

Philosophical Speculation of Chinese Calligraphy Aesthetics: Law and Gist

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Abstract: Appreciating calligraphy is a process in which the subject and the object, the active and the passive, shape each other, which lays the philosophical law of calligraphy aesthetics: the collision of objective interest and subjective interest. The philosophical essence of Chinese calligraphy's aesthetic appreciation lies in cultivating subjective cognition based on the calligraphy's objective history.

1. Introduction

Chinese calligraphy with strong oriental sentiment is deeply affected by Chinese philosophy. Just as Chinese philosophy is centered on Taoism and based on "Qi", "The Chinese art pursues the realm in which the virtual and the real combine with vivid charm"(Lee Chengzong,2019) .From the perspective of aesthetic appreciation, humans aim to enter a certain realm through aesthetic appreciation. The so-called "realm" is infinite time and space beyond specific, limited objects, events, and scenes. In such realm, humans embrace the universe and ponder the past and get philosophical reflection on and understanding of the whole life, history and the universe(Ye Lang,1998). Exploring calligraphy aesthetics from the perspective of philosophy can help humans understand calligraphy aesthetics and serve as a guide for calligraphy aesthetic activities.

Marxism holds that the subject is consciousness, and the object is matter; matter determines consciousness, while consciousness reacts on matter. Therefore, the object determines the subject's cognition; the subject also reflects the object's state. Further, the subject produces initiative, and the object produces motivation; therefore, the initiative acts on motivation. Based on Marxism, calligraphy aesthetics combines humanistic and artistic sentiment, makes clear the characteristics of the calligraphy appreciator as the subject, and calligraphy as the object, and reflects the law and the gist of calligraphy aesthetics.

2. The Subjectivity and Objectivity of Calligraphy Aesthetics

2.1 The subjectivity of calligraphy aesthetics

First, calligraphy aesthetics is a subjective and dynamic behavior, affected and restricted by subjective aesthetic appreciation. Calligraphy appreciators vary in occupations, age, gender, experience, knowledge, economic status, etc. These social factors constitute their unique aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic values and play a key role in aesthetics. The saying goes in *YuanwuLu (the Book of Completeness and Reflection)*, "It is a unique man who knows his jobs. One who knows his jobs must be a unique man".

Second, calligraphy aesthetics is a complex psychological activity, affected and restricted by the subjective mood. A sad man feels sad at it while a happy man feels happy at it. Different moods bring different emotions, thus leading to different or even opposite aesthetic conclusion.

Thus, the subjectivity of calligraphy aesthetic appreciation varies in different subjects and varies over time. As Wang Guowei (a great philosopher of the Qing Dynasty) said, "What I view is affected by my mood"(Wang Guowei, 2011:459) , so the state of the aesthetic subject directly affects its perception of the aesthetic object. In short, the subjectivity of calligraphy aesthetics can be understood as "personalized beauty". It is not idealism, but self-awareness that recognizes and emphasizes the subjectivity of calligraphy aesthetics.

2.2 The objectivity of calligraphy aesthetics

First, calligraphy aesthetics is a symbol of understanding social culture. From the perspective of its historical role, calligraphy, the product of socialization, is a cultural symbol left by humans in building society, reflecting the society's cultural concept, sentiment and charm. From the perspective of its development, calligraphy evolves into different shapes, including big seal script, small seal script, official script, regular script, cursive script and running script, each with unique characteristics. In addition, each era has its aesthetics. For example, charm is valued during Jin Dynasty, standard is valued during Tang Dynasty, artistic conception is valued during Song Dynasty, and shape is valued during Ming and Qing Dynasties.

Second, calligraphy aesthetics is a symbol of seeing originator's artistic ability. The art of calligraphy is not only displayed on the hairbrush's edge, but also originated in the personality cultivation, which reflects humanity and the nature of calligraphy. As the saying goes, "Calligraphy reflects what a person likes, including his learning, talents and will"(Liu Xizai,1978:46), "A man of virtue shows elegance and justice in his calligraphy; a man without virtue shows his aggressiveness in his calligraphy"(Zhu Hegeng,2022:126).The calligraphist's theoretical knowledge, cultivation, character, temperament and thoughts can be displayed through his calligraphy, an artistic realm in which human is the peak of a mountain.

In recent years, the imbalance between economic development and cultural development has drawn a strange phenomenon in which ugliness and weirdness are viewed as beauty. Both calligraphists and appreciators pursue strange shapes and characters. Calligraphists begin to pursue varieties before mastering the basic rules of calligraphy, or even before knowing the basic knowledge of calligraphy. The phenomenon is due to "eye-catching aesthetics". Driven by the mindset, calligraphists crave for winning attention and benefits with weird and strange calligraphy. However, the innovation of any art should not stray off humanistic sentiments and art. Progress can be made in calligraphy aesthetics only when humanistic sentiment combines with calligraphy's charm. Only by recognizing the objectivity of calligraphy aesthetics can we have a comprehensive and unbiased judgment on calligraphy and calligraphists.

