



Perception and Construction in the “Lifeworld”: The Transformation of the Calligraphic Image of Zhao Mengfu in the Ming and Qing Dynasties from a Phenomenological Perspective

Kexin Dai

City University of Macau, Avenida Padre Tomás Pereira, Taipa, Macao SAR, China

13338931559@163.com

Abstract. Taking the phenomenological concepts of the “lifeworld” and the “logic of perception” as the theoretical basis, this study returns to the cultural and intellectual context of the Ming and Qing calligraphic circles and examines the differences in the reception of Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphic image during temporal change and social group division. Through close reading and comparison of calligraphic treatises, colophons and other related texts, this paper reveals the shift in the evaluative paradigm from the moralised criticism of the early Ming that emphasised the unity of person and calligraphy, to the later turn towards the separation of person and calligraphy based on artistic ontology. This transformation is essentially a diachronic reconstruction produced by the intentional projection of the receivers. By integrating multiple historical situations such as court taste, the imperial examination system, the normative force of the Guange style, and the rise of stele studies, this study argues that the deconstruction and reconstruction of Zhao Mengfu’s image were driven by the intersection of three forces: the rise and decline of moral judgement, the re-evaluation of artistic value, and the shaping power of institutional order. The phenomenological framework shows that the history of artistic reception is not linear. Meaning is continuously “disclosed” through the intersection of historical horizon, bodily practice and political context. It therefore goes beyond unidirectional determinism and demonstrates the complexity and generative nature of reception history.

Keywords: Zhao Mengfu; calligraphic image; phenomenology; lifeworld; logic of perception

1 Introduction

Zhao Mengfu is one of the most influential figures in the history of Chinese calligraphy, and his artistic image underwent complex transformation in the Ming and Qing dynasties. This study adopts the perspective of the phenomenological lifeworld and traces the differences and developments in the reception of Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphic image in different periods and different social groups. The debate between the

ideas of unity of person and calligraphy and separation of person and calligraphy, together with the political situation after the Qing conquest and the rise of stele studies, led scholars to reconsider the tradition of model-book calligraphy, so that Zhao Mengfu's image was continually reshaped between moral judgement, artistic value and institutional order.

There is considerable existing scholarship on this topic. Zhou Feng has outlined the basic transmission pattern of the reception of Zhao Mengfu's calligraphy across the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties^[1]. Huang Xiaobo has examined the theory of “servile calligraphy” in the Ming dynasty and revealed how ethical discourse influenced calligraphic evaluation^[2]. However, previous studies mainly focused on the content of judgments and the positions of praise or criticism, and tended to discuss “who said what” rather than investigating the lifeworld on which such evaluation was based and the logic of perception through which such cognition was formed.

If the discussion only remains on the moral level of “loyal or disloyal” and “praise or condemnation”, it becomes difficult to explain why different periods and groups produced starkly different receptions of the same “collaborator with a former dynasty”. It is also difficult to explain why scholars of the Ming strongly insisted on the unity of person and calligraphy, while from the mid-Qing onwards the tendency towards separation of person and calligraphy emerged, represented by Feng Ban^[3]. These questions show that the reception of Zhao Mengfu is not the result of a single cause. It is a product of complex interaction between moral concepts, aesthetic taste and institutional construction within artistic reception.

In examining the transformation of Zhao Mengfu's image in the Ming and Qing dynasties, this paper shifts from the earlier genealogical approach of reception history to an approach based on lifeworld and logic of perception. When reading historical documents, it is therefore necessary to consider the concrete spatial and temporal conditions and to observe how Zhao Mengfu was placed in three different perceptual fields: the moralised idea of unity of person and calligraphy in the Ming, the institutionalised Revering Zhao promoted by the imperial court in the Qing, and the critical reconsideration brought by the rise of stele studies. On this basis, the study analyses the dynamic evolution of calligraphic evaluation and explains that artistic reception is not simply a judgement of a single object but is inevitably shaped by many complex factors.

