

An Archaeological Perception on the Evolving Art of Chinese Calligraphy: Social and Cultural Significance

Boqianshi Zhang¹

¹ University of Southampton, United Kingdom

Correspondence: Boqianshi Zhang, University of Southampton, United Kingdom.

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Abstract

Chinese calligraphy is a significant aspect of Chinese culture, showcasing the evolution of Chinese writing and exemplifying the pinnacle of Chinese art. This art represents a nation's creativity and holds significant archaeological data. This paper will examine the significance of Chinese calligraphy through an analysis of the evolution of Chinese writing, writing instruments, and the utilization of archaeology in calligraphy studies.

Keywords: Chinese calligraphy, inventiveness, crafts, archaeology

1. Introduction

Chinese writing is an arty expression of language in a physical form. Chinese calligraphy has played a huge role in the Chinese culture years. Such a form of art, going back to the Shang dynasty around 1600 BC, is a foundation of understanding the complexities of the Chinese culture and history, beyond writing (Bai, 2020). The development of Chinese characters is a reflection of creativity, besides, it is an important tool for research as it offers deep insights into the evolution of Chinese calligraphy and language. Every Chinese calligraphy style from the early oracle bone writing to the current inscription, gives a story of the times and people who came up with the script (Zhang et al., 2021). Different fonts and layouts used in Chinese calligraphy are not plain aesthetic selections instead they are infused with cultural symbolism and historical significance. For example, the evolution from the formal and rigid inscriptions to the more expressive and flowing clerical reflects the changes in the society during their respective times. In China, Calligraphy is a discipline which needs years of personal expression, dedicated practice, aesthetic principles and exemplifying philosophical ideals since it is not just a form of writing (Shi, 2023). In other words, it is just a visual journey through the history of evolution, apprehending the spirit, intellectual prowess and emotions of its specialists. Per se, Chinese calligraphy is a critical lens through which the development of Chinese language and culture could be viewed and comprehended.

大 dà big / great	小 xiǎo small	一 yī one	二 èr two	三 sān three	十 shí ten	百 bǎi hundred	千 qiān thousand	多 duō much / many	不 bù not
人 rén person	夫 fū man	子 zǐ child	男 nán male	女 nǚ female	王 wáng king	主 zhǔ master	我 wǒ I	你 nǐ you	他 tā he / she
口 kǒu mouth	说 shuō speak	目 mù eye	見 jiàn look	耳 ěr ear	闻 wén hear	手 shǒu hand	工 gōng work	脚 jiǎo foot	行 xíng go
来 lái come	入 rù enter	出 chū exit	上 shàng up / on	下 xià down / under	中 zhōng center	在 zài located at / in	左 zuǒ left	右 yòu right	有 yǒu have
吃 chī eat	饭 fàn rice (cooked)	菜 cài vegetable	豆 dòu bean	肉 ròu meat	牛 niú cow	猪 zhū pig	鸡 jī chicken	鱼 yú fish	茶 chá tea
国 guó nation	家 jiā home	校 xiào school	文 wén text	学 xué learn	狗 gǒu dog	猫 māo cat	马 mǎ horse	鸟 niǎo bird	虫 chóng insect
日 rì sun / day	月 yuè moon / month	天 tiān sky	地 dì land	海 hǎi sea	木 mù wood	火 huǒ fire	土 tǔ earth	金 jīn metal / gold	水 shuǐ water
气 qì air	干 gān dry	雨 yǔ rain	山 shān mountain	川 chuān river	米 mǐ rice (grain)	田 tián field	花 huā flower	石 shí stone	玉 yù jade
村 cūn village	店 diàn shop	车 chē vehicle	衣 yī clothes	白 bái white	黑 hēi black	红 hóng red	蓝 lán blue	绿 lǜ green	黄 huáng yellow
是 shì be	心 xīn heart / mind	好 hǎo good	爱 ài love	喜 xǐ happiness	幸 xìng luck	生 shēng life	死 sǐ death	力 lì strength	病 bìng sickness

Figure 1. Basic Chinese Calligraphy (Source: Wang et al., 2020)

2. Historical, Social, Cultural and Technical Background of Calligraphy

Calligraphy or rather the art of beautiful writing is an ancient form which has been important to several cultures, Chinese culture being prominent. The historical and cultural roots of calligraphy are deep and complex, linking social, cultural and technical features.

2.1 Historical and Cultural Background

Calligraphy devised thousands of years ago. It evolved from ideographs and pictographs created in the Shang dynasty (circa 1600-1046 BCE) within the Chinese culture. With time, it evolved through different Chinese dynasties, all contributing different styles and techniques (Zhu, 2020). Such an evolution mirrors the transforming aesthetics, social norms, and philosophies of the different times.

