A RARE "JADE" BOOK
A Manchu Emperor's Edict carved on Panels of Jade

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Often a museum exhibition on a special subject will bring to light interesting objects in private hands. A casual visitor will see in the show something that recalls a similar or related thing in his own possession, so he will bring that in to discuss it with a curator, hoping to find out more about it. Some thirty years ago, when I had charge of the East Asian section in the University Museum, I organized a series of small shows called "Exhibit of the Month," taking individual themes of worldwide spread to call attention to the international breadth of the museum's collections.

One of these shows, entitled "Jade Around the World," aroused considerable public interest. I had selected for display some Persian and Mughal Indian sword hilts and amulets, a Maori war club and a tiki pendant from New Zealand, some worked pebbles from Alaska, several Mayan pieces from Middle America, and of course some Chinese jades, including belt buckles, personal seals, and even an imperial rice bowl. A family in the suburbs learned about this from some newspaper publicity, and asked me to come to see their Chinese collection. They showed me some fine but not unusual things, then they brought out a strangely shaped box of golden lacquer figured with five-clawed imperial dragons. When I raised the lid, I found several pieces of fine yellow silk, enwrapping a heavy "book" composed of ten panels of jade, mounted in gold brocade. A hasty glance at the inscriptions—in Chinese characters and Manchu script—revealed that it was an edict by the first Manchu Emperor of the Ch'ing Dynasty, in 17th century China.

My hostess said that it had been a present to her late husband in 1900, but it was too large to display in the house, and had merely been stowed away for years. Would the museum like to borrow it, she asked. Of course I accepted it as a temporary loan, and organized another "Exhibit of the Month" to display it. Some years later, they lent it again, for another, larger exhibition of Chinese jades. Finally, last summer, the family decided to present it to the museum, so it now has a more permanent home, where it can be more widely appreciated.

It is a most impressive thing. The two end panels, forming the "covers" of the "book," were deeply incised to portray two fierce dragons in 17th-century style, posed against a background of stylized clouds, sharing between them a flaming pearl. This pattern was emphasized by filling the incised lines with powdered gold.

Inside these "covers" are eight more panels, or "pages," the four on the right inscribed with neatly formed Chinese characters, and the other four in Manchu running script. In both cases, the general words have been incised and filled with gold dust, like the outer tablets; but in the case of exalted proper names—those of the Emperor and his revered ancestress to whom the "book" was dedicated—the incisions were filled with powdered lapis lazuli or lazurite. Not only was this handsome blue mineral an expensive importation from Central Asia, but its color—relating to the blue of Heaven—was most auspicious.

This "jade book" was first exhibited primarily as an unusually interesting example of Chinese jade-working, and as such it evoked much popular interest. Jade has been a highly prized substance in
many civilizations—as the previous exhibition had already demonstrated—but it was especially valued in China.

Our rather loose word "jade" actually refers to two separate minerals of very different composition, which share some unusual properties. More precisely, these are called nephrite and jadeite. Neither of these occurs in China, and the difficulty of importing the raw material was one reason why the Chinese valued them so highly. They had to import the nephrite from Eastern Turkestan (now called Sinkiang), and these panels were sawed out from an especially large block of that substance. Later, in the Ch'in Dynasty, jadeite was imported from Burma, but it generally arrived in much smaller pieces.

Another reason why the Chinese valued jade was the difficulty of carving it. Both nephrite and jadeite are very hard, and because of their inner structure they are far more difficult to work than even harder stones. In fact one of the tests for both kinds of jade is to try to scratch them with a knife blade; the result will be a silver streak—from the metal—because the stone abrades the metal, not vice versa.

Thirdly, the Chinese have prized jade for its wide range of handsome colors. We are accustomed to speak of "jade green," and tend to think that jade must always have a greenish hue. Actually, nephrite comes in a very wide span of colors from pure white to deep black, with a broad range of yellows and browns, while jadeite may have the same colors, with some brighter reds, richer greens, and a more lustrous sheen. These particular tablets are made from spotted and streaked nephrite, in a large block of a single color is extremely rare. It has an interesting mottled effect, with gray or white streaks or spots on its pale bluish green. In fact, the presence of the same general markings on the adjoining tablets demonstrates beyond question that all were sawn from the same large block. The saving in itself was a remarkable feat, in view of the rather limited technology in 17th century China.

