

# Research on the Classification and Artistic Value of the Guan Ge Style Tablets in Hancheng Museum

Jiaming Peng<sup>1,\*†</sup>, Jingwen Wang<sup>2,†</sup>, Qunjiaming Zhang<sup>3,†</sup>

<sup>1</sup> East China Normal University, Shanghai, China

<sup>2</sup> Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, China

<sup>3</sup> Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Dalian, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: 10190110048@stu.edu.ecnu.cn

†Those authors contributed equally.

## ABSTRACT

Guan Ge Style represents a broad and complicated concept which originated from the Imperial Examination System in the feudal times and peaked at Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1912). This paper analyzes the characteristics of Guan Ge Style writing on Chinese curved name tablets and look into its artistic features and cultural connotations in depth by studying the tablets from Hancheng Museum. It is found that characters on tablets are all written in Guan Ge Style and written in different period of time vary subtly. After digging deeper into the specific time when the characters were written, it can be concluded that the writings are profoundly influenced by the ruler at that time. The subtle changes took place due to the variation of different rulers' preferences. People preferred to write name tablets with official and pragmatic writing style, namely, the Guan Ge Style in Ming and Qing Dynasties. But writings in different times, though written in the same style, are different from each other due to the changes in rulers' preference, making the writings unified as a whole yet unique as one. This paper will be beneficial to highlight the academic value of the tablets in the collection of Hancheng Museum, as well as the cultural research of Guan Ge Style.

**Keywords:** Guan Ge Style, Tablets, Hancheng Museum.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Guan Ge style of writing is the standard writing style for imperial examinations, featuring dark black, square, neat and uniform in size. Guan Ge Style is the name of a type of calligraphy. It was called Yuan Style in Song Dynasty, Tai Ge Style in Ming Dynasty, and Guan Ge Style in Qing Dynasty. In fact, the homogenization of the Guan Ge Style seems to lack the taste and aesthetics of diversity, but it also makes official documents become more standardized, tidy and convenient [1].

At present, the opinions concerning this writing style vary among calligraphers. People who are opposing it believes that the characters lack diversity by writing in this way, making artworks lose its ability to express emotions. Consequently, they believe Guan Ge Style should not become the model for future generations to learn from. While people who are supporting it hold that as a mode of writing recognized by the authority, Guan Ge Style carry with it both utility and practicality endued by the ruling class in certain historical periods. Although it may lack individuality in terms of artistic

value and diverse forms in terms of writing skills, Guan Ge Style still boasts the spirits of Chinese aesthetics, making it valuable to learn from [2][3][4].

It is undeniable that the intrinsic and unique artistry of Guan Ge Style should not be overlooked. Calligraphers generally pay little attention to this style of writing and most of the research over the past years concerning Guan Ge Style is focused on its artistic features and historical meaning. For example, the importance of Guan Ge Style to imperial examinations and edicts in feudal times. Consequently, a consensus that Guan Ge Style is in lack of distinct feature and style has been drawn [5]. However, in recent decade or so, more and more attention has been paid to this style of writing and its overall evaluation has also turned from critical to neutral [6][7][8].

Starting from studying the Guan Ge Style and taking the characters on tablets exhibited in Hancheng Museum as examples, this paper will analyze the causal link between the choice of using Guan Ge Style and the requirement of writing on tablets. Based on the field

investigation data, this paper will focus on the classification and artistic characteristics of the tablets in Hancheng Museum.

## **2. THE TABLETS AND HANCHENG MUSEUM**

Chinese curved name tablets are called *Bian* and *E* in Chinese. Xu Sheng, a famous philologist in the Han Dynasty (206 B. C.-220 A. D.) believed that *Bian* means the phrases written on the lintel of one's door. He pointed out the original function of tablets which was to name the architecture. The characters are written horizontal, the tablet is called *Bian*, but when the characters are vertical, then it is called *E*. The tablets originated in the Qin and Han Dynasties, flourished in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, and are still in use today. It has become an important branch in Chinese traditional culture and has formed its own system [9]. The tablets are usually hung above the door or under the eaves. This rule works for places like imperial palaces, temples as well as the residences of important figures. Tablets in the past are usually made of wood, stone, if any, metals. Wooden tablets mainly made of phoebe, pine and fir, while stone-made ones are made of materials like bluestone, sandstone and jade.

