

A Study on the Style of Zhang Menglong Stele Abstract

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Abstract:

The Northern Wei Dynasty occupies a pivotal transitional role in the history of Chinese calligraphy, inheriting the conventions of the Qin, Han, Wei and Jin dynasties and ushering in new styles of the Sui, Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties. As a transitional phase in the evolution from clerical script to regular script, the Zhang Menglong Stele stands as one of the representative regular-script steles of the Northern Wei. Its style of slanting strokes with compact structure marks the maturity of regular script development. This paper briefly reviews the history of stele inscriptions, as well as the historical background and origin of the Zhang Menglong Stele. Furthermore, as a masterpiece of Northern Wei stele calligraphy featuring both square and round brushwork, this paper analyzes its brush techniques and structure using the image analysis method.

Keywords:

Zhang Menglong Stele, Regular Script, Technique Analysis

1. Introduction

The Zhang Menglong Stele is a regular-script work in the evolution of calligraphic scripts, coming after clerical script and before the standardization of Tang regular script. It is one of the most prestigious steles of the Northern Wei and represents the powerful, robust lineage of Northern Wei stele calligraphy. It employs both square and round brushwork with natural variation, boasts exquisite structure, compact interior and expansive exterior, and radiates outward in all directions. The characters are sized freely and full of dynamism. Since the Qing Dynasty, with the rise of stele studies, an increasing number of scholars have researched and highly esteemed the Zhang Menglong Stele, among whom Kang Nanhai (Kang Youwei) was the most prominent. In *Guang Yi Zhou Shuang Ji*, he ranked the stele as “Top Grade Fine Works” and praised: “The Zhang Menglong Stele is like the Duke of Zhou formulating rituals—perfect in every aspect” [1]. As a superb stone inscription of the Northern Wei, the Zhang Menglong Stele has been a model for numerous learners. However, most learners only grasp its superficial beauty and pursue “seeing the original brushwork through the blade marks”, which fails to fully present the authentic features of the work.

This paper mainly adopts the literature research method to analyze the historical context of the Zhang Menglong Stele and explore the formation of its style.

2. Historical and Cultural Background of Zhang Menglong Stele

2.1. Overview of the Development of Stele Inscriptions

In the pre-Qin period, steles served three functions: first, as timekeeping devices placed in palaces and temples to measure time by observing the sun's shadow; second, as tall stone pillars in front of palaces and temples for tethering livestock; third, as funerary objects erected beside tombs to assist in lowering coffins [2]. Gong Zizhen of the Qing Dynasty stated in *On Stele*: "Tombs had steles with a hole in the middle for coffin-lowering; carving inscriptions on them was not an ancient practice" [3]. These examples show that steles were originally utilitarian objects and did not require inscribed characters. After the Eastern Han Dynasty, steles began to be inscribed with the life stories and merits of the tomb owners, erected beside roads to eulogize virtues and achievements.

The tradition of inscribing characters "on metal and stone" [4] for eternal transmission has a long history. As early as the Shang Dynasty, inscriptions were cast on bronze vessels; the Stone Drums of the Qin State in the Warring States Period also belong to metal and stone calligraphic relics. This tradition continued and flourished, with merits eulogized or events recorded on epitaphs, steles, cliff inscriptions and statue steles. The Eastern Han Dynasty witnessed the rise of tomb steles: officials engraved their merits and deeds on stone steles to leave eternal marks, preventing their spiritual legacies from perishing with their physical bodies. A large number of stone inscriptions emerged, such as Shi Chen Stele, Yi Ying Stele, Zhang Qian Stele and Cao Quan Stele. Meanwhile, the prevalent lavish burial custom in the Han Dynasty contributed to the booming development of stele inscriptions.

In the 10th year of Jian'an (205 AD), Cao Cao banned lavish burials and stele erection to curb extravagance and for political purposes. The policy of stele prohibition continued through the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties. Despite occasional relaxations, the number of private steles decreased significantly. After the Northern Wei unified the North, stele erection to praise virtues became an official reward, and stele inscriptions gradually revived. The style of Northern Wei steles inherited the Wei and Jin traditions to a certain extent, while bearing distinctive regional cultural characteristics. At the same time, regular script gradually became the dominant script for stele inscriptions. As a representative work of regular script in the late Northern Wei, the Zhang Menglong Stele was created against such a social background.

