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Originators: Transformation and Collaboration in the Production of Original Written Artefacts

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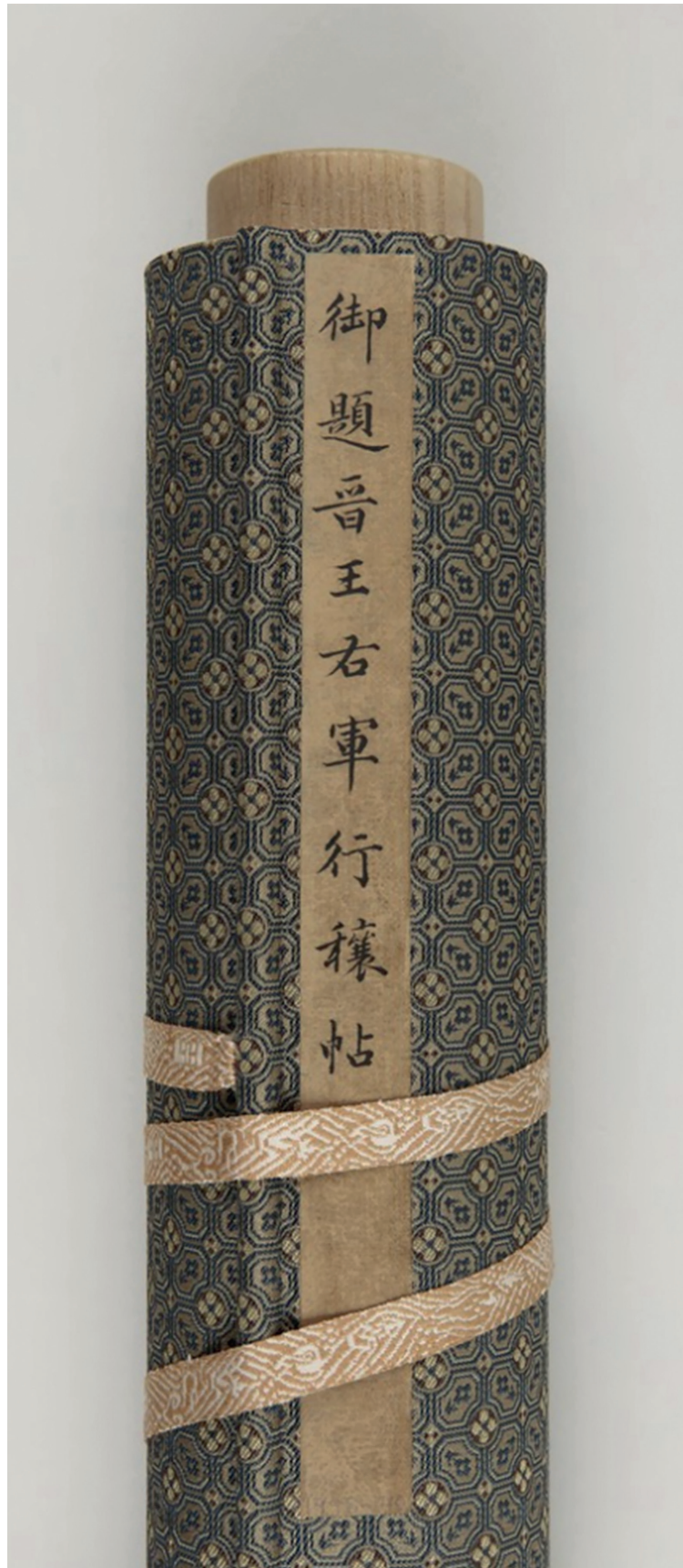


Fig. 1: Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), attr. *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest (Xingrang tie 行穰帖)*; undated, Tang tracing copy, letter fragment mounted as a handscroll, here in rolled-up form with outer title slip; Princeton University Art Museum, Object no. 35203.

Article

A Two-Line Letter Fragment and its many Originators

Uta Lauer | Hamburg

Introduction

A calligraphy handscroll, whose English title is *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* and belongs in the collection of the Princeton University Art Museum (Figs 1 and 2) is the subject of this article.¹ The aim of this paper is to identify, describe and interpret the different acts and stages by which originators of this written artefact created its status as an original. The term ‘original’ here denotes a manuscript with authoritative status. This definition, departing significantly from the traditional concept of ‘original’ as a piece of work, produced by an artist and not a copy, offers new insights into this well-studied scroll.

Sometime in the seventh or eighth century, these two columns (Fig. 3) of the letter were written with brush and ink on semi-transparent, waxed paper in the ‘outline tracing and filling-in’ technique. In this copying method, a specially prepared piece of paper is placed over a manuscript, then the outlines of each character are traced on the copy paper and finally, the details of the ink tonality are filled in with hundreds of hair fine brush strokes, invisible to the naked eye. The manuscript fragment on which this copy was based no longer exists.

From the ninth century onwards, this anonymous fragment had been associated with the name of China’s foremost calligrapher, Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361). Today, not a single character written personally by Wang Xizhi survives. The closest extant written artefacts conveying an idea of what his calligraphy had looked like, are a handful of these tracing copies. The Princeton scroll is the only one outside Asia. The study of this extremely rare and old manuscript is crucial to gain insight into the creation of a corpus attributed to this single most influential calligrapher in the history of

Chinese writing. This rare manuscript with good provenience has been discussed extensively from the eleventh century to the present.

Starting from the material form of the written artefact in its present stage, this article will closely examine the different acts committed by a number of originators in chronological sequence. Based on their interaction with this scroll, the following six categories of originators can be distinguished:

1. The copyist as originator.
2. The transcriber as originator.
3. The author as originator.
4. The colophon writer as originator.
5. The owner as originator.
6. The viewer as originator.

Some individuals acted in more than one capacity. A detailed analysis of this scroll clearly demonstrates how the interplay of different types of originators’ acts were essential in creating its status as an original. This case study shows the validity of the concept of originators as postulated in the introduction, pertaining to questions of material creation, creation of content, planning and conceiving the written artefact, enabling its production, authenticating the manuscript or the mere possession of this piece of calligraphy.

1. The copyist as originator

Judging from material evidence, it is clear that this written artefact, produced in the outline tracing and filling-in technique, is a copy based on an earlier piece of calligraphy. How this manuscript gained the status of an original, despite being a copy, is best illustrated by closely observing the acts and processes by which the originators advanced this highly desirable status through their contributions, the first, contradictory as it may sound, being the copyist.

¹ The translations of the inscriptions and texts have been provided by the author, unless otherwise stated.

Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), attr. *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* (*Xingrang tie* 行穰帖); undated, Tang tracing copy, letter fragment mounted as a handscroll, ink on *ying huang* (‘hardened yellow’) paper, letter fragment alone 24.4 × 8.9 cm, entire scroll 30.0 × 372.0 cm; Princeton University Art Museum. Link to the artefact on the museum’s website: <<https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/35203>>.

