

# New Change and Causes in Lesser Seal Script in the Later Years of Wu Changshuo

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**Abstract:** This paper compares Wu Changshuo's early and mid-period calligraphic works by analyzing his subtle way of using brushstrokes, taking his lesser seal script work *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* made at the age of sixty-six as an example. By analyzing Wu Changshuo's late year lesser seal script, this paper describes features and changes in different periods. It also focuses on the late year lesser seal script works by sorting and summarizing, and analyzes new changes of work characteristics in his later years. The case study of Wu Changshuo's *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* provides a new perspective and undoubtedly has an important theoretical guidance and practical enlightenment for the development of contemporary lesser seal script styles.

**Keywords:** Wu Changshuo, *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze*, Lesser seal script style, Causes

## 1. Introduction

It is one of the representative works of Wu Changshuo's lesser seal script in his later years. It fully reflects Wu Changshuo's mature style in his later years, and the changes of his style in this period can be found by comparing his early and middle years work of *Shiguwen*.

## 2. Brushwork characteristics of Wu Changshuo's early and middle-aged lesser seal script

Born in 1844, Wu Changshuo lived a life without food and clothing during his youth due to the war. When he was 23 years old, he studied calligraphy and poetry under Shi Xuchen. As Wu Changshuo learned seal carving with his father in his early years, he had a unique affection for lesser seal script and slowly realized the charm of the *Shiguwen* during his study.

There is no record of the exact year when Wu Changshuo began to study the *Shiguwen*. However, in 1880, he wrote a couplet in lesser seal script for Hai Ru, which already contained the brushwork of the *Shiguwen*, and in 1882, he inscribed a topical copy of the *Shiguwen*. As he has learnt *Shiguwen* before, *Sherenweixu* is the earliest dated work in the style of *Shiguwen* that we can see, with rounded and neat strokes. Although it has the form of the *Shiguwen*, it is still lacking in brushwork. From the above, Wu Changshuo was already learnt *Shiguwen* before he was forty years old.

In 1889, Wu Changshuo mentioned in his gift to Zi E in *My car* and other four works, "Zi E brother wrote a copy of Tianyi Pavilion *Shiguwen*, which is enough to show that at this time Ruan Yuan Tianyi Pavilion copy of the book has been valued. Topography is good enough to influence the writer's perception of the original post, so Wu Changshuo in his life are searching for *Shiguwen* fine topography, especially the Song dynasty topography. After getting Ruan Yuan Tianyi pavilion copy, he and carefully copy, and had greatly benefit from it.

In his early years, Wu Changshuo wrote a lot of *Shiguwen*, but the brushwork was neat and tidy. The characters were restrained, and the transitions were hard. Although the form remained the original *Shiguwen*, it lacked the majesty. Wu Changshuo himself was dissatisfied with the works of this period, having written in the inscription, "I think I have not been able to get a vivid idea of the ancients", "I have not been able to write a good stroke", "I have not been able to get a standing character", "I think my wrist is too weak" and so on. This all shows that Wu Changshuo constantly found his own problems and was brave to improve in the process of studying the *Shiguwen*. This is also a manifestation of Wu Changshuo's efforts to pursue the height of his art.

Before 1900, Wu Changshuo often studied Chinese bronze inscriptions, ancient monuments and posters, and Chinese brick and tile script for his exploration of calligraphy. After repeated comparisons, he took the *Shiguwen* as the main direction of calligraphy, and kept on studying it and copying it by heart and hand, and then, understood its artistic characteristics. It is a testament to the saying, "After dozens of years of studying the *Shiguwen*, new day has a new realm." Mr. Sha Menghai commented, "This sentence is very interesting, I see his forty or fifty years-aged *Shiguwen*, and he followed the rules, and then the work deepened. Practice resulted in skills, and fingers and wrists had power. As Huai Su said in *Fengfeitie*, 'Recently, I have become slightly less confused about calligraphy, and now I am often puzzled by this bizarre style of writing, which probably came from outside the sky.' Only when knowing this truth, can we appreciate his later years of the sublime *Shiguwen* of the sublime."<sup>[1]</sup>

