

A Study on the Reception of "The Stele of Ritual Vessels" in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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ABSTRACT

"The Stele of Ritual Vessels" is an important document recording the achievements of Han Chi, the Prime Minister of Lu State, such as exempting the Yan clan of Confucius' maternal uncle's family and the Qi Guan clan of his wife's family from corvée labor in their fiefs, making ritual vessels for the Confucius Temple, renovating the Confucius' ancestral temple, and manufacturing two carriages. From the late Ming Dynasty to the early Qing Dynasty, scholars of the two dynasties had different understandings and interpretations of "The Stele of Ritual Vessels" based on their different knowledge backgrounds and ideological intentions. From the perspective of relevant works by scholars since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, this paper interprets the different positions and evolutionary tracks of "The Stele of Ritual Vessels" in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

KEYWORDS

"The Stele of Ritual Vessels"; Ming and Qing Dynasties; Reception

In the early Ming Dynasty, calligraphy was a continuation of that in the Yuan Dynasty. In the middle period, the Women School of Calligraphy, characterized by different regions, emerged. When the Women School of Calligraphy was on the decline, the Yunjian School of Calligraphy led by Dong Qichang rose in succession, adding a touch of vitality to the calligraphy field of the Ming Dynasty. The calligraphy style of the trend of individual liberation in the late Ming Dynasty made it rise suddenly as a new force. Since the middle of the Ming Dynasty, some calligraphers had paid attention to the Han clerical script, such as Feng Fang and Wang Shizhen. Among them, they paid particular attention to The Stele of Ritual Vessels.

1 The Research on "The Stele of Ritual Vessels" by Scholars in the Ming Dynasty

"The Stele of Ritual Vessels" together with "The Stele of Yiyi" and "The Stele of Shichen", are collectively known as the "Three Stele of the Confucius Temple". The existing ones are on display in the Han-Wei Stele Carving Exhibition Hall in Qufu, Shandong. The Palace Museum in Beijing has rubbings from the Ming Dynasty. The full name of "The Stele of Ritual Vessels" is "The Stele of Ritual Vessels Made by Han Chi, the Prime Minister of Lu State in the Han Dynasty". It is also known as "The Stele of the Restoration of the Confucius Temple by Magistrate Han", "The Stele of the Restoration of the Yan and Qi Guan Clans' Corvée Labor and the Repair of Ritual Vessels by Han Chi, the Prime Minister of Lu State" and "The Stele of Han Chi", etc. It was erected in the second year of Yongshou in the Eastern Han Dynasty (156 AD). "The Stele of Ritual Vessels" is a classic of the Han stele and is known as the "ultimate example of the clerical script of the Han stele".

Guo Zongchang of the Ming Dynasty said: "The Han clerical script should take The Stele of Ritual Vessels in the Confucius Temple as the foremost."^[1] It can be seen that Guo Zongchang held The Stele of Ritual Vessels in high esteem and rated it as the top of the Han clerical script, thus enhancing the status of The Stele of Ritual Vessels. He also said: "The beauty of its characters and strokes is neither due to the pen nor the hand. It is unrivaled in ancient elegance. It seems to be the work of divine power rather than human creation. What is described as 'like meteors and lightning, finer than a single hair' is still not enough to depict it." When Guo Zongchang commented on the beauty of the characters and strokes of The Stele of Ritual Vessels, he did not attribute it to the pen or the hand but praised it with ancient elegance. Ancient elegance belongs to the category of the theory of elegance and vulgarity in ancient Chinese literary and artistic aesthetics, involving various aspects such as the knowledge and cultivation, personality and integrity, individual temperament of the creative subject, as well as the content and form of the work. Obviously, what Guo Zongchang pointed out is about the style of the work, with lofty, simple and remote aesthetic tastes and charms.

