

Luo Xiaohuan

An Introduction to the Art of Inscription Calligraphy on the Burial Buildings of Qing Dynasty in Sichuan

Abstract: The above-ground burial buildings of Ming and Qing Dynasties in Sichuan in the Qing Dynasty are the special form of traditional Chinese stone architecture, whose patterns, carved images and stone inscriptions make themselves a comprehensive art carrier. They are not only an important rural landscape and family sacrificial place, but also important relics to research regional history, culture, customs and beliefs. All kinds of characters carved on burial buildings not only record the changes of the family, but also become rare folk calligraphy art materials. In addition to the common examples, such as couplets and plaques (horizontal inscribed boards) which imitate high-level ceremonial buildings, they also present more diversified patterns, such as epitaphs, inscriptions, poetry and decorative characters. In the funeral concept “for the sake of beauty”, they not only comply with the norms of writing, but also have bold individual expression, presenting rich art forms, thus continuing the profound Chinese culture of inscription calligraphy. For the community, especially for the descendants, they not only express their worship and honor for the ancestors, but also inherit rural culture and attain ethical education.

Key words: Ming and Qing burial buildings; Art of tombs; Calligraphy; Rural culture

INTRODUCTION Today in Sichuan, Chongqing, southern Shaanxi and western Hubei remain a large number of Ming and Qing Dynasty above-ground burial buildings, which have become a special form of Chinese traditional architecture because of their complex modeling, large dimension and exquisite sculpture decoration. As important rural landscape and family sacrificial place at that time as well as important relics to research regional history, culture, customs and beliefs nowadays, they have been increasingly paid close attention by more and more historical and cultural scholars.

However, the calligraphy in burial buildings has received little attention compared with the complicated and varied images and decorative carvings. These calligraphic inscriptions present different contents, varied forms of expression and rich artistic purport due to differences in geographical location, family history, tomb owners' status and social contact, as well as architectural



Fig.1 Epitaph works on the central stele of the Du family tombs at Wu Langpo, Wangcang County.

type, scale, subjective choice of tomb owner, craftsmanship and construction design.

Almost all of the writers of the epitaphs, inscriptions, horizontal inscribed boards and tomb couplets were local scholars, cultural celebrities, or even masters. Over the past hundreds of years, a great collection of folk calligraphy art materials have been accumulated, which contribute to the development of the art and cultural history of folk calligraphy scattered in the countryside. This article attempts to preliminarily investigate, sort out and research it.

INSCRIPTIONS—AN INDISPENSABLE PART OF THE TOMB

ARCHITECTURE The Ming and Qing burial buildings in Sichuan in the Qing Dynasty have various types and complex configuration. The simplest and most common building is the single memorial tablet, that is, it has two columns and a unit, inscriptions such as couplets on the columns and the horizontal board top and epitaph on the central stele, all of which are intaglio. Epitaph is divided into left and right columns, which are separated by the name and title of the tomb owner arranged vertically in the middle, and the font size is much larger than the epitaph text, which has a strict writing format. For example, the honorary titles on deserving government official to be presented / conferred (title) to (the name of the deceased person), the honored father's / mother's epitaph (tomb)¹. The right side of the tomb depicts the owner's life, living achievements, etc. and the left side shows the family tree. At the edge of the left side, up there shows the time and down there the craftsman, etc. (Fig.1). It is a general rule, though the layout varies with the content.

There are built-up complexes with multiple widths and multiple eaves. Each width and each pair of columns has column couplet, horizontal inscribed board and epitaphs, as well as inscriptions and other character inscriptions, which vary a lot due to the different types, sizes and structures. Even if as the same shape, such as the memorial tablet, the calligraphy and carving works take on different faces as a result of different sizes and scales.

For tombs as a building complex, in addition to the main tombstone with multiple eaves and widths in front of the mound, there are also left and right accompanying monuments, square monuments in the middle of the cemetery, left and right character tower, memorial archway square in front of the tomb, baluster, stone people, stone lions and other ancillary buildings. Some cemeteries are even surrounded with exquisite walls. Thus, the content and

¹ Notes: the appellations on the tablets are both “the honored elder man and woman”, which also exist in the cover of joss paper in this area.



Fig.2 Column couplets in the burial buildings of Lv family tombs

forms of inscriptions in the tablets have become richer and more diverse. Throughout the burial buildings, there is either an eyeeful of patterns, drama figures and other images or couplets, horizontal inscribed board, epitaph, inscriptions, poems, odes and even some inexplicable inscriptions, etc. Their fonts and sizes change with the content, form, structure and layout, which can be dizzying. Apart from the need for narration, these characters obviously pursue artistry and serve as decoration. Among them, characters in the board and columns are particularly exquisite. For some tombs, images and patterns are even deliberately reduced and put calligraphic inscription in a more important position, or even change the normal flat and simple burial architecture structure to save more space for calligraphic inscription.

Although Lv Xinxiao's tomb in the Lv family tombs in Nanjiang County, Sichuan, is a single "two-layer" type tombstone, the lower layer is not the flat and straight shape as normal, but has additional indented porch through two more pairs of columns, thus creating three couplets in total (Fig. 2): "Couple with hardness and softness living together for a long life, enjoy during life and after death the same roof. The horse rests among the beautiful landscape; the cow with fragrant laureates down the slope. The harmonious husband and wife carry their love into the eternity, leaving their children constantly remember the happy time of the united family." They share a horizontal scroll, namely the horizontal inscription on the top: underground is the forever spring. The words are closely linked to grave, underground housing, geomantic omen, and so on; the couplets were not written by one person. A larger tomb nearby is a five-width-and-four-eave pavilion with a hip roof, with carved stone corbel brackets under the eaves whose decoration is extremely complicated. It also adopts the method of adding external columns, which not only makes the building more complicated and impressive, but also creates space for calligraphic inscriptions.

Other common adopted techniques are to increase the depth of the buildings up to 1 meter or more so as to facilitate engraving text or images on the side tablet. For example, in Shaojiawan, Langzhong City, a semi-lateral turning model has been added to the secondary part of Shao's tomb, on which a few poems were carved in running script. This change would certainly increase the construction cost, but tomb builders seemed to want more writing space.

