

Formation and Interpretation of Archaic Style in Qing Dynasty Sino-Tibetan Calligraphy from the Perspective of Material Carriers

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Abstract

The antique style of Han-Tibetan calligraphy was developed in the Qing Dynasty, it is not only an aesthetic choice, and it is not unrelated to certain historical events. The study discusses the material carriers of calligraphy, and takes writing tools, writing materials and exhibition spaces as the analysis basis to investigate the genuine shaping effect of the calligraphic style. The research has demonstrated that the difference of writing processes between the bamboo and the brush and the material properties of the Tibetan paper and the Xuan paper are the material circumstances of the genesis of the two archaic types of calligraphy. Institutionalised production techniques, such as writing sutras in gold ink, imperial silk tapestry and the employment of all four calligraphic forms in stone inscriptions, provided the Qing court with the opportunity to juxtapose and analyse Han-Tibetan calligraphy within the same political and cultural arena. Thus the antique form was transformed from a technological rebirth to a symbol of cross-ethnic cultural identification. The material bearers were not passive vehicles of style, but structural variables constitutive of the formation of style. This perspective enables us to demonstrate the intrinsic link between creative form, material technology and political institutions. It also offers a practical way to understand the melting pot of multi-ethnic art in Qing Dynasty.

Keywords

Qing Dynasty; Sino-Tibetan calligraphy; material carrier; archaic style; four-script unity.

1. Introduction

Han and Tibetan calligraphy in the Qing Dynasty and its deep interchange. The two schools talked through political exchanges, theological propagation, and cultural participation, creating a conversation that was rarely seen before. Existing research mainly follows the line of stylistic history or history of cultural exchange, focusing on the origins of calligraphic styles, individual cases of famous calligraphers and macro-level clues, but rarely explores why Han and Tibetan calligraphy had a recognisable "archaic style" in the Qing Dynasty, or the mechanisms by which this style was generated [1].

The reproduction of historical ideas and the worship of simplicity in the criticism of calligraphy are often called the archaic style. In the actual form of Han and Tibetan calligraphy in the Qing Dynasty, it is not only an aesthetic direction, but also a style fact progressively formed under specific material restrictions. Tibetan writing uses hard pens of bamboo, while Han writing uses soft pens which are brushes. The angle of the brush, the mechanics of the brush movement and the texture of the lines are all essentially different. Tibetan paper is usually formed of the fibres of *Stellera chamaejasme* and *Euphorbia lathyris*, rough in surface and strong in durability; Xuan paper is mostly made of bamboo, hemp and other plant materials, which has its distinct peculiarity in ink absorption and ink retention. Different mediums, whether scripture, stone inscription, plaque or kesi (silk tapestry), have their own formal criteria and modes of looking.

These material features are not merely the outer wrapping of style, but active participants and definers of the route of style formation.

A fundamental judgement in the study of material culture is that manmade goods in their use shape in turn people's habits of perception and expression. The question for the history of calligraphy is not only "who wrote what" but also "what it was written with", "on what medium", "to whom it was presented" and "in what space it was displayed". In the Qing Dynasty, the restrictions of tools, properties of material, processes of production and the space of display interacted and progressively realised the archaic style of Han-Tibetan calligraphy. Starting from the material medium, the article aims to explore the technique and implications of the making of this style.

Next we shall begin with the writing instruments, and see how this most basic material condition informs the fundamental differences between two calligraphic styles.

2. The Material Differentiation of Writing Tools and the Shaping of the Style Base

The difference in the directions in which Han and Tibetan calligraphy developed was also due to the writing utensils themselves. This is a Qing dynasty brush for Han calligraphy. The bristles were soft and picked up ink well and you could vary the pressure and pace. This constituted the material basis for the establishment and evolution of many forms, such as seal script, clerical script, regular script, running script and cursive script. The Qing dynasty epigraphic studies followed the square and round strokes of the Han and Wei dynasty steles, and the calligraphic studies repeatedly practiced the brushwork of the Jin and Tang dynasties, all of which depended on the brush's ability to reproduce the brushwork of history through diverse stroke approaches. This mimicry was essentially an attempt to "pursue strength with softness"—the gentle bristles of the brush had to imitate the pointed angular impact of chiselled strokes on paper, and the writer had to continuously recalibrate the tempo, pressure and angle of the strokes. But this reconstruction has its limitations. The brush has soft and elastic bristles that naturally promotes graceful curves and rich variations in ink. And even when it was a conscious imitation of the solid and old manner of inscriptions on bronze and stone, the lines on paper still had a gentle warmth to them. The resilience of the material endows the Qing Dynasty Han calligraphy pursuit of antique style with a mild retro character and retains a certain distance from the epigraphic quality of bronze and stone inscriptions.

