

Exploring the Uniqueness of Pingfu Tie Through Wu Region Calligraphy

Shiyu Hou^{1,a,*}

¹Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, China

a. 3371538605@qq.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: *Pingfu Tie* by Lu Ji is a representative calligraphic work from the Western Jin period, reflecting the transitional phase of calligraphy from the “ancient simplicity” to the “modern elegance.” This piece holds significant value for studying the calligraphy and artistic features of this period. This article analyzes the brushwork, materials, and artistic characteristics of the work, with a focus on the style of cursive script during this period, using the description “a style blending Seal Script and Clerical Script” as a key point. It also explores the formation of this calligraphic style by considering the historical context of the Western Jin period and the life of Lu Ji. Additionally, through a comparative analysis with the calligraphy of the Wu region, the article delves into the regional characteristics of this script.

Keywords: *Pingfu Tie*, A Style Blending Seal Script and Clerical Script, Lu Ji, Wu Region Calligraphy

1. Introduction

Lu Ji's *Pingfu Tie*, as a transitional calligraphic work in the evolution from Zhangcao script to modern cursive script, is regarded as a unique surviving manuscript of Wu region calligraphy. Therefore, studying the calligraphy-related issues of *Pingfu Tie* is of crucial significance for delving into the mysteries of writing, the historical changes in calligraphic scripts, and the diversity of calligraphic styles. The creation of this piece took place during the Wei-Jin period, a time of constant transformation and great complexity. During this period, the scholar-official class began to develop an artistic consciousness and placed greater emphasis on the expression of individuality, resulting in highly personal styles. These elements imbue *Pingfu Tie* with distinct value. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the artistic characteristics of *Pingfu Tie*. This paper compares *Pingfu Tie* with other calligraphic works from the same period, such as the Dunhuang *Maquanwan Han Bamboo Slips*, which are also ink manuscripts. The comparison considers the context of the era in which Lu Ji lived and includes a study of Wu region calligraphy. The methods and perspectives employed in this analysis are both unique and comprehensive, reflecting the distinctiveness of Lu Ji's calligraphy, and offering a better understanding of the unique value of *Pingfu Tie* in filling gaps in the history of Chinese calligraphy.

2. The Artistic Value of *Pingfu Tie*

Lu Ji's *Pingfu Tie* is in the form of a letter, made of paper and ink, and is a highly significant piece among the surviving calligraphic works of various dynasties. After several transitions, it was donated to the Palace Museum in Beijing by Mr. Zhang Boyu free of charge half a century ago. This work consists of nine lines and 86 characters, written on hemp paper, and is a letter in which Lu Ji inquires after a friend's well-being. The original dimensions are 23.7 cm in height and 20.6 cm in width. The ink color has a slight green tint, suggesting the use of pine soot ink. There has been much discussion about this work throughout history. In the Ming dynasty, the calligrapher Dong Qichang wrote a famous inscription after *Pingfu Tie*, stating: "Before Wang Xizhi and after Yuan Chang, only this few lines remain, a rare treasure of the age" [1]. This assessment clearly points out that the historical value of this work lies in its creation during a pivotal time, positioned between Zhong Yao and Wang Xizhi, marking an important transitional phase in calligraphy from "ancient simplicity" to "modern elegance." The writing material of *Pingfu Tie* is hemp paper, and the writing tool used is a worn brush. Although papermaking technology had made significant progress during the Western Jin period, the materials remained largely based on those used in Cai Lun's time. At that time, the main raw material was fiber from hemp plants, which had longer fibers. People also processed hemp paper further, and the processed paper was called dyed hemp paper. This provided the assurance that ink-based works could be passed down and facilitate cultural transmission. *Pingfu Tie* was written on such hemp paper. Due to the toughness and slightly rough texture of hemp paper, the friction between the brush and the paper during writing was increased, creating the important condition for *Pingfu Tie*'s grand and ancient style. It is evident that the paper material played a significant role in the formation of the calligraphic style.