2.2. Historical Background of Zhang Menglong Stele

The Zhang Menglong Stele is a merit stele erected by subordinate officials for Zhang Menglong, recording his political achievements as the Prefect of Lu Commandery, especially his accomplishments in promoting education and moral cultivation. Erected in the 3rd year of Zhengguang reign of Emperor Xiaoming of the Northern Wei (522 AD), its full title is *Stele in Commemoration of the Virtues of Prefect Zhang Menglong of Lu Commandery, Wei*. The stele is about 220 cm high (excluding the base), 91 cm wide (wider at the bottom and narrower at the top) and 20 cm thick. The stele header bears the large characters: *Stele in Commemoration of the Virtues of Prefect Zhang Menglong of Lu Commandery, Wei*. The front face has 26 lines with 46 characters per line, totaling 1,106 characters, of which 1,019 are legible. The back face bears 12 columns of names of the officials who erected the stele. The

stele is now preserved in the Han and Wei Stele Exhibition Hall of the Confucius Mansion in Qufu, Shandong Province.

During the Northern Wei Dynasty, Emperor Xiaowen Tuoba Hong carried out sinicization reforms modeled on the Southern Dynasties and moved the capital south from Pingcheng (present-day Datong, Shanxi) to Luoyang in the 18th year of Taihe (494 AD). This top-down sinicization movement exerted a profound impact on the development of calligraphy, most notably on regular script. Different from the regular script with residual clerical features in the Pingcheng period, the regular script of the Luoyang period was greatly influenced by the regular script on Southern Dynasties' epitaphs and steles as sinicization deepened, giving rise to the "Luoyang Style" regular script characterized by "slanting strokes with compact structure", which prevailed throughout the Northern Wei. A large number of original royal epitaphs unearthed in Luoyang demonstrate the rapid spread of the refined and elegant new regular script, including Yuan Zhen Epitaph, Yuan Xiang Epitaph, Yuan Huai Epitaph and Yuan Si Epitaph. As royal epitaphs, they employed superior stone materials, carvers and calligraphers, thus becoming the standard paradigm of the Luoyang Style in the late Northern Wei. In the late Northern Wei, the Luoyang Style became prevalent, and the influence of the Yuan clan epitaphs can be observed in steles, epitaphs and statue steles across the region, including exquisite works such as Shiping Gong Statue Inscription, Gao Daoyue Epitaph, Jia Sibao Epitaph, Zhang Menglong Stele and Cui Jingyong Epitaph. The Zhang Menglong Stele ranks among the finest works of the late Northern Wei.

2.3. Historical Origin of Zhang Menglong Stele

The earliest record of the Zhang Menglong Stele appears in Jin Shi Lu compiled by Zhao Mingcheng in the Northern Song Dynasty, and the earliest surviving Song Dynasty rubbing is also collected by Zhao. Later, Zheng Qiao of the Southern Song Dynasty included the stele in Tong Zhi Lue. Kong Chuan noted in Dong Jia Za Ji: "In the 3rd year of Zhengguang of the Later Wei, the people of Yanzhou erected a stele commemorating the virtues of Prefect Zhang Menglong". These are the records of the stele in the Song Dynasty. Before the Ming and Qing dynasties, calligraphy studies focusing on model books (tiexue) prevailed, and Northern Wei steles were neglected, resulting in scarce relevant records. Zhao Han, a calligrapher of the Ming Dynasty, praised its vigorous regular script in Shi Mo Juan Hua: "Its regular script is robust and coiled, paving the way for Ouyang Xun and Yu Shinan" [5]. "Ou-Yu" refers to Ouyang Xun and Yu Shinan, two renowned calligraphers of the early Tang Dynasty, both of whom were influenced by Northern Wei steles. This shows that the Zhang Menglong Stele was a pivotal node connecting the Wei and Jin dynasties and inheriting the Sui and Tang dynasties, exerting a profound influence on the evolution of scripts from the Wei and Jin dynasties and the formation of Sui and Tang regular script. After the Qing Dynasty, the Zhang Menglong Stele gained increasing attention: Kang Youwei repeatedly commented on the stele in Guang Yi Zhou Shuang Ji, hailing it as "the patriarch of transformed regular scripts" [6] and ranking it as "Top Grade Fine Works", elevating the stele to unprecedented prominence. Yang Shoujing remarked in Xue Shu Er Yan: "Its calligraphy is unrestrained, ancient and elegant, balancing unconventional and orthodox forms. This is why the calligraphy of the Six Dynasties surpassed that of the Tang Dynasty" [7]. He regarded the Zhang Menglong Stele as the pinnacle of Six Dynasties calligraphy. In modern times, Qi Gong wrote a poem in praise of the stele: "My ink wanders without trace and turns to Yang style; I

copied Zhao Mengfu first, then turned to Xiang Guang. Now I only cherish the Zhang Menglong Stele—A potent remedy to fortify bones and invigorate sinew.” [8] This poem reflects Qi Gong’s high esteem for the Zhang Menglong Stele, ranking it after Zhao Mengfu and Dong Qichang and asserting that studying it cultivates robust and vigorous calligraphic qualities.

