguo Kexue yuanshuguan, Peking 1955), the *Cai Zhonglang ji* 蔡中郎集 (in the Sibu congkan edition) and in the *Han Wei liuchao baisan mingjia ji* (Shanghai Saoye shanfang, 1925 ed.), and the *Li shi* 隸釋 20, pp. 16b-17b (Hongshi Huimuzhai congshu, 1871). I have used the *Shuijingzhu* as my basic text, printing the passages that only appear in the *Cai Zhonglang ji* version in italics.

The Wang Ziqiao Stele

Wang Ziqiao would seem to be the name of an antique Perfect Man. It is not known during which dynasty he first appeared as an immortal. Among the numerous Taoists I consulted some say he was from Yingchuan, some say he was born in Meng.¹⁰ This tumulus has been here since the founding of the city and it has been called "the Wang family tomb" by word of mouth since early times. But the family line was not continued; the tomb has been abandoned without an inheritor for years beyond counting.

In the twelfth month of the first year of the Yonghe era, during the night of the All Saints Festival (17 January 137)¹¹, very plaintive crying was heard on the tomb. Wang Bo 王伯, who lived nearby, thought it strange, and when it became light he ascended the tomb and investigated. There had been a heavy snowfall and no path had yet formed, but there were tracks of a large bird where sacrifices had been held, and the onlookers all took them to be supernatural.¹² Later a man wearing an official's hat and a scarlet unlined robe stood before the sepulture leaning upon a bamboo staff. He called to the young wood-gatherer, Yi Yongchang 伊永昌, and said: "I am Wang Ziqiao. You must not take the trees on our¹³ grave mound!" In an inkling he disappeared.

The local magistrate, Wan Xi 萬熹 of Taishan¹⁴, looked into what the elders had to say about this and felt that there had been an extremely favorable supernatural occurrence. He held an inquest and believed there was sufficient evidence proving that miracles had truly taken place. He then had an ancestral temple built to rejoice the god [i.e. Wang Ziqiao]. Thereupon those who took delight in the *dao* came from distant places to assemble there. Some strummed zithers and sang of the Great One¹⁵; others practiced meditation to visit their Cinnabar Fields.¹⁶ Those who were

¹⁰ Yingchuan was a large commandery in central Henan, with its capital in the present Yuxian; Meng is the site of the Wang Ziqiao stele, in eastern Henan near the Shandong border.

¹¹ The All Saints (La 臘) festival is described in D. B o d d e, *Festivals in Classical China*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1975, pp. 49-138.

¹² Wang Ziqiao is said to have risen to heaven on a white crane; cf. M. K a l t e n m a r k, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-113.

¹³ As will soon become clear, this is not Wang Ziqiao's own tomb; the other versions of the text say „my ancestors' tomb”.

¹⁴ Unknown.

¹⁵ An important divinity since early Han times; see, for example, H. M a s p e r o, *op. cit.*, pp. 398-400.

¹⁶ Cinnabar Fields, *dantian* 丹田, are points in the body upon which the Taoist adept concentrates during his meditations; see H. M a s p e r o, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-363, 491-495.

sick or crippled and who silently bowed and prayed for good fortune were granted it straight away, but those who were lacking in respect were struck down immediately. Thus it was known that this was a tomb of great virtue, in truth the tomb of the ancestors of the Perfect Man.¹⁷

In the eighth month, in autumn, of the eighth year of the Yanxi era (165) the emperor sent an envoy to offer a sacrificial victim and perform a ritual. The purification [?] was accomplished with utmost reverence and dignity. The Counselor-Delegate Wang Zhang 王璋 *zi* Boyi, of Donglai¹⁸, felt that the place of origin of a divine saint required the erection of an inscription that would make it known to succeeding generations. It is thus that in Laixiang 賴鄉 they venerate the vestiges of Laozi and that the people living near the Pass admire the remaining aura of Yin Xi 尹喜.¹⁹ [Wang Zhang] then, with his Aide, Bian Qian 邊乾²⁰, had this stele set up to com-

¹⁷ These two paragraphs have been translated by Patricia Ebrey, „Later Han Stone Inscriptions”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40/2 (1980), p. 337.

