

# Careful Review — A Study on Self-written Evaluation of Huai Su's Calligraphy

Wenjun Zeng<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Xiamen Academy of Arts and Design, Fuzhou University, Xiamen, Fujian 361024, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: 931554083@qq.com

## ABSTRACT

In calligraphy criticism, it's not uncommon for calligraphers to examine and evaluate themselves, and to evaluate their calligraphy style, calligraphic viewpoints, and the growth experience of themselves through self-written calligraphy works. In the history of Chinese calligraphy, the most typical representative is Huai Su. His "Zi Xu Tie" (《自叙帖》) and "Cang Zhen Lv Tie" (《藏真律帖》) are based on specific evaluation references, reflecting the understanding of his own calligraphy art through the self-narration and self-writing of his native place, calligraphic viewpoints, and experience of learning calligraphy, as well as mutual evaluations based on making friends with calligraphy and presenting each other with poetry, which also reflects some current situation of calligraphy evaluation at that time.

**Keywords:** *Huai Su, Self-written form, Evaluation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In literary criticism, in addition to the evaluation of literary works by audience and literary critics, artists will also review and re-accept their own works, and then evaluate and re-evaluate their own works.

In the history of calligraphy art, Huai Su is undoubtedly a representative who evaluates, examines and expresses his own calligraphy clearly. In addition, the main content of his representative calligraphy works is his self-narration and self-writing of his calligraphy art. The content of these self-writing includes his analysis and anatomy of his own calligraphy art, as well as responding with poetry from his teachers, friends and elders. The most famous of these are his "Zi Xu Tie" and "Cang Zhen Lv Tie".

By reading the calligrapher's choice specimen of calligraphy and the content of the choice specimen of calligraphy, people can clearly learn the role of calligraphers through self-examination, introspection and observation of their own works, to finally achieve the effect of careful scrutiny, restoring the artistic psychology, and exploring the essence of art. This has a very positive effect on further understanding the artist's own artistic views,

works of art, and the artistic thoughts of the society at that time.

As far as Huai Su's calligraphy art itself is concerned, through Huai Su's self-written calligraphy self-narration, people can clearly see Huai Su's understanding of his own calligraphy art, calligraphy positioning, and the society's analysis and evaluation of Huai Su's calligraphy art at that time.

## 2. EVALUATION REFERENCE

In Huai Su's self-written calligraphy evaluation, the evaluation reference is extremely important.

Huai Su's calligraphy evaluation and reference mainly come from two directions. One is the people of today, that is, the people of that time; the other is the ancients and ancient ways. With regard to the two references, Huai Su involved both of them. For example, in his "Zi Xu Tie", he quoted some sentences from Yan Zhenqing's "Huai Su Shang Ren Cao Ge Xu" (《怀素上人草歌序》) to draw the view from the words of Yan Zhenqing: "The monk Huai Su is the best among monks with generous feelings and clever nature. He has been writing cursive script diligently for many years and is well-known everywhere (开士怀素, 僧中之英, 气概通疏, 性灵豁畅. 精心草圣, 积有岁时, 江岭之间, 其名大著)".

On the one hand, he affirmed his professional artistic status in the calligraphy circle at that time, and on the other hand, he used Yan Zhenqing to clarify the source of calligraphers and the process of passing on the excellent calligraphers, leading to the evaluation that Huai Su's calligraphy is not a tree without roots or water without sources.

Regarding the evaluation of people at that time, in addition to quoting Yan Zhenqing's views, "Zi Xu Tie" also cited the poetry of the people at that time for comment, which won't be given unnecessary details here. In terms of Yan Zhenqing's reference to the calligraphy art review, Huai Su agreed very much, and he also quoted some of Yan Zhenqing's words in "Zi Xu Tie". But Yan Zhenqing's calligraphy art reference should be based on the inheritance of calligraphy of Wei and Jin dynasties since Wei and Jin dynasties.

As everyone knows, the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi is particularly representative in the inheritance since the Wei and Jin dynasties.

