

Retro and Innovation: Exploring the Causes of Using Yuan Zhu Seals to Copy Ancient Characters in the Context of Epigraphy in the Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: This article focuses on the phenomenon of a large number of Yuan and Zhu seals in the field of seal carving during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties using copied ancient characters, aiming to explore its underlying causes. As a key style of literati seals in the history of seal studies, the Yuan Zhu seal showed a combination of retro and innovative features during the Ming and Qing dynasties. By integrating methods such as historical philology, visual analysis, and style comparison, and incorporating a social and cultural history perspective, this study aims to clarify the origin, manifestations, and historical background of this phenomenon. Research has found that this phenomenon is caused by multiple intertwined factors: firstly, the flourishing of epigraphy and ancient textual research in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, providing abundant resources and academic support for character shapes; Secondly, in the development of Indian studies, the Indian people reflected on the traditions of the Qin and Han dynasties, pursued personalized expression, and drove innovative practices; The third is the social retro trend and the aesthetic appreciation of "novelty", which creates a cultural atmosphere and acceptance context for artistic innovation. This article analyzes seal making cases, seal studies, and epigraphy literature to reveal the internal driving force and temporal characteristics of the evolution of Yuan Zhu seal styles in the context of epigraphy, providing reference for understanding the development laws of seal carving during this period.

Keywords: Yuan Zhu Wen Yin; Copying Ancient Texts; Epigraphy

1. Introduction

The practice of using Yuan Zhu seals to copy ancient characters did not begin in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, but can be traced back to the Song and Yuan dynasties. According to existing physical remains and relevant literature records, the self use seal "Guaigui Daoren" (stamped on the 1327 cursive poetry volume) of Feng Zizhen (1253-1348), a literati from the late Song and early Yuan dynasties, is currently the earliest verifiable example of the use of copied ancient characters in the Yuan Zhu seal style.

At the same time or later, similar examples include the "Yuntao Pavilion" seal by Wu Rui (1298-1355), a calligrapher and painter of the Yuan Dynasty (seen in the postscript of Zhang Wo's "Nine Songs" volume in 1340). In addition, seals such as Zhao Mengfu's "Shuijing Palace Taoist", Gan Wenchuan's "Yingchuan County Marquis Family", Yuwen Gong Liang's "Jingzhao Yuwen Gong Liangzi Zhenzhang", Li Sheng's "Zicong Sheng", Wu Rui's "Qingyun Sheng" and "Yuntao Sheng", Liu Guan's "Liushi Daochuan", and Lu Juren's "Zhaizhi", "Jijixuan" and "Yunjian", although having certain differences in style, have shown a tendency to borrow from ancient Chinese characters in some texts (especially in titles and specific characters used in Zhaiguan seals). These early artistic practices fully demonstrate that the unique decorative meaning and aesthetic characteristics possessed by the transmission of ancient texts were already noticed by the seal artists in the early stages of the formation of the Yuan Zhu seal style, and began to be tentatively integrated into the creative process[1].

In the Ming Dynasty, with the further popularization of literati seal carving and the vigorous development of seal book publishing (such as the milestone influence of Gu Congde's "Collection of Ancient Seal Books"), the phenomenon of using ancient texts for printing became increasingly common and reflected in seal theory. Zhou Lianggong described this type of writing as "bizarre" in his writings; Zhu Jian clearly pointed out in the "Yin Jing" that "if the text is larger than an inch and the

writing is either convoluted or bizarre, it must be a clear seal", and associated "strange characters" with "ancient texts".

