A Study of Ancient Chinese Inscriptions and Writings—Take Han Yu’s Tablet Inscriptions as an Example

Wei Li

College of Information Engineering, Fuyang Normal University, Fuyang, 236041, Anhui, China.

Abstract

In ancient times, inscriptions were written about the life and deeds of the deceased, but they were extremely concise and rich in meaning. This article discusses the characteristics of stele texts in terms of their origins, development, and stylistic features. Taking Han Yu's text as an example, it analyses the text in terms of its layout, detailed characterization, frankness and sincerity, its novel language, and its boldness and truthfulness. It concludes that the formation and evolution of the text have been accompanied by the development, maturity, and decline of the Jiaozhi text, as well as by the change of the Jiaozhi style to a loose style, and by the characteristics of the text itself. It also explains the significance and value of the text. In the long process of succession and change, it has developed some of the fixed elements and patterns of the genre itself, while also combining the artistic features of jiaowen, biographical literature, and prose.

Keywords

Stele writing, Han Yu, Epitaph
These texts were written and engraved more casually, on a variety of carriers of different shapes and textures of brick, tile, wood, and stone, reflecting the more primitive state of the tomb. They include inscriptions, wooden tablets, wooden tomb sheets, Qin dynasty tile inscriptions, Western Han tombstones, stone tombstones, portrait stone inscriptions, tomb gates, and Eastern Han tombstone inscriptions (Hu Bo, 2009). Of these, the inscriptions are probably the oldest burial objects dedicated to the identity of the deceased, and the wooden stele, wooden tombstones, stone tombstones, Qin dynasty tile markers, Eastern Han tombstone inscriptions, and pictorial stone inscriptions are the six most crucial and can be said to be the direct source of the monuments.

3. The Development of Stele Texts

At that time, the criteria for historical documentation of monumental texts were not yet strictly defined, and historians were more lenient in their judgment. Later, Kong Rong, Sun Chor, and Yu Xin, all prominent writers of their time, contributed to the development of the monumental style. Yu Xin's Epitaph on the Epitaph of Wu Ming Che, the Great General of Zhou, in fresh and fluent language, is a literary masterpiece of monumental writing from before the Tang dynasty (Du Liping, 2005). The Tang and Song dynasties placed unprecedented importance on the creation of inscriptions, and the ostentatious decoration of the Six Dynasties of the Wei and Jin dynasties led to an unprecedented strengthening of the status of the monument and the Zhi, but with this came dissatisfaction and revulsion at the vague and superficial aesthetic orientation of decoration, creating an aesthetic expectation of simplicity and simplicity (Liu Xuanbei, 2009). The development of the ancient literary movement allowed for more narrative connotations in the transformed inscriptions and a better presentation of the life experiences of the characters. Moreover, in the Tang and Song dynasties, the practice of character assessment in the Wei and Jin dynasties began to merge with traditional ideals of personality. People attached greater importance to their posthumous reputations and thus placed a high value on the monumental monuments that were used to conclude the death. Almost all of the great writers of the time excelled in this genre, and generations of great scholars emerged.

4. Stylistic Features of Stele Texts (with Han Yu as an example)

Han Yu's works occupy a very important place in literary history and have long been known as the 'Han Stele and Du Lue'. According to Zhu Xi, a total of seventy-five of these texts have been preserved (Zhao Xiaoyang, 2017).

4.1 The layout and elaborate setting

The layout of Han Yu's monuments is characterized by 'odd' features, mainly in the form of structure. He focuses on the individual differences in the layout of the tomb owner's identity, which breaks with the traditional pattern of describing the owner's lineage and career first, followed by the inscription. For example, the inscription on the tomb of Kong Jun, a senior official of the Tang dynasty, is based on the word 'virtuous', and begins with the phrase 'Kong suppressing virtuousness': 'Zhaoyi Jidu Lu had a virtuous advisor named Kong Jun', before citing specific facts to praise his virtuous, righteous and courageous behavior and his quality of not being close to a profit. The final paragraph of the stele is a tasty and strange way of passing over his lineage (Zhou Yue, 2009). This shows that the layout of Han Yu's stele is 'still strange', varying from person to person and original, not following the usual pattern and not following the old style, thus reproducing and highlighting the individuality of the stele's master.

4.2 Meticulous characterization and description

The focus of the text is on characterization, which is most prominent in Han Yu's monuments and is most successfully portrayed. The characters are portrayed through specific examples.

(1) The description of the master's fraudulent request for a marriage in The Epitaph of Wang Jun, a judge of the Dali, is legendary, and the characters other than the master are also vividly portrayed and have been praised repeatedly, so I will not record them here. In addition to the main narrative, some brief incidents show the characters' character or characteristics.

(2) "The tombstone of the former minister of the Tang Dynasty, Mr. Quan," says: "He stayed in the eastern capital as a minister of the Ministry of Justice, and when the eastern commanders were too sick to ask for help, Mr. Quan often made statements without disclosing them." (Pan Wuzheng, 2021).

