Pietro De Laurentis

Protecting the *Dharma* through Calligraphy in Tang China

A Study of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*

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Calligraphy by the author

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I have framed and uncovered the ideas and facts discussed in this book through a gradual process of constant interchange with teachers and friends, both in China and in Europe. In fact, it is thanks to these people's direct and indirect help that I have been able to point my questions in the right direction, and to make my thoughts clear. To name all of them would take too much space, so I will only mention here those who have concretely made possible my writing of this book.

First of all, my thanks goes out to Mr. Wang Chengxiong 王承雄, who has given me the theoretical and practical tools for the study of Chinese calligraphy; Professor Zhang Naizhu 張乃翥 from the Research Institute of the Longmen Grottoes, who has shown me the subtleties of Chinese stone inscriptions and their relation to Chinese civilization; Professor Zhang Tiangong 張天弓 from Huazhong Normal University, who has constantly and passionately provided help and inspiration for my study of Chinese calligraphic culture; Professor Liu Tao 劉濤 from the China Central Academy of Fine Arts, who has expertly and patiently discussed almost any subject on the history of Chinese calligraphy that I have asked his guidance for; Professor Shi Rui 史睿 from Peking University, who has provided me with extensive information and data on Chinese sources; Mr. Ma Ji 馬驥 from the Xi'an Beilin Museum, who introduced me to the Xi'an Beilin Museum's wonderful collection of steles and still offers his precious advice on epigraphy; Professor Yao Yuliang 姚宇亮 from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, who has allowed me to see the philosophical extent of Chinese brushwork; Professor Liu Zhen 劉震 from Fudan University, who has helped me with the translation of several Sanskrit and Chinese Buddhist terms. A special word goes to my dear friend Ms. Chin-ching Soo 史今晶, who has decisively contributed to this book's clarity of thought and wording, and to Mr. John Geddes who proofread the final draft and corrected several errors and typos.

My deepest gratitude also goes to the Mitsui Memorial Museum (Mitsui kinen bijutsukan 三井記念美術館) for permission to publish one of their ink rubbings of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* (called Mitsui *Ji Wang* 1 throughout this book), as well as to the Italian School of East Asian Studies (ISEAS), Kyoto, and Professor Silvio Vita for the support in contacting the Museum.

Many themes discussed in this book took shape in 2017 during my visiting fellowship at the International Center for Studies of Chinese Civilization (ICSCC) at Fudan University. Some results of my research have been already published in Chinese in a book issued by the Sichuan People's Publishing House in the spring of 2020, and earlier in the journals *Tang yanjiu* 唐研究, *Shufa yanjiu* 書法研究, and *Zhongguo shufa* 中國書法 in mid-2019. In late May 2019, I also had the unique privilege of participating in the Shaoxing Forum (Shaoxing luntan 紹興論壇) organized by the Chinese Calligraphers' Association (Zhongguo shufajia xiehui 中國書法家協會). Besides the symposium on the calligraphic tradition of the calligraphers Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361) and his son Wang Xianzhi

王獻之 (344–386) (usually referred to as the "Two Wangs"), the Forum has also been the occasion for the official establishment of the discipline of the "Two Wangs Studies" (Er Wangxue 二王學) through the foundation of the Two Wangs Studies Research Center (Er Wangxue yanjiu zhongxin 二王學研究中心) based in Shaoxing. I have the honor of being one of its consultants.

This book would not have seen the light of day without the editorial support of the Monumenta Serica Institute. My heartfelt thanks go to Jozef Bištuť S.V.D., Anna Clart (freelance language editor), Dr. Barbara Hoster, Dr. Anthony Hu, Dr. Dirk Kuhlmann, and Prof. Dr. Zbigniew Wesołowski S.V.D. for their painstaking work and constant advice. Of course, only the author is responsible for any errors and inaccuracies.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Professor Tian Shusheng 田樹生 (1934–2016).

Pietro De Laurentis
Ostuni, Italy

May 21st, 2021

ABBREVIATIONS

B	*Dazangjing bubian*
BD	Dunhuang manuscripts in the National Library of China, Beijing
Beilin *Ji Wang* 1	*Songta Ji Wang Xizhi shengjiao xu*
Beilin *Ji Wang* 2	*Jindai zhengzhi ta Ji Wang shengjiao xu*
FSZ	*Da Tang Da Ci'en si Sanzang fashi zhuan*
FTQJ	*Zhongguo fatie quanji*
H	*Zhonghua Dazangjing*
JS	*Jinshu*
JWSJX	*Ji Wang shengjiao xu*
L.A.II.ii., CP	Loulan documents on paper in the Stockholm Ethnographic Museum discovered by Sven Hedin and edited by August Conrady
L.A.II.ii., CW	Loulan documents on wooden slips in the Stockholm Ethnographic Museum discovered by Sven Hedin and edited by August Conrady
LD	Dunhuang manuscripts in the Liaoning Provincial Museum
LTX	*Lanting xu*
Nakata	Nakata Yūjirō 1974
Mitsui *Ji Wang* 1	*Genshoku hōjō sen* 39
Mitsui *Ji Wang* 2	*Tang Huairen jizi shengjiao xu*
Note	*Sanzang sheng ji*
Or	Oriental collections of the British Library
P	Chinese documents from Dunhuang in the Pelliot Collection, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
Preface	*Da Tang sanzang shengjiao xu*
S	Chinese documents from Dunhuang in the Stein Collection, British Library, London
SD	Dunhuang manuscripts in the Museum of Calligraphy, Tokyo
SDZS	*Shodō zenshū*
SH	Dunhuang manuscripts in the Shanghai Museum
Short Biography	*Da Tang gu sanzang Xuanzang fashi xingzhuang*
SJ	*Youjun shuji*
SM	*Youjun shumu*

SSTK	*Ō Gishi shoseki taikei*
T	*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*
X	*Wan xinzuan Xuzangjing*
XBSD	Dunhuang manuscripts in the Northwestern Normal University, Lanzhou
ZGSHQS	*Zhongguo shuhua quanshu*
Zhang Yingzhao *Ji*	*Wang Jizi shengjiao xu (Zhang Yingzhao ben)*

CONVENTIONS

ann.	annotated
b.	born
c.	century
comp.	compiled
compl.	completed
d.	died
d.u.	date(s) unknown
diss.	dissertation
ed(s).	edited/edition
fl.	floruit
i.e.	id est
lit.	literally
no(s.).	number
pl(s.).	plate
pt.	part
publ.	published
rev.	revised
Skt.	Sanskrit
trans.	translated
vol(s).	volume
*	historical reconstruction

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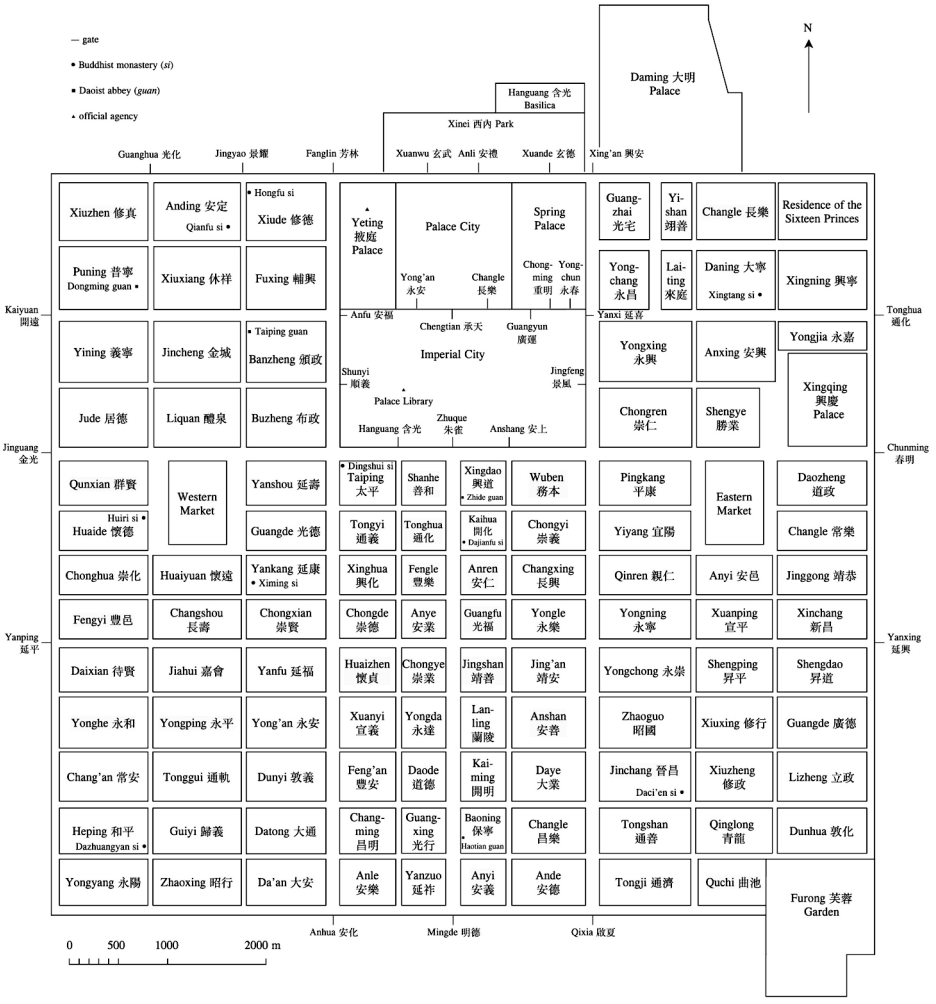
MAP: TANG DYNASTY CHANG'AN



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INTRODUCTION

The object of this book is a Chinese Buddhist stone inscription commonly referred to as *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* 集王聖教序 (Preface to the Sacred Teaching [Scriptures Translated by Xuanzang] in Wang [Xizhi's] Collated [Characters]) (see Plate 1). This stele was erected on January 1st, 673 (Xianheng 3.XII.8),[1] in the Buddhist Hongfu si 弘福寺 (Monastery of the Expansion of Blessings) of Chang'an 長安, present-day Xi'an, at that time the capital of the Tang 唐 (618–907) (see Map) – still standing now at the Xi'an Beilin (Forest of Tablets) Museum (Xi'an Beilin bowuguan 西安碑林博物館, hereafter Xi'an Beilin). It is a record of the Buddhist literary tributes that two Tang emperors, Taizong 太宗 (Li Shimin 李世民, 599–649, r. 626–649) and his son Gaozong 高宗 (Li Zhi 李治, 628–683, r. 649–683), had granted the famous monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (d. 664) for his first Buddhist translations from Sanskrit to Chinese, as well as of Xuanzang's alleged translation of the *Xin jing* 心經 (Heart Sutra, *Bore boluomiduo Xin jing* 般若波羅蜜多心經, Skt. *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*, *T* 8.251), probably the most famous Buddhist scripture in East Asia. Its peculiarity, however, relies on the fact that these texts were collated in the semi-cursive characters of the great master of Chinese calligraphy, Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), and represent the largest single work with Wang Xizhi's characters (1,903 in total).[2] Its historical significance is therefore enormous. Not only is it the first and most successful collated inscription in Chinese calligraphy, it is also the first and last attempt to combine Buddhist authority (Xuanzang), political power (Taizong and Gaozong), and artistic charm (Wang Xizhi) in one single monument. Despite its evident political significance, though, it seems that both traditional scholarship and modern historians have neglected the inscription's close relationship to the political and religious background of the time. The present book, therefore, offers an insight into this exceptional monument.

