

Cultural Studies for Chinese Calligraphy Education in Elementary and Middle Schools in China

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Abstract

This paper focuses on cultural studies to introduce Chinese calligraphy and the teaching of calligraphy in elementary and middle school in China. This paper presents the Cultural Spirit of Chinese Calligraphy which includes: beauty of life, beauty of personal characteristics, and beauty of philosophy, and are based on Chinese calligraphy writing styles, the images that calligraphy embodies, and the techniques of calligraphy. This paper draws attention to the cultural significance of calligraphy education in elementary and middle schools for the purpose of understanding the culture of Chinese characters, immersing the students into Chinese traditional culture, and character development through calligraphy. How to best teach calligraphy? This paper explores the present situation of calligraphy education in China and suggests best cultural practices for implementing calligraphy education at the elementary and middle school level in China. The implementation of Chinese calligraphy at the elementary and middle school levels depends on sound policies, a solid calligraphy curriculum, and proven calligraphy practice techniques as well as sound cultural education.

Keywords: Chinese Calligraphy; Chinese Calligraphy Education; Cultural Studies

The Chinese language is composed of characters which represent different sounds and meanings, according to the symbol. Because Chinese characters represent a combination of meaning and forms, the artistic form of Chinese writing, which we call calligraphy, is special. Chinese calligraphy is known worldwide as a unique art form which represents a distinctive feature of Chinese civilization. Chinese calligraphy is more than an art; it's the national spirit. Chinese calligraphy, which could be called, "dancer on the paper", symbolizes a complex, distinct and mysterious cultural heritage. The four treasures of Chinese calligraphy, brush, paper, ink, and ink stone, have played a crucial role in Chinese culture throughout history. Both within China and elsewhere, knowledge of Chinese calligraphy is seen as a mark of education, creativity, and cultural sophistication. Chinese calligraphy can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives, and this paper cannot cover all these levels, so we will limit our focus to calligraphy as cultural practice and cultural studies. First, let's look at the cultural spirit of Chinese calligraphy.

1. The Cultural Spirit of Chinese Calligraphy

1.1 We can find the beauty of life by studying the history of Chinese calligraphy writing styles

Chinese calligraphy has a long history dating back to original characters. We find that the true beauty of calligraphy lies in the fact that characters and ink and calligrapher work together to express artistic intentions. Culturally, calligraphy represents artistic achievements that are uniquely Chinese. In the practice of calligraphy, calligraphers are used to give their lives and definitions to the ideas and emotions and provide a medium by which deeply personal sentiments and emotions can be preserved for later generations. While Chinese calligraphy requires training in technique, it is also an art which encompasses the Chinese language, history, philosophy and aesthetic. Chinese calligraphy not only has close bonds with Chinese characters, but also provides a medium that reflects the spiritual world and embodies the national spirit.

In general, there are seven calligraphic styles: Oracle Bone Script; Bronze Script; Seal Script (Great Seal Script; Small Seal Script); Clerical Script; Regular Script; Running Style and Cursive Style. Each style is chosen based on the emotion the artist wishes to express. Figure 1.1 illustrates the seven calligraphic styles of Chinese character "horse" (马).

Figure 1.1 Seven calligraphic styles-- From left beginning, they are Oracle Bone Script; Bronze Script; Seal Script; Clerical Script; Regular Script; Running Style and Cursive Style.