3. Artistic Features of Zhang Menglong Stele

3.1. Stroke Characteristics of Zhang Menglong Stele

The brush techniques of Northern Wei regular script differ significantly from those of other scripts, marked by forceful square strokes and vigorous round strokes with striking contrast. Shiping Gong Statue Inscription represents square-stroke Northern Wei calligraphy, with sharp starting strokes and rigid turning and ending strokes like knife-cutting. Zheng Wen Gong Stele is an outstanding work of round-stroke Northern Wei calligraphy, featuring rounded starting and ending strokes and a majestic yet robust demeanor. The brushwork of the Zhang Menglong Stele generally belongs to square-stroke Northern Wei calligraphy, with two core stroke features: first, it integrates square and round strokes, dominated by distinct and concise square strokes and moderated by round strokes to achieve a harmony of firmness and gentleness, presenting a square-dominated style with round undertones; second, the strokes are closely interconnected with partial running script undertones, enabling flexible and interesting handling of upright and oblique forms.

3.2. Structural Analysis of Zhang Menglong Stele

The structural feature of the Zhang Menglong Stele is “slanting strokes with compact structure”. The term “slanting strokes” does not refer to deliberate slanting, but rather stroke momentum serving the structure, with the overall form leaning slightly upward to the right in accordance with the character’s shape. The strokes are as sharp as cutting gold and breaking jade, and the structures balance upright and oblique forms, constituting the innate beauty of the Zhang Menglong Stele. Scholars and calligraphers of all generations have produced numerous classic critiques on its structure, which can be summarized as: “Balancing upright and oblique forms, achieving the marvel of intricate variation”.

Yang Bin of the Qing Dynasty stated in *Da Piao Ou Bi*: “Although most calligraphy of the Southern and Northern Dynasties is somewhat rigid, ancient charm remains; works such as Zhang Menglong and Cui Jingyong are exceptionally exquisite, refined and ineffably wonderful” [9]. He characterized the style of the Zhang Menglong Stele as exquisite and refined. Guo Zongchang of the Ming Dynasty commented: “Judged by the standards of Jin Dynasty calligraphy, it lacks subtle refinement, yet its marvelous intricate structural composition remedies the rigidity of Tang calligraphy and frees it from the monotony of rigidly uniform forms. Masters like Ouyang Xun and Yan Zhenqing thus inherited the essence of Wang Xizhi’s art” [10]. In *Jin Shi Shi*, Guo Zongchang praised the stele’s structure for its “marvel of intricate variation” and noted its influence on Ouyang Xun and Yan Zhenqing of the Tang Dynasty, demonstrating his high admiration for the work. Kang Youwei of the Qing Dynasty elevated the stele to new heights, hailing it as “the patriarch of transformed regular scripts” in terms of structure. He wrote in *Guang Yi Zhou Shuang Ji*: “The structure of the Zhang Menglong Stele represents the pinnacle of calligraphic structure; strokes vary in length and tilt in accordance with each character’s form. Observing ancient

bronze inscriptions, each character follows its natural shape, freely sized and fully rounded, reflecting the forms of all things” [11]. He further noted: “Tang calligraphers attached the greatest importance to structure, yet none of the Tang steles can match the Yang Cui Stele, Jia Sibo Epitaph and Zhang Menglong Stele in the techniques of counterposition, movement, extension and contraction. Their brush force is profound, their bearing dynamic; strokes vary in length and size according to the character, and the rhythmic arrangement of lines and blank spaces achieves inherent grace. They embody variation within order and conceal singularity within plainness, all executed to perfection. Such craftsmanship in writing ranks supreme—a sublime fusion of human ingenuity and natural artistry” [12].

The above critiques illustrate that with the rise of the stele studies movement in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Zhang Menglong Stele gradually gained attention for its exquisite and innate structure, opening up new possibilities for calligraphers.

3.3. Composition Analysis of Zhang Menglong Stele

Discussions on calligraphic composition date back to the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Wang Xizhi wrote in *Bi Shi Lun*: “In dividing spaces and arranging blank areas, distances shall be even; upper and lower characters shall be properly positioned for natural stability. Characters shall overlap sequentially, and no form shall stand isolated or exposed”. This passage addresses the contextual links between upper and lower characters, the correspondence between left and right characters, and the blank distribution between lines. The Zhang Menglong Stele has no bordered grids, yet the characters are arranged orderly in rows and columns with neat alignment. Unearthed relics confirm that most Northern Wei epitaphs and steles were first written by calligraphers on stone (calligraphy inscribed on stone before carving) and then carved by stone masons. Thus, it can be inferred that the composition of the Zhang Menglong Stele was deliberately designed by the calligrapher, though the specific method is no longer traceable.

