

Handwriting for Mind Expression and Social Calligraphy

Yifan Li

School of Fine Arts, Shangqiu Normal University, Shangqiu, Henan, 476000, China

Abstract: *Handwriting for mind expression is the core proposition in the construction of calligraphy history and even the definition and evaluation of calligraphers' style. The value recognition from pure artistic style is based on the general expectation of ancient literati under the ideal mentality of art. However, in the creation and collection of Chinese calligraphy, social calligraphy is a very common phenomenon. Especially in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the number of calligraphy works written for entertainment was far more than that created for self-entertainment. Especially those from the Ming and Qing dynasties, the number of calligraphy works written for social engagement is far more than those created for self-enjoyment. So could this social calligraphy be regarded as the mind expression of calligraphers? How do we look at the relationship between handwriting for mind expression and this social calligraphy? This paper first explains the origin and change process of the theory of handwriting for mind expression, and probes into its theoretical connotation. Then, according to the calligrapher's writing state, writing object, writing purpose, and other factors, the paper classifies social calligraphy and takes Shan Fu and Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics as examples to discuss whether each type of entertainment works can be regarded as the calligrapher's mind expression.*

Keywords: *Handwriting for mind expression; Social calligraphy; Shan Fu*

1. The Origin and Change of Handwriting for Mind Expression

Xiong Yang, who is an author of Ci and Fu and a philologist of the Han Dynasty, discussed the relationship between “Shu” and “Yan” in *Fa Yan: Wen Shen*, and first put forward the theory of mind expression:

It is too difficult for "Shu" to express their inner thoughts and convey their meaning. Only saints can understand the true meaning of "Yan", and grasp the essence of writing. Just like the sun shines in the day, the river washes away dirt, vast and unstoppable. There is nothing better than talking face to face, saying what is in your heart, and making it clear to others. There is nothing like writing to record the events of the world, to record the long history, to show the deeds of the ancient world, and to convey information thousands of miles away. So words are the expression of the heart; Writing is a picture of the mind. Through the sound and the picture, the gentleman and the villain are revealed! Sound and picture are the gentleman and the villain's emotional expression of the way. [1]

Of course, the “Shu” mentioned by Xiong Yang is relative to the “Yan”. Its “Shu” refers to the recording form of “Yan” - writing works, explaining the function of language and writing to express the mind, rather than the artistic form of writing - calligraphy. However, since this expression of Xiong Yang conforms to the true emotional expression phenomenon in calligraphy aesthetics to a certain extent, later calligraphers generally regard it as the theoretical source of discussing the relationship between calligraphy and the calligraphers' emotion and spiritual character, thus opening up the prayer and hope of later generations emphasizing individual performance and personality cultivation.

Changwen Zhu in the Northern Song Dynasty, was the first to apply Xiong Yang's idea of “handwriting is the expression of mind” directly to the evaluation of calligraphy. He thought Zhenqing Yan's calligraphy was the best and listed it as a masterpiece. Changwen Zhu said that Yan was a loyal minister. Though did not work in the court, he could control the situation. In the middle of the Tang Dynasty, there were many dead, so they were not prosperous. It's a pity! When he wrote with his pen, his works were resolute, rigorous, and complete, just like a loyal minister and a righteous man, standing upright in the court and steadfastly in the face of a major moral test. Xiong Yang believes that calligraphy is a picture of the mind, and this is true for Duke Lu. He especially liked to inscribe words on stone tablets, large ones almost a foot square; and small ones square inches in size, to make these

works lasting.[2] Changwen Zhu thought that the spirit embodied in "Yan Shu" is consistent with his personality, so "Shu" embodies his loyal personality.

