

# Contextualizing Decorated Paper and Its Artistic Values During the Song Dynasty

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doi:10.56397/SAA.2024.12.06

## Abstract

The decorated paper (“huajian”) gained prominence during the Song dynasty, which encompasses the fine paper as well as its delicate decorations. The artistic and material value of such paper did not attract a thorough study and scholarly attention. By historicizing Emperor Huizong’s *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script*, this research helps to better understand the paper-making industry in the Northern Song dynasty, the chronological development of paper, and the making process of this famous artwork. While the medium often attracts secondary attention and is often regarded as the background for the imagery, this paper reconsiders the value behind the artistic medium and its agency, which could further reveal historical information about society, technology, and artistic considerations.

**Keywords:** decorated paper, decorations and ornaments, dragon paintings

## 1. Introduction

*Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* by Emperor Huizong (Zhao Ji) has been celebrated not only as Emperor Huizong’s representative calligraphy work but also as one of the most prominent cursive script calligraphy works in Chinese history (Figure 1). Scholars have paid close attention to the calligraphic value of this work from varied perspectives. By historicizing *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* with other calligraphies of *Thousand Character Classic*, Tian Xuzhong and Zhao Shengli elucidate the characteristics of Zhao Ji’s calligraphy style and situate his personal calligraphy advancement within the general development of calligraphy history.<sup>1</sup> By situating this work within the

oeuvre of Zhao Ji’s calligraphy pieces, other scholars, such as Long Xinyu and Duan Xiaoyun, reveal how Zhao Ji approaches cursive script and regular script in different ways and shed light on the personal development of Zhao Ji’s calligraphy achievements.<sup>2</sup> While *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script*’s calligraphy

Ancient Masters Competing to Write the “Thousand Character Classic” 古代名家競書《千字文》的文化現象解讀, *Journal of Fuyang Normal University* 阜陽師範學院學報, 06(01); Tian Xuzhong, (2020). A Brief Overview of the “Cursive Script Thousand Character Classic” by Renowned Calligraphers Throughout the Ages 歷代名家《草書千字文》述略. *Literature and History Magazine* 文史雜誌 06(01).

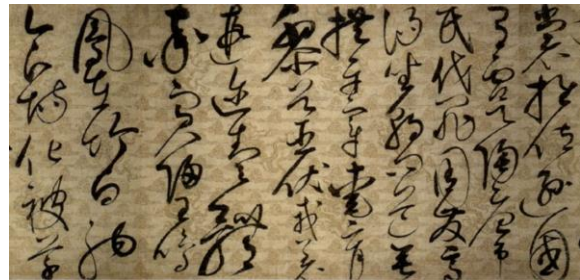
<sup>2</sup> See Long Xinyu, (2020). An Examination of the Authenticity and Ghostwriting in the Calligraphy of Emperor Huizong 宋徽宗趙佶親筆與代筆書法考辨; Duan Xiaoyun, (2020). A Study on the Calligraphic Art of Zhao Ji and Its Socio-Cultural Value 趙佶書法藝術及其社會文化價值研究.

<sup>1</sup> See Zhao Shengli, (2011). The Cultural Phenomenon of

value has been closely studied, the material of this work and its artistic and technological achievements have not been closely examined. By analyzing the material (i.e., its decorated paper) of *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script*, I argue that the decorated paper of this calligraphy work is one of the most rare and precious papers from the Northern Song dynasty, which embodies the various advanced techniques related to paper-making and reveals the material significances during the making process.

The subject of this research is the decorated paper, or “huajian”, which encompasses the fine paper as well as its delicate decorations. Those decorations are an essential component of a decorated paper, as they grant the paper varied symbolic meanings and confine the paper’s target audiences. While this topic only attracted secondary attention in studying Chinese paintings, some scholars have already highlighted the importance of studying materials and its visual property. In “Materials against Materiality”, Tim Ingold urges a scholarly distinction between materials and materiality and a close study of the materials themselves.<sup>1</sup> His plea and reflections pave the way for this research and introduce a serious consideration of the role of material in studying Chinese paintings and calligraphy. The investigation of materials encompasses the materiality, the surface, the artistic transformation, the physical and chemical potentials of the raw materials, and the underlying artistic decisions. In “On rubbings: their materiality and historicity”, Wu Hung breaks down the study on rubbings: “The material and visual properties of a rubbing include not only the imprint it bears but also its material, its mounting style, its colophons and seals, and, if the rubbing is an old one, the physical changes it undergoes during the transmission.”<sup>2</sup> As Wu Hung illuminates the different angles in studying rubbings, he introduces an underlying thinking to approach an artwork or artifact: the materials should be paid close attention; while the material properties of the materials constitute the study