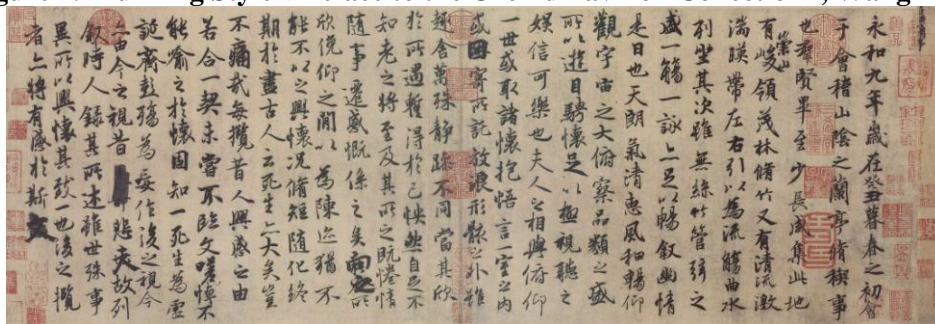
In figure 1.1, we can see the natural and frank nature of Oracle Bone Script which reflects the pursuit of beauty. With a natural style of writing, Bronze Script shows a neat and rigorous style. Seal Script shows a beautiful and elegant style as evidenced by the stroke of smooth and round lines. Clerical Script, which has linear symmetric structures and vertical strokes, creates a beauty of steady flexibility. Regular Script has a flexible brushwork. It has a tetragonal and strong structure, and pays attention to the writing procession of “hiding”, “showing”, “hanging”, and “vertical”, which have some of the heroic and generous traits of Regular script. Running Style is energetic and graceful because of its vivid and beautiful lines. Due to the rich strokes, and momentum throughout, Cursive Style creates a dynamic beauty. To sum up, the various calligraphy styles are used to express the different emotions and sentiments of the calligrapher.

Normally, the literati were able to write in multiple calligraphic styles during ancient times. They used different calligraphy styles to express their feelings, which is the writing that is naturally carried out by the calligrapher’s sense of life. Researcher Zong Baihua, said, “Calligraphy is rhythmic nature, and expresses the idea of a deep layer of life, and then becomes the art of life”. (ZongBaihua 2014, p. 391)

1.2 Calligraphy embodies the beauty of character

In practical terms, calligraphy is the art of Chinese writing characters which combine sounds and meanings. As a symbol of meaning, each character relates directly to a particular concept or idea. GuGan, a modern Chinese scholar, said, “Calligraphy art is image art, and the beauty of calligraphy is amazing of image.” (Gu, Gan 1987, p.47) He suggests that one should analyze the image through several lenses: the beauty of the language, the abstract rhythmic beauty of brush and ink and the isomorphism of the world. We find that the relationship of these external forms, rich in internal meaning, illustrate the profound complexity of the Chinese characters. The calligrapher brings to life the experience and image embodied in these characters. As a musician gives life to the written notes on a score of music, so too does the calligrapher as he creates physical writing rich with invisible meaning. Words are the voice of the mind, which is the artistic conception of calligraphy. If one does not understand the calligraphic image, he does not comprehend the feeling of the calligraphy. If the connotation of Chinese calligraphy cannot be understood, a person does not experience the beauty of calligrapher’s characters. For example, <Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection> (see figure 1.2), which is a masterpiece by Wang Xizhi, is the best known example of Running Style.

Figure 1.2 Running Style <Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection>, Wang Xizhi



By focusing on the image, we can appreciate the calligraphy from a different perspective. <Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection> which was abstracted from nature, and clearly illustrates the essence of nature, embodies the character, feelings and culture of the calligrapher. We also can deepen our understanding through this poem <The Orchid Pavilion>, which was created by Wang Xizhi at the same time.

Looking up:

Blue sky’s end.

Looking down:

Green water's brim.
Deep solitude:
Rimless view.
Before the eyes,
A pattern displays itself.
Immerse, transformation
A million differences,
None out of tune.
Pipings all variegated.
What fits me, none strange.

From his poem, we see the natural cosmology of the calligrapher clearly expressed in words and in symbols. The masterpiece <Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection>, which only has 324 characters and 28 lines in the entire work, each Chinese character shows the true state of nature. The graceful and elegant style of this masterpiece is difficult to replicate. Even Wang Xizhi himself, could not write the calligraphy the same way again because the artist's conception and emotion differ from moment to moment. "Words are the voice of the mind" and the images formed represent the feelings and character at the moment of creation.