The Biography of the Seal Engravers "records:" For decades, those who worked with seals had abandoned ancient methods and turned them into bizarre ones, which was advocated by Huang Zihuan and Liu Yuzhong. In recent times, it has become graceful and elegant, which was advocated by Gu Yuanfang and Qiu Linghe. "This passage clearly points out that there was an innovative trend in the seal industry in the mid to late Ming Dynasty, characterized by" bizarre "(i.e. using ancient Chinese characters), and this trend was led by specific seal engravers. At that time, stamp collections such as "Hu Shi Yin Cun", "Gu Jin Yin Ze", "Han Gu Ji Yin Pu", "Liang Qianqiu Yin Jun", "Cheng Qing Guan Yin Pu", "Zhen Shan Zhai Yin Yin", "Yin Shang", etc., all included a large number of Yuan Zhu seal works of this style, which shows its popularity at that time. The continuous development of this phenomenon laid a solid foundation for the concentrated outbreak of the phenomenon of using and copying ancient Chinese characters in large quantities in the Yuan Zhu seals during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.

2. Academic cornerstone: the prosperity and influence of epigraphy and textual research

The most direct and important driving force for the extensive use and transmission of ancient Chinese characters in Yuan Zhu seals during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties was the unprecedented prosperity of epigraphy and ancient textual research during the same period. The prosperity of this academic field has provided unprecedented font resources, academic support, and selection directions for seal engravers.

2.1 The rise of epigraphy research

As Liu Jiang said, "During the Ming and Qing dynasties, many seal makers, calligraphers, painters, and related enthusiasts attached great importance to the study and organization of ancient Chinese characters in unearthed cultural relics. They gradually introduced oracle bones, bell tripods, stone tablets, bricks, portraits, and even bamboo slips into seal creation, greatly expanding the field of using engraved characters." [3] During this period, the discovery of underground cultural relics (especially Shang and Zhou bronze ware, Qin and Han inscriptions) increased day by day, greatly expanding the ways for scholars and artists to contact and study ancient characters. The origin of the method of selecting Yin people is no longer limited to the traditional concept of "Yin Zong Qin Han", but horizontally extends to various newly unearthed or newly recorded stone and stone materials.

From the perspective of academic deepening and research atmosphere, during the Qing Dynasty, especially during the Qianlong and Jiaqing periods (1736-1820), the development of epigraphy reached its peak. Both at the official level (such as the 40 volume "Western Qing Ancient Mirror" compiled by Emperor Qianlong's decree) and as individual scholars (such as Niu Yunzhen's "Explanation of the Golden Inscriptions", Weng Fanggang's "Examination of the Jiaoshan Ding Inscriptions", Wu Yujian's "Collection of Golden Inscriptions", Zhang Yanchang's "Golden Inscriptions", Huang Yi's "Interpretation of the Fengrun Ancient Ding Inscriptions", Zhang Xun's "Record of the Zhang Family's Jijin Zhenshi", Wu Dongfa's "Collection of Shang and Zhou Jin Inscriptions", Ruan Yuan's "Collection of Treasures in Jiguzhai", Wang Chang's "Compilation of Golden Inscriptions", etc.), a lot of energy has been invested in the collection, recording, interpretation, and research of gold and stone characters. This top-down and long-standing academic atmosphere has effectively promoted the systematic organization and widespread dissemination of ancient written knowledge.

2.2 The role of the scholar artist community

More importantly, many top scholars of epigraphy in the Qing Dynasty were also highly accomplished calligraphers and seal engravers, such as Ding Jing, Huang Yi, Qian Ni, Weng Fanggang, Ruan Yuan, and others. They integrate academic research, cultural relic collection, and artistic creation, and are able to directly and quickly apply the research results of epigraphy to the practice of seal carving art. Their exploration and practice deeply influenced their peers and disciples around them, gradually forming a highly influential academic artistic community, further promoting the use of copied ancient characters in the creation of Yuan Zhu seals.

