

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE IMPERIAL ART COLLECTION IN CHINA

A Paper read by Dr. Lothar Ledderose on 7th November, 1978

OBJECTS in art collections are chosen primarily because of their aesthetic value and not because of religious, historical, political, or other significance. Imperial art collections in this sense began to be formed in China in the first centuries A.D. Ever since, the imperial art collections have had a remarkable cultural and political function, and they have played a decisive role in shaping the course of art history. Again and again in the last two thousand years emperors have demonstrated a keen interest in the art collections of their palaces. For example, emperor Tang Taizong in the 7th centuries and counts how many of them were destroyed by fire and other in order to bring a famous piece into his possession, and he ordered the best piece of his collection to be buried with him in his tomb; or emperor Huizong in the 12th century, one of the most famous emperor collectors, who had catalogues of his treasures made that can still be read today; or emperor Qianlong in the 18th century, perhaps the greatest art collector in world history, who during his sixty-year reign, among other things, composed thousands of poems which he wrote on the paintings and pieces of calligraphy he had assembled; and even in the modern era, in the winter of 1948, when the Chinese Nationalist troops retreated from the mainland to Taiwan, they took with them more than 231,000 objects from the former imperial collection, a venture remarkable both in the art history and the military history of the world.¹

Even today our concepts about Chinese art depend heavily on objects from the imperial art collections. For example, many of the Chinese paintings that are now in the great museums of the world, in China and Japan, Europe and America, were once in the imperial collection, and many of these works represent the best of Chinese art. Looking at modern publications on the history of Chinese art one will almost always come upon a great number of pieces that have been in the palace collection at one time or another.

Despite the fact that even modern scholars are still under the spell of the great emperor collectors, no scholarly study of the imperial art collection has been made so far. In an attempt to draw attention to this problem the present paper will focus on three aspects, the political and religious function of the palace collections of antiquity, the use of the imperial collection as an instrument of cultural policy, and the fluctuations in the scope of the collections in the course of their history.²

The forerunners of the imperial art collections are the palace collections of antiquity. An investigation of these will help in understanding some of the reasons for the continuing imperial concern with later art collections. Stated briefly the explanation is that the possession of the early palace treasures legitimized the political rule in the empire, and that

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the later art collections inherited this function.

The treasures of the imperial storehouses of antiquity were tangible proof that their owner had received the mandate of Heaven. In the *Zhanguo*, a historical text compiled before the 2nd century B.C., a minister advising his ruler says:—

‘When you have taken possession of the Nine Brazen Tripods and put your hands on the charts and registers, and when you have the emperor as hostage to rule the empire, nobody in the world will dare not to obey you.’³⁾

According to this passage there are two groups of objects that guarantee the legitimacy of the imperial rule, the Nine Brazen Tripods (*jiuding*) and the charts and registers (*tuji*).

In early historical sources, in the texts of religious Taoism, and especially in the *weishu*, the apocryphal classical writings that appear in the Han dynasty, one finds relevant information about the Nine Brazen Tripods and the charts and registers. It is said that the tripods were cast by the mythical emperor Yu and handed down from dynasty to dynasty until the Zhou rulers finally lost them. The ill-fated attempt of emperor Qinshihuangdi in 219 B.C. to retrieve them from a river was regarded as a bad omen for his own dynasty; indeed it lasted only for fifteen years.

The charts and registers must among other things have consisted of maps and statistics and thus were indispensable for the administration of the area. Even more important was their magical value. The prototype of all charts and registers is the famous *betu*, the chart of the Yellow River. Its history and function is similar to that of the Nine Brazen Tripods. According to legendary tradition it was revealed to the mythical emperor Yao as a token that on him had been bestowed the mandate of Heaven. When the mandate passed on to his successor Yu, Yu also received the chart, and later it was — like the Nine Tripods — handed down through the dynasties Xia, Shang, and Zhou.

A description of a chart of the Yellow River on a paper fragment found in the caves of Dunhuang reads:

‘When emperor Yao sat on the bank of the Yellow River, a divine dragon rose, carrying a chart. This chart indicated the course of the Long River and of the Yellow River, the shape of the sea, mountain ranges, hills and marshland, the border between the area of the highest ruler and all the kingdoms, as well as the portraits and the sequence of the sons of Heaven and the sages.’⁴⁾

According to this passage the River Chart contains revelations about space and time. It shows the geographical and political situation, as well as the sequence of dynasties and rulers. Being in the possession of the portraits of his predecessors allows the ruler to place himself legitimately in their tradition.

