

# *Aesthetic and Value Study of Inscriptions from the Perspective of Calligraphy*

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**Abstract:** Calligraphy aesthetics is a branch of Chinese aesthetics that gradually formed under the integration of Chinese and Western cultures, and the aesthetics of inscriptions is an important branch of calligraphy aesthetics. In the contemporary context, constructing the aesthetics of inscriptions in the Chinese aesthetic system is of great significance for contemporary calligraphy appreciation, creation, and aesthetics. It is an essential perspective and element in calligraphy appreciation, which can promote contemporary people's aesthetic understanding and stylistic expression of classical calligraphy from past dynasties, better inherit the beauty of Chinese calligraphy art, carry out calligraphy creation, promote the Chinese spirit, and enhance cultural confidence.

## 1. Introduction

Calligraphy and stone inscription are one of the traditional arts in our country and are precious cultural heritage of the Chinese nation. It stands out in the cultural and artistic world of human society with its unique artistic charm and style. Its artistic value is reflected in the beautiful shape of the group of Chinese characters formed by the carving of the seal script (or directly engraved on the stone), and the formation of their own style and appearance. In short, it is the art of calligraphy carved on stone. Calligraphy emphasizes the charm of brush and ink, and pays attention to the expression techniques such as ink usage, brush movement, structure, composition, and artistic conception. Stone inscription, on the other hand, emphasizes the knife technique of carving characters, the preservation of calligraphic brushwork (strokes and lines), brushwork, artistic conception, and the form and spirit of the structure. The development of stone inscription art can be divided into several periods. The Qin stone inscriptions mark the initial stage. The Qin "small seal" script, represented by the Yishan Stele, still shines brightly today. The Han stone inscriptions represent a period of development that builds on the past and paves the way for the future, occupying a unique position in the history of stone inscription calligraphy. The characters before the Qin period were basically part of the seal script system, and it was not until the appearance of the clerical script that Chinese characters completed the evolution from pictographs to ideographs and became standardized square characters [1]. The regular script, running script, and cursive script all developed and evolved from the clerical script. The brushwork and carving techniques of Han stone inscriptions became more mature, and various styles of calligraphy emerged in a brilliant and dazzling manner.

## 2. An overview of the inscription

Inscription, generally refers to the engraved stone text or patterns. The earliest inscriptions are the "Stone Drum Inscriptions" from the Qin Dynasty. Most inscriptions are written with a brush on paper or directly on the stone surface. However, some cliff carvings and grottoes are often carved directly on the stone surface without writing. Inscriptions without a master copy are not easy to determine the calligraphy style, even if based on the true inscriptions, there may be variations in brushwork. Therefore, the study of calligraphy should start with the original or photocopy.

Inscriptions are a common cultural carrier in ancient China. They not only have various forms but also carry rich social information, making them an important part of our traditional culture. Inscriptions have a long history in China and have appeared as early as the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Ancient Chinese inscriptions not only appeared early but also, due to their wide application in social life, gave rise to a variety of types. When it comes to inscriptions with written characters, common types include merit inscriptions, commemorative inscriptions, tombstones, inscriptions on statues, name inscriptions, religious inscriptions, poetry inscriptions, calligraphy and painting inscriptions, and so on. Each type of inscription can be further subdivided into many categories. For example, commemorative inscriptions can be divided into dozens of types based on different content and functions, such as official decrees and announcements, folk inscriptions for bridge construction and temple building, local regulations and agreements, boundary agreement inscriptions, prayer inscriptions for rain, family ancestral hall inscriptions, and so on, covering various aspects of society.

Engraving is the crystallization of various arts. From a large number of surviving engravings, their inscriptions, calligraphy, patterns, and carvings are all of literary and artistic value. First of all, the inscriptions on the engravings are a specialized literary style, generally with rigorous form, exquisite conception, beautiful language, and elegant style. Many literati and scholars have written a large number of inscriptions, which were praised at that time and passed down to later generations, such as Han Yu's "Inscription on the Tomb of Liu Zihou" and Su Shi's "Inscription on the Biaozhong Temple", which are popular literary works. Secondly, the calligraphy of the engravings is mostly written by famous calligraphers, such as Ouyang Xun's "Inscription on the Lique Spring in Jiucheng Palace" and Yan Zhenqing's "Duobao Pagoda Inscription". These works are their representative works, exemplary works of calligraphy art at that time, and also models for calligraphers of all generations. Furthermore, the patterns and carvings of the engravings are also unique and can be regarded as masterpieces of art [2].