Inevitably, in many book reviews later, it is not difficult to find that the calligraphy of Jin dynasty represented by Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi is often used for comparison. Here, negative comments of Huai Su might as well be taken as an example to examine the predecessors' understanding of Huai Su's calligraphy. In the Song dynasty, when Mi Fu commented on cursive script, he said: "If you can't learn from people of the Jin dynasty in cursive script, your artistic style is not high. Zhang Xu is too vulgar, and he wants to change the rules of the ancients. Although he tries to please the public with claptrap, there are masters who can see through him. Huai Su's cursive writing is relatively plain, interesting and natural, but the times he lived in is inherently flawed and he can't learn cursive script from the far away ancients (草书若不入晋人格辙, 徒成下品。张颠俗子, 变乱古法, 惊诸凡夫, 自有识者。怀素少加平淡, 稍到天成, 而时代压之, 不能高古)". From these words, it can be seen that Mi Fu has a lot of veiled criticism of Huai Su, and this is the conclusion drawn by comparing Huai Su's calligraphy with the calligraphy of people from the Jin dynasty. Mi Fu believes that although Huai Su's cursive script is "plain", it can't be "elegant or simple and unsophisticated". The "plain" here is the calligraphy orientation of people of the Jin dynasty. With such a foothold, Mi Fu believed that Huai Su's cursive script had not yet reached the level of people of the Jin dynasty, let alone transcendence.

Huai Su's cursive script was repeatedly mentioned in Wang Duo's postscript in the late Ming dynasty, referring to it as "evil way" and "bad calligraphy". In the third year of Shunzhi (1646), in Wang Duo's postscript after Zhang Tianzheng's "Cao Shu Du Fu Shi" (《草书杜甫诗》), it mentioned: "I have studied calligraphy for 40 years. There must be people who like my calligraphy, but others think that my learning of cursive scripts of Gao Xian, Zhang Xu and Huai Su is not in place (吾书学四十年, 颇有所从来, 必有深于爱吾书者, 不知者谓高闲、张旭、怀素野道, 吾不服, 不服)". Also, in the third year of Shunzhi, Wang Duo said in his "Cao Shu Du Fu Qin Zhou Za Shi Juan Hou" (《草书杜甫秦州杂诗卷后》): "On March 5, 1646, at about 10 o'clock in the night, I was drinking and was slightly drunk. This epilogue was written in the Langhua Hall in Beijing, using the cursive style of Zhang Zhi, Liu Gongquan, and Yu Ji. I enlarged the words, and they were not in Huai Su's style. I hope people who see it in the future are able to distinguish clearly, don't forget it (丙戌三月初五, 夜二更, 带酒, 微醺不能醉, 书于北都琅华馆, 用张芝、柳、虞草法。拓而为大, 菲怀素恶札一路。观者辨之, 勿忘)". Wang Duo wrote in his later "Lang Hua Guan Tie Ce" (《琅华馆帖册》): "It is not the right way unless you learn calligraphy from the ancients. Just like composing poems, one needs to first learn rules of composing poems. So if one doesn't follow the six-pitch score, one won't know the phonation of five notes. This is just like playing chess, which has routines and rules. Now when people look at the "Feng", "Ya" and "Song" in the poems, and the articles of the Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties, they will know a truth. That is to be good at learning the laws of the ancients without being bound by the laws of the ancients. Learning from the ancients is now advocated only because everyone doesn't learn from the ancients (书不师古, 便落野俗一路, 如作诗文, 有法而后合。所谓不以六律, 不能正五音也。如琴棋之有谱。然观诗之《风》《雅》《颂》, 文之夏、商、周、秦、汉, 亦可知矣。故善师古者不离古, 不泥古。必置古之言者, 不过文其不学耳)". Observing from this way, Wang Duo repeatedly denounced Huai Su's calligraphy as "evil way" and "bad calligraphy", and he almost extremely hates it.