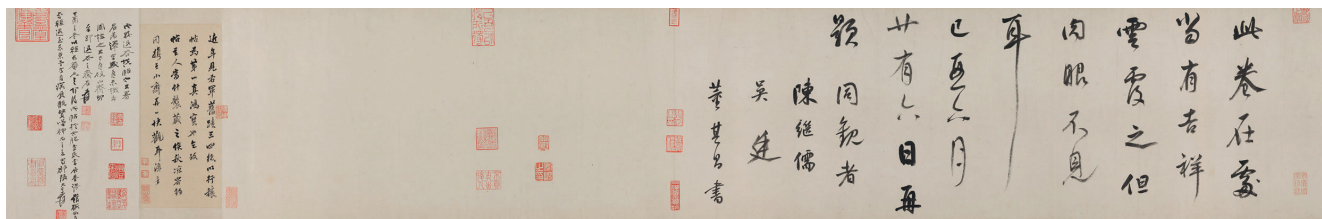


Fig. 2: Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361), attr. *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* (Xingrang tie 行穰帖); undated, Tang tracing copy, letter fragment mounted as a

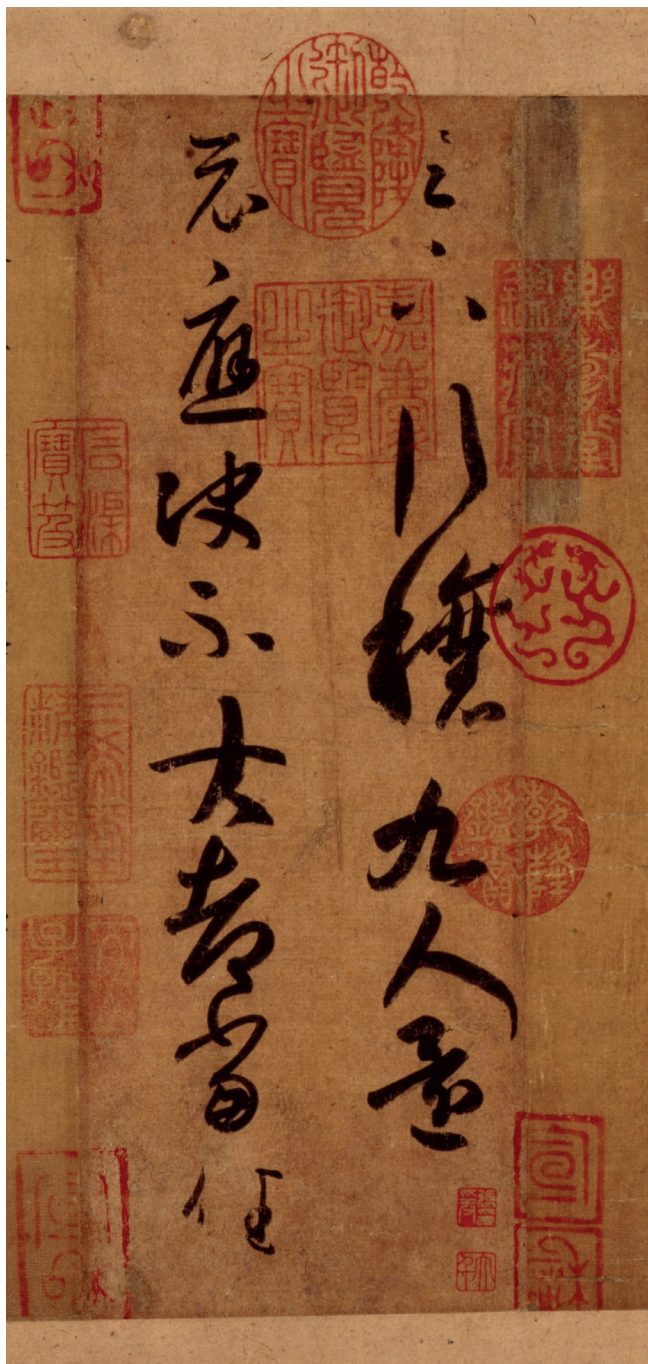


Fig. 3: *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, detail, two-line letter fragment.

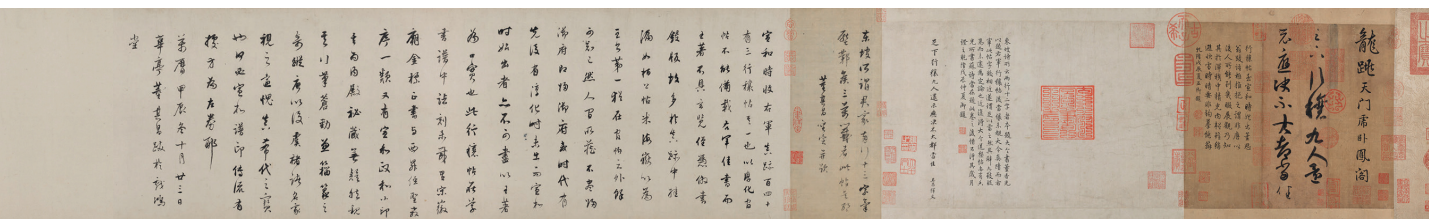
The early beginnings of this multi-layered artefact, *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, lie in the seventh or eighth century, when an anonymous scribe carefully placed a specially prepared sheet of paper² over a two-line fragment of calligraphy. He then traced the outlines of each underlying character with brush and black ink. After that, he filled in the shapes of the characters with very thin brush strokes, conveying the different ink tonalities. Finally, the finished copy was glued onto another piece of paper for better handling and storage. What this first mounting exactly looked like, whether it took the form of a handscroll or an album leaf, is not known.

The high quality of the writing reveals the hand of an extremely skilled scribe. The paper provided to create this copy was costly as was the process to dye it and smoothen it with wax. Taking these two factors into account, plus Emperor Tang Taizong's 唐太宗 (r. 626–649) well-known predilection for Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, it is likely that the copyist was a scribe employed at the imperial scriptorium.

The question whether this is a Tang dynasty (618–907) tracing copy or a genuine piece of writing by Wang Xizhi's own hand is raised on the scroll proper as well as in the writings of some who had the privilege to handle it. In his colophon dated 1604, the influential calligrapher, painter, and art historian Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636) recounts the history of the artefact, appraising *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* as *zhenji* 真跡 ('genuine trace'). Dong later reiterates his judgement of this two-line fragment being genuine in a separate colophon attached to a painting by Li Tang 李唐 (c. 1050 – c. 1130).³ In two instances on the Princeton scroll, Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1735–1796) also airs his conviction that this is a genuine piece from the brush of Wang

² The Chinese technical term for this type of paper is *yingshuang zhi* 硬黃紙 ('yellow hardened paper'). The yellow-coloured substance extracted from the bark of the Amur cork tree has an antimicrobial effect, thus preventing insects from harming the paper.

³ Li Tang, *Jiangshan xiao jing* 江山小景 ('Landscape'), handscroll, ink and colour on silk, 49.7 × 186.7 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei. Dong Qichang's colophon is dated 1623.



handscroll, ink on *ying huang* ('hardened yellow') paper, letter fragment alone 24.4 × 8.9 cm, entire scroll 30.0 × 372.0 cm; Princeton University Art Museum.

