

Zhang Xu's Canonization Research

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Abstract. This research centers on Zhang Xu, a calligrapher from China's Tang Dynasty, and takes a systematic approach to exploring how his calligraphic art became canonized—starting in the Tang era and continuing through later times. The study puts forward a core view: Zhang Xu's status as a classic isn't something fixed. Instead, it comes from the dynamic interaction of three key factors. First is his own remarkable artistic skills—these laid the groundwork for his legacy. Second is the cultural environment of the Tang Dynasty, which gave his art the space to shine. Third is the way later periods kept reinterpreting his works, adding new meanings to them over time. His well-known “Wild Cursive” script stands out for two reasons. It didn't just push beyond the usual limits of calligraphic form; it also captured the spiritual ideals that literati wanted to express. What's more, the process of Zhang Xu becoming a recognized master reveals important patterns. These patterns help us see how art is passed down and how cultural value is judged in the long history of Chinese calligraphy.

Keywords: ZHANG Xu, Crazy grass, Canonization, Accept

1. Introduction

Within Chinese calligraphic tradition, Zhang Xu of the Tang Dynasty earned the title “Sage of Cursive Script” through his uninhibited wild cursive style. His work transcended formal conventions and brought the expressive power of calligraphy to new heights. Yet his established position in art history was not immediate; it emerged from a long process of historical and cultural interpretation spanning centuries.

Current scholarship on Zhang Xu tends to concentrate on his biography, critiques of specific works, and aesthetic qualities—such as Xiong Bingming's analysis of Zhang's wild cursive in *The Theoretical System of Chinese Calligraphy* [1]. Although such research provides a foundation for understanding his art, studies that employ the framework of “canonization” remain limited.

This paper examines the process through which Zhang Xu became a canonical figure, drawing on textual analysis, visual interpretation, and comparative methods. It investigates the historical, artistic, cultural, and receptive dimensions of his legacy, aiming to shed light on how classical status is formed within Chinese calligraphy.

2. The cornerstone of canonization: Zhang Xu's calligraphy art

2.1. Zhang Xu's life and the origin of calligraphy

Zhang Xu, courtesy name Bogao, was a native of Wu County (present-day Suzhou, Jiangsu Province). His exact years of birth and death are unknown, but he was primarily active during the Kaiyuan and Tianbao eras of Emperor Xuanzong's reign in the Tang Dynasty. According to the *Old Book of Tang: Biographies of Literary Figures* [2], Zhang Xu once held the position of Chief Clerk of the Imperial Guards, and thus became known as “Zhang Chief Clerk.” He was known for his unrestrained and eccentric character, his fondness for drinking, and his habit of wielding the brush while intoxicated—a practice that earned him the contemporary nickname “Zhang the Madman.

Zhang Xu’s calligraphic origins can be traced to the cursive script tradition of the “Two Wangs” (Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi) from the Wei and Jin periods. In his early years, he practiced calligraphy with exceptional diligence. Legend has it that he gained insight into brushwork by observing a princess and a procession bearer vying for the right of way, and grasped its spirit by watching the sword dance of Lady Gongsun. The *New Book of Tang: Treatises on Arts and Letters* records a volume titled *Model Calligraphy* by Zhang Xu [3], attesting to the influence of his calligraphy at that time.

Based on the foundation of the cursive script inherited from the “Two Wangs,” Zhang Xu boldly innovated in brush techniques, character structure, and composition, gradually forming a unique artistic style of his own.

2.2. Zhang Xu's artistic characteristics and aesthetic breakthroughs

Zhang Xu’s Wild Cursive script possesses a distinctive artistic character, setting it apart from earlier cursive traditions. His brushwork displays remarkable variation and rhythmic intensity—dynamic, forceful strokes that create a powerful visual impression. In terms of structure, he freed characters from rigid conventions, allowing size, slant, and density to shift freely. Some forms even break conventional boundaries, with strokes overlapping and intertwining to produce a vivid sense of motion. In composition, his characters and lines flow continuously, with subtle contrasts between thick and thin, dry and wet ink. A work like *Stomach Pain Note*, though only thirty characters long, unfolds with rhythmic undulation and monumental force.