1. Buddhist Faith, Imperial Patronage, and Calligraphic Beauty Captured in One Monument

The *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* is related to four historical figures, who, in different ways, were decisive for the destiny of the community of Buddhist monks who

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1 Although the Xi'an Beilin and all Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars (with the sole exception of Alexander Mayer) mention the year 672, the actual date of the stele's erection falls on the first day of 673.

2 Since the Japanese scholar Nakata Yūjirō in 1957 counted 1,904 characters, the entirety of scholars has followed this figure. Nevertheless, the author has detected and cut all the characters from the photographic reproduction of Mitsui *Ji Wang* 1, and has come up with the result of 1,903 characters, which is the number proposed, to my knowledge, only by the Japanese scholar Mizushima Akira. *SDZS*, vol. 8, p. 167; Mizushima Akira 1980, p. 116. Curiously, the table of columns and their relevant number of characters provided by Luo Feng gives the total number of 1,899 characters. Luo Feng 2017, p. 10.

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devised the inscription: the monk Xuanzang, the emperors Taizong and Gaozong, and the so-called "sage of calligraphy" (*shusheng* 書聖), Wang Xizhi.

Xuanzang and Taizong were almost coetaneous, Gaozong was nearly thirty years younger than Xuanzang, whereas Wang Xizhi had lived over three hundred years earlier. Nevertheless, in the early 670s, by which time both Xuanzang and Taizong had already died and Gaozong was in power, Wang Xizhi was "brought to life" again by the monk Huairen 懷仁 (d.u.), who collated his characters in order to transcribe the *Preface* (*xu* 序) and the *Note* (*ji* 記) that, respectively, Taizong and Gaozong – at that time heir apparent – had written in 648 for Xuanzang's Buddhist translations, along with the *Xin jing*.[3] Huairen and the community of Buddhist monks of the capital are thus the active agents of this significant endeavor.

Xuanzang's personal name was Chen Hui 陳褘. He was born in Goushi 緱氏 (present-day Yanshi 偃師, east of Luoyang), but his year of birth is not clear, and it is alternatively given as 600 or 602.[4] What is almost certain, though, is that he set off for India in 627, leaving Chang'an (see Appendix I, note 52), to which he did not return until February 8th, 645 (Zhenguan 19.I.7), and died in the Yuhua si 玉華寺 (Monastery of the Yuhua [Summer Palace]) near Chang'an on March 7th, 664 (Linde 1.II.5).[5] Xuanzang is the most famous of all Chinese pilgrims, and also one of the few Chinese who deeply understood foreign cultures (not to mention his perfect mastery of Sanskrit), as he composed the detailed geographical account *Xiyu ji* 西域記 (Records of the Western Regions, completed in 646).

However, what really mattered for the Buddhists who devised the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was Xuanzang as a promoter of Buddhism in China. Besides him founding the East Asian adaptation of the Yogācāra School (Yujia 瑜伽), which declined after only a few decades, his numerous translations of Buddhist scriptures made him one of the most popular of Chinese translators, with 77 texts translated in 19 years. Perhaps his greatest achievement, though, was that he was

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3 Texts recorded in Xuanzang's biography, *Da Tang Daci'en si sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 (hereafter *FSZ*) (Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Monastery of Compassion of the Great Tang), *T* 50.2053, and translated into English in Li Rongxi 1995. My reference is the second edition published by Zhonghua shuju in 2000, which originally appeared in 1983, edited by Sun Yutang and Xie Fang. *FSZ* 6.142f, 7.146f; *Quan Tangwen* 10.119b–120b, 15.178. English translations in Li Rongxi 1995, pp. 196–199, pp. 203–206. There is a German translation project on Xuanzang's biographies in Chinese and Old Turkic in several volumes entitled *Xuanzangs Leben und Werk*, edited by Alexander Mayer and Klaus Röhrborn for the Societas Uralo-Altaica. Regarding the Chinese biography, to this day only the introductory volume and the translations of *juan* 6, 7, and 8 have already been published (as volumes 1, 6, 2, and 4 of the whole series). See Mayer 1992, 2001, and 1991; Frankenhauser 1995.

4 Xiong 2009, p. 596. Twitchett – Fairbank 1979, p. 219, Mayer 1992, p. 1, and Li Rongxi 1995, p. 1, all consider 600 as the year of birth, but it is more likely that he was born in 602, as shown by Yoshimura Makoto 2015.

5 *FSZ* 1.11, 10.222.

the first in Chinese history to succeed in persuading an emperor to compose a preface for the translation of Buddhist texts – Taizong's *Preface*.

If Tang China rose to power and the Silk Road prospered during the seventh century, much credit goes to Taizong, whose image as a strong and wise emperor has been a constant refrain in Chinese history.[6] He was, in some way, the true founder of China's greatest dynasty, inasmuch as he consolidated his father Gaozu's 高祖 (Li Yuan 李淵, 566–635, r. 618–626) endeavor through military power (*wu* 武), first by sedating the internal revolts that burst out at the end of the Sui dynasty, and secondly by pacifying the menacing Eastern Turks, who recognized him as "Heavenly Qaghan" (*tian kehan* 天可汗), giving Tang China almost complete control over Central Asia. However, especially during the first part of his reign, he had consolidated his power not through repression or authoritarianism but through civil order (*wen* 文).[7] His collaborative and consultative approach with his close ministers has remained an authoritative standard for the effectiveness of government throughout the ages, the so-called "good government of the Zhenguan Reign Period [627–649]" (*Zhenguan zhi zhi* 貞觀之治).[8]

Being the sovereign of the Chinese empire as well as the recognized ruler of many neighboring kingdoms, Taizong was the epitome of power, governing "all under Heaven" (*tianxia* 天下). He was thus a key figure for the Buddhist community's efforts to effectively propagate Buddhism. Once returned to China, Xuanzang tried untiringly to gain the emperor's support. The monk eventually reached his goal, so Taizong turned to Buddhism during the last year of his life. The *Preface* the emperor composed for Xuanzang was not a perfunctory act intended to ingratiate himself with the Buddhist church, but rather a genuine manifestation of his belief in Buddhism.

If the great calligrapher Wang Xizhi became the undisputed epitome of calligraphic art, this also happened during the early Tang, and was mainly thanks to Taizong's admiration for his calligraphy. Taizong revered Wang Xizhi to the extent that he even gave one of his daughters, the Princess Linchuan 臨川 (624–682), the same courtesy name as Wang Xizhi's daughter, Mengjiang 孟姜 (d.u.), on the basis that both were good at calligraphy.[9]

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[6] As explained by Howard Wechsler, Taizong inspired foreign rulers such as the Mongol sovereign Qubilai (Hubilie 忽必烈, Emperor Shizu 世祖, 1215–1294, r. 1260–1294) and the Japanese *shōgun* 將軍 Tokugawa Ieyasu 德川家康 (1543–1616, r. 1600–1616). Twitchett – Fairbank 1979, p. 191.

[7] Shortly after his death, besides the temple name Taizong, he was in fact bestowed the title of "August Emperor of Civil Order" (*wen huangdi* 文皇帝), and in 674 he was also bestowed the title "Sagacious August Emperor of Civil Order and Military Power" (*wenwu sheng huangdi* 文武聖皇帝). *Jiu Tangshu* 3.62f.

[8] Twitchett – Fairbank 1979, p. 191.

[9] The Zhaoling 昭陵 Museum in Xianyang 咸陽 stores the entombed funerary inscription (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘) of Li Mengjiang (entombed on January 27th, 683, Yongchun 永淳 1.XII.25), in which Taizong's words are quoted: "I have heard that the courtesy name of Wang Xizhi's daughter was Mengjiang, who was particularly skilled at the art of calligra-

No wonder that it was Taizong who collected the bulk of Wang Xizhi's calligraphies as we know them today, and that he also wrote a postscript to Wang's official biography in the *Jinshu* 晉書 (Book of the Jin, completed in 648) praising his calligraphy as "absolutely perfect" (*jin shan jin mei* 盡善盡美).[10] Wang Xizhi's calligraphy then became the paramount standard for all the centuries to come; thanks to its graceful and vigorous style, it was to also exert a great influence in Korea and Japan. Along with other important calligraphers from the same period, such as Xie An 謝安 (320–385) and especially his seventh son Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344–386), Wang Xizhi became the aesthetic ideal for the rest of Chinese art history. Although far fewer of his works have been preserved through the centuries, he and his father have been called the "Two Wangs" (Er Wang 二王), a term often used as synonym for the Chinese calligraphic tradition.

Wang Xizhi lived in the fourth century under the Eastern Jin 晉 dynasty (317–420), which ruled from the capital Jiankang 建康 (modern-day Nanjing) over southern China, from present day northern Jiangsu down to Guangdong. These were the troubled times when China was divided between the north, under barbarian rule, and the south, where the aristocracy from the north had fled, and to which Wang Xizhi belonged.[11] Wang Xizhi served as an official with different posts from 324 to 354, residing in several places such as the capital and the regions corresponding to present-day Hubei, Jiangxi, and Zhejiang. He is most famous for his title "General of the Right Army" (*youjun jiangjun* 右軍將軍), which he received in 347 (although he was never involved in warfare). He is thus very often mentioned as "Wang Youjun" 王右軍 or, simply, "Youjun" 右軍. In the same year, he moved to Kuaiji 會稽 (present-day Shaoxing, Zhejiang) and there served as administrator (*neishi* 內史). In 354, though, he resigned from office pleading poor health, and from that moment he devoted himself completely to Daoist practices.

When the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was devised and erected, Gaozong was the emperor in power, but during the first seventeen years of his father Taizong's reign (626–643) he had been very unlikely to become heir apparent at all. In fact, as soon as Taizong became emperor, Li Chengqian 李承乾 (d. 645) was appointed heir apparent, but due to his extravagant and scandalous behavior (he preferred Turkic customs to Chinese customs and was engaged in a homosexual relationship), he was finally demoted in 643.[12] Taizong was first inclined towards Li Tai

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phy. In admiration of her I have given the [same] courtesy name [to my daughter], hoping that [my daughter's achievements] will stand close [to hers]" (朕聞王羲之女字孟姜，頗工書藝。慕之為字，庶可齊蹤). Text recorded in Zhou – Zhao 2001, pp. 260f. The personal names of Wang Xizhi's and Taizong's daughters are unknown. On Wang Xizhi's seven sons and one daughter, see Qi Xiaochun 2007, pp. 393–398.

10 *Jinshu* 80.2107f.

11 On Wang Xizhi's life, I follow the chronological biography in Qi Xiaochun 2007, pp. 659–680.

12 *Jiu Tangshu* 76.2648f.

李泰 (618–652) as the new heir apparent, but due to the complaints of some important ministers such as Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌 (d. 659) and Chu Suiliang 褚遂良 (596–658) who favored Gaozong, he unwillingly changed his mind, very conscious that he was not making the right choice.[13] As a matter of fact, Gaozong had a weak temperament and suffered from illnesses throughout his life. But his biggest mistake, at least from the Tang imperial family's point of view, was to admit into his harem a concubine who once belonged to his father, Wu Zhao 武曌 (624–705, known posthumously by the title Zetian 則天, r. 690–705, hereafter Empress Wu Zetian). She eventually became empress in 655 despite the opposition of the ministers who had once favored Gaozong as heir apparent, and de facto ruled the Tang several years prior to Gaozong's death in 683, before finally proclaiming herself as empress of the Zhou 周 dynasty (690–705), which temporarily interrupted the dynastic rule of the Tang imperial family.

