



Ancient and Modern Changes in Yan Zhenqing's Calligraphy--Taking the Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew as an Example

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Abstract. Yan Zhenqing, a highly influential calligrapher following Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, emphasized blending ancient principles with innovative ideas. Calligraphy involves infusing life with personal wisdom drawn from nature and emotions, expressed through brushstrokes and lines that reveal profound understanding. This study centres on Yan Zhenqing's "Niece Manuscript," exploring the essence of "ancient and modern transformation," a central theme in calligraphy's study and creation. By examining the interplay between ancient and modern concepts, unveiling their impact on calligraphy's stylistic direction and aesthetic evaluation, This research defines "ancient" and "modern," illuminating their historical influence on calligraphy and aiding comprehension of stylistic origins for innovative creation. Yan Zhenqing's style is dissected to extract insights applicable to contemporary calligraphy. Emphasizing the synergy between characters, brushwork, spatial organization, and composition transitions, this analysis reveals Yan Zhenqing's "discard the old, create the new" ethos. The focus shifts from isolated word construction to holistic cursive writing, spotlighting relationships within characters and chapters. Skilful management of these facets determines artistic resonance, guiding modern practitioners in solving complex compositional challenges.

Keywords: Yan Zhenqing; Niece manuscript; Ancient and Modern

1 Introduction

Recognizing the Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew created by Yan Zhenqing, the audience could be impressed by its simplicity and antiquity. As the second largest running script in the world, its everlasting artistic charm lies in its ability to understand the changes of the past and the present and to integrate ancient methods with new ideas. With the prosperity of the current environment for calligraphy creation, understanding the ancient and modern issues in calligraphy and drawing nutrition from the classics will certainly be beneficial to the individual's future path of learning to write.

After consulting related materials, it can be clear to see that the research on Yan Zhenqing's calligraphy is still quite systematic. The calligraphy theories of the past dynasties have sorted out the concepts of "Ancient Method" and "Ancient Idea" and

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their categories. Researchers provide ideas to understand the change between Ancient and Modern Calligraphy and the significance and value of Yan Zhenqing's Calligraphy and other issues^[1]. This paper will discuss the meaning of "ancient and modern debate" in the traditional sense and will have a more comprehensive understanding of the combination of ancient meanings and new methods. In daily life, in the daily creation, the writers should pay attention to the cultivation of creative emotion, and nourish their talent, to inject vigorous vitality into the creation of calligraphy.

2 Sorting out and Analyzing the Concepts of "Ancient and Modern" Calligraphy in the Calligraphy Theory of Later Generations

The relationship between the ancient and the modern has always been an important research topic in the study and creation of calligraphy, and the changes in the concepts of the ancient and the modern have an important impact on the stylistic orientation and aesthetic evaluation of calligraphy. Therefore, first of all, clarifying the specific concepts of "ancient" and "modern" and the influence of the change in the historical process on calligraphy can give a better understanding of the formation of the style of the calligraphers and help students to have a better push forward in the creation of calligraphy, and to explore the source of the method.

2.1 Concepts of "antiquity" and "modernity"

"Ancient" and "modern" are relative terms in the history of Chinese calligraphy theory. The so-called "ancient" has two meanings in calligraphy. One refers to the ancient time, far from the present time; the other refers to the ancient style, which is relatively close to the ancient method. Similarly, the so-called present also has two meanings: one is the present time, the time span from the contemporary near; the second is to refer to the style of the present, calligraphy style close to the recent or current style. In treating ancient and modern problems, the ancients generally have two views: to explore the relationship between heaven and personnel and to understand the ancient and modern laws of rise and fall; another idea is to promote the ancient thought, slack modern aesthetic system. There is also a more brilliant view of the aesthetic style as a reference, the "ancient" and "modern" combined with the aesthetic style of elegance and vulgarity to explore, transforming the concept of ancient and modern^[2].

In the books on Calligraphy by Yu He of the Southern Dynasty, in a comparison of the calligraphic styles of four calligraphers, namely Zhong Yao, Zhang Zhi, Wang Xizhi, and Wang Xianzhi, the concepts of "Ancient" and "Modern" are firstly put forward, with "Ancient" referring to the ancient meaning of calligraphy, which is the style formed by the longevity of the times. "Ancient" refers to the meaning of calligraphy with ancient meaning, which is the style formed by the long time of the era. It has the attributes of simplicity and naturalness. In contrast, "modern" refers to the style characteristics of the more recent era, which is closer to the contemporary calligraphy style. It has the characteristics of a new trend and gorgeousness. At the same time, he clarified

the transformation of "ancient and modern", which is the basic law of art development. It is human nature to like beauty and brightness. Even for Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi (the Wangs), their later years were better than their younger years. Moreover, there is a difference between ancient and modern times between Wang's father and son.

