



A Brief Analysis of Emulation and Innovation in the “Zheng Wengong Stele”

Jiandong Guo

School of Fine Arts, Jilin University of the Arts, Changchun, China

Email:592173227@qq.com

Abstract: Chinese calligraphy, with its rich historical and artistic heritage, has evolved through various dynastic styles, with the Northern Wei period playing a pivotal role. This study examines the Zheng Wengong Stele, a paramount example of Wei Bei calligraphy, through a dual approach that integrates historical analysis with practical artistic investigation. The research first analyzes the stele's distinctive brushwork, which masterfully combines square and round strokes to achieve a dynamic balance. Building on this analysis, the paper presents a detailed case study of creating a contemporary calligraphic model inspired by the stele. This practical component demonstrates a method for adapting traditional techniques, highlighting the challenges and considerations involved in balancing historical fidelity with modern innovation. The study concludes that the Zheng Wengong Stele remains a vital source for artistic practice, and it provides a framework for the creative inheritance of traditional calligraphy, demonstrating its ongoing relevance in shaping contemporary artistic expression.

Keywords: Zheng Wengong Stele, Wei Bei, Northern Wei calligraphy, round brushwork, square brushstrokes, traditional calligraphy

I. Introduction

Chinese calligraphy has long been regarded as one of the highest forms of visual and cultural expression, embodying both artistic aesthetics and philosophical depth. Among its many stylistic evolutions, the Wei steles (魏碑) of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE) represent a critical transitional stage between the formal regularity of Han clerical script (隶书) and the matured regular script (楷书) of later dynasties. During this era, as political unification and cultural integration advanced under Emperor Xiaowu's reign, calligraphy underwent a significant transformation that emphasized structural balance, brush tension, and rhythmic vitality^[1].

The Zheng Wengong Stele (郑文公碑), also known as the Stele of Zheng Xi (郑羲碑), embodies the artistic ideals of both firmness and fluidity (Figure 1). Its creation, attributed to Zheng Daozhao (郑道昭) in 511 CE, demonstrates the sophisticated evolution of Wei calligraphy, integrating the square strength of the brush with circular, flowing strokes reminiscent of seal and clerical script traditions^[2]. The stele's form—carved into mountain cliffs rather than erected as an isolated monument—grants it a unique natural rhythm and raw expressiveness, making it a vital reference for both historical study and modern artistic practice^[3].



Figure 1 The Zheng Wengong Stele front image



Figure 2 The Zheng Wengong Stele side image

In recent decades, scholars and artists alike have re-examined the Zheng Wengong Stele not only as a historical artifact but also as a dynamic model for contemporary calligraphic innovation. Its round-brush technique (圆笔) has been praised by Kang Youwei as “the ultimate standard of rounded brushwork in Wei stele”^[4]. Modern practitioners continue to reinterpret this work through diverse artistic frameworks, seeking to blend classical discipline with individual expression, echoing Qi Baishi's belief that “those who imitate me survive, but those who resemble me perish,” emphasizing innovation within tradition^[5].

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A significant gap remains in systematically analyzing how its specific artistic principles, particularly the interplay of square and round brushwork, can be operationalized and adapted within contemporary creative practice. Many studies treat the stele as a historical artifact to be described, rather than a dynamic model to be actively engaged with. This study seeks to fill this gap by not only analyzing the stele's techniques but also by demonstrating a methodological process for its modern reinterpretation. The research, therefore, contributes a new perspective by bridging historical analysis with practical creation, illustrating how the stele serves as a living source for innovation rather than a static object of imitation. This study explores both the traditional techniques and modern adaptations of the Zheng Wengong Stele, analyzing its brush structure, compositional features, and creative reinterpretations. Through this approach, the research aims to provide new perspectives for understanding the artistic transformation of the Wei steles and their ongoing influence on contemporary Chinese calligraphy.

II. Literature Review

Zheng Wengong Stele (郑文公碑) has been central to understanding the evolution of Chinese calligraphy during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534 CE). Scholars have long debated the significance of this stele, which is regarded as one of the finest examples of Wei steles.