The earliest person to put forward the theory of ancient elegance was Wang Changling in the Tang Dynasty. In "Poetic Styles", he divided the aesthetic tendencies and styles of poetry into five types: lofty style, ancient elegance, leisure and ease, profoundness, and immortality. After Wang Changling, Jiao Ran in the Mid-Tang Dynasty and Sikong Tu in the Late Tang Dynasty put forward similar discussions about "ancient elegance" and advocated loftiness and ancientness. In calligraphy, the theory of ancient elegance originated from the people of the Tang Dynasty. When Zhang Huaiguan discussed Zhong Yao's calligraphy in "Judgment on Calligraphy", he said: "His regular script is unrivaled in the world, with both hardness and softness. There are many unique interests between the dots and strokes. It can be said to be profoundly boundless and abundantly ancient elegant. Since the Qin and Han Dynasties, he is the only one." Wang Shizhen of the Ming Dynasty also attached great value to the beauty of "ancient elegance" and pointed out that Zhong Yao's regular script "Table of Declaration", and the cursive scripts of Suo Jing, Huang Xiang and others are the most ancient elegant.

2 The Research on "The Stele of Sacrificial Vessels" by Scholars in the Qing Dynasty

In the early Qing Dynasty, practical learning for managing state affairs was advocated. The rulers promoted the Neo-Confucianism of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi. The trend of down-to-earth scholarship was prevalent, and philology and epigraphy emerged, driving the development of stele studies. When summarizing the evolution process of academic studies in the Qing Dynasty, Liang Qichao said in "An Outline of Academic Studies in the Qing Dynasty": "Looking at the history of academic studies in the past two hundred years, in general terms, its impact on the ideological circle can be described as achieving liberation through restoration of the ancient ways. In the first step, by restoring the ancient ways of the Song Dynasty, liberation was achieved from Wang Yangming's School of Mind. In the second step, by restoring the ancient ways of the Han and Tang Dynasties, liberation was achieved from Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi. In the third step, by restoring the ancient ways of the Western Han Dynasty, liberation was achieved from Xu Shen and Zheng Xuan. In the fourth step, by restoring the ancient ways of the Pre-Qin period, liberation was achieved from all commentaries and annotations. Since the ancient ways of the Pre-Qin period have been restored, it is inevitable to achieve liberation from Confucius and Mencius."^[2] The calligraphy in the Qing Dynasty also followed this path and had its own development. However, it was all inclined towards restoration of the ancient ways.

The tendency of restoration in the calligraphy of the Qing Dynasty was mainly manifested in the research on seal script and clerical script. Due to the prosperity of epigraphic textual research, it led

to a boom in visiting steles. The study of steles developed rapidly while the study of model calligraphy declined, and people at that time turned their attention to the study of steles. The trend of collecting rubbings of ancient steles gradually took shape in the early Qing Dynasty. Some scholars paid more attention to Han clerical script, and the "Stele of Sacrificial Vessels" was more easily accepted by calligraphers compared to the Ming Dynasty.

2.1 Before the prosperity of stele studies in the early Qing Dynasty

The "Stele of Sacrificial Vessels" represents the ultimate beauty of Han clerical script and has always been highly praised. Zheng Gukou, a great master of clerical script in the early Qing Dynasty, once commented on the "Stele of Sacrificial Vessels": "The brushwork is slender yet vigorous, as sharp as a fine blade, and as delicate as gossamer. It stands out among the inscriptions of the Eastern Han Dynasty, making it difficult for later scholars to follow and describe. The sharpness of the brush tip is revealed, being austere and imposing, and it has its own unique style among the Han steles, so few scholars can take it as their model. The font is square, forceful and profound, with a risky use of the brush, making it hard to imitate. Its delicate parts are like gossamer just fluttering, leaving no trace; its open parts are like iron just spreading out, being amazingly robust. Among the steles, it is one that is endowed with abundant natural talent and complete spiritual essence."^[3] Zheng Gukou spoke highly of the "Stele of Sacrificial Vessels", believing that it had its own unique style in the Eastern Han Dynasty and was hard for later generations to surpass. Meanwhile, he thought that the exposed brush tip made the fine strokes look as delicate as gossamer, the brushwork was slender yet vigorous without losing its robustness, it was magnificent and elegant, the structure was rigorous and upright, the font was square and forceful, giving a sense of being sparse enough for a horse to trot through and dense enough to let no wind pass through, reflecting the elegant style of Han clerical script and possessing extremely high artistic value, thus being a classic work among Han clerical scripts.

