Chapter 3

From Anonymity to Imperial Standard: The Hundred-Rhyme Song Formula for Cursive Script

Near the end of the sixteenth century, the fast-paced publishing activities of the commercial printing market allowed texts to be appropriated, altered and reprinted by eager editors and educated individuals aspiring to make a name for themselves. Attribution of texts to famous scholars or personalities often functioned as advertisements to increase sales,[213] which meant that the names of the actual creators of texts could be suppressed or forgotten. Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, as the attention given to practical instructions increased, even authorless texts came to be valued. The text discussed in this chapter is a case in point. It is best known by the title that it received during the Ming dynasty, *Hundred-Rhyme Song Formula for Cursive Script* (*Caojue baiyun ge* 草訣百韻歌). Its anonymous origin did not prevent the scholarly elite and several members of imperial families from promoting its dissemination. The *Hundred-Rhyme Song Formula for Cursive Script* embodies the slow transition from master's model calligraphy to abstract standards. Its reception shows how an anonymous text came to be put on the same level as canonical works when learning how to write in a specific style.

Calligraphy is a self-referential art in which the transmission of styles relies on the copying of existing models.[214] During the middle period, Chinese calligraphers copied manuscripts and rubbings of model calligraphy by a master that excelled in a specific style. Scholars valued cursive script because it displayed both the calligrapher's dexterity with the brush and allowed him to express his innermost feelings and mood by regulating speed and thickness of his strokes according to the content of the inscription. Under a teacher's guidance, the works of renowned and virtuous men of the past were selected for the student to emulate, making sure that the student was inspired by their words and that he did not acquire the writing habits of unrespectable men.

By the Tang dynasty, the practice of copying a standard text that compiled characters from various texts and reproduced the calligraphy of a famous individual became common. This innovation allowed for a more systematic approach to the acquisition of a certain style. One such standard

[213] Ōki. 2004. *Minmatsu Kōnan no shuppan bunka*, 52.
[214] Ledderose. 1979. *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy*, 33.

text was the *Thousand Character Essay* (*Qianziwen* 千字文), introduced in the first chapter as being commonly used to teach children how to read. Due to its function as a primer, the *Essay* was well known and usually memorized by students. This allowed the text to function as a base for calligraphers to acquire the stylistic features of a script and master the visual qualities of a style. Because the *Essay* had already been memorized, deciphering the text, even when written in the challenging cursive script, was not difficult.

The copying of model calligraphy affirmed the authority of the master and promoted the belief that a man's character and moral qualities were connected to his calligraphy.[215] While model calligraphy often conveyed the author's own ideas, such as in reproductions of personal letters, using the *Thousand Character Essay* to model the visual qualities of strokes and characters provided students little reference to the author's character. The mnemonic quality of the rhymed *Essay,* however, lent it to being appropriated as pedagogical material for learning different styles. The *Hundred-Rhyme Song* was composed to serve as a standard mnemonic text that should not only convey the esthetic qualities of cursive script, but also explicitly address issues concerning the practice of writing. What distinguished it from previous models was that it became increasingly disassociated from any ancient calligraphy master, coming to serve as a standard instead. Over time, the reception of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* shifted and its content was adjusted, becoming increasingly particular and specific in providing guidelines for cursive writing.

The elaboration of a standard that relied less on ancient models came during a period when the use of cursive script was becoming more widespread and the outreach of printed texts broadening. During the Ming dynasty, urban audiences came to value not having to rely on others for instructions and instead using reference works to acquire a skill and to select preferred models. The text's selective content and systematic discussion of compositional features and visual elements of characters met this audience's demand, while also fitting into contemporary scholarly discourses. It provided an alternative canon that presented standards instead of promoting the models from antiquity that had been corrupted though repeated copying.

[215] The belief in a connection between a man's character and calligraphy is wonderfully described in McNair. 1998. *The Upright Brush*, chapter 1.

The *Thousand Character Essay* as Reference for Style

As the aura around Wang Xizhi's 王羲之 (303–361) calligraphy grew during the Tang dynasty with imperial efforts to disseminate his style, the number of apocryphal texts that were ascribed to him also increased. Tang authors knew the *Essay* as a standard text for instructing students in Wang's writing style. As Chartier has pointed out, however, texts can be repurposed by a community to serve new pedagogical functions, and once new practices are in place, it is hard for those who are accustomed to them to disassociate the texts from their new function.[216] Chemla has also shown in numerous articles how early mathematical texts have long been misinterpreted to fulfill practical functions that most likely do not correspond to how they were actually used. In other words, even though a text might have served a certain practical function during the Tang dynasty, it might have had a quite different function before. The changes in reception of the *Thousand Character Essay* thus serve as an example to understand how *The Hundred-Rhyme Song Formula for Cursive Script* introduced a new pedagogical approach to writing in a specific script.

Bottéro's argument on the *Quick Reference of Characters* (*Jijiu pian* 急就篇), a Han dynasty text that contains lists of characters and phrases in rhymed format, provides an instructive example of how the function of texts could change over time.[217] The *Quick Reference,* often taken as a primer for children, was most likely not conceived with this function in mind, Botteró suggests. Rather, it served as a reference work for officials. Botteró's argument is based on qualities inherent to the text, such as the lack of basic characters such as *tian* 天, *xia* 下, *er* 而 or *zao* 早, and the degree of specialization that would be required to use many of the characters that are included, such as those concerning technical matters, medical conditions or law regulations. Memorizing standard characters for such terms would only be necessary for officials fulfilling specific bureaucratic functions. The unusual organization of the characters into thematic categories, instead of the well-known three realms (*sancai* 三才, i.e. Heaven, Earth and Man), could also

[216] Chartier. 2014. "The Teaching Context and Reading from the 16th to the 19th Centuries," 19-40.

[217] Other Han dynasty fragments indicate that the practice of oral repetition and recitation when teaching scribes was already in place during the Han. Wang. 2014. *Writing and the Ancient State*, 284.

indicate that it was meant to be used by specialists who had to memorize standard forms of characters when fulfilling their bureaucratic functions.[218]

The *Thousand Character Essay* also underwent a process of repurposing. Most likely composed during the sixth century as a didactic text for princes at the Liang court, by the Tang dynasty, it was widely used to teach children how to read. It is rightfully described as the most influential literacy primer in imperial China. The *Essay* compiles one thousand unique characters into rhymed and easy-to-memorize passages that summarize existing narratives. In that respect, the *Essay* is similar to the *Master of the Golden Tower* (*Jinlouzi* 金樓子), a text also composed during the first half of the sixth century.[219] It was common practice to "reduce the substance of history to a collection of easily manipulated tokens," which were left as carriers of the story's moral for those who already knew the stories.[220] The *Essay* thus compiled moral lessons and anecdotal knowledge, which made it popular as a didactic text among elite families.[221]

The *Essay* relies heavily on the Confucian classics, summarizing major historical events and stories about virtuous men, and presents this information in a progressive fashion tied to the notion of cosmic order.[222] The

[218] Bottéro. 2003. "Les 'manuels de caractères' à l'époque des Han Occidentaux," 117. Bottéro also provides another example relating to the *Cangjie pian* 倉頡篇, which was most likely conceived as a political medium to disseminate the normalized script imposed by the Qin empire, without initially carrying a pedagogical function. 2003. "Les 'manuels de caractères' à l'époque des Han Occidentaux," 111-112; 119.

[219] In this collection, which resembles a literary anthology, the final section within the category of "collecting the strange" (*zhiguai* 志怪) presents a set of stories from classical and popular anecdotes condensed into short phrases, mostly composed of 4 characters, of which most can be traced back to records with lengthier and more elaborate versions of the narratives. These might have been added to the end of the section that includes lengthier prose to remind the reader of similar, widely known stories that fit into the category of the 'strange.'

[220] Schaberg. 1999. "Song and the Historical Imagination in Early China." 317.

[221] Wu also discusses a category of primers of "miscellaneous characters" (*zazi* 雜字) that developed in the tradition of the earlier works presenting strings of characters and terms, also often in rhymes. These enjoyed less regard among the educated elites and were frequently used in the countryside, while the Essay was generally preferred by elites. Wu. 2007. *Ming Qing yilai minjian shenghuo zhishi de jian'gou yu chuandi*, 128-131. Distinctions among pedagogical materials also emerged earlier. One Tang author who commented on the *Quick Reference of Characters*, which was broadly used as a primer up to the Tang, claimed that it was vulgar (*bi li* 鄙俚) and commonly used to instruct children in poor villages (*qiong xiang you xue* 窮鄉幼學). Yan. 1934. *Jijiu pian,* 1b.

[222] Zhang (2001-2002. "Dunhuang ben 'Liuzi qianziwen' chutan xiyi") and Nugent (2018. "Structured Gaps.") have compared medieval annotated versions of the *Essay* which attest to the use of commentaries explicating the stories behind the condensed phrases.

Essay thus aided the teacher, who was likely able to narrate the full stories to the student, in teaching both moral values and historical events, while the rhymed format ensured that students would remember the summaries.[223] The primary pedagogical function of the text allowed it to be widely disseminated and remembered. This deep familiarity with the text among members of the literate elite opened up the possibility of using the sequence of characters that constituted the *Thousand Character Essay* for a different purpose.