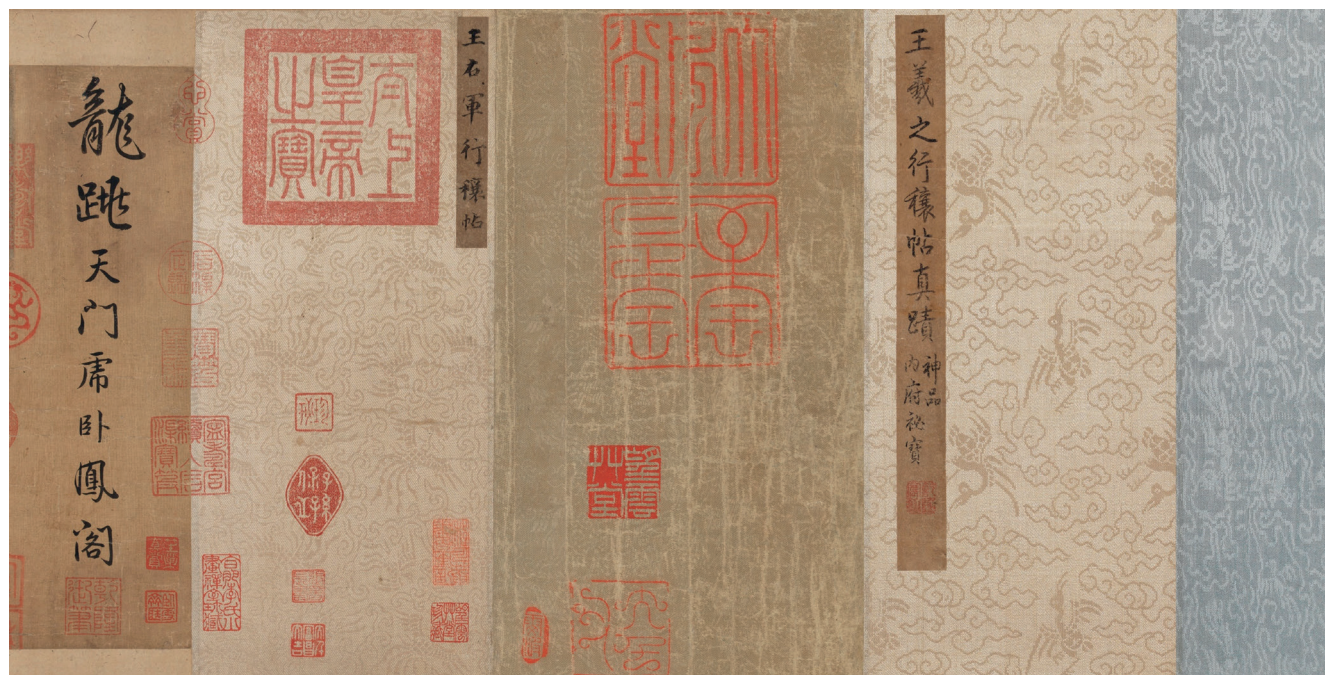


Fig. 4: *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, detail, beginning of the scroll with Emperor Qianlong's label.

Xizhi. He says so on the label (Fig. 4) as well as in his third colophon,⁴ dated 1748, both times employing the term *zhenji*.

The opposing camp included connoisseurs who identified *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* as a Tang dynasty tracing copy. In his collected writings, and commenting on paintings and calligraphies he had the good fortune to examine, Zhan Jingfeng 詹景鳳 (1532–1602) lists seven pieces of calligraphy by Wang Xizhi, among them the two-line fragment, describing them as *moji* 墨迹 ('ink traces') and *Tang mo* 唐摹 ('Tang copies').⁵

From Zhan Jingfeng, *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* entered the collection of the eminent art collector Han Shineng 韓世能 (1528–1598). His son, Han Fengxi 韓逢禧 (early 17th c.) entertained friendly social relations with the connoisseur Zhang Chou 張醜 (1577–1643). Owing to

this circumstance, Zhang Chou was able to see and closely study the scroll at the Han family mansion in Suzhou in 1616. He reiterates Zhan's point, further elucidating that this piece of calligraphy had been recorded in the Song dynasty (960–1279) catalogue of the imperial calligraphy collection *Xuanhe shupu* 宣和書譜, and continues:

[...] 唐人硬黃臨本 定非真迹 [...]⁶

[...] hard yellow (paper) copy by a Tang person, definitely not a genuine trace [...]

Two years later, in 1618, the art-loving assistant salt transport commissioner Wang Keyu 汪軻玉 (1587– after 1643) had the good fortune to view *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* while out on a pleasure cruise on board a boat with the then owner of the scroll, Zhou Minzhong 周敏仲 (fl. early 17th c.). Upon his return home, he noted:

⁴ In this colophon, Emperor Qianlong explicitly writes: '[...] 要非鈎摹能辦 [...]' *yao fei goumo neng ban* ('this is certainly not what a tracing copy can do').

⁵ Zhan 1591, 197.

⁶ Zhang 1763, vol. 2, 215b.

[...] 行穰帖止存二行約二十餘字在黃麻紙上 [...] ⁷

[...] *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* consists of only two columns of about twenty characters, written on yellow hemp paper [...]

Eventually, the scroll entered the collection of the wealthy second-generation salt merchant from Korea, An Qi 安岐 (c. 1683–after 1746), who had formed one of the very best private art collections in China. In his annotated catalogue of his collection, An Qi also identifies this scroll as a Tang copy, praising it as:

[...] 硬黃紙本草書兩行十五字唐模至精者 [...] ⁸

[...] Hard yellow paper, cursive script, two lines, fifteen characters, the finest Tang copy [...]

The term *Tang mo* 唐模 (‘Tang copy’) is basically synonymous with *Tang mo* 唐摹 written with a different character for *mo*, very close in meaning, namely ‘copy’. An Qi not only described the scroll’s material features in detail but also impressed eleven of his seals on the joints of the pieces of paper. From the position of these seals (Fig. 5), it is evident that An Qi further interfered with the scroll by remounting it.⁹

From its creation in the seventh or eighth century onwards, the debate on the two-line letter fragment *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* centered on the question of whether it is an original or a copy.

2. The transcriber as originator

Its transcription was the second important contribution to elevate *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* to the iconic status of an original by China’s calligrapher saint Wang Xizhi.

The two-line fragment is written in a cursive type of script that is notoriously difficult to decipher and defies an accurate reading of the text. A first attempt to transcribe the manuscript into legible, regular script was undertaken by

the renowned art historian, calligrapher and painter Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (fl. ninth-century CE).¹⁰ Three out of the altogether fifteen characters pose almost insurmountable problems in deciphering them. However, Zhang Yanyuan made a conscious choice in his reading of these characters, a choice with far reaching implications. The last character (Fig. 6) of *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, which Zhang transcribes as *ren* 任 (‘an official position’; ‘to put in office’; ‘to appoint’), is of particular interest.

This is especially noteworthy since Zhang Yanyuan not only transcribed the text of the two-line fragment but rendered a complete letter, consisting of thirty-two characters in total, into regular script. In Zhang’s transcription, the deciphering of the last character of the Princeton scroll as *ren* connects it very nicely to the second part of his transcription as far as grammar and contents are concerned. This fact strengthens Zhang’s argument that these two parts do indeed belong together and form a single manuscript.

Furthermore, the second part of Zhang’s transcription was signed Wang Xizhi. In putting the two parts together and publishing them as a complete letter, the hitherto anonymous two-line fragment suddenly had a name attached to it: that of the greatest Chinese calligraphers of all time. The two acts of transcribing the manuscript into regular script and forging it together into a more or less coherent letter with a signed part were certainly crucial in elevating *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* to the status of an original.

A second attempt to transcribe the two-line fragment into regular script was made by Dong Qichang. He wrote his transcription (Fig. 7) directly on the scroll, on the white sheet of paper bearing Emperor Huizong’s 徽宗 (1082–1135) large palace seal. He signed his transcription:

其昌釋文.

Transcription [by] Qichang.