¹⁸ Meng was part of the principality of Liang during the Latter Han dynasty so that the reigning official there was called *xiang* 相, not “governor”, *taishou* 太守. Wang Zhang was one of the officials who were outlawed in this same year (165) for their factional activity against the eunuchs. Little is known of his life, except that he rose to the high rank of Shaofu qing 少府卿, Chamberlain for the Palace Revenues; see *Hou Hanshu* 67, pp. 2190 and 2187.

¹⁹ Laixiang is said in the *Shiji* 63, p. 2139 (Zhonghua shuju, Peking 1975 ed), to be the native place of Laozi. It was located near the present Luyi in eastern Henan, about 60 km south of the Wang Ziqiao stele. Yin Xi is said to have been the Guardian of the Pass when Laozi left China for the West; see their hagiographies in the *Lie-xianzhuan*, Kaltenmark, *op. cit.*, pp. 60–67. A. Seidel, *op. cit.*, pp. 36 ff., discusses the cult rendered to Laozi at his supposed place of origin.

²⁰ Bian Qian is otherwise unknown. He probably belonged to the same family as Bian Shao 韶, the author of an inscription to Laozi written in the same month as this inscription to Wang Ziqiao, and as Bian Rang 讓, a writer and a protégé of Cai Yong, his compatriot from Chenliu. The *Cai Zhonglang ji* version of this line reads “[Wang Zhong] then had Bian Qian consult with the officials, following which they erected this stele.” It is perhaps this version that prompts A. Seidel, *op. cit.*, pp. 58–59, n. 6, to say this inscription is not by Cai Yong, but by Bian Qian himself. Cai Yong often mentions, at the end of the prose sections of his stele inscriptions, in passages that strongly resemble these lines, the circumstances that led to the erection of the stele in question and the names of the men involved; there is no reason to believe Bian Qian is mentioned here because he was the author of the stele. Of course it is always possible that the attribution to Cai Yong is false. The earliest mention of Cai Yong as the author of a “Wang Qiao lu” is late, in *Taiping yulan* 33, p. 6b. (Wang Ziqiao is often called “Wang Qiao”; I do not believe the title attributed to Cai Yong refers to the Wang Qiao who lived under Emperor Ming mentioned above.) However the fact that educated and eminent men like the Bians (if they are related, as seems probable) and Cai Yong are seen associated in the organization of Taoist religious cults is interesting.

memorate and glorify the great acts of the past and for the inspection of those men who have set their hearts on the *dao*.

"Lord Wang,
 So virtuous he could commune with the spirits,
 Shone with internal brightness,
 Keeping himself perfectly pure.
 In tune with the great *dao*,
 He longed for eternal youth.
 Rejecting the world and its customs,
 He flew away, his body made divine.
 Soaring in the highest clouds,
 Floating in the Great Purity,
 He would ride on a hornless dragon,
 Or drive in a car pulled by a crane,
 Wearing a multicolored bamboo hat,
 Making his metallic bells ring out,
 Waving a flag of plumes,
 Brandishing a rainbow banner.
 His joys know no limits
 As he lives for ever and ever, without end.
 To manifest his fervent filial piety,
 He thought of those who had given him life.
 As the year drew to its close
 He showed his sincere feelings.
 In attendance near the tomb
 He sang forth his doleful chant.
 By leaving bird tracks
 He alerted the old town,
 And wearing a scarlet robe,
 With purple hat-strings dangling,
 He called to the child
 And announced his name.
 At this men understood
 And reacted with fear and surprise.
 They rebuilt the shrine
 And returned the altars and bamboo mats.
 They presented sacrificial foods
 That spread forth sweet-smelling odors.
 As all looked on [?],
 A far-wafting fragrance arose from the pure sacrifice,
 Adding to the stream of good fortune
 And to the glory of the imperial court.²¹
 [Thus it is that] heaven will protect our land,
 Aid our common people,
 Make our great blessings glow,
 Shining to the ends of the earth."