Yang Shoujing said: "It is written with a worn, sharp, and strong brush, with no graceful strokes nor rough ones, which is why it is considered lofty" [2]. Works created with a worn brush avoid both vulgarity and excessive boldness. The *Dongtu Xuanlan Bian*, Volume 1, also mentions: "Lu Shiheng's *Pingfu Tie* was drafted with a worn brush, with delicate brushstrokes and an ancient and elegant style" [3]. Most of the strokes in this work begin in such a manner, and this feature is also reflected in the bamboo slips of the Han and Jin periods. For example, the No. 101 bamboo slip from the Eastern Han period, found at Dongpailou, is entirely written with a worn brush. The brushstrokes show no noticeable variation in thickness, with few pressing movements at the start, middle, or end of the strokes. The starting point is mostly written with the middle of the brush and rounded, the middle section of the lines is full and rich, and the end strokes are decisive. The brushstrokes are thick, round, and vigorous, highlighting the robust, rounded, and ancient characteristics of the Han dynasty clerical and cursive script.

Regarding the style of *Pingfu Tie*, critics over the centuries have held various views. The earliest mention of *Pingfu Tie* being called Zhangcao (clerk cursive) appeared in the *Xuanhe Shupu* of the Northern Song dynasty, a viewpoint that has had a significant impact on academic discussions. Zhangcao, as a script that combines both practical and artistic functions, is commonly used for daily cursive writing due to its ease and natural flow. From its formation, Zhangcao evolved through the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, and the Sui and Tang periods, and later flourished again in the Yuan, Ming, and Republic periods. It developed into the modern cursive script and later into wild cursive, forming distinct stylistic characteristics in different historical periods. Most of the surviving calligraphic works from the Western Jin dynasty's famous masters are in a relatively standardized Zhangcao style. This style is characterized by rigorous cursive strokes, with each character standing independently, occasional ligatures within characters, and the retention of the strong, sweeping strokes typical of the clerical script. *Pingfu Tie* largely exhibits these features. In terms of brushwork, there is no distinct sharpness in the strokes, with the middle of the brush

descending directly, and fewer pressing movements in the strokes. The overall style is simple and mature, with vigorous brushstrokes. The characters are close to Zhangcao, but the strokes rarely show the sweeping effects of the clerical script.

The script used for recording in the *Maquanwan Han Bamboo Slips* discovered in Dunhuang includes Han Seal Script, Ancient Clerical Script, Han Clerical Script, and Cursive Script, with the majority of the cursive script being Zhangcao. This is the earliest discovered example of Zhangcao brushwork, and *Pingfu Tie* is the earliest known example of a law-ordered calligraphic work in paper form. Both are highly unified in terms of reference value, and both were written on relatively rough materials, sharing similar artistic characteristics in their expressions. The Zhangcao script in the *Maquanwan Han Bamboo Slips* is free and lively, smooth and flowing, with a strong sense of rhythm. Both the middle and side of the brush are used, and most of the characters maintain the characteristics of Seal Script in terms of brushstroke technique, primarily using the hidden-point technique, with occasional direct, bold strokes. The connections between brushstrokes often employ a rounded turning technique, and in terms of charm and atmosphere, it shares a lineage with *Pingfu Tie*.

Table 1: Comparison of the Same Characters in the *Maquanwan Han Bamboo Slips* and *Pingfu Tie*

Category	自 (Zi)	为 (Wei)	初 (Chu)	来 (Lai)
<i>Maquanwan Han Bamboo Slips</i>				
<i>Pingfu Tie</i>				

Although *Pingfu Tie* belongs to the category of cursive script, its most prominent feature is the use of “a blend of Seal Script and Clerical Script,” while also exhibiting characteristics of Clerical Script. This aspect has been widely praised by calligraphers throughout history. In *Da Guan Lu*, Volume 1, there is a similar description: “The cursive script is a blend of Seal Script and Clerical Script, with a striking brush technique” [4]. *Mo Yuan Hui Guan: Fashu*, Volume 1, states, “This work is greatly influenced by the brush technique of Seal Script, with the traces of Seal Script still evident” [5]. These descriptions emphasize that *Pingfu Tie* predominantly adopts the characteristics of Seal and Clerical Scripts in its brushwork, featuring a typical Seal Script style of rounded, powerful, and forceful strokes, with a strong middle section. The style is distinctly different from that of the “Two Wangs” (Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi) and is more akin to the calligraphy of Yan Zhenqing, with an ancient, natural, and grandiose feel.

3. The Influence of Lu Ji’s Personal Background and the Era He Lived In on His Calligraphy Style

Lu Ji was born into the Lu family of Wu Commandery. His grandfather was Lu Xun, and his father was Lu Kang. Both of his ancestors were pillars of the Eastern Wu regime, and the Lu family was one of the four prominent families of the Wu state, highlighting the family’s prestigious background. However, Lu Ji fell from the position of a noble son to become a fallen subject of a lost state.