*Shiguwen* has rounded strokes, full and heavy lines, square and flat knotted characters, and dignified and elegant physique. The characters are independent, square and sparse, and properly distributed. However, Wu Changshuo was influenced by the lesser seal script of the Qin Dynasty in his early days, so his brushwork on the *Shiguwen* is single and rigid, with thin and rigid dots and drawings, and uniform and unvarying lines. In the same period, he was also influenced by Yang Yisun's lesser seal script, so he had a taste of Yang Yisun's lesser seal script. As a whole, Wu Changshuo's early replica works of *Shiguwen* inherited the square and flat character of *Shiguwen*. The Southern Dynasty calligrapher Wang Zengqian mentioned in his *Biyizan* that a wonderful calligraphy is that the divine beauty is the top. The shape and quality are second, and those who have both can be compared to the ancients<sup>[2]</sup>. In contrast, Wu Changshuo's early works neglected the importance of divine beauty. However, in Wu Changshuo's work on the *Shiguwen* at the age of 59, it is evident that the use of the brush is strong and majestic with a medium sharp edge; the ending of the characters breaks the square and flat form of the *Shiguwen*, incorporating the top tight and bottom loose, left low and right high; and the chapter style gives a sense of sparseness and calmness.

Wu Changshuo's works in the early and middle ages underwent a transformation from rudimentary to skilled, from dull to flexible, gradually incorporating his personal understanding of art in the use of brushwork, character shapes, and whole composition, while the calligraphic characteristics of the *Shiguwen* gradually emerged under Wu Changshuo's brush. Although Wu Changshuo did not have outstanding calligraphic achievements at this time, he laid the foundation for his study of the *Shiguwen* script for the rest of his life.

### 3. Characteristics of Wu Changshuo's lesser seal script in his later years

From 1882 to 1911, Wu Changshuo often traveled to Suzhou, Shanghai and Hangzhou, where he made friends with many senior artists in the art world, thus gradually broadening his horizons and steadily improving his artistic experience and knowledge. During this period, Wu Changshuo was good at learning from the experience of his predecessors and constantly thinking about it, so after the age of 60, he developed a new understanding of the *Shiguwen*, gradually becoming more and more calm and simple in his brushwork, striving for refinement in the strokes, changing to maturity in the knotted characters. Although Wu Changshuo did not complete the transformation of his personal style, the appearance of his style has been revealed, and this process reflects Wu Changshuo's continuous pursuit and exploration of art.

In 1911 Wu Changshuo came to Shanghai, at this time the calligraphy of *Shiguwen* was greatly improved than before and gradually matured, and the writing of *Plain of Abyss* at the age of seventy was the representative work at the time of maturity. At this time Wu Changshuo's late writing of *Shiguwen* attracted the attention of the calligraphy world. His poetry, calligraphy, painting and printing also gained the recognition of the society. At this time, Wang Yiting, an industrialist in Shanghai, paid attention to Wu Changshuo's calligraphy, painting and printing, and also helped Wu Changshuo's works gradually go to the market. Because of Wang Yiting's close relationship with the Japanese and his promotion of Wu Changshuo, Wu Changshuo's calligraphy and paintings were well received by the Japanese, and his calligraphy, paintings and seal engravings were all snapped up by the Japanese in his later years. As his fame grew for writing *Shiguwen*, he received the attention of Shen Zeng Zhi, Zheng Xiao Xu, Pan Zuyin and others. With Wang Yiting's great help, Wu Changshuo's fame grew in Shanghai, and orders for calligraphy and paintings came pouring in. So he concentrated his efforts on his work on the *Shiguwen*. Despite this, the Chinese bronze inscriptions of the *Sangshipan*, which he was working on at the age of 79, was equally wonderful. In 1913, Wu Changshuo was elected president of the Xiling Printing, and Wu Changshuo asked Mr. Shiyou to complete the content of the article on his behalf, and later completed the successful masterpiece *The Xiling Printing* by carrying the weight.

When Wu Changshuo was 71 years old, he wrote a couplet entitled *The Fish and My Horse*, “In recent times, when I wrote lesser seal script, it is difficult to find another way outside the three schools. Mo Shaoting uses a rigid brushwork, Wu Jinlao uses a soft brushwork, and Yang Haozuo uses a thirsty brushwork. I have been engaged in this field for decades, but I am still not able to achieve my originality. Now that I am old, I have to seek for a straight front, and I have the problem that my pen does not follow my heart.” From his statements, he expressed ambition to be original and to set up a separate way from the greats such as Mo Youzhi, Wu Jenzhi and Yang Yisun.

In his later years, Wu Changshuo also continued to study, learning the Chinese bronze inscription from a large number of Qin and Han carved stones and Shang and Zhou bronze inscriptions. At the same time, he learned Huang Tingjian's knotting method of low left and high right, tightening the middle palace and spreading around, while using the brushwork of *Shiguwen* in his own calligraphy, painting and printing. After the age of 78, he finally formed his own artistic style with his ancient and vigorous, pale and bold brushwork. Bai Longshanren once saw a couplet written by Wu Changshuo, “On the plateau, the brown horses are running happily in the rain. The afterglow of the sunset envelops the old forest beds, where a flock of birds are chirping and flying to roost.” And Bai inscribed a poem to praise the strength of Wu's wrist at the age of 83. He was able to infuse the strong essence of the Northern Monument with the rounded and condensed brushwork of the *Shiguwen*.

