

Discussion of theoretical value of Da Chongguang's "Calligraphy Raft"

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Abstract. "Calligraphy Raft" is an important theoretical work of calligraphy written by Da Chongguang in the early Qing Dynasty. It has elaborated the multiple aspects of Chinese calligraphy, including bifa (using the brush method), tishi (form and structure) and bubai (space), i.e., dianhua (dots and lines), jieti (structure) and zhangfa (space). At the same time, it also clarified the essence of calligraphy on core issues such as the key points of learning calligraphy and the structure of brush and ink. In this regard, Wang Wenzhi, Huang Binhong, Lin Sanzhi and other masters all highly praised it. Obviously, from the overall point of view of the history of calligraphy, the position of this book is not prominent. However, as far as the discussion of this article is concerned, it is really penetrating and profound. The dialectical relationship of calligraphy mentioned by Da Chongguang is also worthy of careful appreciation by scholars of ancient and modern times.

Keywords: Da Chongguang, Calligraphy Raft, calligraphy theory, Painting Tool.

1. Introduction

"I learned calligraphy when I was young, but I didn't have a teacher. Fortunately, I got Da Chongguang's "Calligraphy Raft". He wrote many articles on calligraphy, all of them are based on hard research. The ancients have never discussed calligraphy in such a detailed manner. His calligraphy theory is faithful to the ancients, and every word and sentence are with quotation", this is what Wang Wenzhi, a calligrapher in the Qing Dynasty, said in "Kuaiyutang preface and postscript", and it is also the most genuine discussion of "Calligraphy Raft" since ancient times.

There are many examples of summarizing calligraphy in the history of calligraphy. Among them, there are several representative ones, such as Cai Yong's "Calligraphy Theory", put forward the famous idea that "calligraphy is the art of expression". It discusses the artistic nature of calligraphy to express feelings, as well as the mental state of calligraphers when creating, emphasizing that calligraphy art should focus on image beauty, conform to the laws of objective things and express people's psychological state. Mrs. Wei's "Bizhen Image" discusses in detail the dots and lines of calligraphy, the methods of holding and using the brush, and enumerates the seven basic writing methods, which have been widely used in later generations of calligraphy. Other works, such as Wang Xizhi's "Bishi Theory", Yu Shinan's "Bisui Theory", Yan Zhenqing's "Twelve Meanings of Brushwork in Zhang Changshi", Sun Guoting's "Calligraphy Hierarchy", are all the summaries of a major aspect of calligraphy by predecessors. They are with great significance to the study of calligraphy in both historical documents meaning and for learning of calligraphy. As for Da Chongguang's "Calligraphy Raft", it is more like a calligrapher's earnest teaching and good guidance to future generations. Although it is like a causerie, the structure and logic of "Calligraphy Raft" are still very strict. Wang Wenzhi even compared the "Calligraphy Raft" with Mrs. Wei's "Bizhen Image" and Sun Guoting's "Calligraphy Hierarchy", saying that even the "Bizhen Image" cannot match the value of "Calligraphy Raft".

2. Da Chongguang's achievements

Da Chongguang was a famous calligraphy and painting theorist and connoisseur in the Qing Dynasty. He also has a name of Zaixin (changed to Changuang later), with a nickname Jiangshangwaishi (changed to Yugangjushi). At the age of 30, he was admitted to the jinshi examination, and at the age of 33, he was appointed as the inspector of Jiangxi. The following year, he was dismissed from office and returned to his hometown because of offending Li Jiayou, a

powerful official. From the sixth year of Emperor Kangxi, Da Chongguang lived in seclusion in Maoshan Mountain in Jurong, Jiangsu Province. He devoted himself to Taoist cultivation, studying the annals history, and paid attention on poetry and ancient Chinese poems. He wrote two famous books, "Calligraphy Raft" and "Painting Tool". As both a painter and a theoretician of calligraphy and painting, he has a profound knowledge of calligraphy, painting and cultural heritage with deep research over years, "Calligraphy Raft" is his essence of calligraphic theory.

Within "Calligraphy Raft", the basic issues of calligraphy, namely bifa (using the brush method), tishi (form and structure) and bubai (space) are described in great details. "The space of calligraphy is presented, like a crescent moon emerging from the sky, and like a star clothed in the galaxy." Chinese calligraphy is an art that integrates music and architecture. Zhang Huaiguan in the Tang Dynasty described the art of calligraphy as "silent sound" and "invisible appearance" in "Calligraphy Discussion". A calligraphy work with rhythm, vivid ink, and harmonious unity of dots and lines, is like a moving piece of music, which makes people never get tired of reading and have endless aftertastes. The art of calligraphy fully expresses a kind of vigor and attitude of life in brush and ink. The relationship between dots and lines, characters are with their own unique features, showing strong vitality and lively rhythm.

This kind of rhythm of life has been fully demonstrated in Da Chongguang's "Calligraphy Raft", and the following paragraphs discuss the perspectives of "Calligraphy Raft" on dianhua (dots and lines), jieti (structure) and zhangfa (space).

Dianhua (dots and lines) is the smallest unit of calligraphy, and the first five articles in "Calligraphy Raft" are all about the basic issues of dot and lines, "Horizontal and vertical paintings determine the spatial structure of Chinese characters, skimming and turning determine the generation of spirits, and the connection of lines determines overall blood of characters". This is the first sentence of the opening sentence, and it is precise to describe the relationship between dianhua (dots and lines), jieti (structure) and zhangfa (space). Dianhua creates jieti, and jieti produces zhangfa.