2.3 The relationship between subjectivity and objectivity of calligraphy aesthetics

The relationship between objectivity and subjectivity is manifested in three forms: mutual attraction, mutual exclusion, and mutual shaping. On the one hand, from the perspective of objectivity, affected by culture and self-cultivation, the calligraphist forms his distinctive creative style, and becomes more exclusive in calligraphy with his style. On the other hand, from the perspective of subjectivity, affected by personal aesthetics and mood, calligraphy appreciators also construct aesthetic concepts in line with their temperament and become exclusive in calligraphy with their aesthetic concept. Therefore, when the creative style and aesthetic concept fit well, the calligraphist and the appreciator will attract each other. Otherwise, they will exclude each other. Calligraphy aesthetics is not simply either "attraction" or "exclusion", but more likely mutual shaping. "There is no Yang or Yin only"(Li Jingde,1988:61). The mutual shaping of the subject's creative style and the object's aesthetic concept stimulates aesthetic thinking and gives birth to aesthetic taste.

3. The Philosophical Law of Calligraphy Aesthetics

Based on the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, calligraphy aesthetics is the unity of subjectivity and objectivity. This mutual shaping of the subject and the object, as well as the active and the passive is the foundation for the philosophical laws of calligraphy aesthetics. Specifically, this law is reflected in the collision of two dimensions: the objective interest of calligraphy, and the subjective taste of calligraphy appreciators. In this process, the calligraphy's implication, charm, emotion, Yin and Yang are all transformed into appreciators' interest, thus displaying human sentiment and context.

3.1 Objective interest

As the book *Lun Shu Teng Yu* goes, "A book must have its spirit, "Qi", bone, blood, and flesh. A book is not completed with each lost"(Guo Yongjian,2021).To understand the objective interest of calligraphy is to find out what is there in calligraphy.

First, calligraphy has its connotations as its basic attribute. This implication is composed of Chinese characters' connotation, shape, spelling, structure, and strokes, enabling us to get their meaning through visual experience. The so-called "calligraphy" (pinyin: shu fa) is the unity of "writing" (pinyin: shu) and "law"(pinyin: fa), and the combination of form and essence. With "law" after "writing", the form is what the essence looks like, and the essence is what the form functions as(Liu Ye,2008).With the essence superior to the form, the connotation of calligraphy itself and the broad meaning are the basic attributes of calligraphy.

Second, calligraphy has its spirit as its natural attribute. The essence of the spirit is the Chinese philosophy of "Qi", the evolution of the plain Dialectics of Nature. The plain Dialectics of Nature has distinct characteristics as below. First, "Qi" is ontological, filled in the universe. Second, "Qi" is embodied by matter, connected with essence, spirit, emotion, meaning, charm and heart. Third, "Qi" is connected with all things in nature, with harmony between humans and matters. The saying "'Qi" is a matter"(Wang Bi,2020:11) in the *Book of Changes* means everything in the world is composed of Yin and Yang, and calligraphy is no exception. The functions of "Qi" are mentioned in Zhang Huaizhao's *On Characters* and Kang Youwei's *the Books of Calligraphy*. "The calligraphy is dominated by "Qi". With "Qi" filled in calligraphy's flesh, calligraphy has its own spirit. "(Peng Fanjiang, 2014)(Cheng Guoan,1985). The charm of calligraphy is the combination of the calligraphist and the calligraphy. The calligraphist transforms his great virtues into the calligraphy's charm, including righteousness, softness, persistence, unrestrained nature and calmness.

Third, the calligraphy has its emotion as its internal attribute. There are no two identical pieces of calligraphy in the world, as the calligraphy forms upon the flow of emotions. "Calligraphy varies at emotions. When the calligraphist feels joyful, his calligraphy is unfolded; angry, breathtaking; sad, restricted; happy, beautiful"(Song Yang,2001).The calligraphist stores his happiness, sadness, eagerness, anger, and love at that moment in his calligraphy and delivers them to the appreciator, so both the calligraphist and the appreciator can find a place to express their emotions. Wang Xizhi, a great calligraphist in the Jin Dynasty, created *Preface to the Lanting Poetry Anthology*, the greatest running script in the world, when he was drunk and had fun with friends. The piece of running script has never been surpassed by later generation because Wang's emotions under that context cannot be copied. Zhang Huai Guan of the Tang Dynasty said in the book, " Even plants have their vividness, unburied. How can animals and humans bury their vividness? Beasts and birds have their own features and charms. It is the essence of calligraphy."(Zhang Huaiguan,1979:149) "vividness" here also refers to "emotions", which is the spiritual temperament and personality shown by the calligraphist through his hairbrush and ink.

