

Disappearing Joint Strokes: A Discussion of Wang Xizhi's "Yuanhuan" and Related Issues in the "Shiqi" and "Chunhua Pavilion" Modelbooks

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Abstract

Wang Xizhi's "Shiqi" is a famous modelbook in the history of Chinese calligraphy and also has served as a paradigm for studying cursive script for more than a thousand years. However, problems in research methodology have led to considerable controversy for some time over the quality of surviving engraved editions, and no end is apparently in sight for achieving a consensus. Nowadays, however, quite a few "bamboo joint" strokes can still be seen in the rare works of Jin and Tang dynasty calligraphy extant today. These strokes, a special feature of brushwork caused by creases in the paper, are a concrete manifestation of the way writing was done at the time. Starting from the Song dynasty, though, these joint strokes vanished from the history of Chinese calligraphy. As a result, this period marker in calligraphy can, under appropriate circumstances, be used to differentiate the engraved and brushed versions of certain early pieces.

In the present study, the forms of joint strokes are first observed and confirmed in Tang and Song dynasty stele engravings. This is followed by an examination of how the production of modelbook engravings and recarvings perhaps influenced joint strokes in an attempt to see if the perception of this stroke changed during the Tang and Song period. Due to the lack of understanding and emphasis on the period nature of joint strokes, it often led to their being overlooked and discarded in modelbooks. The precious preservation of joint strokes in the tracing copy of Wang Xizhi's "Yuanhuan" modelbook allows us to clarify the situation involving recarvings of his "Shiqi" modelbook and the value of the most reliable "Chunhua Pavilion" modelbooks. Finally, a comparative study of the forms of joint strokes reveals that the least likely of "Shiqi" editions, the Henan one, preserves the most of these strokes, indicating it to be the most faithful to the original Wang Xizhi work of all the surviving famous rubbings today.

Keywords: Wang Xizhi, Yuanhuan, Shiqi modelbooks, Chunhua Pavilion modelbooks, "bamboo joint" strokes

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)