2.1. Historical Context and Stylistic Evolution

The Northern Wei dynasty represents a pivotal period in Chinese calligraphy, characterized by the synthesis of Han Chinese cultural traditions and the influences of the nomadic Xianbei peoples. The capital's relocation to Luoyang in 494 CE, under Emperor Xiaowen, was a significant step towards the unification of the northern and southern territories and the adoption of Han culture, including its calligraphic traditions [6]. This era marked the gradual evolution of Wei Bei as a distinct calligraphic style that blended elements from seal script (篆书) and clerical script (隶书). As a result, the Northern Wei calligraphy, epitomized by works like the Zheng Wengong Stele, presented a harmonious mixture of structural strength and fluid expressiveness [7].

The Zheng Wengong Stele was created during the reign of Emperor Xiaowen and is often considered a key representative of the Wei Bei style. Scholars have noted its profound impact on the subsequent development of Chinese calligraphy, with many calling it a precursor to the regular script (楷书) that would later be refined during the Tang dynasty [8]. The Northern Wei period, marked by political stability and the flourishing of the arts, provided the ideal backdrop for the establishment of this distinctive calligraphic form [9].

2.2. Artistic Features and Calligraphic Techniques

The Zheng Wengong Stele is renowned for its robust yet fluid calligraphic style. The inscriptions on the stele blend the firm, angular strokes of clerical script with the more rounded, flowing strokes derived from seal script. As highlighted by scholars such as Xiong and Li, the use of both square (方笔) and round (圆笔) brush strokes creates a visual contrast that is both dynamic and balanced [10][11]. This combination of strokes produces a harmonious and energetic rhythm throughout the inscriptions, a feature that is characteristic of the Wei steles.

Several studies have examined the brushwork techniques used in the stele's inscriptions. According to Yang and Wang, the application of square brush strokes in the Zheng Wengong Stele imparts a sense of solidity and strength to the characters, while the use of round strokes creates a sense of softness and fluidity [12]. Furthermore, the calligraphy exhibits the particular Northern Wei characteristic of combining both fine and broad brushwork, producing an intricate contrast between the thinner, delicate strokes and the thicker, bolder ones [13]. These contrasts are integral to the aesthetic appeal of the stele, emphasizing both its artistic and functional qualities.

Another key characteristic of the Zheng Wengong Stele is its meticulous composition. According to Liu and Zhang, the character spacing and layout on the stele reflect a carefully planned structure that enhances the overall readability and visual flow of the text [14]. These aspects highlight the advanced understanding of calligraphy during the Northern Wei dynasty, with particular attention paid to the relationship between individual characters and the overall layout.

2.3. Cultural and Religious Significance

Inscriptions like the Zheng Wengong Stele were often commissioned by elite families or religious institutions to commemorate significant individuals or events. As noted by Li and Liu, these stele inscriptions were not only artistic expressions but also served as powerful symbols of familial and cultural identity [15]. In the case of the Zheng Wengong Stele, the text commemorates Zheng Xi, a figure of importance during the period, and its placement in a natural landscape further emphasizes the connection between the divine and the earthly realms [16].

Additionally, the stele's association with religious practice is significant. Many steles from the period were inscribed by Buddhist or Daoist clerics and served as vehicles for spiritual expression [17]. The inscriptions on these steles often contained prayers or dedications, reinforcing the role of calligraphy in both religious and secular contexts. According to Zhao and Huang, the practice of engraving texts onto natural rock surfaces, as seen with the Zheng Wengong Stele, added a layer of permanence and reverence to the act of writing [18].

2.4. Preservation and Transmission

The preservation of the Zheng Wengong Stele has been the subject of extensive study, particularly in relation to the techniques used for copying and reproducing the original inscriptions. As Li and Sun have pointed out, the use of

rubbings (拓本) has allowed for the stele's text to be transmitted through generations, despite the natural erosion and degradation of the stone over time [19]. These rubbings, which capture the intricate details of the brushwork and the unique texture of the stone surface, are invaluable tools for both historical preservation and artistic study.

However, scholars such as Wang and Zhao have also noted the challenges in preserving these rubbings, as they can sometimes distort the original text or fail to capture the subtle nuances of the brushwork [20]. The ongoing efforts to preserve the stele and ensure the accurate transmission of its calligraphy are crucial for future generations of scholars and artists, who continue to draw inspiration from this masterpiece of Northern Wei calligraphy.