According to Peng Ershu, a contemporary of Wang Duo, wrote in the "Po Men Shu Huai Su Tie Ba" (《破门书怀素贴跋》): "Wang Duo in our hometown is a dragon-like figure among calligraphers. He once said to me: 'Don't learn from Huai Su, he writes too poorly', I replied: 'It's not that Huai Su writes poorly, but the people who learn from him didn't learn well. Since ancient

times, there have been so many calligraphers. Huai Su's calligraphy can be spread. Is it because bad things have been passed down?' Wang Duo answered: 'This is the truth. No one can learn from Huai Su well, but they all blame Huai Su himself (吾乡王尚书觉斯, 书法中龙象也。尝谓我曰: '彼怀素恶道也, 不可学' )' 应之曰: "怀素非恶也, 乃学者恶之耳。古今甚大, 书法如林, 怀素能以一钵传, 岂异流毒至此?" 尚书曰: "是也, 但学怀素无佳者耳, 皆怀素罪人也)". It turns out that Wang Duo's so-called "evil way" only means that Huai Su deviates from the way of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi. Due to the different foothold, the evaluation orientation is obviously different.

In addition to later generations' evaluation of Huai Su's calligraphy, there were also some literati of Huai Su's contemporaries who pointed out that Huai Su was different from the way of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi. These remarks pointed out that Huai Su and Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi's methods were not exactly the same. There were some similarities with Mi Fu and Wang Duo here, but the basic standpoint was completely opposite.

These commentators believed that Huai Su's cursive script was not inferior to Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, but surpassed Zhang Zhi, Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, and was a representative of contemporary wild cursive script. For example, in Li Bai's "Huai Su Shang Ren Cao Shu Ge" (《怀素上人草书歌》), when talking about Huai Su's cursive script, he said, "How many people are more famous than Wang Xizhi and Zhang Zhi? Zhang Xu studied until he died, but he didn't learn Wang Xizhi or Zhang Zhi. Huai Su learned directly from the ancients such as Wang Xizhi and Zhang Zhi. Is there anything wrong with that? (王逸少、张伯英, 古来几许浪得名, 张颠老死不足数, 我师此又不师古)" This is to say that Huai Su's cursive script is not conservative and unable to adapt, but a creative and breakthrough cursive style. Li Bai also praised Huai Su: "Huai Su's cursive script is the best in the world". His appreciation and high praise for Huai Su are often seen in his works, which is probably also related to Li Bai's romantic and free creation of poetry.

Coincidentally, Ren Hua, a contemporary of Huai Su, also had a poem: "I often wonder, isn't there a saint who wrote cursive script in ancient times? Although the cursive scripts written by Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi are magnificent, they are not wild enough (吾尝好奇, 古来草圣无不知, 岂不知右军与献之, 虽有壮丽之骨, 恨无狂逸之态)" "People say that you came from the holy place of

calligraphy in the south, but I think you came from heaven (人谓尔从江南来, 我谓尔从天上来)". In Ren Hua's argument, this master Huai Su is almost like a god, solely possessing the wildness and grace, which is far above the calligraphy of Wei and Jin dynasties. What's more, Dai Shulun also wrote a poem saying: "Huai Su from Hunan is very good at cursive script. Not only has he learned ancient methods, but he has also made creation (楚生怀素工草书, 古法尽能有新余)". The implication is that Huai Su is able to create new things through following the past, rather than being conservative and unable to adapt.

However, it is worth noting that their praise and appreciation are clearly based on the calligraphy reviews of the Wei and Jin dynasties. This shows that the evaluation criteria for calligraphy in the Wei and Jin dynasties became a kind of ethos at that time, and even a free and wild Lingling monk like Huai Su couldn't get rid of it. In addition, the "plain" and "elegant" calligraphy style of Wei and Jin dynasties contrasted sharply with Huai Su's free, bold and unrestrained calligraphy style, which was more conducive to the evaluation and analysis of Huai Su's calligraphy art.

### 3. NATIVE PLACE AND CURRICULUM VITAE

In art criticism, the life of an artist will definitely be an important part of art evaluation. This has a very important relationship with the personal growth of the artist and the formation of artistic values. In Huai Su's self-written evaluation, Huai Su often wrote his native place and even his ancestral home in his calligraphy works. On the one hand, it was the understanding of his own growth, and on the other hand, it also advertised that he wasn't out of nowhere and of dubious background.

