Chapter 5

A Forgery and the Pursuit of the Authentic Wang Xizhi

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Appreciating and commenting on rubbings of engraved calligraphy was a key practice in the visual culture of the literati of the Song period. They pursued well-known pieces, differentiated early versions from later recuts, and compiled inventories documenting collectors and collections. The engraved calligraphy that attracted the attention of the Song literati was wide-ranging, including large stone monuments dated from the third century BCE to the ninth century CE, and compendia of model calligraphies engraved on small-scaled stone or wood blocks, which became popular only in the late tenth century.

Some of the most passionate debates and comments were centered on the Eastern Jin calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303-361). His most renowned work, Lantingxu 蘭亭序, enjoyed unprecedented popularity during the Song period due to the wide circulation of reproductions in the form of rubbings. The rubbings of Lantingxu, in great number and from various sources (many collectors boasted of owning hundreds of rubbings), in fact constructed a world of their own, in which collectors and critics were enthralled by the tasks of assembling, sorting, dating, commenting, tracing provenances, and making facsimiles. The fascination with Wang Xizhi and the Lantingxu also helped create a lively market and encouraged the production of imitations, and even new works. Claims about authenticity, history, and aesthetics were often bitterly contested.

These activities and their byproducts—including the engraved blocks, rubbings, colophons, and connoisseurial manuals—made up an important part of visual and material culture in Song literati circles. Moreover, they were crucial in shaping the image of Wang Xizhi. An in-depth study is yet to be done on the reproductions of calligraphy and how they participated in the formation of the calligraphic canon during the Song period. This essay is an attempt to demonstrate some of the complexities.

This chapter starts with an examination of Epitaph for My Nursemaid (Baomuzhi 保母志; hereafter the Epitaph) (Figure 5.1), a piece of carved clay brick unearthed in 1202 and attributed to Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344-386), the
son of Wang Xizhi. The authenticity of the epitaph ignited debate upon its discovery, but it soon received support from most calligraphers and scholars of the thirteenth century. Bearing striking similarities to Lantingxu in its elegant calligraphy, the Epitaph was welcomed as a proof that the younger Wang carried on the family tradition. Furthermore, because the Epitaph was exhumed from the ground, it was considered more reliable and was praised as an ideal model for followers of the Two Wangs. Nevertheless, I argue in this essay that the Epitaph was a new work fabricated not long before its discovery. And the Song literati’s enthusiastic endorsement was possibly a sign of anxiety over the fact that, although Wang Xizhi and his son enjoyed high status, authentic works were scarce while distorted look-alikes were abundant. I then probe the creation and dissemination of Wang Xizhi’s Lantingxu, in the hope of illuminating Song literati’s concerns about the authentic style of Wang Xizhi and the burst of reproductions.¹

The Epitaph for My Nursemaid

In the spring of 1202, a woodsman Zhou 周 came upon Epitaph for My Nursemaid in the Kuaiji 会稽 mountains of Shaoxing 绍興, Zhejiang. It was a thin block of brick, carved on one side, dated 365, and dedicated to Li Yiru 李意如, “the nursemaid of Wang Xianzhi of Langye 郎耶王献之保母.” A small inkstone with the design of a meandering stream was unearthed from the same site. On the back of the inkstone was inscribed: “Xianzhi of the Jin [Dynasty] 晉獻之” and “Yonghe 永和,” an era name of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317-419). The Yonghe era corresponds to the period from 345 to 361, during which the “Two Wangs” were active in the Shaoxing area. Although the epitaph was unsigned, these clues hinted at the possibility that the master calligrapher Wang Xianzhi, the son of Xizhi, brushed the epitaph. Jiang Kui 姜夔 (1155-1221), a leading art critic and theorist in the Southern Song capital Lin’an 臨安 (modern Hangzhou 杭州), was presented with these exciting finds, which he detailed in a colophon written not long after their discovery (Figure 5.2):

¹ A few scholars have written about Epitaph for My Nursemaid, but almost all the inquiries ended with a statement that the epitaph was a forgery without delving further into the issue. For example, see Wang Lichun 王力春, “Cong jiancang shijiao kan Wang Xianzhi Baomuzhi zhi wei,” 82-85. Nomura, “So Tetsu no seibo nikansuru—kōsatsu—So Shoku ‘Hobo Yō shi boshimei’ to Ō Keshi ‘Seibo senshi’ wo megutte”; and Nomura, “Su Shi Baomu Yang shi mu-zhiming zhi mi,” 102-15.