

## Keeping Record

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The Materiality of Rulership and Administration  
in Early China and Medieval Europe

Edited by  
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and Chun Fung Tong

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Chun Fung Tong

# Between Slip and Tablet

Rulership and Writing Support in Eastern Han China, 25–220 CE

## Introduction

The material, size and shape of a writing support often provided a written artefact with authority independent of its textual content. The connection between materiality and political authority is exemplified in administrative manuscripts produced by government organisations in the Qin and Han period (221 BCE–220 CE), during which bamboo and wooden slip (*die* 牒 or *jian* 簡) and tablet (*du* 牘) were the typical writing supports of manuscripts. The choice of writing support for an administrative manuscript was regulated by official models and standards. As noted in the introduction of this volume, Han government personnel often wrote the formal and clean copy of an administrative document on double-column slips (*erhang die* 二行牒 or *lianghang* 兩行), and drafts, registers or accounts on single-column slips (*zha* 札).<sup>1</sup> These pieces would then be bound together to form a multi-piece scroll.<sup>2</sup> In the Eastern Han dynasty, new evidence confirms that although tablets were by nature single-piece manuscripts, they could also be tied or bound together with slips.<sup>3</sup> The diverse forms of administrative manuscripts call for a re-examination of the relationship between administrative practice and standardisation, both of which symbolised the coercive power of the state and reminded the subjects of the presence of political rule.

To this end, this article will explore the dynamics between the authority of local rulers and the materiality of the writing supports of administrative documents through the recently surfaced Wuyiguangchang 五一廣場 manuscripts, which relate unprecedented details of government administration and manuscript culture in south China at the turn of the second century. Discovered in 2010, these manuscripts were unearthed from pit no. 1 of the Wuyiguangchang site in Changsha, Hunan, in which the seat of Linxiang county 臨湘縣 was located.<sup>4</sup> The cache comprises more than

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<sup>1</sup> See Armstrong et al in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> Sumiya 2003, 98; Shih 2021, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Shih 2021, 125–126.

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to the archaeological context of the Wuyiguangchang site, see Tsang Wing Ma's article in this volume.

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6,800 pieces of written artefacts, most of which were administrative or judicial documents produced by the administrative units in the purview of Linxiang. The dated samples range between 90 and 112 CE.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I will focus on manuscripts that record the instructions (*jiao* 教) of the County Prefects (*xian ling* 縣令). First, I will introduce the sources, in which the subsequent analysis is grounded. Specifically, I will discuss the writing supports, forms and contents of two types of instructions—namely, multi-piece and single-piece—as evidenced in the Wuyiguangchang manuscripts. Second, I will establish a chronology of multi-piece and single-piece instructions, suggesting that the adoption of single-piece instructions in Linxiang took place in late 105 CE and likely lasted less than three years. The last section will explore the possible factors that contributed to such transitions, as well as how the choice of writing supports signals the authority of the local ruler.

## Forms of ‘the Lord’s Instruction’ Manuscripts from the Wuyiguangchang

In the decision-making process of an Eastern Han county government, one of the key procedures was “*hua nuo*” (畫諾; literally, “drawing the *nuo* character”). The magistrate would sign a cursive, flamboyant “*nuo*” (literally, “to approve”) or “*ruo*” (若; here serving as a synonym of *nuo*) character on the submitted documents to authorise his subordinate officials’ “deliberations” (*yi* 議) of administrative affairs.<sup>6</sup> As the signed *nuo* (*ruo*) character is always preceded by the pre-written set phrase ‘the lord’s instruction’ (*jun jiao* 君教), researchers often call this type of documents ‘the lord’s instruction’ tablets or slips, dependent upon the manuscripts’ writing supports.

As administrative documents, these instructions record regulations and reminders that magistrates, such as the Commandery Governor (*jun taishou* 郡太守) and County Prefects, created for their subordinates as well as the populace in their purview. The promulgation of such regulations was left to the discretion of the magistrate and aimed to tackle issues of governance caused by the peculiarities in the locality. Hence, the magistrate’s instructions often complemented—but also sometimes even contradicted—statutory laws.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu 2018, vol. 1, preface.

<sup>6</sup> Theoretically, a “*nuo* (*ruo*)” could only be signed by the magistrate, although one cannot deny the possibility that the magistrate could have authorised a subordinate official in his presence to undertake this task: Hsing 2021a, 167–172. Note that the “*hua nuo*” procedure was not necessarily applicable to all administrative affairs. It might well be that only those more complicated and serious matters would require the personal approval from the Prefect: Tong 2019, 166–167.

<sup>7</sup> Satō 2021, 287–293, 301. Note that most of such regulations were promulgated by Commandery Governors or higher authorities and extant instructions from County Prefects were often merely concerned with internal administrative procedures within county governments.

Within the published Wuyiguangchang corpus, the ‘the lord’s instruction’ manuscripts represent only a small proportion of the manuscripts. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these were insignificant documents. On the contrary, it would suggest the opposite, namely that these were important administrative documents. The majority of the Wuyiguangchang cache consists of much more ephemeral, less important documents that were regularly and routinely discarded. As such, this corpus was not the product of a systematic archival or storage scheme but instead likely dumped as waste. Therefore, the relative rarity of ‘the lord’s instruction’ manuscripts within this and similar pits may serve as proof of their special status, as records that were not regularly produced. Indeed, given that these documents concurrently embodied the magistrates’ authority and pushed forward administrative procedure, they are rare exemplars of the interplay between political rule and administrative practice of government organisations. To date, two forms of instruction manuscripts have been identified in the Wuyiguangchang corpus. The first type is a hybrid of slip and tablet, whereas the second type comprises single-piece tablets. Both forms could be tied or bound with supplementary manuscripts.

Before turning to the material characteristics of these documents, given that the extant multi-piece manuscripts in the Wuyiguangchang corpus only survive in a fragmentary state and are detached from one another, it is important to outline the three criteria used to reconstruct the manuscripts that form the basis of investigation in this article. The first criterion is the textual evidence. If the transcriptions of several fragments can be read continuously or share similar contents, it is likely that they constituted the same original manuscript and have been treated as a single document. The second is based on the material traces of fragments, such as their handwriting, layout and the positions of binding strings. The third supplements the internal evidence with the archaeological context of the fragments, especially their locations in the pit.<sup>8</sup> While it is not uncommon that two distant pieces could have initially belonged to the same manuscript,<sup>9</sup> many reconstructed manuscripts are often found in close proxim-

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<sup>8</sup> Given that the formal reports do not include the diagrams that record the manuscripts’ relative positions in the pit, the only source on which we can rely to study the archaeological context of these manuscripts is their excavation numbers (*chutu bianhao* 出土編號), which typically consist of three parts. Consider the reference number: CWJ1③:282-2. “CWJ1” is the short form of “Changsha Wuyiguangchang Jing 1”, which is the Romanised Chinese characters of the pit. The “③” before the colon designates the archaeological layer where a manuscript was buried. The number after the colon is a manuscript’s serial number. Specifically, the number prior to the hyphen refers to the number of a bundle that yields manuscripts, whereas the latter number denotes the sequence when a manuscript is retrieved from this bundle. For example, “282-2” means the second slip of bundle 282. See: *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu* 2018 vol. 1, general conventions (*fanli* 凡例).

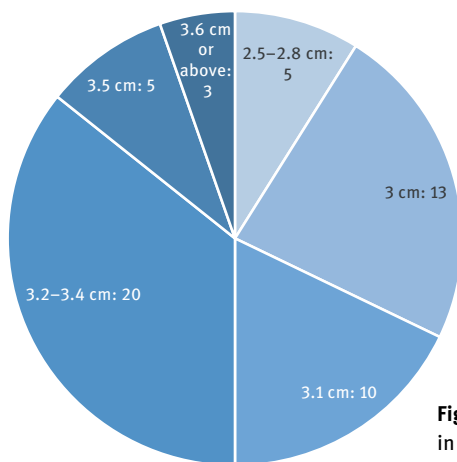
<sup>9</sup> For example, slips 328 (CWJ1③:162), 595 (CWJ1③:261-79) and 1752+1755 (CWJ1③:266-84+266-87) belong to the same manuscript even though they were found in different archaeological layers. For their reconstruction, see: Zhou 2021a.

ity to each other.<sup>10</sup> Hence, if several fragments sharing similar contents and material traces were placed together, the possibility that they belonged to the same manuscript naturally increases.

### Multi-piece ‘the Lord’s Instruction’ Manuscripts

In the Wuyiguangchang corpus, a multi-piece instruction always consists of multiple forms and writing materials. Unfortunately, such instructions are mostly written on bamboo slips, which are often poorly preserved and only less than a handful of them can be reconstructed. Extant evidence reveals that the text of a typical multi-piece instruction can be divided into three parts. The Scribes (*shi* 史) of a Bureau (*cao* 曹) would first draft a deliberation, followed by the endorsements of the Bureau Head (*yuan* 掾) and the county’s Vice-Prefect (*cheng* 丞). These first two parts were entered on single-column bamboo slips. The last part comprises the magistrate’s *nuo* (*ruo*)—sometimes coupled with his remarks—written on a wooden tablet, with an average width of 3.19 cm. These tablets are significantly narrower than the standard width of a three-column tablet (c. 3.5 cm) stipulated by a Qin (221–207 BCE) ordinance.<sup>11</sup> As illustrated in Fig. 1, only five of the 56 extant examples strictly meet this standard.

That said, given that the Qin Empire fell almost three centuries before the establishment of the Eastern Han dynasty, it may be somewhat anachronistic to judge such artefacts by this earlier standard.