During the Tang dynasty, manuscripts of the *Essay* circulated as calligraphic models for a variety of scripts. Manuscripts of the *Essay* in regular, cursive, and even seal script were discovered in the library cave at Dunhuang, a cultural node on the Silk Road. Some manuscripts frequently present columns with repeated characters, an indication that the text was used for practicing calligraphic styles even far away from the capital [Figs. 3.1 and 3.2].[224]

After being transformed from a primer to a calligraphy model, the *Essay* became closely associated with a specific style, namely that of Wang Xizhi. Pre-Tang accounts on the *Thousand Character Essay* contain no explicit statements of Wang's calligraphy being used for the initial composition of the text; neither do the numerous Dunhuang manuscripts that reproduce it. Yet, from the perspective of a late Tang scholar such as Li Chuo 李綽 (fl. 880-889), the association of the *Essay* with Wang's individual style was a given. Li authored the *Tales Told by the Imperial Secretary* (*Shangshu gushi* 尚書故實), in which he provided an account of how the creation of the *Thousand Character Essay* was closely tied to Wang Xizhi's handwriting.[225]

A short passage in the *Tales Told by the Imperial Secretary* introduces the anecdote, claiming that among his contemporaries "no one knows" (*ren jie bu xiao* 人皆不曉) that Zhou Xingsi 周興嗣 (d. 521) had created the *Thousand Character Essay* by using Wang Xizhi's calligraphy. According to the anecdote, Emperor Wu of the Liang 梁武帝 (r. 502-549) ordered Zhou to

[223] Wang. 2014. *Writing and the Ancient State*, 294-295.

[224] Manuscripts that provide seal script models include Pelliot Chinois 4702 and Pelliot Chinois 3658 in the collection of the Bibliothéque National de France. For an example in cursive script, see Pelliot Chinois 3561. Nugent also addresses the different scripts used for the text. 2018. "Structured Gaps: The *Qianziwen* and its Paratexts as Mnemotechnics," 163. For a distinction between the activities of painters and scribes at Dunhuang, see Fraser. 2004. *Performing the Visual*, 193.

[225] According to Yan, the *Shangshu gushi* 尚書故實 most likely served as the base text for later compilations from the Song dynasty, such as the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, in which the anecdote is reproduced. Yan. 2009. *Tang Wudai biji kaolun*, 81.

compose the text by making use of a thousand different characters in Wang's calligraphy. Rubbings of Wang's calligraphy containing the thousand characters were cut into pieces so each individual character became a single and movable unit; Zhou then arranged the characters into a coherent rhyming text. He accomplished this, it is said, in a single evening, after which all of his hair turned white.[226]

Besides the straightforward narrative, the anecdote provides the emperor's motivation behind the composition of the text, namely that the he hoped to use the *Essay* to instruct the princes in writing (*shu* 書).[227] This corresponds to what we know about his esthetic preferences. The emperor's fondness for Wang Xizhi's calligraphy is amply recorded, and his interest in obtaining original works by Wang resulted in an epistolary exchange with the Daoist master Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536), arguably one of the earliest connoisseurs of calligraphy in China.[228] Thus, the association of Emperor Wu with a text that promotes Wang Xizhi's calligraphy is not unnatural. However, the lack of evidence that such calligraphic rubbings were produced during the period,[229] as well as the late date of the anecdote—more than 300 years after Emperor Wu's death—provides ample reason to question the veracity of its content.

In fact, it is more likely that the *Thousand Character Essay* acquired a new function that came to emphasize the transmission of an individual's calligraphic style instead of aiding students in learning how to read and write in general. By the Tang, the function of the text as a calligraphic model was unambiguous, and it might have been difficult to imagine this being different in the past. The association was so ingrained in society that this function could no longer be dissociated from the text. With the canonization of Wang's writing style, a shortcut to help the student learn its specificities was necessary, and the *Thousand Character Essay* served this purpose because it

[226] The anecdote continues to describe how Wang Xishi's descendant, the Buddhist monk Zhi Yong 智永 (fl. late 6th c.), proceeded to copy the work eight hundred times in the style of Wang and distributed the copies among the people, further connecting Wang's lineage with the text.

[227] Li. [1606?] *Shangshu gushi*, 24b-25a.

[228] Ledderose. 1984. "Some Taoist Elements in the Calligraphy of the Six Dynasties," 272. Nakata has conducted an extensive study and translated the letters into Japanese. 1974. *O Gishi*.

[229] While early records attest to the production of rubbings of Confucian or religious canonical texts, personal letters and other texts valued for their calligraphy seem to have been disseminated as rubbings only during the late Sui and Tang. Starr. 2008. *Black Tigers*, 22.

was already so well-known among members of the educated elite. The new function and format of the *Essay* must have impacted the creation of new pedagogical materials, such as the anonymous *Hundred-Rhyme Song Formula for Cursive Script.* The *Song* was created as a pedagogical material for practicing cursive script. Yet, its function also changed over the course of its reception history. Instead of highlighting the value of calligraphic styles, increasing emphasis was placed on formal standards and conventions for writing – a move that catered to new demands from broader audiences during the Yuan and Ming dynasties.

Ubiquitous Rhymes

The earliest extant version of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song Formula for Cursive Script* is recorded in a reedited version of the encyclopedia *Vast Record from the Forest of Affairs* (*Shilin guangji* 事林廣記). The latter was originally compiled by Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚, who most likely lived during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The earliest edition compiled information that was relevant for students preparing for the civil service examinations. However, the content of the existing editions does not entirely correspond to its first edition, which can be inferred from the additions that must have been made during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). During the Yuan, the chances for Chinese scholars to obtain a post by taking examinations were drastically reduced, and the content of encyclopedias began to change. These include, for example, updated calendrical data and didactic content for learning ’Phags-pa script, introduced by the Mongol ruling house. Two early editions of the compilation, which can be dated to 1330-3 and 1340,[230] record the full text of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song,* as well as a preface and a short note at the end. Yet, there is no evidence that the rhyme or its paratexts were later additions to the compilation.

The text, which has the short title *Hundred-Rhyme Song* (*Baiyun ge* 百韻歌) written in cursive at the beginning, is composed of paired sentences of five characters each, with every second sentence ending in a rhyme. The

[230] For a survey of editions, see Wang. 2106. “’Shilin guangji’ banben kaolüe.” A comparative list of early editions and an extant manuscript that complements these can also be found in Miya. 2008. “Eizan Bunko shozō no ‘Shilin guangji’ shahon ni tsuite,” 456. For a reproduction of a *zhishun* 至順 period edition, see Chen and Hu. 1963. *Shilin guangji*. The edition in the collection of Beijing University, from the second *zhiyuan* 至元 period, has also been reproduced. The differences between these two early editions are discussed in an introductory note. Chen. 1998. *Shilin Guangji*, 1-4.

purpose of the song is to assist the student in composing characters in cursive script. Its opening sentences state:

> Mastering cursive script is the greatest challenge,
> for below the brush battle dragons and snakes.
> Its slight variations demand a keen perception,
> yet in structure and vigor one cannot afford mistakes.
>
> 草聖最為難，龍蛇競筆端。
> 毫釐雖欲辨，體勢更須完。[231]

Following this general statement, the rhyme introduces the appearance of common components of characters in cursive script, such as 言, 阝 or 門, along with the composition methods of individual characters by fragmenting them into visual components that correspond to other written characters. For example, the cursive form of the character *sang* 顙 (forehead) is dissected into the visual components 戈, 牛 and 去 [Fig. 3.3]. These components, which are meaningful characters in themselves and can thus be sung when reciting the rhyme, are used as reference for their visual appearance only, functioning as a mnemonic schema for visual composition. The bulk of the text, however, emphasizes the distinction between characters that bear close similarity in cursive script. Sets of two to four characters are embedded in the rhyme along with warnings, telling the reader not to confuse certain characters, or simply reminding the reader how much some characters look alike. The rhyme concludes with an admonishment:

> One must become accustomed to viewing the traces of Wang Xizhi and Xianzhi 王獻之 (344–386),
> and thus avoid muddling the ink pond [i.e. deviating from the standard].
>
> 習觀羲獻跡，免使墨池混。[232]

[231] Chen and Hu. 1963. *Shilin Guangji*, xu ji, wenyi lei, juan 5, 1b.
[232] Chen and Hu. 1963. *Shilin Guangji*, xu ji, wenyi lei, juan 5, 7a. The expression "ink pond" is commonly used to describe calligraphy in general. It is derived from an anecdote in which the calligrapher of the Eastern Han, Zhang Zhi 張芝, one of the early masters of cursive script, is practicing calligraphy next to a pond, dipping his brush in the water so many times that it turned black.

A short note in cursive follows the rhyme:

> To the left is the *Formula for Cursive Script*. The old version was full of mistakes. Today I have changed and corrected it. There should be no harm in studying and perusing it.
>
> 右《草聖訣》。舊本多訛，今改而正之，庶不誤設學之觀覽。[233]

In total, this version of the text discusses the cursive forms of 296 characters, while the text itself has 760 characters. In a tabular fashion, the characters that are the focus of each rhyme are written in cursive script above the text of the song, which is written in regular script below. The sentences of the text are neatly separated and arranged in parallel columns on the page, in two layers, while dots next to the text demarcate the characters being distinguished in each set.

The *Hundred-Rhyme Song* is included in the section titled "Formula-Method for Cursive Script" (*Caoshu juefa* 草書訣法), and a short note before the text claims that the cursive calligraphy is an assemblage of characters written by Wang Xizhi, resembling the description of the *Thousand Character Essay* as a text that compiles characters in Wang's personal writing style. The preface to the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* is undated but suggests that the text must have circulated in print during the early eleventh century. It is the personal account of a scholar, identified as Caizhenzi 采真子, who describes his experience with the text [Fig. 3.4]. The first time he encountered a version of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* was during his youth. It was included in a printed copy of the *Thousand Character Essay* in the calligraphy of a certain Xie Diewang 跕跌望,[234] who was active around the year 1032 and often wrote texts for steles in the style of Wang Xizhi.[235] The author of the preface believes that the text was an abridged version that only discussed about 100 characters in cursive, but people enjoyed reciting it in order to memorize the content. He recounts that he first felt dispirited by the fact that the text had not been transmitted in full, but then, while occupying an official post in

[233] Chen and Hu. 1963. *Shilin Guangji*, xu ji, wenyi lei, juan 5, 7a.

[234] Both Xie and Xiedie are possibly the family name of the calligrapher. No biography or text that clarified this issue could be found.

[235] His work as calligrapher in the style of Wang is recorded on two steles erected in 1032. See Hu. 1901. *Shanyou shike congbian*, juan 12, 53b-54b; 57a-58a. Zhang Duoqiang suggests the calligrapher must have been active sometime between 1022-1067. Zhang. 2011. "Caojuebaiyunge xiaokao."