Besides tombstone, the memorial archway in front of the tomb, accompanying monuments, square monuments, character tower, grave wall



Fig.3 A square monument in front of the tomb of Ma Sanpin in Zengjia Town, Wanyuan.

and other ancillary buildings are also important carriers of inscription calligraphy. Tomb memorial archway is similar to general memorial archway in type and decoration techniques, and its function is nothing but similar to fealty archway, longevity archway, merit archway and so on. In contrast, its secondary part is often closed, and only the central stele is open for access. And the two closed secondary parts on each side are more used for carving images or long text, whose writing style and content are often free and varied.

Accompanying monument is the annex built in addition to the main tombstone in front of the mound. Some stand separately on the left and right, some in front of the main monument, and some are built between the walls of the tomb, and some have as many as even 4 or 5 such accompanying monuments. They're often single tablet like memorial tablets or square monument. As accompanying monument, a memorial tablet has widths both in front and back, where both sides of the tablet are carved with information like family tree, tomb owner's life experience, or the construction of the graveyard, etc. But its jamb covers so wide that it's difficult to read the words inside. They do not seem to be for the beholders; however, its intention to increase the space for inscription is very clear.

If the tomb owner was scholarly honored or officially ranked, even as a donor, his accompanying monument could be a square monument, also called "four-pillar cap monument". The folk preferred to call it "sedan monument", for in ancient time officials used to travel in a sedan chair. The four corners of a square monument are made into pinnacles; there are four sides of the room, four square columns built in the pavilion, each of which has a couplet and is carved with different texts. The square monument in front of the tomb of Ma Sanpin in Zengjia Town, Wanyuan City, whose door cover and carving components were stolen, gave us a chance to see the text in the four sides of the square column inside the stele. Its content is similar to that of ordinary epitaph, including epigraph, family tree, family origin, tomb geomancy and so forth. It is supposed that some content of the main tombstone should be moved to the square monument and then the tablet inside the main tombstone is relatively simple. In order to avoid excessive repetition, only a vertical line is left to show the tombstone owner's name and epigraph, but the surrounding decoration is complicated with the patterns of holy medal, which was also a popular style then. On the facade of the square monument is a pair of couplets: This branch of family lasts forever, so be the genealogy. Its horizontal couplet is "Worship Ancestors and Harmonize the Clan." On the square column are

engraved large characters vertically: to be presented / conferred honorary titles on deserving government official third rank Ma / Wang the honored elder man / woman's grave. On both sides are several lines of text, explaining the Ma family lineage and on the back of the opposite column there is a couplet. Horizontal scroll: safe and stable. On its facade vertically: Sichuan, Dongdao (an administrative district in Qing Dynasty), Suiding, Taiping County, Seventh Town, Third Jia (a unit of civil administration) Heishanzi Mountain, Shigaoyuan. Its inscription shows the name list of his cousins and nephews by the male line and other family members. On either side seem to be the names of part of the lady Wang's clan. In addition to carving works inside the pillar, there are also several poems. Two poems are familiar to us, one of which is a poem by Gao Shi (a poet in Tang Dynasty), *Farewell to Dongda*, "Yellow clouds covering ten li and the sun setting dim. In whirling snow the north wind drives south the wild geese. On the road ahead surely will be friends dear and true. Throughout the land is there anyone who knows not you?" The first character of the poem "十" (ten) have been known as "千" (thousand), now it's hard to know whether there used to be such a version. The other one is Li Bai's *Question and Answer Among the Mountains*: "You ask me why I dwell in the green mountains; I smile and make no reply for my heart is free of care. As the peach-blossom flows down the stream and is gone into the unknown, I have a world apart that is not among men." We can say that in the tomb architecture there are not only the relevant words of the tomb itself, but also some traditional poems and odes as its writing content, exposing to us the spread of traditional Chinese culture in the remote countryside.

Grave wall is usually the fence to link the main tombstone and memorial archways on the both sides, only about one meter or two high. For more complex walls, in the middle is often a one-width tablet respectively or a roof would be raised for the purpose of decoration. The walls are separated by columns and carved with images or characters, whose content and style are flexible. If the space is enough, there can be a long text with tens or hundreds of characters, otherwise inscriptions in several large characters.

In front of some tombs also stand a pair of tall stone columns, called "Weigan (baluster)" by the locals. At the upper end is a square bucket or two. The top of the stone column is pen-point-styled or placed with a stone lion. That is baluster, which is only set for those who had scholarly honor or official rank in feudal times. Local people say that if there are double buckets on each pillar, it means that the tomb owner is "both literary and military" talent.



Fig.4 Calligraphy on the character tower of Yang Anren's cemetery in Wangcang

Everywhere on the columns and its square bucket can be seen carved texts of a variety of sizes and specifications.

Character tower, also named “literal-respecting pavilion” or “tower of words”, is a small-sized building commonly seen at intersections or in towns. It is used to burn “paper written with character” to show people’s respect and even worship for paper with written characters. In folk cemeteries in Sichuan in Qing Dynasty, character tower usually existed as annex of burial buildings. Just as the couplet on “xiku”, the horizontal inscription of the last layer tablet on the right side of Yuan Wende’s tombstone in Liuxi Town, Wangcang County (the 11th year of Tongzhi of Qing Dynasty) said: “Paper bill burnt to the ____, Candles melted into the vault.” These character towers often have carved images and texts. A good representative is the text on the tower in front of Yang Anren and his wife’s tomb in Jiulong Town, Wangcang County (the eighth year of Daoguang of Qing Dynasty). Next to the main tombstone there are couplets “Capital sent to the Hades by loving hearts; joss sticks burnt with firm belief” and horizontal scroll “Constant Surplus in Treasury”. On the side are two poems: 1) *Ode of Wuzi*: “Layers of beautiful stones in the tomb, dragons and birds fly above the clouds. After the incense sacrifice, they enjoy the fame of wealth in the Hades. Inscribed by Juyue.” 2) *Praise for Character Tower*: “A new vault is established in front of the tomb. High it rises, with its inside connected with the tomb, belly round. The tomb owner’s kindness demands millions-of-year sacrifice; the descendants shall keep to it for at least tens of hundreds of years.” (Fig. 4).