Engravings are part of historical memory. Due to their rich information and high credibility, engravings, as a "history on stone", have long become important documentary materials. Cicero once said that history is the life of memory. Engravings, like the well-known historical books such as "Records of the Grand Historian", have the power of memory, especially those engravings that supplement the insufficient records of historical events in books, which enrich our historical memory. It can be said without exaggeration that each engraving has a certain credibility of historical knowledge, thus possessing the objectivity and effectiveness of historical memory.

## 3. The significance of stone inscription aesthetics for calligraphy appreciation

### 3.1 The aesthetics of stone inscriptions as a perspective and element of calligraphy appreciation

"Aesthetics" originally came from Germany and originally meant sensory or perceptual studies. From the perspective of disciplines, aesthetics belongs to philosophy, mainly because aesthetics is a discipline that studies human sensory experiences. It is based on sensory experiences and studies

the emotional changes and pleasure experiences that people have when appreciating nature, life, or art. Therefore, in aesthetics, aesthetic experience, sensibility, emotion, pleasure, aesthetic sense, etc. are the most commonly used terms in the field of aesthetics. As a branch of discipline, aesthetic categories such as painting aesthetics, calligraphy aesthetics, and music aesthetics also teach people how to understand the aesthetic thinking and methods of painting, calligraphy, and music. As a sub-discipline of aesthetics, stone monument carving aesthetics is a unique branch of calligraphy aesthetics. It studies the aesthetic characteristics of stone monument carving, a type of calligraphy medium, which is compared to the "sublime, simple, natural, robust, and vigorous" aesthetic features of the calligraphy in China.

There are many aesthetic elements in calligraphy art. Generally speaking, we can divide the elements of calligraphy aesthetics into various components such as dots and strokes, structure, composition or character laws, brushwork, ink technique, content, and form. Different methods of division lead to different standards of measurement. Especially since the Qing Dynasty, people have divided calligraphy into two major categories: stele and model, which appear distinct from an aesthetic perspective. Although calligraphy is all composed of Chinese characters (or inscriptions) and needs to reflect the structure and form of Chinese characters, it involves the form of each basic dot, stroke, and line, as well as the spacing and combination methods between dots and strokes, and between characters (even between lines and columns of text), but on different carriers, the expression of dots, strokes, and forms can vary greatly. Some even have inherent differences in essence, such as the different texture of stone carving calligraphy itself and the need for exposure to outdoor weathering, writing sites, and display requirements, all of which present different aesthetic characteristics. "Each has its own beauty" is also the most basic principle and criterion in aesthetics. Chinese calligraphy written on paper and engraved on stone tablets have different aesthetic standards and characteristics [3]. Therefore, understanding the characteristics and reasons for the beauty of stone monument carving calligraphy (cultural roots), and being familiar with the recognition and admiration of stone monument carving calligraphy beauty by people of past generations, is very necessary and important for future generations to comprehensively and accurately appreciate Chinese calligraphy art. Understanding the aesthetic characteristics and cultural roots of stone monument carving is also of great significance for us to understand the cultural origins of the nation, grasp the aesthetic spirit of the Chinese nation, and enhance national confidence and cultural self-confidence.

### **3.2 Develop calligraphy appreciation from the aesthetic perspective and connotation of stele carving**

The aesthetic system of Chinese calligraphy includes the beauty of masculinity and femininity. The beauty of masculinity embodied in the "monumental calligraphy" represented by stone inscriptions includes rich aesthetic characteristics such as tranquility, grandeur, strength, ruggedness, simplicity, elegance, and naivety. These characteristics not only reflect the unique aesthetic spirit of Chinese calligraphy, but also nurture the profound and enduring Chinese culture and the aesthetic spirit of the Chinese nation. Therefore, to understand and appreciate Chinese calligraphy, one must understand and grasp the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese stone inscriptions, and delve into the beauty and connotation of stone inscriptions. Only in this way can one better understand and appreciate the art of Chinese calligraphy, and fully and deeply explore the rich and elegant artistic spirit unique to Chinese calligraphy, thereby understanding and comprehending the essence of Chinese traditional culture and enhancing the cultural confidence of the Chinese nation [4,5].