Ultimately, he encountered devastating downfall amidst the power struggles of the Western Jin royal aristocracy. Lu Ji's life journey witnessed a rise to prominence, a decline, and then a return to the top through his own efforts. During his flourishing political career, he was embroiled in successive political conflicts, leading to a tragic end. This tumultuous life experience undoubtedly had an impact on his thoughts and artistic characteristics, as can be seen from the gloomy strokes in *Pingfu Tie*, a work created during a period of conflict.

The Wei-Jin period was a time of dramatic change and complexity. Historical records and the analysis of the *Pingfu Tie* suggest that the work was written during the "War of the Eight Princes." The text mentions, "During the time of the chaos caused by Kou, when I heard inquiries, I was unable to respond," which provides evidence for this dating. This era was marked by a long-standing state of division, frequent wars, and constant changes in the ruling powers. After the establishment of the Western Jin, there was a brief period of stability. However, following the death of Sima Yan, the newly enthroned Emperor Hui lost control, and Empress Jia took full command of the government. This led to the outbreak of the "War of the Eight Princes," which lasted for sixteen years, causing severe damage to society. Literary creations reflect the realities of their times. The Wei-Jin period was one of great upheaval, with individuals facing daily uncertainty. People were acutely aware of the instability of life. The scholars of the Wei-Jin period expressed their aspirations and ambitions through literary works, which were deeply imbued with the spirit of the era. These works often conveyed strong, heroic yet melancholic emotions. At the same time, calligraphy was increasingly detached from practical use and began to evolve into an art form for its own sake. Calligraphers used their art to express emotions, and "technique" became the means of expressing those emotions. Calligraphy, as a written art, gained significant attention and entered a period of unprecedented prosperity.

After Emperor Wu of Jin unified the country, he indulged in pleasures and neglected state affairs. The ruling class of the Western Jin was characterized by extravagance, greed, and excessive indulgence, leading to political corruption that fostered the same vices among subordinates. During this time, the social customs were also extremely decadent. The *Jin Ji Zong Lun* (Comprehensive Commentary on the Annals of Jin) records: "The customs were licentious and perverse, and shame was lost" [6]. This reveals the moral decay in Western Jin society, where extravagance became a prevailing trend. Many scholars were immersed in drunkenness, pursuing a luxurious and embellished lifestyle. These societal trends also influenced calligraphy. From the ancient and simple style in *Pingfu Tie* to the graceful and elegant nature of Wang Xizhi's *Seventeen Letters*, one can discern a shift in the style of cursive script during the Wei-Jin period. Although *Pingfu Tie* still adheres to the rules of the seal cursive style (Zhangcao), the brushstrokes no longer exhibit the pronounced twists and turns seen in earlier versions.

Liu Tao wrote in *History of Chinese Calligraphy: Wei, Jin, and the Northern and Southern Dynasties*: "The Western Jin was an era of the collapse of traditional morals" [7]. Under the influence of this atmosphere, Western Jin scholars pursued fame and fortune in their daily lives, indulging in pleasure and enjoying life's joys, while also striving to remain clear-minded and detached from worldly concerns. This conflict between the pursuit of fame and fortune and the desire for clarity and nobility led to a transformation in the mindset of the scholarly class. They increasingly embraced the teachings of Daoism, allowing for more natural expression. For Western Jin scholars, the eternal nature of the body and soul was no longer a concern. Instead, they focused on expressing their emotions and desires, showcasing the beauty of individuality. The social trend that revered the beauty of individuality in Western Jin scholars helped to stimulate the awakening of literature and art during the Wei-Jin period and gradually became the mainstream of academic thought at the time. With the gradual decline of Confucianism in the late Han period, the scholar class began to develop a stronger sense of artistic self-awareness. The scholars' desire to express their thoughts, emotions, and personal

literary flair became more evident. This was reflected in a wide range of artistic expressions in literature, calligraphy, painting, and music during the period of the Two Jin Dynasties. The era exhibited a strong personal style, in contrast to the formal and solemn calligraphy styles of previous periods. Scholars began to place greater emphasis on individuality in their work, and different calligraphers developed their unique styles. For example, Zhong Yao was skilled in small regular script, characterized by an ancient and elegant style that appeared naturally formed. Zhang Zhi excelled in cursive script, producing works with grandeur and flexibility. Wang Xizhi was renowned for his semi-cursive script, which was graceful, restrained, and beautifully fluid. Lu Ji, on the other hand, combined the characteristics of both regular cursive script and modern cursive script, with a style combining seal script and clerical script. His cursive script is ancient and simple, yet elegant and natural, more fluid than traditional Zhangcao, and more rustic than modern cursive. In conclusion, Lu Ji's calligraphy not only possessed a personal style but also clearly reflected the characteristics of his era.