Unlike his father, Gaozong had no interest in Buddhism and had composed the *Note* only because he was ordered to do so. After Taizong's death, he overtly favored Daoism over Buddhism, and this dramatically changed the Buddhist community of Chang'an's perception of imperial favor.

Gaozong was also an accomplished calligrapher who left several stone tablets personally composed and handwritten by him in a semi-cursive style modelled after that of Wang Xizhi. Thanks to the calligraphies that his father had collected when he was in his teens, in fact, he had the opportunity to practice from high-quality calligraphic specimens. It was, then, to Gaozong that the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was directed.

Nothing is known about the monk Huairen of the Hongfu si who materially collated Wang Xizhi's characters for the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*. What is certain, though, is that he must have been an extremely skilled calligrapher and also a very good manager. In fact, he did not operate in isolation but was the leader of a team of fellow monks, which very likely also included some Buddhist lay devotees, two of whom were perhaps the unknown artisans who took care of the carving of the characters on stone, Zhuge Shenli 諸葛神力 (d.u.) and Zhu Jingcang 朱靜藏 (d.u.). In addition, the Hongfu si as a religious institution is significant for our comprehension of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, as the inscription was installed in that monastery.

2. The Historical Significance of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*

The *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was the fourth and last stone inscription to be erected with Taizong's *Preface* and Gaozong's *Note*. In 654, these two texts had already been carved on a double-stone inscription installed at the feet of the pagoda that Xuanzang requested to be built in the Daci'en si 大慈恩寺 (Great Monastery of Compassion), where it is still located today. Later, in 658, these two texts were again engraved at the Zhaoti si 招提寺 (Monastery of the Four Quarters) in

[13] Twitchett – Fairbank 1979, pp. 236–239.

Yanshi, near Luoyang, and then one more time in 663 in Tongzhou 同州, northeast of Chang'an.

Besides these two texts, the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* records the replies by Taizong and Gaozong to Xuanzang's letters of gratitude, plus the famous Buddhist scripture *Xin jing*, and the names of the officials who were in charge of reviewing the literary content of Xuanzang's translations.

What makes this inscription so extraordinary is the fact that its characters had been carefully and painstakingly selected from the semi-cursive calligraphies of China's greatest calligrapher and were then collated and outlined by Huairen in order to create the final layout of the stele.

Wang Xizhi lived in the period of the *Xuanxue* 玄學 (Dark Learning), an intellectual trend that was heavily influenced by a renewed interest in the Daoist classics. The literati of this period then engaged in lively conversations about metaphysics with Daoists followers and Buddhist monks, in a mood of refusing the vicissitudes of the common world, and enjoying a carefree immersion within nature. Perhaps the best example of this ideal of life is Wang Xizhi's *Lanting xu* 蘭亭序 (Preface to [Poems Composed at] the Orchid Pavilion), which describes the happy gathering of 41 men at the Lanting in Kuaiji, enjoying the beauty of nature and pondering the essence of life. These 41 people included the Buddhist monk Zhidun 支遁 (314–366), who befriended both Wang Xizhi and preeminent ministers such as Xie An. Despite his friendship with Zhidun, though, Wang Xizhi remained mainly a Daoist follower, and was much fond of collecting longevity herbs used in Daoist practices, together with personages such as Xu Mai 許邁 (d.u.). [14]

The fact that the monks who devised the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* used a Daoist figure like Wang Xizhi in order to copy out Buddhist texts is also a crucial issue. The very nature of the texts recorded in the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* makes it not just a calligraphic inscription, but rather a "Buddhist calligraphic inscription," and this is, I argue, what makes it truly unique.

From a pure calligraphic viewpoint, it should be noted that not only is the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* the single work with the largest number of Wang Xizhi's characters ever known, it is also the most refined of all the inscribed reproductions of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy – hence, it holds enormous value for the study of calligraphy. To begin with, the bulk of Wang Xizhi's calligraphic works, in fact, consists of brief letters of only a few dozen characters,[15] usually referred to as *tie*

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[14] On Wang Xizhi and Daoism, see Qi Xiaochun 2007, pp. 505–584.

[15] The *Fengju tie* 奉橘帖 (Fengju Letter) has 12 characters; the *Youmu tie* 遊目帖 (Youmu Letter) has 102. Some calligraphic works are named after the main topic, whereas in other cases the letter is named after the first two characters of the calligraphies. Given the fact that the literary content of all these tracing copies (*moben* 摹本) as well as of the free-hand copies (*linben* 臨本) of these tracing copies has been edited considerably, deleting, for instance, redundant information such as dates along with those characters not clearly visible, their titles are to be considered merely conventional. Throughout this book, the author has

帖,[16] that he sent to friends and relatives. The *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* has 1,903 total characters in 30 columns, but the texts recorded therein are actually made of 755 effective characters (one of which is the iteration mark 々), which evidently occur more than once and which we will call "individual characters" (*danzi* 單字).[17]

As handwritten characters are never the mechanical repetition of a given graphic structure, the same character may look very different in different calligraphies or even within the same work. We will call "configurations" (*zixing* 字形) these different renditions of the same character, which in handwriting specimens obviously correspond to the total amount of characters. Huairen took advantage of the different configurations in Wang Xizhi's calligraphies, and so he not only chose 755 individual characters but also several other configurations of them. Furthermore, whenever a character in the inscription occurred more than once, Huairen did not simply insert different configurations of the same character, but also adjusted the contour of the original character, creating, artificially, new configurations of the same character. In this case we will call the original configuration "master copy" and the new configurations "adjustments." Consequently, the 1,903 total characters also do not correspond to the number of original configurations, whose effective figure is 1,396.

The result of this collation work is that the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* contains a much higher number of characters not only than any single work of Wang Xizhi's, but also of all his extant semi-cursive works put together. As a matter of fact, Wang Xizhi's most famous calligraphy – and also the most celebrated artwork in East Asia, the *Lanting xu* – has 324 configurations for 205 individual characters.[18]

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therefore preferred not to translate them. See Qi Xiaochun 2007, p. 174. For the figures of Wang Xizhi's extant calligraphies, see Table Five.

[16] The character *tie* appears in the titles of many other calligraphic works, but this does not necessarily mean that these specimens are proper letters – it should thus rather be rendered as "autograph," or, more generally, "calligraphic work." In fact, the compound *beitie* 碑帖 refers to the ink rubbings of calligraphies taken from inscriptions, including both steles and calligraphy model-books (*fatie* 法帖). *Hanyu dazidian*, vol. 1, p. 844; *Hanyu dacidian*, vol. 7, p. 1058.

[17] The character *huo* 或 appears twice (5/25 and 6/71), but 5/25 is actually a loan for 惑, although the full configuration 惑 is found as 4/1.

[18] There are several versions of the *Lanting xu*, which have been transmitted as tracing copies, free-hand copies, and engraved copies (*ketie* 刻帖). The Chinese scholar Wang Lianqi has listed seven copies on paper plus nine inscribed versions, but only two of these truly represent Wang Xizhi's style, and they are the so-called "Shenlong" 神龍 *Lanting* and the so-called "Zhang Jinjienu" 張金界奴 *Lanting*, both at the Palace Museum in Beijing. The former is thus named because of the seal "Shenlong," now only partially visible, that was stamped at the beginning of the scroll and refers to the Shenlong reign period [705–706]); it is believed to be the product of tracing copyists of the seventh century. The latter has been regarded as a free-hand copy made by Yu Shinan 虞世南 (558–638), and is generally less popular than the former. However, I believe that both versions are tracing copies and represent two different interpretations of Wang Xizhi's original manuscript that were produced

By adding the characters from Wang Xizhi's other reliable[19] semi-cursive calligraphies that are now extant, we reach the overall number of 946 characters, and by considering some semi-cursive configurations in Wang Xizhi's cursive works, we may even arrive at the figure of ca. 1,000 characters. It goes without saying that, judging on these numbers, although the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was not, strictly speaking, an "original" work of Wang Xizhi, still, thanks to the subtle outline of its characters and the vividness of its layout, in the centuries to follow it has become Wang's most popular calligraphy, no doubt thanks to the availability of its ink rubbings. It can be fairly regarded as the standard for Wang Xizhi's calligraphic style in the semi-cursive, at least until recently, when photo-reproduction made all his calligraphies accessible to the greater public.

As the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* integrates characters from Wang Xizhi's originals or direct copies of originals with characters from later calligraphies inspired by his style under Huairen's masterly work of collation, the inscription de facto represents the canonization of Wang Xizhi's idealized calligraphic style as perceived during the early Tang. As Wang Xizhi was the leading figure of the calligraphy tradition of medieval China, the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* can also be regarded as the summa of the semi-cursive tradition of that period as a whole.

3. Present Location and Physical Dimensions of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*

The *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* is now located at the Xi'an Beilin, in the second exhibition hall (see Plate 1). The stele is registered as no. 624 of the museum, and is inscribed in the national records of the Chinese State Administration of Cultural Heritage (Guojia wenwuju 國家文物局) under the number 610103218000021000498O.

Once serving as the Confucius Temple (*Kongmiao* 孔廟 or *wenmiao* 文廟) of Xi'an[20] as well as the city's prefectural school (*fuxue* 府學) from 1087 onwards, the Xi'an Beilin has been the most important center for the storage and protection of calligraphies inscribed on stone. In the twentieth century, its premises were used as the base of the Shaanxi Provincial Museum, and finally in 1993 the Xi'an Beilin was recognized as a separate museum that represents one of the great historical and tourist attractions of the city.

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during the seventh century. As we will see below, judging from the shape of the characters in the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, the Zhang Jinjienu *Lanting* is closer to the calligraphic works that were consulted by Huairen. Shanghai bowuguan 2011, pp. 1–58. On the superiority of the Zhang Jinjienu *Lanting* over the Shenlong *Lanting*, see Nishikawa Yasushi 1991, vol. 1, pp. 263–294.

[19] The author has located 50 letters in the semi-cursive in calligraphy model-books from the late tenth to the early nineteenth century, but these are very likely posthumous forgeries. The figures of Wang Xizhi's semi-cursive calligraphies are discussed in detail in Chapters Six and Eight and are summarized in Tables Five, Six, Seven, and Eight.

[20] Abbreviation of *Wenxuan wang miao* 文宣王廟 (lit.: Temple of the Prince Propagating Civil Virtue). This title was bestowed on Confucius in 739. *Jiu Tangshu* 9.211.

In the present day, the Xi'an Beilin stores more than 3,000 stone inscriptions,[21] several of which are registered as "national treasures" (*guobao* 國寶). For some of them the Chinese State Administration of Cultural Heritage prohibits the taking of rubbings, not even for research purposes, and the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was one of the first steles for which it declared this prohibition.

