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Calligraphic Reading, and the Misadventures Therein: Preface to the Lanting Gathering [J. Rantei-jō] by Ōgishi (Wang Xizhi)

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Abstract: *The correct rendering and reading of Sinographs (i.e., kanji) has long been a challenging area, as is apparent in the winding road of the two graphs 快 (ō) and 快 (kai), which are quite similar in form yet markedly different in meaning. The calligrapher and the reader can approach this issue in two disparate ways, namely, by understanding the graph in context versus approaching it simply as an artistic presentation. Using the Preface to the Lanting Gathering by Wan Xizhi, these two perspectives are explicated in detail.*

Author's note: Since the reference materials are in Japanese, the names of Chinese historical persons and location are given in the Japanese style, unless the Chinese is known.

Introduction

In this article I would like to address the topic of reading kanji and at times the misadventures that occur therein. The reasons behind that can be insufficient attention span or reading something else than is actually there perhaps as the mind is hindering the correct input by the eyes. Perhaps there are other reasons involved in the complicated act of reading (not at all an easy skill as such).

The last 16 years I have been doing Japanese calligraphy as a member of the Shoyukai organization. At present with an *ex ante* 4th Dan the source material for me is not restricted to only basic texts to study *kaisho* (楷書, standard style), *gyōsho* (行書, cursive style) and *sōsho* (草書, very cursive style). An important criterion for selecting appropriate material for long calligraphy works (cf. fig. 7) is (my) technical skill or lack thereof. Normally, the calligraphy teacher makes the selection. Since a few months ago this has become the Rantei-jō (*Preface to the Lanting Gathering*) written in A.D. 353 by Ōgishi (Chinese: Wang Xizhi). There are other source texts for calligraphy to choose from. For comparison purposes to see if there a stylistic structure in old Chinese sources I am also reading *Kyūseikyū Reisen-mei* (九成宮醴泉銘) by Ōyōku [Ōu Yang Xun], which was written in 632, and the *Senjimon* (千字文) written by a descendant of Ōgishi named Chiei (智永), who was a Zen Buddhist priest in the early

7th century. These two works, the former a descriptive text (it reads like an on-site investigation report, including time and persons involved) on the *Kyūseikyū* palace (formerly known as *Jinjukyū*), a water spring, and finding it accidentally (the game is afoot). The latter is a poem of one thousand characters that begins by making clear the beginning or the setting (time and place), then adding historical persons and or philosophical principles and finally concluding with a message to the reader. The poem, too, follows this structure. With only these three sources mentioned it is too early to make definite statements on the universal structure for all classical texts in Chinese used to study calligraphy. Uozumi (2020) in his book on Ōgishi describes this classic structure in four traditional progressions: introduction (起), development (承) denouement (転 “turn” of the storyline), and conclusion (結) (pp. 142, 144).

With this as a basic starting point, I would like to resume with the main topic of this article, the Rantei-jō (*Preface to the Lanting Gathering*) and its author. For calligraphy Ōgishi is very influential in history and at present. Here I will not fully address his life and the political and historical situation during his lifetime from 318–420 (?). That requires an article on its own to do justice to him. There are some fine publications to consult further on Ōgishi and his calligraphic works, including his views and philosophical ideas. Uozumi (2020) and Yoshikawa (2017) are of a very recent date.

It suffices to say here that Ōgishi was born into a noble family from Langya (in modern Shandong province). It seems he held an army post and other government functions, while also being renowned

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for his calligraphic mastery. In his later years he moved to Kuaiji [K'uai-chi] (Shaoxing in modern Zhejiang province). Most of his children and some of his descendants also became calligraphers.

Background: What happened?

Short introduction on calligraphy in general, my specifics

During one of my monthly calligraphy work tasks (December 2022) consisting of basic tasks (required submission and content) and advanced tasks (optional but required to choose one from a larger set), I had then, already for a couple of months, been writing long calligraphies (cf. fig. 8) in a style based on the *Rantei-jō* text written by Ōgishi in A.D. 353; it is close to the *gyōsho* (行書, cursive) way of calligraphy. Before I continue I should mention that there is a controversy regarding Ōgishi as the “true” author or not and that it is possibly a forgery. This came about after an excavation in 1965 of the tomb of a cousin of Ōgishi. Both Uozumi (2020, pp 153-182) and Yoshikawa (2017, pp. 56-67) refer to this controversy in detail, but they seem not to be convinced that it is a forgery. Yoshikawa finds the line of thought matches Ōgishi’s outlook on life. Uozumi on the other hand with the application of analytical research software of the reliable text edition (Shinryū Haninbon) copied by Fushoso considered it to be very close to the original by Ōgishi. For the actual study of calligraphy we can leave the controversy further alone.

