

A Fine Forgery: The Yellow Court Classic Revisited

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Abstract: Questions arising from the authorship of the Yellow Court Classic have confronted art historians since the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127): who produced it; what is the authentic work of Wang Xizhi (303-361); what are the forgeries? With a focus on the so-called Xin Tai Ping version, once collected by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322) and now held by the Gotoh Museum in Tokyo, this paper argues that it is a fine forgery among the multiple versions of the *Yellow Court Classic*. Through a close reading of the colophons, I attempt to map out the collecting history of the XTP version and why it was prized by connoisseurs over the centuries. I then compare it with the other two versions and Zhou You's (151-230) work, primarily in terms of calligraphic style, to further demonstrate why the XTP version is the best and the closest version to the work of Wang Xizhi.

Keywords: The Yellow Court Classic, Wang Xizhi, calligraphy style, forgery

1. Introduction

In the *History of Calligraphy* (Shushi), the Northern Song (960-1127) artist and connoisseur Mi Fu (1051-1007) recorded, "Feng Jing's (1021-1094) collection of the Yellow Court Classic is a kind of fine forgery in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), which has the characteristics of Zhong You's (151-230) brushwork, followed by Chu Suiliang's (596-659) signature [1]." The "fine forgery" mentioned by Mi Fu is a rubbing of calligraphy that has been engraved based on old master's work. These forgeries were made for academic or political purposes, and attempted to preserve the original appearance of the masterpiece. Additionally, "fine forgery" has another layer of meaning, which denotes a good imitation of a masterpiece. Different from what Mi Fu mentioned, this kind of forgeries was produced for profits [2]¹. In order to increase sales, counterfeiters imitate objects not only limited to ancient masterpieces, but also works of contemporary artists, even adding their own styles to the master's creation.

During the early Northern Song Dynasty, Emperor Taizong (939-997) commissioned Wang Zhu (928-969) to make a rubbing of engraved calligraphy named *Chunhua Getie*, which sparked a wave of engraving calligraphy on blocks fever [3,4]². Most of the rubbings of Yellow Court Classic were

¹ This is further demonstrated in a recent special exhibition held by the National Palace Museum.

² "In the third year of Chunhua, Emperor Taizong of the Song Dynasty took out the authentic works of famous artists from his interior, and ordered Wang Zhu to carved them onto a jujube wood board." And "after that, people have followed the footsteps of Emperor Taizong, making their own wood board, thus developing a carved post trend in the court and field."

made during this period. *The Yellow Court Classic* is said to be authored by Laozi (active in 8th BEC), which is a monograph on Taoist health and immortality cultivation [5]. The *Yellow Court Classic* comprises two parts, the "huangting neijing jing" (External Scenery Scripture) and the "huangting waijing jing" (Internal Scenery Scripture). The rubbings of *the Yellow Court Classic* from Wang Xizhi's (303-361) manuscript belong to the External Scenery Scripture. Due to the trend of engraving calligraphy on blocks during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), many different versions of *the Yellow Court Classic* appear, all claiming to be copied after Wang Xizhi's original version. As a result, multiple versions of *the Yellow Court Classic* rubbing survive today are problematic. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the extant versions for our study.

Previous scholarship on *the Yellow Court Classic* has primarily taken into account five perspectives: a certain version's circulation, calligraphic characteristics, the influence of the work, comparative studies, and imitation of famous artists. Almost all studies are based on the assumption that Wang Xizhi wrote *the Yellow Court Classic*. However, during the Northern Song Dynasty, while *the Yellow Court Classic* was most widespread, some scholars suggested that it was not written by Wang Xizhi [6]³. There are no authentic works of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy in circulation, only imitations and engravings by famous artists are available. We do not know the original appearance of Wang Xizhi's regular script (kaishu). Moreover, since the rubbings were copied by the imitators and then engraved on blocks or stones, it is difficult to say how much of Wang Xizhi's original style has been preserved.