Dong Qichang’s rendition differs from Zhang Yanyuan’s in four places, most importantly in the reading of the last character as *jia* 佳 (‘beautiful’, ‘good’, ‘auspicious’, ‘excellent’). As Kern has noted, ‘If the present Xingrangtie is read on its own, it may end with the character *jia* 佳, which appears some 180 times in Wang’s letters (Antje Richter, personal communication) [...]’¹¹

⁷ Wang 1643, vol. 1, 9b.

⁸ An 1724.

⁹ The subject of remounting certainly deserves a separate article. Suffice to mention here that after An Qi, Emperor Qianlong had the scroll remounted, making significant changes to the sequence of the sheets of paper. When the scroll came into the possession of Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983) in 1957, he also had it remounted. The last remounting was undertaken at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in the 1980s.

¹⁰ Zhang ninth century CE, vol. 10, 45b.

¹¹ Kern 2015, 135.

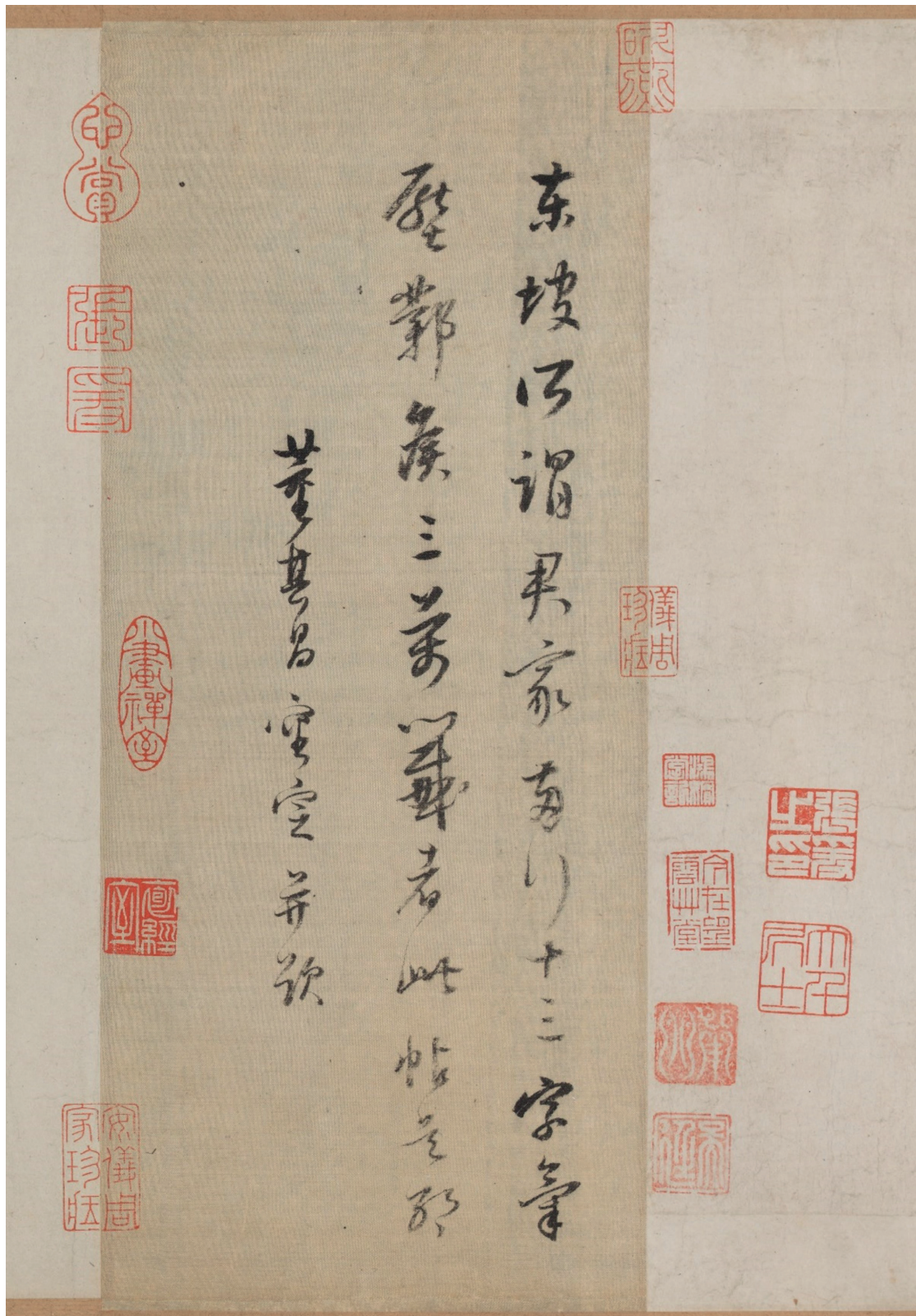


Fig. 5: *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, detail, seals by An Qi surrounding Dong Qichang's undated colophon.

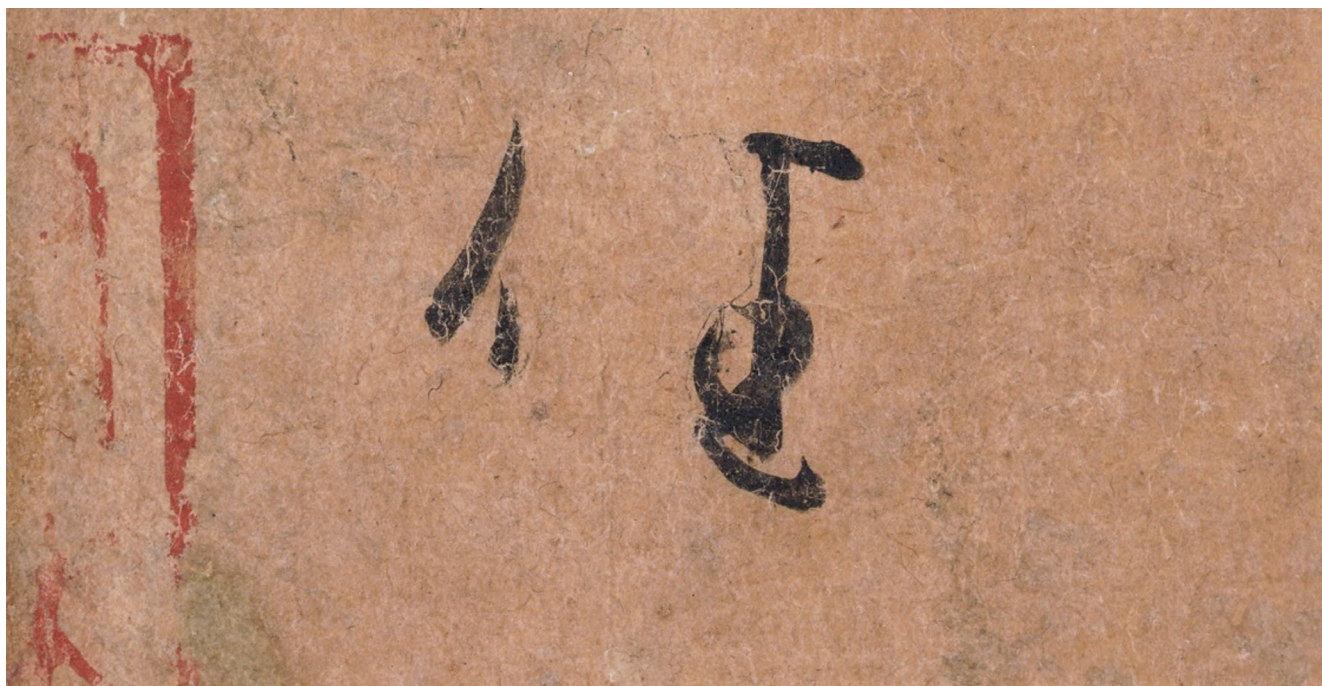


Fig. 6: *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, detail, final character of two-line letter fragment.