2.3 Inheritance and improvement of copying and recording ancient texts

The systematic organization of copied ancient texts began during the Northern Song Dynasty. Guo Zhongshu's "Han Jian" and Xia Song's "Four Sounds and Rhymes of Ancient Chinese Literature" are the two most important works in this field. They are based on the "Shuowen Jiezi" and "Wei Zhengshi Shijing", extensively collecting ancient Chinese fonts from character books, manuscripts, and stone carvings that can be seen at that time, and compiling them into a book. In addition, Du Gu's "Collection of Seal Script and Ancient Prose Rhyme Sea" is also an important achievement of this period. The Song Dynasty became a peak period for the compilation of ancient texts, providing a basic textual database for later generations (including the field of seal creation)[2].

In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, scholars Lin Shangkuai and Li Gen from Fujian made large-scale additions and revisions to the "Jinshi Yunfu" and compiled a more complete "Guangshi Yunfu". The book contains a wide range of ancient texts, including the Book of Changes, the Classic of Filial Piety, the Book of Songs, the Book of Rites, the Tao Te Ching, the Book of Stones, the Analects of Confucius, the Book of Xia, the Book of Documents, the Spring and Autumn Annals, the Book of Rites, the Book of Erya, the Records of the Grand Historian, the Book of Music, the Book of Han, the Book of Yue Ling, the Great Biography of the Book of Zhou, the Ascending Records of Huainanzi, the Book of Documents, the Book of Stone, the Huang Ting Jing of Wang Weigong, the Song of the Great Wind, the Yuncangzi, the Sea Classic, the Ancient Case Classic, the Han Bamboo Slips, the Ancient Zhuangzi, the Classic of Mountains and Seas, and many other classic works. This work became an important reference book for Indonesians in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties to obtain and copy ancient character shapes, and had a profound impact.

In the Qing Dynasty, scholars not only extensively compiled inscriptions on gold and stone, but also conducted in-depth research and verification of ancient texts passed down since the Song Dynasty. For example, Zheng Zhen conducted a systematic study of the "Han Jian", carefully identifying the sources of ancient texts, elaborating on its academic value, correcting previous errors, and significantly enhancing the academic rigor of related research. This rigorous spirit of textual research gradually permeated into the selection and application of ancient characters by the Indonesians, ensuring the accuracy and rationality of the use of copied ancient characters in the creation of Yuan Zhu seals.

3. Internal drive of printing studies: reflection, innovation, and dissemination

While epigraphy provides external resource support for the use and transmission of ancient characters in Yuan Zhu inscriptions, the development logic of epigraphy itself, especially the reflection of traditional culture, pursuit of personalized innovation, and the driving force of the dissemination of printing records, constitute the internal driving force behind this phenomenon.

3.1 Reflection and expansion on the tradition of "Yin Zong Qin Han"

Although "Yin Zong Qin Han" has always been regarded as the golden rule of seal carving art, since the mid Ming Dynasty, some innovative Yin people have begun to reflect on the limitations of simply imitating the past and actively seek new artistic languages and expressive spaces. As a writing resource that has both ancient academic basis and is different from common Qin and Han seal scripts, copying ancient characters has naturally become an ideal choice for seal artists to break through traditional constraints and expand the expressive power of seal script. This choice marks a horizontal expansion of the Indian people's legal perspective, opening up a new path for the innovative development of the Yuan Zhu seal style.

3.2 Pursuit of personalized style and the spirit of "Seeking Change"

From the perspective of theoretical advocacy, the call for "change" and "innovation" gradually rose in the seal theory of the mid to late Ming Dynasty. Su Xuan clearly stated in the preface of "Yinlue Zixu": "It begins with imitation and ends with change. The change becomes more and more, and the transformation becomes more and more. The so-called imitators are more skilled than craftsmen. He firmly opposes the creative attitude of sticking to the past and emphasizes the transformation of personal artistic style on the basis of imitating ancient people. In his specific creative practice, Su Xuan also fully confirmed this viewpoint, and the flexible application of the method of copying ancient characters became an important means for him to form a unique personal artistic appearance.