Lastly, the people of Old China, in their search for pleasures of the senses, paid considerable attention to the stone of touch, and they long admired two special qualities of nephrite: its waxy feel and its coolness. Jadeite is somewhat less waxy, but both kinds are poor conductors of heat; they warm only very slowly when held in the hand, and when put down again they quickly reduce in temperature. In fact, one of the tests for true jade is to hold a piece to your cheek to feel its coldness. That trait is particularly marked in this case, because the heavy silk in which the individual tablets are bound together has a relative warmth which strongly contrasts with the coolness of the jade. For the Chinese who were accustomed to feeling both, this contrast would be visually apparent, without needing to touch them.

The actual document inscribed on these jade panels is, as we have seen, an imperial edict from the beginning of the Ch'in or Manchu Dynasty, that ruled China from 1644 to 1912. Bearing the date of Monday the 21st of December, 1648, by our Western reckoning, this records the words of the first Manchu Emperor to rule in China, commonly known as "the Shun-chih Emperor." Shun-chih was not his name; this was merely the name of his reign period. His actual name—which it was forbidden to mention—was Fu-lin. He could use it, but no one else was permitted to write these characters, even in other contexts.

The edict was written to confer the title of "Emperor" on the Emperor's great-great-great-grandmother, who had been the wife of a minor local chieftain in Manchuria. As she was a very obscure individual—we do not even know her proper name—this document is not as significant as it would be if it had been dedicated to one of this emperor's more distinguished ancestors; and yet the very fact of this individual's relative unimportance gives this a particular historical meaning. It shows the lengths to which the first Manchu rulers of China felt obliged to go in trying to prove their legitimate right to govern the nation they had not recently conquered.

As Fu-lin was still a child, the actual rulers were two regents, his great-uncle, Prince Dorgon, who was virtually a dictator, and one of the latter's nephews. Only four years before, Dorgon had led a Manchu army through a gap to the Great Wall. This time the Manchus did not come as raiders—as they had done so often in the past. They were invited down into China to help drive out a bandit usurper, who had brought an end to the Ming Dynasty and had seized the Dragon Throne. The generals handled the situation very deftly. They pursued the usurping emperor across a long stretch of Chinese territory, being careful not to catch him too soon. By the time they finally caught up with him, they had managed to establish their control over a vast area of north and west China. They then rewarded Marshal Wu Sun-kuei, the man who had invited them into China, by giving him the position of Viceroy over the recalcitrant south, feeling confident that he would pacify that area on their behalf. Ultimately, Marshal Wu fulfilled their expectations. Much later, in his old age, he came to realize that he had not acted in the best interests of his homeland, and he tried to revolt. But that time, however, the Manchus had consolidated their power to such an extent that they were able to suppress his rebellion, and one by one, until they had all China.

When this edict was written, the Regents felt reasonably confident that they already possessed the whole of China—as the edict claims—and yet they were not fully sure of their position. They unquestionably owned North China and felt reasonably certain that they had some degree of control over all the rest; and yet the Chinese openly despised them as "barbarians." They had to offer some visible proof that they were not merely "savages from beyond the Wall," but that they were legitimate rulers, with a long pedigree for the Imperial Family and a due awareness of...
traditional Chinese rites and customs.

An important element in Old Chinese tradition was reverence for ancestors. This included a strong belief that dead grandparents could—for many generations—assist their living descendants. The Manchus found tangible evidence for this when they examined the traditional Temple of Ancestors, just outside the Imperial Palace complex, and found "jade books" much like this, but all in Chinese, that had been made by the Ming Emperors to honor their immediate forebears, as well as those intended to honor the successive emperors after their deaths.

Accordingly, in the fifth year of the new dynasty, the Regents for the boy-emperor decided he should honor four sixty tribal chieftains who had worked to develop the power of their house in Manchuria, giving each of them along with his principal wife posthumous titles of Emperor and Empress.

