**Venerable Copies – The Afterlife of a Fragment of a Letter by Wang Xizhi (303–361 ce)**

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東坡所謂君家兩行十三字氣壓鄴侯三萬簽'者此帖是耶[[1]](#footnote-1)

[…] these two lines are worth more than thirty-thousand other scrolls […]

The calligrapher, painter and art connoisseur Dong Qichang董其昌 (1555–1636) once wrote these words of praise in a colophon appended to a two-line fragment of a letter attributed to China’s most famous calligrapher, Wang Xizhi王羲之 (303–361 ce). This piece of calligraphy is one of twenty-one Tang-dynasty (618–907 ce) tracing copies of works by Wang Xizhi worldwide. It is the only such tracing copy in the United States and now belongs to the Princeton University Art Museum. Seven other copies are kept at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, seven at various museums in China, five in Japanese collections and one has simply disappeared. The original letter that Wang Xizhe wrote has not survived; the closest things we have to it now – in a literal and a figurative sense – are tracing copies from the Tang dynasty.

Why are these manuscripts held in such high esteem, although they are only copies and not original manuscripts? Examining another fragment of a letter – *Sending Regards to a Friend* (*Yuanhuan tie* 遠宦帖)[[2]](#footnote-2) (Fig. 1) – may shed some light on this question.

The full Chinese term for ‘tracing copies’ is *shuanggou kuotian* 雙鉤廓填 (‘double outline and fill-in copy’). How were such tracing copies made?

[…] Using this technique, the artist places a sheet of paper over the model and copies it by tracing […]. With a fine brush, the shape of each original stroke is painstakingly outlined, then filled in […] the copyist must see through the paper […] when employed expertly, this method produces the most accurate duplication of all the ancient means of reproduction.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The letter fragment under discussion here, *Sending Regards to a Friend*, is just such a tracing copy. It consists of six columns of writing containing a total of fifty-three characters and is written in fully cursive script (*caoshu* 草書). This type of script lends itself very well to artistic and personal expression since an almost unlimited range of forms are possible. *Sending Regards to a Friend* is mounted as a handscroll and is now part of the collection kept at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, which houses a large part of the former Imperial Art Collection. The manuscript is not signed, it is only a fragment and that is not the original either, but a tracing copy. Despite these apparent shortcomings, it is still treated as if it were the original itself.

How did this manuscript acquire its almost sacrosanct status? First of all, this tracing copy was in direct physical contact with the original when it was made, as the sheet of paper was placed over the original manuscript. Second, the scroll was imbued with authority, which can be seen in the seals stamped on it and in an inscription added by influential people. Third, active involvement with the copy of the letter fragment in the form of texts written about it; naming the author as Wang Xizhi after analysing the letter’s contents; mounting the original fragment together with other established writings by Wang Xizhi to produce a single handscroll; reproducing this large scroll on stone and taking rubbings of it; and recreating the letter based on such a rubbing in a freehand manner (*lin* 臨).[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Markers of authority on the scroll itself*

1a. The earliest visible trace of an authoritative voice is the title inscription by Huizong徽宗, the art-loving Song emperor (r. 1100–1126). In his distinct style of calligraphy, which is slender and uses gold ink (*shoujin shu*瘦金書), Emperor Huizong wrote the following words on the mounting silk in front of the fragment (Fig. 2]:

晉　王羲之 遠宦帖

‘Jin [dynasty, 265–420], Wang Xizhi, *Sending Regards to a Friend* manuscript’.

By way of this inscription, the emperor dated the piece to the Jin dynasty, provided the hitherto anonymous fragment with an author’s name (Wang Xizhi’s) and gave the manuscript a title: *Sending Regards to a Friend*. In giving a name to the scroll, Emperor Huizong followed the established tradition of choosing two characters from the first column.

1b. Emperor Huizong affixed two seals to the scroll. The first is his double dragon seal placed at the beginning of his inscription. The second is his Xuanhe-era seal (1119–1125), imprinted on the joint between the silk of the title slip and the paper of the actual piece of calligraphy.

2. After the Jurchen people had defeated the Northern Song dynasty and established the Jin dynasty (1115–1234)[[5]](#footnote-5) in Northern China, the scroll became part of the Jin Imperial Collection. Two rather large seals were imprinted on the scroll, one on the joint between the silk mounting following the manuscript and the paper slip pasted thereafter and another on the sheet of paper after that narrow slip of paper.

1. Colophon by Dong Qichang on Wang Xizhi, *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* (Xingrang tie 行穰帖), Tang tracing copy, handscroll, ink on paper, letter alone 24.4 × 8.9 cm, entire scroll 30 × 372 cm, Princeton University Art Museum. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Sending Regards to a Friend* (Yuanhuan tie 遠宦帖), Tang tracing copy, handscroll, ink on paper, 26.1 × 170 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fu 1977, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *lin* 臨, ‘…The artist confronts the original and transfers its forms by free-hand imitation. The method trains both eye and hand, and the copyist learns to discriminate between the essential qualities of the model, both good and bad…’;Fu 1977, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The character for this Jin dynasty,金, is different to the one for the earlier Jin dynasty,晉, but in English the transcription is the same because it has the same pronunciation, but a different tone. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)