

A Paradigm Redefined: Wang Xizhi's (303-361) Calligraphic Masterpiece Essay on Yue Yi (Yue Yi lun) in the Age of Printing

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Abstract

Very few of Wang Xizhi's original works survived into the eighth century. As the connoisseurs and scholars of the Song dynasty (960-1279) embarked on the great task of restoring Wang's elusive "true" style in the model-books, by selecting suitable pieces and making "reproductions" of his works, they applied their own ideas of perfection, sometimes quite different from how Wang was perceived during the Tang (618-907). One of the most significant changes occurred in Wang's small-sized regular script (*xiaokai* 小楷). This paper attempts to chart out this course of change by looking into both textual and visual evidences surrounding *Essay on Yue Yi* (Yue Yi lun), one of the preeminent calligraphy pieces in small-sized regular script attributed to Wang Xizhi. This paper begins with a careful reading of calligraphic treatises on Wang from the pre-Tang, Tang, and Song periods, followed by a close comparison of the calligraphic style in extant copies of *Essay on Yue Yi*. These include a complete eighth-century copy by the Japanese Empress Kōmyō (701-760), manuscript fragments by anonymous writers from Astana, Xinjiang and Dunhuang, Gansu, datable to the eighth and ninth centuries, and multiple versions of the same text found in various model-books from the twelfth century and onwards. In addition to addressing the historical issue of the Tang-Song transition, it is hoped that this example will also bring into discussion the intricate relations between originals and copies, ideals and realities, and prototypes and appropriations.

Keywords: Wang Xizhi, Zhong You, *xiaokai*, model-books, *Essay on Yue Yi* (Yue Yi lun), Tang-Song transition, Empress Kōmyō, *Calligraphy Compendium of the Shi Family in Yuezhou* (Yuezhou Shishi tie), *Calligraphy Compendium of the Yuqingzhai Studio* (Yuqingzhai tie)