As a symbol unique to Chinese culture, curved name tablet is more than a mixture of Chinese language, calligraphy, traditional architecture and carving. It is also a comprehensive artwork combining philosophy and artistry. It could be widely seen hanging remarkably on the front of places like palaces, memorial archways, temples, shops and residences. Whether it is a building, a terrace, a pavilion, a tower or a windowed veranda, a waterside pavilion, a hall, a museum, curved name tablet is an indispensable decoration, thus becoming the eye of the architecture. It is an integral part of Chinese ancient architecture. As it has always taken up the most remarkable place in a building, it is much emphasized by ancient people. It is said that the development of Heluo culture (Heluo represents the vast area of the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River with Henan Province at its core) gave rise to the emergence of curved name tablets. The tablets are representations of Chinese civilization. Being an outstanding part of China's unique folk culture, it integrates poems and essays, handwritings and engravings with the art of architecture by employing concise verses, elegant writing and deep connotation. It is an epitome of handwriting, sealing, carving and coloring which narrates the stories happened over the past thousand years [10]. Therefore, the tablets are also called "the spirit of ancient architecture". Its high status over the years makes enormously important to choose the appropriate content to write on it.

Hancheng is a city in Shaanxi Province which is in the northwest of China. It boasts advantageous

geographical location which is in the transitional area between Guanzhong and Shaanbei, only a river away from Shanxi Province [11]. Therefore, Hancheng is also called the East Front of Shaanxi. As a national historical and cultural city, Hancheng has rich folk culture and cultural relics which are of great historical value. In the city, there are Town God's Temple, Confucius Temple, Jiulang Temple, Taiwei Palace, Five Camp Temple and Qingshan Temple. The curved name tablets on these buildings mean a lot to the research on the features and writing features of tablets at Ming and Qing dynasties. Hancheng not only enjoys a long history but is also home to many famous people in history. People who lived there left us with rich cultural heritages including Hancheng museum. Over the past years, Hancheng museum has collected many cultural relics reflecting the customs and folk traditions of native people, most of which are ancient name tablets or carvings on lintels. It provides us with a great variety of well-preserved tablets which serve as a great material for studying characters on Chinese curved name tablets at Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1912).

## **3. THE CLASSIFICATIONS OF TABLETS IN HANCHENG**

Tablet had another important function. It represented the unofficial commendment system. Different from the medals and certifications in the west, the tablets are not private. They were fixed on the Chastity Archways and at the gathering places in rural areas. They can bring honor and pride to a family and even a whole area.

The tablets in Hancheng Museum are made in Ming and Qing Dynasties, which are made of wood. These tablets can be roughly divided into four types from their function: door tablets, birthday tablets, elegiac tablets and others.

### **3.1. Door Tablets**

In ancient times, people live in separate houses with a courtyard. As long as there is a courtyard, there is a door. Similarly, as long as there is a door, there is a door tablet hanging above the door. A door tablet is no less than the face of a family which showcases the status, moral literacy, thoughts and feelings, life philosophy, spiritual beliefs as well as the pursuit of future. Therefore, in the past, whether people live in town or city, they always decorate their door with door tablets in Hancheng. These door tablets are written in meaningful contents and curved elaborately, which are usually used as a symbol of the identity and status of the homeowners. Nowadays, even with the fast development of our society and the ongoing urbanization, this tradition is still inherited and passed down by many despite various changes on its form and content.

*Wen Kui*, scripts and positive carving, is usually carved gold character on black background. It represents that a family enjoys the honorary title of first in the imperial examinations. *Geng Du*, regular scripts and positive carving on negative-carved area, is usually made red character on blue background. It means that a family not only attaches importance to agricultural production and life, but also attaches importance to family education. *Ai Jian Xi Wen*, regular scripts and positive carving on negative-carved area, is painted Buddha statues on both sides. It represents the memory and admiration for the family ancestors.

