

# Cognition and Transformation from the Perspective of Criticism —— A Brief Discussion on Qichang Dong's Comments on Mengfu Zhao

Zhiming Yu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Arts College of Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

<sup>a</sup>1119571561@qq.com

\*corresponding author

**Key words:** Qichang Dong, Mengfu Zhao, Criticism, transmutation

**Abstract:** The comment of Qichang Dong on Mengfu Zhao has always been a hot topic in the research of Qichang Dong. Shizhen Wang called Mengfu Zhao "the ancient times of two Wang and the atmosphere of a new generation". This comment was also supported by many Ming Dynasty calligraphers. However, contrary to the general trend, Qichang Dong has put forward fierce criticism on Mengfu Zhao. At the same time, in his fierce criticism, who also expressed his approval of Mengfu Zhao. Many scholars have not made a detailed investigation, therefore, all kinds of doubts left by Qichang Dong in his comments need to be verified by us.

## 1

As one of the representatives of Tiexue in the late Ming Dynasty, Qichang Dong seldom compared himself with ancient calligraphers, but he compared with Mengfu Zhao for more than 40 years, which made many scholars relish. Today's scholars' conclusions on the attitude of Qichang Dong towards Mengfu Zhao are mainly divided into the following three types: First, Qichang Dong does not agree with Mengfu Zhao; Second, Qichang Dong first denied and then agreed. 3. Dong and Zhao's Theory of Advantages and Disadvantages.

Today's scholars' research on Qichang Dong and Mengfu Zhao is limited to scattered preface and postscript, they have failed to analyze Dong's true evaluation of Zhao from the long history of Dong's preface and postscript. Even if Fu Shen, Dun Huang and others have found some clues from the chronological comments, they could not fully explain whether his views were reasonable or not, which was full of doubts naturally. In a word, the contemporary scholars' understanding of this research is obviously not deep enough, which leads to various doubts.

## 2

In order to truly understand the attitude of Qichang Dong towards Mengfu Zhao, it is necessary to sort out his preface and postscript diachronically. However, one problem is that many of Qichang Dong's preface and postscript are for chronology, which has caused a lot of trouble to the research. The attitude of Qichang Dong towards Mengfu Zhao becomes difficult to know. Therefore, to understand Qichang Dong's real view on Mengfu Zhao, it is necessary to give priority to preface and postscript of chronology, supplemented by the comments on un-chronology, so as to accurately reflect Dong's true view on Zhao.

Qichang Dong's evaluation of Mengfu Zhao's calligraphy has a total of 53 points with chronologies, scattered in the ancient copybook and Lintie, while Dong's comments on Zhao's paintings have 19 points, and should be divided into different attitude categories in each comment by Qichang Dong, so Qichang Dong's attitude towards Mengfu Zhao can be divided into the following five categories:

About painting, Qichang Dong's attitude towards Mengfu Zhao is relatively obvious, with a total of 17 approvals, 2 negatives, 1 neutrality and 1 transcendence. Among them, the so-called negatives are mostly slandered against him in order to divide the "North and South Zong", saying that they are both "learners" with Ying Qiu and "different from Zan Ni". In this way, Qichang Dong is quite approved of Mengfu Zhao's achievements in painting.

In contrast, Qichang Dong's evaluation of Mengfu Zhao's calligraphy is mixed. Through sorting out the evaluation chronology of calligraphy, painting and preface and postscript<sup>1</sup>, we can clearly see that Qichang Dong's evaluation of Mengfu Zhao's painting is superior to calligraphy. Qichang Dong's evaluation of Mengfu Zhao's calligraphy did not seem to have changed much from his youth to his later years. The negative comments were made from beginning to end, and the praise for him was endless. Judging from this, Dong's attitude towards Zhao is not easy to see through. However, if we take ten years as a dividing line and look at it in segments, then we can easily see some trends. Qichang Dong's evaluation of Mengfu Zhao at the age of 65, which seems to be a watershed. Before the age of 65 (especially between the ages of 55 and 64), Dong's evaluation of Zhao was more negative than positive, while after the age of 65, Dong's evaluation of Zhao was more positive than negative. If some neutral preface and postscript were taken as Dong's recognition and transcendence of Zhao, Dong's attitude towards Zhao could be said to have changed considerably after the age of 65, especially when Qichang Dong's private evaluation of Mengfu Zhao was analyzed, and his attitude change could be seen more clearly. Although Qichang Dong's judgment on Mengfu Zhao is still quite fierce, on the whole, his attitude has slowed down compared with previous ones.

