

# A Comparative Study of the Clerical Script of the “General Guangwu Stele” and the “Yao Boduo Stele”

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## Abstract

This article explores the styles of the two steles and conducts a comparative study by dissecting their calligraphic features; Further explore the connotations of clerical script in Wei stele regular script, providing a reference for understanding the writing state and aesthetics during the transitional period of clerical and regular script<sup>[1]</sup>. This paper is a study of the intersectional style, spanning both regular script and clerical script. In the process of sorting out the transition from clerical script to the two steles, we think about the original intention of the ancients' writing and their daily life conditions. Through copying and interpretation of the text, we can deeply understand the truth of the transition from clerical script to regular script and solve the problem of the lack of ancient charm in the regular script style.

## Keywords

Clerical style; Wei stele regular script; Comparison

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## 1. The clerical script is contained in the two steles

The Northern Wei steles evolved directly from clerical script<sup>[2]</sup>. From the upright to the inclined form, from the horizontal straight to the vertical straight to the slanted lower and the slanted higher, the variations in length and thickness are increasingly rich. From several styles of the two steles during the transitional period, the obvious implications of clerical script can be discerned.

The Yao Boduo Stele features a variety of strokes, both square and round, and is characterized by flatness, uprightness, squareness, and straightness<sup>[3]</sup>. The thickness of the lines is among the thickest in the size of regular

script, with a sense of weightiness and boldness.

The sense of ruggedness and power is obvious; the variations in the middle of the lines are very rich; the internal space of the structure is not extremely sparse or dense, but the way of creating the characters is rather strange. The contrast between the sparse and dense structures is unexpected, the characters are strangely created, and the overall style is simple, heavy, square, and powerful<sup>[4]</sup>. The overall style is simple and heavy, square and powerful. Though naive, the brushwork, structure, and composition are lively. It shares many similarities with the “Zhang Qian Stele”<sup>[5]</sup>.

Take the character “*jun*” (Table 1) as an example.

The five horizontal lines of the character “*jun*” on both steles are strongly horizontal, and the upper structure is treated in a very similar way. Except for the lower half of the stroke except for the stroke angle, the slope and length of the stroke are almost equal. The treatment of the “mouth” in the regular script character “*jun*” is particularly unexpected. The length of the horizontal stroke is almost twice that of the vertical stroke, and the space between the horizontal strokes is also smaller. In the case of the “*zu*” character, the first point of the “*shi*” radical is treated as a short horizontal stroke, with a left-right ratio of nearly 1:1, similar to the structure of Zhang Qian’s “*zu*” character, except that the length of the vertical line is increased, and the right half of the horizontal strokes are straight and the vertical strokes are quite clerical. In the case of “*ji*,” the horizontal strokes on the upper part of the two “*ji*” characters are astonishingly the same, and the final vertical hook, the overall height and width of the characters, and the movement of the left-falling and right-falling strokes are all extremely similar. The characters “*fang*,” “*fu*,” and “*wen*” have almost the same length of the horizontal lines, the overall height and width of the characters, except for the different endings of the strokes. The overall style is very similar.

The similarities between the “Guangwu General Stele” and the “Yanghuai Inscription” are that the structure emphasizes the horizontal posture, the lines are open, and the posture is natural and elegant<sup>[6]</sup>. More round strokes than square ones, no excessive engraving at the beginning, natural lifting and pressing in the strokes, full of three-dimensionality. In terms of composition, it follows the shape of the characters, is not bound by the neat rows and rows, and is staggered in size and width, full of charm<sup>[7]</sup>. There are many inconsistencies between the Yanghuai Inscription and the Guangwu General Stele.

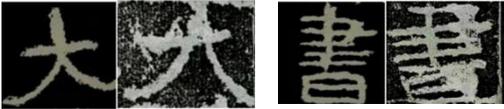
In comparison with the same characters in the Guangwu General Stele and the Yanghuai Inscription (Table 1), the strokes of the character “*da*” are symmetrical, and the two characters are almost the same in height and width, except that the strokes of the character “*da*” in the Yanghuai Inscription are greater than those of the character “*da*” in the Guangwu General Stele, the overall style is almost the same; The upper “*聿*” and “*ri*” of the two “letters” are of the same width, but the first stroke is of different lengths. The right letter has begun to show variations in the length of the horizontal lines of the Wei and Jin regular script; the second line is longer, and the lengths of the three, four, and five lines are the same as the left, which is the initial stage of the transition from clerical script to regular script. The lower “*ri*” is wider at the top and narrower at the bottom, and the lengths of several lines in the left letter are not much different.

The strokes of the Guangwu General Stele and the Yanghuai Inscription are similar, but the structures and postures are different. In the Stele of General Guangwu, the central palace is looser, the edges are open, and the main strokes are prominent. Although the structure of the Yanghuai Inscription is also unconventional, it is basically tightened towards the center, showing a tendency to gather inward. The two steles have both the sharpness of the above-mentioned clerical script and are truly masterpieces of the world.