Chinese calligraphy has always been a popular art form. Especially in the past half century, with the revival and prosperity of Chinese traditional culture, Chinese calligraphy has increasingly

become an art with a wide audience, practitioners, and dissemination. Although calligraphy is a very popular art form, most people cannot appreciate it correctly and effectively. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the aesthetic characteristics of stone inscription aesthetics and appreciate calligraphy from the perspective and connotation of stone inscription aesthetics. In the aesthetic characteristics of stone inscriptions, as long as one can grasp a few key words, one can better appreciate the charm of Chinese calligraphy.

#### **4. The influence of stone inscription aesthetics on the creation of modern calligraphy**

(1) The expression of aesthetic understanding and style of classical calligraphy in different dynasties

Chinese calligraphy has a history of more than 3000 years. In this long history, with the changes in the medium of writing (from oracle bones to bronze, stone, pottery, wood, silk, paper, etc.) and the development of the times, the aesthetic style of calligraphy has also been constantly changing. Before the Wei and Jin dynasties, the various mediums and corresponding calligraphic styles involved in gold and stone inscriptions constantly changed the aesthetic norms of calligraphy. After the Wei and Jin dynasties, the free and elegant style of calligraphy represented by Wang Xizhi almost dominated the aesthetic of Chinese calligraphy. Until the rise of the study of gold and stone inscriptions in the mid-Qing dynasty, the "Two Wangs" became the mainstream of Chinese calligraphy for more than 1500 years. Although the study of the aesthetics of gold and stone inscriptions has not been long (as an aesthetic discipline introduced from the West in China, it has only a history of more than a hundred years), its rise has played an important role in re-examining the classics of calligraphy in various dynasties and comprehensively understanding the beauty of Chinese calligraphy. The birth of the study of the aesthetics of gold and stone inscriptions first relied on the rise of "gold and stone studies" in the mid-Qing dynasty and the rise of "stele studies" proposed by Ruan Yuan, Bao Shichen, and others in the late Qing dynasty. In Chinese history, especially from the early oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions to the stone carvings of the Qin, Han, Wei, Jin, and Tang dynasties, stone tablets and stone inscriptions have only become a relatively independent system of calligraphy. Although scholars have been dedicated to the compilation and collection of gold and stone documents since the Song Dynasty, it has not yet formed an influential aesthetic system of calligraphy, let alone influenced the calligraphy creations in various dynasties. From the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming dynasties to the mid-Qing dynasty, Chinese calligraphy was mainly represented by handwritten manuscripts and scroll ink traces, such as the ink manuscripts written on silk and paper represented by the "Three Major Running Scripts" and the scroll calligraphy written by Wang Duo, Fu Shan, Dong Qichang, and others in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In recent decades, the aesthetics of calligraphy has emerged as a discipline that directly studies the aesthetic nature and characteristics of calligraphy, especially with the study of different styles of calligraphy in various dynasties, the study of calligraphy works in various categories of gold and stone inscriptions has been more systematically sorted and studied. This kind of research is not only a study of the aesthetic characteristics of gold and stone inscriptions in different dynasties, but also requires comparison and observation with other types of calligraphy relics. It must have a more systematic and comprehensive understanding of the various classical calligraphy relics and their aesthetic characteristics in different dynasties, and seek cultural roots in the various styles expressed in gold and stone inscriptions. Therefore, it can be said that the aesthetics of stone inscriptions has gained a more comprehensive understanding of the relics of stone inscriptions in various dynasties, and has a clearer summary of the various aesthetic characteristics of Chinese calligraphy, thus making the expression of calligraphy styles in modern and contemporary China more diverse.