In Tibetan calligraphy it happens differently. Bamboo and wooden pens are hard-pen systems with nibs that are either angled or flat. Writing is engraving on paper. This principle is more sculptural than "writing" [2]. The hard nib has three main effects: the lines are uniform, powerful and regular, lacking the variety of thickness and density of brush calligraphy. The handwriting, largely flat pressing and carving, gave rise to a writing system based on a geometric and modular logic. The Uchen script is grand and blocky, yet the Tsuring, Bêtsug and Chuyig scripts seek the happy medium of flow and speed within this block. The script distinction is not an aesthetic choice, nor a purposeful one, but a natural outcome of the flat pressing and slicing of the powerful nib. According to the China Intangible Cultural Heritage website, Thonmi Sambhota's creation of Tibetan writing in the mid-7th century resulted in two main systems, "Uchin" and "Ume". The Uchen script was then divided into eight main schools. So the "archaic style" of Tibetan calligraphy is not the same as that of Han Chinese calligraphy. It is not a fiction or imitation of some ancient style from the beyond but a careful adherence to the standards and laws of early classic scripts such as Ugyen and Ume. Such adherence is almost a matter of course, because of the toughness of the bamboo. Style is a function of the writing tool. Within the confines of that tool, the writer can only aim for brilliance.

The two writing systems utilise different ways of creating the archaic style and are very influential because of the intrinsic uniqueness of their instruments and the material limits of the writing implements [3].

3. The Physical Properties of Material Substrates and the Medium Constraints of Stylistic Expression

Lines are made by writing instruments and their appearance and survival rely on the substance they carry. Han and Tibetan calligraphy in Qing Dynasty also brought varied choices of paper, silk, stone and wood. They are also the primary sources of its archaic style .

Tibetan paper and bamboo pens were made for each other. The Tibetans make paper from the fibres of the roots of *Stellera chamaejasme* via processes of peeling, boiling, pounding, pulping and paper-making. It is flexible but with a very rough surface. This physical feature is just ideal for the main requirements of bamboo pen writing. If it is too smooth, the friction of the paper is not enough, and if it is too thin and soft, it is not enough to bear the strokes of the pen tip [4]. The friction created when the two collide gives the lines of Tibetan calligraphy a high and very different texture. This texture is significantly different from the ink effect generated by a brush on Xuan paper, it is similar to the result of "carving", a hard pen cutting through the fibre of paper, generating distinct and defined trace. This texture is not a fake of the old style, but a natural result of the instrument and material used in writing, which is the most basic material source of the old style of Tibetan calligraphy.

Han calligraphy on Xuan paper went a different way. Xuan paper is made from the bark of the Qingtan tree and rice straw of Shatian, and is soft, silky with excellent ink absorption and wetting ability, providing plenty of space for the brush to express its nuances. The paper, the subtle shades of ink, the wet and dry, the lightness and weight, the fastness and slowness of the brush. The active selection of paper effect was accomplished mainly in the comprehension of ancient style of Qing Dynasty Chinese calligraphy. The absorbency of raw Xuan paper offered a natural overflowing sense in writing, and the evenness of scaled Xuan paper was closer to the exquisite legacy of ancient calligraphic models. The numerous features of paper made for distinct manifestations of old style.

The Qing court also went another way to archaic style, by adopting calligraphy on dark blue paper (ciqing paper). The Dragon Canon was the Kangxi Emperor's ninth year imperial court edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, 108 volumes in gold lettering on dark blue paper. In the thirty-fifth year of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor, the Kangyur was copied in 108 volumes, based on the original manuscript, with each page measuring 75 centimetres long and 28.5 centimetres wide, and likewise pasted on dark blue paper, with the Tibetan script inscribed in gold on the normal script on both sides. The deep blue background with the sparkle of gold is a good mix and gives a serene and luxury touch to the calligraphy that paper or silk cannot replicate. The visual effect of the "archaic style" is reminiscent of the solemnity of the ancient copying of sutras, and its material basis is related to the specific conditions of Qing royal handicraft. Materials alter the ancient style from functional usage to aesthetic emotion, and then various styles are displayed on a variety of media [5].

4. The Craft Logic of Engraving Media and the Material Transcription of Archaic Style

The above topic is mainly on the original standard of the drafting and transmission. But it gets more complicated, when we consider of the mechanisms of reproduction and of change. Writing tools and transmission materials include the initial layer of material conditions and techniques such as etching and tapestry weaving. Many Han-Tibetan masterpieces of calligraphy from the

Qing Dynasty have survived, not in their original form as ink, but through mediums such as stone inscriptions, plaques and tapestries. These techniques remoulded the style, producing a "engraved archaic style" which was a distinct style. The original handwriting was translated.