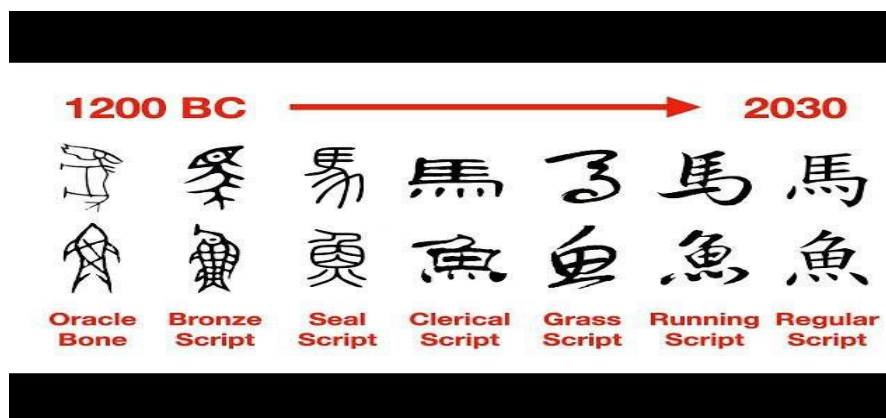


Figure 2. Evolution of Chinese Calligraphy (Source: Bai, 2020)

2.2 Four Treasures of the Study

The traditional Chinese calligraphy tools are known as the “Four Treasures of the Study.” They include; brush (bi), paper (zhi), ink (mo), and ink stone (yan). The brush is the main tool used and it is basically made from animal hair. The brush varies from thin to thick allowing change of strokes from fine to broad. The ink is basically prepared through grinding an ink stock on an ink stone then mixed with water. The ink plays an important role in the texture and depth of the writing. The selection of paper mostly is from rice paper as it helps the ink spread easily and get absorbed faster. The mastery of these materials and techniques needs years of practice and mirrors the skills of the calligrapher and sensibility of art (Huang, 2020).



Figure 3. Four Treasures of the Study (Source: Huang, 2020)

2.3 Role of Calligraphy in Society and Culture

Calligraphy among the Chinese is beyond a form of artistic expression but instead it is deeply rooted in the social and culture fabric. It has basically been a standard for literacy and education, with a strong emphasis on learning calligraphy from the youngest age. Such emphasis mirrors the significance of patience, discipline, and progressive self-improvement, values which are highly regarded among the Chinese culture. In the Chinese history, the mastery of Chinese calligraphy was a status symbol and an obligatory skill for researchers and officials. Basically, it was a main factor in one's career and social advancement, mostly during the grand examination in the traditional China. The elegance and style of one's calligraphy were viewed as a reflection of their personal qualities as well as good integrity (Halimi, 2021).

2.4 Reflection of Social Relations, Education, and Politics

Calligraphy mirrors the philosophical and moral ethics of the Chinese culture. Value of harmony among the Confucian is mostly reflected in the sensible and logical style of the old calligraphy. Taoist philosophies of naturalness and extemporaneity find expression in more free form styles (Wang et al., 2021). In the basis of education, learning inscription is a way of instilling discipline, emphasis, and artistic obligation. It is more than just learning a skill; it is about increasing personality and ethical benefits. Calligraphy has been used as a tool for expressing thoughts and propaganda politically. The messages passed through calligraphic works mostly mirrored the political climate of the time, acting as historical purpose which offers understanding into the socio-political background of different times (Wang et al., 2020). In other words, calligraphy in the Chinese society is a multidimensional form of art. It is a combination of historical development, artistic appearance, as well as cultural identity. Its importance exceeds the mere act of writing, representing the education, values, and political distinctions of the Chinese society all through its history.

3. Application of Archaeological Methods in the Study of Calligraphy

The application of archeological methods in the Chinese calligraphy provides a distinctive perception, combining material culture examination including technical research towards deepening the understanding of this prehistoric form of art. Traditionally, archeology emphasizes on the study of physical artifacts and human connections with their environment, offers valuable insights into the historical and technical characteristics of inscription.

3.1 Material Culture Analysis in Calligraphy

Artifact Analysis

Archaeologists get to examine calligraphic tools and materials, like ink, brushes, paper, or ink stone. The objects

can show a lot about the ancient background in which they were used (Yang, 2022). For example, the type of ink what it is made from indicates the time or the physical location of the object.

3.2 Cultural Background

Getting to understand the cultural background of a calligraphic piece is important. Calligraphy is not just a form of art but it is mostly a cultural appearance. Through analyzing the themes and styles dominant in different times or locations, archaeologists can better comprehend the social ethics, religious beliefs, and historical events which molded them (Yin, 2021).

3.3 Conservation and Degeneration Examination

The study of how calligraphic materials depreciate with time could provide deep insights into the preservation methods that were historically used, and guide current efforts of conservation.

