

# Zhao Zhiqian's Life and Artistic Achievements

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**Abstract:** Zhao Zhiqian (1829-1884) devoted his whole life to obtaining merit and fame and serving the imperial court, who always regarded merit and fame and helping the world as his foundation. However, his career was bumpy and forced him to make a living, so he embarked on the road of donating art for an official position. His seal cutting stood out from his numerous artistic achievements. He integrated Zhejiang and Anhui schools, the ancient and the present style, and became a generation of masters. His calligraphy was all skilled and refined in regular script, official script, seal script and running hand, and his painting could be regarded as the pioneer of Shanghai school in the south and had a great influence on Chen Shizeng and Qi Baishi in the north as well. He is versatile and could be called the all-around champion in the history of Chinese calligraphy, painting and seal cutting art.

**Keywords:** Zhao Zhiqian; Seal cutting; Calligraphy; Painting

## 1. Life Story of Zhao Zhiqian

Zhao Zhiqian (1829-1884), a native of Zhejiang Kuaiji, whose style name was "Huishu" or "Yifu", and was also named Lengjun, Bei'an, Beiweng, Wumen, etc. His study was named Kujian Room, Huidu Room, etc.

In the ninth year of Daoguang (1829), Zhao Zhiqian was born in Dafangkou, the east of Kaiyuan Temple in Shaoxing, and his ancestors engaged in business. His father Zhao Shouli, with the courtesy name Songyun, had ancestral asthma and lay on his bed all year round, resulting in the decline of the business. His mother, Zhang was industrious and virtuous. Cheng Bingyu said in The Epitaph of Zhao in Kuaiji: "... The family was rich but came down when he was born, and he strived to rise with scholarship." [1] That is to say, he took scholarship as his career and stopped business from his period of family.

Zhao Zhiqian was talented and gifted in childhood. He could write with a writing brush at the age of two and went to school at four. Getting a little older, he could recite what he had read. "I have deep thoughts and often come up with new ideas, and the teacher could not give me the answer." [2] Zhao Zhiqian began to study epigraphy at the age of 17 and worshipped Shen Fuchan as my teacher. At the age of 20, he became a scholar by the examination, and at the age of 21, he entered the Miao curtain. In 1859, he became a provincial graduate, but later, he ran to the region of Fujian Province because of the chaos. He was determined to get fame and an official career all his life. He tried the Ministry of Rites four times and later donated his works for an official position, a county magistrate in Jiangxi. In the tenth year of Guangxu (1884), Zhao Zhiqian died of an old disease in the official house in Nancheng at the age of 56.

## 2. Artistic Achievements in Seal Cutting of Zhao Zhiqian

Among his various artistic achievements, seal cutting is the most outstanding. Zhao Zhiqian studied seal cutting early and mainly by himself. "I learned from Mansheng for a long time, knowing it was not satisfied, then abandoned it." [3] "At the beginning, I followed Longhong and Wanbai. Later, I integrated the styles of Hui and Zhejiang schools, and tried to catch up with the style of Qin and Han Dynasty." [4] At the beginning, I mainly studied from the Zhejiang School. He realized that some of the Zhejiang School overemphasized cutting techniques and lacked the sense of writing, so I abandoned it and began to change from "Zhejiang" to "Deng" School. He made a seal carved in relief as "Jihuan", and left an inscription as "Followed the style of Deng and imitated for Jihuan. Ding Si was in October. The seal carved in relief from the Six Dynasties was just like that, and there were many Han seals at present, so this will become great." [5] Zhao Zhiqian studied the "Deng" school mainly to learn seal carved in relief of Deng Shiru. He believed that Deng Shiru's skill had reached the level of that in the Six Dynasties. When his style of the seal carved in relief changed, his imitation of the seal carved in intaglio of the Han Dynasty began to appear. In his opinion, making the Han-style seal, "the difficulty lies in the achievement, not in the layout" [6] "the importance lies in the connotation, but not in the mottle," [7] Huang Mufu once commented on his works: "Zhao Yifu imitates the style of the Han Dynasty, no seal is incomplete, no painting is not smooth, incessantly like an artisan carving a jade, and his works are full of the sense of ancient." [8] Zhao Zhiqian's imitation of the Han-style seal is of high level, with a realistic and ancient style.