Stone engraving is one of the most significant techniques of engraving. The imperial inscriptions commissioned by Emperor Qianlong are unique in form, with the identical inscription etched in four languages, Manchu, Han, Mongolian and Tibetan, on the four sides of the stele. The "Stele Inscribed After the Pacification of the Dzungars in Ili" in Puning Temple, Beijing, is inscribed with four languages (Manchu, Han, Mongolian and Tibetan). All of the "Imperial Stele for the Pacification of Tibet" written by Emperor Kangxi and the "Imperial Stele for the Ten Complete Records" ordered by Emperor Qianlong are engraved in four languages. The hardness of stone carvings, the roughness of the stone surface, the weathering of wind and rain, change the ink on paper and silk into new material forms. Square sharp lines replace gentle brushstrokes, rough stone replaces the smoothness of paper and silk, and traces of weathering provide historical depth.

Another kind of material translation was in Kesi (silk tapestry). "The Kesi Scroll of Emperor Qianlong's Imperial Inscription on the Lama's Discourse", Palace Museum. Emperor Qianlong's running script inscription of the "Lama's Discourse" on a light camel-colored ground, using methods like as flat weaving, cross weaving, and overlapping weaving. Kesi is constructed with a "continuous warp and discontinuous weft" technique and the weavers use a few small shuttles to weave the cloth piece part by section, following the design made with ink [6]. Each line, each turn is converted into a fabric, warp and weft structure. The texture of the surface, the gloss of the silk threads, the display of the ink on the kesi are all different from paper and silk, forming a unique "kesi archaic style" which is genuine to the original and has its own inherent beauty. Lama's Discourse is a political treatise of emperor Qianlong. It is made in kesi (silk tapestry) not on paper, underlining the importance of the material medium.

A third medium for engraving is the plaque. Tibetan plaque culture was popular in Qing Dynasty and there are about 150 Ming and Qing plaques surviving or verifiable. Their material is largely about exhibiting national power and defending Tibet's frontiers, in several languages including Han, Tibetan, Manchu and Mongolian. Here the calligraphy is not public, commemorative, as it is on paper. It is found in architectural spaces suspended in heavy wood, rich with carving, and the glow of lacquer and gold leaf. The handwriting of the plaques thus adopts a "solemn antique style"—not only by means of a revival of calligraphic traditions, but also by the material qualities of the plaque as a commemorative item [7].

5. The Political Connotations of Display Spaces and the Generation of Meaning in Archaic Style

The display location endows the calligraphy works with some significance, which is strongly related to the construction of antique style. In the Qing Dynasty, Han and Tibetan calligraphy was spread in stele pavilions, Buddhist halls, palaces and temples. The acceptance of the archaic style depends on the political and theological connotations of the various locales. The antique style developed gradually from a basic stylistic feature to the carrier of cultural and political identity [8].

The orientation of the exhibition space for the four-script (Han, Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan) steles is clear. The Qianlong imperial inscription is shown in a uniform square stele format, with reliefs on the top and the base, and an outer pavilion. In this static form, the stele is the sign of the government idea of a multiethnic state. The four sides of the stele are inscribed in Han, Manchu, Mongolian and Tibetan scripts, and the differences in the scripts (gentle in Han, strong in Manchu, fluent in Mongolian, and regular in Tibetan) are no longer differences in calligraphy, but are integrated into a unified political and cultural order. Here the archaic style

is no longer simply a copy of the old style, but is mixed with the political purpose of "unifying diversity" and has become a stylised political expression.

Another important place for the fusion of Han and Tibetan calligraphy is the Tibetan Buddhist temple. The Sixth Panchen Lama submitted a memorial in Manchu, Chinese and Tibetan scripts in the forty-fifth year of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor. The Tibetan part was in gold and black cursive writing on Tibetan paper in horizontal lines. The crimson stamp at the end says "Imperial Seal of the Panchen Erdeni". The memorial measured 450 centimetres long and 75 centimetres wide and was put in the Buddhist Hall of Yuhua Pavilion. The Buddhist hall was a hallowed place, thus the monument was both a document and an offering. In the hall there was a function of political communication, but the physical form of the text, printed in gold and black on Tibetan paper, was recognised primarily as a religious offering as a scroll offered before the Buddha. It is consequently the script and its presentation in the ritual space that accounts for the "archaic style" of the Tibetan cursive script.