Apart from visible texts mentioned above, there are some texts in the tomb that do not seem to be for human reading. For example, some texts in the medial stele or spirit hall (upper arch over main stone tablet) are evidently aimed to inform the underground. That is understandable for they are part of tombs after all. Sometimes, some texts can also be found in some corners and other obscure places, seemingly more casual and random, or added by carving afterwards.

The most important function of inscriptions on a tablet is to indicate information related to the tomb owner and burial, thus also called epitaph. In Tongjiang, there is an epitaph with a full text of 400 words in the accompanying monument of Xie Jiabing’s tomb. Compared with the main tombstone inscription, it is more detailed:

A grave is not easy to gain its name as it can only be achieved when the tomb’s owner has enjoyed longevity; and a glorious grave achieved

when the owner is virtuous and fortunate as well. Thus the glorious grave for Master Xie and his wife Liangxuan must have possessed all these virtues. During his life, Master Xie inherited his ancestral legacy. He knew that farming is not easy at all, nor is the academic study, so he had never led a luxurious life. He made every effort to serve his parents, and was praised for his filial conducts. Although he had no brothers, yet he treated all his clansmen as flesh and blood. He was honest and sincere to every one—never cheating any one, relatives, friends, or even strangers. He was never rude but always polite, getting along well with the public. He was always diligent and thrift, accumulating abundant wealth and farm lands, thus had been accepted as a promising talent as he was young. Now that he lived almost to 70 years old, he received the honor from the emperor. Wasn't he a gifted person as he has ranked with the most spectacular celebrities in the history?

His first wife from Family Li died when she gave birth to a son at her middle age. His second wife from Family Cheng was gentle and kind, adding to her husband's fame. She deserved the name of the good half. ... I am a worthless person, but I would exert myself to put down these ancestral deeds.

Xue Zhusan, an inexperienced student of Yixi School, kneels down and writes this inscription.

From the above we can infer a lot of information, but do not elaborate here. In fact, in stele, people can carve anything, such as the area and boundaries, family instructions and precepts, poetry and mottos, even litigations and legends and so forth. They constitute a plenty and complex historical text and provide direct materials for the study of regional history and culture, rural social life and family changes.

Of course, there are also decorative characters such as Fu (fortune), Lu (wealth), Shou (longevity), Xi (happiness), etc., most of which are extremely exquisite auspicious patterns and decorative patterns. It will be discussed in another article separately.

THE FORM OF INSCRIPTION CALLIGRAPHY WHICH EMPHASIZES BOTH STANDARD AND NATURAL GRACE

Till Ming Dynasty, the style and decoration techniques of Chinese traditional architecture tended to be mature and stable. The application of calligraphy not only would enrich the visual image of architecture, but also promote the cultural connotation. Then, calligraphic works as architectural ornament and

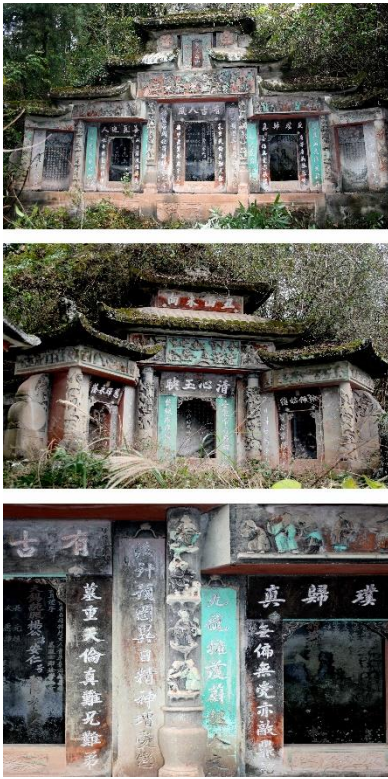


Fig.5 Yang Anren and his wife's tombs in Jiulong, Wangcang (the 8th year of Daoguang of Qing Dynasty)

interior decoration together with horizontal inscribed board and couplets had been quite mature and stylized. This process is also a process of calligraphy art popularization, that is, calligraphy art and folk life is getting closer and closer. “Calligraphy in Ming Dynasty played an important role in house gardens, home decoration, folk customs, imperial examination and commercial economy development. This trend of popularization makes calligraphy more popular and the development of calligraphy art more vigorous (Gao Wentao, 2016:92-96).” This trend also extends to the tombs of Ming and Qing dynasties. If we compare a large number of tombs of Song Dynasty in southern Sichuan, we will find that there are not many inscriptions on the tombs of Song Dynasty, let alone the pursuit of exquisite calligraphy. Obviously, when focus on burial construction was moved from underground to aboveground, from closed coffin chamber which attached importance to buried objects to open buildings which cared more about beauty-oriented buildings like patterned tablets, Calligraphy was more widely used in tomb buildings. As a result, calligraphy on tomb buildings has even more forms and content than on residence, and gradually forms its own standard format. With the change of architectural type, size and configuration, the font, number and size of words on burial buildings have also changed a lot. They are almost totally different from each other. Therefore, they present a very rich expression style of the folk inscription calligraphy, and also show the infinite creativity of folk craftsmen, squires and underclass intellectuals.

Tomb couplet and horizontal inscription are usually regarded as the face of burial architecture, and their form and content reflect the nature, status and the owner's personal philosophy and aesthetics. Yang Anren and his wife's cemetery mentioned above has actually two separate tombs, which is quite rare. Yang Anren's tomb is a medium-sized tomb with five widths and four eaves. (Fig.5) It can be seen that the three parts in the middle on the first floor of the tomb are equipped with double-column couplets. There are 8 couplets in total, with 11 characters for the most and 7 characters for the least, orderly arranged and symmetrically neat. There are four characters on each horizontal scroll, dignified and gracious, and inside the secondary tablet is a tribute to the tomb owner. Font, size and number of the words are decided by the size of the columns. Many have plane surfaces while some have curved surface and carved decorative lines, frame or patterns. On some columns, there are carved plates resembling the wooden plate hanging on a wooden building and even nail heads beautifully decorated, providing an artistic background for the text.