Yuzhang[236] during the Huangyou reign 皇祐 (1049–1053), he obtained complete copies of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song.* He describes the text he acquired, which contained 120 rhymes and discussed 410 characters, extolling its many useful qualities. However, after contemplating the text and conducting a thorough investigation of calligraphy models, he found numerous mistakes that required correcting. He reports that after cutting 3 unsubstantial passages, removing 19 repeated characters, deleting 35 passages that repeated side components (*pian pang* 偏旁) of characters, eliminating 36 characters that were too easy or did not resemble other characters, correcting mistakes in 8 characters, rectifying 37 gaps and omissions, and finally, adding text at the beginning and end of the rhyme, his version of the text comprised 100 rhymes. Thus, the final passage that makes reference to the models by Wang Xizhi and his son were most likely Caizhenzi's additions. He concludes the preface by stating that although his text is not perfect, his version is substantially superior to the previous vulgar text, and that it certainly meets the needs of students of calligraphy. The note that follows the text repeats the claim that the text can be useful, modestly claiming that there "should be no harm" in using it for study. Despite his efforts to improve the text, Caizhenzi still felt the need to defend the rhyme because it discussed merely practical matters and provided no lessons for moral cultivation or historical references to incite deeper reflection. This indicates that Caizhenzi was aware of the expectations the elite had of calligraphy texts. His comment is an attempt to assure the reader that even a practical text could be useful and did not interfere with self-cultivation or was detrimental to using calligraphy to express one's feelings.

Caizhenzi was most likely the style of the Northern Song scholar Wu Keji 吳可幾, who earned his "advanced scholar" (*jinshi* 進士) degree in 1036.[237] Wu must have had a keen interest in pedagogical texts, as he himself authored a rhymed text titled *Compilation of a Thousand Surnames* (*Qianxingbian* 千姓編),[238] which gathered surnames into phrases of four characters. One Southern Song scholar, Chen Zhensun 陳振孫 (1179-1262), included the *Compilation of a Thousand Surnames* in his bibliographical catalogue, the *Commented Bibliographical Record of the Zhizhai Studio* (*Zhizhai shulu jieti* 直齋書錄解題). He describes its resemblance to the

[236] Present-day Nanchang 南昌 in Jiangxi 江西 province.
[237] In early Ming gazetteers, the date for his degree is recorded as 景祐二年 (1306); Qing sources provide the date 景祐元年 (1304). The latter must be a copying mistake.
[238] Liu. 1914. *Wuxing zhi*, juan 17, 11a.

Thousand Character Essay in composition, and playfully remarks how even the three characters of the title (*qian*, *xing* and *bian*) were in fact surnames. Most importantly, however, he adds that a note at the end of the volume states "recorded by Caizhenzi in the year 1063."[239] Thus, although no text titled *Compilation of a Thousand Surnames* has been extant since the Ming dynasty, it is very likely that Wu, who was still active as an official in 1069 and is credited with authorship of this work, adopted the style Caizhenzi.

The time period referred to in the preface of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song*—the middle of the eleventh century—further supports the notion that Wu Keji wrote the preface and authored the extant version of the *Song* included in the encyclopedia.[240] Though the text was recited by people and circulated in print already during the writer's youth, the increased dissemination of the mnemonic aid for learning cursive during the mid eleventh century was surely connected to the heightened status of the script. Although cursive script was not required for the civil service examinations, it was nonetheless a means of artistic expression that had gained popularity among the elite and was also promoted by imperial rulers. The Song Emperor Taizong 宋太宗 (r. 976–997), for instance, exhorted his third son, who was to become the next ruler, to study cursive script. Taizong himself was said to have mastered all forms of script, and to have excelled at cursive, focusing on its study from the Chunhua reign 淳化 (990–994) onwards.[241] His preference for cursive script is documented in his interactions with officials, who were often requested to submit works in cursive to the emperor. Furthermore, his admiration for the cursive calligraphy of Li Jujian 李居簡 (dates unknown) was so great that the emperor granted Li the title Grand Master Admonisher of the Heir Apparent and gave him a post at the Imperial Academy of Calligraphy (*yushu yuan* 御書院).[242] The dissemination of rubbings of Taizong's *Model Calligraphy of the Chunhua Reign* (*Chunhua fatie* 淳化法帖), which included

[239] Chen. [18th c.] *Zhizhai shulu jieti,* juan *8, 3b.*

[240] The extant versions of the text have only 76 rhymes in total, not the 100 rhymes mentioned in the preface. Ma Guoquan, who published a commentary to this version of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song*, believes the author only used this number as an approximate reference. See Ma. 1981. *Yuanke caojue baiyunge jianzhu*, 3-4. However, it is hard to believe that the author would go to the trouble of giving specific numbers for the earlier version of the text he had - as well as list all the changes he made with such accuracy - only to provide a very general figure for his own version. It is much more likely that the compilers of the encyclopedia or publishers of earlier versions of the text abbreviated it.

[241] Liu. 1956. *Chaoshu tonglun*, 135.

[242] Zhu. 1782. *Mochi bian,* juan 3, 119.

several works of Wang Xizhi and his son in cursive, further cemented that the status of cursive script.

Taizong's successors did not share his fondness for cursive writing. More than a century passed until the Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 1127–1162) followed in his footsteps and published the first reference book for cursive script. Functioning like a visual dictionary, the *Cursive Script Treasure of Rhymes of the Ministry of Rites* (*Caoshu libu yunbao* 草書禮部韻寶) arranged entries according to rhyme groups and used characters written in the emperor's own hand.[243] Despite the acknowledgment of its aesthetic qualities by Song emperors, cursive script did not regain political significance as a validation tool until the late Ming dynasty.[244] During the early to mid Ming, however, the *Hundred Rhyme Song* attained unprecedented popularity and outreach, although its status only rose slowly.

Shortly before the Ming dynasty, scholars had already begun to comment on the *Song,* often praising its usefulness beyond the association with Wang's personal style. Yu Ji 虞集 (1272-1348), a scholar from a prominent family of officials, compares the rhyme to other works that dealt with cursive script in his "Reaction to Mr. Wang's Cursive Rhyme" (*Shu Wangshi caoyun hou* 書王氏草韻後). He argues that in the past, authors attempted to create books to benefit scholars by making the content easy to look up. Arranging characters according to rhyme, for example, was very convenient. The *Song* surpassed these reference works, however, because it arranged characters by grasping their appearance and demeanor. He argues that the forms and manner of cursive script are varied, and thus it is

> comparable to people, who possess mouth, nose, ears and eyes in the same configuration, yet their character is not alike; like people who, wearing a robe, hat, belt and shoes of the same making, have a demeanor that is completely different; like when there is a great audience at the court, and a hundred officials are present. There are

[243] The earliest extant edition, a Yuan copy dated 1288, is in the collection of the National Central Library in Taipei. A note added to this edition informs the reader that the book will aid all noble gentlemen in finding all the unusual or marvelous (*qi* 奇) characters on their own, without having to call on any renowned scholar for instruction. Jian'an 建安, where this edition was printed, had already developed into one of the main commercial printing centers by the Yuan dynasty. Such notes must have been added by printers to cater to the clients' demand for reference works for independent study. For Jian'an as printing center, see Chia. 2013. "*Mashaben*: Commercial Publishing in Jianyang from the Song to the Ming."

[244] This phenomenon is described in the next section.

those of equal rank who wait in the same rows, yet when each presents himself, their appearances are diverse.

It is on the basis of these differences that someone good at physiognomy makes distinctions, and it is also based on this that the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* is arranged. Thus, the calligraphy by Wang is not even necessary!

譬諸人之口、鼻、耳、目之形，雖同而神氣不一。衣冠帶履之具同制，而容止則殊。朝廷有大朝會，百官咸在，品秩同等，班序同列，而人則雜然前陳矣。善相人者，乃能於是乎有所擇焉。此輯《草書韻》之例也。然則王氏之書其可少乎![245]

Yu Ji praises the *Song* for using the visual qualities of the characters in cursive as a reference for arranging characters and defends that Wang Xizhi's calligraphy was not necessary for the text to sustain itself. In the rhyme, characters that look alike are placed together, instead of being arranged according to rhyme or components. Yu also points out that it is not necessary to have the rhyme written out in the calligraphy of a famous master for it to be an effective tool. This claim is most likely connected to the phenomenon that the creation of the text came to be attributed to Wang Xizhi instead of it being described as a compilation by a later scholar of characters written by Wang or in Wang's style. Claims of Wang having authored of the text, however, were unacceptable to scholars, who still considered the works base, despite acknowledging its uses. The pervasiveness of the text and its common attribution to Wang Xizhi even became the butt of a joke during the early sixteenth century. An anecdote recorded by the Ming scholar Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488-1559) points to how the scholarly elite perceived the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* as an ordinary composition:

The *Hundred-Rhyme Song for Cursive Writing* is a text that was compiled by someone during the Song dynasty and meant as a guide for beginners. It is falsely attributed to [Wang] Xizhi. Recently a mediocre official had it carved in stone, and some high-standing gentleman wrote a preface for it, believing that the attribution was accurate. There was one man who came from the capital to Yunnan, and with this work in his hands asked me: "Is this *Cursive Rhyme* by Xizhi?" To which I playfully replied: "In all of script, there is no higher achievement than the marvelous *Hundred-Rhyme Song for Cursive Writing* written by Xizhi

[245] Yu. 1929. *Daoyuan xuegulu*, juan 10, 2b-3a.

himself. It is comparable to the unsurpassable achievement of Du Fu in the field of poetry, and Du Fu wrote the *Great Compendium of Poetry.* The classics all originate from Confucius, and Confucius wrote the *Flexible Formula of the Four Books.* If one were to obtain these two books along with this present volume, one would have the three supreme [achievements]! The man was stunned and retorted: "There is no *Flexible Formula of the Four Books* by Confucius!" To which I said: "If there is no *Flexible Formula of the Four Books* by Confucius, how can there be a *Hundred-Rhyme Song for Cursive Writing* by Xizhi?!" Only then did the man begin to catch on.