on the materiality, the visual properties of materials invite a study on the surface of the materials, including its texture, decorations, and shapes. While the paper is often studied as the medium of the imagery, those pioneering insights help to reconsider the role of materials and the value behind them, which lays the groundwork for this research.



**Figure 1.** Zhao Ji (Emperor Huizong of the Song), *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* (details), ink on paper, 1122 CE, 35.1 x 1172cm. Liaoning, Liaoning Provincial Museum.

*Thousand Characters Classic in Cursive Script* not only invites a peek into decorated paper but also manifests an unusual circumstance in Chinese calligraphy history. A cursive script calligraphy piece was complemented by the intricate gold pattern, pushing the artist to ponder the calligraphy-decoration relationship. A calligraphy work could be finished on large-sized paper, enabling a seamless writing and viewing experience. An artist-emperor strived to facilitate a delicate balance between his dual identities, shifting the context of art-making. As an intriguing case in both material art history and calligraphy history, *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* offers a vantage point to perceive such a material turn and its corresponding artistic considerations.

## 2. As a Powder-and-Wax-Coated Paper

The paper used in this calligraphy work is powder-and-wax-coated paper (粉蠟箋), which is the result of two techniques—powder-coating (填粉) and wax-coating (塗蠟). The powder-coating technique originated in the Northern and Southern dynasties (386–589 CE), which belongs to “surface coating technology” (表面塗布技術). Before the emergence of “surface coating technology”, “surface gluing technology” (表面施膠技術) was a dominant way of making processed paper. The raw papers (生紙) without “surface coating technology” or “surface gluing technology” were not smooth

<sup>1</sup> Tim Ingold. (2007, April 4). Materials against Materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14(1), 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1380203807002127>.

<sup>2</sup> Hung Wu. (2003). *Writing and Materiality in China*, ed. Judith T Zeitlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 47-8.

and filled with fissures between fibers. The brushwork on those raw papers with an uneven surface would be blurry and unclear. Therefore, only those processed papers (熟紙) with “surface coating technology”, “surface gluing technology”, or the paper-polishing technique (研光) could make clear brushworks and are more suitable for writing as well as painting. Against this backdrop, the paper of “surface gluing technology,” popularized during the Jin dynasty (266–420 CE), applied plant starch adhesive, making the paper obtain better ink receptivity and smoothness. However, those glued papers are vulnerable to insects and are more brittle, which led to a more advanced technique called “surface coating technology”. This powder-coating technique brushes white, fine mineral powder with adhesives or glues evenly on the surface of paper. Finally, the paper was polished with fine stones (研光), making the surface refined and smooth. In the illustration of this technique (Figure 2), a craftsman on the back hammers the mineral stones into powders. Those powders were stored with adhesives or glues in the ceramics on the table, which turned solid powders into glue that could be applied evenly. A craftsman then brushes glue on a paper surface while the result is examined by the figure on the right. By using the powder-coating technique, the paper is whiter, smoother, opaquer, and better at ink receptivity.<sup>1</sup> The paper processed with this technique was called “powder-coated paper” (粉箋).