In the early stage of the study, Zhao Zhiqian imitated the Han seal and imitated the Zhejiang School to "seek the approach from the seal" and "seek the approach from the books". And he was deeply influenced by Deng Shiru. He inherited the seal style of various schools, but those can not present his innovation and achievements in seal cutting. "Determined to open up the road and a new

situation"<sup>[9]</sup> and "to open up a new prospect for those who made seal cuttings"<sup>[10]</sup> is his ambition. With the learning basis in the early stage, Zhao Zhiqian was not satisfied with the current situation, and then expanded the scope of methods, explored and innovated, and entered a new stage of "seeking seal outside seal" in creative practice. As Wu Changshuo commented<sup>[11]</sup>, Zhao Zhiqian has studied epigraphy, in which he has made great achievements. He could recite the ancient and some strange characters and easily make it. In the aspect of seal cutting, he stands out from others by using those characters in the seal. It is enough to show his high-level skill of creations. His superb creative ability "to seek the approach outside the seal" has effectively promoted the historical development process of seal cutting creation.

Zhao Zhiqian spread his intelligence on the surface of the seal and unprecedentedly created it on the side. The regular script of the Wei Dynasty and carved in relief into the inscription are both pioneered by him. He also carved with simple and deformed animals, Buddhist statues and circus vaudeville."<sup>[12]</sup>In October in 1863, Hu Shu said that "It's even better to recommend his method and think that the inscription is as wonderful as the cliff statues of the northern and Southern Dynasties. His skills are accomplished like a god. His forms of presentation on the side inscription of the seal are innovative, which is unprecedented before, and many of them are pioneered by him. His form is unique and rich in content, either for textual research, seal theory, recording events, expressing ambition, etc. His artistic achievements on the side inscription of the seal are remarkable. In terms of the method and the level he has arrived at, he stands out from the ancients, and most people can not catch up with him." Later generations are influenced by his seal cutting art, including Hu Jue, Wu Changshuo, Huang Shiling, Zhao Shuru, and Qi Baishi, etc. His thought and creative practice of seal cutting have deeply influenced future generations with the spirit of "just being first and foremost but not being a teacher".

### 3. Artistic Achievements of Calligraphy of Zhao Zhiqian

Zhao Zhiqian has a unique understanding of learning calligraphy, that is, "enhancing literacy internally and improving painting skills externally,"<sup>[13]</sup> He not only pays attention to his internal cultivation but insists on studying hard as well. When talking about the state of a calligrapher, he once said: "there are only two figures reached the highest level. The talent could be seen when one is three years old, and if he is determined to be a great scholar with knowledge, he must be extremely talented and gifted."<sup>[14]</sup> Zhao Zhiqian believes that there are two kinds of the highest level of a calligrapher: one is that he must have the condition of "a great scholar", that is, "enhancing literacy internally", which has the excellent quality, and his works can be the greatest. The second is the spiritual talent of the "three-year-old child", coupled with the hard work of "improving painting skills externally", and with that, one can reach the highest level of a calligrapher. While, Zhao Zhiqian has both talent and academic intension (in his letter to Wei Xizeng, he once described himself "my talent accounts for 70% in arts and another 30% was diligence", while the talent of Deng Shiru was 40%, Bao Shichen 30%, and Wu Rangzhi only 10%). From his point of view, the ancient and simple tripod of Shang and Zhou Dynasties, the seal of the Qin dynasty, and tiles of the Han Dynasty are all the objects of his study, which has made him excellent in calligraphy.

Zhao Zhiqian is good at all four calligraphy styles and has reached the realm of mutual integration, and Mengxing admires him a lot. Zhao Zhiqian said in his letter to Mengxing: "if you want to print my characters, it is not necessary to print all four styles of script. I can only write the formal script because the seal script is more informal, the regular script is laxer. In addition, I am not good at the cursive script and haven't learned the running script, so it can only be regarded as a draft." He could write the official script based on the seal script and write the regular script based on the official script. He is good at all four styles, and he can integrate them skillfully. Zhao Zhiqian believes that there is a close connection and mutual integration between them, and that is why he thinks that "it is not necessary to print all four styles" and the regular script is enough.