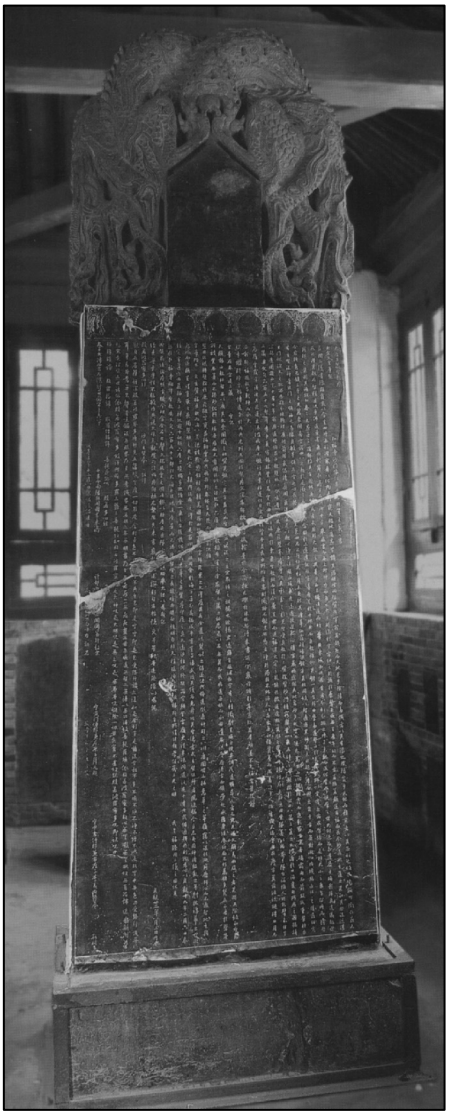

Plate 1: *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, recto of the inscription (from Xi'an Beilin bowuguan)

[21] Especially famous in the West for keeping the so-called Nestorian Stele (*Da Qin jingjiao liuxing Zhongguo bei* 大秦景教流行中國碑, lit.: Stele of the Spread of the Luminous Teaching of Da Qin in China) dated 781, the museum collects most of China's great calligraphic inscriptions. On the Xi'an Beilin, see *Xi'an Beilin shufa yishu* and Lu Yuan 1998.

The inscription is made up of three different parts, namely the heading, the body, and the pedestal, which altogether measure 399 cm x 127 cm. The inscription's text is included in the body, which measures 235 cm x 98 cm at the top and 114 cm at the bottom.[22]

The pedestal is decorated with carvings on its four sides, whereas the main body is carved with the engraved characters only on its recto, on top of which there are seven small engravings of Buddhas, and some decorative images on its two lateral sides. The heading is carved with two mythical creatures symmetrically arranged both on the recto and the verso in the style of traditional Chinese steles. The heading also has a space for the inscription's title, but this was left blank, very likely because the available characters were not as large as those required for a stele's heading. The recto of the main body shows no marks of carving, which has even caused considerable debate on the stele's authenticity, because Wei Shu's 韋述 (d. 757) *Liangjing xinji* 兩京新記 (New Records of the Two [Tang] Capitals) completed in 722 states that the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was carved on the verso of one stele of the *Jingang jing* 金剛經 (Diamond Sutra, Skt. *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*), copied by Helan Minzhi 賀蘭敏之 (643–671) in 665.[23]

The *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* has experienced the constant taking of ink rubbings at least since the early eleventh century. In the long run, this has proved to be too invasive for the characters carved on the surface of the inscriptions; by the thirteenth century, those characters were already less distinct and then severely damaged by the seventeenth century. Moreover, the inscription broke into two parts some time between the mid-twelfth and the late fifteenth century due to an earthquake that worsened the internal longitudinal crack that was already present in the stone in the twelfth century. Although the stone was restored after the earthquake, the two halves were not perfectly aligned, as the upper part was placed slightly leftwards.

If the constant practice of taking ink rubbings did indeed damage the surface of the inscriptions, it must be said, though, that at the same time this preserved the shape of its characters despite the artificial and natural decay of the stone itself. It is in fact by means of ink rubbings that not only can we appreciate the beauty of the characters but we are also able to read the text almost in its entirety, as many parts of the present stone surface are no longer legible. To my knowledge, only ca. 30 early ink rubbings of the inscription exist, and they date from different periods spanning from the late tenth to the early thirteenth century. Therefore, they were taken more than three hundred years after the time of its original carving. Still, especially through four of these ink rubbings, it is possible to admire the vividness and grace conveyed by the subtle carving of the characters, and hence to get a glimpse of what the inscription looked like at the time it was erected. Through

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[22] The stele's measurements are given according to Luo Feng 2018.

[23] *Liangjing xinji* 3.30. I suggest that the inscription on the verso of Helan Minzhi's *Jingang jing* described by Wei Shu may have been only an experimental trial in the process of the construction of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*. See De Laurentis 2020b, pp. 59–61. On Helan Minzhi, see also Chapter Four, note 31.

examining the various published reproductions of ink rubbings, I suggest that the most representative ink rubbing is one of the several *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* rubbings kept in the Mitsui Memorial Museum (Mitsui kinen bijutsukan 三井記念美術館) in Tokyo, hereafter Mitsui *Ji Wang* 1.[24] Therefore, unless otherwise stated, throughout this book the images of the characters of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* are taken from the Mitsui *Ji Wang* 1. When quoting a specific character from the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* or any other from Wang Xizhi's calligraphies, I will refer to it with the ordinal number of the column, a slash /, and the ordinal number of the character in that column (i.e., *da* 大 1/1).

4. The Sources on the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*

The earliest mention of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* is found in Xuanzang's biography *Da Tang Daci'en si Sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 (Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Monastery of Compassion of the Great Tang, hereafter *FSZ*). As we know from the preface dated April 20th, 688 (Chuigong 4.III.15),[25] written by the monk Yancong 彥悰 (*fl*. 650) of the Hongfu si,[26] the *FSZ* was written in five *juan* by Xuanzang's disciple Huili 慧立 (b. 615 – died after January 677) of the Weiguoxi si 魏國西寺 (Western Monastery of the State of Wei) of the capital around 665 (a few months after Xuanzang's death),[27] but did not circulate during Huili's life. Moreover, according to Yancong himself,[28] different sections of *FSZ* were kept by different people and had to be recovered through purchases in the following years. Finally, more than twenty years after its initial composition, Yancong was then asked to re-edit the text, to which he also added another five *juan* covering Xuanzang's life after he returned

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[24] Reproduced in Watanabe Takao 1991.

[25] Curiously, although the Chinese modern critical edition in its introductory note mentions 688 as the year when Yancong completed his editing and expanding of Huili's text, it does not include the date of the completion of Yancong's preface, which is found in the *Taishō* edition of Xuanzang's biography. *FSZ* pp. ii, 1. Li Rongxi's translation follows the *Taishō* text.

[26] Biography in Zanning's 贊寧 (919–1001) *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks [Compiled During the] Song Dynasty) completed in 988, *Song gaoseng zhuan* 4.74. Although there he is mentioned as a disciple of Xuanzang from the Daci'en si, all other sources associate him to the Hongfu si, where he was in the year 661 (*Da Tang neidian lu* 大唐內典錄, p. 283b, p. 333a), and where it is credited to have been during the compilation of *FSZ* in the 680s (*Kaiyuan shijiao lu*, p. 564c).

[27] Here I follow the dates given in Forte 2005, p. 163. *Song gaoseng zhuan* clearly states that Huili arrived in the capital at the end of the Zhenguan reign period (that finished on February 6th, 650), and sought to study with Xuanzang at the Daci'en si. *Song gaoseng zhuan* 4.74. The Weiguo xi si from 687 to 690 was the official name of the Chongfu si 崇福寺 (Monastery of the Exaltation of Blessings).

[28] *FSZ*, p. iii, Liu Shufen 2009, pp. 9f.

to China from Central Asia.[29] When Xuanzang's biography was completed, the stele had already been erected for more than fifteen years. However, this is the very first mention of the stele in any Chinese source.

Xuanzang's other biographical accounts do not mention the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, although they reference the *Preface* and the *Note*. These are the biographical sketches included in Daoxuan's 道宣 (596–667) *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (Sequel to the Biographies of Eminent Monks) (which also records the two texts), Xuanzang's "short biography" (*xingzhuang* 行狀, hereafter *Short Biography*), written by Mingxiang 冥詳 (d.u.) before 683, and Xuanzang's funerary inscription, the *Da Tang sanzang da bianjue fashi taming* 大唐三藏大遍覺法師塔銘 (Inscription of the Stūpa for the Great *Dharma* Master of Perfect Enlightenment Tripiṭaka of the Great Tang), composed by Liu Ke 劉軻 (d.u.) and carved on June 30th, 839 (Kaicheng 4.V.16).[30] In particular, the inscription of 839 was handwritten by the monk Jianchu 建初 (d.u.) of the Anguo si 安國寺 (Monastery of [the Prince of]) An) in Chang'an, and is clearly similar to the calligraphic style of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*. [31]

The other Tang sources on the inscription are two brief notes recorded, respectively, in Wei Shu's above-mentioned *Liangjing xinji* and Zhang Yanyuan's 張彥遠 (ca. 817 – ca. 875) famous *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 (Records of Famous Painters from All Dynasties,) completed in 847.

All the other information we have about the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* dates from the eleventh century onwards, and consists of texts on the history of calligraphy and collection of colophons, epigraphical catalogs, and geographical works.

Particularly important is one colophon on an ink rubbing of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* by the court official and calligraphy connoisseur Huang Bosi 黃伯思 (1079–1118), dated May 30th, 1114 (Zhenghe 4.IV.24), and included in his posthumous collection *Dongguan yulun* 東觀餘論 (Scattered Records of the Palace Library Assistant). Not only is Huang Bosi's comment one of the first on the inscription that we are aware of, but it also contains an earlier reference to the words of the calligraphy expert Zhou Yue 周越 (*fl.* 1030), which are thus to be considered the earliest judgement on the calligraphy of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*.[32]

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[29] Huili's first intent was to recount Xuanzang's travels to India in search of Buddhist scriptures, as is clearly attested in his biography in *Song gaoseng zhuan* 17.413. From this attestation, scholars have inferred that Yancong added the other five *juan* relating to Xuanzang's life from his return to China in 645 until his death in 664. *FSZ*, pp. ii–iii.

[30] *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, *T* 50.2060, pp. 456a–457b; *Da Tang gu sanzang Xuanzang fashi xingzhuang* 大唐故三藏玄奘法師行狀 (Short Biography of the Late *Dharma* Master Tripiṭaka Xuanzang of the Great Tang), *T* 50.2052, p. 218a; Zhou – Zhao 1992, pp. 2184–2187.

[31] Rubbing reproduced with the title *Xuanzang taming* 玄奘塔銘 (Stūpa Inscription of Xuanzang) in Beijing tushuguan jinshi zu 1989–1991, vol. 31, p. 43.

[32] *Dongguan yulun*, in *ZGSHQS*, vol. 1, p. 878.

The earliest mention of the stone itself in epigraphical sources is found in Zhao Mingcheng's 趙明誠 (1081–1129) *Jinshi lu* 金石錄 (Records on Metal and Stone Inscriptions), whereas the most complete account on the inscription is Wang Chang's 王昶 (1724–1806) *Jinshi cuibian* 金石萃編 (Selected Collection of Metal and Stone Inscriptions) of 1805, which also records other relevant epigraphical sources.[33]

Another key source is Luo Tianxiang's 駱天驤 (ca. 1223 – ca. 1300) *Leibian Chang'an zhi* 類編長安志 (Arranged Edition of the Gazetteer of Chang'an), completed in 1296. This geographical work also contains a section on stone inscriptions, where we find the earliest mention of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* being placed at the Confucius Temple, in the premises of what is now the Xi'an Beilin.