The inscription in the University Museum's "jade book" is typical of the general formula that was used for the other early "empresses"; while those for their husbands differed only in minor details. It says:

On the 9th day of the 9th month in the 5th year of the Shun-chih reign (Monday, December 21, 1640), the fillial great-grandson (actually the great-great-great-grandson), the new Emperor, Fu-lin, bowed his head and bowed to the ground (kowtow), announcing to his deceased imperial ancestress, "Now the Empire is united and Great China is all complete, entirely because the deceased ancestress assisted Hsing-tsu, "the Great Empress" (Chih Huang-hou), to do good deeds and to consolidate prosperity in order that this might be accomplished. Therefore, performing the rites and ceremonies, and holding the utmost fillial thoughts, I respectfully offer up a written tablet and an imperial seal conferring (on her) the title of "Great Empress" (Chih Huang-hou) for handing down to posterity admirable virtues."

Respectfully Spoken.

When all eight sets of jade tablets were finished, they were ceremoniously placed in the latest Ju Pei, the Temple of the Ancestors, called the Tai Miao. This had been erected in the 15th century by the third Ming Emperor, after he moved the nation's capital from Nan-king to Peking. He had it built in 1430, in exactly the same grand style as the original Ming Ancestral Temple in the southern capital. Repaired in 1440, it was destroyed by fire in 1462, and rebuilt two years later. Therefore, when the Manchus took over the temple to honor their own ancestors, its buildings dated from 1464—though they had been restored and redecorated several times in the intervening period.

The entire temple complex comprised three great halls, arranged horizontally across a north-south median line. The third, or most northerly hall was called the Ts’un Tien, and this was the shrine for the lesser ancestors who were canonized by being awarded posthumous titles and honors. For each of these eight individuals—honorary emperors and empresses—they set up a throne on which were placed the memorial tablet and the imperial seal referring specifically to him or her, while the golden box containing the edict was displayed nearby. From then on, on the language spoken by Jesus and His disciples in 1st-century Palestine. The sounds and shapes of some letters had somewhat changed in the course of this long transmission, and a few new ones had been added, while the Manchus had devised a more satisfactory method for recording vowel sounds. But the biggest change was in the direction of writing. Aramaic had been written horizontally from right to left, but the later Uighurs, the Mongols and the Manchus wrote vertically—it is usually said
that they did this to be able to interline their writing with columns of Chinese characters. Nevertheless, the remote affinity with Aramaic would still be recognized by a Near Eastern scholar, if he turned the panels written in Manchu 90 degrees to the right so the columns were horizontal. The Manchu script finally passed out of use before the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty, as its users became more and more culturally akin to their Chinese subjects, finally reading and writing entirely with Chinese characters. Thus, this "jade book" preserves an interesting and quite beautiful example of a script and a language that are now both dead, and have been almost entirely forgotten.

It only remains to tell how this treasured "book" came from the third hall of the Temple of Ancestors in Peking to its present home in Philadelphia. That story, too, involves a bit of Ch'ing history.

Toward the end of the 19th century, the Empress Dowager T'zu-hsi, who had been notorious as an autocratic tyrant, suddenly realized that her control was slipping. Not without reason, she blamed this situation and the swift decline of her dynasty on the constant political and economic encroachment by the Western nations and the impact of Occidental ideas. In increasing desperation, and encouraged by some reactionary Manchu princes, in 1900 she put reliance on the help of several bands of Chinese fanatics whom the foreigners called "Boxers." Apparently she believed their claim that they had spiritual protection against foreign bullets and could drive the "Western barbarians" out of China. That June, she invited the Boxers to come to Peking, and they joined with some pro-vindicad troops to attack the foreign legations. For two months the diplomats and missionaries of several nations were under siege. The Western powers—England, France, Germany, America, and Russia—and Japan sent troops to relieve them.

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Arriving in mid-August, they quickly broke the siege, and the Empress Dowager fled with her court to West China.

The foreign soldiers and marines, full of antipathy because of what they felt had been insufferable indignities to their compatriots, took advantage of the defenseless capital to search for loot. As if to prove that they were indeed barbarians, they did not spare even the Temple of Ancestors. The chief culprits were the United States Marines.

As a result of the looting of the T'ai Miao, all the older "jade books" disappeared. Panels from some of them have found their way into various museums, but as far as we know, this is the only one from that earliest Manchu act that remains complete, with even its box intact. Remember that this was a gift to the head of the family that recently donated it—he was not in China during the sack of Peking. He and his descendants took good care of it for nearly eighty years, and now the University Museum can preserve it for posterity.

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