The passage concerned here has a total number of 14 characters starting from 當...足 (cf. Figure 1 for the full passage). The passage refers to a changing mental state when becoming older and in forgetting the importance of happiness in life, but to keep a positive attitude to life and its challenges.

At first, I had difficulty within the passage with one of the compound expressions and the subsequent flow of thought which seemed to be a contradiction in the main text (in Chinese) and the alteration into Japanese translation. The character compound 快然 (Ōzen) that became the crux of the issue is 快; it is possible to consider the first character

然自足。暫得於己快。當其欣於所遇。

快 in the compound as perhaps a variant of “Kai” 快 since its visual aspect is very close with just one stroke fewer to make it different. I will address this point further in the section on rationale but for that it is necessary to consult other sources for comparison with different calligraphic styles which may facilitate understanding (?) of the actual source at hand.

Rationale: the issue

With calligraphy we can identify two main approaches. This article does not have the purpose of criticizing either one of them. The calligrapher decides if the source text should function as primer to learn calligraphic rules and skills; or if the text content is also important. Personally, I prefer to know what I write and if the calligraphic passage makes sense content wise. Even if the calligraphy can be a passage of about 14-18 characters long (if the calligraphy is vertically in two lines; cf. Figure 8), it is important to know the general topic and content development of the whole. Ozaki (2013) has the whole text on a single page (p. 123) and with vertical lines he indicates three major sections (cf. Figure 9). The first section (on the right) starts with a description of the gathering Ōgishi attended, followed with his thoughts on human life, and concludes with the message he wants to impart to future generations.

The two approaches I mentioned earlier can be stated succinctly as:

- writing without getting to know the content, meaning, etc. (primer for writing skills)
- writing with background check of the source text and its contents (choosing the appropriate writing style to complement with the content).

I started to work on this article on calligraphy due to what I found in a major dictionary for reading classical Chinese (China before the Cultural revolution starting in 1966). Therefore, contextual calligraphy (content based) resulted in researching the double character issue: the Ōzen-Kaizen controversy and trying to solve the issue (proving to be impossible without actual primary sources written by Ōgishi in national libraries available).

The dictionary abovementioned was compiled by Morohashi Tetsuji in the 1950s and describes 快然 (Ōzen) as “being unhappy” (an unpleasant state; p. 4391), and 快然 (Kaizen) as “being happy” (a pleasant state; p. 4381). The text section with 快 as in 快然自足 is awkward because it contradicts the text content: “Unpleasantness is for me adequate.” However, the Japanese transla-

tions tend to emphasize: “a pleasant life is adequate”. Although the character 快 is in most editions clearly visible, it is being read as if it is in meaning actually 快然 (Kaizen). This point as stated earlier can be consulted in the companion book (guidebook) (p. 17) of the *Rantei-jō* (Nishibayashi & Kishida, 1995) as such.

With the *Dai-Kangorin* (1992) both characters are simultaneously visible on opposite pages, and without having to turn pages they can be consulted. The character for Kaizen (快然) is on p. 532, and the character for Ōzen (快然) is on p. 533. This was actually also one of the reasons to start writing this article. With the Morohashi dictionary (Vol, 4, p. 979, 989) they are more apart and at first I was looking mainly at one entry, namely Ōzen 快然. Therefore, the *Kangorin* contributed to the final decision of writing this article. It centers on the issue of either misreading a text (passage) or misunderstanding the flow of thought the text intends to express.

Method (A): primary (first) sources such as Ōgishi (*Rantei-jō*), Ōyōku [C. Ōu Yang Xun] (*Kyūseikyū Reisen-meī*); Chiei (*Senjimon*: personal interest)

In the introduction I referred to the content structure of these calligraphic sources. Each of them can be studied to the extent of calligraphic styles. The *Rantei-jō* for a calligraphic style close *gyōsho* (行書, cursive style) as mentioned earlier. The *Kyūseikyū Reisen-meī* on the other hand is more for regulated style comparable to the *kaisho* style (cf. fig. 7) and with the *Senjimon* there are editions of variant calligraphic styles covering *kaisho*, *gyōsho*, and *sōsho* style. In the last few years these three I have met on a regular basis. The *Senjimon* I had encountered earlier when I was still a university student some 30 years ago; at the time I considered it as a primer for calligraphic skills. However, reading the annotated edition by Kida and Ogawa (1984) reveals that it is more than that; it covers Chinese history, philosophy, and customs. With this I have reached the point of what I have called “calligraphic approaches”, in the previous section.