Bian, a horizontal inscribed board, according to *Shuowenjiezi*, “Bian means to sign name on the gate of a house”, is a flat board hanging below eaves or above a door for decoration, with large characters on it. Bian usually indicates the name and nature of a building and its owner’s ambition and interest. It can be hung horizontally or vertically. The top of the columns of a burial building tended to be carved into a horizontal board in a tilted hanging manner, and look like a relief square or fan, etc. at the lower part doornails are carved to imitate the wooden plaques on the building as much as possible. Though most time the horizontal scroll and couplets of a tomb integrated in one, with 2, 3, 4 words or so, special modeling used to be made to separate them intentionally. And on the tomb memorial monuments or on the spirit hall of a large-scale tomb, horizontal inscribed boards would be decorated especially exquisite and luxurious, and the text on the board would be decorated with cloud-dragon pattern, twined flower pattern or fret.

In a word, it is an important way for Chinese people to show the respect to characters to decorate texts with patterns or place the text in an obvious position to make room for it.

In this region it’s common to see a kind of horizontal board that hangs over tombs and memorial monuments with words written vertically on. Let’s call it “LiBian (vertical plaque)”, on which are “rewarded by the emperor with gratitude”, “elder blessed by the heaven” “honored by imperial edict” “moral integrity spread to later generations”, in large solemn font and decorated with complicated intricate ornamentation, such as dragon and phoenix pattern, hollowed-out flower pattern, etc. These plaques are usually official commendations for longevity and filial piety, so they have their sources and names. During the investigation of Tongjiang, an old man told a story that a Luo family built a tomb and asked the county government for seal but only to be refused. Then they used a fake one privately on the board inscription, but were accused and the tomb was finally demolished.

In the feudal society where the ideology of official standard dominated, especially in the remote countryside, such horizontal boards together with the texts and seal on them were a symbol of official “presence”. It had enough authority to the local and reflected a control and regulation over the local. Thus it would also bring honor to the receiver and his family, and even promote their status in society. The authorities were happy to use them as a means of civil governance. So the texts in the horizontal boards have been more than calligraphy and become a kind of symbol.



Fig.6 Calligraphic works of Zhang Wenbing's tomb in Zhangjiahe Village, Cangxi County

Compared with the texts in the beam columns, which have large font, a few characters and fixed writing format, the chirography of burial buildings are much more flexible. Except that epitaphs in the central stele or secondary part are relatively fixed and adopted intaglio regular script, other texts are mostly in running or cursive script. The content relates to the tomb owner's identity, career virtues, cemetery geomancy, family glory, etc., mostly expressed in the form of narrative prose or poetry, at the same time the layout of the text paid more attention to.

Zhang Wenbing's tomb in Zhangjiahe Village, Cangxi County, is a joint burial tomb of husband and wife. It is also a tomb with excellent carving and calligraphy arts, of which the carving works of the first-floor architrave and the three carved decorative stone discs with a diameter of more than 60 cm have survived through several robberies and been preserved. The central stele is divided into two widths by a center pillar, inside which is Xiangtang hall, a place to commemorate ancestors. The design of the door cover between the columns is more ingenious, with exquisite bottle decoration carved below, holding up an arc-shaped banner with more than ten lines of running scripts. It is simply this part that can make the tomb so exquisite, so impressive: the rhythm of the winding or straight lines, decorative components with picturesque disorder, the pattern and layout of refined density, all these let people marvel at folk craftsmen's superb skills and their extraordinary taste. So much so that every time I went there I had to worry about its preservation.

The inner wall of Xiangtang hall is full of inscriptions. On one side of the upper wall is a unrolled triple scroll while on the other side is a similar structure composed of three pomegranate. The left and right sides are symmetrical, varied, natural and interesting, which seems quite easy and shows the flexible designs of folk craftsmen. Lines of running scripts are engraved on it. The first half of the pomegranate is engraved with: "visiting the banks of Sishui River for days, I found boundless beautiful scenes at the moment". The second half seems to be another two sentences, but the handwriting has been blurred, and many of its calligraphy works are almost hard to read because they have been soaked by water and air-slaked. It is really a pity. (Picture 6)

It can be seen that on the one hand, the inscriptions on tombs follow the standard format and special rules; on the other hand, it also boldly breaks through the inherent pattern and presents a free and casual side. This is also the charm of folk art—it has a fixed pattern or tries to imitate the "high-end" official style and the appearance of the literati and scholar-officials' tombs, but

also often does not stick to the law, or according to the situation, or by improvising, or even via temporary supplement, etc. In this way, the form of calligraphic tablet inscriptions, which pay equal attention to both standardization and freedom, is presented on the building, forming a rich and diverse folk art of tablet inscriptions.

The scale, carving decoration and inscriptions of burial buildings are three basic factors that must be considered in the construction of a tomb. Texts of inscriptions here not only provide necessary readable information, but also realize semantic polysemy through the selection and presentation of font, chirography, position, decorative image, writer's identity and so on. While realizing the proper, appropriate and complete content and function of the text required by the tomb itself, it obviously values the visual form and artistic expression of the text. It is because of this that the Qing Dynasty folk calligraphic inscriptions relics develop with wide distribution, rich forms and content and high artistic level in this region. It is not an exaggeration to say it is grand. However, apart from a few collections by genealogists and folk cultural figures, their conservation status is still worrying.

COOPERATION BETWEEN FOLK ARTISANS AND LITERATI WITH GOOD EDUCATION It is a solemn and important thing to compose grave inscriptions, so people of local renown or status would be requested to do it. Just as *Wanyuan County Annals* records:

Inscription and couplets are all written by famous people. After a man's death, his son should deal with the tomb to show his filial piety. This is usually the case. Some people would even build their own tomb when they're still are living, commonly known as "shrine (for living people)", and ask people to write the inscriptions and couplets, many of which are false reputation and often mocked by acquaintances. (Ding Shiliang, 1991:320)

Though there may not be many literati in traditional rural areas, many would work hard on calligraphy because there used to be high requirements on writing in the imperial examination and there was even a tendency to "restrain the writing and emphasize the characters". Therefore, their "treasured calligraphic" works would have a chance to stay on the tombstone. Epitaphs and inscriptions written by famous scholars have been very popular since the Han and Tang dynasties. Liu Gongquan, a famous calligrapher, wrote a large number of epitaphic notes. It is recorded that if the inscription was not written by Liu Gongquan after the death of a minister at that time, his descendants would even be called unfilial. It can be seen that the description in *Wanyuan*

County Annals—Inscription and couplets are all written by famous people seems to have become a natural choice. This concept of valuing tombstone calligraphy continues to this day, which is the result of Chinese people's love and belief in writing and calligraphy.

