

Concept of Cursive Writing in the Northern Song Dynasty

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Abstract: Throughout the history of calligraphy, the calligraphy style of the Song Dynasty is referred to as “pro-conception”. However, the cursive writing art in this period developed at a slower speed than that in the Jin and Tang Dynasties, few works of cursive writing were left, and sparse masters of cursive writing appeared. This paper attempts to take a closer look at the historical context, imperial examination system and the fervor for “books of rubbings” in the Northern Song Dynasty, in order to present the milestones of cursive writing concept in this period, and what changes happened to the concept of cursive writing under the influence of Chan-Buddhism Thought. The alteration of the imperial examination system of the Northern Song Dynasty deprived the standardized form of Chinese characters from a significant role. As a consequence, more attention was turned to cursive script. “Books of rubbings” as a new form of calligraphy retained a lot of letter scripts of previous dynasties, and made it very popular in the Northern Song Dynasty. With this form of calligraphy, calligraphers can express their feelings to the utmost, which in turn drove the development of cursive script.

1. Introduction

Judging from the development history of ancient cursive script in China, cursive script in Northern Song Dynasty was a new development after the cursive script peak in Tang Dynasty. The cursive calligraphers in the Northern Song Dynasty not only worshipped and inherited the cursive script in the previous dynasties, but also had new ideas and styles. In this paper, based on the previous scholars and related research results, combined with historical data, the development of cursive script in the Northern Song Dynasty is comprehensively studied.

2. Background of Cursive Writing Concept in the Northern Song Dynasty

In 960 AD, Zhao Kuangyin led the “Military Mutiny at Chenqiao” to seize the power of the crowning Emperor Gong of Zhou, draped with the imperial yellow robe, united the country, established the Song Dynasty and founded a capital in Bianliang (currently known as Kaifeng, Henan). Zhao Kuangyin is also referred to as “Emperor Taizong of Song”, the founding emperor of the Song Dynasty.

Over the course of 300-year Song Dynasty, the development of politics and economy fueled on the prosperity of culture and art. For calligraphy, “a call for artistic conception” alternates with the Tang calligraphy style “upholding handwriting rule”, contributing to another peak along the history of calligraphy. In this period, the development of cursive writing was constrained by many factors.

2.1 Influence of Imperial Examination System

Many changes happened to the imperial examination system and civil service system of the Song Dynasty, which in turn influenced the development of calligraphy.

Calligraphy was listed as an important subject or precondition for official appointment. As recorded in the New Book of Tang·On the Election System, “any person who is elected as official should meet four requirements: the first requirement is body figure, tall and strong; the second requirement is speech, speak in a dialectical manner; the third requirement is calligraphy, write a beautiful regular script; the fourth requirement is essay structure, logic and coherent. If all

candidates can meet these requirements, the candidate with good character is preferred; if all candidates have good character, the candidate with talent is preferred; if all candidates have good talent, the candidate who works hard is preferred; the qualified official will be retained, while the disqualified one will be laid off.” “Beautiful regular script” requests all candidates to write regular script in a highly skilled way. This reveals that calligraphy plays an important role in the imperial examination of the Tang Dynasty.

In the Song Dynasty, Emperor Zhen of Song established the transcription system and the Transcription Council in the Fourth Year of Jingde for the sake of justice and fairness of the imperial examination. The Transcription Council was responsible for transcribing the examination papers to facilitate the review. As a result, candidates were not required to write “beautiful regular script” on the paper, calligraphy had a weaker status in the imperial examination compared to the Tang Dynasty. Hong Mai mentioned in *Rong Zhai Sui Bi*, “Any candidate who passed the examination organized by the Ministry of Official Personnel Affairs was referred to as “Ru Deng”, anyone who performed poorly was referred to as “Lan Lu”, anyone who failed the examination organized by the Ministry of Official Personnel Affairs, but had three essays accepted was referred to as “Hong Ci”, and anyone who can meet three requirements was referred to as “Ba Cui”. The elected candidate would be awarded the official title. Now that calligraphy was a mandatory work, everyone in the Tang Dynasty was good at writing regular script...Unlike present people who held a brush and leaned against a desk, writing a character would be accepted [1]. “Present people” as mentioned here refers to the Song people. This also implies that “present people” were not good at writing calligraphy compared to the Tang people.

