

The Continuation and Innovation of Retrospective Thought in Qing Dynasty Seal Theory

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ABSTRACT

The development of seal engraving theory during the Ming and Qing dynasties progressed rapidly compared to the millennia-long evolution of calligraphy theory and painting theory, reaching its peak within a remarkably short period. The advancement of seal theory was inseparable from the influence of calligraphy and painting theory, with the three disciplines reinforcing and complementing each other. Throughout the developmental process of seal theory, one unavoidable ideological thread has persisted across its entire history: retrospective thought. The retrospective thought contained within Qing Dynasty seal theory differs in interpretation and understanding from that of the Ming Dynasty. While it continued the retrospective ideals of Ming seal theory, it also introduced innovations due to differing historical contexts. This paper examines the continuation of the retrospective concept "modeling seals after Qin and Han" and the innovation of "integrating epigraphic elements into seal engraving" in Qing Dynasty seal theory, providing a clear analysis of the retrospective thought present during this period.

KEYWORDS

Retrospective thought; Qing Dynasty seal theory; Integrating epigraphic elements into seal engraving

1 Continuation of Retrospective Thought: "Modeling Seals after Qin and Han"

The publication of the *Jigu Yinpu*, in particular, catalyzed a fervent phase of retrospective ideological trends within society, a phenomenon frequently reflected in seal theory.

The earliest explicit articulation of retrospective thought in seal theory appears in Wu Yan's *Thirty-Five Principles*, where the eighteenth principle states: The Han dynasty developed the seal-script *zhuan*, characterized by its square and upright form, with structural principles shared between seal script and clerical script. Later generations, failing to comprehend ancient seals, arbitrarily added curvilinear flourishes and regarded this as normative practice—a truly laughable approach^[1]. The first eighteen principles in Wu Yan's *Thirty-Five Principles* all address the script used for Han dynasty seal engraving. Here, Wu specifically highlights this seal-script script as a distinct type of epigraphic writing, while pointing out later generations' erroneous interpretations of it. In his seal theory, Wu explicitly states that people of his time failed to understand ancient seals and invented incorrect methods—an approach he deemed truly laughable.

While Wu Yan was the first to explicitly advocate the veneration of antiquity in seal engraving, the conceptual origins of seal retrospection can be traced to Zhao Mengfu. Prior to Wu Yan, Zhao Mengfu recorded the following in his *Preface to the History of Seals*: One day, while visiting Guo Chengfu, he showed me two volumes of the Baozhang *Jigu* containing ancient seal impressions, all being imprinted directly onto paper, thus verifiably authentic…… After compiling accompanying textual research, I assembled them into the *History of Seals*, through which the quintessential simplicity and archaic substance from the Han and Wei dynasties onward could be glimpsed and appreciated^[2].

This passage constitutes the colophon Zhao Mengfu wrote for his book *History of Seals*. Although the original work is no longer extant, the content of this text clearly reveals Zhao's recognition of the retrospective ideology in seal engraving and his explicit advocacy for returning to archaic ideals in seal creation. This represents a crucial milestone in the emergence and development of retrospective ideology in seal art. Furthermore, since any conceptual emergence requires temporal evolution rather than sudden appearance, Zhao Mengfu's proposed retrospective thought remains an indispensable element in studying the development of this ideology. However, due to its brief nature, Zhao's *Preface to the History of Seals* does not qualify as formal "seal theory," thus Wu Yan's *Thirty-Five Principles* remains the earliest seal theory text to explicitly propose retrospective thought.

The recognition of the concept "modeling seals after Qin and Han" extends beyond mere approval of artistic creation in seal engraving practice; it also represents a pathway for innovation in the art form. The common saying "no destruction, no construction" emphasizes that both innovation and breakthrough are essential manifestations of seal engraving's development. Huang Mufu, a master seal engraver of the Qing Dynasty, profoundly recognized the necessity of "modeling seals after Qin and Han" in creative practice. This conviction is recorded in one of his seal colophons as follows: Zhao Yifu's emulation of Han-dynasty seals demonstrates consummate perfection: not a single seal is incomplete, not a single stroke lacks luminous clarity. Like a jade artisan working flawless jade without interruptions, they emanate a profound archaic resonance - truly transcendent artistry^[3]! Among seal artists who take Han-dynasty works as their canonical reference, Zhao Zhiqian stands unparalleled in achieving luminous clarity. Few can approach his mastery, and

thus I adopt his approach as my model^[4]. Huang Mufu's endorsement of the retrospective concept "modeling seals after Qin and Han" exerted substantial influence on contemporary seal engraving practice. He not only recognized his predecessors' understanding of this retrospective ideology but also implemented innovations within this framework throughout his creative process, ultimately establishing himself as a master seal engraver of the Qing Dynasty.