**Figure 2.** Illustration of powder-coating technique, from *History of Papermaking* (造紙史話), 1983.

The wax-coating technique is about improving

the waterproofness of a paper by applying wax to its surface. The paper made from this technique is called “wax-coated paper” (蠟箋). According to *Youhuan Jiwen*, “‘hard yellow paper’ refers to placing the paper on a hot iron and evenly coating it with yellow wax, resulting in a smooth and polished surface as if it were a pillow corner, with every detail clearly visible.”<sup>2</sup> As it reveals, wax-coated paper could be yellow and produce a polished surface, which is beneficial for smooth brushwork. Besides using wax-coated paper for making original calligraphy work, it is also used for producing thin paper that suits reproduction of calligraphy. According to *Zhang Yanyuan’s Lidai Minghua Ji*, “It is advisable for connoisseurs to have a hundred sheets of Xuan paper ready, wax them, and use them for copying and tracing. In ancient times, the art of rubbing and copying paintings was highly valued, and one could achieve successful results in about seven or eight attempts, capturing the spirit and brushwork accurately.”<sup>3</sup> Based on the research of paper expert Pan Jixing, what Zhang Yanyuan refers to is a white wax-coated paper as opposed to the yellow one mentioned above.<sup>4</sup> According to Pan, wax-coated paper is famous for its waterproofness and transparency, which led to Zhang Yanyuan’s suggestion — using the wax-coated papers for copying and tracing.<sup>5</sup>

Combining wax-coated paper’s wax-coating technique with powder-coated paper’s powder-coating technique, powder-and-wax-coated paper obtains the advantages of both wax-coating technique and powder-coating technique. Because of the two techniques, powder-and-wax-coated paper is also processed paper (熟紙). The processed paper forms a stark contrast with the raw paper (生紙). Raw paper is a kind of paper without powder-coating, wax-coating, or other paper-processing techniques. According to

<sup>2</sup> See 硬黃紙，謂置紙熱熨斗上，以黃蠟塗勻，儼如枕角，毫釐必見 in Zhang Shinan, (1981). *Records of an Official’s Travels* 遊宦紀聞. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 北京: 中華書局, 40.

<sup>3</sup> See 好事家宜置宣紙百幅，用法蠟之，以備摹寫。古時好拓畫，十得七八，不失神採筆 in Zhang Yanyuan, (1985). *Records of Famous Paintings Throughout History* 歷代名畫記. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 北京: 中華書局, 75-6.

<sup>4</sup> Pan Jixing. (1998). *The History of Science and Technology in China: Volume on Papermaking and Printing* 中國科學技術史: 造紙與印刷卷. Beijing: Science Press 北京: 科學出版社, 169.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1</sup> Pan Jixing. (2009). *The History of Papermaking in China* 中國造紙史. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House 上海: 上海人民出版社, 168.



*Wenjian Houlu*, "During the Tang Dynasty, there were two types of paper: processed paper and raw paper; processed paper, known for its exquisite and radiant appearance, was produced through various methods; raw paper, on the other hand, was not used unless for mourning purposes."<sup>1</sup> As it indicates, at least from the Tang dynasty, there is a clear division between the raw paper and the processed paper (熟紙). However, both the raw paper and the processed paper could be used for writing, and yet the raw paper is cheaper and unsuitable for delicate calligraphy work or painting.<sup>2</sup> According to *Tiangong Kaiwu*, "The wastepaper was washed to remove inks, cinnabars, and impurities, then soaked and mashed in a vat for re-pulping; this method saved a lot of effort compared to the traditional process of cooking and soaking; despite being recycled, the paper still maintained its quality, and the number of resources consumed was also minimal, which is called 'recycled paper' (還魂紙)."<sup>3</sup> This account reveals a practice of recycling paper in premodern China that was intended to remake that paper filled with "inks, cinnabars, and impurities." A persistent issue in Chinese art history questions why there are rarely existing drafts of Chinese artworks while the drafts of western artworks were scarcely abandoned. Combining those historical accounts, a speculative answer is formulated: those drafts in premodern China were done on cheaper papers (predominantly raw papers or once-recycled papers), which were later recycled.

The production of powder-and-wax-coated paper is complex, but it can be preserved for a long time. Since its inception in the Tang Dynasty, it has been used as an exclusive paper for the imperial court.<sup>4</sup> This type of paper was used by emperors to write imperial decrees.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this type of paper is not just

labor-intensive but also has an exclusive identity as royal paper material.

