EASTERN HAN COMMEMORATIVE STELAE:
LAYING THE CORNERSTONES OF PUBLIC MEMORY

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In the waning years of the Han Dynasty as Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) waged his campaigns against the south, a 12-year-old cowherd named Deng Ai 鄧艾 (d. 264 AD) migrated with his mother to Yingchuan. There he encountered the stele of Chen Shi 陳寔 (d. 187 AD), prefect of Taiqiu 太丘, bearing the eulogy “His refinement served as the model for the age, and his behavior served as a pattern for officials” 为世范, 行为士则. Deng Ai was allegedly so impressed by Chen Shi’s praiseworthy virtues, he duly changed his own personal name to Fan 範 (“Model”) and his formal name to Shize 士则 (“Pattern for officials”). Posthumously recounting Chen Shi’s personal story, the stele had successfully served its function as a cornerstone to the public memory by anchoring the prefect’s identity in the physical and mental landscape and by extending his influence into a future generation.

While the custom of inscribing stele hymns for the dead predates the boy Deng Ai, it would have been a new practice during Chen Shi’s own life, the general custom arising in the 140s AD and spreading across all the Han population centers from Shandong to Sichuan in the second half of the 2nd century. Unlike their modern Western counterparts, these stelae or bei 碑 recorded more than just the name, birth and death dates of the grave occupant. They instead reeled off highlights from the dedicatee’s whole life in an allusion-laden, ornate prose preface leading up to an ancestral hymn that concentrated the essence of who the dedicatee was and of what was to be remembered. Deng Ai theoretically encountered Chen Shi’s identity filtered down to its core, a core worthy of emulation.

1 Sanguo zhi (Beijing, 1975) 28, p. 775. The received Chen Shi stele texts do not include the Sanguo zhi’s exact words, although they clearly refer to this justification for his posthumous name.

2 For a thorough treatment on dating the Han stele era, see Miranda Brown, The politics of mourning in early China (Albany, 2007), pp. 42–50.
Just as Deng Ai rode upon the prefect Chen Shi’s coattails, Chen Shi himself rode upon the coattails of earlier cultural champions anchored within the communal memory. Drawing upon pre-imperial classics such as the Lunyu 論語 (Analects) and the Shijing 詩經 (Book of songs), his stele likens the prefect to Liuxia Hui 柳下惠, a worthy man whom the state had failed to recognize, and to the lords of Fu 甫 and Shen 申, heaven-sent guardians to the king.3 These early stelae typically describe how their dedicatees resonated with this past hero or ranked with that historical stalwart. That is, the stele tied the dedicatee’s particular identity into an existing web of cultural symbols, and so reading a stele is an exploration of the communes loci where ancestral cult and public memory overlap.

The late anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously remarked:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.4

Weber directly linked an individual society’s religious format with its own value orientations so that each religious idea system fit uniquely with that particular culture’s economic needs and communal wants. In turn, Geertz likewise argued against one-size-fits-all explanations for religion and instead favored particularized, site-specific understandings of what it constituted. Culture—of which religion is a sub-unit—is the collection of “webs of significance that he himself has spun”; it is not a single universal overlay to be explained away by immutable natural laws. When we turn to the preservation of identity in these stele inscriptions, Geertz would have us sort through the various webs of significance that comprise the meaning of an individual’s existence: the genealogical web, the geographical web, the web of cultural heroes now used to position the dedicatee and so forth. Chen Shi’s stele becomes a “You are here” signpost within this complex web, locating him relative to everyone else and thereby giving him meaning. Yet the ancestral cult—that complex set of webs surrounding the late Chen Shi—might not be “religion” as we limit and explain it today. The ancestral cult here overlaps with less

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3 For Chen Shi’s stele, see Cai zhonglang ji (Shanghai, 1936), 2.5b–8a (“Chen Taiqiu bei”); Li Shan, Wenxuan (Shanghai, 1986) 58, pp. 2504–07 (“Chen Taiqiu beiwen”).