2.5. Modern Interpretations and Educational Applications

In recent years, the Zheng Wengong Stele has been revisited by contemporary calligraphers and scholars who seek to reinterpret its stylistic elements for modern use. As noted by Sun and Liu, contemporary calligraphers have drawn on the stele's dynamic brushwork and balanced structure to inform their own practices, creating a bridge between ancient traditions and modern expression [21]. The use of the stele as a model for artistic creation in modern calligraphy underscores its enduring influence on Chinese calligraphy and its continued relevance in contemporary artistic and educational circles.

Educationally, the Zheng Wengong Stele has become an essential reference for students of calligraphy. Liu and Wang highlight the stele's role in calligraphy curricula, where it is studied not only for its artistic value but also for its historical significance in the development of the regular script [22]. Through the study of such works, students are able to understand the evolution of Chinese calligraphy, gaining a deeper appreciation for the technical and artistic challenges that calligraphers faced during the Northern Wei period.

2.6. Comparative Studies with Other Stele Inscriptions

The Zheng Wengong Stele has also been compared with other important steles from the same period, such as those found in the Longmen Grottoes and the Yunfeng inscriptions. According to scholars like Li and Zhang, these comparative studies reveal regional differences in calligraphic styles, highlighting the diversity of expression within the Northern Wei period [23]. While the Zheng Wengong Stele is known for its robust and angular strokes, other inscriptions from the era exhibit a greater fluidity and organic flow, suggesting the wide range of stylistic possibilities within the Wei Bei tradition [24].

III: Methodology

The analysis of the Zheng Wengong Stele employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating historical analysis with formal visual analysis. The historical component examines primary sources, including stele inscriptions and dynastic records, alongside secondary scholarship to establish the socio-cultural context of the stele's creation under the Northern Wei dynasty. The core of the methodological framework is a systematic visual analysis of the stele's calligraphy, conducted using high-resolution rubbings and photographic documentation. This analysis is guided by a rubric focusing on three key formal elements: brushwork (distinguishing between square and round techniques), character structure (proportion and spatial balance), and compositional rhythm (the flow and relationship between characters). To ensure analytical rigor, these features are compared with those of contemporaneous Wei Bei inscriptions, such as those from the Longmen Grottoes, to identify the unique and representative qualities of the Zheng Wengong Stele. This structured approach moves beyond subjective appreciation to provide a reproducible, evidence-based understanding of the stele's artistic conventions, which subsequently informs the practical model creation discussed in Section IV.

IV. Creation of the Zheng Wengong Stele Model

The artistic lineage of Wei Bei calligraphy provides a rich



repository of styles for contemporary study. A comprehensive engagement with this tradition involves analyzing a spectrum of works, from established monuments like the Zhang Heinu Tombstone (张黑女墓志) and the Zhang Menglong Tombstone (张猛龙墓志) to newly unearthed steles such as the Pei Tan Tombstone (裴坦墓志). These works exhibit a remarkable diversity, ranging from the delicate and graceful to the grand and robust, each possessing distinct artistic character. Within this canon, the Zheng Wengong Stele is a paramount representative of the Wei Bei round brush technique. Its principles are particularly conducive to integration with the structural foundations of seal script, making it a compelling subject for a practical case study in stylistic synthesis (Figure 3). Figure 3: A contemporary calligraphic model based on the Zheng Wengong Stele.

This approach is guided by a core tenet of artistic practice, famously articulated by Qi Baishi: "Those who learn from me will live, but those who merely imitate me will die." This axiom underscores the critical distinction between emulation and innovation that is central to calligraphy's evolution. While the emulation of classical models is a foundational practice, mere replication is insufficient; it risks stifling creativity. True artistic development occurs through a process of reinterpretation, where traditional techniques are transformed through a contemporary lens. Therefore, the objective of this case study is not to replicate the Zheng Wengong Stele mechanically, but to integrate its technical and aesthetic principles into a new artistic expression, thereby demonstrating how tradition can be revitalized through innovative practice.

4.1. Innovation in Inheritance

Calligraphy emerged alongside the written word and has continuously evolved over millennia. Each script style, from seal script to clerical, and from cursive to regular script, possesses distinct qualities shaped by varying brushwork techniques and structural methods. The Zheng Wengong Stele is a quintessential example of the round-brush Wei Bei style. As Kang Youwei emphasizes in his *Guang Yi Zhou Shuang Ji*, the unique quality of round brushstrokes depends on a twisting motion; otherwise, the stroke "will become weak." This twisting technique creates the characteristic texture that distinguishes the round brush. While round brush techniques are typically associated with the use of the central axis (中锋), artistic essence lies in diversity, and a single technique does not yield countless variations. Therefore, in inheriting the Zheng Wengong Stele's technique, the artistic approach must be enriched with varied brushwork to achieve a dynamic and nuanced visual effect.