The objects in the palace collections of antiquity such as the tripods and the charts and registers belong to the category of *lingbao*. *Lingbao* are treasures (*bao*) imbued with religious power (*ling*). The concept of *lingbao* is a very complex one. I would only like to mention two aspects that are of special interest for our problem: these treasures are a tally of a contract that Heaven concludes with the ruler, and secondly, these treasures are preserved in the palace like the vital force in a human body.

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When a ruler receives the mandate, Heaven literally concludes a contract with him. Heaven and ruler 'join tallies' (*hefu*). The tally of the ruler are his treasures; they are the most precious objects in his palace. In the Taoist text *Taiping-jing* (Han dynasty?) for example, the chart of the Yellow River is called the ruler's 'letter of contract' (*quanshu*).⁵

It is not sufficient, however, for the ruler to inherit the palace treasures from his predecessor. When he starts his reign, and especially at the beginning of a new dynasty, Heaven must also show consent through various omens (*ruì*). These omens can take the form of unusual objects that appear somewhere in the empire, like a bronze bell that is found in a well. Another Taoist text, the *Xijing zaji*, says for example:

An omen is a treasure, a guarantee. Heaven responds to the virtue of the ruler by a treasure that serves as a guarantee.⁶

This passage further implies that in his contract with Heaven the ruler pledges himself to conduct a virtuous reign. If the ruler loses his treasures, this would be an indication that he has lost his virtue. On the other hand, once he has lost his legitimate mandate he will also soon lose his treasures.

The second aspect of *lingbao* I want to mention here, briefly, is the analogy to physiological speculation. In the same way in which vital energy has to be stored in the inner organs of a human being, the treasures of the ruler are carefully hidden and preserved in the palaces. It does not seem accidental, that there is only a small difference between the word for inner organs, *zang* 臟, and the word that is used for collections in general and also for art collections, *zang* 藏.

The substitution of art objects for magical objects was a gradual process. The first objects treasured primarily for aesthetic reasons were pieces of calligraphy. Formerly the major criterion in judging a written piece had always been its content, its text. Starting in the 2nd century A.D. one can witness that certain handwritten pieces begin to be valued and collected because of the quality of the handwriting itself. In the 4th century A.D. handwritten pieces enter the palace collection as works of art, and they are soon followed by paintings. At least from the 6th century onward scrolls of calligraphy and painting are considered the most precious part of the imperial collections.

In the process of transition from palace collections of antiquity to imperial art collections certain groups of objects lose their significance while others gain new importance. Common to all groups, however, (and this is the justification for regarding the imperial art collections as successors to the palace collections of antiquity) is their function; they are the most valuable objects in the possession of the ruler, legitimizing his power. Or, to put it another way, when the palace collections of antiquity were replaced by imperial art collections, magical objects which acted as a guarantee for the mandate of Heaven were replaced by art objects, which acted as a guarantee for the legitimate political and cultural tradition in the secularized state.

This hypothesis is confirmed by the great art historian Zhang Yanyuan. In his influential treatise on painting, the *Lidai minghuaqi* of 847 A.D. he adduces several

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examples to prove that the physical power over the paintings in the imperial collection equals political power in the empire. He claims, for example, that Gaozu only succeeded in becoming the first emperor of the Han dynasty in 206 B.C. because he managed to get hold of the paintings (*hua*) and charts (*tu*) in the collection of the preceding Qin dynasty.⁷

Unless one assumes that the imperial art collection had the function of political legitimation, many phenomena would be hard to explain, such as the sacrosanct character that they have enjoyed down to the present century, the personal attachment of the ruler to his art objects, the secrecy in which those were usually kept, and the fact that so many rulers after starting their reign set out to solicit works of art from private collections, a practice that was also adopted by the new government of China after 1949.

The political function of the objects in the imperial art collection inevitably was a factor in governing their choice. Works of art that were not considered to be part of the legitimate cultural and political tradition, were only in rare cases accepted into the palace collection. Because the imperial collection set an aesthetic standard certain artists and schools thus fell into oblivion. By selecting some objects and by rejecting others the imperial collectors could deliberately influence the history of art. The classic example of how an art collection could be used as an instrument of cultural policy was given by Tang Taizong, who ascended to the throne in 626 A.D. His collection was the largest that China had known until that time and its most important objects were pieces of calligraphy.