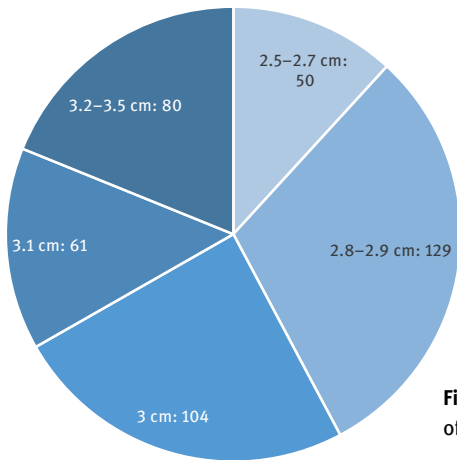
**Fig. 1:** Distribution of the width of wooden tablets in multi-piece instruction manuscripts.

<sup>10</sup> For example, slips 2190 (CWJ1③:282-2), 2198 (CWJ1③:282-10), 2199 (CWJ1③:282-11) and 2200 (CWJ1③:282-12) obviously belong to the same manuscript, which also comprises a much more distant slip 400 (CWJ1③:203). See: Zhou 2021a. This example illustrates the complexity of manuscript reconstruction.

<sup>11</sup> Staack 2018, 271.



The average width of intact double-column slips in the Wuyiguangchang corpus published so far (424 pieces in total) is c. 2.98 cm, which is approximately 73 % wider than similar slips found in the north-western frontier of the preceding Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE).<sup>12</sup> All the published examples from Wuyiguangchang do not have ridges on their surfaces and two-thirds are not more than 3 cm wide (Fig. 2). In contrast, only c. 32 % (eighteen out of 56) of the published multi-piece tablets maintain a similar measurement, whereas half (28 out of 56) of these examples are wider than 3.2 cm (Fig. 1). While the difference in width between multi-piece tablets and double-column slips is ostensibly inconsequential, the statistics do suggest that producers of such tablets seem to have deliberately differentiated multi-piece tablets from double-column slips by slightly increasing the former's width. In this regard, these artefacts should be classified as *du* rather than *jian* despite their relatively narrow width.



**Fig. 2:** Distribution of the width of double-column slips

Additionally, a multi-piece instruction could be supplemented by another multi-piece bamboo manuscript or wooden tablet, thereby creating mixed forms of ‘composite manuscripts’.<sup>13</sup> Examples of the different forms are addressed next.

The simplest form of multi-piece instruction is that without a supplementary manuscript. Tab. 1 lists an example (henceforth Example 1) reconstructed by Sumiya Tsuneko 角谷常子, consisting of seven bamboo slips and a wooden tablet:

<sup>12</sup> According to Takamura Takeyuki, the average width of the ridged double-column slips unearthed in the Dunhuang region is c. 14.567 mm, whereas those unridged is c. 17.146 mm. In comparison, the average width of the unridged double-column slips found in the Juyan region is c. 19.957 mm: Takamura 2022, 207, 211. These figures are significantly narrower than the Wuyiguangchang samples.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Composite manuscript’ (or simply ‘composite’) refers to a manuscript which comprises more than one ‘codicological unit’. For a thorough discussion of the term, see: Gumbert 2004, 26–29.

Tab.1: Text and translation of Example 1.<sup>14</sup>

Writing Sup- port/Sections	Original Text	Tentative English Translation
Bamboo slips/ Deliberation	左賊史昭、助史穆白： 左尉書言：追傷人者□ 真，未能得。小武亭部羅 <sup>1298</sup> 界下有九重山，去 縣二百里。真父□□殺 鄭□、楊丞逃。能(?)兄 不□及載(?) <sup>1297</sup> 斗，輒亡 入羅界□自□□北(?) 部□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□九 <sup>1302</sup> 重 山下，櫟丘例 <sup>16</sup> 亭長轉部 羅界下□ <sup>1296</sup> 例已得亭 長，如□ <sup>17</sup> 言。□ <sup>18</sup> 屬功 曹，亟遣(?)例亭長□□ 伉□□□ <sup>1299</sup>	Scribe of the Left Bureau of Robbery Zhao and Assisting Scribe Mu report: A document from the Left Commander says that he pursued a person who injured others called ... Zhen and was not able to capture him. In the district of the Xiaowu police station, near the boundary of the Luo [county] there is Jiuchong mountain, which is 200 <i>li</i> (ca. 83.2 km) away from the county [headquar- ter]. Zhen's father ... killed Zheng ... and Yang Zheng and escaped. Neng's elder brother could not ... and carried[?] Dou, and instantly absconded and entered the purview of the Luo [county] ...self ... the northern district ... near Jiuchong mountain, [ordering] the Inspecting Constable of Li settlement to transfer his position [to patrol the region] near the boundary of the Luo [county] ... the inspection [post] already has a Constable; this agrees with what [the Commander?] said. [We petition?] to assign [this affair] to the Bureau of Merit to immedi- ately send an Inspecting Constable ... [to?] Kang ...
Bamboo slips/ Endorsement	兼左賊掾 香如曹 <sup>1306</sup> 丞顯如掾。屬(?) <sup>1307</sup>	Concurrent Head of the Bureau of Robbery <i>Xiang</i> agreed with [the opinions of] the Bureau. Vice-Prefect <i>Xian</i> agreed with the Head [of the Bureau of Robbery]. Assign[?]
Wooden tablet/ Approval	君教：諾。舊故有例者， 前何故不署? <sup>1308</sup>	The lord's instruction: <i>Approved. In the past there</i> <i>was someone who inspected [that region], why didn't</i> <i>you station [this person] from the outset?</i>

Given the fragmentary state of this manuscript, the above translation is tentative at best. Both their related contents and proximate archaeological numbers—indicating the pieces were found in close proximity to one another—suggest that these pieces belonged to a single multi-piece manuscript. Moreover, the rugged edge of tablet 1308 seems to intrude into the concave part of slip 1307, indicating that the two pieces were joined. This supports the theory that tablets and bamboo slips could be attached together in multi-piece manuscripts, despite the larger size of the former.

<sup>14</sup> For the reconstruction of Example 1, see: Sumiya 2021, 52–53.

<sup>15</sup> The subscript numbers refer to the folio number (*zhengli hao* 整理號) of the various constituent pieces (tablet, slips) of a manuscript.

<sup>16</sup> Li Junming contends that the term “例” in this context denotes a kind of temporary checkpoint for inspection, which is adopted in the translation: Li Junming 2020, 10.

<sup>17</sup> The character may be “尉”.

<sup>18</sup> Based on other textual witnesses, this character may be “請”.

The handwriting of the manuscript is also noteworthy. The handwriting of the ‘deliberation’ section is uniform and was probably written by the same scribe who was also likely responsible for the ‘endorsement’ section. The personal names of Vice-Prefect Xian 顯 and Head Xiang 香, however, were added later, after both parts one and two had been written, and were possibly autograph. The graph “Xiang” on slip 1306 is slightly larger and also clings to the “ru” (如) graph below, indicating a later, different hand added the name. The *nuo* and the remark on tablet 1308 (see the italic text in Tab. 1) were possibly brushed by the magistrate or one of his deputies. Taken together, this multi-piece instruction conceivably went through four different hands (namely those of the County Prefect and Vice-Prefect, as well as the Head and Scribe of the Left Bureau of Robbery). This suggests that the production of this manuscript was a highly interactive process.

Apart from the more usual tripartite ‘deliberation–endorsement–approval’ structure, another peculiar type of multi-piece instruction without attachments is a draft, which also appears to have required the magistrate’s approval. The manuscript below (henceforth Example 2) is an example:

Tab. 2: Text and translation of Example two.<sup>19</sup>

Writing Supports/ Sections	Original Text	Tentative English Translation
Bamboo slips/ Deliberation	永初二年正月戊辰 朔 日 □□□□ 丞優告……東部勸 農 <sup>887A</sup> 賊捕掾□、 游徼、求盜、亭長： 民自言，諦如辭。 尊負租不輸所 □□□□□ <sup>886</sup>	In the second year of the Yongchu reign (108 CE), in the first month that began on a <i>wuchen</i> day, on the [blank], that is, the [blank] day,...Vice-Prefect You informs...the Head of Encouraging Field Cultivation and Pursing Robber of the Eastern District..., Patrol Leader, Thief Catcher, and Constable: A commoner has lodged a personal statement, [in which the particulars] are verified as accorded with the testimony. [Chen?] Zun was held accountable for the land tax but failed to transfer the amount [to the authorities]...
	掾成、令史陵 <sup>20</sup> 、兼 史勤 <sup>887B</sup>	Head Cheng, Scribe Director Leng, and Concurrent Scribe Qin.
	永初二年正月廿九 日丙申白。主簿□ <sup>21</sup> 省；書佐這劔主 <sup>885</sup>	[This draft is] reported on the 29th, that is, the <i>bingshen</i> day of the first month of the second year of the Yongchu reign. Checked by Master of Accounts...; handled by Writing Assistant Zhe Jian.
Wooden tablet/ Approval	君教：諾 <sup>884</sup>	The lord’s instruction: <i>Approved</i> .

<sup>19</sup> For the texts and images, see: *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu* 2019, vol. 3, 86–87.

<sup>20</sup> The editors of the Wuyiguangchang manuscripts transcribe the graph as “昧”. However, in view of the orthography and the same graph on slip 1676, the graph here should be “陵”.

<sup>21</sup> The editors seem to regard the space between “簿” and “省” as blank. As Takatori Yuji points out, there should be a character in between: Takatori 2021, 224 n. 38.













Fig. 3: Extant pieces of Example 2.