2.2 The contents of the Tang's book theory on "ancient" and "modern"

In his work "Spectrum of Calligraphy," Sun Guoting articulates the concept of calligraphy criticism, asserting that the study of classical calligraphic traditions should harmonize with the contemporary spirit. He emphasizes that undesirable elements must not taint the essence of the present era. He highlights the notable calligraphers of the past – Zhong Yao and Zhang Zhi – as exemplars of simplicity in their craft, whereas the modern calligraphers, represented by the Wangs, are deemed inferior due to their elaborate and vibrant styles. Sun Guoting contends that the simplicity of ancient calligraphy has adapted in tandem with societal progress, while the dynamic and colourful styles of today are a response to the evolving world. The most valuable thing about calligraphy is that it can inherit the traditions of the past generations without departing from the trend of the times; it can pursue the current fashion without mixing with the ills of others". The spirit of criticism in this passage not only runs through the whole text, as one of the most important aesthetic ideals has been internalized in practice to achieve the realm of the dual beauty of the instrument.

Sun Guoting's critique extends beyond the profound impact of subsequent generations' calligraphy evaluation theories. It encompasses the valuable practical significance inherent in the robust advancement of contemporary calligraphy. Sun's perspective on the so-called "evaluators" revolves around the notion that labelling ancient calligraphy as "simple" and today's style as "delicate" should be approached critically [3]. This viewpoint must be apprehended as an integrated and multidimensional entity. On the one hand, calligraphy should naturally evolve in tandem with the progress of time; on the other, it reflects Sun Guoting's stipulation that the evolution of calligraphy must embody healthiness and innovation and preserve the spirit of autonomy and the principle of equilibrium.

In this way, the two evaluation criteria of "ancient" and "modern" reflect Sun's enlightened view on the development of calligraphy and the specific requirements in the continuous improvement of the individual's learning realm of calligraphy. Tradition serves as the foundational source, while innovation represents the branches, trunks, flowers, and leaves. The flourishing of the latter relies upon well-established and robust roots, coupled with the discovery of a sustaining wellspring.

Besides, Sun Guoting employs dialectical thinking to discuss the interplay between continuity and progress. He frequently juxtaposes concepts like "ancient" and "modern," "past" and "present," "old" and "new." Additionally, Sun suggests that both ancient and modern ideals should align with the concept of a "gentleman as warm and moist as jade," as conveyed in the Analects of Confucius - Yongya. This idea emphasizes the harmonious fusion of elegance and simplicity, as exemplified by the quote: "Only when elegance and simplicity are perfectly combined can one embody the demeanour of a gentleman." Sun's perspective further demonstrates his belief that writing

styles will continually evolve with the times. This signifies his understanding of the dynamic relationship between the "ancient" and the "modern," suggesting their relative and transformative nature. Consequently, Sun Guoting promotes the synergy of ancient virtues and contemporary aesthetics, aiming for an elevated state attainable in high positions and everyday life.

"Ancient" refers to a pure and elegant atmosphere in the works after the correct understanding of the tradition and the acquisition of its laws, which is one of the important evaluation criteria of calligraphy. Sun considered that it was difficult to reach the wonderful realm of calligraphy without an in-depth study of tradition.

After Sun put forward this aesthetic standard in a clear manner, it has been held as a treasure in practice. Zhao Mengfu, in the Yuan Dynasty, was a leading figure in the history of calligraphy with a clear banner of restoration, advocating the idea of following the ancient method and revering "Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi" can be said to be the ultimate, saying: "Learning calligraphy must be preceded by learning from the ancients" (Here the ancients refer to the Wangs). Representatives of successive generations of calligraphers almost all give great importance to the tradition; the work of the tradition can be said to lay their position in the history of calligraphy is one of the important reasons, even if some of the calligraphers later became the representative of the innovation school, but in the early stages of the tradition of the effort, which can be seen.