From the beginning to the end, Dong regarded Mengfu Zhao as a competitor and an object of transcendence. However, when he competed with this competitor and the object of transcendence for a long time, his attitude changed subtly, and this attitude was connected with his thoughts, which can be said that the change of Qichang Dong's attitude towards Mengfu Zhao is not as simple as getting older and getting more peaceful, but is related to his calligraphic thoughts.

### 3

Qichang Dong's criticism of Mengfu Zhao involves many aspects, such as copying, writing, statutes, elegance and vulgarity, and Fengshen, these are the places where he concentrated his comments and should be paid more attention to. The study of Qichang Dong's change of attitude towards Mengfu Zhao from these aspects can help us find out why Dong changed his attitude towards Zhao.

From the age of 35 to 64, Qichang Dong's comments on Mengfu Zhao mostly stayed at the level of skills. At the age of 35, Jinshi Dong won the examination of Jinshi, he saw Mengfu Zhao's calligraphy again in the capital city and compared it with Yushu Xian. He believed that Yushu Xian was good at cursive and calligraphy, but could not "win" Mengfu Zhao alone. Therefore, Zhao could "claim honor without Buddha". However, Qichang Dong also believed that Zhao was easier to learn than Yushu Xian and the quality of books was not high. The reason why Mengfu Zhao is easy to learn is not the problem of the quality of books. It is mainly that it

is too much for be adept at to write, so it has a stylized component. At his 39 years old, he mentioned "The Pocket Book of Tang Tuo Huai Ren's Collection of Characters and the Orchid Pavilion" and thought that Mengfu Zhao "does not take off his family's writing" and says that he "cherishes not dreaming". There are 12 postscripts in this book, but there are only five so far. Presumably, many of the remaining preface and postscripts are derogatory remarks against Mengfu Zhao.

Calligraphy, as an art, cannot be separated from skill training, and Qichang Dong is no exception. From his 39-year-old volume "On the Use of a Pen", we can see how diligent Qichang Dong is in exercising calligraphy techniques. However, art is not only a technical problem. Only by mastering the techniques can we explore the "Tao" contained in calligraphy. In traditional Chinese art, there are propositions of "from skill to Tao" and "from both skill and Tao". From this aspect, Dong's criticism of Zhao has entered a higher level, and the change of his criticism points has revealed the change of his calligraphic thoughts.

Whether it is "from skill to Tao" and "from both skill and Tao", this originated from Taoist and Artistic View of Zhuang zi, Zhuang zi, through the mouth of a skilled worker, thought that Wen huijun's "skill" was just a manifestation of Tao. Tao is based on technology, and technology is based on Tao. this is the highest realm of Zhuang zi's vision. here, Zhuang zi proposed the requirement of "from skill to Tao". this concept has been widely accepted and developed in later generations. Shi Su said in "Postscript to the Book of Shaoyou Qin" that "if the skill goes further and the Tao does not advance, then it cannot be done, Qin is better than two moves."<sup>2</sup> He believed that the reason why Guan Qin's calligraphy showed a romantic style in the Wei and Jin dynasties was due to the combination of skills and Tao. From Shi Su's point of view, skill and Tao are two complementary and indispensable things. "Skill and Tao do not advance" is not the highest realm. Only "from both skill and Tao" can achieve perfection. Qichang Dong must have studied Zhuang Zi's and Su Shi's articles more, and his understanding of skill and Tao seemed to begin to emerge around middle age, "one who has advanced in skill ... that is, art is Tao."<sup>3</sup> In "The Story of Chenglexuan," Qichang Dong added, "Therefore, the beginning depends on skill, and the end depends on Tao."<sup>4</sup> It is obvious from these two texts that Qichang Dong agrees with Zhuang Zi's "skill is close to Tao" and Shi Su's "from both skill and Tao". It can be said that after the age of 55, Qichang Dong paid more attention to Fengshen or Tao and no longer paid too much attention to skills. It is this change that has gradually changed Dong's evaluation of Zhao. Mengfu Zhao's style and composition were naturally mocked and ridiculed by Qichang Dong in his later years, but Qichang Dong was also consciously out of reach in the creation of fengshen. Therefore, when commenting on his works in private, he said that "natural and unrestrained and easy to take off" and "especially elegant and charming".

#### 4

Apart from the fact that Qichang Dong's attitude towards Mengfu Zhao has changed "from skill to Tao", perhaps the most critical reason is that in his later years his evaluation of Mengfu Zhao focused on his works imitating HuangTingJing.