Aesthetically, the Wild Cursive of Zhang Xu represents the shift from formal discipline to emotional expression. It goes beyond conventional writing to the medium of conveying inner passion and spiritual resonance, a quality deeply in tune with individual freedom the literati pursued within Tang society.

3. The initiation of classicization: Zhang Xu's acceptance in the Tang Dynasty

3.1. Praise of literati of the same era

Zhang Xu enjoyed considerable renown during the Tang dynasty and was highly praised by contemporary literati. Prominent poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu, and Gao Shi all celebrated his calligraphy in their verses, contributing to the early formation of his image as the “Sage of Cursive Script.” In his poem “Song of the Chu Ge,” Li Bai wrote:

“Every man of Chu knows Zhang Xu’s fame,
Hiding wind and clouds within his heart.
The three Wu regions all turn to gaze,

While heroes across the land follow his trace."

These lines depict both the marvel of Zhang Xu's brushwork and its widespread influence, reflecting the deep admiration he commanded at the time. Similarly, Du Fu, in his "Song of the Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup," vividly captured Zhang Xu's practice of writing while intoxicated:

"Three cups—and Zhang Xu becomes the Sage of Cursive;
Before the nobles, he doffs his cap, bares his crown,
Wielding his brush like clouds and mist."

This portrayal not only conveys Zhang Xu's unrestrained temperament but also underscores his extraordinary skill, further cementing his identity as the "Sage of Cursive" in the popular imagination.

Beyond poetry, Zhang Xu was admired by fellow calligraphers. Yan Zhenqing, a major Tang calligrapher, studied brush method under Zhang Xu and recorded his teachings in *The Twelve Principles of Brushwork*, underscoring Zhang's authority in the field. The monk-calligrapher Huai Su, deeply influenced by Zhang's wild cursive, sought his guidance repeatedly. The two came to be known as "Zhang the Mad and Su the Drunk," together advancing the wild cursive tradition in the Tang.

3.2. Records of history books and book treatises

During the Tang dynasty, records and evaluations of Zhang Xu in official historical texts and calligraphy theory provided crucial support for the initial establishment of his classical status.

The *Old Book of Tang: Biographies of Literary Figures* briefly documents his life and calligraphic achievements: "Xu excelled in cursive script and was fond of wine. Each time he became intoxicated, he would shout and roam wildly, then wield his brush—his transformations endless, as if aided by divine force." [2] Meanwhile, the *New Book of Tang: Treatises on Arts and Letters* records a volume titled *Model Calligraphy* by Zhang Xu [3], indicating that his works had already gained official recognition and canonical value at the time.

The Tang calligraphy theorist Zhang Huaixin, in his *Shudian* (Judgments on Calligraphy), praised Zhang Xu's cursive script highly, classifying it as a "divine category." [4] He commented: "Xu's cursive originated between the traditions of Zhang Zhi and the Two Wangs, yet he achieved such transformation and mastery as to reach the ultimate. His brushwork is vigorous and spirited, soaring with energy—later generations honor him as the 'Sage of Cursive.'" [4] This assessment not only affirmed Zhang Xu's place in the history of cursive calligraphy but also solidified his title as "Sage of Cursive," exerting a profound influence on later generations.

4. The construction of classicization: the interpretation and reshaping of the Song to Qing dynasties

4.1. The "Shangyi" calligraphy of the Song Dynasty and Zhang Xu's modelization

In the Song dynasty, calligraphy was characterized by a prevailing emphasis on "expressive resonance" (尚意). The admiration and reference to Zhang Xu by leading calligraphers of the period—such as Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, and Mi Fu, collectively known as the "Four Masters of the Song"—established his cursive script as an important model of the Song "ideal-expression" style and further advanced his canonization.