As Zong Baihua states, "Ancient Chinese calligraphers strove to make the characters come alive and reflect the reality of life with bones, veins, flesh and blood. Unlike a painting or drawing, which seeks to recreate the objective form, calligraphy uses abstract dots, lines and strokes to structure and image that speaks to the emotions and the imagination." (Zong Baihua 1981, p.161-162)

1.3 The beauty of philosophy is expressed through the techniques of calligraphy.

There is no doubt that technique is essential to the art of calligraphy. For instance, generations of famous calligraphers have discussed and written books about how to best use the writing brush. The three fundamental elements of Chinese calligraphy are: the brush stroke, the structure of the characters, and the art of composition. Calligraphy techniques can be identified by their inherent rules, each which serves a specific philosophic function. Before beginning his work, there are several considerations which the calligrapher needs to determine, such as: how to execute the stroke? How to arrange the stroke order? How to plan the major layout patterns? Without mastering technique, one cannot write well, as the application of the proper technique is fundamental. Throughout history, much has been written about the importance of technique. Cai Yong, who was a calligrapher and writer during the Eastern Han Dynasty, introduced the concept of calligraphy techniques in his work, "Nine Styles". In this first known book of technique, Yong introduced nine specific styles of calligraphy and emphasized that "one must hide the top and protect the bottom of the character". A famous calligrapher during the Tang Dynasty, Sun Guoting, stated his opinion of calligraphy techniques in his book <Pedigree of Calligraphy>. When he said, "A dot is the rule of a word, a word is the standard of the whole calligraphy", he expressed the necessity of proper technique in the details in order to create a work of high standards. Another famous calligrapher during the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Huaiguan, also stressed the importance of technique in his <Statement about Six Chinese Calligraphy Writing Styles>. He said, "Learn calligraphy by the rules, and when you have done well, you can give up the rules." If a person doesn't master the techniques, he cannot be regarded as a person who has the ability to write. Obviously, only mastering basic rules will not create a work of true art. In other words, the mastery of writing technique must be augmented by the calligrapher's character. Generations of calligraphers have focused on the practice of tracing and copying in order to improve their ability, and at the same time, they concentrated on improving their artistic abilities. Through the practice of tracing and copying the stroke types, considering the stroke order, and learning major layout patterns, they discovered that the true beauty of calligraphy lies in the synthesis of all these techniques.

Of course, the process of tracing and copying cannot be mechanical, and must keep on the calligraphy life is vivid. In order to properly grasp the essential writing skills, one must consider how to pursue the strong stroke, the dot, the horizontal line, etc. At the same time, one must be devoted to reflecting the meaning of life through writing. In other words, the brush stroke is restricted by the natural laws of form and technique as well as by the Calligrapher's philosophy and the transmission of meaning, calligraphy is the art of life, and the beauty of the spirit is transmitted through it.

2. The cultural significance of calligraphy education in elementary and middle school

2.1 Being cognizant of the culture

Calligraphy is created using Chinese characters and these Chinese characters are different from sound symbols. They are a combination of meaning and forms, which are the source for the artistry of Chinese calligraphy. The Chinese character is one of the few language symbols in which the script is not only a means of communication, but also is celebrated as an independent form of visual art. In Calligraphy, the image is created by combining the linguistic concepts of the Chinese characters and brush and ink to convey meaning. Chinese characters have key characteristics which are meaningful, figurative and extensive. It is the existence of these three characteristics which lays the foundation for the creation of calligraphy. The combination of these external forms rich in internal meaning, is the special cultural characteristic of the Chinese written language. The ancients placed emphasis on the “experience” and “image” when they created written symbols, and so developed a system of describing objective items as absolutely lifelike, using lively and descriptive language based on the shared experiences of people. In addition, abstract concepts are vividly expressed in Chinese writing. The point where the internal meaning is combined with the calligrapher’s own feelings, philosophy and value of life is where the art of calligraphy enters a highly artistic state.

