

A Study of the “Daoning Study” Seal

Yu Kuo-ching

Department of Education, Exhibition and Information Services
National Palace Museum

Abstract

This study begins with an orpiment seal, donated to the National Palace Museum by Mr. Chi Hsing-fu, bearing unusual characters that are difficult to decipher. After comparing the writing with characters from unearthed artifacts and copies of written forms that have been passed down, as well observing the evolution of character forms through the ages, the three characters of this seal were finally deciphered to be “Daoning zhai (Study)” in clerical script. The process of this discovery will hopefully allow researchers to avoid the subjective trap of guessing and conjecture to acquire a more scientific approach to deciphering unusual characters.

After determining and understanding the character forms of the seal, further textual analysis of historical records was conducted to verify that a study by this name indeed existed below the White Pagoda on Qionghua (Jade) Isle at Beihai (North Lake) in Beijing. Completed in the 18th year of the Qianlong reign (1753), it was given the name Daoning Study. After examining the imperial seals used by the Qing court in Baosou (Treasured Assemblages of Seals), it was discovered that the Qianlong emperor had a seal of the same contents with characters carved in relief but slightly smaller in size and bearing an interpretation for “Daoning zhai.” Since it was not uncommon for the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors to carve seals with the same contents, this gift seal was probably used by the Qianlong emperor. The orpiment material and imperial double-dragon pattern on either side of the characters make this seal all the more precious.

The epigraphical understanding among calligraphers and seal cutters of the Ming and Qing dynasties and the origins behind the use of unusual character forms in ancient writing was a major topic of discussion. Because many painters and calligraphers as well as seal collectors were unfamiliar with the unusual characters on the seals that were difficult to decipher, they often passed on erroneous information. The study of the radicals for the “dao,” “ning,” and “zhai” characters in this paper perhaps can serve as a reference for scholars of characters on seals.

The seals of the Qing imperial family scattered among the people often appear on the auction market. They can be checked against those in Baosou and those not included or missing before compilation, thereby filling the lacunae of this text and providing invaluable historical material for scholars studying the imperial seals of the Qing dynasty court.

Keywords: Daoning Study, seals with unusual characters, Qing imperial seals, epigraphy