Similarly, other Qing Dynasty seal engravers adhered to this approach in their practice, with the most representative retrospective school being the "Zhe School" led by Ding Jing. The development and continuation of retrospective thought progressed through the Yuan and Ming dynasties, with Ming Dynasty retrospective ideology remaining a predominant domain in Qing Dynasty seal engraving. The evolution and perpetuation of seal art inevitably involved the development of distinct schools. As the founding master of the Zhe School, analysis of Ding Jing's specific stylistic manifestations reveals that his seal engraving was fundamentally shaped by retrospective thought. This influence continued with subsequent Zhe School practitioners like Chen Hongshou, as documented in both artists' colophons:

"Xiaotong requested this engraving, executed in imitation of the Han-dynasty cast bronze seal method. Recently studying clerical script, Xiaotong has developed a pronounced archaic sensibility - fundamentally aligned with the principles of calligraphy.^[5]"

"Having acquired two volumes of a compendium of Han-dynasty seals, I devoted entire days to their appreciation, then spontaneously wielded the knife - every stroke manifests Han-dynasty character.^[6]" The documentation in both artists' colophons allows us to directly observe that the retrospective concept of "modeling seals after Qin and Han" persisted continuously until the late Qing period, with seal creators still emphasizing it in their work. Furthermore, under the influence of this retrospective thought, the integration of relevant innovative elements also represents a manifestation of retrospective ideology. In the Qing Dynasty seal treatise *Thirteen Essentials of Seal Engraving*, Yuan Sanjun writes in the section "Studying Antiquity" as follows:

"Ancient seals from the Qin, Han, and Six Dynasties serve as exemplary models for later learners, just as studying calligraphy must trace back to Zhong You and Wang Xizhi, and learning painting must follow Gu Kaizhi and Lu Tanwei. Through extensive searching and broad examination, one will naturally gain profound comprehension.^[7]"

Yuan Sanjun's comparison of studying ancient seals with copying classical calligraphy models implicitly affirms the inseparable connection between seal engraving, calligraphy, and painting, while simultaneously continuing the retrospective thought pioneered by Zhao Mengfu and Wu Yan.

The Dunhao Tang Lun Yin further states: "I heard from my teachers: in philosophical doctrines, Song scholars often surpassed Han scholars; whereas in symbol-numerology studies, Han scholars inevitably exceed later generations, being chronologically closer to antiquity. The Six Scripts belong to symbol-numerology studies. Xu Shen, being a Han scholar, largely preserved ancient traditions in his theories. Since works like *Orthodox Corrections* appeared, many have arbitrarily criticized Xu's theories. While scholars venerate these later works and their arguments appear refined, I remain uncertain of their foundational evidence."

Note: "Six Scripts" refers to the six categories of Chinese character formation as systematized in Xu Shen's *Shuowen Jiezi*. "Symbol-numerology" translates a Han dynasty cosmological system interpreting omens and numerical patterns. "Xu Shen" is the compiler of *Shuowen Jiezi*, the earliest Chinese dictionary. In seal theory, Wu Xiansheng's comparative approach—paralleling the study of ancient Han seals with Tang-dynasty poetry and Jin-dynasty calligraphy—resonates with Ming Dynasty seal discourse. He maintained that modeling after Qin and Han traditions while skillfully extracting their essence represented the concrete manifestation of seal engraving cognition during that period.