Judging by the handwriting, the ‘deliberation’ section (slips 885–887) was written by the same scribe. A marked feature of the execution of these slips is the ample space reserved for the upper binding string. A crack on tablet 884 (Fig. 3) indicates that it was similarly bound together with the slips in the same position. The interrelation between the slips and tablet 884 is also supported by the consecutive archaeological numbers (CWJ1③:264-38–41) of these pieces, an indication that they were buried in close proximity. In short, the four pieces belong to the same manuscript, although they probably do not comprise all of its original constituent parts.

In view of the blanked dates and the use of single-column slips, Example two is likely a draft.<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that it may pertain to another multi-piece manuscript (which at least comprises slips 1673–1674 and 1676–1677) that records the affairs of a man called Chen Zun 陳尊, who like the “Zun” mentioned in Example 2, also failed to pay the land tax. Moreover, slip 1676 reveals that Scribe Leng and Concurrent Scribe Qin—both of whom appear in Example two—were also involved in Chen Zun’s case.<sup>23</sup> In this light, “Zun” probably refers to Chen Zun. Notably, although the verso of slip 887 lists the titles and personal names of Leng, Qin and Cheng, they were likely not the scribes who created the draft. Rather, it should have been written by “Writing Assistant Zhe Jian”, who appeared in slip 885.

**Tab. 3:** Comparison of the handwritings of slips 887B and 1676.


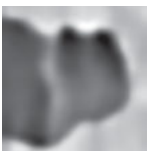


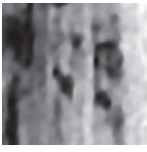

Character/ slip no.	shi 史	leng 陵	jian 兼	shi 史	qin 勤
887B					
1676					

The fact that slip 887B and slip 1676 were written by two different scribes becomes even clearer when we compare their handwriting. As shown in Tab. 3, the scribes who respectively inscribed slips 887 and 1676 wrote the same set of characters in significantly different fashions. Particularly, the scribe of slip 1676 preferred to end a brush-stroke in a sharp and pressed manner, whereas the one who wrote slip 887B maintained more even endings (Tab. 4).

<sup>22</sup> For the traces of drafts among Han administrative manuscripts, see: Hsing 2021b, 72–80.

<sup>23</sup> Judging by its formulaic language, slip 1676 is probably the opening slip of a deliberation drafted by Scribe Leng and Concurrent Scribe Qin who mention that they list “the script of the personal statement made by a commoner in the [attached] slips” (民自言辭如牒). Notably, the two preceding slips (1673–1674) contain the personal statement of a man called Huang Lü 黃閭, who seems to have reported the crime of Chen Zun. Given the spatial proximity of these slips, they were likely fragments of a multi-piece manuscript.

Tab. 4: Comparison of the ending of brushstrokes of 887B and 1676.

slip no.	ending of brushstrokes		
887B			
1676			

That the names on the verso were written by another official leads us to two observations. First, this further confirms that such names were not signatures in the modern sense.<sup>24</sup> Second, this suggests the existence of a secretariat where official documents—at least those that were sent under the name of senior officials—were centrally produced, checked and disseminated.

Moreover, the draft was checked by the Master of Accounts (*zhu bu* 主簿), who primarily served as the secretary of the Commandery Governor or County Prefect and took care of the compilation of accounts and registers during the Han period. This position was also an important constituent of the so-called ‘Beneath-the-Door’ (*mengxia* 門下) organisation, which was filled with the County Prefect’s trusted officials.<sup>25</sup> Given the involvement of the Master of Accounts and the prominence of the ‘Beneath-the-Door’ organisation, the latter might have been the above-mentioned potential secretariat.<sup>26</sup>

After receiving the magistrate’s approval, the Writing Assistant would probably copy the text on the more formal double-column slips and send the clean copies to the recipients.<sup>27</sup> Such a procedure indicates that the magistrate had to authorise drafts submitted by his subordinates, although it is unclear if this practice was universally applied to all administrative documents or was confined to certain types of special documents. Either way, this example shows that in the Eastern Han local government, the local ruler’s authorisation was an essential prerequisite for advancing everyday administrative process.

<sup>24</sup> For more detailed analyses of the nature of the listed names on administrative manuscripts during the Qin and Han period, see: Giele 2005; Hsing 2021b, 17–30.

<sup>25</sup> For the roles that the Master of Accounts played in the Han provincial administration, as well as their connection with the *mengxia* organisation, see: Yen 1990, 124–125, 226.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion of the *mengxia* organisation in Linxiang county, see: Tong 2022, 92–100.

<sup>27</sup> To date, it is unclear if the Magistrate’s remarks would also be incorporated into the clean copies, though sometimes the replying letters of subordinate officials do cite the texts of the lord’s instructions.

Sometimes a multi-piece instruction could be appended by another multi-piece or single-piece manuscript and in turn form a ‘homogenetic’ composite manuscript.<sup>28</sup> Regarding a multi-piece attachment, the abovementioned slips 1673–1674 and 1676 indicate that the personal statement submitted by a commoner eventually became part of a multi-piece instruction. What follows will focus on a multi-piece instruction (henceforth Example 3) that was attached by a single-piece tablet.

Tab. 5: Text and translation of Example 3.<sup>29</sup>

Writing Sup-ports/Sections	Original Text	Tentative English Translation
Wooden tablet/ Attachment	<p>兼左部賊捕掾勤叩 頭死罪白：案故事， 橫溪深內<sup>30</sup>，常恐有 小發，置例亭長禁 姦，從間以來省罷。 方今民輸租時間， 溲陽鄉民多解止橫 溪入縣輸 十一月六日開<sup>○1792A</sup> 租，或夜出縣，歸主 人。恐姦猾昏夜為 非法，姦情難知。願 置例亭長一人，禁 絕姦人，益為便，唯 廷。勤愚戇，職事無 狀，惶恐叩頭死罪 死罪。·十一月五 日甲申白<sup>○1792B</sup></p>	<p>Concurrent Head of the Bureau of Robber Pursuing of the Left District Qin kowtows and risks death penalty to report: [I] checked the precedent, which states that Heng stream flows deep inside the remote areas and [the authorities] used to fear that small [gangs of robbers] would emerge therein, so they established an Inspecting Constable to prohibit the treacherous people. Recently [this position] was abolished to save costs. Now is when commoners transfer the land tax, and the people of Liaoyang commune mostly entered the county [town] to transfer the land tax by ways of Heng stream. They may leave the county [town] at night and return to their landlords’ [houses].<sup>31</sup> I fear that treacherous and wicked people may conspire illegal activities in the evening and night, and it will be difficult to obtain the facts. I hope that we can establish an Inspecting Constable to prohibit the treacherous persons; [this measure] will be advantageous and I beg the court [to implement it]. I am foolish and naïve and failed my official duties; [for this] I fear, kowtow, and repeatedly risk the death penalty. Reported on the fifth, that is, the <i>jiashen</i> day of the eleventh month (105 CE). <i>Opened on the sixth day of the eleventh month.</i></p>

<sup>28</sup> Here ‘homogenetic’ implies that the codicological units in a composite manuscript are ‘related’ and ‘come from the same circle and time’: Gumbert 2004, 27.

<sup>29</sup> For the texts and images of these pieces, see: *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu* 2020, vol. 5, 78–80. Note that Li Junming has reconstructed the “deliberation” section (that is, slips 1800, 1796, 1798, 1801) and related it to tablet 1792: Li Junming 2020, 7. However, Li does not realise the possible connection between these pieces and slips 1803–1804, as well as tablet 1794. Nor does he discuss the materiality of Example 3.

<sup>30</sup> The editors suggest that this character is a scribal error of “匿” (to hide), which is accepted here.

<sup>31</sup> The term “主人” here probably does not refer to the master of unfree labourers. Slip 408 records that an official called Zhang Dong 張董 “exited from the county and returned to the house of the

Writing Sup-ports/Sections	Original Text	Tentative English Translation
Bamboo Slips/ Deliberation	𠄎賊捕掾勤言所部 橫谿道前有例亭 長。間 <sup>1800</sup> 𠄎猾(?)為 (?)非,願置例亭 長一人禁絕。案:往 <sup>1796</sup> 時橫谿姦匪有 小發,前置例亭,并 循行冢間,防遏未 <sup>1798</sup> 然,如勤言。可 復請□□□選(?) 亭長一人,以傳(?) 例。 <sup>1801</sup>	(Scribe of the Left Bureau of Robbery X reports:) Qin, Head of the Bureau of Robber Pursuing, said that the route of Heng stream that he supervises formerly had an Inspecting Constable. Recently... [feared that] treache- rous and wicked people may conspire illegal activities, and hoped [the court] establish an Inspecting Constable to prohibit them. Now I [we] have checked: In the past treacherous persons had emerged from hiding in Heng stream, and formerly we established an Inspecting Constable, who would also make a thorough inspection of nearby cemeteries, so as to prevent [crimes] from happening. This agrees with Qin's report. [Now we] can again petition [to assign the Bureau of Merit?] to select a Constable to assist the inspection post.
Bamboo Slips/ Endorsement	左賊掾…… <sup>1804</sup> ……如掾 <sup>1803</sup>	Head of the Left Bureau of Robbery [X agreed with the opinions of the Bureau]. [Vice-Prefect X] agreed with the Head [of the Left Bureau of Robbery].
Wooden tablet/ Approval	君教:諾。 <sup>1794</sup>	The lord's instruction: <i>Approved</i> .