Method (B): consulting other sources of Ōgishi’s *Rantei-jō* (cf. Figure 10) and the practical issues regarding brush vice a vice or writing tools

Regarding the issue of the two characters,

namely 快 vs. 快, in the *Rantei-jō* most editions go for 快 but may have been misread by copyists since most of Ōgishi’s calligraphies have been entombed in the tomb of Tai Zhong (太宗. 598 - 649) at Shōryō (Zhao) (Uozumi, 2020, p. 149). This emperor ordered several masters in calligraphy to produce close to real copies of important works, among which the *Rantei-jō*, and then to be distributed among other kings and trusted vassals. A successor of Tai Zhong (太宗) successor, Gao Zhong (高宗), also made a similar order (Uozumi, p. 149). It is impossible to give a definite answer resolving whether the *Rantei-jō* is there or not. At first, it seems it was passed down in the family until Chiei. After that, it is considered as a possibility as being one of works entombed (Iijima, 1975).

One publication (the *Rantei-jō* guidebook 15, Nishibayashi) addresses this 快 vis-à-vis 快 issue in suggesting the character option of 快 (cf. Figure 3: the 2nd text edition) and therefore decreasing the contradiction issue in meaning of the passage. Interesting in this light is the edition of Nakane (1975) (cf. fig. 5) with clearly gives the annotation reading as “Kaizen” for the character compound of Ōzen and thus solves in that way the meaning of that particular passage.

There is a third option to interpret the passage as it is stated in the available editions, such as Momoyama (2019, p. 11) does wherein one is in low spirits (unhappiness), which can produce satisfaction (happiness). However, without having the possibility to confirm what Ōgishi actually wrote, we are left with the different interpretations for the time being (unless Tai Zhong’s tomb is opened for research and Ōgishi’s calligraphy works are still well conserved over the long period of entombment).

Let us consider one more matter regarding the reading of handwritten sources. The brushwork, or the brush itself, may have contributed to a slight accidental elongated 4th character stroke transferring 快 to become 快, but there is no independent evidence to confirm this hypothesis at present. One important matter to keep in mind is that facsimiles are sometimes based on stele inscriptions, and as Yoshikawa (p. 59) points out, these may affect the brushwork since both artforms uses very different materials: brush and paper (calligraphy) compared to chisel and stone (stele).

Results and Discussion

The brushwork of different text editions may

result in mis-readings with similarly close characters. With the material available we can make the following observations (indeed, calligraphy is a visual art). Almost all the available editions as stated in the reference section, it seems that the character under discussion should be 快. In the Rantei-jō edition of Nishibayashi & Kishida a.o. (1995; companion book) and Nishibayashi & Fukumoto (2021; facsimile) the possibility of the character 快 is also stated. Nakane (1975) does it through his annotated translation by reading 快 as being 快; this can be seen in Figure 5. Momoyama (2019, p. 11) goes into a third option and makes a textual interpretation of the meaning of the text: hardships and happiness as possible state of being. At present, however, we cannot be sure of these possibilities since the original calligrapher is no longer available anymore to give definite answer on this matter.

In one dictionary that deals with the different styles of Ōgishi Iijima (1975) shows that the character of 快 is grouped within the dictionary entry 快, suggesting a close connection between the two (cf. Figure 4). If the original works are still in Tai Zhong's tomb and well preserved over so many centuries, then it would be possible by excavation to retrieve them and find out what Ōgishi actually wrote and thus eliminate the confusion now haunting the pages in different editions.

Conclusion

With the difficulties stated earlier in the article the teachable outcome is that we need to be attentive to the brushwork and its effects and the possible miscopying (in a non-plagiaristic sense) over the centuries, especially if characters are quite similar in appearance. As for the meaning, we can adopt perhaps a Mr. Spock approach (Star Trek) and keep an open mind to several theories at the same time. From the context of the whole text, we could acquire some basic idea of what Ōgishi wanted to impart on future generations of readers. The message could be that human life has both sides: moments of hardships and moments of happiness.

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Ogawa, T. & Kida, A. (1984). *Annotated Poem (Essay) of a Thousand Characters* [注解・千字文]. Iwanami Shoten.

Ozaki, G. (2013). *Letters by Ōgishi: reading letter 17 and more* [王羲之の手紙 - 十七帖を読む -]. Tenrai Shoin.

Facsimile editions for calligraphic purposes: Rantei-jō

Preface to the Lanting Gathering [J. Rantei-jō 蘭亭叙] (J. Ōgishi, Chin. Wang Xizhi)

Ōgishi. (353 A.D.). *Preface to the Lanting Gathering* [J. Rantei-jō] (S. Nishibayashi & M. Fukumoto, Eds., 2021). (Classic series of Chinese Calligraphy, Vol. 15). Nigensha.

Ōgishi. (A.D. 353). *Preface to the Lanting Gathering* [J. Rantei-jō] (S. Tsutsui, Ed., 2021). Selection of Chinese Calligraphies, Vol. 7. Tōkyō: Tenrai Shoin.