During the period of political division from the 3rd to the 6th century calligraphy in the south and in the north had come to diverge greatly. In the south the genre of handwritten letters was cultivated by the aristocratic élite whereas the north emphasized the traditional craft of writing stone inscriptions. As representative examples of southern calligraphy two letters by Wang Xizhi (306-365?), the most prominent master of this tradition, are seen on Plate 1. Plate 2 shows an example from the north, a detail of an anonymous tomb inscription for a member of the imperial family of the Northern Wei dynasty, dated 499. The elegant yet precise brushlines of Wang Xizhi, the delicate composition of his characters, and the ease in the flow of the lines contrast sharply with the vigorous and angular strokes, and the regular grid pattern in the stone inscription from the north.

When the empire was reunited again a decision had to be made which of the two calligraphic traditions should be adopted as the binding one. The emperors of the short-lived Sui dynasty chose the refined southern tradition, and the Tang emperors followed their example.

The second Tang emperor, Taizong, made a special effort to establish the style of Wang Xizhi as the classical one in the empire. He himself wrote in this style. He composed Wang's biography in the official dynastic history, the *Jinshu*, praising him as the greatest master of all ages, and — most important — he collected all the handwritten pieces by Wang Xizhi that he could lay his hands on. When the Tang dynasty was founded in 618, only 300 scrolls were counted in the imperial store houses. In 632 there were already 1510 scrolls of calligraphy alone, and finally Taizong was able to bring together 2290 pieces of Wang Xizhi's handwriting. He then had copies made of selected works

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from this collection and distributed them among the officials of his court and, as teaching material, in the *Hongwenguan*, the 'Institute for the Propagation of Culture', where the young aristocrats of the capital studied calligraphy.⁸

As a result of the enormous efforts of Tang Taizong as a collector of Wang Xizhi's originals, only a few of them remained outside the palace, and those had to be kept in secrecy to avoid confiscation. The few people who were given access to the palace collection and to the copies distributed by the palace enjoyed a rare privilege and an advantage not shared by others who intended to study Wang Xizhi's style. In a situation in which this style was accepted as the highest standard, the handwriting of these people therefore inevitably must have appeared to be 'better' than the handwriting of less fortunate contemporaries. The quality of the handwriting thus reflected to a certain degree the social position of the writer. It is also significant that the three calligraphers who are praised as the greatest masters of the period, Ouyang Xun, Yu Shinan, and Chu Suiliang, could all study the works in the imperial collection. Other masters who were not given this possibility have left no works and no name in the history of calligraphy.

However, Tang Taizong not only influenced the course of art history by promoting Wang Xizhi's style but also by suppressing other stylistic traditions. The most glaring example is that of Wang Xizhi's own son, Wang Xianzhi. The discussion, who of the two artists was the better one and whose style should be followed, had already started during their lifetime in the 4th century, and at the beginning of the 7th century a definite decision had not yet been reached. Taizong despised the art of the son Wang Xianzhi, and he finally settled the issue of the relative merit of the two Wangs in favour of the father by simply neglecting Wang Xianzhi's works in his collection.

Plate 3 shows a letter by Wang Xianzhi called *Shieryuetie* that has been preserved in the Song dynasty compendium of rubbings called *Baojinjai fatie*. The original was once in Taizong's collection as the label written by his palace connoisseur Chu Suiliang (596-658) and Chu's seals in the four corners indicate. The swift connections between the characters and the zigzagging downward movement show a vehemency that is not found in Wang Xizhi's writing. In spite of this freedom, however, the entire piece is permeated by a forceful artistic unity that manifests itself in the unmodulated brushstrokes and in the rigid pull of the vertical lines.