## 2. Comparison of the brushstrokes in clerical script on the two steles

Although the brushstrokes of clerical script share the same core as those of regular script, the two styles present two completely different postures due to the application

**Table 1.** Example characters in regular script and clerical script

A comparison chart of the same characters in the Yao Boduo Stele and the Zhang Qian Stele	
Comparison of the same characters on the Guangwu General Stele and the Yanghuai Inscription	

of square and round strokes, Kang Youwei, “Guangyi Boat Shuangji.”

The square brushstrokes use a pause instead of a lift. A round pen is twisted, a square pen is flipped, a round pen is not twisted, and a square pen is not flipped; it is stagnant. When the round pen takes a risky step, it gains strength. When a square stroke is drawn, it becomes powerful<sup>[8]</sup>.

Clerical script emphasizes the stacking of horizontal lines, with both the left-falling and right-falling strokes treated in a horizontal manner, shortening the proportion of vertical lines. In terms of brushwork, it places more emphasis on the left and right swinging. The air movement trajectory between two horizontal lines is an S-shaped line against the trend. Compared with regular script, it places more emphasis on flipping and returning to the top. The transition from the folding in clerical script to the use of both square and round strokes in regular script represents progress.

The characters of the Guangwu General Stele are in the clerical script style, with the horizontal strokes straight and the vertical strokes evenly and horizontally, and the vertical strokes shortened. Although it shows many characteristics of clerical script brushwork and structure, everywhere it reveals the brushwork intention of the transition to regular script (Table 2), among which are the first stroke of the character “yun” and the first stroke of the character “chi.” The last stroke of the “cheng”

is very consistent with the “dot” method in regular script. Of course, these must be the natural expression of the calligrapher. Unlike other characters with “horizontal strokes” or “upturned ends,” the appearance of these strokes greatly increases the richness and contrast of the strokes of the single character, from the natural and slightly upturned ends of clerical script to the sharp left lower end of the strokes. It is a natural expression of the evolution of calligraphy, but it also proves the fusion of the brushstrokes of regular and clerical script. Most of the strokes in the Yao Boduo Stele are regular script strokes, but the numerous clerical script “dots” (Table 2) give the entire stele a different flavor. For example, the upper dots of the characters “fang” and “liu,” the lower left dots of the characters “zhen” and “su,” and the lower right dots of the characters “bu,” “zu,” and “gong” are all slightly raised to the upper right, which contrasts with the common clerical script style of “dots horizontally.” This adds to the richness of the strokes and reflects the natural fusion of regular and clerical brushstrokes<sup>[9]</sup>. It gives a dynamic effect to the originally static characters, with both ancient charm and natural charm.

The “zi” character (Table 2) in the General Guangwu Stele is horizontal and vertical, emphasizing the stacking of horizontal lines. Although the overall form is in clerical script, the starting strokes of the two horizontal lines have the charm of regular script, especially the long horizontal lines slightly upturned left and right, which

Table 2. Two sample characters on steles

Example characters from the General Guangwu Stele	
An example of the Yao Boduo Stele	
A comparison illustration of the characters “zi” and “jian”	
“Tai” and “men” character comparison examples	

is very in line with the ancient method of the Six Scripts, adding a sense of innocence and carefree. The “*zi*” character in the Yao Boduo Stele is basically in the style of regular script. But the direction of the vertical hook is different from that of the regular script hook. The hook is horizontal to the left, and the length of the vertical is shortened, mixed with the brushstrokes of the clerical script. The whole character is ancient and lively. Unlike the “*zi*” in Guangwu, the horizontal lines of Yao Boduo are slightly inclined to the upper right, and the shape is off-square. Because of the brushstrokes of clerical script, the entire character is full of charm. The “*zi*” in Guangwu also has a unique style because the horizontal lines have the flavor of regular script.

The word choice of the “*jian*” (**Table 2**) in Guangwu is also meaningful. The left side of the “*jian*” base, which should have been the reverse of clerical script, is switched to the straight cut of regular script, and the treatment of strokes is changed to short strokes. The dynamic sense of the “*jian*” base, combined with the static sense of the “ 隹 ” is dynamic without losing stability and stability without losing temperament. The strokes of the “*jian*” in Yao Boduo are mostly in regular script, and the character shape is rather square and long. The horizontal lines in his “ 隹 ” are denser, and the vertical lines are shorter, presenting the flavor of clerical script. The horizontal angle of the “*jian*” is very similar to the swallowtail of the “Zhang Qian Stele,” thick and simple, slightly upward-curved, with a sense of movement in stability.

The “*tai*” in Yao Boduo already has the dynamic and perilous beauty of Wei stele regular script. The horizontal line is slightly slanted to the right, and the left and right angles of the left-falling and right-falling strokes have a change of direction. Although the vertical stroke of the left-falling stroke is longer, the final leftward change is quite ancient, giving the entire character both height and width, combining regular and clerical script. Guangwu’s “*da*” character has a relatively flat horizontal stroke, with a slightly upturned right at the end. The ending of the left-falling stroke is relatively natural, while the ending of the right-falling stroke is heavier. Unlike the ending of the horizontal stroke, it adds the pause of the right-falling stroke and the meaning of the swallow-tail, making it unique.

