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# The Third Path Beyond the Controversy of the “Bei” School and “Tie” School - Lai Shaoqi’s Calligraphy as a Creative Transformation of the Tradition of Inscriptions and Calligraphy

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the calligraphy of the 20th-century artist Lai Shaoqi, exploring the creative transformation he achieved based on the tradition of calligraphy from ancient inscriptions. It traces the historical context of the Controversy of the “Bei” School and “Tie” School, pointing out the limitations of the inherent dualistic opposition. The characteristics of Lai Shaoqi’s calligraphy are analyzed from two dimensions: form and layout. It also analyzes how Lai Shaoqi, through the re-creation of the life essence of calligraphy from ancient inscriptions, the dialectical expansion of the aesthetic category of calligraphy from ancient inscriptions, and the integration of writing and life experience, has opened up an artistic path that is deeply rooted in the tradition of ancient inscriptions yet highly individualistic, providing a highly enlightening third path for the inheritance and innovation of contemporary calligraphy.

**Keywords:** Controversy of the “Bei” School and “Tie” School; Lai Shaoqi; Calligraphy; Tradition of ancient inscriptions

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## 1. Introduction

For a long time, the Controversy of the “Bei” School and “Tie” School has persisted <sup>[1, 2]</sup>, posing a challenge to the contemporary transformation of traditional resources. Lai Shaoqi, with his outstanding achievements in “Lai-style” calligraphy, provided valuable experience to break through this limitation. His artistic path was based on his profound personal experience and the integration of multiple art forms, and it carried out a creative transformation of the traditional calligraphy tradition. This article analyzes how Lai Shaoqi, through the re-creation of the life essence of calligraphy techniques, the dialectical expansion of the aesthetic appreciation of calligraphy pieces, and the systematic integration of artistic experience, opened up a “third path” that transcended the controversy, providing profound enlightenment for the modern activation of the calligraphy tradition.

## 2. Origin of the Controversy of the “Bei” School and “Tie” School

The Controversy of the “Bei” School and “Tie” School is deeply rooted in the historical changes of the material carriers, dissemination methods, academic atmosphere, and aesthetic concepts of Chinese calligraphy. Before the Tang Dynasty, the calligraphy works of famous artists were mostly written and passed down on soft materials such as silk and paper. These manuscripts (and their later copies and engraved copies) constituted the foundation of “Tie” School<sup>[3]</sup>. The emergence of engraved copies such as the “Chunhua Stele Collection” in the Song Dynasty, although enabling the embodiment of the classics of the “Two Kings” school in countless forms, due to repeated engraving, the spirit and essence of the brushstrokes were inevitably distorted and lost. “Bei” School mainly refers to the characters engraved on hard materials such as gold and stone, cliff inscriptions, tomb inscriptions, etc. Their scope covers oracle bones, bronze vessels, Qin and Han stone inscriptions, and sixth-century stone tablets, etc. These works were originally created for practical commemorative purposes rather than for artistic display.

The radicalization of the Controversy of the “Bei” School and “Tie” School was marked by the writings and statements of figures such as Ruan Yuan, Bao Shichen, Kang Youwei, etc. Ruan Yuan first proposed in “The Discussion on the Northern and Southern School of Calligraphy” that calligraphy could be divided into “Northern” and “Southern” schools, believing that the Southern school was good at writing scrolls (posters), while the Northern school was good at inscriptions (scrolls). The intention was to vindicate the neglected Northern Dynasty inscriptions. To Kang Youwei, who wrote “Guangyi boat double ji”, the idea of respecting the inscriptions reached its peak, gradually evolving into a long-term confrontation between “which is better, the inscriptions or the posters, which one is the orthodox”? Even falling into the predicament of “either-or”.

## 3. Characteristics of Lai Shaoqi’s Calligraphy

### 3.1. Crossed Gold and Stone Ink, Magnificent in Appearance

Lai Shaoqi’s calligraphy is deeply rooted in the traditional calligraphy of “Bei” School, yet it is imbued with a profound sense of simplicity and boldness. His calligraphy is hailed as “Lai style”, with a core style that is calm and concise, simple and sincere, derived from his long-term study and imitation of the famous calligraphers of the Qing Dynasty, especially Jin Nong’s “lacquer script”. Lai Shaoqi keenly grasped the gold and stone flavor in Jin Nong’s calligraphy and used it as a basis for integration and transformation, further studying and absorbing the powerful sense of force in Deng Shiqiu’s lines and the solemn decorative charm in Yi Bingshou’s cursive script, integrating the strengths of various schools into one, so that his lines retained the forceful and resounding feeling of engraving on gold and stone while also embodying the inner depth of the quality of the brushstrokes. Lai Shaoqi internalized the gold and stone flavor from the external form simulation into the life expression of the brushstrokes, making the brush seem like a chisel, and the paper seem like gold and stone. The writing process became a spiritual engraving with a knife as the pen. Therefore, the grandeur of Lai Shaoqi’s calligraphy does not lie in the large volume, but in the profound inner quality of the line quality; his simplicity does not lie in the rough techniques, but in the innocence after stripping away the ostentation and returning to the original state, which is the refined “old simplicity” beauty after being highly refined.