### 3. As a Large-Sized Paper

The length of this paper is 1172cm without any ruptures or splices, which is a noteworthy achievement in paper-making and entails special techniques. The size and format of paper are related to the papermaking machine. Derived from raw materials, pulps are suspension liquids that are insoluble in water and need a papermaking machine to spread evenly. The papermaking machine is equipped with various types of screens for paper formation, including fixed flat screens, curtain strip screens, and collapsible curtain strip screens (curtain beds). Those papermaking machines are predominantly rectangular. Therefore, those papers made from the papermaking machines are also in rectangle shape and the same size. During the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), a normal sheet of paper would be around 27 cm by 36cm.<sup>6</sup> With technological restraints, a longer paper entails innovations in papermaking machines and paper-making techniques. However, from the Tang dynasty on, craftsmen started to innovate the tools and techniques to make longer paper. During the Southern Tang dynasty (937–976 CE), large-sized paper was mass-produced and used for posting notices. According to Su Yijian's *Wenfang Sipu*, "During the reign of the pretender Li of Jiangnan, it was common practice for him to distribute a large piece of paper called 'Huifu paper' on the day when the results of the imperial examinations were announced. This paper was enormous, measuring two zhangs in length and one zhang in width. It was as thick as several layers of silk and was used to record the names of those who passed the examinations [...] When I briefly visited the Jiang region, I observed that despite the ruins of the buildings, there were still thousands of pieces of such paper preserved on the upper floors."<sup>7</sup> When Su visited the region of the Southern Tang dynasty, he saw thousands of existing papers called "Huifu Papers", which are about 31cm by 311cm. It shows that large-sized paper had already realized mass

<sup>1</sup> See 唐人有熟紙、有生紙。熟紙，所謂妍妙輝光者，其法不一；生紙，非有喪故不用。in Shao Bo, (1999). *Shaoshi's Records of Observations and Experiences* 邵氏聞見後錄. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 北京：中華書局, 218.

<sup>2</sup> Pan Jixing. (1998). *Volume on Papermaking and Printing* 造紙與印刷. Beijing: Science Press 北京：科學出版社, 167.

<sup>3</sup> See 其廢紙洗去朱墨、汙穢，浸爛入槽再造，全省從前煮浸之力，依然成紙，耗亦不多。In Song Yingxing, (1976). *The Exploitation of the Works of Nature* 天工開物. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House 廣州：廣東人民出版社, 327.

<sup>4</sup> Liu Hanjun and Duo Yingxuan. (2017). A Sheet Worth a Thousand Pieces of Gold: Powdered Wax Paper 一紙千金粉蠟箋. *Chinese Handicraft* 中華手工 08(01).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

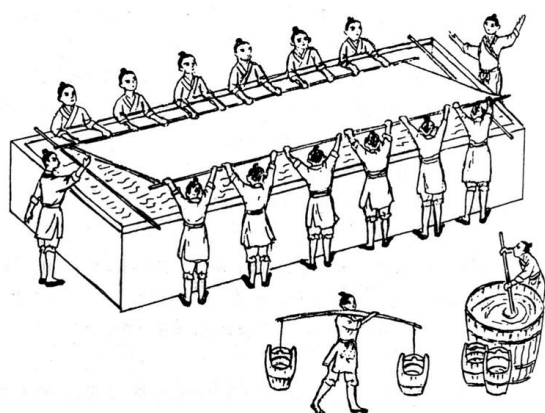
<sup>6</sup> Pan Jixing. (2009). *History of Papermaking* 造紙史. Shanghai People's Publishing House 上海：上海人民出版社, 222.

<sup>7</sup> See 江南偽主李氏常較舉人畢，放榜日，給會府紙一張。可長二丈，闊一丈。厚如縑帛數重，令書合格人姓名...僕公頃使江表，睹今壞樓之上，猶存千數幅。In Su Yijian, (2015). *The Four Treasures of the Study Manual* 文房四譜. Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House 上海：上海書店出版社, 58.

production during the Southern Tang dynasty, attesting to a major advancement in paper-making. However, *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* demonstrates a further development of large-sized paper. With a length of 11.72m, this paper outcompetes Huifu Paper's length of 3.11m greatly. To fully understand the technological achievement in this paper, the making process of a long paper should be introduced.

According to Pan Jixing, the general difficulties of making large-size paper came from three aspects: 1) the fibers must have a high degree of beating, and their suspension in the pulp must be excellent; therefore, meticulous attention should be paid to the selection of materials; 2) they should be capable of being woven into large-scale papermaking screens using long, thin bamboo strips joined together with silk threads, requiring a high level of skill; 3) when lifting the papermaking screens, multiple individuals must coordinate their actions to achieve a synchronized movement, as if performed by a single person. This coordination is also required during the drying and cutting-off processes.<sup>1</sup>

To enable such an extraordinary paper of 11.72m long, there were two potential ways of producing it. The first utilizes a longer paper-making tool and a longer pool (Figure 3). In this illustration, a long paper-making tool is used and involves multiple people. Because the final paper should be even and smooth, the papermaking screens should be lifted evenly and simultaneously. Therefore, two people on the side serve as conductors and command all the craftsmen to act at the same time.