In fact, before Changwen Zhu, there had been a theory discussing the relationship between calligraphy and emotional expression, such as Yi Zhao's *Non-cursive Script* of the Eastern Han Dynasty, each person's physical conditions are different, qi and blood are different, and muscles and bones are also different. The mind is divided into coarse and fine, and the hand is also dexterous and clumsy. The quality of calligraphy depends on the inner thoughts and the skills of the hands. Can it be reluctantly done? [2] However, it is only mentioned, not expanded to study. By the time of the Guoting Sun of the Tang Dynasty, the theoretical expression of handwriting for mind expression began to be more accurate. In Sun Guoting's *Book Score*, the phrase "to achieve his temperament, shape his sorrow and happiness"[3] directly states that the purpose of calligraphy is to express the temperament of a calligrapher. "What I want is not easy to express in words, and the words are not easy to form in the paper"[4], which is directly derived from Xiong Yang's discussion on the relationship between "heart", "Yan" and "Shu". After Changwen Zhu extended the view of handwriting for mind expression in the Northern Song Dynasty, calligraphers of all dynasties discussed this view endlessly, which has become an important standard for calligraphy evaluation. Ke Yue of the Southern Song Dynasty wrote in the postscript of Zhenqing Yan's *Dynasty Reply*, that Yan's loyalty and integrity run through the world, and his writing style runs through ancient and modern times. The firm belief in his heart is unshakable. His writing is vivid, even after a hundred generations, people can still admire him. He also praised, the principle that Yan always adheres to is as firm as the sun and frost. Yan Gong's great moral integrity is as firm as the Big Dipper hanging high and the rock. The momentum of his writing is a reflection of his inner world.[5] It can be seen that the root of it is Zhenqing Yan's character, and then talk about calligraphy, from its writing to see the person, and then glimpse his spirit. *Colophon on the Seventh Month Letter by the Right Army*, written by Mengfu Zhao in the Yuan Dynasty, said Xizhi Wang was a talent in the Jin Dynasty, but his excellence is hidden behind his good calligraphy. Handwriting is the expression of the mind. Under the background of hundreds of generations, his brushwork is sharp and his wrist is strong, which is similar to his character. [6] By quoting Xiong Yang's words, the character is combined with the specific brushwork and wrist strength of calligraphy. Mu Xiang in Ming Dynasty also emphasized the relationship between calligraphy and the human heart, and put forward the famous argument that "calligraphy is to convey the heart". In the Qing Dynasty, Xizai Liu thought that calligraphy was the study of the mind, and the characters he wrote were to express his "will", that is, the inner spiritual world of the calligrapher. On this basis, he also put forward the famous argument that "calligraphy is like people".

At the beginning of the 20th century, due to the introduction of Western culture, some aestheticians started from the visual form and emotional expression of calligraphy and made a more detailed explanation of the theory of handwriting for mind expression. As Yizhe Deng said in the *Appreciation of Calligraphy* in the monograph on Xiong Yang's mind calligraphy, he believes that calligraphy does not need to depict scenery and objects as much as art, and is a more pure expression of the mind. Therefore, he believes that calligraphy is pure art, the highest realm of art.[7]

Through the above explanation of the changes in the theory of handwriting for mind expression, we can find that the core idea of handwriting for mind expression is "the original creation of the spirit", which mainly includes two aspects, one is "handwriting quality is character", the other is "expression one's mind".

2. The Classification of Social Calligraphy and the Embodiment of Handwriting for Mind Expression

At present, Qianshen Bai's research on Shan Fu is the first one to discuss the creation and turnover process of artistic works from the perspective of social engagement in China and to make remarkable achievements. Qianshen Bai gave a simple definition of "social engagement works" in his book *Shan's Fu Communication and Social Engagement*, that is, "works other than "appropriate self-entertainment" are collectively called social engagement works. [8] Based on this definition, we further refine and make a rough classification of the social calligraphy of calligraphers. 1. Birthday couplets and elegiac couplets written for ritual in daily life include works that are actively written for some certain purpose. 2. Works written in response to the requests of relatives, friends, or members of the community, which have to or cannot be refused. 3. Works written to solve economic difficulties, which are divided into two cases: one is the works written in advance by the calligrapher, or the works requested without any requirements; the other is buyers having clear requirements for the content, shape, and style of the work,

and even the works written by the calligrapher under the circumstances of great reluctance. 4. Works written by a calligrapher to cater to the preferences of the audience. To what extent these kinds of social calligraphy can reflect the calligrapher's soul, we can compare the theoretical connotation of "handwriting for mind expression" explained in the above article and distinguish it in detail.