All the listed pieces of Example 3 were unearthed from bundle 266 of layer three (“③:266”). Their archaeological numbers indicate that these pieces were likely located in proximity.<sup>32</sup> The four slips (1800, 1796, 1798 and 1801) in the middle of the document bear an identical hand (Tab. 4). Although slightly damaged, their texts can be read continuously. These features again suggest that these four slips form the same manuscript. Taking the structure of Example 1 into account, these slips were probably followed by slips 1803–1804. Similarly, on the basis of the examples discussed earlier, tablets 1792 and 1794 were likely flanked the bamboo slips. The remnants of binding strings on the two tablets indicate that they were bound together with other pieces (Fig. 4). Moreover, the positions of the binding strings of tablet 1794—which records the magistrate's *nuo*—are akin to those of slips 1800, 1796, 1798 and 1801 (Fig. 4). This may further substantiate the connection between these pieces.

Material traces also hint at the format of this manuscript. Considering the existence of tablet 1794, the manuscript was possibly folded rather than rolled.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, the space between 1794–1803 and 1804 may form the axis for the initial fold on

landlord Su Dao” 從縣出, 歸主人蘇到舍。Obviously, Zhang could not have been Su's slave. As such, I read “主人” as “landlord”.

<sup>32</sup> *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu* 2020, vol. 5, 78–80.

<sup>33</sup> A similar method of storage emerged as early as the third century BCE: Xiao 2017, 247–252.



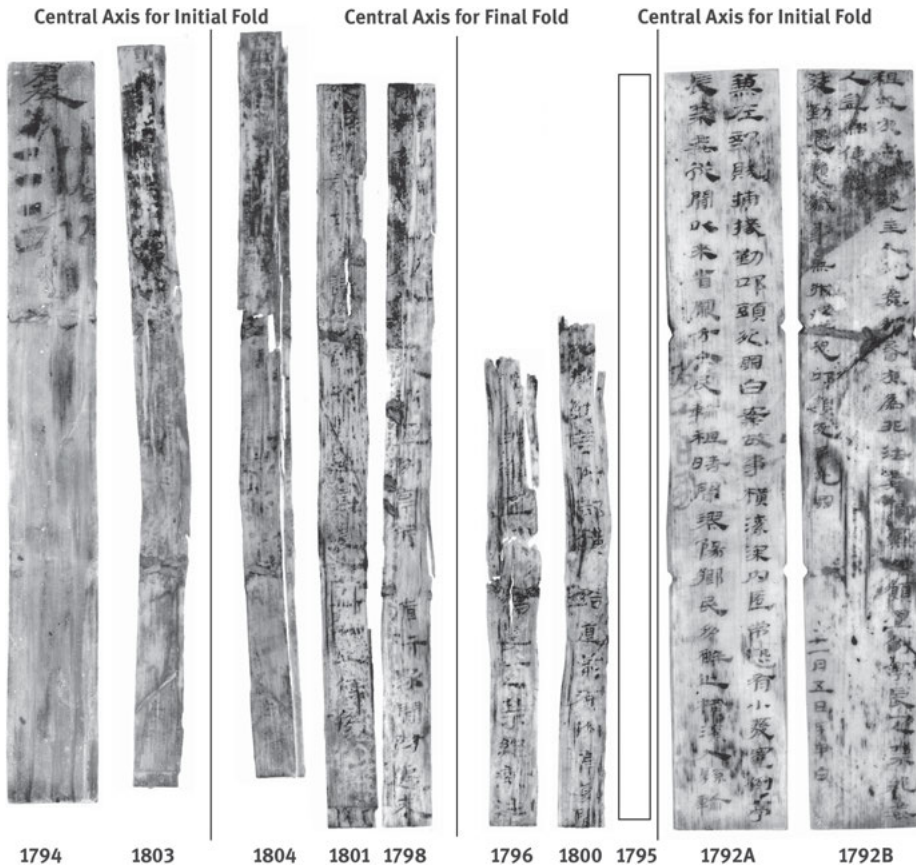


Fig. 4: Extant pieces of Example 3.

the left, meaning that 1794–1803 likely covered slips 1804, 1801 and 1798. Likewise, the right of the wider tablet 1792 might have folded and covered slips 1796, 1800 and 1795, the last of which is blank and was pivotal in keeping the balance between tablet 1792 and slips 1796 and 1800, making the manuscript foldable.<sup>34</sup>

The manuscript might have been folded again between slips 1796 and 1798. Logically, it could be folded in both directions, although the upward direction seems more likely as it would cover all the writing and, as a result, better protected the contents, enhancing confidentiality. The prerequisite of such a formatting method is that the pieces—especially those between the axes—were bound loosely; otherwise it would be difficult to flex the folded parts. This may explain why the remnants of binding

<sup>34</sup> For the existence of the blank slip 1795, see: *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu* 2020, vol. 5, 191.

strings on the tablets and slips are unevenly positioned, as the strings might have moved more easily due to the large gap between each piece. In short, the folded manuscript was likely a compact rectangle.

### Single-piece ‘the Lord’s Instruction’ Manuscripts

The instructions written on single-piece tablets are by far the most well studied manuscripts of the whole Wuyiguangchang corpus. This is both attributable to the early publication of their images and texts, as well as their peculiar material attributes and importance. The average size of such manuscripts is c. 23.05 cm long by c. 4.73 cm wide. It is worth noting that the above-mentioned Qin ordinance stipulates that the width of a five-column tablet—which was the largest possible size for this type of writing support—should be c. 4.4 cm.<sup>35</sup> The measurement of the single-piece instructions is therefore not far removed from this standard.

While the use of tablet was by no means exceptional in the Eastern Han period, the five-column tablet seems to occupy a special status. Wang Chong 王充, a contemporaneous thinker, once lamented:

When writing on a five-column tablet or composing a letter comprising ten memorials, if one is of inferior talent, he or she will find it specifically difficult to wield the power of brush and ink, let alone [asking this person to] combine sentences to paragraphs and [write] hundreds of chapters!

書五行之牘，書十奏之記，其才劣者，筆墨之力尤難，況乃連句結章，篇至十百哉！<sup>36</sup>

The underlying rationale of Wang’s proposition is that although the five-column tablet was not designed for writing an extremely lengthy text, someone who lacks writing talent would still face difficulties to fill it with characters. This would suggest that producing manuscripts such as ‘the lord’s instruction’ was still considered a challenge for a normal person.

Another notable feature of such manuscripts is their extraordinary layout. A single-piece ‘the lord’s Instruction’ comprises two registers. The lower register records the deliberations of subordinate officials, whereas the upper is often inscribed with the autograph (“*ruo*”) of the magistrate (Fig. 5). Indeed, all the *ruo* characters on such manuscripts are of an extraordinary size, occupying almost one-third of a tablet’s surface. This layout easily makes the *ruo* the centre of the viewer’s attention.

Although single-piece instructions were in theory self-contained, it is evident that they could be bound with either another tablet or several slips along the adminis-

<sup>35</sup> Staack 2018, 271.

<sup>36</sup> Huang Hui, *Lun Heng jiaoshi*, vv. 13, 583. The translation is modified from: Forke 1962, 89.

trative process like their multi-piece counterparts.<sup>37</sup> Two examples are provided. The first example features a single-piece instruction, which comprises a tablet and several supplementary double-column slips, whereas the second is a multi-tablet manuscript that constituted two tablets.

A single-piece instruction could be bound with both single- and double-column slips. Tablet 429+430 and double-column slips 431–433 constitute one such manuscript (henceforth Example 4).<sup>38</sup> Specifically, the three double-column slips (one of which is broken) were from an ‘explanation’ (*jie* 解) document, which was used exclusively by subordinate officials to clarify the inquiries of their superior on government affairs. Here, the explanation was compiled by Du 篤, who was requested to investigate the crime of two officials named Huang Gong 黃宮 and Li Zong 李宗.<sup>39</sup>

Du’s explanation should have served as the attachment of a related single-piece instruction (tablet 429+430), in which the subordinates’ deliberation on the lower register explicitly states that they attached the “explanation in slips” (*jie ru die* 解如牒) for the magistrate’s reference. This claim conforms with the existence of a crack which indicates the passing of a binding string. Equally important, all four manuscripts were found in layer ③:202 of pit no. 1 and were likely buried in proximity given their consecutive serial numbers. Considering the materiality, archaeological context and textual content, tablet 429+430 was likely bound together with the three double-column slips.

The creation of this manuscript was not the last stop of the lifecycle of tablet 429+430. The inscription of an inventory label reads: “The Case of Scribes for Measuring Fields Huang Gong and Li Zong; examined in Autumn” (丈田史黃宮、李宗本事; 秋考實).<sup>40</sup> This label should have been attached to the container that stored the documents pertaining to the case of Huang Gong and Li Zong, probably including Example 4. This indicates that the composite manuscript was archived after being signed by the magistrate.

While Example 4 was made for the magistrate’s reference, the creation of multi-tablet manuscripts seems to have been primarily for an archival purpose. Published material of the Wuyiguangchang corpus contains at least two specimens of multi-

<sup>37</sup> In this respect, calling such ‘instruction’ tablets single-piece manuscripts is somewhat misleading. The reader is reminded that in the present context, the phrase “single-piece” is in contrast with instruction manuscripts written on multiple strips and does not include the attachments.

<sup>38</sup> Zhou Haifeng 周海鋒 has correctly pointed out that a single-piece instruction (tablet 1509) and two double-column slips 1858 and 1099 are related: Zhou 2021b. This is another example of the “tablet+double-column” form.

<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, Huang and Li were assigned the crucial tasks of verifying the number of agricultural fields and collecting the land tax. During their trip, however, they abused their power and beat up a man called Deng Guan 鄧官. Tablet 429+430 centres on the reliability of this explanation, which the subordinate officials described as “careless” (*sanlüe* 散略) in their deliberation.

<sup>40</sup> *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jian du* 2018, vol. 2, 90, label 418. For the term “*benshi*” 本事 (literally, “fundamental affair”), see: Yang 2013, 49; Yates 2019, 86–87. The latter of which has translated the inscription of twelve such labels in the appendix.



