

An Elaborate Discourse Concerning the Han Dynasty Steles in Qufu

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Han Dynasty steles in Qufu, offering a comprehensive analysis of the extant stone carvings from the Han Dynasty housed in the Han Stele Museum. The study seeks to elucidate the cultural, textual, ideological, and artistic significance embedded within these Han steles. It further argues that the study of Han steles should be situated within the broader social context of the Han Dynasty, rather than being confined to the superficial remnants of the inscriptions. This perspective aims to provide valuable insights for contemporary scholars engaged in the study of Han steles.

KEYWORDS

Han Dynasty Steles in Qufu; Superficial Appearance; Connotations

"Half of the Han Dynasty steles in the whole country are in Jining, and the Han Dynasty steles in Jining are in Qufu." The Han Dynasty steles in Qufu are renowned all over the world. From the stone inscriptions of the Western Han Dynasty to the "Three Treasures" in the Confucius Temple, there are a large number of stele inscriptions with a long time span, complete preservation and diverse styles. Whether in terms of historical documents, the evolution of characters, or the art of calligraphy, they are extremely precious first-hand materials with extremely high historical value. In the era when Confucian classics were the mainstream of academics and Confucianism was the dominant ideology, the development and growth of the Han stele culture had its special historical conditions and its own laws. It can be said that it is the product of the development of the times and is even more important nowadays.

1 An Overview of the Han Dynasty Steles in Qufu

The Han Dynasty steles in Qufu are remarkable not only for their quantity but also for their quality. They are centrally housed in the Qufu Han-Wei Stele Inscription Exhibition Hall. Ranging from the "Beibi Stone" in the sixth year of King Gong of Lu in the Western Han Dynasty (149 BC) to the "Taoluo Fragmentary Han Dynasty Stele", along with two stone figures in the courtyard (the left one inscribed with "The Chief of Pavilion of Lord Biao, the Former Prefect of Le'an in the Han Dynasty", and the right one inscribed with "The Guard at the Prefectural Gate"), there are a total of twenty-three steles (the Front and Back Shi Chen Stele count as one). It is indeed a magnificent sight and has the largest number of preserved Han Dynasty steles in China.

Generally, all the Han Dynasty steles are currently displayed in the long corridor of the north building, roughly arranged from west to east according to their ages, as detailed in the following table:

The Name of the Stone Stele	The engraving time of the stone stele
Beibi Stone	The sixth year of King Gong of Lu in the Western Han Dynasty (149 BC)
Wufeng Stone Inscription	The second year of Wufeng in the Western Han Dynasty (56 BC)
Stone Inscriptions on the Burial Mound	The second year of Jushe in the Western Han Dynasty (7 AD)
Altar of the Zhuqiqing	
Stone Inscriptions on the Burial Mound	The second year of Jushe in the Western Han Dynasty (7 AD)
Altar of the Shanggufuqing	
The stones Inscriptions that block the	(The Western Han Dynasty)The specific time is unknown
Wangling Mausoleum	
Wuyutai Stone Inscription	(The Eastern Han Dynasty)The specific time is unknown
Inscribed Characters on the Stone Carv-	(The Western Han Dynasty)The specific time is unknown
ings of Portrait in Anhanli	
Ditch Stone in Xinfuli	The twenty-second year of Jianwu in the Eastern Han Dynasty (46 AD)
Yonghe Stele	The second year of Yonghe in the Western Han Dynasty (37 AD)
Yiyi Stele	The third year of Yuanjia in the Eastern Han Dynasty (153 AD)
The Tombstone of Konggian.	The second year of Yongxing in the Eastern Han Dynasty (154 AD)
The Tombstone of Kongjun.	The first year of Yongshou in the Eastern Han Dynasty (155 AD)
The Stele of Ritual Vessels	The second year of Yongshou in the Eastern Han Dynasty (156 AD)
Kongzhou Stele	The seventh year of Yanxi in the Eastern Han Dynasty (164 AD)
Inscribed Characters on the Stone Carv-	The first year of Yanxi in the Eastern Han Dynasty (158 AD)
ings of Portraits in Xujia Village	
Shichen Stele	The second and fourth years of Jianning in the Eastern Han Dynasty (169 AD and 171 AD)
The Tombstone of Kong Biao	The fourth year of Jianning in the Eastern Han Dynasty (171 AD)
The Fragmentary Stele of Xiping	The second year of Xiping in the Eastern Han Dynasty (173 AD)
kongbao Stele	(The Eastern Han Dynasty)The specific time is unknown
Bamboo leaves Stele	(The Eastern Han Dynasty)The specific time is unknown
The Fragmentary Han Dynasty Stele in	(The Eastern Han Dynasty)The specific time is unknown
Taolu	