**Figure 3.** Illustration of making large-sized paper, Pan Jixing, Zhaoguo Zaozhi Shi.

Another way of making long paper is documented in historical accounts of the Northern Song dynasty. According to Su Yijian's *Wenfang Sipu*, "In the region between Yixian and Shexian, there are excellent papers known as "Ningshuang" and "Chengxin". There are also paper scrolls as long as fifty feet. The local people spend several days preparing the bark, then immerse it in a large boat. Dozens of men work together to make paper by using paper-making machines. Another man beats a drum to set the pace. Afterwards, the paper is evenly dried when surrounded by large burners, suspended without touching the walls. Thus, from beginning to end, the paper is uniformly thin."<sup>2</sup> Based on this account, this method replaces a paper tray with a modified long boat. The conductors are still in need while using the drums to issue the commands. To make uniformly thin paper, craftsmen should not only act simultaneously but also use large burners to dry the paper evenly.

No matter what the exact way of realizing such a large paper is, this paper deploys complex techniques and special tools. This 11.72-meter-long paper itself exhibits a spectacle, striking its contemporary audiences. Correspondingly, this large paper embodied monumentality in its smoothness and seamlessness, performing an intriguing contrast to its fragility and ephemeral material form.

#### 4. As a Bast Paper

Based on the raw materials of paper-making, paper could be divided into hemp paper (麻紙), bast paper (皮紙), rattan paper (藤紙), bamboo paper (竹紙), rice and wheat straw paper (稻麥草紙), etc. The raw materials of the paper used in *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* are bast paper.<sup>3</sup> Long before the popularity of bast paper, hemp paper was the dominant paper from the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) to the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE). During the Han Dynasty, Cai Lun, who served as the Prefect of the Imperial Household, examined and revolutionized the process of papermaking. In

<sup>2</sup> See 夥歛間多良紙，有凝霜、澄心之號。復有長者，可五十尺為一幅。蓋歛民數日理其楮，然後於長船中以浸之，數十夫舉抄以抄之，傍一夫以鼓而節之，於是以大薰籠周而焙之，不上於牆壁也。由是自首至尾，勻薄如一。In Su Yijian, (2015). *The Four Treasures of the Study Manual 文房四譜*. Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Publishing House 上海: 上海書店出版社, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Pan Jixing. (2009). *The History of Papermaking in China 中國造紙史*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House 上海: 上海人民出版社, 312.

<sup>1</sup> Pan Jixing. (1998). *Volume on Papermaking and Printing 造紙與印刷*. Beijing: Science Press 北京: 科学出版社, 214.

the Western Han and early Eastern Han periods, paper was primarily made from shredded cloth and hemp fibers. Cai Lun synthesized the technological advancements of making hemp paper during the Western Han and Eastern Han, organized the production of high-quality hemp paper, and introduced the use of discarded fishing nets as a new raw material for hemp paper production, thereby altering the technique of making hemp paper.

However, compared with bast paper, hemp paper has a rough surface and is thick and hard, which is not suitable for calligraphy practice.<sup>1</sup> During the Tang dynasty, people treasured bast paper for its high compatibility with delicate calligraphy works and started to give it nicknames such as “Duke Chuguo” or “Mr. Chu”, as demonstrated by Han Yu’s, Xue Ji’s, and Li Mei’s accounts.<sup>2</sup> As a base paper, the paper of *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* is thin, has a smooth surface, and is more appropriate for making calligraphy work.