Ōgishi. (A.D. 353). *Preface to the Lanting Gathering* [J. Rantei-jō] (S. Itō, Ed., 2008). Tōkyō: Geijutsu shibun-sha.

Ōgishi. (A.D. 353). *Preface to the Lanting Gathering* [J. Rantei-jō] (S. Nakane, Ed., 1975). Nihon-shokan.

Ōgishi. (A.D. 353). *Preface to the Lanting Gathering* [J. Rantei-jō] (Sha Setsuman, Ed., 2019). Nigensha.

Ōgishi. (A.D. 353). *Preface to the Lanting Gathering* [J. Rantei-jō] (Sha Setsuman., Ed., 2019). Nigensha.

Facsimile editions for calligraphic purposes: the Kyūseikyū Reisen-meī:

On Ōyōku [Chin. Ōu Yang Xun]. (632).

Kyūseikyū Reisen-meī (九成宮醴泉銘),

Ōyōku. (A.D. 632). *Sweet wine spring in the*

Jiucheng Palace [J. Kyūseikyū Reisen-me] (Kakui, H. & Akamatsu, N. Eds. 2006). (Classic series of Chinese Calligraphies, Vol. 31). Tōkyō: Nigensha.

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Ōyōku. (A.D. 632). *Sweet wine spring in the Jiucheng Palace* [J. Kyūseikyū Reisen-me] (Nakane, S. Ed. 1981). Nihon-shokan.

Chiei. (? A.D.). *The Poem (Essay) of a Thousand Characters* [J. Senjimon] (Kakui, H. & Ōno, S. Eds. 2019). (Classic series of Chinese Calligraphy, Vol. 27). Nigensha.

Chiei. (? A.D.). *The Poem (Essay) of a Thousand Characters* [J. Senjimon] (Minomo, S. Eds. 2019). (Selection of Chinese Calligraphy, Vol. 16). Tenrai Shoin.

Chiei. (? A.D.). *The Poem (Essay) of a Thousand Characters* [J. Senjimon] (Itō, S. Ed. 2013). Geijutsu shibun-sha.

Facsimile editions for calligraphic purposes: Senjimon

On the *Senjimon* (千字文) which was written by a descendant of Ōgishi named Chiei (智永 Chih-yung) in the early 7th century:

About the author: Jeroen Bode teaches at Ibaraki University and is a licensed translator in addition to being an accomplished calligrapher. While working he enjoys the company of his office contingent of owls and woof-woofs.

永和九年。歲在癸丑。暮春之初。會于會稽山陰之蘭亭。脩禊事也。群賢畢至。少長咸集。此地有崇山峻嶺。茂林脩竹。又有清流激湍。映帶左右。引以為流觴曲水。列坐其次。雖無絲竹管弦之盛。一觴一詠。亦足以暢叙幽情。是日也。天朗氣清。惠風和暢。仰觀宇宙之大。俯察品類之盛。所以遊目騁懷。足以極視聽之娛。信可樂也。夫人之相與。俯仰一世。或取諸懷抱。悟言一室之內。或因寄所託。放浪形骸之外。雖趣舍萬殊。靜躁不同。當其欣於所遇。暫得於己。快然自足。不知老之將至。及其所之既倦。情隨事遷。感慨係之矣。向之所欣。俛仰之間。以為陳迹。猶不能不以之興懷。況脩短隨化。終期於盡。古人云。死生亦大矣。豈不痛哉。每攬昔人興感之由。若合一契。未嘗不臨文嗟悼。不能喻之於懷。固知一死生為虛誕。齊彭殤為妄作。後之視今。亦由今之視昔。悲夫。故列叙時人。錄其所述。雖世殊事異。所以興懷。其致一也。後之攬者。亦將有感於斯文。

Figure 2. Based on the Preface to the Lanting Gathering [J. Rantei-jō] (J. Ōgishi, C.Wang Xizhi); 2019 ed. Sha Setsuman. Nigensha.