It is the alteration of the imperial examination system of the Song Dynasty that gradually weakened the standardized form, which in turn propelled the reform and innovation of the Song Dynasty calligraphy and turned the attention to cursive script.

2.2 Fervor for “Books of Rubbings” in the Northern Song Dynasty

Ancient people learned calligraphy from the authentic scripts by predecessors. However, a very limited access was provided to authentic scripts due to wars and age. As a result, calligraphy writings were preserved by imitating and double-hook inking. Unfortunately, these methods were inefficient, and only a few of authentic scripts can be preserved, which is away from meeting the needs of learning calligraphy. This situation was not changed until the appearance of “books of rubbings” in the Northern Song Dynasty. In particular, the appearance of “Chunhua Pavilion Book” exerted a dramatic influence on the calligraphy of the Song Dynasty and thereafter.

The earliest record on Collection of Books can be dated back to “Baoda Book” and “Shengyuan Book” in the Southern Tang Dynasty, but unfortunately, these two books had been lost. “Chunhua Pavilion Book” is thus known as the authentic “ancestor of Collection of Books”. In “Chunhua Pavilion Book”, the calligraphy works by Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi accounted for nearly a half, implying the overwhelming respect for their works in the Song Dynasty.

“Chunhua Pavilion Book” triggered a surge of books of rubbings in the Song Dynasty. Over three hundred after Emperor Tai of Song came into the power, a variety of new books appeared. Driven by the fervor of books of rubbings, a lot of calligraphy works that almost vanished were preserved in the Song Dynasty. A large number of letter scripts were included in these books of rubbings, most of which are cursive scripts with the style of Wei and Jin Dynasties. This stimulated the ancient people to learn how to write cursive script and in turn, fueled on the development of cursive script in the Song Dynasty [2].

3. Cursive Writing Concept of the Northern Song Dynasty

In the Tang Dynasty, calligraphy became very important for awarding official title based on proficiency level, but it was not the case in the Song Dynasty. Calligraphy was not an essential path to get an official title, but one of the elegant hobbies of man of letters. They perceived ideal calligraphy as an expression of mood, had no zeal to study calligraphy as in the Tang Dynasty, but took pleasure

in it. The thriving of Buddhism brought the Chan-Buddhism thought to the cursive script works. In this period, cursive writing redirected to the path of “pro-conception”, and calligraphers held different views on cursive script.

3.1 Chan-Buddhism Thought blended in Huang Tingjian’s cursive scripts

As a sect of Buddhism, Chan-Buddhism originated in the mid-Tang Dynasty and by the Song Dynasty, officials and scholar-bureaucrats was in full swing to practice meditation and study Buddhism, which was a big part of the social life during the period.

In Chan-Buddhism thought, “look into my heart and see my true nature, get into human mind” asserts that human freedom entirely depends on “self-nature”, setting free the human mind movement. Under this thought, calligraphers in the Song Dynasty ran for the aesthetic taste featuring non-difference to wealth and fame, comfortable feeling and free will. In “Shi Cang Shu Zui Mo Tang”, Su Shi said “never think too much about the writing technique, never be bothered by stippling.”; In “History of Books”, Mi Fu said “Calligraphy should express own feelings and never falsify, write in a free and unfettered way.” “Conception” as mentioned here refers to personal feeling, or the “intention” of personal disposition, implying the writer’s goal of “getting readers impressed” [3].

