

No. 25 Seeking Out the Beauty of Orchid Pavilion

Orchid Pavilion is at Lanzhu Hill, twenty-seven *li* south-west of Shanyin county in the province of Zhejiang. In the Yonghe reign of the Jin dynasty,¹ Wang Xizhi, the Chief Secretary of Kuaiji,² invited forty-two celebrities (including Xie An³) to assemble here and observe the traditional venerable spring festival of Lustration.⁴ He composed a Preface to the collection of poems written by the participants in that famous gathering, and his handwritten copy of that Preface has become a great treasure of calligraphy, up to the present day. The 'Pavilion' has also as a result acquired an everlasting fame.⁵

¹To be exact, the ninth year of the Yonghe 永和 reign of the Eastern Jin, or AD 353.

²Wang has been generally and popularly lauded as China's greatest calligrapher. In the Southern dynasties, the Chief Secretary, *neishi* 內史, was quite often the chief administrator of a region under a royal prince of the blood, who was stationed as a sort of Lieutenant or Deputy Governor. As many of the royal princes of the blood were young or incompetent, the *neishi* ruled the region in the name of the prince.

³One of the most celebrated prime ministers of the Eastern Jin dynasty.

⁴The festival had a long history. We do not know the origins of this partly religious, partly folk festival. The translator considers it a sort of mixture of the Roman Lupercal and the English May Day. It was repeatedly referred to in the beginning of the Spring and Autumn epoch, and was sung about in the 'Songs of Zheng', *Book of Songs* 詩經.

⁵Our author, like all the writers and scholars of the past, believed that the *ting* 亭 was a common noun and referred to an actual architectural construction—a 'pavilion', as I have translated it, deliberately using quotation marks. Nowadays we know better. The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove had nothing to do with a 'grove', and the Orchid Pavilion had nothing to do with a *ting* in the sense of a pavilion. There was no pavilion at the time of Wang's gathering; rather a pavilion was constructed later to commemorate this famous event. *Ting* in the Chinese language in ancient days was a word of measurement, and a place name, hence the famous line *shi li wu li, chang ting duan ting* 十里五里·長亭短亭. Liu Bang 劉邦, the founder of the Han dynasty, in his early manhood in Qin days served as a *tingzhang* 亭長, i.e. a petty officer of an area of five or ten *li*, circa 2 or 3 miles. So here, Lanting ('Orchid Pavilion') was really just a local place name, as in the office of *Hanshou Tinghou* 漢壽亭侯 bestowed by Cao Cao 曹操 on Guan Yu 關羽. *Hanshou* is the name of a county in present-day Changde, Hunan; *Tinghou* was a peculiar title in the medieval period of Chinese history when there were *xian*, *xiang*, *ting*, and *hou*. *Ting* was of the lowest rank. So *ting* here was also used in the sense of a town or village, not a pavilion at all.

Afterwards the Prefect Wang Yizhi built a pavilion in the rivulet, and the Minister of Works He Wuji moved the pavilion to the top of the hill. Since then the building has been repeatedly destroyed by fire but this elegant poetical gathering for the purpose of drinking and versifying has been much talked of and celebrated.

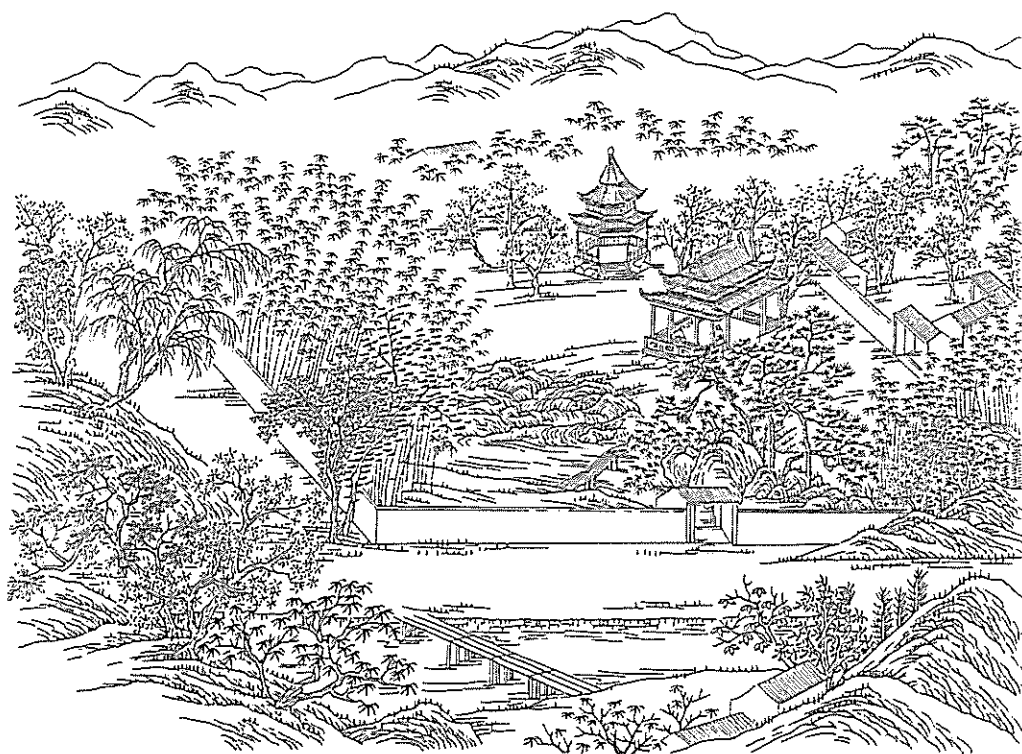
In the present dynasty, in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of His Majesty Kangxi, our Sage Ancestor and Benevolent Monarch had the pavilion rebuilt by special decree, and bestowed a copy of the Preface written in his own Imperial hand: this was to be carved on a stone stele, which was to be erected in the pavilion. In the tenth month of the year *jisi* (AD 1809), I went to Zhejiang. My parents were enjoying the hospitality of Mr Li Hengyuan of Kuaiji, and I hastened to his house to pay my filial respects. During the hours of leisure, besides my morning and evening homage and service to my parents, I went with Uncle Kang Jie to visit this place. High hills and precipitous ridges, flourishing forests and tall bamboos grace it now as they did at the time of Wang's description. And all along the path, an impression of great charm is created by flowery meadows, paddy fields, wooden bridges and thatched cottages. An old proverb says: "All the way through Shanyin, you see picturesque scenery without intermission." This in no way exaggerates the truth.