The Han Dynasty steles in Qufu not only hold significant cultural and documentary value, but also possess extremely high aesthetic and artistic value, especially in calligraphy. They have been highly sought after by calligraphers throughout the ages, with the Qing Dynasty being the peak. Wang Shu in "Xu Zhou Ti Ba" said: "The official script reached its zenith in the Han Dynasty. Each stele has its own uniqueness, and none are the same."^[1] The calligraphy of Han Dynasty steles left a profound mark in the history of Chinese calligraphy. Especially under the prevalence of epigraphy research and stele exploration in the Qing Dynasty, Han Dynasty steles were elevated to a supreme status. Many people studied them, and experts and scholars explored and pondered them day and night. Especially with the deep-rooted concept of "Stele Study", most Qing Dynasty calligraphers followed the path of integrating stele inscriptions and model calligraphy, forming a calligraphic aesthetic awareness of integration. Instead, one should conduct in-depth research on the evolution of calligraphy from a macroscopic cultural perspective and pay attention to the calligrapher's own cultural cultivation and humanistic connotations.

2 All-round understanding and Profound Recognition

Han Dynasty steles are outstanding in the world of calligraphic art. The study and research of Han Dynasty steles should not merely remain at the level of superficial techniques such as strokes. Instead, in-depth exploration should be carried out on the historical background and cultural thoughts of the era in which they were created, with emphasis on the excavation of the aesthetics,

literary styles, forms and other aspects they express. This requires us to decipher the information they are trying to convey to the modern era by using scientific and reasonable methods. Only then can we interpret them from all aspects and multiple perspectives and become good promoters of "Han Dynasty steles".

When it comes to the study and research of Han Dynasty steles, we can't help but ask: Why did Han Dynasty steles come into being? What are the forms and structures of Han Dynasty steles? How did the styles of Han Dynasty steles take shape? How should we view the stylistic characteristics of Han Dynasty steles? What are the functions and significance of Han Dynasty steles? And so on. In the Han Dynasty, the country was governed with filial piety. Meanwhile, the official selection system also highlighted the importance of filial piety. With the development and perfection of the grand stele-making, the phenomenon of erecting steles to embody filial piety emerged, which even led to the custom of spending the entire clan's wealth on engraving stones and erecting steles and conducting elaborate burials. As an important manifestation of being recommended for filial piety and integrity, the grand stele was not only a symbol of the descendants' reverence and longing for their ancestors but also carried some colors of actively seeking official positions and pursuing utilitarian goals.

Han Dynasty steles themselves are important historical materials and are priceless treasures. Judging from the text contents of the extant Han Dynasty steles, they do not exist in isolation. There are intricate connections among the stele-erectors, donors, and between different donors. If these connections are sorted out clearly, can they be regarded as research materials for the study of social interactions? Then, by further researching issues such as their inscriptions, erosions, preservations, and versions, will the understanding of Han Dynasty steles not be simply limited to the analysis and learning practice of calligraphic strokes and styles like the "silkworm head and wild goose tail", fluttering strokes, and elegant and magnificent appearances, but rather enable us to have a thorough understanding of their cultures and connotations.

