

The Aesthetic Connotation of Ancient Calligraphy

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Abstract: From the origin of writing to the formation of the writing system, the names and aesthetics of calligraphy have been evolving with time. Calligraphy has different mainstream writing styles across different eras and has been assigned different names, which also maps the aesthetic orientation of the times. Not only is calligraphy the evolution of the designation of successive generations but also in the continuous pursuit of “name” and “reality” of the unity of the ancient connotation of calligraphy and the era of aesthetic integration. This paper discusses the flavorful meaning behind the concept of ancient calligraphy, as well as its various forms of expression.

Keywords: Calligraphy; Ancient connotation; Evolution; Aesthetic form

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1. The ancient idea of calligraphy

The concept of antiquity in calligraphy and the field of Chinese painting comes from the traditional Chinese culture of respecting antiquity. The word “ancient” represents facts that have been proven in practice, have empirical value, exhibit a relatively complete value system, and, in a sense, serve as a benchmark for the law. From the aesthetic level, “ancient” has some literary significance, but is not entirely an aesthetic concept. Although it is inextricably linked to time, it is not a mere expression of time and space. It transcends the concept of time but is subjected to its constraints. The meaning of “ancient” has been elevated to an aesthetic concept through the transformation and elevation of its meaning. It can be divided into the following levels.

The first is the former and subsequent law theory of the “ancient” concept. The *Shuowen Jiezi* (Explaining and Analyzing Characters) states: “Ancient, meaning past.” This emphasizes the concept of time in the past tense. Xizhi Wang’s “Lanting Preface” states: “Looking at the past is like looking at the present from the future.” This symbolizes a dialectical view of the past and present. Aesthetic views that look back at the past are considered “now”; similarly, the gaze of the future looking ahead is considered ancient. This historical view of aesthetics can better explain the aesthetic connotation of “ancient.” The word “ancient,” which appears in ancient texts, also embodies this idea. For example, the phrase “Passing by without reaching antiquity” (“Day and Night” in the *Book of Songs*) refers to ancient rules and paradigms and contains the idea of using the past as a model for the present; in “Ancient training is the standard” (“Chao Min” in the *Book of Songs*), “standard” refers to a paradigm. From this, we can see that since the *Book of Songs*, the idea of using “ancient” as a

paradigm has been put forward. This paradigm later became the “law.” It was stated in chapter 14 of Laozi’s *Tao Te Ching* that, “Grasp the ancient way to control the present.” This suggests that there is a way in the ancient world, which is invisible and nameless. Though different from the present, it is constant, hence it can be used to “control the present.” Confucius’ *The Analects* states: “Scholars who study ancients for themselves, today’s scholars study for people.” This uses “ancient” as a criterion for criticizing the present, putting forward the idea of “using the ancient as the law.”

As a sociological concept, the “law” flourished among pre-Qin thinkers and was transformed into an artistic concept during the Six Dynasties^[1]. The concept of Six Principles put forward in He Xie’s *Six Principles of Chinese Painting* was the earliest and the most appropriate generalization of the methods of artistic creation. In the field of calligraphy, Xun Ouyang in the Tang Dynasty put forward the “Eight tips” and “36 methods,” and Shimin Li proposed the “Penmanship tips.” It can be said that, the period from the Six Dynasties until the Sui and Tang dynasties was the peak period of the formation of calligraphy of the “law” system. This method comes from the summary of the works and words of ancient generations. Zhengfu Liu of the Song Dynasty said: “Viewing ancient words is like viewing ancient bronze vessels. To learn the characters of the ancient people, one must aspire to reach them. Suppose one can reach the realm of perfection as if they have acquired Tao. In that case, they will not be ashamed when compared to the ancients.” This reflects an understanding of studying antiquity, not only about aspiring to reach a certain level but also about understanding its importance. By doing so, the ancient traditions can be truly honored.