The ultimate goal is to prepare for the arrival of "today". This "today" also comes from tradition and contains or leads the aesthetic requirements of the times. Ultimately, "today" is the purpose, and "ancient" is the means and ways to achieve this purpose. However, here they are an organic whole, a pair of contradictions that are both opposing and unifying and often transform each other. However, the aesthetics of "today" is in high demand; just refreshing the claptrap is not enough; it also must be tasteful, high, and different from the contemporary shortcomings.

3 From the experience of Yan Zhenqing learning to see his calligraphy "ancient" and "modern" give and take

3.1 Changes in the Style of the Regular Script

Yan Zhenqing was the most skilful in Regular Script and wrote many tablets and tombstones. His Regular Script swept away the early Tang Dynasty, creating a majestic, upright, simple and thick style of calligraphy, and the Tang Dynasty meteorological contrast, showing a kind of flourishing in the heart of the cultural self-confidence. The change in his Regular Script style can be divided into three periods ^[4].

The initial phase is regarded as a period of learning. Renowned calligraphers of the early years, such as Chu Suiliang, Ouyang Xun, and Yu Shinan, upheld an elegant and graceful calligraphic style, while also drawing inspiration from the Northern Stele style, exemplified by Ouyang Xun. His works, like the "Wang Lin Tomb Inscription" penned at the age of 33 and the "Luo Wanshun Tomb Inscription" unearthed in 2020 when he was 38, do not exhibit a distinctly pronounced personal style ^[5]; however, the depth of

his calligraphic skill is evident. The fact that he was entrusted with writing tomb inscriptions during that era signifies the recognition his calligraphy garnered from those around him.

The second phase represents a period of transformation. This transition is evident in the works produced at the age of 42, the "Inscription on the Tomb of Guo Xiji," at 44, the "Stele of the Duobao Pagoda," and at 45, the "Eulogy to Dongfang Shuo's Paintings [6]." Yan Zhenqing's calligraphy style gradually evolved from an inward and introspective pursuit to a more outward and expansive expression. The script transformed from a relaxed and expansive format to a style characterized by external tension and internal relaxation. His brushwork shifted from an emphasis on delicacy and grace to a pursuit of grandeur and magnificence. The "Eulogy to Dongfang Shuo's Paintings" exudes resolute righteousness and a powerful, imposing presence.

The third phase signifies a period of maturity. After reaching the age of 50, Yan Zhenqing's calligraphy gradually matured, and between the ages of 60 and 70, his calligraphic style achieved a state of basic maturity. His personal style and aesthetic preferences became more firmly established. During this period, distinctive features emerged that set Yan Zhenqing apart from the "Wang Xizhi and his son" tradition, showcasing his extraordinary innovative abilities and his unwavering determination not merely to be a stepping stone for others. This era also marked the pinnacle of Yan Zhenqing's calligraphic creativity. His works during this time were abundant in quantity and remarkable in quality. Representative works from this period include the inscription "Inscription on the Jintian King Temple" at the age of 50, the "Leisurely Tower" at 62, "Record of the Magu Immortal Altar" and the "Yuan Ci Mountain Stele" at 63, the "Shendao Stele for the Virtuous Duke of Guangping, Song Jing" at 64, "Couplet on the Pan Clan Hall in Zhushan" at 65, "Ganlu Character Inscription" at 66, and the "Stele of Li Xuanjing" and the "Fragmentary Stele of the West Pavilion Record" at 69.

3.2 Changes in the Style of Running Script

During the Tang Dynasty, there were many calligraphers who excelled in regular script, as well as those who excelled in cursive and seal script, but only a few who excelled in running script [7]. Perhaps due to his natural talent, Yan Zhenqing's running script had its own distinctive look from the beginning. He built on this foundation in the future, learning and perfecting it, and then matured. Since the beginning of the Tang Dynasty, Emperor Taizong and Emperor Gaozong of the Tang Dynasty both respected Wang Xizhi's style of writing and when the upper part of the Tang Dynasty was good, the lower part of the Tang Dynasty would follow suit. Therefore, the Tang Dynasty style of calligraphy, especially running script, was basically covered by the "Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi" style of calligraphy.