Fourth, calligraphy has its Yin and Yang as its profound attribute. In *the Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu says, "Being and Not-being grow out of one another; Difficult and easy complete one another. Long and short test one another; High and low determine one another. "(Lao Tzu,2011:28). *The Book of Analogy* goes, "Everything grows out of Yin and Yang"(Yan Yuhua and Li Qizhong,2013), the law of Yin and Yang. This law of Yin and Yang is hidden in calligraphy, reflected in its height, strength, and density. It is the profound attribute of calligraphy, which is the concentrated display of the calligraphy's connotation, charm and emotion.

3.2 Subjective interest

To understand the subjective interest of calligraphy, we need to admit that subjective judgment and aesthetic conclusion are inseparable and admit the difference in aesthetic appreciation.

First, appreciators vary in aesthetic evaluation of the same calligraphy. "The benevolent see benevolence and the wise see wisdom -- different people have different views." "One thousand readers, one thousand Hamlets." Take the great calligraphist Zhao Mengfu as an example. Viewed from the objective interest, Zhao Mengfu excels in numerous scripts, especially in true script, round,

elegant, and rigorous, and in running script, smooth, natural and unrestrained. It is fair to say that Zhao greatly influenced on the later generations. However, Zhao's calligraphy has also been very controversial, highly advocated by some people and badly hated by others. Fu Shan in the Qing Dynasty commented on Zhao's script: " Although Zhao followed Wang Xizhi's scripts, his calligraphy was reduced to weak beauty caused by his virtue. A man without integrity can write out great calligraphy!" Fu Shan believed that Zhao Mengfu, once an official of the Song Dynasty, who was willing to serve another dynasty, was without national integrity, so his calligraphy also had the spirit of flattering the powerful. This kind of evaluation obtained through the cognition of the calligraphists personality is the subjective taste of calligraphy appreciation.

Second, aesthetic evaluation varies in the same calligraphy at different moments. Calligraphy aesthetics is a kind of "humanized beauty", which is the direct embodiment of the object-ego state of the appreciator. Wang Guowei mentioned in the edited manuscript section of *Human World*, "All words of scenery are words of emotions"(Yin Jun sheng,1998:197). Calligraphy aesthetics is a self-reflect of calligraphy, and the appreciator can always get something from the calligraphy.

4. The Philosophical Essence of Calligraphy Aesthetics

Since the calligraphy aesthetics is the collision, harmony and resonance of subjective interest and objective interest, the philosophical essence of calligraphy aesthetics is to revise the subjective cognition based on objective history.

4.1 Abide by objective history

First, we should abide by the tradition of calligraphy. The emergence, development, and evolution of everything have its historical laws. Calligraphy starts from the official script with aesthetic value. With thousands of years of development, the calligraphy style is constantly enriched, and the calligraphists promote their strengths, leaving many norms and laws to follow, so later generations can "develop their styles based on former laws"(Shen Zongqian,2022:152).When creating or appreciating calligraphy, we need to abide by the tradition of calligraphy and understand the importance of integrity. Take the post as an example. Posting is to keep integrity, and innovation based on integrity is the right way. "Without reading ancient books, posting ancient calligraphy, and digesting, one cannot master calligraphy as he like"(Zhu Hexiang,2022). The same holds true for calligraphy anesthetics. Only by keeping calligraphy standard can we avoid straying off course under marketization and avoid the popularity of weird calligraphy.

Second, we should understand the history of calligraphy. We need to hold an outlook of history when studying and viewing things and take them as a "process" rather than a "result". With the outlook of history, we cannot replace the objective "existing history" with the subjective "imaginary history". Take great calligraphists as an example. Most great calligraphists are well known officials. Their calligraphy is passed over generations not simply because of their fame and status. We should study the phenomenon with the outlook of history. Under the ancient imperial examination system, calligraph was a decisive factor in selecting excellent officials, or even outweighed what the calligraphist wrote down in some cases. Therefore, for those great calligraphists, it is not their status that enables their calligraphy to pass over generations, but it is their excellent calligraphy that contributes to their status, making their calligraphy more likely to be passed on.