3 Combine with ink traces and intensively study the writing techniques

The fact that the calligraphy on Han Dynasty steles has been preserved until now is truly remarkable. The long years and the erosion by wind and rain that they have endured have endowed the calligraphy on Han Dynasty steles with a special sense of beauty of inscriptions on ancient bronzes and stone tablets.

Since the 20th century, with the large number of underground historical materials unearthed, especially the excavation and emergence of bamboo and silk manuscripts, it has provided references for us to explore the writing techniques in the periods of the Pre-Qin, Han, Wei and Jin Dynasties. The styles of the calligraphic works on Han Dynasty bamboo slips are diverse. There are those with strict official script features, such as the "Record of Post-Horses on Bamboo Slips of the Former Han Dynasty from Xuanquanzhi" and the "Silk Manuscript of the Former Han Dynasty from Xuanquanzhi"; there are those as elegant as cursive script, such as the "Han Dynasty Bamboo Slips from Maquanwan" and the "Former Han Dynasty Bamboo Slips from Yinwan, Lianyungang" (Ode to the Divine Crow); and there are also those clearly resembling regular script, such as the "Han Dynasty Bamboo Slips of the Later Han Dynasty from Dongpailou". Taking the "Silk Manuscript of the Former Han Dynasty from Xuanquanzhi" as an example, its form is no different from that of "Caoquan Stele" and "Yiyi Stele", yet its writing techniques are clear and full of vitality, providing us with the clearest model for learning the official script of the Han Dynasty.

Compared with the Han Dynasty bamboo slips, the standardization of the official script characters on the Han Dynasty steles is much higher. The function of the steles determines their

high standard of standardization, which is a high manifestation of the rules of the Han Dynasty official script. However, during the engraving process, it is inevitable for the craftsmen to incorporate their personal technical and emotional expressions. Coupled with the erosion of the years, the appearance of the Han Dynasty steles that we see now has long deviated from the original intention of the calligraphers who wrote the inscriptions. Therefore, I personally think that when focusing on the study of the calligraphic art of the official script on Han Dynasty steles, one should not limit one's vision to just one aspect of the steles.

4 Focus on Connotations and Enhance Self-cultivation

As the quintessence of Chinese culture, calligraphy has never been a simple form of writing characters. From the eight styles of Qin Dynasty calligraphy to the new styles of Zhong You and Wang Xizhi, from oracle bone inscriptions to today's regular script, from shamans to scholars, the art of calligraphy, with characters as its carrier, has always accompanied the trend of Chinese culture, recorded the progress of Chinese culture, advocated for Chinese culture, and been deeply rooted in the forest of Chinese culture and art.

Yang Xiong in "Fa Yan" said: "Therefore, speech is the voice of the heart; writing is the painting of the heart. When the voice takes shape, the gentleman and the petty man can be distinguished. It is through the voice and the painting that the emotions of the gentleman and the petty man are stirred."^[2] Zhang Huaiguan in "Wen Zi Lun" stated: "In writing, several words are needed to convey the meaning, while in calligraphy, one character can already reveal the heart."^[3] Hao Jing said that "calligraphy is the method of the heart", and Sheng Ximing claimed that "calligraphy is the trace of the heart". Xiang Mu held that "The hexagrams in the Classics are all the paintings of the heart, and calligraphy is the transmission of the heart."^[4] Liu Xizai in "Yi Gai · Shu Gai" said: "Calligraphy is like a reflection, like one's learning, like one's talent, like one's aspiration. In short, it is just like the person himself."^[5]

Contemporary calligraphy has entered the era of exhibition halls and competitions. It has lost its practical value and appears in people's vision as a pure art, focusing on the exhibition hall effects and the expression of writing techniques. However, in terms of the origin of contemporary calligraphy, we still haven't separated it from culture. The content and form of writing all reveal the flavor of Chinese culture. Behind the calligraphy culture, while engaging in exhibitions and competitions, we still continue to pursue the close connection between the art of calligraphy and Chinese culture. Therefore, in the study and cultural exploration of the Han Dynasty steles in Qufu, we should not merely confine ourselves to the simple study of the calligraphy on the Han Dynasty steles.

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