Yan Zhenqing's style mutation and the Wangs' style is the opposite. "The Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew" can be said to have reached a certain height, which is an exemplary work of the unity of the human book, the skills, emotions, knowledge, aesthetics, and personality harmoniously and perfectly united together. Especially the Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew, which pushes calligraphy to another peak, is "the second line of calligraphy in the world". At age 56, he wrote "Begging for Rice Post",

which is like his person, open and bright. 56-year-old Yan Zhenqing's "Competition for Seats Post" is another masterpiece of Yan Zhenqing's running script, which is even more relaxed and casual, and has reached the realm of freedom.

3.3 Origins of the Calligraphic Style

The mutual influence of teachers and friends was also an important factor in the formation of Yan Zhenqing's style of writing. The key to forming Yan Zhenqing's calligraphy style was his teacher Zhang Xu. From the point of view of Yan Zhenqing's calligraphy, he benefited most directly from Zhang Xu. His use of the seal and official brush in the middle of the dots and paintings makes his calligraphy go beyond the style tradition of Wang Xizhi and directly enter the more extensive and distant seal and official system. His understanding and use of "hairpin folding" was inspired by Zhang Xu's learning from nature. Huaisu was skilled in cursive script and was friendly with Yan Zhenqing.

In his early years, Yan Zhenqing studied calligraphy from the lineage of Wang Xizhi, Chu Suiliang, Yu Shinan, and Ouyang Xun. Yan Zhenqing, from the creation of calligraphy style formation, it can be said with certainty that Shandong territory of the many cliff carvings, especially "Taishan Diamond Sutra", "four mountain cliffs", and so on, must have had an important impact on it.

While faithfully serving in an official capacity, Yan Zhenqing also enjoyed forming friendships with individuals from outside the conventional circles. Perhaps this tendency is an inseparable cultural gene within Chinese literati. The aspirations of Confucianism, the open-mindedness of Daoism, and the harmony of Buddhism all represent profound wisdom for one's conduct and existence. Yan Zhenqing was friends with Zhang Zhihe and the tea sage Lu Yu, while Li Xuanjing held him in high esteem. Huaisu and Jiaoran were monks, and Yan Zhenqing also composed inscriptions for numerous temples, seeking solace for the soul and elevating his character beyond the mundane world. This pursuit aligns harmoniously with the spirit of artistic creation.

In summary, an artist's success is the culmination of various conditions and circumstances. Undoubtedly, the influence of the era's trends and fashions is considerable, and personal development is intricately intertwined with the specific social backdrop. Over the course of more than a century, the Tang Dynasty grew into the world's largest empire, marked by its prosperity and strength, presenting an image of peaceful opulence. The economy thrived as never before, the cultural milieu was accommodating and open, and people exhibited confidence in their lives. Yan Zhenqing's rich, monumental, and majestic artistic style precisely resonated with the aesthetic yearning of this era, characterized by a preference for plenitude. Yan Zhenqing stands as an unwaveringly loyal figure in Chinese history, a pioneer in the annals of calligraphy, and his influence reverberates deeply into subsequent generations.

4 The "ancient" and "present" carried in Yan Zhenqing's "The Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew"

Yan Zhenqing was an influential calligrapher and scholar after Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi. In the flourishing period of the Tang Dynasty, and even in the history of Chinese calligraphy, it can be said to be another milestone figure. His significance in the history of Chinese calligraphy is that he was able to set all the strengths of the ancient and modern changes and created a unique style of running script, both with the previous generation of Wang Xizhi, Wang Xianzhi, father and son of the distance between the style of writing, but also very different from the contemporaneous Regular Script style of running script. It is not difficult to find that Yan Zhenqing blended the "ancient" with the "modern" in the Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew. Yan Zhenqing's changes in running script are the result of his eclecticism. Combined with the stylistic characteristics of the Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew, it can be seen that Yan Zhenqing's creative fusion is manifested in two aspects: first, the extensive use of seal script in running script, which subverts the previous running script; second, the integration of cursive into the running script, which strengthens the lyrical nature of the running script.

4.1 Learning Seal Script Brushwork for Beginners

The "Seal Script Order" established by the Jinwen Calligraphy of the Shang Dynasty and the Zhou Dynasty stipulates Seal Script's basic rules and aesthetics^[8]. Seal script basically maintains the principle of using a centre-front brush, hiding the power and momentum of the brush within the lines to form thick, full, and graceful lines. The application of seal script strokes and gestures in the Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew is very obvious. There are quite a lot of thick, heavy and fat strokes in the work, which enter the paper with a reverse top stroke, and the start of the strokes seldom reveals the edge of the strokes, which often take the momentum in the air and hide the head and protect the tail. The middle part of the line is strong and elastic. From the point of view of the strokes, the overall shape of the characters in "The Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew" is relatively rounded, forming an outwardly expanding posture that enhances the overall sense of roundness and strength, and increases the flavour of the seal script in the work. This creative use of seal script brushwork in the running script results in a distinctive running script style.