Zhao Zhiqian said in Essays of Zhang An: "Before I was 20 years old, I learned 500 words from The Tablet of the Yans, but didn't get anything. Then I looked for the ancient calligraphy and imitate each, and still got nothing. While when I saw only ten characters of Shangu, I began to have some understanding. Occasionally, I wrote some characters, and my handwriting became different, and I felt that it was gradually altered. I didn't imitate any character of him, however, when Taoshu saw my characters, he think that I learned from Shangu. He was also my great confidant for decades."<sup>[15]</sup> The words above show that Zhao Zhiqian learned The Tablet of the Yans, "seek ancient calligraphy", and "study the style of Huang Tingjian" in his early years, and then put it into the tablet. He also wrote the running script in a regular script style of the Wei Dynasty, which is the first precedent of the Wei-style running script. He said earlier that "I didn't learn running script ever, and can only write" is self-deprecating. Zhao Zhiqian's regular script, official script, seal script, and running script are all excellent. They have been integrated, which is the realm of "four-styles-combined script" mentioned in the Three Chapters of Hanrao Song.

Zhao Zhiqian's outstanding achievement of "all four styles are great" in calligraphy deeply impacts future generations. In the postscript of Letter to Zhao Zhiqian, Wu Changshuo said: "His handwriting is unique and his literary style is super. Scholars dare not catch up with him at present."<sup>[16]</sup> Zhang Zongxiang said in Origin of Calligraphy and Painting that "Huishu is able to distinguish carving and calligraphy with the skills from the statues. In addition, he could combine the style of running hand and the regular scripts; he is extremely talented and incompatible."<sup>[17]</sup> Fu Zhu also commented on his works: "His calligraphy is like his painting, and both are domineering. He has the most skillful calligraphy of the Northern Wei Dynasty. His stroke is solid but changes, for this reason, it is valuable. Other styles are proficient as well but some people regard it as a bad habit."<sup>[18]</sup> Zhao Zhiqian is proficient in all styles of calligraphy, and he is best at the regular script. He integrates the stroke of regular script into the running hand perfectly, and this method is the first and foremost; that is his most representative style. While Kang Youwei has different views on Zhao Zhiqian: "Huishu learned from the regular script of the style of Wei Dynasty and had his own style, but the sense is not enough. Now, most people discuss the regular script, and that is all decadent words, which is Huishu's fault"<sup>[19]</sup> Most people wrote in regular script at that time, which was regarded as "decadent words". Kang Youwei attributed it to Zhao Zhiqian's fault, and that was a personal and subjective evaluation. However, there is no evidence that it was not "all decadent words", but at the same time, it is enough to show his great influence in this area at that time.

## 4. Achievements in Painting of Zhao Zhiqian

As an all-around artist with a great personality, Zhao Zhiqian has made great achievements in calligraphy and seal cutting, and his paintings of landscapes, flowers and figures are omnipotent. Most of his paintings that were handed down are flowers, but few are landscapes and figures. The paintings of flowers are remained more than others and acquired high achievements. Therefore, the later generations could be greatly influenced and have a wide research field. In the inscriptions of his paintings of flowers and birds, the previous painters are often mentioned who were imitated by him: Zhu Da, Li Shan, Yun Shouping, Jiang Tingxi, Chen Hongshou, Li Fangying, Jin Nong, Shi Tao, and so on. His innovation in the painting of flowers and birds, rooted in tradition and not losing the ancient method, promoted the creation to a new situation based on inheriting the predecessors.

In *History of Chinese Painting*, Pan Tianshou said that "Zhao Huishu is modest, . . . He was the pioneer of the pre-Shanghai school, who was so excellent. Temporarily, many scholars began to learn from him. Few would like to study the style of Nantian school."<sup>[20]</sup> Huang Binhong once said that Zhao Zhiqian's paintings are "rich and ancient with the style of epigraphy."<sup>[21]</sup> Zhao Zhiqian also said in his inscription: "it is difficult to be simple and unadorned from learning the paintings of Nantian School, but only to be specious. That is not very meaningful."<sup>[22]</sup> The paintings of Nantian School is too specious without the style of epigraphy, so few would like to discuss and study. The works of Zhao Zhiqian are distinguished from others with the sense of epigraphy, and many artists highly recommend them. Zhao Zhiqian developed the style of epigraphy in painting, and he is the pioneer of Shanghai School and the pioneer of the times leading the development of painting. His unique painting style is first and foremost of the Shanghai school in the south and had a significant impact on Chen Shizeng and Qi Baishi in the north.