Huai Su said in the famous article "Zi Xu Tie": "Huai Su was from Changsha and served Buddha when he was young", and he also mentioned in "Cang Zhen Lv Tie": "Huai Su, with courtesy name Cang Zhen, was born in Lingling". In the back and forth self-narration between Lingling and Changsha, he was also conveying his life track to the receivers. He was indeed born in Lingling and then grew up in Changsha, which showed that Huaisu was influenced by the culture of two places. When he traveled to Zhongzhou and then traveled to Chang'an and other Central Plain Culture gathering centers, Huai Su began to awaken to his own growth, learning experience, and calligraphy art outlook.

Of course, there was no lack of suspicion that Huai Su raised his own identity.

However, he still analyzed his own artistic formation process to a certain extent. For example, he said in "Cang Zhen Tie" (《藏真帖》): "Huai Su's another name is Cang Zhen. He was born in Lingling, Hunan, and went to study in Kaifeng, Henan, in his later years. He resented that he couldn't know Zhang Xu. He accidentally met Yan Zhenqing in Luoyang, and Yan Zhenqing taught him Zhang Xu's brushwork. Since then, he made great progress in learning calligraphy (怀素字藏真, 生于零陵, 晚游中州。所恨不与张颠长史相识。近于洛下偶逢颜尚书真卿, 白云颇传长史笔法, 闻斯八法若有所得也)". Huai Su said that he was born in Lingling, and when he was visiting Zhongzhou, he unexpectedly met Yan Zhenqing. When Yan Zhenqing talked about Zhang Xu's exquisite brushwork, Huai Su wished to meet Zhangshi Zhang Dian. At this time, it showed Huai Su's pious study psychology of calligraphy seniors. At this time, he hadn't yet boasted the complacency of being a descendant of an eminent family as he did later.

When Huai Su's calligraphy was recognized by the world, especially when celebrities and aristocrats praised him, at this time, Huai Su would mention his uncle, a poet named Qian Qi. Qian Qi was one of the "Ten Poets During the Dali Period" and a Hanlin bachelor in the Daizong period. Huai Su naturally mentioned this person in his calligraphy works, and he would also describe Qian Qi's presenting poems to Huai Su's calligraphy. These were clearly written in his own "Zi Xu Tie": "My eyesight is getting worse and worse, and I think of my uncle Qian Qi's poem: 'I have walked so far alone, and I rest myself on emptiness and dreamland. When I get crazy about writing calligraphy, I have long forgotten about the world around me. It turns out that when I write calligraphy drunk, I'm able to gain genuine knowledge (目愚劣, 则有从父司勋员外郎吴兴钱起诗云: '远锡无前侣, 孤云寄太虚。狂来轻世界, 醉里得真如')'". This can be regarded as a famous sentence often commenting the wild monk Huai Su by later generations.

Here, it can be learned that Huai Su's original surname is Qian.

The Qian family of Qian Qi was in Wuxing County, Zhejiang. Wuxing County had been a place of cultural success since ancient times. It was not surprising that there were descendants like Huai Su. To some extent, this was Huai Su's rectification of his own name, so that there were more sufficient

reasons for him to study calligraphy and use calligraphy as a name.

Obviously, this is another characteristic of Huai Su's self-written self-evaluation.

#### **4. MAKING FRIENDS WITH CALLIGRAPHY AND COMMENTING ON POETRY**

The way of making friends with calligraphy is itself an important means of calligraphy communication. Whether it was the Lanting Yaji of Wang Xizhi and others, or the Xiyuan Yaji of Wang Shen later, it was an important gathering for literati exchanges. During the gathering, they would definitely comment on their respective poems, paintings, and calligraphy.

However, most painters and calligraphers wouldn't include poems that were written by others with compliment in their own work barely. There were few, if any. However, Huai Su included those presenting poems by elders, celebrities and friends exaggeratedly in his works, and he was proud of this. Although he would write after the article that: "I'm very excited when I speak and write, but with a certain sense. Although what I said was not fallacious, I was still a little embarrassed (皆辞旨激切, 理识玄奥, 固非虚薄之所敢当, 徒增愧畏耳)".

Judging from the reality at that time, the artistic viewpoints of various poetry critics were not all the same. The review standard of calligraphy style in Wei and Jin dynasties was still very powerful, such as Yu Shinan's "Bi Sui Lun" (《笔髓论》), Li Shimin's "Lun Shu" (《论书》) and "Wang Xizhi Zhuan Lun" (《王羲之传论》), etc. At the same time, there were also some calligraphers who wanted to break through the stereotypes of their predecessors and have a new trend of revolution. However, the observation and understanding of calligraphy art mainly depends on the observer's own cultural cultivation and artistic concept.