The second concept involves the recognition of the simplicity of antiquity and the establishment of the aesthetic character of “today’s elegance.” Calligraphy theorists of the Six Dynasties explored the relationship between “ancient simplicity” and “modern elegance.” The allure and style of “modern elegance” were fully affirmed and dominated. In the Tang Dynasty, Shimin Li’s *Biography and Discussions of Wang Xizhi* relatively approved of Yao Zhong’s calligraphy but pointed out that his shortcomings were that “the characters were ancient but not modern” and its style was “long and over-established.” Relative to the Tang Dynasty, Xizhi Wang in the Eastern Jin Dynasty was also considered “ancient,” but shared the same aesthetic interest. Hence, Shimin Li evaluated him from the standpoint of Xizhi Wang. His criterion was based on the perspective of “modern elegance,” that is, using Xizhi Wang’s “yin-mei-liu-pian” cursive writing to evaluate the calligraphy of the predecessors, and naturally, he saw that Yao Zhong’s calligraphy exhibited simplicity. Guoting Sun also mentioned in *The Genealogy of Calligraphy* that, “Ancient simplicity and modern elegance.” He believed that “Simplicity represents revival and elegance is subject to change with the times.” This viewpoint represents dialectical thinking, where “simplicity” and “elegance” are treated as relative standards, emphasizing the impact of the spirit of the times on art aesthetics, classifying such changes as a natural phenomenon. He not only saw the transmutation of the aesthetics of calligraphy from ancient to modern times but also made a preliminary discussion on the inner drive of aesthetic change. In contrast, the *Xuanhe Shupu* compiled during the Song dynasty clearly defined “ancient” as: “The changes in character styles have reached the peak, yet there exists antiquity without any in regular script”^[2]. With this thought, the aesthetics of the clerical script represent antiquity, while the cursive script, due to its emphasis on expressing emotions and ideas, has lost the simple and rich beauty of ancient scholars. This idea stresses the aesthetic characteristics of the writing style and serves as an important criterion for distinguishing between “ancient” and “modern,” “simplicity” and “elegance,” affirming the beauty of calligraphy forms.

The third aspect involves the unique aesthetic interest and aesthetic orientation of “ancient.” Throughout the history of calligraphy criticism, “ancient meaning” has been constantly praised. It can be said that it is achieved through the unique means of copying when learning calligraphy. The practice of calligraphy

throughout history has proved that a large number of imitations of, copying, and learning from the ancients are necessary to understand the intentions of ancient scholars, to the extent of achieving a spiritual connection and ultimately aligning one's heart and hand to express "ancient" through contemporary means. Not only does this involve calligraphic forms and layout standard but also maintain a higher level of style and realm of contemporary creations.

The *Xuanhe Shupu* states that: "...as seen in the transmission of bronzeware and stone inscriptions, where the form is emphasized over decorations." It can be observed that in the ancient calligraphy theory system, "decorative elements" and "ancient" are related. Its connotation and extension have clear boundaries, and from the aesthetic point of view, there is also a distinct difference. The pursuit of "ancient" is not limited to the aesthetics of regular script but is also emphasized in the stele inscription studies of the Qing dynasty. In Youwei Kang's *Guangyi zhou shuang ji*, terms like "ancient and extraordinary," "ancient and elegant," "ancient simplicity," and "ancient elegance" are used to describe calligraphy aesthetics. The text states: "The Northern Zhou style of writing favored antiquity, as reflected by its calligraphy which often incorporates elements of clerical script." It emphasizes the aesthetic element of "ancient," which is related to elements of the clerical script. Youwei Kang believed that "During the Northern Qi dynasty, stele inscriptions underwent changes from clerical to regular. The strokes were powerful and solid, yet flowed with a sense of restraint..." Here, "ancient" does not indicate a long period but is rather a representative term for the comprehensive aesthetic of ancient calligraphy, which possesses unique characteristics and philosophical reflections.

2. Calligraphy's "ancient names" and aesthetic connotations

In the development of the art of calligraphy, many names appear, and at times, coexisted. Shen Xu's *Shuowen Jiezi* stated: "..... Cangjie, the historiographer of the Yellow Emperor, upon seeing the tracks of birds and beasts, perceived the possibility of distinguishing them, thus creating the first writing" [3]. Therefore, the term "Shuci" is equivalent to calligraphy in the modern sense. Jing Suo, a calligrapher of the Western Jin Dynasty, stated in *The Power of Cursive Script*: "With the birth of Cangjie, writing was established." Heng Wei said: "..... Observing those bird tracks, the creation of writing began" [4]. This also regards the term "Shuci" as the earliest title for calligraphy, which served as a synonym during the Wei and Jin dynasties.