It is true that fake things are quick to appear on the market, while authentic things are rarely for sale. As the saying goes: "If it weren't for this generation [of fools], this generation [of tricksters] would starve to death."

《草書百韻歌》乃宋人編成以示初學者。託名于羲之。近有庸中書取以刻石，而鉅公序之，信「以為然」。有自京師來滇，持以問余曰：「此羲之草韻也。」余戲之曰：「字莫高於羲之自作《草書百韻歌》，奇矣，又如詩莫高於杜子美，子美有《詩學大成》，經書出於孔子，孔子有《四書講套》，若求得二書，與此為三絕矣。其人愕然曰：「孔子豈有《四書活套》乎」？余曰：「孔子既無《四書活套》，羲之豈有《草書百韻》乎！」其人始悟。信乎偽物易售，信貨難市也。諺云：若無此輩，餓殺此輩。[246]

The learned elite of the first half of the sixteenth century did not accept the connection of the text to the Jin-dynasty master, nor did they regard the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* as a masterpiece. By then the *Song* had already become available to broader audiences. It was a text to be used by beginners, one that could provide some general rules for composition. It was not the writing of a moral paragon, and, despite its utility, it could be categorized as the lowest type of text to be used in the study of calligraphy.[247]

Among the several sources that reproduced the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* were numerous editions of the encyclopedia *Vast Record from the Forest of Affairs,* published during the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. These all included an identical version of the text, but many employed a different

[246] Yang. 1782. *Danqian zonglu*, juan 15, 10a-10b.

[247] Xu. 1995. *Xushi yimou size*, 29b. In his instructions, dated 1549, Xu categorizes the text as lowly pedagogical material, yet praises it as a model that can be used as reference for structure.

layout, compressing the Song to reduce the number of pages it occupied from 13 to 7, a more cost-effective range.[248] In addition to encyclopedias, manuals that specialized in cursive script also reproduced a version of the text, such as the *Collected Methods for Cursive Script* (*Caoshu jifa* 草書集法), first printed in 1490 by Hu Tingyu 胡廷玉 (dates unknown) and reprinted in 1531 [Fig. 3.5].[249] In the *Collected Methods*, however, the text of the *Song* differs substantially from the earlier version. Instead of 152 sentences (76 rhymes), it comprises only 44 (22 rhymes), and, remarkably, only 8 lines in the beginning are identical to the earlier text, while 33 lines focus on entirely different characters and 3 lines approach characters of similar composition from a different angle. The general introductory lines quoted above, as well as the rhyming remark that concludes the text, which according to the preface were later additions, are not included in the *Collected Methods*. Thus, it is possible that the abridged or partial version that the contemporaries of Wu Keji had recited joyfully was still circulating in manuscript or printed form during the fifteenth century. An even more comprehensive version of the text from *Collected Methods* with 160 sentences (80 rhymes) can be found in a daily-use encyclopedia of 1597.[250] During the early seventeenth century, several versions of the printed *Song*, in longer and shorter forms,[251] circulated simultaneously in different levels of society, also reaching the less educated public through popular and cheap encyclopedias.[252]

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[248] The latest known edition of the *Shilin guangji*, dated 1541, is recorded in Du Xinfu, 1983. *Mingdai banke zonglu*, vol. 6, juan 5:38b. The compressed layout can be seen, for example, in the 1492 edition catalogued under the title *Qunshu leiyao shilin guangji* 群書類要事林広記 in the Yonezawa City Library. Chen. 1492. *Qunshu leiyao shilin guangji*, 30b-33b.

[249] The only known edition is held in the van Gulik collection of the Leiden University Library. The first preface is dated 1490, while a second preface at the beginning of the second volume provides the date 1531 for the second printing of the book. The rhyme is recorded in Hu. 1531. *Caoshu jifa*, juan xia, 39a-42b.

[250] Sakai et al. 1999. *Gosha bakkin*, 499-520.

[251] The longest known version is recorded in the encyclopedia *Xinke tianxia simin bianlan santai wanyong zhengzong* 新刻天下四民便覽三台萬用正宗, printed in 1599. The rhyme is a "revised" (*chongding* 重訂) version with 258 sentences (129 rhymes). Reproduced in Yu et al. 2000. *Sandai Ban'yō Seisō*, 441-462. The shortest one, only 40 sentences (20 rhymes), is recorded in another encyclopedia from the Wanli reign. Ai. [17th c.] *Xinke Ai xiansheng tianluge huibian caijing bianlan wanbao quanshu*, juan 12, 1a-3b.

[252] The *Shilin guangji* is usually not considered a popular encyclopedia as it targeted the needs of elite households. Specialized manuals commissioned by individuals, such as the *Caoshu jifa*, were most likely also disseminated among members of the elite. Several daily-use encyclopedias published during the Wanli reign 萬曆 (1572-1620) contain the rhyme, but in many different versions. It is not possible to identify a progression of different

One noteworthy publication, titled simply *Cursive Formula in Hundred Rhymes* (*Caojue baiyun* 草訣百韻), circulated during the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries and was dedicated solely to reproducing the *Song*.[253] The mere existence of such a publication showed that the perception of the text had changed radically during the late sixteenth century. Instead of recording only the focus characters in each sentence, the entire rhyme was written out in cursive and regular script side by side. This change in format, from a table to running text in two parallel scripts, made the text resemble rubbings of model calligraphy.[254] The volume's focus on a single text was also at odds with how the text was presented in manuals that specialized in cursive script or encyclopedias. Far from according the text such prominence, earlier publications embedded the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* within the category of literature and arts (*wenyi* 文藝) among various practical instructions on calligraphy.

The *Cursive Formula in Hundred Rhymes* (*Caojue baiyun* 草訣百韻), printed in Huizhou 徽州, contains a postface in cursive script that further raises the status of the rhyme:

> When writing cursive, one must adhere to the hundred rhymes. Like all-encompassing regulations, nothing [that manifests itself concretely] could be outside of it.[255] My friend Kuiyu has an outstanding natural talent. He passes on the teachings of Confucius and Mencius and his calligraphy is on a par with that of the two Wangs and the grand scribes of the past. That is extremely rare. This book contains the true traces of his brush. Thus, I had it printed in order to present it to the world and allow connoisseurs to gain an impression [of his work].
>
> 草書必本于百韻。猶範圍之制，器不可外也。予兄夔玉以軼倫之姿，垂孔孟之學，其書與二王久太史齊名。不可多得。茲本其真跡也。付梓以公世鑒者嘗知所彌云。[256]

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versions. Encyclopedias were rarely dated and later editions often copied the version from previous publications, ignoring contemporary developments.

[253] Wu, Chen and Zhang date the edition to the end of the Wanli reign. 2015. "Ming Qing shiqi Shexian bendi sijia keshu kao," 149.

[254] Some versions reproduced in encyclopedias also emulated the appearance of rubbings by providing white text on black. For an example, see Yu et al. 2000. *Sandai Ban'yō Seisō*, 441-462.

[255] *Fanwei* 範圍, something that encompasses everything, as well as *qi* 器, things in concrete or material form, are most likely used here together as reference to the *Book of Changes*.

[256] *Caojue baiyun* 草訣百韻. [n.d.]. 12a.

The author of the postface, Wang Ting 汪珽 (before 1585-after 1644), was a promising scholar who was recommended to the Imperial School (*guozijian* 國子監) in 1585, but became a recluse when the rebel Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606-1645) took over Beijing in 1644. Wang Ting, who was loyal to the imperial clan and retreated after the fall of the dynasty, is said to have live to age 89, and most likely continued to devote himself to scholarship after the dynasty fell. There is no record that he ever held a high office, but he published at least two books during his lifetime, which suggests that he must have had patrons to support him. The calligrapher Kuiyu 夔玉, praised in the postface, might have been one of them.

Referred to by a pseudonym, Kuiyu was most likely a distant member of the imperial clan, which had grown exponentially since the beginning of the Ming dynasty and reached an astounding number of over 80,000 members by 1604.[257] By the Wanli reign, the status of descendants of the imperial clan changed as restrictions imposed on them loosened and they were allowed to sit imperial examinations. Such measures, which aimed to relieve financial strain on the state by cutting loose distant descendants and allowing them to earn their own living, rendered them less visible in society.[258] Members of the imperial family had long been engaged in publishing activities, often reproducing books that had been previously issued by imperial command. Yet, even after members of the royal clan had blended into the scholarly elite, publishing standards to honor them were upheld, such as avoiding their first names and beginning a new line—like a hanging indent that highlights the passage—in running text whenever a member of the imperial family was mentioned.[259] These practices are evident in the postface, suggesting that the calligrapher was part of the imperial clan, though the pseudonym mentioned in the text is not enough to identify him.

The text of the *Cursive Formula in Hundred Rhymes* differs from all the earlier versions of the rhyme. Although it has a total of 166 sentences (83 rhymes), the increase is not due to additions alone. The text often conflates into a single sentence pairs of characters that were discussed in two distinct sentences in earlier versions, and also omits several characters discussed in previous versions. These apparent gaps, however, do not prevent Wang Ting from claiming that the rhyme contains all the necessary references to master

[257] Chen. 1993. *Hongwu huangdi dazhuan*, 645.
[258] Kerlouégan. 2011. "Printing for Prestige?," 44.
[259] Kerlouégan. 2011. "Printing for Prestige?," 58.

the rules of cursive script. He views the rhyme as a prescriptive standard from which one should not deviate. Not only is this presentation of the text much more straightforward than that of the Song scholar Wu Keji, it also discards any connection to Wang Xizhi. There is no claim that the rhyme is composed of characters written by the Jin-dynasty master, nor does the text of the rhyme encourage the reader to study rubbings of writings by the two Wangs. Instead, the rhyme ends with a reassuring statement:

> When the intention is present, there will be resemblance in the form;
> when the structure is fully rendered, the spirit will also be complete.
> In this manner one can manifest one's true heart;
> when lowering the brush, one will effortlessly comprehend the obscure [principle].
>
> 意到形須似，體完神亦全。
> 斯能透肝腑，落筆自通玄。[260]

Similar to the assertion made in the preface regarding the comprehensive rule that regulates cursive script, the ending of this rhyme declares that beyond the writing of the characters, greater principles must be comprehended. With all these additions and adjustments, the *Cursive Formula in Hundred Rhymes* turned the content of an auxiliary formula for beginners into a self-contained guide to the highest principles of calligraphy in cursive script.

