

A NOTE ON THE CHINESE STELA OF 551 A. D.

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THIS stela was published in the *MUSEUM JOURNAL* for March, 1923. At that time the scene represented in relief in the top recess under the dragons was described but no attempt was made to identify it. The tablet has since been published in two works on Chinese sculpture but, although the scenes on the sides have been described as illustrations of the Vessantara jâtaka, no satisfactory explanation has been stated, hitherto, for the scene in question.

The subject that we see here illustrated can be none other than the "Visit of Manjusri to Vimalakirti." On the left, with his attendants around him, seated cross legged on an inverted lotus throne under a canopy, we see the visitor Manjusri, great Bodhisattva of Wisdom and Thought, known by the Chinese name of Wen Shu; in Japan as Monju. Here he is dressed in the garments of a Bodhisattva and holds the scroll of wisdom in his hand. Opposite him on the right side, and partly facing him, is his host, Vimalakirti the dainty hermit saint, clad in elaborate robes and a warm cloak (for he was an invalid) and holding a large fan in his right hand. The canopy over his throne is hung with curtains which are drawn back and held by bands. Behind him stand attendants. The recent arrival, or imminent departure of Manjusri is suggested by the presence of his palanquin, borne on the back of his faithful lion (his usual attribute) and accompanied by two servants, which occupies the center of the scene. Above are two apsaras, Buddhist angels or fairies, flying down toward Manjusri with offerings in their hands.

The incident illustrated is probably that of the "thunderous silence" related in the Vimalakirti Sutra. The story goes that a host of Bodhisattvas led by Manjusri came to visit Vimalakirti. The saint asked them to "express their views as to how to enter into the Dharma of Non-duality." Some gave one answer, some another. One said, "Ignorance and enlightenment are two. No ignorance, no enlightenment, and there is no dualism. Those who have entered a meditation in which there is no sense-perception, no cogitation, are free from ignorance as well as from enlightenment." Others answered in like manner. "Finally Vimalakirti asked Manjusri, who hitherto



Detail of Chinese Votive Stela of 551 A.D. The Visit of Manjusri to Vimalakirti.

had been silent. Manjusri answered, 'That which is in all beings wordless, speechless, shows no signs, is not possible of cognisance, and is above all questionings and answerings, to know this is said to enter into the Dharma of Non-duality.' Manjusri then asked Vimalakirti to express his idea of Non-duality but Vimalakirti kept silent. Then Manjusri admiringly exclaimed, 'Well done, well done! The Dharma of Non-duality is truly above letters and words.' "

Vimalakirti was an Indian Buddhist saint, a native of Vâis'alî, said to have lived in the time of Gautama Buddha. Mr. Waley describes him as "the patron saint of Exquisiteness" and "lying a fragile hermit in his bare white cell." It is hardly as a fragile Indian recluse that he is represented here, however, but rather as a pleasantly plump Chinese patriarch who does not look at all ill. That this particular saint should have come to be so popular in China may perhaps be explained by the tradition that he had actually visited that country. Also the "Vimalakirti Sutra," or book containing his words, was one of the first of the Sanskrit texts to be translated into Chinese. The translation was made by Kumaradjiva, who worked at Ch'ang-an (the old capital of China, now called Sian-Fu) and translated this and the "Lotus Sutra" sometime between the years 397 and 415 A.D. It is interesting to note that it was during these same years that Fa Hsien, a brother scholar at Ch'ang-an, made his famous pilgrimage to India to obtain more of the texts of the Buddhist books. Doubtless Kumaradjiva, whose father was Indian, whose mother was a Kucha princess and who had himself lived in Kashmir, gave his Chinese colleague minute instructions as to the dangerous route through Turkestan and Udyana into India.

The carving on this stela must be one of the earliest Chinese representations of the Vimalakirti story. It was made some one hundred and fifty years after the translation had made the story familiar. But that Vimalakirti was known and regarded with special favor even before this translation had been made we should gather from the tradition in regard to Ku K'ai-chih's exploit at the Tile-Coffin Temple in Nanking, where, in 364 A.D. or thereabouts, the young painter, then only twenty years old, executed a portrait of Vimalakirti on the wall of a nearby building and raised his pledge of a million cash by charging the people admission to come and look at it. This, however, was a portrait of the saint. The incident of the "thunderous silence" probably became generally known only after the translation of the texts. In later years the subject became

extremely popular as is testified to by its frequent representation on the walls of the cave temples at Tun Huang. The best of these is probably the ninth century fresco in Cave 1 (see Pelliot, *Grottoes de Tonen Huang*, Vol. I, plate 11). Yen Li-pen of the seventh century is known to have painted a picture of the "Visit of Manjusri to Vimalakirti" and the fame of it was such that it has been thought that it established the general scheme of composition which the later artists, such as those who executed the Tun Huang frescoes, followed as traditional; namely, placing Manjusri enthroned on one side and Vimalakirti, likewise enthroned, on the other side to balance, the two figures being of equal importance in the design. The scene on the stela of 551 A.D. shows that this traditional scheme of arrangement is to be traced far back of Yen Li-pen, indeed far back of the stela itself. For whether this carving had as its prototype a painting or another sculpture it is evident that the subject is even here represented in a traditional manner, one already well established by precedent. The story is told with perfect self assurance and the significance of the scene conveyed by the simplest means. It is a subject admirably suited for representation on such a monument as this, both on account of the perfect symmetry of the composition and because the arrangement of the two balanced figures lends itself to the broad top of the stela better than would a design with a single dominating central figure. It is a pleasant variation from the dominant symmetry so powerfully illustrated in the niche below and keeps the eye aware of the splendid breadth of the monument clear to the very top. The introduction of the lion bearing the palanquin is a happy feature not, so far as I know, included in other representations of the subject.