### 5. As a Decorated Paper

This paper is painted with “golden paints” (泥金) and decorated with the technique called “Painting-in-Gold” (描金). The cloud-and-dragon patterns on this paper are painted instead of printed.<sup>3</sup> According to the prominent connoisseur Yang Renkai, due to the consistency of these painted decorations, the cloud-and-dragon patterns are very likely to be executed by one craftsman instead of multiple ones.<sup>4</sup>

“Golden paints” (泥金) refers to a gold-colored paint or coating made from gold powder or metallic powder. It is used for decorative purposes on paper, particularly in the context of embellishing paper or blending it into paint for ornamenting objects. The process typically involves mixing the gold or metallic powder with a binding agent or medium to create a paint-like consistency that can be applied to surfaces such as paper or other objects. The application of golden paint adds a lustrous and luxurious gold finish, enhancing the visual

appeal and value of the decorated items.

To obtain gold powder, one has to melt the gold and hammer the fragmented gold into gold foil. The gold used by painters for painting is initially in the form of gold foil, as thin as paper, commonly known as “flying gold” (飛金). After the painter grinds it finely, it can be used. In a Qing dynasty account, “Xiaoshan Huapu,” it is stated: “Golden paint (泥金), there are two types of gold, green and red, and genuine gold is required. Shake the flying gold into a dish, dip it with two fingers in thick glue, and grind it. When it dries, use hot water to help. After grinding it finely, rinse it with boiling water. If the glue is removed but the rust remains, it will not shine. The method to remove the rust is as follows: Soak the pig bristle soap in water and put it in a deep cup. Heat it over a low flame, and after half a moment of rolling, place the cup on the ground and gently peel off the paper cover. This will remove the black water and leave the gold. Repeat this washing and heating process three or four times, and the water will become clear, and the gold will become shiny.”<sup>5</sup>

The “Painting-in-Gold technique” (描金) is to use “golden paint” to paint or decorate paper or objects. Since the golden paints are reflective, the decorative patterns will glitter when the scroll gradually unfolds. This unfolding and shifting viewing experience is derived from the material aspects of this calligraphy work.

The cloud pattern is one of the most common decorative patterns that was combined with letter paper in the Tang Dynasty and known as “Wuyun Jian” (Five Clouds Letter Paper).<sup>6</sup> In addition, cloud patterns were often combined with other motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, bats, flowers, fruits, ruyi, and ancient artifacts for borders and backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> The cloud pattern in *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* is similar to the Wuyun Jian, with five clouds combined into a cloud cluster and the addition of horizontally flowing clouds, creating a sense of movement (Figure 4). Looking alike, each cloud holds small modifications and is unique. Those clouds do not totally separate from each other and yet have one or two faint lines connecting with each other, creating a

<sup>1</sup> Pan Jixing. (1998). *Volume on Papermaking and Printing 造紙與印刷*. Beijing: Beijing: Science Press 北京: 科學出版社, 142.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Yang Renkai. (1997). *Complete Collection of Calligraphy by Masters: Cursive Script Thousand Character Classic 中國名家法書全集: 草書千字文*. Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House 北京: 文物出版社, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Zou Yigui. (2009). *Xiaoshan's Painting Manual 小山畫譜*. Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House 濟南: 山東畫報出版社, 94.

<sup>6</sup> Peng Zhiwen. (2016). *Calligraphy and Design on Letter Paper 箋紙上的書法與設計*, 116.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



sense of fluidity and resonating with Xiehe's aesthetics for brushworks in paintings: vibrant and lively (Qiyun Shengdong or 氣韻生動). At the bottom of the dragon is another cloud pattern: two contradicting small flowing clouds form a fluid cluster, as if holding the weight of the dragon (Figure 5). On the right of the dragon is a splitting current of clouds. As opposed to the flat cloud pattern, the dragon pattern shows more of its body by exhibiting a twisting body (Figure 5). The hairs on the head and the legs are in different directions, showing the various moving directions of body parts.



**Figure 4.** The cloud pattern in *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script*



**Figure 5.** The dragon pattern in *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script*

Each cloud-and-dragon pattern is comprised of 4 dragons and 24 layers of clouds. And this pattern repeats itself from the start to the end.

Many imperial edicts use a cloud-and-dragon pattern as the border decoration.<sup>1</sup> Since dragons are respectful in Chinese culture and are often related to the emperor, this paper with a cloud-and-dragon pattern is no longer a daily or inclusive material. This cloud-and-dragon pattern endows the paper with authority and transforms it into an exclusive material that only a limited number of people can use.