On the sidewall of a central stele on the left side of Qin Zhanlong's tomb in Qinjiaba, Zengjia Town, Wanyuan County (15th of lunar February in 31st year of Guangxu in Qing Dynasty), an inscription describes how the tomb owner asked someone to write this article:

Just in February, my uncle invited me to a dinner. He said to me at the dinner: "I and your aunt are both over seventy years old. We should plan for our place after death, gather some craftsmen to build stone residence. Could you help to write (the inscriptions for the stele)?" I felt nervous and replied: "your young nephew, I have only a little knowledge and usually neglect writing (missing words)" uncle said it was just to introduce a general life experience. Then I began writing.

This story vividly and specifically depicts that as the elder tomb owner carefully put forward the requirements for an inscription at a formal banquet, the writer naturally declined politely, but eventually agreed. It is unfortunate that the signature is incomplete.

On a stone tablet in the cemetery of Jia Ruzhen in Dongqing Town of Cangxi County was inscribed a text "A Tale of Mister Jia Building a Shrine". It says:

In my hometown there is a Mr. Jia called Zeren. He is frank and honest, easy-mannered, and behaves well. One day he met me and said: "we have known each other for a long time and get on well. You know well what I have experienced and done in my whole life. Now I'm going to build a shrine in advance. If you write the inscription, then you would not lose my true colors." I first declined humbly and then agreed to write. The signature is: Confucian Student Your little brother Wang Jiazhen wrote with respect in humility.

Both paragraphs vividly record the scene when the writers were asked to write an epitaph, especially when the writers politely and modestly declined, and then readily agreed. This reflects that writing epitaph is a very serious and formal thing, and it is not easy and casual for the person entrusted. It should be a challenge, but also a sense of honor.

From the signatures of inscription in this area, it can be known that most of the inscriptions are written by their relatives, nephews and grandsons, as well as people with different surnames and local officials. A person might write



Fig.7 Couplets written by Zhang Zhidong

both article and calligraphy for the tablet, or someone else might share the work. The writers usually end up with the format of status, name plus “composed reverently” or only “composed reverently”, “wrote reverently” etc. Many were written by people with good education, like Confucian students in local schools, scholars who live on government grants; and inscriptions written by successful candidates in the imperial examinations and scholars recommended by local governments are also common. For example, the signature of the inscription preface of General Lei Futian’s tomb in Huacheng Town, Bazhong City is: “Magistrate of Bazhou Lei Erqing composed; Nanjiang Confucian student of Baoning Political School, Lei Zerong wrote. Guangxu Qing Dynasty”. The other two five-character poems are separately signed with “Successful candidate in provincial imperial exam in Dingmao year, successive magistrate of the county Lei Wenyuan wrote”, “Successful candidate in provincial imperial exam in Jiazi year, candidate magistrate Lei Zhenrong wrote”. Seemingly their statuses were not low, which may be associated with the tomb owner's identity and association.

Cheng Simeng’s tomb in Longquan, Sanchuan Town, Cangxi County is a large-scale tomb, whose carving technique is quite good. Its calligraphy is not extraordinary, but at the beginning of a half-round-headed tablet were engraved 4 lines:

Epigraph of assistant minister Mister Cheng and his wife’s tomb; Honour candidate prefect, Chengdu County, Zhongjiang State, Sichuan Province, Shen Bingrong composed; recommended student, trial magistrate of a county, present officer of Police Department Little Brother Du Lingyun wrote; imparted successful candidate in the imperial examinations of Guimao year, selected magistrate of a county Tongli, Yang Zhen cut the seal characters.

Watching the tombstone, we will find that, in addition to a few eye-catching large words “blessed by god” at the upper part of central stele and the “fu” decorative word outside the top, the rest are conventional columns and horizontal boards. Since the inscriptions inside the central stele and the two secondary parts had been destroyed, we can only guess that there should have been wonderful inscriptions to match the carving. Cheng’s descendant, an old man of 70, could also recite the lost main couplet for us, and wrote it on the tombstone with a stone: “Nine dragons holding longevity at the carefree tower, five phoenixes flying around the auspicious place”. He was afraid the descendants would forget it. It is written here in case of being forgotten.

In view of this, it seems that more than one person would write couplets,

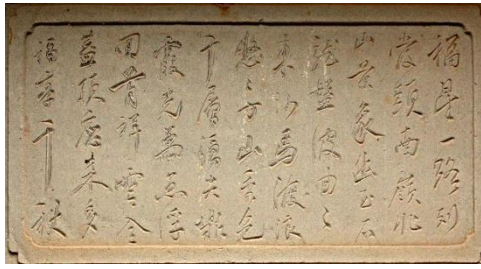


Fig.8 running script on Zhang Youxian' tomb, Lingshan Village, Pingchang.

horizontal boards and inscriptions, so a large tomb, or family cemetery is often a collection of calligraphy inscriptions and also a collection of culture.

Among the folk inscriptions, people found some masters' works. For example Zhang Zhidong once wrote a pair of tomb couplet: higher prestige than Guizhang (valuable jade ritual, compared to noble minds) is bequeathed to descendants, fragrance from orchid and laurel (compared to prosperous and distinguished descendants) decorates sacrificial vessels to inform ancestors; the signature is Sichuan Education Commissioner the third in national civil imperial examination Zhang Zhidong wrote reverently. His chirography is solemn and elegant, the strokes are straight and in appropriate dense, which really shows the grace of an education commissioner. (Fig.7) In addition, we also found Deng Shiru's five-font writing inscriptions. (Li Jiaojiao, 1985: 11) It is certain that as the study progresses, there may be some more surprises. As for those horizontal boards in the name of gifts, they were at least written by officials of the imperial court, which was also the accumulation of the inscription calligraphy culture in this region.