This dramatic shift in how the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* was presented, from a text that could be perused without harming one's studies to a text that embodied a greater principle, did not originate among scholars or commercial printers. Surprisingly, it was the emperor who raised its status.

From Canon to Standard

After the emperors of the Song dynasty, few members of the royal ruling house made efforts to promote cursive script. Following the production and multiple reproductions of the *Model Calligraphy of the Chunhua Reign*, which made works of calligraphy by ancient masters accessible to more scholars, imitating models became the standard and widespread practice for

[260] *Caojue baiyun* 草訣百韻. [n.d.]. 11b. (In the collection of the National Library of China.)

learning calligraphy. This extensive collection of calligraphy, published in 992, aimed to trace writing back to its ancient roots. Previous scholarship has already addressed the political aspirations behind the production of this collection and the ways in which it legitimized the ruling house.[261] More than three centuries later, Ming princes also spared no effort to follow this path of legitimization, recarving previous collections of model calligraphy to make new rubbings and even compiling their own authoritative collections of masters' calligraphy.[262]

When the Wanli Emperor, Zhu Yijun 朱翊鈞 (1562-1620), decided to put forth a standard of his own, he was following this precedent. The Wanli Emperor had been fond of practicing cursive script since his youth. The Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525-1582), who was also the emperor's tutor during Zhu Yijun's youth, arranged two calligraphy tutors to instruct him. Zhu Yijun had to copy texts such as the *Admonitions on Rulership* (*Da baozhan* 大寶箴) to practice his writing. Beyond these assignments, however, he treasured and repeatedly copied model calligraphy by past masters such as Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (709-785), immersing himself in practice for extended periods. It is known that in 1573, the young emperor gave a calligraphy performance before court officials at the palace, later presenting his work to the audience and receiving lavish praise for his achievements as a calligrapher, such as "the structure is majestic, with a layout as sublime as that of Zhou dynasty tripods and Shang dynasty vine vessels" (體格莊嚴，儼然周鼎商彝的陳列).[263] The young emperor's passion for calligraphy was so intense that his tutor found it necessary to admonish him, listing past emperors who indulged in such pleasant pastimes and caused the fall of their dynasties, such as Song Huizong. He later cut calligraphy from the emperor's curriculum and urged him to focus on political matters and study history instead, arguing that minor arts were potential distractions from preventing the decay of virtue.[264]

Needless to say, his tutor's admonishments did nothing to diminish the emperor's interest in calligraphy. In 1584, less than two years after Zhang Juzheng's death, the court published *Distinguishing Structures of Cursive*

[261] McNair. 1994. "The Engraved Model-Letters Compendia of the Song Dynasty." On collecting and cataloguing practices, see Ebrey. 2008. *Accumulating Culture: the Collections of Emperor Huizong*, chapter 7.
[262] Pang. 2016. "Heritage or Imperial Violence," 11-13. Clunas. 2013. *Screen of Kings*, chapter 3.
[263] Cao. 1994. *Wanli huangdi dazhuan*, 49.
[264] Cao. 1994. *Wanli huangdi dazhuan*, 48-50. Huang. 1981. *1587: A Year of No Significance*, 12.

According to Rhyme (*Caoyun bianti* 草韻辨體), a visual reference book—similar to a dictionary—of characters in cursive script by various calligraphers. The volume includes the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* [Fig. 3.6] as well as two additional texts in rhyme, the *Latter Rhymes of the Song Formula for Cursive Script* (*Houyun caojue ge* 後韻草訣歌) and the *Continued Rhymed Song Formula for Cursive Script* (*Caojue xuyun ge* 草訣續韻歌). All songs were written in the emperor's own hand and attest to his continued dedication to cursive calligraphy.[265] The songs are similar in composition and format to previous versions and contain some overlaps, indicating that they were probably variants that circulated at the same time. The first version recorded in the collection was the longest, most likely a revised version with corrections by the official Guo Chen 郭諶 (b. 1488).[266]

The Wanli Emperor's enthusiasm for cursive is tellingly recorded in the prefaces and postfaces he wrote for these works. In the preface to *Distinguishing Structures of Cursive,* the emperor mostly praises the ancient masters of cursive script and the author of the compilation, the official Guo Chen, for their great achievements. In the postface, the emperor goes further, describing the central role that cursive script plays in society.[267] After urging readers to quickly reproduce this reference work, he claims:

> The use of cursive script is beneficial for both governing officials and inspecting the populace. [...] How could one take it only as material for playful enjoyment if it can also be adopted as an aid in governing and inspecting?
>
> 草書之用于治官察民均有裨焉。(...) 匪直為游藝之資，倘亦治察之一助乎？[268]

In this postface he repeatedly claims that cursive script is a tool for governing, and not a pastime. Exactly how he envisioned cursive script to aid him as a ruler is explained in the paratexts he wrote for the three rhymed

[265] The three rhymes are reproduced in Gugong bowuyuan. 2001. *Jinhuji/Caoyun bianti*, 29-147.
[266] According to Gao. 1903-1918. *Baizhou shuzhi*, juan 9, 13b.
[267] In his study on cursive script, Liu Yantao has already pointed out how unusual Wanli's claims about cursive were, and that his endorsement of cursive script was unprecedented, since it went beyond a personal preference and became directly connected to rulership. Liu. 1956. *Caoshu tonglun*, 134-136.
[268] Gugong bowuyuan. 2001. *Jinhuji/Caoyun bianti*, 131.

texts that follow this reference work. Their preface first explains that the three following texts provide the proper method for composing characters, which not only helps the calligrapher to understand its underlying principle, but is also conveniently composed in rhymes to facilitate perusal and memorization (*lan ji zhe bian* 覽記者便). The emperor states that the variations of composition and shape, described and distinguished in detail in the rhymes, are elemental in defining the role that these rhymes should play in calligraphy. To bolster his claim, he makes use of colorful analogies, explaining that "they are comparable to the mold that remains visible in ceremonial vessels; like the musical notes that make up songs" (若型範陳於彝鼎，若節奏按於宮商).[269] Thus, the three *Songs* provide the components that make up the fabric of cursive script. They define a standard that is detached from a specific master and based on abstract notions of placement and composite structure. The rhymes, the emperor claims, "do not mix the principles of the spirit, and thus serve as a guide in the forest of script and as a compass in the garden of arts" (不淆神理。斯固字林之榘矱，而藝苑之指南也).[270] Their content allows one to grasp essential points of cursive script, which can be achieved by those who comprehend the text beyond its words and strokes. Without denigrating the model works of ancient masters, the emperor thus raises the status of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* to an unprecedented level, hailing it as an appropriate standard precisely because it lacks individuality or style - like musical notes or molds for casting bronze.

His positive judgment of the rhymes and his intention to establish this new standard become even clearer in the postface that follows the rhymes:

> *The Hundred-Rhyme Formula for Cursive*, the *Latter Rhymes* and the *Continued Song* have been printed. Scrutinize and examine them, for all the structural manifestations are present. Although the characters in them do not cover one hundredth of the six categories [for composing Chinese characters], their dots, strokes, hooks and connecting lines are forms cast in their true likeness. Thus, they exhaust the underlying method [of the six categories].
>
> Alas! There has never been a matter in which departing from the standard led to superior results. If it were the case that one had no ambition to excel and did not seek to follow past masters - even Du Du and Cui Yuan [calligraphers of the Eastern Han], Wei Guan and Suo Jing

[269] Gugong bowuyuan. 2001. *Jinhuji/Caoyun bianti*, 132.
[270] Gugong bowuyuan. 2001. *Jinhuji/Caoyun bianti*, 132.

[calligraphers of the Western Jin] could not suddenly deviate from the proper path [i.e. standards]!

Yet, fighting snakes and sword dances can be taken as inspiration for writing. The cutting up of an ox and the making of a wheel[271] served as means to comprehend the Way. In this way the method could be established in antiquity, as there was a sublime harmony [of the Way] with their minds, with its divine variations, leading to the utmost achievements [in calligraphy]. This can be extrapolated to the ten thousand affairs; nothing escapes it. It was through this same method that I have grasped the principles (*li* 理) of governance. It would go against my intentions to use [these rhymes] merely as aids for daubing and splattering as a playful pastime.

《草訣百韻》、《後》、《續歌》梓既成，諦而觀之，體勢咸備，雖其字不當六書之百一，而點畫鉤連，鑄形肖象，則既曲盡其術矣。嗟乎！事未有離法而善者也。儻曰無意於佳，不求踐跡。即使杜、崔運指，衛、索濡毫，惡能遽超畦徑之外哉！雖然鬥蛇舞劍可以資書；解牛斫輪因而悟道；是故成法在古，妙契以心，變化神明，臻於極致，推之萬務，無不然者。朕於是得治理焉。若徒為遊藝揮灑之助，非朕志也。[272]

The emperor makes it clear in this postface and through his previous analogies that this standard for calligraphy, represented by the rhymes he had carved at the imperial workshop, can potentially reveal the Way (*dao* 道) to the practitioner. This shift away from emulating the writing of past masters towards observation of the world and practice based on generalized rules as means to find the Way resonated with contemporary trends in Neo-Confucian thought.[273] Scholars discussed the Way or principle (*li* 理) as something that should be apprehended by the studious mind. The principle permeated everything, and natural phenomena were thus perceived as its manifestations.[274] In this work, the Wanli Emperor takes these assumptions

[271] A reference to two passages in the *Zhuangzi*. According to the anecdotes, the cook Ding and the wheelwright Bian both gained a deep understanding of the Way from their seemingly menial occupations.