4. Wu Region Calligraphy and Lu Ji

In Volume 26, *Ji Huo* of Ge Hong's *Baopuzi*, it is stated:

“In Wu, the great calligraphers include Huang Xiang, Liu Zuan, Cen Boran, and Zhu Jiping, all masters of their era. In the Central Plains, there are Zhong Yuanchang, Hu Kongming, Zhang Zhi, and Suo Jing, each a master of their own region. All of them use the ancient style, and all are competent in their craft. As for me, I believe that abandoning previously learned techniques and diligently studying Chinese calligraphy would be unnecessary” [8].

According to *Baopuzi*, the calligraphy of Wu is a style that flourished in the southern region of the former Eastern Wu, specifically the areas of Wujun, Wuxing, and Kuaiji. The term “Wu people” typically refers to these three regions. Over time, Wu Region calligraphy developed its own distinct characteristics, setting it apart from the ancient style of the Central Plains. While it may not occupy a major place in the history of calligraphy development, its stylistic development is certainly unique to the Wu region. In *Shu Shu Fu* by Dou Bao, it is written: “Wu, represented by Guangling and Xiuming (Huang Xiang's style), is simple and ancient in feeling. It is difficult to exhaust the truth of it; it cannot be learned in a complete form. It is like the dragon and the silkworm coming out of their hibernation, stretching and moving again” [9]. This “simple and ancient feeling” likely refers to the characteristics of Eastern Wu cursive script. According to Ge Hong's description, although the calligraphy of Wu region and the Central Plains both originated from the “ancient style” of the Han Dynasty, their stylistic differences are evident. This can be seen in the calligraphy works of Huang Xiang from Eastern Wu and Suo Jing from the Central Plains, as mentioned in *Baopuzi*.