Few works of his figure paintings were handed down, only *Zuikuixing*, which was painted for Han Fosheng, Zhong Kui, and Longwei Zhangren. On the left side of *Zhong Kui*, which is now in possession of the Palace Museum, Wu Changshuo wrote that "Changshuo has read", and Wu Changshuo deeply appreciates Zhao's works. Zhao Zhiqian wrote, "I have been selling paintings for a living for twenty years, and *Zhong Kui* is painted with no outline. If you ask me the reason, I will be speechless and pretend to be a fool. When May 5th comes every year, countless *Zhong Kui* appears in every family. I just want to get some profit and it is not suitable to imitate the original image. The inscription was my casual work, but it was appreciated by others. The painting was made in Hangzhou in the ninth year of Tongzhi."<sup>[23]</sup> As is mentioned above, his paintings of *Zhong Kui* are numerous and artistic but exist few. His figure paintings have many long inscriptions, and the combination of words and pictures is witty and meaningful. This painting style has had a significant impact on Qi Baishi and other later generations and has been further developed.

Nowadays, the study of his paintings mostly focuses on flowers, but few care about landscapes and figures. Despite the small number of his works, the styles of landscape paintings are diverse. From his existing works, it can be seen that his skills in painting landscapes are as excellent as that of flowers and birds.

Zhao Zhiqian's landscape paintings handed down more than figure paintings, among which there are many delicate works. He studied landscape painting early, and in the inscription of *Landscape* created for Jingchu in 1864, Zhao Zhiqian said: "it has been 15 years since I didn't paint the landscape. However, Jingchu wanted it, so I finished this for him."<sup>[24]</sup> In 1864, Zhao Zhiqian was 36 years old, and he said that it has been 15 years since he didn't paint landscape (it's not absolute not to paint the landscape, but seldom painted). After the age of 21, Zhao Zhiqian didn't paint the landscapes. He had a solid foundation for landscape painting already. In his early years, he made more landscapes paintings, and then he focused on his official career. Forced by his livelihood, he didn't paint landscapes. The posterity all felt regret for it.

His inscription shows that he studied and imitated some prominent figures of the Yuan Dynasty, such as Wang Meng, Wu Zhen and Ni Zan, etc. He often accumulated ink while painting the landscapes. Huang Binhong said in *Ink Using* that "this method of ink using was derived from Dong Ju, and Wu Zhonggui applied it the best."<sup>[25]</sup> That is enough to explain the reason why his style of landscape painting is unique.

In addition, Zhao Zhiqian also integrated the style of epigraph into his painting. Wu Yin said in the preface of *The Collection of Bei'an*: "I am fond of calligraphy and painting, especially Bei'an's works; while he also likes them. He is accomplished in the regular script of Wei Dynasty, which is full of changes in the regular forms. The change lies in the stroke, which is marvelous and incompatible. That is to say that there are images in his handwriting. He does well in the landscapes and flowers. With his elegant stroke, it embodies a sense of modesty, which means that his stroke is not harsh. In other words, there is calligraphy in his paintings as well. He could not be so excellent without his conduct and being widely read, and that is the reason why his works are valuable."<sup>[26]</sup> Zhao Zhiqian skillfully combined and integrate calligraphy and painting. He also has super-high attainments in seal cutting and integrates seal cutting into painting. That is a new modest style of his own, which is a style of epigraphy in landscape painting.

## 5. Conclusion

Throughout Zhao Zhiqian's life, scholarship and being an official is his greatest pursuit all his life. However, inadvertently he made remarkable achievements in the art of calligraphy, painting and seal cutting. Sha Menghai remarked that "His scholarship and articles are deep-rooted, and his calligraphy, painting and seal cutting are first-class." Zhao Zhiqian is erudite, quick in thinking and eloquent, and his words in inscriptions had become famous sentences. His seal cutting stood out from his numerous artistic achievements. He integrated Zhejiang and Anhui schools, the ancient and the present style, and became a generation of masters. His calligraphy was all skilled and refined in regular script, official script, seal script and running hand, and his painting could be regarded as the pioneer of Shanghai school in the south and had a great influence on Chen Shizeng and Qi Baishi in the north as well. He is versatile and could be called the all-around champion in the history of Chinese calligraphy, painting, and seal cutting art.

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