3.4 Applied Research in Calligraphy

3.4.1 Technological Improvement

Outlining the development of tools and materials used in calligraphy through archaeological findings enables investigators to get to comprehend technical innovations with time. For instance, the improvement from natural to synthetic inks or the improvement of brush designs can be planned.

3.4.2 Method Modernization

Investigating attire patterns on the tools or the ink dissemination on paper could be of help in the reconstruction of the methods used by prehistoric writers. This also involves studying the density, position, and movement of the brush or even other tools, providing a profounder understanding of the aesthetic development in writing (Yang, 2022).

3.4.3 Chemical and Physical Examination

Using current methods like spectroscopy, radiocarbon dating, or microscopy, archaeologists could be at a better position of determining the age of calligraphic pieces, the chemical composition of the inks and pigments, as well as the physical properties of the papers and surfaces employed (Wang, 2020).

3.5 Assimilating History and Techniques Through Archaeology

The general method of archaeology in learning calligraphy reserves the physical features of the art and also recovers the imperceptible legacy. Through rebuilding the methods, accepting the cultural consequence, and learning the development of materials and methods, archaeology bridges the gap between the prehistoric and contemporary realms of writing (Yang, 2022). It helps in appreciating the artistic value of inscription but then again its part as a historical manuscript which summarizes the viewpoints, backgrounds, and information of historical cultures.

4. How Calligraphy Is Embedded in Social Relations

Calligraphy is deeply embedded in social relations and could be understood better through different social theories like social construction theory, semiotics, symbolic interactionism, cultural capital theory, and postmodern perspectives.

The theory of social construction suggests that every information including inventive practices like calligraphy is created on the basis of social interactions. Based on this context, calligraphy is considered to be a social product not just an artistic expression (Kwok & Koh, 2021). Calligraphy basically evolves through collective social customs and practices, shaped by the society in which it is being created. For instance, the reverence of writing within East Asia philosophies mirrors social values of aesthetics, discipline, and historic continuity. Every stroke and character exemplifies cultural tradition approved by generations emphasizing on the significance of shared values and social inheritance.

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols which offer a different lens towards understand writing's social impact. Every stroke in writing is more than just a part of a letter or character; it is a sign overloaded with significance (Ting, 2022). In Chinese inscription, for example, the method a character is inscribed can pass sentiments, ethical thoughts, or religious opinions. This figurative influence of lettering turns it into a way of communication in a social setting, where understanding the nuances of these symbols build up social connections as well as shared identity.

On the other hand, symbolic interactionism focuses on the role of symbols in social relations. Based on this context, inscription could be viewed as an active tool for communication. It is not fixed as the way it is interpreted and understood could change according to the situation and the context of the viewer (Chen, 2023). For examples, in public meetings, the obligation of inscription fosters a sense of unrestricted and public artistic rise. It becomes a tool through which people interrelate, share skills, and bond.

Additionally, cultural capital theory proposes that cultural products, like calligraphy, contribute towards social status of a person. Calligraphy mastery could be viewed as a form of cultural capital, providing respect and difference within assured social groups. In cultures where writing is highly appreciated, being capable of it or having a deep thoughtful of its forms could help in enhancing social standing and networks of an individual (Guillory, 2023).

Postmodern Perspectives argues that inscription challenges the conventional ideas of art and letter. It shapes the restrictions between inscribed language and visual depiction, signifying a more unsolidified thoughtful of social concepts. In a postmodern culture where characters and persons are progressively fragmented, lettering could serve as a standard of exploring and expressing these complications (Lambert, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Archaeological study of the Chinese calligraphy is dominating in undoing the rich tapestry of the Chinese culture and history. Such prehistoric form of art, more than just a way of communication, signifies a profound spiritual and theoretical heritage which has shaped the identity of China. Every personality and style revealed in archaeological sites has a story to tell, offering valuable understandings into the political, social and cultural aspects of different times. This paper gave light on the evolution of the Chinese calligraphy and provides a distinctive gap into the views, philosophies, and everyday lives of previous cultures.

The application of archaeological methods in studying calligraphy is a multidisciplinary attempt which enhances understanding of such form of art. It enables people to see beyond the apparent beauty of calligraphy and grow its ancient, artistic, and practical profundity. Besides, social theories offer multifaceted understandings into which inscription is interlinked with social associations. Calligraphy is a social occurrence which mirrors, highlights, and occasionally tasks ethnic customs and social structures. Getting to understand calligraphy through these theories let slip its philosophical effect on social connections and linkages, emphasizing on its role as an ethnic bridge and a way of collective human experience.

This study of the prehistoric scripts has resulted in a better understanding of chronological events, systems of governance, as well as cultural exchange among the Chinese. The study also bridges the past with the present in recent Chinese culture. In addition to that, this paper significantly contributes to the conservation and obligation of the Chinese tradition, boosting an international understanding of the China's philosophical historic and cultural effect.

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