

A Stylistic Analysis of *Ode to Pied Wagtails* by Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang and Its Transformation in Meaning at the Northern Song Court of Emperor Huizong

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Abstract

In the collection of the National Palace Museum is a famous piece of calligraphy entitled *Ode to Pied Wagtails* by the Tang emperor Xuanzong (685-762, r. 712-756) based on the idea of “brotherly bonds among pied wagtails,” in which he sang the praise in literary form of the affection between brothers. Scholars have proposed numerous discussions about the date of its completion, status of the calligrapher, and motivation behind its creation, but there has been little consensus. The brushwork in *Ode on Pied Wagtails* is thick and full, its ink brimming in a style of calligraphy that preserves much of the legacy from such models as *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Gathering* and *Character Compilation for the Sacred Teachings Preface*, reflecting the trend of the Tang imperial house in studying the style of Wang Xizhi (303-361), with whom the two works are closely associated. However, given the size of the characters in the Xuanzong handscroll and dramatic variation in the thickness of the strokes as well as the hesitation seen in places, disconnected traces of the strokes, and lack of naturalness to the line spacing, it has long been questioned whether it is actually a tracing copy. *Ode to Pied Wagtails*, as an important example of Tang dynasty imperial calligraphy, presents many questions that have yet to be answered fully. As such, the present study examines surviving materials of Emperor Xuanzong’s stele engravings in running script to present their development and determine if *Ode on Pied Wagtails* actually came from his hand or not. This is followed by a careful comparison of details in the calligraphy to provide concrete evidence for the connection with Wang Xizhi’s style, the analysis giving rise to a possible explanation for the unnaturalness in the calligraphy of this handscroll.

Ode to Pied Wagtails, in the history of its transmission, is most noteworthy in the Northern Song period. The “Seven Imperial Seals of Xuanhe” from the court of Emperor Huizong (1082-1135) are complete and a record of a work with this title in his *Xuanhe*

Calligraphy Catalogue is also to be found. Likewise, there are colophons afterwards by such important Northern Song figures as Cai Jing (1047-1126) and Cai Bian (1048-1117), though their authenticity has yet to be confirmed. Nonetheless, the contents of the colophons speak of how “ten-thousand” pied wagtails congregated at a palace hall in 1115 and Emperor Huizong (r. 1100-1126), after witnessing this event, personally did a painting of *Pied Wagtails* with an ode of poetry to record it. The colophons and documentary evidence point to the symbolic significance of “pied wagtails congregating at the palace hall” during Huizong’s reign: In addition to the original idea of “brotherly bonds among pied wagtails,” it was extended in meaning to become an “auspicious omen.” It is hoped by studying *Ode to Pied Wagtails* and related issues to have a more complete perspective of Emperor Xuanzong’s calligraphy and trace the importance of this handscroll in the history of Chinese calligraphy.

Keywords: Emperor Xuanzong, *Ode to Pied Wagtails*, emperor’s brush traces, Wang Xizhi, *Character Compilation for the Sacred Teachings Preface*, Emperor Huizong

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)