## 6. Material Significances During the Making Process

The paper of *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* is labor-consuming, expensive, and precious. As the previous analysis indicates, the paper is powder-and-wax-coated, bast paper, large-size paper, and gilt-decorated paper. The creation of this large-sized paper entails a group of laborers, special tools, and techniques. Moreover, conductors are needed to make those actions synchronized. The making process requires more labor and care. As a powder-and-wax-coated paper, the paper applies the complicated techniques of powder-coating and wax-coating. All the powders and wax require craftsmen to utilize their techniques to apply them evenly. Powder and wax also take time to dry. As a gilt-decorated paper, the paper consumes a very expensive metallic material—gold. This hard metal needs a complicated process to melt down and be transformed into powder. Besides, those golden paints require a laborious process to be painted as decorations. Each line in those delicate patterns should be executed slowly and meticulously. Those decorations are well-painted and consistent. An experienced painter would devote a large amount of time and energy to designing the composition, carefully painting those patterns, and avoiding any potential mistakes. Using expensive metallic materials, a large amount of labor, and varied techniques, this paper holds high monetary and artistic value.

From a chronological perspective, this calligraphy piece has three layers, revealing its identity as a specialized imperial material and narrowing the range of authorship. As the raw materials transformed themselves into paper, the paper was already a writing material. As this paper was decorated with dragon patterns, it became a special writing material waiting for imperial use and conveying a sense of authority.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

This refined paper is a self-contained product, material, aesthetic object, and object of gaze. At those two stages, its “thingness” is still present, meaning its quality of being an objective existence remains. As an objective entity, this paper was being circulated, yet its embodied human agency was neglected. Echoing the Marxist concept of alienation, the laborers of paper-making and the authorship of the decoration were rarely a concern. As this paper was written with calligraphy, it was turned into a calligraphy piece and an artwork. When people started to treat this piece as an artwork, the human agency and authorship of this artwork were brought out. The object of gaze was shifted between paper and its content, between material and its imprint, and between the visual and its medium. Because of the incompatibility between ink and golden powders, the golden decorations appear in each brushwork. Correspondingly, each brushwork is not made of pure ink but a combination of ink and golden powders instead. The self-containedness of this objective material thus had its rupture when adding an aesthetic layer, which divided its cohesiveness between the visual component and its medium. As the scroll gradually unrolls, the intertwined dynamics and movements penetrate the viewing experience. Resonating with the chorological unfolding of the writing, the viewer could reexperience the original writing sequences as the movement of cursive script reveals. When dragons with different movements continuously appear, the dynamics of moving dragons are vivified. While the golden powders successively shine, the decorations are activated along with the shifting gaze. As the 11-meter paper enables a long viewing experience, those interpenetrated fluidities unfold chronologically.

From a material perspective, this calligraphy work carries various symbolic meanings, embodying authority and enhancing social prestige. Among all the Chinese writing styles, cursive style is the fastest. Among all the subgenres of cursive style, including “current cursive style” (今草), “official cursive style” (章草), and “wild cursive style” (狂草), “wild cursive style” is the fastest one. The calligraphy on this paper is done in such a “wild cursive style”. As an 11.72-meter paper with varied techniques, this paper is not a result of mass production but is one of the most precious artifacts in the Northern Song dynasty. Writing

the swift calligraphy on this scarce paper, Zhao Ji not only demonstrated his calligraphic skills but also expressed a sense of confidence. On the other hand, Zhao Ji also fosters a juxtaposition between slowness and quickness in this piece. The craftsman who painted this paper should paint slowly and consume a large amount of time. And yet, the emperor occupies the space of the golden paper swiftly. The process of writing is also an inevitable process of layering, covering the artistic creation of the craftsman and the decorations. Writing calligraphy on the golden decorations is a consumption of the precious writing material and thus a way of highlighting his authorship over the craftsman and the materials. The visual traces of the craftsman (i.e., decorations) and materials (i.e., paper without seams) only elevated the position of “protagonists”—the calligraphy and thus the emperor. Those calligraphic brushworks are just like those dragons above the clouds: floating, twisting, and dancing, they are free in the sky and showing off their presence. Like Emperor Qianlong’s huge inscription and stamps on the artworks, by consuming the precious materials, using extravagant calligraphy style, and making huge characters, Zhao Ji achieves not only an artistic achievement but also a performativity. Utilizing all those methods, Zhao successively highlights his presence, his authority, and his identity as an emperor.