Retrospective thought never emerged abruptly. While no documented evidence predates Wu Yan and Zhao Mengfu, China's millennium-long seal tradition demonstrates continuous evolution in seal systems and character transmission. Qing seal retrospection differed from predecessors in certain aspects: while maintaining "modeling seals after Qin and Han" as foundation, it shifted from relying solely on "seal-script zhuan" and "curl-script zhuan" to incorporating innovative elements. This created discernible distinctions from Ming seal retrospection, closely linked to Ming-Qing cultural consensus—specifically "integrating epigraphic elements into seal engraving." The incorporation of epigraphic materials impacted existing retrospective thought in Qing seal theory, directly generating new perspectives and developments in seal studies history. The perfect integration of seal art with social trends enabled the new interpretation of "modeling seals after Qin and Han" to unfold, with comprehension and innovation collectively shaping this innovative historical context for seal art.

2 Innovation in Retrospective Thought: "Integrating Epigraphic Elements into Seal Engraving"

During the Ming and Qing periods, retrospective thought remained the central ideology driving the development of seal engraving. It was precisely this philosophical orientation that elevated the art of seal engraving to its zenith. However, innovation remains an inevitable aspect of developmental processes. For instance, the Zhe School founder Ding Jing established the school's foundational "incised knife technique". His extensive application of this method, reformed and

innovated upon predecessors' practices, enabled Zhe School seal engraving to distinguish itself during the Ming-Qing transitional period. Thus, innovation constitutes an indispensable element in seal engraving's evolution. Within Qing Dynasty seal innovation and reform, the phenomenon of integrating epigraphic studies into seal engraving emerged extensively. This development rendered Qing seal art particularly brilliant and remarkable.

The Qing Dynasty witnessed the of epigraphy (jinshixue), with scholarly enthusiasm approaching obsession as literati ardently pursued this field. The concurrently prevalent "epigraphy" and "textual criticism" during the Ming-Qing period represented two distinct disciplines. During the early Qing, scholars like Gu Yanwu conducted profound research in epigraphy, while Qian Daxin during the Qianlong-Jiaqing era earned recognition as a great Confucian master whose epigraphic investigations significantly influenced the field's development in the Qing. Understanding of epigraphy traces back to the Song and Yuan periods when the discipline initially flourished before gradually declining during the Ming Dynasty. Not until the Qing Dynasty was epigraphy restored to its central position in cultural research. This developmental process consequently established epigraphy as a crucial entry point for seal engravers to inject innovative vitality into their creative practice.

"Contemporary practitioners have intensified these features to extremes—some approaching crude roughness, others becoming constricted and narrow—significantly deviating from refined elegance."^[8]

This passage describes how Zhe School seal engraving incorporated the structural elements of the Heavenly Prophecy Stele into its square, angular forms. Upon recognizing this transformation, contemporary practitioners amplified these characteristics, thereby diversifying seal variations. The phrase "contemporary practitioners have intensified these features to extremes—some approaching crude roughness, others becoming constricted and narrow" reveals contemporary shortcomings in seal form creation. Seal engravers exaggerated individual aspects without comprehending their essential significance. While such improper methodological approaches are undesirable, the conceptual choice to integrate epigraphic elements undoubtedly introduced transformative innovation to seal art development.

During the Qing Dynasty, epigraphy held paramount importance, and most seal engravers were epigraphic masters. Seal engraving primarily concerns the selection of characters for engraving. Ming Dynasty retrospection mainly focused on reviving specific seal scripts like "seal-script zhuan" and "curl-script zhuan," while emulating the archaic, monumental, and elegant aesthetic of Qin-Han seals. Although Ming Dynasty had master seal engravers versed in epigraphy, none proposed integrating bronze and stone inscriptions directly into seals. Instead, epigraphy was primarily studied for authenticating seal script characters. The Qing literati's innovation of directly incorporating bronze and stone inscriptions into seals injected fresh vitality into seal art creativity.

