THE DOORS OF THE WAITING DOGS

AN acquisition of especial interest has recently been made to the collections of Chinese sculpture. The Museum is widely recognized as holding an eminent position in this field, therefore it is rare to have an opportunity to supplement the many important pieces exhibited in Harrison Hall. In the case of the present pair of grey limestone tomb doors and accompanying lintel, an unusual opportunity was presented and accepted.

Some tomb doors of this general character are not of exceptional occurrence: undecorated specimens have been reported in the course of recent excavations in China, and several decorated examples are to be found in European and American collections. Of these the majority are not in reality workable doors, but single stone slabs with the leaves of the doors, the lintel and perhaps the jambs merely indicated by carving. A door in the Metropolitan Museum, of the same epoch would, from the somewhat obscure description of the native excavator, seem to have had a pair of stone workable doors which, after the burial, were overlaid with stucco decorated with tempera painting. A section of this painting, split down the centre is exhibited in New York between the jambs. This example would seem to be the closest parallel to the doors at present under consideration.

When a single slab was used and was decorated with simulated doors, it was doubtless set before the mouth of the tomb after interment and not only adequately indicated the entrance, but also made later entry less feasible than if separate doors were hung. But it would seem inescapable that ours were meant for actual use—perhaps to make periodic sacrifices to the deceased within, or for successive family burials. The sturdy rings attached to iron pins deeply inserted in the stone indicates this, as well as the fact that the outer corners of each door are broken off leaving, however, evidence that there were originally inserted iron hinge-pins which fitted into socket holes in the sill and on another lintel member, both of which are now missing; these were doubtless undecorated and not thought worthy of rescue.

The lintel is the most completely ornamented portion of the ensemble, although other elements of the decoration are of equal interest. With somewhat curved top and straight bottom, the lintel's exposed surface is completely filled with a dynamic composition of animated phoenix-

PLATE II. Chinese Tomb Doors of the sixth century recently acquired by the Museum.

like birds, with swirling plumage, flanking a stylized sacred jewel surrounded with flames and lotus pods and leaves. This is rendered in a type of surface engraving with background portions cut out to a greater depth to accent the engraved areas, and is a technique, perhaps stemming back to tomb slab decoration of the Han dynasty—vide the Wu Tombs in Shantung—but, whatever its origin, a means for surface decoration very prevalent in the Sixth and Seventh Century A. D. The jambs and lintel of the Metropolitan specimen, all the other false tomb doors mentioned above, the set of tomb slabs in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, as well as the edges of many stelæ preserved in the Pei Lin at Sianfu are decorated in this self same manner.

The phoenix bird flanking the sacred jewel was also a favorite motif in the lintels of such tomb doors. It is obviously a symbolic composition, partly pagan, partly Buddhist. In any case it provided the artist with an opportunity for a fantastic free-hand decorative scheme, one which he executed with vigor and skillfulness. Even its slight asymmetry enhances its grace.

To a certain extent the same vitality is found in the carvings of the two chimæra-masks that form the bases for the iron ring handles. Although these are carved in almost full relief the hair of the manes is in whirls of windblown activity, their features are screwed up in not too malevolent grins, and vitality is implicit in them.

Such masks, in stone and bronze, large and small, are, again, not unfamiliar in work of this pleasant epoch in Chinese art. They are perhaps more to be associated with the close of the Sixth Century than with beginnings of the T'ang dynasty in the Seventh. But dating on stylistic grounds within a half century is sufficiently close for all general purposes.

The presence of two guardian figures—sometimes civil guardians as are these, sometimes armed guardians—is as usual as the phoenix composition on the lintel. But no example seems to be extant where these are carved in high relief rather than indicated in the engraved process described in connexion with the lintel.

These guardian figures, garbed in simple robes and leather cuirasses hung by straps from the shoulders, have indications of slight beards on their chins, and wear typical caps thrust through with flat pieces of jade. They are, in stone, close counterparts to the many pottery tomb guardians, glazed and unglazed, that are entirely familiar to us. Their relatively simple dress would tend to corroborate the evidence adduced above for a late Sixth Century date.

The last and most unusual decorative motif is the pair of dogs, executed in simple incised lines, placidly sitting face to face at the bottom of the door slabs. Guardian lions would have been the expected animals, if any, to find depicted here; the Chinese lion or chimæra is not unfrequently depicted in odd ways, and despite an invariable feline expression and build, resemblance to the Pekingese type has often led it to be called a dog. But the dogs on the present doors are unmistakably ordinary domestic canines, almost puppies, with flop ears, long curling tails, and rather large paws. That they were placed here on guard seems inescapable, but they are behaving in a very gentle, faithful manner. The thought is a pleasant one—though it contains no shred of evidence—that these were the favorite dogs of the owner of the tomb chamber and that he wished replicas of them to sit outside and to wait after he had passed through the doors of eternity.

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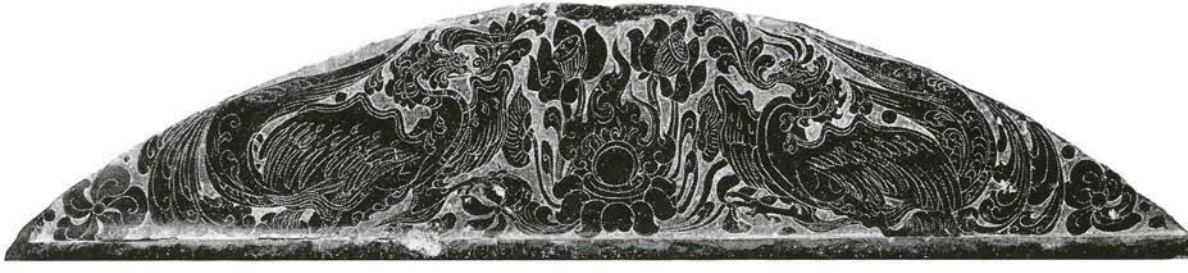

Lintel of the Chinese Tomb Doors.