As the comparison between Plates 1 and 3 shows there is obviously a definite stylistic difference between the calligraphic styles of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, but it is hard to believe that Tang Taizong rejected Wang Xianzhi solely on aesthetic grounds. If father and son both make a name for themselves in the same field, and if both achieve a comparable standing, Chinese critics always tend to prefer the father. Tang Taizong, moreover, who kept his own father under house arrest after he had apparently compelled him to abdicate, might have felt a special need to show that he had not forgotten the virtue of filial piety. Perhaps the emperor was also suspicious of Wang Xianzhi's political loyalty, because Xianzhi had once refused to inscribe the tablet on the main hall of the imperial palace, and the easy flow in his uninterrupted brushlines apparently showed the influence

of automatic writing as it was practised by Taoist mystics. The only reason why Wang Xianzhi's *Shieryuetie* nevertheless entered Taizong's collection was probably the fact, that it had been mounted together with a piece of Wang Xizhi, the *Kuaixue shiqing tie*.

In this connection a remark of the eminent 11th century artist-connoisseur Mi Fu is of interest. He talks about a piece of calligraphy by Wang Xianzhi on which his signature had been erased and replaced by that of another artist. This was done, according to Mi Fu, because the owner of the scroll knew about the emperor's dislike of Wang Xianzhi, but nevertheless wanted to present the piece to the palace, probably hoping for some reward. This example shows, how art historical facts were deliberately falsified and adapted to the emperor's taste.

Tang Taizong's preferences had lasting repercussions on the history of calligraphy. After the 7th century the position of the father Wang Xizhi as China's greatest calligrapher went unchallenged for more than a millenium. Of the works by him known today almost all were once in Taizong's collection. The artistic image of the son Wang Xianzhi, however, has become obscured since Taizong's time, and even today it is not clear what his style really looked like.

Mi Fu's story also raises the delicate problem of authenticity. There is good reason to doubt that all 2290 of Wang Xizhi's pieces in Taizong's collection were indeed written by the master's own hand. Early texts tell us that Wang Xizhi's works were forged even during his lifetime, and if one traces the fate of Wang Xizhi's works from the 4th to the 7th centuries and counts how many of them were destroyed by fire and other catastrophies, the result is an uneven and disillusioning balance. One cannot help getting the impression that the cultural and political weight of an imperial art collection was not likely to be sacrificed for the sake of an impeccable pedigree of all the objects in it.

Taizong, to be sure, was well aware of the authenticity problem, and he asked the calligraphy expert, Chu Suiliang to examine all the pieces in the palace. Chu compiled a list of the 266 best items by Wang Xizhi. This list set a standard for centuries and it is still preserved today. There is no specific reason to doubt Chu's good judgement, but we have no means of checking his verdicts. The pieces which he rejected as forgeries have not been transmitted. But even for Chu Suiliang's contemporaries it was all but impossible to challenge his expertise, because outside the palace comparative material was lacking, and the imperial collection itself was kept in secrecy. Chu Suiliang held the monopoly in the matter of Wang Xizhi and by using the imperial collection he gave shape to the image of Wang Xizhi that has been transmitted down to the present day.

Finally I would like to illustrate the later fate of the imperial collection by tracing the history of two pieces allegedly once in the Tang palace. One is a scroll with three letters by Wang Xizhi, two of which are shown on Plate 1. It is normally called *Fengjutie*. The other piece is the Admonition Scroll by Gu Kaizhi, which may properly be called the most famous Chinese painting in Europe. The history of major works like these two can normally be traced in great detail by using literary records such as old collectors' catalogues, and, even more important, with the help of collectors' seals on the scrolls themselves.

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Plate 4 shows the end of the Admonition Scroll where many such seals are seen.

It would lead us too far today to examine all the evidence for the history of the two scrolls in detail,⁹⁾ but the result is shown in a rough diagram (fig. 1). Periods when the scrolls stayed in the imperial collection are marked by little triangles. Even at first glance one can make some important observations. The scope of the imperial collection was never stable. Periods of dispersion altered with periods of intensive collecting. The Gu Kaizhi scroll entered the palace four times and left it four times. These changes in the scope of the imperial collection reflect changes in the strength of the central power. After having looked at the palace collections of antiquity such fluctuations can now be better interpreted. When in old times a ruler ascended to the throne, it was expected, as mentioned before, that Heaven showed its approval through omina, which meant among other things, that unusual objects were found somewhere and presented to the ruler. In a more secularized time emperors saw to it, that after they started their reign or a new dynasty their art collections grew, as a demonstration that they were going to conduct a virtuous and enlightened government. Scrolls in the hands of private families then found their way — in many cases one has to say back — into the palace.

