

# Opposition and Combination: the Excavation of “JianDu” and the Evolution of Chinese Calligraphy

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**Abstract:** In the middle and late Qing Dynasty, the decline of Model Calligraphy and the rise of Stele Theory were the overall trend of Chinese calligraphy field. The publication of Kang Youwei’s *Guang Yi Zhou Shuang Ji* brought this trend to a climax. But things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme. After the fall of the Qing Empire, many leaders in the calligraphy field cut off ills, and guide the recovery of Model Calligraphy again. In the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, Stele Theory and Model Calligraphy were still in opposition. During this period, the excavation of “JianDu” indicated the future direction of Chinese calligraphy. “JianDu” broke the opposition between Stele Theory and Model Calligraphy, allowing them to return to the traditional calligraphy path in a unified way. It makes Chinese calligraphy jump out of the relatively narrow and pure boundaries of Stele Theory or Model Calligraphy, and gradually evolve towards a wider and more diverse world.

**Keywords:** JianDu; Calligraphy; Stele Theory and Model Calligraphy; Evolution

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## 1. “JianDu” is an Important Carrier of Calligraphy

“JianDu”, specifically refers to the wood slips or bamboo slips used for writing in ancient China, which are not compiled into volumes. “Jian” is made of bamboo or wood, which is usually cut into long strips and polished on the writing side. The bamboo slips should be dried on the fire to make them easy to write and prevent moths. This process is called “Han Qing” or “Sha Qing”. “Du” is mostly made of wood, which is several times wider than “Jian”. Some are about 6 cm wide, and some are more than 15 cm wide. Because “Du” is rectangular, it also called “Fang” or “Ban”. “Jian Du” includes “Jian” made of bamboo and wood, and “Du” made of bamboo and wood. Different types correspond to different regional environments and usage methods.

Before paper became popular, “JianDu” is the main presentation method of Chinese character writing. From the pre-Qin period to the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the writing of Chinese characters has been very mature, but its practicality still comes first. “During this period, technical preparation (such as the improvement of writing, the development of tools, etc.) is carried out simultaneously with the preparation of ideas.” (Jiang Chengqing, 2013:20) The history of about three thousand years is called the quasi-art stage of Chinese calligraphy. At this stage, the ancient Chinese nation used “JianDu” as the main material for Chinese characters writing. The whole writing process “not only fixed the unique writing form of Chinese characters, but also changed the pictorial symbols of Chinese characters into line symbols. Finally, square Chinese characters were created.” (Hou Kaijia, 2003:7) Specifically, on the one hand, the structure of Chinese characters is becoming more and more simplified; on the other hand, it has created rich pen method, which makes the writing of Chinese characters from simple to complex, from changeable to inner beauty. These developments provided fertile soil and important foundation for calligraphy to become an unique art to China. “JianDu” is also the main presentation method of ancient classics, which has had a profound impact on the book style development. The shape of “JianDu” not only forms the unique writing style of Chinese characters, but also has an indelible effect on the simplification of Chinese characters and the arrangement of strokes.

## 2. The Excavation Process of “JianDu”

In the 20th century, the excavation of “JianDu” caused a big sensation in the Chinese calligraphy field. This event was consistent with the social stage of China. At this stage, Chinese art, as well as any other art, is pursuing evolution. The invasion of Western economy, politics and culture has also brought promotion and guidance to China’s native culture. It

inspires Chinese art to embark on a new journey.

### 3. The Excavation of “JianDu” Before the 20th Century

In ancient times, people have used “JianDu” to write. However, as the cheapest writing material, its origin time is uncertain. During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, someone mentioned in the book, “Writing on bamboo slips and silk fabrics, carving on bells, stone tablets, and vessels. Future generations can learn about history in this way.” (Sun Yirang, Sun Qizhi, 2017) Bamboo slips from the Warring States Period were discovered in the tomb of Xiangyang, Hubei, during the period of Emperor Gao of the Southern Qi Dynasty. However, they have not been preserved. Lugong King destroyed Confucius’ house and obtained ancient classics such as *Book of Rites*, *Book of Documents*, *Spring and Autumn Annals* and so on. This can also prove its origin time. (Zhang Taiyan, 2009:23) Recently, the “JianDu” from the Han Dynasty to the Wei and Jin Dynasties have been discovered in archaeological excavations and engineering projects. Until now, they are still being discovered. “The handwriting of this kind of pen and ink has very important practical value for the transmission of calligraphy in the Qin, Han, Wei and Jin Dynasties.” (Zhang Guangbin, 1984: 53)

The excavation of “JianDu” is mainly divided into two areas: the northwest and the central region. The northwest region mainly includes Dunhuang, Jiuquan, Juyan (now Ejina Banner, Outer Mongolia, near Jiuquan, Gansu), Wuwei, and Loulan in southern Xinjiang. “JianDu” was unearthed earlier in the northwest region. Most of them were made of wood, and they were all relics from the Han Dynasty to the Jin Dynasty. The central region mainly includes Changsha, Jiangling, Yunmeng, Xinyang, Linyi and other places. (Zhang Guangbin, 1984: 53) “JianDu” was unearthed later in the central region. Bamboo slips are the main writing material, belonging to the relics from the Warring States Period to the Western Han Dynasty.