Fig. 5: Relevant pieces of Example 5.

tablet manuscripts; that is, a single-piece instruction in combination with another single-piece attachment. The following will concentrate on the case of tablets 336 and CWJ1③:305 (henceforth Example 5).<sup>41</sup>

Fig. 5 shows the images of the latter example. Tablet 336 on the right is a letter submitted from Wang Chun 王純 to the county court, reporting that he was assaulted by the relatives of a murderer called Huang Wu 黃胡, whom he had killed in a combat. When the letter was delivered, it was likely immediately handed in to the Prefect for his instruction; this accounts for the cursive remark on the left of the verso (which also indicates that tablet 336 is an original). Following Wang's report and the Prefect's preliminary instruction, the responsible subordinate officials drew up a deliberation (tablet CWJ1③:305), which required the Prefect's authorisation. However, the Prefect was absent when the subordinates finished the tablet, so the latter had to replace his *nuo* with the line "the lord is pursuing a murderer in the district of Xiao Wuling guard post" (君追殺人賊小武陵亭部).

With their related contents and similar cracks caused by a binding string on the lower parts, tablets 336 and CWJ1③:305 were likely bound together.<sup>42</sup> The most probable storage method of a "multi-tablet" composite manuscript was to fold the tablets face to face.<sup>43</sup> Such an arrangement suggests two things: first, binding two pieces of tablets violated the affordance of this type of writing supports, which should have carried self-contained texts; second, it was difficult to secure the position of two pieces of wood that are relatively large and unevenly shaped. Considering that the Prefect likely knew the content of tablet CWJ1③:305 beforehand, it was unlikely that subordinate officials would have attached it when they gave their deliberation to the magistrate. As such, the production of a "multi-tablet" manuscript was presumably motivated by archival demands, rather than serving as reference material for the magistrate. By putting separate administrative documents concerning the same event together, government personnel could trace and check relevant documents more efficiently in the future.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Another example of such multi-tablet manuscripts is tablets 2496 and 2497.

<sup>42</sup> Shih 2021, 126.

<sup>43</sup> As Tsang Wing Ma notes, if this type of manuscript comprised more than three tablets, a quasi-accordion fold might have been created, meaning that the tablets were folded back and forth to form a compact manuscript: Ma 2020, 364–367.

<sup>44</sup> Shih 2021, 126.

## Chronology of Multi-piece and Single-piece 'Instruction' Manuscripts

The variety of forms of the 'the lord's instruction' manuscripts have not been devoid of scholarly attention. Sumiya Tsuneko argues that multi-piece instructions aimed to document mundane accounts and reports that did not require the deliberation and petition of the Vice-Prefect and Bureau Head, whereas single-piece instructions were created especially for recording these two procedures.<sup>45</sup> Takatori Yuji 鷹取祐司, on the other hand, suggests that the instructions written on multi-piece manuscripts were the actual administrative documents used during the decision-making process. In contrast, single-piece instructions were compiled on the basis of their multi-piece counterparts and their purpose was to emphasise that the Prefect, the Vice-Prefect and the Head endorsed and approved the Bureau Scribe's deliberations. In other words, Takatori argues that multi-piece instructions were the precursors to single-piece instructions, although he refrains from characterising the former as drafts or the latter as copies.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, the materiality of both types of instruction manuscripts suggests that they were the actual documents used during administrative process. On the one hand, the magistrate's signing of "*nuo* (*ruo*)" carried a strong symbolic meaning. Although Example 2 reveals that drafts of official documents sent in the name of the County Prefect might also require his approval, these documents were, after all, designed to be disseminated outside the county court. This sets them apart from other 'instruction' manuscripts, whose contents mostly revolved around internal discussions within the county court, although later examples indicate that 'instructions' of the Commandery Governor could be monumentalised in stone.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is unlikely that subordinate officials would have to produce drafts or copies of such instructions.

On the other hand, that single-piece instructions—like their multi-piece counterparts—could have included attachments during their submissions suggests that their production and signing were not mere formalities. It is equally unlikely that single-piece instructions were reworked from the multi-piece ones, because if this was so, it implies that after a follow-up single-piece instruction was produced, the officials in charge would have to untie the attachment that was originally bound with a multi-piece instruction, in order to put it together with the new single-piece instruction and sign it for the second time. While one cannot completely deny the possibility of this repeating procedure, it does seem unnecessary.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Sumiya 2021, 52–54.

<sup>46</sup> Takatori 2021, 252–254, 261–262.

<sup>47</sup> Sumiya 2014, 23.

<sup>48</sup> A possible reason would be that the single-piece instructions were devoted to ritualistic purposes. Nevertheless, such manuscripts' ordinary (23.05 cm on average) length—which was a common

In contrast to Takatori's proposition, existing evidence suggests that the dates between most multi-piece and single-piece instructions do not overlap, meaning that the use of the two forms may be influenced by diachronic factors. The following attempts to reconstruct the chronology of these two types of instruction manuscripts.

Regarding the dating of multi-piece instructions, two of the three examples discussed above are dated to late 105 CE and early 108 CE. Although Example 1 is undated, it mentions "Vice-Prefect Xian" in slip 1307. Among the published Wuyiguangchang material, the earliest appearance of Xian should be dated to 109 CE.<sup>49</sup> Prior to Xian, this position was held by You 優, who stepped down in early 108 CE (see Example 2). Also in another multi-piece manuscript, Vice-Prefect Xian is listed alongside the "Mi Constable Wang Gu" (縣亭長王固),<sup>50</sup> who appears in a document in 109 CE.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, Example 1 likely postdates early 108 CE. Additionally, slip 1091, datable to the eleventh month of 107 CE, was likely a fragment of a multi-piece instruction based on its synonymous content with the above-mentioned slip 885.

The dating of single-piece instructions is much clearer than their multi-piece counterparts. The dates of single-piece instructions (including unpublished pieces) range from approximately the twelfth month of 105 CE (tablet 1509) to the fifth month of 107 CE (tablet 330).<sup>52</sup> Strikingly, such a timeframe barely overlapped with the dated multi-piece instructions, suggesting that single-piece instructions were only used for a short time. Although the sampling size of the dated multi-piece instructions is too small to reach any conclusive argument, the distribution of the *nuo* (*ruo*) characters in the single-piece and multi-piece instructions does seem to substantiate the above hypothesis. Tab. 6 categorises six types of *nuo* (*ruo*) characters taken from the published 'the Lord's instruction' manuscripts:

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denominator of a written artefact's authority—makes this theory unlikely. For a detailed examination of how the length of writing support affected the authority of a manuscript in Qin and Han China, see: Tomiya 2010, 29–49.

**49** Slip 1808 lists Prefect Dan and Vice-Prefect Xian. Despite missing the regal year, the slip records that it was produced "on the 23rd, that is, the *gengxu* day of the ninth month" 九月廿三日庚戌. According to the reconstructed calendar, the only year that matches both the numerical and sexagenary days and the span of the Wuyiguangchang manuscripts was the third year of Yongchu (109 CE): *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu* 2020, vol. 5, 81.





















**50** The manuscript comprises at least slips 737, 739, 741, and 743–745. Xian and Wang Gu appear respectively in slips 739 and 741; see: *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu* 2018, vol. 2, 159–161.

**51** *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu* 2018, vol. 1, 111, slip 88.











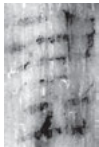






**52** I am grateful to Yang Xiaoliang 楊小亮 for checking the dates of unpublished single-piece instructions for me, thereby confirming this hypothesis. Dr. Yang also informed me that Zhang Chi 張馳, a doctoral student from Tsinghua University, made a similar observation that all single-piece instructions in the Wuyiguangchang corpus range from the eleventh month of 105 CE to the eleventh month of 107 CE: email communication with the author.


























**Tab. 6:** Categorisation of *nuo* and *ruo* character forms taken from the Wuyiguangchang ‘the lord’s instruction’ manuscripts.


Type	Images of <i>nuo</i> ( <i>ruo</i> ) samples				
Nuo 1a					
	17 (multi-piece)	308 (multi-piece)	368 (multi-piece)	388 (multi-piece)	690 (multi-piece)
					
	718 (multi-piece)	1271 (multi-piece)	1689 (multi-piece)	1718 (multi-piece)	
					
	103 (multi-piece)]	310 (multi-piece)	424 (multi-piece)	521 (multi-piece)	757 (multi-piece)
					
	884 (multi-piece; 108.1 CE)	1285 (multi-piece)	2514 (multi-piece)	CWJ1③:306-2 (multi-piece)	984 (Single-piece)
					
	2495 (multi-piece)				



Type	Images of <i>nuo</i> ( <i>ruo</i> ) samples				
<i>Nuo 2</i>					
	98 (multi-piece)	419 (multi-piece)	1114 (multi-piece)	1147 (multi-piece)	1794 (multi-piece; 105.11 CE)
					
	2499 (multi-piece)	1777 (multi-piece)			
<i>Nuo 3a</i>					
	573 (multi-piece)	1308 (multi-piece; 109 CE?)			
<i>Nuo 3b</i>					
	132+86 (multi-piece)	2194 (multi-piece)			
<i>Ruo 1</i>					
	311 (multi-piece)	658 (multi-piece)	670 (multi-piece)	748 (multi-piece)	1061 (multi-piece)
					
	604 (multi-piece)				

Type	Images of <i>nuo</i> ( <i>ruo</i> ) samples				
<i>Ruo</i> 2					
	314 (multi-piece)	386 (multi-piece)	689 (multi-piece)		
<i>Ruo</i> 3					
	390 (multi-piece)	96 (Single-piece; 106.7 CE)	156 (Single-piece; 106.? CE)	290 (Single-piece; 106.9 CE)	307 (Single-piece)
					
	331 (Single-piece; 106.12 CE)	427 (Single-piece)	429+430 (Single-piece)	538+393 <sup>53</sup> (Single-piece; 106.9 CE)	1106 (Single-piece; 106.11 CE)
					
	1110 (Single-piece)	1276 (Single-piece; 107.3 CE)	1509 (Single-piece; 105.12?)	1687 (Single-piece; 106.12 CE)	1729 (Single-piece; 106.7 CE)
					
	1772 (Single-piece; 106.10 CE)	1848 (Single-piece)	CWJ1③:325-2-9 (Single-piece; 106.8 CE)	CWJ1③:325-5-21 (Single-piece; 106.8 CE)	CWJ1③:325-32 (Single-piece; 107.4 CE)

<sup>53</sup> The tablet is reconstructed in: Wang 2019.