[272] Gugong bowuyuan. 2001. *Jinhuji/Caoyun bianti*, 147. A manuscript that reproduces the text faithfully is held in the special collection of the University of British Columbia. Another source that reproduces the edition from the Gugong is Ma. 2017. *Lidai caoshugejue huibian*.

[273] See also chapter 4.

[274] See for example, Makeham. 2010. *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, XXVIII-XXIX.

for granted, building his argument that calligraphy embodies this principle and can thus serve as a tool that will aid him in governance, which adheres to the same principle.

Interestingly, the emperor's endorsement of these anonymous rhymes also bypasses the significance of lineage and transmission, which had dominated calligraphy discourses since the Tang dynasty. Even princes of the early Ming went to great lengths to make sure that their calligraphy was connected to the great masters of the Jin dynasty.[275] The Wanli Emperor's position suggests that he perceived copying of ancient masters' calligraphy as a roundabout way to the goal to which he had devised a direct path. The emperor did not perceive memorization and the use of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* as detrimental to developing a unique style. According to him, trained calligraphers grasped a greater principle by committing it to memory and thus achieved an even higher goal.

The *Hundred-Rhyme Song* approached cursive writing in a syncretic and modular fashion. Its many printed and manuscript versions were not to be regarded as a fixed model, only as several visual instantiations of a standard. This allowed for more creative freedom and expression, since the calligrapher did not have to adhere to the exact shape and strokes of a character from a specific model, only to general rules of structure. The rhymes had been circulating since the Song dynasty and had undergone countless adaptations and alterations. Nevertheless, it took an emperor to establish these mnemonic formulas as an alternative to the established canon. This new standard did not rely on the character or moral achievements of calligraphers or their personal styles, but focused on the formal qualities of script. The *Hundred-Rhyme Song* compressed principles of cursive script so they could be easily comprehended, remembered, and put to use when needed.

Calligraphy remained a self-referential tradition and even such an abstract standard as the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* never overcame, let alone eradicated, the practice of copying model calligraphy. What the *Song* presented was, however, a synthesis of models that were previously conceived as unique reflections of a master's mood. Wu Keji, for instance, claimed to have undertaken a thorough investigation of numerous models of the past before correcting the rhyme. The Wanli Emperor also chose to append the rhymes to a reference work that resembled a dictionary in which characters by various masters were taken out of their original contexts and

[275] Clunas. 2013. *Screen of Kings,* 87-91.

ordered according to rhyme. Through the synthesis of the variations, which meant turning away from individual styles, a broader audience of people who had no access to models could be engaged. By including the transcription of the cursive text in regular script, the iterations of the rhyme also allowed calligraphers to study on their own.

It has often been said that the late sixteenth century witnessed the blooming of a generation of "individualist calligraphers." Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) is usually given credit as the progenitor of this innovative trend and described as a "theorist and prophet."[276] Yet, when the broad circulation of texts such as the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* is taken into account—texts only rarely discussed in elite theories and removed from their discourse on calligraphy—Dong Qichang's contribution seems less "prophetic." Dong certainly approved of works that decontextualized characters, as is made evident in an inscription he added to a reference work for cursive script titled *Collection of Characters in Cursive According to Rhyme* (*Jigu caoyun* 集古草韻).[277] But his ideas, like other calligraphy theories proposed by late-Ming scholars, were anchored in the common and widespread acceptance of calligraphic principles and rules that did not depend on individual styles. Popular texts provide a glimpse into the broader context of the sixteenth century, in which approaches that mixed and syncretized script types and styles were circulating not just among members of the scholarly elite. This is not to say that calligraphers like Dong or his follower Wang Duo 王鐸 (1592-1652), who was known to create "collages" of masters' calligraphy by tapping into his memory after years of copying models, should not be credited for their efforts to theorize calligraphy practice or to create visual puzzles.[278] However, calligraphy, even cursive script, was no longer an endeavor reserved for the elite, and the tension between the present and the traditional canon that was tied to distant masters and unreliable copies of their works was felt in all strata of the growing society of educated people.[279]

Not surprisingly, the spread of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* only increased after the Wanli Emperor's endorsement of the text. Several copies were published after the imperial edition, most of which adhered to the content and sequence of the first rhyme published in his collection. Scholars also

[276] Bai. 2003. *Fu Shan's World,* 20-34, esp. 25.
[277] Fang and Chen. 1630. *Songjiangfu zhi*, juan 56, 26b.
[278] Bai. 2003. *Fu Shan's World,* 44.
[279] This issue was addressed in the previous chapter and the lack of trust in rubbings will be discussed in the next chapter.

published or engraved it in stone independently, praising its use in prefaces to their publications. For example, in one edition that is now lost, the scholar-official He Qiaoyuan 何喬遠 (1558-1632) argues that "when its rules are firmly set and your mind has familiarized itself with it, whenever your brush is inhibited, you can use it as an aid to fulfill your intentions" (其規摹一定，若熟於心，則一時筆窘，可以助意).[280] Two iterations from the Wanli period that have survived are a rubbing dated 1592, published under the title *Collected Cursive Formulas of Antiquity* (*Jigu caojue* 集古草訣), and a manuscript written in 1613 by Han Daoheng 韓道亨 (dates unknown).[281] Besides Kuiyu, mentioned above, other members of the imperial clan also promoted the text, a practice that was later taken up by Qing rulers and bannermen. The Kangxi Emperor 康熙 (r.1661-1722) ordered a stele to be carved with the text in 1694, keeping the stele on the palace compound.[282] Two more steles that reproduce the rhyme are preserved in the in the Forest of Steles (*beilin* 碑林) in Xi'an 西安.[283] One is the work of the Ming imperial clan member Zhu Jinghe 朱敬鑉 (style Jinfu 進父, fl. 1573-1620), who made minor changes to the text and praised it for being easy to memorize and thus very convenient [Fig. 3.7]; the second, in the calligraphy of a Manchu bannerman whose name in Chinese was Dalishan 達禮善, is dated 1705.[284] In his rendering of the rhyme, which bears no inscription, he chose to write the text without including the transcription, as was customary for model letters. The text was also included in the Qianlong Emperor's *Compilation on Calligraphy and Painting from the Studio for Admiring Culture* (*Peiwenzhai shuhuapu* 佩文齋書畫譜). Scholars wrote poems to accompany the rhyme, as

[280] This edition of the rhyme has been lost, but the preface is recorded in a collection of Ming literature originally printed during the Qing dynasty. Huang. 1987. *Ming Wenha*i, juan 229, 12a.

[281] Several other editions are recorded in gazetteers but have not survived, such as one engraving made of rubbings in the script of Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559) dated 1630; one volume titled *Caojue fatie* 草訣法帖 by Han Yingsong 韓應嵩 (1524-1598); Qing editions including the *Zhengzi caojue zengshan baiyun* 正字草訣增刪百韻, with a preface by Chen Shuping 陳樹苹; and one stele made by imperial command in 1694 (Kangxi reign) and kept in the palace compound. Several printed editions are recorded in different bibliographical records of the Qing.

[282] The current location of the stele is unknown. E et al. 1782. *Guochao gongshi*, juan 36, 8b.

[283] Chen et al. 2006. *Xi'an beilin bowuguancang beike zongmu tiyao*, 26; 34. The inventory numbers for the steles are 686 and 687. See also Lu. 1998. *Xi'an beilin shi*, 287.

[284] Both are reproduced in the collection *Xi'an beilin quanji* 西安碑林全集. The Wanli reign stele, titled *caojue ge* 草訣歌, is reproduced in Gao et al. 1999. *Xi'an beilin quanji, 34,* 3370-3390. The Kangxi reign stele, *caojue baiyun ge* 草訣百韻歌, is reproduced in Gao et al. 1999. *Xi'an beilin quanji,* 45, 4309-4343.

did the Manchu bannerman Kuixu 揆敘, who received a copy of the rhyme along with other didactic texts from the Kangxi Emperor and composed a poem for each.[285] Finally, the text was even used for making forgeries, as in a version written on silk attributed to Zhao Mengfu, which made its first appearance during the mid Qing dynasty.[286]

Conclusion

When the Wanli Emperor embarked on the attempt to establish the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* as a new standard for cursive calligraphy, the text had been circulating in print for at least five centuries. Initially, it presented itself as a guide to the style of Wang Xizhi. However, the *Song* began to shed this association when its popularity increased during the Yuan, and it was slowly adopted as a general reference that addressed challenges specific to grass script and allowed to the student to interpret masters' calligraphy in a flexible way. Scholars and editors took the initiative to continuously reproduce and disseminate the text, be it as a rubbing or in cheaply printed encyclopedias. Thanks to their efforts, the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* became a standard in the collective memory of late imperial society.

One rhyme, written during the Qing dynasty and dedicated to describing steps for learning cursive script, makes the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* an inherent component of the process for learning cursive. Memorizing the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* came to be perceived as the first step in learning the rules of cursive—a step that, in itself, should be memorized:

> The form of cursive is extremely loose,
> but as loose as it may be, rules are still in use.
> When it comes to spirit, steles of the Han and Tang exceed.
> as for style, people of the Jin are in the lead.
> When studying cursive, the *Formula Song* you must read,
> once it is memorized, ancient models you should heed.[...]
>
> 草書形體極放縱，
> 放縱之中規矩用。
> 神奇莫測漢唐碑，
> 晉人風度明淨隨。

[285] Nalan. 1724. *Yijietang shiji*, juan3, 11b-12b.
[286] Wang. 1701. *Juyi lu*, juan 31, 6a.

學識草書讀歌訣，
歌訣熟時閱古帖。[287]

[287] Fu. 1687. *Zixue jinliang*, caofa ge xing, 1a.