Therefore, Huai Su wouldn't include all the presenting poems in his own works, but selectively include, which could also reflect Huai Su's calligraphy orientation to a certain extent. For example, he included a lot of presenting poems by people at the time in "Zi Xu Tie". Among them were the poems presented by eight people including Zhang Wei, Yu Xiang, Zhu Kui, Li Zhou, Xu Huang, Dai Shulun, Dou Ji, and Qian Qi. And Huai Su extracted the essence of these poems and reviewed them in categories.

These poems were clearly divided into four aspects in "Zi Xu Tie", including "Shuxingsi (迷形似)", "Xujige (叙机格)", "Yujixun (语疾迅)" and "Muyulie (目愚劣)" in order to sort out comments and praises from friends and predecessors.

The so-called "Shuxingsi" referred to the specific form of Huai Su's calligraphy. "Huai Su's calligraphy travels freely like snakes, but it is very organized and it is as contagious as the storm outside the window (奔蛇走虺势入座, 骤雨旋风声满堂)". The so-called "Xujige" referred to his method of creation. "Huai Su's writing emphasizes vagary, and even if the ink in his brush is run out, he can still write thin and hard strokes. He once wrote two or three lines of words when he was drunk, but he couldn't write the original effect when he woke up (志在新奇无定则, 古瘦漓漓半无墨。醉来信手两三行, 醒后却书书不得)". As for "Yuxunji", it referred to the state of him during writing. "I wrote more than ten meters on the white wall, expressing my heroic spirit. Suddenly, I yelled three or five times, and the entire wall was covered with calligraphy written by me (粉壁长廊数十间, 兴来小豁胸中气。忽然绝叫三五声, 满壁纵横千万字)". The so-called "Muyulie" referred his correcting the character "wildness" and "inebriation" of his calligraphy creation. Here he quoted a presenting poem by Qian Qi, "I have walked so far alone, and I rest myself on emptiness and dreamland. When I get crazy about writing calligraphy, I have long forgotten about the world around me. It turns out that when I write calligraphy drunk, I'm able to gain genuine knowledge (远锡无前侣, 孤云寄太虚。狂来轻世界, 醉里得真如)". Now that one has the "genuine knowledge", what "stupidity" is there?

Obviously, this was Huai Su's affirmation of his calligraphy art, and he wrote it to encourage himself. This was also related to his situation at that time, which was also his self-written self-expression. For example, he wrote in "Shi Yu Tie" (《食鱼帖》): "I, an old monk, often eat fish in Changsha, and I often eat meat when I come to Chang'an. But this is teased by those ordinary people, which is very inconvenient. Therefore, I often plead illness and do not want to write more calligraphy. I'm indeed lazy. Today, in order to thank you all, I'm interested again, and I shall write well. Huai Su's words on the 9th (老僧在长沙食鱼, 及来长安城中, 多食肉, 又为常流所笑, 深为不便, 故久病, 不能多书, 实疏。还报诸君, 欲兴善之会, 当得扶羸也。九日怀素藏真白)". In addition to the different living habits of a monk, his calligraphy would naturally be laughed at by ordinary people, he was unwilling to write more, but he didn't give up the "Xingshan

Gathering". This was not only a true portrayal of Huai Su's self-existence at that time, but also an objective reflection of the calligraphy group at that time and the evaluation of the entire calligraphy society.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In summary, Huai Su not only discussed the style of his own calligraphy art and his own calligraphy art growth experience in his self-written calligraphy evaluation, but also clarified the reference for calligraphy evaluation at that time, and he also made a relatively objective evaluation of the living condition of his own calligraphy at that time. This plays a very important role in the study of Huai Su's own calligraphy values and artistic psychology, and is also a portrayal of calligraphy evaluation of an era. In this way, self-written calligraphy evaluation is not only a very special phenomenon in the history of Chinese calligraphy criticism, but also has a very important significance.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Wenjun Zeng.

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