Finally, from the viewpoint of calligraphy connoisseurship and rubbing appraisal, the main traditional source is Wang Shu 王澍 (1668–1743), who viewed 110 ink rubbings of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* datable to the Song dynasty during his several years in Beijing.

As to modern studies, an important reference is Nakata Yūjirō's discussion in his 1970 collection of essays on calligraphy.[34] Zhang Yansheng's *Shanben beitie lu* 善本碑帖錄 (Records of Refined Ink rubbings of Stone Inscriptions and Calligraphy Model-Books) published in 1984 is a seminal work for the appraisal of stone inscriptions,[35] but unfortunately does not take into account ink rubbings in Japanese collections. A more detailed study is that published by the Japanese scholar Itō Shigeru in 1998 and then published by the official journal of the Xi'an Beilin, *Beilin jikan* 碑林集刊 (Collected Publications of the Beilin Museum), in 2000.[36] A thorough study of the inscription's decorative engravings as well as of the stone's present condition is found in a recent article by the director of the Ningxia Archaeological Bureau, Luo Feng, who presented his first draft to the workshop on Buddhism, calligraphy, and politics in medieval China that the present author organized at Fudan University in June 2017.[37] Another recent study on the calligraphy of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* is that published by the Japanese scholar Endo Masahiro in 2016.

With regard to Western studies, Taizong, Gaozong, and Xuanzang are well-known figures,[38] and perhaps it can be said that Xuanzang is even popular to the general public.[39] However, despite the immense credit the calligrapher Wang

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33 *Jinshi cuibian* 49.13a–23a.

34 Nakata Yūjirō 1970, pp. 267–277.

35 Zhang Yansheng 1984, pp. 113f.

36 Itō Shigeru 1998 and 2000.

37 Luo Feng 2018.

38 On Taizong, see, for instance, Fitzgerald 1933; Chen, Jack 2010. On Gaozong, see Twitchett – Fairbank 1979, pp. 236–289.

39 On Xuanzang, see Julien 1853; Waley 1952; Wriggins 2004. Xuanzang's personage was also made popular through the Monkey, Arthur Waley's abridged translation of the Ming novel *Xiyouji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West).

Xizhi is still given in China and Japan, Western Sinology has expressed very little interest in his calligraphy. As early as 1933, the Finnish-born Swedish scholar of Chinese art Osvald Sirén (1879–1966) claimed that "[n]o artist in China has, as a matter of fact, become the object of a more universal admiration than Wang Xizhi."[40] Given his importance, one would expect Western scholarship to treat Wang Xizhi with some interest. If we consider that the Song literatus, artist, and connoisseur Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107) has no less than five monographs devoted to him,[41] the Tang calligrapher Sun Guoting 孫過庭 (ca. 647 – ca. 690) has three,[42] and other Tang calligraphers such as Zhang Xu 張旭 (ca. 675–759), Huaisu 懷素 (b. 737), and Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (709–785) have one each,[43] it is bewildering that, as of 2020, no book in any Western language has been devoted to Wang Xizhi. The only exception is Friedrich Bischoff's idiosyncratic study of Wang Xizhi's most famous work, the *Lanting xu*[44] and its relevant poems, the *Lanting shiji* 蘭亭詩集 (Collection of the Poems [Composed at the] Orchid Pavilion), although Bischoff's study focuses only on its literary content and not on its calligraphic value.[45]

To my knowledge, the earliest reference to Wang Xizhi in a Western language is James Summers's (1828–1891) *A Handbook of the Chinese Language* (1863), in which, however, he is not mentioned for his calligraphic skill, but for being the author of the *Qianziwen* 千字文 (Thousand Character Text).[46] The first reference to Wang Xizhi as a calligrapher is found in Alexander Wylie's (1815–1887) *Notes on Chinese Literature* (1867),[47] whereas his first biographical sketch, albeit extremely short, is found in William Mayers's (1831–1878) *A Chinese Reader's Manual* (1874),[48] which was shortly afterwards followed by Angelo Zottoli's (1826–1902) biographic outline of Wang Xizhi in Latin.[49] Herbert Giles's (1845–1935) *A Chinese Biographical Dictionary* (1898) has a slightly longer introduction to Wang Xizhi's life.[50]

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40 Sirén 1933, p. 3.

41 Van Gulik 1938; Vandier-Nicolas 1963 and 1964; Ledderose 1979; Sturman 1997.

42 Goepper 1974; Chang – Frankel 1995; De Laurentis 2011b.

43 Hsiung Ping-ming 1984; Schlombs 1998; McNair 1998.

44 Preface first translated into Latin by Angelo Zottoli (1826–1902) under the title "Ad orchideae absidem conventus proemium." Zottoli 1879–1882, vol. 4, pp. 295–297.

45 Bischoff 1985. Bischoff considered the gathering at the Orchid Pavilion as a homosexual orgy and read the poems accordingly. See Christoph Harbsmeier's criticism in Harbsmeier 1995, p. 326, note 127.

46 Summers 1863, p. 9.

47 Wylie 1867, p. 108.

48 Mayers 1874, p. 240.

49 Zottoli 1879–1882, vol. 4, p. xi.

50 Giles 1898, pp. 821–822.

The earliest specific mention of Wang Xizhi as a calligrapher is found in John Chalmers's (1825–1899) article entitled "Chinese Running Hand" (1879).[51] In addition, Stanislas Millot's (*fl.* 1900) dictionary of the Chinese cursive script, *Dictionnaire des formes cursives des caractères chinois* (1909), refers to Wang Xizhi as the most authoritative guide for the study of that script.[52]

Some decades later, in the 1930s, despite the first histories on Chinese calligraphy in English and French being published,[53] Wang Xizhi was still treated briefly without any insight into the calligraphy or the man.[54]

A considerable move forward in the study of Wang Xizhi in the West was made when the German scholar Roger Goepper published a biography of Wang Xizhi in German (1972).[55] In 1979, another German scholar, Lothar Ledderose, produced an introduction to Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, albeit based mainly on the contributions of Chinese and Japanese scholars, in his book on Mi Fu,[56] and in 1984 he published a scholarly article on Daoism and calligraphy during the period of the Six Dynasties (220–589), in which he also treated the figure of Wang Xizhi.[57]

More books on Chinese calligraphy have been published from the late 1980s onwards,[58] and since the late 1990s more detailed articles on Wang Xizhi have also begun to appear in journals and collection of essays.[59] However, despite some of Wang Xizhi's calligraphies being the object of scholarly articles, none of them has addressed the calligraphic quality of these works.

American scholarship has often focused on one single work attributed to Wang Xizhi, the *Xingrang tie* 行穰帖 (usually translated as "Letter on Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest"), now in the collection of the Princeton University Art Museum, and as a consequence this calligraphy has been often used as a cover for American publications on Chinese calligraphy.[60] This work has been generally

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51 Chalmers 1879, p. 303.

52 Millot 1909, p. 7.

53 Driscoll – Toda 1935; Yang Yu-hsun 1937; Yee, Chiang 1938.

54 Perhaps the only feature worth a mention is that Yang Yu-hsun's work reproduces for the first time in the western world the tracing copy of one of Wang Xizhi's masterpieces, the *Sangluan tie* 喪亂帖 (Sangluan Letter). Yang wrongly places it in the Beijing National Palace Museum rather than in the imperial collection of Japan. See Yang Yu-hsun 1937, p. 66, pl. x no. 25 ter.

55 Goepper 1972.

56 Ledderose 1979.

57 Ledderose 1984.

58 Billeter 1989; Tseng Yuho 1993; Escande 2003.

59 E. Wang 1999; Harrist 1999 and 2001; Lauer 2012; Kern 2015; Lu Hui-wen 2017.

60 Fu Shen 1977; Liu – Ching – Smith 1999; Ouyang – Fong 2008. Reproduction on the official webpage of the Princeton University Art Museum: https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/35203 (accessed January 11, 2021).

regarded as an authentic work by Wang Xizhi,[61] although other scholars have expressed more skeptical views about its calligraphic style.[62]

Recently, another calligraphy only partly representative of Wang Xizhi's calligraphic style, the *Kuaixue shiqing tie* 快雪時晴帖 (Kuaixue shiqing letter, Taipei National Palace Museum),[63] has been the object of a publication by Birgitta Augustin.[64] Yet despite very detailed coverage of the history of this calligraphic piece, including its later reception, the article does not address any issues concerning brushwork.

In addition, it should be said that the French scholar Yolaine Escande has published the French translation of three texts attributed to Wang Xizhi (only the first of which is authentic), which perhaps should have been equipped with more philological and interpretative annotations.[65]

Despite these articles' lack of insight into brushwork, however, Western Sinology has produced more results from the perspective of literary studies, such as Antje Richter's research on epistolary culture, which is useful for understanding the language and cultural milieu of Wang Xizhi's times.[66] Another valuable contribution of traditional Sinology is the biographical and bibliographic outline by David Knechtges, which, along with other recent scholarly articles,[67] gives the Western reader reliable information on aspects of Wang Xizhi's life.

With regard to the central theme of the present book, the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, however, we find almost no trace in Western scholarship, with the exception of very few cases. Lothar Ledderose mentions this inscription in his book on Mi Fu and the classical tradition of Chinese calligraphy without quoting any primary sources, apparently relying exclusively on Japanese sources.[68] Kenneth Starr eventually reprised Ledderose's words.[69]

Furthermore, Eugene Y. Wang in his essay entitled "The Taming of the Shrew: Wang Hsi-chih (303–361) and Calligraphic Gentrification in the Seventh Century"[70] discusses the canonization of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy during the seventh century. In an article of this kind, the reader would expect Eugene Y. Wang to have analyzed in detail the most evident of all cases of canonization of Wang

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61 *SDZS*, vol. 4, p. 168; Fu Shen 1977, pp. 5–8; Nishikawa Yasushi 1991, vol. 1, p. 224; Liu Tao 1997b, p. 360.

62 Nakata Yūjirō 1974, p. 221; De Laurentis 2019c, pp. 176f.

63 Both the configurations of characters and the modulations in brushwork are much less subtle and varied than in other tracing copies of Wang Xizhi's calligraphies. Liu Tao 1997b, p. 357.

64 Augustin 2017.

65 Escande 2003, pp. 157–175.

66 Richter 2010; Richter – Chace 2017.

67 Knechtges – Chang 2010–2014, vol. 2, pp. 1257–1262; Kieser 2011; Swartz 2012.

68 Ledderose 1979, p. 14.

69 Starr 2008, pp. 22–24.

70 E. Wang 1999.

Xizhi's calligraphy – the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*. Quite surprisingly, though, Eugene Y. Wang does not mention this stele, albeit he discusses the inscription on two stones onto which Chu Suiliang copied the texts of the *Preface* and the *Note*.[71]

After the present book was completed, the author was made aware that Ruth Sheng at the University of Florida had defended a doctoral thesis on a similar subject in 2011.[72] The thesis is entitled "The Development of Chinese Calligraphy in Relation to Buddhism and Politics during the Early Tang Era," and consists of seven chapters for a total of 233 pages. It covers a great range of topics, including chapters such as "Religious and Political Uses of Calligraphy from Antiquity through the Six Dynasties," "Buddhist Steles in the Early Tang Dynasty," "Buddhist Scriptures and Dunhuang Manuscripts," "Buddhist Sutra Copyists and Sutra Copying Style," and finally an English translation of Taizong's *Preface*. Despite this breadth of topics, Sheng's examination relies basically on secondary sources and provides only a general picture of a much more articulated scenario, which would have required a more thorough implementation of primary sources.