Such a reading, as postulated here by Dong Qichang, strengthens his conviction, as recorded in his colophon dated 1604 on the scroll, that *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* is indeed a genuine trace. In transcribing the cursive manuscript directly on the scroll with marked differences to Zhang Yanyuan's earlier reading, Dong deliberately made a case for *Ritual* to be an original letter. He was fully aware of Zhang's transcription and had even included a rubbing of the alleged second part of the letter¹² in his own collection of model calligraphies, the *Xihong tang fatie* 戲鴻堂法帖 ('Model Calligraphies from the Hall of Playing Geese'), published in 1603, a year before he wrote that colophon.

Ultimately, it does not matter which, or if any, of the two transcriptions is correct. In Zhang's case the two-line fragment was tied to the name of Wang Xizhi through the transcription and through proclaiming that it was the first part of a letter, signed after the second part of the letter, to belong together as one manuscript. Dong went a step further with his reading of the final character which led him to believe that *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* is indeed a handwritten original from Wang Xizhi's brush. Both transcribers acted as originators since their reading of the fragment makes a claim on this manuscript to be part of a letter (Zhang), or a self-contained letter (Dong) written by Wang Xizhi.

¹² The second part of the letter is called *Xuanliang tie* 懸量帖. As it no longer exists as a handwritten manuscript, only in reproductions in various forms, especially rubbings, it will be treated in this article only in passing.

3. The author as originator

There is nothing in *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* in its present form that ties it in any way to the elusive persona of Wang Xizhi, no names, no mention of places or anything concrete known about Wang Xizhi's biography.

Nevertheless, Wang Xizhi is hailed as the author of this two-line fragment, not only by the acts of transcription detailed above, but also through the frequent mention of his name or official rank in labels and colophons on the Princeton scroll.

The first visible trace on the scroll proper connecting the manuscript with Wang Xizhi is Emperor Huizong's label written in his typical slender gold style of calligraphy, reading 王羲之行穰帖 *Wang Xizhi xingrang tie* ('*Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* [by] Wang Xizhi'). The scroll was listed in Emperor Huizong's catalogue of his calligraphy collection, the 宣和書譜 *Xuanhe shupu* ('Notes on calligraphy from the Xuanhe reign') under the name of Wang Xizhi with its title, 行穰帖 *Xingrang tie*.

Then there was an almost five-hundred-year silence on the scroll proper, until Dong Qichang graced the scroll with a title slip, saying, '王右軍行穰帖' ('*Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* [by] Wang Commander-of-the-Right'). The military title Commander-of-the-Right was Wang Xizhi's official title. Dong Qichang writes in his colophon of 1604: '宣和時收右軍真跡百四十有三行穰帖其一也' ('*Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* is one of the Commander-of-the-Right's one



Fig. 7: *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, detail, Dong Qichang transcription at the far left.

hundered and fourty three genuine traces collected during the Xuanhe era'). The Xuanhe era (1119–1125) refers to Emperor Huizong's reign. The scroll is mentioned with its correct name. Dong Qichang only erred in the number of calligraphies by Wang Xizhi in Emperor Huizong's collection, which was two hundred and forty-three and not one hundered and fourty three.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the Beijing-based official Sun Chengze 孫承澤 (1592–1676) acquired the scroll, at a time, when after the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644, many works of art left the Jiangnan region in the South and were bought by Northerners. In his colophon (Fig. 8), now mounted towards the end of the scroll, he praises the work, exclaiming that, '近年見右軍舊迹三四紙以行穰帖爲第一真鴻寶也' ('Of the three or four [sheets] of paper with old traces by the Commader-of-the Right I have seen in recent years, *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* is the best, truly a great treasure!').

After passing through the collection of the discriminating and well-informed connoisseur An Qi, who had re-mounted the scroll and impressed many of his seals, but left no writing on the scroll proper, it entered the world's biggest art collection of the time, that of Emperor Qianlong.¹³ He not only reiterated Dong Qichang's earlier judgement that this is an original piece by Wang Xizhi, but also explicitly names Wang Xizhi as the author of this calligraphy. Emperor Qianlong does this very prominently on the title slip, saying, '王羲之行穰帖真跡神品內府秘寶' ('Wang Xizhi, *Ritual to Pray for Good*

Harvest, genuine trace, divine work, Inner Palace secret treasure'). And again, in his colophon dated 1748, written on the white Song dynasty paper directly after Emperor Huizong's large palace seal, Emperor Qianlong names Wang Xizhe as the author of the two-line fragment, stating, '[...] 右軍行穰帖... 右軍此帖 [...]' ('Commander-of-the-Right, *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*... this piece of calligraphy by the Commander-of-the-Right'). Other than directly referring to Wang Xizhi by his name or title, Emperor Qianlong also implicitly refers to him in his colophon written directly after the two-line fragment by discussing the piece with regard to another well-known calligraphy by Wang, namely *Timely Clearing after Snowfall*.¹⁴ By doing so, Emperor Qianlong elevated the anonymous fragment *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* to the status of an original written by the hand of Wang Xizhi, on the same level with *Timely Clearing after Snowfall*, which was one of Emperor Qianlong's most highly venerated works of calligraphy in his art collection. This ranking of *Ritual* right after *Timely Clearing after Snowfall*, which Emperor Qianlong proclaimed to be '天下法書第一 王家法書第一' ('The best calligraphy in the world; the best calligraphy of the Wang family'), was also reflected in its inclusion in the first volume of the collection of rubbings *Rubbings from the Hall of Three Rarities*. This compendium of rubbings was commissioned by Emperor Qianlong in

¹³ Liu, 2008, 302–303.

¹⁴ Wang Xizhi. Kuai xue shi qing tie 快雪時晴帖 *Timely Clearing after Snowfall*, album leaf, ink on paper, 23.0 × 14.8 cm, National Palace Museum Taipei. This calligraphy is also a Tang dynasty tracing copy, but unlike *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, the text of this letter fragment does contain Wang Xizhi's name.



Fig. 8: *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, detail, Sun Chengze colophon to the right.

1747, containing altogether three hundred and forty works of calligraphy from the Imperial collection. Here, *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* was reproduced in the first section dedicated to works of calligraphy by Wang Xizhi under the heading, ‘晉 王羲之書’ (‘Calligraphy of Wang Xizhi of the Jin [dynasty]’), again clearly naming Wang Xizhi as author and originator of this anonymous two-line letter fragment.

Based on the material form of the scroll and the different acts and stages by which originators helped to create the status of an original, the purported author, Wang Xizhi, enters the scene only after the copyist had done his part as originator of the fragment and after the transcribers as originators had attached this short manuscript to the name of the famous calligrapher. Whether Wang ever authored this text will never be known.

4. The colophon writer as originator

On the scroll *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, there are three handwritten labels and altogether nine colophons. The sequence of both the labels and the colophons is not in chronological order. This fact is nothing unusual. On the contrary, it can be observed that on almost all Chinese calligraphy scrolls, colophon writers vied to place their inscription as close as possible to the written artefact. This lends prestige to the colophon writer and reflected his social standing. Colophon writers were and are an important type of originator because their writing directly on the artefact as to its aesthetic form, placing and contents had a strong impact on the manuscript’s status as an authentic piece of calligraphy.