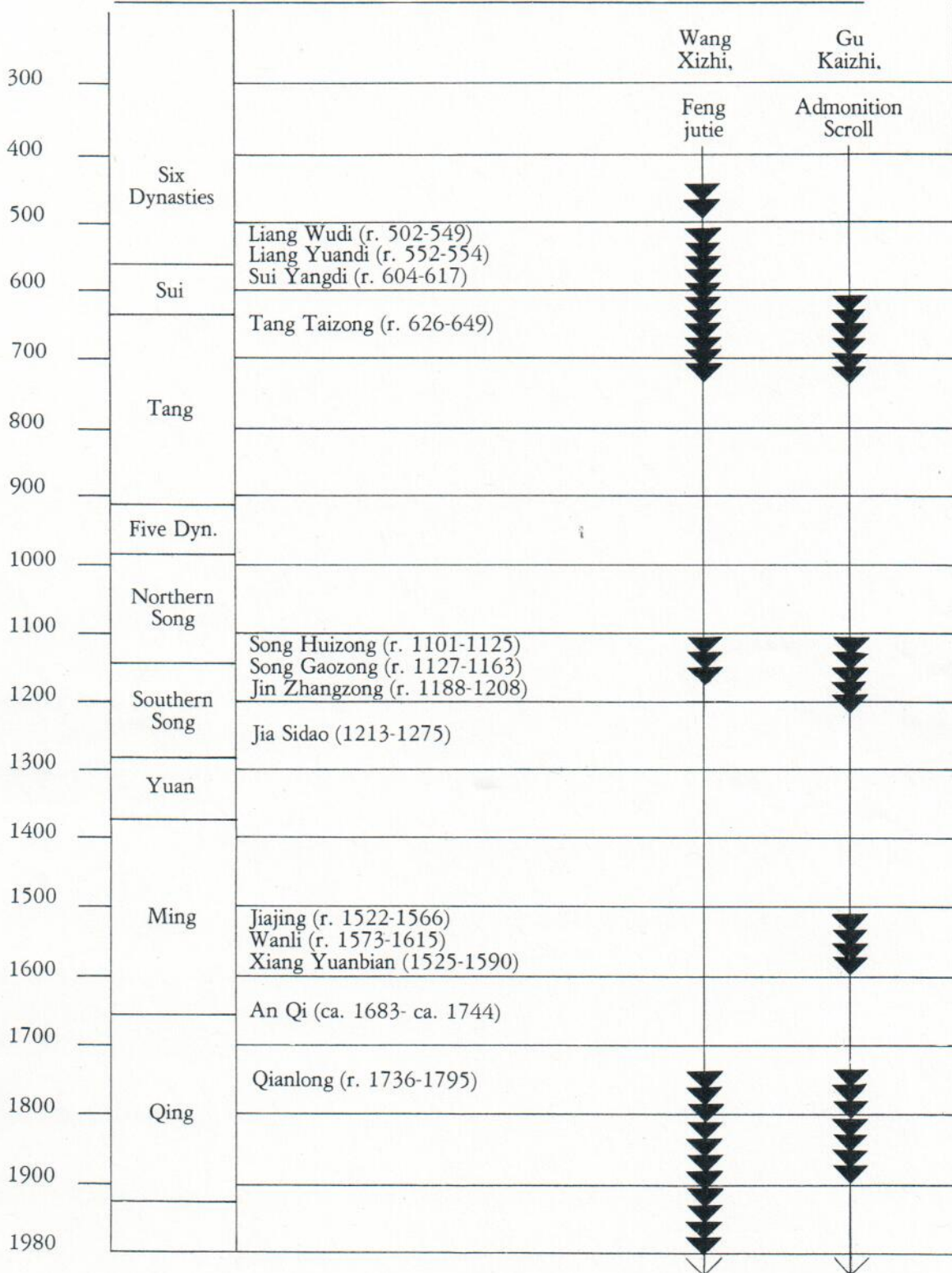
Periods, however, when art objects left the palace in great numbers, were generally periods of political weakness and dynastic decline, as the diagram shows symptomatically: at the end of the Tang dynasty, after the rebellion of An Lushan; at the end of the Song dynasty, when the Mongols conquered China; under emperor Wanli who sometimes gave his court officials works of art instead of their salaries; and also all the paintings from Qianlong's collection that are now kept in the great museums of the world, left the palace in such a period of decline, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. One is reminded of the Nine Brazen Tripods of antiquity which could not be kept in the possession of a dynasty, once it had begun to fall.