The first category is works that are actively written to achieve a certain purpose of the calligrapher. Calligraphers generally have a strong purpose in writing such works, and the writing object is often their relatives and friends or dignitaries, who often give the calligrapher great help in life, or the calligrapher is in urgent need of help from them so the calligrapher will be more careful in the writing process. Take Shan Fu as an example, Shan Fu's social calligraphy has the least small regular script, the main reason should be that writing a small regular script is very time-consuming and energy, and it is not easy to play, out of the perspective of social interaction, usually choose to write cursive. However, writing in small regular script can give people a sense of meticulous seriousness, more can reflect the importance of the object, even if not as wonderful as cursive script, it is easier to win the favor of the object. As a result, Shan Fu often wrote books in small regular scripts for senior officials and close friends. In 1681, for Heng Gao, a left servant of the Ministry of Punishment, Shan Fu wrote the small regular script of *the Classic of Filial Piety*. [8] At that time, Shan Fu was 74 years old, and still chose to copy *the Classic of Filial Piety* in small regular script, which shows that he attached great importance to this kind of social calligraphy. In 1684, before Shan Fu died, he entrusted his two grandchildren to his old friend Xiangshu Wei, who had been the official minister, and also presented his classic book *Zeng Ziwen* in small regular script.[9] In addition to government officials, Shan Fu also wrote small regular scripts for his close friends, such as Yindu Li, a famous scholar and poet in Shaanxi Province, whom he admired greatly and even rated as a leader of the poetry circle in the early Qing Dynasty. Li Yindu recorded in *Fuxu Xuexian*, which mentioned that when the poem of the Jundu was in Taiyuan, he promised to write a regular script for him and drew thirteen pictures.[10] Shan Fu specially transcribes Indu's poems in a small regular script and draws thirteen scenes, which shows the importance of this social calligraphy. We take Shan Fu as an example to analyze this kind of work and find that calligraphers attach great importance to this kind of social engagement, and the quality requirements of calligraphy works are also extremely high, so it can be considered that this kind of social calligraphy is basically in line with the standard of "handwriting for mind expression".

The second category is works that have to be written or cannot be refused at the request of relatives, friends, or people in society. Here also take Shan Fu as an example. In the face of his old friends' requests for calligraphy, Shan Fu is not always willing and usually chooses the way of deferment. Even in a letter to Tingshi Dai, he said Yan Bo's pamphlet, which has been in writing for three years, is now in your hands. If you pass Pinggan, you can bring it to him. [11] After the cursive *Thousand Characters* written by Shan Fu for Tingshi Dai, his inscription also mentions that Feng Zhong asked for *Thousand Characters*, which need three or four years..."[11] As Figure 2, when facing the demands of old friends, although Shan Fu is reluctant, will delay, but let friends wait for months or even years, because of the relationship, Shan Fu will eventually seriously write calligraphy to submit, and even special poems and compositions to express apology, so this kind of calligraphy is often the calligraphers in the fine calligraphy, can also be regarded as the calligrapher's "handwriting for mind expression".

However, if Shan Fu did not know the applicant, or if he wrote for someone else at the request of a friend, Shan Fu would not be so serious. Because of this kind of social engagement too much, he suffers from eye disease and hemorrhoids in old age, for the disease, he often shows disgust or even anger when facing this kind of entertainment. This kind of thing is often mentioned in Shan Fu's letters to friends or postscripts to his works.

To avoid writing because of old age and illness is really like a Mongolian child skipping school. The elder brother took out the cloth and asked me to write. I reluctantly agreed, but the writing was almost shapely and I could only laugh it off. [11]

My hands and arms have been swollen and sore for about ninety days since I got the sore. I haven't put pen to paper in over a hundred days. I have not complied with your teachings for a long time, and I do not want to live up to your exhortations. Although the paper is full of failures, I still reply to you first. As for the fan, please give me a couple of days, because I don't have a pen suitable for writing on the fan. I don't have a stamp, so I don't have a seal. Mr. Genweng Michio. [11]

This kind of non-seal work is indeed more common in Shan Fu's handed-down writings, it must be that Shan Fu hates this kind of social engagement, coupled with physical discomfort, and poor writing, so he does not want to seal. In the face of such entertainment works, Shan Fu knows that it is the result of a hasty response. He has self-evaluated that vulgar people often force me to write for some person,

thinking that this will get the real thing. None of the works written in front of others are worth seeing. And with discontent and anger in the heart, it is a great violation of the mind and the subtleties of handcraft, and how can real outsiders understand this? [11] Anger is overexpressed, and says greatly contrary to the mind and the subtleties of handmade, this work is not a “handwriting for mind expression”.