永和九年歲在癸丑暮春之初會
 于會稽山陰之蘭亭脩禊事
 也羣賢畢至少長咸集此地
 有峻嶺茂林脩竹又有清流激
 湍映帶左右引以為流觴曲水
 列坐其次雖無絲竹管弦之
 盛一觴一詠亦足以暢叙幽情
 是日也天朗氣清惠風和暢仰
 觀宇宙之大俯察品類之盛
 所以遊目騁懷足以極視聽之
 娛信可樂也夫人之相與俯仰
 一世或取諸懷抱悟言一室之內
 或因寄所託放浪形骸之外雖
 趣舍萬殊靜躁不同當其欣
 於所遇輒得於己快然自足不

於所遇輒得於己快然自足不
 知老之將至及其所之既倦情
 隨事遷感慨係之矣向之所
 欣俛仰之間以為陳迹猶不
 能不以之興懷况脩短隨化終
 期於盡古人云死生亦大矣豈
 不痛哉每覽昔人興感之由
 若合一契未嘗不臨文嗟悼不
 能喻之於懷固知一死生為虛
 誕齊彭殤為妄作後之視今
 亦猶今之視昔 悲夫故列
 叙時人錄其所述雖世殊事
 異所以興懷其致一也後之攬
 者亦將有感於斯文

王右軍蘭亭叙散筆斜
 簪自然越妙昔人以為行
 書之龍戊申之秋余寄書
 寫依式臨寫而通而以此本
 存吾堂上故懷自得之
 一道也 余堂長誌記

Figure 3. Ishikawa, K. (1997). *The Universe of Calligraphy*, Vol. 6 [書の宇宙]. Nigensha.

Comparison text 1. The character in question is in the lower panel in the third column from the right.

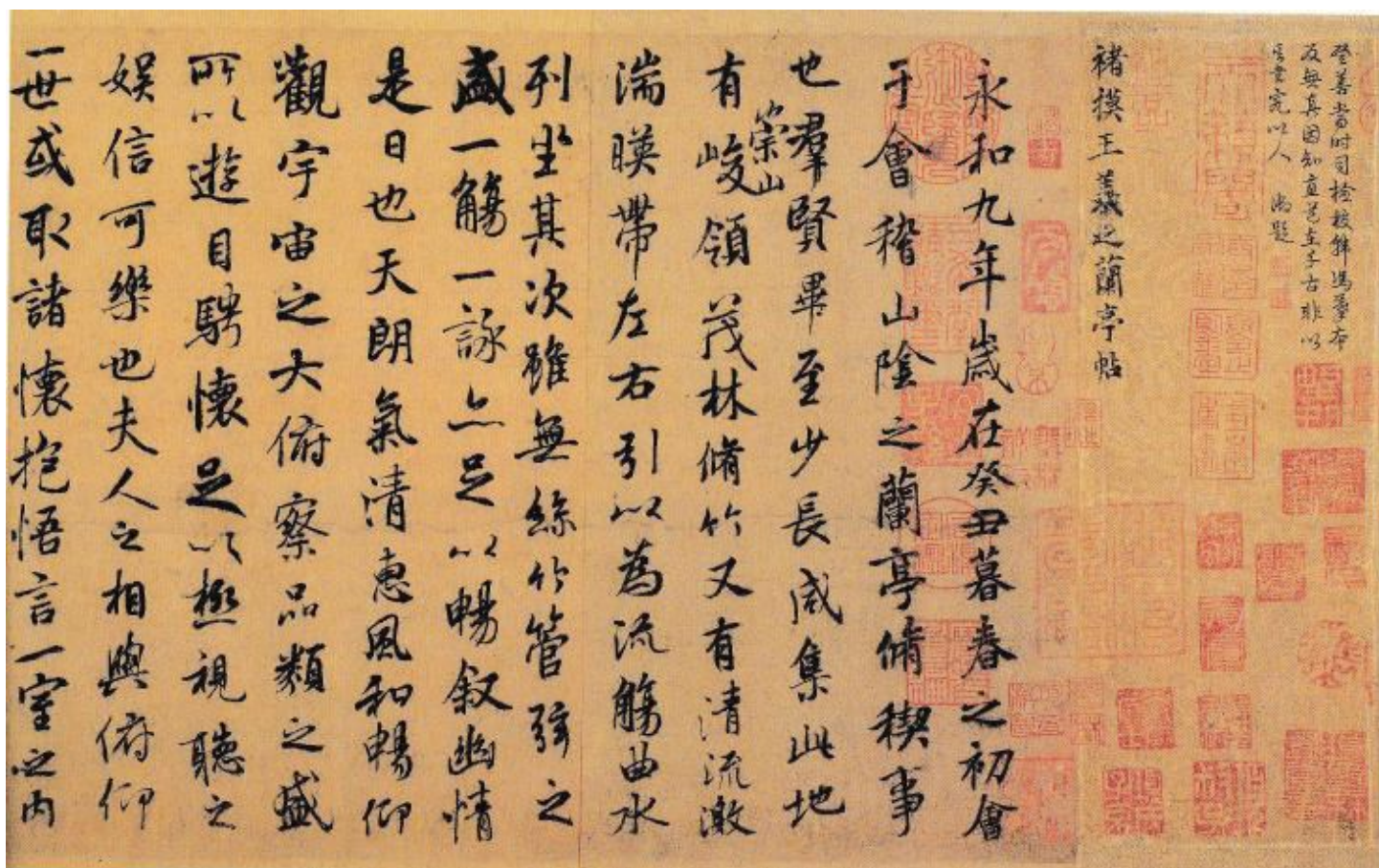


Figure 3 (continued). Comparison text 2. The character in question is in the lower panel in the third column from the right.