Huang Tingjian tried to reflect the Chan-Buddhism thought in cursive scripts. He valued the technique of “gaining insight” in Chan-Buddhism School. In “Annotations to Cursive Writing”, he said “In Jiayu of Shaosheng, I suddenly knew the rope of cursive script on Huanglong Mountain, and came to realize that my previous works showed off. If I can learn how to write in a clear and fluent way, I would write thousands of characters without feeling tired, but it is hard to do.” “Samadhi” was originally a Buddhist term, which refers to the mystery and trick here, indicating how he gained an insight from cursive script. In “Annotations to You Jun Shu”, he added “When I stayed in the south part of Guizhou, I didn’t realize my writing was poor. But after I moved to Rongzhou (now known as Yibin, Sichuan”, I came to realize how poor it was. 3-4 out of 10 characters were counted so-so. It is until now that I really understand what is meant to be ‘calm and delighted’, but it is hard to do.” Huang compared “Enlightened on Aoshan Mountain”, a calligraphy work by the Chan master Xue Feng, to his insight into cursive script. Huang often brought the Chan-Buddhism Thought to his book *On the Calligraphy*. “For review of calligraphy writings, a writing technique is compared to rule in Chan-Buddhism. For Annotations to You Jun Shu, just as ‘Nie Kou Jing’ said, ‘calligraphy has three rules to follow’. This has to be perceived in person and should not involve in argument”, where his thought can be seen as an example of “appreciating calligraphy works by Chan-Buddhism” [4].

3.2 Su Shi’s Idea on Cursive Writing - “Unintentional”, “Creative”, “Proper”

Su Shi (1037-1101), courtesy name of Zizhan, pseudonym of Dongpo Jushi, native of Meishan, Meizhou (now Meishan, Sichuan), known as one of the famous writers, politicians and thinkers, and outstanding calligraphers in the Northern Song Dynasty. In calligraphy, acclaimed as one of the four masters with Huang Tingjian, Mi Fu, and Cai Xiang in the Song Dynasty. As a pioneer of “pro-conception” in the Song Dynasty, his concept of calligraphy leveraged the mainstream in the circles of calligraphy and exerted a far-reaching influence on coming generations. “Pro-conception” is a generalized term of the Song Dynasty calligraphy style given by the people of the Qing Dynasty, precisely inspired from “never think too much about the writing technique, never be bothered by stippling”, the poem lines written by Su Shi in “Shi Cang Shu Zui Mo Tang Ji”. In Su Shi’s idea on calligraphy, “artistic conception” can be found anywhere. Our current focus is how “artistic conception” is reflected in cursive writing.

In “On the Calligraphy”, Su Shi said “Do not intentionally seek for the best state when writing, but take relaxed. To learn cursive script, one should learn bit by bit, but the thumb rule is to write fast. An old saying goes like that, ‘time is too tight to write cursive script’, but I think it is not correct. It’s inappropriate to write cursive script in peaceful mind if time is too tight, so it is not surprising to influence Zhou Yue and Zhong Yi. Though my writing is not good, but I take pleasure in writing creatively, without being limited by ancient people.” This suggests two of his ideas on cursive writing.

One is “unintentional”, he stressed that cursive writing should be unintentional, but express true feelings. If it is intentional, then reader cannot grasp its core idea. The other is “creative” which argues that cursive writing should be “creative and never do as ancient people did”; in plain words, cursive writing should be creative and indicative of calligrapher’s personality. “Creative” as mentioned here bears the same meaning as “never think too much about the writing technique” in “never think too much about the writing technique, never be bothered by stippling”, which upholds free creation without copying the ancient technique. In “Annotations to Wu Daozi’s Painting”, he said “make creative painting in accordance with the normal standard, imply an overwhelming charm in unconstrained style” This suggests that “creative” stressed by Su Shi has a dialectical relationship with the normal standard. To put it in another way, cursive writing should fulfill the normal standard, but go beyond its limitation.

Su Shi also stressed that cursive writing should be “proper”. He added that calligraphy writing should convey the unworldly fun in a proper means. It is this “proper conception” that made him very sick of the wild cursive scripts by Tang people. In “Annotations to Wang Yishao’s Book”, he wrote “Zhang Xu and Huai Su, two bald men, wrote works to the public interests and were considered as good writings, but I don’t think they are comparable to Zhong Yao and Wang Xizhi. They solely went for fame like streetwalkers wearing heavy powder and teased children, unlike Wang Xizhi’s calligraphy works, appearing like a daughter of a noble family, talented and gifted.” In this book, he compared the cursive writings by Zhong Yao and Wang Xizhi with the wild cursive writings by Zhang Xu and Huai Su. He further considered that the wild cursive writings by Zhang Xu and Huai Su are a kind of playing works, too crazy but improper, so he preferred the classic, elegant and proper cursive scripts of the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Unconsciously influenced by this “proper” concept, Su Shi scarcely wrote wild cursive scripts.