This essay aims to demonstrate *the Xin Tai Ping version of the Yellow Court Classic* (hereafter the XTP version) is the best among the many versions, and is the closest to the calligraphic style of the Wei-Jin periods (220-420). I will start with sorting out the multiple versions of *the Yellow Court Classic* that survive today, all of which claim to copy after Wang Xizhi's original but were made of different materials, collected by different collectors, written in different styles and by different imitators. Next, I will discuss the colophons on the XTP version, demonstrating why connoisseurs from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1664) to the early 20th century considered it to be the best. Furthermore, I will choose Zhong You's work *Xuan Shi Biao* and two other different versions of the Yellow Court Classic to compare with *the XTP version*, in order to support the viewpoint of the colophons.

2. The Yellow Court Classic and Related Studies

Generally speaking, there are two common ways to classify *the Yellow Court Classic*, one is based on the number of characters in the first two sentences, and another is based on the brushwork [7]. In addition, some scholars made a more detailed classification based on different collectors, imitators, and topiary versions [8].

In their essay, Zhao Guangqing and Zhao Hui classified the extant Yellow Court Classic into nine versions: *the Yuezhou shishi version*, *Shuihen system*, *Xu sanxitang fatie version*, *Yulin moji version*, *Xintai Ping version collected by Zhao Mengfu*, *Yuqingzhai version*, *Yingshang jingdi vesion*, *Yuanyou mige xutie version*, and *Yijinzhai version* (also called *Song Gaozong lin version*). It also can be further subdivided under different systems according to various collectors' editions.

These classification methods leave some problems. For example, Zhang classified the XTP version into eight-character versions, based on the number of characters in the first two sentences [7]. However, it is easy to get confused when comparing the content from the later texts. Zhao, on the

³ For example, scholars such as Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) argued "It is said that the Yellow Court Classic was written by Wang Xi. This is a good piece of calligraphy, but it is not Wang Xizhi's style of brushwork." see Ouyang Xiu, *Jigulu Bawei*, Xing Su Cao Tang version, 1887. Huang Bosi (1079-1118) argued "Wang Xizhi died in 361 AD, and the Yellow Court Classic started to appear in 364 AD, so it is concluded that it was written by the people of Qi Dynasty(479-502) after 364 AD."

other hand, contended that the *Mochitang version* collected by Zhang Zao (1918-1941) belong to the shuihen version, and was later grouped with the *Yuanyou mige xutie version* as the same category [8].

It can be seen above that the rubbing system of the Yellow Court Classic is very complicated, and it is difficult to identify each category specifically that contains several collectors. In the colophons of the *XTP version*, many connoisseurs have mentioned that it is the best version they have ever seen among the various rubbings. In the following section, I will read the colophons to analyze from which aspects the *XTP version* was considered to be the best.

3. Reading the Colophons

There are in total 23 colophons on the *XTP version*, inscribed by connoisseurs such as Fang Congyi (ca.1302-1393) from the Ming dynasty to Hu Bicheng (active in early 20th century). Among them, nineteen preserved the detailed comment on the calligraphy style. Some described the origin of this version, and sorted out the transmission. Combined with the seals on the rubbings, we can reconstruct the collection history of the *XTP version* (Fig.1).

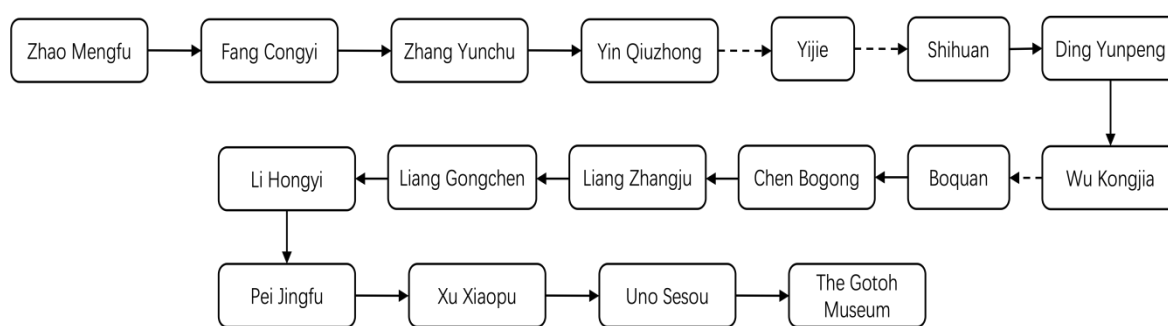


Figure 1: The collection transmission of XTP version.