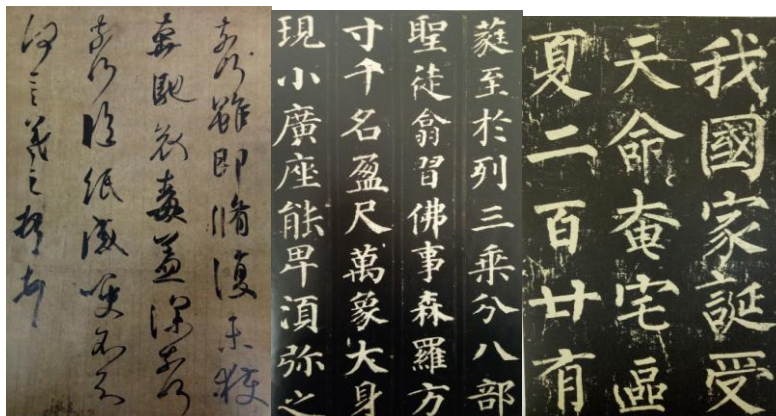
The aim of calligraphy education in elementary and middle school is not for the purpose of training professional calligraphers, but to cultivate an understanding and appreciation of the aesthetic spirit of art as well as develop an appreciation of Chinese culture.

2.2 Immersion into the Chinese traditional culture

Calligraphy beautifully expresses the traditional Chinese culture and combines Chinese philosophy, worldview and traditional values into a unique art form. In other words, while art such as painting, music, engraving, and so on is produced all over the world, only Chinese calligraphy is born in Chinese tradition. Learning Chinese calligraphy is not only learning the art of Chinese writing, it is also learning the values of Chinese traditional culture. Aesthetic principles and standards in calligraphy are rooted in Chinese culture. In addition, social and cultural influences play a strong role in developing the emotional character of calligraphers.

In Chinese history, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism form the foundation of Chinese culture and thus, have a strong influence on Chinese calligraphy. Although there are many differences between the three philosophies, their influence on calligraphy remains equal. China is the only country where three powerful religions have existed together for ages without one of them being successful in destroying the other two. What are the reasons for this amazing phenomenon? It’s Chinese harmonism. In traditional Chinese culture, harmonism, which stresses the idea of dialectics in life, is a major principle. Harmonism is also reflected in every aspect of Chinese calligraphy. For example, the pure contrast of black writing on a white background is a perfect example. When ever the artist manipulates and elaborates the calligraphy, harmonism must be a key consideration. In writing practice, the artist emphasizes the diversity of the parts and the harmony or unity of the whole, including the layout, the stroke quality, and the coordination of dots and lines, and so on. Notice in figure 2.2, the three individual styles of Wang Xizhi, Yan Zhenqing, and Liu Gongquan. Each style has distinctive characteristic, and is informed by the time and society in which the artist lived.

Figure 2.2: from left to right are Wang Xizhi’s <Sangluan Tie>; Yan Zhenqing’s <Multi-Pagoda Stele>; Liu Gongquan’s <Shencejun Stele>



Wang Xizhi Yan Zhenqing Liu Gongquan

The Wang style looks relaxed and graceful because he lived during the Jin Dynasty, which was known for impractical discussion and graceful nobility. In contrast, the Yan style is heavier and fuller and was informed by the Tang Dynasty culture of flourishing and prosperity, at the same time, Yan's heroic career also reflects his calligraphic style. The Liu style is thinner, which was reflected by his strong and straight characteristic. Unlike Yan, whose life was in turbulence under the Tang Dynasty, Liu's life was steady under the Tang Dynasty's leader. Using a metaphor to compare Yan and Liu's styles, we can say that Yan's style is like a mighty river whereas as Liu's style is like a clear stream.

While calligraphy expresses the aesthetic values of Chinese culture, it also reflects the historical and cultural period in which the calligrapher lived. Without the foundational knowledge of traditional Chinese culture, and the historical context of the calligrapher's life, one is unable to understand the full meaning of calligraphy, and it appears only as a work of skill and technique. Calligraphy is more than technique, the connotative meaning not only reveals aesthetic principles, but is also a cultural abstract. In order to understand the full meaning of calligraphy, we must focus on immersion into the Chinese traditional culture in elementary and middle schools.