Of course, the craftsmen played an important role in this process, and thus there were many studies on the engravers throughout the ages. Tomb inscriptions in tombs and burial buildings in Sichuan and Chongqing are usually finished by the craftsmen who are responsible for building tombs. They also put their names in buildings, often calling themselves stonecutters, craftsmen, stone men, etc. Their skills and crafts have a direct impact on the calligraphy level of tablet inscriptions.

Most of the inscriptions are engraved, whose incision section is triangular, the depth of carving is related to font size and carving skills. If cleanly cut, the characters look strong, clear and neat; if the incision is round and blunt, then they look simple, firm and steady. Some larger characters are more exquisite, their bottom often carved smooth or arc, so that they look decorous and neat. Some are just scribed with lines at the outer edge of the strokes, with a slope for gradual transition, the middle part of the stroke leveled with the character layout, also quite a taste, which is also great. In Zhang Youxian's tomb in Lingshan Town, Pingchang County, there are tens of calligraphy inscriptions on the tombstone, accompanying monument, tomb memorial archway and the grave wall. The ink line of "double hooked" inscriptions on the tomb memorial archway is still quite clear, which allows us to have a glimpse of the process of inscription on the tablet. (As shown in Picture 8) on closer inspection, I found that a number of ink lines are not very precise, and some even a little sloppy.

Ink lines of a few characters' outer contour are still retained, presumably more different from the writing on paper. But on the whole, the writing structure is regular and generous, neat, smooth overall and has full dynamic sense, which still can be regarded as wonderful works. In some extent the craftsmen still have relatively skillful techniques. The inscription shows that the craftsmen are Li Chunrong and Li Enrong.

On some inscriptions, we can clearly see that on the one hand engravers would revise some characters for the convenience of engraving, on the other hand they may also adjust some words that are not well written. Of course, sometimes artisans would deliberately "embellish" something too much, but the overall condition of the writing is preserved. That's not a problem with a skilled, experienced craftsman. It was these craftsmen who made the calligraphy and writing of ancient literati remain on the stone for a long time as a witness to history and culture.

The inscription on the gravestone of Tian Dacheng's tomb in Ziyun Town, Yuanba District, Guangyuan City allows us to see clearly this cooperation of composing, writing and engraving. The inscription says:

Yiwei year of Daoguang (1835, 15th year) imparted successful candidate in the imperial examinations, Confucian instructor of Guangyuan County, candidate magistrate of the county Liu Ji composed reverently. Student at county school the son-in-law Zhao Jinyan wrote the calligraphy with respect. Stonecutter Jiang Chaofu Built in early March of 2nd year of Xianfeng.

This kind of cooperation between literati and artisans has an inexplicable tacit understanding, which is derived from thousands of years of Chinese stele inscriptions cultural tradition; some ancient famous calligraphers even had their own special carving artisans. In this way the ideal of the host or the bereaved family, the family history, the literati's interest and the craftsman's skill converge here, making a tombstone rich and substantial. The skill of the folk craftsmen and the interest of the literati came together, so that this kind of folk funeral customs and Chinese traditional rites and beliefs could be passed on. The craftsmen give literati's simple words with special texture and structural form and make it an important component of architecture.

ARTISTIC FEATURES OF INSCRIPTION CALLIGRAPHY The inscription calligraphy of tombs presents different visual effects due to the differences of architectural type, carving technology and writing style. Inscriptions also take on different features due to different content, location, size and carving techniques. They can be solemn and dignified, or plain but



Fig.9 various chirographies on Zheng's tomb in Dahe, Nanjiang County

elegant, or light and graceful, or simple and rough, like a folk inscription calligraphy database of Qing Dynasty. If epitaph and its preface and so on mainly undertake the function of narration and biography, then the horizontal inscribed boards and couplets on beams and columns are more a kind of form symbol that decorate the building so as to improve the taste, grade and even rank of the building.

The most concerned is of course the calligraphy of column couplets and horizontal boards. As mentioned earlier, the texts on columns are written in regular script or Xingkai (a style between the running hand and the regular script) most commonly, running script second, and there is also seal character. The writing is standard and in neat formation, stresses neat antithesis and auspicious implication, and reads easy. For column couplets of multiples widths, their font, number of words, content, size and position would be paid attention to so that they have rich layers and orderly pace.

For example, Yang Anren's tomb mentioned earlier has multiple columns that were written by several people. They can be classified into gatepost couplet (on door pocket of a width) and column couplet. In terms of the former, its calligraphy stroke is mellow and full, the glyph is plump, the structure is dignified, which gives people a frank magnanimous feeling. In contrast, column couplets of the central stele are relatively formal, with strong brushwork and square upright structure and those of the secondary part elegant and clear, with smooth strokes. Together, they create a rich display effect of calligraphy, with good readability and artistry.

At Zheng's tomb in Dahe Town Nanjiang County in Sichuan, there is a pair of tomb couplet with three styles—regular script, running script and seal script, which is often visible in other tombs. This tomb couplet has large characters, upright shape, open stroke, but it is also rigorous, especially the running script on the three horizontal scrolls. The stroke is so skilled and liquid that it almost makes people feel the writer's expression and movement at that time. (Fig.9)



Fig.10 Character tower and memorial archway in front of Chen Junji's tomb in Tongjiang (left); the main tombstone and accompanying monument in the cemetery.

The tomb of Chen Junji and his wife in Tongjiang (in 1895, the 21st year of Guangxu Reign of Qing Dynasty) has become a provincial key cultural preservation in Sichuan for its architectural form and sculpture decoration. The architectural style, carving and decoration of the tomb, as well as the inscription and calligraphy of the tablet all give people a sense of simpleness and elegance and a reserved and straight air. Its style and artistic level are unique among the tombs of Qing Dynasty in Sichuan and Chongqing, of which

the overall design and effect are rare in folk art. (Fig.10)

According to preliminary statistics, the texts of this tomb were composed and written by nearly ten people, distributed in the main tombstone, accompanying monument, tomb memorial archway, character tower and baluster. In front of the tomb is a pair of stone square columns more than 4 meters tall, with a pair of stone lions on the top (stolen later). On the front surface is engraved with a 48-character long couplet.