There are three undocumented collectors we need to interpret. According to the colophons of Yang Mingshi (active in 1573-1644 AD) and Liu Ran (active in the 15th year of Kangxi), Yijie is the youngest son of Yin Qiuzhong, after his death, he passed the Yellow Court Classic to Yijie⁴. When Yijie died, he gave it to his brother Shihuan. In Weng Fanggang's (1733-1818) inscription, he mentioned that Boquan brought the *XTP version* to Suzhai for a month to appreciate and imitate it. From this we can see that, after Wu Kongjia (1588-1667), Boquan got this version.

In the colophons, connoisseurs praised the *XTP version* as the best in terms of five aspects: content, the accuracy of the characters and calligraphy, calligraphic style, transmission, and colophons. In order to see why connoisseurs prefer the *XTP version* clearly, we will choose another two versions to compare, the *Die Yan Lu version* (hereafter the *DYL version*) and *Si Gu Zhai version* (hereafter the *SGZ version*, also called *Yingshang Jingdi version*) [9]⁵.

DYL version is esteemed by Wang Zhuanghong, and belongs to the most circulated shuihen category [10]⁶. Dong Qichang (1555-1636) praised the *SGZ version* as the best he had ever seen in his book *Rongtaiji Bieji* [11]⁷. These two versions are also the most available copies.

In terms of the content, connoisseurs consider the *XTP version* to be the most correct version and thus could be used to evaluate other versions⁸. According to the text annotated by Wu Chengzi (active

⁴ Yin Zongfu (1540-1589), a courtesy name is Qiuzhong, the second son of Yin Zhengmao (1513-1593).

⁵ The *Si Gu Zhai version* is now collected by the Shanghai Library, while the location of the *Die Yan Lu version* remains unknown.

⁶ "Die Yan Lu version is the best.

⁷ "I use this version to compare with others, others are inferior to it."

⁸ See the colophons of Zhang Yuchu, Mo Shilong, Liu Ran, and Hu Bicheng.

around 581-907) and Liang Qiuzi (active around 847-858), Laozi wrote the Yellow Court Classic in seven-word sentences. Among the extant versions, only the XTP version is written in seven words.

In addition to the number of characters in first two sentences, there are also many differences among *the XTP version*, *the Si Gu Zhai version* and *the DYL version* in the following contents. Dong Qichang mentioned that *the Yellow Court Classic* annotated by Liang Qiuzi is particularly filled with errors⁹. Others connoisseurs also argue that *the Yellow Court Classic* preserved in the rubbings are closer to the original text¹⁰. If we compare *the XTP version* with *the SGZ version* and *the DYL version*, we are more convinced that *the XTP version* preserves the most correct text of *the Yellow Court Classic*.

In terms of the accuracy of the characters and calligraphy, Mo Shilong (1537-1587) has examined it carefully, and found that there is not a single error in the text and characters. Those who mentioned this point in the colophons were Zhang Yuchu (1359-1410), Mo Shilong, Liu Ran, and Hu Bicheng. If we examine them carefully, we find that there are character mistakes both in *DYL* and *SGZ versions*.

First, the fifth line of DYL version has an extra dot for the character "根", which was copied as "根". The character "然" has a dot missing from the character "犬". Second, the word "玉" in *the SGZ version*, is written with one point less¹¹. Third, the word "然" is written with one point less on the word "犬"¹². It is worth to note that, in *the DYL version*, the word "枝" is written with one less dot, and the word "致" written with one less dot¹³. In addition, the word "渊" in the *DYL version* lacks the last vertical, in order to avoid the name of the Tang emperor Li Yuan (566-635)¹⁴. Therefore, it should be considered as a copy after the Tang version. However, *the XTP version* has the complete strokes of the character "渊", without evasion (Fig. 2), its original version was probably made before the Tang dynasty (618-907). *The SGZ version* missed the phrase that include the character "渊" due to the scribe's ignorance.

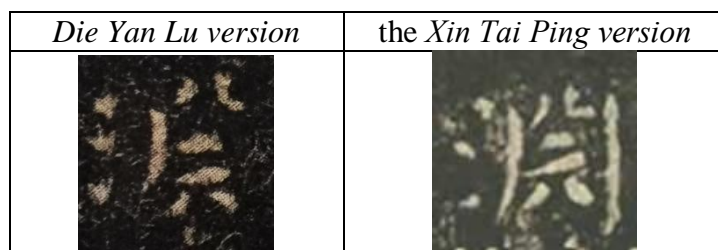


Figure 2: The comparison of the word "渊".