3.3 Promotion of material innovation

The widespread use of high-quality seal stone materials such as Qingtian stone has made it possible to carve more precise and smooth lines in seal carving creation. The innovation in this material provides solid technical support for showcasing the complex character structure and graceful stroke features in the copied ancient characters, while also greatly encouraging Indians to engage in more free and diverse artistic attempts, further promoting the application and innovation of copied ancient characters in Yuan Zhu printing.

3.4 Transformation of aesthetic consciousness

The Indian people gradually broke away from the blind worship of ancient thinking and began to use the "Six Books" as the fundamental basis to rationally examine the rules of seal script. At the same time, they are increasingly evaluating seal works from a purely aesthetic perspective, such as layout, knife technique, artistic conception, etc. The unique aesthetic beauty of copying ancient characters, such as convoluted shapes, peculiar styles, and graceful charm, perfectly meets the increasingly diverse and personalized aesthetic needs, becoming an important driving force for the innovation of Yuan Zhu seal styles.

3.5 Printing, publication, and cultural transmission

The flourishing development of the publishing industry in the mid to late Ming Dynasty greatly promoted the printing and circulation of printed music. Since the publication of the German book "Ji Gu Yin Pu", there has been an endless stream of Ji Gu Yin Pu and personal printed music. The previously mentioned books such as "Hu Shi Yin Cun", "Gu Jin Yin Ze", "Liang Qianqiu Yin Jun", and "Cheng Qing Guan Yin Pu" belong to this category, and they have become the main media for spreading printed music and showcasing new works; The large number of Yuan Zhu seals collected in these genealogies, which copied ancient Chinese characters, provided intuitive creative templates and imitation objects for other seal artists. Through the widespread dissemination of genealogies, the traces of mutual reference and imitation among seal artists are very obvious, which is reflected in the repeated use of some idle seal contents (such as "How many times a day do you look at a clear window" and "Stop Cloud") by many seal artists. The "Stop Cloud" seal is often designed as a circle by most seal artists, and the use of specific copied ancient writing methods for commonly used characters such as "Mountain", "Cloud", "Ming", "Wen", "Ju", "Dao", "Xuan" has gradually become a popular trend and even a programmatic creation habit. Moreover, seal theorists also focus on Yuan Zhu seals. Theoretical thinking and normative guidance are carried out on the phenomenon of using copied ancient characters. For example, Zhu Jian acknowledged in "Yin Jing" that "strange characters are common in ancient texts," but was wary of excessive pursuit of strange character shapes, Pointing out that "Miao Zhuan is proficient in eight parts, Ruofu's bronze plate carved halberds are complex, Jing Xi and Bi Luo are strange, Yanling Jizi is erroneous, Sengmeng Ying's eighteen forms are born, and Li Yangbing's Qian Gua is a strong work, I have nothing to take from it", emphasizing the moderate standard of "strangeness" in "ancient texts", Shen Ye proposed the aesthetic standard of "strangeness without strangeness" in "Yin Tan", and Su Xuan appreciated the "strangeness" in seals. These discussions not only reflect the artistic atmosphere of the time, but also define the relatively rational boundaries for innovative practice, and provide guidance in knife techniques, character techniques, and seal techniques (such as Xu Shangda's "Yin Fa"). The popularization of seal scores further accelerated the spread and formation of the Yuan Zhu seal style, which integrates ancient Chinese styles, as reflected in the relevant content of "Shen Tong" and Yang Shixiu's "Yin Mu".

4. Social trends: retro trends and "Shang Qi" aesthetics

The flourishing of the use and transmission of ancient Chinese characters in Yuan Zhu seals during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties was closely related to the prevailing trend of retro culture and the aesthetic style of "novelty" in various fields of society and culture at that time. They provided a profound social and cultural soil for the emergence and development of this artistic phenomenon.