永和九年歲在癸丑暮春之初會
 于會稽山陰之蘭亭脩禊事
 也羣賢畢至少長咸集此地
 有峻領茂林脩竹又有清流激
 湍映帶左右引以為流觴曲水
 列坐其次雖無絲竹管絃之
 盛一觴一詠亦足以暢叙幽情
 是日也天朗氣清惠風和暢仰
 觀宇宙之大俯察品類之盛
 所以遊目騁懷足以極視聽之
 娛信可樂也夫人之相與俯仰
 一世或取諸懷抱悟言一室之內

或因寄所託放浪形骸之外雖
 趣舍萬殊靜躁不同當其欣
 於所遇暫得於己快然自足不
 知老之將至及其所之既倦情
 隨事遷感慨係之矣向之所欣
 欣俛仰之間以為陳迹猶不
 能不以之興懷况脩短隨化終
 期於盡古人云死生亦大矣豈
 不痛哉每覽昔人興感之由
 若合一契未嘗不臨文嗟悼不
 能喻之於懷固知一死生為虛
 誕齊彭殤為妄作後之視今
 亦猶今之視昔悲夫故列
 敘時人錄其所述雖世殊事
 異所以興懷其致一也後之覽
 者亦將有感於斯文

Figure 4. Iijima, T. (1980). The Ōgishi Character Dictionary [王羲之的大字典]. Tokyo Bijutsu.



Figure 4. Iijima, T. (1980). The Ōgishi Character Dictionary [王羲之の字典]. Tokyo Bijutsu.