Each of the six types of “*nuo* (*ruo*)” graphs has its own distinctive characteristics. Overall, three hands chose to sign in *nuo*, whereas the other three preferred *ruo*. Compared to the *nuo* forms, which are closer to the standard orthography of the time, the *ruo* forms are executed in a more abstract, exaggerated style, carrying curved and elongated strokes. Sometimes subtle structural variances can be found within the same group. For example, despite maintaining a synonymous orthography, the top-right component of *nuo* 1a never penetrates the horizontal stroke below (e. g. , something that the scribe who wrote *nuo* 1b always did.

With regard to the dated examples, slips 1794 (the eleventh month of 105 CE) and 884 (the first month of 108 CE) were signed respectively in types *nuo* 2 and *nuo* 1b, whereas slip 1308—which is allegedly dated to 109 CE—adopts a *nuo* 3a style. Additionally, all thirteen datable *ruo* 3 samples are scattered between the twelfth month of 105 and mid-107 CE, implying that it is probably the autograph that the magistrate adopted during the timeframe. Assuming that a magistrate would have signed consistently in the same style within a given period, *nuo* 2 seems to be immediately succeeded by *ruo* 3. As such, we may surmise the following chronology: *nuo* 2 (?—the eleventh month of 105 CE); *ruo* 3 (the twelfth month of 105 to mid-107 CE); *nuo* 1b (108 CE); and *nuo* 3a (c. 109 CE). In other words, the autographs on the instruction manuscripts changed frequently within the five-year span.

Admittedly, this chronology is approximate because of the incomplete sources. That said, it may still help us to reconstruct the dating of instruction manuscripts. First, among the twenty specimens of *ruo* 3, all except tablet 390 adhere to single-piece instructions. Second, tablet 984 is the only relatively intact single-piece instruction that was not signed in the *ruo* 3 style (Fig. 6). These two trends indicate a strong correlation between single-piece instructions and *ruo* 3, suggesting that most undated single-piece instructions which carry *ruo* 3 were likely produced between 106–107 CE.

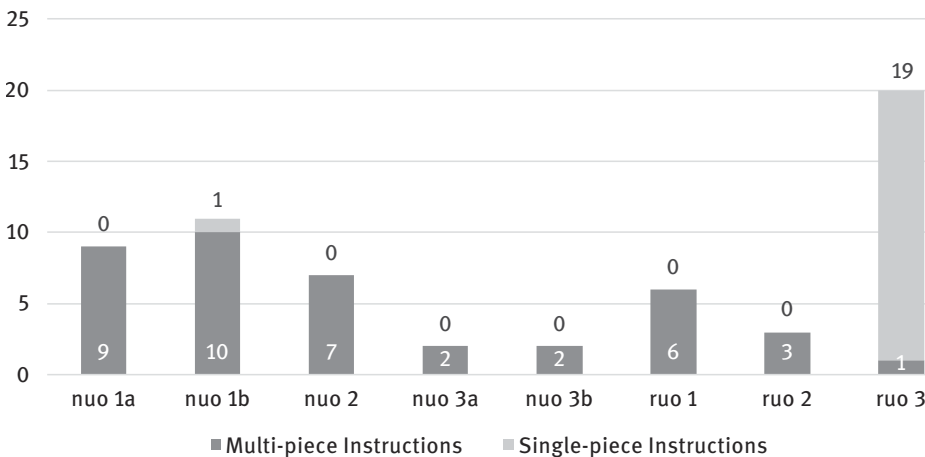


Fig. 6: Distribution of *nuo* and *ruo*.

This theory also seems to correlate with the content of the exceptional tablet 984:

Shi and Min, the scribes of the Left Bureau of Robbery, report: A letter from the commandery headquarter says: Wang Zheng injured Zhen, and Guo Xi the Pending Head of Yong, Huang Lang the Head of Robber Arresting, Yin Hong the Patrol Leader, and Zhang Han the Constable did not thoroughly pursue him; [rather, they] blamed the Constable of Xiaogong. You the Vice-Prefect, Ou Xun and Tang Jiu who served as the Heads, Zhe Xiu, Peng Qian, Chen Bao, Liu Xin who served as the scribes, Wang Cheng the Head of Robber Arresting, as well as Wang Lun the Constable intentionally let [Wang Zheng] go during the investigation, and thereby failed to adjudicate [Wang] Zheng's case; their explanation is [...] each of their fines of redeeming the death penalty amounts to two *jin* and eight *liang*, as said in the headquarters' letter. You the Vice-Prefect and Jun the Head suggest: We petition to assign [the affair] to the Bureau of Currency, ordering them to collect the debts owed by Xun, Xin, Jiu, Bao and others in cash, whose amount should be booked in the account of the ninth month. The Head of the Bureau of Merit informed [Huang] Lang, [Ying] Hong, and [Zhang] Han: [You] suggested to resolutely examine [Wang Zheng?] and exempt the absconded...

左賊史式、晏白：府記曰：王政傷枕，靡待事掾郭憲、賊捕掾黃朗、游徼殷泓、亭長張漢不窮追，適效功亭長。丞優、掾區訓、唐就，史這脩、彭遷、陳寶、劉信，賊捕掾王成，亭長王倫考縱不結政，解□□，贖死金各二斤八兩，如府記。丞優、掾均議：請屬金曹收責訓、信、就、寶等金錢，薄以九月時。功曹謂朗、泓、漢：議詭課，除亡□□□□□<sup>54</sup>

The report entails the corporate malfeasance of the Linxiang officials in a lawsuit case. The names of the listed officials hint at the artefact's dating. Notably, Vice-Prefect You appears in documents ranging from mid-106 to early 108 CE, while a letter datable to autumn 107 CE mentions a Bureau Head called Zhu Jun 朱均,<sup>55</sup> who was likely the Jun in this report. Additionally, Example 2, which carries a *nuo* 1b autograph, is also dated to early 108 CE. These pieces of evidence suggest that tablet 984 was possibly produced between mid-106 and early 108. Such a span coincides neatly with the abovementioned dating of other single-piece instructions.

Adopting the same method, we may surmise the following chronology of multi-piece and single-piece instructions. The Linxiang county government appear to have primarily used multi-piece instructions prior to the twelfth month of 105 CE. Afterwards, the government replaced multi-piece with single-piece instructions, which seem to have been employed no later than early 108 CE, with a brief overlap. From late 107 or early 108 CE onward, multi-piece instructions once again became the prevalent form of instruction manuscripts. Simply put, single-piece instructions were only used for a short twelve-to-eighteen-month period before being replaced again by multi-piece instructions.



<sup>54</sup> Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu 2019, vol. 3, 104, tablet 984.

<sup>55</sup> Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu 2020, vol. 5, 62, slip 1703.

## Writing Supports and Rulership in the Linxiang Government

The previous section has shown that the writing supports and forms of the ‘the lord’s instruction’ manuscripts exchanged between multi-piece and single-piece in the government of Linxiang county in less than two years. Rather than serving as the sources of single-piece instructions, multi-piece instructions were likely produced in the same administrative procedure and performed an authorising function identical with their single-piece counterparts. Such a rapid transition of the material forms of the ‘lord’s instruction’ manuscripts does not seem to have been prompted by any order of the central authorities, as such institutional reforms tended to be more long-lasting. Hence, the more conceivable impulse was the demand of the so-called ‘lords’—that is, the Prefect—or the leading subordinate officials of Linxiang county. The seemingly arbitrary transition calls into question the standardisation of administrative documents. What were the factors that encouraged the local ruler(s) to impose such changes over a few years?

Comparing the contents of the texts of the published single-piece and multi-piece instructions, the affairs they address and the number of words they carry show no salient differences. For instance, Examples 4 and 5 discussed earlier entail criminal cases such as abscondence and murder; these themes can also be found in Examples 1 and 3. Additionally, the average length of the texts of twenty complete single-piece instructions amounts to 90.8 characters, whereas that of the four intact multi-piece is 82.25 characters. In this light, we may exclude these two factors from the list of possible reasons.

Moreover, the transition of material forms may not even be caused by a change in magistrate. While the diverse *nuo* (*ruo*) autographs displayed in the last section do hint at such a scenario,<sup>56</sup> the styles of some of these autographs are not far removed from each other. For instance, the upper part of the *nuo* 1b specimen on tablet 1285 was written in a “” shape. If its two vertical strokes are extended, the part will become the elongated “” characteristic of *nuo* 2. Hence, it may even be that *nuo* 1b and *nuo* 2 were created by the same person. Likewise, both types *ruo* 2 and *ruo* 3 share not only the elongated, curved vertical stroke, but also a similar orthography. Taking the chronology of instruction manuscripts developed in the last section into consideration, in an extreme case, it is even possible that the oscillation between the multi-piece and single-piece instructions might have taken place during the term of the same magistrate.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Li Songru 2016, 169.