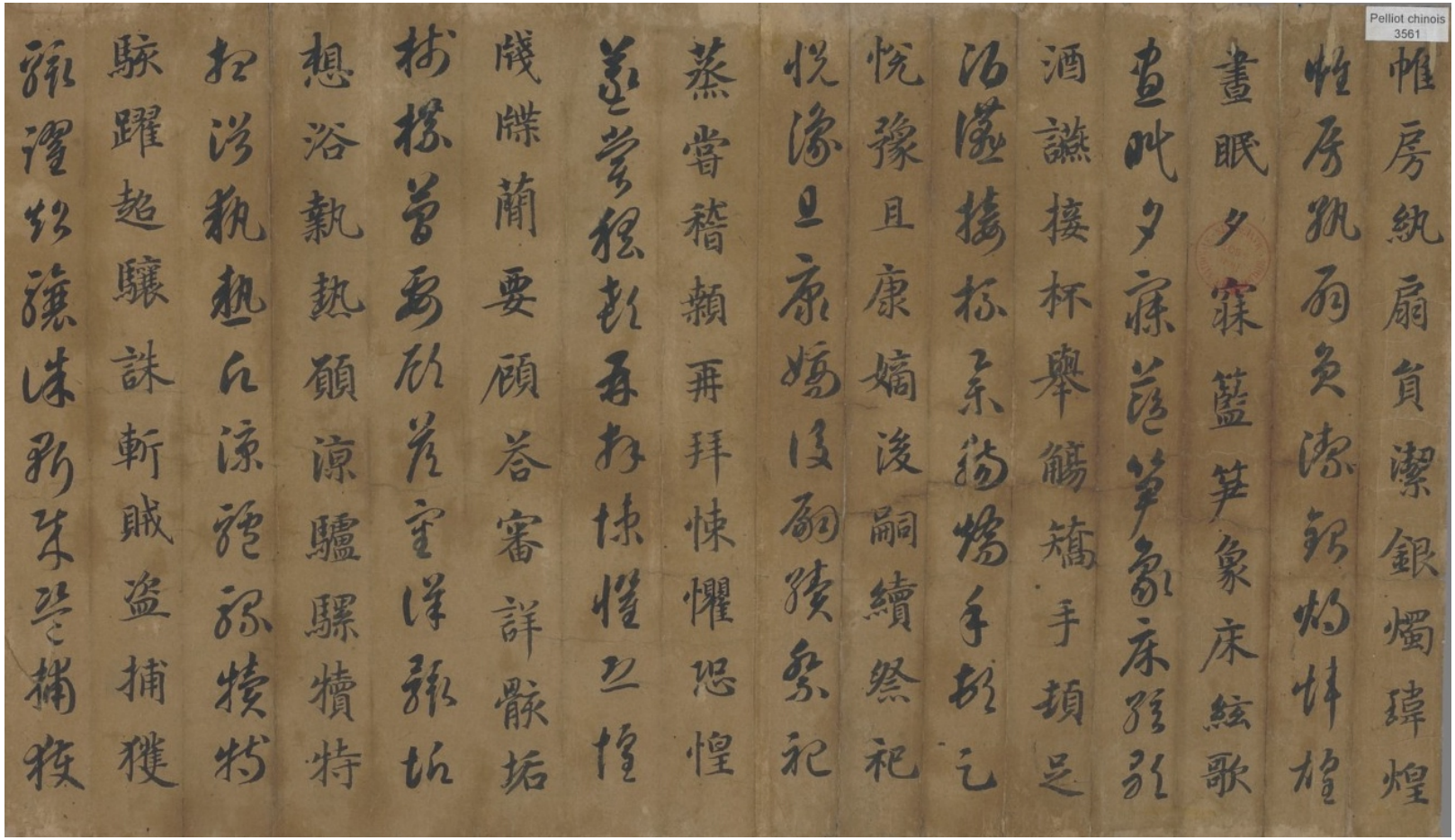
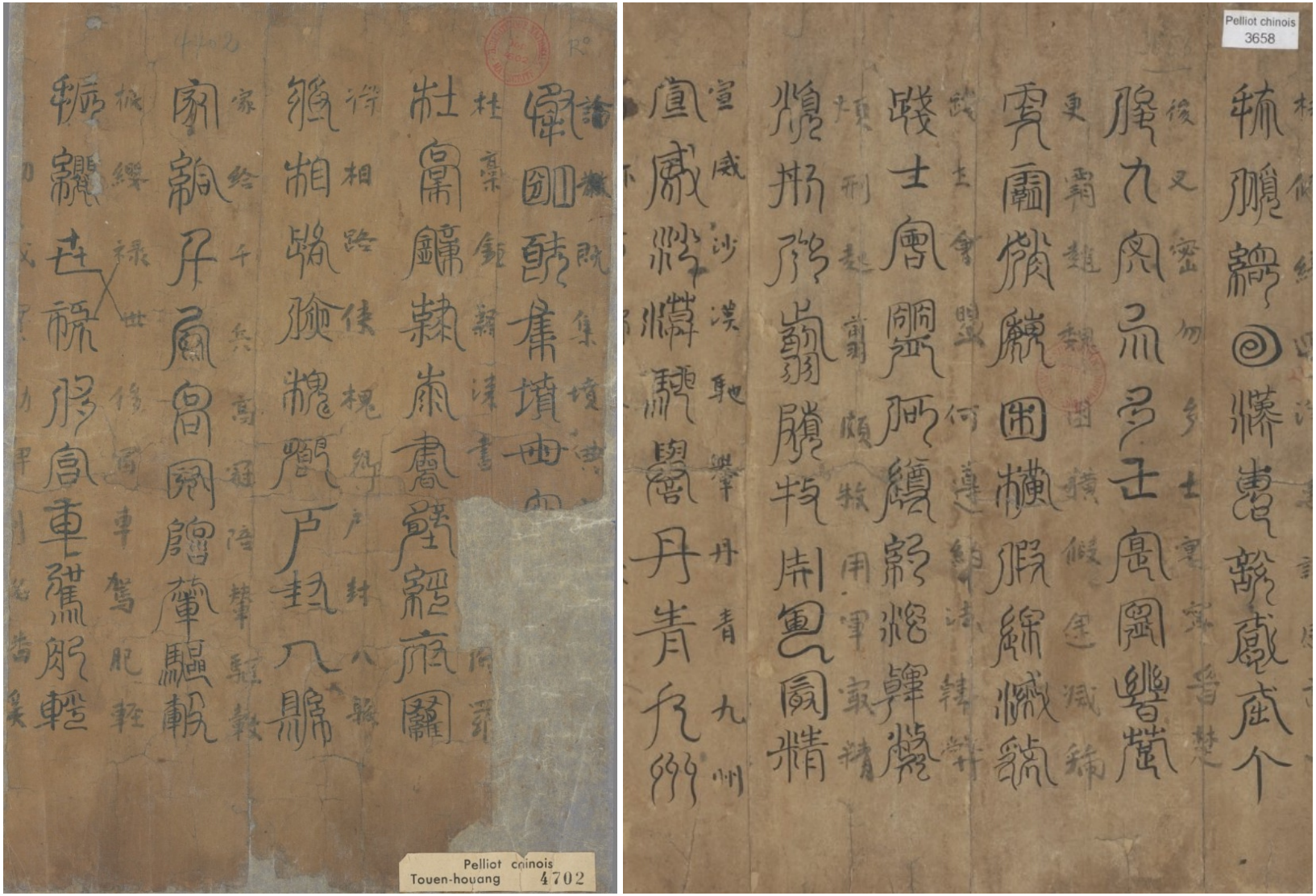


Fig. 3.1
Manuscript of the *Thousand Character Essay* in cursive and regular script found in the Dunhuang library cave. Source: Pelliot Chinois 3561. gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Fig. 3.2 Manuscripts of the *Thousand Character Essay* in seal and regular script found in the Dunhuang library cave. Left: Pelliot Chinois 4702. Right: Pelliot Chinois 3658. Source: gallica.bnf.fr Bibliothèque nationale de France.



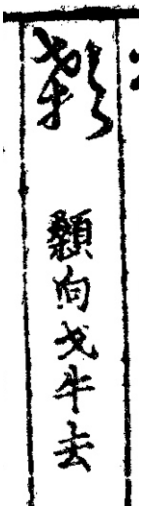


Fig. 3.3 Instructions on how to compose the character *sang* 顙 in the Yuan edition of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song.* Source: Chen and Hu. 1963. *Shilin Guanji*, xu ji, wenyi lei, juan 5, 2a.

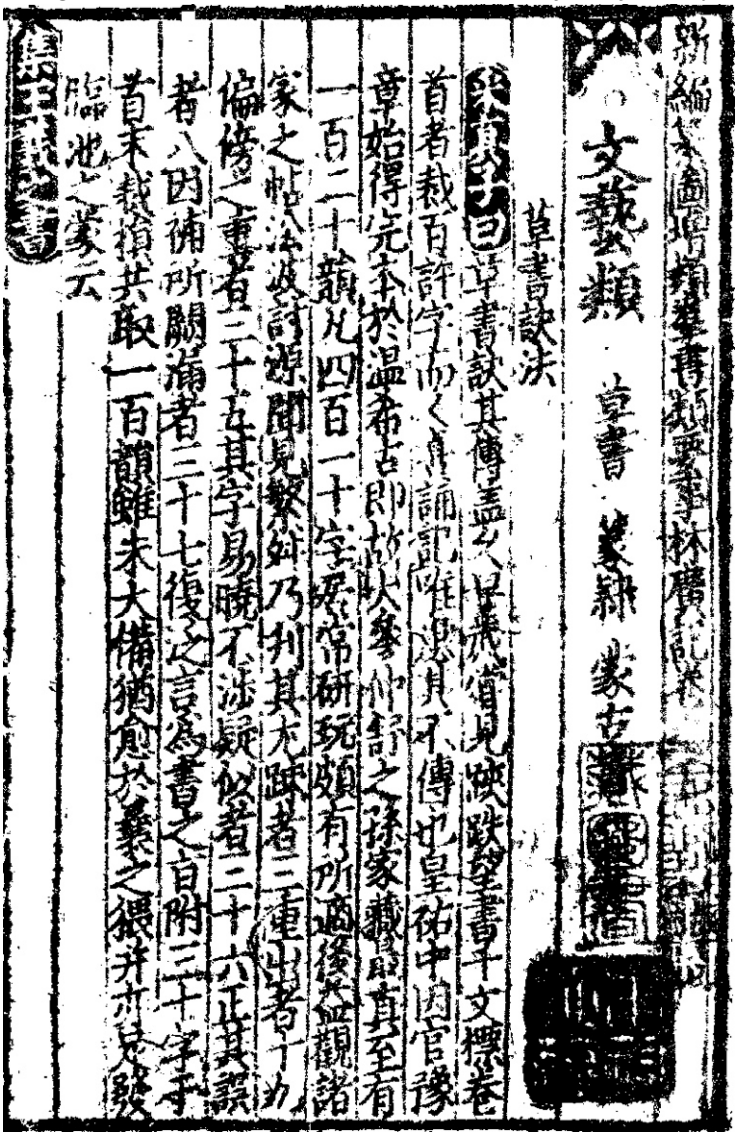


Fig. 3.4 Introductory note to the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* in the Yuan edition of the *Extensive Records from the Forest of Matters* (*Shilin guangji* 事林廣記). Source: Chen and Hu. 1963. *Shilin Guanji*, xu ji, wenyi lei, juan 5, 1a.