### **3.2. Birthday Tablets for the old**

When the seniors are celebrating their birthday, their friends, relatives and younger generations will prepare birthday tablets as presents to express good wishes. As this kind of tablets contains good wills sent by a great number of acquaintances, there exists a large amount of birthday tablets.

Birthday Tablets consist of an important part of Chinese traditional culture. In *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (the earliest Chinese dictionary that systematically analyzes Chinese characters and their etymology), *shou* means live long (longevity). While in *Shangshu* (one of the five classics of Confucianism), longevity is the top of five blessings. The tradition of wishing others longevity appeared in China long ago. It is said in the time of Yao, another important figure from Huashan had wished him longevity. The first birthday celebration in history was recorded in Northern and Southern Dynasties. Its early appearance shows how important it is to Chinese traditional culture. Birthday Tablets is an integral part of Chinese Longevity Wishing Culture. The production is sophisticated. The characters on the tablet are not only written in superb calligraphy but also been carved elaborately. Surrounding the characters are patterns like *shou*, bat, peach and so on. These patterns all carry auspicious meanings like longevity and luck, being rich and prosperous.

*Chun Xuan Fu Yin*, regular scripts and positive carving on negative-carved area, is usually carved gold characters. *Chun* means father, while *Xuan* means mother. *Chun Xuan Fu Yin* means means a prayer for parents' longevity.

### **3.3. Elegiac Tablets**

Chinese people have attached importance to funeral culture since ancient times. The culture expresses their passion towards life, the pursuit of eternity, the obedience of filial piety as well as how they miss their ancestors. Elegiac Tablets are given as presents on the funeral or on the anniversaries of someone's death. The younger generation or the relatives and friends of the dead will invite famous calligraphers to write on the

tablet. The content on the tablets is usually write to eulogize the morality or achievements of the deceased or to express gratitude and sadness which shows strong emotions towards the deceased.

*Yi Xin Kan Yang*, regular scripts and negative carving, is usually carved gold character on black background. It uses the dragon and Chinese character *wan* as the pattern of four corners. There are three statues representing longevity at the top, middle and bottom of the tablet. The gourd symmetrical on both sides of the tablet also symbolizes longevity. It is mainly used to praise the noble character of the deceased. *Wang Zhong Yuan Qiao*, regular scripts. And negative carving, is usually carved gold character on blue background. In Arched frame in dark green with gold patterns resembling cloud, incense vessel, vase and bat. Chinese character *wan* are curved in the center and around the corners. It is used to praise the moral nobility, good reputation and wide respect of the deceased. *Xing Jing Xiang Qu*, running hand and negative gilded carving, is made with flora patterns around the corners. *Xing Jing* means moral behaviors. *Xiang Qu* means countryside. The whole phrase means the news of someone conducting moral behaviors have gone viral in the region.

### **3.4. Other Tablets**

Among all the tablets, there are many other types including Promotion Tablets to celebrate one's promotion, Good Deeds Tablets to praise one's good deeds, Admission Tablets to celebrate their children's admission to ideal school and Chastity Tablets for women.

It is recorded on *Hanshu* (a famous history record written in the Han Dynasty) that the government will give tablets to people who helps others and values justice. The tablets are rewards for their good deeds. This tradition acted as a motivation system to maintain a social awarding policy. Therefore, a tablet is more than a plate, it is a symbol of the wish to cultivate the moral self, regulate the family and then run the state rightly. The meaning behind the tablets is to be passed down generations after generations. It has the function of motivating the offspring and relatives.

Tablets are direct representations to express good will through calligraphy and carving. People write down their beliefs, pursuits and wishes in phrases or sentences on their front door to regulate themselves as well as alarm their offspring. As time goes by, a unique tablet culture is formed. It is a linguistic symbol worth dissemination and is rich in cultural connotation.