Another type of spatial representation is the Garbi Chinese rock inscription on the east side of Red Mountain in the Potala Palace, Lhasa. This cliff inscription is one of six Han Chinese cliff inscriptions carved in Lhasa after the Qing army had expelled the Dzungars and captured Tibet. The cliff inscription was carved between 1720 and 1722, in the 59th and 61st years of reign of the Emperor Kangxi. This is a space for all pedestrians and is adjacent to the mountaintop, which is the declaring function of Han Chinese calligraphy. Cultural presence is simply the presence of Han Chinese in the heartland of Tibetan culture. The cliff calligraphy, eroded by nature into a rough look, is emblematic of frontier governance and national unification. Here the antique style is directly subordinated to political aims [9].

6. The Institutionalized Production of Material Carriers and the Cross-Ethnic Construction of Archaic Style

But the calligraphic activities in these places were not isolated phenomena, they were backed by a comprehensive institutionalised system of material creation. The tribute system, imperial printing and imperial inscriptions brought Han and Tibetan calligraphy together into a unified network of material circulation. Thus, the ancient style stopped being a stylistic job on the technical level, but became a sign of cross-ethnic cultural affiliation [10].

The exchange of material culture between the Han and Tibetan peoples was an important avenue for the two-way flow of tribute items in the Qing Dynasty. The gifts provided to Tibetan envoys were gold tea canisters, jade bottles, jade cups and gilded saddles, typically engraved with calligraphic characteristics in Han characters or Tibetan blessings. The eleventh year of the Shunzhi emperor's reign, for example, saw gifts returned to the envoys of the Dalai Lama. Tibetan artists producing tribute goods learned calligraphic styles and standards of craftsmanship from the inland. Inland craftspeople producing gifts in exchange learned Tibetan writing conventions and aesthetic sensitivities. This two-way passage of material established a channel for the institutionalised mutual infiltration of the two calligraphic styles.

Printing for the empire was another way of materialising. In the 35th year of the reign of the Qianlong Emperor, the Qing imperial court edited the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* in Manchu, Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian, using the woodblock print pictures of the Kangxi Emperor's Mongolian translation of the Kangyur as a basis. The Qing court, in producing multi-lingual religious texts, was concerned about more than only the translation and authorship of the content; it was also worried about the consistency of the kinds of prints and binding patterns. Different calligraphic languages are mixed into a coherent whole in the same format, paper and binding mechanism. This unifying framework made it possible to compare and intertextualise the several calligraphic styles, which enabled the juxtaposition and comparison of their various "archaic style" on the same material platform.

Another example is the KuBris writing of the Dege chieftain. The birth of KuBris calligraphy is not a natural process in the art of calligraphy, but it is born from the aspirations of the cultural identity of the local administration in a particular political situation. The institutional framework was given by the border policies of the Qing court; the material conditions and human resources by the cultural practices of the local government; official recognition for the script by the institutional design of the central government; and concrete form and dissemination media by the local cultural practices. Together these two factors helped to produce the new script. This new calligraphic style was adopted as "traditional" and "antique", and its cultural legitimacy was further maintained by the Qing administration at the local level. In Tibet the calligraphy was even in areas far away from the center, very much influenced by political and material actualities.

7. Conclusion

In this study, initially the material carriers are explored, and then the genuine conditions which form the archaic style of Han-Tibetan calligraphy in Qing Dynasty. Tools, materials, methods and space are not ancillary, but the tangible factors which have helped to build it. The brush and bamboo pen are different in substance, thus the texture of lines and the logic of structure are different. The Han script focuses on mimicking the brush strokes, while the Tibetan script focuses on following the rules. The roughness of Tibetan paper and the pliability of Xuan paper brought the idea of antique style into a material effect. Carving of steles, weaving of silk tapestries and etching of plaques in the translation of ink traces also affected the style. The stele pavilions, Buddhist halls, and cliff inscriptions, for instance, gave the archaic style political and religious connotations and raised it above the level of technique, turning it into a symbol of cross-ethnic cultural connection.

Such development depends on an institutionalised system of material production. The two-way flow of tribute items, the uniform management of the imperial printing, the unified format of stele inscriptions combining four scripts, and the cultural practices of local governments together constructed a material cultural network connecting the interior and the frontier. This network provided both the material carriers of Han-Tibetan calligraphy and a trans-ethnic idea of antique style: calligraphy in other scripts, even if artistically heterogeneous, was a legitimate expression of orthodox Chinese culture.

It cannot be explained by the history of ideas or styles as such that the development of artistic styles. Structural factors are also material and technical prerequisites and the institutional framework. Together, they form the dual material-institutional ground for the production of calligraphic styles. The study mainly focuses on the material carriers of the court and government levels of the Qing Dynasty, but comparatively neglects the local folk literary traditions. The development of Tibetan calligraphy among the general public, the writing practice in the Han-Tibetan border areas and the interaction mechanism between various material carriers need to be further researched. One direction for the future is to provide a more comprehensive framework of the relationship between material culture and history of calligraphy.

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