### 3.2. Coexistence of Innocence and Rationality, and the Unity of Ingenious and Clumsy

In terms of composition, Lai Shaoqi’s calligraphy exhibits a unique interest of harmonizing with the rightness and showing ingenious changes, reflecting his profound understanding of the rules of form. His character forms often present strange changes in the solemn and firm atmosphere, with the size of the characters being uneven, like the careful arrangement of a picture composition. It creates a sense of imbalance in the overall stability, forming tension; the font structure refuses to be standardized, adding anomalies where possible to the possible regularity, resulting in vitality in order and charm in seriousness. The dialectical unity of “ingenious” and “clumsy” is the essence of Lai Shaoqi’s calligraphy aesthetics. The dialectical unity of “cleverness” and “clumsiness” is the essence of Lai Shaoqi’s calligraphy aesthetics. His “clumsiness”

is “great cleverness if clumsiness,” which is the trueness revealed after the technical flaunt is faded, and his “cleverness” is the light that is inadvertently displayed. Lai Shaoqi’s study of traditional calligraphy was not merely superficial but profound. He delved deeply into Jin Nong’s works but did not aim for mere resemblance. He extensively explored various styles and traditions, yet integrated and transformed them, eventually achieving his own unique style. This enabled his calligraphy to be supported by ancient techniques while avoiding the constraints of those techniques. The strokes he created exuded a naive and pure aesthetic pursuit, a clarity that emerged after the soul was cleansed of dust, and a purity that came from a soldier’s enduring life experiences, preserved in the art world with a childlike heart.

## **4. The Creative Transformation of Calligraphy from the Traditional Stone School Tradition**

### **4.1. Reconstructing the Life of the Stone School Penmanship**

The most fundamental transformation of the traditional stone school tradition by Lai Shaoqi lies in his conversion of the static “metal and stone energy” in stone inscriptions into the dynamic “ink and brush energy” in brush writing. When confronted with ancient stone inscriptions, Qing Dynasty stone scholars primarily focused on the visual effects such as the powerful and boldness and the thick and firm strokes formed after weathering and erosion, and in practice, they sought to simulate this chiseling sensation with brushes. The “ten beauties” advocated by Kang Youwei, to a large extent, summarized this final visual effect. However, if this pursuit was not handled properly, it could easily lead to the deliberate imitation of the mottled appearance, turning the writing into a production process and losing the natural charm of ink and brush.

Lai Shaoqi avoided direct imitation of the surface appearance of stone inscriptions and traced back to their source, shifting the focus from “effect” to “process”, from “form” to “power”. With the unique sensitivity of a wood engraver, he deeply understood that the essence of “carving” is the movement and retention of power in resistance, and he brought this understanding into calligraphy, striving to reproduce the powerful and penetrating strength on the paper. Therefore, his lines were like iron strokes and silver hooks, yet they were the result of natural brush writing. The use of both the middle and side strokes, and the lifting and turning points revealed the robustness of metal and stone, while also retaining the changes in the ink. In the turning points of square strokes, he incorporated round and smooth strokes, making the brush strokes reveal a sense of richness and depth.

### **4.2. Dialectical Expansion of the Aesthetic of the Stone School**

Lai Shaoqi’s calligraphy quietly resolved some rigid oppositions in the Controversy of the “Bei” School and “Tie” School, especially regarding the contradiction between “rustic” and “elaborate”. Kang Youwei and others advocated the North “Bei” School in their works such as “Guangyi boat double ji”, constructing theories that valued “power” and “strokes” as representative of the stone school tradition. Although this had innovative significance, it also had an extreme nature. Lai Shaoqi’s calligraphy path provided a more inclusive answer. He learned from Jin Nong’s “rustic” style, but was clear that art should not stop at imitating a stylized “rustic”. Therefore, he traced back to the grandeur of Han Regular Script “Shimen Song”, drew on the simplicity of “Hao Da Wang Stele”, and continuously infused the aesthetic category of “rustic” with new connotations. In his works, “rustic” is no longer the original state of being “primitive” but an active and advanced aesthetic pursuit, “great beauty like rusticity”, and the natural expression after removing all the dust. At the same time, he did not reject “elaborate” and “precise”, and had long immersed himself in the calligraphy of “Two Kings”, having “practiced the Preface of the Orchid Pavilion” over a thousand times, making his running script lively and smooth, and his calligraphic and clerical integration “Lai Style” could also have lightness and change in the thickness.

### **4.3. Systematic Integration of Artistic Experience**

The ultimate goal of Lai Shaoqi’s transformation of the traditional stone school tradition was to break through the level of

simple technical style, making “stone school” no longer merely a “knowledge” in the study room but turning towards the expression of the artist’s complete life. The rise of Qing Dynasty stone school and the study of inscriptions and artifacts were closely linked, carrying a strong academic research flavor. The achievements of many stone school calligraphers, their accomplishments in philology and inscriptions, were inseparable. Lai Shaoqi’s rich, bumpy, and firm life experience was the deepest foundation of his art. His numerous self-written revolutionary poetry works, such as “Red Stone Ode” and “In Memoriam”, embody the traditional essence of “integration of calligraphy and text” and “poetry and calligraphy coexistence”. The “one piece of wood, one stone” spirit they advocated is not only a reflection of their personality but also a method of their art. They integrated the “knife sensation” of woodcutting, the “composition” of painting, the “imagination” of poetry, and the “experience” of life into their fingertips. Therefore, Lai Shaoqi’s calligraphy art was not a repetition of a certain calligraphy piece or stone inscription, but rather with the powerful force of the “Bei” School, it merged various artistic nourishments and ultimately wrote his own magnificent life. In this sense, he not only responded to Kang Youwei’s call for “collecting the best”, but also achieved the more fundamental “life renewal” behind the “fusion of fonts”.

## 5. Conclusion

Apart from the Controversy of the “Bei” School and “Tie” School, Lai Shaoqi took a “third path”. Not only did he creatively transform the gold and stone atmosphere of the “Bei” School into a pen and ink language full of life rhythm, but also through his personal revolutionary journey and comprehensive cultivation of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seals, he realized the modernization reformation of the core of the “Bei” School spirit. This has significant implications for the inheritance and development of contemporary calligraphy.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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