As we have seen, the topic 'imperial collection' poses many problems that I could only briefly discuss today. However, I hope to have shown that by investigating the history and function of the imperial collections we will advance in our understanding of what art meant in China.¹⁰⁾

REFERENCES

- 1 See Chu-tsing Li, 'Recent History of the Palace Collection', *ACASA* 12, 1958, 61-75.
- 2 See also my two former articles 'Die Kaiserliche Sammlung als Instrument der Kunstpolitik in China', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, Suppl.* III,2 (19. Deutscher Orientalistentag, Freiburg), 1977, 1632-1637; and 'Der politische und religiöse Charakter der Palastsammlungen im chinesischen Altertum', *Zur Kunstgeschichte Asiens, 50 Jahre Lehre und Forschung an der Universität Köln*. R. Goepper et al. ed. Wiesbaden, 1977, 153-159.
- 3 *Zhanguoce, Qince*, 3/12b; quoted by Fu Weiping in his valuable *Zhongguo kaogu xueshi*, Shanghai, 1936 (reprint Taipei, 1973), 34.
- 4 Quoted by Chen Pan, 'Guchanwei quanishu cunmu jieti', part 1, *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica*, 12, 1948, 57. It is a great pleasure for me to thank Dr. Anna Seidel, Kyoto, for discussing the chart of the Yellow River with me and for bringing this passage to my attention.
- 5 *Taipingjing* 47/11a. Quoted by M. Kaltenmark, 'Ling-Pao: Note sur un terme du Taoisme religieux', *Mélanges publiés par l'institut des hautes études Chinoises*, II, Peking, 1947, 584. See also 'The ideology of the T'ai-p'ing Ch'ing' by the same author in *Facets of Taoism*, H. Welch and A. Seidel (ed), New Haven and London, 1979, 19-52.
- 6 *Xijing zaji*, 3/6a; quoted by Kaltenmark, 'Ling-Pao...', 574, n 1.
- 7 *Lidai minghuaji*, 1/11-12; translation by W R B. Acker, *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting*, (*Sinica Leidensia* 8), Leiden, 1954, 75f.
- 8 The history of the calligraphic pieces by Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi is discussed in detail in my *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy*, Princeton, 1979.
- 9 A detailed investigation of the history of the Admonition Scroll has been made by H. Kohara, 'Joshi shin zukan', *Kokka* 908, Nov. 1967, 17-31 and 909, Dec.1967, 13-27.
- 10 I should like to thank the Breuninger Foundation, whose support enabled me to study the history of art collections in China.

Figure 1
Schematic history of two representative works of art



ILLUSTRATIONS

- Plate 1 Wang Xizhi (305-365?).
Two letters, *Hejutie* and
Fengjutie. Tang dynasty (?)
tracing copy. National Palace
Museum, Taipei, Taiwan,
Rep. of China.
- Plate 2 Anonymous calligrapher.
Tombstone inscription for
Yuan Jian. Dated 499. Detail
of rubbing. Stone in *Xian
peilin*.
- Plate 3 Wang Xianzhi (344-388).
Letter, *Shieryuetie*. Rubbing
from *Baojinjai fatie*.
- Plate 4 Gu Kaizhi (348-409).
Admonition scroll. Detail.
London, British Museum.

義之白不審，尊體比復



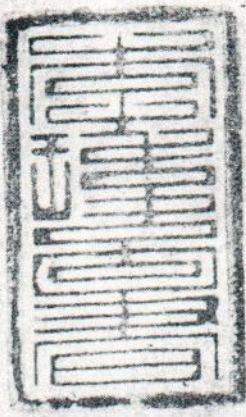
案懷乞

何如遲復奉告義之中冷

賴尋復白義之白

長端三百枚霜未降未

得



太保齊郡王 姓元諱簡字
 陽縣都鄉 洛陽里人
 高宗之姪 子
 皇帝之第五 姪也惟王稟
 神守質志性 寬雅冥慶殫和
 廿三年歲在 己卯正月戊寅
 秋廿二日 寢疾薨于第謚曰順王
 可南各易之 上
 芒迺鏤