"Horizontal painting should has a raised pen, vertical painting should have a stooping pen, slanted pen should be heavy, pressed pen should be light, folded pen should be with a pause, wrapped pen should be in a round shape...." With short description, the core elements of calligraphy, such as retraction, concealment, pressing, astringency, elasticity and pitch in a single line of calligraphy, as well as the infinite changes and liveliness contained in a painting are all vividly expressed.

"The space expression of lines in calligraphy is like a golden knife crossing, or a jade rule." This sentence reveals another important essence of dianhua, texture, with the combination of jieti and bubai. In The Calligraphy Raft, the issue of black-white distribution is mentioned many times, such as "the cleverness lies in the bubai", "the black is round and the white is square, the frame is wide and silk is tight", "The measurement of ink is divided into fen, and the emptiness of space is bu." Da Chongguang's paid great attention to bubai. The issue of "white" and "black" in calligraphy is also the relationship between "yin" and "yang" from Taoist philosophy. The eleventh chapter of Lao Tzu's "Tao Te Ching" mentions: "Thirty spokes gather together into a hub, and only the space in the hub can produce the function of a wheel. When kneading clay to make a vessel, only the empty part produce its actual utility. When a window is cut to build a house, only the hollowness can produce the function of the house. Therefore, "existence" is certainly beneficial, but "empty" also plays its role." On the surface, "existence" and "empty" are opposites, with existence represents fullness and a real life, while empty means nothing. However, it is precisely by having the concept of "empty", which makes the concept of "existence" with meaning and ability, thus creating liveliness in a quiet space

In fact, before Deng Shiru put forward the theory of "counting white as black", Da Chongguang had already paid attention to the issue of "space". He said: "the specific space distribution of lines requires the calligrapher to write while the scattered space requires the calligrapher's keen observation." He divides bubai into two forms: Kuangkuo space and Scattered space. Kuangkuo space refers to a relatively neat and even space. Keeping a dignified manner when writing, and arranging the space between lines and lines, characters and characters through natural writing by using fingers,

wrists and arms, Scattered space refers to irregular space, which naturally reveals an interest and a sense of space from the calligrapher. Kuangkuo space and Scattered space are essentially the same, like thickness, length, height, odd sides, shades, dryness, density, virtual and solid, opening and closing in calligraphy. All these contrasting factors are mutually dependent. Just like the saying in "Tao Te Ching", "existence and empty arise from each other, difficult and easy complement each other, lengths and rely on each other, high and low lean against each other, different sound harmonize with each other, and front and rear follow each other." The opposite sides are mutually exclusive and interdependence, which has deeply inner connection in essence of them.

"The transparency of light is distributed" and "round and lustrous" all refer to "light", which is closely related to "light" and jieti (structure), bubai (space). This is closely related with "counting white as black" in last paragraph. Da Chongguang mentioned in "Painting Tool": "The shadows in the forest and other figurative objects can be painted, but what about the empty realm such as the clear light outside the mountains? Empty realm is difficult to draw. If the real scene is clear, then empty realm could be revealed. It is also difficult to draw the spirit. However, with contrasting the real scene, the spirit could be produced. The position of the virtual and real is opposite. The virtual and the real produce each other. For the place without painting, the real scene and spirit could also be generated". Da Chongguang's point of "light" is with feature of transparent and penetrating. Similar with Zong Bing's view of "keeping a clear state to learn Taoism", Da Chongguang was with the idea to maintain a vision of emptiness and tranquility when looking at all things in the world and calligraphy. In the art field of calligraphy, the final target for calligrapher is to achieve spiritual transcendence and freedom, just like Sun Guoting mentioned "graceful and spiritual" in his "Calligraphy Hierarchy" which is the common pursuit of the nature in calligraphy and the nature of life.

When mentioning "Calligraphy Raft", it is inevitably to mention another book by Da Chongguang, "Painting Tool", which is also his understanding of the most essential spirit of Chinese painting. It is the core of spiritual essence of Chinese painting. He emphasized that painters must take the combination of knowledge growth and moral cultivation as the foundation, using improvement of the realm of life as the core. His idea inherits Ni Yunlin's tradition of emphasizing realm, and open up ideas of Sheng Da Shi and Tang Yifen, representing the first-class calligraphy and painting artists in the Ming and Qing Dynasties regarding with the understanding and summary of the traditional theory. To certain extent, it predicts the development direction of painting theory in the Qing Dynasty. "Painting Tool" is the first time to propose the concept of commenting painting based on realm, which reflects Da Chongguang's unique understanding and expression of the spirit of Chinese painting.

3. Da Chongguang's value to Chinese painting and calligraphy

For his thoughts on Chinese painting and calligraphy, Da Chongguang left his works including "Painting Tool" (only 4,600 words) and "Calligraphy Raft" (only 970 words). Although the text is short, its theory is with a high stand to look down on others, which is extremely inclusive. Its profound philosophies and thoughts are with far-reaching influence on future generations. Zheng Wuchang once gave him a very high evaluation: "Da Zhongguang occasionally paints landscape paintings with elegant and full of expression, which are very sophisticated paintings. The two books he wrote, "Calligraphy Raft" and "Painting Tool", have a huge inspiration for future generations and have a great influence on Chinese calligraphy." For the specific discussion of these two works, we no longer need to add further ones. Perhaps Da Chongguang's own summary about his two books is more real than anyone's comments: "The above discussion on calligraphy is short and concise, but the purpose and intention are clear. Only scholars with profound skills can truly appreciate it." "There are too many painting methods to list them all, but to feel the natural realm and the rhythm of brush could be achieved through this book."

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