Recently, a book in English by the Chinese scholar Xue Lei 薛磊 has tried to shed light on the Daoist inscription *Yihe ming* 瘞鶴銘 (Eulogy for Burying a Crane),[73] a long-debated calligraphic work dating from the early sixth century. Xue's study is stimulating in advancing new interpretations of the rather obscure content and context of this inscription; but given the arduous goal of examining an inscription whose exact historical background and physical data are almost impossible to reconstruct, Xue's book avoids any enquiry into the archeological and paleographic issues involved with inscription itself, taking for granted the traditional scholarship that has so far provided the basic framework in which any interpretation of the inscription is made. Despite considerable insight in literary and religious sources, Xue's book pays little attention to calligraphic technique per se, and only briefly discusses the inscription's artistic features. Therefore, it is clearly not intended as a traditional work on the history of calligraphy, but as an investigation of calligraphic culture within the milieu of Chinese literati.

As the present book was entering the final editing phase, I was informed that the Taiwanese scholar Tsui Chung-hui 崔中慧 had published a monograph on Chinese calligraphy and early Buddhist manuscripts.[74] The main theme of Tsui's book is the influence that foreign monk-scribes working in westernmost China during the third and fourth centuries exerted on the development of the standard script in the so-called "Northern Liang 涼 (397–439) calligraphic style" and its alleged dissemination eastwards. Tsui's thesis, though, should have been corroborated with more evidence, not to mention relevant primary and secondary sources that should have been examined in more detail. Nevertheless, Tsui's monograph provides considerable philological documentation as well as several images of

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71 E. Wang 1999, pp. 163–165.

72 R. Sheng 2011.

73 L. Xue 2019.

74 Tsui Chung-hui 2020.

Buddhist manuscripts and stone inscriptions from western China not easily available elsewhere, hence it proves a useful tool for research on early Buddhist manuscript culture in China.

This book aims at carrying on the line of research of previous studies by deepening our insight of the interrelations between calligraphy, Buddhism, and political power in medieval China from the privileged perspective of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*. In order to do so, it examines in detail the facts about the stele, and places them into the wider context of the calligraphic, religious, and political milieu of Taizong's and Gaozong's reigns (626–683) in particular, and of medieval China in general. It thus intends to achieve this goal not just by describing calligraphy in its technical terms, but, at the same time, by investigating on a deeper level its political and religious functions at the apogee of medieval China.

5. The Buddhist Context of the Early Tang

In order to fully appreciate the historical and artistic value of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, a few words must be said about the spread of Buddhism during the Tang. The Tang ruling house explicitly claimed to descend from the mythical founder of Daoism, Laozi 老子 (Li Er 李耳, 6th c. BCE), on the ground that they shared the surname Li. However, during the nearly three centuries of Tang rule, in terms of the number of clergy and adherents, Daoism was much weaker than Buddhism, both in the capital and in other parts of the empire. During the Tang dynasty, Chang'an held almost five times more Buddhist monasteries than Daoist abbeys (*guan* 觀), 193 vs. 48; in 739, we know that Buddhist monasteries outnumbered Daoist abbeys by more than three to one across the empire as a whole (5,358 vs. 1,687).[75] In 845, the fervent Daoist Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (Li Yan 李炎, 814–846, r. 840–846) launched a drastic anti-Buddhist campaign. As a consequence, the two capitals Chang'an and Luoyang 洛陽 retained only four monasteries, whereas the upper prefectures (*shangzhou* 上州), i.e., the prefectures with a population of over 30,000 people,[76] were allowed to keep only one monastery each. As many as 4,600 monasteries were closed, with 260,500 monks and nuns being compelled to renounce their vows.[77] The following year, the new Emperor Xuānzong 宣宗 (Li Chen 李忱, 797–859, r. 846–859) rehabilitated Buddhism because of its popularity in the empire. Yet the religion could not recover the splendor of the past.[78]

A very significant fact is that monasteries spread even more strongly in times of war, and the ratio between the population and number of monasteries during Taizong's reign falling much higher than during the early seventh or eighth centuries. At the end of the Sui dynasty (i.e., late 610s), according to Daoxuan's *Shijia*

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[75] Xiong 2000, pp. 297–320; *Tang liudian* 4.125.

[76] In some cases, smaller prefectures were granted the grade of upper prefectures. *Tang liudian* 3.73.

[77] *Jiu Tangshu* 18a.604–606.

[78] *Jiu Tangshu* 18b.615. See also Ch'en 1964, pp. 229–233.

fangzhi 釋迦方誌 (Accounts on the Buddhist Regions) of 650, there were 236,200 monks and nuns in China, with a total of 3,985 monasteries (including nunneries). On the basis of the modern survey *Zhongguo renkoushi* 中國人口史 (The History of China's Population), the Chinese population in the year 610 was 46,019,516, but it eventually decreased dramatically during the early Tang, and in 639 it was only 12,351,681. It rose again in the following decades and in 705 it reached 37,140,000 people, peaking in the years before the so-called An Lushan 安祿山 Rebellion (755–763) with 52,919,309 people. These numbers mean that during the 610s there was one monastery/nunnery for every 11,548 people, but this ratio must have been much higher during the 620s, 630s, and 640s. In fact, due to war campaigns and famine in the first years of the Tang dynasty, the population decreased by nearly one third, and even if we speculate that by 649 the population reached as many as 20 million (from ca. 12 million in 639), the number of monasteries does not seem to have been severely affected by the population loss (46 million/20 million people vs. 3,985/3,716 monasteries). In the late 640s, there was one monastery for every 5,382 people, which is more than double the ratio of the 610s. The *Tang liudian* 唐六典 (Six Codes of the Tang) compiled in 739 during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (Li Longji 李隆基, 685–762, r. 713–756) records a total of 5,358 Buddhist monasteries (vs. 1,687 Daoist abbeys), but unfortunately says nothing about the total number of monks and nuns. The population in 740 was 48,134,609, meaning one monastery for every 8,983 people.[79]

These piecemeal records allow us to infer that Buddhism was more popular in the troubled times of Taizong's war campaigns than during the late Sui or Xuanzong's time. When Xuanzang returned from India in 645 and started working on his translation project with Taizong's support, Tang China was deeply imbued with Buddhist ideas.

Buddhism greatly favored the manuscript culture of China. Alongside administration records and Chinese literary texts, from the late fourth century, Buddhist manuscripts became very popular in China and were de facto the most copied of all the texts. Historical sources and archaeological evidence alike attest this immense popularity; it was due, needless to say, to the deep impact that Buddhism had made on Chinese culture, making it, within a few centuries of its arrival, the most widespread religion in China.[80] The main reason behind the extensive production of Buddhist manuscripts in China was that copying Buddhist scriptures, as well as reciting and reading them, produced merit (*gongde* 功德, Skt. *guṇa*) for Mahāyāna Buddhists and led to a better quality of life in the present and future

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[79] *FSZ* 7.153; Li Rongxi 1995, p. 215; *Shijia fangzhi* 2.122; *Tang liudian* 4.125; *Zhongguo renkoushi*, vol. 2, pp. 130–134.

[80] As Kenneth Ch'en points out, after the difficult times of the early third century when Buddhism was very weak in China, in the first half of the sixth century Buddhism flourished across the empire, and especially in the north, where historical records mention the impressive number of two million monks and nuns. Ch'en 1964, pp. 203f.

lives. Merits are positive imprints left on the mind by virtuous actions, which according to Buddhist belief can cause happiness that will lead to enlightenment.

This was the primary religious background in which the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* took root and is of the utmost importance for our understanding of the causes of the construction of the inscription.

6. Originals, Copies, and Forgeries in Wang Xizhi's Calligraphies

Although Wang Xizhi has long since been the most revered of all calligraphers in East Asia, no original work in his hand remains. The natural perishability of paper, worsened by accidental fires and wars, as well as the dearth of stone inscriptions from the area where Wang Xizhi lived, have resulted in only a few originals of his calligraphic works being available during the Tang period. Although the imperial collection of the Sui 隋 (581–618) dynasty, too, held a considerable number of Wang Xizhi's calligraphies, it is very likely that the majority were tracing copies (see Section 1.3.2). As a matter of fact, most of the calligraphies Taizong purchased in the 620s–640s consisted of copies. It goes without saying that in any manuscript tradition the preservation of written documents depends on their reproduction. Medieval China relied heavily on copies, and in fact Robert Harrist has even claimed that Chinese calligraphy "is copies, all the way down."[81]

Copies were of two kinds: duplicative tracing copies (*moben* 摹本) and imitative free-hand copies (*linben* 臨本). A tracing copy is the exact drawing over the contours of the original's characters, implemented on a superimposed piece of transparent paper, and the quality of the copy depended mainly on the quality of the materials used and on the accuracy of the person(s) involved in the work. By contrast, free-hand copies are the result of the calligrapher's personal skill in consciously imitating the original, and although the result can be extremely close, it will never be an exact copy.

Since these two types of copies' faithfulness to their originals could vary considerably, either because of inaccuracies in the reproducing process or because the original sources could be spurious, Taizong tasked Chu Suiliang with putting the imperial collection in order and assessing the authenticity of these calligraphic works, and his *Youjun shumu* 右軍書目 (List of [Wang] Youjun's Calligraphies) is a partial outcome of his inspection.[82] It should be stressed, though, that tracing copies are not necessarily a serious demeaning of the aesthetic quality of the originals. We know from Yu He's 虞龢 (*fl*. 470) *Lunshu biao* 論書表 (Memorial on Calligraphy) that the imperial collection of calligraphies of the Liu-Song dynasty comprised tracing copies, which were produced by painstakingly outlining the contour of brushstrokes with extremely fine brushes on specially-treated paper, so that the copies could preserve even the most subtle shapes of the characters.[83] The Tang bureaucratic systems even had tracing copyists (*tashu shou* 搨書手) who

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[81] Harrist 2001, p. 179.

[82] Nakata Yūjirō 1974, pp. 187–191.

[83] See *Lunshu biao*, in *Fashu yaolu* 2.39.

worked in various agencies, and it is thanks to some of them that many calligraphic works of the Six Dynasties have been preserved to our day.[84] However, tracing copies do not always equal a complete replication of the original. As Yu He explains, during the process of tracing "incomplete characters (*baizi*) were restored, without losing their [original] style, and the vividness of the ink was even clearer."[85] If tracing copies guarantee a high degree of resemblance with the original, free-hand copies pose more problems of faithfulness and authenticity, as they may be the result of an attempt to reproduce the original work or simply of acquiring its style by imitation. This means that there may be considerable degrees of difference between the originals and the imitative copies, depending on the calligrapher's skills. For instance, Chinese sources even state that there were indeed several people capable of producing "perfect imitations" (*luanzhen* 亂真, lit.: [copies able to be] confused with the originals).