In addition to "Shuci," the word "Shu" also refers to some of the connotations of calligraphy.

The *Shuowen Jiezi* explains: "When Cangjie first created writing, it was based on pictograms, hence it is called 'wen' When inscribed on bamboo and silk, it is called 'shu.'" In the oracle bone inscriptions and gold inscriptions, "shu" is depicted as the shape of a hand holding a brush, representing the act of writing, as seen in **Figure 1**. In the small seal script, 'shu' is a pictogram, in the sense of holding a pen in one's hand (**Figure 2**). Jianwu Yu, a literary critic in the Southern Liang Dynasty stated: "..... the name of calligraphy originated from Xu and Luo, and the characters were developed from Cangjie's historiographer." For a long time, 'shu' could refer to calligraphy, calligraphic works, and writing, which overlaps with the modern connotation of "calligraphy."



Figure 1. The character for "book" in Oracle and Jin scripts



Figure 2. The character "Shu" in the small seal script

In the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Shuo Wei's *Pen Array Diagram*, the term “*shudao*” (the way of calligraphy) first appeared: “However, with a sincere and humble heart, for each character, one should depict its form to create something wonderful.” Referring to the art of calligraphy as a “way” (*dao*) is probably related to the popularity of metaphysics in the Wei and Jin dynasties. At that time, the literati scholar class advocated Daoist teachings, emphasizing the principle of “*wuwei*” (non-action), while incorporating the concept of Buddhism, which formed the theoretical framework of Xuanxue, which emphasizes the exploration of metaphysics and pursuit of spirituality over form.

The use of metaphysics acts as a guide to artistic creation, which inevitably led to the use of terms close to Taoism. Xizhi Wang also revered Taoism and he once claimed to have been taught calligraphy by the Celestial Master of Tiantai Mountain. It was stated in the “Memorandum on the Principles of Calligraphy”: “The essence of calligraphy must reach the Tao, in harmony with the principle of the primordial chaos.” This reflects the application of Taoist principles in calligraphy.

During the Tang Dynasty, the word “*hanmo*” was commonly seen, which used physical objects to represent calligraphy. Xun Ouyang in his “Essay on the Use of the Brush” said: “..... since my youth, I have been deeply immersed in *hanmo*, I never fail to recite and admire whenever I read a different style of calligraphy.” In Shimin Li's *Biography and Discussions of Wang Xizhi*, he stated: “..... also these two aspects, is it indeed the ailment of *hanmo*?” Guoting Sun's *Shupu* states: “In my student years, I paid much attention to *hanmo*.....” “*Han*” originally refers to a celestial bird, also referring to long and hard feathers. The *Shuowen Jiezi* said: “*Han*: celestial bird, with red feathers.” Due to the emphasis on legalism during the Tang Dynasty, calligraphy scholars tend to exhaust its principles and adhere to the rules, focusing on using the brush and ink, with specificity to the physical characteristics of the objects, hence using tangible objects as representation. In addition, there are also terms such as “*danzqing*,” “*shuhan*,” “*shuxue*” etc. These generally have similar connotations with minimal differences depending on the context of the discourse.

The *Tao Te Ching* states: “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name.” It discusses the relationship between the essence of things and its expression in words, in which the great Tao cannot be named. The concept of calligraphy that emerged during the development of the art of calligraphy does not reveal its essence, hence “the name can be named is not the eternal name.” The connotation and aesthetic point of “ancient” in the calligraphy demonstrate the temporal symbol of art, which is also reflected in name changes. Not only does this illustrate the gradual development of things but also reflects the philosophical trends and aesthetic ideas of different historical periods. This is because the beauty of art is closely associated with the beauty of times and cannot be considered in isolation.

3. Conclusion

Tracing the “ancient” connotation of calligraphy is conducive to understanding its aesthetic process and exploring the use of calligraphy through different ages, although it involves the debate on the etymology of words, it also carries profound meanings. It can serve as a bridge to understanding the true purpose of the art of calligraphy. Furthermore, it also dialectically explores the relationship between name and reality.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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