²¹ The text seems extremely corrupt here and the *Cai Zhonglang ji* version (Sibu congkan ed.) is even harder to construe.

It was appropriate for Wang Ziqiao to visit the family tomb during the All Saints Festival because the worship of one's ancestors played a significant role in this all-important festival.²² We do not know exactly when the Wangs' family tomb was rebuilt, nor do we know anything about Wang Xi, the local magistrate, but the crowds that assembled at the miraculous site and their conduct—singing hymns to a great deity, meditating, seeking deliverance from sickness—all look very familiar and might describe religious manifestations almost anywhere. The sacrifice made in the name of the emperor in 165 should be seen in the context of similar sacrifices made around this same time. In February a powerful eunuch was sent to Ku 苦²³ to perform a sacrifice to Laozi; in September the inscription to Laozi was written and the sacrifice to Wang Ziqiao performed; in January of 166 another eunuch performed the same ceremony to Laozi in Ku²⁴; and on 25 September 166 “a sacrifice was performed by the emperor to Huang Lao in the Bright Dragon Palace”.²⁵ “The emperor personally sacrificed to Laozi in the Bright Dragon Palace. The altars were covered with patterned rugs; the vessels were of pure gold; flower-canopied thrones were erected and the music used was the music performed at the suburban sacrifices to Heaven”.²⁶ Thus the cult of Laozi was considered important enough to be accompanied by the music performed during the most solemn imperial civil ceremonies!

This short inscription shows us that, less than twenty years before the revolt of the Yellow Turbans, the Taoist religion had permeated all classes of Chinese society, as Maspero saw so clearly²⁷, and was not a purely “popular” or lower-class phenomenon. The fact that the inscription was written by Cai Yong, one of the very greatest scholars of his time, a calligraphist of genius, a ritualist and musician, is another sign that Taoism was accepted by the élite, much as Christianity was accepted by the élite in the Mediterranean world, as well as by the common

²² This is underlined by T'ung-tsu Ch'ü, *Han social structure*, University of Washington Press Seattle and London 1972, p. 31, and William G. Boltz, *Philological footnotes to the Han New Year rites*, “Journal of the American Oriental Society” (Baltimore) 99 (1979), pp. 427–428.

²³ Near Laozi's birth place, Laixiang.

²⁴ Cf. A. Seidel, *op. cit.*, p. 37, and Qing Xitai 卿希泰, *Zhongguo daojiao sixiang shigang* 中國道教思想史綱, Sichuan renmin chubanshe, Chengdu 1981, pp. 54–55.

²⁵ *Hou Hanshu* 7, p. 317. The Bright Dragon Palace and Park were in the easternmost part of the palace grounds in Luoyang; see Hans Bielanstein, *Lo-yang in Later Han times*, “Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities” (Stockholm) 48 (1976), p. 38 and notes 177–179. Bielanstein translates the name of the palace as “Sleek Dragon Palace”.

²⁶ *Hou Hanshu zhi* 8, p. 3188.

²⁷ H. Maspero, *op. cit.*, pp. 465–466.

people.²⁸ The cataclysmic results of the revolt of the Yellow Turbans put an end to imperial patronage of the Taoist religion for over a century, but it probably remained an important religious phenomenon in all classes of society even when it was hardly seen in the historical records.

²⁸ This is one of the leitmotifs of the book of Peter Brown, (*The Cult of the Saints* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1981, pp. 12-22), in which he castigates early scholars (such as Hume and Gibbon) for seeing religion in late Antiquity as a "two-tiered" system, one tier for the "ignorant masses" and one for the (very small) educated class.