Third, get the most profound cognition from authentic works. According to the way of presenting calligraphy, we can divide them into authentic works, replica and electronic works. The depth of people's cognition of calligraphy shows a decreasing trend along with these three forms. In other words, we prefer replica works to electronic works, and prefer authentic works to replica works. (Table 1).On the first level, people feel differently about authentic works and replica works. Benjamin, a Marxist cultural critic, believes that copy makes art popular, but also makes the spiritual charm of art disappear. When appreciators appreciate authentic works, the moment of watching and the moment of the birth of the work are integrated. The appreciator can feel the life of the work, including the calligraphist 's mood, scene, waving ink at that time, and even the breath in the work. Pictures and replicas, explained by Foucault's "the collapse of reproduction" theory, lose

its original connotations when the work is reproduced. In the documentary *The Way of Watching*, Schnberg stands in front of an authentic oil painting of Leonardo Da Vinci and delivers a series of historical reviews and emotional descriptions. He continues, " When the camera spreads the art, it adds potential meaning to the work, but it also destroys the unique meaning of the original." On the second level, people feel very different when looking at electronic images on the device and seeing live copies on the scene. When people are in front of even a copy, they feel more a vivid and profound impact on the retina.

Table 1: The way the calligraphy presented

artistic form	feature	degree of awareness
authentic works	rich in spirit and charm	the most profound
replica works	reduced spirit and charm	rather profound
electronic works	lost spirit and charm	not profound

4.2 Repair the subjective cognition

First, understand with the spirit of "befriend with humans and matters". Beauty is essentially a value, not a certain objective material attribute. "Beauty is not beauty inherently but viewed as beauty by humans"(Liu Zongyuan,1983:123), this value is not innate or unchanged, but born. It will change with the times, nation, aesthetic subject and even the scenarios. For example, in different times, "fat is beautiful" in the Tang Dynasty and "thin is beautiful" in modern times. Today, beauty can be divided into "Western beauty" and "Oriental beauty". In short, beauty is the "personalized nature". "The level of calligraphy aesthetic and spiritual feelings is intertwined, so we must not distinguish our own subject from the object of calligraphy. Zhang Huaijin pointed out that calligraphy appreciation should be "an evaluation of sprit and essence" to pursue "without loss"; "without concentration and meditation, one cannot get all the essence"(Ancient Books collation research Office,1979:209). The same calligraphy is viewed different in the eyes of the knowledgeable and the less educated, the mentally refined and the mentally detached.

Second, reflect with the philosophical thinking of "spirit and essence as a thing". The Chinese philosophy of ""Qi""(means spirit and energy) holds that ""Qi"" is the foundation of the universe and the source of all things. Numerous ""Qi"" exists on earth, and life is born out of ""Qi"". Based on the great flow of the universe, Calligraphy turns Chinese characters into clouds, travelling over earth, between ancient and modern times. While calligraphers depict the invisible realm, calligraphists should first inject their own mental state and vitality into the dot, and then integrate the charm of the whole universe. For appreciators, they feel ""Qi"" upon them, and ""Qi"" comes from the connotation of the text itself and the accomplishment of the calligraphist. As "Qi" is flowing, each piece of calligraphy work is unique, and there aren't two identical calligraphy works in the world.

Third, enjoy with the mental of "elegance and transcendences". Calligraphy, which nourishes the fertile soil of Chinese traditional culture, carries forward and inherits the spirit of Chinese culture, forms the Chinese aesthetic spirit, and concentrates on the Chinese aesthetics. The Chinese aesthetics is featured by calmness and elegance. Just like "Man is born to be quiet"(Dai Sheng,2022), " When you know where to stop, you have stability. When you have stability, you can be tranquil. When you are tranquil, you can be at ease. When you are at ease, you can deliberate. When you can deliberate you can attain your aims"(Zeng Zi,2022), " Of mortals, the golden mean is the most valued! The golden mean is plain so that it can be cultivated into five virtues and adapt to changes"(Liu Shao,2022). Since ancient times, Chinese painters and calligraphists are all transcended. For them, the core of calligraphy is "quality, plainness, and nature"(Song Cao,2012), and a natural work without decoration is viewed as beautiful. Then, as a calligraphy appreciator, it is also necessary to adjust his physical and mental state to "elegance and transcendences", so they can pursue authenticity. In this process, we can find an original, quiet heart, which is also the greatest value brought by calligraphy art to the viewer.

5. Conclusion

If art is a window for artists to view the world and themselves, appreciating art is a mirror for appreciators to gaze at the world and themselves. The essence of calligraphy aesthetic appreciation is also a philosophical cognitive process or a journey of philosophical sentiment. When reflecting on calligraphy aesthetics with subjective interest and objective interest, one can get the essence of calligraphy aesthetics based on objective history and subjective cognition, thus finding a place to express his emotions. In this way, the appreciator can cultivate his temperament, growing from irritable to gentle, superficial to deep, emotional to rational, and rough to fine.

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