CALLIGRAPHIC STUDIES ON THE FIFTH SCROLL OF THE ZOKU-SHŪ SHŌSŌIN KOMONJO: THE RELATIONSHIP OF WRITING ON THE FACE AND REVERSE OF A DOCUMENT FROM THE STATE Scriptorium

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The term shūsho, literally practice writing, refers to characters written in preparation for a final version of a text. In the field of ancient Japanese history where the variety of original sources is limited, shūsho is a specialist’s term frequently employed in the study of Shōsō-in documents and mokkan (wooden tablets). The ancient scribes of the temple scriptoria and government offices aimed to master written forms (shōtai) for documents by copying out these shūsho. How then did they approach the task of developing the beautiful written forms necessary for the characters of sutras and official documents? It appears that these officials repeatedly copied them out, practicing until they were able to represent the written forms in a sufficiently elegant manner.

The fifth fascicle of the Zoku-Shū Sōshōin komonjo (Supplementary Compilation of Old Documents in the Shōsō-in), addressed in this article, has been recognized as a manuscript in which many of these shūsho (practice characters) can be found. The document was first created in 702 (Taihō 2) as a provincial household register (its first use), but the character of the document was transformed as the reverse was next used as a ledger of the scriptorium in 747 (Tenpyō 19) (the second use), and then the face, containing the provincial household register, was reused for another scriptorium ledger that was written atop the earlier record in Tenpyō 19 (the third use).

However, the temporal relationship between the two ledgers from the year Tenpyō 19 on the front and back of the scroll cannot be determined from their contents, and it is possible that the “second use” and the “third use” should be reversed. It is also possible that the two ledgers on the front and back were written at the same time, one immediately after the other.

In this article I examine when and under what circumstances the many notations on the household register side that appear to be shūsho characters that are unrelated to the scriptorium’s ledgers were written in order to clarify the order of the creation of the two ledgers. In the shūsho found amidst the provincial household register, there are practice characters that were modeled on characters written on the reverse. In the case of a hand scroll, the act of copying characters that appear on the reverse of the paper is only possible when the scroll is rolled up little by little from the roller shaft on the left side, and the character in question on the reverse side then appears face up. The character could then serve as a model to be copied on the flat surface immediately to the right.

This being the case, the side with the shūsho would have been written after the side with the model characters, and thus it is certain that the ledger written over the household register was the third usage of the document. This can also be confirmed as a result of the examination of other ledgers from the same period.