#### 4. Factors of the new change in the use of the lesser seal script in Wu Changshuo's later years

The formation of Wu Changshuo's lesser seal script was influenced by the factors of the times. In the early Qing Dynasty, the emperor loved the calligraphy of Dong Qichang and Zhao Mengfu, so all the ministers followed their example. “What the top likes is what the bottom likes.” this trend continued until the Jiaqing period, when the entire calligraphy was pervaded by the air of vulgarity and slenderness. Since Ruan Yuan, Bao Shichen, Kang Youwei, and other calligraphers paid attention to steleology, it quickly caused the rise of steleological culture. As Kang Youwei's *Guang Yi Zhou Shuang Ji* said, “The rise of steleology, multiplied by the down of postology, also because of the great flourishing of Chinese bronze inscriptions.” Under the guidance of the idea of steleology, Deng Shiru, Zhao Zhiqian, He Shaoji and others began the practice of steleological calligraphy. The socio-political, economic and social aspects of the time were influenced by Western capitalism and affected the art of calligraphy, and the concept of art began to be liberated like never before. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, Wu Changshuo began to put into practice the monumental calligraphy movement, as many of the conditions for the practice of monumental calligraphy were available due to the continuous efforts of his predecessors. The socio-economic development also influenced the development of the painting and calligraphy market, as we can see from Wu Changshuo's Chronology, he started to order calligraphy rungs when he was 60 years old, which proves that he started to move towards the market gradually. After that, the rungs were readjusted at the age of 70, 73 and 77, and each time the rungs were adjusted, the market demand for Wu Changshuo's works increased continuously. The book *Selected Jinshui Paintings and Calligraphy by Wu Changshuo in Japan* records in the Afterword, “A considerable number of Wu Changshuo's works were circulated to Japan during his lifetime. It is rumored that orders from Japan through Takashima-ou and Wang Yiting numbered tens of thousands of pieces.”<sup>[3]</sup>In this case, Wu Changshuo devoted a lot of time and energy to the writing of the *Shiguwen*. The market atmosphere was one of the factors that contributed to the new change in Wu Changshuo's brushwork in his later years, but it also made Wu Changshuo's *Shiguwen*.

Wu Changshuo once said, “I was good at seal carving when I was young, and from my youth to my old age, I never left with my seals.”<sup>[4]</sup>This shows Wu Changshuo's love for art, and that he never left lesser seal script. Wu Changshuo was a lifelong calligrapher and left behind a staggering number of calligraphic works that are unmatched by other calligraphers. “It is easy to pick up small skills, but difficult to create them. If you want to stand on your own, you have to work hard for at least half a lifetime, but if you pick up at most half a year, you cannot touch the true.” This is Wu Changshuo's understanding of art, when he found the *Shiguwen*, he concentrated on the *Shiguwen*, collected a number of original Song and Ming topography, placed next to the pillow, and repeatedly copied to learn. Although he concentrated on the *Shiguwen*, he also absorbed the Chinese bronze inscription of the *Langya Carving*, *Taishan Carving*, *Yishan Carving* and *Huiji Carving* and other carvings, which also complemented the creation of the “Shiguwen”. The study of three generations of bronze inscriptions, such as *San Shipan*, *Mao Gongding* and *Qiang Pan*. He used brushwork of clerical script, regular script, running script, and lesser seal script are skillfully integrated into the creation of *Shiguwen*. The famous painter Feng Jianwu once said, “Wu Changshuo's *Shiguwen*, more interjection, horizontal painting mostly made with upward slanting lift, resulted in the knotted characters in the loose way. This is the

result of his long time immersed in Li Beihai, Su Dongpo, and Huang Luzhi. His cursive pushed this feature to the extreme.” Although he learns from the ancients, he does not only copy from the ancient. Wu Changshuo's thought was “inherit the tradition and create the future”, and his innovation was based on the grasp of the tradition.