The “*men*” in Yao Boduo (**Table 2**) is smaller on the left and larger on the right. The overall shape and the treatment of the two vertical strokes are all Wei regular

script, basically aligned at the top, except for the left and right vertical strokes; the rest of the treatment is similar. What is different from the “*men*” in Guangwu is that the two “*ri*” characters in Guangwu are flatter, and the left vertical stroke is completely treated in the style of clerical script with a horizontal posture, resulting in a dynamic left half. The right side is close to the treatment of regular script, returning to stability. The vertical strokes on the right side are slightly expanded outward, and the whole character is a blend of regular and clerical script, full of dynamic sense.

From the characters “*zi*,” “*jian*,” “*men*,” “*da*,” it can be seen that the style of Wei stele regular script is diverse. Judging from the two styles of the transition from clerical script to regular script in the early and late periods, Wei stele with clerical script as the style of regular script and Wei stele with regular script as the style of clerical script as the style of clerical script, as long as the ancient method is not lost, it can have both innocence and simplicity<sup>[10]</sup>.

### 3. A comparison of the structure of clerical script on two steles

The structure of clerical script is characterized by being top-heavy and bottom-light, laterally expansive, and having flat and square characters<sup>[11]</sup>. There are many similar structural features in the characters of the two Wei steles, but there are subtle differences, which can be understood more clearly through comparison and explanation.

Take the characters “*bing*,” “*jun*,” and “*qin*” (**Table 3**) in the General Guangwu Stele as an example. In the character “*bing*,” the multiple horizontal lines are closely spaced, weakening the length of the vertical center line. The left-falling strokes and right-falling strokes are treated as left and right dots, and the treatment of the lower part of the vertical line and the left-falling strokes and right-falling strokes is all weakened, strengthening the horizontal momentum at the top and creating a top-heavy momentum. The treatment of the “*jun*” is somewhat like that of bamboo slips. The left stroke is treated as a long vertical stroke, the horizontal line of the middle “*ri*” is almost aligned up and down, and the last horizontal line is almost aligned with the upper part. This treatment

**Table 3.** Two sample characters on steles

Example characters from the General Guangwu Stele	
An example in the Yao Boduo Stele	

results in a top-heavy effect, the vertical center line is weakened, and the overall shape is flat and square. The three horizontal lines of “*qin*” are in a regular triangular shape, from short to long, which is different from the way many horizontal lines are handled in clerical script. The left-falling and right-falling strokes are even more unexpected, resulting in a larger top and smaller bottom.

Take the characters “*huang*,” “*ling*,” and “*kong*” (Table 3) in the Yao Boduo Stele as an example. The upper and lower parts of the character “*huang*” are of equal width, and the character that was originally smaller at the top and larger at the bottom is made larger at the top and smaller at the bottom, which is very ancient and clumsy; The proportion of the radical to the right part of the “*ling*” character is almost one to one. The weight of the radical is even greater than that of the right part, and the weight of the three horizontal lines is much greater than that of the lower part. The width of the horizontal lines is almost the same as that of the left-falling and right-falling strokes, thicker at the top and thinner at the bottom. The upper part of the “*kong*” character is spacious, the lower part of the “*gong*” character has very short vertical lines, the upper part has exaggerated strokes, the overall is larger and thicker, the overall strokes of the “*gong*” character are also relatively thin, and the overall posture is larger at the top and smaller at the bottom.

Take the “*qing*” character (Table 3) in the Yao Boduo Stele as an example. The upper part is treated normally. The two vertical lines of the moon character in the lower part are shorter, almost the same length as the short horizontal line. The proportion of the upper and lower parts is equal. The length of the vertical line is compressed and the length of the middle horizontal line is increased; The right part of the vertical line of the “*shi*” character is treated in the same way as the vertical line

of the “*qing*” character, with a greater distance between the left and right parts and a stronger horizontal position; The third line of the character “*di*” is particularly striking. The middle vertical line is made shorter than the left and right vertical lines. What was originally a long vertical character is made very strong horizontally, and the left and right treatment of the final horizontal line emphasizes the squareness and horizontal expansion to the fullest extent, which also corresponds to Bao Shichen’s “Artistic Boat with Two OARS” in the Qing Dynasty: one point and one stroke, one character and one line, arranged in sequence and joined together. The size of the ancient calligraphy is quite similar to that of the neck court, like an old man walking with his young grandson, with varying lengths, but with sincere feelings and related pain and itch<sup>[12]</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

The richness of the Wei stele regular script stems from the complex historical process (politics, economy, culture) of the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, and the regional differences between the north and the south<sup>[13]</sup>. The great differences in calligraphic styles between the north and the south are also different manifestations of culture, ideology, economy, and other aspects. The reason why many Wei steles of regular script have a strong sense of clerical script is a natural manifestation of different transitional stages<sup>[14,15]</sup>. The degree of clerical script varies with different eras, and the styles of calligraphy in different regions during the same transitional period are also not the same. It is precisely because of the diversity that we calligraphers have more sources to draw inspiration from.

**Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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