The third category is works written to solve economic difficulties. Shan Fu’s family was in a poor situation, he suffered from prison disasters, and economic difficulties, and his main source of living was calligraphy, so he wrote a large number of social calligraphy after Jia Shen. Shan Fu sends a letter to his friend, saying that he would exchange books for rice, occasionally there is no rice at home, and father and son, uncle, and nephew laugh at each other, this scene seems very poor and indifferent... Occasionally, a dozen pieces of small gold paper were placed on the decrepit desk... He asked his son to take these gold papers to the office and to change them back to two or three buckets of rice to relieve his eyebrows. If we can generously leave this gold paper without exchange for rice, it will become a good story of Daling. It is so true! [11] Frankly “using a book for rice” to save the emergency, here “staying for selling”, which means letting a friend sell calligraphy, to repay the cost of rice. There are many similar records, for example, to go to Songshan and Shaoshi Mountain... The plan was to finance the trip by selling one or two paintings. [11] Selling calligraphy to change rice oil and other daily necessities, to raise travel funds is to solve the economic dilemma by writing works. This kind of work is different from the above mentioned "in response to the requests of relatives, friends or social people and had to or could not refuse to write the works", many of them are completed over a long time. Not for rice change at the beginning, but are collected by their own or friends, that is, not hastily dealt with. Therefore, the quality will be much higher than the second type of work mentioned above, and it can be regarded as the performance of the calligrapher's "handwriting for mind expression”.

The fourth category is works written by the calligrapher to cater to the preferences of the audience. This kind of calligraphy is less reflected in Shan Fu's social calligraphy because Shan Fu's social calligraphy is mainly turned around in two ways: social entertainment and indirect selling of characters. The fourth type of work appears more in the direct money trading between the calligrapher and the object and this direct money trading can also affect the artistic performance of the calligrapher because the calligrapher is often influenced by the preferences of the consumer in this environment. This kind of calligrapher is the most representative of *the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics* in the Qing Dynasty.

Due to the importance of the ancient salt industry and water transport, Yangzhou has always been an important transportation hub and commercial city in the Qing Dynasty. Huizhou merchants and Shanxi merchants who operated the salt industry in Yangzhou, after becoming rich, the demand and consumption of culture also increased sharply. They often organized literati banquets to sing, and they also liked the collection of calligraphy and painting. This atmosphere not only stimulated the development of literature and art in Yangzhou and its surrounding areas but also attracted literati from all over the country to be active here. During the Qianlong period, Yangzhou had become the most concentrated place for calligraphers and painters in the country. *The Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics* in the late Qing Dynasty formed a novel and unique artistic style, which pushed Yangzhou’s position in the history of art to the climax.

Most of the calligraphies in *the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics* came from a humble background or were losers in the official circle, and most of them had economic difficulties. In this context, *the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics* busking in Yangzhou, dependent on the economic assistance of the salt merchants, in the process of creation inevitably by the merchant's aesthetic influence. Xie Zheng of *the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics* has the description of salt merchants guiding the atmosphere in *Letters to Jiang Bingu and Jiang Yujium*.