Su Shi held Zhang Xu's calligraphy in high esteem, remarking in his Postscript to the Six Rubbings of the Tang Dynasty: "Chief Clerk Zhang's cursive script appears unrestrained, with sparse and subtle strokes, yet its manner is entirely self-contained—truly what may be called divine elegance." [5] Su believed that beneath the seemingly spontaneous brushwork of Zhang Xu's cursive lay a richly expressive mood, embodying the spiritual core of ideal-expression calligraphy. In his own practice, Su also drew upon Zhang's brush techniques and compositional approach, striving for a natural and effortless artistic effect.

Huang Tingjian had a particular affinity for Zhang Xu's wild cursive. He repeatedly copied Zhang Xu's Four Poems of Antiquity and conducted a detailed analysis of his art in Inscriptions from the Valley. Huang asserted that Zhang Xu's cursive script was "unrestrained yet never improper," and further proposed that "to learn calligraphy, one must nurture virtue within the heart and broaden one's learning through the study of sages—only then can calligraphy be truly valued." [6] This connected Zhang Xu's artistry to the inner cultivation of the literati, deepening its cultural significance.

Mi Fu's calligraphy was also influenced by Zhang Xu. He skillfully employed "scattered brush" techniques, producing vigorous and resilient lines, with structures that combined slanted postures and upright balance—sharing clear affinities with Zhang Xu's wild cursive. In his Record of Calligraphy and Painting, Mi Fu commented: "Zhang the Madman's regular script is impeccable; his wild cursive is divine." [7] He believed Zhang's calligraphy had attained a state where spirit and form were perfectly unified, making it a model of wild cursive art.

Beyond technique, Song literati reinterpreted Zhang's "madness" as a symbol of spiritual freedom and personal liberation, elevating his art from technical model to cultural symbol.

4.2. The inheritance and evolution of "Zhang Xu" in the Yuan and Ming dynasties

In the Yuan dynasty, most calligraphers advocated a return to classical traditions, and Zhang Xu came to be regarded as their "spiritual mentor." Zhao Mengfu, a leading figure in Yuan calligraphy, promoted a revival of the "Two Wangs" tradition—emphasizing standardized and elegant beauty. Within this climate, Zhang Xu's unrestrained wild cursive did not enjoy the same level of popularity as it had in the Song dynasty, yet his stature remained undiminished.

Zhao Mengfu himself spoke of Zhang Xu with great esteem, describing his creative process in these terms:

"When Zhang Xu took up the brush, he was like a Daoist priest in deep meditation—first concentrating his spirit in quiet contemplation, then suddenly attaining enlightenment, wielding his brush in a burst of inspiration, and ultimately establishing a school of his own."

Zhao admired Zhang Xu's emphasis on inner reflection and spiritual pursuit, and while he incorporated elements of Zhang's brushwork into his own cursive script, Zhao's writing exhibited a more serene and refined quality, lacking the wild intensity of Zhang's style. This illustrates how Yuan dynasty calligraphers viewed Zhang Xu as a venerated "spiritual mentor."

By the Ming Dynasty, with its growing emphasis on individual expression, the legacy of Zhang Xu was reemphasized. While the early Ming was dominated by the precise and rigid "Court Style," the later period saw highly individualistic calligraphers such as Zhu Yunming, Xu Wei, and Fu Shan. These artists inherited and further developed the wild cursive tradition of Zhang Xu, pushing it to unprecedented expressive heights.

Zhu Yunming's cursive script was deeply influenced by Zhang Xu and Huai Su. His brushwork was vigorous and majestic, with varied, dynamic lines and exaggerated structural forms. Works such as Cursive Script Poems are full of rhythmic power and striking visual impact. Xu Wei took the

“madness” in Zhang Xu’s style to an extreme—his writing was unfettered and free, breaking the constraints of traditional calligraphy and epitomizing the Ming literati’s pursuit of personal liberation.