Whether it is HuangTing Exterior Jing or Huang Ting Interior Jing, its position in the history of calligraphy is very important. In his later years, Qichang Dong's evaluation of Zhao mostly focused on his works of HuangTingJing or imitations of Huang TingJing. It is no accident that Qichang Dong should stand in the perspective of Wei and Jin Dynasties and compete with Mengfu Zhao from a higher level. He should avoid the suspicion of unfair self-evaluation in his early years.

Mengfu Zhao naturally studied HuangTingJing. Huang Gongwang mentioned that Mengfu Zhao had written Huang TingJing more than a thousand times. Ni Zan also said that Mengfu Zhao's Xiaokai was "worthy of the people of Sui and Tang Dynasties". Qichang Dong certainly knew the risks he took in such a contest with Mengfu Zhao. But even so, Qichang Dong commented on Mengfu Zhao's imitation of HuangTingJing in his later years to see how far Zhao was from Wei and Jin Dynasties and how far he was from Zhao.

It is true that Qichang Dong's attitude towards Mengfu Zhao has changed, but it is by no means a complete change from negation to praise. In Qichang Dong's comments after the age of 65, Qichang Dong has always had both. However, compared with Mengfu Zhao's works other than HuangTingJing, its comments are obviously much better. Mengfu Zhao's regular script was not saturated by Yong Li (Yong Li did not have Xiaokai in his life), and the number of people in Jin Dynasty was large (although the Xiaokai volumes in the later period were mostly of Tang Dynasty style), while Qichang Dong was not. In his early years, he adopted a wide range of methods, including Xizhi Wang, Xianzhi Wang, Shinan Yu, and even Fu Mi. Although the wide range of methods brought many benefits to Dong, it was also easy to "count and move industries" and could not stand on his own. Qichang Dong boasted that he was "most proud of Xiaokai". However, when faced with the Xiaokai of Huang Ting, which was written in the Wei and Jin Dynasties, he had to admit that it was a divine product and expressed his "hatred of being seen later". In the comparison of Xiaokai letters between Dong and Zhao, Dong naturally fell into a disadvantageous position. However, this was just an opportunity to re-examine Mengfu Zhao's works. In the comments of unknown years, Dong said, "When I studied Jin calligraphy at the age of 18, I had no respect for WuXing. Now I am too old to know the beauty of WuXing's calligraphy. Every time I see a lonely short volume, I love to play all day long." <sup>5</sup>This preface and postscript is also a private book written by Dong, which can reflect his mentality towards Zhao when he was old, when did Dong specifically say this has not been verified, but judging from his narrative tone, he should be 60 or 70 years old. After reading Mengfu Zhao's Xiaokai, Dong also gradually appreciated Mengfu Zhao's "lonely short script" (which should be Xiang and Cao) and his attitude towards Mengfu Zhao was much milder than before. It can be said that Mengfu Zhao's Xiaokai was one of the important factors that changed Dong's evaluation of it. If there were no Xiaokai, Dong would have criticized Zhao consistently, but it happened that the appearance of "HuangTingJing" changed Dong's understanding of Zhao for a large part. Therefore, Dong only in his preface and postscript did he criticize the ancient Wei state.

## 5

For those who can leave a name in art history, their exploration of art is not like "a horse with strength and a goose with a good wind", especially when they face the choice between tradition and innovation, they are full of countless unknown challenges. The change of the attitude of Dong towards Zhao is caused by such changes. Perhaps Qichang Dong will consider more about how to find out the pros and cons of Mengfu Zhao than what is discussed in this article. Mengfu Zhao once said that "it is not easy to use a pen through the ages". Qichang Dong thinks that "if do not like this, how to let the name loud in the universe". Previous scholars have not easily measured it, but he has got to the point.

## Acknowledgements

supported by “The Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities”

## References

[1] About Qichang Dong's criticism of Mengfu Zhao, there are 61 preface and postscripts for unknown years. Among them, there are 38 calligraphy articles: 19 bad reviews, 14 good reviews, 5 neutral reviews, and 23 painting articles are all good reviews. The proportion distribution of calligraphy and painting is also similar to the conclusion drawn from the text.

[2] Wrote by Shi Su, edited by Fanli Kong: "Collected Works of Shi Su", Beijing Zhonghua Book Company, 1986, 2194.

[3] Wrote by Qichang Dong, edited by Haiqing Shao: Rongtai Collection, Xiling Printing House, 2012 Edition, 710.

[4] Same as above, 272.

[5] Guang Xiao: Sanxi Hall Fatie, Economic Daily Press, 1996, 551.