The Qing retrospective movement and Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism primarily represented a critique of the late Ming's prevailing School of Mind and abandonment of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. Qing political measures sought to rectify Ming errors, indirectly reflecting anti-Manchu social sentiments. Nevertheless, this transition enabled renewed recognition of epigraphy's importance to seal development. During the early Qing, Zhou Lianggong asserted that seal artists proficient in calligraphy created more visually appealing and artistic works compared to those without calligraphic training. He writes: "The singular exception exists in seal engraving, where practitioners both design and carve. However, these individuals typically lack calligraphic proficiency - if the ink design is already erroneous, how can the result be exceptional? During my travels south of the Yangtze, I observed that those competent in running-standard script or seal-script/large seal script produced predominantly exquisite seals, while the unskilled generally created unremarkable works."^[9]

Therefore, the incorporation of epigraphic elements became a crucial innovative component in the creative process of seal engraving. This aligns undoubtedly with the previously mentioned characteristic of Zhe School seals integrating bronze and stone inscriptions. Furthermore, seal engravers of the Zhe School possessed profound expertise in epigraphy, with some even exhausting their personal fortunes to collect bronze and stone inscriptions.

He integrated the stylistic features of bronze and stone inscriptions into his seal works, significantly enriching their substantive content. From the perspective of seal artists, Wu Changshuo, a master of late Qing seal art development, established his iconic artistic style particularly through incorporating Stone Drum Script into seal engraving. By integrating Stone Drum Script characters into his creative process, Wu Changshuo distinguished himself as a paramount figure in late Qing seal art history. As Stone Drum Script represents a category of epigraphy, Wu's innovative application broke from the traditional use of "seal-script zhuan" and "curl-script zhuan," elevating seal art development to its zenith. Numerous Qing Dynasty seal artists adopted bronze and stone inscriptions in their work, with Wu's seals establishing new trends in Chinese seal history. Precisely because seal artists combined essential ideological concepts with practical theory within their field, current academic conclusions have been reached.

The application of epigraphic elements in seals extended beyond mere stele inscriptions. This integration served as both a fresh source and vitalizing force for seal development, encompassing diverse categories beyond steles for reference and innovation—including bell and cauldron inscriptions, bronze artifacts, coinage, brick texts, jade objects,

pottery, mirror inscriptions, and oracle bone script. During the early Qing, Cheng Sui pioneered incorporating bronze vessel inscriptions into seals. Although few of Cheng Sui's seal works survive, their characteristic integration of epigraphic elements remains preserved. As documented by other sources, Zhao Bingchong writes in his Preface to the Xuegu Studio Seal Compendium:

"Examining this compendium reveals vigorous engraving techniques progressing from established rules to spiritual transformation - the exquisite beauty of 'ancient hairpin strokes' and 'leak-stain traces' proves inadequate to describe its achievement. Thus we recognize its masterful understanding of epigraphic scholarship and seal-script methods, persevering until attaining ancient excellence."^[10]

Zhao Bingchong's multidimensional analysis, presented through varied perspectives, documents the integration of epigraphic elements as innovative components, thereby establishing this approach as an artistic element in seal creation. This influence pioneered new pathways beyond traditional seal methodologies, representing an innovative manifestation of retrospective thought in Qing Dynasty seal art. The social phenomenon of "seeking references beyond seals", originating from epigraphic integration, has persisted to the present day.

The distinction between Qing and Ming retrospective thought in seal engraving extends beyond script selection to fundamental differences in social ethos. The Qing social environment contrasted sharply with the late Ming context—where extravagance confronted refined elegance, the Qing atmosphere proved superior. Furthermore, contact with Western societies introduced new learning trends, liberalizing perspectives and triggering qualitative leaps in artistic cognition. The innovation of incorporating epigraphy into seal scripts transcended superficial adaptation to absorb substantive nourishment. As epigraphy represents cultural transmission from the Qin-Han periods and earlier, its integration into seal art constituted the very process of Qing seal innovation. Inheritance and innovation together form the essential content and developmental trajectory of seal engraving.

Despite the challenging environment for Han Chinese during the Qing, seal artists persistently pursued innovation and maintained their passion, ultimately elevating seal art to new heights. Their exploration of "integrating epigraphic elements into seal engraving" based on social phenomena represented not merely literati sentimentalism but a crucial turning point in seal art's culmination—fundamental conditions for retrospective thought and innovation. While interpretations of seal retrospection and innovation vary individually, the integration of seal creation with societal realities consistently reveals innovative pathways. This constitutes the inevitable course of Chinese literary development across generations and embodies the enduring charm of China's millennia-old cultural legacy.

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