Sun Chengze of the Qing Dynasty wrote in "Records of Passing the Summer in Gengzi": "The brushwork techniques and the rising and falling strokes of the 'Stele of Sacrificial Vessels' are all preserved. Not all the existing Han steles are necessarily excellent, and those that are forceful and elegant with an ancient charm are the best."^[4] Sun Chengze gave extremely high praise to the "Stele of Sacrificial Vessels", believing that its brushwork techniques are all intact. Guo Shangxian of the Qing Dynasty wrote in "Inscriptions and Postscripts of Fangjian Hall": "Among the works of the Han people, the 'Stele of Han Chi's Construction of Sacrificial Vessels' ranks first. It is lofty, graceful, and elegant. If it were a cloud in the sky, all things would look up to it in admiration. Its artistic conception is above that of stones such as 'Shi Chen', 'Yi Ying', 'Kong Zhou', and 'Cao Quan', not to mention other stones."^[5] 6 Here, Guo Shangxian ranked the "Stele of Sacrificial Vessels" first among the Han steles and believed that its artistic conception is superior to that of other steles.

Sun Guoting's "Calligraphy Manual" holds that Wang Xizhi's calligraphy reached the harmonious state of "neither excessive nor lacking in intensity", thus he became the Sage of Calligraphy. Fang Shuo of the Qing Dynasty commented on the "Stele of Sacrificial Vessels" in "Inscriptions and Postscripts on Bronze, Stone, Calligraphy and Painting in Zhenjing Hall" as follows: "The beauty of this stele lies not in its neatness but in its variations, not in its abundant momentum but in its vigorous brushstrokes. Although there are many excellent Han steles, starting from this one, those who want to imitate the flowing and graceful style can do so, those who aim for the square and upright style can also do it, those who prefer the ancient and lofty style can imitate it, and even those who like the unrestrained and fluctuating style can imitate it without any problem." It can be seen that Fang Shuo believed that the charm of this stele lies in its variations and its vigorous brushstrokes. Among the numerous Han steles, it is the best model for learning.

2.2 After the prosperity of stele studies in the Qing Dynasty

In the middle and late Qing Dynasty, the study of model calligraphy declined while the study of steles flourished and became the mainstream in the calligraphy field. The attention to Han clerical script had become a common trend, and "The Stele of Sacrificial Vessels" was one of those that received much attention.

In the Qing Dynasty, Wang Shu was even more generous with his praise, saying: "Among the Han clerical scripts, the 'Stele of Sacrificial Vessels' is the best."^[6] Or he said, "The art of clerical script reached its peak in the Han Dynasty. Among the Han clerical scripts, those from the Confucius Temple are the best, and among those from the Confucius Temple, the 'Han Chi' referring to the 'Stele of Sacrificial Vessels' is the best." Or he also said, "This is the sage among the clerical scripts." Or he described it as: "Surpassing the works of the Han people, it is the supreme masterpiece in calligraphy."^[7] From the above comments, we can see Wang Shu's praise for the "Stele of Sacrificial Vessels". Bao Shichen of the Qing Dynasty also said: "The beauty of calligraphy lies in temperament and is expressed through form. However, temperament is felt in the heart but hard to define, while form can be seen with the eyes and is evidence-based. Therefore, both imitation and observation are matters related to form." This is also a good interpretation of the beauty of form and temperament of the "Stele of Sacrificial Vessels".

3 Conclusion

With the rise of stele studies, a boom of "the revival of seal script and clerical script" was set off. As one of the Han steles, "The Stele of Sacrificial Vessels" attracted the attention and great importance of many scholars. Promoted by scholars in the late Ming Dynasty and highly praised by scholars in the Qing Dynasty, the art of calligraphy was accepted by scholars.

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