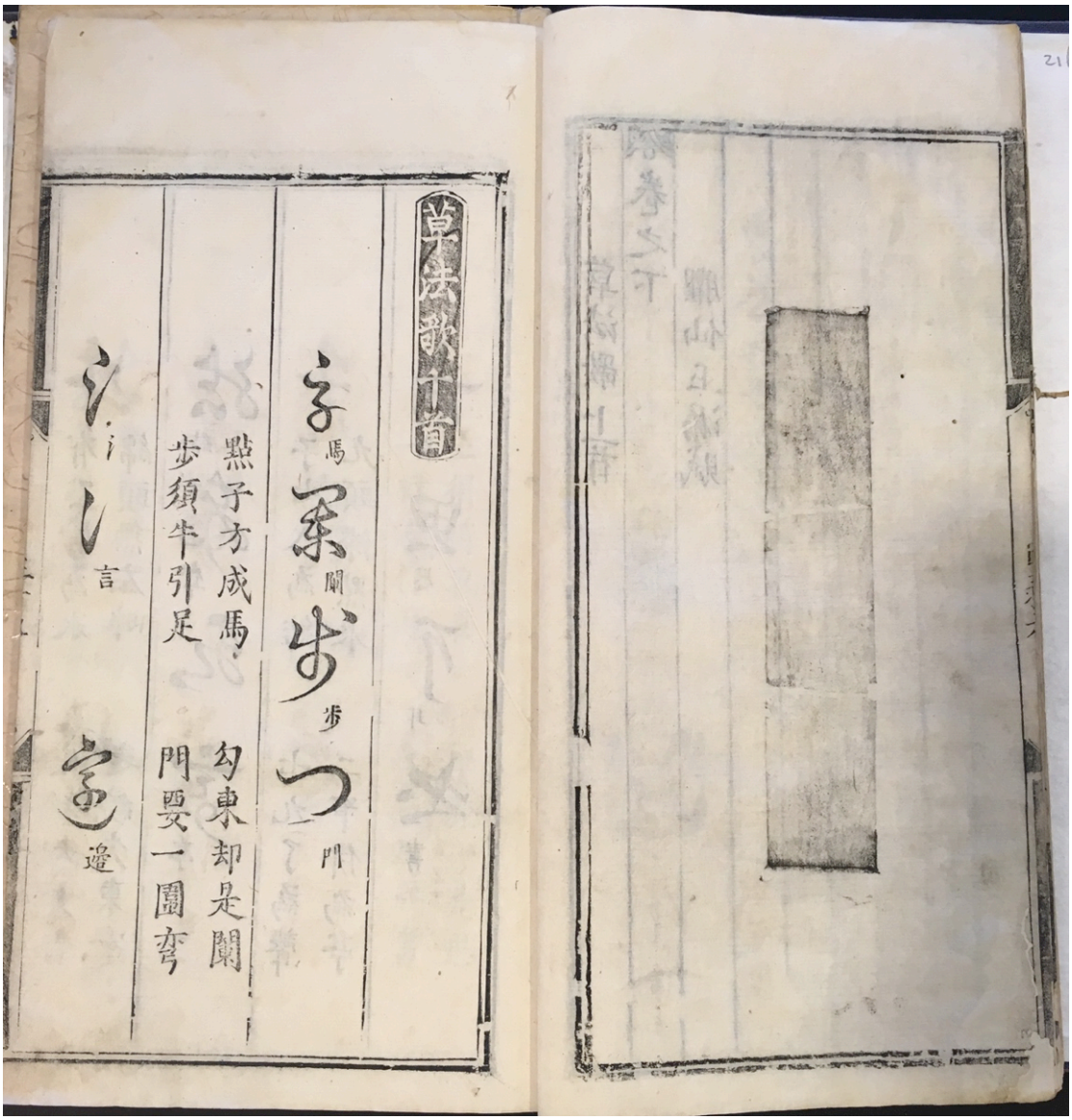


Fig. 3.5 First page of a short version of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* from the 1531 *Collected Methods for Cursive Script* (*Caoshu jifa* 草書集法) by Hu Tingyu. Source: Hu. 1531. *Caoshu jifa*, juan xia, 38a-39b. Photo by author.


草訣百韻歌

草聖㝡為難龍蛇競筆端

毫釐雖欲辨體勢更須完

有點方為水空挑卻是言

草訣百韻 一

頭無左畔遠闕東邊

長短分知去微茫視每安

步觀牛引足羞見羊蹅田

Fig. 3.6
First page of the first of three versions of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* written in the hand of the Wanli Emperor. Source: Gugong bowuyuan. 2001. *Jinhuji/Caoyun bianti*, 132.

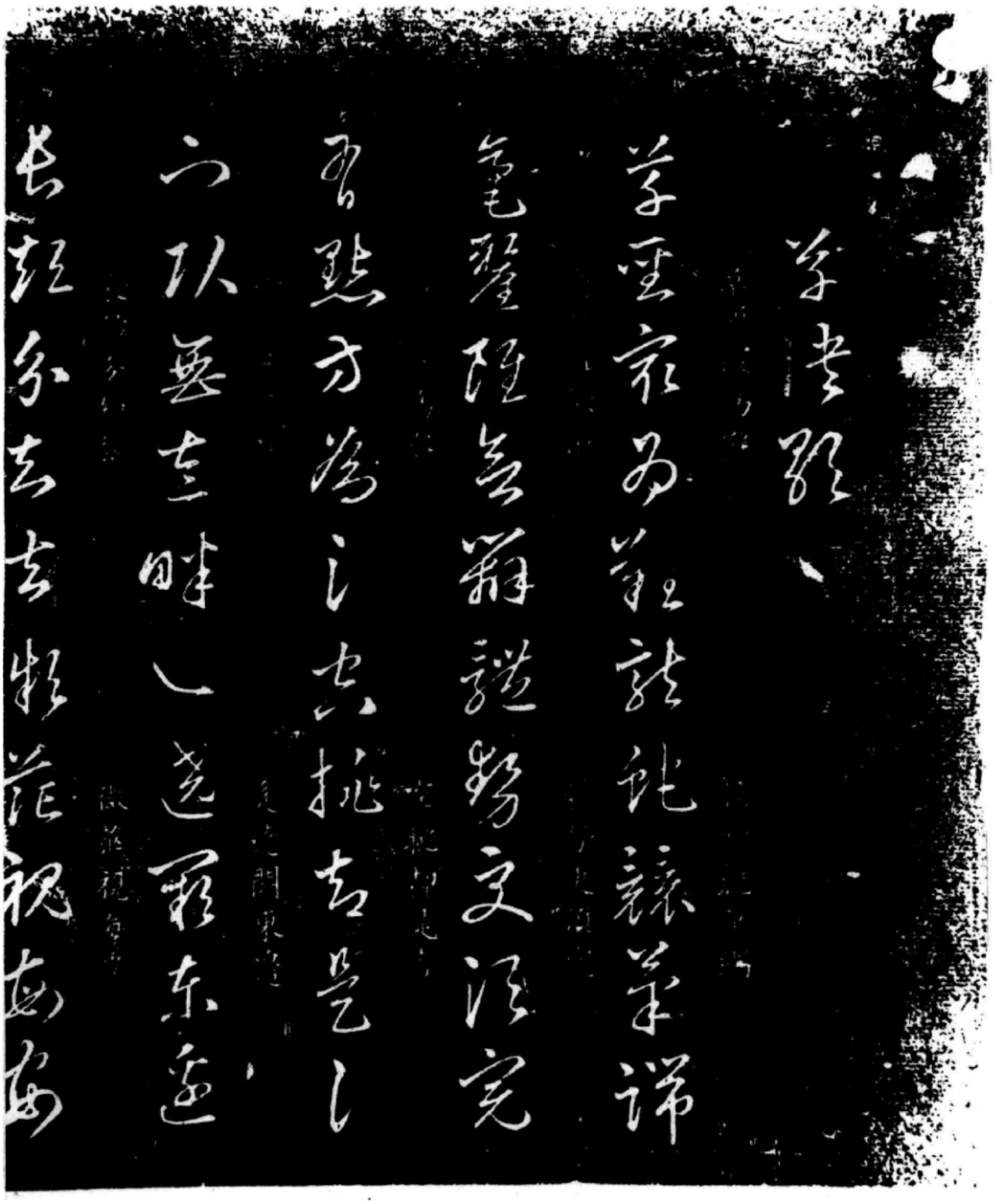


Fig. 3.7 Detail from rubbing of the *Hundred-Rhyme Song* in the hand of the Ming imperial clansman Zhu Jinghe 朱敬鑉. The text of the rhyme was carved in regular and grass script. Source: Gao et al. 1999. *Xi'an beilin quanji,* vol. 34, 3372.