The XTP version is mostly mentioned for its most fascinating calligraphic style. Connoisseurs found that *the XTP version* presents the most vivid brushwork, and is most similar to the style of Wei and Jin dynasties¹⁵. Cheng Jiasui (1565-1643), for example, once purchased hundreds of rubbings, and commented that the XTP version is incomparable¹⁶. Some mentioned that this version should be

⁹ See Dong Qichang's inscription in the Xin Tai Ping version.

¹⁰ See the colophons of Mo Shilong, Yu Anqi, Xu Yuanfen and Liang Zhangju.

¹¹ See the sentences in the Si Gu Zhai version as "玉池清水上生肥", "养子玉树不可", "闭塞命门如玉都", "二神相得下玉英".

¹² See the sentences in the Si Gu Zhai version as "还魂反魄道自然"

¹³ See the sentences in the Die Yan Lu version "此非枝叶实是根", "积精所致和专仁"

¹⁴ See the sentence of "入清冷渊见吾形" in Die Yan Lu version.

¹⁵ See the colophons of Yu Anqi, Zhang Yuchu, Yang Mingshi, Liu Ran, Dong Qichang, and Zhou Shuzong.

¹⁶ See Cheng Jiasui's colophon in XTP version.

the earliest copy¹⁷. That is to say, the rubbing should be made before the Tang Dynasty, and it is copied from the original ink, which has preserved the original's beauty to the greatest extent.

The XTP version is praised for preserving 22 authentic inscription works of about 7000 words, including some renowned literataries such as Dong Qichang, Mo Shilong, Yang Mingshi, Chen Jiru (1558-1639), Cheng Jiasui, Weng Fanggang, Liang Zhangju (1775-1849) and Xu Shuming (1824-1900). Liang Zhangju mentioned in his colophon that the paper and ink of the XTP version is extremely excellent, as confirmed by other scholars. Liang further regarded this version as an ink treasure, even if there are minor errors¹⁸.

4. Visual Analysis

There are two key factors to consider in the quality of a rubbing: one is the strokes, and the other is the calligraphic style. In terms of the strokes, *the XTP version* has 34 missing strokes, *the SGZ version* has 26 missing strokes, and *the DYL version* has 36 missing strokes, of which 9 characters are lost due to worm damage. Although *the XTP version* seems to bear more abrasions, when we compare it with the two versions, it is obvious to notice that the strokes preserved in *the XTP version* are much more vivid. We can trace the movement of the brush (where it starts and ends) clearly from this version. It shows more variations in the strokes, rather than an unchanged, straight line (Fig. 3).

The brushwork of the original *Yellow Court Classic* should bear the characteristic of the Wei-Jin periods, as it is said to be written by Wang Xizhi. For example, the character "支" in the XTP version was written with a dot, which is consistent with the calligraphic style from the Wei-Jin to the early Tang dynasties (Fig.4).













	Huang 黄	Ting 庭	Jing 经	Shou 守
<i>Xin Tai Ping version</i>				
<i>Si Gu Zhai version</i>				
<i>Die Yan Lu version</i>				

Figure 3: The comparison in the clear and expressive of the strokes.

¹⁷ See the colophons of Zhang Yuchu, Mo Shilong, Yu Anqi, Liu Ran, Cheng Jiasui, Zhou Shuzong, Wang Jie, and Wu Kongjia.

¹⁸ See Liang Zhangju's colophon in XTP version.






<i>The Tombstone of Yuan Chang</i>	<i>The Tombstone of Yuan Gong</i>	<i>The Tombstone of Yuan Wei</i>	<i>Zhen Cao Qian Zi Wen</i>	<i>The Fanxing stele</i>
				

Figure 4 : The characteristic of "支" in Wei-Jin to early Tang dynasties.