2 The Calligraphic Image of Zhao Mengfu in the Ming Dynasty: Moral Judgement and Anxiety in Calligraphic Learning

The construction of Zhao Mengfu's calligraphic image in the Ming dynasty was always entangled with moral judgement and anxiety within the calligraphic tradition. Under the Neo-Confucianism of Cheng and Zhu, the idea of the “unity of person and calligraphy” closely bound personal character to artistic taste, so that Zhao Mengfu's identity as a “collaborator with a former dynasty” became an unavoidable moral stain. At the same time, the Ming calligraphic world wavered between the revivalist tradition

of “honouring the two Wangs” and the search for a new orthodoxy, which further intensified the anxiety surrounding evaluations of his style. This double pressure gave rise to moralised criticism represented by the theory of “servile calligraphy”: labels such as “soft”, “sweet” and “boneless” gradually became fixed and obscured the artistic substance of Zhao’s calligraphy. Yet Wen Zhengming, Dong Qichang, Wang Duo and other calligraphers did not fully submit to a single moral discourse. Through the practice of copying, theoretical writings on calligraphy and competition over style, they brought attention back to the core of brushwork and structure, and in the continuation of the cultural lineage they carried out a latent repair of Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphic image. These different forces were interwoven and advanced layer by layer, together outlining the complex aspects of Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphic image in the Ming dynasty under the joint conditions of moral judgement and calligraphic anxiety.

2.1 The Dual Pressure of Cultural Context and Calligraphic Trends

The construction of Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphic image in the Ming dynasty was constantly entangled with moral judgement and anxiety in the calligraphic tradition. In the cultural environment dominated by Neo-Confucianism of Cheng and Zhu, ethical discourse filled the field of calligraphic evaluation. The idea that “nature and desires must be disciplined”, and the emphasis on loyalty and moral integrity, caused art to be regarded as a direct reflection of personal character. Therefore, calligraphy was often interpreted as an expression of moral cultivation. Xiang Mu stated: “The merit of calligraphy is to follow heaven and earth and to support the classics of teaching”^[4], taking “harmony” as the highest aesthetic criterion. This kind of thinking, which placed calligraphy within the Confucian system of moral education, offered the basis for the later paradigm of evaluation that insisted on the unity of person and calligraphy. According to Zhou Feng, in the Yuan dynasty Zhao Mengfu was mainly praised for his contribution to the revival of the “two Wangs”, but from the mid and late Ming, the focus of evaluation gradually shifted to his behaviour and personal integrity^[1]. The tendency of “denying the calligraphy because of the man” became stronger, and such comments as “soft”, “sweet” and “boneless” were used repeatedly. These terms implied moral weakness and damaged the recognition of the artistic value of Zhao’s work.

At the same time, the development of calligraphic thought in the Ming dynasty intensified this trend. The calligraphic circle continued the tradition of “honouring the two Wangs”, while also seeking a new orthodoxy. Xiang Mu systematised the ontology of calligraphy through the theory of “harmony” and regarded stylistic deviation as a sign of insufficient moral cultivation^[5]. Although Zhao Mengfu was seen as an important transmitter of the two Wangs, he was criticised because his identity as a “collaborator with a former dynasty” and some stylistic features of his calligraphy did not conform to the expected orthodoxy. Thus, discussions of Zhao’s calligraphy were inevitably linked with debates on personal character, loyalty and legitimacy of tradition. For this reason, a condition emerged in which moral judgement and anxiety about calligraphic orthodoxy acted together.