### 4. The Excavation of “JianDu” in the Early 20th Century

China experienced a period of enduring impoverishment and long-standing debility in its modern history. And the development of Chinese archaeology was mostly realized by foreign archaeologists. First, Stein led an Indian expedition in the 27th year of Guangxu (1901 A.D.) to start Central Asia. During the expedition, three investigations were conducted successively, and it was found that the bamboo slips were roughly the relics from the third year of Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty (98BC) to the fourth year of Jingyuan (263) of the Yuan Emperor. The content are mostly literature, almanac, mathematics, divination, astronomy, and records of communication between military stations. The findings of the first and second investigations were recorded in Luo Zhenyu’s *Liu Sha Zhui Jian*, and the third discovery was recorded in Zhang Feng’s *Compilation of Wood Slips in the Western Border of the Han and Jin Dynasties*. Second, in 1930 A.D., Sven Hedin and Bergman of the Northwest China Scientific Expedition Group found more than 10,000 pieces of “JianDu” at Pochengzi and Hongchengzi along the east bank of Ruoshui. They are probably relics from Emperor Wu of Western Han Dynasty to Emperor Guangwu.

### 5. The Influence of Excavated “JianDu” on Chinese Calligraphy

Among the newly unearthed “JianDu”, we can find some important clues from the details. Different from the Han Dynasty, the clerical script, featuring with “silkworm head, wild goose tail”, almost disappeared in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. During this period, regular script similar to running script, fonts between running script and cursive script, and cursive script were the majority. From these relics, it can be fully proved that the existing famous calligraphy models in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, such as Zhong Yao’s *Xuan Shi Biao*, Lu Ji’s *Ping Fu Tie*, and Wang Xizhi’s model calligraphy, are all related to each other. They can truly reflect the evolution of Chinese calligraphy fonts. For example, before the excavation of “JianDu”, academic field generally concluded that the clerical script was mature in the Eastern Han Dynasty. Because in the Eastern Han Dynasty, clerical script inscriptions were the most abundant in number and varied in style. After the excavation of “JianDu”, People found that the clerical script had already matured before and after Emperor Wu of the Western Han Dynasty. This event made the mature time of clerical script nearly two hundred years earlier and caused a sensation in the Chinese calligraphy field. These unearthed “JianDu”, especially the most representative one, *Liu Sha Zhui Jian*, (Luo Zhenyu, Wang Guowei, 1993) came out because the advanced photography technique invented by the West was transmitted to China. Due to

the spread of photography, these cultural relics -- “JianDu” that cannot be preserved for a long time, can be printed into books and reproduced in their original form. Meanwhile, both public and private collections, and ancient calligraphy works preserved overseas, as well as ancient rubbings from the Tang and Song dynasties, can all be printed and produced through camera reproduction technology. After being published and reproduced many times, it becomes a sample for the masses to study. The ills that were once attacked by Stele Theory—the distortion of Model Calligraphy rubbings due to reprinting, will be gone forever. Model calligraphy took the opportunity to rise, and broke the situation dominated by Stele Theory. At this major turning point, the concept of Stele Theory calligraphers also changed. Originally, most calligraphers fully recognized Kang Youwei’s concept of respecting the Stele Theory and suppressing the Model Calligraphy in *Guang Yi Zhou Shuang Ji*. But when they saw these newly unearthed “JianDu”, their concept changed from opposition to combination.

Based on the theories of Ruan Yuan and Bao Shichen, Kang Youwei developed the history thoughts of calligraphy, calligraphy theories and technical principles. He first put forward the concept of Stele Theory and Model Calligraphy in *Guang Yi Zhou Shuang Ji*, and pushed the Stele Theory to the peak. Kang Youwei proposed that “Ruan Yuan also studied the Model Calligraphy, but in his book *Theory On the Northern and Southern Calligraphy School*, he expounded the disadvantages of Model Calligraphy and the prosperity of Stele Theory, as well as the great value of Steles in the Northern and Southern Dynasties.” (Institute of Ancient Book collation, East China Normal University, 2014:755) This thought also has the problem of being too extreme and self-contradictory. After that, Stele Theory and Model Calligraphy were in opposition for a long time. People believed that they were two completely opposite ways of learning calligraphy. At the beginning of the 20th century, the unearthed “JianDu”, such as *Liu Sha Zhui Jian*, changed this situation. The ink marks of “JianDu” and residual documents, and the combination concept make the Stele Theory and Stele school calligraphy forces show a strong trend of inclusiveness and generalization. Afterwards, important calligraphers such as Shen Zengzhi, Zheng Xiaoxu, Zeng Xi, Yu Youren, and Lu Weizhao who were proficient in both Stele Theory and Model Calligraphy appeared. Because of the dual nature of “JianDu”, the opposition no longer exists. Since then, The Stele Theory calligraphers no longer abandon the Model Calligraphy, they can learn the Model Calligraphy at will, and similarly, the Model Calligraphers can also write the Stele as they want. Because the writing on “JianDu” has a long history, it has naturally become a sought-after object by Stele Theory calligraphers; and because it is free handwriting, it is similar to the Model calligraphy. The function between the two objectively breaks the boundary of the opposition between the Stele Theory and Model Calligraphy. It cleared the obstacles for the Stele scholars to learn Model Calligraphy, making the creation concept of the combination of Stele Theory and Model Calligraphy an inevitable trend. All of these indicate that Chinese calligraphy jump out of the relatively narrow and pure boundaries of Stele Theory or Model Calligraphy, and gradually evolve towards a wider and more diverse world of art.

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