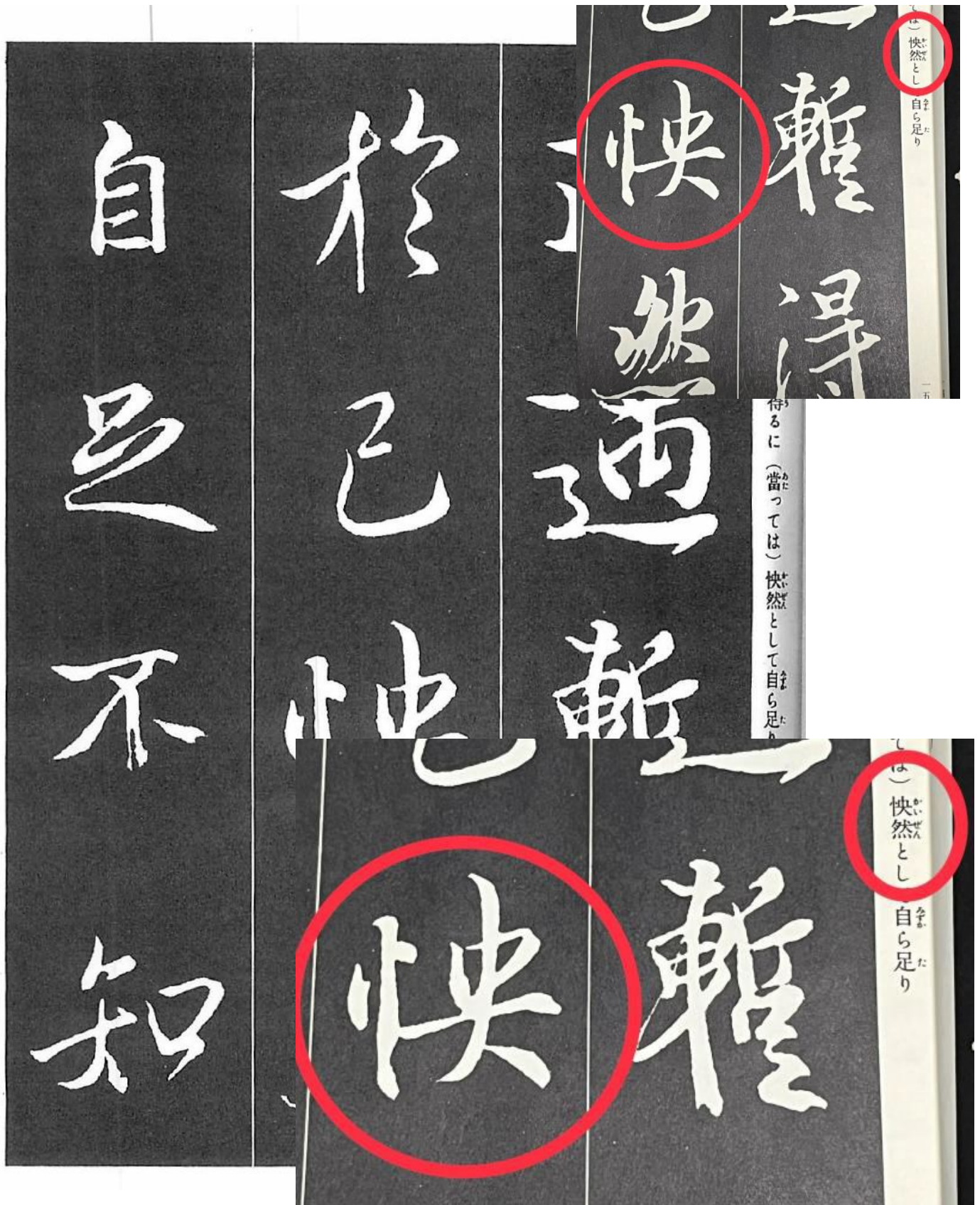


Figure 6. Ōgishi (bron: Ozaki, G. (2013)). The map shows three locations important to Ōgishi.

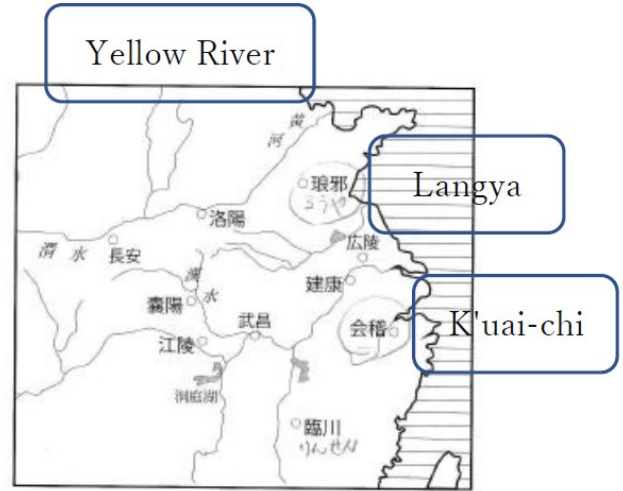


Figure 7. Calligraphy works by the author of this article. The left panel is in the *gyōsho* (cursive) style, and the right panel is in the *kaisho* style.

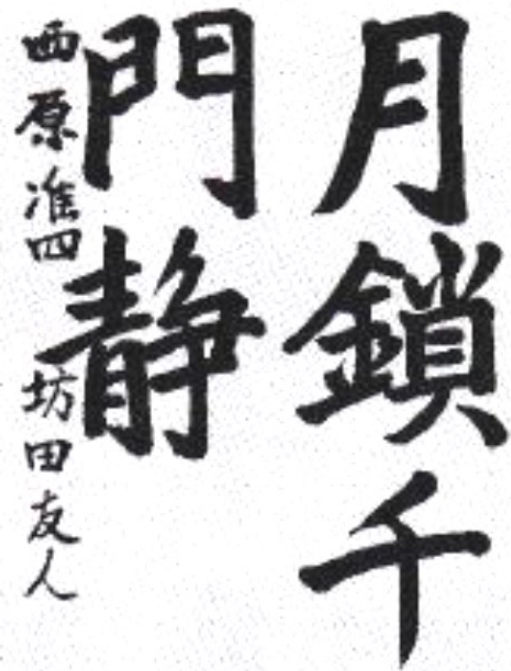
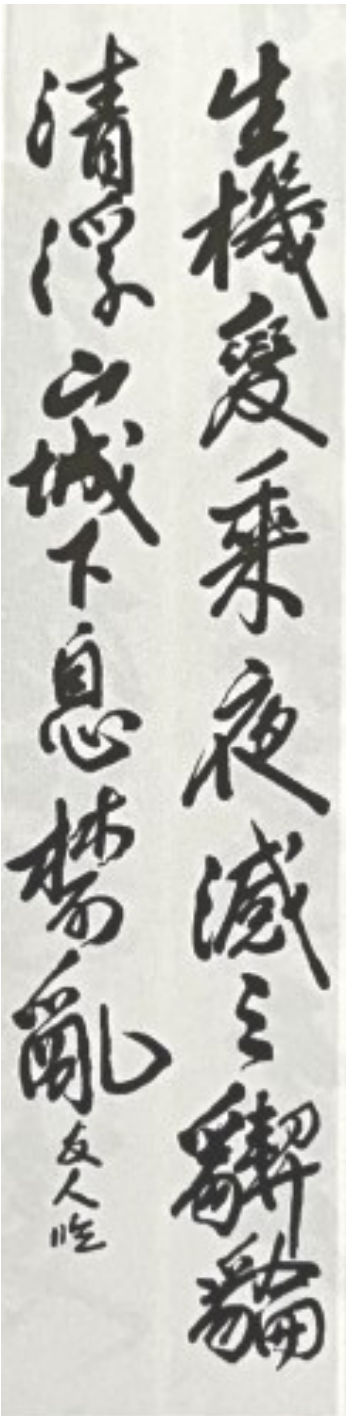


Figure 12. Hansetsu (Jōfuku) long calligraphy by the author of this article. The work shown includes 17 characters in 2 columns.