Figure 1: Comparison between Huang Xiang's *Wenwu Tie* and Lu Ji's *Pingfu Tie*

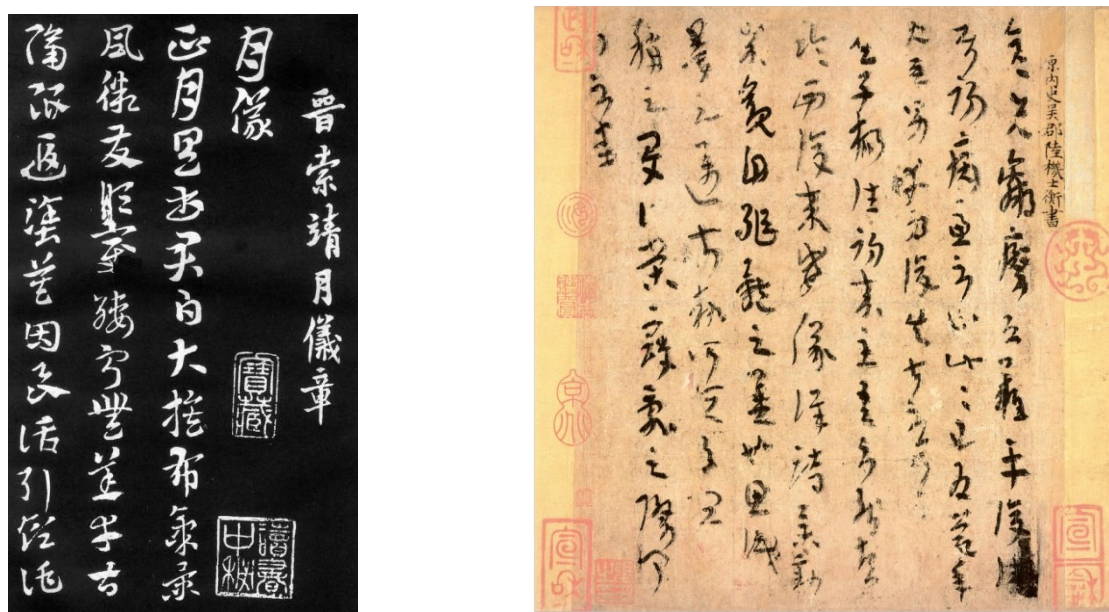


Figure 2: Comparison between Suo Jing's *Yueyi Tie* and Lu Ji's *Pingfu Tie*

Figure 1 is Huang Xiang's *Wenwu Tie*. From this piece, it is evident that Huang Xiang's calligraphy exhibits a restrained and serious style, with strokes influenced largely by clerical script. Although there are some connecting strokes between the brushstrokes, they still adhere to certain rules. Each character is distinct and contained, while the overall effect conveys a sense of simplicity and weight, presenting a calm and resolute temperament. The strokes flow naturally and freely, reflecting some characteristics of the early phase of the regular script (Zhangcao). This style, while very similar to Lu Ji's calligraphy from the Wu region, also has its differences. *Pingfu Tie* employs a blunt brush and often utilizes the oblique stroke technique, making the brushwork appear more ancient, rough, and powerful. The layout is more fluid and vibrant, with a distinct rhythm. Given that Huang Xiang and Lu Ji were essentially from the same era and both representative calligraphers of Wu Region calligraphy, it is fitting to describe Lu Ji's calligraphy using the phrase "the dragon and the silkworm coming out of their hibernation, stretching and moving again," which conveys a sense of natural movement and freedom.

Figure 2 is Suo Jing's *Yueyi Tie*. From this piece, it is clear that Suo Jing's calligraphy is both steep and sturdy, with strict rules and a vigorous momentum. In comparison, *Pingfu Tie* is more flexible and varied in its structure, with fewer angular strokes. The overall character structure of *Pingfu Tie* is more vertical in orientation.

Table 2: Comparison of the Same Characters in *Yueyi Tie* and *Pingfu Tie*

Category	之 (Zhi)	吾 (Wu)	子 (Zi)	也 (Ye)	幸 (Xing)	有 (You)
<i>Yueyi Tie</i>						
<i>Pingfu Tie</i>						

Liang Guo's Yu Jianwu's *Shu Pin* is one of the most important treatises on calligraphy from the Southern Dynasties period. In the book, Zhang Zhi, Zhong Yao, and Wang Xizhi are praised as the most outstanding calligraphers, reflecting the mainstream aesthetic of the time, which favored the calligraphy of the Wei state represented by Zhong Yao and Suo Jing. In contrast, the Southern Wu Region Calligraphy, represented by Huang Xiang and Lu Ji, was considered less impressive. In fact, Wu Region Calligraphy was merely a fleeting phenomenon in the calligraphy world. After the fall of the Wu state, Wu calligraphers naturally began to admire the calligraphy style of the Central Plains. As the capital moved from Luoyang to Jiankang after the fall of the Jin dynasty, the center of calligraphic art shifted southward, and the already peripheral Wu Region Calligraphy began to decline even further, until it was completely replaced by the calligraphy of the "Two Wangs" (Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi). Liu Tao holds a similar viewpoint on this matter. *Pingfu Tie* is now regarded as a rare surviving example of Wu Region Calligraphy, authentically showcasing the distinctive features of Wu Region Calligraphy. This relic not only fills in the unclear parts of the historical record but also corrects previous misunderstandings of Wu Region Calligraphy. *Pingfu Tie* blends the writing styles of the clerical script (Zhangcao) and the seal script (Li Shu), while also containing some characteristics of running script (Xing Shu). This resonates with the earlier description of "a style blending Seal Script and Clerical Script." Therefore, simply calling it "Zhangcao" would be inappropriate, as it may lead to misinterpretation and controversy. In the framework of the development of Chinese calligraphy, Wu Region Calligraphy and its style have not played a central role. Relying solely on traditional systems of calligraphy history to understand the script of *Pingfu Tie* would inevitably lead to inconclusive outcomes. However, interpreting its script as "Wu Region Calligraphy" not only aligns with the historical context but also represents an objective recognition of Wu Region Calligraphy culture. Although referring to it as the "Ink Emperor" may seem exaggerated, its preservation undoubtedly holds significant value for calligraphy research.

5. Conclusion

In summary, *Pingfu Tie* is a piece of writing that incorporates both "the qualities of Seal and Clerical Scripts." It reflects the internal struggles and pain of Lu Ji, shaped by the era and life circumstances in which he lived. Among the calligraphic works of the same period, it is highly unique. At the same time, as a rare surviving example of Wu Region calligraphy, it holds tremendous historical and documentary value for future generations.

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