4.2 Obvious Tendency toward Cursive Script Style

Yan's integration of the ancient and modern worlds is also evident in his perfect incorporation of cursive meaning into his running script, creating a highly lyrical style. The cursive style originated from the rapid writing of handwritten characters during the Warring States period and has been characterized by scribbling since its inception. This scribbling style is often arbitrary and spontaneous and has unexpected effects. The sparing use of the word "nephew" and the randomness of the scribbles in "The Manuscript

of Offering to a Nephew" make the casualness of the cursive style obvious. Compared with the Scribal Cursive Script of the Eastern Han Dynasty, which also comes from the folk handwriting, and the relics of Dunhuang and Gaochang areas in the Jin and Tang Dynasties, similarities can be easily found between them. The obvious cursive character of this kind of draft calligraphy makes the overall style present a kind of irregular interest; on the other hand, Tang's broad and eclectic style achieved the art of cursive writing in an indulgent and volatile manner.

4.3 Brushwork Techniques in the Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew

4.3.1. Against the Brush Stroke

The application of seal script strokes and strokes in the Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew is very obvious. Many thick and fat strokes in the work enter the paper against the trend of the top of the stroke, and the strokes are often hidden from view and do not show up when writing. This kind of seal script strokes with a peak into the paper is conducive to the power of the lines, making the character structure solid, powerful and elastic ^[9]. In the process of creation, deliberate inspiration was drawn from this technique of counter-flowing brushwork in seal and clerical scripts. Firstly, this was done to enrich the variety of brushwork within the composition, distinguishing it from the prevalent method of entering strokes with a natural flow, thus generating a diverse range of angular and circular transformations through distinct initiation and termination points. Secondly, it was aimed at constructing an overall ambience characterised by seamless transitions, subtle complexity, and profound depth.

4.3.2. The outward expansion of the strokes

The Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew appears to be written with many spreading and rounding strokes, which resemble open bows and arrows, resulting in a tendency of outward expansion of the character and strong and vigorous lines. Applying this kind of brushwork adds a kind of pale and simple weather. In the creation, the appropriate addition of this round potential outward expansion of the ground brushwork is conducive to adjusting the shape of the word on the square and round changes and striving to highlight the overall magnificence of the work. On the other hand, in personal creations, the problem is that the lines become pale and lack connotation when using withered strokes and flying white. After several adjustments, it cannot be difficult to find that adding twisting strokes to individual writing increases the lines' content. The texture of the strokes, the characters' overall form and the seal script's overall flavour can be taken into account.

4.4 Composition

The combination of different connecting methods of lines effectively regulates the rhythm of a single line or even the entire passage, while the variations in ink tones present a sectional quality to the overall composition. For instance, in the first five lines

of "The Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew", ink is dipped twice. During the first dip, from the first line to the character "che" in the third line, the ink transitions from dense to light, and the lines shift from thick and full to dry and circular. The second dip spans from the initial two characters to the fourth line, restoring the thickness and fullness^[10]. This cyclical adjustment of ink tones, multiple instances of substantial brushwork, and unconscious smudging enhance the overall block-like aspect. This amplifies the contrast between the virtual and the real, eliciting a stronger resonance of emotional fluctuations within the viewer.

5 Conclusion

Through the analysis and study of the world-famous classic "The Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew", what can be seen more clearly is how Yan Zhenqing took the ancient methods and how he integrated them into his creative practice, developing a new style of calligraphy rich in the spirit and weather of the times. The ultimate goal of studying the classics of the past is to return to one's creations through the study of the pen and ink paradigms established in the Manuscript of Offering to a Nephew, gaining a deeper understanding of the combination of the ancient meaning and the new method, and hoping to continue to explore in future calligraphic practice, to find a pen and ink language that is suitable for self-expression of emotions and in line with the aesthetic ideals of the times, and to continue to broaden the path of calligraphic creation.

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