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Figure 9. General text structure of the Rantei-jō (bron: Ozaki, G., 2013).

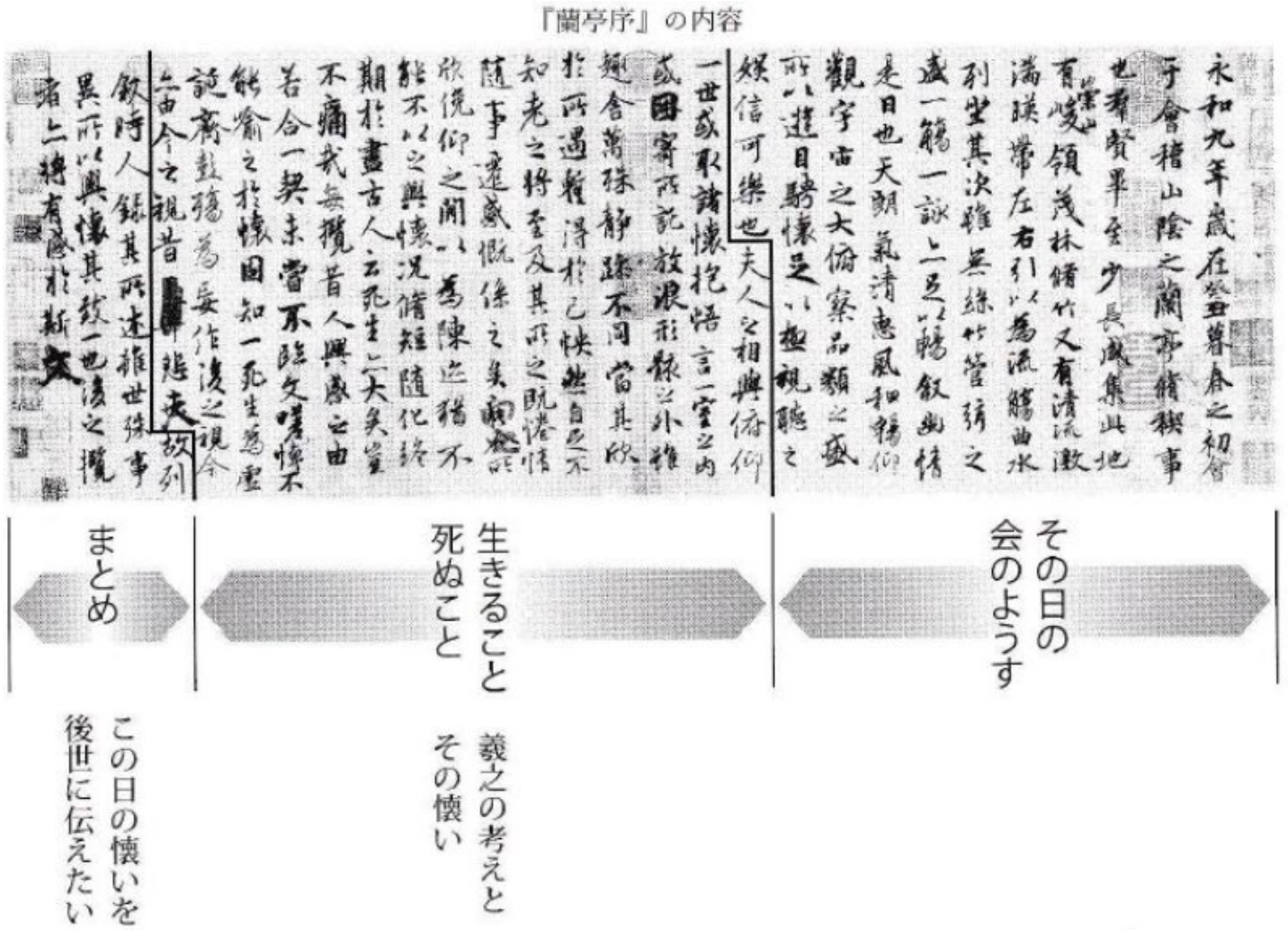


Figure 10. The various editions of the Rantei-jō.

