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FOUNDED BY EDWARD C. HEGELER

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Courtesy of Field Museum, Chicago

WEI-TO

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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A DEFENDER OF THE FAITH AND HIS MIRACLES

BY BERTHOLD LAUFER
Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

AN exhibit recently installed in a case on the East Gallery of Field Museum, Chicago, comprises a number of fine, carved, wooden images of Buddhist and Taoist deities most of which were obtained by me from ancient temples in and around Si-an fu, the present capital of Shensi Province and erstwhile glamorous metropolis of the Han and T'ang dynasties of China. Negotiations for such images were by no means easy and required a great deal of pourparlers, tact, and diplomacy. The mere hint at a commercial transaction would have been regarded as an insult by the abbot of a temple both to himself and the gods. It was necessary first to gain the confidence and amity of monks and abbots and then to try to effect on this basis an exchange of gifts—the gods while not venal might be presented to one who possessed an intimate understanding of their nature and who promised to treat them with care and reverence. Under this formula, by making a present to the abbot and an offering to the temple, which reconciled the gods, I became the proud owner of a statue of Wei-to, who is the loyal protector of Buddha's temples and a staunch defender of his faith.

Not that statues of this god are rare, nearly every Buddhistic temple boasts of one, but most of these are made after a commonplace routine by artisans who copy their models mechanically. This one was singularly beautiful, free and original in his conception, well carved and finely lacquered, the lacquer coat being mellow in tone with age. Last but not least, this particular Wei-to was glorified by a tradition which clothed him with a nimbus in the eyes of his admirers and imbued him with a historical significance of the first order. The story briefly is this. Long ago, during the seventh century, in the glorious age of the T'ang emperors, there lived at Si-an fu a Buddhist priest, Tao Süan by name, a profound thinker and an eminent writer on subjects connected with his religion. Like all members of the monkhood he was deeply devoted to self-con-

centration and contemplation, looked upon as the great means of self-perfection. Meditation would naturally lead to dreams putting him in contact with the supernatural world. Tao Süan wrote his memoirs, and has left to us many precious documents in which he records his conversations with gods and spirits that revealed themselves to him in his inspirational dreams. Among others Wei-to appeared to him in his visions and directed him to have his statue made exactly as his apparition. Tao Süan obeyed the command, and from this time onward images of Wei-to were set up as the guardians of Buddha's temples and clergy. It is a singular fact that all Buddhistic divinities of China are derived from types created in India where Buddhism was born, but that Wei-to is the only Buddhistic deity conceived in China. He has the appearance of a handsome Chinese youth with a smiling countenance and is a powerful general fortified by a heavy suit of mail, ever ready to strike demons and the foes of the faith. Now it happened that the temple from which the Wei-to, at present in the Museum, has come was erected on the very spot where Tao Süan, master of contemplation and original creator of Wei-to, lived and taught. According to a tradition of this temple, which appears to be well founded, this statue was a direct descendant of Tao Süan's work, traceable to his inspiration, permeated by his spirit. It was regarded as a palladium capable of innumerable blessings, and one may realize how hard it was for my friend, the abbot, to part with this treasure for the benefit of Chicago.

The statue of this god was a great miracle-worker. Wei-to, above all, was a good provider, an efficient money-raiser and bill collector. In some monasteries where the monks thought more of their temporal than spiritual welfare they placed his statue in the kitchen the supervision of which was entrusted to his care. It even occurred that when he was installed as a culinary purveyor, the monks recited incantations, threatening him with severe corporal punishments if he should ever neglect his duty to supply the kitchen regularly with provisions.

Whenever it happened that the temple buildings were in need of repairs or that the walls had to be repainted or that a pagoda was to be restored, good Wei-to was instrumental in raising the necessary cash for such labors. In a case like this the brotherhood would stage a solemn procession through the streets and lanes of the city. One of the monks carried a shrine harboring Wei-to's picture, beating

a wooden drum in the shape of a fish and soliciting funds or subscriptions from wealthy shopkeepers and well-to-do families. If not successful in this venture, one of the monks would deposit Wei-to's image on the threshold of the house of a very prominent family, obstruct the entrance, and remain seated there cross-legged like a Buddha, for days if necessary, and would patiently wait till the expected contribution was turned over to him.

If the monks failed in this quest of charity, the racket was pushed to extremes. A member of the brotherhood was locked up in a cage just high enough to allow him to squeeze in, and was openly exhibited to the crowd in the market place. The door of this cage was carefully shut with several padlocks, and the news was broadcast that the fellow in the cage was on a hunger strike, doomed to die, and that he would not be released until the necessary amount was raised. The people were urged to have pity with the moribund man and to surrender speedily their loose change. In order to play their feelings up to a pitch, it was alleged that the prisoner's bare feet rested on sharp iron spikes; this in a way was true, but the spikes were so deeply sunk into a wooden plank that it formed a smooth surface, and moreover he was always secretly released before any harm could befall him.

It will thus be seen that rackets are not an institution of recent origin, or peculiar to Chicago, and that rackets also have their history whose threads may take us back to the intricate mysteries of the Orient.