At the same time, though, these copies may also be the result of the conscious will of re-interpreting the original work according to the so-called practice of "conceptual imitation" (*yilin* 意臨), regardless of the calligrapher's skills. Given these diverse conditions, it goes without saying that it is extremely difficult to draw a sharp line between what is "authentic" and what is "spurious" in the received tradition of calligraphic works on paper. What is certain, however, is that conscious attempts at forging autographs were popular as early as the first part of the fifth century.[86] In addition, the Chinese scholar Zhang Tiangong has pointed out the fact that the Emperor Wudi 武帝 (Xiao Yan 蕭衍, 464–549, r. 502–549) of the Liang 梁 dynasty (502–557) believed that some of the calligraphies that Wang Xizhi produced in the "declining years of his life" (*monian* 末年), which he stored in his collection, were not written by the great master himself but were produced by someone whom Wang Xizhi entrusted with writing in his name, perhaps because his health had worsened. In one letter to the Daoist hermit and connoisseur of calligraphy Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536), Emperor Wudi did mention the name of this kind of "ghost calligrapher," but unfortunately only Tao's reply has been recorded. Apparently, due to the poor quality of these calligraphies the people of the early sixth century disregarded Wang Xizhi's calligraphic art in the final years of his life, and so Tao Hongjing explains that Wang Xizhi is not to be blamed at all for these calligraphies, as they were not his own creations.[87] Considering this piecemeal but very significant evidence, it is perfectly clear that a great deal of Wang Xizhi's calligraphies cannot be considered the

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[84] See De Laurentis 2014b.

[85] 今搨書皆用大厚紙，泯若一體同度，翦截皆齊，又補接敗字，體勢不失，墨色更明. *Lunshu biao*, in *Fashu yaolu* 2.39.

[86] This is the case for Liu Yizong 劉義宗 (d. 444), whose collection of calligraphic works was filled with fakes fabricated with malicious intent by imitating the style (*moxue* 摹學) of famous calligraphers. *Lunshu biao*, in *Fashu yaolu* 2.37.

[87] Zhang Tiangong 2009, p. 306; *Tao yinju you qi* 陶隱居又啟 (Further Memorial by the Hermit Tao), in *Fashu yaolu* 2.54.

product of the great master's calligraphic hand. Therefore, we should keep in mind that forgeries and imitation were quite common in medieval China, also considering the profit that could be made by selling works attributed to Wang Xizhi. Accordingly, the majority of Wang Xizhi's calligraphies collected by the imperial court of the Liang were lost in 555;[88] it is hence very likely that a considerable number of works that Huairen consulted were copied, either by tracing or as free-hand copies, and that many of them were even forgeries.

Huairen's collated characters thus bear different degrees of resemblance with Wang Xizhi's original calligraphic style: first of all, because the sources from which he collated the characters were not necessarily originals, strictly speaking; secondly, because Huiren did process, at least to some degree, the contour of Wang Xizhi's characters, either because the originals were damaged or because the monk consciously adapted some characters for the sake of stylistic consistency and aesthetic efficacy.

7. The *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* as a Work of Calligraphic Art

Any Chinese character needs to be written out in one of the scripts that constitute the Chinese writing system in order to be properly visualized. These scripts are commonly regarded as five:[89] the *zhuan* 篆 (usually translated as "seal" but better left untranslated), a general term that comprises all pictographic scripts in use between the fourteenth and third century BCE, as well as the official script of the Qin 秦 dynasty (221–206 BCE), the "lesser *zhuan*" (*xiaozhuan* 小篆); the clerical (*lishu* 隸書), the official script of the Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE), arisen in the third century BCE; the standard (*kaishu* 楷書), the dominant form of script since the fourth century, emerging at the end of the Han period, which was used to design typographic fonts from the tenth century onwards; the semi-cursive, which is almost contemporary to the standard script and has been the favorite script in everyday written communication; the cursive (*caoshu* 草書), which appeared in the first century BCE and is a very synthetical form of the clerical and standard scripts.[90]

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[88] Emperor Wudi's son, Emperor Yuandi 元帝 (Xiao Yi 蕭繹, 508–555, r. 552–555), burned his collection of 140,000 *juan* of books along with calligraphic works of the Two Wangs, just before being captured and killed by the Western Wei 魏 (535–557) troops in the capital Jingzhou 荊州 in 555. *Er Wang deng shulu*, in *Fashu yaolu*, 4.147.

[89] The most comprehensive dictionaries of the shapes of Chinese characters are the volumes published by the Wenwu 文物 (Cultural Relics) publishing house, arranged according to the five scripts, namely *Zhuan zi bian* 篆字編 (Collection of Characters in the *zhuan* Script), *Li zi bian* 隸字編 (Collection of Characters in the Clerical Script), *Kai zi bian* 楷字編 (Collection of Characters in the Standard Script), *Xing zi bian* 行字編 (Collection of Characters in the Semi-Cursive Script), and *Cao zi bian* 草字編 (Collection of Characters in the Cursive Script). A condensed version of these volumes called *Wuti Hanzi leibian* 五體漢字類編 (Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Characters in the Five Scripts) was also published.

[90] For a general view of the transformation of the Chinese writing scripts, see Qiu Xigui 2000.

Each of the five scripts of the Chinese writing system differ in the way the shape of characters is configured, with the standard and the semi-cursive being the most readable and popular ones (see Plate 2). These scripts have come out in different epochs and follow a diachronic development that goes from the *zhuan* to the standard, covering a period of at least one and a half millennia. Scholar divide them into two groups: the *zhuan* script and the other archaic scripts belong to the ancient stage of the Chinese writing system, whereas the clerical, standard, cursive, and semi-cursive scripts belong to the modern stage. At the same time, traditional Chinese literati have also used the five scripts synchronically, often combining more than one script in the same handwriting specimen.[91] Men of letters in China have thus long since dedicated extreme care to the graphic outlook of their handwritten texts. Nowadays, however, most of these scripts are used only for calligraphic purposes.

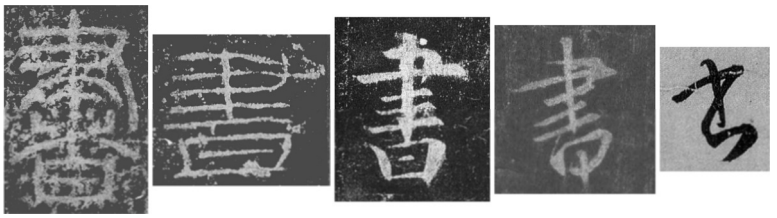

Plate 2: Character *shu* 書 in the *zhuan*, clerical, standard, semi-cursive, and cursive scripts (from *Zhongguo beike quanji*, vol. 1, *Tang Ouyang Xun shu Jiuchenggong liquan ming*, Mitsui *Ji Wang* 1, and *Zhongguo fashu quanji*, vol. 3)

A popular saying recorded in Yan Zhitui's 顏之推 (531 – ca. 590) *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓 (Family Instructions of Mr. Yan) states that "a letter (*chidu*) or a memorial is like the face and eyes [of the sender] shown from a distance of a thousand miles."[92] This reflects medieval China's belief that handwriting had a strong visual impact on the eyes of any learned man who pictured in his mind the face of the person whose handwriting was in front of him. The adage can be also seen as the forerunner of the popular modern saying "[handwritten] characters look like the person [who wrote them]" (*zi ru qi ren* 字如其人). Using Wang Xizhi's characters to create a brand-new work, as in the case of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, did in fact imply that Wang Xizhi manifested himself, and not just his calligraphy, in the inscription.

The fact that over three hundred years after Wang Xizhi's death people had the idea of using his characters to compile a brand-new text is in itself astonishing. If we extend our perspective to Western art, the comparisons are even more startling. Let us hypothesize that parts of the sculptures created by the great Greek sculptor

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[91] Typical is the case of the heading of stone inscriptions written in the *zhuan* script and the text of the inscription either in the clerical or the standard, or, as seen in Plate 3 in Chapter Two, the heading in the clerical and the text in the cursive.

[92] 尺牘書疏，千里面目也. *Yanshi jiaxun jijie* 7.567. Slightly different translation in Teng Ssu-yü 1968, p. 198.

Phidias (ca. 490 – ca. 430 BCE) were used to assemble a new sculpture, or that portions of Leonardo da Vinci's (1452–1519) paintings were re-adapted for a new painting; or even that different motifs from Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685–1750) music were mingled together into a new composition. I venture that these enterprises would hardly be regarded as works of art, but in all likelihood would count as artistic divertissements at best. What a group of Chinese monks did in the second half of the seventh century with Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, though, was exactly a conscious endeavor to create a new work of art with "pieces" belonging to different compositions dating from different phases of Wang Xizhi's life, but also presumably including posthumous forgeries. Theirs was not at all a calligraphic divertissement, but a pioneering and refined work of art, which eventually became one of the most popular calligraphic works of all time.

As a matter of fact, the only cases of successful "assemblage" in Western art are the sculptures restored during in the eighteenth century by Italian artists such as Bartolomeo Cavaceppi (1716–1799), Pietro Pacilli (1720–1772), Carlo Albacini (ca. 1734 – ca. 1813), and others.[93] This amalgamation of different unrelated or loosely related elements is called *pasticcio* (French, *pastiche*), but it is more common in music than in other art forms.[94] However, two very famous cases are two Roman copies of Greek statues, the Townley Discobolus, held at the British Museum since 1805, and the Barberini Venus, sold for nearly 8 million British pounds at Christie's in London in 2002 to Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al Thani of Qatar (1966–2014). The former statue was a headless torso of the 2nd century restored by Albacini in Rome after it was purchased by Charles Townley (1737–1805) in 1792 and then sent to London in 1794. Although Albacini found another head that was extremely similar to the original in terms of marble quality, he applied it to the body in the wrong direction (it does not face the disc). Very likely because his work was so subtle and precise, the British Museum denied this addition until 1861.[95] The Barberini Venus represents an even more serious case of manipulation, for it involves the addition of several parts, but especially of a head that had to be severely reworked to suit the Roman goddess.[96]

In Western art history, the conscious attempt at producing a brand-new artwork from collected elements starts only with the technique of collage, which was first devised in the early twentieth century European avant-garde. It consisted of a patchwork from a variety of sources and materials, whose different provenance appeared very explicitly, and the same overtly different combination of elements is indeed shared by ransom notes collated with single letters from newspapers and

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93 Rossi Pinelli 1981.

94 *Enciclopedia italiana*, vol. 26, pp. 478–479; Arnau 1961, pp. 51f; Lucie-Smith 1984, p. 141.

95 Jones 1990, pp. 141f. Photograph and other resources accessible online on the website: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1805-0703-43 (accessed April 22, 2021).

96 Description available online on the website: https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/a-highly-important-roman-marble-statue-of-3928868-details.aspx (accessed April 22, 2021).

magazines clippings. The intended effect is in fact to look as un-uniform as possible, so that no one is able to trace the source of the note by detecting a coherent recognizable style. The aim of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* and other collated inscriptions in China is exactly the opposite. Since Huairen, Chinese collators cared about recreating as realistically as possible the personal style of the calligrapher (in most cases Wang Xizhi's semi-cursive), so that the implemented work could look like a new natural manifestation of that style.

So how could a collated work fully function as a successful work of art in China, whereas this would have been highly unacceptable in Western art? How is it possible that some 1,300 years prior to the European avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century, the Chinese ventured to create a brand-new calligraphy out of extant works, thus bringing Wang Xizhi to life again?