The composition of the Zhang Menglong Stele is natural, harmonious and uniform, yet it pursues rich variation within order. The character forms are highly diverse, presenting varied postures—some elongated, some flattened—with compact interiors and expansive exteriors radiating outward like long spears and halberds.

4. Application of Zhang Menglong Stele in Contemporary Calligraphy Creation

The Zhang Menglong Stele bears tremendous value and significance in the history and art of calligraphy. Unlike other steles and epitaphs of the same period, it features a large number of characters, strong regularity, unique style and powerful momentum, making it an excellent model for learning Northern Wei regular script. Contemporary calligraphy creators have fully absorbed its artistic nutrients, reinterpreted it through their own understanding, and created many excellent works with elements from the Zhang Menglong Stele, achieving fruitful results in various national exhibitions and competitions. With the popularity of mobile devices and the internet, numerous online calligraphy training platforms have emerged in China, among which “Mochi” is the largest. Therefore, this paper takes six calligraphers who offered specialized courses on the Zhang Menglong Stele on the Mochi platform in the past three years as examples: Sun Boxiang, Li Song, Zong Mingyi, Qu Qingwei, Liu Guangwen and Ou Liang. All six analysts analyze brush techniques, structure and composition, and

present different styles based on their own understanding. The following discussion combines their works.

Sun Boxiang is a master of contemporary Northern Wei calligraphy creation. He remedied the deficiencies of square-stroke Northern Wei calligraphy overlooked since the late Qing Dynasty and inherited the robust lineage of Northern Wei steles. Sun Boxiang's regular script mainly draws on Longmen Twenty Inscriptions, blended with running script undertones. His works are thick and powerful, a combination of robustness and delicacy, full of variation within solemnity and elegance within sharpness. His transcription of the Zhang Menglong Stele features broad, substantial strokes, dominated by square brushwork with round undertones; the character structure highlights "slanting strokes with compact structure", with proper expansion and contraction and balanced upright and oblique forms; the overall density is appropriate with staggered variations. Sun Boxiang has set a model in contemporary Northern Wei creation, and subsequent calligraphers of square-stroke Northern Wei have been influenced by him—either following his style or blazing new trails beyond it. Li Song is a case in point.

Li Song inherits Sun Boxiang's square brushwork in Northern Wei creation and focuses on the writing of "dots" in his creation. He divides dots into "positive tangent dots" and "reverse tangent dots", emphasizing that: first, the square brush technique of dots is the most basic, typical and important skill; second, all other strokes are extensions and evolutions of dots. Li Song's creation mostly draws on epitaphs, which feature peculiar structure and varied lines. From his character-collecting creation and re-creation based on the Zhang Menglong Stele, it can be seen that he uses square brushwork dominated, blended with running script undertones to highlight posture changes, with flexible and vivid character variations. However, the shortcoming is that the flexibility lacks the robust and thick momentum of the original stele.

Zong Mingyi and Qu Qingwei inherit the style of Li Song and Hu Limin (after Li Song). The difference is that the two weaken the exaggeration of character forms and reduce the sense of swing; their brushwork is clean with reduced metallic and stone texture, presenting a stable and harmonious overall look with few innovations, so no further discussion is made.

Liu Guangwen and Ou Liang can be classified as calligraphers with similar styles. Both weaken the variation of lines in brushwork; their lines are mostly straight lines with slight running script undertones and weak variation, carrying the aura of seal and clerical scripts, with delicate detailed depiction of starting and ending strokes. In terms of structure, different from Li Song's Northern Wei style, the two weaken the ups and downs of structure, making it broad and flat, making simplifications on the basis of Li Song's style, while presenting a broad and upright momentum that Li Song's works lack. Both draw on the running script brushwork of Yan Zhenqing and He Shaoji, but there are differences between them, presenting different styles: Liu Guangwen applies the structure and brushwork of Sui and Tang regular script in Northern Wei creation, adding the uprightness of Tang regular script to the whole; Ou Liang's character structure is more archaic, with traces of Songgao Lingmiao Stele, Cuan Baozi Stele and folk statue inscriptions, blended with Zhao Zhiqian's unconventional and interesting character structure. Therefore, Ou Liang's Northern Wei character structure is more archaic than Liu Guangwen's.

5. Conclusions

The Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties marked a golden age in the development of Chinese calligraphy, where the social context fostered the growth of calligraphic art. Regular script emerged in the Eastern Han Dynasty and matured gradually during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties, becoming an official script. The Zhang Menglong Stele can be regarded as a landmark marking the transition from clerical script to mature regular script, and a milestone representative work in the evolution of Northern Wei regular script.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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