The three labels were written by Emperor Huizong, by Dong Qichang and by Emperor Qianlong. They all state Wang Xizhi as the originator of this two-line letter fragment and provide its title.

Emperor Huizong's label, now barely visible with the naked eye, is written on a greyish coloured slip of paper in faint gold characters. The label is pasted on the seam between the two-line fragment and the adjoining dark piece of paper to its right.

Dong Qichang's label written in crisp regular script is now glued on to the piece of silk to the right of the central part of the scroll. Originally, this label was on the outside of the scroll but was carefully cut off and pasted in its current position during remounting in Emperor Qianlong's time, thus preserving and protecting an important piece of historical evidence concerning the provenience of the scroll.

The last label in chronological sequence is that by Emperor Qianlong, written in semi-cursive script. Prominently placed at the beginning of the scroll, this label is the very first writing the viewer of the scroll will encounter when opening the scroll. Interestingly, the placement of Emperor Qianlong's title slip in this exalted position was not of his own doing but was the result of the re-mounting by the Metropolitan Museum in the 1980s. According to evidence seen by Kern¹⁵, the label was originally pasted on the first piece of dark paper, now dominated by the seals of twentieth century collectors. In other words, prior to the application of these seals, Emperor Qianlong's label would still have occupied the prime position on the scroll, as it does now after its last re-mounting.¹⁶

On the scroll in its current form, there is an outer title label, saying '御題晉王右軍行穰帖' ('Imperially inscribed *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* [by the] Jin [dynasty] Commander-of-the Right, Wang'). It is not exactly known when this label was written, but Kern¹⁷ suggests it might have been produced during the Jiaqing era (1796–1820) because of the presence of a seal (Fig. 9) by Emperor Jiaqing on the scroll. This big, square relief seal is imprinted directly on the two-line fragment, touching, and partly covering several of the written characters. Other than this boldly placed seal, Emperor Jiaqing left no inscriptions on the scroll.

There are nine colophons on *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, three by Dong Qichang, one by Sun Chengze, three by Emperor Qianlong and two by Zhang Daqian. As previously noted, they are not arranged in chronological

sequence from right to left. Here, the colophons will be discussed in chronological order with due mention of their physical position on the scroll and their contents, and what both factors contribute to the status of the scroll as an original.

Dong Qichang's first undated colophon is written on a piece of silk, following directly after the white Song dynasty paper with Emperor Huizong's large palace seal. Though undated, circumstantial evidence indicates, as Harrist¹⁸ convincingly argues, that Dong had purchased the scroll at a date between late 1603 and winter 1604. In his colophon, Dong Qichang evokes the name of the great poet, calligrapher and painter Su Dongpo 蘇東坡 (1037–1101), who in his time had inscribed a short piece of calligraphy by Wang Xizhi's son, Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344–386), with the same words Dong now quotes in his colophon. In doing so, Dong Qichang not only displayed his erudition and profound knowledge of the history of calligraphy but also inscribed himself in the illustrious lineage of famous cultural figures, whose contributions were essential in establishing the canon of the Two Wangs 二王 (Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi). The colophon is signed '董其昌審定并題' ('Dong Qichang, examined and approved, appended colophon'). The expression *shen ding* 審定 ('to examine and approve') used in this context is a very formal wording, underlining Dong Qichang's belief that this piece of calligraphy is an authentic, genuine work.

The second and longest of Dong Qichang's colophons is dated to the winter of 1604. Recording the history and provenience of the scroll and appraising it as a *genuine trace*, he then signs it '華亭董其昌跋於戲鴻堂' ('Dong Qichang from Huating wrote this colophon at the Playing Geese Hall.') Playing Geese Hall was the name of Dong Qichang's studio. It was in the intimacy of his studio, where he, surrounded by his art collection and books, wrote this colophon. One can well imagine Dong thoroughly examining his newly acquired treasure, identifying earlier seals and writing on the scroll, comparing them with other artefacts in his collection and consulting books in his library. His colophon is written in small, semi-cursive script, perfectly suitable for the occasion. This type of script augments a feeling of concentrated study and scholarly seclusion in emerging himself into the history of this most significant manuscript.

¹⁵ Kern 2015, 135.

¹⁶ I would like to take this opportunity to thank Zoe Kwok, Nancy and Peter Lee, associate curator of Asian Art at the Princeton University Art Museum, for her efforts to locate and share the original restoration report at the Metropolitan Museum, New York. At the time of finishing this article, the restoration report was not yet available to me.

¹⁷ Kern 2015, 119.

¹⁸ Harrist 1999, 253, 258.



Fig. 9: *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, detail, seal of Emperor Jiaqing to the top left.

In marked contrast, Dong Qichang's last colophon, dated 1609, is written in large semi-cursive script, an exquisite piece of calligraphy in itself. The writing is modelled on Wang Xizhi's, flamboyantly showing off Dong's mastery of Wang's style. Indeed, this colophon was written as a performance when Dong was viewing the scroll together with his childhood friend, Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639), and the wealthy and astute art collector Wu Ting 吳廷 (c. 1555–after 1626) on a fine summer day. Chen Jiru left no trace on the scroll, except that Dong mentioned his presence during the joint viewing. Wu Ting did not write anything on the scroll proper, but he impressed two of his square intaglio seals on the white Song dynasty paper, right after Dong Qichang's transcription of the text of the two-line letter fragment. In viewing the scroll together and through Dong Qichang writing a colophon to confirm this, all three gentlemen played an active part as originators.

After Dong Qichang had owned and inscribed *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, the scroll changed hands several times, until it finally left the Jiangnan region of China and was purchased by an official in the capital named Sun Chengze. Sun had served in high government positions in the late Ming dynasty. After the fall of the Ming dynasty and three failed suicide attempts to demonstrate his loyalty to the Ming house, he reluctantly followed summons to the Qing court where he served in various capacities. At the earliest available opportunity, Sun Chengze withdrew into private life as a recluse, writing books on history and devoting his time to his art collection. He was especially interested in the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi. From his undated colophon on *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, it is clear that, in one year, he had chanced to see three to four pieces of calligraphy by Wang Xizhi, quite a rare feat in the seventeenth century. Beyond writing this colophon on the scroll, Sun Chengze was actively engaged as originator in different capacities. A Song dynasty rubbing of a model letter compendium¹⁹ of the works by Wang Xizhi²⁰, which is now in the Palace Museum in Beijing, was once owned by Sun Chengze; his seals and inscriptions in this album attest to this. This compendium of rubbings is extremely rare. The original stones have long been lost. No complete set of rubbings has survived the times. The leaves in Sun Chengze's set are the most comprehensive handed down to the present. They represent a most important

source for the study of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, and this was material at hand, available to Sun, assisting him enormously in research.

In chronological order, the next traces of writing on *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* are the three colophons by Emperor Qianlong. The first colophon consisting of one column written in large semi-cursive script is placed on the dark brown paper immediately to the right of the two-line fragment. It reads '龍跳天門虎臥鳳閣' ('A dragon leaping at the Gate of Heaven, a tiger crouching at the Phoenix Tower'). This phrase is a quote which the Liang Emperor Wu 梁武帝 (502–549) had coined more than a thousand years earlier in praise of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy. As a study by He Chuanxin²¹ has revealed, Emperor Qianlong applied this phrase to several other calligraphies by Wang Xizhi in his possession, singling them out as the foremost and very best written artefacts in his collection. Furthermore, as this description of Wang's calligraphy had been applied to his works as early as the sixth century, this strengthened Emperor Qianlong's claim of a valid, historical connection with these priceless works of art.