Investigation reveals that the authentic copy of the Preface in Wang's own hand was once in the collection of the famous Zen Master and calligrapher Zhiyong. Then Xiao Yi, by special order of the Tang Emperor Taizong, succeeded in obtaining it by a swindle, and at the Emperor's decease, it was buried with His Majesty in the Zhao Mausoleum,⁶ and hence is no longer to be seen. However, before it came into the possession of the Emperor, there had already been more than one facsimile copy made, and these were in turn carved on stone. One was the hand-written copy of the Master Zhiyong himself; another was the Kaihuang copy of the Sui dynasty; yet another was the Dingwu copy made by Ouyang Xun.⁷ During the Song dynasty, when Song Jingwen was Governor and Garrison Commandant of Dingzhou, he deposited this last copy in the

⁶The official nomenclature of His Majesty's tomb.

⁷Perhaps the greatest calligrapher of the Tang dynasty. Ouyang was at one time Household Chamberlain to the Heir Apparent.

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Official Treasury in Dingzhou.⁸

Later Xue Shaopeng⁹ substituted a facsimile copy for the Dingwu copy and moved it to Chang'an. In the Daguan reign of the Song dynasty,¹⁰ this Dingwu copy was brought to Kaifeng and placed in the Xuanhe Hall of the Imperial Palace.¹¹

⁸Hence this copy became known ever after as the Dingwu copy. Song Jingwen's 宋景文 name was Song Qi 宋祁, Jingwen being his posthumous title.

⁹A scholarly official who was a renowned calligrapher himself.

¹⁰During the reign of Huizong 徽宗 (1102–1125).

¹¹The famous museum where art objects—calligraphy, paintings, rare editions, etc., collected by Huizong—were housed.

Subsequently, at the invasion of the Jin Jurchens and the debacle of the Song, many treasures including this piece of calligraphy and the Stone Drums of the Qin from Qiyang were transported north. Since then the Dingwu copy has been irretrievably lost, like the Guangling melody.¹²

In my own collection I have a rubbing of the original Dingwu version. Before the text there is a portrait of Wang Xizhi, and the text itself is identical to the text in the collection of Chen Zhensun,¹³ in which the character *hui* is completely corroded, and a small seal has been impressed on the blank space. At the end there are two colophons written by the Prefect Wang Menglou,¹⁴ and three colophons written by Assistant Prefect Wang Mengquan,¹⁵ asserting that this copy is a rubbing of a Song dynasty stone-carving, and quoting the words of Zhao Songxue as evidence.¹⁶ This copy was really the woodblock-printed copy from the Hall of Partial Leisure of the Jia family.¹⁷

As for the Zhiyong copy, it is known to be in the collection of the Fang family of Tongcheng county in Anhui province, but I have never seen it. The Kaihuang copy is now in the collection of the Zha family of Haining county; it has been reproduced recently as part of the *Collection of Calligraphy in the Hall of Spring Grass*.

¹²The 'Guangling melody' has two interpretations. According to the popular and conventional version it was a rare *qin* 琴 tune with a musical scale known only to Ji Kang 嵇康, who during his lifetime refused to teach it to anybody or publicize it. When he was on the point of being executed he deplored the fact that this tune and the musical scale that went with it would be irretrievably lost. The other and almost unnoticed interpretation says that when he was about to be executed he sighed, and predicted the hopeless fate of the Wei dynasty, which was soon to be overthrown by the Sima 司馬 family—founders of the Jin dynasty. The Wei troops sustained two crushing defeats at the hands of the Sima forces, at Guangling (present day Yangzhou). These defeats sealed the fate of the Wei dynasty. The translator is inclined to favour this last, and less conventional, interpretation.

¹³Chen Zhizhai 陳直齋, author of *Shulu jieti* 書錄解題 (Descriptive Catalogue of Books). (LQ)

¹⁴Wang Wenzhi 王文治, native of Jiangsu, *tanhua* 探花, or Third on the *jinshi* 進士 list. (LQ)

¹⁵Wang Yangdu 王養度, native of Zhejiang, Recommended Candidate. (LQ)

¹⁶Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫, whose studio name was Songxue 松雪, or Pine Snow, was an extremely versatile, original and influential painter and calligrapher, and also a poet and scholar.

¹⁷Jia Sidao 賈似道, infamous Prime Minister of the Southern Song.