## (2) Better Inheritance of the Beauty of Chinese Calligraphy Art

The expression and aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy styles have been constantly changing throughout history. Each period has its own dominant aesthetic characteristics, such as the exquisite Qin seal script and Han clerical script, the vigorous and orderly Tang regular script, and the free and unrestrained Song running script. But looking at each period before the Qing Dynasty, its aesthetic tendency was relatively singular. After the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, influenced by the study of ancient inscriptions and steles, the face of Chinese calligraphy art became richer. Especially in contemporary times, with the continuous discovery of new archaeological achievements and people's tolerance and absorption of various classic calligraphy styles from past dynasties, as well as the recognition of the aesthetic characteristics of inscriptions and various calligraphy styles from an aesthetic perspective, seeking innovation and change in calligraphy art has become a fashion. Especially under the mechanism of contemporary calligraphy exhibitions and selection, exhibition works require novelty and uniqueness, and must be more pleasing to the eye, so calligraphy authors spare no effort to express different new styles from various aspects. Therefore, the newly excavated broken steles, bamboo and wooden slips, and Qin and Han silk and paper calligraphy from various regions in past dynasties have become the objects pursued by contemporary calligraphers. The aesthetics of stone inscriptions study the beauty of the incompleteness, antiquity, stiffness, immaturity, magnificence, and robustness possessed by various broken steles, inscriptions, and inscribed artifacts from different periods and categories, and thus have the function and credit of organizing the beauty of various calligraphy relics from past dynasties. Its systematic study has very timely and important significance for the continuous development of Chinese calligraphy art, as well as for the study and summarization of the splendid and diverse aesthetic characteristics of calligraphy art. Of course, it also deserves credit for better inheriting the beauty of Chinese calligraphy art for future generations.

(3) Give full play to the magnificence of stone inscriptions, promote the spirit of China, and enhance cultural confidence

The aesthetics of stone inscription carving is a discipline that comprehensively summarizes the aesthetic attributes of calligraphy in stone inscriptions from various dynasties. Its rise and appearance play an important role in the comprehensive study of the beauty of Chinese calligraphy art [6]. With the promotion of the aesthetics of stone inscription carving, people have conducted more systematic research on various artistic aesthetics and artistic spirits in Chinese calligraphy art. In the composition of the beauty of Chinese calligraphy art, stone inscriptions mainly embody the beauty of nobility, grandeur, strength, and uniqueness, representing the natural beauty, respecting Chinese philosophy and ethics, advocating filial piety, righteousness, integrity, and establishing cultural behaviors that exemplify traditional morality and demonstrate social beauty. Therefore, from the beauty of stone inscription calligraphy, from the actions of people in various dynasties erecting steles, inscribing stones, casting tripods, and making pottery, from the upright and solemn, square and vigorous, strong and natural forms of Chinese characters, strokes, and structural forms displayed on various stone inscriptions, from the strokes that reflect character, strength, expression, and ceremonial sense, it reflects more of the social customs and aesthetic pursuits of Chinese dynasties, and reflects the profound and rich traditional culture of Chinese society. The beauty of strength, natural uniqueness, and solemnity expressed by stone inscription calligraphy is not only an aesthetic characteristic and symbol of the Chinese national spirit that is worth inheriting and promoting in Chinese calligraphy art, but also an important element that constitutes the profound artistic charm of Chinese calligraphy art. In contemporary calligraphy creation, the use of elements from the aesthetics of stone inscription carving can better represent China's excellent traditional culture and promote the spirit of China. The exploration and expression of China's excellent traditional culture, especially the exploration and expression of the Chinese stone inscription

calligraphy culture that has been passed down for thousands of years, reflects a cultural confidence and recognition of Chinese traditional calligraphy culture, which is also in line with the overall development of Chinese society and culture.

## 5. Conclusion

The aesthetic orientation and stylistic features of calligraphy throughout history are closely linked to the cultural atmosphere of the time. Currently, China is in an era of deepening reform, increasing national strength, and vigorous social development. People's spiritual state is striving for excellence and full of vitality. The exploration and expression of the aesthetic style of Chinese calligraphy stone inscriptions is precisely a reflection and symbol of the spirit of the current era. The purpose of this article is to arouse the attention and inspiration of the academic community to research in this area, in order to seek further progress.

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