In his second colophon, dated summer of the year 1748, Emperor Qianlong, like Dong Qichang before him, refers to the provenience of the scroll, including Dong's evaluation of it, and then proceeds to favourably compare it to another work by Wang Xizhi in his collection, namely *Timely Clearing after Snowfall*, pronouncing both to be *genuine traces*.

After bracketing the two-line fragment with his powerful inscriptions and slightly later in the summer of the same year 1748, Emperor Qianlong once again wrote a colophon on the scroll. This time, he wrote in the space of the white Song dynasty paper directly after Emperor Huizong's large palace seal and before Dong Qichang's transcription of the text of *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*. Emperor Qianlong's three colophons are the ones written closest to the two-line fragment, thus visibly cementing his authoritative role as originator.

The last written traces of a brush on *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* are the two colophons by Zhang Daqian, written on a separate white sheet of paper after Sun Chengze's colophon from the eighteenth century. In his first colophon, Zhang Daqian notes that Sun Tuigu (one of Sun Chengze's sobriquets acquired later in life) had spoken of

¹⁹ For a detailed study on 'model letters' see McNair 1994.

²⁰ *Chengqing tang tie* 澄清堂帖, album of 82 leaves, ink rubbing on paper, 26.5 × 13.4 cm each, Song dynasty, Palace Museum, Beijing.

²¹ He 2010, 5, 17, 39, 40.

this manuscript, but there is a problem with the name given in the signature as Zeyan 澤言. Sun Chengze was not known under this name. However, the seal below this strange signature is a genuine seal bearing Sun Chengze's studio name, 硯山齋 Yanshan zhai ('Inkstone Mountain Studio'). Zhang Daqian just states the fact of this observation but draws no conclusion.

In his second colophon, Zhang provides the date, 1957, when he bought the scroll from the Li family in Hong Kong. Zhang himself was living in Japan at the time and had the scroll delivered to him in Tokyo by his close friend, the photographer Gao Lingmei 高嶺梅 (1913–1993). With this colophon, Zhang Daqian literally inscribes himself and his friend into the history of *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, as an originator, who played an active role in the scroll's life. In 1962, Zhang Daqian apparently had a limited number of facsimile prints made of the scroll in a studio in Kyoto, which he liked to give away as gifts to his friends.

5. The owner as originator

After having presented colophon writers as originators who left writing on the *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* scroll, only owners who left no writing on the artefact proper but imprinted their seals will be considered here.

The presence of numerous seals points to collectors who owned the scroll, impressed one or more seals, and, in most cases, recorded their experience of handling and owning the scroll elsewhere in their writings, be it catalogues, letters or personal notes. Owners who had inscribed the scroll and of course impressed it with their seals will not be discussed here since this has been done in detail elsewhere, namely by Yang (2008) and Kern (2015). It must also be emphasized that the positioning of seals is significant. The exact location of where a seal or a set of seals is impressed, reflects different intentions by the originator. They range from a mere statement of ownership to documenting the sequence of the sheets of paper and silk slips as they were at the time when the seals were applied on the joints of two sheets of paper. Like the sequence of colophons, the sequence of seals does not reflect chronological order.

Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest was once part of Wu Ting's formidable art collection, along with other famous works of calligraphy by Wang Xizhi, Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (709–785) and Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107). All these outstanding artefacts eventually entered the Qing imperial collection and are now in major museums. Wu Ting

impressed two of his personal seals on this scroll. Both are square intaglio seals, placed in the bottom left corner of the white sheet of Song paper, directly after Dong Qichang's transcription. Apart from Emperors, it was common practice that earlier owners impressed their seals in one of the two lower corners of a manuscript, leaving space above for the seals of later collectors. Wu Ting was part of the coterie surrounding Dong Qichang. From Dong's colophon dated 1609, it is evident that Wu, together with his friend Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru, had viewed *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* in the early summer of that year. Wu Ting was so taken by the scroll that he included it in his collection of model calligraphies, the *Yuqing zhai fatie* 餘清齋法帖 ('Model Letters of the Remaining Purity Studio'),²² carved into stone between the years 1596 and 1614. For this big project, Wu Ting engaged the poet, calligrapher and painter Yang Mingshi 楊明時 (deceased 1643) to copy the written artefacts from his collection in the double-outline method. These carefully rendered copies were then pasted on to the polished face of a stone to be carved. From these engraved renditions²³, an almost infinite number of rubbings on paper could be taken, helping immensely to spread knowledge about the actual visual appearance of a work of calligraphy. The two seals by Wu Ting on *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* led the inquisitive scholar to browse his model letter compendium for this manuscript and thus gain an idea, what the scroll's appearance was at the beginning of the seventeenth century. After having viewed *Ritual*, later acquiring it, then imprinting his two seals and including it in his model letter compendium, Wu Ting certainly played an important role as an owner and originator of this scroll.

The scroll changed hands several times after it was in the possession of Wu Ting before entering the collection of An Qi. As the collectors who owned the scroll between Wu Ting and An Qi left no visible traces in the form of colophons or seals, they will be introduced separately in the next section (i.e. The Viewer as Originator). The next owner who imprinted a total of eleven seals on *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* was the wealthy art collector An Qi. When

²² Wu Ting chose to name his studio *Remaining Purity Studio*, because one of his most treasured artefacts was a painting with the title, *Picture of Remaining Purity* by Wang Meng 王蒙 (c. 1308–1385), dated 1382. This hanging scroll is still extant and now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Wang Meng, *Picture of Remaining Purity* 有餘清圖, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 76.6 × 44.0 cm, dated 1382, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

²³ The original stones are still extant and today housed in the Shexian Museum 歙縣博物館 in Huangshan city.

An Qi owned the scroll, he had it re-mounted. From the position of his seals, which as a rule he always impressed on the joints of two sheets of paper or a piece of silk, it can be concluded that he added a white empty sheet of paper after Dong Qichang's 1609 colophon. At the same time, An Qi cut off Sun Chenze's colophon and glued it at the end of the scroll. This interference with *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* is obvious from the position of two of his seals, most notably one square intaglio seal at the lower right corner of the blank paper and another square intaglio seal at the joint of the empty paper and Sun Chengze's colophon following it. Other than providing a glimpse at An Qi's re-mounting of the scroll, unveiling the changes he introduced to the artefact, the presence of his personal seals also indicates that *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* was included in the catalogue of his art collection, *Moyuan huiguan* 墨緣匯觀, preface dated 1742. The catalogue entry first offers a material description of the scroll and then proceeds to transcribe the text of the colophons and seals.

In 1860, when British and French troops had plundered and burnt the Emperor's Summer Palace during the Second Opium War, many works of art from the imperial collection were among the looted booty and re-entered the art market. At the time, *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* was acquired by the youngest son of the renowned poet Zeng Ao 曾燠 (1759–1830), Zeng Xiejun 曾協均 (b. 1821). He imprinted two square seals on the scroll, one intaglio above, one relief below, both in the bottom right corner on the dark paper with Emperor Qianlong's inscription to the right of the two-line letter fragment. In his notes of the summer of 1862, Zeng Xiejun mentions *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, quoting An Qi, who had declared that the manuscript was a Tang copy. In reiterating An Qi's view, Zeng Xiejun upholds the high status assigned to this manuscript, because it was based directly on the original and because of its great antiquity.