2.3 Focus on training character through calligraphy

In traditional Chinese culture, an artist's success is associated with his moral values and personal conduct. In calligraphy, it is the same situation. Subjective elements such as scholasticism, personal achievements, personality and moral virtues are all-important to the creation of a work of calligraphy. If these elements are lacking, any work of calligraphy will not be considered art. As Liu Gongquan said, "An upright mind for an upright brush", which captures the Chinese emphasis on the formation of strong moral virtues as the basis for artistic calligraphy. In the modern Chinese vocabulary, words such as: magnificent, simple, natural, upright, elegant, dignified, etc., used to describe the charm of calligraphy, can also be used to describe strong moral character. One calligrapher follows another and learns not only the art of calligraphy, but also moral values of his teacher. Throughout history, graceful moral virtues have played an essential role in the art of calligraphy.

As an example, Yan Zhenqing's calligraphy work is powerful and majestic, and correspond to his integrity and strong personality. On the contrary, a person with poor moral character may be skillful at calligraphy, but his work cannot be appreciated at the aesthetic level. In this way, the training of students in calligraphy must also include strong moral teaching. Teachers can teach students the artist's moral character at the same time as they learn the actual techniques of brush and stroke.

3. The present situation of Chinese calligraphy education in elementary and middle schools in China

3.1 Policy guidance

Two key policy guidelines for calligraphy education were recently published by the Chinese Education Department. "The opinion of the Education Department of China on the use of calligraphy education in elementary and middle schools", issued in 2011, and "Guidelines for calligraphy education in elementary and middle schools", issued in 2013. These two policies offer six clear guidelines to support calligraphy education. First, schools must strengthen the guidance and management of calligraphy education. Second, schools must strengthen the instruction of calligraphy teachers. Third, relational departments will provide the necessary support materials, such as stele, chart, book, electronic publication in library. Fourth, calligraphy education must be treated as an academic topic. Fifth, the Education Department will evaluate calligraphy curriculum. Finally, the textbooks of calligraphy must be updated. In addition, the policy guides offer suggestions to improve calligraphy education such as: Clarify the aims and goals of calligraphy education in elementary and middle school, clarify the content of calligraphy education, create standards for the teaching of Chinese writing, etc. It is strongly suggested that the major stroke types and basic writing sequences be codified, and at the same time, samples of important works of calligraphy and tracing activities should be provided. The policy guide directs the teaching of Chinese calligraphy in elementary and middle schools.

3.2 Setting up Chinese calligraphy curriculum

In China, calligraphy is a regular part of the school curriculum. Calligraphy class officially entered the compulsory education curriculum in Spring Term, 2013. According to the education policy, elementary school and middle school students must have a calligraphy lesson once a week. In addition, the students must finish a piece of calligraphy work once a week.

In general, beginning learners start with Clerical Script followed by Regular Script. In addition to the physical appearance of the writing, students are also evaluated on cultural attainment and aesthetic sensitivities. Good handwriting is a key element for achieving high marks on exams because the instinct to judge or comment on a person's handwriting is as common as the instinct to judge people's appearance and personality. The quality of a student's handwriting reflects on her score, and in fact, neat handwriting increases the score on exams. Therefore, mastery of Chinese characters and neat writing are key course objectives and can only be improved through guided writing practice.

In China, each elementary and middle school sets up their own calligraphy curriculum. However, they must abide by the following four rules. First, the calligraphy curriculum must cover every student and provides support in order to write good Chinese characters. Second, Both hard pen and brush must be learned in a combination of practice and aesthetics. Third, the curriculum must establish calligraphy standards and focus on the personal experience of each student. Fourth, skills and cultural understanding must be strengthened.