## **5. Analysis of the artistic style of the representative work *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* in his later years**

The book *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* is an ink copy, which Wu Changshuo was commissioned to write in 1910, and it is a masterpiece in his later years. The post has 768 words. The full text is mainly about the background of the restoration of Zhenze Xu Pond, its significance and donations. In calligraphy, the structure becomes more and more unrestrained and rosy, and the brushwork is simple and heavy. This work emphasizes writing, and in terms of body, it emphasizes taking the momentum vertically, with the left low and right high, and expressing dignity in the midst of staggering. The style is ancient, majestic and bold, and the whole structure is sparse, dense and rhythmic. It is different from the plagiarism and strength of the lesser seal script in the prime of life, and has reached a state of old age and a return to the basics. *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* embodies the characteristics of Wu Changshuo's lesser seal script style in his later years. The combination of square and round strokes is not only neat and rigorous, but also shows a calm and simple rhythm, which subtly integrates the free personal emotions into the lesser seal script, forming a unique beauty of Chinese brozen inscription. Therefore, the artistic style is embodied in four aspects, namely, the beauty of simplicity, the beauty of oddness and correctness, the beauty of sparseness and density, and the beauty of ancient methods.

### **5.1 *The beauty of simplicity and thickness***

Wu Changshuo's brushwork is rounded and full, and the closing strokes are light and slow, which is a fusion of the rules of the big seal script and the small seal script. Compared with his work on the *Shiguwen*, *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* has more dynamic but dignified strokes, and is more simple and heavy. The strokes show a kind of strength at the turn of the brush, soft but not weak, smooth and quiet, and the strength of the brush shows the pale in the characters, writing a sense of old and vigorous. The treatment of the lines varies in degrees, and the changes in ink color penetrate into each character when writing, and the brushwork is free and unrestrained. At the same time, he has good control over the weight of the strokes and the speed of the strokes.

In his later years, Wu Changshuo's lesser seal script reached a state where he was able to use his brush with perfection. The difficulty lies in the dash of the brush, yet the quietness of the brush, and *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* is a classic work of calligraphy, showing a high degree of difficulty in writing, without the disadvantages of pandering and without a sense of madness.

### **5.2 *The beauty of uniqueness and correctness***

Wu Changshuo's lesser seal script has learned the characteristics of Qin Dynasty lesser seal script in terms of character structure, stretching the characters vertically, and absorbing the characteristics of Deng Shiru and Wu Jianshi's style in lesser seal script, as well as playing with the aura of Chinese bronze inscription that he learned in carving. The characters are tightly knotted, odd and positive, and the body is low on the left and high on the right, with dignity. The characters are sparse and well-defined, with proper avoidance. There are echoes in the dense and sparse places, the shape is like a dragon leaping, and the internal structure is like a horse, richly demonstrating the beauty of the lines. The style is ancient and open-minded, reaching the realm where people are old and return to the basics. It is a beautiful peak in the world of calligraphy.

Although Wu Changshuo writes lesser seal script with few strokes, it does not appear to be scattered and scattered. Although the strokes are lush and the characters are dense, it looks sparse and dense without the disadvantage of swelling. “Changshuo used the Deng method to write *Shiguwen*, changing the horizontal to vertical and forming a school of its own.” This is also Wu Changshuo's mastery of learning and changing, and his subtlety in the handling of character structure.

### 5.3 The beauty of density

*The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* has the beauty of dense layout, and is regulated by the boundary grid. Wu Changshuo is a calligrapher who studied Confucianism, so he followed the principle of “Yin and Yang” in his creation, which also showed that Wu Changshuo is pursuing the realm of nature and ethereality, seeking for the strange in the plain, sparse and dense distribution of the layout, dealing with the word properly. The concept of “Ji Bai Dang Hei” reflects the beauty of sparse and dense layout.

Although the form limits the overall coherence, Wu Changshuo is using the flexible method of each word to remedy the feeling of overall bondage. The use of ink in *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* is dominated by thick ink, and the concept of “bone” in the line is appropriately grasped through the variation of the brush, “too slow without sinew, too sharp without bone.”<sup>[5]</sup> In his later years, Wu Changshuo's seal script had reached the point where he was so skilled that he was able to make it work, which is exactly what Su Shi said, “The initial calligraphy should not be deliberately good, and should be relaxed and casual, so that it can naturally reach a good state.”

### 6. Conclusion

Wu Changshuo's lesser seal script, *The Record of Repairing Xu Tang in Zhenze* is highly archaic and meteorological. This is due to the fact that Wu Changshuo copied the *Shiguwen* for decades and achieved a unique position in the lesser seal script from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, due to his unique artistic thinking on the one hand and his comprehensive artistic thinking on the other. The formation of Wu Changshuo's lesser seal script style in his later years was the result of his years of searching for a way to blend in many disciplines of art. The innovative ideas revealed are of great significance to us as practitioners of the art today, and provide a new perspective for a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Wu Changshuo's lesser seal script style and creative concepts.

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