4.1 The spread of retro trends

In the literary field of the Ming Dynasty, the retro movement initiated by the first and last seven

sons had a huge and lasting impact. The retro proposition of "literature must be Qin and Han, poetry must be prosperous in Tang" deeply affected various fields of artistic creation, reflected in the seal carving industry. The retro trend is mainly manifested in the high attention to ancient stone tablets, the careful imitation of Qin and Han seals (such as the imitation of ancient seals included in Zhu Jian's "Seals"), and the large-scale publication of collection of ancient seals (such as Gu Shi's "Collection of Ancient Seals" and many subsequent publications). This overall retro atmosphere provides a legal basis and spiritual driving force for seal engravers to draw creative inspiration from even older sources of writing (transmission of ancient texts); At the same time, epigraphy itself has a strong retro attribute, and its core research content is the study and revival of ancient characters, objects, and laws and regulations. Seal engravers apply the research results of epigraphy (copying ancient characters) to seal creation, which is the most direct manifestation of the academic level retro concept into artistic practice, making the retro trend concretely implemented and vividly presented in the field of seal carving art.

4.2 Promotion of the aesthetic trend of "Shang Qi"

In the mid to late Ming Dynasty, with the rapid development of the commodity economy, the continuous growth of the urban class, and the widespread dissemination of Wang Xue's leftist (Taizhou School) and Zen Buddhism ideas, a trend of ideological liberation centered on individual liberation emerged in society (Wang Fuzhi referred to it as "the collapse of heaven and earth"). Traditional moral concepts, ideal pursuits, and value systems have been challenged, and this ideological change is reflected in the field of aesthetics, which is people's pursuit of individual expression, free creation, novel experiences, and unique styles.

The retro trend of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties was not simply imitating the past, but rather "reforming the past" or "restoring the past to create new things". The use of copied ancient characters in Yuan Zhu Wen Yin is a typical manifestation of this "innovation in retro": it uses ancient writing forms (reflecting retro concepts) to create a visual effect that is completely different from the traditional Qin and Han seals and early Yuan Zhu Wen styles (meeting the aesthetic needs of "shang qi"), accurately matching the era's desire for individuality and innovation. The academic support provided by epigraphy gives this "strangeness" an "ancient" basis, effectively avoiding artistic expression from becoming purely bizarre and bizarre.

5. Artistic expression: the application and innovation of copying ancient characters in Yuan Zhu seals

In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, when using copied ancient characters to create Yuan Zhu seals, the seal artists did not mechanically copy the character shapes, but creatively transformed and applied the copied ancient characters based on the artistic laws and aesthetic needs of seal studies.

5.1 Selection and transformation of character shapes

In the creation of Yuan Zhu seals during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the use of copied ancient characters by seal artists was first reflected in the selective selection method, which mainly selected ancient Chinese characters with beautiful structures, suitable line features, and easy to print processing from character books such as "Khan Jian", "Four Sounds of Ancient Chinese", and "Guangshi Stone Rhyme Mansion". For characters that were too strange and difficult to integrate into the overall style of the seal, they were not blindly adopted, fully demonstrating the aesthetic judgment and rational thinking of seal artists in character selection; On this basis, the engraver will also carry out necessary printing processing on the selected ancient Chinese characters, using artistic processing methods such as simplification, regularization, squaring, or rounding to better adapt to the square (or circular) spatial layout and chapter arrangement requirements of the seal, while also conforming to the smooth and rounded style characteristics of the Yuan Zhu script lines. For example, excessive decorative elements in the characters will be appropriately simplified, loose structures of the characters will be adjusted, and stiff turning strokes will be softened to ensure that the characters present a harmonious and unified visual effect in the seal.

5.2 Harmony of chapter layout

The seal artist will harmoniously integrate the ancient and unique characters that have undergone "seal processing" into the overall layout of the seal, so that they can harmoniously coexist with other

fonts such as small seal script or Miao seal script that may be used in the seal. In this process, the printer carefully handles the density relationship, contrast of areas, balance of weight and weight, and coordination of the printing surface to ensure a stable, balanced, and varied layout of the entire printing surface. At the same time, due to the unique structure of ancient Chinese characters, they are often used as the visual focal point or key elements for adjusting the rhythm of the seal, enhancing the artistic expression and visual appeal of the seal.