(3) The "Qingbian County King Yang Yanqi monument", narrates that Lord Zhi welcomed his mother for Tian Gong: "At the beginning, the servant Tian Gong whose mother was separated in Jizhou, the public alone asked to
go to welcome him, operating the city of thieves, in and out of the dead, and finally to his mother." In just a few dozen words, one can feel the bravery of this man.

5. Love and hate are clear, frank, and sincere

The innovation in the content of Han Yu's stele texts is also evident in the emotions of the creative subjects. Because of the seriousness of the genre, and the fact that the content is mostly about praising merit and virtue, the author intentionally limits the infiltration of emotion into the subject. Han Yu's stele texts have, to a certain extent, overcome the traditional dilemma of expressing emotion in stele texts by no longer merely praising merit and virtue, but by expressing a strong sense of love, hate and praise.

The inscription on the tomb of Xue Jun of Hedong, the assistant teacher of the National Son of China, describes the transformation of Xue Gongda from "a man who was concerned with being strange and different from the commonplace" to "a man who gave up being strange and was with others" (Yu Jinfang, 2008). The author's regret and disdain for the change in Xue Jun's behavior are succinctly revealed.

The inscription in the first person recalls the three generations of the Ma family, and the inscription expresses a sense of sorrow: "I have not yet grown old, and I have not cried for forty years since the beginning of my life, but I have cried for three generations of my ancestors and grandchildren. What is the point of living in this world when one wants to remain immortal for a long time?" The impermanence of life brings about the sorrow of the whole human race. Liu Haifeng says: "This text is less erratic and resembles a preface to a mournful eulogy." Han Yu's text does not use the word 'inscription' as a prompt to move on to an inscription of praise, but moves directly into a discussion, expressing his sorrow for the impermanence of life and the eternal death of the deceased. It is with this vivid narrative and rich emotion that Han Yu revolutionized the traditional paradigm of stele writing.

6. Novel and distinctive language

Han Yu said: "If the way of the sage is not to use the text, then it is to be used by those who can. Those who can are not others, but those who can establish themselves and do not follow the rules. The text comes from everyone who does not write, but those who survive today must be able to do so." Han Yu, for example, praises a man of strange language in his inscriptions, and the Nanyang Fan Shaoshu Epitaph says that Fan's writing "must come from himself, not copying a single word from his predecessors, and how difficult it is". The poem also reads: "But in ancient times, the words must come out of one's mouth. It is a long time ago that I did not feel that I belonged to the family. The text follows the wording of the text, and each knows his or her job. There is a desire to seek this out." This is a very good example of the master's ability to write in a way that is consistent with his words. Such an assessment also shows Han Yu's tendency to admire the strange.

7. Outspoken and truthful

The creation of a monument is not a personal act of the writer; it is a socially appropriate style of writing that recounts the deceased's deeds and honors his or her merits, and the writer naturally has to consider the feelings and needs of the family when writing the monument (Zhou Min, 2000). At the same time, we should also see that Han Yu is still able to base most of his tomb records on facts, without any hidden or false beauty. The tombstone of Fang Jun with Yuan Shaojun has only four words of praise for Fang: "careful and fearful"; the inscription on the tombstone of Minister Lu of Xiangyang is entirely devoted to the words of Lu Xingji, but Han Yu only says the end that he was filial.

In his inscriptions, Han also seizes the opportunity to expose and condemn mercilessly those officials who were corrupt and domineering. For example, the Epitaph of Duke Xue exposes Liu Guan's unscrupulous persecution of his subordinates, while the Epitaph of Duke Kong, the left minister of the Shang Shu, writes of a certain Yin of Henan who, because he had a grudge against a man, falsely accused him of being a thief and put him in jail, where he was eventually killed. Han Yu does not positively expose such social evils, but rather unobtrusively writes about them, seemingly without praise or criticism, while revealing his tendencies and criticisms in the contrast.

8. Meaning and value

The greatest achievement of the Tang dynasty is the change in style from pride to dispersion and the shift in emphasis from celebrating merit to writing about people. The quality of the Jiao genre reached its peak in Gengxin, and the subsequent works were all of a lower order, with their heyday declining and their content becoming
increasingly hollow and deviating from the 'actual record'. By the early Tang, the clichéd beauty and rigidity of form had pushed the creation of such monuments to a dead end, and it became inevitable that the genre would develop from pride to dispersion. With the intentional and unintentional impetus of many creators, especially a few great writers at various points in time, the stele-zhi text gradually evolved from its early Tang origins, becoming less and less arrogant, taking advantage of the trend of the ancient literary movement and the flourishing of biographical literature to complete the most crucial step in its literalization in the Middle Tang - combining it with the most suitable prose for writing narratives, and drawing on the artistic features of biographical literature, It became a truly 'literary and refined' literary work.

9. Conclusion

The formation and evolution of tablet inscriptions are not only accompanied by the development of Jiaowen, maturity, and decline, Jiao body changes to the general environment, but also has its characteristics. In the long process of inheritance and evolution, it not only formed some fixed elements and patterns of the style itself but also combined the artistic characteristics of Jiaowen, biographical literature, and prose.

References