<sup>57</sup> As noted earlier, the signing of “*nuo* (*ruo*)” could in theory only be executed by the County Prefect. If the Prefect was absent, an instruction manuscript, regardless of whether it was a single-piece or multi-piece, would state his whereabouts or condition. Published Wuyiguangchang materials such as tablet 392 and slips 295, 437 and 2362 reveal that the Linxiang County Prefect since 109 CE was Yin Dan 殷丹. However, to date there is no information on the name of the Prefect prior to this time, although an undated record (tablet 99) indicates the transition of the Prefect.

Putting the factors discussed above aside, what were the irreplaceable advantages that propelled the ruler to return to multi-piece instructions? To tackle this question, we may look at the two unique features of multi-piece instructions. First, in such manuscripts, the last wooden tablet with which the magistrate's authorisation is inscribed sometimes carry an extra remark after the "approved" statement, which is absent from the single-piece instructions.<sup>58</sup> The published Wuyiguangchang material comprises five multi-piece instructions that include the magistrate's extra remarks:

**Tab. 7:** Texts and translations of instructions that contain extra remarks.

Original Texts	Tentative English Translations	Serial nos.
君教：諾。勅獄、司空條【言？】☐	The lord's instruction: Approved. Order the prison and the office of convict labour to [report?] in columns...	CWJ1③:306-2 <sup>59</sup>
君教：諾。送第十七連道。字(?)	The lord's instruction: Approved. Escort the number seventeen to Lian march. Word[?]	310 <sup>60</sup>
君教：信真臧非。	The lord's instruction: Xin's [words] are authentic whereas [those of] Zang are wrong.	601 <sup>61</sup>
君教：諾。勿錄問。	The lord's instruction: Approved. Do not examine and inquire.	1271 <sup>62</sup>
君教：諾。舊故有例者，前何故不署？	The lord's instruction: Approved. In the past there was someone who inspected [that region], why did you not station [this person] from the outset?	1308

All the listed remarks were added in response to affairs enumerated in the subordinates' deliberations, meaning that the tablets had to be accompanied by other manuscripts. It is worth noting that tablet 601 does not contain the "*nuo (ruo)*" of the magistrate, even though there should have been one in view of other examples. That said, this remark was still reminiscent of other instructions, in that it aims at deciding

<sup>58</sup> Takatori Yuji also observes this feature. He argues that it implies single-piece instructions were made after the deliberations were acknowledged by the County Prefect, thereby attesting his proposition that multi-piece instructions were the precursors of single-piece instructions: Takatori 2021, 258–259.

<sup>59</sup> Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu xuanshi 2015, 70.

<sup>60</sup> Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu 2018, vol. 1, 156, tablet 310.

<sup>61</sup> Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu 2018, vol. 1, 2, 135, tablet 601.

<sup>62</sup> Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu 2019, vol. 4, 87, tablet 1271.

certain matters. Regardless, this suggests that the real focus of these tablets was on the remarks rather than the *nuo* autograph. Equally important, the remarks on tablets 310 and 1308—both of which are written in cursive—occupy the whole recto, although the magistrates could certainly have executed them in a more spatially economic manner. Moreover, the space of the upper register of a single-piece instruction could handily accommodate these concise remarks. For example, the upper register of the above-mentioned CWJ1③:305 carries ten characters, whose number is only three less than that on tablet 1308.

A possible reason for writing on a separate tablet may be that it allowed a magistrate to sign and write in the way he preferred. To flaunt the political authority of the magistrate (i. e. the lord), the *nuo* (*ruo*) characters were often large, cursive and in some measure individualistic. As part of the magistrate's instruction, his remark also undertook an identical function and should thus have been written in a style like the *nuo* (*ruo*). What really mattered, therefore, was *how* rather than *what* one should write. In this respect, multi-piece instructions granted the magistrate more than enough space to express his ideas and exhibit his authority. This is an advantage that the single-piece instructions could not have offered.

The second unique feature of the multi-piece instructions is that the endorsements of the Vice-Prefect and the Head of a Bureau were always written separately on two individual bamboo slips. In contrast, such records were integrated into subordinates' deliberations in the single-piece instructions. Additionally, unlike multi-piece instructions, in which the scribes of a related Bureau were the personnel who proposed the deliberation, the same section in single-piece instructions always began with the names of the Vice-Prefect and the Head.<sup>63</sup>

Two hypotheses can be raised regarding this distinction. First, it may reflect an internal rearrangement of the responsibilities of Linxiang government officials between late 105 CE and mid-107 CE. As a result, the task of drafting deliberations to the magistrate was transferred from the Scribes of a Bureau to the Vice-Prefect and the Head of that Bureau. Second, the scribes were always in charge of this task and the change appeared in single-piece instructions that sought to express the division of accountability between officials more clearly—both visually and textually.<sup>64</sup> The second of the two theories seems more probable. Inasmuch as the Vice-Prefect and the Bureau Head were the superiors of the scribes, it seems unnecessary to transfer such a task to them, though they might have been responsible for presenting the deliberation to the magistrate in person.

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<sup>63</sup> Takatori 2021, 249–252.

<sup>64</sup> Takatori Yuji also contends that such records are only a simplified form of the “endorsement” section on multi-piece instructions. However, he suggests that this distinction indicates that the major goal of creating a single-piece instruction was to highlight the identities of the Head and the Assistant Prefect who approved the scribe's deliberation for future reference: Takatori 2021, 261.

Such an advantage of the materiality of multi-piece instructions is also embodied in the replacements for the ‘the lord’s instruction’ tablet. The Wuyiguangchang corpus includes the peculiar tablet 2571, whose inscription reads: “The Master’s instruction: I agreed with the deliberation of the Bureau” 卿教：如曹議.<sup>65</sup> Given that the text of this slip resembles those of the endorsement slips of the Bureau Head, the “Master’s instruction” (*qing jiao* 卿教) likely refers to the instruction of a Bureau Head or the Vice-Prefect. This may account for the absence of the “*nuo* (*ruo*)” signature on this tablet, as such officials were not qualified to perform this act. Additionally, on tablet 1830 is written: “I agreed with the report” (如白事), in which the character “事” (*shi*) is inscribed in a considerably larger size and more cursive than the preceding graphs. These traits echo the magistrate’s signatures on instruction manuscripts.

In sum, the textual and material characteristics of tablets 2571 and 1830 suggest that they likely served to substitute the ‘the lord’s instruction’ tablet when the County Prefect was not in office and thus could not approve the deliberation. Notably, this practice was only possible in the multi-piece instructions, where the accountability of the Vice-Prefect and the Bureau Head was recorded on separate slips. In other words, the format of multi-piece instructions allowed the reader to better understand who actually approved a deliberation, rather than simply attributing it to the absent magistrate. This may prompt the revival of such a form in 108 CE. However, such an advantage came at a price. Although the multi-piece instruction may better demonstrate the mutual accountability of officials who took part in the administrative procedure, the ruler’s authority became less pronounced when the tablet carrying his “*nuo* (*ruo*)” signature was merely placed alongside other slips, instead of catching the user’s immediate attention as in a single-piece instruction. In this respect, the back and forth between multi-piece and single-piece instructions somewhat manifests the dynamics between the pragmatic concern over a more efficient administration and the better expression of rulership.

Regardless of the motivations behind this phenomenon, it in itself indicates that the choice of writing supports and material forms of administrative documents could be remarkably flexible. The seeming lack of consistency in the writing supports urges us to reconsider when and to what extent standardisation would have been imposed on administrative documents. On the one hand, it may be because the magistrates’ instructions were primarily circulated internally within the county headquarter and therefore were more casual in its writing materials and forms. On the other hand, such swift transitions indicate that although the Qin and Han central authorities had evidently instituted manifold regulations to standardise administrative documents, considerable leeway in relation to government affairs was left to the discretion of the local ruler and their subordinates.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu 2020, vol. 6, 124. For the meaning of “*ru*” (如) in this context: Takatori 2021, 240–247.

<sup>66</sup> Thies Staack also makes a similar observation based on the layout of grain disbursal tallies in the Liye corpus: Staack 2023, 169.



Within a permissible range—which was often circumscribed by the contemporaneous framework of standardisation—administrative units on different levels of the political hierarchy across different regions might have developed their own individual practices, which were contingent upon the customs of an organisation (such as a scriptorium, a secretariat) or the preference of a magistrate and the responsible officials. Interestingly, the flexible choice of writing supports of instruction manuscripts is in line with the nature of ‘the lord’s instructions’, whose promulgation manifested the local ruler’s authority and was independent of the central government’s regulations and interests.<sup>67</sup> In this respect, the flexible forms of instruction manuscripts may result from the fact that the central government did not set a strict standard for the forms of such documents in view of the local ruler’s authority. This in some measure reflects the limit of the central government’s power.

That said, official standards were not the only restriction imposed on the users of written artefacts. Rather, users’ choices would inevitably be structured by contemporaneous manuscript culture. The employment of relatively narrow wooden tablets in multi-piece instructions is a good example of such influences. Given the almost negligible differences between the width of such tablets and double-column slips, the former could be easily replaced by the latter. However, the officials in Linxiang still troubled themselves to produce these wooden tablets and use them exclusively to carry the authorisation of the magistrate in multi-piece instructions.