This distinctive phenomenon can only be explained through the structural essence of the artistic object in question, in this case Chinese calligraphy, that does allow such an endeavor. The key factor is that the basic unit of calligraphic expression, the Chinese character, is much more elemental than any other form of art in the world. At the same time, though, any single character equally bears the complete general style of the work, despite the length of the calligraphy's text. As a matter of fact, any masterpiece of Chinese calligraphy can be easily identified by looking at just one of its characters. Not that works from other forms of art cannot be detected from their parts or details. One would easily recognize Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* by simply looking at the eyes in the portrait, but this would not be possible by looking at other less distinctive details, such as a particular spot in the background or parts of her dress. By contrast, in calligraphy each character is equally a bearer of the complete style of a work, be it the first or the last character.

The author has claimed that on the basis of semiotic analysis, Chinese calligraphy at its best is a system of non-articulated visual signs, which means that any well-made calligraphic work cannot be reduced to a set of elementary units which, combined all together, assemble in successive order brushstrokes, characters, and columns in a final coherent work.[97] Rather, a well-made work of Chinese calligraphy is the result of the balance of visual richness and overall uniformity that takes place in an unbroken and dynamic flow from the very beginning of the first stroke composing the starting character of the initial column. Such dynamic flow is achieved by the "lifting and raising of the tip of the brush" (*qifu* 起伏), which produces extremely varied and vivid modulations of brushstrokes. By contrast, Chinese characters in their typographic realization are regarded as signs made up

[97] A brushstroke refers to any constitutive element of a handwritten character in any of the scripts of the Chinese writing system. The most famous set of elementary units refers to the eight brush types of the modern form of Chinese characters, as summarized in the so-called "eight methods of the character *yong*" (*yong zi bafa* 永字八法). The author has addressed the question of the relationship between strokes and characters, as well as the relationship between characters and the entire work, in three specific articles (De Laurentis 2010, 2014a, and 2017).

of a small set of only five elementary brushstrokes.[98] This means that calligraphy is just the opposite of Chinese typographic fonts, in which similar strokes or components can be interchanged at will without breaking the original structure of characters. In exquisite works of calligraphy, brushstrokes and constituent parts cannot be interchanged without breaking the character structure, although brushstrokes or radicals in a given character may appear similar to those in others.

This assumption obviously calls into question the legitimacy of Huairen's collated characters as works of art, on the ground that he worked with characters that were not interchangeable. In fact, Huairen's work was the result of an operation of "calligraphic surgery," so to speak – it therefore goes without saying that it does not appear as natural as a spontaneous, historically occurring calligraphic act. By comparing, for instance, Wang Xizhi's tracing copies or other historically attested stone inscriptions with the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, it is clear that Huairen's collated inscription is less free-flowing, and that he time and again repeats the configuration of many characters. Nevertheless, if we look at the traditional method of duplicating – and thus preserving – Chinese calligraphic works on paper, we learn that slight although conscious modifications were still admissible, not to mention the cases where engravers unconsciously caused modifications while transferring written texts from paper onto stone. Therefore, when we look at Huairen's collated inscription, what we see is not just the mechanical transfer of characters from different calligraphies into one new framework. Rather, we see a conscious attempt at implementing these scattered characters for the creation of a coherent and well-made new calligraphy. But in order to avoid the inscription appearing repetitive, Huairen had to minimize the number of times an individual character was used, and therefore had to find a means of transforming them into vivid expression of spontaneous handwriting. To this end, Huairen aptly modified several details in the components of characters, either varying the position of brief strokes or changing their direction by transforming their shapes. The result is astonishingly positive, for the same character appears at the same time both different and coherent with the style of the whole inscription.

Such a modus operandi should not be considered simply as a manipulative device. A few years after the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was erected, Sun Guoting in his *Shupu* 書譜 (Manual of Calligraphy) of 687 states that "[a]s for the simultaneous use of various long strokes, for each of them the shape should be different; when numerous dot strokes are arranged in succession their figure should be diversified."[99] Sun Guoting was of course referring to individual calligraphic works, and not to collated inscriptions. Yet his statement perfectly describes Huairen's ap-

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[98] Contemporary dictionaries arrange strokes in a set of five units (一 *heng* 橫, 丨 *shu* 豎, 丿 *pie* 撇, 乛 *zhe* 折, and 丶 *dian* 點, which also comprises the right-falling stroke *na* 乀), and consider all the other strokes as mere variants of at least one of these five. Fei Jinchang 1996, p. vii.

[99] 至若數畫並施，其形各異。眾點齊列，為體互乖. Annotated translation in De Laurentis 2011b, p. 59.

proach to devising a brand-new calligraphic work such as the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*.

Researchers of Chinese Buddhist art have mainly focused on sculpture and painting, and rarely paid attention to the relationship between calligraphy and Buddhism.[100] This book is therefore intended as a contribution, on the one hand, to widen the scope of research on medieval Chinese calligraphy, and, on the other, to fill the gap in calligraphy studies in Chinese Buddhist art.

8. The Present Book's Structure

This is a book on the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, a Buddhist stone inscription and an outstanding work in the history of Chinese calligraphy, but it does not focus solely on the technical aspects of the inscription or its implications for Chinese calligraphy. Rather, it intends to explore the wider background in which the inscription was devised and erected in order to clarify the motivations behind its erection. In other words, this is not a book that isolates the calligraphic phenomenon from the social context in which it arose; rather, it attempts to investigate as thoroughly as possible the key persons who were, either directly or indirectly, involved in the production of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*.

The book is divided into eight chapters, which deal with distinct but interrelated topics.

Chapter One is a general introduction to the relationship between Buddhism and calligraphy in medieval China, and gives an overview of manuscript production and stone engravings of the period. It suggests that there is a type of calligraphic production in medieval China that can fairly be called "Buddhist calligraphy," as it should be considered part of the larger set of Buddhist art. This preliminary description is in fact necessary in order to understand the wider cultural context in which the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was created.

Chapter Two discusses the formation of Wang Xizhi's calligraphic tradition and analyzes the origin and development of the semi-cursive script, as well as Wang Xizhi's function as its aesthetic norm.

Chapter Three refers to the history of the texts that constitute the inscription's content. The complete transcription and annotated translation of the entire stele text is given in this chapter's appendix (Appendix I).

Chapter Four investigates the historical events that motivated the inscription's erection, focusing on the relationship between imperial authority and Daoism and Buddhism during Gaozong's reign.

Chapter Five expands the content of Chapters Three and Four, as it traces the physical places where the stele of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* was installed, starting

[100] For instance, the catalog of the exhibition at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, *China: Dawn of a Golden Age AD 200–750* is dedicated to the period in which both the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* and Wang Xizhi appeared. The last chapter by Angela Howard is entitled "Buddhist Art in China," but it treats only Buddhist sculpture, and is totally silent about calligraphy. Watt 2004, pp. 89–99.

with the history of the Hongfu si and its monks in the seventh century, until the stele's removal to the Xi'an Beilin in the twelfth century.

Chapter Six describes the history of the practice of collating characters and discusses the feasibility of producing a collated Buddhist inscription on the basis of the characters found in Wang Xizhi's calligraphies. It also proposes a possible method that Huairen may have adopted while devising the inscription. A list of the collated inscriptions erected during the Tang and the Song dynasties is found in the chapter's appendix (Appendix II).

Chapter Seven describes the processes of the transferring and carving on stone of the characters, and the reproduction of Wang Xizhi's calligraphies through the ages, with particular attention to the faithfulness of stone inscriptions in relation to calligraphic works on paper.

Chapter Eight is devoted to the analysis of the shape and the calligraphy of the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu*, including an evaluation of the ink rubbings, and a formal description of the visual adjustments that Huairen undertook while arranging the collated characters.

On the basis of the research conducted on the *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* and its political and religious implications, the book's Conclusion puts forward the hypothesis that the inscription was not simply a "work of calligraphy," but was intended to meet the demands and needs of the Buddhist clergy of Chang'an. Consequently, it also highlights the specific and complex role that calligraphy played in the cultural milieu of medieval China.

The book also provides one map, twelve tables, and thirty-five plates related to the content of each chapter, as well as the complete reproduction of Mitsui *Ji Wang* 1, an extensive bibliography divided into primary and secondary sources, a general index and a glossary of calligraphic terms.

Chinese characters are given in the traditional form unless referring to articles and books published in simplified characters. Chinese dates are given as "name of the reign period year (in cardinal numbers).month (in Roman numerals).day (in cardinal numbers)," e.g., Xianheng 3.XII.8, and whenever at least the month is specified they have also been converted into the Western calendar according to the digital system provided by the Academia Sinica Computing Center, available online at the website http://sinocal.sinica.edu.tw/. Whenever a date is attested in the Chinese sources with an element of the sexagenary cycle, the characters are omitted and relevant reference is given in Table 12.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations in this book are by the author.

CHAPTER ONE

Buddhism and Calligraphy in Medieval China

The *Ji Wang shengjiao xu* is a Buddhist inscription that used calligraphy to enhance Buddhism's prestige and influence in the Chinese society of the early Tang. In order to understand the cultural milieu in which the inscription was devised and constructed, it is necessary to pinpoint calligraphy's specific role in the Buddhist world of medieval China. The present chapter examines, on the one hand, the relationship between Buddhism and Chinese manuscript culture, with a focus on the religious value of the copying of sutras and the particular implementation of stone inscriptions by the Buddhist clergy and the Buddhist lay devotees; on the other hand, it explores the varied manifestations of calligraphic practice among the community of Buddhist monks and their connections with Chinese literati, which is further evidence of Buddhism's adaptation to Chinese culture.

1.1 Buddhism and Manuscript Production

The Buddhist follower is defined as someone who takes refuge in the "Three Jewels" (*sanbao* 三寶, Skt. *triratna*). These are the three objects of Buddhist veneration, namely the Buddha (*fo* 佛), chiefly the historical Buddha who having reached enlightenment was able to show its path to others; the *dharma* (*fa* 法), which consists of the teachings based on the Buddha's enlightenment; and the *saṃgha* (*seng* 僧), which is the community of monks and nuns (sometimes intended to also include lay devotees) that practices such teachings.[1] The Buddha's teachings refer to a broad set of practices, words, and beliefs, and are made up of both the "realized *dharma*" (*zhengfa* 證法, Skt. *adhigamadharma*) and the "scriptural *dharma*" (*jiaofa* 教法, Skt. *āgamadharma*). The former consists of training to attain direct realization rather than conceptual understanding, whereas the latter is associated with the corpus of Buddhist scriptures, the so-called "three baskets" (*sanzang* 三藏, Skt. *tripiṭaka*), which were believed to have once contained, respectively, sutras (*jing* 經, the words spoken directly by the Buddha), *vinaya* texts (*lü* 律, monastic regulations), and *abhidharma* texts (*lun* 論, commentaries). It is evident that the realized *dharma* is the most crucial kind of *dharma* for Buddhist followers, but it cannot be completely separated from the scriptural *dharma*, as it relies – at least partly – on transmitted texts. The function of Buddhist scriptures, then, must be seen primarily in this perspective of tools for spiritual enlightenment, and not as mere intellectual products.

The scriptural *dharma* was essentially transmitted orally and obliged the communities of monks and nuns to memorize extremely long passages from both the Buddha's sermons and other texts. Scholars believe that the Buddhist canon started to be preserved in written form only at the end of the first century BCE, when

[1] *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, p. 704; *Foguang dacidian*, vol. 1, pp. 700f.

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