Consequently, it is necessary for writings on tablets to be remarkable, easy to recognize as well as aesthetical. To be remarkable, the calligrapher had to choose the right color combination and pick the right

pigment. It means that the writing style has to be close to the regular script, making it easier to read. The aesthetics imposes a stricter requirement to the color combination and the calligraphers' ability. Based on these requirements, tablet writing is set apart from the writing works done by literatis for entertainment. It gives much emphasis on practicality and common touch. Moreover, the writing had better be able to create a serious and solemn atmosphere.

#### **4. THE ARTISTIC FEATURES OF TABLETS IN HANCHENG**

In Ming and Qing Dynasties, awarding tablets gradually became a ceremonial tradition as a way of public commendation from the government or the royal family. Tablets in Ming and Qing Dynasties are usually made of wood or stone. The size of these rectangular tablets is decided according to the size of the door. It is not hard to find that most of tablets in Hancheng museum have gold characters and black backgrounds. The characters are eye-catching and dignified. The contents are rich in profundity, elegant in diction. The calligraphy is strong and powerful. The author will further analyse the tablets in Hancheng museum in terms of the way of using the brush, the structure of character and the layout of the artwork.

The elegant, fair, and graceful movements of the brush make the characters on the tablets even and unified, and the standards that should be well-regulated have extremely high requirements for brushwork. Judging from the content, it can be easily spotted that the writing followed the strict and neat brushwork of regular scripts in Tang Dynasty. The touch of the brush is plump, the stippling is full, the movement is steady, and the breath is even and thick.

The characters on the tablets are stable and well-proportioned, and the overall shape is long and square, giving the viewer a sense of appropriate squareness. The writing structure is strict, the middle part tends to be tight, and it has the style of both Ou Yangxun and Liu Gongquan. No matter the length or width of the font, it is stable and regular, not a little overdone, showing a dignified and solemn beauty in the overall square visual effect.

The tablet is the eye of the building, so the characters on it are independent and consistent in size. Viewing from a distance, they are neatly arranged and well-proportioned vertically and horizontally. From a closer inspection, their spacing is sparse and the postures echo with each other.

Most of the tablets in the Hancheng Museum are inscribed in Ming and Qing Dynasties. The characters follow strict laws in the way of using the brush, the structure of character and the layout of the artwork, showing strictness and elegance. It is not difficult to

find that besides some characters carrying the style of running script, most of them in Hancheng Museum are greatly influenced by the "Guan Ge style", and its form is single and the style is standardized.

The choice of the style of characters on tablets matters. In Ming and Qing Dynasties, though the characters on the tablets have different contents, they shared the same style. Official Script and Seal Script went popular at that time, but only Guan Ge Style was used as the style of tablet characters. The overall shape of "Guan Ge Style" is fair and well-proportioned, with solemnity and dignity. It appears on the lintel as the face of the whole family and even the clan. Therefore, it is necessary to choose an official and easy-to-recognize calligraphy style, and "Guan Ge Style" as an official font naturally stands out as the best choice for the purpose.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

The tablet culture is a unique part of Chinese traditional culture. It has developed for more than two thousand years since Qin and Han Dynasties. It is an epitome of the art and philosophy of Chinese nation. Many messages in the past are hidden in the tablets. Historical information about a certain place at certain period might also be discovered from the tablets. The events recorded could be important to a person, a nation, a village. Although this art form is old, people today cherish it and actively develops it. They use the art works in Guan Ge Style to decorate their own houses to pursue or show the charm of Oriental Culture. With the development of our society and social economy, discovering more about the traditional culture of Tablets means a lot to the development and innovation in the modern commercial advertising industry. The advertising industry can certainly learn from and draw inspirations from Tablets.

Because of its neatness and formality, Guan Ge Style has always been mistaken as a norm rather than a writing style. Many believes that too much uniformity in style and obliteration of individuality are itself a kind of restraint on freedom. In fact, Guan Ge Style did nothing to affect the prosperity of calligraphy in Qing Dynasty. Norms and formats can sometimes mean the beauty of restraint. The application of Guan Ge Style calligraphy on Tablets in the Qing Dynasty is the pearl on the crown of Hancheng culture. This paper studies the classification and value of the tablets in Hancheng Museum, hoping to attract more people's attention to the Guan Ge Style tablets.

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