3.3 More attention should be paid to calligraphy training

Calligraphy is considered an essential part of the school curriculum. According to the traditional Chinese training method, students in elementary school calligraphy spend a substantial amount of time mastering the Regular Script before moving on to other styles. In middle school, students must spend one year mastering the Clerical Script while continuing to practice Regular Script; after eighth grade, they begin to practice Running Style. When students begin the third grade, they have a one brush calligraphy lesson once a week. In these lessons, the teacher will teach, step-by-step, the basic major stroke types. The major stroke types include the dot, the horizontal line, the vertical line, the down-left, the down-right, the up-right, the turn, and the hook. It should be noted that each of these eight types can appear in varied forms. However, at the elementary level, the calligraphy teacher is seldom a calligrapher, so students are taught by the use of calligraphy textbooks. At this level, the goals of teaching are basic: understanding Chinese culture, fostering an interest in writing, and learning to write good script. Although the students will take much time to practice, the teachers only give grades for neatness in writing script. The aesthetic rules of calligraphy are based on the teacher's own standards. Calligraphy education, to a large extent, happens at the lower level. At the middle school level, there are no specialized lessons for calligraphy practice and work is done primarily at home and focuses on hard pen.

4. The vision for Chinese Calligraphy in Elementary and Middle Schools in China

4.1 A scientific approach to calligraphy practice

All too often, a four-step procedure is followed to help students improve their technique, learn the aesthetic principals and culture of writing, from Chinese traditional culture to following a model, and finally to free writing. Step-by-step instructions are provided, from teaching traditional illustration to teaching how to write each stroke type. A variety of calligraphy works are provided in the classroom so students can benefit by imitating the great masters.

A four-step procedure is followed. First, models are provided for writing practice and guidance. Second, traditional teaching and learning practices are followed. For example, the students are taught to focus on a correct writing position which will keep their mind calm, patient and focused. Third, a basic and important step, tracing and copying models are provided. Students learn by imitating; stroke-by-stroke, and then character-by-character until the spirit of the art penetrates their minds. Traditional Chinese training methods have always put a strong emphasis on imitation and copying, and it is considered a pedagogical tool at the elementary and middle school level; to "imitate so-and-so". While students copy the external forms, they are immersed in the internal spirit of the work. It is believed that students must first learn the essentials from masters of the past before trying to develop their individual style. The fourth step is free writing that is the last and most challenging step in the training process. We know that each calligrapher must integrate her own character into the strokes and character in order to produce a personal style. At the elementary and middle school level, the level of free writing will be lower as students are still rooted in imitation and they are not yet ready to focus on individual style. Imitation is a process leading to discovery--a discovery of the good qualities in the model and the techniques used to produce them, as well as a discovery of one's own limitations so that efforts can be made to overcome them.

4.2 Focus on the cultural component of calligraphy education

As we know, the study of Chinese writing is the study of Chinese philosophy and traditional values as well as the Chinese worldview. Aesthetic principles and standards are rooted in cultural and philosophical tenets.

Especially at the beginning stage, student-learners should be immersed in the Chinese and calligraphy culture, and then they can begin to think about questions such as: how to handle the balance of Chinese characters? How to feel the calligraphy art? How to trace and copy from models?

The education of calligraphy is a progression based on the training of calligraphy in order to achieve an aesthetic experience. We are not only teaching students' calligraphy techniques but also are cultivating their minds to see and appreciate beauty. The education of calligraphy cannot be focused solely on the mechanical training of skills as this daily repetition of mechanical training will not allow students to feel the beauty of calligraphy. The creation of calligraphy is inseparable from the emotional life of the calligrapher, and the emotional life of the calligrapher is the product of culture, thus making calligraphy a mixture of technique, emotion and culture. The goal is to let students feel the meaning of calligraphy in as tea dy aesthetical procession. Obviously, the purpose of calligraphy education in elementary and middle school is not to train calligraphers, but to cultivate a kind of verve to let students experience the artistic conception, the beauty of rhythm, and the way of nature, so students can feel the charm of Chinese culture.

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