2.2 Moralised “Unity of Person and Calligraphy” and the Practice of Criticism

Xiang Mu continued the traditional idea of “calligraphy as the image of the mind” and regarded calligraphy as the natural expression of inner virtue. When expounding the idea of “harmony”, he pointed out that even small deviations in strokes reflected inadequacy in moral cultivation, and therefore the foundation of calligraphy was moral attainment. When this view was applied to Zhao Mengfu, stylistic features such as “softness”, “sweetness”, and “bonelessness” were interpreted as insufficient loyalty and weakness in moral character. The emergence of the theory of “servile calligraphy” marked the peak of this moralised criticism. Li Yingzhen and others used ethical terms such as “servile” and “flattering” to connect Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphy with the “Guange style” and officials close to political power, turning the discussion of artistic style into a moral accusation. As Huang Xiaobo pointed out, such “transformation” did not mean the disappearance of moral discourse, but rather that moral assumptions became the precondition for evaluating strokes and style^[2]. Fang Xiaoru, from the stance of “distinguishing China and the barbarians” and strong political emotion, described Zhao Mengfu as a negative symbol of attachment to the Yuan dynasty and argued that “if the character is not upright, the art cannot be complete”. In consequence, the ideal of “unity of person and calligraphy” functioned in practice as “denying the calligraphy because of the man”.

The repetition of this discourse expanded within the calligraphic circle of Wu school in the mid and late Ming. Critical phrases such as “soft”, “sweet” and “boneless” appeared frequently and became convenient formulae. Many calligraphers tended to make use of pre-existing negative language rather than offer detailed analysis of strokes and structures. In the early Qing, the emotional grief caused by the fall of the Ming dynasty brought more radical expressions. Fu Shan interpreted Zhao Mengfu as a symbol of “the fall of the dynasty”, and thus pushed the theory of “servile calligraphy” to an emotional extreme.

From the perspective of perception, this moralised criticism concealed the real artistic features of Zhao Mengfu’s work. His integration and innovation of Jin and Tang models were simplified as “imitation” and “servility”. As a result, detailed technical analysis became rare and anxiety about “orthodoxy” overshadowed the artistic substance of calligraphy.

2.3 Reception and Competition: Continuity of Tradition and Restoration of Image

Nevertheless, complete moral dominance did not occur. Wen Zhengming, in his colophon to Zhao Mengfu’s Four Letters, affirmed Zhao’s contribution to the tradition of the two Wangs and mentioned his own learning process: “When I was young I learned calligraphy from Shiling, and later I turned to the two Wangs”^[6]. Through this statement he brought the debate back to the practice of copying, rather than moral labels.

Dong Qichang adopted an attitude of “competition”. He praised Zhao Mengfu as “a great master of collecting ancient models”, but he emphasised that he himself would

reach a “new summit” beyond Zhao by reconstructing the meaning of “ancient and modern” and “mastery and maturity”^[7]. In this way, Zhao Mengfu became both a model and an object to surpass. Wang Duo took a more self-conscious artistic stance. Although he lived through dynastic transition, he suspended discussion of moral identity and instead concentrated on the artistic ontology of brushwork and structure. His criticism of Zhao Mengfu as having “contemporary habits” came from stylistic comparison within the tradition of the two Wangs, not from moral judgement.

Therefore, from Wen Zhengming to Dong Qichang and Wang Duo, although they held different aesthetic positions, they all recognised Zhao Mengfu as a necessary reference for continuing the tradition of the two Wangs. At the same time, they re-interpreted and reconstructed the evaluation by means of copying, colophons and theoretical writing. As a result, Zhao Mengfu’s image in the late Ming was not completely erased by moral discourse, but instead received a certain degree of “restoration” within technical and stylistic discussions.

From the viewpoint of the lifeworld, the reception of Zhao Mengfu in the Ming dynasty shows a tension between moral judgement and recognition of artistic ontology. The constant pressure of the theory of “servile calligraphy” required scholars to express a moral stance, while the practices of copying and theoretical argument led to renewed attention to strokes and structure. This contradictory perceptual logic reflects the hesitation of Ming scholars between political ethics and artistic autonomy and later served as the basis for the Qing-period tendency towards the separation of person and calligraphy.