5.3 Application of knife techniques

The Indonesians used punching knives or a combination of punching and cutting techniques to fully showcase the smooth and graceful features of Yuan and Zhu literature, in order to engrave these ancient lines. Through exquisite swordsmanship, the seal not only retains the ancient charm contained in the copied ancient characters, but also endows them with the unique elegant temperament of Yuan Zhu script, effectively avoiding the rigid and rigid effect of line engraving, making the entire seal work both elegant and dynamic.

6. Conclusion

The widespread use of copied ancient characters in Yuan Zhu seals during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties is a product of the interaction and joint influence of multiple historical factors in a specific temporal and spatial context. It deeply reflects the close relationship between the evolution of artistic styles, social and cultural trends, and academic development.

Firstly, the flourishing development of epigraphy and textual criticism has laid the most solid academic foundation for the emergence of this phenomenon. The emergence of a large number of unearthed cultural relics has provided rich physical references for the Indonesians; The improvement of systematic ancient text recording tools such as "Guangjinshi Yunfu" has provided a convenient way for Indonesians to obtain copied ancient text forms; The in-depth research and practical exploration of the scholar artist community have achieved an effective connection between academic achievements and artistic creation. These factors together construct a rich, reliable, and easily accessible database of ancient Chinese language resources, providing the possibility of knowledge and legitimacy at the academic level for the Indonesians to obtain French ancient texts.

Secondly, the development logic of printmaking itself provided an internal driving force for the use and transmission of ancient Chinese characters in the Yuan and Zhu dynasties. On the one hand, the reflection of the Indian people on the simple tradition of "Yin Zong Qin and Han" has prompted them to actively expand their perspective on law and seek new artistic breakthroughs; On the other hand, the strong pursuit of personalized art and the spirit of "seeking change" (including theoretical advocacy, material innovation, aesthetic transformation, etc.) drive artists to constantly explore new formal languages; In addition, the widespread publication and dissemination of printed music greatly promoted the promotion, imitation, and formation of a cultural atmosphere that integrates ancient Chinese styles, accelerating the development and popularization of this artistic phenomenon.

Once again, the retro trend and "novelty" aesthetic trend in social culture have created a crucial cultural context and receptive soil for this artistic phenomenon. The retro trend led by the literary retro movement provided spiritual motivation and contemporary atmosphere for seal engravers to trace back to the origins of even older texts; At the same time, the aesthetic concept of "Shang Qi" born from the liberation of individuality in the late Ming Dynasty gave rise to the widespread social psychological recognition and artistic value affirmation of the "peculiar" and "eerie" beauty of copying ancient texts. The use of ancient texts for printing is a successful practice of the strategy of "innovating with retro style". Under the banner of "antiquity", Indonesians have achieved their artistic pursuit of "strangeness".

Finally, the creative transformation in artistic expression marks the success of this practice. The seal engravers did not simply rigidly apply the copied ancient characters, but carefully selected, transformed, and integrated the copied ancient characters according to the rules of seal art (including seal layout, knife technique application, seal processing requirements, etc.), ultimately creating a new style of Yuan Zhu script that combines ancient elegance and new visual effects, greatly enriching the artistic treasure trove of literati seal carving.

In summary, the deep integration of Yuan Zhu Wen Yin and the transmission of ancient Chinese characters during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties was the result of the synergistic development

and resonance of the academic support of epigraphy, the internal innovation needs of seal studies, and the social trend of "retro and novelty". This phenomenon not only shaped a unique and glorious stage in the development history of Yuan Zhu seals, but also provided vivid and typical examples for us to understand the interactive relationship between art, learning, and social trends in traditional Chinese culture, fully demonstrating the outstanding creativity of artists in seeking balance and breakthrough between tradition and innovation, academia and aesthetics.

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