In other words, to use or “waste” this decorated paper is as important as making a prominent calligraphic work. Or, to push further, the use of hasty “wild cursive style” is about highlighting this sense of wastefulness. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to explain how squandering is essential to maintaining social prestige.<sup>1</sup> Along this line of thinking, anthropologists found more provocative cases. Among the indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest Coast, in a gift-giving feast (called “potlatch”), a leader will give away or destroy valuable items to demonstrate wealth and power.<sup>2</sup> Destroying wealth therefore became meaningful, best representing a leader’s prestige. As Zhao Ji consumed this almost unique paper of that period, he reached one key

<sup>1</sup> Thorstein Veblen. (2007). *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 112, 135.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Bracken. (1997). *The Potlatch Papers*. University of Chicago Press, 126-7.



objective—enhancing his social prestige. Even if Zhao Ji made graffiti on this paper, this objective could still be realized, which is similar to the format of “wild cursive style.” No matter wasting or destroying, the core issue evolves around the concept of performance. A viewing experience and a tacit symbolic code within a community made wasting and destroying meaningful. It was through this tacit code that a mentality of “conspicuous consumption” was realized, reshaping the art and “art action” of a nobility or emperor.

Both the material and the calligraphy contribute to the visual spectacle of this final work. The huge calligraphic character, the extravagant use of gold paint, the delicate decorations, and the invaluable paper bring about a visual impact. In the finished work, one could not appreciate the calligraphy without noticing the decorations and the paper. The artistic significance is, therefore, complemented by the material significances.

## 7. Conclusion

The rarity of this paper sprouts from its laborious process as well as its advanced paper-making technology. Unlike silks from silk weaving machine, papers from rectangle-size screen are confined in length and width. This 11.72-meter-long paper confirms a breakthrough in technological history as well as in the history of art materials. From the Northern Song dynasty, the paper suddenly could be as long as the silk to a certain degree while retain its materiality as paper, such as high absorbency and translucency. The long horizontal and vertical landscape on silk obtained the possibility to be transmitted to paper medium, experimenting with the new interactions between ink and paper. This existing northern Song artworks thus could be treated as a prelude of the broader popularity of paper during Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties.

The gilded decorations endow the paper with imperial authority and mark its ownership and sacredness. The untouchable sacredness places an intriguing contrast with the intimacy of the handscroll because the handscroll only allows one primary audience to touch and unroll it.

While the primary audience could set the viewing pace, the others could only appreciate it from the back. The primary audience then obtains honor and dignity from its sacredness. This cloud-and-dragon-patterned paper therefore belongs to the imperial art materials in

history, which not only set the imperial tastes but also manifested the technological advancement in an era.

Its rarity and sacredness reveal the paper’s symbolic meaning, affecting the way in which the artists perceive and make use of it. The growing popularity of decorative paper in the Northern Song dynasty signifies the emergence of specialized materials. Normal paper, such as bast paper without decorations, could be used for different people and purposes (e.g., painting, drawing, or drafting). Those decorated papers, on the other hand, have their target users and specific purposes. Those papers often have their own names based on the materials and decorations; for instance, “red decorative paper” (Xuetao Jian), “reed-and-geese paper” (Luyan Jian), and “cloud-and-dragon paper” (Yunlong Jian). The “reed-and-geese paper” has reed and geese decorations sparsely, which is suitable for calligraphy and letters. The geese imagery applies to the paper with a sense of longing, as the geese often symbolize homesickness in China. Nevertheless, because of the intricate decorations, the paper could be used for painting or drafting. The “cloud-and-dragon paper” also limits its use to royal members and confines its use to calligraphy because of its intricate patterns. *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script* exemplifies the intriguing use of paper in the Northern Song dynasty. Those varied decorated papers with corresponding symbolic meanings gave Song artists a new material to experiment with, a new inspiration, and a new artistic medium.

By historicizing Emperor Huizong’s *Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script*, this research helps to better understand the paper-making industry in the Northern Song dynasty, the chronological development of paper, and the making process of this famous artwork. While the medium often attracts secondary attention and is often regarded as the background for the imagery, this paper reconsiders the value behind the artistic medium and its agency, which could further reveal historical information about society, technology, and artistic considerations.

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