3 The Calligraphic Image of Zhao Mengfu in the Qing Dynasty: Political Symbol and the Shaping of Order

In the Qing context, Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphy underwent a deep reconstruction. His image was no longer limited to questions of stylistic transmission in art history, but became an important vehicle for dynastic political aims and struggles over cultural order. The moral controversy around his status as a “collaborator with a former dynasty”, which had existed since the Ming, did not disappear. However, from the need to build a new cultural orthodoxy, Qing rulers selectively promoted and reshaped his calligraphy. At the same time, shifts in aesthetic taste and scholarly trends within the literati made his image the object of repeated redefinition between official norms and private discourse, and between the tradition of model-book calligraphy and the new movement of stele studies.

3.1 Court Promotion and the Reconstruction of Orthodoxy

After the establishment of the Qing dynasty, Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphy was systematically incorporated into the court project of constructing cultural orthodoxy. In the early Qing, the calligraphic world still took Dong Qichang as a model of revival. By the Kangxi and Qianlong reigns, as the regime became more stable, the court began to “Revere Zhao”, turning Zhao Mengfu from a Yuan calligrapher with a problematic

political identity into an official model that met the political needs of the Qing. Li Chao points out that during the Qianlong and Jiaqing period, the movement of “Revering Zhao” formed an interactive pattern between the court and the literati, and Zhao’s calligraphy gradually replaced the earlier narrative that centred solely on “Revering Dong”, becoming an important resource for rebuilding calligraphic order^[8].

This shift was first shown in the large-scale collection and arrangement of Zhao’s works in the imperial household. From the Kangxi reign onwards, the imperial storehouse, the Southern Study and the Upper Study collected Zhao Mengfu’s originals and copies and built up a stable collection of “Songxue classics”. Imperial officials and inner-court calligraphers such as Sun Chengze and Gao Shiqi took part in authentication and cataloguing, and provided authoritative interpretations of Zhao’s calligraphy in their colophons and notes, from the aspects of rules and spirit. Sun Chengze said that Zhao’s regular script “reached the holiness of Jin calligraphy, and only Zhao Ziang obtained the lost methods of the Jin people”; he further cited Hu Jizhong’s remark that “for five hundred years above and below, and over ten thousand miles, there is no calligraphy like this”, placing Zhao’s work at the highest level since the Jin dynasty^[9].

The Qianlong Emperor pushed the canonisation of Zhao’s calligraphy to its height. In his own colophons he wrote that “the standard of calligraphy changed at Zhao Mengfu”, and he believed that although Zhao’s style tended towards grace and charm, it still followed the tradition since Wang Xizhi of “winning through elegance of appearance”. Such comments transformed Zhao Mengfu from a “collaborator” of the Yuan into a legitimate heir of the tradition of the two Wangs and made him an important symbol of the Qing dynasty’s “civil governance through culture”.

The Qing court established Zhao’s calligraphy as a model through several institutional measures. In the imperial examinations and Guange script used in official documents, his upright, regular style was taken as a standard^[10]. Within the palace, the Upper Study and the Southern Study treated Zhao’s calligraphy as a required model for princes and close officials. Through official publications such as the Sanxitang Fatie (Model Calligraphy of the Hall of Three Rarities), his works were widely disseminated and entered local schools and the daily writing of literati. As Zhang Wei has shown, the process from the collecting activities of private connoisseurs such as An Qi to the systematic cataloguing and promotion by the imperial storehouse clearly reflects the interaction and mutual reinforcement between court aesthetics and institutional norms^[11].

From the perspective of the lifeworld, Zhao Mengfu in the Qing palace context was both a calligrapher and a political symbol. His style satisfied the practical needs of examination writing and Guange script, and at the same time matched the soft and restrained cultural image required by imperial power. More importantly, Zhao’s identity as a Han Chinese and former imperial clansman allowed the Qing court to use the elevation of his artistic achievement as a symbolic gesture towards Han literati. It signalled an invitation to “cover moral integrity with art” and to “use cultural orthodoxy to cover political orthodoxy”. In this way, without directly touching the sensitive issue of loyalty and integrity, the court could place Zhao Mengfu within the grand project of dynastic cultural construction.