Although Wang Xizhi's calligraphy is no longer available, according to the literature, Wang learnt from Zhong You for his regular script [4]. Therefore, there should be some similarities between Wang and Zhong You's works. Dong Qichang comments:

Previous scholars considered Wang Xizhi's calligraphy preserved some style of Zhong You. The extant copies are no longer similar to Zhong Yao, only *the XTP version* preserves some structural similarities¹⁹.

We will take *the XTP version* as a departing point to compare with *the SGZ* and *the DYL versions*, as well as Zhong You's work *Xuan Shi Biao*. Scholars have considered *the Xuan Shi Biao*, collected by the Capital Museum in Beijing, as a copy of Wang Xizhi [12]²⁰. From the comparisons, we can see that Zhong You writes with a wide and flat body, and the characters stretch breadthways. The tendency to stretch laterally is more obvious in *the Xin Ping version* and *DYL version* (Fig. 5). We can take the semi-encircled structure character as an example. In *the Xuan Shi Biao*, the frame "門" of the character "聞" is lower on the left and higher on the right, with a tendency to lean to the left. This tendency is more evident in *the XTP version* and *the DYL version*. However, *the SGZ version* is different.

	<i>Xuan Shi Biao</i>	<i>Xin Tai Ping version</i>	<i>Si Gu Zhai version</i>	<i>Die Yan Lu version</i>
Wen/Jian 聞/间				

Figure 5: The comparison with semi-encircled structure "聞/间".

Another example is a up-and-down structure character of "異". In the *Xuan Shi Biao*, there is also a sideways development trend in transverse lines (Fig. 6). This tendency can also be found in the two dots of the character, which is lower on the left one and higher on the right. Comparing the character "異" with the three versions, from the tendency of transverse lines, the angle of two dots and lowest point of the dots. Combine with the shape of the strokes, *the XTP version* is the most similar, followed by *the DYL version* and *the SGZ version*.

¹⁹ See the colophon of Dong Qichang in *Xin Tai Ping version*.

²⁰ It is a letter written by Zhong You to Cao Pi (187-226), the Emperor of the Wei state of the Three-Kingdoms Period (220-266), urging Cao Pi to accept Sun Quan's request to attach to him.





	<i>Xuan Shi Biao</i>	<i>Xin Tai Ping version</i>	<i>Si Gu Zhai version</i>	<i>Die Yan Lu version</i>
Yi 異				

Figure 6: The comparison with character "異".

The axis of the character in *the Xuan Shi Biao* are consistent in the upper and middle parts, while the axis of the lowest part "心" is misaligned (Fig. 7). The calligraphic style of *the XTP version* and *DYL version* are consistent. In addition, it can be clearly noticed that the way of writing the characters is the same between *Xuan Shi Biao* and *XTP version*. The character in *SGZ version* stretch lengthways, which is more consistent with the writing style of the Tang Dynasty.





	<i>Xuan Shi Biao</i>	<i>Xin Tai Ping version</i>	<i>Si Gu Zhai version</i>	<i>Die Yan Lu version</i>
Lv 慮				

Figure 7 : The comparison with character "慮".

The character "故" which is the left and right structure, in *Xuan Shi Biao* and *XTP version* the left part is higher than right, and the characters has a left-leaning tendency (Fig. 8). While in *the SGZ version*, the left part is lower than right. Neither of the characters in *the SGZ version* and *the DYL version* has a tendency to lean left.





	<i>Xuan Shi Biao</i>	<i>Xin Tai Ping version</i>	<i>Si Gu Zhai version</i>	<i>Die Yan Lu version</i>
Gu 故				

Figure 8: The comparison with character "故".

From the above analysis, it is obvious that *the XTP version* preserves the most characteristic of Zhong You's calligraphy style, and thus serves as a good example to consider on the "lost" authentic Wang Xizhi's style.

5. Conclusion

Based on reading the colophons and comparison with other versions, we conclude that the *XTP version* is superior to the others. It is well-preserved, not only has received the most colophons documenting its collecting history, but also preserves the most legacy of Zhong You's style. By comparing with two other versions, we believe the *XTP version* was carved earlier because it does

not lack strokes to avoid the emperor's name. Furthermore, the calligraphic style resembles the calligraphy from the Wei and Jin dynasties, indicating that the *XTP version* is a much earlier copy. We can presume that the original stone or wood board of the *XTP version* was made before the Tang Dynasty.

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