THE HOLM-NESTORIAN EXPEDITION TO SIAN
MCMVII.*

BY FRITS V. HOLM, M.R.A.S.

It is with the greatest regret that I have not been able to enjoy
the honor extended to me by the President of the Congress to
accept his invitation to be present at the deliberations of the Congress
and there exhibit and lecture on the replica of the Nestorian Stone
of Sianfu; but I have thought fit to submit a brief statement of my
work to the Council, to be dealt with as the President and his
Council may decide.

After several months of constant study in the British Museum’s
library, and due to a keen interest I have always taken in matters
Chinese from my former residence in that great empire, I decided
to undertake an expedition to the capital of the province of Shensi,
Sian-fu, known generally as the place of refuge of the Chinese
Court during and after the Boxer troubles. I was fortunate enough
to obtain the necessary financial means in London and New York,
where I arrived in February, 1907, from Europe, and I likewise
found much moral support from several university professors, scient-
ists and museum authorities in various countries.

The chief aim of the expedition was to proceed to Sianfu and
there on the spot examine the local and outer relations of the Nes-
torian Stone of A. D. 781, with a possible view of purchasing the
ancient monument or obtaining a true copy or monolith replica of
the same.

I copy the following paragraphs from my book-manuscript
(part 1):

"Of all the historical monuments near and in Sianfu, the fa-
mous Nestorian Stone, or Chingchiaopei as the natives call it, un-
doubtedly ranks as the very first. It is perhaps not too much to
say, that while these lines are being written on the river Han in

*Communicated to the XV. International Congress of Orientalists at
Copenhagen on August 19, 1908.
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Standing by the Nestorian Stone before its removal.
THE ORIGINAL NESTORIAN STONE.
As it now stands in the Peilin or "Forest of Tablets."
Hupch province mediō July, 1907, the Nestorian Tablet, as it stands outside the west gate of Sian, unheeded and neglected, although known to science, is the most valuable historical monument in the world, that has not, as yet, been acquired by any museum or scientific society or corporation.

"It is true that prints and photographs have been taken of the famous inscription and that translations have been made and published of the same,—but the stone stands there, lonely, in all kinds of weather, and only the very rare traveler, who gets as far as Sianfu, or an occasional missionary, pays the Chingchiaopei a visit of short duration.

"As already formerly alluded to, Christianity first came to China in the beginning of the sixth century in its Nestorian form and was allowed to flourish during some three centuries under the protection of the early emperors of the famous Tang dynasty. Still Nestorians were found in Cathay and Manji, i.e., North and South China, by Marco Polo, when he traveled in these regions towards the end of the eighth century.

"The priests of Nestorianism enjoyed the favor of the court and were allowed to erect churches and monasteries. The Nestorian Tablet proves above all suspicion the early existence of Christianity in the Middle Kingdom.

"The Chingchiaopei is dated A.D. 781 and was accidentally found by some laborers in 1625, when it was placed on a "fair pedestal" by the governor of Shensi. It was early visited by many Chinese who took an interest in the ancient monument's inscription, which is marvelously well preserved.

"For decades after, the stone was little thought of and rarely visited, and the arch which had been built over it disappeared. Towards the end of the last century (1891) a small roof was erected over the stone at the instigation of the corps diplomatique at Peking, which had induced the Tsungli Yamen, the then Foreign Office, to guard the monument against injury. One hundred taels were sent to Sianfu from Peking; but in those days there was no post office, and only five taels reached Sian in safety, the balance having been mysteriously absorbed underway. Thus the shed erected was of a very inferior kind and to-day has quite disappeared. Mr. W. W. Rockell, the U. S. Minister to China, who made a name for himself by journeying in the Koko Nor Lake district some fifteen years ago, told me, while in Peking, that "the Chinese thought quite a good deal of the stone and had a shed erected to protect it some time ago"; but I am afraid the honorable gentleman would
be very disappointed to see the precious old monument stand as naked and unprotected as its innumerable fellow-stones of minor value, which are to be found by the score in the vicinity of the ancient capital. Several translations, more or less correct, more or
less complete, of the Chinese and Syriac inscriptions have been published. The task of translating the ca. 2000 characters on the stone is a very difficult one, but the translation by the well-known sinologist Dr. Wylie,* is generally considered the best.

*Dr. Wylie's translation appears on page 35 of this issue, taken from the second part of Dr. S. Wells Williams's great work, *The Middle Kingdom.*
On the 10th of June, 1907, I first visited the resting-place of the unique monument. I went out alone on horseback through the west gate, traversed the western suburb and, having passed some military barracks outside the western suburban gate, had no difficulty in finding the old Buddha temple, on the premises of which the stone is situated. A large brick entrance in ruins and some remnants of a decayed Lōss wall show the former large extent of the temple. But to-day we only find a comparatively modern center building, which is more of a farm than a temple. Everybody was busy with the wheat harvest, even the three Buddhist priests, and nobody interfered with me as I walked about snapping shots and wondering at the ruinous surroundings of such an invaluable monument.