The insistence of the Linxiang officials may be under the influence of the cultural implications of tablet. Eastern Han sources reveal that tablet, as a writing support, was often associated with reporting to one’s superior. The following anecdote vividly portrays such a function of tablet:

Meanwhile [the fifteenth year of the Jianwu reign; (39 CE)], commanderies each sent their messengers to report affairs, and the emperor [Emperor Guangwu 光武帝] saw that a tablet owed by the official from Chenliu [commandery] was inscribed; When he looked at it, [the text] reads: “[You] may ask [the officials] from Yingchuan and Hongnong [commanderies], but not those from Henan and Nanyang [commanderies].” The emperor interrogated this official about the cause and background [of the statement on the tablet], and the official refused to confess, falsely claiming that he got the tablet on Changshou street. This angered the emperor. By the time, Xianzong (Emperor Ming; Guangwu’s successor), who was the Duke of Donghai and aged twelve, said behind a curtain that: “This official should have received the order of the Commandery [Governor], who wished to attain a number of cultivated fields comparable [with his colleagues].”

時諸郡各遣使奏事，帝見陳留吏牘上有書，視之，云「潁川、弘農可問，河南、南陽不可問」。帝詰吏由趣，吏不肯服，抵言於長壽街上得之。帝怒。時顯宗為東海公，年十二，在幄後言曰：「吏受郡勅，當欲以墾田相方耳。」<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> As Satō Tatsurō observes, the predominance of ‘the lord’s instruction’ documents should be put in the context of relatively weak central authorities during the Eastern Han period: Satō 2021, 289.

<sup>68</sup> Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu*, vv. 22, 780–781.

The concise remark of the Chenliu Governor resembles those on the multi-piece instructions discussed above, although it seems unlikely that the tablet was an instruction made by the Governor; otherwise the emperor would have immediately recognised the person who articulated the remark. Indeed, the context indicates that the tablet was to assist the Chenliu official when he orally reported the affairs of his commandery to the emperor. Thus, the remark on the tablet might have been written by the official himself in order to remind him of the crucial terms that he should or should not have mentioned. This confirms that as a type of writing support, a tablet facilitated not only written but also oral communication.

The close connection between tablet and reporting is also reflected in contemporaneous terminologies. Wang Chong, for instance, often described tablets using compounds such as “*zou du*” 奏牘 or “*du zou*” 牘奏, both of which literally mean “tablets for memorials.”<sup>69</sup> A similar term also appears in an anecdote of Zhang Ji 張既:

[Zhang] Ji's ancestry was an ordinary family, and he was a person who maintained a decent appearance and decorum. From a young age, he practiced his craft at writing letters and served as a junior official at the *menxia* of the commandery, thereby making his family rich. He regarded himself as coming from a humble background and thought that there was no way that he could establish himself by his own efforts. He thereupon always carried high quality writing-knives, brushes, and boards for memorials with him, waited and immediately gave [them] to those prominent officials when they ran out of their own stationery, thereby making acquaintances with them.

既世單家，為人有容儀。少小工書疏，為郡門下小吏，而家富。自惟門寒，念無以自達，乃常畜好刀筆及版奏，伺諸大吏有乏者輒給與，以是見識焉。<sup>70</sup>

In this context, the word “board” (*ban* 版) should be equivalent of tablet (*du*),<sup>71</sup> and the term “prominent officials” (*dali* 大吏) likely denotes subordinate officials who held important posts such as the Head of the Bureau of Merit or the Master of Accounts.<sup>72</sup> Such subordinate officials likely maintained frequent communication with the magistrate. This undoubtedly created an incessant demand for tablets, which were the pivotal writing support for reports. Taking this a step further, one may even say that the affordance of tablets was to help report to one's superior. This may account for the use of wooden tablets in multi-piece instructions, as these documents were also reports presented to the magistrate. In this respect, although the magistrate of Linxiang could have the authority to deliberately change the form of instruction manuscripts, the choices were still circumscribed by the manuscript culture of his time.

<sup>69</sup> Huang Hui, *Lun Heng jiaoshi*, vv. 12, 551; *Ibid.*, vv. 13, 607.

<sup>70</sup> Chen Shou, *Sanguo zhi*, vv. 15, 471.

<sup>71</sup> Note that such usage differs from those in a Qin regulation and *Lun heng*, both of which distinguish between *ban* and *du*. See: Staack 2018, 253–254. That said, the *ban* in the above passage clearly refers to a writing support similar to *du*.

<sup>72</sup> Ban Gu, *Hanshu*, vv. 83, 3400.

## Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have discerned the interplay between political authority of local rulers and the materiality of administrative documents through the study of the transition of the material forms of the “the lord’s instruction” manuscripts in Eastern Han China. To this end, it has first shown the diverse forms of multi-piece and single-piece instructions. Multi-piece instructions constituted bamboo slips that carried the subordinate officials’ report and the endorsement of the Vice-Prefect and the Head, as well as a wooden tablet signed by the magistrate to authorise the suggestion. In contrast, single-piece instructions were often inscribed on a wooden tablet that could accommodate five or more lines of writing. Both multi-piece and single-piece instructions can be supplemented by tablets and slips, thus further complicating the materiality of such manuscripts.

The second part of this article attempted to reconstruct a chronology of multi-piece and single-piece instructions. It argues that multi-piece manuscripts were replaced by single-piece in late 105 CE. Such a change was nonetheless reversed in 108 CE. Simply put, there was a transition between multi-piece and single-piece manuscripts in four years.

In addition to changes in magistrates, two unique features of multi-piece instructions may be the reason for the reversion from single-piece to multi-piece. First, in addition to the magistrate’s *nuo* (*ruo*), the wooden tablet of a multi-piece instruction sometimes carries his additional remarks, which are absent from the single-piece instructions. From this perspective, multi-piece instructions might have provided the magistrate more space to express his decisions and authority in the way that he preferred. Second, in the multi-piece instructions, the endorsements of the Vice-Prefect and the Head of a Bureau were always written on two individual bamboo slips respectively, rather than being integrated into the scribes’ report. This allows a clearer division of accountability between officials.

The swift, non-linear transition between multi-piece and single-piece manuscripts seems to delineate the boundary between central and local authorities. Despite the manifold standards instituted by the central government, local rulers retained certain autonomy in everyday administrative affairs. This probably led to various individual practices across different administrative units. That said, the choices of officials were never totally unconstrained. Rather, they were inevitably affected by manuscript culture of the time. For instance, the employment of relatively narrow wooden tablets in the multi-piece instructions may be ascribed to the fact that tablet was often associated with reporting to one’s superior. Such an affordance may account for the use of wooden tablets in the multi-piece instructions, which also comprise reports of subordinate officials.

Similarities in the Wuyiguangchang ‘the lord’s instruction’ manuscripts can also be found in the Zoumalou 走馬樓 corpus dated to the early third century CE. While most Zoumalou instructions are single-piece, both material and textual traits

suggest that they were not directly derived from the single-piece instructions in the Wuyiguangchang corpus. Materially, the published Zoumalou instructions are written on both wooden and bamboo tablets, although wood seems to remain the preferred material substrate;<sup>73</sup> the average width of these manuscripts is c. 3.97 cm.<sup>74</sup> It is noteworthy that there is a marked difference among the width of the Zoumalou instruction manuscripts. The average width of the twenty-four intact wooden tablets is c. 4.07 cm, whereas that of the three bamboo tablets only amounts to c. 3.17 cm. However, it is difficult to determine if such a discrepancy was caused by a deliberate choice of the scribes or by the higher shrinkage rate of bamboo. Overall, the 3.97 cm figure is almost 20 % narrower than that of the Wuyiguangchang single-piece instructions.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, unlike the Wuyiguangchang instructions, the Zoumalou examples include only abstracts of subordinate officials' reports, which often occupy the right-hand corner of the tablets.

Content-wise, the Zoumalou instructions concern the verification of accounts and registers, whereas the extant Wuyiguangchang examples mostly deal with legal cases.<sup>76</sup> Rather than being incorporated into the text of the subordinates' reports, the "endorsement" section of the Zoumalou instructions were written separately like the multi-piece Wuyiguangchang examples. Likewise, records of the checking of officials such as the Master of Accounts became one of the required items; this also mirrors the multi-piece instructions from the Wuyiguangchang. These commonalities suggest that the Zoumalou instructions likely stemmed from their multi-piece, rather than single-piece, peers in Wuyiguangchang.

Conceivably, the changes that we can observe from the Zoumalou 'the lord's instruction' manuscripts were not the invention of the Wu 吳 regime, which ruled over the Linxiang region during the early third century CE. Rather, a Han stele that carries the text of an instruction datable to 182 CE reveals that most abovementioned textual changes were already in place prior to the end of the Eastern Han Empire.<sup>77</sup> The reason underlying this transition remains unclear. Perhaps this was because of the advantage of tablet as a writing support, which reduced the risks of losing texts due to broken binding strings, as well as of the layout of single-piece instructions, which displayed the ruler's authority more prominently. Thus, once officials discovered a way to incorporate the advantages of a multi-piece instruction — sufficient space and more intelligible expression of mutual responsibilities — into a single tablet, they adopted such a

<sup>73</sup> The official report of the Zoumalou instruction manuscripts remains unpublished. However, among the thirty-two instruction manuscripts listed in Xu Chang's 徐暢 book, only seven were written on bamboo tablets: Xu 2021, 73–86.

<sup>74</sup> The figure is calculated from the figures offered by Xu Chang, who has disclosed the measurements of twenty-seven intact single-piece instructions: Xu 2021, 73–84.

<sup>75</sup> For a similar observation, see: Sumiya 2021, 55.

<sup>76</sup> Sumiya 2021, 55.

<sup>77</sup> Sumiya 2014, 23.

form for the second time. Suffice to say that the Zoumalou examples once again illustrate how flexible the instruction manuscripts could be. Nevertheless, further study is required to track the trajectory of development of these intriguing materials.

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