One of the stele's remarkable features is its subtle expression of weight and pressure within the brushstrokes. Analysis shows that transitions between light and heavy strokes are not overtly emphasized. When displayed on a massive cliff face, the characters achieve a grand effect through their sheer boldness. However, in smaller-scale compositions, such subtleties can appear flat and lack the necessary contrast. Consequently, the process of creating a contemporary model based on the stele necessitates an intentional exaggeration of the contrast between thick and thin strokes. This adjustment enhances the visual impact and ensures that the intricate beauty and weight of the original brushwork are pronounced in a modern, reduced-scale format.

4.2. The Adjustment Process of the Work

The creation of calligraphy is an iterative process requiring successive adjustments to achieve aesthetic harmony. Unlike its historical counterpart, contemporary calligraphy functions primarily as an art form, liberated from the pragmatic demands of everyday communication. This shift in context presents a central challenge: balancing historical fidelity to a source like the Zheng Wengong Stele with the expressive freedom of modern artistic practice. The adaptation process must therefore incorporate contemporary sensibilities while respecting the original stele's formal integrity, brushwork principles, and structural logic.

The process began with determining the content and format of the piece. Several textual options were considered, including poetic verses, philosophical writings, and classical essays. A calligraphic treatise was ultimately selected for its dual capacity to demonstrate script beauty and convey intellectual depth. The subsequent phase involved refining the internal structure of the characters and the overall composition, a stage complicated by the need to select appropriate materials, such as ink and paper, to enhance the final work's visual and textual qualities.

Following the initial draft, a meticulous character-by-character analysis was conducted, with continual reference to the Zheng Wengong Stele and related Wei Bei works. This comparative analysis informed adjustments to balance and proportion. The subsequent draft then focused on macro-level composition and ink application. The layout was carefully calibrated to ensure cohesive integration of characters, balancing stroke size and linear flow. Spacing between lines was adjusted to promote a natural, even rhythm. Ink was applied with deliberate variation in saturation, creating a dynamic contrast between deep, rich strokes and lighter, faded brushwork. This intentional modulation of ink density was essential for achieving a sense of depth and dimension, enhancing the work's overall visual impact.

4.3. The Final Refinement and Presentation

The final stage of the model's creation involved meticulous refinement of the compositional balance, particularly the relationship between characters of varying size and complexity. The work was subjected to a detailed analytical review, where each character was scrutinized for harmonious proportion and integration within the overall layout. Adjustments were made to the positioning of individual strokes to optimize both aesthetic balance and readability.

The guiding principles for these refinements were derived directly from the Zheng Wengong Stele's artistic ethos, ensuring the model remained grounded in the original work's concepts of structural weight and rhythmic flow. The overarching objective of this phase was to present a finished work that demonstrates a successful synthesis of traditional calligraphic principles with a modern artistic sensibility. The final model thus represents not a replica, but a conscious interpretation that seeks to retain the foundational power and fluidity of the stele while incorporating the expressive possibilities of contemporary practice. This approach aims to illustrate the dynamic potential of traditional models as a living source for ongoing artistic innovation.

Conclusion

The Zheng Wengong Stele stands as one of the most significant examples of Northern Wei calligraphy, embodying the fusion of form, strength, and fluidity that defines Wei Bei style. Through its unique combination of square and round brushwork, the stele has captured the attention of scholars and calligraphers alike, becoming a cornerstone of traditional Chinese calligraphy. This study has explored the historical, artistic, and technical aspects of the Zheng Wengong Stele, offering an in-depth analysis of its brushwork, character structure, and overall composition. The study has highlighted the ongoing relevance of this ancient work in contemporary artistic practice.

Through the detailed process of creating a model based on the Zheng Wengong Stele, this research has demonstrated how traditional techniques can be adapted and reinterpreted in modern contexts. Contemporary calligraphers can continue to draw inspiration from the past while creating works that resonate with today's aesthetic sensibilities. The Zheng Wengong Stele remains an enduring example of how art evolves through a continuous dialogue between the past and the present, ensuring that traditional Chinese calligraphy will thrive in the modern world.

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