The texts on the columns and the memorial tablet “honored by imperial edict” at the upper part of memorial monument—holding beautiful jade and big ambition in the universe; leaving scholarly honor and official success to encourage descendants, as well as an inscription preface, were all written by Pu Min, this successful candidate in the imperial examinations.

In order to ensure the tomb memorial archway is stable, the front and back of the column are often supported by wide drum-shaped bearing stones, whose height often occupies more than half of the column. Then the rest of the space is very short, so the columns of tomb memorial archway seldom have couplets. But on the front and back of the upper column of the central stele at the tomb of Chen Junji and his wife was engraved a pair of long couplets with more than 10 characters. On the front side is:

As both a good son and husband his deportment respected by a generation in the southwest, as both a virtuous woman and loving mother her strength and elegance heard for years.

Front column of the tomb archway Specially asked the teacher of Tongjiang the imparted candidate in the imperial examination in Guisi year Chen Dexin inscribed.

On the back is:

With sincere heart the mother is distinguished for her virginity and the son for longevity; with two-width fine places are surrounded by mountains and guarder by waters.

Selected scholar in the highest imperial examinations in Xinyou year Lecturer of Donggao Academy Chen Yuanliang wrote.

Since the text is divided into two lines on the column, compared with the regular column couplet, the characters are naturally much smaller and need a closer look. Regular script, with the style of clerical script, mellow and strong, beautiful and neat, showing an extraordinary artistic level, really matches the identity of the inscription writer as scholars in the imperial examinations. Naturally they were placed in the tomb memorial archway. Thus we have the



Fig.11 The column Calligraphy on Chen Junji's tomb.

honor to appreciate scholar's calligraphy attainment of the late Qing Dynasty. (Fig.11) The tomb couplets of the tomb owner's gravestone were written by different people, which all showed a dignified atmosphere. And the running script inside secondary parts on the left and right of the tomb is also very worth a view, but pitifully most has weathered off. (Fig.12)

The carving worker of this tomb is Gu Xianzhong. As mentioned earlier, the craftsman's inscription is of great importance. From the carved text on the column, we can see small angular characters whose strokes are clear, have artistic conception and consistently deep base, and are grinded smooth. The carving is in harmony with the handwritten text. This master's ability to deal with the overall design and details of the tomb is really admirable. At that time, a group of such highly skilled folk craftsmen worked actively in the southwest countryside, and these Qing dynasty burial buildings we see now are just their works.

Besides popular tomb couplets, horizontal inscribed board is the most striking inscription. First, horizontal board is positioned high between columns, standing out at the architrave; Second, its words are not many, but the font is large, elegant and the text terse and fluent. In addition, many boards come from distinguished people, and had been specially designed. Thus it has become important decoration of buildings to improve their taste or quality and is regarded as the eye of a building. For wooden-structure-imitating burial buildings, the importance of horizontal boards can't be emphasized more. In order to enhance the visual strength, its carving is more exquisite. The characters are often cut very deep, the bottom will be polished sunken and smooth, or the edge line emphasized to highlight the level and effect of the text; there is also coating, outlining in gold, etc. Whether it is used as the horizontal scroll of tomb couplets or the horizontal board on the square beam of door, it will be decorated with complicated ornamentation to improve the shape and pattern, or carved decorations, surrounded by characters, and becomes a part of the overall decoration of tomb buildings, which is also a major feature of the decoration of folk tombs in the Qing Dynasty. The characters not only undertake the function of "bringing out the theme" here, but also have the same decorative function as ornamentation and image.



Fig.12 The column couplets of the main tomentone of Chen Junji's tomb

Chinese people always attach great importance to symmetry, especially in ritual architecture, and emphasize central axis and symmetry all the time. But the symmetry in China is a balance of momentum on both sides, not absolute equality on both sides. Couplet is a typical example of this symmetry in

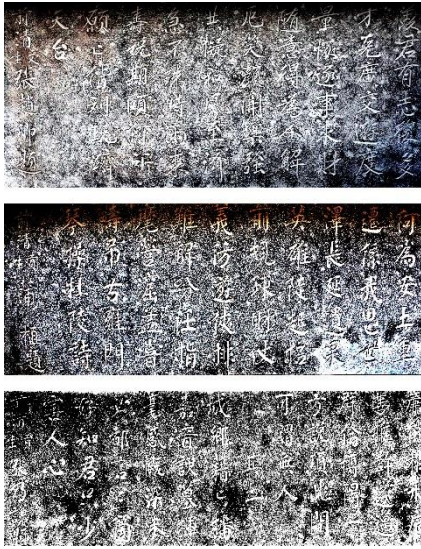


Fig.13 The calligraphy of Fang Wanrong's tomb in Wanyuan County

Chinese style. If we take into account the “horizontal scroll” or “horizontal board” that always accompany couplets, we will find that the emphasis of Chinese people on symmetry has another hidden purpose, that is, the emphasis on “zhong (the middle)”. That is to say, this ritual symmetry is to highlight and emphasize the “one” in the middle; that’s why Chinese culture values the Yang number, that is, odd number, because odd number always makes “one” exists in the middle beyond symmetry. (Luo Xiaohuan, 2014: 114-117) In this way, the emphasis and decoration of the tomb couplets is also to enhance the symmetry of the whole building and highlight the central part of the tomb. Because the memorial tablet, statue and text in the central stele is what really matters.

If we say the number of words in tomb couplet and inscribed board is relatively small, and the writing requirements are strictly regulated and bound by the overall style of burial building, then the contents and forms of inscriptions on tablet, grave wall and accompanying monuments are much more free and casual. The content generally would be a complete poem or even a complete article, and the calligraphy style is based on the writer’s interest, running script for the most part, but regular script and cursive script are also common. These texts and inscriptions display more freedom and nature.