3.2 Transformation of Image and the Achievement of Perceptual Balance

The reception of Zhao Mengfu in the Qing dynasty shows a clear trend from moral judgement towards a return to artistic ontology. Fan Ying points out that within the traditional framework of “character equals calligraphic quality”, calligraphers who were “collaborators with a former dynasty” were criticised for their lack of moral integrity, but their artistic status was not completely erased. On the contrary, this situation forced later generations to distinguish and balance between moral praise or blame and artistic achievement^[12].

In the early Qing, Feng Ban and others continued the Ming pattern of moral criticism, but their position became more complex. While they denied Zhao Mengfu’s service to the Yuan court, they also had to admit his excellence in technique and rules. This produced a contradictory attitude of “denying his character but submitting to his brushwork”. From the mid-Qing onwards, the main focus of evaluation clearly moved back to the works themselves. Chen Wei’s research shows that Sun Chengze praised Zhao’s calligraphy as having “tight structure and graceful spirit”, Gao Shiqi described it as “strong and charming, like jade that is smooth and round”, and Qian Yong believed that “Songxue’s calligraphy uses rounded strokes, goes directly back to the two Wangs, and has no rival in everyday writing”. In these evaluations, moral considerations were no longer the primary starting point^[9].

Model-book calligraphers such as Liang Yan and Wang Wenzhi pushed this change further. They openly regarded Zhao Mengfu as an important link in the system of the two Wangs. Liang Yan “throughout his life insisted on the aesthetic standard of traditional model-book calligraphy and sought guidance from the calligraphy of the Wei, Jin and Tang dynasties”. In his theoretical works such as *Pingshutie* and *Chengjinzhai Jiwenlu*, he repeatedly affirmed the exemplary value of Zhao’s brushwork and structure^[13]. Wang Wenzhi, even under the prevailing trend of “esteeming steles”, still defended model-book calligraphy. In *Kuaiyutang Tiba* he argued for Zhao’s school from the aspects of “refined charm” and “overall atmosphere”, explaining their “grace” and “delicacy” as an aesthetic taste in line with the Confucian ideal of harmony, rather than as simple weakness^[14].

From the point of view of the logic of perception, the reception of Zhao Mengfu in the Qing dynasty shows a pattern in which one element declines while another rises. Moral discourse did not disappear completely, but gradually withdrew from the core of calligraphic criticism. In actual practice of copying, commenting and teaching, Zhao’s calligraphy became a classic object that could be compared and used as a source of method again and again. Viewers, when facing Zhao Mengfu, no longer stayed only at the level of judging loyalty or treachery, but began to reorganise their perceptual experience around artistic dimensions such as line, structure and stylistic spirit.

3.3 The Re-examination of Zhao’s Calligraphy under the Rise of Stele Studies

The rise of stele studies in the Qing dynasty brought a new challenge to Zhao Mengfu’s status in the history of calligraphy. Bai Qianshen points out in *Fu Shan’s World* that, in the seventeenth-century scholarly circle of Shanxi, “the budding of stele studies” had already appeared. The fashion of visiting steles and the development of epigraphic studies changed scholars’ ways of understanding calligraphy. They gradually “broke the pattern of Tang regular script” and turned to seek more simple and powerful writing resources in Han and Wei stone inscriptions^[15]. In this trend, the model-book tradition represented by Zhao Mengfu was naturally treated as the opposite of “overly polished” and “overly graceful”.

In the late Qing, stele studies developed from an emerging idea into a powerful discourse. Scholars such as Ruan Yuan and Duan Yucai advocated “learning from steles without disparaging model-books”. They promoted extensive copying of Han and Six Dynasties steles to correct the one-sided understanding of the two Wangs tradition since the Song and Yuan, and they still believed that Zhao’s calligraphy had normative value. Bao Shichen and Kang Youwei took a more radical position. They elevated stele studies to the status of a “modern method” and used it to criticise systematically the “softness” and “delicate skill” of Zhao and Dong’s line of model-book calligraphy.