After Zeng Xiejun, one of the sons of the powerful official Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901), Li Jingmai 李經邁 (1876–1940), bought the scroll. Li Jingmai named his studio Wangyun caotang 望雲草堂 ('Thatched Cottage of Gazing at Clouds') and had several seals carved containing this name. On *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, he impressed eleven seals, mainly at the beginning and at the end of the scroll. After Li Jingmai had passed away, his son Li Guozhao (dates unknown) sold the family property in Shanghai and moved to the British-ruled territory of Hong Kong. He could not take all the family's possessions with him, so he left several

thousand books behind, donating them to Fudan University library. However, Li Guozhao at the time did not part with the precious calligraphies and paintings. He kept them in his possession until 1957, when he sold *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* to Zhang Daqian.

The highest number of seals imprinted on the scroll are the twenty-seven seals by Zhang Daqian. He even surpassed Emperor Qianlong with a relatively moderate nineteen seals. Zhang's seals are mainly at the beginning and end of the scroll. Emperor Qianlong's seals crowd around the two-line letter fragment and are even imprinted on the actual manuscript. Zhang Daqian's wife, Xu Wenbo 徐雯波 (b. 1927), is among those who did not write a colophon but only put their seals on the scroll. She left three seals and is the only female originator leaving her traces on *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*. One oblong relief seal is placed in the bottom left corner of the brownish paper pasted between Emperor Qianlong's and Dong Qichang's title slips at the opening of the scroll, a very prominent position indeed (Fig. 4).

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed and complete analysis of all ninety-one seals on *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*. Here, the general principles which apply to the placing of seals and the different strategies originators chose have been outlined. A future study of the seals regarding the concept of originator and examining questions relating to the position of a seal and how it enhances the written artefact's overall status as an original will offer new insights into this old, much discussed manuscript.

6. The viewer as originator

Viewers in this context are understood as people who physically handled *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* but left no visible traces on the scroll. They wrote down their experience of encountering the artefact, often supplying detailed descriptions of the scroll's material condition. Comparing the information provided in such texts to the material condition of the written artefact at present, helps to detect changes made to the manuscript; for example, through trimming, cutting off sections and re-mounting.

As *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* is a famous and much sought-after piece of calligraphy, a multitude of viewers took great pride in having the privilege to handle this scroll and announced this to the world in their writings.

The art collector and official Wang Keyu never owned *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, but he viewed the scroll in

the year 1618 and recorded this in his book on calligraphies and paintings, the *Shanhuwang* 珊瑚網 ('coral net').²⁴ The book, completed in 1643, consists of forty-eight fascicles, the first half is about calligraphy and the second about painting. Wang Keyu's entry on *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* is to be found in the first fascicle, very close to the beginning.

Going through Wang Keyu's text step by step with the concept of originator in mind is most revealing. His entry in *Shanhuwang* bears the title 二王行穰中秋兩帖 (*Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest and Mid-Autumn*)²⁵, by the Two Wang). Wang Keyu thus introduces two anonymous letter fragments as the works by father and son, Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi. In his opening line, he gives the year 1618 as the date when he saw the two written artefacts. He then informs his readers that the two works of calligraphy at that time were owned by Zhou Minzhong from Wujiang 吳江. Wujiang is an area within the city of Suzhou in Southern China. Zhou Minzhong left no traces on the scroll. If records such as Wang Keyu's did not exist, one would not know that Zhou owned the scroll and showed it to his friends. He did the latter on this fine day, showing the two works of calligraphy to Wang Keyu while on a pleasure boat cruise. This is not such an odd setting for viewing calligraphies as one might think. In fact, it was quite common practice among the literati gentry in the Jiangnan region (South of the Yangzi River) to take artefacts on boat trips.

After naming Wang Xizhi by his title, Commander-of-the-Right, as author of *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest*, he speaks of the two-line fragment as containing twenty characters. Today, the manuscript only has fifteen characters. When and why did this loss happen? The answer to this question would certainly shed some new light on the scroll's history. Reading on Wang Keyu's text, he then confirms that the two-line fragment was written on yellow hemp paper. This material description matches the scroll as we see it today. When Wang Keyu saw the piece of calligraphy it still bore the customary two-character numbering from Xiang Yuanbian's 項元汴 (1525–1590) collection. Today, there are no traces by Xiang Yuanbian left on the scroll. When a calligraphy or a painting came into his possession, Xiang would mark it with two characters taken from the *Thousand Character Classic*. This numbering system made it easier for

him to keep order and to find scrolls more quickly. Xiang Yuanbian usually wrote two characters in an inconspicuous place, in a corner at the opening of a handscroll. It is not clear when the two characters still present on the scroll in 1618 disappeared. Wang Keyu's word can be trusted on this matter. His father had been a close friend of Xiang Yuanbian and several pieces in the Wang family art collection had come through the collection of Xiang Yuanbian. After praising the quality of the calligraphy of *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* and *Mid-Autumn*, Wang Keyu ends his remarks on this scroll with a quote from Dong Qichang's colophon of 1609. It should be noted that Wang's transcription differs from the reading proposed by Yang (2008)²⁶ and Kern (2015)²⁷, especially at the beginning. Whether this is actually a misreading by Wang Keyu or due to printing mistakes in editions of his book cannot be ascertained here. After briefly touching upon Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy *Mid-Autumn*, he concludes the entry with another quote from Dong Qichang's undated colophon. Again, his transcription differs from that of Yang²⁸ and Kern²⁹. From the facts Wang Keyu relates about the scroll *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* it seems that he is writing about the same artefact, now at the Princeton University Art Museum, and not some other version of it.

Viewers were important originators because they published their experience of viewing and handling the scroll, often adding their own opinion on the authenticity of an artefact. These texts, describing first-hand encounters with a manuscript were widely read by the multitude of art aficionados who were not in a privileged enough position to see the real thing. Such texts had a strong impact on their readers, shaping their ideas about the authenticity of an artefact.

7. Conclusion

According to the concepts, definitions and methodologies developed in research field C 'Creating Originals' at the Cluster of Excellence *Understanding Written Artefacts* at Hamburg University, *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* is an original. It is a handwritten manuscript and as such treated as an original. This new approach liberates the discussion about ancient works of calligraphy from traditional notions

²⁴ Wang Keyu 汪珂玉 1643.

²⁵ Wang Xianzhi, *Mid-Autumn* 中秋帖, handscroll, ink on paper, 27.0 × 11.9 cm (three-line fragment only, not overall scroll), The Palace Museum, Beijing.

²⁶ Yang 2008, 13.

²⁷ Kern 2015, 127.

²⁸ Yang 2008, 13.

²⁹ Kern 2015, 127.

defining an original as a written artefact by the hand of a master. It is a fact that the anonymous two-line letter fragment of *Ritual to Pray for Good Harvest* is a Tang dynasty tracing-copy. Yet, throughout the ages, it has been venerated as an original associated with the name of Wang Xizhi. Through a close study of the acts the different originators committed to establish the scroll's status of an original, it is now possible to elucidate why and how the copy of an anonymous manuscript fragment came to be regarded as a masterpiece of calligraphy inextricably linked to the calligrapher sage Wang Xizhi.

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