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## Rubbings of Chinese Inscriptions: An Exhibit at the Library of the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology

No civilization has relied as much as the Chinese civilization on carved stone inscriptions as a way of preserving the memory of its history and culture. Records of important events were inscribed on bone and bronze as early as the second millennium B.C., and brick, tile, ceramics, wood, and jade were also engraved to preserve writings and pictorial representations; but the medium most used for long inscriptions was stone. By the beginning of the seventh century, or perhaps much earlier, the Chinese had found a method of making multiple copies of old inscribed records, using paper and ink. Rubbings in effect "print" the inscription, making precise copies that can be carried away and distributed in considerable numbers.

To make a rubbing, a sheet of moistened paper is laid on the inscribed surface and tamped into every depression with a rabbit-hair brush. When the paper is almost dry, its surface is tapped with an inked pad. The paper is then peeled from the stone. This technique appeared simultaneously with, if not earlier than, the development of printing in China. Many scholars contend that block printing derived from the technique of making impressions with carved seals: in printing, a mirror image is carved in relief on a wood block; the surface that stands in relief is then inked, and paper pressed onto it - the reverse of the method used for making rubbings.

Early rubbings are invaluable sources, preserving impressions of countless inscriptions now defaced or completely lost. Paradoxically, it is paper, usually thought of as a fragile medium, that preserves unique copies of inscriptions that were conceived of as permanent records in stone.

The Hong Kong University of Science & Technology Library is presenting an exhibition of rubbings of Chinese inscriptions from the collection of the University of California, Berkeley's East Asian Library from 16 April to 30 May 1993. The East Asian Library's collection of Chinese Rubbings is the second largest collection of this sort outside East Asia. The largest is at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. About half of the inscriptions date from before the year 1000. A few of the rubbings themselves can be dated to around the fourteenth century. The nucleus of the collection was acquired from the estate of Mitsui Soken, a wealthy Japanese bibliophile, and includes albums of rubbings once owned by noted Chinese connoisseurs of the nineteenth century. Other important acquisitions were made through the bequest of Professor Woodbridge Bingham's collection.

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