Even in this climate of “revering steles and belittling model-books”, Zhao Mengfu was not entirely denied. Instead, he was redefined as a “starting point that must be surpassed”. Many advocates of stele studies had begun their learning with Zhao’s calligraphy in their youth and only later turned to steles. They acknowledged that Zhao’s work was irreplaceable in training brush control and structure, but they argued that one should not remain at this stage when forming a personal style. This situation of “Zhao first, stele later” meant that, even while being questioned from moral and stylistic perspectives, Zhao Mengfu still held an important position in the transmission of technique.

Thus, in the Qing dynasty, the reception of Zhao Mengfu’s calligraphy developed into a pattern in which the official system and the intellectual trend of stele studies coexisted and interacted. Officially, the two Wangs and Zhao’s calligraphy formed the core, and his style was established as a normative model through the examination system, Guange script and palace model-book collections. Among literati, stele studies constantly expanded the meaning of “the ancient”, and by promoting the simplicity and strength of Han and Wei steles, they set up new aesthetic requirements and historical comparisons for the model-book tradition represented by Zhao. This opposition and interaction made Zhao Mengfu both the “centre” of Qing calligraphic order and the object of continuous debate for new ideas and new models of learning. In the context of the court and official schools, his calligraphy symbolised rules and orthodoxy; in the world of epigraphy and stele studies, his style became a target for reflection and transcendence. In this field of tension, Zhao Mengfu’s image gradually moved away from the purely moral framework of the Ming and, in the Qing dynasty, presented a state in which political symbol and artistic ontology coexisted.

4 Conclusion: The Logic of Perception and the Changing Lifeworld of Zhao Mengfu's Image

Zhao Mengfu's historical image was never a fixed symbol. In different lifeworlds of different periods, it was continuously reconstructed according to changes in the logic of perception. This reconstruction was always shaped by the complex interaction of moral criticism, artistic concepts and institutional power. It reflected the value orientations within specific historical situations, and also revealed deeper patterns of the history of artistic reception.

4.1 The Interweaving of Moral Judgement, Artistic Concepts and Institutional Forces

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the evaluation of Zhao Mengfu was not a simple opposition such as "a good calligrapher but a bad person", but the result of repeated entanglement of moral judgement, aesthetic ideas and institutional forces. The first dimension was the moral judgement centred on his identity as a "collaborator with a former dynasty". The second dimension was the discussion of artistic ontology, expressed through concepts such as "the ancient spirit", "harmony" and "systems of method". These two dimensions at times overlapped and at times separated, which led to the production of very different images of Zhao Mengfu in different lifeworlds and different social groups.

In the early Ming, under the influence of Neo-Confucianism within the official academic system, the image of calligraphy was placed directly inside ethical thinking. Tian Jingyuan points out that early Ming calligraphic theorists "regarded li as the highest principle and raised it to the fundamental level of the calligraphic image", and also emphasised that upright character and upright social ethos played a decisive role in the formation of calligraphic style^[16]. In this environment, Fei Ying proposed that "to learn calligraphy, one must start from being a person, and to be a person, one must start from rectifying the mind". Xiang Mu in Shufa Yayan stated that "calligraphy is the image of the mind", treating calligraphy as the direct outward expression of morality and inner state^[4]. In this situation, the idea of unity of person and calligraphy was not a descriptive remark but the basic precondition for evaluation. The viewer first judged the person, and only then judged the calligraphy.