A scholar should choose his style. All about food, salt ship transport, and other affairs, you can listen to the views of businessmen; but did not hear the article learn to listen to the businessman’s opinion. The scholars in Yangzhou, wandering in front of the merchant’s home, regard the merchant’s words as the standard of happiness and sorrow, such behavior damages the character of the scholar, but also loses morale. It is impossible to continue.[12]

It can be seen that not only in calligraphy and painting, but also the likes and dislikes of businessmen have affected the wind of article learning, and even the prosperity and decline because of right and wrong in a word from businessmen. Weiye Dong, a poet who lived in Yangzhou during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, wrote that even if all the odd books are sold out, they cannot get rid of poverty. Living in a luxurious house and using silver lamps and lanterns, they still work hard. It is strange that those poor scholars desperately run, with some unpopular characters to deceive

businessmen.[13] “Odd books” and “unpopular characters” are the phenomenon that calligraphies in the Yangzhou area at that time wrote more strange books and used rare ancient characters, and this trend was to cater to the aesthetic trend of businessmen. This is also one of the reasons why *the Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics* were regarded as strange people by the world. This kind of works, which have to compromise the pursuit of their artistic style due to economic factors and other factors to cater to buyers, can hardly be the embodiment of their mind expression. But this phenomenon has also promoted the formation of the style of calligraphy to a certain extent, so there are many excellent works among them.

3. Conclusion

After Changwen Zhu, who was born in the Northern Song Dynasty, introduced “handwriting is the expression of mind” directly into calligraphy evaluation, and extended the view of “handwriting for mind expression”, the interpretations for this have been endless, which has become an important standard of calligraphy evaluation, and also the highest embodiment of calligraphers’ spiritual quality. However, not all calligraphy works can be regarded as the mind expression of calligraphers. Since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, a large number of social calligraphy has been handed down to the world. Due to the different factors such as the state of writing, the object of writing, and the purpose of writing, their quality also exists at different levels. Therefore, when we study the calligrapher’s works, we should restore the works to the specific writing purpose and writing state of the calligrapher, and judge whether the works can represent the calligrapher’s writing level at a certain stage, whether they can be the embodiment of the calligrapher’s soul. Only by deeply thinking about the various internal and external factors that affect the production of a calligraphy work, understanding the deep reason, and then analyzing the artistic and cultural values, can it be more practical and meaningful.

References

- [1] Lin Huang, Fan Jiang. *Selected Chinese Ancient Literary Theories* [M]. Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2022, 09, 73-74.
- [2] Shanghai Society Painting Publishing House, Ancient Books Collation Laboratory of East China Normal University. *Traditional vertical typesetting of calligraphy treatise* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2012, 08, 2-324.
- [3] Shuqiang Cui. *Writing with the Spirit of a Dragon: Twenty Lectures on Calligraphy Culture* [M]. Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 2015,12,153.
- [4] Jia Zhu. *Collected Works on Calligraphy Studies by Zhu Jia, Volume 4, Part A: Elaborations on Historical Calligraphy Treatises* [M]. Suzhou: Suzhou University Press, 2021,06,91.
- [5] The compilation committee of "The Chronicle of Yan Zhenqing". *The Chronicle of Yan Zhenqing* [M]. Jinan: Shandong People's Publishing House, 1998,11,102.
- [6] Fusheng Lu. *Chinese Calligraphy and Painting Book Volume 8* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2000, 12, 142.
- [7] Yizhe Deng; Edited by Gangji Liu. *Deng Yizhuo's Collection of Essays on Fine Arts* [M]. Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1993,12,50.
- [8] Qianshen Bai. *A Case Study on the Social History of Shan Fu's Communication and Entertainment Art* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House, 2003, 12, 86-93.
- [9] Yixin Zhou, Furong Zhang, editors of this book; Wen Changlu, general editor of this series. *Stories of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Shanxi Volume* [M]. Zhengzhou: Henan Science and Technology Press, 2017,01,252.
- [10] Qianshen Bai, author;Jinan Yin, general editor. *The World of Fu Shan: The Transformation of Chinese Calligraphy in the 17th Century* [M]. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2021,10,218.
- [11] Shan Fu, author;Xieli Yin, editor-in-charge. *The Complete Works of Fu Shan, Volume 1* [M]. Taiyuan: Shanxi People's Publishing House, 2016,04,474.
- [12] Ao Li. *The Collected Works of Ouyang Xiu, Su Dongpo, and Zheng Banqiao* [M]. Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, 2016,11,545.
- [13] Yongnian Xue; General Editor-in-Charge: Jiyin Zhou. *A Comprehensive Study of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou: A Collection of Texts on the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, Volume 1* [M]. Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Art Publishing House, 2021,11,376.