“Behind the farm-temple is a piece of ground where a large stone arch and several memorial slabs are situated. In a row of five stones, the Chingchiaopei is the fourth, counting towards the East. Like most stones of a similar kind it stands on the back of a clumsily worked stone-tortoise, but nothing is left of a protecting shed, and nothing indicates, as some authors most likely wrongly, assert, that the stone and its neighbors, which do not even stand in a straight line, have ever been built into a brick wall. An old picture of the stone shows it encased in a kind of brick niche, and it is by no means impossible that this has given rise to the wrongful idea concerning a brick wall. But there is no trace of any niche around the tablet, nor of any later wooden shed, and the 74 years old chief priest, who has been constantly on the spot for over 50 years, only remembers the stone standing free and frank and lonely—looking apart from the ramshackle shed of 1891.

“The much-discussed cross on the stone is not very plain and must almost be searched after before found, but the characters are beautifully preserved with the exception of one or two which are said to have been wilfully injured by the Bonzes, who thought that too much attention was being paid to this ancient relic of Christian fame. Still this is hardly probable.

“The other stones on the temple ground are of no immediate value or interest, their inscriptions giving the history of the farm-temple and the names and titles of the various donors.

“As will be noted from the photographs (which I have the honor to submit with this paper) the slab is a very large one, being 10 feet high, its weight being two tons. The difficulties in connection with the transport of the original or a replica were consequently appalling, as it would be necessary to transport the stone on a
specially constructed cart nearly 350 miles to the nearest railway station, Chengchow."....

Laying aside the manuscript, I may shortly mention that I did everything in my power to obtain the original by applying to the local authorities etc.; but although the Chinese do not care more

YÜ SHOW, THE CHINESE HIGH PRIEST.
Seated where the Nestorian stone had stood before its removal.
Photograph by Holm.

to-day for the stone than for any ordinary brick, they at once got suspicious; and I might as well have endeavored to "lift" the Rosetta Stone out of the British Museum, or take the Moabite Stone from the Louvre, as to carry away the Chingchiaopei from Sian.
I shall not here dwell on the apparently unsurmountable difficulties the officials and even the foreign missionaries laid in my way when I decided to confine my efforts to obtain and carry home to Europe or America a replica of the venerable tablet. Suffice it to say that both the local, the transport and eventually the customs difficulties were all overcome in due course, and after eleven months on Chinese soil I was able to leave Shanghai on the last day of February, 1908, bound for New York.

The replica is one of the most beautiful pieces of Chinese workmanship I have ever seen. In the first place there is not a measure, not a character, not a detail that differs from the original tablet— even the weight is the same. In the second place this piece of art was executed by four native stone-cutters in eleven days, including polishing, after the huge slab had been brought from the Fuping quarries to Sian. In the third place the Chinese artisans have been able to accomplish the miracle of carving the cross and chiseling the Syriac characters, which they did of course not know, to absolute perfection.

On the 16th of June, 1908, in accordance with arrangement with Sir Purdon Clarke, Director, the replica was deposited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the City of New York.

Although the replica is not yet the property of the museum, there is a probability that it may never leave its new abode again; but the fact should not be overlooked that all museums and universities of the world can now be supplied, if so desired, with plaster casts.
of the Nestorian tablet, casts which would not be more accurate, had they be taken from the original itself.

Once more to quote my manuscript (II. part):

"The second day of October, 1907, saw, at Sianfu, the fulfilment of an act which ought to have taken place nearly 300 years ago."
"Being the day previous to the final departure of the replica, I rode out to the farm-temple in order to supervise various arrangements concerning the packing of the stone etc., and in order to "square" my account with the old chief priest Yu Show. Nearing the temple grounds I noticed with feelings that can easier be imagined than described, that the original Nestorian Tablet had disappeared.

"I galloped up to its former resting-place, and all I saw, was a hole in the ground, where the monument's pedestal, the sad-looking stone-tortoise had been left. The stone itself had certainly gone, and I wondered whether any harm had befallen the replica in the temple-barn. Half a minute brought me to the temple where I found the replica in prime condition.

"The chief priest said that the officials had caused the tablet to be moved—he did not know its destination. So, my business over, I rode back through the western suburb, promising to come back the next day to see the replica off.

"About half way between the suburb and the city gates I overtook the Nestorian Tablet, which was being slowly carried by no less than 48 coolies towards the city. They carried it, hanging under a multitude of bamboo yokes, in the same way heavy coffins are usually transported.

"The 'Pellin,' or 'forest of tablets,' a place where innumerable small and large tablets with inscriptions of great age are kept, was the destination of the Chingchiaopei. The 'Pellin' is a place of great interest, and it is well-nigh incredible that the officials on the spot had never thought of moving the stone thither.

"The repeated, earnest representations of the corps diplomatique and the missionary bodies in Peking for the preservation of the ancient Christian relic had, through years, proved futile. The missionaries on the spot had done next to nothing to preserve "their" venerable tablet. It was therefore a great satisfaction to me to know that my expedition had been the direct cause for the removal of the stone to a place, where it will not be exposed to wind and weather, and where it will stand a fair chance of being able to adequately fight a long, long battle against age and time."