The theory of "servile calligraphy" in the mid-Ming obtained powerful symbolic effect in such a lifeworld. Huang Xiaobo's research shows that during this period "the term 'servile calligraphy' appeared repeatedly, mostly in direct association with Zhao Mengfu", which made stylistic criticism slide quickly into moral accusation^[2]. However, voices that opposed this situation also appeared in the Ming. Zhu Yunming in Nushu Ding questioned the servile calligraphy argument and stated that such a theory "is not in line with the understanding of most people", stressing instead that learning calligraphy should still "follow the ancients" and should not be overturned by extreme exceptional arguments^[17].

In the Qing dynasty, unity of person and calligraphy did not disappear, but the contradiction between moral ethics and artistic ontology was more clearly recognised. If judged entirely by the expectations of Neo-Confucian moral integrity, “one should absolutely not study Zhao’s calligraphy”; yet according to the long-standing Confucian aesthetic principle that “harmony is beauty”, “Zhao’s calligraphy happens to fit this standard, and his achievement in harmony is outstanding”^[1]. This contradiction forced Qing scholars to search for a new pathway of evaluation. Feng Ban wrote in *Dunyin Zalu*: “Zhao Songxue’s calligraphy enters and exits the ancients and studies everything, combining and weighing them and eventually forming his own school. In his time, he was truly unmatched”^[3]. He further stressed “judging the character of the strokes only through the strokes themselves”, releasing artistic judgement from the strict control of ethics.

In the mid-Qing, Liang Yan continued to defend the aesthetics of model-book calligraphy and “throughout his life sought guidance from the calligraphy of the Wei, Jin and Tang dynasties”, using a harmonious and balanced style to resist the rigid standardisation of Guange script^[13]. Wang Wenzhi proposed the principle of “observing the refined spirit alone”, focusing on the formal beauty and atmosphere of the works rather than on their moral implications^[14].

From the shift in evaluation from the Ming to the Qing, we can see that the reception of Zhao Mengfu reflects how moral judgement, aesthetic thinking and institutional power became intertwined and constantly generated new images. The transformation from unity of person and calligraphy to separation of person and calligraphy was not an abrupt break but the concrete manifestation of changes in the logic of perception within different lifeworlds.

4.2 Summary and Implications: Reconstructing Artistic Value Through the Mirror of History

Overall, the evaluation of Zhao Mengfu in the Ming and Qing dynasties went through a general process: from “judging the man first” to “returning to the calligraphy”; from private debate to institutional endorsement; from a discourse dominated only by model-book calligraphy to a situation in which model-books and steles coexisted and competed.

In the Ming dynasty, calligraphy was incorporated into ethical discourse centred on Neo-Confucian morality, and the theory of “servile calligraphy” gained strong influence in this environment.

After the Qing conquest, under the influence of stele studies and evidential scholarship, scholars gradually broke through the single moral perspective. New evaluation models emerged such as Feng Ban’s “judging the strokes on their own” and Wang Wenzhi’s “observing refined charm alone”. These changes enabled Zhao Mengfu’s image to achieve a relatively balanced state between the identity of a “collaborator” and that of a “revivalist of ancient models”.

From this historical experience, there is a lesson for present-day scholarship. When interpreting historical statements, researchers should examine them from the perspective of the lifeworld; they should restore each comment to its political environment,

scholarly background and social network at the time. As Fan Ying argues, “when evaluating the merits and faults of calligraphers who served a former dynasty, their behaviour should be examined within the specific historical situation”^[12]. Contemporary research should avoid reproducing moralised labels such as “servile”, “sweet” or “boneless”. Instead, researchers should return to the artistic ontology through technical and stylistic analysis that can be debated and verified, in order to correct established perceptions.

The controversies around Zhao Mengfu in the Ming and Qing dynasties are not only a mirror that reflects the moral concepts of the past, but also a mirror that displays the changes in artistic ideas and institutional power. Meaningful perception of calligraphy cannot be separated from deep understanding and conscious reflection on history^[18]. This experience shows that proper calligraphic criticism needs to understand how the calligraphic image is perceived, and also needs to evaluate works within the dialectical relation between history and aesthetics. Only in such a process can we summarise the artistic value of Zhao Mengfu today.

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