Fu Shan proposed the famous calligraphic principle known as the “Four Preferables and Four Avoidables”: “Better awkward than skillful, better ugly than charming, better fragmented than slick, better straightforward than contrived.” He advocated a return to unadorned spontaneity, rejecting deliberate refinement. His own cursive style—vigorous, powerful, and majestic in its simplicity—resonated deeply with the spirit of spiritual freedom embodied in Zhang Xu’s wild cursive.

4.3. The rise of stele studies in the Qing Dynasty and Zhang Xu's revaluation of value

The Qing Dynasty saw a big shift in calligraphy, all thanks to the rise of *beixue*—the study of ancient stele inscriptions. Back then, calligraphers stopped fixating only on the “model-book tradition,” which had long centered on the ink works of masters like the “Two Wangs” and Zhang Xu. Instead, they started looking to older stone carvings from the Han and Wei dynasties for inspiration. These stele inscriptions had a grand, rough-hewn, and energetic style—and that vibe couldn’t help but leave its mark on the well-established model-book tradition. It was in this new landscape that Zhang Xu, a key figure in the model-book system, got a fresh look and a new evaluation.

One part of this reevaluation was the affirmation from theory. Liu Xizai, a leading Qing calligraphy theorist, gave Zhang Xu a thorough assessment in his works *Art Overview* and *Calligraphy*. He wrote, “Though Zhang Xu’s cursive looks unruly, it ‘never steps outside the rules.’” [8] In short, Zhang’s “wildness” was rooted in discipline—not random, messy scribbling. This take mattered a lot: it didn’t just back up Zhang’s artistic creativity, but also highlighted how he stuck to tradition, making his calligraphic achievements even more meaningful in theory.

The other part was about blending this with practice. While many Qing calligraphers dived into stele art, they didn’t toss aside Zhang Xu’s legacy entirely. Instead, they tried to mix the powerful, raw feel of stele script with the free-spirited energy of Zhang’s wild cursive, creating something new. Take He Shaoji, for example—he combined elements of Han-dynasty clerical script with the expressive flair of Zhang’s cursive, making lines that were both tough and forceful. Zhao Zhiqian did something similar: he wove brush techniques from Northern Wei steles into his own cursive, crafting a bold, grand style that echoed Zhang Xu’s spirit closely.

All in all, the Qing Dynasty didn’t make Zhang Xu less important. Instead, it put his legacy into a wider artistic context—letting people understand his art in a new way and take it even further.

5. Conclusion

Zhang Xu’s calligraphy didn’t gain recognition as a “classic” in the modern sense all at once—it took shape over a long, winding historical journey. The Tang Dynasty was where this “canon-building” began: his bold, unrestrained cursive style caused a stir back then, earning him wide admiration among scholars and men of letters. From the Song to the Qing Dynasties, his status as a calligraphy master was built up systematically. Later calligraphers kept studying and copying his works, while art theorists interpreted and elevated his style from multiple angles. Bit by bit, his position grew stronger—turning him into a role model for generations of calligraphers, and giving his art new relevance in every era that followed.

Three key things explain why Zhang Xu and his calligraphy have stayed a classic for so long. First, his artistic skill laid the groundwork: his wild cursive broke new ground in brush techniques,

character structure, and overall composition, pushing calligraphy's ability to convey emotion and expression to its fullest. Second, the Tang Dynasty's historical context gave his free-spirited style room to thrive—backed by the period's economic prosperity, social atmosphere, and intellectual trends. Third, how people received his work after the Tang Dynasty mattered a great deal: calligraphers kept praising and learning from him, official history books preserved his legacy, and theorists kept reinterpreting his art—adding fresh meaning and value to this classic model. It's this ongoing “building and refining” process that has steadily cemented Zhang Xu's place as an eternal classic in Chinese calligraphy.

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