Fang Wanrong’s tomb in Shiwo Town, Wanyuan County, Dazhou City, Sichuan, is a burial building built in late Qing Dynasty or early Republic of China. It has complicated type and surely the engraving patterns are greatly exquisite and its calligraphy carving deserves attention in particular. The epitaphs in the central and secondary steles look vigorous, neat and solemn, with firm and strong strokes, which is really admirable. In front of the tomb is a stone courtyard, with a depth of 6 meters, a width of 8 meters and a height of 1.35 meters. Around the courtyard dam is the wall made of long square stone, and the characters on the walls are distinctive and free in style. (Fig. 13,14)

As can be seen from well-preserved tomb inscriptions, just like creation on paper, there is also a complete presentation of “blank”, composition art, inscribed names, etc., which makes tomb inscriptions can be independent of burial building decoration and become independent calligraphy works. The craftsmen do not just passively transfer the characters written by the calligrapher to the stone, but also adjust them according to the overall design of the tomb building or the style of the partial components. Epitaph in the central or secondary stele is generally more formal, regularly and neatly written. Since there are many characters, from dozens to several hundred, it required carvers write at one stretch, which really challenges their writing skills.



Fig.14 The calligraphy on Fang Wanrong's wall in Wanyuan County

Therefore, it is possible that the author and calligrapher of these inscriptions are not the same person. In this way, those who are good at writing are not necessarily good at calligraphy. Only those who are good at calligraphy are able to or dare to write such long calligraphy. Thus it can be seen that the calligraphy art of these folk steles is worth a look.

Burial buildings have the characteristics of traditional rituals and daily life. In addition to the writing function of burial rituals, obviously the characters show people's pursuit of aesthetics, personalization and artistry. Due to the different structure and location of buildings, they present different artistic appeal. They generally can be grouped as follows: Magnificent horizontal inscriptions, heavy and solemn tomb couplets, dignified and plain epitaph, free inscriptions, plain and rough preface and casual daily writing.

They are independent calligraphy and inscriptions works, and are actually part of the carving decoration of burial buildings as well. That is to say, the inscription calligraphy and carved images together contribute to the overall visual impression and aesthetic perception of the burial buildings, which can be viewed at a distance, perused, scanned, or make people pause to appreciate. Different from sealed tombs of previous generations buried in the underground, these aboveground burial buildings were built for people to "see". The most direct viewers may be clansmen, but more can be the community, even strangers. The burial buildings not only use location, shape, size and scale to create the effect for "distant view", but also present such rich details attracting people to linger as a large number of images, ornamentation and calligraphy, which not only create an atmosphere in space for the audience but also touch people in the sense of time. In such a space, customs and taboos are taught to the later generation in the daily family life through what they read and see. The authors and writers of inscriptions, as cultural elites and intellectuals in rural society, used these funeral customs and rituals to display and inherit folk beliefs and rural education. In this time-space process, later generations completed the memory of, communication with and commemoration of their ancestors, and completed the cultural inheritance and ethical education through these visual symbols and texts.

Mr. Zhou Ruchang said, "It is the nature of the Chinese nation to love Chinese characters. Ordinary people also know (the importance of) treasuring handwriting. Farmers do not know how to read, but at the New Year Festival they also strived for pasting bright red 'Spring Festival couplets', would find a

place to write and refused to ‘make do’.”¹ Perhaps from when Cang Jie created characters, the mystery and charm of characters to the Chinese have grown done to the bone. That’s why even in the countryside we often see those character towers often with statement “Cherish paper bearing written or printed words”.

In Qing Dynasty, the calligraphy level of ordinary intellectuals should not be too low, as the imperial examinations had quite high requirements for their calligraphy. It was recorded that Emperor Qianlong once was dissatisfied with the examiners who cared more about “calligraphic skill” than the content and said: “Today, when scholars discuss, express, judge, record something, they just echo what others have said, and the examiners also only focus on calligraphy level, that is, the text draws little attention. (If so) What does it mean to select a scholar? It’s pointless.”² Undoubtedly, this reflected indirectly the high requirements for writing at that time, which naturally influenced the intellectuals’ attention to calligraphy. However, of course, most texts of these inscriptions were written by ordinary intellectuals, whose calligraphy levels are not considered high. Anyway they have been part of Chinese culture accumulated for thousands of years, reflect people’s basic ideas and practical operation for writing at that time, and thus are closely related to their concept, faith, education and aesthetic fashion. Nowadays, the inscriptions in the open air have been seriously weathered and peeling off. Their preservation condition is worrying. It is imperative to catalog and digitize them. This paper only does this kind of foundation work.

FOUNDATION SUPPORT: This article is a periodical outcome of a humanities and social sciences project funded by the Ministry of Education: *Measurement of Ming and Qing Dynasty Stone Architecture and Building and Research of Oral Document Base in Bashu Area* (No. 19YJA760042). Besides, it is also an outcome of a major key training project of Chongqing Normal University—*Building and Research of Ming and Qing Dynasty Tomb Architecture Art Database in Sichuan Immigrant Area*.

¹ Zhou Ruchang. *Chinese People’s love for characters is the nature of the nation*. Douban Group. [OL].<https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/112353215.html>. 2011-01-05

² *Records of Emperor Gaozong of Qing Dynasty*, Vol.526, November, 21st year of Qianlong Reign.

Bibliography

Gao Wentao, *A Brief Description of Folk Calligraphy in Ming Dynasty*, *Journal of Beihua University* [J]. August 2016, pp:92-96

Wanyuan County Annals (Vol. 10, stereotype edition in the 21st year of Republic of China), cited from *A Collection of Chinese Chorography Folk Culture* (Southwest Volume) by Ding Shiliang, Zhao Fang et, Beijing Bibliography Literature Publishing House, 1991, p. 320

Li Jiaojiao, *Deng Shiru's five-font writing inscriptions*, *Sichuan Cultural Relics* [J].1985(3), 11

Luo Xiaohuan, *Research on the Decorative Structure of Folk Tombstones in the East and North of Sichuan in Qing Dynasty* [J] *Journal of Nanjing Art Institute* (Fine arts and Design), 2014(5) pp:114-117

Author: Luo Xiaohuan, Vice Dean, College of Fine Arts, Chongqing Normal University. Chongqing, China. Email: luo_xh910@qq.com