3.3 Mi Fu’s Idea on Cursive Writing with “Jin Personality”

Mi Fu (1051-1108), former name of Fu, courtesy name of Yuan Zhang, pseudonym of Xiangyang Manshi, Haiyue Waishi, native from Taiyuan (now in the jurisdiction of Shanxin), relocated to Xiangyang (now Xiangfan, Hubei), reputed as “Mi Xiangyang”, known as one of the four masters in the Song Dynasty. What he had accomplished in calligraphy has been considered remarkable and influential in the history of calligraphy. Most calligraphers in the Song Dynasty were good at running script, so was Mi Fu. However, his accomplishments in cursive script are not impressive, Huang Bosi, a contemporary with him, evaluated his cursive writings in “Dong Guan Yu Lun”, “In contrast, Mi Xiangyang claimed to know the ancient writing technique and can write cursive script, but his regular script was not good. He loved to appreciate ancient books and involved in heated discussion, preferred imitating ancient books with distorted stippling. His books of rubbings were considered the same as authentic works, but not compared to calligraphy masters such as Li Jianzhong and Zhou Yue.” To gain an insight into Mi Fu’s idea on cursive writing, we have to observe the few cursive works and theories he wrote.

In the second year of Yuanyou, Mi Fu first clearly proposed the concept on cursive writing – “Jin Personality” - in “On the Cursive Writing Book”. It writes “If a cursive writing doesn’t have Jin personality, then it is regarded as a low-grade work. Zhang Xu was a vulgar man who subverted the ancient technique, just for surprising ordinary person; Huai Su wrote better works, but I don’t think his works would be highly rated; Gao Xian was never shy to hang his works in pub. I am very sick of Bian Guang!” However, Mi Fu didn’t go further into the concept of “Jin Personality”, but criticized some cursive writings by Zhang Xu, Huai Su, Gao Xian and Bian Guang, known as the representatives of wild cursive script in the Tang Dynasty, commented Zhang Xu’s cursive writings as “secular” and “subversion of ancient writing technique”, and rated those who appreciated his cursive writings as “vulgar people”. Mi Fu once again criticized the cursive writings by Zhang Xu and Huai Su in a letter to Xue Shaopeng, which in turn suggests that he cannot accept the wild cursive writings of the Tang Dynasty. In “A Book by My Friend”, he wrote “My friend, why not rewrite the cursive script? Think about ancient people. It appears to like the ancient technique, but still cannot be compared to Cai Junmo’s writings! I suggest you adding a bit artistic conception. I promise that your

writing techniques will improve a lot by reference to Yang Danian's Thousand Character Classic. What differs Tang calligraphy from Jin calligraphy is that Tang calligraphy is not so ancient like Jin calligraphy, depending on where it is written." This was written by Mi Fu to his friend, instructing him to rewrite Jin cursive script with reference to Thousand Character Classic, implying his reverence for Jin cursive script.

Some calligraphers in the Song Dynasty, though with different concepts of cursive writing, had something in common, that's seeking "artistic conception". The Chan-Buddhism thought of "look into my heart and see my true nature" in Huang Tingjian's "On the Calligraphy"; "Never think too much about the writing technique" upheld by Su Shi; "write in a free and unfettered way" pursued by Mi Di, all argued that cursive script should express the feelings of calligraphers.

4. Conclusion

The development of cursive script in the Northern Song Dynasty is in a transitional period from Tang Dynasty to Yuan Dynasty, Ming and Qing Dynasty. In the history of the development of cursive calligraphy, cursive script is still an indispensable part of the Northern Song Dynasty. Throughout the development of cursive script in Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, if cursive script in Tang Dynasty is a beginning, cursive script in Song Dynasty is in the transition hub from Tang Dynasty to Yuan Dynasty, and the cursive script of Ming and Qing Dynasty is an explosion of energy accumulated by cursive script in Song Dynasty.

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